




2021

Annual Report



Ombudsman Toronto acknowledges that we are on the traditional territory of many nations, including the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishnabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee, and the Wendat peoples, and that this land is now home to many diverse First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples. We also acknowledge that Toronto is covered by Treaty 13 signed with the Mississaugas of the Credit, and the Williams Treaties signed with multiple Mississaugas and Chippewa bands.

At Ombudsman Toronto, we have the responsibility to uphold and ensure fairness in the city's local government and we understand that this must be done with a respectful and culturally responsive approach. We commit to ongoing learning, engagement, and relationship building.

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Message from the Ombudsman



Message from the Ombudsman

I am pleased to present my first Annual Report since becoming Toronto's Ombudsman in the summer of 2021.

As some of you may know, I was one of the very first employees of Ombudsman Toronto when the office opened its doors to the public in 2009. Since then, I have witnessed the positive impact this office has had on both the City government and the lives of people in Toronto. It is an honour to return as Ombudsman.

I would be remiss, however, if I didn't acknowledge the work of Fiona Crean and Susan Opler, the Ombudsmen who came before me. I am grateful to have the opportunity to build upon their outstanding work.

Importance of Accountability During a Crisis

Torontonians have spent more than two years adjusting to the ever-changing realities of the COVID-19 pandemic, and their City government has been delivering its services and programs in a completely new landscape.

It is especially during these times of uncertainty and change that people need to be able to rely on their government—and their government in turn needs to show the public empathy and care. Last year, people contacted us with a range of issues about COVID-19, such as requests for information about vaccine clinics, relief from business licence fees, and the disruption to

in-person services. Staff at Ombudsman Toronto worked hard during those difficult times to continue the critical task of ensuring the City serves people fairly.

Our Work Last Year: Making Toronto a Fairer Place for Everyone

HANDLING MORE CASES

Since 2017, the number of cases handled by Ombudsman Toronto has increased every year. Last year, we saw another large increase—more than 15%—in the number of complaints, and thanks to the commitment of the team at Ombudsman Toronto, we were able to resolve more than 90% of those cases within 30 days (an increase of more than 8% from 2020).

CREATING POSITIVE SYSTEMIC CHANGE

In 2021, we released an Enquiry into the City's communication and enforcement of COVID-19 rules in City parks, as well as an update on the trends for complaints we received about Toronto Community Housing Corporation. You'll find the details of those reports in the pages that follow.

In September, our office also launched an investigation into the City's clearing of encampments in public parks. The investigation focuses on the City's planning of the clearings, the policies and procedures that guided its actions, its engagement with stakeholders, and how it communicated with the public.

NEW OVERSIGHT OF TORONTO POLICE SERVICE

At its April 2021 meeting, City Council unanimously approved a motion expanding our mandate to include oversight of the Toronto Police Service (TPS) through a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with our office, the TPS, and the Toronto Police Services Board. This decision allows Ombudsman Toronto to investigate the fairness of TPS's policies and procedures. We are proud to take on this work.

Reducing Barriers to Access

One of the Ombudsman's core responsibilities is to ensure that everyone in Toronto is aware of the role and function of our office and can access our services. It is important that people know who we are and how we can help, and I have made it a personal priority to ensure that anyone who feels they have been treated unfairly by the City knows that they can come to us.

We are using focused outreach in underserved communities to ensure that people who need our services—especially those who may not know about the Ombudsman or may face barriers accessing support—know what we do and how to contact us for help. We do this by appearing at special events, meetings, and speaking engagements, and by developing and distributing targeted educational materials.

Looking Ahead

Finally, I would like to recognize the excellent work done by our amazing team. They have managed to adapt and overcome any obstacle they have encountered, while continuing to advocate for fairness for the people of Toronto. As I begin my tenure as Ombudsman, I am honoured to work with them in pursuit of a fair and accountable City government for all.

Yours sincerely,



Kwame Addo
Ombudsman






What Can the Ombudsman Do for You?



What Can the Ombudsman Do for You?



Local government impacts everyone daily. It matters when the City of Toronto doesn't treat people fairly—its decisions and actions can have significant consequences. At Ombudsman Toronto, we make sure your government works for you.

What is an Ombudsman?

An Ombudsman investigates complaints from members of the public who believe they have been treated unfairly by or received unfair service from their government. Ombudsman Toronto is independent and impartial. Our work is confidential and free for everyone.

What Do We Do?

We hold the City of Toronto administration accountable by making sure it serves people fairly. We oversee all City divisions, and most City agencies, boards, and corporations.* If someone believes they have not been treated fairly by the City—and has taken their complaint

as far as it can go through the City's complaint process—they can contact our office to make a complaint. We will listen and work to see if we can resolve the issue as quickly as possible.

How Can We Help?

If we find that the City has acted unfairly, we will provide the City with clear and practical recommendations to resolve the complaint and improve its service in the future. On issues big and small, our work impacts the daily lives of people in Toronto and improves the City for us all.

* For a full list of who we oversee, visit ombudsmantoronto.ca.





What Does Fairness Look Like?

What Does Fairness Look Like?



At Ombudsman Toronto, we stand up for fairness at the City.
But what is fairness?

Everyone who interacts with the City has the right to three kinds of fairness: a fair process, a fair decision, and fair treatment. When we look into a complaint, we ask questions to make sure each of these areas were fair.

Did They Have Access to a Fair Process?

A fair process is about how the City makes a decision or delivers a service.

DID YOU KNOW?

The City must provide you with opportunities to participate meaningfully when the decision has the potential to affect your rights, privileges, or interests.

The City is responsible for ensuring that employees understand that they must be impartial and follow the highest standards of ethical conduct in delivering public programs and services.

ELEMENTS OF A FAIR PROCESS

For a process to be fair, there must be:

- Clear communication and good record-keeping.
- Information available about review or appeal processes.
- Advance notice of an action or a decision.
- Clear reasons for the decision.



Was the Decision Fair?

Every day, City of Toronto employees make decisions that affect members of the public. These are results, outcomes, actions, or responses by the City that affect one or more people or organizations.

DID YOU KNOW?

