Hope Rising from a Sea of Inhumanity: Imagining a Compassionate Vision into Reality in Winnipeg's Community Safety Team

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Abstract

Fostering hope in our divided world: Winnipeg's Community Safety Team was created with a ground-breaking vision of compassionate service to those most vulnerable in society while improving public safety. Drawing on Jean Paul Lederach's hopeful idea of the moral imagination, the author contends that hope can rise from the sea of inhumanity, if we develop empathy and the strength to carry it out. This article explores how seminal peace-keeping strategies such as sustained dialogue can empower networks to build collective peace. The paper also highlights the importance of protecting protectors, as this type of work carries a high risk of trauma for caregivers.

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Canada has high living standards. We also struggle with disparity that can rival almost any of the impoverished nations in the world. Many Canadians suffer from the structural violence of poverty, living unhoused or in communities with unstable power, undrinkable water, and insecure food supply. In larger urban centres, people have become accustomed to stepping over others dying in the streets, often suffering untreated mental health issues that are compounded by addictions and poverty.

Indigenous, First Nations, people are overrepresented among the unsheltered and in Canada's prisons. They experience unique health challenges, poor educational achievement and higher unemployment in relation to the national averages. Many of their deep traumas can be directly attributed to the lasting transgenerational effects of

colonization (Chrismas, 2013, 2020, Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015, Volkan, 1997).

While Canada has made official government apologies, the country still has a long way to go to make amends for the wrongs committed during the colonial settlement. The reserve system and sixties "baby scoop" that removed Indigenous children from their parents on mass created traumas that carry forward into the present (Chrismas, 2013, 2020, Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015).

Many feel that if these social wounds are out of sight, and "not in my back yard" (NIMBY) then they are someone else's problem (Chrismas, 2020). In the fast-paced contemporary world we are all often too wrapped up in our own first world problems to concern ourselves with improving society. However, we all should feel responsible for overcoming this culture of indifference and silence.

When people are not called to action, feeling social issues are someone else's problem (NIMBYism), there is a high societal cost to everyone, regardless of their station in life (Chrismas and Schellenberg, in press). Some do feel responsible, and survivor's guilt is more commonplace among our modern-day majority population than denial was in our past. Yet, we still have a long way to go in acknowledging and rectifying the inequities of our troubled past.

While it is critical that we acknowledge our historical and ongoing injustices, the prognosis is not all doom and gloom. Hope springs from adversity, and compassion is a mantra for many who now serve the public. Assimilation that prevailed in the discourse that drove many of Canada's failed colonial policies has now given way to a new public discourse that respects and embraces diversity and social justice (Chrismas, 2012; Chrismas & McFee, 2020).

The geographical distance that once separated countries and cultures is collapsing into an Internet based reality in which time and distance is decreased between us (Chrismas, 2013). This accessibility is improving our mutual understanding and appreciation of differing cultures and the challenges they face. Greater knowledge of the strengths we each can bring to a multi-cultural society is empowering for all of us. The challenge for modern society is to decipher what to attend to in a growing sea of information. Artificial intelligence is a new and exciting frontier full of potential, but we must navigate wisely or suffer its perils.

Hope can rise from the belief in basic human rights and dignity, and that every person has value. For those of us who embrace it, humanitarian work can be a rewarding and fulfilling pursuit. In this paper, I explore one such initiative in Winnipeg's newly established Community Safety Team (CST).

Over the past decade, the police in Winnipeg became overwhelmed with calls for service they could never keep up with. The burden is due in large part to the well-documented phenomenon of too many duties being offloaded onto police from other service sectors. Police have taken on health, social service, and child welfare roles to the point of failure in achieving their core mandates around responding to emergencies and crime (Chrismas, 2024, 2013).

For about eight of the last 13 years of my 34-year policing career, I worked as a Staff Sergeant overseeing all frontline police operations for the city (Chrismas, 2024a). As a Duty Officer, I saw the system gaps grow, with police and fire paramedic resources deployed in the struggle to maintain public safety and help our vulnerable citizens.

The common colloquialism was/is that the police are the only service available in the middle of the night when all others are closed. As a result, they end up dealing with child welfare and mental health issues that more appropriately should be managed by other service sectors. I knew that a more upstream approach was required to help people rather than reacting and not addressing the root causes of problems.

