

Exclusive: Agency for crime victims just a Tory PR stunt, says ex-Ombud

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Steve Sullivan, former ombudsman for victims of crime, at his home in Ottawa. “My sense is they created the office because it made a good press release,” said Sullivan.

Four years ago, to great fanfare, the federal Conservatives opened an ombudsman’s office to help victims of crime.

Now, the agency’s first boss says it was just a \$6 million public relations stunt to score political points.

To date, the Office of the Federal Ombudsman for Victims of Crime has released only one annual report. Two others were filed to the federal justice minister but, for more than a year, they have remained secret.

Because the ombudsman’s office has no legislative powers, the reports — which include spending summaries and recommendations for improving the rights of crime victims — cannot be made public until Justice Minister Rob Nicholson tables them in Parliament.

The missing reports, from 2008 and 2009, would have been made public earlier this month — to coincide with the sixth annual national victims of crime awareness week — but the “coalition forced an unnecessary election and shut down Parliament,” said Geneviève Breton, the justice minister’s spokesperson.

“My sense is they created the office because it made a good press release,” said Steve Sullivan, whose federal appointment to a three-year term as ombudsman ended last April. He was replaced in August by Sue O’Sullivan, a former deputy police chief in Ottawa.

“They use the word victim a lot but it’s done to support or justify the get-tough-on-crime agenda, which really doesn’t do a whole lot for most victims of crime,” said Sullivan, who is now executive director of Ottawa Victim Services, a community-based agency that works primarily with women who have been abused by their partners. Throughout the federal election campaign, the Conservatives have criticized Michael Ignatieff’s Liberals for not having victims’ best interests at heart.

“Come to think of it, Ignatieff’s platform doesn’t mention victims once,” Tory campaign chair Guy Giorno tweeted.

The word “victim” appears 40 times throughout the Conservative party platform.

“They thought the office would be more publicly supportive of their get-tough-on-crime agenda,” Sullivan said. “That wasn’t the office I envisioned.”

Sullivan said a highlight of his time in the office was pushing the federal government to invest in child advocacy centres. Last fall, Ottawa provided \$5 million over five years to fund future and existing centres.

“That is one of the things I am most proud of in my career,” he said. “Even if it was only \$5 million over five years, which was a lot less than the \$160 million announced for prisons the day before.”

Sullivan told the *Star* he filed the outstanding annual reports before his term ended and that Nicholson has been sitting on them.

“They were both done,” Sullivan said of the reports. “The minister chose to not introduce them in the House. I don’t know why.”

Annual reports from all other federal ombudsman offices are current to last year.

Joe Wamback, a victim’s rights advocate in Newmarket, said he thinks the office is handcuffed by a lack of legislative and investigative powers.

It doesn’t help that it has a very narrow mandate.

The ombudsman can only review issues that involve federal departments, agencies, employees or laws. Many victims of crime, however, face problems at the provincial or municipal level, where most services are administered.

Wamback, who co-founded the Canadian Crime Victims Foundation, said he had referred dozens of victims to the office during its early years with negative feedback.

“You had to have exhausted all other avenues before the office could do anything for you,” he said.

Wamback described the current ombud, O’Sullivan, as dynamic, well-spoken and organized. He said the office has the potential to present a “unified voice for victims.”

O’Sullivan’s spokesperson said she could not speak with the *Star* until after the election.

A spokeswoman referred to the office as a “one-stop shop” for crime victims looking for information.

In 2009-2010, three-quarters of the 474 calls and emails the office received came from victims looking for information about their rights and how to access services in their communities, said Christina McDonald, a communications officer. The office referred these victims to agencies that could help them.

While the office — which has received \$1.5 million in annual funding since 2007 — employs nine full-time staff including the ombud, just two are complaint review officers who answer phones and talk with victims. One-quarter of calls and emails to the office in 2009-2010 came from victims looking to have complaints reviewed.

Some of these callers needed help getting information from the Correctional Service or the national parole board about the status of offenders who harmed them.

By law, these agencies are supposed to keep registered victims of crime apprised of offenders' release dates and transfers.

How many complaints the ombudsman's office has actually resolved is unclear because it has not tracked the data, McDonald said.

Sullivan and other advocates for victims of crime would like to see the ombudsman's role strengthened after the election.

"I think the office has the potential to affect some real change, Sullivan said.

An ombudsman could help establish national standards of service for crime victims.

"Canada is lagging in every major area in which you would want to treat victims better," said Irvin Waller, a University of Ottawa criminology professor and author of *Rights for Victims of Crime: Rebalancing Justice*. He has advised governments and attorneys general in more than 40 countries on how to prevent violence and respect victim rights.

Waller would like to see improved restitution programs and policies that will reduce pain and suffering for victims. A good start, he said, would be empowering the ombudsman to speak independently and directly to Parliament. "You absolutely have to have those annual reports coming out and going to Parliament and getting press coverage if you're going to see improvements," Waller said.