To ensure that it operates fairly, the City must have rules that are fair and just, and comply with the law.

The City must ensure that its decisions are based on complete and relevant information. Its decisions must also be equitable by reasonably considering the specific case and people's circumstances.

ELEMENTS OF A FAIR DECISION

For a decision to be fair, it must:

- Be based on rules, policies, and procedures that are applied consistently.
- Not be discriminatory.
- Be based only on relevant information.
- Be considerate of the needs and circumstances of the person affected by the decision.

Were They Treated Fairly?

All people who interact with the City have the right to be treated fairly.

DID YOU KNOW?

The City must ensure that its programs and services are easily accessible to a diverse range of people.

When delivering services and programs, the City must consider people's individual needs and circumstances.

The City must also demonstrate that it holds itself accountable by having a robust and accessible complaints process and by fostering a culture of continuous service improvement.

ELEMENTS OF FAIR TREATMENT

For treatment to be fair:

- People must be treated with dignity, respect, and care.
- There needs to be a robust and accessible complaints process.
- The City must provide accessible service that meets people's needs.

“We are Toronto’s bridge to fairness.”
Ombudsman
Toronto’s
description of
what they do is
something I think
we should be
proud we offer
our residents.”

– City Councillor







Making a Complaint

Making a Complaint: A Step-by-Step Guide

Every person in Toronto deserves fair treatment from the City of Toronto and has the right to speak up if they don't get it. At Ombudsman Toronto, we provide members of the public with a way to raise their concerns if they believe they have not been treated fairly by the City.



Step 1: Contact the City

The City has the responsibility and must give people the opportunity to resolve problems before our office gets involved. That means the first step is to raise your complaint directly with the relevant City division, agency, board, or corporation. If you're not sure where to make your complaint, contact 311 Toronto by phone at [3-1-1](tel:311), email at 311@toronto.ca, or through their [mobile app](#), and they will direct you.

Step 2: The City's Response

Take your complaint as far as you can through the City's complaints process until you get the City's final answer. You should receive an answer from the City in writing, with its reasons for the decision. If you encounter any delays or problems, contact our office and we will help you navigate the system.

Step 3: Make Your Complaint

If the issue does not get resolved or you are not satisfied with the City's response, your next step is to make your complaint to our office. You can contact us by phone at [416-392-7062](tel:4163927062), by email at ombudsman@toronto.ca, or through our [online complaints form at ombudsmantoronto.ca](#). All complaints made to our office are confidential.

Step 4: Understanding Your Complaint

Once we receive your complaint, a member of our team will contact you to understand the issue better. They will listen and ask questions. They will also ask for consent to contact the City to learn more.

Step 5: Gathering Information

We will then contact the City to gather more information, keeping you informed about what we are doing throughout the process.

Step 6: Our Findings

After we've reviewed all the relevant information, we will determine whether or not the City acted fairly. We will contact you to explain what we did, let you know what we found, and tell you what we said to the City, including any recommendations we made.





“Thank you for all your hard work. The world needs more people like you to go to bat for them.”

– Member of the Public





A Look at Our 2021 Data

2,802

Cases Handled
(15.4% increase from 2020)

66

**Outreach Activities
Carried Out**
(47% increase from 2020)

228

**COVID-19-Related
Cases Handled**
(8.1% of total cases handled in 2021)

2021

3

**Public
Reports**

The background image shows a residential building with a grey brick upper section and a lower section with horizontal siding. A satellite dish is mounted on the brick wall. A yellow diamond-shaped road sign with a black silhouette of a mountain range is visible. A dashed yellow line curves across the top left. The text 'by the' is in white, bold, sans-serif font.

by the

Numbers

128

Formal
Recommendations
Monitored

92.4%

of all Cases were
Closed Within 30 Days

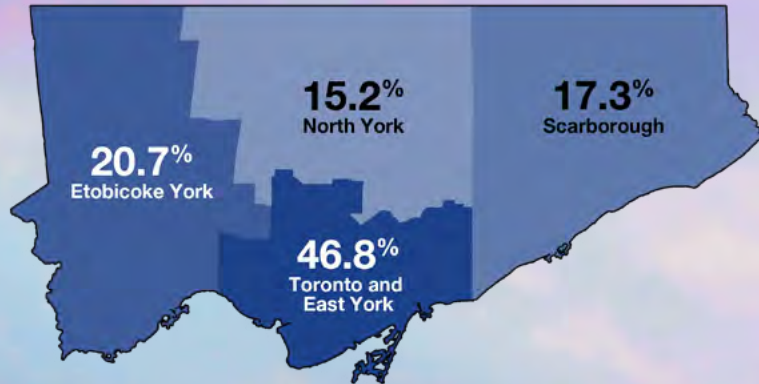
(8.3% increase from 2020)

14

Consultations
Undertaken
with the City

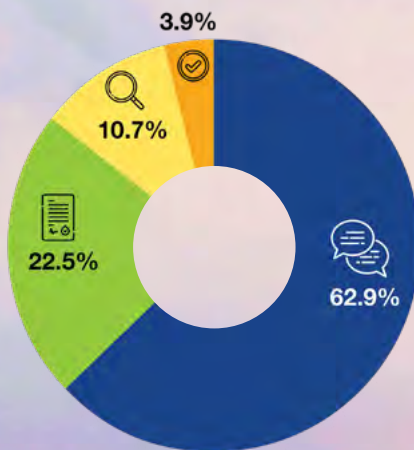
Who We Heard From

*Based on complaints where address data was available



What We Found

In 2021, we identified administrative fairness problems in just over half of the complaints we looked into, with some cases involving multiple instances of unfairness. Here is a breakdown of the most frequent types of issues we found.



