



**King County | Ombuds Office**

# 2024 Annual Report

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### For best viewing experience

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Alternative formats and languages are available. Call 206-477-1050 or TTY: 711.




## King County | Ombuds Office

*Responding to public ethics, whistleblower, or other complaints in an impartial, efficient, and timely way to improve county operations.*

### Contact the Ombuds Office

 Phone: 206-477-1050

 Email: [ombuds@kingcounty.gov](mailto:ombuds@kingcounty.gov)

 Web: [kingcounty.gov/independent/ombuds](http://kingcounty.gov/independent/ombuds)



## Background

The King County Ombuds 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 Ombuds Office investigates County agency conduct in response to complaints received from the public, county employees, or on its own initiative, and resolves issues informally where possible. The authority for the Ombuds Office to carry out this work comes from King County Code (KCC 2.52). Additional authorization granted to the Ombuds Office to investigate other alleged violations of county code includes investigating alleged violations of the Employee Code of Ethics (KCC 3.04), Whistleblower Protection Code (KCC 3.42), and the Lobbyist Disclosure Code (KCC 1.07). In addition, the Tax Advisor section of the Ombuds 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 Ombuds Office reports to the Metropolitan King County Council in March each year on the activities of the Office, per KCC 2.52.150. This report summarizes Office activities for January through December 2024.

## Mission

To promote public trust in King County government by responding to complaints in an impartial, efficient and timely manner, and to contribute to the improved operation of County government by making recommendations based upon the results of complaint investigations.

“

I am sincerely grateful for the Ombuds Office's help in connecting me with Metro staff who were able to help me solve my son's pick-up and drop off problems. ”

– Metro Access rider

## Letter from the Director

The close of 2024 marks the completion of my first full year as Ombuds Director, and a close to a year of transition and restructuring for the Ombuds Office. Though many changes have occurred internally, our mission to promote confidence in county government by responding impartially to complaints remains the same. To improve operations and enhance workflows, we've been working with consultants to help identify and enhance efficiencies within the office. Through this work it's clear everyone on our team is committed to our office's mission, and as such committed to the changes necessary to make us become better public servants.

To assist in building capacity within the office, strengthen office infrastructure, and provide additional management support, we created a deputy director position. Shawn Abernethy joined the Ombuds Office as our first deputy director. Shawn came to us from King County Elections, and brings with her extensive experience in human resources, organizational dynamics, and county operations. Shawn supervises our administrative team which includes the ombuds office administrator, public records officer, as well as the assistant tax advisor.

We've had two new deputy ombuds join our team as well. Eric Beach joined the office in January, from King County Water and Land Resources Division of the Department of Natural Resources and Parks. Eric has extensive knowledge of King County code concerning land use, and leads our Rural and unincorporated Ombuds Program. In June, Anna Endter joined our team from the University of Washington where she served as an Associate Dean at the UW School of Law. Anna has experience in complex problem solving within the public sector, and leads our Transit Ombuds Program.

In addition to our staff changes, we've been working on standardizing some of our internal processes and systems. Having a single point for intake, and streamlining our case review and assignment process helps mitigate duplicative work. We use a case management system to track cases, store relevant documents, and report outcomes and metrics. By working with the system developer, we've been able to refine the user interface, increase the speed for data entry and retrieval, and incorporate the tax advisor function of the office. These improvements have ultimately made our system more efficient and effective at no additional taxpayer cost.

A common misconception of the office is that by contacting us we will serve as your advocate, but that is not our role. We are an impartial and independent body, charged with investigating concerns raised about King County government. This coming year, we plan to increase our accessibility to underserved communities, identify complaint trends to improve King County operations, and serve as a sounding board for residents undergoing difficulties with County services. Please take a moment to review some examples of our work included in this report. Our team remains united in our mission commitment to promote confidence in King County government.



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jeremy Bell', written in a cursive style.

**Jeremy Bell,**  
Director of Ombuds Office

## Response to Complaints

The Ombuds Office reviews each complaint individually to determine the appropriate actions. Once we fully understand the complaint, our office responds in one or more of the following ways:



### Information

Requests for information or guidance, which may result in referral.



