

2024 Ombudsman Annual Report

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**Portland
City Auditor**
Ombudsman



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A note from the Ombudsman

Dear Portlanders,

The year 2024 was a time of big changes as the City began to transition to its new form of government that Portland voters approved in 2022. As a result of the City's new organizational structure that took effect July 1, we directed several of our recommendations to newly appointed Deputy City Administrators rather than to Commissioners-in-Charge. The new structure included six service areas, each led by a Deputy City Administrator, and we began monitoring complaints in these areas.

We also made changes in the Ombudsman's Office. We began collecting a broader range of demographic data about complainants, which will help us better understand how to ensure equitable access to our services and analyze other trends. We launched a new customer feedback survey so that we can continue to improve how we do our work. In addition, simultaneously with this report we are launching our new public dashboard with information about complaints and investigations since 2012, which will make our activities more transparent to Portlanders and others interested in our work.

For delivering on these and other initiatives while ensuring a high level of service as our complaint numbers increased, I'm thankful to my team: Deputy Ombudsman Andy Stevens; Deputy Ombudsman Tony Green; and Isaiah Henry, a Hatfield Resident Fellow, who contributed to our work with energy, skill, and professionalism during his eight-month fellowship.

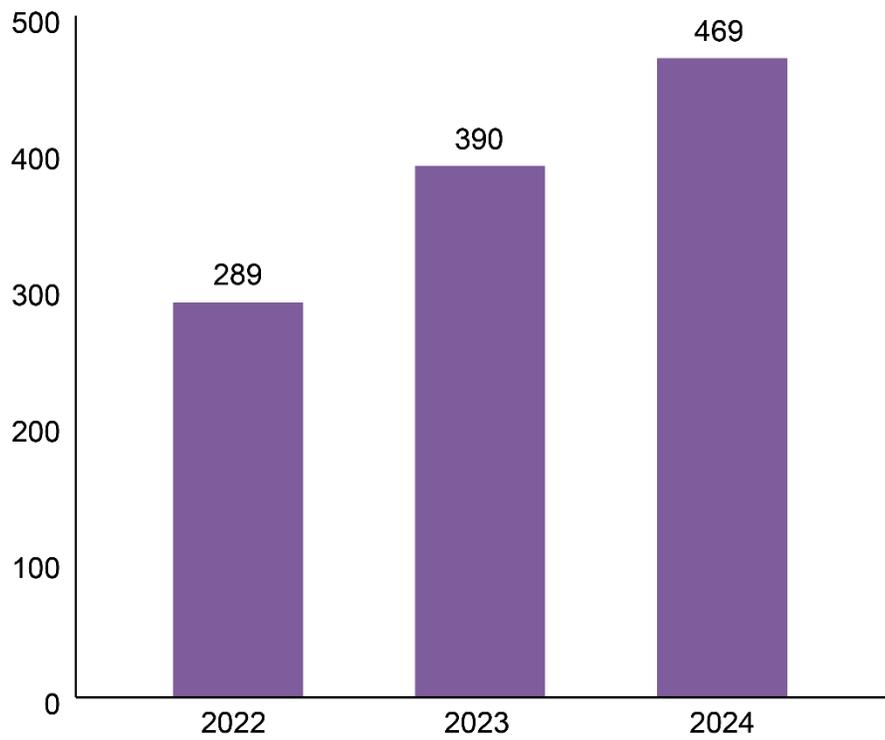
Sincerely,

Jennifer Croft
City Ombudsman

Our complaint numbers increased again

We handled a total of 691 requests for assistance during the year, of which 475 were complaints about the City. Six complaints about the City fell outside our authority to investigate because they were about elected officials, issues subject to collective bargaining, or employee discrimination. The 469 complaints that fell within our authority to investigate marked a 20% increase compared to the previous year.

Figure 1. The number of complaints we received about the City continued to increase compared to previous years



Source: Ombudsman’s Office analysis of complaint data.

Most of the 469 complaints about the City came from members of the public (85%). We also received complaints from businesses (7%), City employees (4%), and individuals who did not share their contact information (4%).

We gathered more kinds of demographic information from complainants

In 2024, we began asking an expanded list of voluntary demographic questions of complainants that included not only race/ethnicity but also age, gender, language, disability status, housing status, economic vulnerability, veteran status, and sexual orientation. We gather this data as part of our efforts to ensure that Portlanders have equitable access to our services and that we equitably handle complaints.

