

Silencing the Noise: Navigating By-laws

What Happened

Arianna was frustrated with the service she received from Municipal Licensing & Standards (MLS) by-law officers. She told us that after making calls to 311 about noise complaints in her condo building, she got in contact with by-law officers. However, Arianna did not feel that the by-law officers took the issue seriously, nor did she feel they had educated themselves about her previous 311 calls. Arianna told us that eventually the by-law officers stopped responding to her calls. Frustrated with the service she received and unsure where to raise her concerns, Arianna contacted us for help.

What We Did

We provided Arianna with a link to MLS's complaints process to raise her concerns about the service she received from the by-law officers. We also referred her to the City's Manager of Noise Enforcement and the 311 Operations Manager. In addition, we explained how the City handles noise complaints and clarified the respective roles of by-law officers and the police in handling such issues. Specifically, we told Arianna that by-law officers can respond to persistent and reoccurring noise, but do not respond to complaints about isolated events that occur infrequently, such as parties or noise from disorderly conduct. Those complaints fall under the jurisdiction of the police.

The Result

After speaking with our office, Arianna had the information she needed to escalate her concerns with the City and knew she could come back to our office for help if she was dissatisfied with its response.

Why This Matters

Sometimes navigating an issue with the City can feel overwhelming. When someone comes to our office and doesn't know where to go to address their problem, we always try to refer them to the right place.



Connecting Communities: Supporting Seniors through a Referral

What Happened

Evangeline came to us with questions about City programs for seniors. She told us that she is an advocate for seniors and helps to ensure they have the support they need to stay engaged, informed, and employed. She noted that Durham Region had senior-specific programs but could not find any at the City. Concerned, she contacted us.

What We Did

We referred Evangeline to the City's Equity Unit for more information on initiatives for seniors and informed her about the Toronto Seniors Strategy, which outlines the City's commitment to improving the well-being of seniors across Toronto.

The Result

Evangeline appreciated the information we shared and said she was looking forward to learning more.

Why This Matters

It is important to know about the available resources provided by your local government and that efforts are being made to ensure equitable access to City services. We helped connect Evangeline with the City's initiatives for and commitment to supporting seniors in Toronto.

“Thank you so much for viewing my email and showing concern about my complaint. I understand my concern doesn't fall under your jurisdiction, but at the same time I would like to thank you for the all the support you provided for further assistance.”

Member of the Public



Communication Clarification: Providing Necessary Updates on Time

What Happened

We heard from Lan, who had concerns about the status of their application for Rent-Geared-to-Income housing (Rent-Geared-to-Income or RGI is subsidized housing made available by the City to help make rent more affordable). Lan told us they had reached out to TCHC for a status update, but did not receive a response.

What We Did

With Lan's consent, we contacted TCHC to confirm the status of their application and determine why they had not yet received a response. TCHC told us that Lan's application had been approved, but acknowledged there was a delay in communicating the result. We stressed the importance of timely communication.

The Result

Shortly after we contacted TCHC, Lan received confirmation that their RGI application had been processed and approved.

Why This Matters

Timely communication is a key aspect of fair service and delays can have a big impact. This is especially the case when it involves a person's ability to secure safe and affordable housing. We identified the source of the delay in TCHC's communications to Lan and helped ensure they received a quick response from TCHC.

“I have been calling the City for help, but just get the run around. In the end, I wrote to you, the Ombudsman, and was given a swift response. Thank you.”

Member of the Public



An Opportunity to be Heard: Clarifying a City Decision

What Happened

Li had done some construction on his house that damaged a tree on his neighbour's property. Staff from the City's Urban Forestry department conducted an inspection and found that the damage occurred within the official 'tree protection zone,' a protected area determined by the diameter of a tree. As a result, the City charged Li a \$790.63 fee. Li disagreed with the City's assessment.

After raising his concerns with the City and being dissatisfied with its response, Li came to our office. He told us that he had obtained his own assessment from an independent arborist who determined the tree was dangerous and needed to be removed. Because of this independent assessment, he did not feel that he should have to pay the fee.