With increasing demands and insufficient resources, my colleagues and I have witnessed the erosion of the ability of emergency services to provide compassionate service. The fire and paramedic services have worked at a burnt-out pace, responding to endless addiction fueled medical emergencies.

Things have evolved such that there is no safety net for many of our most vulnerable citizens (Chrismas, 2024a). Despite the growing network of service providers struggling to help our exposed population, more was needed. Hence, the CST was established. I was selected as the inaugural Team Lead.

With the support of Mayor Gillingham and Council, Chief Administrative Officers Mike Jack and then Sherwood Armbruster, and all city departments, we all pulled together to stand the team up in record time. Establishing this new CST, for the city of Winnipeg, I was determined to take a humanitarian, trauma informed approach, based on compassion and valuing the dignity

of every individual we work with (Chrismas, 2024b).

The CST was established in 2023 to fill the gaps that had grown over recent decades within our service delivery systems. The investment was also driven by demands for improved safety in Winnipeg's public spaces and bus transportation system (CST, 2025; Chrismas, 2024a, 2024b). In Winnipeg, as in most major cities across North America, social conditions have deteriorated over recent decades. Public perception of safety declined in the face of endemic addiction and mental health challenges along with the associated violence and disruptive social behaviour.

This type of work requires empathy, understanding the other person's situation, and the discipline to treat people well, even as they are attacking you in a meth-induced psychosis. The work also requires careful protection of our safety officers' mental health. The risk for moral injury, trauma, and physical injury is high, as we deal on an intimate and intense level with the most difficult elements of humanity, and with limited resources.

Winnipeg's Community Safety Team was established with a vision of a unified society, providing compassionate service to an oppressed population while improving public safety. In this paper I describe how we've coped and strived to keep the focus on compassionate service. Drawing on some seminal peacebuilding and conflict resolution theories, I explore how the CST are striving to be peacebuilders and force multipliers in the community of service providers.

Becoming a force multiplier for peace

My colleagues in policing and I could see the growing service gaps, as demands increased and social conditions deteriorated, especially during and after Covid. My peace and conflict studies at the Mauro Institute for Peace and Justice, University of Manitoba, deepened my understanding through knowledge of how things could be better. Travelling and study peacebuilding in Africa, India and Asia gave me further context as I gained a deeper sense of what we do well in Canada, and what we could improve.

Former Police Chief Devon Clunis had a vision of crime prevention through social development. It aligned with my view that we need to address the root causes of violence, and not just the symptoms. For several years, I worked full time on police-community collaboration, looking for synergies between the police and partner agencies, to improve public safety.

In 2016, I travelled to Kitchener/ Waterloo with the then Deputy Mayor Pagtakhan and Community Services Director Clive Wightman. I was still a Staff Sergeant in the police service and searching for ways to gain better synergies in public safety. At the time, Kitchener and Waterloo were leaders in Canada in collaborative approaches to public safety. We came back with a resolve to implement a similar approach in Winnipeg. For a variety of reasons, the city didn't take that approach.

Fast forward to 2023, I was in my 34th year of policing and seeing continually worsening social conditions. The police and fire paramedic services were experiencing a growing chasm between service agencies' inability to improve conditions. Mayor Gillingham promised in his electoral campaign to do something for public safety, starting with our public Transit system that had also worsened over the past decade.

As I took on the role of team lead I drew on all I had experienced and my peace and conflict studies education. I envisioned a collaborative team to fill system gaps, taking a compassionate approach that meets peoples' needs. The Community Safety Team was established as a collaborative safety net, with a compassionate, trauma-informed

approach that respects the dignity of every person we deal with.

With the new team we have the time to work with people for as long as it takes to do something positive for them. I also knew going in that it would be difficult work, with a high risk of trauma and moral injury for the practitioners. We built--in safety mechanisms to protect them.

Ubuntu, and hope on the horizon

One year since inception, it's hard to believe how far the CST has come. It is now well established as a significant element in our city's public safety network. With 25 Safety Officers, we've seen positive impacts in safety in and around our transit system and Winnipeg's public spaces. The budget was approved in 2025, by City Council, for 15 more officers to be added over the next two years.

The decision to deploy safety officers in hi-visibility uniforms and without weapons (outside of the baton) has been integral to overcoming several barriers. It reduced the tangible 'trigger of the uniform' and its representation of 'enforcement' and the related fear and trauma that goes with it for many in our vulnerable population. As a result of being basically unarmed, the safety

officers have been able to work quickly towards being accepted as trusted resources among some of Winnipeg's most vulnerable citizens.

