Candidate Name

Paul Sotoudeh JD (Juris Doctor)

Candidate Title

University Ombuds

Organization

University of Rochester

Candidate Statement

I believe my breadth of leadership experience in the ombuds profession, particularly my 8 years as COFO Chair, and my personal connections across the various ombuds organizations make me a useful candidate for the IOA Board at this moment. I've successfully stewarded a broad-based ombuds organization and, with the help of a strong executive committee, helped build and lead a robust all-volunteer community that supported itself with multiple programs. I'd like to bring those experiences and connections to bear in support of the broader organizational ombuds profession through a role on the IOA Board.

Pathway to the Profession

The ombuds profession faces many challenges in the years to come, but one is a crisis from the outside, as external actors continue to use and exploit the words "ombuds" and "ombudsman" as marketing terms, untethered from their actual meaning and for services that do not even remotely follow recognized professional standards of practice. These actors take advantage of the public's vague understanding that the ombuds is a neutral party, but lack of knowledge about the ombuds role and resource as an established, defined profession. Bit by bit, these misuses incorrectly define what an ombuds is for scores of people, and as a profession we must aggressively counter them or risk losing control of the meaning of the word.

IOA Values

Engagement requires broad-based consistent representation and outreach, including touchpoints where communities feel safe and welcomed to raise issues and concerns with the state of the organization. There is no feasible way to create sector-specific and interest-specific opportunities for every single possible community, but maintaining opportunities for connection at different times of day and, when possible, in different parts of the world is crucial to soliciting honest feedback. The organization then must do the hard part - building credibility and trust by listening, acknowledging, and, when appropriate, acting on the feedback received, and doing so in a transparent way that makes clear that a concern was heard even if the outcome isn't exactly what the member wanted.

Volunteer or Leadership Experience

During my federal service, I also served as Chair of the Coalition of Federal Ombuds (COFO) for a cumulative 8 years over two stints, first from September 2016 to June 2017, then again from March 2018 until my departure from federal service in September 2025.

I currently serve, and have served for the last three years, as the communications director of the California Caucus of College and University Ombuds (commonly known as "Cal Caucus").

I also served for four years, from 2007-2011, as President of the Screaming Eagles, a 501(c)(4) social organization with over 1000 paid members and an unpaid leadership committee and volunteer base.

Professional Expertise

As COFO Chair, I built relevant partnerships and opened communication channels with the ABA Ombuds Committee, USOA, and IOA itself to support the broad-based interests of the federal ombuds community.

Candidate Bio

I have been the University Ombuds at the University of Rochester since September 2025. Prior to that, I served for 8 1/2 years as the Chief Ombuds at the US Patent and Trademark Office (USPTO), 3 1/2 years as an Associate Ombudsman at the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB), and 6 years as a Senior Assistant Ombudsman at the Transportation Security Administration (TSA).