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Indigenous Services Canada headlines trifecta of federal departments 'winning' at obstructing release of information

February 1, 2022

OTTAWA, ON, Feb 1, 2022 - Indigenous Services Canada has been selected as the 2021 recipient of the Code of Silence Award for Outstanding Achievement in Government Secrecy in the federal category.

Indigenous Services Canada is recognized for its ongoing failure to provide details surrounding test results of drinking water (<https://www.thestar.com/news/investigations/2019/11/26/oneida-residents-say-the-tap-water-is-making-them-sick-but-across-the-road-their-neighbours-have-safe-clean-water.html>) in many Indigenous communities, as well as contracts negotiated with private water companies requested under Canada's federal Access to Information Act.

Numerous requests have been filed with Indigenous Services Canada over the past several years. The department has not responded to questions about why it has taken so long for records to be released and, even when any are, they are heavily redacted.

The nomination package for Indigenous Services Canada noted how the department has consistently been citing the principle of Ownership, Control, Access and Possession (<https://fnigc.ca/ocap-training/>) (OCAP) as the reason for withholding records.

"Indigenous Services Canada's persistent resistance to openness and transparency calls into question the federal government's commitment to reconciliation with Indigenous peoples," said James L. Turk, Director of the Centre for Free Expression at Ryerson University.

In addition to Indigenous Services Canada, two other federal departments are being recognized with dishonourable mentions in this year's competition for their efforts to obstruct and obfuscate.

The Public Health Agency of Canada has been awarded a dishonourable mention for taking an extension of 1,950 days (<https://kitchener.citynews.ca/national-news/access-requester-told-to-wait-five-years-for-public-health-agency-heads-email-texts-4167443>) (more than five years) for a

request for one week's worth of emails and texts Iain Stewart (<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/politics/article-phac-president-out-after-one-year-on-the-job/>), the agency's then-president, had sent and received in June 2021.

Library and Archives Canada has also received a dishonourable mention for the huge delays it has sought for completing requests made under the Access to Information Act. The institution has made cuts (<https://www.thestar.com/politics/2021/10/22/library-and-archives-canada-service-cuts-hindering-research-historians-complain.html>) that have left its archival reading room open just three days per week.

As a result of this change, Canadians will know less about the history of their country at a time when they are trying to come to grips with painful and important episodes of the past in order to build a better future.

The Code of Silence Awards are presented annually by The Canadian Association of Journalists, the Centre for Free Expression at Ryerson University (CFE), the Canadian Journalists for Free Expression (CJFE), and News Media Canada. The intent of the awards is to call public attention to government or publicly funded agencies that work hard to hide information to which the public has a right under access to information legislation.

Previous years' winners in the federal category include the Federal Cabinet (https://caj.ca/blog/Code_of_silence_award_goes_to_federal_cabinet), Environment and Climate Change Canada (<https://caj.ca/blog/248>), and The Treasury Board of Canada (<https://caj.ca/blog/95>).

The Code of Silence Award recipients in the provincial, municipal and law enforcement categories will be announced each Tuesday over the course of this month.

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Rogers Communications Centre
80 Gould Street
Toronto, Ontario
cfe@ryerson.ca (<mailto:cfe@ryerson.ca>)
(416) 979-5000, ext. 556396

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