

IOA Standards of Practice Revisions For Community January 2026

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.

Existing Language IOA SOPs		New Language
IOA General Practice Standards		
1.1	<p>The Ombuds is an independent, impartial, informal and confidential resource for an organization.</p> <p>Compliance with the standards is essential for an Ombuds program</p>	<p><i>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.</i></p>
1.2	<p>The Ombuds assists people through voluntary consultation and provides information, guidance and assistance in developing options to address their concerns.</p> <p>When possible the Ombuds facilitates outcomes that build trust, enhance relationships and improve communication within the organization.</p>	<p><i>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.</i></p> <p><i>These standards are interdependent and non-severable; when one standard is specifically emphasized, the remaining standards are incorporated by reference.</i></p>

Existing Language IOA SOPs	New Language
1.3 The Ombuds assists the organization by identifying procedural irregularities and systemic problems. This may include identifying emerging trends, policy gaps, and patterns of problematic behavior in ways that do not disclose confidential communications or information. The Ombuds may provide general recommendations to the organization for addressing these concerns.	<p><i>An Ombuds:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>A. works directly with individuals and groups at all levels of the organization to address concerns;</i> <i>B. facilitates open communication, dialogue, and collaborative problem-solving to resolve conflicts;</i> <i>C. helps participants identify options and connects them with appropriate resources;</i> <i>D. identifies and brings forward issues and procedural irregularities that affect individuals or the organization; and</i> <i>E. provides feedback to the organization on emerging or systemic concerns.</i>
1.4 Each Ombuds program shall have a charter, Terms of Reference or a detailed program description approved by executive leadership of the organization that complies with the provisions of the IOA Code of Ethics and SOPs and that articulates the basis on which the O operates. The Ombuds keeps professionally current through relevant CE and provides opportunities for its staff professional development	<p><i>An Ombuds and program staff keep professionally current through relevant educational opportunities and professional development.</i></p>

Existing Language IOA SOPs		New Language
Independence		
2.1	The Ombuds is independent in appearance, purpose, practice and decision-making. The Ombuds operates independently of the line and staff reporting structures and without influence from other functions or entities within the organization.	<p><i>An Ombuds is independent in appearance, purpose, practice and decision-making.</i></p> <p><i>An ombuds program operates independently from other organizational entities or functions to safeguard the program from the influences or pressures of other organizational functions.</i></p>
2.2	The Ombuds program reports to the highest authority possible within the organization. In executing the roles and responsibilities, the Ombuds does not report programmatically to any function that affects, or is perceived affecting the Ombuds independence.	<p><i>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.</i></p>
2.3	The Ombuds holds no other position that compromises or could reasonably be perceived as compromising the Ombuds's independence. If the Ombuds has non-Ombuds duties, those duties must not interfere with their Ombuds duties. The Ombuds must clearly communicate when they are and are not	<p><i>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.</i></p>

Existing Language IOA SOPs		New Language
	acting as the Ombuds.	
2.4	<p>The Ombuds has the authority to select Ombuds program staff and to manage the Ombuds program budget and operations without undue external influence or limitations.</p> <p>However, the Ombuds has no formal policy-making enforcement or disciplinary role except internally within the Ombuds program. The Ombuds must clearly communicate when they are not acting as the Ombuds.</p>	<p><i>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.</i></p>
2.5	<p>The Ombuds has the sole discretion over whether and how to engage regarding individual, group or systemic concerns.</p> <p>Acting on their own initiative, an Ombuds may bring a concern to the attention of the appropriate individuals.</p>	<p><i>An Ombuds program has the sole discretion over whether and how to engage regarding individual, group or systemic concerns.</i></p> <p><i>Acting on their own initiative, an Ombuds may bring a concern to the attention of the appropriate individuals.</i></p>
2.6	The Ombuds has access to relevant individuals and information within the organization as necessary to fulfill their informal role and as permitted by law.	<p><i>An Ombuds has access, as permitted by law, to relevant individuals and information within the organization necessary to fulfill their role.</i></p>

