



# Ombudsperson Annual Report

June-December 2023

Multnomah County Auditor's Office



**Multnomah County  
Ombudsperson**

*Fun fact:* Originating in Sweden, the meaning of the word Ombudsman (and by extension, Ombudsperson), is a 'representative' and the role was created as a way to investigate complaints about the government in an impartial manner.

## A New Role for Multnomah County

The Ombudsperson is a relatively new addition to Multnomah County. In November 2022, a Charter amendment to introduce the position passed with 85% of voters in favor of establishing the role in the County Auditor's Office. The first County Ombudsperson is Cheryl Taylor, who began at the end of May 2023. The Ombudsperson works alongside the Auditor's Office's hotline and performance audit functions to promote accountable and equitable county government. The Ombudsperson investigates and engages with complaints raised by members of the general public and can also pursue investigations as they see fit. The Ombudsperson also receives referrals from other agencies, such as 311 and the City of Portland Ombudsman.

As a function of the Multnomah County Auditor's Office, the Ombudsperson is an independent, impartial resource for county residents who need assistance resolving disputes related to county programs and services. This report will cover work done from June to December 2023.

### Our Mission of Community Support

The County Ombudsperson helps people who live in Multnomah County resolve issues with county programs and departments. The Ombudsperson is here to ensure that residents are treated fairly in their interactions with the county. She is tasked with protecting the rights of county residents and promoting fairness, efficiency, and transparency in county government. The Ombudsperson can assist the public by conducting investigations into administrative acts of county agencies and recommending changes.

85% of Multnomah County voters were in favor of establishing the Ombudsperson position.

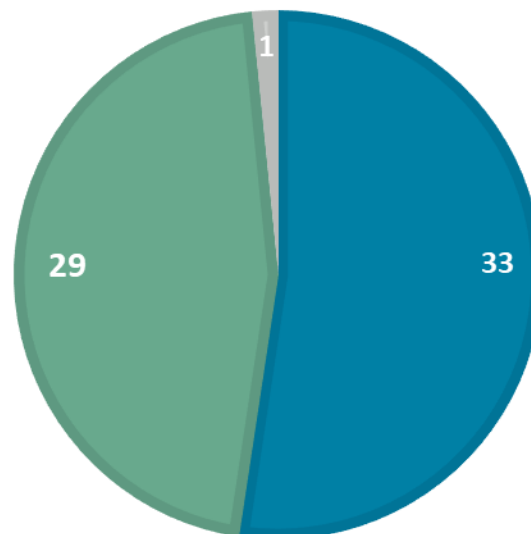
## Overview of Cases: June – December 2023

The Ombudsperson thoughtfully reviews all complaints that are filed, whether via phone call, email, or online form, and then pursues the appropriate course of action. Generally, complaints are resolved in one of three ways: referral to other resources (such as hotlines and county departments) better suited to resolve the issue at hand, informal resolution through Ombudsperson mediation or assistance, or through formal investigation.

Between June and December 2023, the Ombudsperson received and responded to 233 requests for help and opened 63 cases. Of the cases, 29 were ultimately related to Multnomah County, and the other 33 were redirected to non-county resources for support. One case could not be classified into either category.

