
**Service Plan
Fiscal Years
2011/12 – 2013/14**



ombudsperson

B.C.'s Independent Voice For Fairness

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Message from the Ombudsperson

I am pleased to present the Office of the Ombudsperson's Service Plan for fiscal years 2011/12 - 2013/14. This service plan is based upon the current Strategic Plan for my office which continues to the end of this fiscal year and also takes into account aspects of our 2011 – 2014 Strategic Plan which is being finalized.

As the Office of the Ombudsperson begins its fourth decade of service to British Columbians we are looking forward to new ways to ensure fair treatment for British Columbians is central to the programs delivered by public authorities; to collaborative opportunities to deliver effective and timely oversight of the administrative actions of government authorities; and to developing innovative mechanisms to improve openness, transparency and accountability in public services.

While the principal focus of our work must and will remain the thousands of resolutions we achieve each for individuals and authorities, we continue to examine new ways to apply our resources in a proactive and preventative manner.

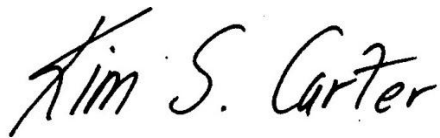
In the past four years our widely read systemic investigations have worked to not only resolve complex systemic problems in particular areas, but also to provide useful guides to a wide range of authorities on how to identify and remedy – or avoid – administrative unfairness in their own programs and service delivery. In addition they have resulted in improved openness, transparency and accountability in the development and delivery of public services.

Going forward we will be building on this success by developing materials and training for stakeholders based on the lessons learned from both our systemic and individual investigations as well as the process of implementing recommendations arising from those investigations. In addition, wherever appropriate, we will also be available to share our experience and expertise with public authorities who are developing new processes and programs or reviewing existing ones. By being willing and available to proactively assist with improving the overall administrative fairness of processes and programs by identifying potential problem areas and recommending improvements, not only should the number of complaints to an authority (and subsequently to our Office) be reduced, but there should also be savings in training and materials for the authority and an improvement in the overall satisfaction of program clients.

In dealing with the individual inquiries and complaints that come to us for a fair resolution we have introduced two significant operational innovations over the past two years to allow us to deal with more complaints - the Early Resolution Process and the Managers of Investigation Assistant. Combined they have resulted in the diversion of approximately 450 investigative files in a one year period from investigators workloads to alternate, appropriate resolution processes. However, the major challenge for the Office of the Ombudsperson today remains, and will remain for the foreseeable future, its ability to investigate and resolve individual complaints in a timely manner with existing resources.

British Columbia today is a different place than it was more than 30 years ago when this Office was established. There have been changes in population size and composition; public service delivery mechanisms; the complexity and interaction of laws, regulations, and policies; the speed of communications; and the public's expectations of good governance. Yet, in some important ways things remain the same. Citizens, residents and visitors to the province still interact with public authorities on a daily basis in the conduct of their business and personal affairs. They still have a right to receive fair and reasonable treatment. The fact that there are still thousands of complaints brought to the office each year for resolution is evidence that the Office of the Ombudsperson continues to provide a necessary service to the people of British Columbia.

This objective of this service plan is to enable British Columbians to be confident that they have a provincial Office of the Ombudsperson that has the capacity to act to ensure they have been treated fairly by public authorities in British Columbia.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kim S. Carter". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Vision

The vision of the Office of the Ombudsperson is that it is British Columbia's "Independent Voice for Fairness".

Mandate

The Office of the Ombudsperson has two primary roles. The first is to investigate complaints of administrative unfairness involving the more than 2500 public authorities in British Columbia; to independently and impartially identify if a decision, recommendation, action or procedure complained about did result in unfair treatment; to seek a fair resolution where this is the case; and to provide a well-reasoned explanation when it concludes that is not the case. The second role is to provide general oversight of the administrative actions of public authorities with a view to upholding the democratic principles of openness, transparency and accountability.

