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# Maryland Office of the Correctional Ombudsman

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**DECEMBER 31, 2024**

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**Acting Correctional Ombudsman**

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## Message from the Acting Correctional Ombudsman

Dear distinguished colleagues and partners,

As the Acting Correctional Ombudsman for the State of Maryland, I am humbled and honored to share the inaugural 2024 Office of the Correctional Ombudsman Report. This communication represents a breakthrough in the state's migration towards transparency, accountability, and change within the correctional and juvenile services agencies. It is the first installation of a series of reports designed to facilitate observation, investigation, and oversight.

I view this as an opportunity to change the landscape of and influence positive and impactful improvements in corrections and juvenile service in our great state of Maryland for years to come. I bring a wealth of experience in public safety (corrections and juvenile services), advocacy, and investigative work. My experience and commitment to serving and working with diverse populations including incarcerated individuals, their families, and correctional staff, guides my approach to this role. As the first Acting Correctional Ombudsman, I am determined and dedicated to achieving the legislative directives that are mandated in the legislation and will guide the agency daily ensuring independence, impartiality, transparency, objectivity, and fairness.

This report outlines a general overview of the ombudsman role overall, the background work as acting ombudsman since assuming my role, and the strategic initiatives for the agency for moving forward. This is a pivotal time of promise and potential growth. It will require independence, the synergy of the right staff (one who has a passion for this work), and a commitment to honest and transparent reporting. As an agency, we will actively engage with and encourage the agencies under our oversight to have open and reciprocal feedback. I recognize that we will not always agree, but I intend to always maintain transparent, honest, and respectful communication as it is essential to effective oversight.

I am motivated by the challenges we are facing in the facilities and with the experiences of the incarcerated individuals. I am inspired by the occasion and opportunity to change the trajectory of public safety and correctional services and juvenile services. Lastly, I am determined because of my passion to make meaningful and impactful changes. Together we can achieve great things.

Thank you for your consideration, support, and commitment as we commence on this transformative exploration.

Respectfully submitted,  
Yvonne Briley-Wilson, Esquire  
Acting Correctional Ombudsman for the State of Maryland

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## Ombudsman - Background

The enactment of Senate Bill 134 (SB 134) has changed the landscape of Corrections in the State of Maryland moving forward. This Bill established the Office of the Correctional Ombudsman and transferred juvenile justice oversight, namely the Juvenile Justice Monitoring Unit (JJMU) to the supervision of the agency. It seeks to ensure the tenants of a traditional Ombudsman office are upheld in the state of Maryland.

The historical context of the Ombudsman, a Swedish term coined circa 1700s to mean representative or agent and the role focused on overseeing the Swedish Parliament.<sup>1</sup> The word can actually be traced back to Egypt, the Roman Republic, and the Han Dynasty.<sup>2</sup> Many countries gained an appreciation for the concept of the Ombudsman between then and 1969 when the American Bar Association (ABA) established its resolution which was adopted in 1971. Over time, the role of the classical/traditional Ombudsman has evolved to enhance the function of the governmental agencies, private companies, educational institutions, and the many other organizations for which Ombudsman provide oversight.

While there have been many iterations of resolutions shared over the years from the ABA about what is necessary to establish Ombudsman offices, the ABA shared twenty (20) specific requirements necessary for effective monitoring/oversight in corrections and detentions facilities:

- The monitoring entity is independent of the agency operating or utilizing the correctional or detention facility.
- The monitoring entity is adequately funded and staffed.
- The head of the monitoring entity is appointed for a fixed term by an elected official, is subject to confirmation by a legislative body and can be removed only for just cause.
- Inspection teams have the expertise, training, and requisite number of people to meet the monitoring entity's purposes.
- The monitoring entity has the duty to conduct regular inspections of the facility, such as the authority to examine, and issue reports on, a particular problem at one or more facilities.
- The monitoring entity is authorized to inspect or examine all aspects of a facility's operations and conditions including, but not limited to: staff recruitment, training, supervision, and discipline; inmate deaths; medical and mental-health care; use of force; inmate violence; conditions of confinement; inmate disciplinary processes; inmate grievance processes; substance-abuse treatment; educational, vocational, and other programming; and reentry planning.
- The monitoring entity uses an array of means to gather and substantiate facts, including observations, interviews, surveys, document and record reviews, video and tape recordings, reports, statistics, and performance-based outcome measures.
- Facility and other governmental officials are authorized and required to cooperate fully and promptly with the monitoring entity.