Taking a trauma-informed, compassionate approach with many of Winnipeg's most vulnerable citizens, the CST has filled services gaps and assisted people in immeasurable ways. The safety officers have interrupted thousands of disputes, fights, and disturbances and rendered first aid daily, saving over 15 lives with life-saving trauma care. They offer safe rides and provide a reassuring presence in the community, connecting people with resources and collaborating with other service providers to assist.

For example, in March of 2025 the CST was asked to connect with some unsheltered people living in an encampment in the city. They met repeatedly and built trust with the squatters, giving them water and food, and checking in on them. The safety officers helped the residents fill out paperwork to receive identification and approvals for transitional housing. Eventually, within a few weeks, the couple had moved into a house and the encampment was cleaned up.

The CST takes part in community and cultural events, building trust to better serve our city. The leaders have accommodated

many media ride-a-longs and interviews, striving to be transparent and keep the city informed on our progress. They continue to collaborate and coordinate with our emergency services and the entire network of government and non-government service providers to fill system gaps.

Studying reconciliation while travelling across South Africa, I learned a beautiful Zulu word, "Ubuntu." The concept of Ubuntu is simple yet profound. It means, "I am because we are," highlighting the importance of community and the interconnectedness of all human beings. Ubuntu is a reminder for society about how we should treat others.

In kindergarten, we learned about the golden rule: "treat others the way you'd like to be treated." To me, Ubuntu speaks to that. We are all the same people, and we are all connected. We have no English word that equates to Ubuntu, but that doesn't mean that we can't emulate the concept in our everyday lives.

A scholar named Mbigi (1997) wrote the five core values of Ubuntu are: survival, spirit of solidarity, compassion, respect and dignity. These words, defined by Mbigi, resonate with the work we are doing in our CST. It is the common thread of the United Nations's Global Goals, and the motivation in

the mission to end extreme poverty, so that everyone, everywhere, can live equally.

Ubuntu refers to behaving well towards others and acting in ways that benefit the community. Such acts could be as simple as helping a stranger in need or involving a more evolved coordination for the good with the community. I equate Ubuntu to compassion in our current context, for those of us who feel the drive to respect humanity and treat those less fortunate with respect and basic dignity that every human being should have.

Our small team could not make an impact on community issues without collaboration with other stakeholders. Our success depends on the network of social service providers to see themselves as part of an interdependent network. New solutions require stakeholders to envision themselves as part of collective community-based approaches.

Renowned peace scholar Jean Paul Lederach (1997, 2005, p. 5) defined the term, "moral imagination." He described interventions that can "work with the existing social geography, relational networks, and be flexible enough to adapt to challenges that will emerge during the process" (Lederach, 2005, p.84). In the moral imagination participants view themselves as a part of the

social web that brings all the relevant parts together for greater peace.

Collective goals could be achieved through conflict resolution processes, including getting the right people to the table for "sustained dialogue" (Saunders, 2003; Lowry & Littlejohn, 2003). To do this, we must identify the type of conflicts and processes through which they may be resolved (Simmel, 1908/1955, Schellenberg, 1996; Rothman 2001, 1997; Rothman & Olson, 1992).

The collaborative public safety work we've been doing among a network of about 60 different government and non-government agencies in Winnipeg resonates as a sustained dialogue. We've strived within the CST to imagine a better world and play a part in bringing the right agencies together to achieve it. Part of the work has involved identifying what we are striving to achieve together.

Rothman (2001) has pointed out the importance of bringing out the deep truth about the issues that are at the root of conflicts. In our case, it requires honesty among the stakeholders working with the CST about what we are all trying to achieve. We are seeking to find common ground and ensure our added new resources truly fill the

gaps in our systems that serve our most vulnerable.

Kriesberg (1998) highlighted that social conflict between persons or groups tends to polarize people. He stressed prizing the social context of conflicts (1998). In Winnipeg, it has become clear that the people we are working to assist are some of our most vulnerable citizens. Hence, our success will involve bringing the right people to the table and seeking sustained dialogue around sustainable solutions to overcome conflicts. This requires understanding the perspectives of the people we are trying to support, as well as the people and organizations we seek to collaborate with.

