

STAMP OF APPROVAL:

Delivering income and assistance
cheques during a postal strike



OMBUDSPERSON
BRITISH COLUMBIA

Special Report No. 59
December 2025

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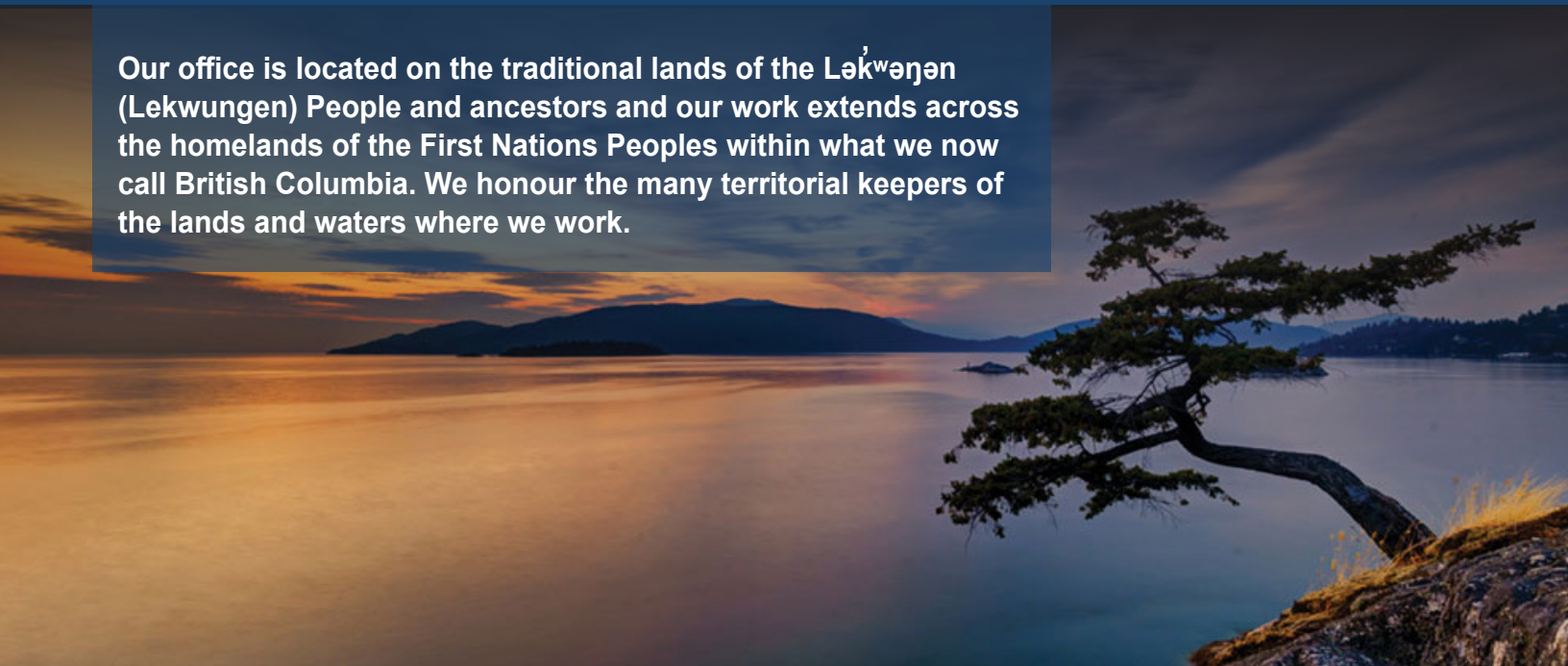
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Our office is located on the traditional lands of the Lək'wəŋən (Lekwungen) People and ancestors and our work extends across the homelands of the First Nations Peoples within what we now call British Columbia. We honour the many territorial keepers of the lands and waters where we work.





