

COVID-19 complaints update, new municipal reports, Q&A on French language services and more in our January newsletter

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In this month's newsletter:

- [COVID-19 complaints surpass 2,000](#)
- [French Language Services Commissioner speaks out about her first year in office](#)
- [Who broke the rules? Our latest closed meeting investigations](#)
- [How we helped this month](#)
- [Work with us: Job openings](#)

Pandemic problems: Assisting Ontarians with more than 2,000 COVID-related complaints

Woman wearing surgical mask seated on public bus



The beginning of a new year is usually a time to look forward, but in 2021, the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns that dominated 2020 continue to pose huge challenges for Ontarians and their public services. Our Office has now received more than 2,000 complaints specifically related to the pandemic since February 2020 (out of almost 18,000 total complaints).

Among the most common complaint topics are:

- Confusion about government restrictions and public health directives, such as the recent provincewide stay-at-home order and the definition of “essential” work (also, delays in providing this information in French as well as English);
- Lack of access to government programs or services, such as emergency benefits or pandemic pay;
- The impact of government decisions or policy changes, such as pausing evictions or limiting drug supplies; and

- Concerns about the impact of the pandemic on the operations of long-term care homes and hospitals.

Often, our staff help people navigate evolving information about pandemic-related funding, resources, or directives – or, if the issue isn't within our jurisdiction, refer them to someone who can help. In other cases, our intervention prompts organizations to provide clearer information or improve customer service.

"The complaints we have received throughout the pandemic illustrate the importance of independent oversight of public services," says Ombudsman Paul Dubé. "While working remotely since mid-March, our staff have been able to work collaboratively with public sector bodies to ensure people are getting the services and information they need."

Two of the most-complained about areas – delays at the Landlord and Tenant Board and the oversight of long-term care homes – are also the subjects of ongoing systemic investigations by our Special Ombudsman Response Team. Interviews and evidence-gathering are continuing in both investigations, while our staff also help individuals with related issues on a case-by-case basis.

We continue to take calls and resolve issues for some of Ontario's most vulnerable populations, including inmates in provincial correctional facilities and children and youth in care, the Ombudsman added.

[Contact us via our online complaint form](#)

Do you need help beyond what our Office is able to provide? Here are a few additional resources:

- [Ontario government COVID-19 information](#)
- [Public Health Ontario](#)
- [ConnexOntario](#) has free health information available 24/7
- [211 Ontario](#) is a free helpline that connects people to community and social services in your area 24/7, in 150 languages
- [Kids Help Phone](#) provides free, confidential counselling online 24/7, by phone and via text to youth across Canada in English and French
- [Crisis Services Canada](#) is a national network of distress, crisis and suicide prevention line services, with a 24/7 toll-free telephone line

[French language services: Commissioner Burke encourages community to come forward in Club canadien address](#)

Screenshot of FLS Commissioner Kelly Burke's address to the Club Canadien



One year in office and an inaugural Annual Report: Two reasons for the [Club canadien de Toronto](#) to invite French Language Services Commissioner Kelly Burke to kick off its 2021 event series. The live virtual event was hosted by ONFR+ journalist Benjamin Vachet and included questions from the audience.

Commissioner Burke spoke about her recent [recommendations](#) to the Ontario government to improve services in French, emphasizing the need for planning to ensure public communications in French are equivalent to those in English – and provided without delay. Citing recent concerns about gaps and delays in the provision of important COVID-19-related announcements in French, Ms. Burke reiterated the message from her December report: Planning for equivalent service, without delay, is all the more important in times of crisis.

During this live event, for which more than 160 people were registered, the Commissioner also explained how complaints from the public are the foundation of our Office's work, and encouraged participants to contact us if they experience a lack of government service in French. She responded to questions on a wide range of topics, including education, immigration, building a bilingual workforce, and the modernization of the *French Language Services Act*.

[Watch a recording of the event here \(French only\)](#)

Open for discussion: Recent municipal meeting investigations



The Ombudsman has released several new reports on investigations of closed municipal meetings. All can be found through our [online digest](#). In four of our seven latest cases, he found violations:

The [Sables-Spanish River](#) council failed to properly advise the public that the open-session portion of a meeting would continue after a closed session, and [Emo](#)'s council failed to publicly state the matter to be discussed in closed session. [Johnson Township](#)'s council voted illegally in closed session, while [Southgate](#)'s committee broke its own bylaw by starting a meeting more than 30 minutes late.