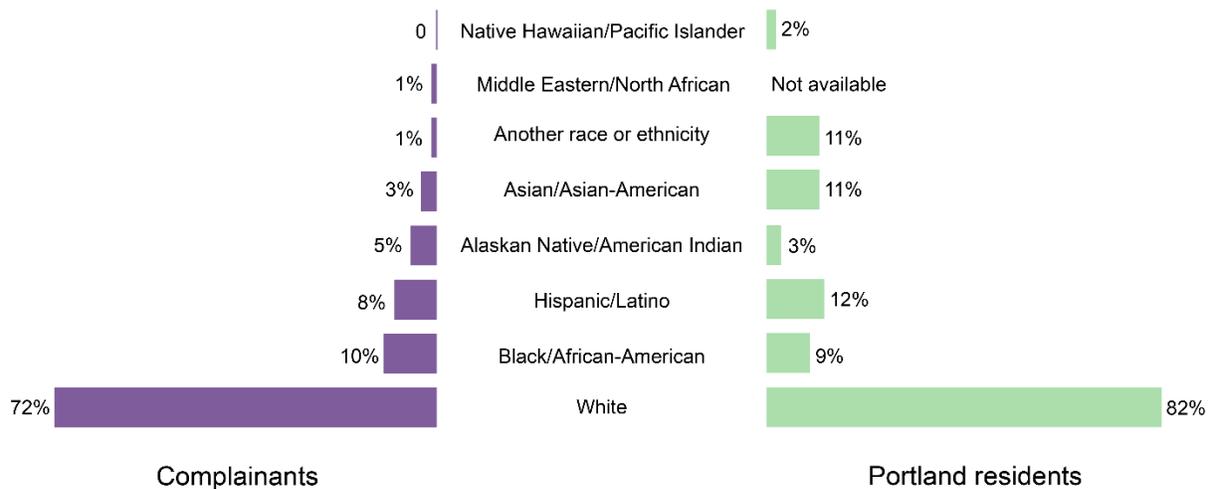
We received responses about race/ethnicity for 292 complainants, 72% of whom identified as White, 10% as Black/African American, 8% as Hispanic/Latino, 5% as

Alaska Native/American Indian, 3% as Asian/Asian American, 1% as Middle Eastern/North African, and 1% as another race/ethnicity.

We changed how we are calculating the data to more accurately reflect complainants' race/ethnicity and allow for better comparability with other data sources, such as the U.S. Census Bureau, as we track the progress of our equity efforts. In 2023, we calculated percentages based on the total number of complaints instead of the number of complaints where complainants responded about race/ethnicity.

Advertising in community-specific media is one of the steps we are taking to reach some of the groups who are underrepresented among our complainants.

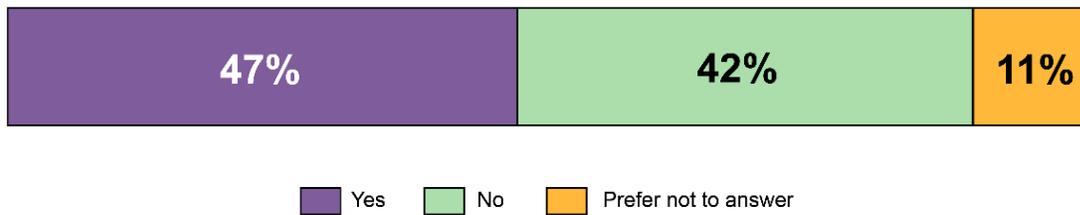
Figure 2. Some groups are underrepresented among our complainants compared to Portland's population



Source: Ombudsman's Office visualization of complaint data and U.S. Census Bureau data.

To identify economic vulnerability, we asked whether complainants live on a limited fixed income, receive government benefits, and/or have difficulty covering monthly expenses. Of the 307 people who answered this question, 47% answered yes, 42% said no, and 11% said they preferred not to answer.

Figure 3. Almost half of complainants who answered our question about economic vulnerability reported that they are economically vulnerable

