



Collaborating for public safety

Bridging police funding with accountability



Though policing is one of the largest expenditure items for municipal budgets, Councils have indirect control over how police services utilize those amounts. Municipalities want safe communities and expect police services to address crime and disorderly conduct. Determining the right amount to spend on policing, however, can be a challenge. Local leaders want to know they're getting good service in return.

Circumstances today are making this even more difficult for local governments. Everyone is facing budget constraints. Provincial governments have reduced spending on social programs, which shifts those responsibilities onto Municipalities.

City Councils are facing complex social struggles such as housing insecurity, mental health, and addiction. Much of the municipal cost of dealing with those matters is borne by the police service. At the same time citizens want those issues dealt with, they are encouraging tiered or alternative police services and pressuring local leaders to reduce municipal funding for police budgets.

The truth is, communities do have choice. They can contract a policing agency and enter into a regional policing model with other Municipalities or deliver their own municipal policing service. Communities across Canada (including Red Deer, Lethbridge, Grande Prairie, Moncton, Surrey, and West Grey) have challenged the cost and effectiveness of their policing providers and explored alternatives. Whatever option they choose, they need to demonstrate value for money.

Accountability alongside independence

Cities are dynamic places and circumstances change. It's not easy for Municipal Councils to show where their public safety spending is going or how effective it is. When issues related to mental health and homelessness, traffic control and pedestrian accidents, or crime on public transit, gain visibility in city spaces and capture media attention, an impression emerges that police services are neglecting those issues. At the same time, there are grey areas around funding deployment. Policing services maintain independence from the Municipal Councils that fund them and this relationship is firmly established in legislation. While that relationship has evolved to allow police services to maintain control over law enforcement decision-making, it doesn't preclude accountability.

Nevertheless, this legislative separation has, in some cases, impeded effective communication, collaboration, and understanding between Councils and their Police Commissions and Boards.

Getting on the same page

What's needed is a healthier and more constructive process to setting policing budgets and demonstrating accountability. Municipal Councils need to share their priorities and concerns as a community. For their part, police services need to be responsive to those statements and take them into consideration as they develop their broader policing plans.

A collaborative framework respects the independence of police services over response approaches. At the same time, it sets up a process for agreeing priority areas in advance and making expenditure more transparent. Police services might come forward with a budget that's aligned with a set of principles and a framework that the Municipal Council has already approved, for example, or vice versa.

Meeting once a year at budget time isn't sufficient. There should be an ongoing dialogue between elected officials and Police Boards/Commissions to validate the Municipality's public safety priorities and respective mandates for effectively dealing with community safety issues.

The issue of mandates is critical, because in addition to police services, there is a fragmented ecosystem of non-profit organizations delivering social services that impact public safety. While Municipalities will lack control and insight into the non-profit organizations, Police Services have resources and capabilities that intersect with the non-profit organizations. They're in a leadership position to facilitate coordination between these social service efforts and public safety responses. As we discussed in a related article (Delivering

Community Safety with Alternative Policing Models), mental health and drug addiction issues, for instance, might be best addressed by a blend of non-profit social programs and policing.

Determining true drivers

Done well, this collaborative process can tease out true drivers that need attention. Is it homelessness? Is it income disparity within the city? This is where better communication and working together help deliver and demonstrate accountability. When drivers are agreed upon that both parties can attend to, budgeting is achievable, response approaches have impact, and cities see meaningful and measurable results.

Some cities and Police Commissions and Boards, for instance, are setting up working groups and trying to establish formulas to determine annual police budgets. They're looking at crime rates alongside deeper and broader changes in unemployment, housing, poverty rates, and demographic shifts. This approach makes more direct associations between police resourcing and areas of community need – and demonstrates where policing makes a difference.

The fact is, police can't eradicate crime from a city. Problems are solved by communities working together. Policing services and community organizations all play a role, but the Municipality itself is the most powerful influencer. Police-led initiatives such as "community hubs" and "situation tables" can help establish relationships with community organizations to identify needs and response strategies. But to move the dial, collaboration is essential.

Building a business case for resources

At the end of the day, Municipalities provide the policing budget, but there are many ways of arriving at one that reflects community needs and delivers desired outcomes. It's crucial to tease out the true drivers that need attention and create a budget that aligns with those objectives.

KPMG's experienced partners can help Municipal Councils demonstrate need for policing services and guide policing services to better demonstrate accountability for those budget lines. We've worked with Municipalities and Police Boards and Commissions across Canada and around the world on funding models. We've performed in-depth performance reviews to demonstrate accountability and justify resource allocations. Our expertise focuses on data, budgeting, and management, but our priority is always to enhance public safety and facilitate organizational cooperation.

To explore strategies to meet your community's public safety needs and build accountability into police services funding, contact us at KPMG in Canada.

Contact us

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