

## WHAT TO DO BEFORE CONTACTING THE OFFICE OF OMBUDSMAN

A difference of opinion or misunderstanding is often resolved by simply taking the time to talk and listen. If you have a problem with a state or local government agency, *first take the matter up with the agency involved* before calling the Office of Ombudsman. Many times, an agency official will be eager to explain a specific policy or will correct the problem to your satisfaction.

Here are some good common-sense basic steps to take when trying to resolve most any problems with a government agency or a company in the private sector.

**Be prepared.** Know what questions you are going to ask (it helps to write them down). Be sure to have any relevant information you need available before you contact the agency.

**Be pleasant.** Treat public employees as you like to be treated. Getting angry or rude will not resolve your problem and may only confuse the real issues.

**Keep records.** Take notes, ask for the names and titles of employees you speak with, and save all of your correspondence.

**Ask questions.** Ask why the agency acted as it did. Ask employees to identify the rules, policies, or laws that governed their actions. Ask for copies.

**Talk to the right people.** Do not get angry with the first employee you meet; usually he or she cannot make or change policy. If you cannot resolve the matter, ask to talk with a supervisor. Keep asking questions until you understand what happened and why.

**Read what is sent to you (including the fine print)!** Carefully read all information sent to you. Many agency decisions may be appealed, but there are deadlines. *Be sure to follow appeal rules and deadlines.* It is a good idea to mail your appeal certified, return receipt.

**If you follow these suggestions and still cannot resolve your problem, then give us a call. Maybe we can help.**

## HOW TO CONTACT THE OFFICE OF OMBUDSMAN

### Telephone:

In Des Moines: 515-281-3592  
Toll free: 1-888-IA-OMBUD  
(1-888-426-6283)  
TTY: 515-242-5065

**Fax:** 515-242-6007

### Internet or Email address:

ombudsman@legis.iowa.gov  
www.legis.iowa.gov/ombudsman

### Write us:

Office of Ombudsman  
Ola Babcock Miller Building  
1112 East Grand Avenue  
Des Moines, IA 50319-0231

### Visit us:

We are open from 8-4:30 on weekdays, except state holidays. Our office is handicap-accessible and located north of the state Capitol.

## A FINAL THOUGHT

The ombudsman system is based upon the principle that every person has a right to have his or her grievances against the government heard and, if justified, satisfied. The Office of Ombudsman provides Iowans a non-partisan independent agency where action can be taken to resolve their complaints.

## STATE OF IOWA

## OFFICE OF OMBUDSMAN



Dedicated to Making Good  
Government Better

*An independent Legislative agency  
created for the citizens of Iowa to help  
ensure fair and equitable government  
services for all its residents*

## WHAT IS AN OMBUDSMAN?

Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary defines the word "Ombudsman" as "a government official (as in Sweden or New Zealand) appointed to receive and investigate complaints made by individuals against abuses or capricious acts of public officials." After careful investigation, research, and analysis the ombudsman makes recommendations to resolve complaints that are found justified. Additionally, the ombudsman may provide information and answer questions relating to government.

### HISTORY

The gender neutral term "ombudsman" is Swedish in origin. Sweden established the office of Ombudsman in 1809. It has been a sound institution in Sweden and is widely accepted in Europe, Africa, New Zealand, Australia, most Canadian provinces, and several states by legislative enactment. Governor Robert D. Ray initially established the Office of Ombudsman in Iowa as part of his office. The Iowa Citizens' Aide Act was passed by the General Assembly in 1972. It created the office by statute and placed it within the legislative branch of government to ensure its independence.

### CONCEPT

The First Amendment to the United States Constitution and Article I Section 20 of the Iowa Constitution guarantees citizens the right to petition government for redress of grievances. Government has grown very large and complex at the state, county, and municipal levels. Each level has a wide variety of divisions, authorities, agencies, district offices, boards, commissions, etc. It is understandable that people may experience difficulty in addressing complaints and questions to the proper offices or officials. The Office of Ombudsman was established for the purpose of providing Iowans with one office to which they may take grievances. Complaints receive a fair and impartial determination on the merits of the grievance.

## WHAT THE OFFICE OF OMBUDSMAN CAN DO

1. We investigate complaints against agencies or officials of state and local governments in Iowa.
2. We work with agencies to attempt to rectify problems when our investigation finds that a mistake, arbitrary, or illegal action has taken place.
3. We have unique statutory authority to investigate and determine if an action was fair or reasonable, even if in accordance with law.
4. We often can speed up official responses from agencies.
5. We perform this service, without a fee, in an independent and, when appropriate, confidential manner.
6. We have access to state and local government's facilities and confidential records to ensure a complete review of facts regarding a complaint.
7. We make recommendations to the General Assembly for legislation, when appropriate.
8. We answer questions about government or direct people where to go for answers.

## WHAT THE OFFICE OF OMBUDSMAN CANNOT DO

1. We cannot investigate the acts of the Iowa General Assembly or actions of legislators or their staff.
2. We cannot investigate the acts of the Governor or the Governor's personal staff.
3. We cannot investigate or review the acts or decisions of courts or judges or their staff.
4. We cannot investigate agencies established pursuant to interstate compacts and answerable to more than one state.
5. We cannot investigate complaints by governmental employees about their employment relationship with the agency. (An exception may exist if you suffered retaliation for reporting problems within your office.)
6. We cannot investigate agencies of the federal government.
7. We cannot investigate actions between private parties that do not involve agencies of state or local government.

## OUR SERVICES ARE AVAILABLE TO

All residents of the State of Iowa, including those confined in state institutions, and persons from other states and countries who may have complaints against agencies of Iowa government.