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- To the greatest extent possible consistent with the monitoring entity's purposes, the monitoring entity works collaboratively and constructively with administrators, legislators, and others to improve the facility's operations and conditions.
  - The monitoring entity has the authority to conduct both scheduled and unannounced inspections of any part or all of the facility at any time. The entity must adopt procedures to ensure that unannounced inspections are conducted in a reasonable manner.
  - The monitoring entity has the authority to obtain and inspect any and all records, including inmate and personnel records, bearing on the facility's operations or conditions.
  - The monitoring entity has the authority to conduct confidential interviews with any person, including line staff and inmates, concerning the facility's operations and conditions; to hold public hearings; to subpoena witnesses and documents; and to require that witnesses testify under oath.
  - Procedures are in place to enable facility administrators, line staff, inmates, and others to transmit information confidentially to the monitoring entity about the facility's operations and conditions.
  - Adequate safeguards are in place to protect individuals who transmit information to the monitoring entity from retaliation and threats of retaliation.
  - Facility administrators are provided the opportunity to review monitoring reports and provide feedback about them to the monitoring entity before their dissemination to the public, but the release of the reports is not subject to approval from outside the monitoring entity.
  - Monitoring reports apply legal requirements, best correctional practices, and other criteria to objectively and accurately review and assess a facility's policies, procedures, programs, and practices; identify systemic problems and the reasons for them; and proffer possible solutions to those problems.
  - Subject to reasonable privacy and security requirements as determined by the monitoring entity, the monitoring entity's reports are public, accessible through the Internet, and distributed to the media, the jurisdiction's legislative body, and its top elected official.
  - Facility administrators are required to respond publicly to monitoring reports; to develop and implement, in a timely fashion, action plans to rectify problems identified in those reports; and to inform the public semi-annually of their progress in implementing these action plans. The jurisdiction vests an administrative entity with the authority to redress noncompliance with these requirements.

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<sup>1</sup> American Bar Association Section on Dispute Resolution, Report to the House of Delegate Resolution, 2017

<sup>2</sup> American Bar Association Section on Dispute Resolution, Report to the House of Delegate Resolution, 2017

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- The monitoring entity continues to assess and report on previously identified problems and the progress made in resolving them until the problems are resolved.
  - The jurisdiction adopts safeguards to ensure that the monitoring entity is meeting its designated purposes, including a requirement that it publish an annual report of its findings and activities that is public, accessible through the Internet, and distributed to the media, the jurisdiction's legislative body, and its top elected official.<sup>3</sup>

Senate Bill 134 establishing the Office of the Correctional Ombudsman is consistent with the recommendations of the ABA and the United States Ombudsman Association as an independent unit within state government. It is vital to ensure the agency can respond to complaints as well as independently investigate any violations of administrative acts and address systematic concerns within the Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services or the Department of Juvenile Services. The dedication to these guidelines will foster an atmosphere of safety, dignity, humanity, and security for detainees, incarcerated individuals, and the staff alike.

## Summary of Accomplishments

As the Acting Ombudsman I have been actively engaged in establishing our agency since starting on October 2<sup>nd</sup>. During the last two and a half months of operations, I have focused on several crucial actions to ensure the agency's successful establishment and evolution. The following represents a synopsis of some of the actions performed.

## Networking and Collaboration

- **Engagement with legislators, stakeholders, and advocacy groups:** I have prioritized meeting with legislators, stakeholders, and advocacy groups to gain appreciation for their perspectives and gain insights into the legislative landscape affecting our operations. These interactions are instrumental for the appropriate implementation of SB 134, the aligning of our agency's goals, keeping in mind the broader community needs, and securing the necessary support for our initiatives.
- **Facility visits:** By touring the focused facilities, I have achieved a broader understanding of the facilities the Office of the Correctional Ombudsman is now responsible for overseeing. In addition to creating visibility among incarcerated individuals, these tours have also allowed me

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<sup>3</sup> American Bar Association, Criminal Justice Section Report to the House of Delegates August 2008

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to recognize some basic areas in need of improvement. It has afforded the opportunity to begin cultivating relationships of honesty, transparency, and trust with the incarcerated individuals, staff and leadership within the facilities.

- **Learning Opportunities:** Actively engaging in learning and networking with other Correctional Ombudsman around the country and similarly situated state of Maryland agency heads have been essential. The experience has afforded me the opportunity to appreciate and stay current of best practices and innovative solutions.
- **Infrastructure:** A temporary office location has been secured inclusive of office furniture. The process has also begun through consultation with the Department of General Services/Real Estate Division to secure a new location once the state center closes within the next eighteen months.
- **Confidential Communications with Incarcerated Individuals:** Perhaps one of the most significant challenges taken on by the Office of the Correctional Ombudsman has been determining the most effective means for establishing confidential communication between the office and incarcerated individuals. I have explored multiple options inclusive of creating a phone hotline, encrypted email, confidential communications via the United States mail, and most recently exploring communicating through the Viapath Tablets. Ensuring safe, secure, and confidential communications between the agency and the incarcerated individuals, staff, and family members will prove essential to maintaining safety and security. Through research, networking opportunities, and collaboration, it has been determined that the most effective way to create an immediate tool for safe confidential, secure communications is through the tablets provided to most incarcerated individuals. This will not be the only means of communication, but it will be the initial tool provided to incarcerated individuals. We are collaborating with Viapath representatives and the Department of Public Safety Correctional Services to hopefully bring this to fruition.

I have had an email address established specifically for contacting the Office of the Correctional Ombudsman, but the same confidentiality challenge remains. The email address is [oco.contact@maryland.com](mailto:oco.contact@maryland.com)

- **Establishment of the Advisory Board:** SB 134 prescribes that there will be a twelve-person advisory board for the Office of the Correctional Ombudsman. There have been four appointments made to the board of individuals passionate about oversight who are equipped with the necessary knowledge, expertise, and commitment to guide the work of the agency.
- **Staffing Hiring and Development:** The integration of the Office of the Correctional

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Ombudsman with the Juvenile Justice Monitoring Unit (JJMU) has also been a significant focus over the past two and a half months. This process has involved fostering a cohesive and synergistic environment between the existing JJMU staff and me as the newly appointed Acting Correctional Ombudsman. I have taken the time to gather a deeper understanding of the team's work, expertise, and challenges. We have engaged in thought-provoking discussion designed to increase trust, enhance understanding, and build interpersonal relationships. We have successfully hired one staff member for the JJMU, who brings valuable skills and a wealth of experience to the team. Additionally, we have identified a promising candidate for the correctional oversight side who we believe will contribute positively to our efforts. These new hires are essential to expanding our capacity and expanding our capabilities.

