



King County

Tri-Annual Report

King County Ombudsman's Office

Ombudsman's Office Tri-Annual Report
September 1 to December 31, 2012

January 29, 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 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, 2012.

Complaints Received

The Ombudsman's Office received 668 cases from residents and county employees during the reporting period from September 1 to December 31, 2012. Most of these cases involved multiple issues or concerns about county government. Overall, the Ombudsman's Office received a total of 2,094 complaints and inquiries in 2012.

A review of our recent case statistics revealed the following:

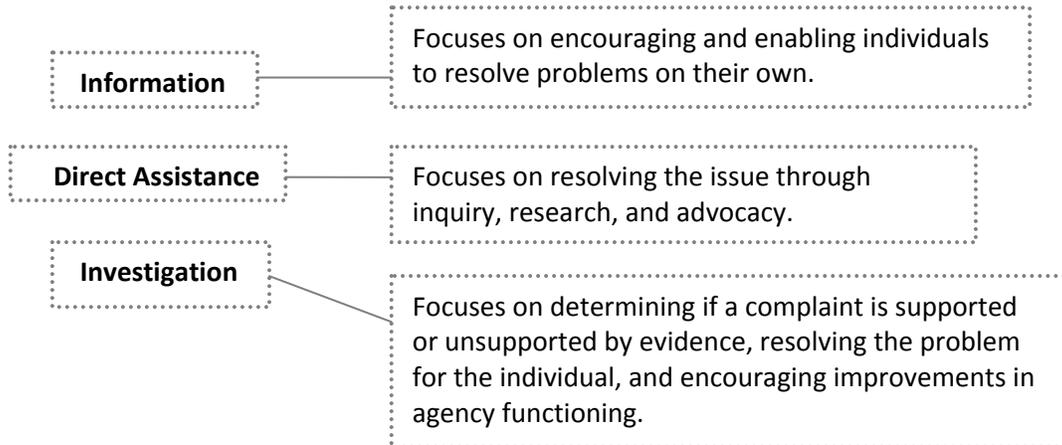
- In 2012, the Ombudsman's Office experienced a 6% increase in the number of Ethics, Whistleblower and Lobbyist Disclosure investigations, when compared to 2011. Resolving these cases in a way that improves county operations and protects public trust in county government, often requires extensive investigation, legal analysis, mediation, and a significant dose of diplomacy. Given the resource-intensive nature of these cases, even this slight increase in cases can result in a significant increase in the workload for our office.
- During the reporting period, the Ombudsman's Office received 10% more cases requiring "direct assistance" which we define as inquiry, research, or advocacy, than during the same period in 2011. While it is difficult to determine the reasons for this increase, the Ombudsman's Office is one of the few remaining countywide offices with staff who answer every call during business hours. Residents who contact our office have often 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: 206.205.6338
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 or more of the following ways:

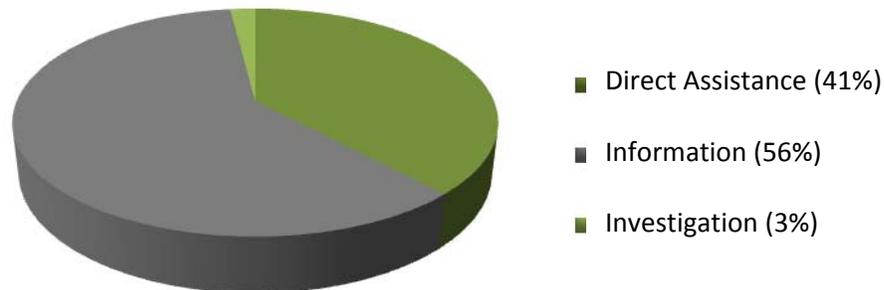


Complaint Disposition

The graph below shows the number of Ombudsman’s Office cases associated with each county agency, and reveals how we responded to the 668 complaints and inquiries we received in the last four months of 2012:

Department	Direct Assistance	Investigation	Information	Total
Adult and Juvenile Detention	119	6	177	302
Assessments	0	0	3	3
Community and Human Services	4	2	12	18
Planning and Environmental Review	9	2	8	19
District Court	0	0	3	3
Executive Services	13	4	14	31
Natural Resources and Parks	6	4	9	19
Ombudsman’s Office / Tax Advisor	32	0	17	49
Prosecuting Attorney's Office	2	0	1	3
Public Health	58	3	20	81
Sheriff’s Office	4	3	7	14
Superior Court	0	0	7	7
Transportation	11	1	10	22
Non-Jurisdictional	0	0	97	97
Total	258	25	385	668

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 25 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 nearly 700 complaints we received between September 1 and December 31, 2012:

Issue / Complaint	Resolution
Our office reviewed whether the county’s implementation of the noise ordinance had been “unfair or otherwise objectionable” and embarked on a thorough analysis of the problem and potential solutions.	The Ombudsman’s Office extensively researched the issue, including code review and assessment, case law analysis, and interviews with many noise professionals. We crafted and transmitted a twenty-page analysis which sketched the evolution of county noise enforcement, explained the various legal and budgetary challenges, and provided our views concerning desirable legislative change, including creating a system for noise-related mediation.
Residents of Pierce, Kitsap, and Snohomish counties complained they had been erroneously assessed the King County Congestion Reduction Charge (CRC) and asked for our office’s assistance in remedying the situation.	The Ombudsman’s Office contacted multiple county agencies to better understand the issue and found that several zip codes had been erroneously included in the assessment of the CRC fee. We worked with the county’s finance office to ensure the zip code issue was addressed and the individual residents received refunds.
A local restaurant owner complained about the invoice they received from Public Health which they claimed didn’t provide sufficient information to explain the charges.	The Ombudsman’s Office reviewed the case and found that while the charges were correct, we agreed with the complainant that the invoice could have been more informative. We provided Public Health with an example of a more detailed invoice from another county agency and recommended they revise their invoices so that they make sense as stand-alone documents.

Issue / Complaint	Resolution
<p>A County Councilmember forwarded the Ombudsman an anonymous letter alleging that the contractors who operate the summer concerts at Marymoor Park were being improperly replaced by the Parks Division within the Department of Natural Resources and Parks (DNRP).</p>	<p>The Ombudsman's Office reviewed relevant records and interviewed procurement experts as well as county officials associated with the park. We determined that the county had afforded the previous contractors opportunities to continue their contracts. The county also appropriately negotiated with a new contractor to maximize revenue for the county. Contrary to the allegations in the anonymous letter, we found no reason to believe that DNRP acted improperly or unfairly toward the previous contractors.</p>
<p>The Ombudsman's Office worked with several county offices to improve the King County Ethics Code.</p>	<p>Our office worked with Council, the Executive, Ethics Board, and the Prosecuting Attorney's Office, to analyze and formulate amendments to the Ethics Code. The proposed amendments are intended to clarify and update the code so that it is easier for county employees to understand, and were approved with the unanimous support of County Council in December.</p>
<p>A citizen with a long-running dispute with the county requested that we investigate whether her building work should have triggered the county's sewer capacity charge.</p>	<p>We reviewed the relevant county and city codes and concluded that the charge was correct. In several emails, we explained the basis for our legal analysis and answered her follow-up questions. While not fully embracing the answer, by the end she was "satisfied that it has been examined thoroughly" and agreed to pay the charge, allowing her and the county to move on.</p>
<p>Several senior citizens complained about the unruly behavior of high school students riding Metro buses, including, not offering their seats to seniors when the bus is filled.</p>	<p>The Ombudsman's Office worked with the Seattle School District Ombudsman and Metro Transit to understand the seniors' concerns and to brainstorm options for addressing them. The collaboration resulted in a public service announcement on buses that reminds riders to give up priority seating at the front of a bus to those who need it, including seniors.</p>
<p>A resident alleged that the King County Sheriff was using county resources for his election campaign in violation of the Employee Code of Ethics.</p>	<p>The Ombudsman's Office conducted a thorough investigation with which the Sheriff cooperated fully and promptly. Consistent with state interpretations of ethics laws, we found minor but clear ethics violations when (1) the Sheriff's campaign took a photo of him in his county-issued uniform, and posted it online; and (2) the Sheriff appeared and spoke in his county-issued uniform at a political party picnic where his campaign had a booth and campaign materials. The Ombudsman found no violation in the Sheriff's use of publicly available photos and videos for campaign purposes or in an email sent to employees concerning Ethics Code compliance.</p>
<p>An inmate alleged that after several weeks in the county jail, he had still not been assigned an attorney or scheduled for a court appearance.</p>	<p>The Ombudsman reviewed the inmate's status and found that his attorney and court assignments had been significantly delayed. We notified the Office of Public Defense and the office immediately took action to remedy the oversight and protect the inmate's right to a speedy trial with legal representation.</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 information about:

- 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 county departments.

Resident Contacts

A signature function of our office is assisting citizens with their property tax appeals. The Tax Advisor Office responded to 2,060 residents from September 1 to December 31, 2012, and provided sales research to 354 (17%) of our contacts.

	Information	Research	Total
September	424	135	559
October	757	134	891
November	360	55	415
December	165	30	195
Total	1,706	354	2,060

As the chart below indicates, the county residents who contact our office for assistance represent a variety of income levels. 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	44
\$201-300K	28
\$301-400K	32
\$401-500K	29
\$501-700K	35
\$701K-1M	37
Over \$1M	37
Total	242