



THE EVOLVE PROGRAM: A PSYCHO-SOCIAL INTERVENTION PROGRAM FOR TARGETED VIOLENCE

Date: November 19, 2024

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KEY EVENT

On November 19, 2024, Dr. Michael King presented *The Evolve Program: A Psycho-Social Intervention Program for Targeted Violence* for this year's West Coast Security Conference. The key points discussed were the positive impact that providing psychosocial support had on reducing extremist beliefs in participants, the importance of building a trusting relationship with participants, and that the program is available for free to anyone needing assistance in Alberta, Saskatchewan, or Manitoba.

NATURE OF DISCUSSION

Dr. King introduced the Evolve Program, operated by the Organization for the Prevention of Violence (OPV), as a psycho-social intervention program dedicated to preventing and countering targeted violence motivated by violent extremism, hate, and violent conspiracy theories. The OPV has developed its own method of measuring success by having caseworkers track improvements and setbacks in the areas that the Evolve Program addresses after each session. The program is free, and accepts voluntary and mandated participation by individuals anywhere on the "violent extremist timeline" in Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba.

BACKGROUND

Presentation

The Evolve Program is one of the OPV's flagship programs that helps individuals who are involved in, or affected by, targeted violence. It is one of several

countering violent extremism (CVE) intervention programs in Canada that provide professional support to aid individuals in disengaging from violent extremism. Dr. King noted that the Evolve Program provides support for both involved individuals, who themselves espouse violent extremist ideologies, and their families who are affected by an involved individual's behaviour. He emphasized that the program is free with no wait list, providing care to all individuals who need it quickly, and referrals can be made by involved or affected individuals.

Individuals at any stage of his "violent extremist timeline," which demonstrates the general trajectory of an individual's experience with terrorism, are able to receive intervention through the Evolve Program. As Dr. King explained, the timeline involves initial radicalization, mobilization and observable behaviour, disengagement of physical actions, then deradicalization, all of which can be experienced by individuals in different orders and nonlinearly.

Participants work with caseworkers, mental health professionals, and mentors to help them disengage from extremism. The mentors are unique to this program, providing individuals access to someone with lived-experience, or deep knowledge, of extremist issues. Currently, there are former white supremacists, an Islamic scholar, and a former special forces veteran that contribute to addressing different concerns and beliefs of the participants. Their diverse backgrounds provide a legitimacy that fosters trust, ultimately creating a strong connection between mentors and participants that may contribute to the overall success of the program.

Involved individuals who are either religiously or ideologically motivated make up the majority of participants, with lower participation from others affected by them. The program intentionally involves the families of involved participants to help them disengage from extremism and also helps families foster participation of unwilling involved individuals. Dr. King noted that there has been a concerning trend of referred individuals being younger now than other times since 2019, suggesting that the risks associated with targeted violence are affecting younger populations.

To determine the program's efficacy, the OPV has created special measures to try to confirm that the program is producing positive impacts. As Dr. King explained, caseworkers will track participants' progress in each life domain that the program addresses, as well as violent extremism domains including expressed grievances, violent thoughts, violent actions, involvement in extremist networks,

extremist behaviours, and extremist beliefs. Any category could see progress or a setback, and the severity of the change is documented. Dr. King showed a case study where the intervention has been successful, with violent extremism domain improvements coinciding with life domain improvements and overall significant decreases in extremist beliefs, the key area that the program focuses on. He emphasized that the first year tends to be the most challenging, which he suggested may be due to the time required to build trust encouraging participants to share more of their thoughts and ideologies. This could be deemed to be setbacks by caseworkers at the time, despite no actual change occurring. After the initial first year in the program, Dr. King noted a clear trajectory for improvement in all areas; although not all participants see the exact same trajectory, there is evidence that the intervention is helping.

KEY POINTS OF DISCUSSION

- The Evolve program provides participants with psychosocial support, including mentorship, to help participants disengage from violent extremist ideologies and beliefs.
- Individuals can be either involved or affected by someone involved in extremism to participate. The program intentionally works with families to help involved individuals disengage from their extremist beliefs.
- Caseworkers use a system unique to the OPV to evaluate any improvements or setbacks at each appointment to track the program's effectiveness.
- The Evolve program is available to address violent extremism, conspiracies, and fixated grievances to mandated and voluntary participants anywhere on the "violent extremist timeline" free of charge with no waitlist.

FURTHER READING

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