## **Conference Participation**

### **National Association of Civilian Oversight of Law Enforcement (NACOLE)**

- Attending the annual NACOLE - Corrections track October 13<sup>th</sup> – 17<sup>th</sup> provided a unique experience to engage firsthand with the Top thought leaders in correction oversight. The conference also provided valuable insight on best practices, specifically in correctional oversight, and initiated the certification process toward the NACOLE Certified Practitioner of Oversight (CPO) Credential Program.

### **United States Ombudsman Association**

- Attending the United States Ombudsman Association (USOA) Conference from November 17<sup>th</sup> – November 22<sup>nd</sup> was multifaceted in that it provided a new ombudsman training opportunity, various general topics related to ombudsman work, and an opportunity to connect with other ombudsman working in specialized chapters. It also afforded me the advantage of connecting and networking once again with the knowledgeable ombudsman I met at the NAOLE conference. The USOA conference provided many best practice solutions to everyday challenges and concerns in ombudsman work

## **Technology**

- **IT Systems:** SB 134 requires the creation of a website. I have been in the process of creating a website dedicated to correctional and juvenile oversight in consultation with the Department of Information Technology (Do-It). Additionally, it is absolutely necessary to have a case management system that accurately tracks and stores information for the Office of the Correctional Ombudsman for both correctional and juvenile oversight. I have been consulting with Do-It, networking with other agencies and ombudspersons in other states as well as researching before beginning the RFP process to select the most effective case management systems for our agency.

- Pending the establishment of a case management system, an internal process has been established to track the data generated as complaints are received.

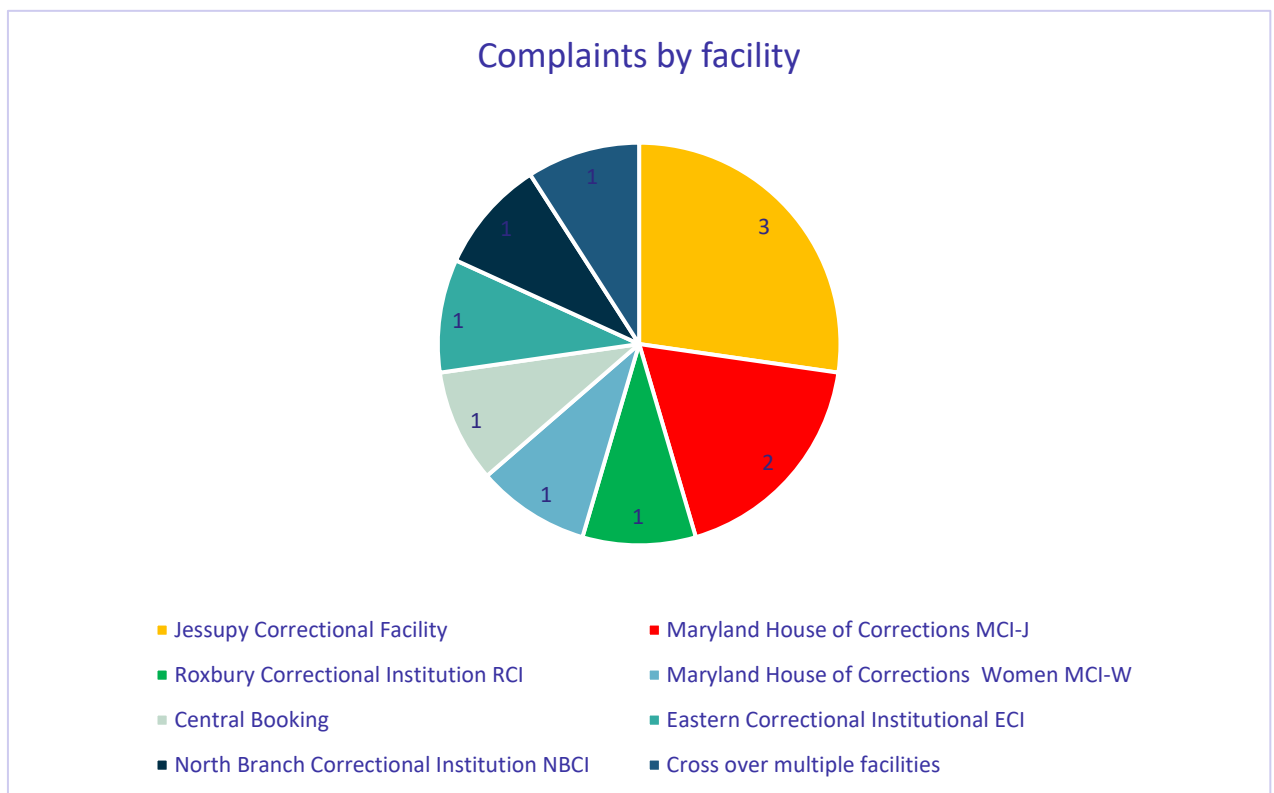
## Vehicles

- **Vehicles:** The agency has secured three fuel-efficient vehicles to ensure the safety of staff and facilitate travel throughout the state to perform oversight measures. These vehicles are a critical part of our operations, allowing us to conduct our duties effectively while minimizing our environmental footprint. The use of these fuel-efficient vehicles will underscore the agency's commitment to sustainable practices while aiding in our operations to continue to operate smoothly and effectively.

