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## NEWS RELEASE

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### **BC Ombudsperson’s Annual Report highlights 40-year history of ensuring BC’s most vulnerable are treated fairly**

**Victoria** – British Columbians complained about the two government departments that provide services to some of BC’s most marginalized citizens more often than any other public body last year, according to the BC Ombudsperson’s 40<sup>th</sup> Annual Report released today.

“It is concerning to me that even though we have oversight over more than 1,000 public sector organizations, we see so many of the complaints we receive are about two ministries, the Ministry of Children and Family Development and the Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction,” said Ombudsperson Jay Chalke, adding his office received more than 1,200 complaints and enquiries about the two ministries last year. “It would be my hope, given the acute situations many of these complainants are in, that we would see their needs being taken care of fairly and reasonably. Unfortunately, when we look at our work over the past year, and frankly over the four decades we’ve been in existence, we continue to see too many occasions in which that simply isn’t the case.”

The report highlights a number of examples of cases in which unfair treatment of vulnerable individuals was remedied after investigations by the Ombudsperson. Many people on income or disability assistance received benefits that were previously denied. Investigative work by the Ombudsperson also resulted in the Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction redefining its definition of “parent” to include grandparents caring for their grandchildren without a court order, a change that will impact many grandparents providing care for their grandchildren in the province. The report also highlights an administrative error made by the same ministry that resulted in a woman’s previously denied crisis supplement being issued, allowing her to avoid eviction. Another case in the report focuses on a Muslim youth in custody who was concerned that his dietary needs were not meeting his religion’s requirements.

“In all of this work, we are doing what the Attorney General said our role would be when our office was created 40 years ago, namely approaching the unapproachable and shining a light on actions that are unfair and can seriously impact peoples’ lives,” said Chalke, adding that the three public reports the office released last year all focused on vulnerable British Columbians. Those three public reports were the result of investigations into lengthy telephone wait times for income assistance recipients, a chronic and repeated error in calculating income assistance benefits, and gaps in safeguards to protect the legal rights of patients involuntarily detained under the *Mental Health Act* in BC psychiatric facilities.

Other cases and issues highlighted in the report include:

- Translation services for immigrants and refugees – an Ombudsperson investigation resulted in the Legal Services Society improving its translation services after a complaint from an individual highlighted phone prompts were not in multiple languages.



- Errors in ICBC’s administrative practices – ICBC was the subject of over 300 complaints and enquiries to the Ombudsperson last year. There were a number of complaints about how ICBC enforces identity standards on licences and the BC Services Card. Complaints continue to be received from individuals who used to have a driver’s licence in their commonly used name only to find on renewal that ICBC had changed its policy by narrowing what names were acceptable. Complaints about ICBC liability determination are also common. The report highlights one case where ICBC failed to review all available evidence and a liability determination was changed as a result of the Ombudsperson’s investigation.
- Unfair administrative practices by BC school districts – a case highlights that a school district unfairly made a decision that a new immigrant family with three children would have to pay \$12,000 per child because they did not meet residency criteria. However, an Ombudsperson investigation found the district had misapplied the criteria and the family’s children were in fact entitled to free public education in BC.

“While all of the complaints we investigate are very different, what they highlight is the importance for the public of questioning decisions they feel are unfair,” said Chalke. “And that’s why we’re here, whether it’s ICBC, BC Hydro, a provincial ministry, a local government or a health authority, we can look into complaints from most public sector organizations. We’re here to listen to everybody and where people have been treated unfairly by government, to point the way so that public bodies can make things right.”

To view the full report visit [www.bcombudsperson.ca](http://www.bcombudsperson.ca)

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