

Snohomish County Office of the Public Advocate

2017 Annual Report

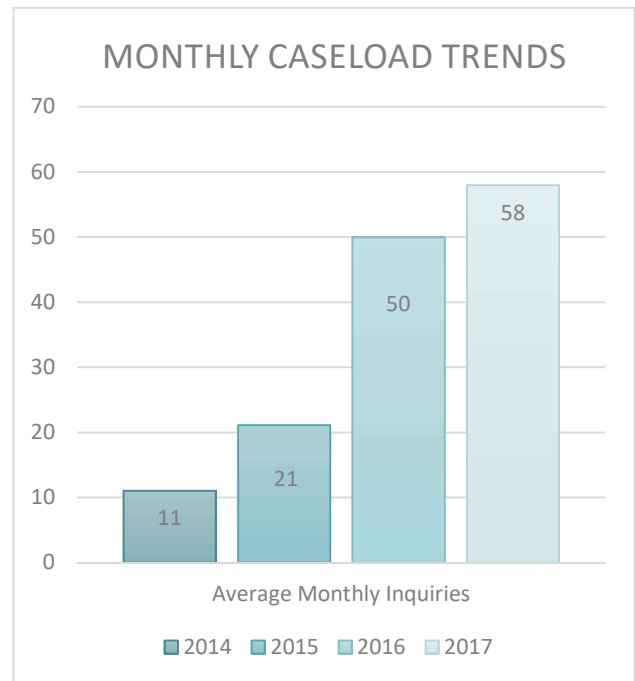
Overview and Scope

The Office of the Ombudsman was created in 2014 as an independent, impartial office to receive and be responsive to citizens' complaints, inquiries and concerns about County government. Additionally the Ombudsman was tasked with making recommendations to improve the efficiency, effectiveness and transparency of County government.

In the 2016 General Election, the voters of Snohomish County approved an amendment to the Snohomish County Charter directing the County Council to establish the Office of the Snohomish County Public Advocate. In May of 2017 the County Council passed Ordinance No. 17-024 establishing the Office of Public Advocate and eliminating the Office of Ombudsman.

Annual Progression of Complaints and Inquiries Received

In 2017, the Office of the Public Advocate received 695 complaints and inquiries from county residents or people conducting business with Snohomish County. This number is an increase of 17% over 2016. Inquiries continue to increase, a trend that is anticipated to continue as referrals from previous clientele, as well as county staff continue to rise. The spectrum of complaints, concerns, and questions are widely varied, as are demographics of the constituents generating inquiries.



A CLOSER LOOK

A working couple found themselves homeless and were living in their car at rest stops. Not knowing where to turn, they reached out to the Office of the Public Advocate as a last resort. We provided them housing resources including local non-profits and the VOA 2-1-1. The couple contacted 2-1-1 found out they qualified for housing assistance.

