



KCRHA
King County Regional Homelessness Authority

Ombuds Office Annual Report 2023



KCRHA OMBUDS OFFICE

Table of Contents

Message from the Ombuds Office 2

About the Ombuds Office 3

Our Process 4

Ombuds Office Data 5

Case Examples 14

System Trends 22

2024 Ombuds Office Priorities 31

KCRHA's Ombuds Office Team 32

kcrha.org/ombuds

Message from the Ombuds Office



Greetings from KCRHA's Ombuds Office

We are pleased to report that 2023 was a foundational year for our Ombuds Office. We expanded our team from two to five members and assisted 536 constituents, a 366% increase from the previous year. We also presented our services to various community groups, established internal and external policies, and improved our intake and data collection practices.

We are committed to continuing our work and serving the King County region in the coming year. Our goals for 2024 include working with KCRHA to develop model grievance policies, increasing community engagement with providers and constituents, and promoting transparency among KCRHA, its contractors, our office, and the constituents we serve. We hope to use the feedback we receive to inform KCRHA's continuous improvement efforts and to support its mission to reduce homelessness in King County using equity and social justice principles.

In partnership
KCRHA Ombuds Team



About the Ombuds Office

The Ombuds Office works to foster accountability in the homeless response system by providing information, resolving concerns, investigating complaints, and monitoring trends to guide improvements in King County.

What We Do

- Educate, inform, and provide referrals to homeless resources in King County
- Respond to inquiries and concerns about homeless services and work to resolve them informally
- Investigate complaints
- Receive feedback from KCRHA constituents regarding homeless response system services
- Report constituent concerns to KCRHA leadership, staff, and governance

Who Do We Serve?

- Community members served by a KCRHA-funded program
- KCRHA-funded service providers
- Employees or contractors of the KCRHA
- Anyone seeking information about the homeless response system or services

Our Scope

We can review, investigate, and resolve issues in four areas:

- Delivery of Services
- Program Administration
- Policies implemented by KCRHA or service providers
- Other activities managed by KCRHA (e.g., Coordinated Entry, Homeless Management Information System)

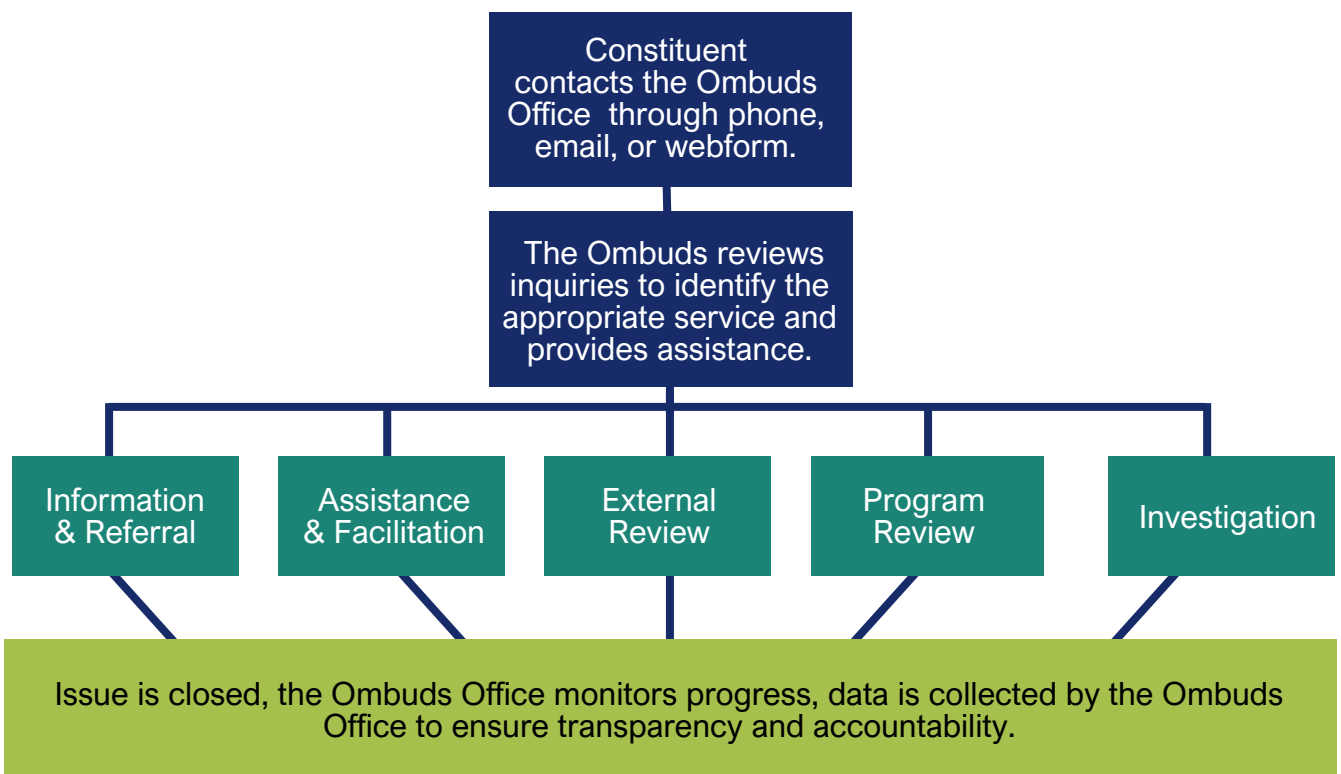


Our Process

What Happens When a Person Contacts the Ombuds Office?

The KCRHA Ombuds Office is responsible for listening and responding to the concerns of people who contact the Ombuds Office regarding services provided through the homeless response system. Most constituents seek information about homeless services, such as how to access emergency shelters, rental assistance, or where to start their housing search. Others may need additional support in understanding a service, resolving an issue, or want to file a complaint about a provider receiving funding from KCRHA. If the Ombuds Office cannot address a constituent's concerns, it will do its best to direct them to other resources for information or support.

The Ombuds Office offers five services to respond to inquiries: information and referral, assistance and navigation, external review, program review, or, if necessary, conduct an investigation. The Ombuds Office tracks demographic information to help inform KCRHA's system improvement efforts. Please refer to the [Ombuds Brochure](#) or [Primer](#) for more information about the Ombuds Office's services.



The Ombuds Office has adopted the term **Constituent** to refer to individuals who seek assistance from the office. This change arose from feedback from unhoused community members who preferred not to be called customers. The term "Constituent" is more inclusive and recognizes the diverse groups the Ombuds Office serves, including those served by a KCRHA-funded program, homeless service providers that receive funding from KCRHA, and KCRHA employees.





OMBUDS OFFICE DATA

The Ombuds Office gathers information from constituents to help make well-informed decisions about its policies and practices. This data is analyzed to identify system trends. Since 2022, the Ombuds Office has collected data about the types and number of incoming submissions and inquiries. In June 2023, the Ombuds Office began collecting additional qualitative and demographic data through the [Ombuds Office Web Request Form](#), such as race, gender identity, length of homelessness, geographic region of the constituents, and information related to the nature of their inquiries.

