

Annual Report 2021-2022 – Ombudsman's remarks

Good morning, and welcome to everyone here today, in person and online. It is good to be back with you here at Queen's Park today.

I want to acknowledge that this land is the traditional territory of many nations, including the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishnabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee and the Wendat peoples, and is now home to many diverse First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples.

I am here today to report on my Office's work over the past fiscal year. I am, of course, well aware that this is the first week of a brand-new legislative session, and that we are only a couple of months away from municipal and school board elections.

We usually release our Annual Report in June, but the provincial election necessitated a change in timing, so we planned for August, not knowing that members would be returning to the Assembly this month.

In that context, I would like to offer a reminder about the nature of my role and the work of this Office. We are independent of government, apolitical and non-partisan. We do not get involved in the political process or political decisions.

We oversee government administration and the delivery of provincial and municipal government services, to ensure they are fair to everyone, and working as they should.

As noted in today's report, complaints and inquiries to my Office are trending upwards. They are almost back to pre-pandemic levels, as more and more public services rebound from the impact of shutdowns and emergencies. We see that as good news. The more we hear from Ontarians, the more we are able to help them resolve their issues, and to identify larger systemic problems.

This report is filled with examples of how we can help with administrative problems, big and small. It shows how my Office is uniquely positioned to assist all stakeholders – from citizens, to provincial ministries and public sector bodies, to elected officials.

Our mandate now includes so much more than provincial government agencies – which was already a very broad jurisdiction. The expansions of our mandate in 2016, and again in 2019, were very challenging for us as an organization.

Amalgamating three separate organizations, each with distinctive mandates, stakeholder groups – and even three different collective agreements – into a single organization, while working remotely in the midst of a global pandemic, has been a complex exercise, to say the least. However, it did present an opportunity for us as problem solvers.

We have been able to help so many more Ontarians, by using our expertise to promote transparency, fairness and accountability more widely across the public sector. We also helped public servants by either validating their work, or providing constructive feedback on how to improve their services. In addition, we helped elected representatives serve their constituents by taking referrals and providing assistance.

I am particularly proud of the work we've done in our two newest areas, children and youth in care, and French language services, because it was a team effort involving the talents of our entire office. We published investigative reports this past spring in both areas, leveraging the expertise of our specialized Children and Youth and French Language Services units.

In March, French Language Services Commissioner Kelly Burke reported on her investigation into Laurentian University's cuts to French-language programs during its financial restructuring. In April, I reported on the sudden closures of two youth justice programs in the North.

In both cases, we revealed how a lack of planning and consultation adversely affected the rights of vulnerable people. In both cases, we made recommendations for constructive change. And in both cases, all of our recommendations were accepted.

Both of these units have done considerable outreach to the community, to ensure people know their rights, and how we can help them exercise them. They have illustrated how this Office can play an important role in protecting citizens' rights and even in reconciliation, which is a goal that we will continue to prioritize in the years to come.

We have also been busier than ever in the areas we began overseeing around the time I took office in 2016: Municipalities, universities and school boards. The pandemic has clearly been difficult for these bodies, and we've worked with a great many of them, not just to flag complaints, but to identify best practices. These can involve everything from making sure a virtual meeting is open to the public, to ensuring that a university's vaccine policy is fair.

Of course, we continue to engage with provincial government agencies and ministries, and we resolved thousands of individual cases, involving everything from birth certificates to family support payments.

We worked proactively to help people with disabilities renew their health cards online with photo ID, and to even help new arrivals from Ukraine cut through red tape to get driver's licences.

As always, our frontline staff used their expertise in navigating bureaucracy to achieve these results.

We stayed on top of longstanding issues as well. In our work, when our recommendations are accepted, we follow up to ensure they are implemented. For example, we continue to work with senior officials on access to services and supports for adults and children with developmental disabilities.

A perennial issue I talk about is de-escalation training for police in dealing with people in crisis. The fact is, policing and corrections have historically been areas in which it is extremely difficult to drive change. Experts and coroners' juries have called for more de-escalation training and a new use-of-force model for decades. I made these same recommendations in 2016, and they were accepted – but progress has been painfully slow. Still, we continue to work on this issue, and I look forward to discussing it soon with the new Solicitor General, along with the need to improve oversight of vulnerable inmates in segregation.

In the coming months, I also look forward to reporting on two important and extremely complex systemic investigations that we have pursued throughout the pandemic. One relates to delays at the Landlord and Tenant Board, and the other is about oversight of long-term care homes during COVID. As today's report points out, we resolved individual cases – and fixed issues that affected hundreds of people – while these investigations continued.

I look forward to being back here later this year to discuss those cases in more detail. For now, I am happy to answer your questions about today's report.

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