



King County

Tri-Annual Report

King County Ombudsman's Office

Ombudsman's Office Tri-Annual Report
May 1 to August 31, 2014

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 valuation.

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, 2014.

Complaints Received

The Ombudsman's Office received 816 complaints and inquiries from residents and county employees between May 1 and August 31, 2014. Ombudsman cases are either classified as Investigations, Direct Assistance, or Information/Referral. A review of our recent case statistics revealed the following:

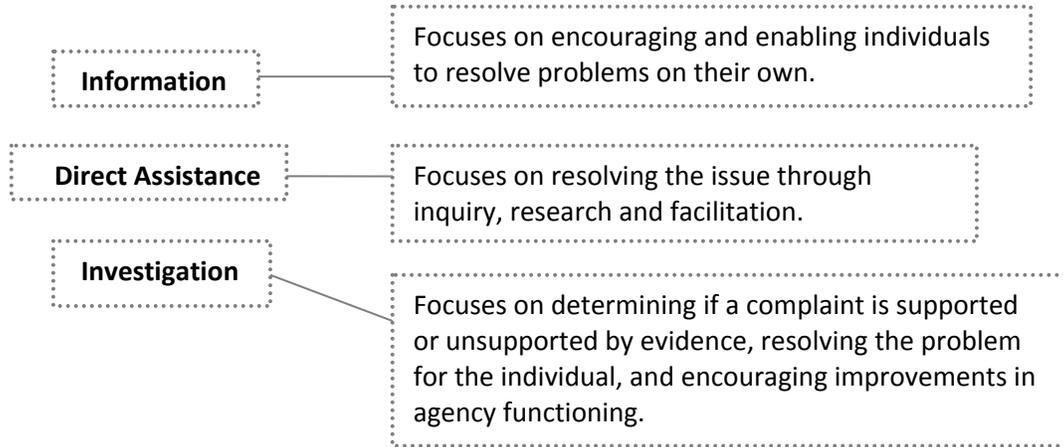
- The Ombudsman's Office opened 19 new investigations and completed 24 investigations during the May through August triannual report period. The allegations that initiated these investigations relate to potential Ethics, Whistleblower, Whistleblower Retaliation, and/or Administrative Conduct violations. Completing these investigations in a thorough and timely manner that strives to improve county operations and protect public trust in county government, makes these cases the most resource-intensive aspect of our Office's work.
- The Ombudsman's Office received 18% more cases in this reporting period than during the same reporting period in 2013. While it is difficult to determine a single reason for this increase, the Ombudsman's Office is one of the few remaining countywide offices with staff who strive to answer every call during business hours. When residents reach our office, many have already attempted to reach multiple county offices and we make every effort possible to assist them in resolving their issue.

Contact the King County Ombudsman's Office:

516 Third Avenue, Room W-1039
Phone: 206.477-1050
Email: ombudsman@kingcounty.gov
Website: <http://www.kingcounty.gov/operations/Ombudsman.aspx>

Response to Complaints

The Ombudsman’s Office reviews each complaint individually to determine the appropriate action(s) to be taken. 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 816 complaints and inquiries we received during the report period.

Department	Direct Assistance	Investigation	Information	Total
Adult and Juvenile Detention	99	3	270	372
Assessments	0	0	3	3
Community and Human Services	2	2	5	9
District Court	0	1	3	4
Elections	0	1	0	1
Executive Services	12	3	17	32
Judicial Administration	1	0	3	4
Legislative Branch Agencies	1	0	0	1
Natural Resources and Parks	11	1	3	15
Ombudsman's Office / Tax Advisor	20	0	7	27
Permitting and Environmental Review	12	0	2	14
Prosecuting Attorney's Office	0	0	6	6
Public Defense	4	0	13	17
Public Health	73	2	30	105
Sheriff's Office	2	6	8	16
Superior Court	1	0	8	9
Transportation	6	1	7	14
Non-Jurisdictional	8	0	159	167
Total	252	20	544	816

Case Summaries

The nature and circumstances of the issues we receive often vary widely and our office has a broad array of tools to respond to the nuances of each case. The case summaries below describe how our office resolved some of the complaints we completed in the May through August 2014 triannual report period.

