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OMBUDSMAN'S OFFICE HELPS MORE PEOPLE IN 2008/09

VICTORIA – British Columbia Ombudsman Kim Carter released her 2008/09 annual report today, saying that it reflects what was a busy and challenging year for her office.

The number of enquiries and complaints the Ombudsman's office handled in 2008/09 grew to 7,948, an increase of 19 per cent over 2007/08. This is the second year in a row that the office has handled an increased number of intakes.

"I'm very pleased that we were able to help more people in 2008/09," Ms. Carter said. "Provincial and local government services affect all aspects of people's lives, and as our annual report shows, it can be very important to have an independent and impartial office such as ours to help sort out problems. That is true whether you are a parent concerned about your child's education, a homeowner concerned about your assessment, a businessperson concerned about a bidding process, a student concerned about a debt, or someone receiving income assistance or a homeowner's grant who feels the rules have not been followed."

In response to the increased volume of work, the Ombudsman's office launched a new early resolution process in September 2008. This process is designed to deal with complaints that the office's Intake Team believes can be resolved within five business days. Examples of complaints resolved through the early resolution process, as well as through full investigations, are included as case summaries in the annual report (see backgrounder, next page).

The Ombudsman released her annual report during Fairness Week (October 12-16), which other provincial ombudsman offices across Canada are also marking. Fairness Week celebrates the 200th anniversary of the first ombudsman's office, established in Sweden in 1809. This also coincides with the 30th anniversary of the B.C. Ombudsman's office.

In celebration of Fairness Week, the Ombudsman is inviting students in Grades 11 and 12 to submit an essay, video or work of art that explains why fair treatment by government authorities is important in a democratic society. Contest details and rules are on the Ombudsman's website at www.ombudsman.bc.ca/youth.

The Ombudsman's mandate is to ensure that public administration in B.C. is fair, transparent and accountable. The public bodies over which the Ombudsman has jurisdiction include provincial ministries, health authorities, Crown corporations, colleges and universities, boards of education, self-regulating professions and local governments.

The Ombudsman's annual report is available at www.ombudsman.bc.ca.

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CASE SUMMARY HIGHLIGHTS

As well as summarizing the office's activities, statistics and budget, the annual report contains more than 60 case summaries. In order to protect the confidentiality of the people who complain to us, all personal names used in the summaries have been changed.

Case Summary Highlights by Region

Interior

BC Assessment

- We investigated a complaint from a man who believed the assessment for the mobile home he had recently bought was too high. BC Assessment agreed to review his file and found the assessment was incorrect. BC Assessment then issued a new, lower assessment that better reflected the home's market value (page 25).

Kamloops Regional Correctional Centre

- After we investigated a complaint from an inmate, Kamloops Regional Correctional Centre agreed to put security call buttons in its segregation cells (page 59).

Lower Mainland

BC Hydro

- We investigated a complaint about a BC Hydro bill that the recipient believed was incorrect. The investigation resulted in BC Hydro agreeing to refund a total of more than \$114,000 to approximately 580 other people who had been affected by the same error (page 22).

Northern B.C.

Northern Lights College

- We investigated a complaint about safety and course quality from two students taking a course in heavy equipment operation. The college responded quickly by shutting down the existing work site, finding a new one, and offering all the students in the course two weeks of extra instruction at no charge (page 30).

Vancouver Island/Sunshine Coast

Motor Vehicle Sales Authority of British Columbia

- We investigated a complaint from a man whose new car had 400 kilometres more on the odometer than in his sales contract. The man took his complaint to the Motor Vehicle Sales Authority of British Columbia (MVSA), who said it was not something they could investigate. After the man complained to us, we looked into the MVSA's complaints process. We thought the MVSA could investigate this type of complaint. After discussion, the MVSA agreed and investigated. At the end of this process, the dealership apologized to the man and offered him some free car maintenance service (page 27).