



INTERNATIONAL
OMBUDS
ASSOCIATION

Standards of Practice Limited Scope Revisions



January 2026 Review Session

Agenda

- **Welcome and Introductions**
- **How to Access Drafts**
- **Limited Scope TF Process**
- **Thematic Overview of Changes**
- **The Compendium**
- **Next Steps – Feedback Sessions**



Overview of Changes

Accessing the Drafts:

IOA Home Page

www.ombudsassociation.org

or

<https://ioa.memberclicks.net/>

clarifications-to-the-sops-and-code-of-ethics

Overview of Changes

The screenshot shows a web browser window with the URL <https://www.ombudsassociation.org>. The page features a registration banner for the IOA 2026 Annual Conference, a section for clarifications to the IOA SOPs and Code of Ethics, and a sidebar with quick links and upcoming events.

IOA 2026 Annual Conference
Join Virtually | 13-15 April 2026

REGISTER NOW

Clarifications to the IOA SOPs and Code of Ethics

Join us for a Guided Review Session on 28 January at 9:00 AM PT | 12:00 PM ET, and provide feedback at one of the upcoming Feedback Sessions on Friday, 6 February at 9:00 AM PT | 12:00 PM ET, Monday, 9 February at 10:00 AM PT | 1:00 PM ET, and Thursday, 12 February at 8:00 AM PT | 11:00 AM ET. RSVP now to join members and IOA leadership for this important task. Zoom details will be provided after completing your RSVP.

[RSVP to Attend](#)

[Read More](#)

What is IOA?



Quick Links

- [Profile Portal](#)
- [Member Center](#)
- [Online Community](#)
- [Online Learning Center](#)
- [Outsourced Ombuds and Consultant Directory](#)
- [Independent Voice Blog](#)
- [Annual Conference](#)
- [Job Board](#)
- [IOA Friends List](#)

Upcoming Events & Trainings

- Fri Jan 23, 2026**
[2026 IOA Live Ombuds Seminar: Navigating Confidentiality as an Ombuds Every Day](#)
Category: Seminar
- Tue Jan 27, 2026**
[January Community Connections](#)
Category: Community Connections
- Wed Jan 28, 2026**
[January Community Connections](#)
Category: Community Connections
- Wed Jan 28, 2026**
[SOP and Code of Ethics Review](#)
Category: IOA Events
- Fri Feb 6, 2026**
[SOP and Code of Ethics Review](#)
Category: IOA Events

[View Full Calendar](#)

Overview of Changes

Chrome File Edit View History Bookmarks Profiles Tab Window Help

Clarifications to the SOPs and... x +

https://ioa.memberclicks.net/clarifications-to-the-sops-and-code-of-ethics

Member Login Search our site...

Relaunch to update

About IOA About Ombuds Membership Events & Training Certification Resources Publications

Clarifications to the IOA SOPs and Code of Ethics

As a best practice, our Standards of Practice and Code of Ethics will be reviewed every three to four years to address clarity issues and gaps. To facilitate this work, the Board of Directors convened a special short-term Limited Task Force last summer/early fall to make recommendations for clarity revisions. Their draft is ready, and we will hold a series of events to assist with feedback. Members are encouraged to attend and participate.

[RSVP now](#) to join members and IOA leadership for this important task. **Zoom details will be provided after completing your RSVP.**

Stage one will be a **Guided Review Session** that will take place on **28 January** at 9:00 AM PT | 12:00 PM ET, during which representatives of the Task Force will discuss the proposed revisions and introduce the new Compendium. This session will be recorded.

The second stage will be three Feedback Sessions. The Board will be seeking input on meaning and interpretation and how these revisions align with practice. These feedback sessions will take place on **Friday, 6 February** at 9:00 AM PT | 12:00 PM ET, **Monday, 9 February** at 10:00 AM PT | 1:00 PM ET, and **Thursday, 12 February** at 8:00 AM PT | 11:00 AM ET. We have asked our RAC leadership in Europe and Asia Pacific to hold space for discussion before **1 March**.

