



## COALITION OF FEDERAL OMBUDSMAN

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### MEETING MINUTES

**Meeting Date and Time:** December 8, 2021, 1:35-2:58 pm (EST)

**Location:** WebEx

**Agenda:**

1. COFO Nominating Committee and the upcoming Executive Committee elections
2. Status of COFO mailing lists
3. COFO Website
4. COFO Voluntary Leave Transfer Initiative
5. Next Ombuds Supporting Ombuds (OSO) meeting 1/26/22
6. Announcements – Training opportunities, job openings, or really any office and ombudsman happenings you'd like to tell the world about
7. General Questions - Space for programs to ask questions and get feedback from the COFO community in a short discussion format
8. Discussion Topics
  - Have you noticed a change in your visitors since the pandemic began? Some of our offices have reported (among other things) increased anger, a greater sense of entitlement, or a lot more anxiety. Let's discuss, compare notes, and talk about strategies for serving these visitors.
  - The so-called "elevator speech" is an important tool for any ombuds to quickly explain the value of the ombuds role and resource to stakeholders. So what's in your elevator speech? Let's think about the things we need to say and the best ways to say them.
9. Reminders

**Highlights:**

1. **COFO Nominating Committee and the upcoming Executive Committee elections**
  - a. Current Executive Committee term ends 3/1/2022, as term is two years long.
  - b. Charter calls for Nominating Committee to administer the election—take nominations, assess eligibility to run and vote, and to count ballots.
  - c. Volunteers are Jenn Mahony, Elisa Enriquez, and Bina Patel; thanks to all of them
  - d. Consider running for an Executive Committee role if you are a voting member of COFO, which entails serving as a Federal ombuds; individuals can be nominated or you can nominate yourself.
  - e. Chair is a single person, Vice-Chair, Secretary, and Coordinator positions can be held by two people.

- f. Chair leads the organization and runs the meetings; Vice-Chairs assist and act in the absence of the Chair; Secretaries keep the records, take minutes, tally votes outside of Executive Committee elections; Coordinators maintain lists, conduct outreach, and receive notice to the organization.
- g. Voting members will receive one vote for Chair and two each for Vice-Chair, Secretary, and Coordinator.
- h. The difference between voting and non-voting members of COFO is that voting members are serving as Federal ombuds and practice to the Standards of independence, confidentiality, and impartiality. Non-voting members do not have to serve as ombuds; for example, they may be interested in ADR or ombuds work or may be retired. Non-voting members are an important part of the COFO community.
- i. Nominating committee will open the nominations for a month and then hold elections in January 2022 with the announcement of the new Executive Committee expected at the February 2022 COFO meeting.
- j. Contractors cannot vote at the moment, as the Charter indicates that individuals have to be Federal employee ombuds. Work is ongoing to clarify the Charter with the Charter and Governance Workgroup and the Executive Committee.
- k. Consider running for a position or thinking about people you think would be good to nominate for the Executive Committee positions.

## **2. Status of COFO mailing lists**

- a. The Google group is officially retired because we could not rely on it to send to all, so no more double emails.
- b. Present mailing list is one way traffic, not a listserv, so we continue to look for other solutions for back and forth discussion.
- c. Please advise the Coordinators Laurel Gordon and Heather Milner, who did an outstanding job of checking the mailing lists, if you are not receiving COFO emails so we can make sure that you are on the mailing list.

## **3. COFO Website**

- a. Still looking for a new home for the COFO website.
- b. Department of Education has graciously hosted the COFO website for many years and has asked us to look for a place to migrate the website.
- c. It can be a Federal agency, quasi-Federal agency, or a private location.
- d. COFO has no money, so we are looking for donated server space.
- e. If you have any idea or solution, email an Executive Committee member.

## **4. COFO Voluntary Leave Transfer Initiative**

- a. COFO Voluntary Leave Transfer Initiative is designed to support ombuds who have been approved for voluntary leave by their agency.
- b. It may be difficult for ombuds to ask for voluntary leave donations due to the nature of the work or role they play in an organization.

- c. This initiative allows us to donate leave across Federal agencies and support our ombuds community.
- d. Any questions, reach out to Wendy Kamenshine, Heather Milner, or Susanne Porch.

