



## COALITION OF FEDERAL OMBUDSMAN

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### MEETING MINUTES

**Meeting Date and Time:** March 9, 2022, 1:36-2:58 pm (EST)

**Location:** Webex

**Agenda:**

1. New COFO Executive Committee
2. Ombuds Day 2022 is October 13<sup>th</sup> – Federal rep still needed on committee!
3. COFO Website – help still needed!
4. Reminder: Peer Practitioner Network participant survey
5. Voluntary Leave Transfer Initiative reminder
6. Next Ombuds Supporting Ombuds (OSO) meeting 3/23/22
7. Announcements – Training opportunities, job openings, or really any office and ombudsman happenings you'd like to tell the world about
8. General Questions - Space for new and emerging practitioners and programs to ask questions and get feedback from the COFO community in a short discussion format
  - How long do people have to leave voicemails on your system before it cuts them off? For example, some systems have a voicemail length limits of 2-3 minutes and then the system ends the message and hangs up on the caller. This sometimes can impact people attempting to leave detailed messages with us.
9. Discussion Topics –
  - As federal agencies look to transition back to the physical workplace, let's talk about some trends in that area. Based on what we've seen in the last week, rules governing masking and testing for onsite employees are being relaxed, at least for the moment. Have you seen cases come in related to that? How will this apply to your own practice? What about your personal approach to work and meeting with people in person?
  - Your topic here!

**Highlights:**

1. **New COFO Executive Committee**
  - a. Paul acknowledged first COFO meeting of new Exec Committee, introduced Guy, Mollie, Heather as members continuing service from last term, and introduced Jason and Marcus as new members, and Tyler assisting Heather with the Coordinator role.
  - b. Deep thanks and appreciation to those from prior Exec Committee who just completed their terms, and to the Election Committee for their hard work reviewing and processing nominations, setting us up for welcoming new committee members.
2. **Ombuds Day 2022 is October 13<sup>th</sup> – Federal rep still needed on committee!**

- a. Reminder of date, October 13, Ryan Smith joined us last time to share more information.
  - b. We are still looking for a federal representative on that committee. Ken Skodacek previously served, giving COFO significant representation on that committee .
  - c. Ombuds Day is coordinated through the ABA's Dispute Resolution Section Ombuds Committee and the Ombuds Day Subcommittee.
  - d. Please consider volunteering to serve as the federal representative for this year's Ombuds Day. Additional email reminders will be distributed in the near future .
  - e. Please reach out to Paul or Ryan if interested.
- 3. COFO Website – help still needed!**
- a. Still in need of a new home. If your agency or an organization you are aware of has the ability to host, please let us know.
- 4. Reminder: Peer Practitioner Network participant survey**
- a. Please complete participant survey if you are able to, it will help us with planning for the Peer Practitioner Network.
  - b. Network point of contact Susanne Porch mentioned that she sent an email to those who have already expressed an interest in joining, and reminded that survey closes today.
  - c. Will be holding meeting in near future to discuss roles and next steps.
  - d. If you want to join the Peer Practitioner Network, please reach out to POC and please remember to complete survey if you are a network participant and haven't been able to complete the survey to this point.
- 5. Voluntary Leave Transfer Initiative reminder**
- a. Initiative is to support federal employees who need leave transfers, but not able to ask others in their agency for support due to ombuds' needing to be impartial and independent.
  - b. Initiative alleviates that discomfort by allowing ombuds to transfer leave to each other interagency.
  - c. If you think you might need leave, and if you have been approved for the voluntary transfer program within your agency, please let us at COFO know and we can facilitate the transfer from another ombuds.
- 6. Next Ombuds Supporting Ombuds (OSO) meeting 3/23/22**
- a. Next meeting March 23 from 2pm to 3pm.
  - b. Some history, OSO started shortly after pandemic began to create spaces for ombuds to connect about things going on in our own lives, a bit less professional and a bit more personal, in order to support the needs of COFO ombuds.
  - c. Heather added that last month Olivia Walker joined and presented, which was wonderful and very interactive. Nothing out of the ordinary planned for this month's

meeting, but Heather will send out an update with information about this month's meeting shortly.