OMBUDSPERSON
BRITISH COLUMBIA

December 2025

The Honourable Raj Chouhan
Speaker of the Legislative Assembly
Parliament Buildings
Victoria BC V8V 1X4

Dear Mr. Speaker,

It is my pleasure to present the Ombudsperson's Special Report No. 59, *Stamp of Approval: Delivering income and assistance cheques during a postal strike*.

The report is presented pursuant to section 31(3) of the *Ombudsperson Act*.

Yours sincerely,

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MESSAGE FROM THE OMBUDSPERSON

When postal workers announced national strike action in November 2024, there was a real possibility that thousands of people in BC who receive their income and disability assistance cheques by mail could face delays. These monthly payments from the provincial government help people meet essential needs – food on the table, a safe place to stay, warm clothing, transit to work or medical appointments. Even short delays can have significant consequences for those who rely on these supports.

At the outset of the strike, the Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction had not yet communicated publicly about how it would ensure cheques reached the people who needed them. Because of this uncertainty, my office publicly announced an investigation. We wanted the public to know in real time that we would, after the strike ended, be reviewing the ministry's actions. The decision reflected a simple principle: when potential impacts are serious and affect many people, transparency matters.

Our investigation began with several key questions: What plan did the ministry have to distribute cheques during the strike? Were cheques delivered in a timely way despite postal disruptions? What plans were in place if the strike continued into late December?

We obtained and analysed the ministry's planning documents, internal and external communications, and distribution data. As with every investigation, our role was to follow the facts – not to predetermine whether unfairness had occurred. The *Ombudsperson Act* sets clear thresholds for what constitutes unfair or unreasonable treatment, and it is against these standards that we assess government conduct.

While the ministry's actions were not perfect, its response to the strike met the *Ombudsperson Act's* fairness standards. Cheques were delivered with only minor delays, and supports remained available to those who needed them. For that reason, I did not make a finding of unfair or unreasonable service and thus I am not making recommendations in this report. Importantly, the ministry has acted on opportunities for improvement we identified, even without formal findings, including strengthening public communication during service disruptions and increasing direct-deposit enrolment.

We are releasing this as a special report for the same reason we announced the start of the investigation publicly: when we announce an investigation openly, we report openly on what we learned. Usually our public reports identify where a public body has not met the fairness standards in the *Ombudsperson Act* and contain our recommendations for individual and system redress. It is also important to recognize examples of good administration – of a public body delivering a service that does meet those fairness thresholds by adapting effectively to challenging circumstances and maintaining services essential to people’s well-being. That was the case here.

Finally, I want to acknowledge and thank the many ministry employees who worked diligently throughout the mail strike period. Their efforts helped ensure that people in BC continued to receive the financial supports they rely on, even under uncertain and rapidly changing conditions.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jay Chalke', with a stylized, cursive script.

Jay Chalke
Ombudsperson
Province of British Columbia

INTRODUCTION

More than 250,000 people in British Columbia, including 50,000 children and youth, rely on income and disability assistance payments to meet their day-to-day needs. These monthly payments help people afford essentials like food, shelter, clothing, and transit. Any delay in receiving assistance payments can mean people are unable to pay for these basic needs.

The Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction (the ministry) is responsible for the province's income and disability assistance program, including the distribution of payments. Most people receive assistance payments electronically, through direct deposit. However, a small percentage receive their monthly assistance cheques by mail.

When a national strike of Canada Post workers began in November 2024, we were concerned that people who rely on the mail for their monthly assistance may not receive their cheques on time. We launched an investigation to determine whether the ministry had a reasonable plan for distributing these cheques during the strike and whether people received their cheques in a timely way.

Overall, our investigation found that while the ministry's pre-strike contingency planning was not robust, the ministry successfully minimized the impacts of the strike on its cheque distribution. The ministry was able to get cheques to people who would typically receive them by mail with only small delays. We concluded that the ministry's strike response was reasonable.

Still, even small disruptions in assistance payments can have a significant impact. Going forward, the ministry has committed to encouraging recipients to enrol in direct deposit as the most efficient way of receiving income and disability assistance. In addition, the ministry has agreed to more proactively issue public communications about its strike planning when a strike mandate is announced, for the benefit of staff, community partners, and assistance recipients.

