



COALITION OF FEDERAL OMBUDSMAN

COFO MONTHLY MEETING MINUTES

Meeting Date/Time: August 9, 2023, 1:30-3:00pm (EST)

Location: Video/telephone

Agenda:

1. COFO September meeting moved one week back to September 20th
2. COFO Charter – update on proposed amendment/rewrite
3. COFO Annual Conference – October 13, 2023 at USPTO in Alexandria, VA
4. USOA Annual Conference – September 13-15 in Atlanta
5. IOA September Symposium
6. Ombuds Day 2023 – October 12
7. Voluntary Leave Transfer Initiative reminder
8. Next Ombuds Supporting Ombuds (OSO) meeting 8/23
9. Announcements – Training opportunities, job openings, or really any office and ombuds happenings you'd like to tell the world about
10. 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
11. Discussion Topic
 - o Pronouns – One COFO member reports that in their office they have shied away from displaying their pronouns for neutrality reasons, because their display can be seen as a political statement. This member reports that their agency has employees around the country and sometimes an employee (particularly from a red state) will be upset with someone from the DC headquarters who displays their pronouns. How do each of you handle this issue – do you display your pronouns in your email signature? Introduce yourself with them before presentations? Why or why not? Let's discuss.

Highlights:

1. **COFO September Meeting**
 - o Want to avoid potential scheduling conflicts as much as possible and, given the USOA Annual Conference the week of September 11th, we've moved the September COFO membership meeting to September 20th at the same time of day, 1:30pm ET.
2. **COFO Charter**
 - o Proposed changes to the Charter will be sent out to COFO membership soon. ExComm just finishing up some last comments and suggestions.
 - o Charter was last updated 10 years ago, so it's a good time to update it given how much COFO and the ombuds field as a whole have developed in that time.
 - o We'll also set aside some time to discuss those changes as a group.

3. **COFO Annual Conference**
 - Has been virtual for three years but will be back in person this year, but if people can't make it there will be a virtual attendance option.
 - As always, a free event and full day of programming open to anyone with an interest in ombuds practice and a particular focus on federal ombuds.
 - More information and announcements related to the conference will likely come in September when registration opens.
4. **USOA Annual Conference**
 - Being held in Atlanta.
 - There is a government sector chapter that will also be meeting as a smaller group during the conference.
5. **IOA September Symposium**
 - DEIA focused mini event for internally facing ombuds, will be spread over two days.
6. **Ombuds Day 2023**
 - October 13, the day after the COFO conference.
 - Programming is still being put together but more information will be available soon.
 - Proclamation requesting process is going on for Ombuds Day with requesting sessions being held this week, and there is still time to participate if anyone is interested.
7. **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.
8. **Next Ombuds Supporting Ombuds (OSO) Meeting – 8/23**
 - Scheduled for 2-3pm.
 - Safe space to discuss personal and professional topics that impact us.
9. **Announcements - Training opportunities, job openings, or really any office and ombudsman happenings you'd like to tell the world about**
 - Retirement announcement.
 - FBI ombuds position is open but closes tomorrow for those who are interested.
 - DOE ombuds position was only open for 12 hours and has now been reposted with longer application window for anyone who is interested and would still like to apply.
 - Associate ombuds at ATF is new to the group.
 - George Mason University is having a gathering for university ombuds in October.
10. **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
11. **Discussion Topic: Pronouns – One COFO member reports that in their office they have shied away from displaying their pronouns for neutrality reasons, because their display can be seen as a political statement. This member reports that their agency has employees around the country and sometimes an employee (particularly from a red state) will be upset with someone from the DC headquarters who displays their pronouns. How do each of you handle this issue – do you display your pronouns in your email signature? Introduce yourself with them before presentations? Why or why not? Let's discuss.**
 - Someone shared that its part of their office and organization's culture and they do include their pronouns in email signatures.