2014 – 133 total inquiries

***2015 – 169 total inquiries**

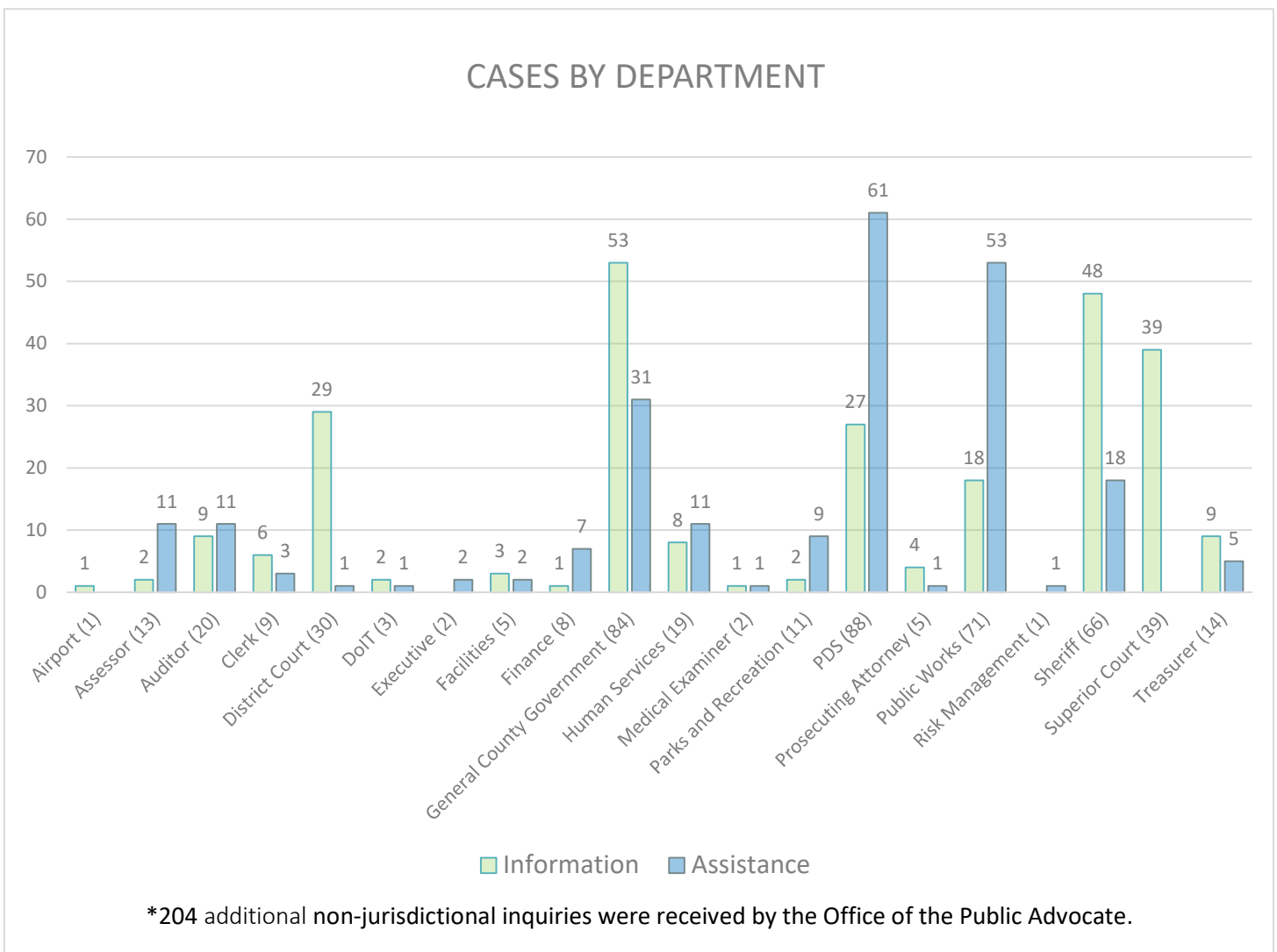
2016 – 595 total inquiries

2017 – 695 total inquiries

***2015 only reflects inquiries collected from May through December.**

Department and Complaint/Inquiry Classification

The Public Advocate does not have the authority to overturn the decision of a department, although, it is charged with ensuring that decisions are not contrary to regulation or county code. Quite often, the office acts as an interpreter of government for the citizens, clarifying decisions, or helping them understand the basis on which a decision was made. Occasionally, residents have issues that transcend a single department and they need guidance in determining the best avenue to obtain the information/assistance they seek. Because each department has different functions, the staff may not have the information needed to satisfy a request, as it is outside of their specialization. The Public Advocate easily reaches across departmental lines to locate the best resources to assist the public.



Complaints and Inquiries Received

Public Advocate 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 Public Advocate to focus on patterns which may emerge indicating systemic issues.