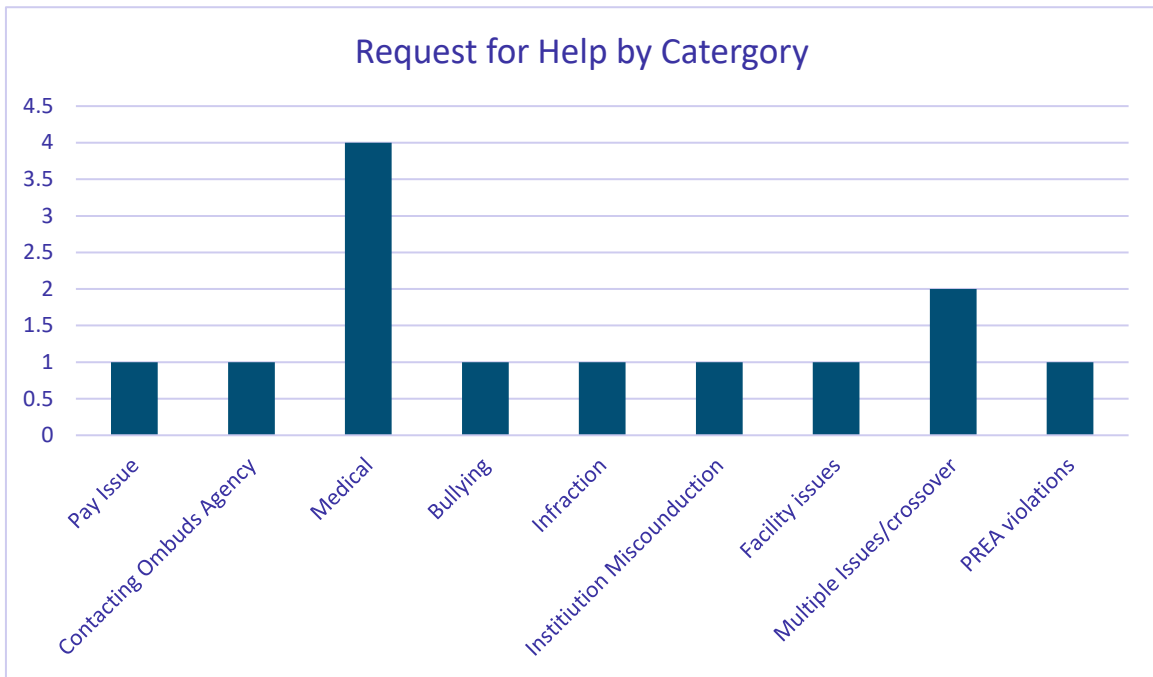
## COMPLAINTS

- **Complaints:** After networking with Ombudspersons from across the country, the Office of the Correctional Ombudsman has made a strategic and conscientious decision to focus on facilities in Jessup, not to pursue complaints until properly staffed, and appropriate procedures and processes are in place. That being said, the agency has still received complaints broken down as follows:

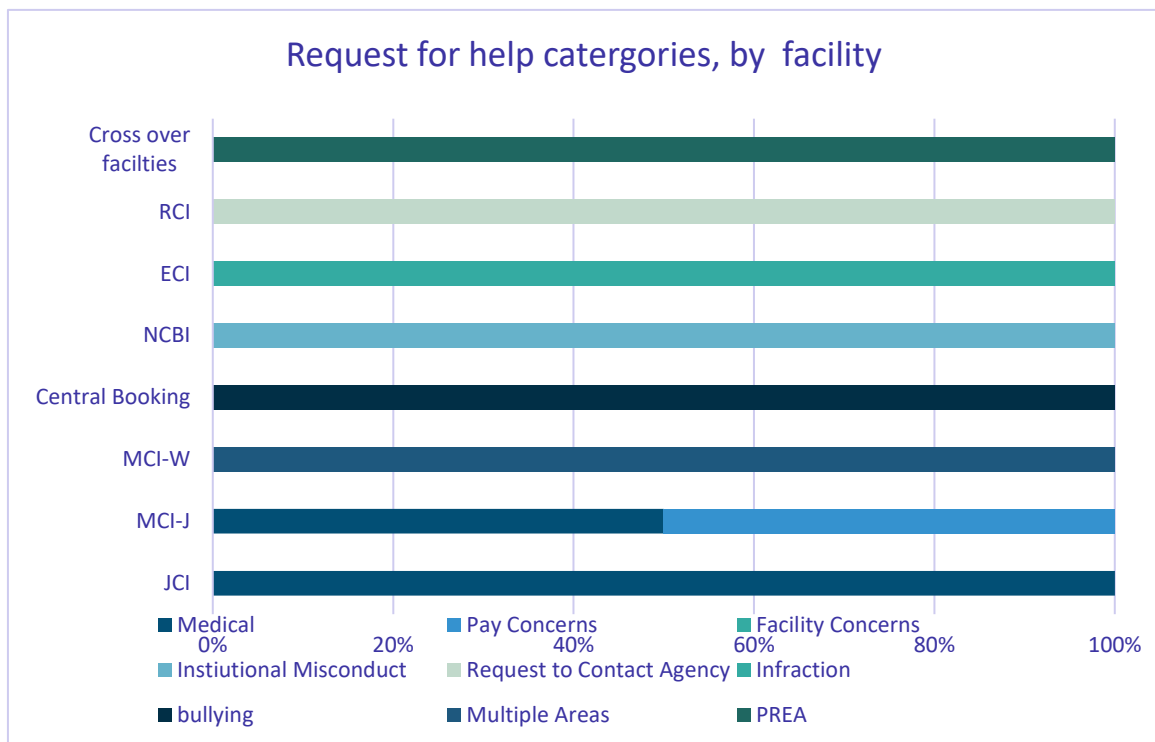
### Total Number of Complaints/Inquiries 11