Communication

(e.g., delays in getting back to people, poor complaint handling)



Policies and Procedures

(e.g., not having good written procedures, not making policies publicly accessible)



Investigations and Enforcement

(e.g. failing to give proper notice)



Decisions

(e.g., failing to provide sufficient reasons for a decision, making an unreasonable or unfair decision)



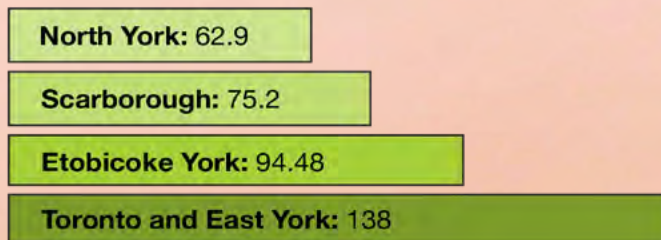
Who We Heard About Most Often

*In alphabetical order

- Legal Services, regarding the Administrative Penalty System
- Parks, Forestry & Recreation
- Municipal Licensing & Standards
- Revenue Services
- Shelter, Support & Housing Administration
- Toronto Building
- Toronto Community Housing Corporation
- Toronto Employment & Social Services
- Toronto Transit Commission
- Transportation Services

Complaints per 100,000 People

*Estimation based on complaints where address data was available



Most Frequent Complaint Topics

TORONTO COMMUNITY HOUSING CORPORATION

- Maintenance Issues
- Neighbour Issues
- Problems with Service from TCHC's Solutions Team

MUNICIPAL LICENSING & STANDARDS

- Property Standards
- Noise
- Business Licence Applications & Renewals
- RentSafeTO: Apartment Building Standards

SHELTER, SUPPORT & HOUSING ADMINISTRATION

- Maintenance and Client Experience: Shelters
- Housing Waiting List
- City's Role as Service Manager for Social Housing Providers



MARTIN GOODMAN TRAIL
CLOSED
LOWER SIMCOE TO REES
USE QUEENS QUAY BLVD.
←


DETOUR
←

DANGER

NO PEDESTRIAN ACCESS


GRASCAN
ATTENTION
EVERYONE
ENTERING SITE
MUST SIGN
IN AT SAFETY
TRAILER
PERSONAL PROTECTIVE
EQUIPMENT MUST BE WORN
AT ALL TIMES
  
HARD HATS SAFETY VESTS SAFETY BOOTS

Our 2021 Public Reports





Our 2021 Public Reports



We issue public reports after completing Enquiries and Investigations. These are matters that are in the public's interest, and usually involve complex systemic issues that have a wide impact and require in-depth exploration. Our public reports—and the findings and recommendations the Ombudsman makes in them—improve public services for everyone and help hold the City accountable for its actions.

All public reports are available on our website:
ombudsmantoronto.ca/Investigative-Work/Investigative-Reports

“I want to thank the Ombudsman for the work that they’ve done and the recommendations that they’ve put forward. I think that they offer very valuable guidance for us.”

– Mayor Tory

Enquiry into the City of Toronto's Communication and Enforcement of COVID-19 Rules in City Parks in Spring 2020

THE ISSUE

In March of 2020, the Province of Ontario declared a provincial emergency and Toronto's Mayor declared a State of Emergency in the City—both in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. As part of the measures implemented to keep people in Toronto safe, the City announced that it was closing all City-owned playgrounds and other park amenities, including sports fields, picnic areas, and off-leash dog parks. Soon after, the Province ordered the closure of all outdoor recreational amenities across Ontario, and the Mayor issued Emergency Orders imposing physical distancing in City parks and public squares.

The City informed the public that a COVID-19 Enforcement Team would be monitoring City parks and that violation of these new rules would result in a fine. It wasn't long after the Province ordered outdoor recreational amenities closed and the Mayor issued his Emergency Orders that we began to hear from people who had received tickets from by-law enforcement officers in City parks.

They told us that at the time they were given tickets, they were unclear about what they could and could not do in City parks, and that they did not know how they could dispute a ticket, since Court Services' offices and public counters were closed because of the pandemic.

At a time of such fear and uncertainty, clear, accessible, and timely answers to these questions were vital. People in Toronto needed to be able to rely on and trust in their local government, and good service to the public was more important than ever.



WHAT WE DID

We interviewed several members of the public who had received a ticket for not following the new rules regarding park usage, and talked with City staff as well. We also completed an extensive document review, which included Municipal Licensing & Standards (MLS) training materials, City news releases, and the reports of two investigations—one by an investigator outside the City and one by the City’s Human Rights Office—into allegations of racial profiling and discrimination by MLS by-law enforcement officers enforcing COVID-19 rules in City parks.

WHAT WE FOUND

After reviewing all the evidence, we found notable instances of unfairness in the way the City communicated the rules for using City parks, by-law enforcement officers' training to enforce those rules, and how the City communicated the options for disputing tickets.



Photo by Hansen Tang

Our findings included:

- The City's communication about its new COVID-19 rules for park use was unclear. Park benches were a particular source of confusion. The City knew people were confused about whether they could sit on benches, yet its messaging about park benches was inconsistent and unclear.
- When MLS management directed a 'zero tolerance' approach, by-law enforcement officers were uncertain about what 'zero tolerance' meant and how that impacted their ability to exercise discretion and judgement.
- We found that MLS by-law enforcement officers were not adequately trained on fair and equitable enforcement, raising a concern that MLS's enforcement activities may be disproportionately impacting vulnerable populations.
- The tickets people received contained outdated, inaccurate information on how to dispute them, and it was hard for people to get answers to their questions about that.

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

While conducting the Enquiry, the Ombudsman noted several issues that required immediate action. The Ombudsman responded with a number of early recommendations, including that the City should provide the public with more and clearer information on its website about the rules for park use, and, for those who had been issued a ticket, information about the suspension of the time limits for disputing a ticket. The City quickly implemented these early recommendations.

At the conclusion of [our Enquiry](#), the Ombudsman made several additional recommendations, including that the City:

- Immediately send clear and direct communication to all MLS staff that 'zero tolerance' is an unacceptable, unclear, and unfair approach to enforcement.
- Create an organization-wide policy to ensure timely, accurate, coordinated, and accessible communication to the public about changes to City services and facilities.
- Develop an anti-racism strategy within MLS to eliminate racial profiling from by-law enforcement.

RESULTS

MLS has already implemented three of our recommendations since the release of our report.