The Office of the Ombudsperson does not advocate or represent the interests of individuals or groups, but rather represents the interests of the people of British Columbia in ensuring everyone in British Columbia is treated fairly by public authorities.

Administrative matters within the Ombudsperson's jurisdiction include decisions, recommendations, actions and procedures that are contrary to law; unjust; oppressive; improperly discriminatory; done pursuant to a statutory provision or other rule of law or practice that is unjust, oppressive or otherwise discriminatory; based on a mistake of law or fact or an irrelevant ground or consideration; the result of an arbitrary, unreasonable or unfair procedure; done for an improper purpose; result in inadequate or inappropriate reasons; are negligent; unduly delayed; or otherwise wrong.

The work of the office is carried out through an integrated process of intake, referral, early resolution, investigation of individual complaints, systemic investigations, consultation, reporting, monitoring of implementation of accepted recommendations, education and outreach.

In addition, the office provides Shared Services support to the co-located Office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner, the Office of the Police Complaint Commissioner and, for the past three years to the Office of the Merit Commissioner.

Strategic Goals

Our Strategic Plan identifies four goals that assist us in fulfilling our mandate. These are:

1. Conducting Thorough and Impartial Investigations;
2. Establishing the Office as a Recognized Centre of Excellence in Administrative Fairness;
3. Ensuring well-being in the workplace; and
4. Outreach.

Performance Measures

Our performance measures, which are linked to our goals, focus on effectiveness, quality service, timeliness and well-being in the work place. A summary of our successes in a number of these areas can be found in the statistics portion of our Annual Report.

In 2009/2010 while our effectiveness and quality service standards have been maintained, meeting our goals in the areas of timeliness and staff well-being have proved more challenging principally as a result of resource constraints.

Conducting Thorough, Impartial Investigations in a Timely Manner

In fiscal 2009/10 our Early Resolution Officers and our Ombudsperson Officers investigated and closed 2,646 files, the highest number since 2002. While the number of files closed within 30 days increased as a result of our Early Resolution and Manager of Investigation Assistant initiatives, the number of investigations that we are able to complete within 3 to 6 months has declined as caseloads remain high.

Establishing the Office as a Recognized Centre of Excellence in Administrative Fairness/Providing Quality Service

These include our front line “walk the talk” performance measures. A concerted focus on making first contacts for individuals with our office positive and useful has resulted in the timeliness and effectiveness of our response in this area being maintained. People who contact our office will normally be able to speak to a call coordinator within 40 seconds (+75%); people who contact us in writing will normally receive a response within two days (+90%); and the majority of our early resolutions are completed within ten days (+95%).

Well-Being in the Workplace/Workplace of Excellence

The annual workplace environment surveys continue to indicate challenges in this area even though we are working hard to ensure that we provide the environment, tools, training and supports necessary to allow our staff to operate in our demanding, fast-paced workplace. The percentage of staff who found workload and stress difficult to manage decreased last year in part, I believe, due to the introduction of the Files Awaiting Assignment process being implemented but also as the result of our imminent move to a building that provides people with a healthier, well-designed, more functional work place.

Outreach/Increasing Understanding

Our outreach efforts during the last fiscal year continued and we completed three Ombudsperson Tours to Northeast BC, the South Okanagan and the Southeast Kootenays. In addition we were active in making more than 70 presentations to stakeholders including public authorities and not-for-profit agencies.

Progress on Priorities for Fiscal 2010/11

Our last service plan set out five priorities for this fiscal year. I am able to report on the progress made to date in this fiscal year.

Shared Office Consolidation

The driving force, oversight and day-to-day implementation of this project has been the responsibility of the Executive Director of Corporate Services and the Shared Services organization of the Office of the Ombudsperson. In less than two years we have moved from vision to reality. The project has been delivered on time and on budget. Four offices of the legislature now operate out of a functional combined space with a 15 year lease.