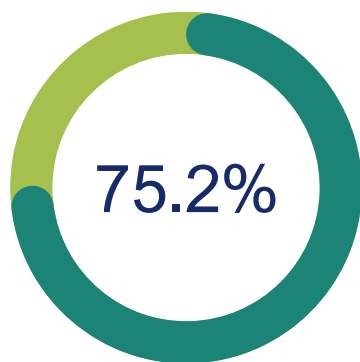
The Ombuds Office will continue engaging with constituents to refine and expand the data it collects, which will help KCRHA better understand what's working and what's not. The data collected is intended to provide insight into KCRHA's work as the regional organization responsible for homeless response policy and oversight. The Ombuds Office expects that KCRHA will use the information collected by the Ombuds Office in the design of programs, program guidelines, budget planning, and other activities that support the homeless response system to improve our understanding of the needs of KCRHA's constituents and provide better services to those experiencing homelessness.



Data

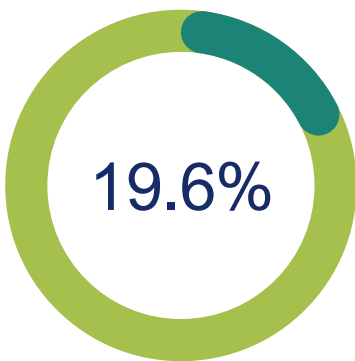
Submissions & Inquiries

Figure 1: Types of Submissions & Inquiries
January-December 2023



Support and System Facilitation

Submissions or inquiries from a constituent seeking information about the homeless response system or other resources.



Complaints

Submissions or inquiries that arise when a constituent expresses dissatisfaction with a program or service's actions or lack of action.



Concerns or Comments

Submissions or inquiries where a constituent may share their observations, provide feedback, or express their discomfort with a problem or situation they feel needs attention.



Data Submissions & Inquiries

Figure 2: Types of Submissions & Inquiries Comparison by Year

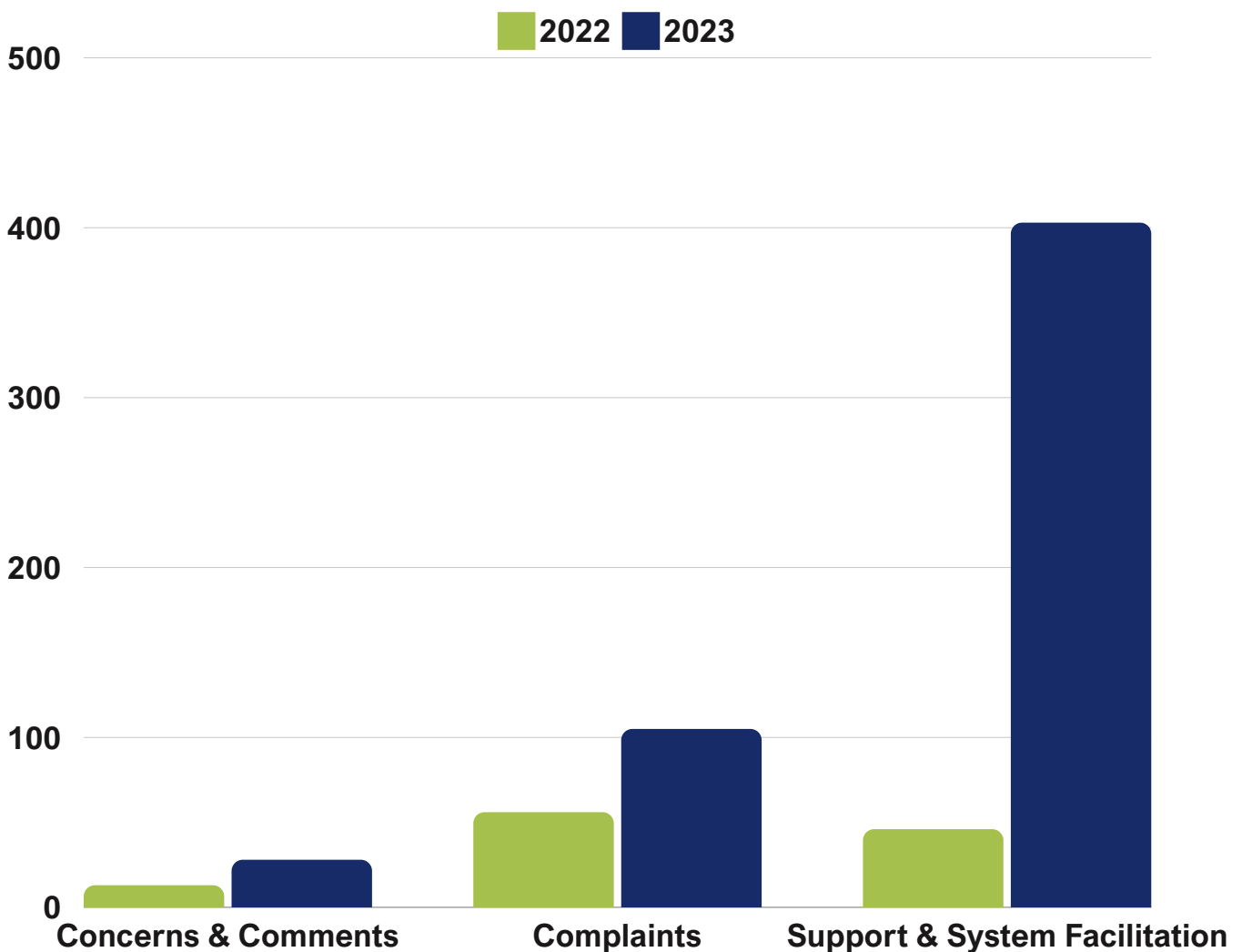


Figure 2 compares the types of requests that the Ombuds Office received in 2022 and 2023. In 2023, most inquiries and submissions the Ombuds Office received were related to constituents seeking information about the homeless response system or additional resources. It is important to note that the stark difference in the number of inquiries is mainly attributed to the Ombuds Office having only one or two staff in 2022 and not increasing its capacity to five staff until August 2023.



Data Services Offered

536

Submission/Inquiries

In 2023, the Ombuds Office received 536 inquiries/submissions, a 366% increase from 2022. Most of the Ombuds Office inquiries come from constituents seeking information on finding housing or support to bridge a service gap between themselves and their service provider.

Table 1: Services Offered
January-December 2023

SERVICE TYPE	NUMBER SERVED
ASSISTANCE & FACILITATION	62
EXTERNAL REVIEW	2
INFORMATION & REFERRAL	394
INVESTIGATION	2
NO RESPONSE	41
OTHER	23
PROGRAM REVIEW	12
TOTAL	536



Data Submissions & Inquiries

Table 2: Services Offered
Comparison Table by Year

SERVICE TYPE	2022	2023	TOTAL BY TYPE
ASSISTANCE & FACILITATION	33	62	95
EXTERNAL REVIEW	0	2	2
INFORMATION & REFERRAL	45	394	439
INVESTIGATION	8	2	10
NO RESPONSE	16	41	57
OTHER	11	23	34
PROGRAM REVIEW	2	12	14
OVERALL TOTAL	115	536	651

Table 2 displays the services provided by the Ombuds Office to constituents in 2022 and 2023. Over time, the Ombuds Office has improved its approach to responding to complaints and, as a result, has shifted its focus away from investigating complaints and towards exploring administrative and less adversarial methods to address concerns. This change is reflected in the table by the increase in external and program reviews and the decrease in investigations.