### Assistance

Complaints addressed through problem solving, including by agency inquiry, facilitation, counseling, and coaching. Assistance cases can range from simple to complex.



### Investigation

Complaints resolved through impartial, evidence-based fact-finding. This may involve gathering documents, interviewing witnesses, and analyzing appropriate laws, policies, and procedures. The Ombuds Office may issue findings and recommendations for change, and work with King County agencies/departments to ensure that appropriate actions are taken. Investigation cases can range from simple to complex. In addition to addressing individual concerns, the Ombuds Office also focuses on identifying patterns which may indicate a systemic issue. We work with agencies to ensure systemic problems are resolved, and necessary changes are made to improve functions going forward.

### What is an Ombuds?

Ombuds comes from the word *Ombudsman*, a Swedish word, which literally translated means “representative” or “agent” and is gender neutral. The first Ombudsman, created in Sweden in 1809, was elected by the Swedish Parliament to control the activities of and to prevent abuses by public officials. Since that time, the Ombudsman institution has spread around the world at the national, state or provincial, and local levels.

In its classical form, certain characteristics make the Ombudsman unique among complaint-handling agencies. As envisioned, the Ombudsman is an independent, nonpartisan officer of the legislative branch. This enables the Ombudsman to be independent of the executive agencies under his or her jurisdiction and identifies the Ombudsman’s investigative role as an extension of the power of legislative oversight.

At King County, we use the term *Ombuds* to further embrace the gender neutral form of the word.

# Ombuds Office Staff



**Jeremy Bell**  
*Director*



**Shawn Abernethy**  
*Deputy Director*



**Eric Beach**  
*Senior Deputy Ombuds*



**Elise Daniels**  
*Administrator*



**Anna Endter**  
*Senior Deputy Ombuds*



**Tida Keovernkhone**  
*Assistant Tax Advisor III*



**Janna Lewis**  
*Principal Deputy Ombuds*



**Luke Oh**  
*Principal Deputy Ombuds*



**Jon Stier**  
*Principal Deputy Ombuds*



**Trang Tran**  
*Legislative Records Specialist*



## 2024 Overview

In 2024, the Ombuds Office closed 804 cases from residents and county employees during the report period. Ombuds cases are classified as Information, Assistance, or Investigation

The Ombuds Office opened 20 new investigations during this period. The allegations that initiated these investigations relate to potential improper administrative conduct, as well as violations of the county’s ethics and whistleblower codes, including allegations of conflicts of interest, retaliation, and improper governmental action. We strive to complete investigations in a thorough and timely manner, and to produce findings and recommendations to improve county operations and promote public trust in county government. Investigations are the most resource-intensive aspect of our work.

The Ombuds Office staff attended two national conferences this year. The United States Ombudsman Association (USOA) is a national organization for public sector ombudsman professionals, and assists existing ombuds organizations in improving their operations throughout the United States. The Council on Governmental Ethics Laws (COGEL) conference includes federal and state “ethics” agencies dedicated to the growing interest and importance of governmental ethics laws. Our staff attended sessions on new trends in public sector ombuds work, reaching successful complaint outcomes through early resolution, and building an informed practice that will serve residents more equitably.