- [1. Proposed Limited Changes to the Standards of Practice](#)
- [2. Draft Compendium](#)
- [3. Feedback Form](#)

RSVP Now

Select Language

Powered by Google Translate

Quick Links

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Upcoming Events & Trainings

Fri Jan 23, 2025

[2025 IOA Live Ombuds Seminar: Navigating Confidentiality as an Ombuds](#)

TF Process

- **Source/Scope of feedback**
- **Alignment to full community**
- **Understandable to those who aren't ombuds**
- **Reduction of redundancy**
- **Suggestions that were beyond clarifications/gaps**

NEW DRAFT: Preamble/Reference to the Code of Ethics

New Preamble: *These Standards of Practice form the foundation necessary for the unique and valuable role of an Ombuds in the sponsoring organization.*

NOTE: *Working Group included much of the preamble in section 1 and also recommended decoupling/removing reference to the Code of Ethics in the SOPs.*

NEW DRAFT: IOA General Practice Standards

1.1 An Ombuds serves as a uniquely independent, impartial, informal, and confidential resource—empowering both organizations and their people to navigate concerns with trust and integrity.

1.2 When an organization establishes an Ombuds program, compliance with these standards will be upheld by the organization and the ombuds. A charter, policy, terms of reference, or a detailed program description, accepted by organizational leadership and publicized, will articulate the basis on which the ombuds operates, including through the incorporation of these standards. Adherence to these standards facilitates outcomes that build trust, enhance relationships, improve communication, and address conflict within the organization.

These standards are interdependent and non-severable; when one standard is specifically emphasized, the remaining standards are incorporated by reference.

NEW DRAFT: IOA General Practice Standards (continued)

1.3 An Ombuds works directly with individuals and groups at all levels of the organization to address concerns; facilitates open communication, dialogue, and collaborative problem-solving to resolve conflicts; helps participants identify options and connects them with appropriate resources; identifies and brings forward issues and procedural irregularities that affect individuals or the organization; and provides feedback to the organization on emerging or systemic concerns.

1.4 An Ombuds and program staff keep professionally current through relevant educational opportunities and professional development.

NEW DRAFT: Independence

2.1 An Ombuds is independent in appearance, purpose, practice and decision-making. An ombuds program operates independently from other organizational entities or functions to safeguard the program from the influences or pressures of other organizational functions.

2.2 An Ombuds program shall report to the highest level of senior leadership within the organization needed to ensure the program's independence, which is interdependent with the standards of impartiality, confidentiality, and informality.

2.3 If the Ombuds has non-Ombuds duties, those duties must not interfere with their Ombuds duties, or the ability to adhere to the principle of independence and the interdependent standards of impartiality, confidentiality, and informality.

NEW DRAFT: Independence (continued)

2.4 An Ombuds has the authority to select Ombuds program staff and to manage the Ombuds program staff and to manage the program budget and operations without undue influence or limitations.

2.5 An Ombuds program has the sole discretion over whether and how to engage regarding individual, group or systemic concerns. Acting on their own initiative, an Ombuds may bring a concern to the attention of the appropriate individuals.

2.6 An Ombuds has access, as permitted by law, to relevant individuals and information within the organization necessary to fulfill their role.

NEW DRAFT: Impartiality

3.1 An Ombuds program functions as an impartial, neutral, and unbiased resource.

3.2 An Ombuds has no personal interest in, and incurs no gain or loss from, the outcome of a matter.

3.3 An Ombuds fairly and objectively considers the implications of options and alternatives discussed with participants, including possible impacts on participants, others, and the organization. The ombuds promotes equitably administered processes but does not advocate on behalf of anyone.

NEW DRAFT: Informality

4.1 Use of the Ombuds program is voluntary. Consultation with the Ombuds is not a required step in any formal disciplinary process or grievance policy.

An Ombuds program is an informal resource that is not authorized to act, speak, or accept formal notice on behalf of the organization and works with individuals who freely and voluntarily seek assistance.

4.2 An Ombuds program is an informal and off-the-record resource. The Ombuds does not make business or policy decisions, adjudicate issues, participate in disciplinary or grievance processes, or conduct formal investigations for the organization.

4.3 An Ombuds takes action related to issues with the permission of those contacting the ombuds and at the sole discretion of the ombuds unless such action can be taken while safeguarding the identity of those contacting the ombuds program or an exception to confidentiality applies.