As a result:

- Staff have been told that they are not to take a 'zero tolerance' approach to enforcement.
- Training materials no longer have any reference to a 'zero tolerance' approach to enforcement.

We are continuing to follow up on the remaining recommendations. We know that:

- MLS is developing a comprehensive anti-racism strategy and will be publicly sharing summaries of the findings and systemic recommendations from the April and June 2020 investigations into the earlier incidents of racial profiling in High Park and Centennial Park.

- MLS is also creating a policy and training materials for by-law enforcement staff on the fair and equitable exercise of judgment and the use of discretion in exercising their authority.
- Strategic Communications is reviewing its communications-related policies and procedures, including how best to work with all City divisions to ensure timely and thorough responses to public complaints.
- Both MLS and Strategic Communications are working together to include MLS's policy on fair and equitable enforcement on the City's website.

We will continue to follow up with the City until our recommendations are fully implemented.



Report on Toronto Community Housing Corporation Complaint Trend Data and Related Recommendations (2021 Report)

THE ISSUE

In 2020, Toronto's Ombudsman released a public report looking at data and trends in complaints from 2019 about Toronto Community Housing Corporation (TCHC) to our office. We found that poor or no communication was the most common cause of unfairness in TCHC complaints that we handled that year. The Ombudsman recommended that TCHC more effectively publicize its complaints process and train all staff on how to provide good service to the public.

In response to our recommendations in that [2020 report](#), TCHC launched a communications campaign in July and August of 2020 to publicize its internal complaints process to its residents, including posters, brochures, and information on its website and in its newsletter. TCHC also targeted staff with an information campaign, and developed a training plan for all staff on good public service, which it began rolling out in June of 2020.

In 2021, [we released an update](#) to this initial report, looking at complaints data from TCHC in 2020, which has served as a constructive tool to help TCHC continue to improve its service to tenants.

WHAT WE DID

We analysed complaints to our office about TCHC from 2020, including the overall number of complaints about TCHC, as well as a comparison of TCHC-related complaints to those about other City of Toronto organizations we heard about the most.



Photo by Bahram Bayat



Photo by Josh Willink

WHAT WE FOUND

We found that yet again, the number of TCHC complaints to Ombudsman Toronto increased in 2020. We also identified the following key problems:

- **Premature Complaints:** We continued to receive a high number of premature complaints (i.e., complaints where tenants had not completed TCHC's internal complaints process before contacting us).
- **Lack of Awareness:** We heard that some tenants are still unaware that TCHC has an internal complaints process.
- **Communication Issues:** Poor communication, such as delayed communication or a lack of a response, remained the number one fairness problem in the cases we handled.

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

To address these findings, we recommended that TCHC:

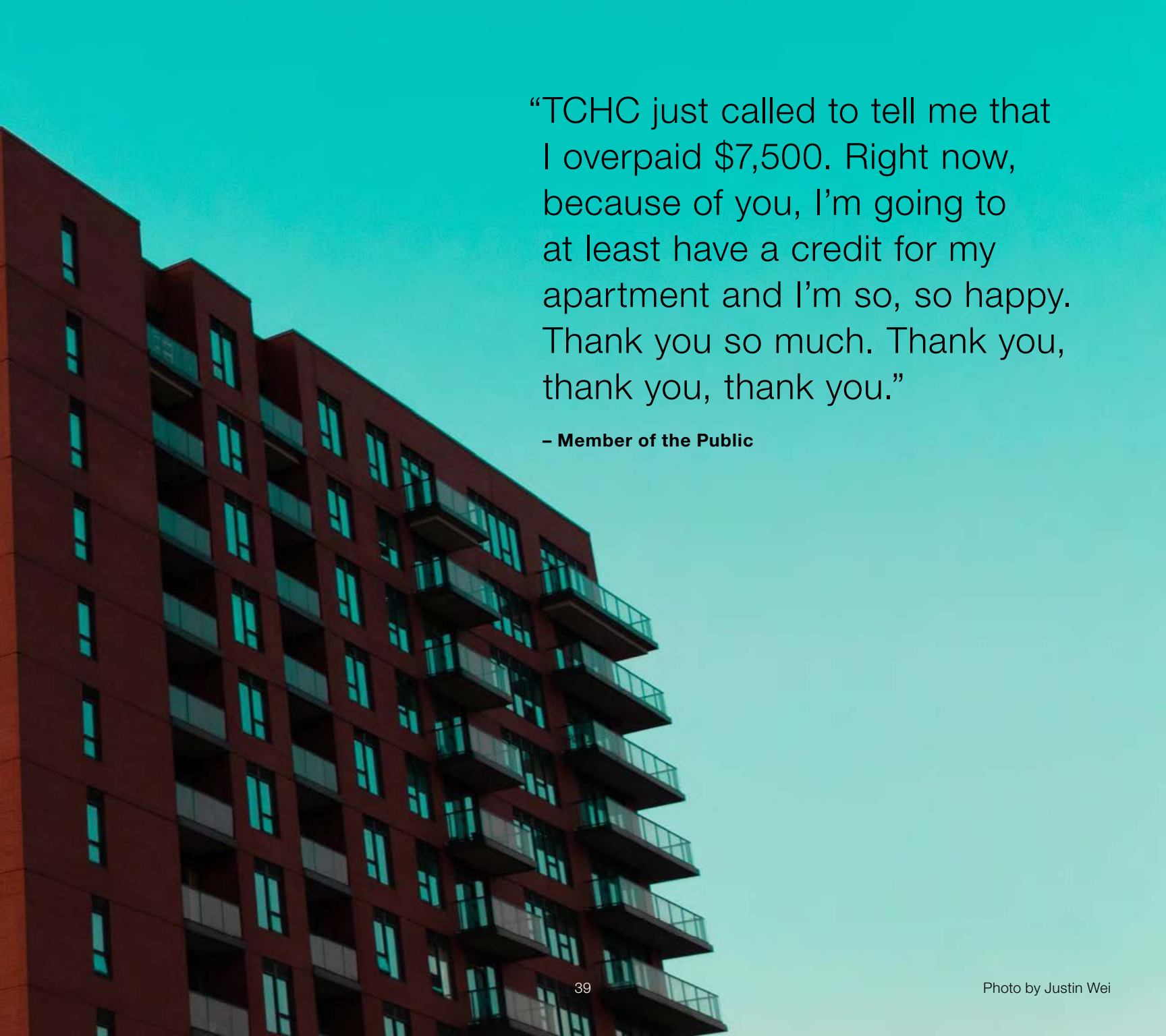
- Update and renew its communications campaign for Solutions, its internal complaints department, to ensure that more tenants know how to make a complaint to TCHC.
- Ensure that it has assessed whether the Solutions team has sufficient resources to effectively carry out its duties, given the large increase in complaints it received from 2019 to 2020, and the potential for its complaint numbers to continue to increase.
- Review its public service staff training plans for all staff corporation-wide, to ensure the training includes specific content on the importance of timely communications.