Data Region

Figure 3: Constituent Demographics by Region
June-December 2023

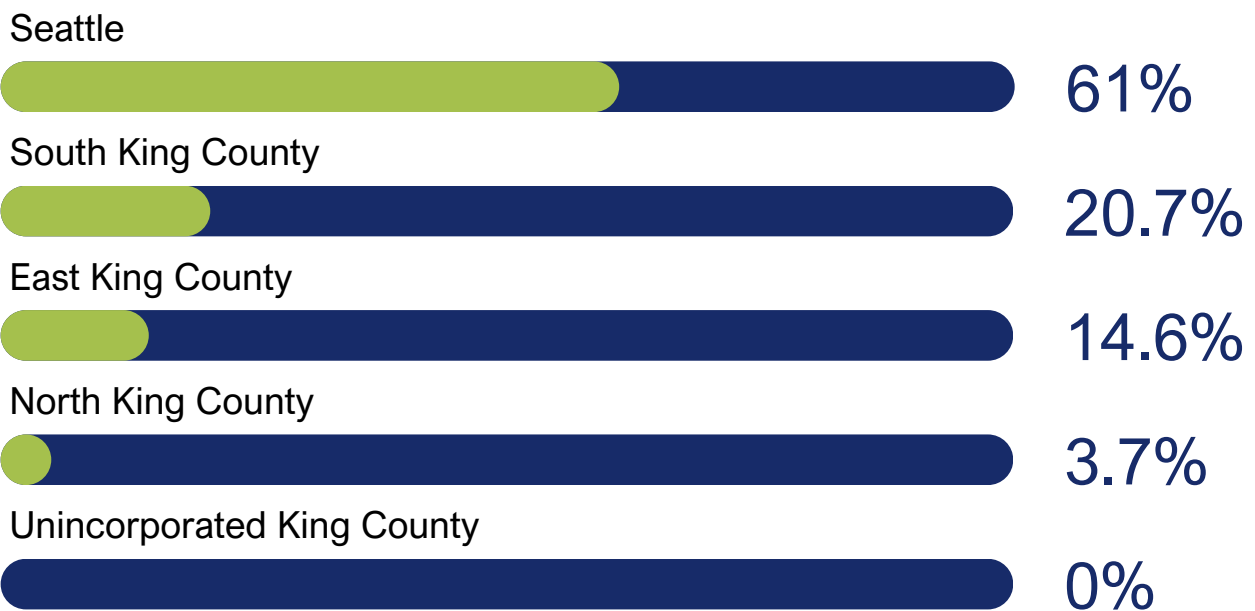


Figure 3 illustrates the areas from where constituents are contacting the Ombuds Office. Most constituents contact the Ombuds Office from Seattle, followed by South King County. In the coming months, the Ombuds Office aims to expand its outreach to East, North, and Unincorporated King County areas.



Data Race

Figure 4: Constituent Demographics by Race
June-December 2023

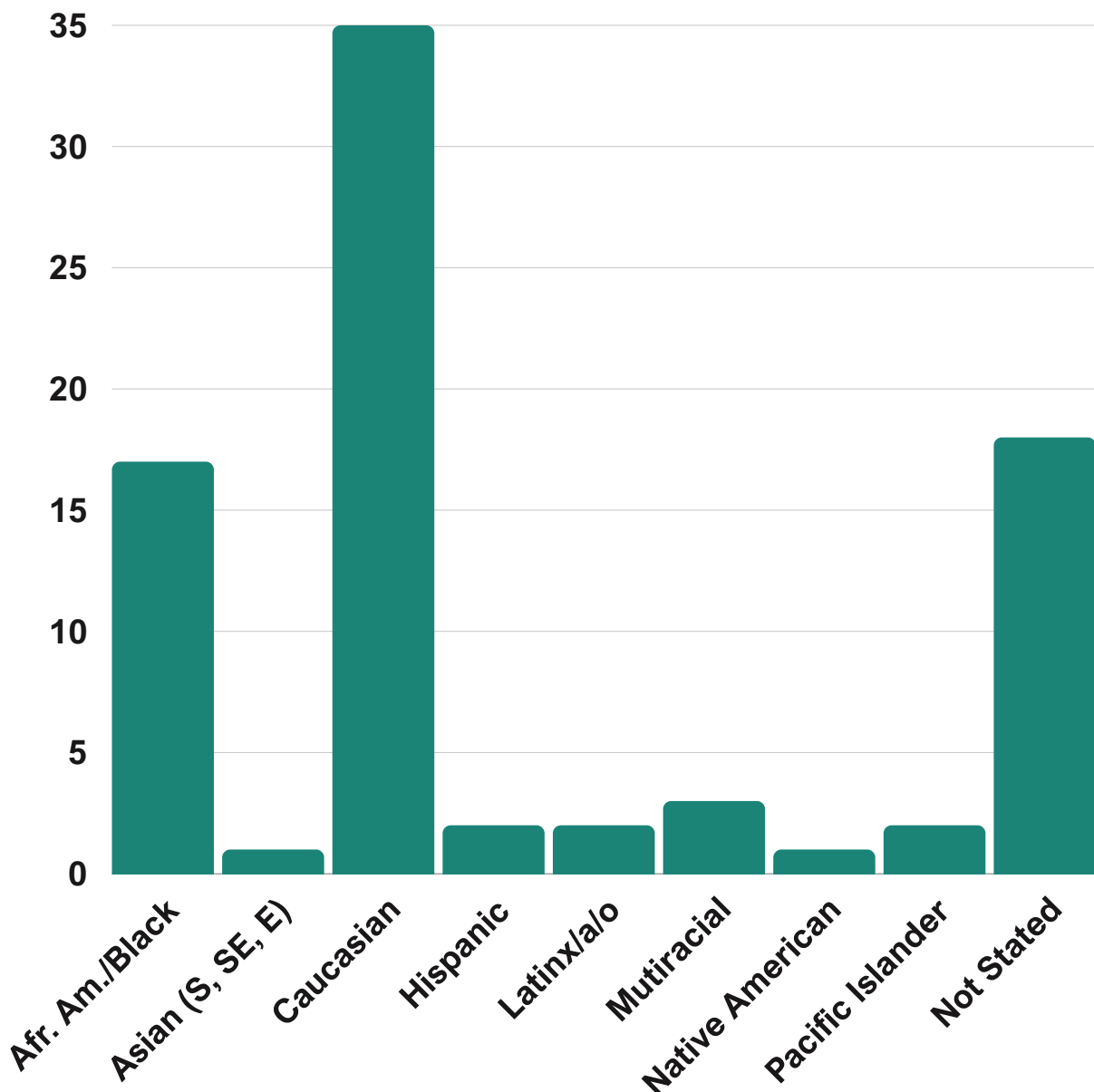


Figure 4 depicts the race of constituents who contacted the Ombuds Office between June and December 2023. Please note that providing demographic data on race is voluntary, so the data collected may not represent the total number of constituents who contact the office.



