



King County

Tri-Annual Report

King County Ombudsman's Office

Ombudsman's Office Tri-Annual Report
September 1 to December 31, 2011

February 7, 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 September 1 through December 31, 2011.

Complaints Received

The Ombudsman's Office received 659 complaints and inquiries from citizens and county employees between September 1 and December 31, 2011. Our office received 2,223 complaints and inquiries in 2011.

A review of our case statistics revealed the following trends:

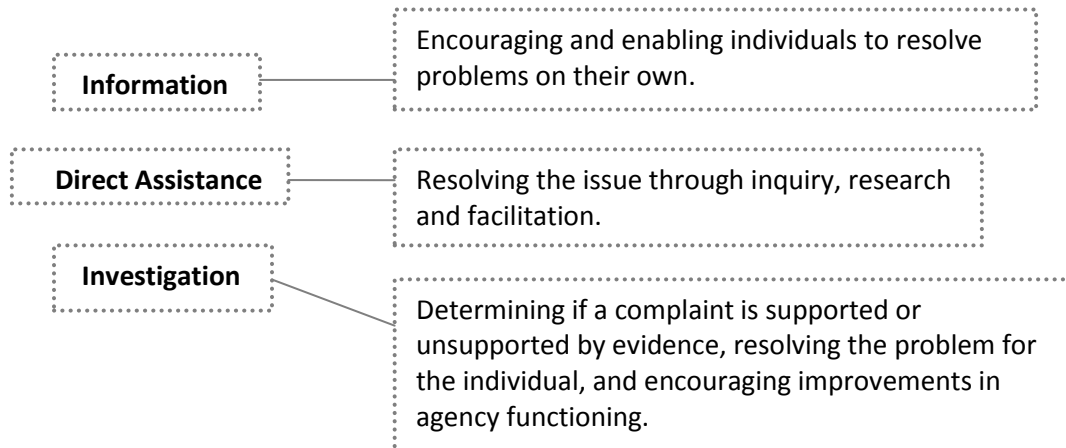
- The Ombudsman's Office has experienced a steady rise over the past three years in the number of employee whistleblower and retaliation complaints. We expected these results in light of the well publicized expansion of whistleblower protections and the difficult cycle of layoffs prompted by reduced county revenues. These cases are often high-stakes for both the complainant and the County. Typically, they are also complex and nuanced, and thus they are resource-intensive for our staff, whether the cases are resolved informally or through an investigation.
- While King County jail inmates have access to our office through a dedicated phone line, we received fewer complaints from Department of Adult and Juvenile Detention (DAJD) facilities than we have in previous periods. Over the final four months of 2011, our office received 24% fewer inmate complaints than in 2010. This trend may be related to the reduction in the overall number of people booked into the King County jail system in 2011 when compared to previous years.

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>

Response to Complaints

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:

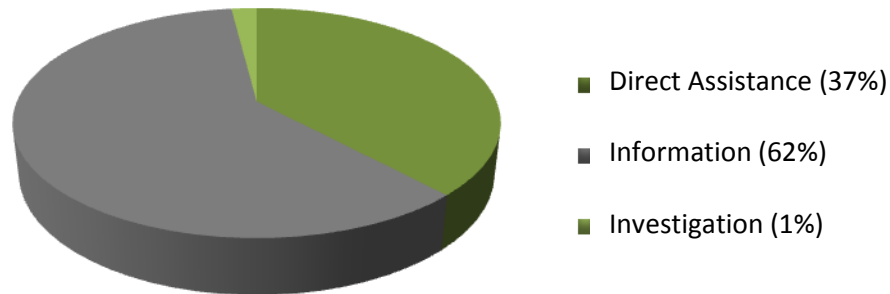


Complaint Disposition

The graph below shows the number of Ombudsman’s Office cases associated with each county agency, and reveals how we responded to the 659 complaints and inquiries we received in the final four months of 2011:

Department	Direct Assistance	Investigation	Information	Total
Adult and Juvenile Detention	84	4	183	271
Assessments	3	0	4	7
Community and Human Services	2	0	20	22
Development and Environmental Services	16	0	11	27
District Court	0	0	2	2
Judicial Administration	0	0	1	1
King County Council	1	0	2	3
King County Executive	3	1	0	4
Executive Services	9	1	12	22
Natural Resources and Parks	8	0	1	9
Ombudsman’s Office / Tax Advisor	16	0	10	26
Prosecuting Attorney's Office	4	0	1	5
Public Health	86	0	29	115
Sheriff's Office	2	0	6	8
Superior Court	0	0	8	8
Transportation	10	1	6	17
Non-Jurisdictional	2	0	110	112
Total	246	7	406	659

