

Hydro One investigation update: Complaints to Ombudsman more than triple since Tuesday

(TORONTO – February 7, 2014) Ontario Ombudsman André Marin’s investigation into complaints about Hydro One’s billing practices and customer service has garnered **2,185** complaints and submissions, more than **1,500** of those since Tuesday – the most complaints the office has ever received about a provincial body in such a short time.

Prior to launching the investigation on February 4, the Ombudsman’s office had received **624** complaints about Hydro One between April 1, 2013 and January 31, 2014. Although Hydro One has been among the top 10 sources of complaints to the Ombudsman in recent years, Mr. Marin announced the investigation in light of a recent spike in complaints about “alarming” Hydro One bills and poor customer service. In 2012-2013 there were **328** complaints; in 2011-2012 there were **232**.

Mr. Marin met with Hydro One President and CEO Carmine Marcello on Thursday at the Ombudsman’s Office. “We had a constructive and productive meeting. Mr. Marcello pledged Hydro One’s full co-operation with our investigation,” said Mr. Marin.

The Ombudsman also sat in with complaint intake staff on Wednesday and spoke to a few callers to hear their concerns firsthand. “We have assigned all available staff to take as many calls as possible, and everyone is working hard to handle the hundreds of complaints that are coming in via web and email,” he said.

Complaints to the Ombudsman can be filed anytime via the complaint form at www.ombudsman.on.ca (web or mobile device) and the email address info@ombudsman.on.ca – or during office hours by calling 1-800-263-1830.

“I want to assure everyone that they will be heard, whether they call, email or contact us through the web or their smartphone or tablet,” Mr. Marin said. “Our staff will work to resolve individual cases with Hydro One even as we dig into the broader systemic issues at the heart of this investigation.”

The Special Ombudsman Response Team (SORT) is doing a nine-month probe, focusing on two systemic issues: Whether Hydro One’s customer billing practices are transparent, and whether its process for responding to customer billing concerns is timely and effective.

Mr. Marin also stressed that confidentiality is guaranteed by law to anyone who would like to contribute information relevant to the investigation. “The *Ombudsman Act* provides powerful protections to whistleblowers,” he noted.

The Hydro One complaint tally is the highest since the Ombudsman's 2006 SORT investigation into the Municipal Property Tax Assessment Corporation (MPAC), which involved **3,720** complaints in all. The Ombudsman's report and recommendations in that case resulted in a two-year freeze on property tax assessments and an overhaul of MPAC's procedures.

The Ombudsman's ongoing SORT investigation into the provision of services for adults with developmental disabilities in crisis has received more than **1,040** complaints.

Aussi disponible en français

See also attached backgrounder:

Backgrounder: Past Ombudsman investigations of Crown corporations – OLG and MPAC

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Backgrounder: Past Ombudsman investigations of Crown Corporations – OLG and MPAC

The Ombudsman's investigation into complaints about Hydro One's billing practices and customer services marks the third time his office has conducted a systemic investigation of a provincial Crown corporation. The previous two resulted in dramatic reforms.

2006: Municipal Property Tax Assessment Corporation (MPAC)

Report: *Getting it Right* - Investigation into the transparency of assessment process and the integrity and efficiency of decision-making at MPAC

Complaints: 3,720

Ombudsman findings: MPAC's practices were secretive, unfair to property owners, not in the public interest; complaints of inaccurate assessments were brushed off.

Main recommendations: Onus should be on MPAC to prove its assessments are accurate; its practices should be more transparent.

Results: Government froze tax assessments for two years, changed legislation to reverse onus to MPAC; MPAC implemented all recommendations, created new forms, website and tools for property owners to find information on their assessments.

Quote: MPAC's public literature now says, "If an error has been made, we will correct it."

More information: <http://bit.ly/1garmtV>

2006-2007: Ontario Lottery and Gaming Corporation (OLG)

Report: *A Game of Trust* - Investigation into the OLG's protection of the public from fraud and theft

Complaints: Ombudsman launched investigation on his own motion in light of reports of lottery "insiders" (ticket retailers and OLG staff) winning a suspicious number of prizes; 456 complaints received once investigation launched.

Ombudsman findings: More than \$100 million was paid out in prizes to "insiders," often in suspicious circumstances; OLG did no background checks on retailers, was dismissive of public complaints; culture focused on profit instead of public interest.

Main recommendations: Regulation of lotteries by Alcohol and Gaming Commission; background checks and integrity checks on retailers.

Results: All recommendations implemented; OLG internal audit found "insider" wins over 13 years were \$198 million; introduced ticket-checking machines in all retail outlets, required players to sign tickets and banned retailers from playing in stores; turned fraud cases over to police; developed technology to find rightful winners.

Quote: OLG reported to the Ombudsman in 2008 that his report "brought about deep and systemic change within the Corporation in very short order" and prompted "a shift in culture... that has moved OLG away from an organization driven by profits only."

More information: <http://bit.ly/1bgUYVg>