BACKGROUND

On October 25, 2024, the Canadian Union of Postal Workers announced that it had a strike mandate from its members.¹ On November 12, 2024, the union issued a 72-hour strike notice and three days later, on November 15, 2024, the union began a national strike.²

As a result, Canada Post's operations were shut down across the country. Letters and parcels stopped being processed and delivered, and some post offices were closed. Postal operations did not resume until December 17, 2024, after the Canada Industrial Relations Board ordered postal workers to return to work.³

The strike impacted millions of Canadians across the country. In BC, where income and disability assistance payments are issued monthly, the postal strike disrupted the delivery of assistance cheques on November 20, 2024, and December 18, 2024.

Income and disability assistance recipients: a snapshot

The ministry makes income and disability assistance payments to approximately 250,000 people per month on average.

At the time of our investigation, approximately 85 per cent of recipients received their monthly cheques via direct deposit and approximately six per cent typically picked up their cheques in person at a local office. The strike had no impact on the distribution of cheques to these two groups.

The remaining 22,500 people (or approximately nine per cent of recipients) received their assistance cheques by mail. This was the group directly impacted by the strike, and the focus of our investigation.

¹ Canada Post, "[Canada Post continues to negotiate with CUPW as union announces strike mandate](#)," Negotiations updates, October 25, 2024; Canadian Union of Postal Workers, "[Postal Workers Strongly Support Strike Mandate, Advocate for Fair Jobs and Expanded Services](#)," news release, October 28, 2024.

² Canada Post, "[Canada Post receives strike notices from CUPW](#)," News release, November 12, 2024; Canada Post, "[CUPW announces national strike that will cause delays for Canadians as holiday shopping season begins](#)," News release, November 15, 2024; Canadian Union of Postal Workers, "[Statement from the Canadian Union of Postal Workers: More Than 55,000 Postal Workers on Strike](#)," news release, November 15, 2024.

³ Canada Post, "[CUPW negotiations: Postal operations to resume on Tuesday, December 17 following CIRB ruling](#)," Negotiations updates, December 16, 2024.

ANALYSIS

We investigated whether the ministry took reasonable steps to ensure timely distribution of income and disability assistance cheques during the strike.

We reviewed and considered records provided to us by the ministry, including planning documents, internal and external communications, and cheque distribution data. We considered relevant legislation and policy, including the *Employment and Assistance for Persons with Disabilities Act*, the *Employment and Assistance Act*, and terms of reference for the ministry's emergency planning team.

The ministry's pre-strike planning was limited

The ministry activates an emergency planning team to respond to adverse events that impact service delivery where no state of emergency is declared under the provincial *Emergency and Disaster Management Act*. According to the terms of reference, the planning team is activated when an adverse event – such as a wildfire, extreme temperatures, road closure, or labour disruption – occurs.⁴

We examined whether the ministry should have begun its strike-response planning sooner since there was a clear risk that postal deliveries could be disrupted in the likely event of a postal strike. Public information showed that Canada Post and the union had been actively negotiating throughout the fall of 2024.⁵ And, on October 25, 2024, the union announced that it had a strike mandate from its members and would be able to strike on November 3, 2024 if an agreement was not reached.⁶ We questioned why the ministry had only taken limited steps to plan for the strike and waited for the issuance of the strike notice before taking additional steps.

Information that the ministry received about the likely scope of the strike informed its planning. The ministry relied on information from BC Mail Plus, a branch of the provincial government responsible for producing and distributing income and disability assistance cheques. In an email to the ministry on October 30, 2024, BC Mail Plus summarized a call with Canada Post which said that during a previous strike in 2018, job action rotated (i.e.,

⁴ This may include coordinating changes to staff resourcing (e.g. redeployment, overtime), issuing communications, making service delivery changes (e.g. related to payment distribution, waiving reporting requirements), and approving additional costs (e.g., hand warmers, water bottles).

