CBC
CBCnews
Thunder Bay

'No one was coming to help me': Police officer recalls night woman died by suicide in his truck

Police 'can't do their jobs' in a place where there are no cells, Cst. Jeremy Swanson tells inquest

By Jody Porter, CBC News Posted: Nov 09, 2016 7:44 AM ET Last Updated: Nov 09, 2016 8:59 AM ET

Lena Anderson, 23, was a "caring, loving" mother who enjoyed broomball and square dancing, according to her mom. She died by suicide in the back of a police vehicle in 2013. (Aboriginal Legal Services Toronto)

The police officer who arrested a 23-year-old First Nations woman, who later died by suicide in the back of his police truck, shed tears as he testified at her inquest in Thunder Bay, Ont., on Tuesday.

His testimony provided a window into the shortcomings of the Nishnawbe Aski Police Service (NAPS), which serves 35 remote First Nations in northern Ontario, and the tragic consequences of running a police service that is not legally required to meet provincial standards.

Cst. Jeremy Swanson told the inquest that he arrested Lena Anderson for her own safety and the safety of others after an altercation at her house where she appeared intoxicated. He said he intended to release her when she "sobered up."

At that time there were no police holding cells in the First Nation and it was NAPS' practice to hold prisoners in the back of the police truck. The First Nations police service doesn't fall under the provincial Police Services Act and is therefore not legally bound to meet safety standards for officers or prisoners.

"There should be cells. Otherwise there shouldn't be police officers, because they can't do their jobs," Swanson said when asked at the inquest about potential alternatives to holding prisoners in the absence of cells.

Nishnawbe Aski Police officers in Kasabonika Lake were using the passenger compartment of a 4-door police truck, like this one, to hold prisoners because there were no holding cells in the remote First Nation.

Swanson left Anderson alone in the back of the truck for 16 minutes, according to his notes, while he went to wake up the only other police officer in the remote community.

When he returned to the truck, Anderson had used the drawstring from her pants to hang herself.

'I checked for a pulse. There was nothing."

"She fell as I cut her down," Swanson testified, his voice unsteady. "I checked for a pulse.There was nothing...I tried to yell as loud as I could. No one was coming to help me."

Swanson said he tried to use his police radio to call the other officer but he couldn't get through. NAPS doesn't have a modern police communications system, so there was no way to contact a dispatcher or other officers unless he left the truck.

The Nishnawbe Aski police detachment in Eabametoong First Nation opened in 2015 and is one of the few modern police buildings in the 35 communities served by NAPS. (Jody Porter/CBC)

Alone, Swanson drove Anderson to the nursing station, where she was later pronounced dead.

He had been a police officer for less than a year at that time, spending most of it working alone. He had never met his supervising officer who worked in another community — a plane ride away.

From the nursing station, Swanson called the only senior NAPS officer for whom he had a phone number, in another community, to ask about what he should do next.

"I got on the phone and basically, I couldn't talk," he told the inquest as he wiped away tears. "I couldn't control my emotions."

'Didn't think I'd make it out alive'

Eventually he said the "whole community" was at the nursing station, having learned of the death.

"Honestly, I was a little scared to leave the nursing station. I would have had to walk through the main lobby where everybody was. I didn't think I'd make it out alive," he said.

He left Kasabonika that night on the plane that brought provincial police officers to investigate Swanson's work. They found nothing criminal had occurred in Anderson's death.

In 2014, Swanson was hired by the York Regional Police where he says the availability of resources is "night and day" compared to NAPS.

After Anderson died, there was quick action to get heating into a modular police building, with holding cells, that had been sitting vacant in the Kasabonika Lake for months, he said.

"I'm sorry about the whole situation," he said. "It's unfortunate that something like this has to happen to get stuff done."

'Why does NAPS exist?'

One juror seemed especially perplexed about why First Nations would choose such poor quality policing when the provincial police provide service that meets health and safety standards, to other First Nations in the area.

"What difference does NAPS offer that OPP would not," the juror asked Swanson. "I'm just wondering why, if there's such deficiencies and problems with safety issues compared to the OPP, why does NAPS exist?"

The jury had previously heard testimony from the chief of NAPS who told them his service has an annual budget of $27 million, while the provincial police have said it would cost $70 to $80 million to serve the same area.

"I don't know what would happen if OPP took over. Would they station someone there or just fly up when there's an incident? Swanson said. "With NAPS, at least you have a guy in the community to respond to the calls about a drunk in a house causing a disturbance. They [OPP] are not going to fly up for that."