### OMBUDSPERSON CASES COUNTY VS. NON COUNTY

■ Non County ■ County ■ Unknown



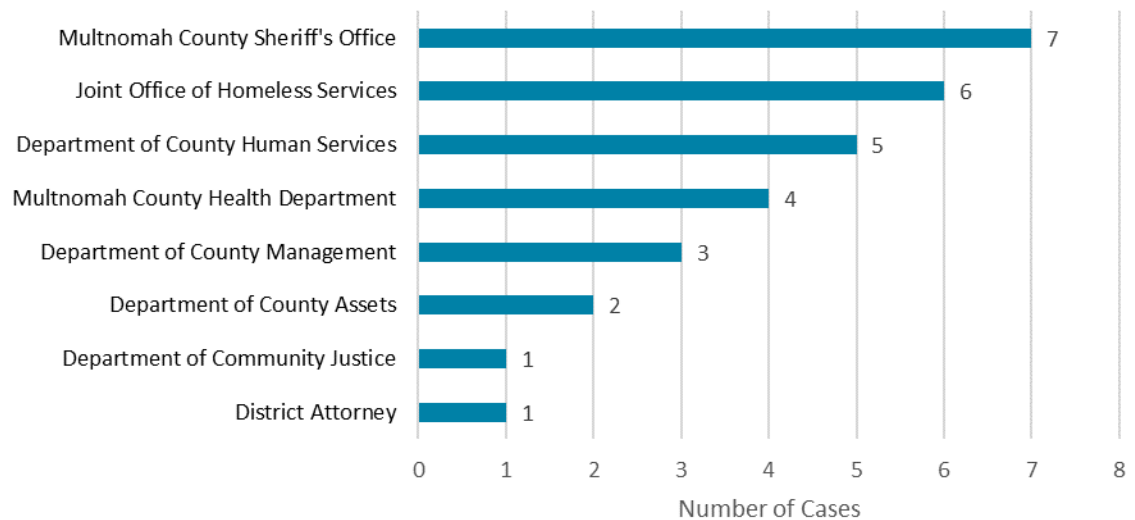
Source: Auditor's Office

The Ombudsperson receives complaints that are often outside of her jurisdiction, and she connected the individuals who raised the 33 non-county issues to the appropriate resources. These agencies include City of Portland and the Oregon Long Term Care

Ombudsman, as well as non-profit community partners. The case that was 'unknown' was unable to be solved through county or non-county channels.

The cases that fell within the scope of the Ombudsperson were related to 8 different Multnomah County departments and offices. Those that most commonly engaged with the Ombudsperson were the Multnomah County Sheriff's Office (7 cases), the Joint Office of Homeless Services (6 cases), and the Department of County Human Services (5 cases).

### CASES WERE SPREAD ACROSS DEPARTMENTS



Source: Auditor's Office

## Statistics Highlights

Between June-December 2023, the Ombudsperson worked on 29 cases helping individuals resolve their issues with county departments. The Sheriff's Office was the most common, followed by the Joint Office of Homeless Services and the Department of County Human Services.





## Case Summaries

The Ombudsperson works on cases from residents that are associated with county departments and resources. Below are some examples of the cases that the Ombudsperson worked on during the reporting period.

## Case #1: Towing Refund

The Ombudsperson responded to a complaint from a man stopped by Multnomah County Sheriff's Deputies for speeding. The deputies said they would tow his car, and he was cited for driving with a suspended license, though he denied having a suspended driver's license. He called his daughter, a licensed driver, to drive the car home. Deputies had already called for a tow truck. They would not allow the man's daughter to drive the car and claimed that once they call for a tow, the tow must happen, and the driver must pay for the tow. However, this is not correct under Oregon law.

After a Sheriff's Office hearing upheld the validity of the tow, the reporter contacted the County Ombudsperson. The Ombudsperson worked with the Multnomah County Sheriff's Office, providing proof that the man's license was suspended in error. The Ombudsperson recommended a full refund of all fees charged in conjunction with the tow. The Multnomah County Sheriff's Office accepted the recommendation and provided a full refund.



Source: Michael Kappel, Flickr <https://shorturl.at/gfWM2>. Not a photo of the exact vehicles involved in the case.

