

When tragedy calls

ACT Policing members go the extra mile in the midst of human tragedy.



Senior Constable Dan Williams, left, and Constable Richard York have been recognised for their humanity.

AFP Commissioner Andrew Colvin has said that most of the best work of police will rarely be seen. It is part of the job that police officers will be asked to confront often tragic human situations in their service to the community.

More often than not this service will take place behind the scenes, far from the public view. In one such case in Canberra last year, police officers couldn't help but go the extra mile when two young children were confronted with their own family tragedy.

On 8 December 2015, the AFP's community policing service in the Australian Capital Territory attended a suspected drug overdose death in the Canberra suburb of Florey. Senior Constable Dan Williams, Constable Richard York and Sergeant David Wills from ACT Policing responded from Belconnen Police Station.

A deceased male had been found non-responsive in bed by his 13-year-old son, Brad*. The initial information said Brad had noticed his father was very stiff, there was a lot of "white stuff" on the pillow where his dad's head had been and there was a syringe in one of his dad's hands. The deceased had a history of drug addiction including use of heroin and, more recently, Ice.

Brad closed the bedroom door and made sure his 10-year-old sister got ready and left for school. When she had left, Brad contacted Triple 0 and asked for police assistance.

ACT Policing responded from Woden and Belconnen stations. Among the responders were Constable York and Senior Constable Williams. Given the circumstances, police spent a significant amount of time looking after Brad and provided him timely support. Constable York noted the situation was particularly sad as the Christmas period loomed.

"It was a very brave effort from the little fellow," Constable York says. "I think the fact his son was able to do what he did and get his younger sister and her friend off to school without even kind of thinking about it. He wasn't looking after himself; he was looking after his baby sister."

Constable Dan Marshall and Constable Christopher Pham (Belconnen Patrol) also attended during the incident, along with Detective Acting Sergeant Dan Shaw, First Constable

Jeff Smith, Constable Jamie Whyte and Senior Constable Ben Russell (Criminal Investigations – Woden Crime).

At this point it became apparent the deceased had pawned Brad's Sony PlayStation prior to his death. Constable York took the initiative to purchase the PlayStation back from Cash Converters. He collected \$70 from the members present and set off for Cash Converters with Senior Constable Williams. Cash Converters returned the PlayStation without charge and the money collected was used to purchase Brad a soccer game to use with the PlayStation.

Unfortunately, the situation is all too familiar to police officers. "We attend a lot of deaths and a lot of different circumstances," says Senior Constable Williams. "We don't like doing it, we just do it – a deceased person, a drug overdose – in our role it is not too uncommon. We have got to get in and do what we need to do, with as low an impact on the affected family members as we can."

But the officers decided they could make a small difference. Senior Constable Williams says losing his PlayStation was just another bad outcome.

"It's like 'what can we do here?' Surely, we can do something because the PlayStation was never going to be brought back. If we don't do something about it, if we don't try and do something then he's not going to get that back, because no-one is ever going to go back and pay that."

The actions throughout the incident by Constable York and Senior Constable Williams were recognised in a formal Recognition of Members along with the other attending officers that helped without hesitation, noting their "impressive care, compassion and concern".

"All members' actions go 'above and beyond' and embody not only the true spirit of community policing, but also of the Christmas season. They should all be congratulated for their actions and acknowledged for their selfless acts," the document states.

Finally, it states that Brad may require acknowledgement for his own mature handling of the incident, despite the shocking circumstances.

*name changed for privacy