NEW DRAFT: Informality (continued)

4.4 An Ombuds program is not considered an agent of the organization authorized to receive notice of claims, complaints, or grievances against the organization unless specifically and expressly required by law. The Ombuds may refer individuals to the appropriate place where formal notice of claims can be made.

4.5 The Ombuds maintains no permanent records containing personally identifiable information. The Ombuds has a consistent practice for the timely elimination of personally identifiable information.

NEW DRAFT: Confidentiality

5.1 The identity of those seeking assistance from the Ombuds, as well as communications and information specifically relating to them obtained within the scope of providing ombuds services, is confidential information.

5.2 An Ombuds, an Ombuds program, and the organization shall protect confidential information. Others cannot waive this requirement. The principle of confidentiality is limited only by specific requirements in the laws of a state, territory, region, country, or associated union, and only to the extent required by such laws.

5.3 The Ombuds and Ombuds program staff do not disclose Confidential Ombuds Information and shall oppose disclosing Confidential Ombuds Information in any formal or informal, administrative, or legal matter within or external to the organization.

NEW DRAFT: Confidentiality (continued)

5.4 An Ombuds program, including all Ombuds and ombuds program staff, may only disclose Confidential Ombuds Information to the most limited extent possible, when:

1. an Ombuds determines that there appears to be an imminent risk of serious harm;
2. the participant has granted the Ombuds or the Ombuds program express permission to assist with informal resolution of a concern; whether or not to disclose is at the sole discretion of the ombuds. Any such permitted disclosure does not constitute a waiver of confidentiality regarding other Confidential Ombuds Information.

NEW DRAFT: Confidentiality (continued)

5.4 An Ombuds program, including all Ombuds and Ombuds program staff, may only disclose Confidential Ombuds Information to the most limited extent possible, when:

3. The Ombuds, in their professional judgment, determines that disclosure of confidential information about a specific matter is required to defend the ombuds or ombuds program from an allegation of professional misconduct raised in a formal proceeding or investigation;
4. Expressly required by law.

5.5 The Ombuds may provide non-confidential information about the ombuds program in any appropriate forum. The Ombuds shares data, trends, or reports in a manner that protects confidential information.

Introducing: The Compendium

- Evolving space to provide more guidance
- Sector and regional nuance
- Allows us to explain intent
- Speaks to other stakeholders
- Not binding
- Includes general definitions
- Updated annually (min)

Example 1: SOP 1.3

An Ombuds: works directly with individuals and groups at all levels of the organization to address concerns; facilitates open communication, dialogue, and collaborative problem-solving to resolve conflicts; helps participants identify options and connects them with appropriate resources; identifies and brings forward issues and procedural irregularities that affect individuals or the organization; and provides feedback to the organization on emerging or systemic concerns.

Compendium

Sole discretion

The independence of an ombuds is paramount, but an ombuds does not work in a silo. While an ombuds ultimately decides how to conduct their work, such a decision may be reached after consulting internal and external stakeholders or references, including other ombuds.

If an ombuds program employs more than one ombuds, administrative and tactical decisions may be made by the highest ranking ombuds without violating these standards. However, great care should be taken to ensure that subordinate ombuds are given the same latitude to comply with these standards in a manner that is genuine and reflective of the work and the unique approach of each ombuds

Organization

An ombuds may be tasked with serving visitors that are not employed by the organization but related to it (ex: patients, community members); as such, constituency guidance should be made clear when an ombuds program is established.

Assists

An ombuds is not a passive employee of an organization, and foundationally, an ombuds work begins along one of three paths:

- The visitor takes action (ex: the visitor speaks to their supervisor);
- The ombuds intervenes on behalf of the visitor (ex: contacting an with a hypothetical or directed question, conducting research, speaking to relevant leaders about themes or patterns of saturation); or,
- The visitor pursues formal action outside of an ombuds program (formal report).

While these three paths can overlap and diverge, an ombuds works to empower a visitor to select the path that aligns with their goals, while also realizing any obligations of duties an ombuds may have to other visitors.