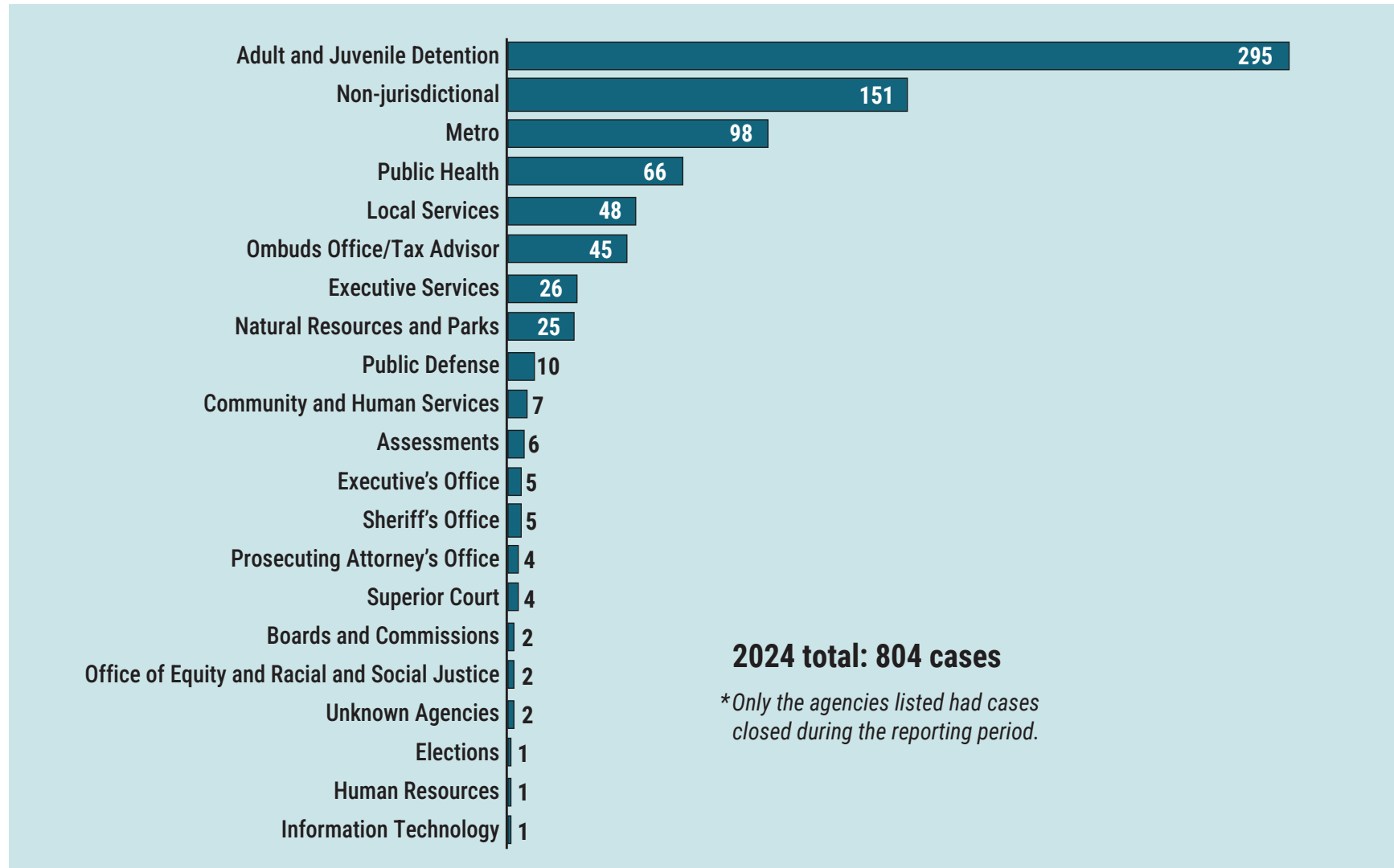
The Watergate scandal from the 1970s was the catalyst for ethics reform in government and the legal profession. John Dean joined COGEL for historical context and perspective on ethics in government having served as White House Counsel during the Watergate scandal.



*Eric Beach, Luke Oh, Jeremy Bell, and Janna Lewis with John Dean (center) at the Council on Governmental Ethics Laws (COGEL) conference.*

# Cases Closed

In 2024, the Ombuds Office closed a total of 804 cases regarding King County agencies.\*





## Case Summaries

The Ombuds Office handles cases involving a wide range of issues, circumstances, and County agencies. We employ a variety of tools and methods to research and respond to the needs of each case. The case summaries below describe how our office resolved some of the cases we closed during the reporting period.

