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## Police 'don't ask' policy okayed

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The Toronto Police Services Board voted unanimously in favour of a policy that would have officers refrain from asking witnesses and victims of crime about their immigration status, but supporters of the policy said it fell short of the "don't ask, don't tell" position they were seeking.

"We feel that today is a qualified victory for the 'don't ask, don't tell' campaign," said Sima Sahar Zerehi, one of the campaign's organizers.

She said the language adopted by the board is too vague in specifying when officers have the right to ask about immigration status. It allows for circumstances where police have "bona fide" reasons to ask for documentation, but the campaigners would have preferred a ban except in cases where officers are executing an arrest warrant.

Chief Bill Blair expressed his support for the new measure and said the campaigners' concerns will be addressed when the new police procedure is formally drafted.

"I think it will enable officers to deal with victims in a very compassionate way and a very appropriate way," Chief Blair said.

It will also help police keep the streets safe, he said. Many victims of crime who don't have status in Canada might be afraid to speak to police if there's a chance they could be discovered and deported.

"We need them to report those crimes," Chief Blair said. "We have a responsibility to keep everyone in the city of Toronto safe.

"I have a difficulty with the 'don't tell' part, because police officers have a statutory obligation to report information about a person should they become aware of it. . . . At the same time, it's appropriate for us to instruct [officers] on exercising their discretion when inquiring about a person's immigration status."

Mayor David Miller said a similar strategy is being implemented across many city services. The exception is social assistance, where there is legal obligation to ask about immigration status.

"Where it's not necessary, the city doesn't ask," Mr. Miller said.

The board also heard yesterday that TAVIS, a new rapid response anti-violence strategy based on a community policing model, is already paying dividends.

Chief Blair told the board that calls from the public reporting incidents of gunfire, usually citizens reporting the sound of shots fired, are up 103 per cent this year from 2005.

He said that in the first four weeks of TAVIS, more than 120 calls have been received, compared with 62 last year.

It may be because there are simply more incidents to report, the chief said, but it's also possible that people are more concerned about gunfire and are more willing to call police.

"I think it's a very positive thing because it gives us an opportunity to respond," Chief Blair said. He said the presence of uniformed officers in greater numbers in the targeted troubled neighbourhoods is increasing public confidence in police and encouraging witnesses to feel they can come forward without putting themselves in danger.

"We are moving into those neighbourhoods very rapidly, and in some cases with a lot of personnel, in response to any violent incident," Chief Blair said. The initiative is the result of discussions with police in the United States, including chiefs in Boston, Los Angeles and Chicago.

"We're looking at best practices, what has worked in other places," he said.

"The signal I want to send is that if you're engaged in violence, you're going to get an awful lot of us. And we've been able to put more people on the street, which is important."

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