



King County

Tri-Annual Report

King County Ombudsman's Office

Ombudsman's Office Tri-Annual Report
May 1 to August 31, 2012

October 4, 2012

Background

The King County Ombudsman's Office was created by the voters of King County in the County Home Rule Charter of 1968, and operates as an independent office within the legislative branch of county government. The Ombudsman's Office resolves issues informally where possible, and investigates county agency conduct in response to complaints received from the public, county employees, or on its own initiative. This includes investigating alleged violations of the Employee Code of Ethics (KCC 3.04), Lobbyist Disclosure Code (KCC 1.07), and the Whistleblower Protection Code (KCC 3.42). In addition, the Tax Advisor section of the Ombudsman's Office provides property owners with information regarding all aspects of the property tax assessment process, and offers specific guidance for those who are considering an appeal of their assessment.

The Ombudsman's Office reports to the Metropolitan King County Council in January, May, and September of each year on the activities of the Office for the preceding calendar period, per KCC 2.52.150. This report summarizes Office activities for May 1 through August 31, 2012.

Complaints Received

The Ombudsman's Office received 757 complaints and inquiries from residents and county employees between May 1 and August 31, 2012. Based upon the first eight months of this year, our office is projected to receive 2,139 complaints and inquiries in 2012.

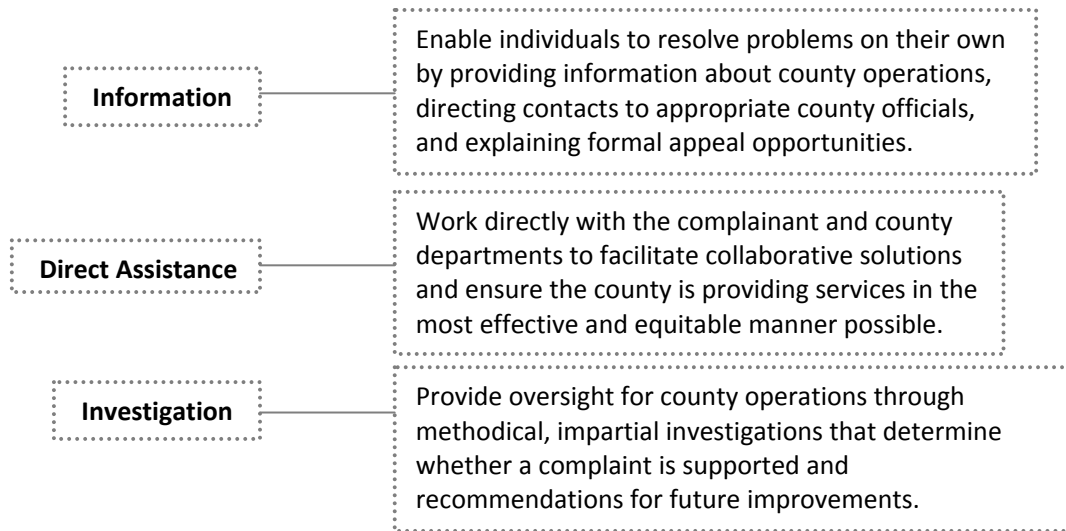
A review of our case statistics and office workload revealed the following trends:

- After a three year rise in the number of whistleblower and retaliation complaints, the numbers of those types of complaints are stabilizing. These cases are often high-stakes matters for both the complainant and the county and are a very resource-intensive aspect of our work. As King County government continues adjusting to the challenge of providing vital services with fewer resources, we expect that employee whistleblower protections will continue to be an important component of maintaining public trust in county government.
- We received fewer contacts from Department of Adult and Juvenile Detention (DAJD) facilities than we have in previous periods. Over the first eight months of 2012, our office received 10% fewer inmate contacts than in 2011. This trend may be related to the reduction in jail bookings during 2012 compared to previous years, and to reforms recommended by our office and others, and instituted by DAJD. We also encourage inmates to exhaust the available grievance procedure before requesting assistance from the Ombudsman's Office.
- The Ombudsman's Office has experienced a significant increase in the number of Public Records Requests that we have received in 2012. While it is difficult to pinpoint a single reason for this change, one factor may be our office's increased connection to controversial complaints.