What We Did

We met with Li to gather more information. We also met with the City and reviewed the documentation it provided about its inspection and the City's response to Li. After reviewing all the information, we found the City's response to Li was satisfactory. This was because the City both provided Li with an opportunity to be heard and clearly explained its final decision, which included that the independent assessment Li obtained did not exclude the tree from protection.

The Result

We let Li know that after looking into the matter, we did not find any fairness issues with the City's decision to charge him a fee related to the tree's damage.

Why This Matters

Sometimes after gathering and considering all the available evidence, we find that the City's policies and procedures were, in fact, applied fairly. Regardless of whether we ultimately find unfairness or not, all people deserve to have their issues taken seriously and investigated objectively.



Navigating Neighbour Concerns: Providing Avenues for Support

What Happened

Haval contacted us on behalf of their mother, an 80-year-old widow with a heart condition. Haval was concerned about their mother's neighbours who Haval said often displayed aggressive behaviour and actively teased Haval's mother.

What We Did

We empathized with Haval but confirmed that their concerns fell outside of the scope of the City administration, which meant we would be unable to look into the matter further. Instead, we referred Haval to the Toronto Police Service's non-emergency hotline to report their concerns about neighbour harassment. We also provided them with information about the services provided by 211 Ontario to assist them with their caregiving for seniors' needs.

The Result

Haval thanked us for our help and for the referrals we provided, confirming they now had the information they needed to address their concerns and request community support.

Why This Matters

It can be hard to know who the right person is to contact and where you should make your complaint. When we hear from people who contact us about an issue that is outside of our jurisdiction, we do our best to refer them to the right place to raise their concerns. When possible, we will also recommend avenues where you might receive additional support.

“Thank you so much for providing me the contacts to reach out to. That solves half the problem.”

Member of the Public



Public Reports and Announcements in 2023

We release public reports after completing investigations into issues that are in the public interest. Our public reports — and the findings and recommendations the Ombudsman makes in them — improve City services for everyone and help hold the administration accountable for its actions. Since our office opened in 2009, our recommendations have been responsible for hundreds of lasting improvements to City systems and services.

All public reports and announcements are available on our website at ombudsmantoronto.ca

An Investigation into the City’s Clearing of Encampments

The Issue

Toronto is experiencing a sharp increase in homelessness and housing precarity; more and more people are struggling to live with dignity and security. These issues — which are directly connected to the shortage of affordable housing — were heightened by the COVID-19 pandemic and Toronto has seen a significant increase since March 2020 in the number, size, and visibility of encampments.

In the spring and summer of 2021, the City of Toronto cleared people who had been living in encampments in Trinity Bellwoods, Alexandra, and Lamport Stadium Parks. This upset many members of the public, community groups, advocates, and outreach organizations who were concerned about the impact the City’s clearings were having on people living in encampments.

The City is responsible for treating its residents fairly and has a particularly high duty of care towards those navigating vulnerable situations, including people experiencing homelessness. It is against this backdrop that Ombudsman Addo began an investigation into the City’s clearing of encampments in Trinity Bellwoods, Alexandra, and Lamport Stadium Parks.

Our Investigation

Our investigation focused on how the City planned the encampment clearings, communicated and engaged with community members and the public, as well as the policies and procedures that guided its actions.

On July 14, 2022, we released an interim report in which we found issues with key City policies and processes that

are fundamental to the City’s work in encampments (see page 45 for more on our interim report). Our 2023 report, which builds on those findings and recommendations, completed our investigation.

What We Did

Through interviews and document analysis, we conducted an extensive review of evidence gathered from the City and the public. We:

- Conducted 50 interviews, including 37 interviews with City staff from 10 divisions and 13 interviews with community workers who assist individuals experiencing housing precarity and homelessness.
- Spoke to 43 people with lived experience of encampments and homelessness.
- Received 54 complaints and submissions from members of the public.
- Reviewed over 11,000 documents from the City, including more than 4,600 staff emails.