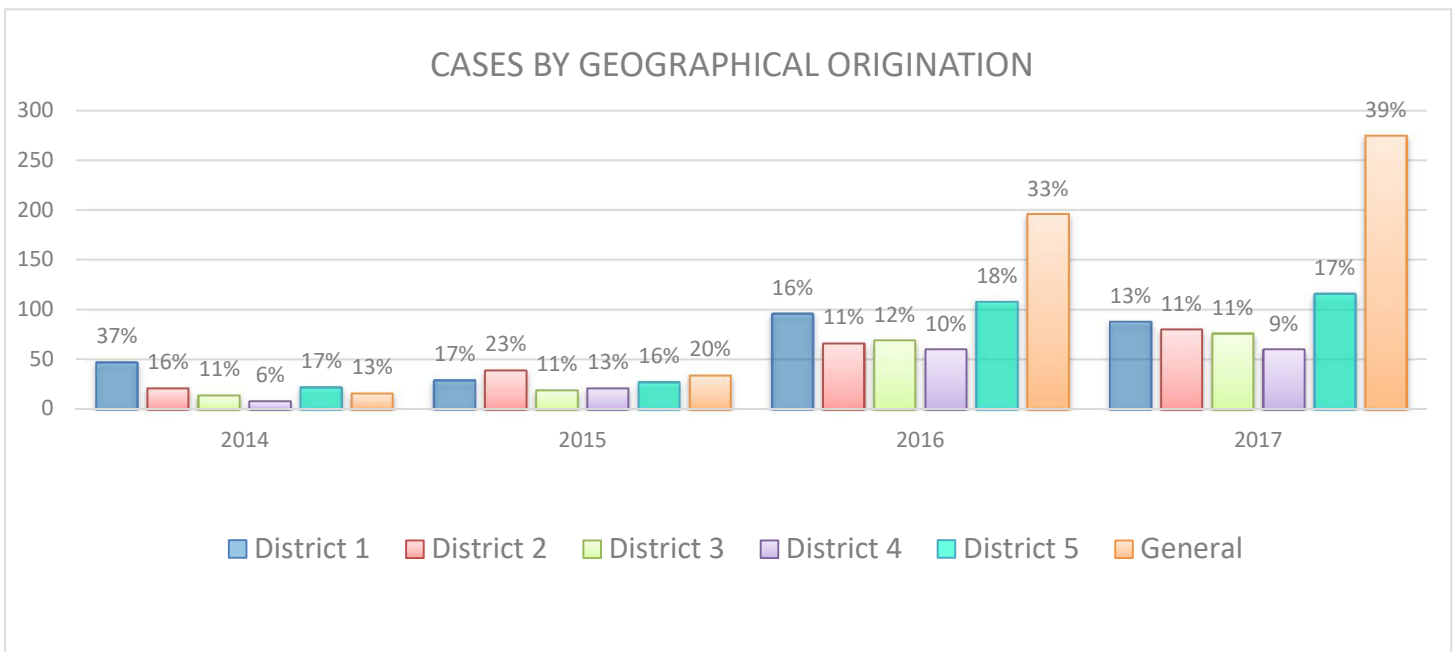
Responses to the inquiry or complaint are handled in the following ways:

- **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.

Geographical Origination of Inquiries and Complaints

As previous trends suggest, the most rural districts generated slightly higher numbers of inquiries and complaints.

The *general* category includes contacts from people who did not identify where they reside, as well as those who live outside of the county, but who also engage with Snohomish County government in some aspect.



Additional Responsibilities

2017 brought additional responsibilities to the workload of the Public Advocate. Early in the year the office entered into an agreement with the Snohomish County Sheriff's Office Corrections Bureau to be the third party reporter for inmates wishing to report sexual abuse or sexual harassment under the Federal Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA). The Public Advocate is responsible for taking the complaint and passing the report onto the highest ranking jail authority for investigation, allowing the inmates to have their reports investigated at the highest possible level.

With the adoption of the citizen approved charter amendment, a requirement of monitoring and reporting to County Council on "the nature and disposition of whistleblower, ethics and human rights complaints filed pursuant to other county ordinances or procedures" was added to the job description.

In 2017, there were no ethics complaints submitted to the Ethics Commission and there were no Whistleblower complaints submitted to the Deputy County Executive. However, because neither the whistleblower form nor the ethic complaint form are available on the county website, the Public Advocate recommends that the forms be accessible via the website to improve the public's access to the forms.

And finally, late in 2017, the office took the lead in responding to inquiries that come to the county through Facebook messages. Previously there were only sporadic responses to those messages.

A CLOSER LOOK

A resident with a county recreation facility near his home, requested assistance in getting better directional signage installed to assist boaters to find the proper street. With a lack of directional signage, boaters were ending up on his dead end road and becoming very frustrated having to maneuver their trailers back around. After working with the Parks and Public Works departments, proper signage was put up in a rapid manner directing boaters to the correct street for launching their boat.



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