From September through December, 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 7 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 complaints we received during the final four months of 2011:

Complaint	Resolution
<p>A county supervisor allegedly worked on a private business using county resources and during work hours, and directed a subordinate to do the same.</p>	<p>The Ombudsman's Office interviewed the complainant, respondent, and other witnesses. Additionally, the Ombudsman reviewed the respondent's emails, calendar and computer hard drive. Based on the available evidence, the Ombudsman confirmed the allegations and found reasonable cause to believe the supervisor had violated the Employee Code of Ethics. The supervisor's department was notified of our office's findings and the supervisor did not appeal.</p>
<p>County employee alleged that his co-worker was under the influence of drugs and asked for our office's assistance in reporting the situation.</p>	<p>The Ombudsman's Office transmitted the complaint to the county's alcohol and drug treatment program and notified the employee's department to ensure the issue was addressed immediately.</p>
<p>Complainant who had previously alleged an ethics violation in the King County Sheriff's Office (KCSO) provided new evidence, and asked the Ombudsman's Office to reconsider the issue.</p>	<p>In response to the new evidence, the Ombudsman reopened the investigation and conducted additional witness interviews. The Ombudsman determined the evidence did not corroborate the complainant's assertion; however, we revised our findings to include a full consideration of the new information. Although our office's ultimate determination remained largely unchanged, the complainant expressed appreciation for our diligence and chose not to appeal the findings.</p>

Complaint	Resolution
Local military veteran alleged that the King County Veteran's Program had wrongfully denied him services.	Ombudsman's Office staff worked with the complainant and discussed their situation with the program's administrator. The department revisited the veteran's request to ensure his application accurately reflected his military service and eligibility for county services.
The Department Development and Environmental Services (DDES) asked the Ombudsman's Office to review proposed changes to a code enforcement policy.	The Ombudsman's Office reviewed the department's draft policy and provided substantive suggestions based on previous complaints our office has received. DDES incorporated our proposed revisions into the final version which resulted in a code enforcement policy that is more responsive to county residents.
Inmate alleged that the Department of Adult and Juvenile Detention (DAJD) was holding him beyond his proper release date.	The Ombudsman reviewed the inmate's commitment record and determined that the inmate was right and should have been released four days earlier. The Ombudsman notified DAJD of our findings and the department immediately reviewed the inmate's release date, corrected the error in his sentencing documents, and processed his release.
Complaint that the ACCESS shuttle service was not sufficiently responding to a citizen's service request.	After a preliminary review, the Ombudsman transmitted the complaint to the ACCESS administrator. Ombudsman's Office staff worked with the program's administrator to clarify the citizen's needs. The ACCESS administrator reviewed their service plan and devised a solution that met both the citizen's needs and also addressed the program's concern for driver safety.
Allegation that a DAJD employee behaved disrespectfully toward a citizen when she visited her son in the King County Jail.	With the complainant's consent, the Ombudsman transmitted the complaint to the department. DAJD conducted an internal investigation and took corrective action to address the issue. The Ombudsman's office worked with DAJD to explain the department's investigative and disciplinary processes to the complainant.
Allegation that DDES did not respond in a timely fashion to a citizen's request for a zoning certification.	The Ombudsman's Office transmitted the allegation to DDES. After an extensive review, DDES acknowledged an error had occurred in their processing of this citizen's request. DDES apologized to the citizen for the excessive delay, and worked with our office to ensure that the zoning certification was immediately processed.
Citizen expressed concern about an ongoing alarm at a nearby Metro Transit pump station and was unable to directly reach a Metro employee through the agency's phone system.	Our office directly contacted the Facilities Division for Metro Transit, which immediately dispatched a technician to investigate and remedy the cause of the alarm.

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,
- Records and deed research,
- Information on property tax exemptions for seniors and disabled persons,
- Home improvement, current use and open space exemptions,
- Assistance resolving complaints about other departments.

Resident Contacts

The Tax Advisor Office responded to 2,160 residents from September 1 to December 30, 2011. A signature function of our office is assisting citizens with their property tax appeals. In the last four months of 2011, we provided sales research to 281 (13%) of our contacts.

	Information	Research	Total
January	421	180	601
February	743	127	870
March	344	48	392
April	284	13	297
Total	1,792	369	2,160

The chart below shows property value ranges for the county residents who contacted our office for assistance in the last four months of 2011:

Assessed Property Value	Sales Surveys
\$0-200K	68
\$201-300K	46
\$301-400K	43
\$401-500K	39
\$501-700K	39
\$701K-1M	22
Over \$1M	24
Total	281