What We Found

Our investigation found that the City chose expediency over the needs of the individual: its focus on enforcement meant that it discounted the experiences of and impact on individuals in encampments. The overall result was significant unfairness in how the City planned, engaged, and communicated about the encampment clearings.

Speed Over People

- The City treated its encampment clearing response as a top priority, but there was no evidence suggesting that encampments required that level of urgency.
- The team coordinating the City’s response prioritized speed. It had no previous involvement with encampments or delivering social supports, and City staff with that experience felt their advice was ignored.
- The City did not provide vital social services supports to help people transition out of the encampments. Mental health supports were not available, despite advice that they needed to be provided.

Insufficient Engagement

- Despite the importance of hearing from people in encampments, the City’s engagement with them was inconsistent and often insufficient, sometimes viewing simply greeting someone as meaningful engagement.
- The City did not consider the unique needs and circumstances of the specific people living in encampments, including Indigenous peoples.
- There was mistrust between the City and people living in encampments, and a breakdown in the relationship between the City and community groups.

Unclear Communication

- The City provided little information to the public about its process for clearing encampments, no information about how to make a complaint, and often repeated its key messages, which raised concerns about transparency.
- The City’s communication with people living in encampments was confusing, lacked transparency, and showed a lack of understanding about their reality.
- The City provided no dedicated onsite staff for people in encampments to speak with, even though it knew they had questions. These questions went unanswered.

Our Recommendations

In addition to the 8 recommendations in our interim report, we made 23 in our final report — for a total of 31 recommendations — to ensure the City’s future actions are fair, transparent, and prioritize the wellbeing of those living in encampments.

Since the release of our final report, we have met quarterly with the City to receive updates on its implementation of our recommendations and to provide our feedback. We will continue to monitor the City’s implementation of these recommendations until we are satisfied that they are being successfully carried out.

“What the Ombudsman’s report has shown us is the way things were done was not right and that we must ensure that we’ve learned and that we do better. We must treat all Torontonians with respect and build a better path forward.”

City Councillor





An Investigation into Toronto Community Housing Corporation's Tenant Human Rights Complaints Process

The Issue

Toronto Community Housing Corporation (TCHC) is Toronto's publicly owned social housing provider and the largest social housing provider in Canada. The City of Toronto is its sole shareholder.

Over the last two years, we heard from several TCHC tenants about complaints involving their human rights. Based on these complaints, we were concerned that TCHC did not have a system in place to carefully assess and respond to the human rights needs of its tenants and that TCHC staff were potentially overlooking issues that involved the legal rights of tenants. Human rights are fundamental rights and TCHC has legal obligations under the *Ontario Human Rights Code* to respect them.

Our Investigation

Our investigation looked at TCHC's process for handling tenants' human rights complaints. We assessed whether its human rights policies and procedures were clear, current, accessible, fair, and applied consistently. We also considered whether TCHC staff have the proper expertise to address human rights complaints.

What We Did

As part of this investigation, we conducted 20 interviews with TCHC staff, external experts in human rights complaint handling, and other social housing providers. We also reviewed documents provided by TCHC or available on its website.

What We Found

Our investigation found a number of fairness concerns with TCHC's process for addressing human rights complaints from its tenants, including that:

- TCHC shared incorrect and misleading information with its tenants about its human rights complaints process, including referring them to a human rights office that had not been active for several years.
- It had wildly out of date policies and procedures that disregarded major changes to Ontario's human rights system made in 2008.
- It did not provide proper training or the necessary resources to staff responsible for dealing with tenants' human rights.

As a result, TCHC tenants did not know where they should take their concerns about human rights and staff were unequipped to address them once they were identified.

Our Recommendations

In response to our findings, we made 14 recommendations to ensure that TCHC maintains a housing environment where tenants' human rights are respected and protected. Before the report was released, we were pleased to see that TCHC had already made progress on the implementation of our recommendations. We will continue to monitor its actions until we are satisfied that our recommendations are being successfully carried out.

“Thank you so much for your dedication, passion, and hard work on this report. As a TCHC tenant myself, I couldn't be more grateful. TCHC tenants and vulnerable tenants have high hopes your detailed report will lead to changes that so many tenants will benefit from.”