Existing Language IOA SOPs		New Language
Impartiality		
3.1	The Ombuds functions as an impartial, neutral, and unbiased resource.	<i>An ombuds program functions as an impartial, neutral, and unbiased resource.</i>
3.2	<p>The Ombuds has no personal interest in, and incurs no gain or loss from, the outcome of a matter.</p> <p>The Ombuds declines involvement when the Ombuds determines that they may have a real or perceived conflict of interest.</p>	<i>An Ombuds has no personal interest in, and incurs no gain or loss from, the outcome of a matter.</i>
3.3	<p>The Ombuds fairly and objectively considers issues and people who may be affected.</p> <p>The Ombuds promotes equitably administered processes but does not advocate on behalf of anyone.</p>	<i>An ombuds fairly and objectively considers the implications of options and alternatives discussed with participants, including possible impacts on participants, others, and the organization.</i> <i>The ombuds promotes equitably administered processes but does not advocate on behalf of anyone</i>
3.4	The Ombuds facilitates communication, dialogue, and collaborative problem-solving and helps identify a range of reasonable options to surface or resolve issues or concerns.	<i>3.4 concepts moved to general standards under 1.3 and incorporating into the appropriate paragraphs rather than as a complete separate standard</i>

Existing Language IOA SOPs		New Language
Informality		
4.1	The Ombuds 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.	<p><i>Use of the ombuds program is voluntary. Consultation with the Ombuds is not a required step in any formal disciplinary process or grievance policy.</i></p> <p>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.</p>
4.2	Consultation with the Ombuds is not a required step in any formal disciplinary process or grievance policy.	<p><i>An ombuds program is an informal and off-the-record resource.</i></p> <p><i>The Ombuds does not make business or policy decisions, adjudicate issues, participate in disciplinary or grievance processes, or conduct formal investigations for the organization</i></p>
4.3	The Ombuds takes specific action related to an individual's issue only with the individual's express permission and only to the extent permitted, and even then, at the sole discretion of the Ombuds, unless such action can be taken in a way that safeguards the identity of the individual contacting the Ombuds Office.	<p><i>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.</i></p>

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4.4	<p>Consistent with these standards, consulting with the Ombuds is completely voluntary.</p> <p>People who use the services of the Ombuds are understood to have agreed to abide by the terms, conditions, and principles under which the program was created and not call the Ombuds to testify or disclose confidential information in any formal, legal, or other matter.</p>	<i>Concepts moved to 4.1</i>
4.5	<p>The Ombuds is not 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.</p>	<i>New 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.</i>
4.6	<p>The Ombuds creates no permanent records containing confidential information. The Ombuds has a</p>	<i>New 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.</i>

Existing Language IOA SOPs		New Language
consistent practice for the timely destruction of confidential information.		
Confidentiality		
5.1	The identity of those seeking assistance from the Ombuds, as well as communications and information specifically relating to them is confidential information.	<i>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.</i>
5.2	To the maximum extent permitted by law, the Ombuds shall protect confidential information, and others cannot waive this requirement. The Ombuds and the organization that established the program shall take reasonable measures to safeguard the security of confidential information.	<i>An ombuds, an ombuds program, and the organization shall protect confidential information. Others cannot waive this requirement.</i> <i>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.</i>
5.3	Except as provided in these standards, the Ombuds does not disclose confidential information in any matter within the organization.	<i>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.</i>
5.4	The Ombuds shall oppose disclosing	<i>An ombuds program, including all ombuds and ombuds program staff, may only</i>

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	<p>confidential information in any formal, administrative, or legal matter external to the organization, unless an appropriate judicial or regulatory authority determines that disclosure is necessary to prevent a manifest injustice or that disclosure is required because the interests served by disclosure clearly outweigh the interests served by ombuds confidentiality.</p> <p><i>disclose Confidential Ombuds Information to the most limited extent possible, when:</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <i>1. an ombuds determines that there appears to be an imminent risk of serious harm;</i> <i>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.</i> <i>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;</i> <i>4. expressly required by law</i>
5.5	<p>The Ombuds may disclose confidential information as necessary if the Ombuds determines that the failure to do so could result in imminent risk of serious harm.</p> <p><i>Concept moved to 5.4</i></p>

Existing Language IOA SOPs		New Language
5.6	The Ombuds may disclose confidential information about a specific matter to the extent the ombuds determines it is necessary to defend themselves against a formal complaint of professional misconduct.	<i>Concept moved to 5.4</i>
5.7	Confidential information relating to an individual may be disclosed with their permission to assist with informal resolution of a concern but at the sole discretion of the Ombuds.	<i>Concept moved to 5.4</i>
5.8	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.	<i>New 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.</i>