

Opening remarks – Paul Dubé Annual Report 2016-2017

Thank you for being here today and for watching us via webcast.

It's an honour for me to present today's report, covering what is not only my first full year as Ombudsman, but the first full fiscal year of my office's expanded mandate.

As you all know, our jurisdiction now includes municipalities, universities and school boards, as well as provincial government bodies, meaning we now oversee more than 1,000 broader public sector organizations.

This means that we have been able to help Ontarians with a wider array of problems than ever before. It has also been an incredible learning opportunity, as people have come to us from across the province with a diverse new assortment of concerns.

Part of my job as Ombudsman is to listen for the common themes in these complaints, to be alert to the trends that signal potential systemic issues in the broader public sector. When we catch problems early enough, we can flag them to the proper authorities and stop them before they grow.

Today's report highlights many of these trends, along with our major investigations and the thousands of individual cases we resolved.

But if there is one common theme in what we have heard this year, from stakeholders and citizens alike, it is a thirst for accountability.

We see it at the municipal level, where concerned residents and even members of councils have sought guidance in how to improve fairness and transparency at the local government level.

We see it in the education sector, where senior officials of school boards and universities have asked for our help in crafting complaint processes to better serve students and their parents.

And we see it at the provincial level, where, among other things, our work has been bolstered by that of independent reviewers and other accountability mechanisms. In this report, I welcome the long-awaited legislative changes that will improve oversight of municipalities, police and correctional facilities, along with the ongoing reforms that are in the works in response to the 114 recommendations I've made in reports so far.

I have spent a good part of the past year speaking to people in communities across the province, including many officials from our new areas of jurisdiction, explaining why they should

embrace complaints as a positive thing. Responding to complaints is how you demonstrate accountability.

As today's report illustrates, complaints can be beneficial in many ways. Sometimes the benefit is tangible, as it was for the woman who received nearly \$100,000 in support payments after our office prompted the Family Responsibility Office to take long-overdue action against her ex-husband.

In other cases, it is more subtle, such as when we persuaded a municipality to clarify a by-law on its website, or a provincial ministry to fix confusing forms, or a school board to explain the reasoning behind a contentious busing decision.

These cases may not be the stuff of headlines, but they resonate with the public on a personal level. Take the story on page 30, of a very sick woman who was told she would have to travel from Oshawa into Toronto to have her disability benefits reinstated. This was a huge obstacle to her. Our staff talked to disability support staff in both cities and arranged to have someone go to her in Oshawa instead. It was a simple, common-sense resolution, but it meant a great deal to that woman and her family. It's that kind of quiet, behind-the-scenes help that our staff provide every day.

Of course, we also work toward broad, systemic change, like abolishing indefinite solitary confinement, or transforming services and supports for adults with developmental disabilities. These are both still works in progress, but "progress" is the operative word.

All of the recommendations we have made in provincial systemic investigations since last April 1 have been accepted and are in various stages of implementation. The improvements we proposed in our first systemic investigation of a municipality – in Brampton – were also well received by the city. Our first systemic report related to school boards, involving school busing issues in Toronto, will be out later this summer, before the new school year begins.

Throughout this past year, we have been able to leverage our excellent relationships with stakeholders, old and new, to effect positive change. I look forward to building on this foundation in the coming years, and you can find an outline of some of the initiatives we have planned in this report. That is part of our commitment to transparency and accountability on our end.

And on that note, I'd be happy to answer any questions you might have.