

For Immediate Release
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OMBUDSMAN INVESTIGATES INCOME ASSISTANCE COMPLAINTS

VICTORIA – Acting Provincial Ombudsman Howard Kushner today released Special Report No. 28, Ombudsman Investigation of the Public Interest Advocacy Centre’s Complaints about the Ministry of Employment and Income Assistance. The report details the outcome of three investigations initiated in response to complaints from the BC Public Interest Advocacy Centre (PIAC).

“I want to acknowledge the contribution made by the Public Interest Advocacy Centre and the many advocacy organizations that PIAC represented in bringing their experience and concerns about the ministry’s practices to my attention,” said Kushner. “Five general issues raised by PIAC were investigated by this office and today I am able to report on three of those issues.”

Kushner stated that concerns had been raised about:

1. the ministry’s response to individuals with emergency needs;
2. the use of home visits to verify information; and
3. how the ministry communicated and reviewed decisions involving the exercise of discretion.

Kushner said that in most cases, the ministry’s stated policies were clear and reasonable. However, PIAC provided numerous examples of situations where policy was not complied with. The ministry concurred that there were some gaps in adherence to policy and has taken measures to address this. The ministry also acknowledged that in some cases changes to regulations was required to bring more fairness to people applying for income assistance; for example, to exempt more individuals from the initial three-week job search.

“Our investigations will benefit ministry clients,” notes Kushner. “The advocacy organizations who are involved in these issues will keep us informed if the ministry’s commitments are not met.”

Kushner reported that in response to these investigations, the ministry has made changes to staff training and orientation, and has amended or modified existing legislation, policies and practices, and information provided to the public. The ministry has also committed to conducting audits to ensure compliance with policies.

“I am pleased with the co-operation we received from the ministry,” said Kushner. “Based on the ministry’s response, I am confident that ministry staff will take reasonable steps to determine a person’s emergency requirements and to provide a response within 24 hours of that assessment.

“I am also satisfied that ministry staff who conduct home visits will do so only in order to assist a client who is unable to attend a ministry office and that, if the visit is only intended for verification of residence, that ministry staff will not enter a person’s premises. Finally, the ministry has agreed to provide full reasons for decisions and to ensure that opportunities for a reconsideration of those decisions are available.”

The Office of the Ombudsman is an independent office reporting to the Legislative Assembly. The office has authority to investigate complaints about provincial and civic public services.

Special Report No. 28 can be viewed at <http://www.ombudsman.bc.ca/> online.

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