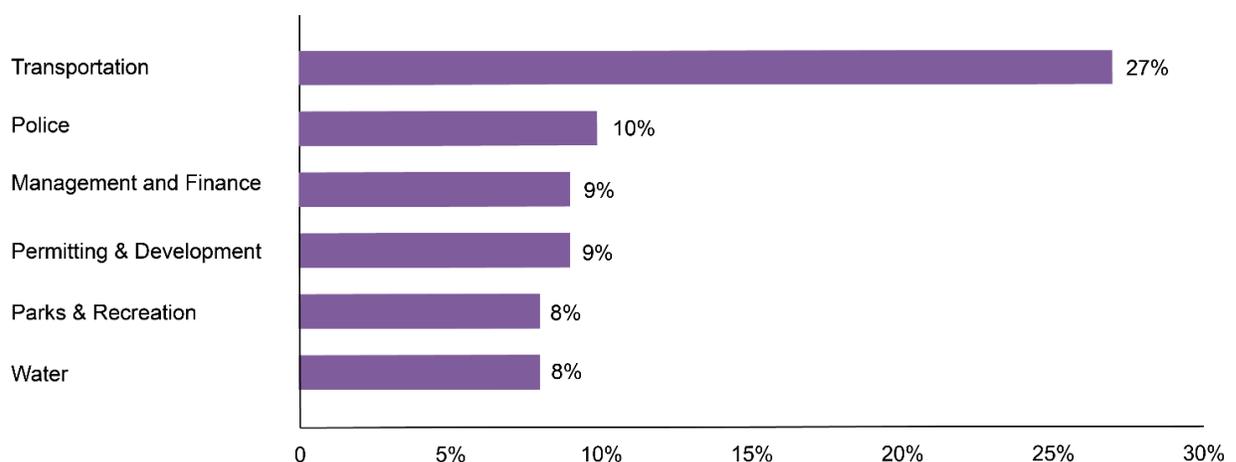


Source: Ombudsman’s Office analysis of complaint data.

Bureau complaint trends were similar to the previous year

The six bureaus with the highest percentages of complaints were the same as in 2023. The Bureau of Transportation had the highest number of complaints at 27%. Complaints about the Police Bureau made up 10% of the total. Permitting & Development made up 9%, as did the Office of Management and Finance. Parks & Recreation and the Water Bureau each made up 8%.

Figure 4. Almost one-third of complaints were about the Bureau of Transportation



Source: Ombudsman’s Office analysis of complaint data.

Bureaus are organized into service areas under Portland’s new form of government. The largest share of complaints (43%) concerned the Public Works service area,

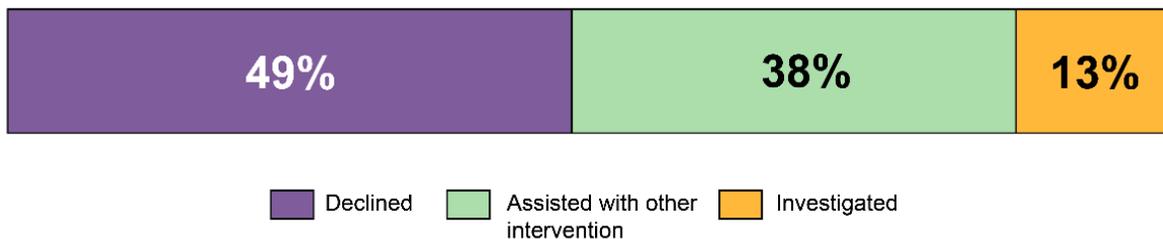
followed by Public Safety (17%). The Community & Economic Development service area accounted for 14% of complaints and Budget & Finance for 13%. Complaints about the Vibrant Communities service area made up 9% and City Operations made up 4%.

We investigated more complaints

When we receive a complaint and determine whether we will accept it for assistance, we consider factors such as whether the bureau has been given a chance to resolve the issue or if it affects the complainant personally. When we decline to assist with a complaint, we connect complainants with appropriate resources whenever possible. We often tell complainants they can reach out to us again if the issue remains unresolved.

Most complaints we accept for assistance are resolved through other interventions than an investigation. For example, after a community member reported seeing an employee driving dangerously in a City vehicle, we identified the driver and asked their supervisor and the Bureau of Human Resources to investigate and keep us informed of the outcome. In another case, we helped a community member find out the status of the report they had filed about some of their belongings going missing after a City contractor swept their campsite.

Figure 5. We investigated or assisted the complainant with another intervention in over half of the complaints we received



Source: Ombudsman's Office analysis of complaint data.

We investigate a complaint when we have serious concerns that a City action or decision has been unfair or inequitable. In 2024, we conducted 62 investigations, representing 13% of complaints. This was a higher number of investigations compared to the previous year; in 2023 we completed 34 investigations, representing about 9% of complaints.

In 23 of the investigations we conducted in 2024, or 37% of investigations, we found that the complaint was substantiated, meaning that we found evidence that the City’s action was harmful or unfair. We found that the complaint was not substantiated in 22 investigations (35%). We were not able to reach a definitive conclusion in 16 investigations (26%), and one investigation remains in progress. These rates somewhat varied from last year. In 2023 we found that the complaint was substantiated in 44% of investigations and not substantiated in 29% of investigations, and in 26% of investigations we were not able to reach a definitive conclusion.

Of the 23 complaints that we found to be substantiated, we made recommendations in 16 cases. We may not always make a recommendation even though a complaint is substantiated; this might be because the bureau has already taken appropriate action, there is not a feasible way to resolve the issue, or it is more appropriate for the complainant to pursue another process to obtain resolution.

Sometimes our recommendations focus on providing financial relief or restitution. The implementation of our recommendations resulted in a total of \$140,335 in financial savings for community members—about twice as much as last year.

Our recommendations were partly or fully accepted in all but three cases. The City declined to accept our [recommendation](#) not to hold a homeowner responsible for removing a tree that was located far behind the homeowner’s property line. The City also declined to accept a recommendation to provide a Safe Rest Village participant with a requested accommodation, and to remove a large lien on the property of an elderly, economically vulnerable homeowner because of a storage container located in their yard.

