

Examples of our work in 2022 . . .

We investigated individual complaints and helped people to resolve problems. Sometimes individual complaint investigations led us to look at system-wide issues and to recommend reforms. These are some of the cases we worked on and the solutions we advocated for.

Boat towing

Accountability for wrongful action

A community member's boat was illegally towed and destroyed by Parks and Recreation. The community member was rendered houseless, as they were living on the boat. The Ombudsman helped them file an appeal and advocated that Parks be sanctioned for the egregious behavior and for withholding relevant facts during the appeal hearing. The Hearings Office issued a sanction to Parks for the maximum amount.

Water services

Billing transparency

A tenant owed more than \$1400 in water bills when their landlord signed them up for water service without their knowledge. The Ombudsman convinced the Water Bureau to significantly reduce the debt and recommended that the Bureau cease allowing landlords to commit renters to pay services without their knowledge or consent. The Water Bureau agreed to change the practice.

Property maintenance

Even-handed enforcement

A neighbor complained about another neighbor creating a rat harborage by feeding squirrels. A Bureau of Development Services inspection found evidence of rats. The neighbor feeding the squirrels was the roommate of the homeowner, who lived on a fixed income. When the roommate continued feeding the squirrels, Development Services cited the homeowner twice, for a total of \$937. The Ombudsman found the citations unreasonable and recommended that the City reimburse the homeowner, which they did.

Parking enforcement

Fairness and flexibility

The Bureau of Transportation towed a vehicle for illegal parking. The owner appealed the tow and won, but was suffering from severe Covid symptoms and unable to pick up the vehicle for another week. By then, they could not afford the accrued storage fees. The Ombudsman argued that fairness and mitigating circumstances supported the City covering the storage fees. The City agreed, and the community member recovered the vehicle the day before it was scheduled to be sold at auction.

YOUR ROSE CITY WATCHDOG

We are here to make sure City government treats residents and businesses fairly.

We investigate complaints and identify ways to resolve them. As part of the Auditor's Office, we're independent and impartial.

"You helped me out in a situation I thought was impossible to get out of. You absolutely were there when I needed you."

— M.D.

"Single-handedly, the Ombudsman's office restored my faith that government really can look out for the interests of the people it's meant to serve. I am just immensely grateful it exists."

— W.T.

Contact Us

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Photo credit: David Nguyen



Annual Report 2022

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Changes to our team

At the end of 2022, Margie Sollinger stepped down as Ombudsman after serving in the role for 11 years. During this time she investigated numerous complaints and produced reports on systemic problems in the City. Jennifer Croft came on board as the new Ombudsman in December, bringing a background in international diplomacy and development and extensive experience working on human rights and democratic governance issues in various countries.

The Ombudsman's Office has two other full-time employees, Deputy Ombudsman Tony Green and Deputy Ombudsman Elizabeth Martinez. Corey White joined us for part of the year as a Pathway to Public Service Fellow and provided important support with intake of complaints.

Demand for our services

We received a total of 542 requests for assistance in 2022. Of these, 289 were complaints related to City bureaus. The other 253 complaints received in 2022 fell outside our investigative authority, including complaints about issues handled by state or county agencies. For non-jurisdictional requests, we provide information and referrals to the appropriate agencies.

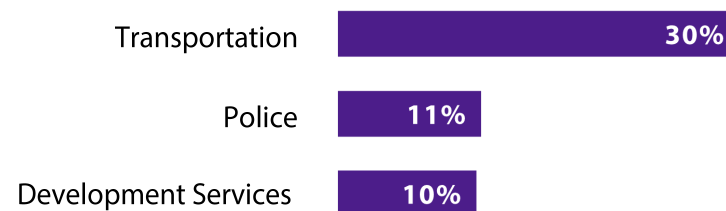


When prioritizing our resources, we consider whether complaints involve egregious injustice, inequitable impacts, or basic needs such as shelter, or if they come from members of historically underserved and marginalized communities.

Ninety percent of complaints came from the public; the rest came from businesses or City employees. Most complainants contacted us through email or our online form. About 40 percent contacted us by phone. We had no walk-in complaints in 2022, when City Hall was closed most of the year due to the pandemic.

Complaint trends

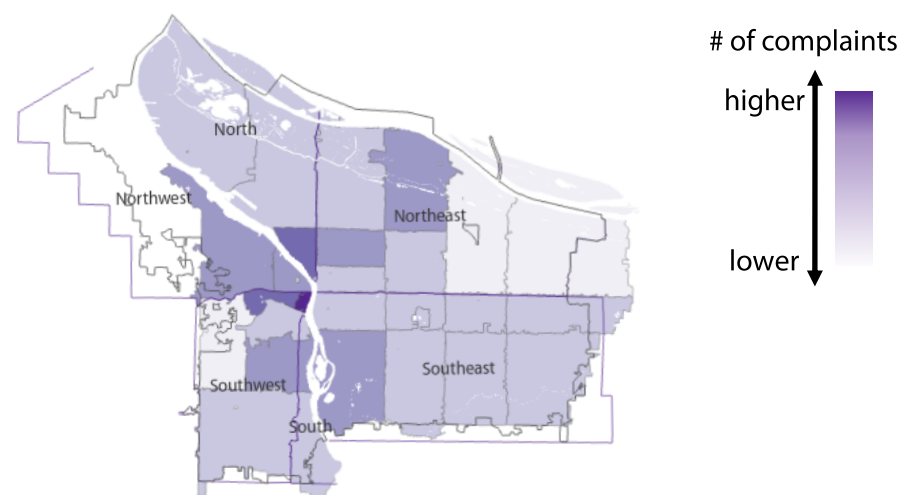
We received complaints covering a broad range of City bureaus. Some complaints involved more than one bureau. Consistent with previous years, bureaus responsible for enforcing controls and restrictions on certain activities tended to generate more complaints. The Bureau of Transportation had the highest number of complaints in 2022, followed by the Police Bureau and the Bureau of Development Services.



To learn more about specific issues that complainants raised about different bureaus, check out the case examples on our website.

Complaints by zip code, adjusted for population

To help us see whether our services are reaching all Portlanders, we ask complainants to voluntarily provide information on their race/ethnicity. However, many complainants choose not to provide this information, so our data are incomplete. We have more information about complainants' zip codes, and can see that we still have work to do to improve our outreach across the city.




Complaint handling


We look at each jurisdictional complaint on a case by case basis to determine the appropriate response. We try to resolve most complaints informally through facilitation. In 2022, the most frequent reason we declined to assist a complainant was the availability of another process to address their issue, such as a bureau's complaint procedure or appeals process.

Investigations

We may decide to conduct an investigation into a complaint, especially if it is an issue that affects vulnerable community members, suggests a system-wide problem or involves an important principle of good government.

In 2022, we investigated 15 percent of jurisdictional complaints. We found 36 percent of investigated complaints to be fully or partially substantiated and 33 percent to be unfounded. In 31 percent of cases we did not have enough information or evidence to reach a conclusion about whether the City did something wrong or treated someone unfairly.

36% 
Substantiated

33% 
Unfounded

31% 
Indeterminate

Recommendations to bureaus

When an investigation finds that a complaint is substantiated, we seek to resolve the issue by making recommendations to the bureau. Recommendations may include asking the bureau to change a policy or practice or to take corrective action. Thirteen investigations in 2022 resulted in recommendations, and City bureaus fully or partially accepted all of these.