Member of the Public

Helping to Address the Housing Crisis through a New Housing Unit

What Happened

As a part of the creation of its housing strategy in 2020, the City acknowledged that adequate housing is a human right and pledged to make Toronto a place where all people have access to housing that is safe, secure, and affordable.

In 2023, City Council approved the creation of a dedicated unit within our office to hold the City accountable to that commitment.

Why It Matters

The housing crisis has reached dizzying heights in Toronto and across the world, with no signs of slowing down — leaving more and more people struggling to live with dignity and security.

Fixing it will take collaboration from all levels of government, innovative solutions, a commitment to meeting the needs of those most vulnerable to housing precarity, and importantly, real accountability.

What the Unit Does

Led by a Deputy Ombudsman (Housing), the new unit oversees the City's housing policies and programs to make sure they are fair. As a part of this work, the unit uses a human rights lens to investigate systemic discrimination and hurdles in the City's planning and the delivery of its housing services. It also proactively engages with the public to best understand the housing-related challenges they are facing.

The Impact

In the five months that the housing unit was active in 2023, we:

- Hired the full unit's team — a group of seasoned investigators, public policy professionals, and administrative support.
- Launched the unit's first investigation, a review of the City's response to refugee claimants looking to access space in the City's shelter system in the spring and summer of 2023.
- Connected with over 30 key external contacts, from members of Council to senior City leadership to advocates and service providers in the community.

What's Next

The momentum of these first five months was only the beginning and has continued into 2024. If you'd like to meet with the housing unit to learn more or to let us know about an issue you think we should be aware of, we encourage you to reach out at ombudsman@toronto.ca.

See page 11 for more information on the housing unit.

“The Ombudsman has given us some clear ideas about how we fix this urgent issue.”

City Councillor





Update on our Interim Report into the City’s Process for Clearing Encampments (2022 Report)

What We Recommended

The City’s response to encampments, including its enforcement action, must be consistent and coordinated, following a well-established process that is transparent, and understood by all — City staff, the public, and encampment residents alike — and this work must be carried out by a team with a clear mandate.

With this in mind, we made eight recommendations in our interim report — which focused on how the City coordinates its response to encampments and encampment clearings — to increase the fairness, transparency, and accountability of the City’s response to encampments in parks.

- To ensure transparency, the City made detailed summaries of this feedback public in its report to the Economic Community Development Committee on May 29, 2024.
- The City created a new and detailed IDP, which incorporates the public’s feedback. This updated IDP will help guide its future response to encampments in Toronto.
- The City has assessed the resource and expertise needs of its Encampment Office and has clearly defined its mandate, role, and responsibilities.

What Has Been Implemented

The City has completed all recommendations in our interim report. As a result:

- Members of the public had an opportunity to share their feedback on the City’s Interdivisional Protocol for Encampments (IDP) — formerly called the Interdepartmental Service Protocol for Homeless People Camping in Public Spaces — which guides the City’s response to encampments.

“I’m so grateful, as so many people are, to the Ombudsman and his office for the extraordinary work that they did. For so many people, both the unhoused and their advocates, this is the first time that they’ve been heard by anybody in a position of authority to make any substantive change.”

City Councillor



Improving the Fairness of City Services

Our work ranges from finding quick and practical solutions for individual problems to doing comprehensive deep dives into issues of public concern. On issues big and small, our work impacts the daily lives of people in Toronto and improves City services for us all.