**7. Announcements – Training opportunities, job openings, or really any office and ombudsman happenings you'd like to tell the world about**

- a. Noreen Kinnavy shared that, if there is anyone in the COFO community (not necessarily an ombuds) who is interested and able to take this on, someone in her agency is hoping to learn more about the ombuds and ADR profession. They are looking for a placement of between four to eight weeks, would be working under the ombuds/ADR practitioner's supervision as an intern. Reach out to Noreen by phone or email if anyone has an interest. Her contact information was shared in the WebEx chat box. Thank you in advance for considering the opportunity.
  - i. Paul asked if she can share the person's grade level, and whether that is even material to the internship or detail. Also, what would the timing be?
  - ii. Apparently the person looking to intern/detail is a GS-13 (90% sure). In terms of timing, there is flexibility, but she otherwise isn't sure of the exact timeframe this person needs to intern/detail within.
- b. New ombuds at George Mason University welcomed herself, first COFO meeting attended, wanted to raise that she will be looking to hire a Coordinator and is hopeful that position will post within the next month or so. Also shared she is hoping the Coordinator can be someone who is ultimately interested in ombuds work to give that person experience.
  - i. Paul asked if she knew the potential salary range, GMU ombuds responded that the higher end of the salary range would be \$65,000. Not an ombuds position, but hoping it will be someone interested in ombuds work to allow them the opportunity to work in an office and eventually transition into an ombuds role.
  - ii. Will likely be posted at some time in the next few weeks.
  - iii. Member unmuted themselves and thanked the GMU ombuds for thinking to look for a new and aspiring ombuds, given the difficulty aspiring ombuds have breaking into the field. Paul reiterated that person's thanks to the GMU ombuds.

**8. General Questions - Space for new and emerging practitioners and programs to ask questions and get feedback from the COFO community in a short discussion format**

- a. One that was already submitted in advance, Paul read it to the group and opened it up for discussion:
  - i. How long do people have to leave voicemails on your system before it cuts them off? For example, some systems have a voicemail length limit of 2-3 minutes and then the system ends the message and hangs up on the caller. This can sometimes impact people attempting to leave detailed messages with us.
    1. Someone shared that at one point in time, their voicemail length limit was 20 minutes, which they do not recommend because people will leave 20 minute messages and then possibly even call back to leave another message and say more.

2. Someone else shared that they believes their own voicemail length limit is 2-3 minutes as well and that seems sufficient.
  3. Someone else shared that, when reading the question, they assumed the person posing the question had the goal of reducing as opposed to extending the length limit for the purposes of not creating more detailed records.
  4. Someone shared that in the federal space, ombuds don't need to worry about that as much because of ADRA. Outside the federal space, people are indeed cautious of anything that gathers more information than would be comfortable for an ombuds not protected by ADRA. One solution proposed by this person is starting the recording by stating how long they have, and asking them to keep their message to a one or two sentence explanation of what they are looking for.
  5. Someone added that it's one thing to not want a record, but it's another to want enough information to be prepared for the call that will eventually take place. Without understanding what they are looking for in advance, that creates more back and forth because when the ombuds finally connects with the person/visitor, the ombuds might need to schedule yet another call once the ombuds has had the opportunity to research and/or further consider how they can be helpful to that person/visitor.
  6. Someone added agreement with the previous comment, and that there is value in getting basic background information on what the person/visitor wants, and limiting your voicemail length to a happy medium.
- b. No other general questions posed.

## 9. Discussion Topics –

- a. Guy Weber led the discussion of the following question:
  - i. As federal agencies look to transition back to the physical workplace, let's talk about some trends in that area. Based on what we've seen in the last week, rules governing masking and testing for onsite employees are being relaxed, at least for the moment. Have you seen cases come in related to that? How will this apply to your own practice? What about your personal approach to work and meeting with people in person?
  - ii. Someone shared that in their workspace, people are back, and there's been a lot of discussion about masking policies and when is it ok to shed the masks, particularly because the policy depends on local transmission rates. To them, it feels almost back to normal. They shared that only about 5% of the people in their office are masking, and this person is one of them because 1) they have a three-year-old at home and, 2) they don't want to be the one transmitting to visitors.
  - iii. Someone mentioned that the last person who spoke is in St. Louis, for clarification, and asked that person if St. Louis is at the low transmission level. The person in St. Louis answered that the city is in the middle transmission area, and that is announced at the end of each week as a barometer for whether or not masking is required the following week. Someone clarified that what was low a few months ago is no longer low. A few weeks ago, the DC area was either

high or close to it, but under the new guidelines DC is no longer high, closer to low.

