



King County

Tri-Annual Report

King County Ombudsman's Office

Ombudsman's Office Tri-Annual Report
January 1 to April 30, 2012

June 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 three times 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, 2012.

Complaints Received

The Ombudsman's Office received 669 complaints and inquiries from residents and county employees between January 1 and April 30, 2012. Based upon the first four months, our office is projected to receive 2,007 complaints and inquiries in 2012.

A review of our case statistics revealed the following trends:

- After a three year rise in the number of whistleblower and retaliation complaints we have begun to see the number of those types of complaints become stable. The rise in whistleblower and retaliation complaints followed a difficult cycle of layoffs prompted by reduced county revenues and the well-publicized expansion of whistleblower protections in 2009. 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 for building and maintaining public trust in county government. These cases are often high-stakes matters for both the complainant and the County and are a very resource-intensive aspect of our work.
- 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 first four months of 2012, our office received 15% fewer inmate complaints than in 2011. This trend may be related to the reduction in the number of people booked into the King County jail system in 2012 when compared to previous years.

Contact the King County Ombudsman's Office:

516 Third Avenue, Room W-1039

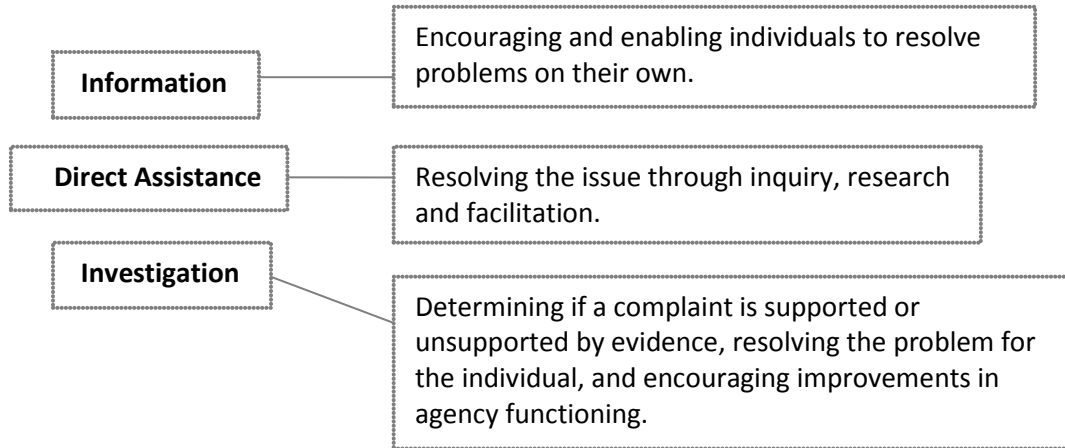
Phone: 206.205.6338

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:

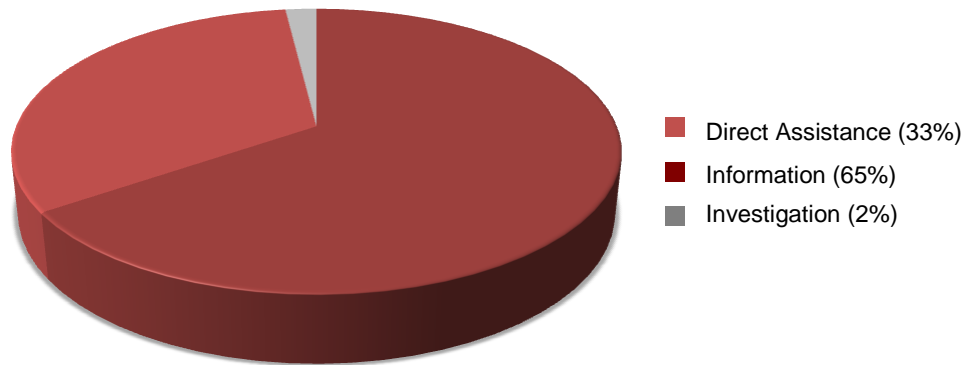


Complaint Disposition

The graph below shows the number of Ombudsman’s Office cases associated with each county agency, and reveals how we responded to the 669 complaints and inquiries we received in the first four months of 2012:

Department	Direct Assistance	Investigation	Information	Total
Adult and Juvenile Detention	55	6	170	231
Community and Human Services	1	0	9	10
Development and Environmental Services	12	0	11	23
District Court	0	0	2	2
Hearing Examiner	0	0	1	1
Judicial Administration	0	0	1	1
King County Council	0	0	1	1
King County Executive	3	0	0	3
Executive Services	12	0	21	33
Natural Resources and Parks	7	1	6	14
Ombudsman’s Office / Tax Advisor	28	0	18	46
Prosecuting Attorney's Office	3	0	6	9
Public Health	72	2	33	107
Sheriff's Office	6	2	4	12
Superior Court	0	0	4	4
Transportation	17	2	12	31
Non-Jurisdictional	2	0	139	141
Total	218	13	438	669

