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Hydro One investigation draws historic number of complaints

Ombudsman staff "all hands on deck" to keep pace with challenge

The Ombudsman's investigation into billing practices at Hydro One was only launched three weeks ago, but it has already made history. At 5,067 complaints and counting, it is the most complaints the Office has received about a single organization in 38 years, and the highest volume of complaints in the shortest time.

Handling the flood of calls, emails and online submissions – as well as referrals from MPPs from all parties – has tested the Ombudsman's systems on every level. Extra staff take calls and sort emails, senior managers meet directly with Hydro One brass, investigators sift systemic issues from urgent individual cases, and IT personnel ensure the hi-tech complaints management system and website can handle it all.

"Our staff have been extremely dedicated to managing these huge caseloads," said Deputy Ombudsman Barbara Finlay. "Right after the



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The Ombudsman investigates public complaints about Ontario government agencies. His office oversees more than 500 provincial ministries, agencies, tribunals, boards, commissions and Crown corporations.

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Ombudsman Ontario

Bell Trinity Square
483 Bay St., 10th Floor, South Tower
Toronto, ON
M5G 2C9

Phone: 1-800-263-1830

Fax: 416-586-3485

TTY: 1-866-411-4211

Email: info@ombudsman.on.ca



TEN THOUSAND COFFEES

Ombudsman André Marin has joined the 10,000 Coffees movement! If you're a student, recent graduate, or young professional, sign up to pick his brain over coffee. Learn more about it [here](#).

announcement, we actually had 950 emails come in overnight – our IT staff had to ensure we didn't crash our servers.”

To put those numbers in perspective, in 2012-2013, the Ombudsman received just under 20,000 complaints. Having to deal with one-fifth of that in less than a month has meant rotating teams of early resolution officers, investigators and their managers working nights, weekends and Family Day to keep pace.

Judy, an investigator, recalled “a feeling of disbelief” as the complaints first soared from 640 (for the 10 months prior to the announcement) to several hundred a day. “Usually there are only seven to 10 people on the phones at a given time; that week, there were 30 people on the phones at once, and we still had calls waiting in the queue.”

Gordon, an early resolution officer, has seen his caseload top more than 200 at times. “Everybody is busy, but it's a great collaborative atmosphere,” he said, adding that many callers seem relieved their Hydro One concerns are being heard: “People are really happy to be calling us and sharing their concerns, and we're happy to be listening to them and doing what we can to resolve them.”

Some of the complaints flooding in include huge bills after months of no billing or without Hydro One actually reading the smart meters; Hydro One unable to explain higher-than-usual bills, even after repeated phone calls; automatic withdrawals of large sums of money without explanation or warning; and even cases where people have been billed for hydro usage after their homes have burned to the ground.



Hydro One has been co-operative and has top managers meeting weekly with Ombudsman managers, including Director of Investigations Sue Haslam. The meetings keep the case resolutions moving and provide opportunities to “problem-solve,” she said. “For example, if we see a



INVESTIGATION UPDATES

- › [Hydro One billing practices](#): Investigators are in the fact-gathering stage and taking individual complaints - more than 5,000 have been received since the investigation was announced on Feb. 4.
- › [Ontario direction to police on de-escalation](#): The fact-gathering stage of this investigation is ongoing.
- › [Monitoring of unlicensed daycares](#): Investigators have finished gathering evidence. The evidence is being reviewed and a preliminary report is being drafted.
- › [Adults with developmental disabilities in crisis](#): The fact-gathering is nearing completion, and we have received 1,053 complaints. We continue to take complaints and resolve individual cases.
- › [Monitoring of drivers with uncontrolled hypoglycemia](#): The Ombudsman's preliminary report is finished and recommendations will be provided shortly to the Ministry of Transportation for response.

Anyone who has information relevant to these investigations can contact our office at 1-800-263-1830, file an online complaint or email info@ombudsman.on.ca.

IN THE NEWS

- › ["Hydro One needs to come back](#)

complaint trend, or a repetitive or new issue that requires clarification, it's flagged for discussion at the weekly meeting. We want to get to the root cause of the problems we're hearing about."

Urgent complaints are flagged – for example, cases involving vulnerable people facing extraordinarily high bills or financial crisis – and sent in batches of 10 to a dedicated team at Hydro One, who will report back to the Ombudsman's team on the status of the cases.

Ombudsman André Marin noted that planning, flexibility and the team approach – early resolution officers to handle individual complaints, investigators to tackle thornier cases, and the Special Ombudsman Response Team to delve into the underlying systemic problems – have always helped the office eliminate complaint backlog.

"We prepared for this case for months," he said. "We pre-trained our staff and devised strategies for volume. Every person who calls our office will be speaking to someone with a tremendous amount of experience, someone who's highly trained and who can take immediate action to help resolve their issue."

[Read more about the Hydro One investigation here.](#)

- › [down to earth" \(Toronto Sun\)](#)
- › ["Hydro One billing woes a pain for years" \(Toronto Star\)](#)
- › ["Ombudsman's office inundated with Hydro One complaints" \(CityNews\)](#)

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1-800-263-1830 - Complaints Line | Ligne des plaintes | 1-866-411-4211 - TTY | ATS

Bell Trinity Square, 483 Bay St., 10th Floor, South Tower

Bell Trinity Square 483, rue Bay 10e étage, Tour Sud, Toronto, Ontario, M5G 2C9, Canada

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