**Figure 1**



**Figure 2**



**Figure 3**

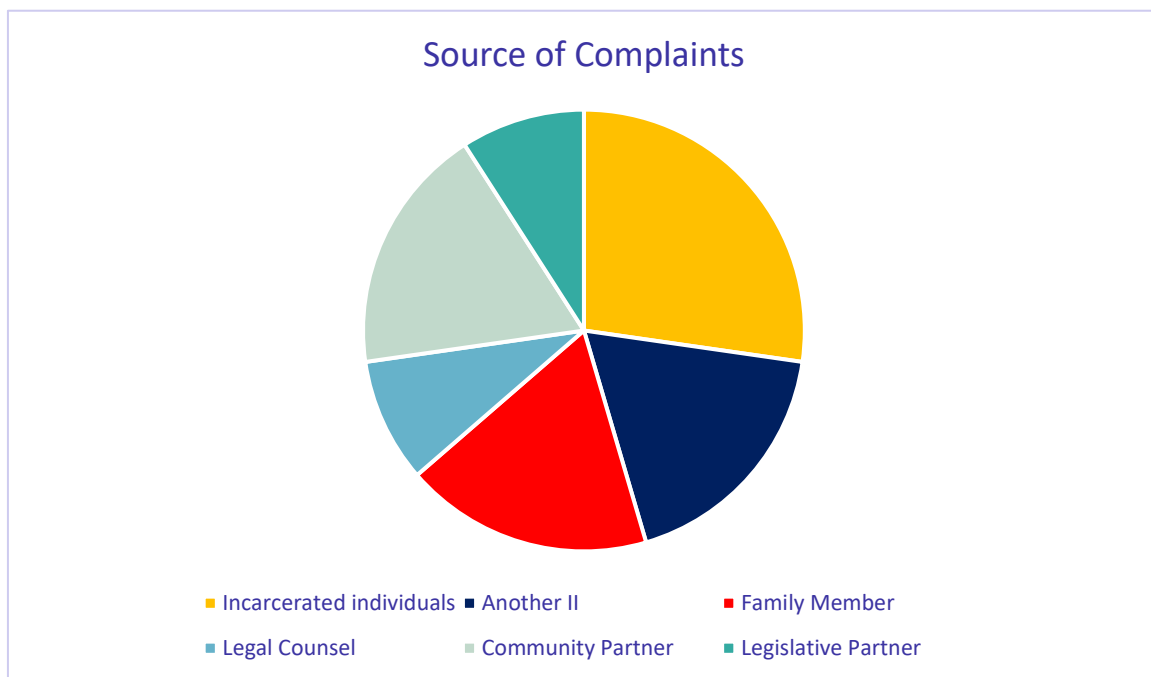


Figure 4

Draft complaint forms have been created to ensure consistency and will be added to the website and/or the tablets once established.

## BRANDING

The USOA recommends that Ombudsman Offices in an effort to maintain independence and impartiality brand themselves with a distinct color scheme, logo and/or seal. As a result of this recommendation, I sought the volunteer assistance of Maryland Artist Marisa Summers.

## NEXT STEPS – STRATEGIC PLAN

The upcoming year presents a monumental opportunity for the Office of Correctional Ombudsman to lay a robust foundation by fulfilling the legislative mandate set forth for its inaugural year. The following strategic plan outlines the key steps and initiatives that will guide the agency in achieving its objectives effectively and transparently.

### Key Objectives

The primary focus for the year includes the following objectives.

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## STAFFING

- **Staffing, Hiring, Training & Development:** At the beginning of the new year, we will continue to bolster the success of our team by seeking and hiring successful candidates that will enhance our team dynamics and bring diverse perspectives to the workspace, making for a richer and more inclusive work atmosphere. As we embrace diversity, we will foster innovation and create an effective and harmonious team.
- **Hiring Positions at the Office of the Correctional Ombudsman**

The Office of the Correctional Ombudsman is seeking dedicated and skilled professionals to join their team.

The following are positions that will be available in the new year.