Agency	Allegation	Resolution
<b>Executive Office - Performance, Strategy &amp; Budget (PSB)</b>	Complainant who participates in the King County led Fish Farm Flood (FFF) effort noticed that the Executive's Office draft Comprehensive Plan language substantially deviated from the consensus language developed by the FFF Implementation Oversight Committee (IOC) submitted to the Executive by Water and Land Resource Division (WLRD). The FFF IOC was not advised of the changes. The concern was two-fold; the apparent disregard for engaging partners in a consensus process, and a perceived weakening of King County policies conserving prime ag land for agricultural uses.	The Ombuds Office contacted the Performance Strategy and Budget Office (PSB), which acknowledged they had deviated from the process conveyed to the FFF participants. PSB management recognized the opportunities for improvement. As a result, and as the Comprehensive Plan language has been transmitted to King County Council, the FFF IOC is working with district staff to ensure the language in the Comprehensive Plan reflects input from the IOC.
<b>Department of Executive Services - Facilities Management Division</b>	Complainant was concerned about the sale of rural King County property to private parties. The complaint alleged that King County sold environmentally sensitive property by auction for \$6,700 and the parties that purchased the parcel immediately listed it for sale for \$295,000. The question was raised about the potential for unethical behavior by King County.	The Ombuds Office contacted Real Estate Services who clarified that this was a Tax Title sale; a foreclosure due to non payment of property taxes. King County has a statutory duty to return these parcels to the tax roles. Before placing the properties for sale to the public, Property Services contacts King County resource agencies to make these properties available if there is interest. Otherwise, properties are disposed of using an online auction, which has proven to be a cost effective way for King County to meet the legal obligation to dispose of these types of properties. This information was conveyed to the complainant who was satisfied with the explanation.

*Continued on next page*

*Case summaries continued*

**Agency**

**Allegation**

**Resolution**

**Department of Local Services - Permitting Division**

Complainant had purchased property that included two separate tax lots. The landowner intended to then sell one lot to fund improvements on the adjacent parcel. To close the sale, it was necessary for Permitting to make a determination that it was as legal lot. Permitting did not recognize the property as having been legally subdivided and issued a denial letter based on the lack of a legal description. A legal description was not available as the parcel information in the WA state archives was a poor quality scanned document and the pages that contained legal location were illegible.

The Ombuds Office identified King County code language that allowed for Permitting Division to consider alternative forms of proof, such as tax records, to indicate a legal lot subdivision. The Ombuds Office provided additional supporting information to Permitting, who agreed with the Ombuds' position and issued a letter of revision that recognized that sale parcel was a legal lot, allowing the landowner to complete the transaction.

**Department of Local Services - Permitting Division**

Complainant alleged they were being required to obtain permits and mitigate for trees removed by a former owner of their property and for construction of a small patio in the aquatic buffer that had already been removed. Obtaining permits involved expensive environmental studies and planting 30 trees. Additionally, as there was an open code enforcement action, the complainant could not apply for a building permit for a home remodel.

The Ombuds Office provided Code Enforcement with: a) records indicating the earlier determination that the trees had been legally removed, b) photographic evidence demonstrating the negligible impact of the patio construction and subsequent removal and c) King County Code references that supported the ability of Permitting management to exercise discretion and close the case as de minimis. Permitting concurred with the Ombuds Office's position and closed the enforcement case.

**Department of Local Services - Permitting Division**

Complainant was concerned about the long permit review time for constructing an ADA accessible residence. They have a child with disabilities and their current home was not suitable. The concern was prolonged permit review times would require obtaining interim housing to allow for the child's mobility until permits could be issued to construct a new residence.

The Ombuds Office contacted permitting building officials, facilitated a request for an expedited permit review based on medical hardship and provided evidence and justification for the action. The request was granted by the Permitting Director.

