Candidate Name

Nadia Ferrara

Candidate Title

Ombuds

Organization

Indigenous Services Canada

Candidate Statement

I am interested in serving on the IOA Board because I believe deeply in what Ombuds can be. For me, Ombuds work is about ensuring that people, particularly in their most vulnerable moments, feel seen, heard, valued and respected. I believe we are at our best when we create spaces where someone can arrive carrying anger, fear, grief, uncertainty, trauma or simply the exhaustion of not feeling heard, and encounter someone willing to be fully present with them. That is simple, and it is transformative.

My life's work has been about human connection. I want to serve on the Board because I want to help protect and strengthen that human heart of our profession.

I bring experience, research, leadership and a career devoted to organizational transformation. But I would also bring something that I value just as deeply: my humility and my humanity.

My hope for IOA is that we have the courage to lead with compassion, to embrace difference without losing connection, to challenge inequity without losing dialogue, and to remain radically hopeful about the possibility of transformation.

The Ombuds profession has tremendous power, the kind that comes from being trusted with lived experience. My own journey has taught me that transformation rarely begins in relationship. It begins when somebody feels heard, and when somebody feels that they matter.

If I have the privilege of serving on the IOA Board, I want to help us create those ripples – within our association, across our profession, and through the organizations and communities we serve, because ultimately, for me, Ombuds work is not simply about resolving concerns. It is about honouring our shared humanity.

Pathway to the Profession

Over the next five years, I believe one of the greatest opportunities and responsibilities for our profession is to ensure that as our organizations become more complex, technological and process-driven, Ombuds become even more profoundly human.

We live and work in systems increasingly shaped by speed, uncertainty, polarization, artificial intelligence, organizational change and pressures to do more with less. In that environment, I believe there will be an even greater need for spaces in which human beings can simply sit together and be present, be heard, and our challenge will be to protect that space.

I believe the Ombuds profession has an incredible opportunity to demonstrate that empathy, compassion, humility and human connection are not "soft" skills, but essential leadership qualities. Ombuds can help organizations understand what policies and data alone cannot: what it actually feels like to experience the organization.

I believe we must also continue examining our understanding of neutrality and impartiality. I do not believe neutrality means indifference, nor that impartiality requires us to become emotionally detached from suffering or inequity. We can be impartial while caring deeply, we can remain independent while identifying systemic barriers, and we can listen to every perspective while refusing to lose sight of our shared humanity.

I would also bring radical hope – not hope as the belief that everything will somehow be fine, but hope as a practice; as the courage to imagine that systems created by human beings can also be transformed by human beings. Hope as the ripple created when one person feels truly heard and carries that experience into their relationship with someone else. An Elder once taught me: you teach one, you teach many; you heal one, you heal many.

That teaching has stayed with me throughout my life, and I believe Ombuds have the privilege of creating those ripples every day.

IOA Values

IOA represents people across countries, cultures, identities, sectors, career stages and ways of knowing. That diversity is an extraordinary strength, although I believe that representation alone does not create belonging. Belonging happens through relationship, and when people experience that their voice matters, that their story matters, and that there is space for them not simply to participate in the IOA, but to help shape it.

I would therefore encourage the Board to create more intentional spaces for human-to-human connection – spaces for storytelling, intergenerational and intercultural dialogue, mentorship, listening and shared learning. We need to reach beyond those voices that are already easily heard and ask who is absent, who is at the margins, and who may not yet see themselves reflected in the association. Rather than deciding what creates value for members, we can remain curious and ask them; we can create dialogue that demonstrates not simply that we listened, but what we learned and how that learning influenced our actions.

I would also like to think about membership value beyond what the IOA provides to members and toward what we create together as a community. People experience belonging when they are part of something meaningful – when their knowledge, lived experience and gifts contribute to a larger community. My hope is that every IOA member can find a place within this community where they can feel they have something meaningful to contribute. That is the type of caring and compassionate Ombuds community I would like us to continue building together.

Volunteer or Leadership Experience

My leadership experience has taught me that leadership is not about having all the answers – it is about remaining curious, present, and about creating spaces in which people can find answers together.

Within the IOA, I serve as Chair of the Membership Engagement Committee in addition to supporting the DEIAB Committee, where I have had the privilege of working with colleagues committed to advancing diversity, equity, inclusion, accessibility and belonging across our international Ombuds community. This work has reinforced for me that meaningful inclusion must be relational, sustained and reflected in the structures in which decisions are made.