From January through April, 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 13 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 first four months of 2012:

Complaint	Resolution
Resident complained the county’s application of a 165 foot buffer was erroneous and would effectively shut down her wedding facility business.	The Ombudsman’s Office staff worked with the resident and representatives of Department of Development and Environmental Services (DDES) to better understand the environmental restrictions that applied to this property. We coordinated a site visit and walked the neighborhood with the resident and a DDES investigator. Based on information gathered during the site visit, DDES determined that the buffer should only be 25 feet, thus allowing the resident to continue operating their business.
Resident expressed frustration with college students who use the limited parking spaces at the Eastgate transit parking garage and then walk to the nearby campus.	The Ombudsman’s Office reviewed the matter with King County Metro Transit and Bellevue College officials. We coordinated a plan to notify students of the relevant parking restrictions associated with the transit parking garage. The resident noticed a dramatic reduction in student parking and has expressed satisfaction with the county’s response.
A county employee in the Department of Executive Services (DES) raised serious concerns about a lack of financial controls in their section.	The Ombudsman’s Office conducted a thorough intake with the complainant who decided not to file a whistleblower complaint. Instead, at the complainant’s request, the Ombudsman’s Office facilitated a meeting with the complainant and a department administrator to discuss the matter. After hearing the complainant’s concerns, the administrator initiated a process to update the section’s policies and procedures to improve their financial controls.

Complaint	Resolution
<p>In 2010 and 2011, the Ombudsman's Office conducted an exhaustive investigation into a whistleblower complaint from a county employee alleging that the county improperly accepted a major road in sub-par condition.</p>	<p>After visiting the roadway on multiple occasions, analyzing hundreds of pages of documents, and interviewing two dozen witnesses, we determined that King County Department of Transportation (DOT) administrators did not engage in improper governmental action. However, we recommended several specific changes to ensure that future roads of such poor condition are not accepted into the county system. In early 2012 we followed up on our investigation and determined that DOT had sufficiently integrated our recommendations, taking steps we believe will improve future outcomes</p>
<p>Three inmates at the King County Correctional Facility (KCCF) separately complained that they were not released or transported to other jurisdictions due to unusual late-spring snowstorms on the mountain passes. Further, the inmates complained that they were being denied access to telephone calling cards, indigent packs and other commissary items due to their "transfer" status.</p>	<p>The Ombudsman's Office contacted a KCCF administrator who confirmed that weather constraints had resulted in delayed transports for these inmates. The administrator was not aware of the access issues associated with their extended "transfer" status but promised to address the situation. The Ombudsman's Office received updates from KCCF regarding the inmates' status and they were provided the full-range of available items until they were eventually transported as required.</p>
<p>A church in King County that has a parking agreement with Metro Transit expressed complaints about an abandoned trailer. The church asserted that it was the county's responsibility to remove the trailer.</p>	<p>The Ombudsman's Office staff worked with representatives from the church and officials with Metro Transit to better understand the county's parking agreement and responsibilities. We then reviewed the matter with an administrator for Metro Transit who reversed the department's earlier decision and agreed to remove the trailer from the church's property.</p>
<p>Resident complained about a fence the Department of Natural Resources and Planning (DNRP) built in conjunction with the Burke-Gilman Trail renovation.</p>	<p>The Ombudsman's Office reviewed the rules related to fence placement and explained to the resident the background principles that apply to this type of property dispute. In addition, the Ombudsman's Office also reviewed the matter and toured the site with DNRP. Ultimately, DNRP decided to replace the fence and has moved it to a location that meets the needs of the resident and the county.</p>
<p>A county resident complained about noise and exhaust pollution emanating from King County Metro Transit ("Metro") buses that idle in front of their home.</p>	<p>The Ombudsman's Office raised this issue with representatives of Metro who acknowledged the resident's concerns. Metro remedied the situation by designating a new area for buses idling on this route and the resident expressed satisfaction with the county's responsiveness.</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 2,528 residents from January 1 to April 30, 2012. A signature function of our office is assisting residents with their property tax appeals. In the first four months of 2012, we provided sales research to 246 (11%) of our contacts.

	Information	Research	Total
January	260	22	282
February	707	72	779
March	598	68	666
April	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