Contact the King County Ombudsman's Office:

516 Third Avenue, Room W-1039
Phone: 206.205.6338
Email: ombudsman@kingcounty.gov
Website: <http://www.kingcounty.gov/operations/Ombudsman.aspx>

The Ombudsman’s Office reviews each complaint individually, to determine the appropriate response. In addition to addressing individual concerns, our office also focuses on complaint patterns which may indicate a systemic issue. Once we fully understand the complainant’s issue, our office responds in one, several, or all of the following three ways:

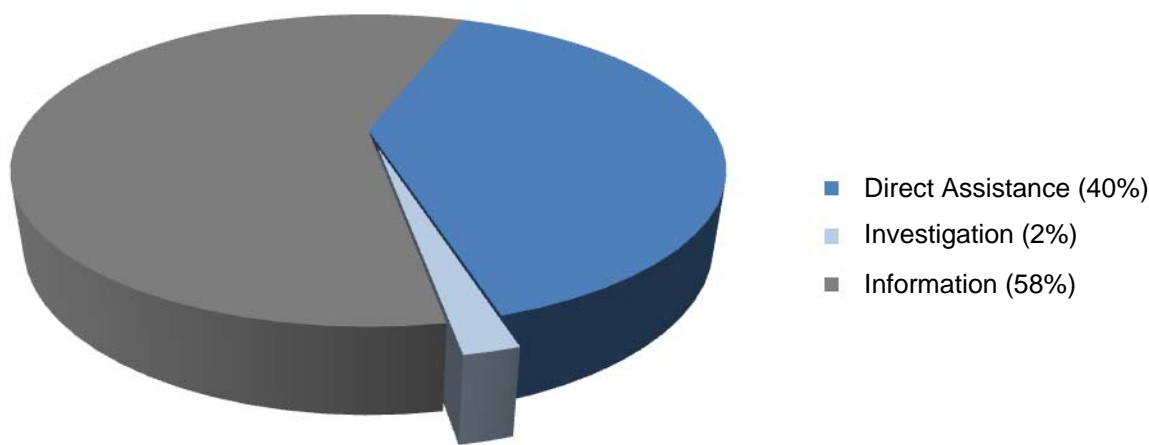


Complaint Disposition

The graph below shows the number of Ombudsman’s Office cases associated with each county agency, and reveals how we responded to the 757 complaints and inquiries we received between May 1 and August 31, 2012:

Department	Direct Assistance	Investigation	Information	Total
Assessments	1	0	3	4
Adult and Juvenile Detention	132	4	195	331
Community and Human Services	6	0	10	16
Development and Environmental Services	9	1	15	25
District Court	0	0	5	5
Judicial Administration	0	0	4	4
King County Council	3	3	1	7
King County Executive	0	0	1	1
Executive Services	14	1	15	30
Natural Resources and Parks	6	2	5	13
Ombudsman’s Office / Tax Advisor	21	0	8	29
Prosecuting Attorney’s Office	1	0	5	6
Public Health	82	2	26	110
Sheriff’s Office	4	3	8	15
Superior Court	1	0	6	7
Transportation	13	0	17	30
Non-Jurisdictional	7	0	117	124
Total	300	16	441	757

From May through August, as in previous periods, the majority of public contacts to our office required either direct assistance or information. In addition to these cases, the Ombudsman’s Office also opened 18 new investigations.



Case Summaries

The nature and circumstances of the issues people bring to our office vary widely. The case summaries below describe how our office resolved some of the 757 complaints we received between May 1 and August 31, 2012:

Complaint	Resolution
A county manager contacted the Ombudsman’s Office with concerns about a potential ethics issue involving his staff.	The Ombudsman’s Office worked with the manager, provided information about relevant sections of the King County Ethics Code, and counseled him about his responsibilities as a supervisor to address the potential ethics issue.
A county resident contacted our office to complain about a county levee on the Cedar River. The resident alleged the levee had resulted in river migration and erosion on his property.	The Ombudsman’s Office visited the site on multiple occasions, interviewed several witnesses, reviewed the extensive photo and documentary evidence, and issued a detailed report. We concluded the levee has had a negative impact on the citizen’s property, but the county was immunized by law. We recommended to the county that if acquisition does occur for this area, the resident’s property should receive some priority and be appraised in its pre-erosion state.
We received a report that Metro Transit was delayed in processing ORCA fare card payments from hundreds of county residents whose accounts are paid through the Washington State Department of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR).	The Ombudsman’s Office reviewed the matter with King County Metro Transit officials. When advised of the details associated with DVR payments and the complainants’ information, Metro was able to successfully process the payments which enabled the affected residents to resume using their ORCA cards.

