



Nowhere to Turn – Ombudsman’s Remarks **Paul Dubé**

Good morning, and thank you all for being here today, and for watching via webcast. I want to start by saying I am honoured that so many people who are directly affected by this investigation are watching today, here in person and elsewhere.

I’m speaking of the adults with developmental disabilities, and their families, who know firsthand what we mean when we speak of “crisis” situations in our report.

These are the people who had the courage to complain about a well-intentioned but deeply flawed developmental services system. They told our investigators of their frustrations and heart-wrenching experiences, exposing shocking systemic problems. They persevered through years of bureaucratic back-and-forth to achieve small successes, one case at a time. Their dedication and devotion to their loved ones has finally given way to constructive changes that will ensure thousands of other Ontarians will not have to endure a similar ordeal.

For that, and for their patience, I thank them on behalf of my entire office for helping us bring about positive change.

Because it is thanks to their stories that we were able to do what an Ombudsman office does best – work with the many layers of government and agency officials to find constructive solutions.

When we first began this investigation, we encountered the same roadblocks many of these families had faced for years: A fragmented, overly complicated system of service agencies and funding programs, and a baffling lack of flexibility from officials at the top.

In the early stages of this investigation, when we uncovered obvious problems at the local or regional level and tried to get Ministry officials to intervene, we discovered it took a hands-off stance – the official line was “We are NOT case managers.” Helping with individual cases – even in crisis situations – tended to be seen as helping people jump the service queue.

The Ministry clung to its big-picture vision of a modern developmental services system, based on individual choice and community supports. For a long time, it was unwilling to acknowledge its responsibility for addressing the systemic issues we were bringing to its attention. Meanwhile, vulnerable people with complex needs were living in hospitals, long-term care homes, homeless shelters and jails – shades of a shameful institutional system that was abolished decades ago.

Some parents even made the heart-wrenching decision to relinquish responsibility for their adult children to the community, in a desperate attempt to get them the services they needed.

At times, our own staff had a taste of the futility that so many families experienced – finding help seemed impossible. But persistence paid off and, one case at a time, working with Ministry officials and agencies, we found it was possible. Suitable homes were found. Funding flowed. Placements were created. And ultimately, after several months of working collaboratively, we saw a culture change at the Ministry.

In 2014, as you all know, there was a major budget increase for developmental services, bringing annual spending in the sector to \$2 billion this fiscal year. But the fundamental issue here has never been money – after all, it is incredibly costly to house people in hospitals and long-term care homes who don't belong there. That money could be spent far more efficiently.

What really made the difference is leadership, and attitudinal changes at the Ministry, from the top down. Officials are no longer aloof and are more willing to engage directly in resolving individual crisis cases. They are no longer on the defensive when dealing with our Office and see the value we can add in helping them maximize service to Ontarians.

Most importantly, when I met last month with the Minister and Deputy Minister, they agreed to implement all 60 of my recommendations, including those that require the government to take the lead in fixing systemic problems provincewide.

Many of my recommendations involve research and consultation and working with other areas, such as the justice and health systems, which won't happen overnight. But others are common sense, such as ensuring that vulnerable people aren't left to return to potentially dangerous situations, and planning for emergencies and the inevitable challenges that come with age and illness.

The Ministry has already begun addressing some of these issues, and you can find a list of all the steps it has taken at the back of my report. But we all know there is still work to do. We are still receiving complaints from individuals in crisis situations – in fact, we have had 25 more since this report was finalized, although the pace has slowed.

My office and I will continue working with the families and the Ministry to resolve these urgent issues, building on what we have achieved thus far. I look forward to reporting on the Ministry's progress in future. We will keep the spotlight on this issue, which is critical for so many families. There are still problems.

And now I'd be pleased to answer your questions...