



KCRHA
King County Regional Homelessness Authority

THE OMBUDS OFFICE PRIMER

AN OVERVIEW OF KCRHA'S OMBUDS OFFICE &
HOW IT OPERATES TO SERVE KING COUNTY'S
HOMELESS RESPONSE SYSTEM

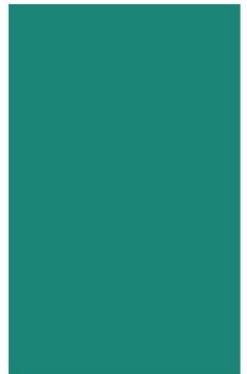
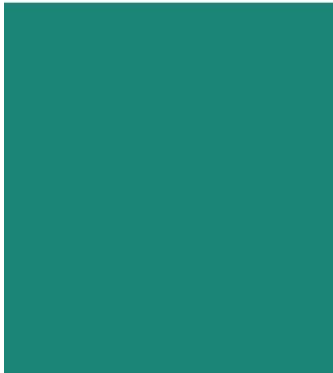


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I. Introduction

This document defines and clarifies the standards of the Ombuds Office within the context of the King County Regional Homelessness Authority (KCRHA). The intent of this document is to:

- a. Educate the community about the history and role of the Ombuds Office.
- b. Articulate the practices, principles, and standards of the Ombuds Office.
- c. Ensure the Ombuds Office operates in a manner consistent with this document.

II. Background: The KCRHA and the King County Homeless Response System

According to Community Solutions, the homeless response system "refers to the various organizations and entities within an area that serve homeless individuals and families. These [organizations and agencies] can include nonprofit organizations, housing authorities, local and federal government agencies, faith-based organizations, the VA, shelter providers, and other homeless coalitions."¹

In King County, the King County Regional Homelessness Authority is the local government agency responsible for overseeing components of the homeless response system, such as the Continuum of Care (COC), which coordinates and plans how federal, state, and local funding will be used to address homelessness in King County. KCRHA also oversees the processes that distribute funding to COC-funded programs. These programs are responsible for implementing various housing interventions and services, including but not limited to diversion, rapid rehousing, permanent supportive housing, and emergency housing and shelter funding.

In addition to these responsibilities, KCRHA oversees system components such as the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) and manages Coordinated Entry, "a process designed to quickly identify, assess, refer, and connect people in crisis to housing and assistance and services."² KCRHA also shares the responsibility for other services provided within a homeless response system, such as outreach and encampment resolution with our government partners, the City of Seattle and King County.

The goal of KCRHA is to coordinate homelessness services, policies, programs, and processes in the region to efficiently help people exit homelessness.

III. History of the KCRHA Ombuds Office

In 2019, the City of Seattle, King County, and All Home (the former county-wide HUD-funded Continuum of Care) partnered with the National Innovation Service (NIS) to redesign the local homeless response system. During this process, NIS collaborated with our unhoused



neighbors, people with lived experience of homelessness, providers, businesses, philanthropists, and public sector stakeholders to develop the KCRHA.

As part of this system redesign, our unhoused neighbors advocated for creating an ombuds office to help center the voices of people with lived experience in KCRHA's provision of services to those experiencing homelessness. Out of these community conversations emerged the three core functions of the Ombuds Office:

- a. Providing quality support to people experiencing homelessness in navigating, accessing, and using KCRHA services.
- b. Coordinating ongoing engagement with people experiencing homelessness and frontline service providers to ensure consistent improvements to KCRHA services.
- c. Driving systems change by centering the voices of people with lived experience and advocating for system improvements.

IV. Purpose of the Ombuds Office

The purpose of the Ombuds Office is to promote public confidence in the KCRHA's ability to serve people experiencing homelessness effectively, efficiently, and equitably. The Ombuds Office serves as an accountability mechanism within King County's homeless response system that provides system constituents with access to a fair process.

Fair process means that the Ombuds Office provides a means for constituents to voice their concerns about the services they receive or any other issues that may impact them. The Ombuds Office strives to assist constituents in understanding the reasoning behind decisions made by system actors, such as KCRHA and homeless service providers. Moreover, we work collaboratively with all parties involved to resolve complaints or issues raised by members of the public.

