

## Message from the Québec Ombudsperson



In order to carry out its mission effectively, the Québec Ombudsman is often required to examine complex and sensitive questions. It must act rigorously and impartially in finding the truth and obtaining the corrections called for when injustices have occurred. At times it must report publicly on what it has found, and this involves proposing realistic recommendations likely to lead to sustainable solutions to the problems observed. However, once these observations become part of public discourse they take on a life of their own, and sometimes without the proper nuances.

At times we do indeed see unacceptable situations. When this happens, the Québec Ombudsman must make its voice heard above the partisan fray and with the sole objective of ensuring that the rights of all citizens are upheld and that they receive the quality services they are entitled to expect from Québec's public services. In this respect, I will continue to assume the responsibilities incumbent on me as the person unanimously appointed by the National Assembly of Québec.

However, it would be a mistake to tar the entire system with the same brush. In most interventions to solve individual situations, the Québec Ombudsman can vouch that the government departments, public agencies and institutions concerned are open to correcting their mistakes when they realize they have made them. The proof: the very high rate of acceptance of our recommendations. I have also seen that the Québec Ombudsman's philosophy (*Remedy for one citizen – remedy for all citizens*) is well received and that the instances concerned are sensitive to the fact that they must solve the problems identified not just for the individuals directly involved, but for every citizen who could be harmed. In a context in which budgets are often stretched to the limit, pragmatic solutions are proposed and implemented.

Similarly, in its interventions to solve systemic problems, the Québec Ombudsman often notices that those on the front line are aware of the dysfunction observed and try to mitigate the effects through various means. There are interesting initiatives for countering the more generalized problems detected. If information about these initiatives and best practices is shared, they can be used in and tailored to other settings. One thing is sure: in every systemic investigation that the Québec Ombudsman conducts, the public servants it interacts with are by and large competent, involved and caring people who believe in the value of public service.

As the Ombudsperson, I share this deep conviction. I believe that once Quebecers actually access public services, the services they get are quality services. It is interesting to note that the most frequent grounds for the complaints submitted to the Québec Ombudsman are access problems and wait times, not the quality of services per se. These problems nonetheless raise questions about public service efficiency and the transparency expected in the distribution of resources. In the course of a number of interventions this year in an array of areas, I was in a position to see the great challenges posed when staff from different institutions or networks must work together to tend to the needs of an individual. I have often spoken out against the silo approach to service delivery.

Here it is not a matter of not knowing that the problem exists. What we need is more openness and mobilization in order to implement flexible formulas geared to citizens' needs, formulas that make it easier to work collaboratively across the board.

Inefficiency at this level is very costly—precious resources are not used to their full potential because action is not harmonized effectively, there is unnecessary overlap, and for those who need multiple services, the situation is utterly deplorable. All too often we are witnesses to what can only be described as games of "administrative ping-pong," whereby institutions keep passing the proverbial buck for delivering services even though no one disputes the fact that the services are necessary.

I acknowledge that there are difficult conditions that make the management of public services complex. That said, often there is much too wide a gap between solid and appropriate policies and action plans that set out a theoretical slate of services and the services as they exist—or do not exist—in the real world. This gap is the cause of much dissatisfaction. Given the shortage of resources in relation to needs, this disconnect and the vagueness surrounding it make it necessary to choose one front-line public service over another, with the resulting risk of citizens being deprived of services and disparity from institution to institution or from region to region.

Often, to make matters worse, there are grey areas in the information on resource distribution and the relative effectiveness of current accountability mechanisms within government departments and public agencies. This is where relevant and clear information makes all the difference. Performance reviews in the public service must include aspects related to respect for rights, access to services, promptness and service quality. Going beyond simple compliance with legal and budgetary requirements, the expanded notion of public service performance must be maintained and used to gauge how our public services are really doing.

These observations stem from the work of my entire team both in our processing of the files of the individuals who seek our assistance and our systemic investigation of certain problems. I wish to thank them for their tireless dedication to the Québec Ombudsman's mission. This annual report marks the close of a strategic planning cycle. The deliberations surrounding the drafting of our 2012-2017 strategic plan brought into focus the importance of putting greater emphasis on the Québec Ombudsman's action on the preventive front, while making sure that we continue to provide effective recourse to citizens who consider that they have been wronged, a role that remains at the heart of what the Québec Ombudsman does.

One of our preferred means of prevention is to propose legislative or regulatory amendments that will nip the unjust treatment of citizens in the bud, or, at least, prevent further injustices from occurring. The implementation of such recommendations can be complex and often requires sustained monitoring by the Québec Ombudsman. I fully understand the context and the issues involved at times. That is why I would be remiss if I did not applaud the work undertaken this year to increase access to justice for the citizens of Québec. I am pleased to note that several legislative amendments recommended by the Québec Ombudsman were passed into law during the last parliamentary session.

In closing, I would like to draw attention to a lesser-known side of the Québec Ombudsman's role. After every investigation involving a complaint that we deem unsubstantiated, our job is to explain the reasons for our conclusion to the citizen who feels that he or she has been dealt with unfairly.

After receiving an explanation, the individual has a better understanding of the decision or the contested situation and the Québec Ombudsman's action helps to restore the citizen's trust in the government. This eminently positive but less visible part of our work also highlights the fact that it is to the advantage of public services to take the time to explain their decisions properly and in their interest to process complaints about them promptly and efficiently. Clear information and transparency will always be assets that earn respect and build credibility.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "R. Saint-Germain". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "R" and "S".

Raymonde Saint-Germain  
Québec Ombudsperson