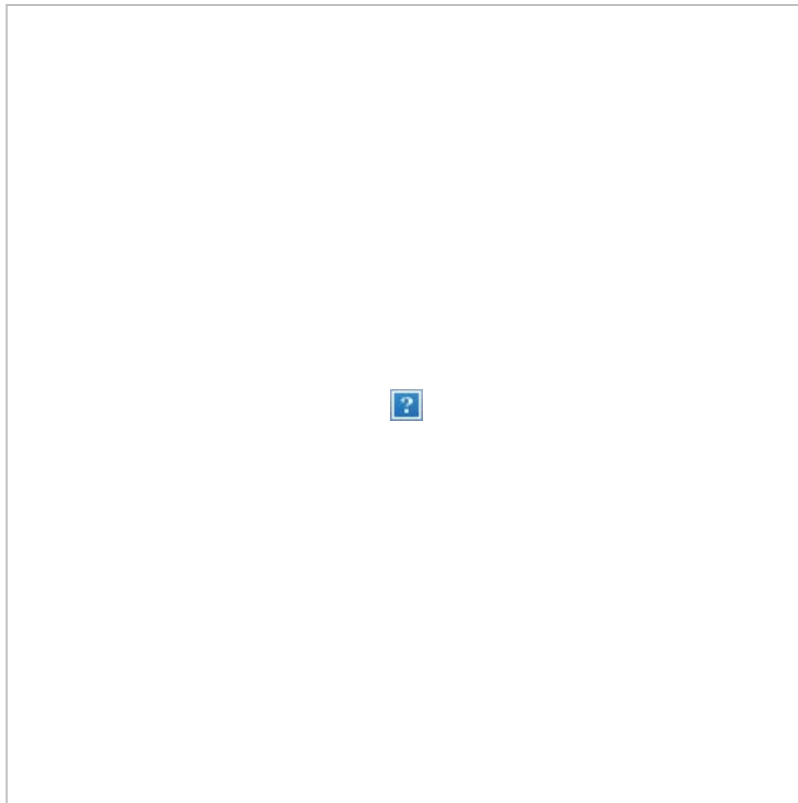
However, in cases in [Pickering](#) and [Hamilton](#), the Ombudsman found no issues – and in [Stone Mills](#), he found council did not break the rules when it met in person, since the public could attend (while maintaining social distance).

Children and youth:

Online resources for youth and service providers

To ensure we remain accessible and responsive to the needs of children and youth in care and those who work with vulnerable young people across the children's services sector, our Children and Youth Unit has created [a collection of digital resources to assist service providers](#). These resources can be used to inform young people in care about our Office and their rights, and how they can contact us with questions or concerns about their care.

We're also preparing to send hard-copy brochures and posters to service providers upon request – and to do a series of virtual presentations about the work of the Children and Youth Unit. If you're interested in these materials or a presentation, or have any questions, contact us at cy-ej@ombudsman.on.ca or 1-800-263-2841.



Here, there, and (virtually) everywhere

Cartoon-style depiction of virtual meeting



On January 18, Ombudsman Dubé spoke in French to a group of first-year law students from the University of Ottawa. Mr. Dubé talked about our Office's work, our expertise in the area of dispute resolution, and the importance of independent and impartial oversight of the public sector. On January 26, the Ombudsman participated once again in an evening of mentorship hosted by the Ontario Bar Association's Women's' Law Forum.

On January 21, Paul Sloan, Manager of Early Resolutions, delivered a virtual presentation about our work for members of the PROBUS Club, an association of retired and semi-retired professionals in Blue Mountain.

**Are you interested in a presentation about how we take
and resolve complaints about government and public sector bodies?**
Get in touch: thewatchdog@ombudsman.on.ca.

Coming Feb. 8: A Day in the Life of the Ontario Ombudsman

A day in the life: In conversation with leaders and legends, virtual edition



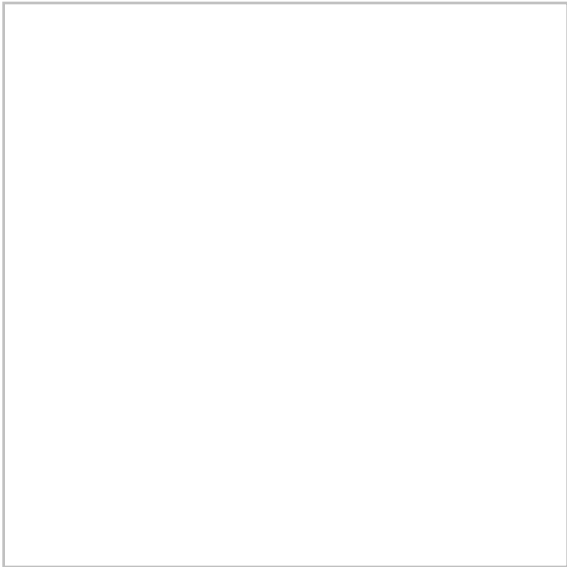
The Ombudsman will be featured next month on *A Day in the Life* with Fred Hacker. Presented by the Midland Cultural Centre, the program has interviewed more than 100 distinguished Canadians.

The video of Ombudsman Dubé discussing his daily responsibilities as Ontario's watchdog will be available on February 8 here: <https://midlandculturalcentre.com/ADayInTheLife>

Case Summaries

Keep on truckin'

A truck driver who crosses the Canada-U.S. border weekly as an essential worker complained to us that a ServiceOntario location would not let him in and demanded he self-isolate for 14 days because he had recently crossed the border. [Read more.](#)



Email fail

After requesting information from the Ministry of Health in French and receiving answers in English twice, a Francophone journalist complained to our Office. [Learn about how we resolved this complaint.](#)

Close-up of someone typing on a laptop



Young man opening fridge door



The right balance

A 16-year-old youth complained to us that staff at his group home threatened to lock the refrigerator after he helped himself to food at night when he was hungry. [Read more.](#)

[Work with us: Job openings](#)

Person in meeting space sitting at desk with coffee cup



Interested in working with us?

We continue to hire new staff. Check out all of our open positions in the [Careers](#) section of our website.

- [Communications Officer, French Language Services Unit](#)
- [Early Resolution Officer](#)
- [Early Resolution Officer, Children and Youth Unit](#)
- [Legal Counsel](#)

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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