Aligned with its purpose, the Ombuds Office employs a hybrid approach that blends classical, organizational, and advocacy ombuds models with principles of equity to serve communities supported by KCRHA and the broader homeless response system.

V. Standards of Practice

a. Equity and Justice

The Ombuds Office is committed to identifying gaps and advancing more equitable practices within the homeless response system. It aims to do so by first recognizing that our unhoused neighbors have specific needs and then partnering with providers and other agencies to meet those needs with specificity when possible. The Ombuds Office will regularly engage with communities across the King County region,



elevating community feedback to KCRHA leadership and governance, and partnering with community members to develop solutions to their inquiries and concerns.

In its review of issues, the Ombuds Office works closely with our unhoused neighbors and KCRHA constituents to ensure they are actively involved as informed partners. This collaboration holds the office, the KCRHA, and the broader homeless response system accountable by centering the voices of those currently experiencing or who have previously experienced homelessness. This approach improves the delivery of quality support, strengthens ongoing engagement, and drives continuous system improvement to better meet the varied needs of people and communities impacted by homelessness.

b. Independence

[The Interlocal Agreement \(ILA\)](#) for the Establishment of the King County Regional Homelessness Authority intended for the Ombuds Office to be a division within the authority. As a result, the Ombuds Office's independence is limited by its structure.

In this context, independence refers to the ability of the Ombuds Office to define its decision-making boundaries within the authority.

The Ombuds Office remains independent to the highest degree possible in structure and function in the following ways:

- i. The senior director reports directly to the Office of the CEO
- ii. The Ombuds Office submits an annual written report to the Governance Board.
- iii. Ombuds team members do not hold any other KCRHA positions.
- iv. The Ombuds Office has sole discretion to initiate and pursue complaints and inquiries.
- v. The Ombuds Office has access to all KCRHA records as well as its contractor records to the extent permitted by law.
- vi. The senior director has the authority to select ombuds staff and manage the Ombuds Office budget and operations.
- vii. The Ombuds Office has the authority to establish and engage an ad-hoc advisory group, which may or may not include KCRHA staff and other stakeholders, to provide guidance on Ombuds Office activities, findings, and recommendations.



- viii. The senior or assistant director can report directly to the Governance Board Executive Committee or equivalent governance or reporting structure without the prior approval of the chief executive officer or other members of executive management.

c. Impartiality in Context

The Ombuds Office endeavors to review inquiries without bias and prejudice and allow all parties involved to express their concerns. At the same time, it acknowledges that blanket statements of neutrality, fairness, and impartiality can harm individuals and groups that have been historically marginalized and can perpetuate institutional inequities. The Ombuds Office is committed to actively identifying and challenging both conscious and unconscious bias in how it reviews issues.

d. Confidentiality

As a public entity, the Ombuds Office is required to comply with Washington State's Public Records Act (PRA).³ Thus, the Ombuds Office cannot guarantee absolute confidentiality in every situation. The Ombuds Office will not reveal the identity of any person contacting the office to file a complaint, or to disclose any information provided in confidence to support a complaint, except to address an imminent risk of serious harm or when required to do so by law. If necessary to help resolve a complaint, it is at the Ombuds Office's discretion to disclose information that does not reveal the identity of the source. That said, to the greatest extent possible, the Ombuds Office will try to get an individual's express permission before disclosing any identifying information. The Ombuds Office will explain the risks of sharing sensitive information with those who contact the office.

VI. Core Functions, Jurisdiction, Services, Appeals and Review Processes

a. Core Functions

The ILA authorizes the Ombuds Office to perform the following functions:

- i. Gather information from our unhoused neighbors, contract holders, and community members to improve operations and outcomes of the Authority's contract holders.
- ii. Ensure ease of contact for unhoused neighbors, contract holders, and community members, and provide appropriate resources to resolve concerns.



- iii. Implement strategies to collect, investigate, and respond to complaints and concerns about service delivery, policies, program administration, or other activities overseen by the KCRHA.
- iv. Receive complaints from our unhoused neighbors, community members, and contract holders.
- v. Develop methods to respond to complaints or concerns in an equitable, impartial, and efficient manner.
- vi. Investigate complaints and issue findings, collect and analyze aggregate complaints data, and partner with KCRHA leadership, the Governance Board, employees, and community members to design and recommend improvements to service, funding, and oversight.

b. Jurisdiction - What issues does the Ombuds Office have the authority to review?