RESULTS

TCHC accepted all our recommendations and has since rolled out a renewed comprehensive communications campaign about its complaints resolution process.







“TCHC just called to tell me that I overpaid \$7,500. Right now, because of you, I’m going to at least have a credit for my apartment and I’m so, so happy. Thank you so much. Thank you, thank you, thank you.”

– Member of the Public



Update on Past Reports



Update on Past Reports

Update on How the City of Toronto Handles Homeowner Third-Party Liability Claims for Basement Flooding and Sewer Backups (2020 Enquiry)

WHAT WE RECOMMENDED

We made [nine recommendations to the City](#) to improve the fairness and transparency of its process for homeowners affected by basement floods and sewer backups.

WHAT HAS BEEN IMPLEMENTED

All recommendations have been implemented.
As a result:

- The public now has access to better information about how the City handles basement floods and sewer backup claims, including a clear explanation that the City will only pay a claim where the claimant can prove that the City was negligent.

- The City's website now explains to the public why it is important to report a basement flood or sewer backup to 311, and that the failure to do this could hurt a person's ability to prove that the City was negligent.
- Insurance & Risk Management, Toronto Water, and Legal Services now have a process to coordinate the investigation of storm event claims. This information is available on the City's website.

“Thank you for the work
you do for us citizens!”

– Member of the Public





Photo by Sam Lion

Update on How Toronto Animal Services Handled a Dangerous Dog Investigation and Appeal (2019 Enquiry)

WHAT WE RECOMMENDED

We made [nine recommendations to MLS](#) to improve how it handles dangerous dog investigations.

WHAT HAS BEEN IMPLEMENTED

All recommendations have been implemented.
As a result:

- A new Dangerous Dog Review Tribunal has been operating since May 2019.
- There is more information available on the City's website about what to do if you are the victim of a dog bite or attack, as well as what the City will do as part of its investigation.
- MLS now provides information to the public about Toronto Animal Services' investigation of dog bites or attacks, including how it determines whether a dog's act is severe.
- MLS now provides improved training to its staff involved in investigating dog bites and attacks, including guidance on how to interview child witnesses and communicate information to victims.

Update on the Review of TTC's Investigation of a February 18, 2018 Incident Involving Transit Fare Inspectors (2019 Enquiry)

WHAT WE RECOMMENDED

We made [six recommendations to the TTC](#) to strengthen the independence, fairness, transparency, and thoroughness of its process for investigating complaints about TTC Fare Inspectors and Special Constables.

WHAT HAS BEEN IMPLEMENTED

We followed up with the TTC regularly over two years to monitor its implementation of our recommendations, including getting updates on the development and rollout of its anti-racism strategy. Our recommendations have now been implemented. As a result:

- The TTC has a Ten Point Action Plan to build greater diversity and inclusion.
- There is now a Fare Inspector and Special Constable Complaints (FISCC) Office. This new office will investigate all public complaints involving TTC Fare Inspectors and Special Constables and will provide a more accessible, accountable, and inclusive process for receiving and responding to public complaints.
- To ensure impartiality, the complaints office reports directly to the TTC's Chief Diversity and Culture Officer. It operates independently from TTC management and employees, as well as the public.



Update on the Investigation into TTC's Oversight of its Transit Enforcement Unit (2017 Investigation)

WHAT WE RECOMMENDED

We made [26 recommendations to the TTC](#) to improve the accountability and transparency of its oversight of the Transit Enforcement Unit.

WHAT HAS BEEN IMPLEMENTED

Many of our recommendations about the TTC's public complaints process were addressed as part of the TTC's creation of the Fare Inspector and Special Constable Complaints (FISCC) Office, which was established in response to our [Review of the TTC's Investigation of a February 18, 2018 Incident Involving Transit Fare Inspectors](#).

WHAT WE CONTINUE TO FOLLOW

We continue to meet with the TTC to ensure that it implements the following recommendations:

- Improve its 'use of force' policies and training to highlight the importance and value of de-escalation.
- Create a system to monitor incidents of 'use of force' involving staff.
- Create a policy to guide the use of discretion by transit enforcement staff when exercising their authority.

“Ombudsman Toronto staff listened with their mind and their heart.”

– Member of the Public








Case Stories



“I would like to thank
you for helping me.
Your hard work
and effort brought
the outcome I was
waiting for.”

– Member of the Public

Case Stories



Every day, we hear from people who believe they have been treated unfairly by the City of Toronto. Case stories provide a window into the kinds of complaints we handle, and how we help make the City's systems and services fairer for everyone. Here is a small selection of the complaints we handled last year.

All names have been changed to protect people's privacy.
Photos are for illustrative purposes only.

Direct-Withdrawal Mistake: Getting a Refund

When signing up for a mortgage, homeowners must choose whether they would like their property taxes to be withdrawn from their mortgage or sent directly to them through an invoice. Unfortunately, when Manjula's bank set up their mortgage, the bank mistakenly selected both options. The City did not notice that Manjula was set up to pay their property taxes in two different ways, which meant that Manjula was being charged double.

Frustrated and unsure what steps to take, Manjula contacted us for help. We looked into the matter and confirmed that Manjula was being charged twice. We then helped Manjula get in touch with Revenue Services to obtain their refund.