- iv. Someone else added that in their agency, when there are cases affecting a particular office, everyone in that office is reassigned back out to telework, although a vast majority of workforce still teleworking. That agency also puts out information about how many new reported COVID cases there are which allows people to decide their own masking comfort level. Also appreciated another person's comments on if the ombuds were to test positive, for contact tracing purposes, would need to reach out to someone they met with which could create an abundance of problems.
- v. Someone mentioned that their agency is not back yet, but will be soon. That agency promised everyone 30 days notice before expected to report back to office, but that email is expected in the next few days. This person asked within the agency if ombuds are allowed to require masks when the ombuds physically meets with people. They haven't received an answer yet, unsure of whether they'll be able to require masks on visitors. Curious about what others have set up in terms of plans to go back, logistics once back, etc.?
- vi. Comment in chat, first day back in that person's office and it feels great.
- vii. Someone else commented masking no longer required, which has received a mixed bag of responses and reactions (excitement, fear, confusion, judgment).
- viii. Someone else mentioned they go back next week (with OPM minimum of in office 2 day per pay period in person).
- ix. Guy asked people to think about and comment on someone's thought of what we have control over and don't, requiring people to mask or unable to.
- x. Someone answered that their office is external, so this person doesn't have the issue of what to do about people who don't want to be masked, but in thinking about it this person is remembering a few recent personal situations when they attended events and masking wasn't mandatory, it was an adjustment for them.
- xi. Comment in the chat, "Few factors that are leaning against coming back to work (people are not social distancing, inflated gas prices, money wasted on working on creating a effective teleworking environment, child care etc) I'm praying we don't have another variant!"
- xii. Someone came off mute to share that their office is going to go with how people show up to the ombuds office. Won't require one way or the other. A more germane thing to think they can control is how much ombuds coverage is needed in the office given the number of people who will actually be reporting to the office as opposed to teleworking. Their ombuds office is actually trying to find a few days when ombuds "in the office days" can overlap so that they do have the chance to see each other in person.
- xiii. Guy asked if externals have thought about this too, and how it might impact them and the ways they meet with visitors.
- xiv. An external came off mute to share that a majority of their work was phone calls and emails, but times when it was best to meet in person because of sensitive topics and confidentiality. Unsure though how many employees will be taking advantage of continued telework offerings. If most people don't go back to the office, when this ombuds goes back, she needs to think about how she can make those sensitive normally in-person conversations happen again but virtually.

- xv. Someone added that even though that person is an external, that is an interesting point for internals too, and wonders about what returning to the office means for rank and file coworkers whose interaction face-to-face with others, and particularly with ombuds, will be impacted disproportionately by continued telework.
  - xvi. The external came off mute again and shared that in their experience, they've actually been able to make more of a connection sometimes virtually. They say to visitors, "feel free to keep your video off if you are more comfortable with that, I just choose to keep mine on." And they added that it seems like a more informal way of communicating, which helps the dialogue. Not sitting there in heels and a suit feels more approachable.
  - xvii. Someone shared that just yesterday their agency ran a program designed for supervisors, but the invite went to all employees. Got a lot of participation, some on camera and others not, but a takeaway that large group meetings are perhaps best held virtually.
  - xviii. Comment from the chat that each agency will likely be slightly different depending on leadership priorities, either closely or not as closely adhering to Biden's goal for government to be a model for all other industries. Person also mentioned that retirements are apparently way up in their agency, which is getting the attention of senior leadership. They also shared that they have seen a few situations when people unhappy with performance appraisals are actually leaving as opposed to just saying they are going to leave.
  - xix. Comment from chat, "in our planning efforts, my agency is encouraging an experimental and flexible approach because what we do in weeks 1-3 may be very different as we get into months 3-6..."
  - xx. Someone came off mute to share something that they also shared in the chat, "Few factors leading against coming back to work. (people are not social distancing, inflated gas prices, money wasted on working on creating an effective teleworking environment, child care etc) Im praying we dont have another variant!" Verbal comments shared some people's uneasiness about what returning to work in this current environment actually means to different aspects of people's current life situations, work included.
  - xxi. Someone found out yesterday that due to changes in the metro route they would normally take, the only way for them to get to office is to drive. Also acknowledged the last person's concerns about bringing COVID home to elders or minors in family.
  - xxii. Someone shared related to the immunocompromised, a family member needed to go to the emergency room recently, and what this person thinks of after going to the hospital is that there are so many mixed messages between health care professionals and employers and then everyone's own personal comfort levels. Their takeaway is that we therefore need to be flexible and acknowledge people's own personal comfort levels.
  - xxiii. Someone mentioned that they haven't had anyone complaining that they've been pressured to mask or unmask, so far things seem pretty calm in the office.
  - xxiv. Paul encouraged people to continue raising their personal concerns related to this topic on OSO meetings.
- b. Paul welcomed people to share topics that are top of their minds, and those can be considered for future meeting discussion topics.

