

# Putting the focus on stopping a crisis

Group enables interventions in high-risk situations, which can be especially significant for young people

**LIZ BEDDALL**  
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

In the later hours of a typical Toronto night, a 911 call is placed. It is regarding a loud, domestic dispute overhead by a neighbour and, when a police officer arrives, he begins to ask questions.

He discovers the argument stemmed from the husband's recent job loss and the imminent eviction of his family. Further, the couple's oldest son has been arrested for gang involvement, and their two younger kids are showing interest in following the same path.

"So all of a sudden you have all these risk factors," says Det. Brian Smith of the Toronto Police community partnerships and engagement unit, who is also police co-ordinator for FOCUS Toronto. "If some supports aren't offered soon, something bad will surely happen."

It is a hypothetical scenario, but a case that would be all too familiar to members of the FOCUS Toronto team, which gathers each week in four corners of the city to aid members of community in their darkest hours.

They are the passionate repre-

sentatives of diverse social service agencies, and in partnership with United Way, the City of Toronto and the Toronto Police Service, they are collectively committed to identifying and serving the city's most vulnerable individuals by way of immediate and co-ordinated interventions.

"In many of the cases, the agencies chosen to take action are literally leaving these situation tables to go and provide a service or services to an at-risk individual that very day," says Smith.

A situation table, or FOCUS table, is a meeting in which social agency representatives, as well as representatives from United Way, the city and the Toronto police force, gather to review the cases of at-risk individuals in the community, which have been submitted by referral.

Once a case has been determined to be in the "acutely elevated risk" category, the group will then discuss which agency will take the lead in delivering assistance to that individual or family within 48 hours.

"Last year alone, about 700



LIZ BEDDALL FOR THE TORONTO STAR

Det. Brian Smith is the police co-ordinator for FOCUS Toronto.

cases were brought to our situation tables, assessed as high-risk and intervened upon by the appropriate agencies within 48 hours," Smith says. "And some of the biggest beneficiaries were youth who fell within the 14-17 age bracket."

Nation Cheong, United Way's vice-president of Community Opportunities and Mobilization and overseer of the FOCUS Toronto initiative, believes the impact of these one-to-one interventions can be particularly significant for youth.

"We know that we have approximately 80,000 young people who are living in poverty across the GTA," says Cheong. "When you're dealing with a young person in a crisis situation, or anyone for that matter, you have to take into context the family situation, their hous-

ing, their education, their history of mental health, and so on."

He adds that the co-operative FOCUS model, which commits to being intentional about acknowledging the whole person, has been able to provide crucial offramps for young people who are beginning to follow a path toward negative or violent behaviour.

"We know that healthy youth development leads to positive outcomes for youth," says Costanza Allevato, director of Community Resources, Social Development, Finance and Administration for the City of Toronto.

"That occurs when young people have access to decent housing, have access to education, training and employment stability ... when they're exposed to positive recreational activities and health care, and have a sense of belonging and connectedness to their neighbourhood and city."

She adds that the FOCUS program, for which she serves as a co-ordinator, has provided all these resources and more to more than 2,700 youth since its inception in 2013. It was a humble beginning in Rexdale, with the establishment of a single situation table supported by 20 agencies.

Now with 100-plus agencies participating in weekly community tables in North Scarborough, Downtown East, Downtown West and Rexdale, Allevato says upcoming plans to expand to the Black Creek Community and beyond speak to the ways in which this comprehensive network has fine-

tuned the social strategy into a science.

"The success of FOCUS is that it provides quick and effective co-ordination and wraparound services," she says. "Often these are situations that one partner cannot solve well on their own and that's why it comes to the table."

Smith, who estimates that 55 to 75 per cent of FOCUS table referrals come from the police force, doesn't hesitate to show his gratitude for the program. It's one, he says, that has added a new glimmer of hope to a professional grind that can often be disheartening.

"I've been in many different positions throughout my 30-year career with the police force, and throughout that time it has almost always been the case that when I come into a situation, something bad has already happened," he says.

"FOCUS provides me, my colleagues and everyone involved with the ability to actually get in there before a situation occurs, and hopefully prevent it from happening entirely."

He adds that while each year the city's police force works tirelessly to remove the most hardcore criminal elements out of the community, lasting change to a city's landscape can only come from greater upstream efforts. Efforts, he says, that are best made by a diverse group of players, willing to join forces for the greater good.

"What FOCUS really does is pulls us out of our silos," he says. "There's a much better outcome when we're working together."