⁵ Canada Post, "[Negotiations Updates](#)," various dates, August, September and October, 2024.

⁶ Canadian Union of Postal Workers, "[Postal Workers Strongly Support Strike Mandate, Advocate for Fair Jobs and Expanded Services](#)," news release, October 28, 2024.

the locations of the strike action changed from day-to-day), was focused on large urban centres, and strike actions in any one location lasted one or two days. The email explained that it was reasonable to assume any job action would be similar this time. BC Mail Plus reiterated this advice to the ministry after the union issued strike notice on November 12, 2024. The assumption was that any job action would be limited, at least initially, with minimal impact to cheque distribution.

However, the assumption about rotating job action proved to be wrong, and a general strike began immediately after the 72-hour strike notice expired.⁷ However, in assessing the ministry's actions, we found that it was reasonable for the ministry to receive information from BC Mail Plus, given that agency's responsibility for distributing cheques, rather than reaching out to Canada Post directly. Further because details of the strike were not publicly available until the strike started, it was reasonable for the ministry to rely on information about past job action in planning its 2024 response. The measures it took before the strike were limited, but reasonable.

Not using Canada Post's socio-economic cheque delivery program was justified

Before the strike, Canada Post announced that it had reached an agreement with the postal workers' union whereby workers across the country would continue to deliver government pension and social assistance cheques.⁸ This was known as the socio-economic cheque delivery program (the program). We questioned whether the ministry should have used the program to decrease the risk arising from postal service disruption.

During our investigation, we learned that the program would not have been a viable option because it did not align with the ministry's payment process. Specifically, the ministry requires assistance recipients to submit a report by the fifth day of each month which staff use to determine each person's eligible assistance amount for that month.⁹

By contrast, the program required cheques to be submitted to Canada Post by November 5, 2024, for the ministry's scheduled November 20, 2024 payment date. This was not possible because on November 5, the ministry had not yet confirmed assistance amounts or printed cheques.

The ministry's decision not to participate in the program was consistent with other jurisdictions in Canada. Canada Post confirmed that no other provinces used this program to distribute income and disability assistance cheques.

⁷ Canadian Union of Postal Workers, "[Statement from the Canadian Union of Postal Workers: More Than 55,000 Postal Workers on Strike](#)," news release, November 15, 2024.

⁸ Canada Post, "[Canada Post will continue to operate, but customers should anticipate delays in the event of strike activity](#)," Negotiations updates, November 14, 2024.

⁹ *Employment and Assistance Regulation*, B.C. Reg. 263/2002, s. 33; *Employment and Assistance for Persons with Disabilities Regulation*, B.C. Reg. 265/2002, s. 29.

We found that the ministry's decision not to distribute cheques through the program was reasonable. In addition, the province wrote to the federal minister of public services and procurement to advocate for changes to the program to make it more usable for provincial benefits in the event of future job action.

The ministry's response once the strike began was effective and reasonable

Once the strike notice was issued, the ministry's response was thorough and effective.

On November 13, 2024, the day after the union issued its strike notice, the ministry activated the emergency planning team to lead its response. At the time, the ministry still did not know what the scope of the strike would be.

The team included representatives from key service delivery areas, including policy, finance, and communications. The team held frequent meetings throughout the strike to share information and coordinate activities. It moved quickly to implement emergency measures, including:

- reassigning staff and approving overtime to support cheque distribution
- extending local office and call centre hours
- expediting direct deposit requests
- issuing regular communications to staff,¹⁰ assistance recipients, and community partners¹¹

On Wednesday, November 13, 2024, immediately after strike notice was issued, the ministry advised all staff of the strike. The strike began on Friday, November 15. On Monday, November 18 – two business days before cheque issue day – the ministry provided staff with instructions for processing mail cheques and confirmed that it had communicated with recipients via messages on its public website, contact centre, and the My Self Serve portal.

However, the ministry did not issue a public news release until December 17, 2024. This contributed to a gap in public information about the ministry's response.