Data Gender

Figure 5: Constituent Demographics by Gender
June-December 2023

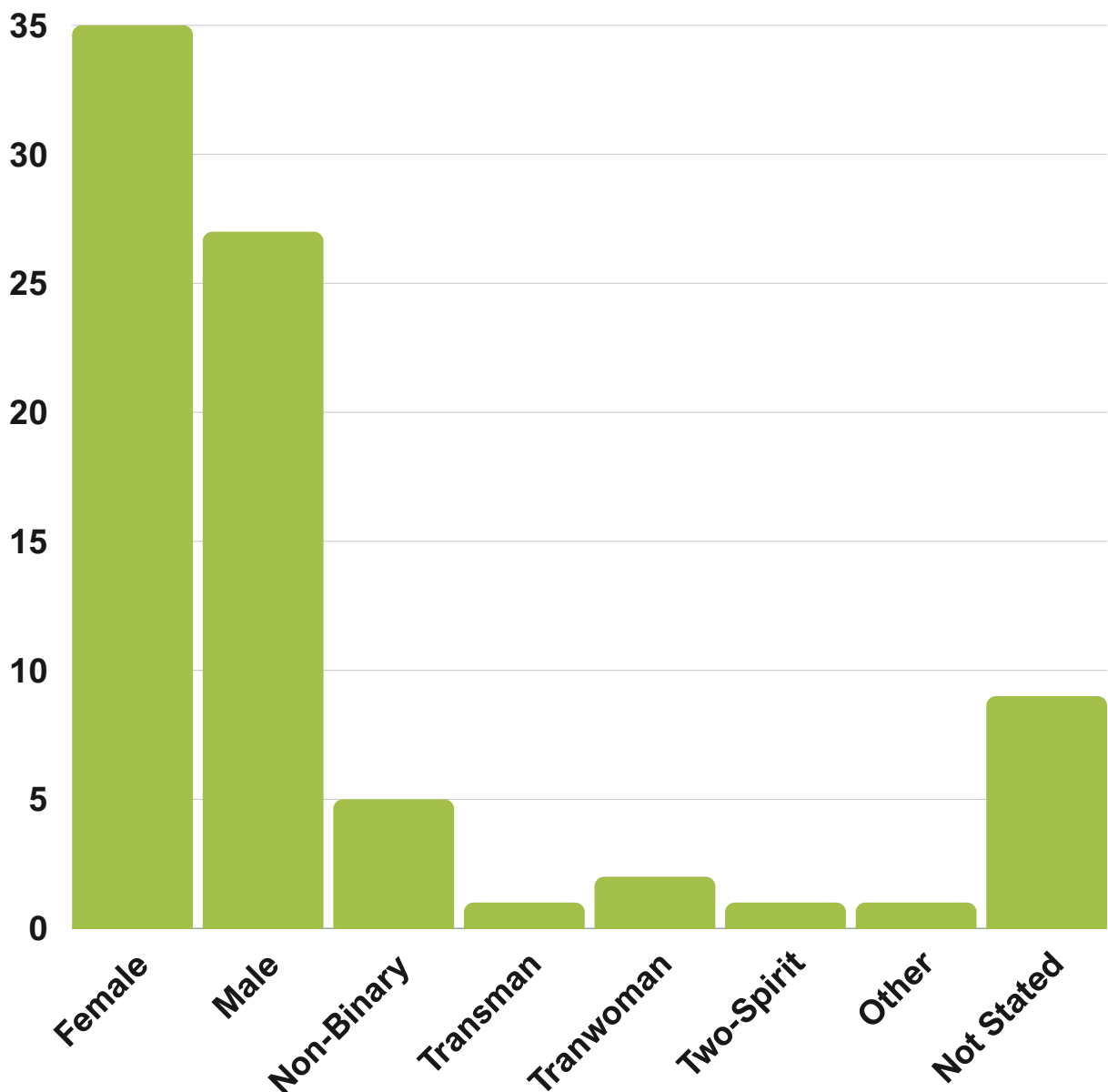


Figure 5 shows the gender of constituents who contacted the Ombuds Office between June and December 2023. Please note that providing demographic data on gender is voluntary, so the data collected may not represent the total number of constituents who contact the office.