Complaint	Resolution
<p>The Ombudsman's Office received a complaint alleging that a Sheriff's Deputy failed to adequately investigate and follow-up on a property crime. The resident stated that he knew who had committed the crime and was disturbed by the deputy's lack of follow-through on the matter.</p>	<p>After conducting a preliminary review, the Ombudsman's Office determined that this allegation warranted further inquiry. We contacted the Deputy's chain of command and the matter was referred to the Internal Investigations Unit (IIU) for a formal investigation. IIU ultimately sustained the resident's allegation. We reviewed the investigatory findings and concurred with the department's finding and proposed resolution of the matter.</p>
<p>An inmate complained that the county jail's refusal to provide him with sunglasses caused him to experience a seizure and miss a scheduled court appearance.</p>	<p>The Ombudsman's Office contacted the directors of King County Public Health and Department of Adult and Juvenile Detention. The inmate's allegations were fully investigated and after a review of all the available evidence, we found that neither the inmate's medical records nor his jail records supported the allegation. We notified the complainant and department of our finding.</p>
<p>The Ombudsman's Office received a complaint from a county resident who took issue with a Department of Transportation (DOT) right-of-way decision.</p>	<p>The Ombudsman's Office conducted an extensive investigation which included a review of road standards, county documentation, and relevant law. In addition, we visited the site and interviewed county employees, trade professionals, and the complainants. In the end, our findings partially supported and partially rejected the resident's contentions. We made several recommendations, which DOT accepted and we intend to follow-up with the department in early 2013 to assess their implementation.</p>
<p>An inmate at the county jail complained that he injured himself working as a trusty and Jail Health Services (JHS) now refused to acknowledge the injury or provide sufficient medical care.</p>	<p>The Ombudsman's Office reviewed the complainant's medical information and relevant JHS policies and procedures. Based on our review, we requested a formal response from the department. After several communications with JHS administrators, the department reconsidered the inmate's condition and authorized treatment.</p>
<p>The Ombudsman's Office received an inquiry from a county resident who had unsuccessfully requested a partial refund of permit fees based on mitigating circumstances.</p>	<p>The Ombudsman's Office reviewed the resident's information and determined the situation warranted additional consideration from the Department of Development and Environmental Services (DDES). After providing our Office's assessment of the situation, mitigating circumstances, and options for resolution, DDES agreed to refund two-thirds of the resident's permit fees.</p>

Tax Advisor Statistics

The Tax Advisor Office, a section of the Ombudsman's Office, provides property owners with information and resources regarding all aspects of the property tax assessment process, and offers specific guidance for those who are considering an appeal of their assessment.

The assistance we provide helps support fair and equitable taxation, especially in cases where the King County Assessor may not have known or considered significant new property information during the valuation process. To facilitate this process, we regularly provide:

- Comparable sales searches,
- Information on property tax exemptions,
- Segregation or merger for multiple parcels, and
- Assistance resolving complaints about other departments.

Resident Contacts

The Tax Advisor Office responded to 2,528 residents from May 1 to August 31, 2012. A signature function of our Office is assisting residents with their property tax appeals. In the past four months, we provided sales research to 246 (10%) of our contacts.

	Information	Research	Total
May	260	22	282
June	707	72	779
July	598	68	666
August	717	84	801
Total	2282	246	2528

As the chart below indicates, the county residents who contact our office for assistance represent a variety of income levels and we strive to provide them all with accurate information that will assist them in making decisions about their homes.

Assessed Property Value	Sales Surveys
\$0-200K	29
\$201-300K	18
\$301-400K	26
\$401-500K	19
\$501-700K	27
\$701K-1M	14
Over \$1M	14
Total	147