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News Release

NEWS RELEASE

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Government takes a step backwards on timely responses to access to information requests

VICTORIA — The B.C. government has taken a step backward in providing timely responses to access to information requests under the *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act*, according to a special report issued today by Information and Privacy Commissioner Elizabeth Denham.

“This is my office's fourth report examining government's performance responding to access requests within the 30-business-day time limit set out in the legislation. In our last timeliness report card, government's performance had improved to an average of 93% on time; over the past two years their performance has fallen to 74% on time.

“Government's disappointing decline in timely responses to access to information requests frustrates individual applicants and erodes the public's right to know,” said Denham.

The Commissioner's report outlines the substantial and systemic issues contributing to government's lagging performance on timeliness, including a 24% increase in the number of requests since 2011, staffing challenges in the Information Access Operations (IAO) office of the Ministry of Technology, Innovation and Citizens' Services, and issues specific to the Ministry of Children and Family Development where on-time responses have plummeted from 99% to 52% over two fiscal years.

The report makes seven recommendations to address the underlying issues driving access to information requests and the challenges facing government in responding in a timely manner, including a recommendation that government proactively disclose calendar information of ministers and senior public officials.

“Calendar requests account for 75% of the increase in access requests over the past two fiscal years, and 18% of all access requests received by government. In past reports I have recommended that government proactively release calendar details as part of their commitment to open government. This report makes it clear that proactive disclosure of routinely requested calendars would result in significant administrative efficiencies that would reduce pressure on IAO staff, who processed almost 2,000 calendar requests this past fiscal year.”

The Commissioner's report also provides an important followup on the increasing number of 'no responsive records' replies to access requests made to the B.C. government.

"While the percentage of no responsive records responses has improved from 25% to 19%, I remain concerned about government's records management practices and the deletion of emails that it considers transitory in nature. To address this issue, I recommend that government implement an email management system with respect to senior government officials to ensure these documents are preserved and archived," said Denham.

Finally, the Commissioner's report examined government's issuance of fee estimates in response to access requests, to determine whether these estimates are being used as a means to deter applicants from pursuing a request. The report did not find evidence of such a practice, but instead found government to be working with applicants to narrow broad requests to focus on records of particular interest.

A Step Backwards: Report Card on Government's Access to Information Responses is available for download at: www.oipc.bc.ca/report/special-reports

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