

Opening remarks – Paul Dubé Annual Report 2018-2019

Good morning and thanks to all of you for being here, and for watching via webcast.

I'm here today to report on the work my office has done for Ontarians in the past fiscal year, as well as to update you on the brand new areas we began overseeing just last month.

This has been a year of significant change across Ontario, at the provincial and local levels. It has been a year of great change for my office as well.

Seven months ago, we learned, from media reports, that new legislation was going to transfer the investigative function of the Child Advocate to our office, as well as the full function of the French Language Services Commissioner.

Once the law passed in December, we took on the enormous challenge of merging those two formerly independent offices with ours. This meant creating a new organizational structure from three separate offices with three different bargaining units, finding synergies between three different locations, and making an entirely new budget proposal for the resources we needed.

It meant ensuring that all three offices continued to serve the public without interruption, and being ready by May 1. And all of this while dealing with our regular work – including a 30% increase in complaints.

Taken together, what all of this presented was an opportunity. An opportunity to help more Ontarians than ever before. To build on the expertise of our new colleagues in dealing with French language rights and helping children and youth in care. And to demonstrate how effective the Ombudsman model can be, whether it's through informal resolution of bureaucratic glitches or in-depth investigation of major systemic issues.

This report is full of examples of how we do that, across the wide swath of public sector bodies we oversee.

We do it by working proactively and addressing hot complaint topics before they grow. That's exactly what we did when we received more than 2,000 complaints about the Ontario Cannabis Store right after it opened. We set up a dedicated team that worked closely with the OCS to iron out its customer service problems quickly.

We also do it by investigating complex, longstanding issues, like the fundamentally flawed way the Ministry of Transportation informs drivers of licence suspensions for unpaid fines. After we revealed that many people were on the road with no idea they were driving illegally, the Ministry agreed to overhaul its system and report back to us.

Although our systemic investigations get well-deserved attention for their positive impact, the fact is that we get positive results for individuals on a daily basis.

I'm particularly proud this year of the way we were able to promote people's fundamental rights:

- We helped disabled and homeless people obtain health coverage.

- We helped people with developmental disabilities find placements when they could not be cared for at home.
- We helped refugees get driver's licences after their identification was taken away by border agents.
- We helped inmates who were being held in inhumane conditions.
- We assisted Indigenous inmates who had no access to cultural services that the province had committed to provide.
- And our interventions prompted solutions for transgender inmates whose specific needs were not being met.
- We even championed the rights of a journalist, whose freedom of expression was violated when his laptop was seized by the municipal council whose meeting he was covering.

And then there's the work we have done with municipalities, school boards and universities: You may remember, our mandate was extended to these sectors less than four years ago. Since then, we have resolved thousands of cases and shared best practices to help them improve their service to the public. We also provided stakeholders with resources like our open meeting guide and digital digest of open meeting cases, to help municipalities comply with the law.

This is the approach we are now taking to let Ontarians know we can now help them with child protection issues and French language services.

Our Children and Youth unit has handled hundreds of complaints since May 1, with some good resolutions so far. They are also continuing work on ongoing investigations, and I look forward to releasing reports on those in the coming months.

Our French Language Services unit is also taking complaints steadily, and pursuing ongoing investigations. I've also participated in meetings and events to reach out to stakeholders in both areas.

I expect the profile of our French language services work to increase once we have a full-time Commissioner in place who will lead the unit. We will launch our nationwide search for a commissioner very soon. In the meantime, tomorrow, we are hosting the annual conference of the International Association of Language Commissioners, of which I am now a member – and I look forward to exchanging ideas with experts in minority languages around the world.

I also recently attended the annual meeting of the Canadian Council of Child and Youth Advocates, to share strategies and expertise with our counterparts in that area.

I'm aware that one challenge our office faces as we grow is that we oversee so many things, our role is not always well understood. That is why we divide our work into topics – law and order, social services, and so on – to illustrate all the different types of things we can help with. And as this year's cover shows, we've now added two more.

We tell as many stories as we can in this report in the hope that they will inspire someone with similar problems to come to us for help. If you have any questions about these stories, I'm happy to answer them now.