Bringing stakeholders together and finding common ground, through sustained dialogue we've been able to overcome territorialism and conflict among normally competing agencies. For example, we resolved concerns from several unions that the CST might be taking their members' work. By meeting and clarifying exactly what we are doing, we were able to resolve a grievance and work together for the common good.

Empathy

We talk in our team about what is compassion, understanding the others' pain

and wanting to ease it. To have compassion we need empathy, the ability and heart to understand and feel the other's perspective. In public service this often means opening yourself up to others' pain. Sympathy is understanding others' pain or joy but not necessarily taking steps to rectify the cause of their pain.

Having worked in public service, in various justice related roles for over 40 years, I've gained some wisdom around the concept of service. In my books on policing, I described the paradox of wanting to connect with people and help them on an emotional level. Yet, the more you open yourself up to others' pain, the more vulnerable you become to emotional injury (Chrismas, 2013, 2024). Compassionate work requires a deeply held belief in human dignity, and an understanding that life's lottery largely determines where each of us winds up in the world. It is having the empathy to put oneself in the other's place.

We understand that the unsheltered person in a drug-induced psychotic crisis, could be any of us. In fact, it is conventional contemporary wisdom that in today's credit economy, most of us are only a few missed mortgage payments away from being unsheltered. I have met many people who had stable families and homes and then

suffered a mental health crisis, fell into addictions, or lost their job, rendering them suddenly, and to their surprise, out in the street.

Empathy, or putting oneself in the others' shoes, can drive our desire to help others. If we believe in the aphorism, "there but for the grace of God go I," it can fuel our humanitarian drive to assist people. It is important to think correctly about who the "other" is who we are helping. Othering is an important concept related to understanding positions and perceptions in conflict. It is a highly relevant concept in peacebuilding and conflict resolution.

Edward Said described the process by which people develop perceptions of the 'other.' In his seminal book, *Orientalism* (1978), Said described how many Westerners have often held an obscured view of people from other parts of the world as strange and exotic. Othering or viewing people as "less than" or "different" could be said to be at the root of some of history's worst atrocities. It can be an obstacle to meeting people with empathy and treating them as we would like to be treated if our roles were reversed. Feeling 'othered' could also prevent people on the fringes from coming forward and accepting help or taking part in peace-

building processes for fear of being further labelled and ostracized.

Social labels contribute to othering, by categorizing people as different. It is important that we look at people first as fellow human beings, not as "unhoused", "mental patient", or "drug addict." Every person has their own unique story, regardless of their station in life. If we are to meet them where they are and help provide resources, we must see them as fellow human beings.

My dissertation research sought to understand and interrupt sex trafficking in Manitoba (Chrismas, 2017, 2020). A key finding was the significance that labels and categories play in stigmatizing women who are involved in the sex industry (Lozano, 2010; Pheterson, 1996). Lozano (2010, p. 229) wrote, "othering" occurs in the way modern-day prostitutes are identified as such. They are labelled as bad women as opposed to virtuous, distinguishing them along other similar dichotomies including normal vs. abnormal, wife vs. prostitute, virgin vs. whore, chaste vs. licentious, reproductive vs. un(re)productive (Bell, 1994, p. 39-41; Kempadoo & Doezema, 1998, p. 5-6).

Lozano (2010) highlighted that prostitution exists because of power differentials through which women are objectified and dehumanized. This is a form

of othering. My research confirmed that women are objectified, targeted and dehumanized by the organized sex industry.

Some have contended that it is a free choice by many to enter the sex industry as a business. My findings, however, were clear that the majority of women and children who enter the sex industry are targeted and forced into it against their will (Chrismas, 2020). In many cases any money the exploited woman can keep for herself, goes to buying alcohol and street drugs for self- medication to numb the psychological distress of living with the previously noted social stigmas. The vast majority of earnings, in most cases, goes to the trafficker.

The same type of categorization of some people as "unsheltered", "impoverished", "addicted", "suffering mental health issues" can cause service providers to treat 'others' differently according to their preconceived perspectives. People do not choose to live in the street. They are victims of an unlucky roll of the dice if life. If we can overcome the human tendency to categorize people and assign labels, then we can begin to think and act compassionately towards them.

Compassion

Compassion and *empathy* both refer to a caring response to someone else's distress.

