

Annual Report 2008-2009
Ombudsman's Remarks
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This is my fourth annual report as Ombudsman, and I cannot help but notice that a few things are very different from previous years. The Legislature has just ended a session where the government predicted a record deficit – and a week where its use of taxpayers' money to fund the snacking habits of consultants prompted a string of resignations and investigations.

These are tough times, by any measure, but I have positive news to report, because at times like these, the value of public services – and prudent oversight – is emphasized. This report shows the value that my office delivered to taxpayers. For a few people, there was literally a cheque in the mail, but for millions more, the work of our Special Ombudsman Response Team – or SORT – resulted in improvements and efficiencies in government that saved them money, time, aggravation, trauma – and in a few cases, actual lives.

Today's report is longer than some of my previous ones. This is a reflection of how in my office, our work is never really done. We follow up on all of our investigations, and we keep the pressure on. There have been new developments in almost all of them – and most of the news is good.

For example, the Municipal Property Assessment Corporation is back with its first assessments since my 2006 report, operating much more transparently and fairly than in its “cutthroat” days of a few years ago. The Ontario Lottery and Gaming Corporation (OLG) is almost unrecognizable after all the changes it has made since our investigation into retailer fraud, and it's still working to improve. The OLG has spent a lot of money to fix its problems, but lottery revenues are increasing – a far cry from the losses that the government and the rest of us would have suffered if nothing had been done to restore trust in the system.

Even the very first systemic issue we investigated in 2005 – the appalling situation where parents of children with special needs were being forced to surrender them to children's aid societies in order to get them the care they needed – reared its ugly head again this year, when we began hearing of the same thing happening to more desperate families. While bureaucrats dithered about which pocket the money should come from to care for these kids, families were put through unnecessary trauma and cost. We worked directly with the Ministry of Children and Youth Services and managed to resolve most of the cases, and we continue to keep a close eye on them.

We've taken this approach with our most consistently complained-about organizations, like correctional facilities and the Family Responsibility Office (FRO). We meet with senior Corrections officials every three months to address the most pressing complaints, quickly and without need for costly investigations. We meet with senior FRO people as well – and this report includes several cases where we helped put food on the tables of single parents who weren't getting their support payments. We convinced FRO to track down two deadbeat dads who owed tens of thousands of dollars while their families were forced to go on welfare. Not only did the families start getting paid, but the government started getting its welfare money back, too!

One area where we have yet to make progress, though, is in the MUSH sector – **Municipalities, Universities, School boards, Hospitals and long-term care homes, children's aid societies and police.** Ontario still lags far behind the rest of the country in allowing Ombudsman oversight of these areas, which account for the bulk of government spending. Complaints about hospitals and long-term care homes have almost doubled in the past year. And while we do have some major health-related investigations on the go, including into government's monitoring of long-term care homes, we can only do that by dancing at the edge of our jurisdiction. Imagine how much more we could do if we were able to enter the homes themselves!

In our one new mandate – investigating complaints about closed municipal meetings, which we've been doing for 18 months now – results have been mixed. Most municipalities understand why it's important to keep their meetings open to the public and have been very co-operative, but a few have blatantly defied our investigations. They do it because they can. The law allows them to pay for their own lapdog investigator instead of a watchdog, meaning there's no real standard of transparency being enforced across the province. I fail to see the value in this.

But overall, I think this report tells a positive story about how the traditional Ombudsman institution – which, by the way, was invented 200 years ago this year – can be modernized to make 21st-century government more accessible, efficient and valuable to its citizens. We're no longer just the “complaints department” – we are helping to improve governance, resolving individual problems and fixing big ones before they get worse.