

AN OVERVIEW OF CLIENT AND INTERNAL OMBUDSMEN

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INTRODUCTION

If we add together all the kinds of ombuds practitioners here there are eight to ten thousand or more North Americans engaged in such work. It is, however, important to remember that almost no statement about ombudsmen is true for all practitioners, therefore the various offices may look different from each other.

CLIENT OMBUDSMEN

Half a dozen U.S. states and all but one of the Canadian provinces have (classic) ombuds offices and some offices are quite large. Many North American cities have ombuds offices which vary in independence from those attached to a given mayor to those established by law. In the U.S. there appear to be at least a dozen school system ombudsmen and a dozen prison and mental health ombuds practitioners. Every U.S. state has a long-term care ombudsmen's office; some of these offices coordinate dozens of hundreds of part-time and full-time, paid and volunteer, nursing home ombuds practitioners. Some college and university ombudsmen serve only students and are therefore solely client ombudsmen.

Client ombudsmen also include some of the thousands of patient representatives who work in hospitals--those who function as neutrals. They include three dozen newspaper ombudsmen who serve readers, some public utility and public service ombudsmen, and the ombudsmen for major agencies like the Internal Revenue Service. There are ombuds-like citizens' complaint offices attached to many newspapers, TV, and radio stations. Some private corporations and government agencies have ombuds offices which serve contractors and/or grantees. Many large corporations have consumer complaint handlers, some of whom make major efforts to be, and to be seen as,

impartial complaint handlers. A number of churches and church bureaucracies have ombudsman offices for members of the given faith. Several large franchise operations, like the 7-11 stores, have ombudsmen who serves franchisees.

Some professional associations have ombuds officials who serve members of the profession; examples include nurses, secretaries, organists. Ombuds offices have appeared in an international youth exchange and in other international service agencies as well as in a very large insurance company serving more than a million subscribers.

INTERNAL OMBUDSMEN

There are at least a hundred and fifty college and university ombuds offices and at least five hundred corporation ombuds offices in North America. These practitioners are also appearing in the United Kingdom. Many federal agencies have set up internal ombudsmen and so have other, unusual employers like a Wall Street financial firm and a zoo. These offices usually serve both employees and managers. Some deal only with certain kinds of questions like ethics problems, although most offices take every kind of problem. Large corporations may have dozens of such ombuds professionals working with people one-on-one or on an 800 telephone line or both. Small enterprises appoint one or more part-time ombudsmen.

While the "generic term" is ombudsman, the "broad names" within private businesses in the U.S. are very varied: liaison office; internal mediator; work problems counselor; dialogue specialist; personnel communications. This author's definition of an ombuds practitioner is "a neutral or impartial administrator or manager within an institution who may provide confidential and informal assistance to anyone within that institution in resolving work (or education) related concerns, who may serve as counselor, go-between, mediator, fact-finder, systems change or upward-feedback mechanism, and whose office is located outside ordinary line management (or academic) structures."

Most ombudsmen in North America have every function possible for a complaint-handler except adjudication and arbitration. There are exceptions within corporations and in public service ombuds offices of the nonclassical type, but they appear to be rare.

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