

# Public knows little about role of ombudsman

TORONTO (CP) — A homeless man is denied social assistance because he doesn't have a permanent address.

A farmer is refused a government grant because his application was tied up in the mail and arrived late.

A woman's claim is rejected by Ontario's Criminal Injuries Compensation Board because it ruled she contributed to her own misfortune by attending the same party as her estranged husband who the next day beat her and broke her neck.

These are examples of the 25,000 people who turn every year to Ontario's ombudsman for help dealing with government bureaucracy.

## Acts as mediator

"We're the only channel available to many people beyond casting their ballots," says Roberta Jamieson, who for the past five months has been the mediator between the public and the public service.

"We provide them with the opportunity to shape the government they want."

With a long list of objectives in her new post, Jamieson has vowed to change everything from the information pamphlets handed out by her office to the layout of the building's lobby.

She even describes her own opulent office — just down the street from the provincial legislature and across from the Royal Ontario Museum — as "a bit much."

But, Jamieson adds, the most important task in her \$105,000-a-year post will be explaining to nine million Ontario residents how to take advantage of the ombudsman's office.

"My own friends, when I got this job, said, 'That's terrific, dynamite. What is it you do?'" says Jamieson.

"They know it's an important institution but I think the details are missing."

## Grew up on reserve

The daughter of a Mohawk father and an Irish mother, Jamieson, 36, grew up on the Six Nations reserve. She still commutes there on weekends to live with her husband and 11-year-old daughter.

With a staff of 122, Jamieson is one of nine provincial ombudsmen in Canada whose sole role is to keep governments in line. Prince Edward Island is the only province without its own ombudsman and the federal government also has no such counterpart.

Jamieson spends her time searching for arrogance, unfairness, systemic problems, even rudeness, among Ontario's 80,000-member public service as well as its 500 agencies, boards and tribunals.

"We're basically looking for cases where there's been some kind of maladministration," Jamieson says in an interview.

"We have to make sure that what we get is fair, reasonable, prudent treatment."

She wants the government to stop seeing complainants as a problem and look at them instead as a valuable resource.

"I'd like to take the stigma away from registering a complaint, invite people to raise their concerns and be able to put forward recommendations," says Jamieson.

"I hope the government is interested in doing the same thing the private sector is in terms of public relations."

3,500 complaints

The ombudsman's office formally investigated 3,500 complaints last year. Action — either a policy change or compensation of some sort — was taken on 530 of them. The rest were ruled unsubstantiated, solved without the ombudsman's help or discontinued because the complainant lost interest or for some other reason.

Jamieson studied pre-medicine at McGill University in Montreal before leaving after two years to enrol in law at the University of Western Ontario. In 1987, she became the first Indian woman to receive a law degree in Canada as well as the first private citizen to be appointed an ex-officio member of a Commons committee.

In 1985 she was appointed the commissioner and chief executive officer of the Indian Commission of Ontario.

For most of her working life, Jamieson has aimed to find common ground on issues like Indian self-government and land claims. She downplays the importance of her background but doesn't sell herself short.

Through nine district offices, Jamieson hears complaints about everything from workers' compensation and government hiring to pensions and services in Northern Ontario.

She then tries to come up with solutions that will be acceptable to all parties — anything from an apology, compensation or a change in policy.

## Standing committee

If that doesn't work, Jamieson can take her concerns to the minister involved or the premier, and finally to a standing committee on the ombudsman which makes recommendations to the legislature.

"I don't have a direct pipeline to the above," Jamieson concedes. "But I do have special powers to subpoena records or take evidence under oath."

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