

Ombudsman's Message - Our service to citizens during the coronavirus emergency

(April 9, 2020) In accordance with the guidance of public health authorities and the provincial government, the office locations of Ombudsman Ontario have been closed since March 16. Despite this, my staff and I continue to work from home during the provincial state of emergency and remain available to assist the people of Ontario.

During this period of pandemic and social distancing that has disrupted our lives so much, I want the people of Ontario to know that my team is working diligently to ensure that we remain accessible and able to help them as much as possible.

Our Executive Management Team (EMT) meets by conference call every morning to review the latest developments and public health news, share updates on the progress of work being performed by each section of our office, find solutions to the challenges they face, and engage in issues management and problem solving with the public and key stakeholders.

Although the workload and challenges have increased considerably, I am immensely proud of the concern and dedication my entire team has exhibited these past weeks for the people we serve, and their commitment to doing what it takes to continue to assist citizens and inform government during these trying times.

Almost all of our staff (more than 100) are equipped with the necessary technology to enable them to work remotely in a technologically secure and effective manner. Our Information Technology team has done an incredible job of keeping us connected and operational while ensuring security of our data and the confidentiality of complainants' files. We have activated teleconferencing lines to enhance communication among teams and with stakeholders, as well as video conferencing tools that have enhanced internal collaboration and will facilitate interviews for recruitment and investigations.

We continue to receive complaints in all areas of our jurisdiction through our website and by email. While working from home over the past few weeks, we have received some 800 new cases, including almost 300 related to the COVID-19 pandemic alone.

Complaints are being received and responded to according to our normal processes, with the most urgent ones triaged for quick response. Although response times in some cases may be slower because the officials with whom we regularly interact are also working remotely, we are achieving critical results.

One of my main preoccupations since the pandemic was declared has been how to remain accessible to the most vulnerable citizens in our province.

Children and youth in care or custody, for example, may not have online access. Our Children and Youth Unit staff have cell phones and can be reached while working remotely. Young people in care or custody can leave a message at 1-800-263-2841 or 416-325-5669 – all calls are being reviewed. In the past few weeks, the Unit has handled close to 100 new cases. We are also in regular contact with youth justice facilities regarding the effect of this situation on youth in custody, and officials there are responding to our inquiries promptly. The Children and Youth Unit also continues to monitor and follow up on reports of death or serious bodily harm related to young people involved in the child welfare system.

I have serious concerns about the potential impact of coronavirus on correctional facilities, so we have also arranged to set up special phone lines to enable inmates to reach us. This was essential, because their normal points of contact with us – our toll-free phone line and mail-in forms provided through jails – aren't accessible during the present shutdown. (We typically receive thousands of complaints from inmates – 5,711 in 2018-2019).

Several of our Investigators have been issued cellphones so that, beginning next week, inmates can call them during designated hours. Correctional facilities will post these new numbers near the phones used by inmates. This constructive solution is the result of ongoing efforts between our Office, the Ministry of the Solicitor General and senior officials in correctional facilities to keep abreast of the serious risks that coronavirus poses to inmates and correctional staff.

In the meantime, we have responded to several complaints from family members concerned about loved ones who are in correctional facilities. The Ministry has been forthcoming with us in providing its plans and safety protocols to deal with the pandemic, and we have been able to provide some of this information to reassure many of those who came to us with concerns.

We continue to help Ontarians resolve complaints quickly and effectively, as we do with thousands of cases every year. (Of 27,419 cases in 2018-2019, 62% were resolved within two weeks). Our staff have used their expertise in navigating bureaucracy to help people sort through the rapidly changing and sometimes confusing information about public services during this time.

For example, a woman whose job has been deemed an essential service during the pandemic sought our help when her driver's licence was suspended due to a medical matter and she was temporarily unable to get to work. Our staff were able to facilitate the reinstatement of her licence within a few days.

We reassured one woman whose driver's licence expired while she was self-quarantining, by pointing her to information about the Ministry of Transportation extending all driver's licences due to expire after March 1. And we eased the concerns of a man who couldn't pay his

property taxes while in quarantine, by confirming with its municipality that it planned to waive late tax payment penalties.

As well, we are assessing several complaints from the public and frontline staff that relate to COVID-19 health and safety protocols in a number of provincial and broader public sector bodies. The Directors of our Investigations, Legal Services, Children and Youth and French Language Services teams hold regular teleconferences with senior officials in several ministries to bring issues to their attention, learn about their pandemic planning measures, and share information about complaint trends.

We continue to investigate complaints about closed municipal meetings, and engaged with the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing regarding municipal councils holding virtual meetings during this emergency, to ensure the requirements for open meetings are balanced with public safety.

Our systemic investigations into Landlord and Tenant Board delays and the province's handling of ambulance service complaints continue, and reports will be issued upon completion. Timelines for these will be determined by the ability of the organizations in question to provide the necessary evidence and, once the investigations are complete, to respond to our findings. In dealing with these organizations, we make it clear that while we understand the pressures and challenges they are facing during this time, this does not prevent us from fulfilling our oversight responsibilities.

The French Language Services Commissioner and her Unit remain vigilant and engaged to ensure that, among other things, government communications during this crisis are provided in French as well as English. For example, the Commissioner recently wrote to the Premier to underscore the heightened importance of government messages being communicated in French as well as in English during this crisis. In his response to the Commissioner, the Premier committed to ensuring all information about COVID-19 is available in both languages, that Telehealth service is available in French, and that ministers speak French where possible at news briefings. He wrote: "As you noted, Francophones in Ontario have the right to receive communications services in French, equivalent to those offered in English. This is even more critical at this time of crisis."

We are also continuing to build the French Language Services Unit, the Children and Youth Unit, and our Early Resolutions team. We are actively recruiting Early Resolution Officers and Investigators through our online hiring portal, and interviews and tests are being conducted via videoconference. Our Human Resources and Administration team is working steadily to find the right people to place in the right positions.



It goes without saying that during a state of emergency, timely and effective communications become more important than ever. Our Communications team has been busier than ever, helping keep stakeholders informed and aware, in both English and French.

I want the citizens of Ontario to know that the Ombudsman's Office is here for you and working hard to respond to your needs. Furthermore, with the knowledge gained during this exceptional time, we are – and will continue to be – uniquely positioned to inform the government about the impact of its administrative actions and assist it in optimizing its responses.

As always, it is a privilege to lead such a professional and passionate team that is playing a key role during this crisis, and remains more committed than ever to serve the people and institutions of Ontario.

-Paul Dubé, Ombudsman of Ontario