Example 2: SOP 5.4

*Notwithstanding that an ombuds and ombuds staff do not disclose Confidential Ombuds Information, the following exceptions apply to the most limited extent possible. An ombuds program, including all ombuds and ombuds program staff, may only disclose confidential ombuds information, to the **most limited extent possible**, when:*

- 1. an ombuds determines that there appears to be an **imminent risk of serious harm**;*
- 2. the participant has granted the ombuds or the ombuds program **express permission** to assist with informal resolution of a concern; whether or not to disclose is at the sole discretion of the ombuds. Any such permitted disclosure does not constitute a waiver of confidentiality regarding other Confidential Ombuds Information.*

Compendium:

- *Most limited extent possible*
 - An ombuds should take particular care when an exception applies to ensure that information not being sought is not disclosed, that confidential information about other visitors is not disclosed, and XYZ.
 - Means of limitation may include redating ancillary information, seeking an *in camera* review process, or asking for special counsel to be provided to ensure compliance without excess disclosure.
- *Imminent risk of serious harm*
 - An ombuds is tasked with determining how to interpret this phrase within the context of their work environment, and while such an evaluation may evolve, program or self-standards would be prudent to have already established.
 - Harm categories that may be considered include physical, emotional, financial, patient safety, or national security.
- *Express permission*
 - Permission does not need to be written to formalized.
 - An ombuds shall consider whether the express permission given by the visitor may inadvertently reveal other information impacting other visitors, which may be a reason not to disclose the information. However, an ombuds—if deciding not to disclose such information—should creatively consider how to address the matter in accordance with these standards.

Example 2: SOP 5.4

Exceptions–

3. *the ombuds, in their professional judgment, determines that disclosure of confidential information about a specific matter is required to defend the ombuds or ombuds program from an **allegation of professional misconduct** raised in a formal proceeding or investigation;*

Compendium:

• *Allegation of professional misconduct raised in a formal proceeding or investigation:*

- The work of an ombuds is nebulous, and at times, a visitor may unintentionally or intentionally make choices which could reflect negatively on the competencies or ethics of an ombuds. If a matter elevates to a formal proceeding or investigation from an internal (ex: human resources) or external (ex: professional organization or accrediting body such as a state bar) entity, an ombuds, to *the most limited extent possible*, may break confidence to defend themselves.
- If a matter does not rise to a formal proceeding or investigation, an ombuds may work to dispel misinformation though explaining what an ombuds does, how they would typically address a hypothetical situation, or provide examples regarded their typical course of practice.
- The ombuds is a position of trust, and while there may be instances where an ombuds cannot fully dispel how another views them or their role, an ombuds demonstrates credibility by adhering to these standards, even if other roles would afford a more public manner in dispelling inaccurate information.
- ADD LINK TO OPINION FROM ETHICS LAWYER

Example 2: SOP 5.4

Exceptions:

4. expressly required **by law**.

Compendium:

•By law

- In addition to compliance with the laws of an ombud's jurisdiction (ex: mandatory reporting minor or elder abuse), as required by law may also include in accordance with a judicial order or mandate such as a litigation hold.
- Questions about confidentiality and privilege and compliance with the law should be understood by an ombuds within the context of their organization and may be uniquely impacted by the laws of a state, territory, region, country, or associated union, including implied contracts and statutory privilege.
- In the event of any formal legal proceeding, an ombuds will assert any and all applicable testimonial privileges, immunities, and legal protections available under the governing law of the organization to safeguard the confidentiality of communications and the identities of those who see assistance.
- In such instances, an ombuds shall, to *the most limited extent possible*, comply with such requirements.
- For additional information related to this exception, see (INSERT LINK to MARY ROWE's ARTICLE).

Feedback

Scope of Feedback

- Input on meaning and interpretation
- How these align to your practice
- What additional guidance would you like to see in the Compendium

How to Provide

By Zoom

- Feb 6 12 EST
- Feb 9 1 EST
- Feb 12 11 EST

By google form – accessed from home page box

Next Steps: Timeline

March/April

- Working Group will review all feedback and make final recommendations to the Board of Directors

May - August

- Board to review final recommendations
- Translate into multiple languages
- Hold information sessions with community



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Thank you. We look forward to your feedback.