  - Deputy Ombudsman for Correctional Oversight
  - Assistant Attorney General for the Office of the Correctional Ombudsman
  - Assistant Ombudspersons
  - Analyst
- **Continuous Professional Development:** Continuous professional development will be the cornerstone of our approach. We appreciate the importance of keeping our team members engaged and up to date with industry standards and new methodologies. Our commitment to professional growth will not only benefit the staff but will also benefit those we serve.

To support this position, it will be our goal to implement a robust training program that will focus on

- **Skill enhancement:** Not only ensuring that our staff are equipped with the necessary skills to excel in their roles, but that they feel competent and confident working independently in DPSCS and DJS facilities.
  - **Compliance with internal standards:** Maintaining high standards of operation and adhering to organization norms; confirming that staff is knowledgeable of institutional regulations, policies and procedures.
  - **Latest Best Practices:** Integrating the newest and most effective practices in correctional and juvenile oversight.
- **Integration and Staff Development:** To ensure the successful integration of new hires and the continuous development of existing staff, we have begun to establish regularly scheduled sessions for staff meetings to
    - **Debriefing:** Reflecting on activities and outcomes to learn and improve.
    - **Exploring challenges:** Identifying and addressing obstacles in a supportive environment.
    - **Sharing wins:** Celebrating successes to boost morale and motivation.

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- **Brainstorming ideas:** Encouraging creativity and innovation through collaborative thinking.
  - **Mentorship Program:** Once fully staffed, we plan to explore establishing a mentorship program. This initiative will pair new staff members with more experienced staff members, providing guidance and support as they navigate their roles. Mentorship will facilitate knowledge transfer, foster professional relationships, and promote a cultural of continuous learning and support within our team.

In summary, by aligning our efforts in hiring, training, and development, the aim is to create a thriving workspace that supports both personal and professional growth for our team which will in turn prove instrumental in building a strong integrated team capable of delivering effective oversight and monitoring corrections and the juvenile systems.

## TECHNOLOGY

**Website:** As mandated by SB 134, the Ombudsman is tasked with developing a comprehensive website that serves as an essential resource for the public and anyone interested in understanding the agency's function and scope. While the launch date remains unspecified at this time, the following outline details the planned content and features of the website, designed to foster transparency, education, and engagement.

- **Website Sections**

- Home Page**

- **Purpose:** Introduce visitors to the agency's missions, primary duties, and objectives.

- About**

- **Mission Statement:** Define the agency's goals and guiding principles.
    - **Work:** Highlights the agency's key initiatives and projects.
    - **Statutory Authority:** Explain the legal framework governing the agency.

- Newsletter & Updates**

- **Subscription Options:** Allow users to sign up for newsletters, updates and notifications.

- Reports**

- **Access to Reports:** Provide public access to various reports generated by the agency.
    - **Yearly Summaries:** Archive annual reports for public view.

- Complaint Process**

- **Explanation:** Outline of steps for filing a complaint.
    - **Downloadable forms:** Offer downloadable forms for filing.
    - **Offer On-line submission forms for filing.**

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### **Staff Directory**

- **Personnel Listing:** Introduce the staff, their roles, and the general contact email address.

### **Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)**

- **Common Inquires:** Address typical questions and concerns.

### **Message from the Correctional Ombudsman**

- **Personal Greeting:** A welcoming note from the Ombudsman, highlighting recent developments and goals.

### **Board Members**

- **Profiles:** Introduce board members and their responsibilities.

### **Strategic Priorities**

- **Goals:** Outlines the agency's strategic objectives and future plans.

### **Facilities**

- **Location Information:** Details for the locations and facilities the agency provides oversight for within the DPSCS and DJS.

### **Community Partners & Engagement**

- **Collaboration:** Highlight partnerships and community engagement efforts.

### **Confidential Resources/Hotline**

- **Support:** Introduce confidential support services, pending establishment.

### **Contact Information:**

- **Details:** Provide phone numbers, addresses, and emails contacts for direct communications.

### **Resources**

- **Education Materials:** Include guides, articles, and other informational resources.

### **Juvenile Justice Intake Monitoring (JJMU)**

- **Link:** Provide a link to the Juvenile Justice Intake Monitor Process page on the Attorney General's page until the information is migrated into the site.

### **Events**

- **Calendar:** List of upcoming events and opportunities for public participation.

This planned website aims to create a user-friendly platform, enhancing public understanding and interaction with the Maryland Ombudsman and JJMU agency.

**Case Management:** The pursuit of an effective case management system is a fundamental step in enhancing the operations of the Office of the Correctional Ombudsman and the Juvenile Justice Monitoring Unit (JJMU). This endeavor aims to ensure that all complaints are meticulously tracked and managed, thereby establishing the overall efficiency and effectiveness of the agency's operations.

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## Research and Networking

As previously mentioned, the research phase for identifying the most suitable case management system is already in progress. This involves networking with other Ombudsman agencies across the country, engaging with leaders of similarity situated state agencies, and consulting with vendors of case management companies. The collaborative approach aims to explore a variety of options, methodologies for delivery, and identify the most cost-effective, but efficient solution for the agency.

## Key Features of the Case Management Systems

The envisioned case management system is designed to track a comprehensive set of data related complaints. Below are the key features that the system will incorporate.

