

Note: The OEO will not conduct investigations.

## Frequently Asked Questions

### **What is the Employee Ombuds Office?**

The Office of the Employee Ombud provides a safe and confidential place for you to seek information, discuss concerns and conflicts, explore options, and identify possible resources. Our goal is to help you develop constructive strategies for dealing with challenging situations and find answers to questions about available programs and resources.

### **Who can use the Ombuds Office?**

The Office of the Employee Ombud is offered as a no-charge service to the entire City of Seattle Employee community.

### **What is an ombudsperson?**

An ombudsperson is a neutral person who can assist in resolving concerns in an informal, confidential, impartial, and non-escalating manner. The ombudsperson provides services designed to support individuals and groups, optimize the effectiveness of programs and services, and enhance the overall learning and workplace environments. The ombudsperson does not provide legal advice or psychological counseling.

### **What procedures or approaches does the ombudsperson use to provide help?**

To assist a visitor, the ombudsperson employs a wide variety of informal approaches, including but not limited to:

- Listening
- Coaching
- Informal consulting
- Facilitated dialogue
- Informal mediation
- Shuttle diplomacy
- Suggesting referrals to existing services

### **How is the Ombuds Office different from other Employee services?**

The Office of the Employee Ombud is a designated confidential resource for all employees. Additionally, the services provided by the Ombuds Office are designed to complement rather than replace other services such as formal investigative processes. We are an informal and confidential resource here to help amicably manage conflict with an intention to de-escalate, or to identify other available options.

### **The Ombuds Office offers a good alternative if you:**

- Would appreciate a confidential sounding board
- Want help thinking through how to deal directly with a concern
- Are uncertain about taking a problem through other established channels

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- Are unsure who to talk to about a problem or concern
- Want to strategize how to avoid a small problem becoming a big problem
- Want an informal non-escalating approach where the next steps remain within your control
- Need a fresh, impartial perspective
- Want to discuss strategies or possible options and resources for resolving a concern
- Want to maintain the greatest flexibility in addressing a concern
- Would like help communicating with another person or group (e.g., supervisor, co-workers, roommate, etc.)

**Am I required to visit the Ombuds Office before I contact other services?**

The Office of the Employee Ombud is an entirely voluntary service and you are never required to contact the ombudsperson before seeking the assistance of other programs. If you are not sure which other programs may be available to help you resolve a particular issue or concern, you may visit the ombudsperson, who can discuss your concern and we will suggest options, approaches, and other resources.

**Does visiting the Ombuds Office put the City on notice?**

No. Because of its confidentiality, impartiality, and independence, the Ombuds Office is not an "office of notice" for reporting discrimination, crimes, or allegations of violations of law (such as a Title IX violation). If you want to put something on the record or obligate the City administration to respond in some way, you must pursue alternative avenues. We can work with you to figure out what those alternative avenues might be, given the situation.

**Are there exceptions to Ombuds Office confidentiality?**

Yes. The Standards of Practice and Code of Ethics of the International Ombuds Association provide standards for operating the Ombuds Office. These standards establish an important exception to confidentiality: when, in the judgment of the ombudsperson, failure to disclose information creates an imminent risk of serious harm to the visitor or to others. Additionally, the Ombuds Office will disclose information where expressly required by state or federal law (e.g., in cases of child abuse or neglect) or if ordered by a court with appropriate authority.

**Is the ombudsperson a "mandatory reporter" for Title IX or prohibited discrimination?**

No. The ombudsperson is a designated confidential resource at the City of Seattle and is therefore not obligated to report situations that may implicate Title IX or prohibited discrimination. Additionally, the ombudsperson is not a "security authority," and thus does not pass along information about crimes that may have been committed. The only exceptions to ombuds confidentiality are child abuse or neglect; imminent risk of serious harm to the visitor or another person; or the order of a court with appropriate authority.

**Can the ombudsperson come with me to my performance review?**

No. The ombudsperson does not participate in formal processes, such as performance reviews or disciplinary action. Additionally, the ombudsperson will not participate as a "witness" in a meeting, because the ombudsperson cannot be called upon afterward to verify that something was or was not

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said. This is not to say that you must face all these processes and meetings alone. Come talk with us about your options in these situations.

### **Does the ombudsperson maintain records?**

The ombudsperson and anyone associated with the Ombuds Office maintains only redacted records of individual visits which means any information about the individual visitor that can identify the person, or the particular issue or concern will not be recorded. We will keep short-term working notes as necessary to keep track of commitments and follow-up activities. The ombudsperson does keep limited non-identifiable information so that the program can track general trends and work with Employee governance and administration to identify opportunities for systemic improvements.

### **Can I remain anonymous?**

If you want to remain anonymous, we will work with you to find a way to address your concern in a way that does not compromise your identity whenever possible. The best way to remain anonymous is by communicating in person or via phone. Please note that if you send email, ensure that you **Do Not** include confidential information.

### **Whom do I contact, if I have other questions about the Ombuds Office?**

Please feel free to call the Office of the Employee Ombuds at 206-256-5982 or send an e-mail at [ombuds@seattle.gov](mailto:ombuds@seattle.gov). Please note that if you send email, please do not include confidential information.

### **What happens in a visit?**

The Ombuds will open the visit with a description of what the office does, and the principles of confidentiality, independence, informality, and impartiality to ensure that you are aware of what the office can and cannot do. We will then ask you to describe the issue you wish to discuss. You are free to disclose as much or as little as you want, although we find that the more information one can provide the better, we are at helping to support you in finding a solution(s).

### **What should I bring with me to visit?**

There is nothing that you are required to bring. However, you are welcome to bring documentation that helps you explain the issue you wish to discuss. The Ombuds will not keep any of the documents you bring with you.

### **How long is a visit? How many will there be?**

We generally schedule a visit for one hour. Often an issue can be resolved in one visit, but we are happy to schedule additional visits as needed.