- c. Paul closed with mentioning a lighter note, that a Grizzly Bear Conflict Management position was posted recently. Responsible for coordinating conflict management in Montana, Idaho, a few other states. Requires a balanced perspective, significant grizzly bear handling experience, and strong communication skills. Read aloud other requirements of position and mentioned, "All of this sounds familiar." Ended by saying this was shared with him by a fellow COFO ombuds!

**Attendance 03/09/2022**

Last	First	Agency	Call-In
Baker	Jason	NIH	1
Behr	Virginia	FDA	1
Bookstein	Monique	Prince William County Public Schools	1
Brown	Andrea	United States Patent and Trademark Office (USPTO)	1
Brown	Dallas	DHS / National Protection and Programs Directorate	1
Cameron	Bob	CFPB	1
Chavez Rudolph	Mary	DOI	1
Coffman	Cherina	NGA	1
Davidson	Kimberly	George Mason University	1
Footman	Aaron	USPTO	1
Frazier	Veronica	DOD / DIA	1
Garmon	Felisa	CFPB	1
Gnatt	Sheldon	NSA	1
Gordon	Laurel	DOJ / U. S. Marshals Service (USMS)	1
Green	Veronica	State OIG	1
Harley	Jasmine	National Credit Union Administration	1
Hartman	Jessie	NARA/ Office of Government Information Services (OGIS)	1
Hebron	Eric	ATF	1
Holland	Shavon	Dept of Education	1
Hurley	Nathan	FDA / Center for Tobacco Products	1
Jarrett	Syreeta	DIA	1
Kelly	John	SBA	1
Kinnavy	Noreen	USAGM	1
Lenkel	Laurie	FDA	1
Levine	Lisa	DOJ / Executive Office of Immigration Review (EOIR)	1
Lloyd	Brenda	FLETC	1

## UNCLASSIFIED

Manzines	Rosamaria	Prince William County Public Schools	1
Maurer	Bill	Census	1
McGuire	Carrie	NARA / OGIS	1
Megee	Christine	DOD Education Activity	1
Miller	Carla	DOJ / ATF	1
Milner	Heather	CFPB	1
Mitchell	John	DHS	1
Patel	Bina	USPTO	1
Patno	Arielle	FDA / Center for Tobacco Products	1
Porch	Susanne	Commerce / National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST)	1
Rojas	Nick	DOD / DIA	1
Skodacek	Ken	FDA	1
Smith	Julie	Census	1
Smith	Tyler	NIH	1
Sotoudeh	Paul	USPTO	1
Stergio	Marcus	Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs / DOL	1
Swann	Benita	FDIC	1
Thomson	Ronnie	Sandia National Laboratories	1
Trujillo	Sarah	USDA	1
Vermillion	Chris	DOE	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
White	Karen	DOD / National Guard Bureau	1
Whittington	Fred (Whitt)	DOL OIG	1
Wolfe	Lexi	DOE	1
Yuille Banford	Deanna	DOD / Defense Human Resources Activity	1
		Total	54