- **When complaints are received:** Capturing the exact date and time of each complaint to ensure timely processing.
- **Source of complaint:** Identifying where each complaint originates, whether it be from individuals, family members, legislators, community partners, or other entities.
- **Nature of Complaint:** Categorizing the type of complaint to facilitate targeted responses.
- **Facilities:** Keeping records of the facilities involved in each complaint.
- **Identifying information for incarcerated or detained individuals:** Collecting necessary details to accurately identify individuals related to complaints.
- **Category of complaint:** Classifying complaint into predefined categories for systematic analysis.
- **Assigned staff member:** Assigning responsibility to specific staff members for each complaint for handling and tracking.
- **Resolution:** Documenting how each complaint is resolved, providing transparency and accountability.
- **Timeline:** Tracking the duration from complaint, receipt, to resolution to ensure efficiency.
- **Outside Resources/Referral if any:** Noting any external resources or referrals utilized in resolving complaints.
- **Systematic or individual complaint:** Differentiating between broader system issues and individual cases.
- **Correctional or Juvenile Oversight:** Distinguishing between a juvenile oversight issue or a correctional oversight issue.
- **Oversight Facility Response to complaint (if contacted):** Noting the oversight facility's response to a complaint if notified.

## Importance of the Case Management System

The implementation of an appropriate case management system is crucial for several reasons:

- **Data Accuracy:** Ensures the maintenance of accurate and comprehensive data, which is essential for effective and informed decision making.

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- **Staffing Needs:** Helps in determining the staffing needs of the agency by accessing the workload and complexity of responsibilities.
  - **Evaluating Effectiveness:** Enables the evaluation of the agency's effectiveness by providing clear and concise insights into the resolution of complaints and overall performance.

By creating and adopting a robust case management system, the Office of the Correctional Ombudsman will be better equipped to fulfill the mission of providing and ensuring transparent, independent, and effective oversight in the DPSCS and the DJS.

### **Confidential Communications**

As we move forward into the year of 2025, efforts remain underway to establish the means of confidential communication for incarcerated individuals with the agency. As previously mentioned, the agency is actively collaborating with Viapath and DPSCS to leverage the technology available through tablets provided to incarcerated individuals. Our primary goal is to establish a secure and effective system that respects the privacy and rights of the incarcerated population and ensures their safety.

To ensure the success of this initiative, the agency will continue to work closely with Viapath. The intention is to facilitate confidential communication through the tablets already available to the incarcerated individuals. This approach promises a more manageable and scalable solution, utilizing existing technology to meet the immediate needs of the incarcerated individuals.

The goal is to implement a confidential communication system within the first two to three months of 2025. This timeline will allow for thorough testing and adjustments to ensure the system operates effectively and securely.

### **Hotline Feasibility**

Through discussions with other Ombudsman and analysis of best practices, it has been determined that creating a hotline for confidential communication is not feasible at this time. The primary challenges include the lack of necessary staffing resources to manage such a system effectively. The effort required to set up and maintain a hotline are considerable, particularly without the appropriate support systems in place.

Currently, the focus is limited to the Jessup facilities, and attempting to expand this initiative statewide would be overwhelming. The complexity and scale of such a rollout would require extensive planning and resources beyond current capacity.

The agency remains committed to enhancing the means of confidential communication for incarcerated individuals. By focusing on practical and sustainable solutions, we strive to uphold the dignity and rights

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of those within the systems while also ensuring their safety. Through continued collaboration and strategic planning, we are optimistic about the successful implementation of this initiative.

## **DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC SAFETY AND CORRECTIONAL SERVICES**

SB 134, has prioritized the Jessup regional facilities for the initial year of operations. The aim is to build a relationship characterized by honesty, transparency, and accountability with DPSCS. The department oversees the daily lives of approximately 17,000 incarcerated individuals, managing housing and everything from programming and education to health and dietary needs. Effective communication, honest, open, and impartial is deemed essential. Thus far, the department has been welcoming and cooperative.

- **Familiarization and Audit**

To acquaint myself with the operating procedures facilities, I have been conducting tours, educating myself on the policies, procedures. Given the requirement of auditing of the programming and services provided by the Division of Corrections since 2019. This audit will focus on:

1. Rates of participation by incarcerated individuals in:
  - Educational and vocal training
  - Evidence-based behavioral health and substance use disorder counseling
  - Mentoring and reentry programs
2. Identifying obstacles to participation.

In support of these objectives, I have engaged with DPSCS executive leadership to establish productive working relationships. I have met with various key leaders within DPSCS to begin cultivating positive relationships and gathering information. The following list is not exhaustive:

- Assistant Secretary of Data, Policy, and Grants Angelina Guarino, and Office of Data Development Executive Director Jay E. Miller
- Americans' w/ Disability Act Compliance Coordinator Michele C. Gardner
- Correctional Education Director Danielle Cox
- Reentry and Transition Services Executive Director Ellen S. Rappaport
- MD Commission on Correctional Standards Veronica D. Moore Executive Director and Assistant Executive Director Tanya Joyner
- Assistant Secretary of Programs, Treatment, and Reentry Renard E. Brooks, Health and Clinical Services Chief Medical Officer Oscar H. Jerkins, and Executive Assistant Robin Conley
- Intelligence Investigations, Director Errol Etting, Detectives Brian Diggs, Dwayne Swinton, and Donald Bauer

