

Snohomish County Office of the Public Advocate

2019 Annual Report

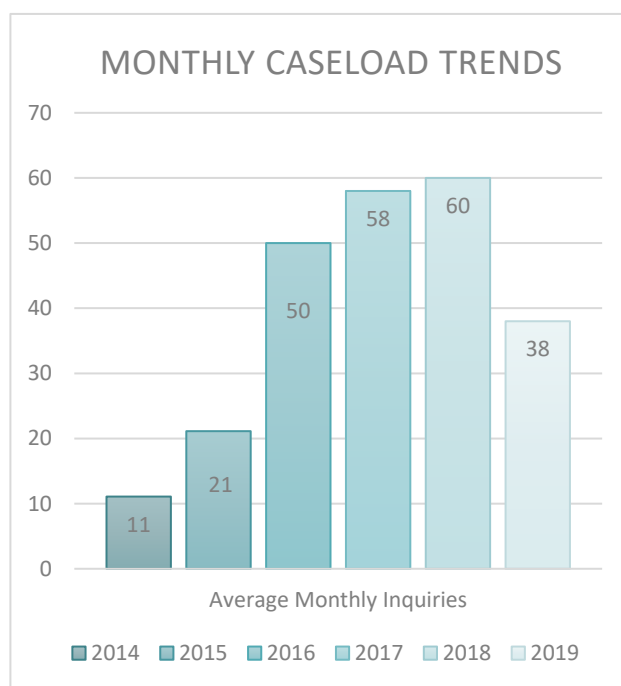
Overview and Scope

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 2019, the Office of the Public Advocate received 452 complaints and inquiries from county residents or people conducting business with Snohomish County. Inquiries were down 37% from 2018, a trend which correlated with the revamp of the county website and improved smart phone access to the website. The spectrum of complaints, concerns, and questions are widely varied, as are demographics of the constituents generating inquiries.



Words from a Constituent:

“I don’t know how exactly to put this into words but your support in dealing with this government agency is very important.... there is a big need for people like you and your staff”

-Randy M.

2019 – 452 total inquiries

2018 – 719 total inquiries

2017 – 695 total inquiries

2016 – 595 total inquiries

***2015 – 169 total inquiries**

2014 – 133 total inquiries

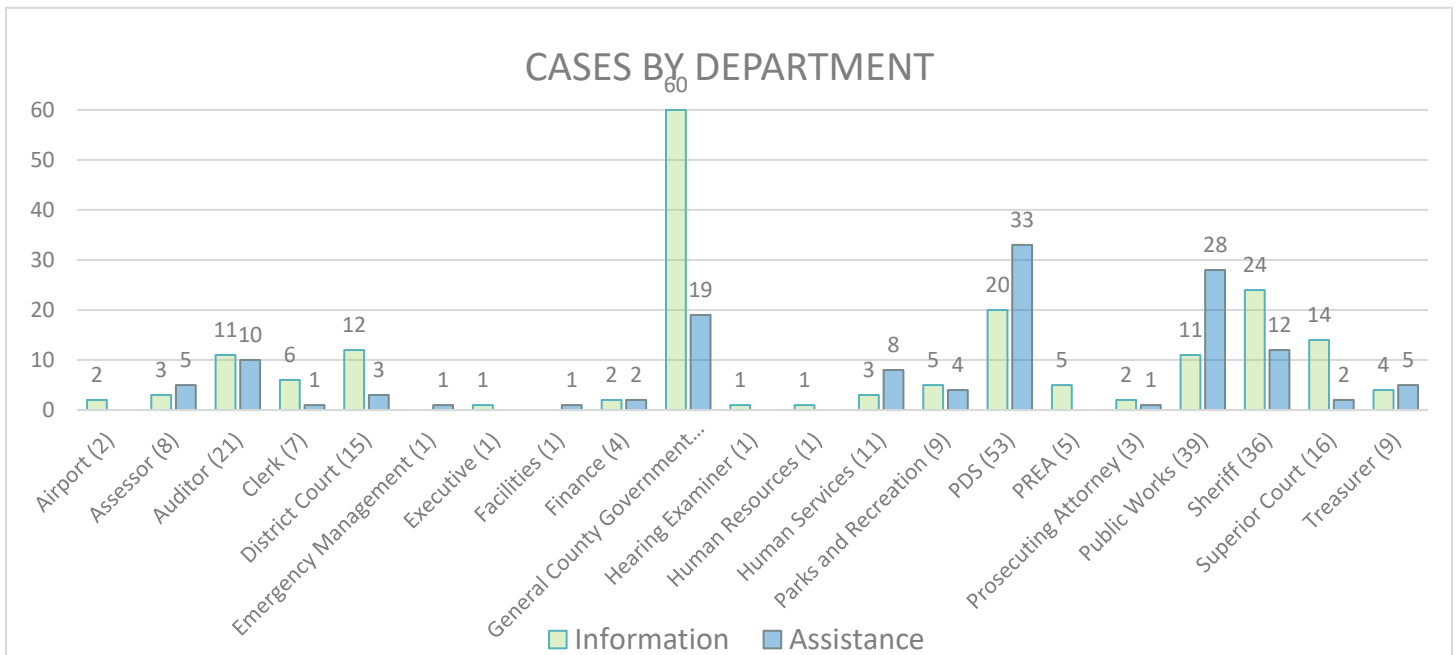
***2015 only reflects inquiries collected from May through December.**

