



COALITION OF FEDERAL OMBUDSMAN

COFO MONTHLY MEETING MINUTES

Meeting Date/Time: June 14, 2023, 1:30-2:50pm (EST)

Location: Video/telephone

Agenda:

1. COFO Annual Conference
2. COFO website updates
3. USOA Annual Conference – September 13-15 in Atlanta
4. Ombuds Day 2023 – October 12
5. Voluntary Leave Transfer Initiative reminder
6. Next Ombuds Supporting Ombuds (OSO) meeting 6/28
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
9. Discussion Topic
 - At this year's IOA Annual Conference, the "Undebate" on the future of our profession considered whether it's time to rethink the core ombuds practice tenet of independence. Let's discuss that idea at the June COFO membership meeting through a multi-model lens, considering all the ombuds practice models represented in our diverse membership. IOA Executive Director Ellen Miller will join us to explain the reasoning behind the Undebate topic and help us introduce the discussion.

Highlights:

- 1. COFO Annual Conference**
 - October 13 at USPTO, hybrid conference with in person option for first time since pre-pandemic.
 - Call for presentation proposals went out a few weeks ago. In person and virtual presentations both welcome.
- 2. COFO Website Updates**
 - Making updates to the website to bring back documents and meeting minutes that were kept on the website prior to migration to adr.gov.
 - If you see anything that looks missing, let us know.
- 3. USOA Annual Conference**
 - Being held in Atlanta.
 - USOA is focused on external ombuds work and usually classical leaning.
- 4. Ombuds Day 2023**

- October 13, the day after the COFO conference.
 - There is now an Ombuds Day toolkit with a logo that can be used for email signatures.
 - Theme for this year is, “Diverse in Role United in Service”
 - Next step will be working on state proclamations, which will likely begin next month.
- 5. Voluntary Leave Transfer Initiative reminder**
- Connects ombuds who need leave with ombuds from around the federal government who have leave to donate. Helps to avoid awkward scenario where ombuds ask for or donate leave to others in their agency.
 - Contact COFO if you’ve qualified for leave transfer and would like to get leave from other ombuds.
- 6. Next Ombuds Supporting Ombuds (OSO) Meeting – 6/28**
- Scheduled for 2-3pm.
 - Safe space to discuss personal and professional topics that impact us.
- 7. Announcements - Training opportunities, job openings, or really any office and ombudsman happenings you'd like to tell the world about**
- None
- 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.**
- None
- 9. Discussion Topic:** At this year’s IOA Annual Conference, the “Undebate” on the future of our profession considered whether it’s time to rethink the core ombuds practice tenet of independence. Let’s discuss that idea at the June COFO membership meeting through a multi-model lens, considering all the ombuds practice models represented in our diverse membership. IOA Executive Director Ellen Miller will join us to explain the reasoning behind the Undebate topic and help us introduce the discussion.
- Not need to panic, IOA not considering removing independence from the Standards. Goal was to focus on the importance of it and consider what might need to change to make it as impactful as it can be.
 - When independence was conceptualized as a Standard, there was no DEIA or other programs/offices that create potentially sensitive issues for ombuds independence.
 - Independence is often misunderstood, so the goal is to make sure it is understood and how it can be achieved.
 - Someone mentioned how, at least in the government, independence is aspirational if you don’t have things like your own budget.
 - An external ombuds mentioned that their independence has been challenged by external stakeholders asking questions like, “who pays you?”
 - Another external else says power of independence is the ability for the ombuds to say or do whatever they need to in a particular moment in time.
 - In response to a question about whether there is anything else that could take the place of independence and still give ombuds access that is needed and maintain ability to practice other Standards, an internal said no.
 - Another external mentioned that it is critical to what they do, as mentioned before, in deciding what they do and don’t take on. Also, the way they approach independence is they are independent to the max, and if someone ever questioned it because of being paid by federal government, they then explain all of the ways they are independent. Also mentioned that if ombuds ever struggle to effectively explain and have senior leadership in their agencies accept and respect independence, the answer can’t be to