While *empathy* refers to actively sharing in the emotional experience of the other person, *compassion* adds to that connection a desire to alleviate the person's distress. Ten years ago, I wrote an editorial, which was published in the Winnipeg Free Press. It highlighted the humanitarian culture in Winnipeg, and the heart that front-line emergency responders invest in protecting our vulnerable (Chrismas, 2014). As the cycle of things goes, we seem to continuously revisit social issues and solutions to them. Perhaps the lesson in this is that we need to find solutions for the urgent issues, but then we have to sustain them as well.

One constant has been the compassion and devotion of front-line emergency services, police, fire, paramedic, medical staff, and social workers who all carry the burden of dealing directly with social issues and community safety on the front-line. I see now, more than ever, the passion that public safety personnel have for the vulnerable, and the burden they bare, the moral injuries and operational stress that they carry always striving to do more with less. Having completed 34 years in front-line policing, as well as my post-doctoral fellowship with the Canadian Institute for Public Safety Research and Treatment, I am acutely aware of the

emotional burden that is continually imposed on contemporary emergency services.

Lederach's moral imagination of humane ways to help our most vulnerable citizens is needed now more than ever (2005). While social justice is not their primary mandate, emergency services are the ones who, day in and day out, strive to help homeless people get in from the cold, protect people suffering debilitating substance-abuse or mental-health issues and advocate for them. In the vast majority of cases, they do their best for people in need.

This phenomenon is not unique to Winnipeg, but our history has a particular social-justice character. We are a compassionate city, perhaps because of our diversity and the deep social issues we have struggled with as a community. Ten years ago, I wrote (Chrismas, 2014),

It is no accident the Canadian Museum for Human Rights, the first national museum established outside the Ottawa capital region, was opened in Winnipeg to serve as a beacon for human rights and social justice. This intellectual underpinning is part of our compassionate culture. However, it is the people at street level who look out for vulnerable peoples' basic human rights. It is the people who do the right thing for fellow human beings when nobody is looking that are our real protectors of human dignity. It is the businessperson who volunteers at a soup line and the child who stands up for a bullied peer at school. Each of us plays a part in our

own unique ways, but we are all a part of our community. The thing we know for sure is that working together we are all stronger. As long as we continue to have problems in our community, we all must ask ourselves what we have done today to help make the situation better. "A little knowledge that acts is worth infinitely more than much knowledge that is idle." (Khalil Gibran). We all know ways we can contribute, but until we act, we know we haven't unleashed our full potential.

Now we have the CST stood up to help take the burden along with existing resources, to improve a feeling of safety in the city (Winnipeg. 2025). Transit is our first priority, and it seems fitting as many of our community's problems are intensified in our public transportation system.

The more we all collaborate and find collective multi-sectoral, multi-faceted ways to combine and focus our efforts, the greater synergies and momentum for peace and the brighter our future will be. The CST was built with a culture of compassion for our most vulnerable citizens, with a goal of connecting people with the right resources, but also with the tools to protect them. Coming from a lifetime devoted to law enforcement, I can say with confidence that this new team feels like the perfect element to fill many of the system gaps that I've watched grow over the past two decades.

As a graduate of the Arthur V. Mauro Institute for Peace and Justice, I am grateful for the critical thinking, peacebuilding and mediation skills I developed there; I am also grateful for the voice that education gave me. I've been in public service for many years, and I've had a growing clarity and resolve about the need for compassion as well as proactive problem solving in public service. We cannot simply respond without addressing the root causes of social issues and expect to solve them.

The basis for my desire to provide compassionate service does not have a lot of academic rigour behind it, although I am sure there is a theoretical explanation could be provided. It also is not faith-based, although compassion is a fundamental value in most, if not all faith systems from Christianity to Hinduism. Fundamentally, I feel it is respecting others and treating them well.

From my perspective I will say my drive for compassion is based in spirituality, in the sense that I've always identified as a spiritual person, if not strongly religious. Philip D. Kenneson (1999) wrote that many identify as spiritual but not strongly affiliated with a specific church or belief system. Some, according to Kenneson, feel a tension between their personal spirituality and membership in a conventional religious organization. They value curiosity, intellectual freedom, and an experimental approach to religion.

A spiritual life doesn't require a belief in deities or adhering to a specific religious belief system. An atheist can see God as energy or a spirit, not as a deity. This is the basis for spiritual atheism (Kenneson, 1999). I am not an atheist, but I've always felt a strong spirituality within me. I was raised Christian; in fact, my mother was on the alter guild of our local Anglican church for 40 years. I spent many Saturdays in my childhood helping her set up the alter for the Sunday services.

