



**King County**

# Tri-Annual Report

## King County Ombudsman's Office

Ombudsman's Office Tri-Annual Report  
January 1 to April 30, 2013

June 10, 2013

### 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 January 1 through April 30, 2013.

### Complaints Received

The Ombudsman's Office received 638 complaints and inquiries from residents and county employees between January 1 and April 30, 2013. Ombudsman cases are either classified as Investigations, Direct Assistance, or Information/Referral. A review of our recent case statistics revealed the following:

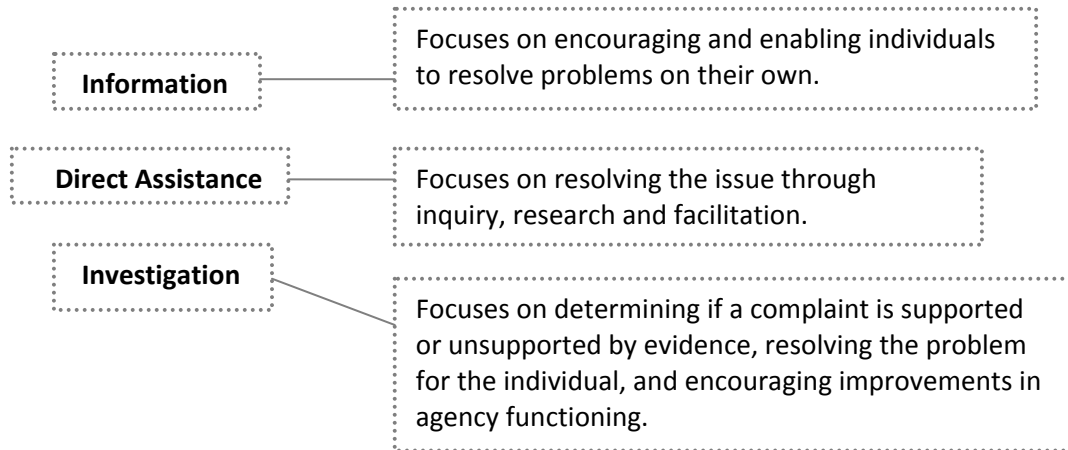
- The Ombudsman's Office opened 14 new investigations during this period. The allegations that initiated these investigations relate to potential Ethics, Whistleblower, Whistleblower Retaliation, and/or Administrative Conduct violations. Completing these investigations in a thorough and timely manner 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.
- In the first four months of 2013, the Ombudsman's Office received 6% more cases requiring Direct Assistance than during the same period of 2012. 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](mailto: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:

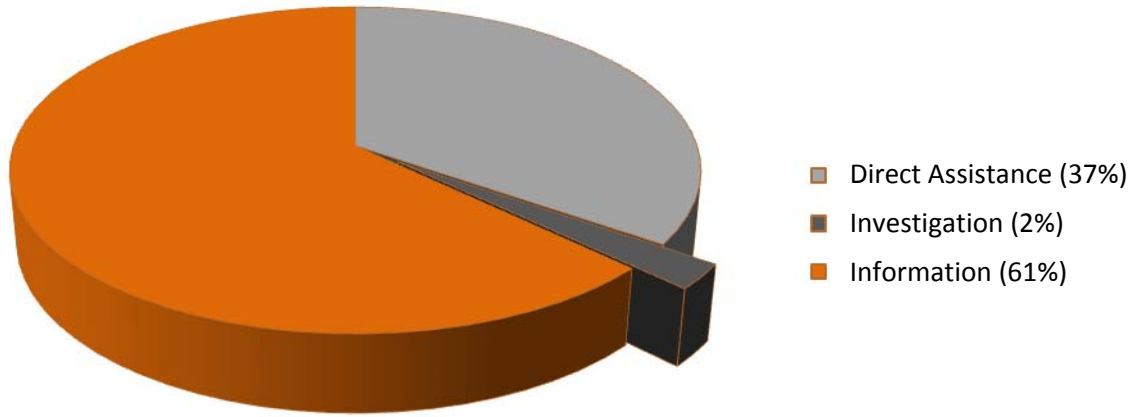


## Complaint Disposition

The graph below shows the number of Ombudsman's Office cases associated with each county agency, and reveals how we responded to the 638 complaints and inquiries we received during the first four months of 2013:

Department	Direct Assistance	Investigation	Information	Total
Adult and Juvenile Detention	97	4	194	295
Assessments	2	0	2	4
District Court	0	0	3	3
Elections	0	1	2	3
Executive Services	4	4	7	15
Community and Human Services	5	0	9	14
Judicial Administration	2	0	2	4
Legislative Branch Agencies	2	0	4	6
Natural Resources and Parks	6	0	4	10
Ombudsman's Office / Tax Advisor	27	0	10	37
Permitting and Environmental Review	5	0	8	13
Prosecuting Attorney's Office	3	0	0	3
Public Health	63	1	19	83
Sheriff's Office	3	1	4	8
Superior Court	0	0	9	9
Transportation	11	3	12	26
Non-Jurisdictional	8	0	97	105
<b>Total</b>	<b>238</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>386</b>	<b>638</b>

From January through April, as in previous periods, the majority of public contacts to our office required either direct assistance or information/referral. In addition to these cases, the Ombudsman’s Office also opened 14 investigations.