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:

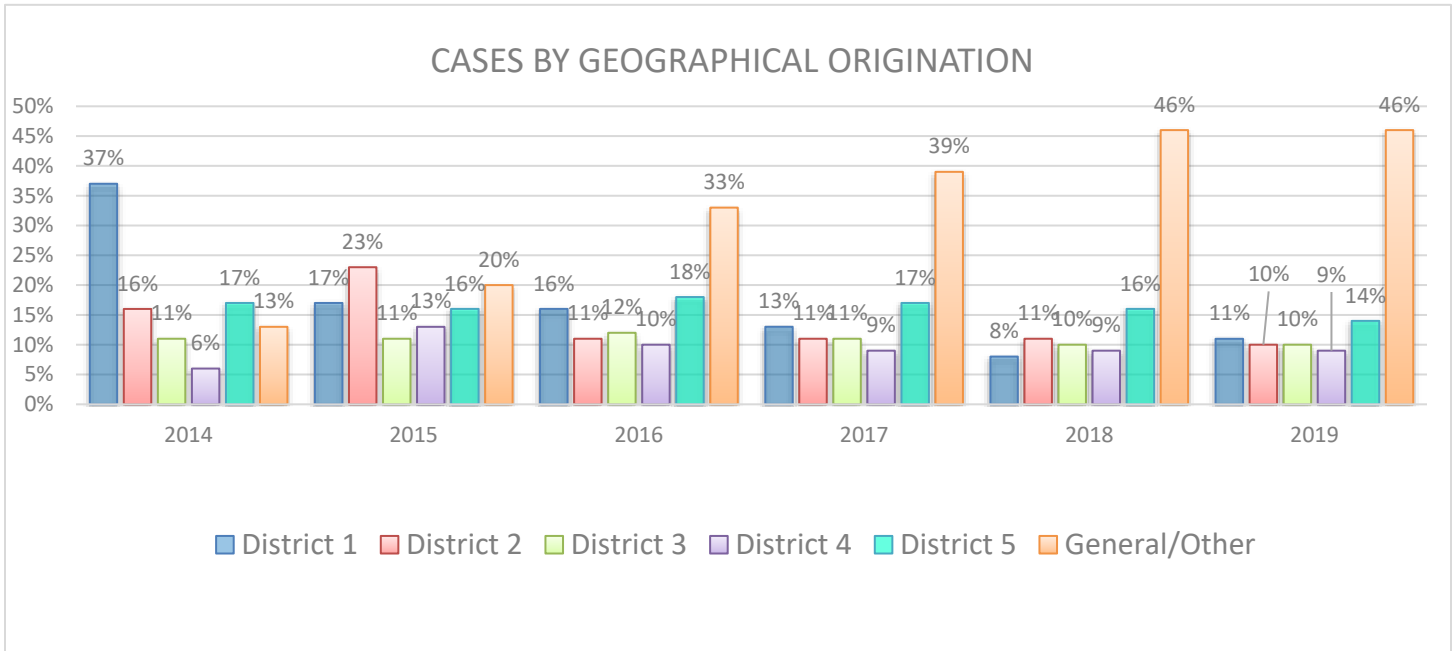
- **Information/Referral** – Focuses on encouraging and enabling individuals to resolve problems on their own by providing additional information to the individual.
- **Direct Assistance** – Focuses on resolving the issue through inquiry, research and facilitation.
- **Investigation** – Focuses on determining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



Additionally, 130 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.



A CLOSER LOOK

A constituent called our office after one of her properties was sold in an auction at the courthouse. She needed assistance with gathering more information about the sale and locating any unclaimed funds from the proceeds. After research was done by our Public Advocate, the constituent was provided with direct contact information to the staff member that was handling this sale. Additionally, after locating and providing a Notice and Trustee Sale record, contact information to the successor was discovered. The constituent was able to use this information to discover whether there were funds to claim.



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