KCRHA's Ombuds Office can review, investigate, and resolve issues in four areas: delivery of services, program administration, policies, and other activities overseen by KCRHA.

- i. Delivery of Services – The services, resources and activities provided to participants of homeless service programs.
- ii. Program Administration – The administrative responsibilities of KCRHA and its contracted service providers that include contract management, performance monitoring, compliance, and customer service.
- iii. Policies – The decisions, courses of action, protocols, or procedures implemented by KCRHA, a contracted provider, or the homeless response system to address a concern.
- iv. Other Activities Overseen by the Authority– These activities include but are not limited to system administration of continuum responsibilities such as the Coordinated Entry System or the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS).

Please note that the office is open to anyone seeking information about the homeless response system or services.

c. Who does the Ombuds Office serve?



The ILA authorizes the Ombuds Office to serve the following groups:

- i. Participants served by a KCRHA funded program.
- ii. Contract holders receiving funding from the KCRHA.
- iii. Community members seeking information about King County's homeless response system.

d. Services offered by the Ombuds Office

The Ombuds Office offers the following services to respond to inquiries or resolve complaints.

- i. Information and Referral

An Ombudsperson responds to an inquiry by providing information on resources and services available in King County or redirecting to a more appropriate resource.

- ii. Assistance and Facilitation

Through assistance and facilitation, an Ombudsperson helps program participants address service gaps and connects those seeking services to outreach teams or provides warm handoffs as needed.

- iii. Program or Department Review

A program or department review is a findings-and-recommendations report prepared after a fact-finding process (sometimes referred to as an investigation, systemic review, or formal review) in response to a complaint or multiple complaints that draw attention to a significant concern about the delivery of services, policies, program administration, or other activities overseen by the authority. Program or department reviews apply only to programs with contracts for homeless services administered by KCRHA.¹

¹ Most Ombuds reports are Program Reviews. These address concerns about KCRHA-funded service providers, which are monitored by the Programs Division. Department Reviews are reports that focus on matters outside the Programs Division or issues that span multiple divisions.



The Ombuds Office will first receive and log the issue or complaint. It will then complete a case assessment to determine whether an issue or complaint warrants a program or department review. During this assessment, the Ombuds Office will consider factors such as the level of seriousness and urgency, the number of people affected, community concern, alignment with the Ombuds Office's priorities, and whether another agency or authority should investigate the matter. Based on these factors, the Ombuds Office will decide whether to proceed with a review or refer the issue to another entity, such as the City, County, or the Department of Commerce, the Office of Housing and Urban Development, or another appropriate agency.

A program or department review results in findings and recommendations that are intended to improve performance, policies, procedures, or modify practices. These reports are shared with KCRHA leadership, program management, and members of the public as applicable.

iv. External Review

The Ombuds Office often receives complaints and concerns about homeless services that are not contracted with KCRHA. Upon receiving such complaints, the Ombuds Office documents and forwards them to the relevant external partner. The program team can use this information to make informed decisions about the types of programs that may be eligible for KCRHA funding in the future.

v. Decline or Discontinue of Ombuds-Related Services

The Ombuds Office reserves the right to discontinue or decline an investigation or other ombuds-related service. A decision to decline or discontinue may happen for the following reasons:

1. Unreasonable delay: If a complaint is filed after an unreasonable amount of time has passed since the action occurred.
2. Second-hand complaint: Generally speaking, the Ombuds Office will not act when a person not directly affected by an issue submits a complaint. Unless there is a significant systemic problem, or the complainant is willing to help the Ombuds Office work directly with the affected person. The concerns of the person affected always take



precedence in directing how the Ombuds Office will proceed.

3. **Bad Faith:** If a complaint is made in bad faith, e.g., to harass, delay, or embarrass a party or is deemed to lack merit.
 4. **Lack of Jurisdiction:** If a complaint falls outside the scope of the Ombuds Office.
 5. **Lack of Resources/Higher Priority Complaints:** If the Ombuds Office cannot investigate the complaint due to its current capacity or caseload.
- vi. **Complaint Escalation**

Please refer to the [Ombuds Office Grievance Policy](#) for more information about complaint escalation.