**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 received during the first four months of 2013:

Complaint	Resolution
A county resident contacted our office regarding a fence on their property that a Department of Transportation (KCDOT) work crew had allegedly removed while clearing brush beside an adjacent road. KCDOT initially denied their work had impacted the fence and the citizen turned to our office for assistance.	The Ombudsman’s Office arranged for a site visit with the resident and KCDOT. In the course of reviewing the matter, it became clear that (a) the claim was far from frivolous, (b) it would cost the county more to investigate than the few hundred dollars in materials the citizen was willing to resolve the case for, and (c) the avenue for reimbursement was Risk Management. We worked with KCDOT and Risk Management to ensure the resident understood how to proceed with her claim and the resident ultimately received reimbursement to rebuild the fence.
An out-of-state applicant for a position with the King County Sheriff’s Office (KCSO) alleged the KCSO recruiter had acted unprofessionally during their email exchanges. The applicant also alleged the recruiter had contacted the police department in his city, in an effort to dissuade him from contacting KCSO in the future.	After reviewing the email communications between the complainant and KCSO, we found the recruiter had been both professional and appropriately supportive in their communication with the applicant. Additionally, after some preliminary inquiries, we found that it was not KCSO, but rather another county in Washington State, that had contacted the applicant’s local police department. We provided our findings to the applicant in an effort to enhance his understanding of this matter.

Complaint	Resolution
<p>A county family who lost their dog was unable to locate their missing pet until after it had been adopted out of the county's regional Animal Services facility. The family expressed frustration at the difficulty they had navigating the county's system and questioned whether Animal Services had erred in adopting their pet out.</p>	<p>The Ombudsman's Office fully reviewed the matter and found Animal Services had acted properly in adopting the dog out. In fact, they had actually had gone beyond their required duty and held the dog longer than required. After hearing from our Office about the family's difficulty in accessing their system, Animal Services has begun exploring the feasibility of an area-wide Pet Lost and Found website, which would make it easier for citizens to reunite with lost pets.</p>
<p>A county resident complained about the process involved with obtaining a senior citizen pass for Metro Transit and also asked to be reimbursed for the additional bus fare they paid during the resolution process.</p>	<p>The Ombudsman's Office worked with the resident to understand her experience and conveyed it to Metro Transit. In response, Metro Transit reached out to the resident, approved her senior citizen pass, and also provided a partial reimbursement for the money she had overpaid in bus fares. In light of her experience, Metro Transit reviewed this process to ensure they are effectively serving county residents.</p>
<p>The Ombudsman's Office received multiple anonymous complaints from county employees about a county supervisor.</p>	<p>The Ombudsman's Office compiled the complainants' descriptions and, while protecting their identities, provided information to administrators in the supervisor's department. In response, the department took several corrective actions to improve the supervisor's effectiveness and general communication within the workgroup.</p>
<p>A county resident had concerns about the on-line application process for seasonal work with the Parks Division which allegedly caused him to miss the submittal deadline. He asked the county to review the on-line application process and reconsider his application.</p>	<p>After several communications with the resident, the Ombudsman's Office facilitated communications between the resident and a Parks Department employee who coordinates the on-line process. After a thorough review, the Parks Division official was unable to recreate the glitch the resident had allegedly experienced and found insufficient justification to accept the resident's application after their posted deadline. Considering the available evidence, our Office concurred with the department's decision and communicated the outcome to the resident.</p>
<p>A county resident complained about the lack of follow through on an issue they had brought to the King County Sheriff's Office (KCSO) and the Office of Law Enforcement Oversight (OLEO).</p>	<p>The Ombudsman's Office raised the resident's concerns to representatives of KCSO and OLEO. The agencies both acknowledged the resident had not been sent a letter as they had intended, and promptly contacted the resident to apologize for the delay and provide an update on their efforts to resolve the initial complaint.</p>
<p>An inmate in the King County Correctional Facility (KCCF) complained that he had served his complete sentence but was still awaiting release.</p>	<p>The Ombudsman's Office reviewed the inmate's status and found that his legal process and court paperwork had been significantly delayed and the inmate was now being held beyond his release date. We notified KCCF, and the jail promptly acknowledged the error and the inmate was immediately processed for release.</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,
- Segregation or merger for multiple parcels, and
- Assistance resolving complaints about other departments.

## Resident Contacts

The Tax Advisor Office responded to 2,064 residents from January 1 to April 30, 2013. A signature function of our office is assisting citizens with their property tax appeals. In the first four months of 2013, we provided sales research to 274 (14%) of our contacts.

	Information	Research	Total
January	235	59	294
February	550	65	615
March	448	74	522
April	553	80	633
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,786</b>	<b>278</b>	<b>2,064</b>

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	18
\$201-300K	15
\$301-400K	12
\$401-500K	9
\$501-700K	9
\$701K-1M	11
Over \$1M	10
<b>Total</b>	<b>84</b>