

Multnomah County Ombudsperson

2024 Annual Report



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Serving Multnomah County

Mission of Community Support

The Multnomah County Ombudsperson is an independent, impartial resource for county residents who need assistance resolving disputes related to county programs, departments, and services. The Ombudsperson position was created after the November 2022 election, when more than 85% of Multnomah County voters passed a Charter amendment establishing the position in the Multnomah County Auditor's Office.

The Ombudsperson responds to reports made by the public, helps solve issues, and gives referrals to other resources when appropriate. The Ombudsperson can also assist the public by conducting investigations into administrative acts of the county and recommending changes.

As a function of the Auditor's Office, the Ombudsperson works to promote accountable and equitable county government. The Ombudsperson is tasked with ensuring that residents are treated fairly in their interactions with Multnomah County.

Community Outreach Overview

In 2024, the Ombudsperson, the Ombudsperson Intake Specialist, and other members of the Auditor's Office attended 12 community engagement events focused on the Ombudsperson's Office. Community outreach is essential to educating the public about what the Ombudsperson offers to Multnomah County residents.

We distributed information and resources at the Lents International Farmers Market, Rose Haven Day Shelter and Community Center, the Community for Positive Aging, a Community Services Network event, the Immigrant Refugee Community Organization (IRCO) resource fair, and more.

At these events, community members have the opportunity to meet the Ombudsperson team, learn about what sorts of situations are within our jurisdiction, and file reports, if desired. Getting out into the community in this way creates another channel for residents to connect with our office, and for more people to learn about support that is available to them. In 2025, the Ombudsperson will continue doing community outreach, to increase general knowledge about this resource.



County Ombudsperson Cheryl Taylor (left) and Intake Specialist Kate Milne (right) table at the IRCO Winter fair. Source: Auditor's Office.

In 2024, the Ombudsperson team attended 12 community outreach events and met countless community members.

By the Numbers: Our First Full Year

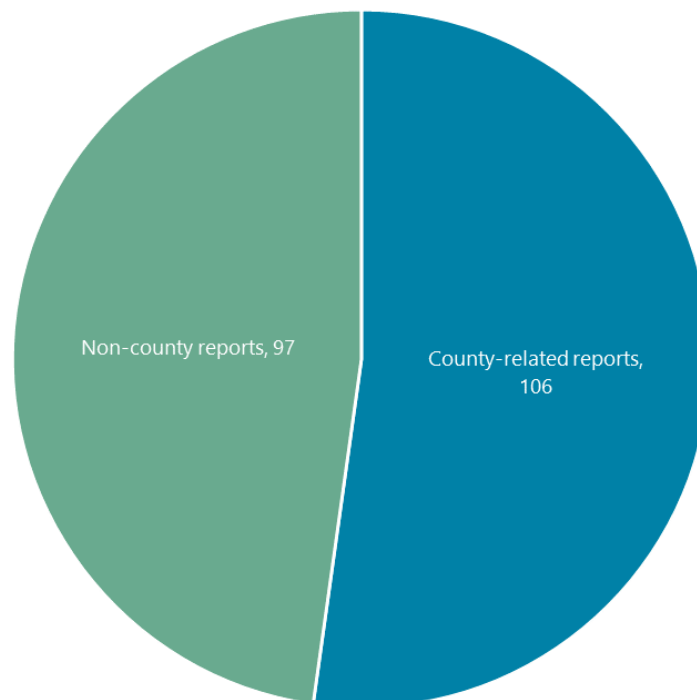
We received 203 total reports

Between January 1 and December 31, 2024, the Ombudsperson received 203 reports from community members. Of the 203 reports, 106 were related to Multnomah County. We found that 97 reports were non-jurisdictional, meaning the issues raised were not related to a county program, department, or service.

While the Ombudsperson does not investigate non-jurisdictional reports, the Ombuds team may do significant work to assist community members in locating and accessing resources to resolve their issues. We recognize that community members have usually gone through several other channels before reaching the Ombudsperson. We also

understand how frustrating it can be to navigate complex governmental entities and therefore strive to never leave anyone struggling to find the help they need. In 2024, we worked on 42 non-jurisdictional reports, often referring community members to non-jurisdictional offices such as the Portland City Ombudsman, the Oregon Long Term Care Ombudsman, and others.

