



PRESS RELEASE

State of Iowa
Office of Ombudsman

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Complaints to Ombudsman Continue to Rise; Government's Commitment to Transparency Remains a Problem

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DES MOINES – For the fifth straight year, Iowa's Office of Ombudsman fielded more complaints and information requests than the year prior, reaching a total of 5,406 contacts during fiscal year 2019. If the trend continues in FY2020, the office will set an all-time record on contacts received in a 12-month period, according to an annual report released today.

Ombudsman Kristie Hirschman gave several reasons for the increase: jail populations, a shortfall of community mental-health resources, and understaffed government agencies. "This understaffing has caused mistakes, made agencies less responsive, and increased frustrations for citizens and government employees alike," Hirschman wrote. "I continue to be gravely concerned about what happens when government agencies are tasked to do more with less."

Hirschman said she also expects more complaints about local government in FY2020 due to a new law that promotes the Ombudsman as a place for employees to report fraud and waste.

The Ombudsman is a good-government office that accepts complaints from citizens who believe that a state or local government agency has acted unfairly, unreasonably, inefficiently, or contrary to law, rule, or policy. The Ombudsman has the authority to investigate complaints, but more often tries to resolve disagreements or misunderstandings informally and cooperatively. Hirschman and her office's 12 assistants are impartial and objective in their reviews of complaints.

Also in the report, Hirschman reported her continuing dissatisfaction with agencies that seem to prefer secrecy to transparency with both citizens and Ombudsman investigators. This does damage to the public's confidence in government, she said. "Government agencies have the discretion, under the law, to release information in the interest of clearing up confusion, justifying decisions, or embracing accountability. Unfortunately, this broad power is rarely acknowledged by public officials."

The Ombudsman's office has proposed legislation that would disallow government officials from raising privileges that interfere with the Ombudsman's access to important records and information from witnesses.

Today's report also features a sampling of 21 cases that Ombudsman staff investigated in fiscal year 2019. The report can be found online at www.legis.iowa.gov/Ombudsman.