Data

Length of Homelessness

Figure 6: Constituent Demographics by Length of Homelessness
June-December 2023

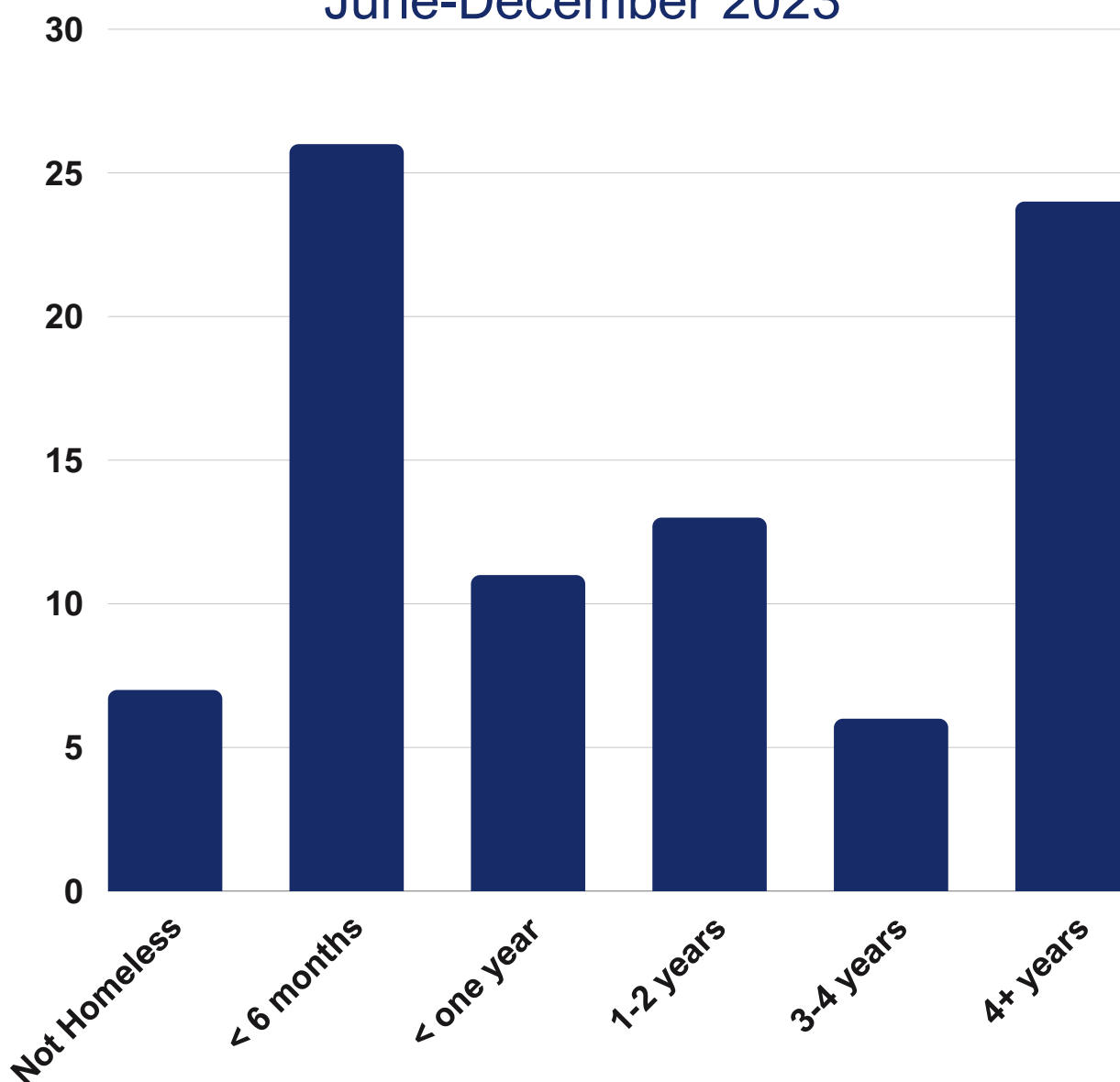


Figure 6 illustrates the length of time that people who have approached the Ombuds Office for assistance have experienced homelessness. Most constituents have been homeless either for less than six months or more than four years. This observation aligns with the Ombuds Office's direct service experience, where it was typical to have a full caseload with people new to the system and individuals with high-acuity needs that the homeless response system could not meet.





CASE EXAMPLES

The following case examples provide a snapshot of the submissions the Ombuds Office receives and reflects the trends it has observed through its interactions with hundreds of community members navigating King County's Homeless Response System.

The Ombuds Office strives to provide each constituent with a fair process to voice their concerns about the services they receive or any other issues that may impact them. Fair process means that every KCRHA constituent has a right to understand the reasoning behind decisions made by system actors overseeing or providing homeless services, such as KCRHA and homeless service providers. Due to scarce housing resources and the limitations of KCRHA's oversight authority, the Ombuds Office may be unable to resolve issues that meet the needs of its constituents, as illustrated in these examples.



CASE EXAMPLE

RELOCATION ASSISTANCE

PROBLEM

A case manager's failure to submit an emergency housing voucher (EHV) application resulted in the constituent not having a secure housing option.

OVERVIEW

A constituent contacted the Ombuds Office asking about the status of his emergency housing voucher application. At the time, the constituent reported that they had been living in a transitional housing program for six years. However, during the last two years of his stay, the building he had been living in had been condemned and was scheduled for demolition.

The agency responsible for the transitional housing program was aware of the upcoming demolition and had promised to offer relocation and counseling services to those affected. This help was meant to be provided through an emergency housing voucher or coverage of moving expenses up to a specific amount. For almost a year, this participant thought that he had submitted an emergency housing voucher application and was waiting for the Public Housing Authority (PHA) to reach out. However, he soon learned that his application had never been submitted and that he missed the deadline for submitting another application. The constituent repeatedly contacted agency staff for help with moving expenses but was met with indifference or responses indicating that he was solely responsible for all relocation expenses.

ACTIONS TAKEN

The Ombuds Office contacted agency staff to inquire about the emergency housing voucher application and learned there had been a miscommunication between the constituent and the agency about the application process. Critical information regarding necessary follow-up steps was not relayed to the constituent. The Ombuds Office then elevated the concern to agency leadership, who were not opposed to assisting with relocation funds but wanted to ensure they could provide relocation funding directly in alignment with City of Seattle policy. Agency staff received confirmation they could provide relocation assistance directly to the constituent.

RESULT

The provider directly gave the constituent relocation funds. Before involving the Ombuds Office, this constituent had been struggling to resolve his housing situation for over a year. The Ombuds Office's intervention and the agency's cooperation resolved the issue within four months. The constituent moved out of the transitional housing program that he felt trapped in and into an apartment he loved.



CASE EXAMPLE SEEKING ANSWERS

PROBLEM

A resident at a shelter passed away, and his family expressed concerns about the shelter staff's handling of the situation.

OVERVIEW

A family contacted the Ombuds Office on behalf of their deceased family member who died on-site at a shelter. The family reported that shelter staff did not locate the resident within a reasonable timeframe, did not provide adequate assistance in obtaining the resident's personal belongings, and did not provide sufficient communication about the events that took place. The family wanted to learn more about the agency policies and how their family member was supported during his time at the shelter.

ACTIONS TAKEN

In collaboration with KCRHA's Emergency Services Team, the Ombuds Office facilitated a conversation with the agency to discuss the issue, learn more about agency policies, and share recommendations on supporting residents' families.

RESULT

The agency reached out to the family to share more about their internal processes and policies, hear their concerns, and adjust accordingly to prevent similar problems in the future.



CASE EXAMPLE

HOUSING NAVIGATION

PROBLEM

After completing a coordinated entry assessment, a constituent was unable to connect with an agency that could provide case management to help him navigate the Coordinated Entry (CE) housing match process.

OVERVIEW

A 60-year-old constituent contacted the Ombuds Office seeking assistance in finding emergency shelter or housing resources. The constituent had recently relocated to Seattle to be closer to his family while undergoing cancer treatment. However, his relative lived in public housing, so he could not be added to his relative's lease and had to live in his truck outside the family member's home.

The constituent had already completed a CE assessment through a Regional Access Point (RAP). The CE assessor advised him to find a housing case manager who could refer him to housing and provided him with a list of day centers and homeless services agencies to find one. However, he could not find an agency on the list that could provide him with housing case management, which was necessary for him to be nominated for housing and transition from the priority pool into a housing resource. The constituent's health issues, and weekly doctor's appointments made it difficult for him to find shelter and stable housing on his own. He needed the help of a housing navigation case manager to find an emergency shelter or housing resource close to his healthcare providers. Without this support, he was uncomfortable moving to an area that wasn't near his medical care.

ACTIONS TAKEN

The Ombuds Office referred the constituent to several outreach programs, but unfortunately, he either did not meet the eligibility criteria or was provided with another list of shelters to call. Eventually, the Ombuds Office connected the constituent with an outreach team that connected him to a Safe Parking Lot.

With the constituent's permission, the Ombuds Office contacted their medical case manager and educated them about the homeless response system so the case manager could better assist the constituent in finding stable housing. The Ombuds Office also connected the case manager to an Emergency Gas Voucher program so that the client could obtain a gas voucher and track their monthly mileage.

RESULT

The constituent was connected to an outreach worker who referred him to a Safe Parking Lot in South King County, with the hope that the constituent now has increased case management support, between the outreach team, his medical care caseworker, and the Safe Parking Lot staff.



CASE EXAMPLE SURVIVOR SUPPORT

PROBLEM

A constituent was concerned that a provider was not sensitive to their experience as a survivor of domestic violence or their language access barriers.