People made more county-related reports than non-county ones in 2024



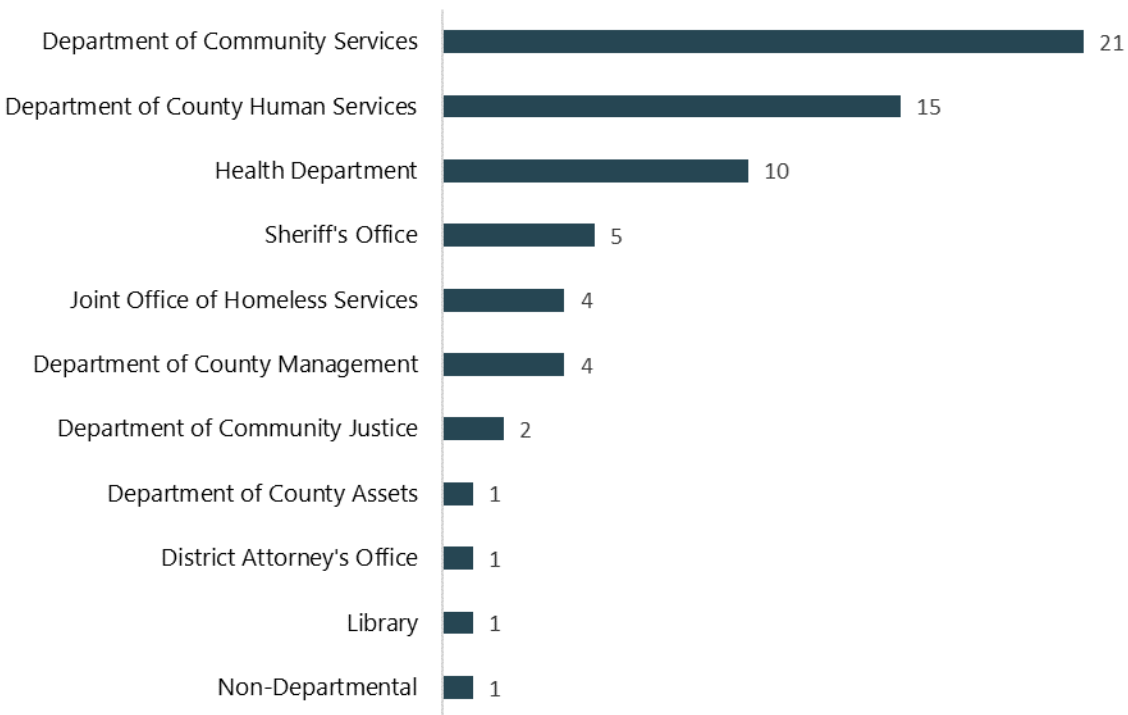
Source: Auditor's Office

Increased outreach and education efforts in 2024 likely contributed to community members making more county-related reports than non-county ones. This is an improvement from 2023, when non-county reports outnumbered county reports. This is important because the Ombudsperson is tasked with helping residents of Multnomah County.

The Ombudsperson worked on 65 county-related reports to help people resolve issues

In 2024, the Ombudsperson worked on 65 jurisdictional (county-related) reports to help individuals resolve their issues with county programs, departments, and services. We received reports about all major county departments. People contacted the Ombudsperson most frequently about the Department of Community Services, the Department of County Human Services, and the Health Department.

The Ombudsperson handled cases including all departments in 2024



Source: Auditor's Office

Note: Non-departmental accounts for programs and countywide functions that do not belong to a particular department. These functions include the County Commissioners and County Chair, Auditor's Office, the Offices of the County Attorney, Communications, Emergency Management, Sustainability, Diversity and Equity, and the Community Involvement Committee.

Community members sought out Ombudsperson services more frequently in 2024 than in 2023. Between June 1 and December 31, 2023, the Ombudsperson addressed 29 jurisdictional reports. Compared to the same seven-month period in 2024, there was a 31% increase in jurisdictional reports. The office now has greater capacity to handle the rise in contacts because the team has grown to include a full time Intake Specialist.

However, not all jurisdictional reports made by community members are pursued for further investigation. At times, county-related reports lack sufficient information that the Ombudsperson needs to investigate. In those instances, the Ombudsperson will try to reach the community member after the initial report, but may not be successful; despite the Ombudsperson's best efforts, the connection is never established and the Ombudsperson isn't able to proceed with the investigation. In all cases, the Ombudsperson carefully reviews all reports to determine the best course of action and timely resolution of reporters' issues.

Public Report Completed in 2024

Often, the Ombudsperson can resolve issues through phone calls or other informal means. While most matters people report to the Ombudsperson do not result in public reports, we do issue those on occasion, like the one recapped below.

Ambulance Response Times

In 2024, the Ombudsperson published a report on ambulance response times in Multnomah County, focused on the county's role in the issue. In this instance, the County Auditor asked the Ombudsperson to investigate the issue after news reporting that a man passed away after waiting 32 minutes for an ambulance to arrive. The report examined the contract between Multnomah County and American Medical Response, as well as the health chapter of the Multnomah County Code, and data about ambulance response times compiled by Emergency Medical Services Staff.

The Ombudsperson offered two recommendations that have both since been implemented – that the full Board of County Commissioners regularly receive ambulance response time data compiled by Emergency Medical Services staff, and for the Emergency Medical Services Advisory Council to be formed and the Emergency Medical Services Administrator to recommend advisory council members to the Board of County Commissioners for appointment, in compliance with County Code.