Why this Matters: Mistakes happen, and it's sometimes difficult to know how to navigate the City administration to get them fixed. When someone comes to our office and doesn't know where to go to address their problem, we always try to help refer them to the right place.



Quarantine Confusion

When Alessandro contracted COVID-19, he was eager to follow public health guidelines and quarantine for the proper amount of time. But after being contacted by the City of Toronto's Public Health department, he was confused about what exactly he needed to do. He knew he was supposed to quarantine but was unclear as to how long.

Instead of offering straightforward guidance, Toronto Public Health provided Alessandro with two different dates for the end of his quarantine. Puzzled, he contacted our office to find out why Toronto Public Health gave him conflicting information.

When we asked Toronto Public Health, it clarified the information it had provided Alessandro and promised to improve communications with COVID-positive residents to avoid further confusion.

Why this Matters: Clear, consistent communication is a key component of fair service. It is extremely important that the City communicates effectively and accurately with residents so that they can follow public health guidelines. We helped the City ensure that it is providing the public with the information they need to stay safe and follow public health measures.

Ending a Business Lease Agreement

Adamma came to our office after the City did not renew their business lease. They shared the hardships they faced due to the COVID-19 pandemic and told us they didn't think it was fair that their lease was not renewed. We spoke with the City's Corporate Real Estate Management division, which explained its rationale for deciding not to renew the lease. We found its rationale to be fair and shared this information with Adamma. We helped Adamma better understand why the City had made this decision, and told them about the different avenues of relief available to them through the City.

Why this Matters: Even when we do not find any fairness issues with a case, we always try to help the person who complained to understand the City's position, as well as our decision. We also work to provide referrals and as much information as possible to help the individual.

Applying Policies Consistently

Liang was considering withdrawing his Committee of Adjustment (COA) application. He contacted a City Planner to ask if this was possible and if so, what would happen to his application fee. The City Planner he spoke with told him that he would get a full refund, minus a \$100 administration fee, if he withdrew it before a hearing was scheduled. This meant that Liang would receive a refund of \$12,096.07.

After speaking with the City Planner, Liang decided to withdraw his application, and did so before a hearing was scheduled. However, he was then told by City Planning that his refund request would need to go to the COA for a formal decision.

The COA reviewed his request, but decided not to issue the refund, stating that significant work had already been done on his application. Frustrated, Liang contacted our office for help.

We looked into his complaint and found several fairness issues, including that Liang did in fact qualify for a refund according to the policy that was in place at the time Liang withdrew his application. We learned that City Planning had drafted a new refund policy, but it did not go into effect until after Liang requested a refund. It therefore appeared that the refund policy was not being applied consistently and objectively to Liang's request.

We also found that the policy that was in place at the time of Liang's request was not clear or easy to understand. It did not say anything about sending refund requests to the COA to decide whether a refund would be given.

Finally, we found that at the time Liang requested a refund, City Planning's refund policy was not publicly available. This meant that Liang was reliant on City Planning and COA staff to tell him what the process was.

We recommended that City Planning refund Liang the full \$12,096.07. The City accepted our recommendation and confirmed that it would refund Liang the full amount.

Why this Matters: When the City's policies are unclear or aren't applied consistently—or even if there's a belief that this might not be the case—it can impact the public's trust in their local government. That's why it's important that the City clearly communicates its policies to the public and follows through on what's been communicated. We worked to make sure that happened for Liang.





Photo by Harps Joseph



Assisting with a Medical Transfer

A family living in one of the City's Toronto Community Housing Corporation (TCHC) buildings contacted our office. They told us that their son has a disability that limits his mobility, and that to get into their apartment, he had to climb a large staircase that was difficult for him to navigate. The family had requested a medical transfer to accommodate their son, but their request had been denied and they were hoping we could help.

After speaking with the family, we learned that they had not yet complained to TCHC about their transfer being denied. Instead, they brought their complaint directly to us. Since Ombudsman Toronto is an office of last resort, members of the public have to complain to the City through its complaints process before we can help. However, in matters of urgent health and safety concerns, we will often make an exception.

Given the family's circumstances, we moved ahead with the complaint and found that the process through which the family was denied the medical transfer was unfair. The family had clearly stated that their son could not climb the stairs to get in their apartment and provided a medical letter to support their claim, but their transfer was still denied. We spoke with TCHC, who agreed to reassess the family's request.

Why this Matters: The City organizations we oversee have the responsibility—and must have the opportunity—to address complaints from the people they serve. That's why our office cannot handle complaints unless they have first gone through the City's regular complaints process. But sometimes members of the public contact us before they have tried to resolve a problem directly with the City. When this happens and the complaint is regarding an urgent health and safety matter, we will do what we can to help resolve the complaint as quickly as possible.

Helping a Refugee Get the Support They Deserved

When Jean came to us for help, they were new to Canada, having recently entered the country as a refugee. They had previously been unhoused and living in a shelter, but had just received a permanent spot for emergency housing through the City's rent-geared-to-income program.

Unfortunately, the challenges they faced did not end there.

When approved for emergency housing, Jean had been allocated a furniture stipend, but the City did not tell them how to access it or that their room would be unfurnished. Then, once they moved into the unit, no one explained to Jean that the unit had heat or how to turn it on.

As a result, Jean spent the first three nights in their new apartment with no furniture and no heat. 911 had to be contacted to treat symptoms of extreme cold.

Concerned, we looked into the matter. We discovered that Shelter, Support & Housing Administration (SSHA) and Toronto Employment & Social Services (TESS)—the two divisions responsible for supporting Jean's transition from the shelter system to their new housing—were not communicating with one another.

Further, the information SSHA and TESS shared with Jean was not communicated appropriately—they did not accommodate Jean's language barrier.

Recognizing the urgency, we immediately set up a meeting with staff at SSHA and TESS to make sure Jean's complaints were escalated, and ensured Jean was quickly set up with both heat and furniture.

Why this Matters: When a City service involves multiple divisions, it's important they communicate with one another to ensure nothing falls through the cracks. This is especially the case when the City is supporting a vulnerable member of the public. We identified the broken link in the City's support for Jean—ensuring they got the support they needed.