OVERVIEW

The Ombuds Office received a request from a constituent for eviction prevention support. In speaking with the constituent, it was discovered that their rental assistance services were terminated due to a miscommunication and a language barrier with the agency responsible for providing rental assistance. Furthermore, the Ombuds Office also learned that the constituent was a survivor of domestic violence, which they felt was not considered by their case manager and later hindered their ability to maintain rental support from the agency.

ACTIONS TAKEN

In collaboration with KCRHA's Housing and Stability division, the Ombuds team facilitated a conversation with the agency, relayed the constituent's experience, and advocated for the client's services to be reinstated.

RESULT

The agency was receptive to the constituent's situation, offered to reinstate the client's services, and provided additional context on the miscommunication that led to the initial termination.



CASE EXAMPLE

EXIT FROM SHELTER

PROBLEM

A constituent believed her rights were violated when her family was exited from an emergency shelter.

OVERVIEW

A single mother with young children filed a complaint after being exited from an emergency family shelter. The constituent believed she was exited because she did not accept a housing referral to rapid re-Housing by the shelter case manager. However, the shelter case manager reported that the constituent refused to communicate, attend meetings, or respond to inquiries about housing and work. After multiple attempts to work with the constituent, the shelter felt it could not help this family if they refused to participate in services or communicate their needs.

ACTIONS TAKEN

The Ombuds Office contacted the shelter and scheduled a meeting to discuss the constituent's concerns. According to shelter case manager, the constituent had multiple program violations, and they had repeatedly worked with her to reconcile the 30-day exit notice. Unfortunately, the constituent did not respond until the exit process was completed.

The shelter staff explained that they were transparent with the constituent about the program policies around participation, including attending case management meetings, actively working on housing resources, and following program policies around furniture and other equipment. These requirements were clarified during the intake process, and the constituent signed and acknowledged the agreement to comply with the program requirements.

The Ombuds Office contacted the resident to inform her of the shelter's policies and requirements and advised that the shelter was within its rights to exit her from the program for non-compliance with program rules. While the client was not happy with the outcome of the complaint, the Ombuds worked with the constituent to find other housing resources.

RESULT

The constituent received clarification about why she and her family were exited for not following program requirements and received referrals to the emergency family shelter line, a family shelter outreach team, medical case management, and a local shelter.



CASE EXAMPLE KNOWING WHO TO CALL

PROBLEM

A constituent was frustrated because they didn't know who to contact regarding the closure of a local community day center.

OVERVIEW

The Ombuds Office received a complaint regarding the closure of a day center and how it would impact the daily activities of the concerned constituent. According to the constituent, the day center's closure would negatively impact their daily activities, and it would be hard to access services elsewhere. They were unsure where to go for reliable support in their community and how they could file a grievance against the city where they lived.

ACTIONS TAKEN

The day center in question was not receiving funding from KCRHA, meaning it was outside the jurisdiction of the Ombuds Office. Therefore, the Ombuds Office referred the constituent to the appropriate contact person in their city who would be able to provide further information and clarify the reasons behind the program's closure and ramp-down.

RESULT

The constituent was connected to a partner office in their local city so that their concerns and grievances would have an opportunity to be heard.



CASE EXAMPLE

RAPID REHOUSING

PROBLEM

A constituent in a rapid re-housing program was placed under an unexpected financial burden due to the program staff's failure to maintain effective communication with the constituent.

OVERVIEW

The constituent, who participated in a rapid re-housing program, faced delays in receiving financial assistance since they began the program. In June 2023, they were informed that their August 2023 rent contribution would not exceed \$100 based on their income. However, just two days before the rent due date in August, their case manager told them about a significantly higher rent payment of \$700, which left the constituent in distress and in need of urgent help.

ACTIONS TAKEN

The Ombuds contacted the provider to seek a resolution to address the unexpected financial burden on the constituent. The provider acknowledged a miscommunication about the rent obligation and promised to pay the rent for August 2023. However, the provider delayed the payment by two weeks without telling the constituent. The lack of clear communication from program staff about the delay was a significant challenge. The constituent wanted to work with another case manager as a possible solution.

RESULT

There was an immediate resolution and financial stress was mitigated. The Ombuds Office's outreach to the provider led to an assurance from the program that the rent for August 2023 paid in the amount of \$700 would be covered. This alleviated the participant's immediate financial burden but did not resolve the constituent's desire to be assigned to another case manager within the program.

TRENDS


SYSTEM TRENDS

The following trends are based on the interactions of the Ombuds Office with constituents in 2023. It's important to note that presenting these trends aims to provide objective insights and not to make any recommendations. KCRHA is working diligently to establish and strengthen its role within King County's Homeless Response System, which is a complex task. As the community adapts to these changes, the Ombuds Office is committed to staying engaged with all stakeholders and providing support wherever necessary. The Ombuds Office hopes that any future system-wide recommendations will be made collaboratively with input from its larger constituency. By working together, with community, the Ombuds Office will work with KCRHA to ensure that the agency's efforts are focused on addressing system-wide issues for the benefit of all.





System Trends

The Ombuds Office encountered six dominant trends while engaging with constituents.





The homeless response system in King County is not easily accessible for people experiencing homelessness.

Not enough case management and housing navigation staff are available to provide services across programs and interventions.




There is a shortage of prevention services to meet the demand, such as emergency financial assistance that is designed to support people who are at risk of experiencing homelessness.

Permanent Supportive Housing sites in the community find it challenging to meet the high acuity and diverse needs of program participants.



There is a shortage of technical assistance available to support the complex needs of providers.

The confidentiality of those seeking help from the Ombuds Office is not adequately protected.



System Trends



The homeless response system in King County is not easily accessible for people experiencing homelessness.

Regional Access Points (RAPs) are the entry points to access Coordinated Entry (CE) in King County. The main goal of the CE process is to ensure that all households experiencing homelessness have an equal opportunity to access housing resources. The CE process involves unhoused individuals connecting with a RAP site, where they complete an assessment and are placed on a by-name list. Service providers can then nominate a client from that list for various types of housing assistance, such as Rapid Re-housing, Transitional Housing, Permanent Housing, and Permanent Supportive Housing.

However, constituents have reported to the Ombuds Office that when they reach out to RAP sites, they are often instructed to leave a message and don't receive a return call. Even when constituents visit RAP sites in person, they are turned away due to limited office hours and staff capacity. Employees stationed at RAP sites have reported that they are often unable to complete housing assessments because they have other duties to attend to at their agencies. Additionally, not all outreach team staff are trained to complete a CE assessment, so even if they connect with someone experiencing literal street homelessness, they cannot always complete a housing assessment at the time of contact.

These challenges mean that people with the greatest needs, such as those living with a mental illness, substance abuse disorder, disability, navigating financial difficulties, or lack the means to access a phone or transportation, are facing barriers to accessing King County housing resources because they are not able to connect with RAP sites to be assessed for a housing resource through Coordinated Entry.

Impact on Constituents

A family living in a shelter didn't speak English and had trouble scheduling a housing assessment. They were told that the RAP site had no translator services available and that they should arrange the assessment when their child, who speaks English, could translate for them. Despite their repeated attempts, the family could not schedule an assessment for four weeks. Eventually, their shelter case manager contacted the Ombuds Office for help. The Ombuds Office helped coordinate a housing assessment for the family in a language they could understand.