Effectively Addressing Investigative Workload

The introduction of the Files Awaiting Assignment process has brought some much needed stability to investigative workloads over the past year. In particular the efficiencies of a Manager of Investigations Assistant has allowed an alternate process to reduce investigative workloads by more than 150 files.

Systemic Investigations

Resources allocated to systemic investigations were maintained until September when one of the two investigators was reassigned temporarily to assist with individual complaints.

Good Governance Materials for Authorities

Progress on this project has been delayed due to reassignment of resources to other priorities.

Outreach to Underserved Communities

Only one Ombudsperson Tour is planned, for the final quarter of this fiscal year.

Priorities for Fiscal 2011/12

In Fiscal 2010/11 the Office of the Ombudsperson focused on developing a new strategic plan; supporting a move to a new location for four Offices of the Legislature; and managing workload within existing resources in order to maximize timely delivery of services. The Office of the Ombudsperson will however look to make modest progress in four other areas in Fiscal 2011/12 – development of good governance materials; outreach to underserved communities; building partnerships/preventative ombudship; and developing a long-term strategic model for service delivery. These initiatives are consistent with the office's current integrated process of intake, referral, early resolution, investigation of individual complaints, systemic investigations, monitoring of implementation of accepted recommendations, education and outreach.

Effectively Addressing Investigative Workload/Timely Delivery of Services

This will continue to be the Office's primary priority for Fiscal 2011/12. Timely investigation of individual complaints is essential to ensuring fair resolutions can be achieved. While a number of steps have been taken to achieve this, the continued existence of a Files Awaiting Assignment is not consistent with this principle of administrative fairness.

In Fiscal 2009/2010 2,709 files went to early resolution, investigation, or were on our files awaiting assignment list. This is the highest number since 1999. Early Resolution Officers and Ombudsperson Officers closed 2,646 files in Fiscal 2009/2010, the highest number since 2002. Eight years ago 23% of our intakes went on to investigation: last fiscal year it was 32%.

Our current focus on providing the best service possible to individual British Columbians who come to us with their concerns about unfair or unreasonable treatment by public authorities has imposed limitations on our ability to achieve our other goals over the past fiscal year. Current resource constraints also limit the scope and timely delivery of Ombudsperson initiated and systemic investigations.

Good Governance Materials for Authorities

To assist public authorities in identifying areas of risk for administrative unfairness and to evaluate and improve their own administrative processes the Office will develop good governance packages targeted at specific areas. These good governance packages will assist authorities in more consistently

applying the principles of administrative fairness in their policies, procedures and decision making. This should lead to fewer complaints being brought to the Office of the Ombudsperson over time.

Outreach to Underserved Communities

Our 2008 survey indicates that people whose first language is not English are significantly less aware of the role of the Office of the Ombudsperson and that there is somewhere they can go if they cannot resolve their concerns about unfair or unreasonable treatment by a public authority. This is of concern as often these are the very people who have the greatest need. We will continue to build on our contacts with agencies that serve these communities and will be targeting tour and mobile intake activities in the coming year to increasing access for people in these communities.

Building Partnerships/Preventative Ombudship

In April 2011 the Office of the Ombudsperson will host the Canadian Council of Parliamentary Ombudsman annual meeting in Victoria. The membership of this group consists of parliamentary ombudspersons in Canada. This meeting will be followed in May 2011 by the bi-annual meeting of the broadly based Forum of Canadian Ombudsmen in Vancouver and in September by a meeting of banking services ombudsmen. The BC Office of the Ombudsperson will use these opportunities to build partnerships with other jurisdictions and to highlight the innovative work being done in BC. In addition we will be initiating a preventative ombudship project designed to provide the opportunity for agencies to consult with us before making changes or beginning initiatives that raise administrative fairness concerns to identify and assist in reducing problem areas.

Developing a Long-term Strategic Model for Service Delivery

The Office of the Ombudsperson delivers services to both individuals and public authorities. In the next fiscal year we will be looking to develop a long-term strategic model that builds on our success and identifies new approaches and technologies to maximize our service delivery.