- get rid of it, the ombuds instead needs to continue educating and conducting outreach so that more and more people do understand, accept, and respect it.
- Someone wrote in chat, “Thank you for this conversation. Independence is so important, which is why terms of reference and charters are so appropriate. For example, what does an ombuds do when a higher level, non-ombuds higher level manager, shows up to a case review? It seems like an excellent opportunity for use to educate and definitely stop any discussions about cases. The only time perhaps it's an unhelpful crutch is when there is a lack of integrity about catching trends and doing deep thinking about potential root cause issues and how to message.”
 - Someone else mentioned, to the concern about how can you be independent when paid by your organization, they raised that using the language that the ombuds “has been designated by the organization,” as in a designated impartial, a designated confidential, a designated independent, etc.
 - Someone else said their concern with designation is that something the agency has designated can be taken away, and also makes it appear the power is coming from the organization.
 - Someone else weighed in on this that especially in the government when political appointees change every few years, and so consistency in reporting is critical through administration changes. If reporting to political, you need to start from scratch and education on the role, why you are set up the way you are, what the value of you being the “skunk in the room” at times might be.
 - Someone else mentioned that if the goal of using the term designation is to make it appear that the ombuds is not putting themselves on a pedestal and/or didn't create this high power for themselves, just refer to ADRA or IOA or other resources that talk about ombuds and Standards.
 - Someone mentioned that all four principles interact in a way that is hard to explain but essential. The previous ombuds at this person's university worked exclusively with students and reported to the dean of student life, and this ombuds themselves used to work somewhere where they reported to the Director of HR and they felt that was fine because less important is who they report to but how they do their work.
 - Someone else respectfully disagreed, that who you report to and how you do your work are both important. This person reports to the Deputy Director and also has access to the Director to remove the office from the politics.
 - Someone in the chat mentioned, “The sad/challenging thing is that our ability to actually be independent depends so much on individual organizational circumstances (and people). Simply being an ombuds is not enough to establish it in practice.”
 - Someone else mentioned that while there is value in being removed from politics and therefore not reporting to a political, being much lower is not good either. There is equal value in being as high as you can be.
 - Someone asked if it made a difference whether it was an ombuds program or office.
 - Someone answered that office is ideal.
 - Someone else shared that even though they are in high level executive meetings, people aren't concerned by that because of how many times they have repeated independence and the other Standards. Leadership also eventually understands you aren't there to participate as “one of them” but instead identifies you are there to stay in the loop and continue adding value with needed organizational awareness.

Attendees:

Last	First	Agency	Call-In
Behr	Virginia	FDA	
Berg	Mollie	NGA	1
Bloch	Brian	DOI	1
Bookstein	Monique	Prince William County Public Schools	1
Braden	Lara	DeCA	1
Chavez Rudolph	Mary	DOI	1
Chen	Sonja	DOE Intern	1
Coffman	Cherina	NGA	1
Danabar	Sheila	DHS	1
Davenport	Nathelia	FEMA ADR Advisor	1
Davidson	Kimberly	George Mason	1
Enriquez	Elisa	Los Alamos National Laboratory	1
Footman	Aaron	USPTO	1
Fox	Angela	FDA	1
Ginn	Brad	Argonne National Laboratory	1
Gnatt	Sheldon	NSA	1
Green-Small	Monica	NSA	1
Harley	Jasmine	National Credit Union Administration	1
Heffernan	Claire	TSA	1
Hendrickson	Caitlan	FEMA	1
Hurley	Nathan	FDA/Center for Tobacco Products	1
Jioia-Jones	Tyswana	MRP-APHIS	1
Johnson	Bradley		1
Kamenshine	Wendy	CFPB	1
Katherine	Erica	FDA	1
Kinnavy	Noreen	USAGM	1
Lawrence	Steven	DHS I&A	1
Lelar	Taylor	VA	1
Lenkel	Laurie	FDA	1
Levine	Lisa	DOJ / Executive Office of Immigration Review (EOIR)	1
Manderson	Katie	VA	1
Merrix	Celeste	FLETC	1

UNCLASSIFIED

Milner	Heather	CFPB	1
Maurer	Bill	Census	1
Megee	Christine	DOD	1
Michael	David	NIH	1
Miller	Carla	DOJ/ATF	1
Miller	Ellen	IOA	1
Miller Sander	Dawn	Red Cross	1
Morey	Chauntanette	FBI	1
Nelson	Annika	EPA	1
Patel	Bina	USPTO	1
Patno	Ariel	FDA	1
Piziali	Jamie	EPA	1
Porch	Susanne	Commerce/National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST)	1
Robinson	Belinda	FBI	1
Rowe	Mary	MIT	1
Sanglier	Elizabeth	TSA	1
Schauer	Greta	DHS	1
Skodocek	Ken	FDA	1
Smith	Julie	Census Bureau	1
Smith	Tyler	NIH	1
Sotoudeh	Paul	USPTO	1
Steinberg	Michael	Columbia University	1
Stergio	Marcus	Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs/DOL	1
Villafane	Jacqueline	American Red Cross	1
Vissing	Yvonne	Salem State Univeristy	1
Voloshin	Victor	NIH	1
Weber	Guy	NGA	1
Whittington	Frederick	DOL	1
Younger Banks	Tiffany	SBA	1
		Total	61