

This month, as Ontario's state of emergency due to the COVID-19 outbreak continued, the Ombudsman and staff helped hundreds of Ontarians resolve public sector issues.

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In this month's newsletter:

- The Ombudsman's new measures to help vulnerable Ontarians, such as inmates in provincial correctional facilities, during the coronavirus outbreak
- French Language Services Commissioner Kelly Burke's comments on the progress made in ensuring government information regarding the pandemic is provided in French
- We are hiring Early Resolution Officers, Investigators and more

Ombudsman receives hundreds of COVID-19-related complaints, prioritizes service to vulnerable Ontarians



Ombudsman Paul Dubé issued a detailed statement this month, assuring Ontarians that even though our Office doors are closed due to the pandemic, we have helped hundreds of people resolve COVID-19 related questions, among other things. “I want the people of Ontario to know that my team is working diligently to ensure that we remain accessible and able to help them as much as possible,” he says in his [latest message on our website](#).

From the start of the state of emergency on March 16 (when our Office began working from home) to April 30, we have received almost 1,500 new cases, including more than 400 related to the pandemic.

“One of my main preoccupations since the pandemic was declared has been how to remain accessible to the most vulnerable citizens in our province,” the Ombudsman says in the statement. To that end, our Children and Youth Unit staff continue to respond to calls – children and youth in care can leave messages at 1-800-263-2841 or 416-325-5669.

We have also set up new temporary phone lines that inmates in correctional facilities across the province can use to reach members of our team who specialize in correctional issues, in English and French. In addition, we are in regular contact with youth justice facilities regarding the effect of this situation on youth in custody.

French Language Services: Government briefings now simultaneously translated



French Language Services Commissioner Kelly Burke reported significant progress on discussions with the government about the fact that the daily press briefings by the Premier and other Cabinet and public health officials were only in English – an issue that has generated about two dozen complaints to our Office.

Noting that she shares the concerns of members of the Franco-Ontarian community on this matter, Commissioner Burke published a [message to Ontarians on our website](#), outlining her work in bringing it to the government's attention.

"I proactively contacted Public Health Ontario, the Ministry of Health, and TeleHealth Ontario...I have had regular discussions over the past few weeks with the government. I raised these issues with the Premier, with the Minister of Francophone Affairs, Caroline Mulroney, and public service leaders," she said. "They have acknowledged the right of Francophones to receive services in French that are equivalent to those provided to the general population."

On April 16, the government began broadcasting simultaneous translation of the press briefings via its YouTube channel. "I am very pleased to see that our intervention has led to a favourable response by the government and in real time," Ms. Burke said. "There is always room to improve, to do better, as has become apparent in the current situation. I am keeping a close eye on the government's actions and I am in regular contact with the community."

It should also be noted that as of April 28, TFO is rebroadcasting [Premier Ford's daily briefings](#) at 8:30 p.m. with simultaneous translation.

Commissioner Burke and the French Language Services Unit continue to receive complaints and engage with stakeholders on a wide range of issues. The Unit is also recruiting – see "We're hiring," below.

Children and youth: Effects of coronavirus on child welfare



Our Children and Youth Unit has handled more than 100 new cases since the state of emergency began, and has reached out to children's aid societies and care providers about the effect of COVID-19 on their services. Problems posed by the pandemic include:

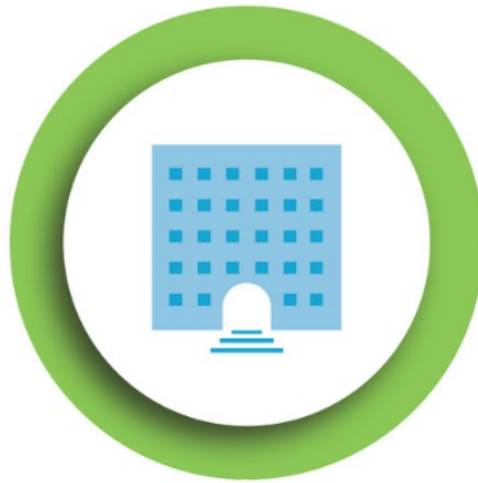
- Youth aging out of care at a time when there are very few supports and services available for them;
- The cancellation of in-person visits between parents and their children in care;
- The availability of personal protective equipment for staff and clients;
- Safety concerns raised by foster parents; and
- Questions about how children's aid societies are responding to community referrals during the pandemic.

Along with responding directly to complaints, we have made inquiries and raised concerns with the relevant agencies and ministries, monitored court decisions, and participated in weekly teleconferences with ministry representatives and other sector-specific working groups.

We also continue to monitor and review reports of death and serious bodily harm (DSBH) submitted to us by agencies required to do so by law, via our [online form](#).