Across the Government of Canada, I have spent much of my career bringing people and perspectives together. At Indigenous Services Canada, I spearheaded the integration of the Inclusion, Diversity, Equity and Accessibility Secretariat and the Informal Conflict Management Office within the Ombuds Team. This innovative model helps us connect individual lived experiences with systemic organizational change, while supporting broader work on anti-racism and inclusion. I have also worked collaboratively with the Government of Canada Ombuds Community, the Forum of Canadian Ombuds and of course, the IOA.

My leadership has also been shaped profoundly by Indigenous Elders, colleagues, clients and communities who have taught me about Cultural Humility, relational accountability, and the responsibility that comes with being invited into another person's experience.

I therefore bring a leadership style grounded in curiosity rather than certainty, humility rather than authority, and relationship rather than hierarchy. I am comfortable challenging systems, but I believe transformation becomes sustainable when people are invited into it rather than left behind by it.

I have sometimes been called a "trouble-maker," later a "wisdom warrior," and even a "hope giver." I hold those descriptions close to my heart because meaningful change sometimes requires us to lovingly disrupt what has become normalized.

That is the leadership I would bring to the IOA Board: courageous enough to ask difficult questions, humble enough to know that I do not have all the answers, and hopeful enough to believe that we can find new ways forward for the Ombuds profession together.

Professional Expertise

Of the areas identified, I bring particularly extensive experience in research and strategic partnership development, together with expertise in organizational transformation, Cultural Humility, trauma- and resilience-informed practice, reconciliation, DEIAB, policy development, teaching, and human-centred dialogue.

My academic and professional career has crossed disciplines and sectors: art therapy, anthropology, psychology, public policy, organizational change, victims' rights, reconciliation, inclusion and Ombuds practice. What connects these experiences is my care for people – how people create meaning, how systems affect us, how relationships can restore dignity, and how lived experience can transform institutions.

My approach to partnership is deeply relational, and I have built partnerships across government, academia, Ombuds communities and Indigenous contexts. I believe trust is not something we can

demand through our title or institutional authority. Trust is something we earn through how we show up when we engage with others, and it grows when people see consistency between what we say and what we do.

My research experience similarly influences the perspective I would bring to the Board. I value evidence, but I also ask us to broaden what we recognize as evidence. Stories are evidence, lived experience is knowledge, and patterns emerging from hundreds of conversations can tell us something that a policy document cannot. Ombuds are uniquely positioned to bring those truths into places where they might otherwise remain invisible.

My work has consistently involved creating bridges: between people and systems, lived experience and policy, grassroots voices and decision-making tables, theory and practice, and sometimes between people who have very different understandings of the same reality.

I believe these experiences could support IOA's strategic direction by helping us strengthen partnerships, deepen our research and learning, and ensure that our strategic decisions remain connected to the human beings our profession exists to serve.

Candidate Bio

My professional journey has always been rooted in one purpose: to help others help themselves, and to create spaces where people feel like they belong.

I began my career as an art therapist, working from 1990 to 2003, including with Indigenous communities in Northern Quebec. Those early experiences profoundly shaped who I am and my way of being with others. As a Western-trained therapist, I was taught the importance of professional distance and individual healing. My clients taught me something different: that healing is relational and collective; that the person sitting across from me is the expert of their own lived experience; and that my responsibility is not to impose my knowledge, but to listen, witness, learn, and walk alongside the individual seeking my help with humility.

In 2003, I entered the Canadian Federal Public Service as a Senior Policy Advisor. I quickly learned that we are very good at developing policies, procedures and processes, but that the essential human elements of empathy and compassion were often missing. I became committed to humanizing the bureaucracy – bringing empathy, compassion, lived experience and a trauma- and resilience-informed lens into policy-making and organizational change. This work became deeply connected to my own personal commitment to reconciliation, and inspired me to develop my reconciliACTION and Cultural Humility Dialogue Sessions, which I have delivered to more than 40,000 public servants to date.

I later served as Executive Director of the Office of the Federal Ombudsman for Victims of Crime at the Department of Justice Canada and led work in Values, Ethics, Diversity and Inclusion at Parks Canada Agency as Senior Director. Today, as Ombuds at Indigenous Services Canada and part-time Ombuds at the Privy Council Office, I feel that my journey has come full circle. The therapist, teacher, public servant and Ombuds are not separate parts of me – in every role, I have been a helper, a listener and a learner.