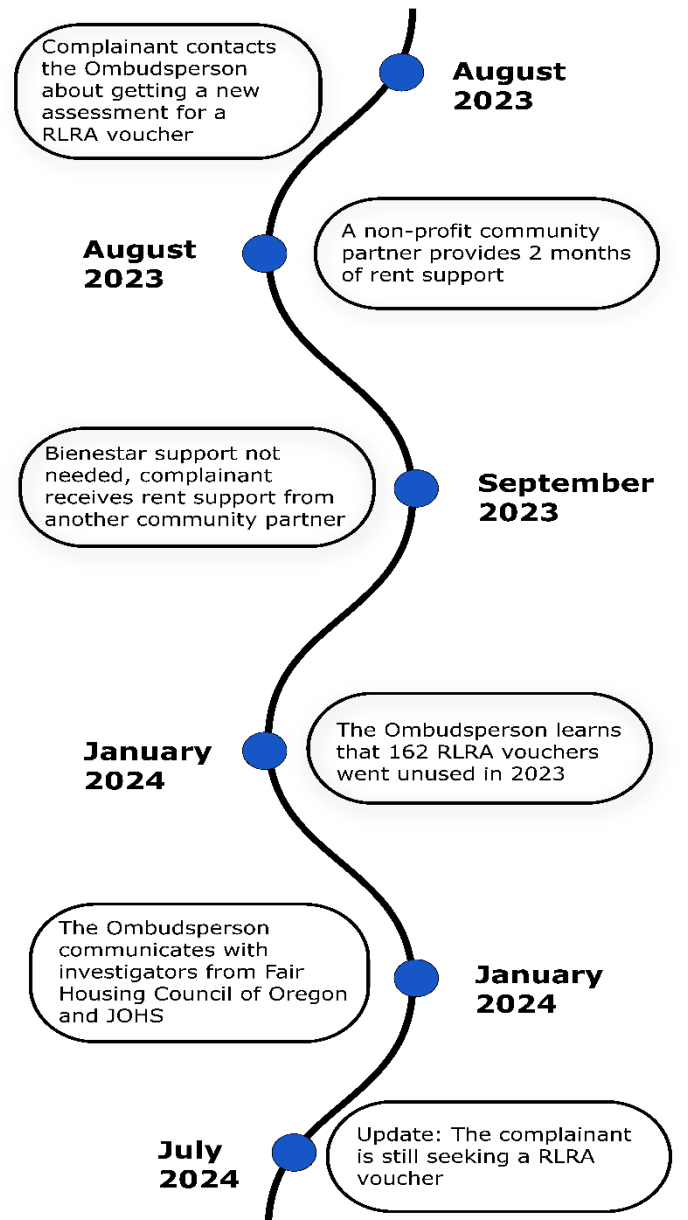


## Case #2: A Long Road to Rent Assistance

One of the Ombudsperson's earliest cases was for a community member wanting to access long-term rent assistance. The complainant needed a new assessment for the assistance due to a change in circumstances, but was having difficulty obtaining an updated assessment. The complainant's goal was to obtain a RLRA (Regional Long-Term Rent Assistance) voucher. The Ombudsperson first connected them to a non-profit community partner who was able to provide 2 full months of rent. A policy analyst in the Chair's Office connected the Ombudsperson with the director of Bienestar de la Familia to assist with additional short-term rent assistance. The assistance was ultimately not needed as the complainant located additional support separately.

A staff auditor, assisting with research, informed the Ombudsperson that 162 RLRA vouchers went unused in 2023. Around that same time, the Ombudsperson was contacted by investigators from the Fair Housing Council of Oregon for an interview about the complainant's difficulties accessing the RLRA voucher. Finally, the Ombudsperson also connected with staff at the Joint Office of Homeless Services who were able to intervene and facilitate a new assessment by a community partner with the goal of obtaining a more accurate score for long-term rent assistance.

The case was closed. However, in July 2024, the Ombudsperson learned that the individual was still having trouble accessing long-term rent support.



Source: Auditor's Office

### Case #3: Health Department Billing

A Multnomah County Health Department employee reached out to the Ombudsperson because a client received an invoice for a service that is normally free. This invoice was sent to a personal residence, which was problematic, as it included sensitive personal health information and others living there could potentially access the information. Because the service was free, no invoice should have been mailed.

The Health Department employee proactively reached out to the Ombudsperson to report the situation. The Ombudsperson met with the employee who had resolved the situation by investigating what caused the invoice to be mailed and correcting the error. The Ombudsperson thanked the Health Department employee for reaching out and for all their work resolving the client's issue.



Source: Motoya Nakamura, MultCo Commons Flickr



## Community Outreach and Making New Connections

In order to best serve the residents of Multnomah County, it is important that people understand the services the Ombudsperson can offer, such as mediation, problem solving, and support. A main area of focus for the remainder of 2024 and beyond is fostering connections with community members through outreach events in Multnomah County as well as generally educating individuals on what the County Ombudsperson does and how this vital service can help county residents when they experience challenges working with county government.

Additionally, the Ombudsperson plans to improve data tracking about the work that is being done, including tracking complaints geographically, and learning how individuals are finding out about the Ombudsperson. This information will bolster future annual reports. Improved data collection will help the Ombudsperson provide feedback to county departments about how they can better serve community members, and shed light on areas that create the most obstacles for individuals accessing county services.

In the first year, the Ombudsperson has established a strong foundation for the role, developed policies and procedures, and helped county residents resolve issues. She looks forward to building community connections and increasing the public's understanding of what the Ombudsperson can offer in the coming years.

*To file a report with the Ombudsperson, call 503-988-1234, email [ombudsperson@multco.us](mailto:ombudsperson@multco.us) or fill out the online form [here](#).*

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