*Continued on next page*

*Case summaries continued*

Agency	Allegation	Resolution
<p><b>Department of Adult and Juvenile Detention - Maleng Regional Justice Center</b></p>	<p>Complainant was concerned about loss of “good time” as a sanction imposed for fighting. Alleged that the planned release date was moved back a month, and they did not receive a hearing, violating due process.</p>	<p>The Ombuds Office determined that the loss of "good time" was unrelated to behavior while in custody. It was imposed as the individual violated the conditions of electronic home detention, leading to incarceration. However, as a result of the Ombuds inquiry, the DAJD identified an error in release date and it was amended, allowing the resident to be released a week earlier than they anticipated.</p>
<p><b>King County Metro</b></p>	<p>Metro customer complained on behalf of her son who lives with disabilities about ongoing pick up and drop off issues with Metro Access.</p>	<p>The Ombuds Office contacted Metro. Metro Access with its contractor MV created an individualized ride plan for the complainant's son, including assigning his rides to experienced operators and monitoring his rides at every step of the way to ensure proper pick up and drop off. Access has assigned a point of contact for his mother to call when she experiences problems or has questions about Access reservations and rides. Access and MV will engage in ongoing monitoring of the plan, and will be in regular contact with the rider's mother.</p>
<p><b>Department of Community and Human Services - King County Veterans Program</b></p>	<p>Complainant alleged that the King County Veterans Program (KCVP) denied her request for a medically necessary mattress and is not following consistent processes and standards for the awarding of wellness funds to veterans in the community.</p>	<p>The Ombuds Office facilitated a resolution with both parties that included the purchase of an appropriate mattress, and made a recommendation to KCVP about improving processes and consistency going forward.</p>
<p><b>Department of Assessments</b></p>	<p>The complainant alleged that the King County Department of Assessments improperly relied on photographs rather than conducting thorough physical inspections, deeming their appraisal methods incompetent.</p>	<p>The Ombuds Office found these allegations to be unfounded. We found that Assessments' practices comply with industry standards and Washington State regulations, with physical inspections conducted as required, and adjustments made based on observed conditions.</p>

*Continued on next page*

*Case summaries continued*

Agency	Allegation	Resolution
<p><b>Department of Adult and Juvenile Detention - Maleng Regional Justice Center</b></p>	<p>Complainant alleged the following, respectively: mistreatment by DAJD staff; issue with reporting Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA) to DAJD staff; insufficient PREA response by DAJD staff; jail conditions unsanitary; inoperable exhaust fans within DAJD-KCCF facility; foodstrike related to passover.</p>	<p>The Ombuds Office received multiple complaints about DAJD staff and their operations. We found that the complainant had not exhausted their administrative remedies by filing complaints (KITEs) or grievances. We communicated to the complainant why filing KITEs and grievances were important, and also provided information from the Resident Handbook on what KITEs/grievances to use and for when.</p>
<p><b>Department of Adult and Juvenile Detention - Maleng Regional Justice Center</b></p>	<p>Complainant alleged that JHS had made long delays to follow-up appointment with Harborview Medical Center concerning brain tumor.</p>	<p>The Ombuds Office found that a review of the complainant's medical records showed that none of their appointments were previously cancelled. We communicated to the complainant that the clinic in which the complainant was referred was not a clinic that JHS routinely schedules with, and that appointments may take longer to obtain. We also provided information from the Resident Handbook on how to file a medical KITEs/grievances with JHS.</p>
<p><b>Department of Public Health - Vital Statistics</b></p>	<p>Complainant alleged that Public Health - Vital Statistics (VS) improperly refused to provide complainant's documentation due to their failure of understanding family law. Complainant also alleged that VS staff was impolite and rude.</p>	<p>The Ombuds Office found the complainant's allegation to be unfounded. Complainant alleged that VS staff improperly refused complainant's documentation due to their inability to recognize certain documents to distinguish between guardianship, power of attorney, and that VS staff failed to provide sufficient customer service. We found that VS frontline staff properly deferred to policy analysts concerning whether to release complainant's documents, and that the allegation concerning VS' customer service to be poor as unsupported.</p>

