

Randall Denley: Taxpayers are getting million-dollar lunch tabs, but not much work from Ontario's 'authorities'

The auditor general's job is to determine whether agencies are performing and offering value for money. None score well there

Author of the article:

[Randall Denley](#)

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Ontario Auditor General Bonnie Lysyk holds a news conference at the Ontario Legislature in Toronto on Wednesday, November 25, 2020. PHOTO BY CHRIS YOUNG/THE CANADIAN PRESS

If you are under the impression that government engages in a great deal of useless and unproductive activity, you will find ample proof in [this week's report](#) from Ontario Auditor General Bonnie Lysyk.

The public and the media pay some attention to the big things the provincial government does, such as health, education and social services. Beneath that there is a thicket of obscure agencies that people probably never even think about. Lysyk focused on some of them in her annual report.

Let's start with the Bereavement Authority of Ontario. Ever heard of it? The bereavement authority regulates the funeral industry on behalf of the Ministry of Government and Consumer Services, another entity that hasn't exactly been grabbing headlines. According to the auditor, the bereavement authority engages in very little activity. One could say that it is embalmed, but that would imply that it once had life.

Over four years, the authority inspected a total of only 3.4 per cent of the businesses it is supposed to be regulating and it is years behind on relevant paperwork. Twelve per cent of cemeteries haven't renewed their licences. One hasn't done so for almost 30 years.

Then there is the Condominium Authority of Ontario. That sounds like it could be useful because condo owners have problems with escalating fees, inadequate boards and poor management companies. The condo authority has been around since 2017 and hasn't figured out how to do its job yet. But never mind; the "authority" has so little authority that it probably doesn't matter.

Retirement homes are regulated by yet another authority, this one overseen by the Ministry for Seniors and Accessibility. One can only imagine how bustling that ministry must be, so naturally it jobs out its work to another group. The retirement-home industry is changing and offering more medical care to its residents. About 10,000 people waiting for long-term care live in retirement homes. The Retirement Homes Regulatory Authority is not on top of the situation, the auditor says, which isn't surprising because, nearly 10 years after its creation, it still hasn't developed performance benchmarks. Maybe this is where people from the bereavement authority go when they just can't take the pace.

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Let's move on from the useless little authorities to the much larger self-serving empires. The Electrical Safety Authority appears to be one of those. No one is against electrical safety, but the ESA isn't particularly good at ensuring it. The authority is funded by its inspection fees, which certainly encourages it to do a lot of inspections, or — to put it more accurately — to bill for a lot of inspections. Between 2015 and 2019, the ESA billed for \$17 million in inspections it didn't actually complete. Perhaps the inspectors were at lunch. ESA employees charge well in excess of the lunch allowance offered in the government generally, racking up a total of \$1.3 million in lunch tabs in 2019–20 alone.

Approving electrical work you've never even looked at would tend to undermine the reason for the agency's existence. Looking at the auditor's analysis, one would have to conclude that the prime purpose of the ESA is to sustain and please its unionized workforce. Any electrical safety it might create is just a happy side benefit.

Finally, there is the Alcohol and Gaming Commission of Ontario. This is the provincial vice squad, in charge of booze, gambling, horse racing and private cannabis retail. Although it employs 614 people and spends \$86 million a year, the commission does not deign to produce an audited financial statement, unlike other provincial regulatory agencies. The auditor has a problem with this, but let's be fair: organized crime engaged in the same kinds of activities doesn't make its books public, either.

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As for its actual work, the auditor notes an awful lot of reports of suspicious transactions at casinos but almost no cash seized or individuals banned. The nascent private cannabis retail industry is experiencing a surprising gap between the amount of cannabis that is supposed to be in their inventory and the amount actually on hand. It's as if some of the stock has gone up in smoke.

The commission is also weak on following up on complaints, which would seem like a core job for a regulator. Nearly two-thirds of the complaints about the horse-racing industry and one-third of those about alcohol were not followed up.

The auditor general's job is to determine whether these agencies are performing effectively and offering value for money. None of them score well there. The government's job is to ask why the agencies are even required. Based on the gross ineffectiveness of the five cited here, they certainly wouldn't be missed.