A Late Water Bill

Taylor did not receive her water bill on time because of delays caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. When the bill came, it included extra charges due to a leaking fixture, which Taylor had not been aware of before the bill arrived. She came to us, unhappy with the delay and the extra charges. She told us that if Revenue Services had issued the water bill on time, she would have discovered that her water use was higher than normal, recognized that there was a leak, and been able to fix the leaking fixture sooner. But because the water bill was not mailed on time, Taylor told us she remained unaware of the leak, which continued into the next billing cycle.

We reviewed her case and spoke to Revenue Services. It explained that the delay was caused by unavoidable staffing issues due to COVID-19: staff were not allowed in the office at the beginning of the pandemic, and could only process bills with irregular usage, like Taylor's, once they were back in the office. Revenue Services also said residents have access to online tools

like the MyWater Toronto and Utility Account Lookup to view their water consumption. The online portal allows people to view total average water consumption, identify leaks, become aware of water use habits, and view utility account information. Staff said that Taylor had access to her water bill information and if viewed, could have identified the leaking fixture earlier.

After looking into the matter, we found that Revenue Services' response to Taylor was reasonable, and that she was not eligible for an adjustment to her water bill.

Why this Matters: When someone complains to our office, we always listen and look into the issue. However, once we review all the evidence, we don't always find a problem with how the City acted. In Taylor's case, we found that the City acted reasonably given the circumstances and closed the case.

Navigating the Subsidized Housing Waitlist

Cathy, a tenant of Toronto Community Housing Corporation (TCHC), was concerned when she came to our office. She had been deemed "overhoused", which meant that she was in an apartment considered too large for her needs. She was unsure about how the process for moving her to a more appropriately sized apartment would work. She found the information TCHC provided confusing, and she wanted to be able to choose the building she would be moving to, not just the geographic area of her next apartment.

After speaking with Cathy, we contacted TCHC staff and asked them to clarify their policies for Cathy. They explained that TCHC had changed the protocols for moving tenants considered to be overhoused and outlined the steps they would follow in Cathy's case, so that she could better understand the process.

In addition to the changes to TCHC's protocols for overhoused tenants, there had been several changes to the City's Access to Housing service that impacted Cathy. As a result, she was worried she may have been removed from the City's centralized subsidized housing waitlist. The centralized list is a waitlist for social housing administered by the City of Toronto.

It is separate from TCHC's internal list and allows tenants to potentially access housing options with other providers. Being on the City's list was important to Cathy because she wanted to make sure she had as many options as possible to find housing.

We spoke with City staff, who assured us that Cathy was still on the City's subsidized housing waitlist. She was able to make her housing selections and told us that she was very happy with the resolution of her case—she now understood the relocation process and was reassured about her status on the centralized waitlist.

Why this Matters: City policies must be easy to access and understand. When new policies come out, it is important that the City ensures that people understand the changes, and what those changes mean for them. We helped Cathy understand the changes to a policy that affected her and made sure that the City communicated those changes to her, and other tenants like her.





Ensuring Accommodation

Ryan contacted us, unhappy he had not been accommodated by the Administrative Penalty Tribunal (administered by Court Services) for a hearing which he was unable to attend. He told us that he was unable to use screens, as he was visually impaired and had suffered a concussion. He was frustrated, saying that Court Services had not accommodated him.

We got in touch with Court Services to find out what happened. Staff told us that they had tried to accommodate Ryan by sending all necessary information to him in an email, instead of requiring him to fill out an online form. We explained that their modification still did not allow Ryan to fully participate, since he would need to access his email on a phone or computer and was unable to look at a screen for long periods.

Following our conversation, Court Services set up a call with Ryan, allowing him to participate in the hearing in a way that met his needs.

Why this Matters: Fair treatment requires the City to consider people's individual needs and circumstances, and to ensure that it provides accessible service. We helped the City understand that it was not doing this in Ryan's case, and we helped Ryan get the fair service he deserved.

Holding the City Accountable by Reinstating a Complaints Phone Line

Many people told us that the complaint telephone number at Shelter, Support & Housing Administration (SSHA) was no longer accepting calls due to the COVID-19 pandemic. When people called the number, the automated message told callers to email their complaint instead.

We contacted SSHA, stressing that its telephone complaint line is a crucial way for people to lodge complaints about SSHA's services, particularly for individuals who often do not have access to email. SSHA understood and took immediate action to reinstate the phone line. Following our conversation, we confirmed that the phone line was operational again and accepting voice messages for complaints.

Why this Matters: Accountability is a key element of fair treatment. When SSHA did not accept calls on its complaints phone line, it was not being accountable to the people it serves. By alerting the City to this important access issue, we helped ensure that people could keep their government accountable by making complaints about its service.

Clarifying an Appeal Process

Léandre disagreed with a decision that the Committee of Adjustment (COA) had made. She went to the City's website to see how she could appeal the decision to the Toronto Local Appeal Body (TLAB), a tribunal of locally appointed members who make decisions about local planning matters affecting Toronto neighbourhoods. Based on information she found on the City's website, Léandre emailed her appeal form directly to the TLAB.

It wasn't until weeks later that someone from the City responded to Léandre's email, letting her know that she was supposed to file her appeal documents directly with the COA. Unfortunately, at this point, the deadline to submit an appeal had passed and so Léandre was unable to resubmit her documents.

Frustrated at what she saw as a broken process, Léandre contacted our office to make a complaint.

We looked into the matter and found that some of the information on the City's website about how to appeal a COA decision to the TLAB was confusing.

After sharing our findings with staff at the COA, they agreed to improve their communication to the public, including on the City's website, working collaboratively with the TLAB to ensure they share consistent and accurate instructions on how to appeal a decision. The COA also wrote to Léandre to apologize for the confusion and to explain how it would be improving its communications moving forward.

Why this Matters: For the City's services to be fair, people need to know how they can appeal a decision. That includes ensuring that information on how to make an appeal is consistent, clear, and easy to understand. We helped the COA and TLAB improve how they communicated instructions about their appeal process, ensuring they are fair for everyone.





