

## Annual Report 2020-2021 – Ombudsman's remarks

Good morning and thank you to everyone tuning in today, in person, online and on the phone.

I am pleased to be back at Queen's Park to table my Annual Report, after so many months of working remotely.

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 Hadenosaunee and the Wendat peoples, and is now home to many diverse First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples.

I am here to talk to you about the work that my Office has done over the past fiscal year to help Ontarians with issues across the provincial public sector.

It's important to recognize the gravity of what this province has faced in that time: More than 9,000 Ontarians have died from COVID-19, and almost 550,000 contracted the virus. Every aspect of our public and private sectors has been affected.

As we seek to learn and implement lessons from this crisis, we must be mindful of the incredible work and sacrifice of so many across this province. I want to recognize the co-operation and tremendous efforts of public servants at the provincial and local levels, which helped us resolve more than 20,000 complaints this past fiscal year.

Ontarians relied on public services more than ever during this time – but at times also found them more complicated and difficult to access. With directives, plans, policies, and programs constantly evolving in response to the ever-changing state of public health, many turned to us to help them obtain services and information when they felt lost and overwhelmed.

The stories outlined in my report are a testament to the many ways in which we serve Ontarians and enhance governance – by promoting transparency, accountability, fairness, and respect for rights. We helped thousands of people get the information they needed and the services they required, all while working remotely, like most of the public service.

For vulnerable people like inmates in provincial jails, children and youth in care and custody, or Ontarians reliant on social benefits who were unable to reach caseworkers, our staff's ability to connect them with the right person was particularly valuable. Or even, in the words of one father who sought our help with Ontario Works benefits, "life-changing."

We helped many people sort out issues with the various government relief and emergency benefit programs, and also nudged officials of those programs to help applicants who were unfairly denied.

Sometimes we simply directed people to information – for example, if they were worried that their health cards or marriage licences were going to expire. Other times, we made persistent inquiries with officials at many levels – for example, to help adults with complex special needs who were languishing in hospitals because their placements and supports were delayed by the pandemic.

Another important aspect of our work is being proactive and offering guidance to government. For instance, when municipal meetings went virtual for the first time, we put our expertise in open meetings to good use, advising municipalities on how to ensure their electronic meetings were within the law.

Of course, we are well known for our systemic investigations, and we continued with several of these against the backdrop of the pandemic. Last month, the Ministry of Health agreed to all of my recommendations for overhauling its oversight of ambulance services, after we published our latest investigative report. We have also had excellent co-operation from that Ministry and the Ministry of Long-Term Care in our ongoing investigation of the province's oversight of long-term care during the pandemic.

We have seen progress and reform at the Landlord and Tenant Board as well, as our investigation into delays there continues. And our two new investigations are progressing, one into the closures of two youth justice centres in the North, and another into cuts to French-language programs at Laurentian University.

I'm pleased to say that in the newest areas of our jurisdiction – French language services and children and youth – we have done a great deal to ensure that the rights of Francophones and young people in care are respected.

Commissioner Kelly Burke's first Annual Report and recommendations on improving French language services were well received in December, and she will report in detail on our work in that area later this year.

Our Children and Youth Unit has worked tirelessly to ensure the concerns of young people in care are heard. They participate in meetings every week with senior government and child welfare sector leaders to discuss emerging issues, and do regular virtual outreach with kids in care and service providers. They have flagged disturbing complaint trends, such as children's aid societies resorting to calling police to deal with children in their care.

All of these examples demonstrate the value of independent oversight. Which brings me to two areas where I feel a lack of oversight and action is a disservice to the public: Public health units and policing.

Public health units, which have played such a huge role in our lives this past year, have no independent oversight. Not only was my office unable to address the complaints we received about them, we could not refer them to the Patient Ombudsman or anywhere else. For any public body to function effectively, there must be oversight, a complaint mechanism, and a way to have complaints addressed.

And after a year of protests calling for police reform across North America, I have to note the regrettable lack of progress on my 2016 recommendations to improve police de-

escalation training. As well, parts of new policing legislation that would expand my office's jurisdiction over all of the province's police oversight bodies have still not been brought into force.

I encourage the government to address these gaps in the oversight of police and public health units as part of its efforts to implement lessons learned from this pandemic year.

I'm now happy to take questions from the journalists in attendance.