

This month, the Ombudsman promotes international guidelines for ombudsmen and tours Toronto's largest correctional facility, plus our latest outreach and cases

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In this month's newsletter:

- Strengthening Ombudsman institutions around the world
- Reaching out to youth workers and students
- Help wanted – and welcomed

A matter of principles: Strengthening ombudsmen around the world

Speaking to colleagues from across Canada and around the world on February 11, Ontario Ombudsman Paul Dubé welcomed new international standards that define, promote and protect the role of ombudsmen in strengthening democracy and promoting fundamental rights.

Ombudsmen who strengthen democracy by overseeing government and the public sector now have a unique international set of standards, referred to as the Venice Principles, that set out the fundamental legal principles essential to the establishment of independent and impartial ombudsman institutions.

Emphasizing that the ombudsman is an important element in states based on democracy, the rule of law, good administration, and the respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, the 25 Venice Principles represent the first independent and internationally accepted standards for the proper functioning and independence of parliamentary and public services ombudsmen.

“As Ombudsman of Ontario and the International Ombudsman Institute’s President for

North America, I welcome the Venice Principles and hope that enabling legislation or terms of reference for ombudsmen around the world will reflect the spirit and intent of these internationally accepted standards," Mr. Dubé stated.

At a time when many ombudsmen around the world are under threat, and others have widely varying mandates, the creation of the Venice Principles is an historic development in the centuries-old evolution of the ombudsman institution, Mr. Dubé told participants in the "Advanced Issues for Ombuds" course, offered by Osgoode Hall Law School's Professional Development program, in conjunction with the Forum of Canadian Ombudsman.

"The Venice Principles recognize that ombudsmen who oversee government and the public sector play a key role in strengthening democracy," he noted in a joint presentation with Rob Behrens, U.K. Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman. "They set out the fundamental legal principles essential to the establishment of properly independent and impartial ombudsman institutions. They will help protect ombudsmen who are facing threats, and provide useful guidelines for improving existing ombudsman offices and establishing new ones." These comments were echoed by Andreas Pottakis, Ombudsman of Greece (pictured), in a visit to Mr. Dubé's office on February 12.



Dubbed "democratic ABCs for ombudsman institutions," the Principles were created on March 15, 2019 by the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe. Among the bodies consulted by the Commission were the International Ombudsman Institute and the Association des ombudsmans et médiateurs de la francophonie, of which the Ontario Ombudsman is also a member. On May 2, 2019, the Principles were endorsed by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe.

They stipulate, among other things, that a state or parliamentary ombudsman should have

a “firm legal foundation, preferably at the constitutional level,” that the state should “refrain from any action undermining its independence,” and that ombudsman appointments should be “according to procedures strengthening to the highest possible extent the authority, impartiality, independence and legitimacy of the institution.”

Said Mr. Dubé: “Government and public sector bodies do not always act in a manner that is transparent, fair, or respectful of people’s rights, and would sometimes prefer not to be held to account,” Ombudsman Dubé said. “Ombudsmen across the world frequently come under attack or face challenges, including threats, legal action, reprisals, budget cuts or limitations to their mandates.”

“If governments are truly committed to upholding democracy and human rights, they need to protect ombudsmen from such threats and to make sure they can continue to do their work, both independently and effectively. The best way to protect any important structure is to build it on a firm foundation.”

Read more: Ombudsman Dubé supports Venice Principles, strong legal foundation for ombudsman institutions



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Here, There and Everywhere

Visit to Toronto South Detention Centre



Ombudsman Dubé and staff toured Toronto South Detention Centre on February 24, meeting with officials and inmates at the facility, and noting ongoing concerns about lockdowns and medical care.

Ombudsman shares stories in CNIB teleconference



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On February 5, Ombudsman Dubé was the guest host of the monthly “Educate to Advocate” teleconference by the Canadian National Institute for the Blind (CNIB). Participants from across Canada called in to hear Mr. Dubé discuss his role and our office’s commitment to promoting government accessibility. He also shared some key case

examples and answered callers' questions. [Listen to the session.](#)

Reaching out to children and youth workers – present and future



Staff from the Ombudsman's Children and Youth Unit meet frequently with workers in the child welfare sector – and those studying to join it. At a session at Centennial College on February 11, they explained to students in the “Application of the Criminal Justice System for Youth and Adults” program how young people receiving services in custody facilities may make a complaint to our Office – and how workers in those facilities are expected to enable youth to reach out to us.

On February 20, our staff visited the Family and Children's Services of the Waterloo Region (pictured above), to discuss the Ombudsman's oversight over children's aid societies and residential licensees, such as foster homes and group homes – and agencies' obligations to report incidents of death and serious bodily harm to our Office.

Visit from Botswana Ombudsman investigators



On February 24-28, two investigators from the office of the Ombudsman of Botswana met with the Special Ombudsman Response team to learn techniques in conducting systemic investigations.

Commissioner and Ombudsman attend launch of new French-language university



French Language Services Commissioner Kelly Burke, Ombudsman Paul Dubé and staff attended the official signing of the joint funding agreement for the Université de l'Ontario français on February 26, near the university's future site in downtown Toronto. The ceremony included federal and provincial ministers Mélanie Joly, Caroline Mulroney and Ross Romano, as well as UOF President Dyane Adam. Said Commissioner Burke: "The increase of the offer of services in French in Ontario is always good news! We wish the UOF and its students much success."

Welcome: French Language Services director

Our French Language Services Unit welcomed Carl Bouchard as Director of Operations on February 24. Mr. Bouchard was previously Director of Policy at the Ministry of Francophone Affairs, where he provided advice related to minority language rights and contributed to several high-profile government initiatives involving the francophone community.

Wanted: Systemic investigations director

The Special Ombudsman Response Team, which is responsible for our Office's systemic investigations, is seeking a Director, following last month's retirement of Gareth Jones, who initiated the team in 2005. [Read the job posting.](#)

How We Can Help: Case Summaries

A time to mourn

An inmate sought our help in reaching the appropriate correctional officials after her father passed away and she could not get a response to her request to attend his funeral. She had made repeated requests for a temporary absence pass, but had heard nothing, and feared she would miss her chance to pay her respects. After Ombudsman staff spoke with staff at the facility, they made arrangements for her to visit the funeral home.

Left out in the cold

The mother of a teenager with developmental disability complained to us about an incident involving her daughter at a group home, after the daughter left the home at midnight and was outside in the cold for more than 30 minutes before she was found by police. The mother was frustrated because she had repeatedly tried to reach the group home supervisor to discuss the incident, but no one had returned her calls. Our staff contacted the group home supervisor, who called the mother and listed a number of measures they

had put in place to prevent similar situations from happening again. This included one-on-one staffing for residents who require it.

[Read about other cases we've resolved](#)



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Did You Know?

“Ombudsman” is a gender-neutral Swedish word that means “citizen’s representative” – an independent official who investigates complaints from the public about problems in government administration.



[File a complaint or contact us here](#)

The Ombudsman is an independent officer of the Ontario legislature who conducts oversight of provincial government agencies and municipalities, universities and school boards, as well as child protection services and French language services. Ombudsman Paul Dubé began his five-year term on April 1, 2016.

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