**5. Ombuds Supporting Ombuds (OSO) Meeting**

- a. OSO meetings are led by Heather Milner.
- b. They are offered as a way to connect and/or let off steam and support each other.
- c. Meetings are typically held on the fourth Wednesday of the month but no meeting will take place in December.
- d. Next meeting is January 26, 2022 from 2:00-3:00 pm EST.

**6. Announcements**

- a. None

**7. General Questions**

- a. None

**8. Discussion Topics**

- a. Have you noticed a change in your visitors since the pandemic began? Some of our offices have reported (among other things) increased anger, a greater sense of entitlement, or a lot more anxiety. Let's discuss, compare notes, and talk about strategies for serving these visitors.
  - i. Guy Weber and Mollie Berg led the discussion.
  - ii. Some have seen a whole lot of change in behavior, mostly related to COVID, in the internal space.
  - iii. Initially, individuals had concerns about return to work, the vaccine mandate, and what is safe and meaningful.
  - iv. General sense of shortness, a change of behavior, with folks.
  - v. An internal ombuds noted that initially there was not too much of a difference and recognized that their visitors have job-related concerns, while externally facing clientele deal with visitors possibly having a range of desperations.
  - vi. External ombuds has seen a big increase in visitors this year and unsure if it is pandemic-related.
  - vii. Many Federal agencies have not moved back from maximum telework, so there is a perceived unfairness in comparing agencies, as some Federal work does not allow for 100% telework. Some have flexibility, like telework 2-3 days/week.
  - viii. Inflection point--some Federal workers returned to in-person work or never went home while some are still at home.
  - ix. Before COVID, telework was not more than a limited option in one agency, but the pandemic has opened the door to people asking what the options are.

- x. Uptick in number of people coming in with existing anxieties exacerbated by the pandemic.
- xi. An agency is considering a second campaign to encourage greater civility and acts of kindness, to rebuild a sense of community. Last year's campaign had to do with election and civility. Used to value the holiday party but not doing that this year, so they are coming up with something to fill the void and remind each other of the best of human nature.
- xii. One challenge is that a lot of social time is gone.
- xiii. Social interaction problems initially diminished during the pandemic, but some are seeing that pattern return.
- xiv. Some people seem to be more impatient, want things done quickly and virtually.
- xv. Some mentioned that people are more standoffish.
- xvi. Folks have been working in a certain way for a long time, so they have a sense of expectation that the agency is going to understand and have learned from what we have gone through, what's gone well. Early on, there was a time of adjustment to telework. Will the agency maintain it for the future? Tenor has changed in the last six weeks as discussions concern re-entry.
- xvii. How much of the creativity and flexibility will be possible? Some agencies will not be going back to what was before. The boundaries have changed.
- xviii. Some agencies promised 60 days of notice before going back and will not be going back to what it was before.
- xix. This goes to competitiveness, to attracting talent, a retention tool. It is a workers' market. Will people be told they have to go back in-person, while they have shown that they can do their job from home? Some may leave.
- xx. Organizational agility is being questioned by external and internal visitors. Internals—What if employees refuse to do what agency asks? Are organizations equipping managers on how people can be team players in this new environment? Externals—Expectation that organization can rebound. Is organization prepared?
- xxi. It depends how employees say they are not going to do something, as it could potentially be insubordination depending on how they say that. Ways to do that that are positive vs. ways that require discipline.
- xxii. Unintended consequences and conflict cycle and responsibility of conflict being discussed in agency.
- xxiii. World has changed so much; people are asserting autonomy and have greater expectation of being involved in decision-making, to be engaged. Is management engaging employees on what the nature of work will be?
- xxiv. Some have seen slight uptick in people saying they are considering looking for work elsewhere and people asking about career advancement.