I've always viewed myself as a philosophical person, even in childhood, and even as I dropped out of high school to join the workforce young. In my case, I felt I wasn't getting much out of high school and moved on to other things in life. I always knew I would, and in fact did continue my education, but later in life, after I'd been in the workforce for many years.

For me, I believe my drive for compassionate service was born and nourished many years ago, from my work. Over forty years in public service, all in the justice and law enforcement public safety realm, has exposed me to a great deal of the inhumanity that people experience and daily.

Many of the things I've witnessed and experienced in my police work cannot be unseen and have left mental and emotional scars on my soul. I cannot imagine how vulnerable people can endure this trauma without relief day in and day out. The exposure to so much violence has driven home for me some ideas about human nature and what people are capable of, both bad and good.

Based on a lifetime of working with people at their worst, I've concluded that without some social control, some people WILL exploit and hurt other people. Whether people are inherently violent or if it is learned behaviour is beyond the scope of this article. In my opinion, Thomas Hobbes was correct about the social contract (Hobbes, 1651). We all live within the constraints of a set of laws. We need them, otherwise, as Hobbes said, "life would be nasty, brutish, and short" (xliii).

From a young age, I became a protector. I had a strong sense of right and wrong. I'll say my values developed from what I was taught as a child and from my experiences along the way. Here again, it is beyond the scope of this article, and also not relevant whether I or anyone's values are innate or learned, and whether we each adopt the values of the culture we grew up in. We all have values;

the question is what these values are. For whatever reason, I grew up with a respect for humanity and tried to live by the golden rule; do unto others as I would have them do unto me.

My sense of duty and compassion grew from all those years I served in social organizations and law enforcement. I devoted my life to serving and trying to protect the vulnerable. So did all my colleagues, some from a basis in their faith, and some from their upbringings and the culture they were raised in.

A clinical psychologist could analyze people like me and might be able to explain why my values developed the way they did. They also might find that the compassionate basis in my work grew from the cognitive dissonance associated to working with the inhumanity I was exposed to. Feeling bad for victims, realizing the frailty of life through police work required me to be stoic and help people deal with violence and death daily. My colleagues and I had to remain professional and help people who had been shocked by life, with a sudden loss of a loved one or the trauma of being violated.

Those of us in public service and especially the emergency services feel the incongruity and pain of not having the time and resources to serve people the way we

want to. It is the definition of moral injury, not being able to do what we signed up for, and knowing we could do better if we had more time and resources. In their book, *Soul Repair: Recovering from Moral Injury after War*, Brock and Lettini (2012) first coined the term moral injury, in describing the trauma that soldiers have undergone in waging war.

Moral injury is the trauma we feel when we feel compassion for people but cannot help them as well as we wish to. The work we are doing in the CST comes with a high risk of moral injury. We are working with people who are dying in the street of drug overdoses and suffering the extreme structural violence of poverty.

It is difficult and troubling work, but also deeply rewarding to help people who are highly vulnerable. We are also asking safety officers to make themselves vulnerable in order to connect and build trust with people we are trying to help. Hence, the final section here is dedicated to how we protect people doing this arduous work.

Protecting the Protectors

Mental health among public safety personnel has declined over recent decades in Canada. Eight retired and serving police officers in the province of Ontario committed suicide in 2018. It was a wake-up call about frontline mental health and well-being in Canada (Milliard & Chrismas, 2023). The Federal Government funded $20M to supplement ongoing research and development of mental health resources for public safety personnel (Chrismas, 2023). My 34 years of policing experience, coupled with a one-year post-doctoral fellowship in 2023 with the Canadian Institute for Public Safety Research and Treatment has ingrained a deep desire to protect the mental health of members in this new CST (Chrismas, 2023).

In my experience, the constant and increasing demand on police officers never allowed time for thorough regular debriefs. Hence the stereotypical stoicism that the policing culture is known for. Under normal conditions, stoicism is a way to be emotionally resilient and boost inner strength by accepting what you cannot control and focusing on what you can. Conversely, stoicism practiced as the primary method for coping can cause officers to detach from their feelings, resulting in a lack of empathy that is integral to community policing.

Policing today is increasingly fraught with challenges beyond the control of individual officers, including staffing gaps and excessive work hours. They are constantly asked to do more with less. These

stresses are exacerbated by increasing demand and intensifying social scourges of poverty and addictions.