System Trends

Not enough case management and housing navigation staff are available to provide services across programs and interventions.



1. The effectiveness of homeless service programs and interventions is impacted by inadequate case management.

Collaboration between homeless services staff and clients is essential for achieving housing goals by utilizing available resources within the homeless response and adjacent systems. This work includes providing some education about what is available and the need for clients to have a short-term housing goal (e.g., moving from shelter to an apartment) and then a longer-term housing goal (e.g., finding the perfect apartment in their preferred area). However, in engaging with constituents, it has become apparent that one of the key challenges within the system is that case management services are even more limited outside of emergency shelter service programming, leaving those outside shelter services without consistent support or a clear path to permanent housing.

The high turnover rate among case management positions across various programs and housing interventions only exacerbates the problem. Even in programs with a more progressive engagement approach, clients who need additional support are usually given a list of resources and encouraged to conduct independent searches without guidance on finding services that match their needs. In addition, agencies are not always transparent about their case management services and the support they can offer clients, resulting in unmet expectations. For example, programs are often constrained by their funding sources regarding how they can support a client or lack the necessary experience or expertise to provide the level of service that clients with high acuity or accessibility needs require. Unfortunately, this results in those experiencing homelessness continuing to struggle to find pathways toward permanent housing.

Impact on Constituents

A person staying in a shelter not connected to CE was unaware they needed to complete a housing assessment. They contacted the Ombuds Office, who referred them to a RAP site. After four attempts, they finally connected with a RAP site and completed the housing assessment. RAP staff then informed them they needed to find a housing case manager to be referred to a housing resource. However, when the constituent asked staff how to find a case manager, they were given a list of community agencies, which included the RAP sites. Unfortunately, every agency they contacted told them they did not offer housing navigation, case management, or housing referrals.

System Trends

2. The Coordinated Entry Process can be challenging to navigate when there is a lack of proper case management.

The lack of housing navigation and case management compounds the access issue. The level of support offered by emergency shelters varies, with some providing comprehensive support and others providing limited support. In shelters with limited support, residents often struggle to access available housing resources because they cannot refer themselves through the Coordinated Entry (CE) process. This process is designed for service providers with access to the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) to nominate individuals for housing referrals. As a result, residents staying in shelters with limited case management support are often unaware of their housing options and how to access them. This issue is even more challenging for community members sleeping in cars, tents, or on the streets as they typically do not have access to housing case management unless they can contact an outreach worker who also knows how to access CE, complete a housing assessment, and nominate an individual for a housing referral.

The CE process is designed to function as a central component of a community's homeless response system. It is meant to be the entry point for community members to access housing support services and resources. However, many unhoused neighbors and those at risk of homelessness are not aware of CE, including some case managers. Even for those familiar with CE, the limited availability of housing case managers and navigators creates a situation where people enter into CE via a housing assessment and remain on the by-name list without receiving any notification about their status. The latter only happens if an individual can find an agency that offers case management and understands CE. However, more often than not, they are left to find housing independently.

The pool of people needing housing through CE is growing, and the movement out of CE is reduced to a trickle since very few agencies offer housing navigation or case management services. This situation has led to the reality that people experiencing homelessness in King County do not have equitable access to housing resources. Only those who reside in a shelter offering informed case management can be nominated for housing resources to help them move into stable housing.

Impact on Constituents

A person fleeing domestic violence who was staying in an emergency family shelter asked their housing case manager for a referral to a permanent supportive housing resource with ADA accommodations for a disabled child. They were told that the shelter did not provide referrals for that kind of housing. The person then reached out to the Ombuds Office, who contacted the agency to understand why the request was denied. After meeting with the agency, the Ombuds Office discovered that the agency had undergone high staff turnover, and the staff member responsible for making referrals to CE PSH resources for families had left. The new staff members were unaware of how to make referrals to these resources.



System Trends



There is a shortage of prevention services to meet the demand, such as emergency financial assistance that is designed to support people who are at risk of experiencing homelessness.

The Ombuds Office receives three-fourths of its inquiries from individuals seeking information about housing resources in the community. Many of these inquiries come from people at risk of eviction or needing rental assistance. However, accessing prevention funds has become a challenge since the COVID-19 pandemic, as many previously available funds for prevention are no longer available to the system. People seeking immediate financial help must undergo lengthy approval processes or be told that funds are no longer available.

Community members have also reported that they are not always informed of why their requests for assistance were denied or the restrictions associated with funding. Many prevention programs only cover partial amounts of overdue rent and do not provide additional support in finding local resources to pay off the entire amount. These agencies and programs also do not regularly update the community on available prevention resources. Consequently, many people seeking prevention assistance feel that they are forced to become homeless before they can access resources.

Impact on Constituents

The Ombuds Office received a complaint from a constituent who had been waiting for three months for their application for eviction prevention/rental assistance to be approved. The constituent had informed her landlord that she was applying for rental service; however, the landlord became impatient and served her with an eviction notice. The Ombuds Office contacted the agency responsible for overseeing the constituent's application and found out that her application had been denied because she had previously applied for rental assistance in 2019 during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the agency failed to inform the constituent about the denial of her application. The constituent has been persistently applying for prevention funding from various agencies, but she reports that she has not received any return calls or responses to her applications. She is worried that she will only be eligible for additional funds to pay off her debt once she has been evicted and moved to a shelter.

System Trends

Permanent Supportive Housing sites in the community find it challenging to meet the high acuity and diverse needs of program participants.



Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH) is a unique housing assistance program that provides tailored supportive services to individuals and families experiencing chronic homelessness. It specifically caters to those who struggle with conditions or barriers that hinder housing stability, such as substance use disorders, mental health issues, or chronic health conditions. PSH and Rapid Re-housing are permanent housing interventions funded by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). King County also funds a housing intervention called Permanent Housing with Supports (PHS) that is designed to provide specialized support to individuals with medium to high-level needs.

However, the experiences of PSH residents have brought to light challenges. These include the perception that PSH may not be as supportive in providing the level of services needed to support people with high acuity needs. Complaints from constituents living in permanent supportive housing have often highlighted the lack of onsite case management support, high staff turnover, and sporadic support for people with documented disabilities. Additionally, many residents with high acuity or high-level needs are placed into permanent housing without a clear understanding of the differences between the PSH and PHS models. When residents express their expectations for more support to match their needs, some sites respond that they are PHS models and need not provide the same standard of care as PSH sites.

The Ombuds Office often receives complaints from residents in PSH that appear related to mental health crises. At several PSH sites, staff members have acknowledged the challenges and lack of staff capacity to work with residents who refuse to receive onsite support, such as psychiatric nurse visits or medication management. These challenges are compounded by PSH programs navigating both fair housing laws, as well as the behavioral health system to access crisis intervention or more supportive services for residents.

