



Media Release

Hay River (March 28, 2022) – Ombud Release Special Report on Fairness in Business Support Programs

The Northwest Territories Ombud, Colette Langlois, released a special report today, *Miscommunication, Missed Opportunities: Fairness in Business Assistance Programs*.

The report follows an investigation into a complaint by a small business owner, “Ms. Smith”, who was a client of both the Department of Industry Tourism and Investment (ITI) and the Business Development and Investment Corporation (BDIC). The business ran into unexpected difficulties and began to miss payments on its BDIC loan. BDIC eventually foreclosed on the business.

The investigation considered the fairness of the overall advice and assistance ITI and BDIC provided to Ms. Smith, decisions they made on her applications for assistance, and BDIC’s decision to go ahead with foreclosure proceedings. The investigation did not consider Ms. Smith’s dealings with ITI and BDIC prior to 2016, or the foreclosure proceedings themselves, as these matters are outside the Ombud’s jurisdiction.

The investigation found a series of communication failures, which led to Ms. Smith missing opportunities to make applications for assistance, to appeal decisions, and to look for other sources of support for her business. The investigation did not find evidence of bias against Ms. Smith, or that the authorities’ decisions or their advice to her were themselves unreasonable or unfair.

The Ombud’s recommendations are aimed at preventing similar outcomes by improving the authorities’ communications practices and the information they provide to clients.

“This report highlights the importance of thinking through communications and procedures from the perspective of clients,” said Langlois. “Clear and accessible information gives clients the power of choice, and a sense of control. Good communication not only contributes to procedural and decision fairness, it also empowers clients and fosters relational fairness. Relational fairness improves clients’ experiences and helps build trust between clients and officials. This benefits everyone.”

Both ITI and BDIC have taken, or committed to, steps to implement the report’s recommendations. The Ombud will provide an update on their progress in a future report.

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