Improving Communication about a Licence Renewal

Jerry reached out to our office, upset that the City had cancelled her vehicle-for-hire licence. She'd submitted her renewal application on time, and so hadn't expected there to be any issues and was understandably surprised when her licence was cancelled.

The City's Municipal Licensing & Standards division (MLS) told her that, while her renewal application was on time, her licence was cancelled because she had not submitted the background check before the deadline.


When we spoke with Jerry, she shared that she hadn't known the renewal application and background check were due at the same time.

After reviewing the available evidence in Jerry's specific case, we were satisfied that MLS made clear to Jerry that she needed to submit both the renewal fee and the background check to renew her licence before the deadline.

However, while looking into the matter, we found that MLS needed to be clearer about the joint deadline in its communications to applicants. Specifically, we noted that MLS's initial notice should clearly state that both the renewal fee and background check are due at the same time. We made this recommendation to MLS, who agreed with our assessment and updated its communication.

Why this Matters: When investigating a complaint, we sometimes come across fairness issues that are not necessarily related to the complaint itself. When that happens, even if we find the City did not act unfairly towards the person who complained, we will recommend ways the City can improve its service to the public.



A close-up, low-angle shot of a person's head and neck, focusing on the ear and jawline. The person has dark skin and short hair. They are wearing a dark-colored shirt. The background is a solid blue color.

Because of Ombudsman Toronto

“Thank you, Ombudsman,
for making a very powerful
and very effective intervention.”

– City Councillor



Because of Ombudsman Toronto


We are proud to help make Toronto a fairer place for everyone. Here are some of the improvements the City made in 2021, in direct response to our work.

- **The City improved the process for obtaining a natural garden exemption** after our report outlined concerns and made recommendations for improvement.
- In response to our recommendation that the City of Toronto improve its collection and reporting of data on homelessness in Toronto, the Shelter, Support & Housing Administration (SSHA) began using a “Shelter System Flow Data” dashboard. Instead of looking solely at nightly occupancy, **the dashboard provides a more comprehensive view of homelessness in Toronto and greater detail on how the City's shelter system is used**, including showing how people experiencing homelessness enter and exit the system.
- We recommended better communication with the public about the City's winter maintenance program, which includes snow clearing, snow removal, and salting. As a result, **the City sent a brochure in January 2021 called “Get to Know the Plan for Snow” to all Toronto residents**, which explained in simple language its snow clearing plan.
- We recommended that SSHA consult with the Office of the Chief Coroner—a provincial office—about **improving its processes for notifying the Next of Kin after the death of a person experiencing homelessness in the shelter system**. SSHA is also making improvements to its Shelter Management Information System to ensure staff gather Next of Kin information and document it appropriately, respecting shelter residents' wishes.
- After we contacted them, **the City updated its website to reflect new changes to the Occupiers' Liability Act, which could be important for people who have suffered a slip and fall accident**. While the City's website was clear that people have 10 days to submit a claim to the City for property damage or injury relating to the condition of the City's roads or sidewalks, it did not explain that there is a different timeline for claims relating to an injury caused by snow or ice on City property that is not a City road or sidewalk, and that these claims must be submitted within 60 days of the date of the incident. Previously, notice of a claim had to be provided within two years of the incident. As a result of our consultation, the City updated its website to clarify this information.




Photo by Dan Newman

Consultations with the City

The background of the slide features a photograph of a city plaza. On the left, a large, white, three-dimensional letter 'T' stands prominently. Behind it, a modern building with a curved, metallic roof is visible. Several people are walking around the plaza, and a large, circular sculpture is partially visible behind the 'T'. The right side of the slide is covered by a solid blue shape that curves from the top right towards the bottom left, partially obscuring the photograph. A horizontal dotted orange line is positioned below the title, and a dashed orange arc is at the bottom left.



Consultations with the City



We believe in working proactively to address complaints before they even arise. That's why we consult with the City to ensure that the new policies or programs it develops are fair from the beginning. Here are some examples of consultations we undertook in 2021 to make sure the City serves you fairly.

- We continued an ongoing consultation with Corporate Services, helping it to develop and implement a City-wide complaints policy and mechanism.
- We consulted with the City's Senior Services & Long-Term Care division on a policy it is developing for residents or substitute decision-makers using electronic monitoring equipment in resident rooms.
- While the City publishes detailed information about the rights and responsibilities of landlords and tenants on its website, we noticed there was nothing similar on the City's Housing and Shelter section for residents of co-op homes. We are consulting with the Shelter, Support & Housing Administration to help improve and clarify information on the City's website for residents of co-ops.
- We helped make the public complaints processes of Toronto Public Health, Transportation Services, and Toronto Water more accessible and easier to understand.

“Thank you for the partnership and collaboration. It was always a pleasure dealing with everyone in the Ombudsman's office.”

– City Staff Member





Engagement with Communities

“I would like to thank you and staff that worked on my case for a job well done. Thanks to all who worked on this case.”

– Member of the Public

Photo by Ehsan Ahmadnejad

Engagement with Communities

At Ombudsman Toronto, we know the first step in accessing our services is knowing who we are. That's why, every year, we meet with members of the public and community organizations to answer any questions they have and let them know how they can access our services.

Meeting Virtually

As the pandemic continued, so too did our virtual outreach activities. In 2021, we held 66 virtual outreach sessions, including meetings, presentations, and panel appearances—an increase of 47% from the previous year.

Listening and Learning

While the primary goal of our outreach sessions is to help the public better understand who we are and what we do, they also provide an opportunity for people to tell us about themselves, let us know how they interact with the City, and share any concerns they may have about the City's services. These conversations are not formal complaints, but often shed light on instances of potential unfairness that we may need to keep an eye on.

Meet with Ombudsman Toronto

If you're interested in scheduling an outreach session with us, or just want to learn more, contact us at ombudsmancomms@toronto.ca.



Photo by Ike Louie-Natividad

Our Team

Transparency and respect are at the heart of everything we do, and each member of our team is proud to serve the people of Toronto, making sure the City administration treats everyone fairly.







Ombudsman
Toronto

Listening. Investigating. Improving City Services.

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