*Continued on next page*

*Case summaries continued*




Agency	Allegation	Resolution
<p><b>Executive Office - Office of Equity Racial and Social Justice (OERSJ)</b></p>	<p>Complainant alleged that requirements made by OERSJ for a job position were changed during the process, that the instructions for selecting references were inconsistent, that certain contacts were contacted without authorization, and that these issues raised equity concerns in the hiring process at King County government.</p>	<p>Following investigation, we found that the complainant's allegation was unfounded. We found that the complainant was granted an exception to standard reference-checking procedures, allowing the submission of alternative references. The hiring decision was based on a comprehensive evaluation of qualifications and references, which was conducted in accordance with standard HR practices. Furthermore, we were unable to find any evidence of unauthorized contact with any reference. We found that HR's practices were found to be fair, consistent, and compliant with established King County policies.</p>
<p><b>Department of Adult and Juvenile Detention - Maleng Regional Justice Center</b></p>	<p>Complainant alleged that their mech-soft diet was not sufficient; some components of their meal was missing as the tray left the kitchen; the food was inconsistent; and handling of the milk on the tray was improper.</p>	<p>The Ombuds Office found the complainant's allegation to be unfounded. We found that the complainant was transitioned from a mech-soft diet to a 'mech-soft via straw' diet per JHS' assessment, which was made to better accommodate the complainant's dietary needs and to ensure that they would consume their food comfortably and safely. We also verified with the kitchen staff that all components of their meal were included on their tray prior to leaving the kitchen. We communicated to the complainant that their diet was designed to allow food to be consumed through a straw, indicating a thinner consistency than a puree but specifically tailored to meet their nutritional and medical needs. We also confirmed with DAJD staff that the complainant was not provided milk because their medical diet did not require it, and instead, was substituted with powdered milk.</p>
<p><b>Department of Community and Human Services</b></p>	<p>Complaints received from King County parents about a social and behavioral health screening tool (SB-SBIRT) for middle and high school students, developed by DCHS. Parents' concerns centered mainly on validation, consent, privacy, confidentiality, and the credentials of brief interventionists.</p>	<p>Following investigation, the Ombuds Office made no adverse programmatic findings, but recommended DCHS should include in all SB-SBIRT privacy compliance communications a plain-language notice that caregivers and students should contact their school or school district about those entities' privacy and public disclosure policies. DCHS accepted the recommendation.</p>

## Ethics Program Report

King County has established a code of ethics for all county officials and employees which provides guidance for public employees in the event of conflicts and to prevent conflicts of interest. It is the policy of King County that the private conduct and financial dealings of public officials and employees and of candidates for public office shall present no actual or apparent conflict of interest between the public trust, and the private interests of county officials and employees.

### Code of Ethics Cases Received

This table lists all code of ethics cases received by the Ombuds Office in 2024.

King County Agency	 Information	 Assistance	 Investigation	Total
Metro	0	0	1	1
Natural Resources and Parks	0	1	0	1
Ombuds Office/Tax Advisor	2	0	0	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>4</b>

“The private conduct and financial dealings of [county employees] shall present no actual or apparent conflict of interest between the public trust and private interest.”

– King County  
Employee Code of Ethics  
KCC 3.04






## Whistleblower Program Report

King County encourages employees to report significant wrongdoing, called “improper governmental action,” so problems can be identified and corrected. King County’s Whistleblower Protection Code creates a reporting process for employees, and protects employees from retaliation for reporting improper governmental action or cooperating in investigations.

### Whistleblower Cases Received

This table lists whistleblower and whistleblower retaliation cases received by the Ombuds Office in 2024.

King County Agency	 Information	 Assistance	 Investigation	Total
Information Technology	0	0	1	1
Metro	1	2	0	3
Natural Resources and Parks	0	1	0	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>5</b>

### Improper Governmental Action

**What it is:** “Improper governmental action” means any action by a county employee while performing official duties, that: violates any state or federal law or rule or county ordinance or rule; or is an abuse of authority; or is gross mismanagement; or creates a substantial and specific danger to the public health or safety; or results in a gross waste of public funds; or prevents the dissemination of scientific opinion or alters technical findings without scientifically valid justification, unless disclosure is legally prohibited.

**What it is not:** Improper governmental action does not include violations of anti-discrimination laws or collective bargaining agreements. It does not include properly authorized county policies or expenditures that employees disagree with. Employees do not have a right to report privileged or legally protected information. Employees reporting their own improper governmental action are not protected from discipline.

### Whistleblower Process Participant Feedback & Recommendations

The Ombuds Office consistently receives feedback on the whistleblower process (KCC 3.42) related to confidentiality. Two concerns often expressed are:

- 1. complainants worry about their identity being revealed through the public records request process, and
- 2. protection for a whistleblower against retaliation only lasts six months.

These concerns are raised primarily because there is no categorical exemption for local government ombuds offices in the Public Records Act (RCW 42.56). Unfortunately, this is often a deterrent to employees because they are fearful of retaliation. While some employees decide to proceed anonymously in the whistleblower process, this presents investigative challenges for the ombuds. A categorical state exemption protecting whistleblowers' identities from public disclosure would also enable the ombuds to comply with the practices and standards accepted by ombuds offices nationally.

