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TIMELY FOI RESPONSES & E-HEALTH DEVELOPMENTS ARE KEY THEMES OF COMMISSIONER'S 2008-2009 ANNUAL REPORT

Victoria—Information and Privacy Commissioner David Loukidelis today reiterated the crucial need for the provincial government to continue to reduce delays in responding to access requests. The message was contained in his annual report for 2008-2009, released today. Acknowledging that government has put major reforms in motion, he stated that “Ensuring the public’s right to know is not impeded will require ongoing executive leadership and resources. While I’m encouraged by government’s steps so far, we’ll continue to monitor progress and report any concerns publicly.”

Loukidelis also repeated his commitment to publishing ongoing annual reports on timeliness of government’s responses to access requests. Affirming the critical importance of meaningful access to government information, he said, “After 20 years of work in freedom of information, FOI remains a fundamental tool for ensuring accountable government. Without FOI, you can’t have meaningful openness and accountability.”

The commissioner confirmed his ongoing commitment to ensuring privacy is fully protected as the government rolls out its plans for an integrated electronic health record of every citizen in the province. “My role as the privacy regulator in this province includes a clear mandate to audit the privacy aspects of information systems, including e-health systems. Later this year, my office will start work on a comprehensive privacy framework for the provincial government’s e-health system and I call on the health ministry to co-operate fully with this work.” The commissioner today added that his office’s work will be as transparent as possible, with progress reports as the work proceeds and a final public report. The commissioner’s new direction comes on the heels of his decision to withdraw from the Ministry of Health Services’ consultation forum on e-health privacy.

The commissioner also restated his ongoing concerns for privacy in wider government data sharing initiatives. “The sharing of citizen information across ministry lines can in the right circumstances improve the quality and timeliness of service delivery,” Loukidelis stated, but cautioned that “Government must ensure personal information is only disclosed and used in appropriate ways and mustn’t move too far down the data-sharing road without meaningful public debate about the policy choices it’s considering. The discussion paper my office is working on will contribute to that necessary debate.”

As the commissioner's annual message indicates, the next mandatory review of the *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act* must begin this October. Loukidelis today urged the legislature to quickly create the required all-party committee to review the act. "One pressing issue the committee should study is how our FOI law relates to records management laws and practices in B.C., which sorely need to be updated to work in the increasingly digital environment government operates in." He added that he'll ask the committee to urge public bodies to be more proactive in their disclosure of information, adding, "Why wait for an access request to disclose information that the public needs to hold government to account? B.C. needs to catch up with other jurisdictions in the world and routinely release records of public interest."

A copy of the commissioner's annual report can be found at:
http://www.oipc.bc.ca/publications/annual_reports/OIPC_AR_2008_09.pdf.

-30-

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