VII. Limits of the Ombuds Office

The Ombuds Office is intended to supplement, not replace, KCRHA's formal compliance and complaint channels, such as those created by the Office of the CEO or Human Resources. KCRHA employees are encouraged to use the Ombuds Office when any personnel issues arise for confidential coaching and support on how to use the previously mentioned channels effectively. Nothing in this current section should be used to prevent an employee from raising concerns about service delivery, policies, program administration, or any other activities overseen by KCRHA.

Furthermore, the Ombuds Office does not, nor should it be expected to:

- a. Address or investigate issues outside its jurisdiction.
- b. Make, change, or set aside the law, policy, administrative, or managerial decisions.
- c. Make binding decisions or determine rights.
- d. Directly compel an entity or any person to implement the office's recommendations.
- e. Receive notice on behalf of KCRHA.
- f. Address any issues arising within the purview of any existing federal, state, or local labor or employment law, rule, or regulation.
- g. Investigate matters currently in litigation or covered by a collective bargaining agreement or complaints related to employee or applicant discrimination.



VIII. Data Collection and Reporting

- a. Intake. The Ombuds Office collects demographic information such as race and ethnicity, gender identity, location, referral source, and ombuds service-related outcomes. The office maintains case notes to help document each ombudspersons' interactions and how the office addresses issues and concerns.
- b. Quarterly and Annual Reports. The Ombuds Office uses information collected during the intake process, investigations, and community engagement to inform internal and annual reports on system trends and responses to community feedback.

IX. Appointment and Removal from Office

- a. The senior director of the Ombuds Office will be selected and appointed by the chief executive officer and the senior director of human resources.
- b. The senior director may be removed from the office for neglect of duty, misconduct, inability to perform tasks, and actions or behaviors not aligned with KCRHA values or code of conduct.

XI. Conflict of Interest

A conflict of interest is when an ombudsperson has an actual or potential interest that impairs or might impair their ability to perform their responsibilities and duties in alignment with the Ombuds Office's standards of practice. If there is a potential conflict of interest, the ombudsperson will let the senior or assistant director know and will not take part in any ombudsperson-related actions, such as investigations, if necessary.

All Ombuds Office staff must:

- a. Abide by KCRHA's Code of Ethics Policy.
- b. Report to general counsel if a conflict of interest is discovered during an investigation. KCRHA's general counsel will determine if the conflict can be managed or should be eliminated. The senior or assistant director of the Ombuds Office is responsible for determining the appropriate entity to report to based on the circumstances surrounding a conflict of interest.

All Ombuds Office staff may:

- c. Participate on community and advisory committees as non-voting members unless doing so creates a conflict of interest.



XII. Document Revision History

Last Reviewed/ Update Date	Revisions
2/23/2024	Implementation Date. No revisions, published.
4/8/2024	The term “Assistance and Facilitation” has replaced 'Assistance and Navigation” in Section VI (d)(ii) and Section VI (e)(i).
2/11/2025	<p>The title of chief ombudsperson has been changed to senior director, while the title of deputy ombudsperson has been revised to assistant director.</p> <p>The grievance policy link has been updated to align with the latest version, revised in the summer of 2024.</p> <p>References for the Implementation Board have been removed to reflect the new governance structure of KCRHA.</p> <p>All instances of "people operations" have been replaced with "human resources."</p> <p>All links to the Interlocal Agreement (ILA) were updated to link to the Amended and Restated Interlocal Agreement dated November 7, 2024.</p> <p>Language was changed throughout the document to align with ILA amendments</p>
2/19/2025	<p>Until further review, Section VIII, addressing "Safety from Retribution or Retaliation for Using the Ombuds Office," has been removed and replaced with "Data Collecting and Reporting."</p> <p>Please note that Section VI(d)(v), “Investigation” is under review until further notice.</p>
5/27/2026	Sections V and VI (d) – “Standards of Practice” and "Services offered by the Ombuds Office," was amended to reflect current Ombuds Office fact-finding practices and align with the updated Ombuds Office Grievance Policy, revised in Fall 2025. The Assistance and Facilitation description was also modified to reflect current practice.



¹ [What is a homeless response system? - Community Solutions](#)

² [Crisis Response - National Alliance to End Homelessness](#)

³ The Washington Public Records Act requires that all public records maintained by state and local government agencies be made available to all members of the public with very narrow statutory exemptions. (See Chapter 42.56 RCW)



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