



NEWS RELEASE

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For Immediate Release

Ten-year high for complaints and enquiries to B.C. Ombudsperson about provincial and local governments

Victoria – B.C. Ombudsperson Jay Chalke released his office’s 2017/18 Annual Report today highlighting that the public is contacting the office more frequently than any year in the last decade.

“This 10-year high is both positive and negative,” said Chalke. “It’s great that people know we are here to receive and investigate concerns about fair and reasonable treatment by provincial and local governments. However, it also signals that there is still lots of work to be done until public bodies in the province are treating all people fairly.”

The office received 8,400 complaints and enquiries last year, the highest number in the past decade. Complaints were about a wide range of public bodies with the highest number of complaints being about two government ministries that provide service to vulnerable people; the Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction and the Ministry of Children and Family Development.

“As has been the case every year in the past decade, we received more complaints about the Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction than any other public body. Their complaint numbers have been coming down and that is good news, but their overall volume remains high,” said Chalke. “It is time for the ministry’s fairness issues to be addressed as part of government’s broader poverty reduction strategy being developed this year.”

A broad spectrum of concerns were examined in today’s report about how social services are administered by these two ministries. Following these investigations, positive changes took place including:

- A commitment by the Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction to revise its information provided to the public about how provincial Hardship Assistance impacts federal Employment Insurance Benefits. Two complainants came to our office concerned they would not be able to afford rent



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or food because of increased deductions to their EI after they had received provincial Hardship Assistance. Our investigation found information provided by the Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction about how EI payments would be affected was inadequately communicated.

- Following an investigation into a complaint regarding a one-year delay in the placement of a nine-year old child, the Ministry of Children and Family Development acknowledged the delay and also agreed to provide increased training for staff about how to conduct safe home studies and restricted home placements which had slowed down the placement process.
- After our investigation into a complaint from a mother that she was not getting regular supervised access to her children in care, a Delegated Aboriginal Agency contracted by the Ministry of Children and Families agreed to ensure the mother was able to visit with her children twice a week.

“These cases reflect the fact that despite large complaint volumes, public bodies will make changes when issues are brought to their attention, and sometimes these changes can be very significant and impact not just one person, but many,” Chalke said.

In addition to its investigative work, this past year the Ombudsperson also launched a new three-year initiative to help public bodies proactively make their services more fair.

“Increasingly, public bodies are recognizing the importance of trying to resolve fairness problems before they escalate and our office is here to help them proactively do that,” said Chalke. “After all, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.”

Key statistical highlights from the 2017/18 Annual Report include:

- 376 complaints came from health authorities, the top non-ministry complaint category. Among the health authorities, Island Health had the most complaints (89)
- Other top non-ministry complaints include those about ICBC (325), the Workers’ Compensation Board (182) and BC Hydro (155)
- The Office received 680 complaints about local governments. The top three areas of complaints related to bylaw enforcement, developing/zoning and municipal fees and charges
- Most complaints (1940) came from the Lower Mainland



View the Office of the Ombudsperson's 2017/18 Annual Report at www.bcombudsperson.ca

About the Office of the Ombudsperson

The Office of the Ombudsperson receives enquiries and complaints about the practices and services of public agencies within its jurisdiction. Its role is to independently and impartially investigate these complaints to determine whether public agencies have acted fairly and reasonably, and whether their actions and decisions were consistent with relevant legislation, policies and procedures. In addition to investigating individual complaints, the Ombudsperson also conducts systemic investigations into complex issues. The Ombudsperson has jurisdiction over a wide range of public agencies, including provincial government ministries, crown corporations, government boards, schools, universities and colleges, local governments and self-regulating professions.

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