Here is a glimpse at some of the ways we helped make Toronto more fair in 2023:

- Janine was having trouble getting a refund from the City's Committee of Adjustment (COA). We helped her receive her rightful refund and recommended larger system changes within the COA, ensuring better service for the public in the future.
- Hader received a parking ticket that he didn't think was fair. He wanted to dispute it with the City but couldn't figure out how to do that. We gave Hader contact information for someone at the City who he could speak to about his concerns.
- Despite contacting Revenue Services several times, Cheyenne was unable to get someone to call her back. We repaired the communication breakdown by ensuring Revenue Services contacted Cheyenne to answer her property tax questions.
- Chen's basement was flooding, and he needed help getting the City to repair the leak. We worked with Toronto Water to pin down the problem and have it repaired.
- Yeva contacted our office after receiving countless incorrect referrals to different City divisions — they were tired of feeling like the City was giving them the runaround. We listened to Yeva, identified that their issue had to do with Transportation Services, and provided the correct referral.
- Amayra had concerns about the conditions at the City-run shelter where she and her four children were staying. We helped get Amayra and her family transferred to a different shelter that better fit her family's needs.
- All people, even City staff, deserve to be treated fairly. We worked with several City Divisions to ensure their staff have the knowledge, tools, and guidance required to continue delivering fair service, despite dealing with challenging or difficult behaviour.

**All names have been changed to protect people's privacy.*

Working Together

“I am extremely grateful for your work on this file and for your integrity throughout the process. I’m looking forward to continuing to advance this work with the guidance of your office. Thank you again for all of your hard work.”

City Staff Member





Consulting with City Staff

Our team proactively consults with the City of Toronto on a range of topics to improve its policies, programs, and services. In 2023, we conducted 20 consultations with City leaders and divisions.

Here is a small sample of how we helped:

- We provided 311 Toronto with feedback on its new complaints process, which aims to streamline complaints to the City for various divisions, including Toronto Water, Transportation Services, Municipal Licensing & Standards, Animal Services, and 311.
- We worked with the City Manager's Office to create one centralized tool to help the public navigate the different City tribunal complaints processes, making it easier for members of the public to make a complaint.
- We helped the City's Newcomer Office enhance the fairness of its complaints processes for AccessTO and undocumented Torontonians.

We always welcome requests for consultations from City staff and will continue to work constructively with the City to promote fairness in the delivery of its services.

“I would like to sincerely thank you for the time you and your staff have taken in reviewing this matter. It has triggered very important discussions within our team to ensure our processes are clear, transparent and understandable.”

City Staff Member



Meaningfully Engaging with People Across Toronto

One of our key priorities at Ombudsman Toronto is to make sure that anyone who needs our services knows how to access them — connecting with and hearing from the public is fundamental to that work.

Throughout 2023, we met with many individuals and organizations who are creating positive change in their communities. This work included 111 engagement sessions, an increase of 35% from last year and 48% over our yearly target. To all those who took the time to meet with us, thank you. We extend our sincerest gratitude for the time and knowledge you shared with us.

As we continue this work, we understand that true engagement involves ongoing conversations, listening, and (un)learning. We remain committed to proactively building trust with people and their communities through consistent and intentional work. This work includes,

but is not limited to, unlearning harmful policies and beliefs that have become normalized, listening to the experiences of people in Toronto and applying what we've been told to our work, and making our services as accessible as possible.

By prioritizing relationship-building and proactively engaging with people throughout the city — with a particular focus on reaching people from equity-deserving groups and people who may experience higher barriers to accessing City services — we are actively choosing not to wait for problems to come to us.

If you wish to meet with our office or learn more, we encourage you to contact us at ombudsmancomms@toronto.ca

“Thank you for speaking with us today. It was an informative, engaging, and very beneficial session!”

Member of the Public

Our Financials

Ombudsman Toronto’s operating budget allocation approved by City Council was \$3.6 million for the year ending December 31, 2023.

An external audit firm conducts a compliance audit of Ombudsman Toronto annually.

All unused funds are returned to the City Treasury.





Our Team

At Ombudsman Toronto, we are proud to dedicate each day to improving City of Toronto services for everyone. From our complaints and investigation staff to our research, administrative, and communications team members, we all believe in the importance of a fair, equitable, and accountable municipal government and are grateful to the members of the public who entrust us with this vital work.

“It is both an honour and a privilege to do the work we do at Ombudsman Toronto, and it’s a responsibility that my team and I do not take lightly. As we look ahead, our commitment to a fair City government is stronger than ever before.”

Ombudsman Kwame Addo








Ombudsman
Toronto

Making sure
the City of Toronto
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