We advocated for just outcomes

Below are examples of complaints we investigated and resolved during the year.

Reinstatement on housing preference list

A family living on a low income waited for two years to get housing through a City waitlist for applicants with generational ties to North/Northeast Portland. The Housing Bureau removed the family from the waitlist because a property management company said they were unresponsive when units became available. We concluded that the family had been responsive and found that the Housing Bureau had no system to verify property management companies’ claims about applicants’ responsiveness. We recommended that the Housing Bureau reinstate the family to their original place on the waitlist, along with any other family who had been removed for the same reason. The

Housing Bureau agreed and reinstated the complainant's family along with at least 26 other families who requested to be reinstated. They also stopped removing people from the waitlist for unresponsiveness until adequate safeguards are in place.

Reversal of unfair debt transfer

A community member opened an account with the Portland Water Bureau. The Bureau searched U.S. Postal Service records and determined that they had previously lived at an address with an outstanding balance of nearly \$4,500. Even though the debt was under someone else's name, the Water Bureau transferred it to the community member and threatened to shut off their water if they didn't pay. We determined that City Code did not authorize the Water Bureau to transfer an outstanding debt to someone who had not accepted responsibility for the previous account. We recommended that the Bureau cancel the debt transfer and refund any amount that the community member had paid. They agreed to do so.

Refund after illegal towing

Three vehicles belonging to a family living on a low income were towed from their apartment complex. We determined that the vehicles were towed in violation of state law, which requires written authorization from a property owner before a vehicle can be towed from a private parking lot. We recommended that the Transportation Bureau, which regulates towing from private lots, ensure that the family receive a full refund of nearly \$1,000. The Bureau agreed.

We published the results of four systemic investigations

In addition to investigating and resolving individual complaints, we investigate systemic issues that affect larger numbers of Portlanders. We recommend process improvements or other changes to bring more fairness and justice to City services. In 2024, we reported on four such investigations, all of which stemmed from individual complaints. Bureaus generally agreed with the recommendations we made to address the concerns our investigations identified.

- We investigated how Parks and Recreation handles reviews of certain development permits for compliance with street tree planting standards and

- We [recommended](#) the Water Bureau remove returned payment fees after we found that such fees have inequitable impacts on certain socioeconomic groups and that the Bureau was spending more to collect the fees than it was receiving.
- We investigated the Bureau of Transportation’s regulation of tour bus companies and [recommended](#) that it step up efforts to investigate unpermitted companies and streamline its enforcement process to better protect public safety.
- We found that predatory towing at a cluster of low-income apartment complexes caused significant financial and emotional harm to vulnerable, mostly Latino community members. We [recommended](#) that the Housing Bureau work with the nonprofit property owner to prevent this harm from recurring.

We strive to keep the City accountable by following up on the implementation of recommendations we have made previously. In 2024, we [reported](#) that the Community Safety Division had not implemented most of our recommendations to address gaps in oversight of the City’s emergency board-up contractor. Another follow-up [reported](#) that the Police Bureau was still in the process of addressing our recommendations related to its handling of applications for U visas.

We asked complainants for feedback

In 2024, we began sending a feedback survey to complainants by email when closing their cases. Approximately 10% of complainants completed the survey. They were able to choose whether to do so anonymously.

When asked about the impact of our work, over half (51%) of respondents said that our work created a sense of fairness and accountability. Almost a third (30%) said it alleviated mental and emotional duress; 14% said it did not benefit them.

A high percentage of respondents (86%) said that we were courteous and respectful and that we responded to their complaint in a reasonable time (84%). Three-fourths (76%) said they would recommend our office to others. About half of respondents (53%) felt that their complaint was resolved in the way they were seeking or in a way they found acceptable.

Figure 6. Seventy-six percent of people who responded to our feedback survey said that they would recommend our office to others



Source: Ombudsman’s Office visualization of survey data.

We also asked respondents what we did well and how we can improve our services. Here’s what some respondents said about us:

“I am completely satisfied with the service I received. The only suggestion I have is to help more people become aware that you exist. The Ombudsman is a critical resource for people who feel disempowered and have run out of options.”

“The Ombudsman's Office was really competent, consistent, knew of solutions I didn't see anywhere else and could tell me what to expect and who to talk to.”

Community members suggested we can improve by doing more outreach, advertising, and provision of bilingual services. We are pursuing new opportunities to advertise our services, including in partnership with community organizations and on Spanish-language radio, and we strive to engage in outreach activities on an ongoing basis. Organizations or groups interested to meet with our office are encouraged to contact us at ombudsman@portlandoregon.gov.

Other community members expressed disappointment with the outcome of their case and with our lack of enforcement authority.