[Contact us here if you have a question or complaint](#)

Municipalities: Ombudsman's first investigation of new emergency meeting rules



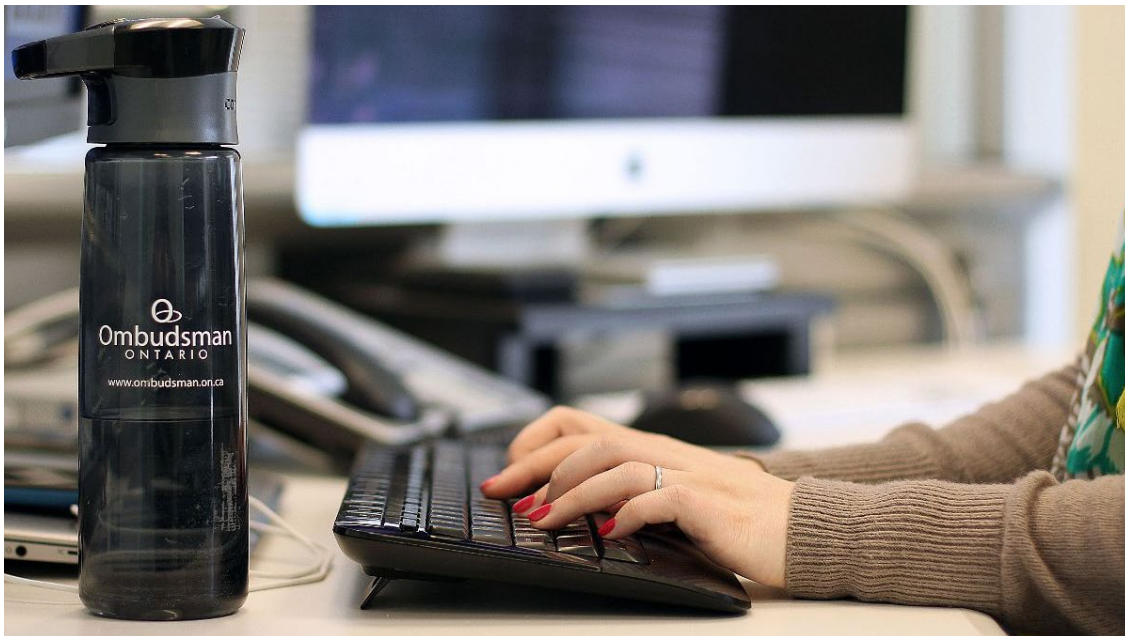
As the open meeting investigator for most municipalities in Ontario, the Ombudsman raised concerns with the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing in March about the impact of the state of emergency on the democratic requirement that municipal councils hold public meetings. The new [Municipal Emergency Act, 2020](#) allows council members to meet electronically – but still requires meetings to be open to the public.

On April 17, the Ombudsman published a [report](#) on his first investigation related to these new rules – involving a complaint about an electronic meeting by the Township of Russell on April 2, which was publicly available via webcast. The Ombudsman found that the meeting did not violate the rules. He commended the municipality for ensuring that information about how to observe and participate in electronic meetings was widely available to the public.

“The requirement to hold meetings that are open to the public is not suspended in an emergency,” he wrote. “I encourage municipalities to continue to strive to carry out their business in as transparent and open a manner as possible while protecting public health and safety.”

[Contact us here if you have a question or complaint](#)

We're hiring!



Work with us: We continue to recruit for several open positions. Although our Offices are closed, we are reviewing applications, testing candidates and conducting interviews remotely.

[Current opportunities](#) include:

- Director, Special Ombudsman Response Team
- Investigator, French Language Services Unit *new*
- Early Resolution Officers for all of our units: General, French Language Services and Children and Youth
- Administrative Assistant

How we can help - Case summaries

Essential licence

A woman whose job was deemed an essential service during the COVID-19 pandemic sought our help when her driver's licence was suspended due to a medical matter and she was temporarily unable to get to work. Our staff were able to facilitate the reinstatement of her licence within a few days.

Paid upfront

A cancer patient who is an Ontario Disability Support Program recipient told us she was about to have surgery and urgently needed funds to pay for transportation, but could not reach her caseworker. We spoke with ODSP officials, who explained that caseworkers are rotating in and out of the office during the COVID-19 state of emergency, but clients can contact them through their general line. They contacted the woman right away and arranged to pay for her transportation, with the understanding that she could submit the paperwork later.

Parked at home

A man complained to us about his municipality issuing parking tickets during the COVID-19 state of emergency. He said he and his wife had both received tickets while working from

home. Our staff made inquiries with city officials, who told us certain elements of the parking by-law had been suspended, and the appeal deadline for tickets was extended to 60 days. We let the man know that he could dispute the tickets via a form on the city's website.

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



[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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