



## Annual Report 2023-2024 – Ombudsman’s Remarks

Bonjour, boozhoo, and good morning to everyone present and those joining us online today. We are honoured to gather on the traditional territory of the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishnabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee, and the Wendat peoples, who have stewarded these lands for generations. It is our duty to recognize, respect, and honor the treaties that have shaped our shared history and continue to guide our path towards reconciliation, a commitment central to our mission and detailed in this year’s report.

This annual report is not just a compilation of statistics; it is a testament to our office’s unwavering dedication to justice and accountability. We have seen a significant increase in cases, totaling over 27,000 this year, marking one of the busiest periods in the history of our organization. This surge includes matters inherited when our mandate expanded five years ago, incorporating responsibilities previously held by the Child Advocate and the French Language Services Commissioner.

To manage this increased workload effectively, we are unveiling a strategic plan that charts our course for the next three years. This plan emphasizes service excellence, enhancing public services, and fostering unity and empowerment within our team. As we approach our 50th anniversary in 2025, we look forward to reporting on our progress on these initiatives next year.

Our efforts have yielded tangible results, particularly through our Children and Youth Unit, which has handled nearly 8,000 cases in the past five years. By amplifying the voices of children and youth across Ontario, we have driven systemic improvements in care facilities and educational settings, ensuring their rights are upheld and their concerns addressed.

Similarly, our French Language Services Unit achieved a record 511 cases this year, a testament to the confidence our interventions have inspired within the Francophone community. This represents the highest number of complaints since the role of Commissioner was established and speaks to the confidence our work has inspired.

The Ombudsman methodology of direct engagement, issue-flagging, and proactive investigation underpins our effectiveness in ensuring compliance with the *French Language Services Act*. Our French Language Services Commissioner, Carl Bouchard, will be reporting in the coming weeks on his “own motion” investigation into out-of-home advertising. This investigation was launched – as ombudsmen sometimes do – on his own initiative and not in response to complaints.

Yet, amidst these successes, challenges persist. We continue to confront systemic issues related to access to justice, human rights in correctional facilities, transparency in municipal governance, and the delivery of developmental disability services.

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Specifically, we are seeing adults with developmental disabilities not getting the supports and services they need. We are assisting people who have been deprived of access to justice by an under-resourced and overwhelmed tribunal system. We are hearing of children being housed by struggling children's aid societies in offices or trailers. We are addressing the human rights of inmates that are being violated in a corrections system that both staff and inmates say has inadequate resources and infrastructure.

Our ongoing investigations and advocacy for fairness aim not merely to resolve complaints but to foster broader reforms that uphold the principles of fairness, transparency, and a respect for rights. And while I cannot tell the government how or where to spend money, my duty is to highlight the pain points in public services and shine a light on the hardships being caused in sectors that are under great strain and require urgent attention.

In the meantime, this report showcases our commitment to achieving meaningful outcomes, as highlighted by our interventions in areas like the Landlord Tenant Board, where systemic delays have necessitated ongoing scrutiny and advocacy for improvements. Or in long-term care, where we demonstrated how crucial inspections are to keep residents and staff safe during a public health crisis. Each recommendation implemented represents a step forward in our pursuit of justice for all Ontarians.

In our top area of complaints, correctional facilities, we not only handled 4,444 cases, we saw progress on our systemic investigations about the use of force against inmates, and the use of segregation. We also sent a team of investigators to tour several facilities to see conditions firsthand in a year of severe overcrowding, and have resumed regular visits post-COVID.

Our systemic investigation into cases of people with developmental disabilities who are being inappropriately housed in hospitals is nearly finished, and I look forward to publishing a report in the coming months. But in the meantime, our staff have worked with the relevant ministries and agencies to find suitable placements for several individuals who were hospitalized for years.

Looking ahead, the road is clear but demanding. We remain resolute in our mission to safeguard the rights of vulnerable populations, advocate for systemic improvements, and ensure that every complaint entrusted to us receives the attention it deserves. Our role transcends mere complaint handling; it is about embedding democracy, driving change, and promoting a more equitable society.

In closing, I echo the sentiments of Emily O'Reilly, the European Union Ombudsman, who has aptly described the role of the ombudsman institution as not just complaint handlers, but as architects of democracy and agents of transformation.

Thank you all for your attention. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.