The stoic mindset in policing has traditionally been to leave your problems at home, even if the problems were directly work related (Gill, Milliard & Chrismas, 2023). In the past, officers avoided seeking help for fear of being stigmatized as weak or unfit (Chrismas, 2013 & 2024; Milliard & Chrismas, 2023). While the value of regular debriefing is now conventional wisdom, it is still not embraced in most work environments due to factors such as budget, manpower constraints and organizational cultures (Chrismas, 2023, 2024). It is a preventative exercise that can pre-empt the micro-traumas of daily emergency services work from compounding into full-blown disorders.

We were well aware of the potential challenges and dangers Winnipeg's first public safety team would experience. Hence, we integrated a thorough briefing and debriefing process from day one, and not just after critical incidents (Chrismas, 2024b). The need was intensified by the lack of opportunity to perform field training following an initial five weeks of in-class training. We established a permanent circle in the office, for sharing and joint learning in a safe and open environment.

We also embraced the circle as a process for continuous learning. In his seminal book, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*, Peter Senge (2006) described how organizations can perpetuate continuous improvement through self-reflection. Our debriefings allow every individual to gain from the experiences, mistakes, and victories of our colleagues. In this way, it creates a virtuous learning loop. The circle is an ancient configuration found in the traditions of many North American Indigenous people and recognized for facilitating sharing. Sitting in a circle amongst peers creates a feeling that it is a safe space in which to share. It is impossible for anyone to hide when seated in a circle, so sharing is enhanced.

As we unpack our daily interactions and experiences, we learn from everyone's strengths, knowledge, and vulnerabilities and how we can each contribute to the betterment of the team and our community. We learn from each other's mistakes as a team, which is easier than on an individual basis. Our members have experienced challenges and growing pains– - learning on the fly, where we fit in the community and within our team. Sharing daily has allowed us to empower

people based on their strengths. We've capitalized on moments to challenge, motivate, and encourage team members to perform to their full potential. This also helps us balance their skills and address areas for improvement. Debriefing in the sharing circle has been truly rewarding. It has also allowed us to recognize achievements and support each other by applauding members in gratitude and appreciation of each other's contributions. While this is an unfamiliar and innovative approach for most, it has allowed us to deal with issues at a deeper, more emotional level (Welsh & Chrismas, 2025).

As expressed through observations by Winnipeg's safety officers: "Through the sharing circle, the team is able to express the stress of 'what could we have done better' which helps with easing burdens on our shoulders." A second officer said, "The sharing circle allowed me to let go of the burden that's hidden inside my heart."

Every team member takes part in the debriefing, sharing their feelings and lessons learned. By taking the time to unpack things, we have made significant strides overcoming the culture of denial that has thrived in emergency services over recent decades (Chrismas, 2023). Taking the time to share at each debriefing has allowed a wonderful cohesive culture to emerge. It is also a great

opportunity to share our successes and perform team-building exercises. Creating this positive space fosters emotional well-being, strengthens team cohesion, and allows for meaningful reflection, making a significant difference in how we cope and grow as a team.

Hope Rising

Our Community Safety Team is empowered with a clear image of empathy and compassion in public service. It is an example of moral imagination (Lederach, 1997, 2005). We've imagined a better society, in which all citizens have dignity and the right to have their basic human needs met through a collaborative safety net. Now it is just a matter of time and pressure to bring the vision into reality. Through sustained dialogue with partner agencies, we find that a compassionate approach is infectious and inspiring (Saunders, 2003; Lowry & Littlejohn, 2003). The safety officers inspire and support each other to continuously improve, not only our service, but our shared vision of compassionate public service.

More research on the cost and/or benefits of investing time in better briefing and debriefing would be useful. For instance, would it reduce sick leave usage by reducing

the effects of trauma for frontline emergency service staff? There is room for research on the effectiveness of briefings/debriefings on organizational and individual learning. More research would also be welcomed on the effectiveness of sustained dialogue on developing a shared vision among service sector partners.

The work is groundbreaking in that service delivery has become reactive in the fast-paced contemporary world. Yet, the capacity for love of our fellow man can be increased by making ourselves vulnerable to connection and an idealistic and empathetic idea that we are equal under nature. Striving to provide non-judgmental and compassionate service, our safety team has sought to raise hope from the sea of suffering inhumanity of our modern world. Seeking the ideal of pure compassion within the modern context, we've strived to foster hope in our divided world.

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