

Snohomish County Office of the Public Advocate

2018 Annual Report

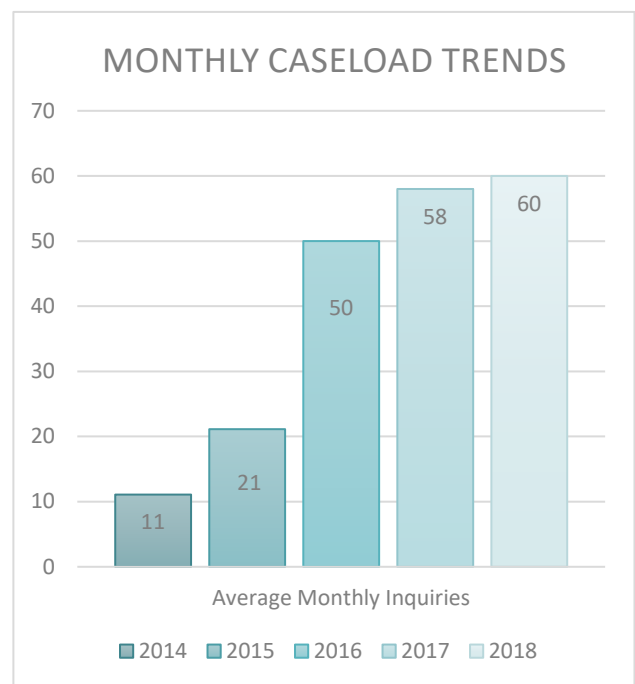
Overview and Scope

Originally established in 2014 as the Office of the Ombudsman, the office was renamed the Office of the Public Advocate as the result of an amendment to the County Charter approved by the voters.

The Office of the Public Advocate is an independent, impartial office tasked with receiving and responding to citizen complaints, inquiries and concerns about county government. Additionally, the Public Advocate makes recommendations to improve the efficiency, effectiveness and transparency of county government.

Annual Progression of Complaints and Inquiries Received

In 2018, the Office of the Public Advocate received 719 complaints and inquiries from county residents or people conducting business with Snohomish County. Inquiries continue to increase, a trend that is anticipated to continue based on historical data. The spectrum of complaints, concerns, and questions are widely varied, as are demographics of the constituents generating inquiries.



A CLOSER LOOK

A low income, disabled citizen in desperate need of assistance in having her derelict shed disposed of contacted the office. She was unable to afford dump fees and didn't know where to turn. We were able to connect her with the senior discount program in the Solid Waste division which allows qualifying residences twenty visits per year at a cost of \$2 per visit.

2018 – 719 total inquiries

2017 – 695 total inquiries

2016 – 595 total inquiries

***2015 – 169 total inquiries**

2014 – 133 total inquiries

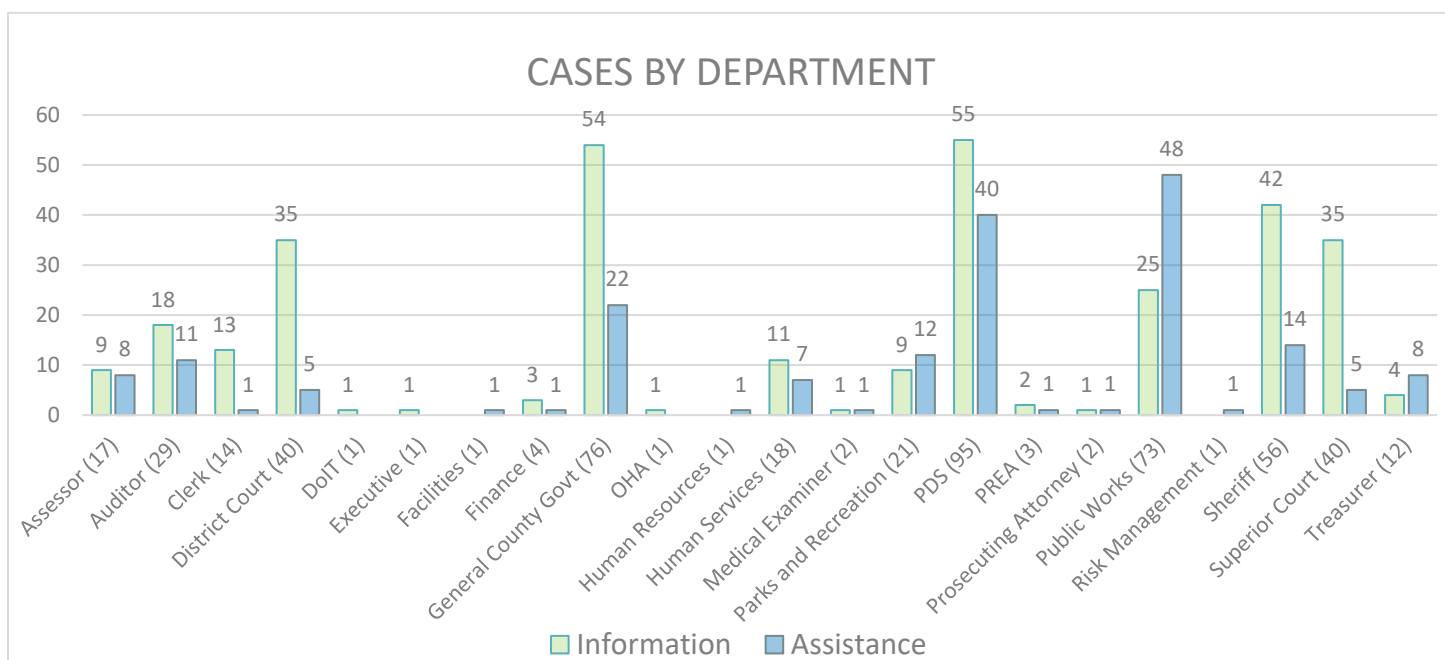
***2015 only reflects inquiries collected from May through December.**

