

2015 Annual Report
Snohomish County Ombudsman
May 1 to December 31, 2015

Background

In 2014 the County Executive and County Council created the Office of the Ombudsman as an independent, impartial office to receive and be responsive to citizens' complaints, inquiries and concerns about County government. The Ombudsman may also make recommendations to improve the efficiency, effectiveness and transparency of County government. The current Ombudsman assumed the position on April 27, 2015.

Complaints Received

The Ombudsman's Office received 169 complaints and inquiries from County residents or people conducting business with Snohomish County between May 1, 2015 and December 31, 2015. This number is an increase of over 77% from the same time frame the prior year.

Ombudsman cases are classified as Information/Referral, Direct Assistance, or Investigation and are sometimes a combination of the three. Each inquiry or complaint is reviewed individually to determine the appropriate action to take and allows the Ombudsman to focus on patterns which may emerge indicating systemic issues.

Responses to the inquiry or complaint are handled in the following ways:

- Information/Referral – Focuses on encouraging and enabling individuals to resolve problems on their own by providing additional information to the individual.
- Direct Assistance – Focuses on resolving the issue through inquiry, research and facilitation.
- Investigation – Focuses on determining if a complaint is supported or unsupported by evidence, resolving the problem for the individual, and encouraging (recommending) improvements in agency functioning.

Contact the Snohomish County Ombudsman Office:

3000 Rockefeller, MS 401/Robert J. Drewel Bldg. 2nd Floor

425.388.3365

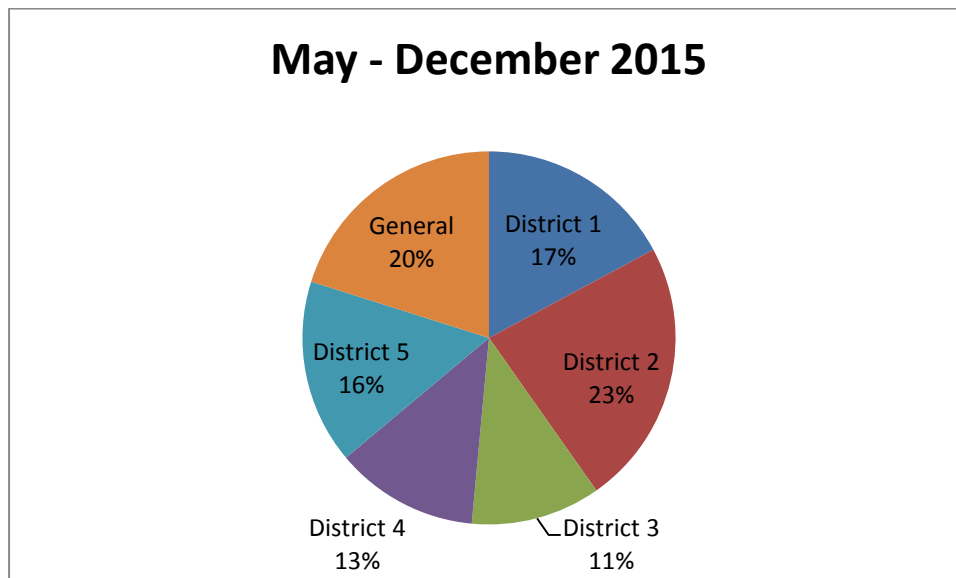
Ombudsman@snoco.org

Complaint/Inquiry Classification

The chart below shows the number of cases associated with each county department and shows the response to the 169 complaints and inquiries received during the eight months of my tenure as Ombudsman in 2015.

Department	Information	Assistance	Total
Assessor		3	3
Auditor		8	8
Clerk	1	2	3
District Court	3	3	6
Emergency Management		2	2
Ethics	2	1	3
Executive		1	1
Facilities		5	5
General County Govt.	5	3	8
Human Resources	5	2	7
Human Services	5	7	12
Other	26	12	38
Parks and Recreation	2	1	3
PDS	1	22	23
Prosecuting Attorney	2	1	3
Public Works		8	8
Risk Management		1	1
Sheriff	4	17	21
Superior Court	7	3	10
Treasurer		4	4
Total	63	106	169

Geographical Location of People Contacting the Ombudsman



Example Case Summaries

<p>County resident noticed on his telephone bill that he was paying taxes to a local city and a 911 fee to King County even though he lived in unincorporated Snohomish County. Despite his many efforts, he was unable to get an answer about the misdirected taxes from the telephone company, the City or the FCC.</p>	<p>Working with County staff, it was finally discovered that the phone company had upgraded their software a few months earlier. Due to a glitch in the taxing software approximately 140 County residents were incorrectly taxed. The company agreed to refund any excess taxes paid by the consumer and to cover the costs of any additional taxes during the impacted time frame.</p>
<p>County resident was desperate to receive assistance with squatters and drug use in an abandoned house next door. Because the house was abandoned there was not an owner who could take action or initiate legal action to remove the squatters.</p>	<p>Worked with Code Enforcement and the Regional Drug Task Force who included the house on their list of properties to monitor and help bring into compliance. I provided resources for the resident to pursue in her quest to find the party financially responsible for the property.</p>
<p>County resident complained that he had been reporting five burned out street lights for two years with no satisfaction. He lives in unincorporated Snohomish County but the streets lights were across a busy street and inside the city limits.</p>	<p>Worked with the PUD and the local City to bring the need for replacement lights to the attention of the appropriate City staff. The City then contracted with the County to replace the five streetlights. The complainant was pleased with the improved safety along the busy street.</p>
<p>County resident was deeply concerned about inappropriate activity taking place at a small surface water facility located next to his house. He reached out for resources and assistance to combat the problem and make the area safe for his family and neighbors.</p>	<p>Working with Public Works, Parks and Recreation, and the Sheriff's Office, plans were made for a gate to be placed at the entrance of the parking lot to restrict overnight parking and an increased Sheriff's presence was implemented.</p>

Outreach/Educational Activities

Outreach included introductory meetings with each of the elected County officials and department heads. An introductory email with the Ombudsman brochure attached was sent to all five Congressional offices and all 21 State Legislators representing Snohomish County. Introductory emails were also sent to the Mayors and City Administrators/Managers of all 20 cities and the Tribal Chairs of the three tribes. During this time frame I met with 16 of the Mayors and/or City Administrators as well as the Sauk Suiattle Tribal Council. I sought out hands on training/observation opportunities such as spending a day in the field with the Joint Drug and Gang Task Force and spending a morning with a Land Development Specialist at the PDS counter. I also attended the U.S. Ombudsmen Association 2015 annual training and conference.