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## Jessup Focus Facilities

- **Maryland Institute for Women (MCI-W):** Is the only institution in the state dedicated to women. I was impressed by the Maryland Correctional Enterprise training and job experiences offered for the women. Given, however, that MCI-W is the primary state facility which houses women, the offering isn't as vast as in the men's facilities. This is also true as it relates to employment, the dog training program, and educational opportunities alike. As I walked through the campus, I observed what will become a common theme through all the facilities, buildings in ill repair, poor shower conditions, and incarcerated individuals complaining of health challenges.
- **Jessup Correctional Institution (JCI) :** Is a maximum-security facility with massive responsibilities for the region. As with MCI-W, the MCE training opportunity is a plus and there are more options available.  
Challenges: Infrastructure issues, ceiling leaks, medical challenges  
Positive: On-site infirmary and drug treatment
- **Maryland House of Corrections Jessup (MCI-J):** Is a medium-security facility.  
Challenges: Infrastructure issues, aging population, medical issues
- **Dorsey Run Correctional Facility:** Is a minimum facility and pre-release facility.  
Challenges: Case management response time appeared to be a consistent complaint  
Positive: The Re-entry preparation program
- **Patuxent Institution:** Is a maximum-security facility.  
Challenge: Major infrastructure issues; areas of the facility not conducive to treatment  
Strengths: Outstanding programming and rehabilitative services.

The executive leadership has been present and engaged during some of the tours, including Secretary Scruggs, Chief of Staff Gaskins, Commissioner Morgan, and Assistant Commissioners Keith Dickens and Laura Armstead.

Additional meetings are planned, it is important to highlight the cooperative and collaborative nature of DPSCS. All wardens have direct contact information, lending to open lines of communication.

## Methodology for Effective Engagement

Secretary Scruggs and I are committed to fostering a strong, trust-based relationship between the agencies and ourselves as leaders. To achieve this, we have devised a comprehensive methodology for effective engagement.

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- **Regular Monthly Meetings:** To ensure consistent communication and collaboration, we will establish a regular monthly meeting schedule. These meetings will serve as a platform for sharing updates, discussing ongoing projects, and addressing any challenge that may arise. By maintaining a predictable meeting cadence, we aim to create a structured environment where both agencies feel heard and valued and we can address the common goal of meeting the needs of incarcerated individuals.
  - **Direct Communication:** We believe that open and direct communication is the cornerstone of trust. We will approach one another directly with any questions or concerns. This approach will help us address issues promptly and prevent misunderstandings from escalating. By fostering a culture of openness, we hope to encourage transparency and mutual respect.
  - **Sharing Reports in Advance:** To facilitate informed discussions and collaborative decision-making, we will share relevant reports and documents in advance of our meetings or them being shared publicly. This will aim to enhance the quality of our interactions.

This methodology will help us lead effectively and achieve our shared goals.

## Juvenile Justice Monitoring Unit

The blending of the JJMU and the Office of the Correctional Ombudsman Office represents a progressive and fitting approach to oversight for Maryland. To illustrate this, I draw an analogy to a tree with two branches. The agency is the tree, and the two branches represent juvenile and correctional oversight. This structure symbolizes unity and shared purpose while maintaining distinct functions.

- **Shared Objectives and Unique Roles:** While the staff within each branch will not be interchangeable, there will be similarities in our work experience and crossover in training. This integration allows for a comprehensive approach to justice oversight while respecting the unique demands of juvenile and correctional environments. Each branch will maintain its specialized focus but will collaborate to enhance overall effectiveness.
- **Observations and Reflections:** During my experience shadowing the team within juvenile facilities, I was struck by their tenacity, commitment, and determination to operate with transparency and fairness. Their dedication to these principles are essential in building trust and ensuring accountability within the system.
- **Philosophical Evolution Towards a Common Goal:** As our agency continues to evolve, it is crucial to adopt a philosophical view that encourages collaboration and teamwork. By working from a team perspective, we can better achieve our common goals in oversight. Our unity will enable us to address challenges more effectively and maintain the high standards required for both juvenile and correctional oversight.

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The blending of the Correctional Ombudsman and the JJMU is an innovative step forward. It allows for the sharing of expertise and resources while respecting the distinct needs of each oversight area. By fostering an environment of collaboration, transparency, and fairness, we can create a more just and accountable system for all involved.

## **Conclusion**

The journey of the Office of the Correctional Ombudsman is significant and represents continuous and intentional work. A framework for best practices will be established creating transparent, independent, and impartial oversight. What will prove crucial in building the meaningful trust intended by the legislation and necessary for the incarcerated individuals, the community, the legislators, and community partners is ensuring that the Ombudsman Agency has a seat at the table. A cornerstone of the initiative is guaranteeing that the Ombudsman engages directly and regularly with all relevant leaders and agencies that impact the oversight work. The direct line of communication is vital because it safeguards against information being filtered or diluted. The information, instead, is disseminated firsthand in meeting spaces where crucial discussions that impact the agency's work takes place. This further ensures clarity and accuracy and maintains an independent stance ensuring fair and unbiased communications. This is a position consistent with the legislation and the thematic ideals that underpin correctional oversight and support the Ombudsman's role. It advances the safety, humanity, and dignity of incarcerated individuals, while enabling transparency in operations, independence in oversight, and increased functionality of DPSCS and DJS. Fostering this type of meaningful, and regular engagement can enhance a correctional system that is safe, fair, and effective for all stakeholders.