

Speaker's Notes

From the Taxpayer's Ombudsperson, Mr. François Boileau

News Conference

Tabling of the 2020-2021 Annual Report
Adapting and Delivering in Unprecedented Times

Message to the Media

Thursday, December 16, 2021

11 :00 AM

Canadian Parliamentary Press Gallery

Ottawa, Ontario

Only the spoken speech shall prevail

Hello,

It is with great pleasure and pride that I am releasing today my very first annual report as Canada's Taxpayers' Ombudsperson.

In a year that was unlike any other, it is not surprising that the Canada Revenue Agency (CRA) had to transform itself and adapt to the new reality that all Canadians were facing. As part of its journey to transform its programs and services to better meet the needs and expectations of Canadians, it is clear that the CRA has adopted its people-first approach. This includes an increased focus on the Taxpayer Bill of Rights to ensure that Canadians are treated accordingly when dealing with the CRA. We believe that this approach puts the CRA on the right track to better serve Canadians and we encourage it to continue to do so.

While the pandemic has changed the way we operate, we have remained operational and ready to help Canadians. I assumed my role as Taxpayers' Ombudsperson in the midst of a global pandemic, when the CRA was providing critical emergency benefits to Canadians and our office was under enormous pressure to help those facing financial hardship.

We adapted and delivered by constantly challenging our processes to improve the efficiency of the service we provide to Canadians. I couldn't be more proud of this team.

The new working environment has led us to research technologies and methods that can simplify some of our processes, and to invest in them. For example, we have gone digital as well as paperless, while still looking for more modern ways of communicating with our clients that are both more modern, but also totally secure, while reducing the time to respond to them, as access to our office was limited.

As the CRA has been instrumental in providing emergency benefits to many Canadians, this has resulted in our office receiving a greater volume of enquiries and complaints.

While it is clear that the rapid restructuring of the CRA's resources has ensured that Canadians were quickly supported after the introduction of many pandemic-related restrictions were put in place, these restrictions caused financial hardship for many people. The rapid launch of the Canada Emergency Benefit by the CRA provided relief to millions of people.

This was a radical but temporary change for the CRA, whose focus shifted from collecting taxes to distributing emergency benefits. This change allowed the CRA to distribute thousands of dollars to Canadians in need, in a very short period of time. This was recognized not only by the Canadians we spoke with, but also by the organizations we met with.

That said, in 2020-2021, our operational readiness has allowed us to handle **a record number of enquiries, complaints, calls and referrals to the CRA Service Feedback for review.**

Our Office received a total of **3,533 complaints.**

Our office responded to **183% more calls** than in 2019-2020, or 4010 calls.

Our office sent **132% more urgent requests** to be processed by the CRA than in 2019-2020, an amount of 760.

While I acknowledge that the CRA has delivered COVID-19-related benefits in record time, we found that the CRA did not always provide clear, accurate and timely information to Canadians when they needed it most.

That's why, in February 2021, I began a review of the CRA's communications to taxpayers regarding the CRA account lockout conducted in mid-February 2021. Many affected taxpayers have expressed concerns about the clarity of the information they received from the CRA. As a result, we are currently reviewing the actions taken by the CRA, in how they provided affected taxpayers with information, the goal being to ensure that the CRA provides the best possible information so that Canadians can make informed decisions.

This annual report outlines key achievements, identifies issues related to the CRA's service, and describes the service issues, and describes complaint trends. In addition, the report includes five recommendations to the Minister of National Revenue and the Chair of the Board of Management to improve service to Canadians.

These recommendations may seem simple and common sense at times, and that is by design. What they have in common is that the CRA should improve communications in all its forms. The better informed Canadians are about their rights, their recourse, about electronic filing, about being able to speak to an agent at a set time, the more effectively the CRA will serve Canadians.

Many of the complaints we received were also related to the CRA's administration of COVID-19 benefits, the majority of which came from individuals experiencing financial hardship.

The main categories of complaint trends over the past year are

- o COVID-19 benefits

Canadians often expressed frustration with delays caused by many factors, including eligibility verification.

- o CRA account

The lack of clear information provided when the CRA disabled online access to MyAccount for over 180,000 users in February 2021.

- o Contact Centres

Canadians are often faced with long wait times, premature disconnections, or are told that lines are full, making it difficult to reach the CRA to explain the problems they may be facing.

- o Income tax and benefit returns and adjustment requests

Delays in CRA processing of income tax and benefit returns and requests for adjustments

- o Canada Child Benefit (CCB)

Thank you for listening and I am available in the official language of your choice if you have any questions.

Appendix

1. The Taxpayers' Ombudsperson recommends that the CRA provide a link, from its landing page *canada.ca/revenue-agency*, and *canada.ca/taxes*, to our landing page *canada.ca/taxpayers-ombudsperson*.
2. The Taxpayers' Ombudsperson recommends that the CRA make Canadians aware they can complain or provide feedback about the service it provides.
3. The Taxpayers' Ombudsperson recommends that the CRA create a process to ensure that any unclassified information that is provided by a CRA area to assist contact centre agents is also made publicly available.
4. The Taxpayers' Ombudsperson recommends that the CRA develop a way for people to securely submit documents electronically, without the need for them to access their CRA account.
5. The Taxpayers' Ombudsperson recommends that the CRA provide Canadians with the opportunity to request a callback, without the need to call the contact centre first.

(In February 2021, the CRA deactivated the login credentials of more than 180,000 users, resulting in users being locked out of their CRA accounts. The CRA took this action to protect taxpayer information, as their credentials may have been compromised by unauthorized third parties outside the CRA. However, the increase in complaints we have received from locked out users prompted us to launch a review of the steps taken by the CRA to provide affected taxpayers with complete, accurate, and clear information in a timely manner. We believe this should have been the CRA's primary concern. The purpose of our review is to ensure that this does not happen again.)