An American Medical Response ambulance. Source: Kristyna Wentz-Graff / OPB.

Example Case Summaries

Reports received by the Ombudsperson team covered a wide range of issues, and required a diverse range of problem-solving skills. The Ombudsperson thoughtfully reviews all reports that community members file, via phone call, email, online form, or in person at outreach events and determines the appropriate course of action for each one. Reports are handled in one of three ways: resolution through Ombudsperson mediation or assistance, referral to additional resources that are better suited to resolve the issue at hand, or through a formal investigation by the Ombudsperson. The following examples demonstrate some of the different ways the Ombudsperson helps people get to resolution with the county.

Case #1: Bridging gaps in support

This reporter was a new mom, struggling to access resources at Multnomah County's Early Childhood Mental Health Program. Each time she called, the phone would ring and then simply disconnect, with no option to leave a voicemail. She was unsure of what to do, so she submitted a report to the Ombudsperson.

The Ombudsperson contacted the Early Childhood Mental Health Program supervisor, who called the reporter directly and connected her with the resources she was seeking, as well as offering to be her point of contact going forward. The issue of the phone not being answered, nor having a voicemail option, was found to be due to the publicly shared number being assigned to a former employee and the phone remaining in use after the employee was no longer with the county. The Ombudsperson confirmed that the team discontinued the unstaffed phone line, so the issue wouldn't occur again.

Case #2: Facilitating solutions to complex issues

A community member reported an issue to the Ombudsperson about the Multnomah County Weatherization Program. After qualifying for assistance for weatherization in November 2023, the reporter faced obstacles to getting the weatherization improvements implemented in their home. This led the reporter to allege that the work

was not up to code, there were delays from the inspector assigned to the project, and there was a lack of responsiveness from the county in general.

The Ombudsperson brought the Multnomah County Youth and Family Services interim director, the weatherization program supervisor, and the electrical and HVAC contractors together to resolve the issues the reporter cited. They went to the reporter's property together and, by the end of the day, heat was restored to the home. The Ombudsperson can bring parties together to facilitate solutions on behalf of community members when appropriate.

Case #3: Helping to detect potential fraud

A reporter reached out to the Ombudsperson because she noticed charges on her credit card statement that read "Multnomah County." The reporter told the Ombudsperson that she was merely trying to get a copy of the deed to her property and thought she was talking with Multnomah County when she placed the order.

The Ombudsperson did some online research while talking with the reporter and discovered that the charge actually came from a private software company that enrolled her in a subscription monitoring service. The Ombudsperson reached out to the Division of Recording, Assessment, and Taxation to verify that the county had not charged this person for a copy of the deed. After receiving verification that Multnomah County had not initiated the charges, the Ombudsperson provided the reporter a copy of her deed at no charge and referred her to resources for reporting consumer fraud.

Case #4: Navigating barriers to accessing necessary information

In October 2022, after attending the Portland Community College Clear Clinic, a county resident filed a motion to clear a criminal offense from his record, a process called expungement. Due to a backlog at both the District Attorney's Office and the Multnomah County Circuit Court, it had been well over a year and the reporter still had not received notification that the offense had been cleared from his record. The reporter was unsure which judge would be signing the order to clear his criminal conviction, and had called several judge's chambers and left voicemails to no avail.

The Ombudsperson followed up with both the District Attorney's Office and the expungement desk at the court. The expungement clerk acknowledged a backlog and shared that the reporter's case was on the judge's desk for signature and should be signed within a few days. The Ombudsperson offered to check the court records in one week and call the reporter to let him know if the offense had been cleared from his record. After checking online court records, the Ombudsperson found that the offense was no longer visible, which is an indication that the court had sealed the record. This information was provided to the reporter and the Ombudsperson let him know that he should be receiving certified copies of the expungement.

Looking Ahead

Applying an Equity Lens

A goal set in the 2023 annual report was to implement more data collection methods to learn about who is contacting the Ombudsperson and who isn't. Since then, the Ombudsperson has been working with the Auditor Office's Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Committee to examine additional avenues for community members to file reports for the Ombudsperson's consideration. The office is preparing to pilot a new intake form that includes optional demographic related questions. This additional data collection could allow the Ombudsperson to gain a better understanding about which community members are making reports to the Ombudsperson.

Additionally, the Ombudsperson, with the help of the DEI Committee, has developed an equity lens tool that we are now using to help the Ombudsperson team quickly evaluate reports for issues that disproportionately impact community members from marginalized and historically underrepresented groups.

For the duration of 2025 and beyond, the Ombudsperson's goals of connecting with and serving the members of Multnomah County will continue. The Ombudsperson team plans to attend outreach events in as many parts of the county as possible, and continue to think of new and innovative ways to connect with and serve the public.

Photo Credits

Report photos by Motoya Nakamura, Multnomah County Communications Office, except as noted in the report.

Staff

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Kate Milne, County Ombudsperson Intake Specialist