

October 10, 2013

The Honourable Madeleine Meilleur, MPP  
Minister of Community Safety and Correctional Services  
18th Floor, George Drew Building  
25 Grosvenor Street  
Toronto, Ontario M7A 1Y6

Dear Minister,

I am writing regarding the initiative to equip front-line local police services in Ontario with Conducted Energy Weapons or TASERS. The announcement was made in the aftermath of the deaths of several people with mental illness at the hands of police.

Police have a very difficult task when faced with a person in crisis. While TASERS give police a less lethal option when they are put in such a situation, they enable bypassing non violent techniques to calm or subdue an individual threatening aggression. In addition, the use of these devices is not without risk. The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) recommends that police engage a multi-faceted approach to assessing and managing people in mental or emotional crisis. The approach should be created, implemented and monitored in consultation with people with mental illness. It should include:

- Ready access to mental health supports in the form of crisis teams in partnership with local hospitals, community mental health services and other community resources.
- Education and training on compassionate and respectful approaches to people with aggressive or erratic behavior. This should be supported by police leadership and made available to all employees and representatives of the criminal justice system.
- Education and training on de-escalation techniques for front-line police officers that is applicable to the unique needs and circumstances of first responders. This should be standardized, monitored and subject to on-going evaluation.
- A 'use of force' philosophy that emphasizes the wellbeing of persons in crisis while still ensuring public and officer safety.

Negative interactions between police and people with mental illness, while rare, are distressing for everyone. I would appreciate the opportunity to speak with you about how we can work together to ensure the safety of our most vulnerable citizens.

Sincerely,



Catherine Zahn, MD, FRCP(C)  
President and CEO