“  
 Thank you for your diligence,  
 your deep concern, and deep  
 listening. We appreciated the  
 review. It helps our work be better.

– King County agency

”



## Tax Advisor Office

The Tax Advisor Office, a section of the Ombuds 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 provide comparable sales searches and information on property tax exemption programs.

### 2024 Tax Advisor Assistance by Type and Month (1,061 total)

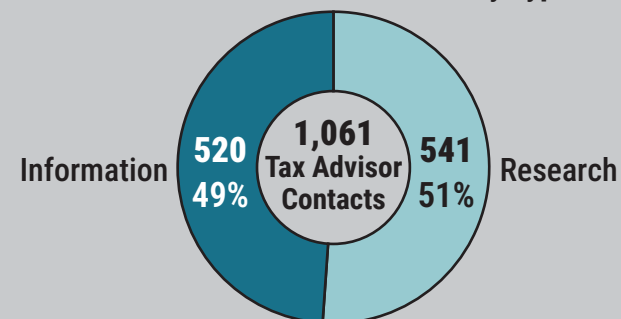
	Information	Research
January	39	22
February	58	36
March	54	32
April	73	35
May	28	11
June	23	13
July	22	20
August	41	69
September	63	101
October	72	138
November	20	46
December	27	18

### Assistance Types

**Information:** Inquiries that can be answered within 15 minutes, often involving readily available online information or explaining straightforward agency practices. These questions may relate to topics such as property tax bills, assessed valuation increases, levy rates, senior exemption guidelines, appeal deadlines, and general website navigation.

**Research:** Inquiries that require thorough explanations, in-depth research, often involving multiple departments or specialized tasks. May include activities like running comparable sales surveys for residential valuation appeals, providing step-by-step tutorials for filing appeals, reviewing area reports, or producing maps. Sometimes involves coordination between agencies to address complex issues or complaints.

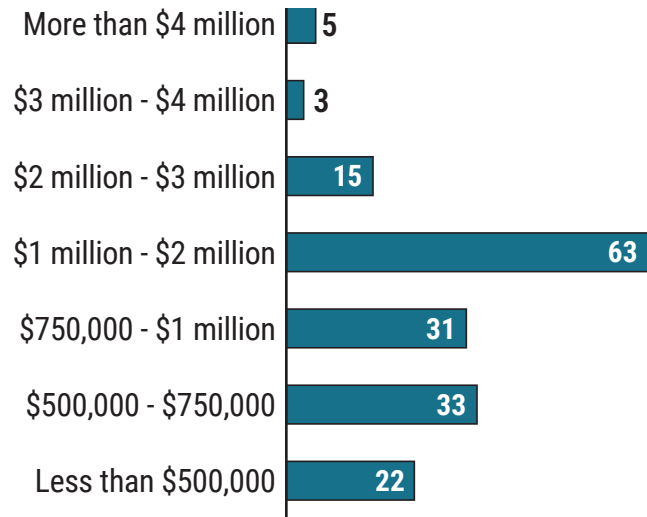
### 2024 Tax Advisor Assistance by Type



### Sales Surveys by Property Value

As the chart below shows, the Tax Advisor Office is contacted for assistance by county residents with inquiries representing a range of property values. We strive to provide accurate information that will assist them in making decisions regarding potential assessed valuation appeals.

#### 2024 Tax Advisor Assistance by Assessed Property Value



#### Did you know?

We conduct comparable sales research and offer unbiased advice for appealing values. We serve as a neutral resource, ensuring taxpayers receive accurate and reliable information to understand or appeal their assessed property value.


“ I am incredibly grateful for this information. It is not something that we could ever have pulled together ourselves and it gives me hope! Thank you for taking the time to do this, and especially for calling me back last year and explaining the process. ”

– Property owner



# King County Ombuds Office

## Contact the Ombuds Office

 **Phone:** 206-477-1050

 **Email:** [ombuds@kingcounty.gov](mailto:ombuds@kingcounty.gov)

 **Web:** [kingcounty.gov/independent/ombuds](http://kingcounty.gov/independent/ombuds)