Overall, when strike notice was issued, the ministry quickly activated its emergency planning team, which is designed to respond to service disruptions as they occur. The emergency planning team coordinated resources and communication for the duration of the strike.

¹⁰ The ministry sent field communications to staff on November 13, 18, 25 & 27 and December 3, 6, 13, 16 & 19.

¹¹ The ministry sent letters to community partners on November 18 & 27 and December 17 & 28.

Cheques were distributed in a timely way

We began this investigation because we wanted to ensure that income and disability assistance recipients would receive their cheques quickly and that the ministry has appropriate systems in place to serve people in need. We are satisfied that the ministry distributed cheques without unreasonable delay.

In November and December 2024, 99 per cent of recipients received their cheques. This matched the ministry's rate of distribution in previous months. Each month, about 2,500 cheques go unclaimed for various reasons – for example, because people have found work or have left the province.

The ministry was able to distribute nearly all 22,500 cheques that were usually mailed, by expediting direct deposit requests, supporting in person pickup at local offices, and couriering payments to bulk suppliers (such as landlords who rent to multiple ministry clients).

Many people experienced some delay in receiving their cheques during the strike. However, these delays were on average short, and we concluded the delays were reasonable, considering the challenges the ministry faced in managing the impact of the postal strike.

Ministry data showed a small increase in the average number of days between when assistance cheques were issued and when cheques were cashed in both November and December, 2024 (eight and six days, respectively) compared with surrounding months (see Table 1). Importantly, despite the delays in November and December, on average, cheques were cashed before the end of the month, when expenses may be due (e.g., rent). It is also relevant that the ministry received no documented complaints about its response to the strike.

Table 1: Average number of days until cheques cashed

Benefit month	Cheque issue date	Days to end of month	Average days until cheques cashed
September 2024	September 18	12	5
October 2024	October 23	8	4
November 2024*	November 20	10	8
December 2024*	December 18	13	6
January 2025	January 15	16	5
February 2025	February 19	9	3

*Blue shaded area: Canada Post strike, November 15 to December 17

Conclusion

We are satisfied that the ministry responded reasonably to the service disruptions posed by the strike. Most importantly, cheques were distributed in a relatively timely way.

Accordingly, we have not made a finding of unfairness under s.23 of the *Ombudsperson Act*.

FUTURE PLANNING CONSIDERATIONS

While we are satisfied that the ministry took reasonable steps to ensure that people continued to receive their income and disability assistance during the strike, the ministry's planning for future service disruptions can be improved. The ministry has committed to implement additional measures aimed at reducing even small delays that can cause significant challenges for people who receive income and disability assistance.

Earlier public communication

Despite the ministry's success in minimizing the impacts of the strike on people who rely on assistance payments, it did not communicate publicly about its response until one month into the strike. Early and clear public communication helps to reassure assistance recipients, community partners, and staff alike that the ministry has a plan in place for the timely delivery of assistance cheques. The ministry has made a commitment to proactively communicate to the public about disruptions to income assistance distribution. We were pleased to see the ministry apply this commitment in response to more recent postal strike action, issuing timely news releases to communicate its process for distributing assistance cheques during the strike.¹²

Continue to encourage direct deposit

Encouraging people to enrol in direct deposit was a key focus of the ministry's response to the postal strike. Direct deposit is a safe, convenient, and dependable way to receive assistance payments each month.

The ministry successfully enrolled an additional 5,000 people in direct deposit by the end of December 2024. The ministry has committed to continue to explore ways to increase enrolment in direct deposit and confirmed that as of October 2025, 89 per cent of its clients receive assistance via direct deposit.

We acknowledge the public servants in the ministry who worked to ensure that assistance recipients received their cheques without undue delay during the strike action in late 2024 and are encouraged by the ministry's efforts to further minimize any impacts of strike action on cheque delivery in the future.

¹² Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction, "[Assistance payments will continue during Canada Post strike](#)," news release, May 20, 2025; Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction, "[People in B.C. can count on getting income assistance during strike action](#)," news release, October 16, 2025.



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