- Someone else mentioned that it largely depends on leadership and what they message about inclusivity generally or even the use of pronouns more specifically.
- Someone shared that it's part of the organizational culture to use pronouns, internally and also among some external stakeholders, but this ombuds still doesn't use pronouns in an attempt to be impartial in case certain stakeholders have an issue with it.
- Someone feels that as a federal ombuds we should have a pulse on belonging and fairness. It goes beyond what is political and what isn't, there are things in our day-to-day practice as ombuds where we can and should endorse normative practices.
- Question asked about whether those who do and/or don't use pronouns have received any types of reactions from their stakeholders.
 - Someone who has their pronouns in their email signature has received pushback, mostly questions about why this person uses them, and the ombuds' answer was "they are a part of my name" and also "it provides a level of comfort to those who find it important for their pronouns to be known."
 - In the chat someone responded, "I share my pronouns and have not gotten questioned about it, but have received gratitude for sharing them."
- In the chat someone wrote, "I have this website hyperlinked in my pronoun in my email signature: <https://pronouns.org/how>."
- Someone asked in the chat, "May we also ask about the use of THEY in writing? I am using THEY in writing and find it puzzles people here and there."
 - Someone who doesn't use they in writing suggested it's because they have received pushback from white males who feel their gender was obvious and it's insulting to them to be asked.
 - Someone responded in the chat, "I have been advised not to use they generically, but in response to pronouns or how they have asked to be addressed. But I agree with what's been said, it could be a nice broad term."
 - Someone else mentioned they do use they because there's no reason to gender someone who we don't know.
 - An external ombuds office when referring to a consumer just refers to them as the consumer instead of using they or gendered terms. They also try to use the specific person's name as much as possible so as to be genderless without using salutations.
- Someone else in the chat shared, "To not label oneself is a privilege. Society does not give groups outside of a dominant group that option."
- Someone uses their own policy of proactively asking people how they would like to be referred to.
 - Someone likened it to their complaint training when recalling that at times people need permission to complain.
- Someone who doesn't use their pronouns says it would be very problematic in their agency because there are a wide range of cultures, some of which wouldn't welcome conversations about gender or pronouns. They want to be respectful of all stakeholder preferences and therefore shy away from asking people their pronouns.
 - Someone responded that whether or not they agree, they respect that perspective and choice and particularly because of the general preference of ombuds to be neutral.
- In the chat someone wrote, "What I hear from this wonderful conversation is the OO value for being and being perceived as respectful..."

- Someone else mentioned that when hiring an Associate Ombuds they contemplated whether it should be an ombuds who identifies as a certain gender because people are already vulnerable when approaching the ombuds and may be more comfortable working with an ombuds who identifies as a certain gender.
 - Someone responded that they talk a lot about meeting people where they are, which sometimes is not the spaces that we are individually in, so being conscious of barriers we might create for people is helpful.
- Someone feels the struggle and pull between being an effective ombuds by meeting people where they are in a situation or as a person, and meanwhile not agreeing with something that person is suggesting or is. For this person it comes down to tolerance and they are working in an organization where it would be more counterproductive than productive to put their pronouns out there.
- Someone else shared that they are in a law enforcement organization and feel that it would be polarizing and therefore do not use their pronouns. The conversation also makes them realize the other reason they don't use pronouns is a fear of not being liked or accepted, but this conversation has enabled them to feel more comfortable and just now created a new email signature using their pronouns!

Attendees:

Last	First	Agency	Call-In
Anderson	Jeff	DOE	1
Bedrossian	Leona	NIH	1
Belanus	Nicole	DC Office of the Long-Term Care Ombudsman	1
Bloch	Brian	DOI	1
Brown	Andrea	USPTO	1
Brown	Sudie	Federal Reserve	1
Crump-Wilson	Karen	N/A	1
Davis	Ashley	University of Washington	1
Doty	Brenda	Federal Maritime Commission	1
Footman	Aaron	USPTO	1
Garmon	Felisa	CFPB	1
Gartlan	Jennifer	N/A	1
Gayle	Patrick	N/A	1
Gordon	Laurel	US Marshals Service	1
Harley	Jasmine	National Credit Union Administration	1
Hartman	Jessie	OGIS	1
Hawkins	Toni	NIH	1
Hebron	Eric	DOJ	1
Hendrickson	Caitlan	FEMA	1

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Horvath	Julia	NASA	1
Johnson	Stella	N/A	1
Kamenshine	Wendy	CFPB	1
Katherine	Erica	FDA	1
Kinnavy	Noreen	USAGM	1
Knight	Burlynda	FDIC	1
Lawrence	Steven	DHS I&A	1
Lenkel	Laurie	FDA	1
Lopez Johnson	Jennifer	US Forest Service	1
Mahony	Jennifer	Boston Children's Hospital	1
Manderson	Katie	VA	1
Manzines	Rosamaria	Prince William County Public Schools	1
Marcotte	Dan	FDIC	1
Maurer	Bill	Census	1
McGuire	Carrie	OGIS	1
Megee	Christine	DOD	1
Melançon	Tom	FMCS	1
Merrix	Celeste	FLETC	1
Miller	Carla	DOJ/ATF	1
Miller	Ellen	IOA	1
Milner	Heather	CFPB	1
Morey	Chauntanette	FBI	1
Nelson	Annika	EPA	1
Palosky	Dania	Federal Reserve	1
Patel	Bina	USPTO	1
Patno	Ariel	FDA	1
Porch	Susanne	Commerce/National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST)	1
Reilly	Kevin	NASA	1
Robinson	Belinda	FBI	1
Rowe	Mary	MIT	1
Schauer	Greta	DHS	1
Skrzycki	Lisa	SEC	1
Smith	Julie	Census Bureau	1
Sotoudeh	Paul	USPTO	1

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Stergio	Marcus	Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs/DOL	1
Taylor	Lelar	VA	1
Thomson	Ronnie	Sandia National Laboratories	1
Thompson	Patricia	DC Department of Behavioral Health	1
Voloshin	Victor	NIH	1
Williams	Kellyann	GSA	1
Wolfe	Lexi	DOE	1
Younger Banks	Tiffany	SBA	1
Yuille Banford	Deanna	FDA	1
Yurgelan	Christine	N/A	1
		Total	63