



ONTARIO'S WATCHDOG
CHIEN DE GARDE DE L'ONTARIO

Annual Report 2013-2014
Ombudsman's Remarks
André Marin

Thanks to everyone who is joining us today, here in the Media Studio and via live webcast. This is an unusually exciting time here at the Legislature. Most years, when we meet here in June, it feels like the end of the school year – a time to reflect back on past lessons and achievements. But this year, with a new legislative session starting next week and a new cabinet being sworn in tomorrow, it's also a time to look forward.

The report I'm releasing today does both. It details the unprecedented volume of cases we dealt with in the past year, and updates the important ones to come. It reviews the significant progress made by government in responding to serious systemic problems – including modernizing the mandate of my office. And it sets the stage for building on that momentum.

Let me start with the flood of cases this year – a 37% increase over last year. As you know, a good chunk of those are Hydro One complaints, now at more than 7,900. But we've also seen an increase in many of the province's most complained about organizations, and in complaints about the MUSH sector. In my business, an increase in complaints is good news – the more people we can help, the better.

The Hydro One case is a great illustration of what our office does. While we are probing the systemic problems in their billing and customer service, we're also helping individual customers every day with some egregious problems – like the woman who had \$8,400 sucked out of her bank account for a hydro bill that wasn't even based on a meter reading. We are doing the same for people with severe developmental disabilities who are in crisis – while we dig into the deeper issues, we have worked to get them immediate help as well, so they are not left at police stations and homeless shelters.

In a nutshell, that's how we work – efficient, effective and outside the box. We cut through red tape and get results.

This is why, in addition to the individual stories we highlight in our report, we also flag persistent complaint trends and target broad, systemic issues. This way, we root out problems in the bureaucracy that affect thousands or even millions of people. For example, today's report exposes a shocking communication breakdown between the Family Responsibility Office and the Ontario Disability Support Program that deprived

families of hundreds of thousands of dollars, simply because the two agencies failed to talk to one another.

We also follow up on our previous work. For example, we praise the government for things like cracking down on the “code of silence” among prison guards, or working with the OPP to address operational stress injuries among police. And also to remind it of unfinished business, like the infamous “G20 law” that still hasn’t been replaced, or the regulation of the non-emergency medical transfer industry. Both of these things were derailed because of the election, but we’ll make sure they aren’t forgotten.

That brings me to the most exciting development of the past year – the government’s move to open up the MUSH sector to Ombudsman oversight for the first time ever. As you all know, for almost 40 years, my office has had to turn away everyone who came to us with complaints about municipalities, universities, school boards, hospitals and long-term care homes, children’s aid societies and police. Every provincial ombudsman in Canada has some jurisdiction over this sector, except in Ontario.

But last March, the “Accountability Bill” – known as Bill 179 – made history by proposing to give us oversight of the M, U and S in MUSH; municipalities, universities and school boards. Although this bill wasn’t quite everything I dreamed it would be, I was pleased to have been consulted on its first incarnation, and I was even more pleased to hear the Premier say last week that she intends to reintroduce it.

My message to her and the new cabinet is that we are here to offer more constructive input on how MUSH bodies can be held to account, at long last. The important thing is that thousands of Ontarians who have problems with these organizations will finally benefit from our help – the same kind of help that is detailed in so many stories in this report.

I also want all the returning MPPs, new or re-elected, to know we are here to help their constituents. Finally, I hope everyone involved in the MUSH bodies that we might soon oversee will take a look at this report, to see how we could help them, constructively and productively, just as we do with the hundreds of provincial bodies we oversee.

Now, before I take your questions, I just want to remind members of the public who are watching us via live webcast that I will be doing a live chat at 2 p.m. on our website, and I look forward to hearing from them at that time.