- xxv. Insubordination can be loaded for many; could be clear or solely substantive disagreement.
  - xxvi. More confidence that people can find work elsewhere.
  - xxvii. In the beginning of the pandemic, external ombuds noted that people were very angry, a lot of sadness and anxiety. Visitors are now beginning to articulate what they want more, including more flexibility from government. They want their voices to be heard. An ombuds noted that they try to listen more thoughtfully, give people more breaks in silence, take more time for careful listening. People start to get to heart of the matter.
- b. The so-called “elevator speech” is an important tool for any ombuds to quickly explain the value of the ombuds role and resource to stakeholders. So what’s in your elevator speech? Let’s think about the things we need to say and the best ways to say them.
- i. Quick, couple of minutes to explain what the ombuds does and introduce the role.
  - ii. An internal ombuds explains that they serve employees and are confidential, impartial, and independent; usually include piece about conflict resolution and informational, coaching, and advisory resource.
  - iii. One ombuds likes to think of it as an accordion with core things to say and can compress or expand, as necessary. One can think of it in terms of time, like two sentences if one is on the elevator for two floors; one can add a few sentences if one is going up 10 floors. Useful for outreach, as you can make a five minute presentation or an hour. What will you add, and what can you toss out?
  - iv. Can think of a long escalator ride speech if you have more time.
  - v. Can begin with your outreach presentation and boil it down to the most important issues to share.
  - vi. Suggestion to practice as if you are hopping on an elevator and start talking, literally mini-presentations of two-three sentences.
  - vii. An external ombuds noted that they tie in some mission responsibilities of the program, how does ombuds support the organization?
  - viii. One ombuds explains how work they are doing makes the organization higher functioning.
  - ix. You may need an elevator, an escalator, and a one-sentence warp speed speech. You build depending on how much time you have with the audience.

## 9. Reminders

- a. If you are interested in an Executive Committee position and have questions, reach out to any Executive Committee and/or look at Charter.

- b. Holidays can be a wonderful time, sharing and connection. Remember that it can be a very stressful or difficult time for people. Remember to support ourselves, our stakeholders, and each other.
- c. Next meeting is January 12, 2022.

**Attendance 12/8/2021**

Last	First	Agency	Call-In
Anderson	Jeff	DOE	1
Berg	Mollie	DOD / National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency (NGA)	1
Bookstein	Monique	FBI	1
Cecil	Tina	FBI	1
Coffman	Cherina	NGA	1
Dorn	Dedra	FDIC	1
Elson	Kayla		1
Enriquez	Elisa	Los Alamos Laboratory (DOE)	1
Foisy	Paul-Dominick	State	1
Garmon	Felisa	CFPB	1
Gill	Sarah	FINRA	1
Gordon	Laurel	DOJ / U. S. Marshals Service (USMS)	1
Heffernan	Claire	TSA	1
Holland	ShaVon	Dept. of Education	1
Hopkins	Emilee	NGA	1
Jarrett	Syreeta	DIA	1
Kamenshine	Wendy	CFPB	1
Katherine	Erica	FDA	1
Lawrence	Steve	DHS Office of Intelligence & Analysis	1
Levine	Lisa	DOJ / Executive Office of Immigration Review (EOIR)	1
Mahony	Jennifer	Boston Childrens Hospital	1
Maurer	Bill	Census	1
Michael	David	NIH	1
Miller	Carla	DOJ / ATF	1
Milner	Heather	CFPB	1
Patel	Bina	USPTO	1
Piziali	Jamie	EPA	1
Porch	Susanne	Commerce / National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST)	1
Robinson	Belinda	FBI	1

## UNCLASSIFIED

<b>Last</b>	<b>First</b>	<b>Agency</b>	<b>Call-In</b>
Rojas	Nick	DOD / DIA	1
Roth	Lewis	NRO	1
Rowe	Mary	Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT)	1
Smith	Julie	Census	1
Sotoudeh	Paul	USPTO	1
Stergio	Marcus	Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs / DOL	1
Tisdale	Laurice	HHS / CMS	1
Valdez	Roberta	FDIC (RETIRED)	1
Vermillion	Chris	TSA	1
Villafane	Jacqueline	American Red Cross	1
Voloshin	Victor	NIH	1
Walker	Olivia	DOD / Army Medical Readiness Assistance Program	1
Weber	Guy	DOD / NGA	1
Wolfe	Lexi	DOE	1
Yuille Banford	Deanna	DOD / Defense Human Resources Activity	1
		Total	43