Complaints and Inquiries Received

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. 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:

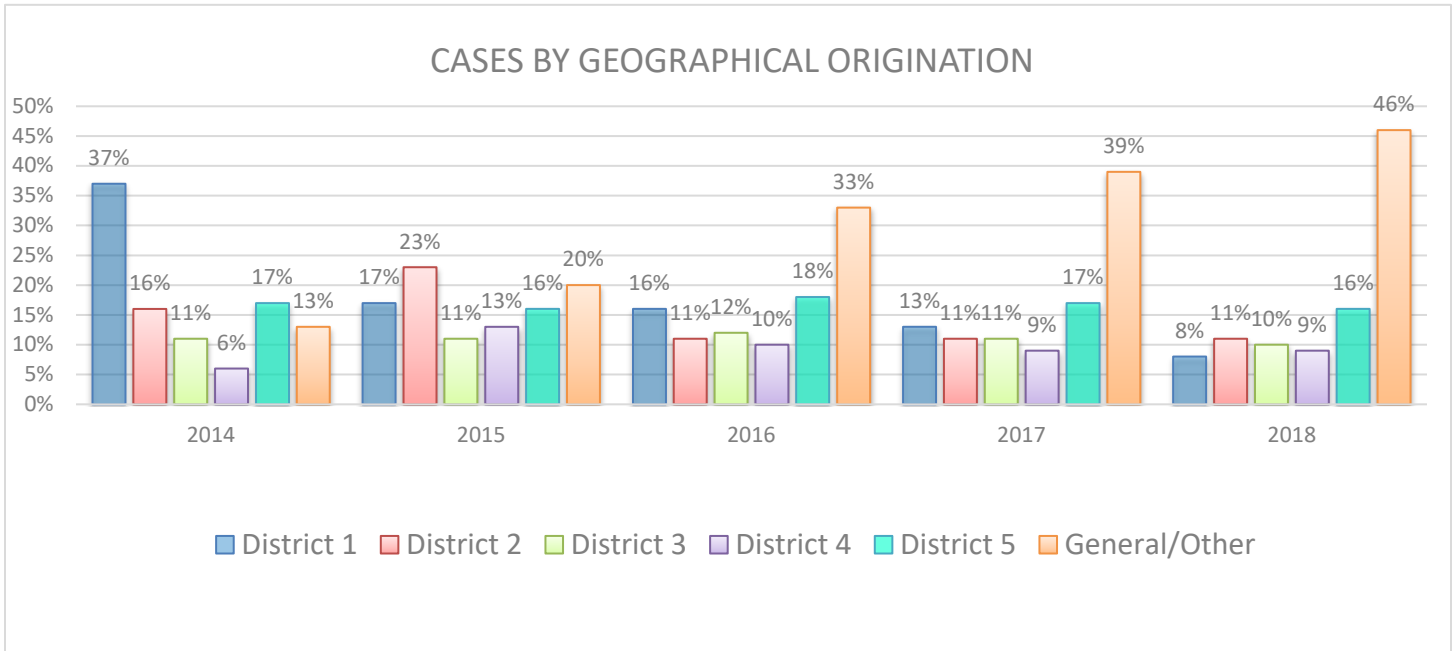
- **Information/Referral** – Focuses on encouraging and enabling individuals to resolve problems on their own by providing additional information to the individual.
- **Direct Assistance** – Focuses on resolving the issue through inquiry, research and facilitation.
- **Investigation** – Focuses on determining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



Additionally, 211 non-jurisdictional inquiries were received by the Office of the Public Advocate. The largest volume of those calls dealt with requests for assistance in housing and legal assistance.

Geographical Origination 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.



Update on 2018 Ethics and Whistleblower Complaints

Snohomish County did not receive any ethics or whistleblower complaints during the year of 2018.

A CLOSER LOOK

A homeowner living on a private road in rural Snohomish County called asking for assistance in changing the name of a new county road. The new county road was named the same as their private road, resulting in constant confusion with delivery people and other drivers ending up at their house. We were able to connect them with the appropriate county staff to help eliminate their frustration.



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