Impact on Constituents

A constituent raised a complaint with the Ombuds Office regarding the lack of a case manager at her PSH program for over eight months. The constituent was going through a difficult time due to behavioral health challenges and felt isolated in her PSH placement. Following this, the Ombuds Office contacted the program manager at the PSH program, who explained that they are experiencing staffing issues due to a competitive job market. To address the problem, the PSH program developed a plan to collaborate with case managers from other housing programs to provide support. However, like other PSH programs across the county, due to staffing limitations, these case managers were also overwhelmed, had limited availability, and were not familiar with the medical histories and needs of their residents.



System Trends



There is a shortage of technical assistance available to support the complex needs of providers.

The needs of homeless service providers are complex, and they need support in developing and implementing best practices in service delivery. Technical assistance bridges the gap between what's stated in an agency's contract and promised practices in service delivery. The goal is to help agencies not only comply with the minimal requirements of their contracts but incorporate feedback to help change behaviors and practices that lead to improved services.

The Ombuds Office has observed that KCRHA grantees require proactive technical support grounded in a deep understanding of HUD regulations, the grantee's knowledge of their work, their staff's experiences, and resource limitations. Additionally, providers have shared that a lack of intentional, focused networking spaces on service delivery fosters isolation instead of support systems among providers to discuss and learn best practices from one another. By increasing KCRHA and the system's capacity to develop and maintain institutional knowledge and provide technical assistance and support, the system can better identify what works, what needs improvement, and how to work with grantees to develop creative solutions to its issues.

Impact on Constituents

The Ombuds Office received several complaints from constituents regarding bed bug infestations at emergency shelters. Each time the Ombuds Office contacted the shelters, staff explained that they bomb the spaces regularly or have people come in to spray the areas frequently. In one shelter, all of the residents' belongings were placed in one room during bug treatments but were not treated. Research suggests that bombs or fumigators are not the most effective way to address bed bug infestations because they cannot penetrate the cracks and open spaces in walls and furniture where bed bugs often reside. The Ombuds asked shelter staff via their program specialists if those shelters had ever researched, developed, and implemented an integrated pest management plan that doesn't rely on chemicals alone but includes encasements, vacuuming, steaming, and the implementation of intake, laundry, cleaning, and room preparation policies. Neither staff at KCRHA nor the shelters were familiar with integrated pest management, which highlighted a system gap in providing equipment, resources, and training to implement best practices to help shelters address a frequent concern.

System Trends

The confidentiality of those seeking help from the Ombuds Office is not adequately protected.



The Ombuds Office, a division within KCRHA, a local government agency, must abide by Washington State's Public Records Act (PRA). According to the PRA, government agencies must make all their records available to the public, except for very narrow statutory exemptions. However, many exemptions do not apply to individuals who contact the Ombuds Office seeking help resolving conflicts with providers. These individuals are often worried about the adverse consequences of filing a complaint, such as being asked to leave a shelter or facing retaliation from homeless services staff. This fear is significant for people who have experienced trauma, such as assault, rape, or harassment, and who have substantial barriers to trusting that the information they share will not be used against them.

This fear also affects service providers, especially frontline staff, who fear losing their jobs. Many homeless services staff also worry about losing essential services for their clients or organizations if they report concerns about a partnering agency. While changing state law is crucial to resolving this problem, it's worth noting that laws already exist to keep the records of Ombuds Offices serving vulnerable populations confidential. The Office of the Family and Children's Ombuds and the Office of Behavioral Health Advocacy are two such examples.

Impact on Constituents

Multiple partnering agencies and residents of a particular program had filed complaints regarding the services they or their clients were receiving. The Ombuds Office attempted to reach out to these individuals for more information. However, they were reluctant to speak unless guaranteed complete anonymity because residents feared being targeted or exited from the program in retaliation for filing a complaint or speaking to the Ombuds Office. One staff person at a partnering agency even reported being advised by their supervisor not to communicate with the Ombuds Office because the issue was too political. They feared being blocked from important outreach sites, which would hinder them from providing vital services to their clients. As a result, the Ombuds Office could not collect and document accurate and complete information about the complainants core issues, which limited how the Ombuds could help address the problem among providers and program participants.



2024 Ombuds Office Priorities



The Ombuds Office aims to enhance our services to constituents, strengthen relationships with providers and increase community awareness of our role through the following priorities:

01. Constituent Inquiries

Respond to constituent inquiries in a timely, responsive, and efficient manner.

02. Community Engagement

Enhance community engagement by connecting with people actively experiencing homelessness, educating providers about the Ombuds Office, and providing light-touch technical support.

03. Promising Practices

Develop promising practices and guidance, informed by constituent trends, to contribute to KCRHA's continuous improvement efforts in overseeing homeless services across King County.

04. Transparency

Update the Ombuds Office website to promote transparency of the Ombuds Office, including a dashboard of constituent data, details of upcoming community engagement events, an Ombuds Office primer, an annual report, a brochure, and translated outreach materials.

05. Annual Report

Publish 2023 Ombuds Annual Report and update report for 2024.

KCRHA's Ombuds Team

We are a team of five with very diverse backgrounds who all bring a perspective of having lived experience to this work. We also share 55 years of combined professional experience in homeless response services including working among various systems across diverse subpopulations, such as veterans, families, youth, refugees, trans and gender nonconforming, community mental health, and survivor services.



Merylin Castelan

Ombuds

Merylin Castelan has over nine years of experience working with Veterans, survivors of Intimate Partner Violence and Sexual Assault, and LGBTQ+ youth. She is passionate about centering the voices of people with lived experience. As a former Texan, Merylin's personal mission is to find a restaurant salsa in Seattle that doesn't taste like Marinara Sauce.



Mary Dunbar

Ombuds

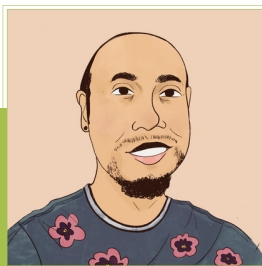
Mary has over 30 years of experience in community mental health, early intervention/disability services, social work, and providing medical case management services to families experiencing homelessness. Born and raised in Seattle, Mary is passionate about coffee, baking, reading, and growing a plethora of produce in her garden.



Em Ishiki

Ombuds

Em has over ten years of experience working in sex worker/survivor and harm reduction services. They previously worked in KCRHA's Program Emergency Services division. Born and raised in Hawaii and the Bay Area, Em enjoys laughter, talking about their dog Huey, or discovering their next music obsession.



Raphael Hartman

Deputy Ombuds

Raphael has over ten years of experience working in the homeless response system. Throughout his career, Raphael has held positions such as peer advocate, coordinated entry specialist, and project manager within King County's Coordinated Entry System. Outside of work, Raphael values time in nature with his dogs, immerses himself in literature, and channels creativity into his drawings.



Katara Jordan

Chief Ombuds

Katara has over 13 years of experience working on behalf of populations experiencing homelessness. She began her career as a legal services attorney and has led advocacy efforts across the state to promote data-driven and cross-sector solutions to housing issues affecting children, youth, and families. Growing up in a military family, she has lived in many states and finds pleasure in reading and playing with her German Shepherd, Sergeant.





MORE ABOUT US



Phone

206-639-4601



Email

ombuds@kcrha.org



Website

<https://kcrha.org/ombuds/>



Office Address

**400 Yesler Way #600
Seattle, WA 98104**