

ATTENTION NEWS EDITORS: Embargoed until 11:30 a.m., Monday, June 23

Record 37% increase in complaints, historic bid to expand mandate mark “banner year” for Ombudsman: Annual Report 2013-2014

TORONTO (June 23, 2014) – Reporting on a record number of cases and systemic investigations in progress, Ontario Ombudsman André Marin today called on the provincial government to build on its historic momentum toward opening the broader public sector to independent scrutiny.

Mr. Marin’s 2013-2014 Annual Report relates several firsts for his office: A record 26,999 complaints received (up 37% from the previous year), an unprecedented number of ongoing large-scale investigations, and the first-ever government bill to extend Ombudsman oversight into the “MUSH” sector (municipalities, universities, school boards, hospitals and long-term care homes, children’s aid societies and police).

“This year has been an exceptional one... for both the sheer volume of public complaints and the historic progress that was achieved towards modernizing our mandate,” the Ombudsman says in the report, noting that it also includes numerous “examples of cases where we assisted to humanize government, often for the most vulnerable members of society.”

The Ombudsman’s largest systemic investigation to date – now at more than 7,900 complaints – involves billing and customer service problems at Hydro One. While probing the underlying issues, his staff are also meeting regularly with Hydro One brass and working to resolve individual complaints. “We have already seen the agency accept blame for problems and begin to fix existing system failures,” Mr. Marin notes.

Similarly, Ombudsman staff helped individual families find placements for several adults with severe developmental disabilities, while handling more than 1,100 complaints relating to the office’s systemic investigation into the provision of such services.

Proactive meetings with officials from ministries and agencies that are perennial top sources of complaints – e.g., the Family Responsibility Office (FRO – 1,157 complaints) and correctional facilities (3,839 complaints) – have also resulted in improvements, without need for formal investigation. For example, the FRO is reviewing how it pursues parents who owe child support outside of Ontario after the Ombudsman flagged numerous cases of families left in the lurch; Ombudsman staff also identified a disturbing trend in inmates being held in segregation in provincial jails contrary to procedures required by law.

However, several reforms were stalled when the Legislature was dissolved for the June 12 election, the Ombudsman points out – including the *Public Sector and MPP Accountability and Transparency Act*, which would have expanded his mandate to include municipalities, universities and school boards. The bill marked the first time in 39 years that an Ontario government has proposed to open the MUSH sector to ombudsman oversight – an area where Ontario ranks last in Canada.

Although the bill did not propose to extend the Ombudsman’s oversight to hospitals, long-term care homes or children’s aid societies, Mr. Marin noted he was pleased to be consulted on its drafting and expressed hope that it will be revived and passed.

“[T]his important legislative effort ... reflected a commitment to increasing accountability in the MUSH sector,” he writes. “Our office stands ready to help the thousands of Ontarians who have complained to us about MUSH organizations.”

Other “unfinished business” the Ombudsman urged the province to tackle includes replacing the outdated *Public Works Protection Act* (used to expand police powers for the G20 summit in Toronto four years ago), regulating the non-emergency medical transportation industry, bolstering the Special Investigations Unit’s police oversight through new legislation and improving the monitoring of drivers with uncontrolled hypoglycemia.

He also encouraged MUSH sector officials – notably in municipalities – to review his report’s explanation of “Ombudsman Basics 101” and embrace the concept of Ombudsman oversight as “a healthy check and balance that would serve to promote public confidence in local governance, though recourse to an independent, impartial and credible investigative process.”

The Ombudsman is an independent Officer of the Legislature who investigates public complaints about more than 500 provincial government ministries, corporations, agencies, boards, commissions and tribunals, as well as complaints about closed meetings in municipalities. The latter will be detailed in a separate annual report later this year.

Aussi disponible en français

Full report, backgrounders, video and more available at www.ombudsman.on.ca

The Ombudsman’s 11:30 a.m. news conference will be livestreamed at www.ombudsman.on.ca and live-tweeted at www.twitter.com/Ont_Ombudsman (#OOLive). Video of Mr. Marin’s news conference will also be posted at

www.youtube.com/OntarioOmbudsman

Mr. Marin will conduct a live chat at 2 p.m. at www.ombudsman.on.ca

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