

Annual Report 2019-2020 – Ombudsman's remarks

Good morning, everyone. Welcome to this pandemic version of our Annual Report press conference.

I decided to do this press conference virtually to avoid putting additional strains on the Legislative Assembly staff and operations, and to make things as easy and safe as possible for you journalists. No need to leave the comfort of wherever your laptop is parked!

So we'll see how it goes. I am sure you are all used to these by now.

I have a few opening remarks to make about the report I am releasing today. Then I'll be happy to take questions from the journalists who are joining this videoconference.

As I say in my Message in the report, everything changed for us – and the world – in March.

But I want to underscore that it had already been an historic year for us up to that as point, as we assumed responsibilities of two former offices of the Legislature, the French Language Services Commissioner and Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth, on May 1, 2019.

We spent much of the previous year adapting to that challenge – the expansion of our mandate into two brand new areas: Children and youth in care, and French language services.

So it has been a year of change, and adaptation. But the common thread in these developments is that that presented opportunities for our Office to help more people in new ways. To do what we have done for almost 45 years – helping wherever we can to make sure public services work as they should.

This report details another productive year of fulfilling our responsibility for enhancing governance by promoting transparency, accountability, and fairness in government and the public sector.

For example, we raised the alarm about conditions in Ontario correctional facilities – as complaints from inmates reached a record 6,000.

In the two investigation reports we released, we highlighted serious issues with transparency and accountability at the municipal and school board levels, and all of our recommendations were accepted.

When coronavirus hit, we – like the rest of the province – were thrown into a new reality and had to adapt our operations. We had to pivot like so many other institutions, responding to thousands of public complaints while working remotely, ensuring that the concerns of vulnerable people are heard, and continuing to resolve complaints as well as pursue and launch investigations.

But ombudsmen are premier problem-solvers. Those abilities have enabled us not just to re-adjust our operations and remain accessible; they have enabled us to contribute to positive change and find solutions that benefit both citizens and the agencies that serve them in these difficult times.

To everyone watching this, I encourage you to review some of the stories in this report about the many ways we helped people with complaints – big or small, complex or simple. They might remind you of problems you've experienced with public sector bodies yourselves – and if they do, we are here for you. We stand ready to help.

If there is one lesson we can draw from this pandemic, it is how much citizens rely on their public services.

My observation is that the public service responded admirably in most instances to the challenges posed by the pandemic. In our interactions with the public sector, we see public servants doing their best to serve, and meet people's needs. However, given the scale of the pandemic and the speed with which it spread, there were bound to be gaps in the responses. They would not all be perfect.

Therefore, if this report has a theme, it is the importance of having robust oversight of public services. It is about ensuring that the rights and voices of the vulnerable are not overlooked, whether they are inmates in correctional facilities, young people in foster homes, the frail and elderly in long-term care – or French-speaking Ontarians seeking emergency health information in their language.

Thank you, and now I'll take your questions.