Complaint	Resolution
<p>Ethics inquiry regarding county employee supervisor-subordinate business relationships outside of county government.</p>	<p>The Ethics Code for county employees prohibits supervisors from entering into outside business relationships with subordinates. This inquiry sought to clarify whether subordinates could be held liable for such relationships. After analysis and discussion, Ombudsman staff informally advised that subordinates would not likely be held liable in such cases. The prohibition is aimed at protecting subordinates and encouraging ethical conduct by preventing supervisory abuses of authority.</p>
<p>Citizen complaint alleging King County Metro Transit improperly attempted to influence the outcome of an election by offering voters free ORCA cards valued at \$10.</p>	<p>We analyzed applicable sections of the King County Code of Ethics alongside the alleged violations and did not find any attempt to influence the outcome of the election by offering free ORCA cards. Rather, the offer was one of many Metro Transit programs that are used to promote a “healthier” mode of travel (e.g., walking, bicycling, transit, and/or carpooling), whereby participants receive incentives – Free Ride Tickets or pre-loaded ORCA cards – as encouragement for changing their travel behavior. We determined that King County has implemented similar programs for decades using a variety of incentives to encourage King County employees, commuters, and other residents to reduce “drive-alone” travel.</p>
<p>Resident with mobility issues complained that he and his service dog, as well as other pedestrians, had to walk into traffic in an area of downtown Vashon. There was a section of missing sidewalk and vehicles were being parked in the area where the walkway should have been which caused pedestrians to walk into traffic.</p>	<p>We inspected the site and concurred that the walkway gap created a safety problem. We also noted a stop sign in a make shift container surrounded by barricades in the same location. We worked with the Vashon Chamber of Commerce, complainant, and others and developed two possible solutions that were recommended to the Roads Services Division. Roads selected an alternative, developed a detailed design, conducted additional public outreach, and implemented the design. There is now improved safety through an established walkway and a newly installed stop sign. This was a cost effective solution and the resident is very pleased.</p>

Complaint	Resolution
<p>Homeowner's association reports to the Ombudsman's Office, during a community meeting on another topic, that a deep catch basin in a County road has been neglected and is filled with sediment. Complainants allege that because the catch basin is filled with sediment, the water from the road is running down the face of a dam that creates a 20-acre lake. The concern is that the water could cause erosion to the earthen dam which is a public safety concern.</p>	<p>We reported the issue to the Department of Transportation Roads Services Division with a description of the risks associated with the dam. Roads immediately cleaned the deep catch basin. We checked in with complainants who confirmed catch basin cleaning.</p>
<p>Homeowner alleges that the Department of Permitting and Environmental Review is not enforcing King County zoning code and is allowing a person to live in a Recreational Vehicle (RV) in their neighborhood. Specifically, the homeowner was upset because the neighborhood had provided evidence to code enforcement office and King County Sheriff's Office and no action was taken.</p>	<p>We visited the neighborhood and met with complainant and other affected residents. We observed the RV, talked with DPER and KCSO, who were involved with the RV resident on other matters. As a result of the work done by Code Enforcement, the RV was removed. However, within days of removal, the same neighbor started to build a shed attached to the main house that appeared to neighbors as if it would be used as a living space. Ombudsman staff worked with Code Enforcement to get the shed immediately removed.</p>
<p>Homeowner alleges that the process to get approval for a water catchment system inspection is not clear.</p>	<p>Ombudsman staff worked with Public Health to get inspections scheduled and correction items clearly communicated to homeowner. Applicant was able to complete the process and now has a legal, approved water supply system.</p>
<p>Inmate called Ombudsman on behalf of another inmate who spoke limited English. Inmate believed that charges had been dismissed and that he should have been out of custody.</p>	<p>Ombudsman staff alerted Jail Commitments office, which obtained necessary paperwork, and inmate was released.</p>
<p>Inmate claims to have been court ordered to work release. Requests information on work release status.</p>	<p>We contacted work release staff and learned that they were missing necessary conditions of court paperwork. Based on our alert, work release obtained paperwork from the court and inmate was subsequently transferred to work release.</p>

Complaint	Resolution
<p>Inmate upset about DAJD Kosher meal denial on procedural grounds.</p>	<p>Ombudsman staff contacted the Inmate Programs Supervisor, and discussed issue at length. This office made suggestions for changes to the inmate form requesting a Kosher meal that clarifies when and how approval or denial will be determined. During the discussion, another employee joined the discussion and confirmed that the forms were already in the process of being changed in order to clarify what the expectations are prior to approval of a Kosher diet.</p>
<p>Inmate reports lack of medical care and transport via jail van to hospital during labor.</p>	<p>Reviewed jail records including extensive medical records. Engaged physician consultant to independently analyze medical information. Developed and presented preliminary findings and recommendations to agency managers, who concurred and provided input that we incorporated into our final findings. Found that while the complainant received appropriate and sufficient prenatal care, she should have been transported to hospital by ambulance rather than by jail van, and possibly earlier in her labor. Made recommendations regarding the future transport to a medical facility of pregnant inmates who are suspected to be in active labor and/or show certain symptoms, and the referral by Jail Health Services to another facility for labor evaluation in such cases. Department fully accepted recommendations and conducted immediate follow up to brief its medical staff.</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,
- Reviews of GIS and other mapping resources,
- Records and deed research,
- Information on property tax exemptions for seniors and disabled persons,
- Home improvement, current use and open space exemptions,

Resident Contacts

The Tax Advisor Office responded to 1612 residents from May 1 to August 31, 2014. A signature function of our office is assisting citizens with their property tax appeals. We provided sales and property research information to 31% (500) of the taxpayers who contacted us during the report period.

	Information	Research	Total
May	238	83	321
June	401	84	485
July	244	155	399
August	229	178	407
Total	1112	500	1612

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	27
\$201-300K	33
\$301-400K	45
\$401-500K	42
\$501-700K	68
\$701K-1M	37
Over \$1M	42
Total	294