

NEWS RELEASE

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Ombudsperson urges government to improve chronically slow telephone service for income and disability assistance recipients

Government response generally positive but more action needed on call answer timeliness.

Victoria - B.C.'s Ombudsperson Jay Chalke released today Special Report No. 40, *Holding Pattern: Call Wait Times for Income and Disability Assistance*. Holding Pattern is the report of the Ombudsperson's investigation into the Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction's centralized telephone system and its impact on the applicants and recipients of income and disability assistance.

"The ministry's telephone-based service has been chronically slow for a number of years," said B.C. Ombudsperson Jay Chalke. "Income and disability assistance applicants and recipients include some of the most vulnerable people in the province. The ministry needs to ensure its services are timely and meet the needs of the people it serves."

The Ombudsperson initiated the systemic investigation in July 2017 in response to a range of complaints about long wait times, disconnected calls, call time limits, and other challenges recipients of income and disability assistance face in communicating with the ministry by telephone.

The investigation resulted in nine recommendations for the Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction. The ministry has fully accepted six of the Ombudsperson's nine recommendations and partially accepted the other three.

"I am pleased that the ministry has accepted our recommendations about publicly posting its wait times, which means that ministry clients and stakeholders will be able to follow the ministry's progress in addressing this problem. I am also pleased the ministry is phasing out some of the limited service techniques it applied to shorten call answer wait times, but that resulted in reduced service quality," added Chalke. "However, I am disappointed the ministry has not agreed to the timeliness service standards I recommended, preferring to substitute a different standard. Overall, their commitments are a good start, but more will need to be done."

The Office of the Ombudsperson will monitor the progress of the ministry's implementation of the recommendations and report publicly.

The B.C. Ombudsperson provides independent and impartial oversight of public authorities to ensure every person is treated fairly in the provision of public services. In addition to being an independent avenue for individuals with complaints with B.C. public services, the Ombudsperson reports to the Legislative Assembly and the people of British Columbia to bring attention to matters of administrative fairness. These reports provide oversight of public bodies and assurance to legislators and the public regarding the fairness of provincial and local public administration.

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