

# 2024 Annual Report

---

NEW JERSEY OFFICE OF THE CORRECTIONS OMBUDSPERSON

Terry Schuster, Corrections Ombudsperson  
NOVEMBER 2024 |

## Table of Contents

Message from the Ombudsperson .....	2
Statutory Authority .....	3
Budget .....	3
Advisory Board .....	3
Requests for Assistance .....	4
Takeaways from Oversight of New Jersey Prisons.....	10
Steps the Ombudsperson Office is taking to Become More Effective.....	19
Ombudsperson Staff .....	24
Contacting the Office .....	24

## Message from the Ombudsperson

The Office of the Corrections Ombudsperson provides independent oversight of state prisons to protect people in custody from harm. There are two primary ways in which we do this: by troubleshooting individual complaints of mistreatment, and by monitoring issues that impact large numbers of people in prison.

The Ombudsperson Office is not meant to duplicate or replace the New Jersey Department of Corrections' management activities and decisions. The Department of Corrections has a remedy system to respond to grievances, a division to investigate alleged abuse, and processes to revise policies and audit their own performance. These are vital tools for internal management, but they do not necessarily create transparency for the public.

The Ombudsperson Office, on the other hand has access to prison facilities and records, and the ability to speak confidentially with those who live and work in state prisons, in order to serve as the eyes and ears of the public in an environment that is otherwise inaccessible. We are neutral observers who report publicly on conditions impacting the health and safety of those confined by the state. When changes can be made at an individual or system level to better protect people's wellbeing and rights, we are mandated to identify and recommend those changes.

Our credibility matters a great deal. Because members of the public can't see for themselves what New Jersey prisons are like, it's vital that we defend our findings with data, be honest about the limitations of what we know, challenge our own biases, and seek out differing perspectives. We take these responsibilities very seriously and understand the Ombudsperson Office's effectiveness is dependent on its reputation as honest and trustworthy.

In this Annual Report, we track the types of help people were looking for when they reached out to the Ombudsperson Office, as well as the challenges and issues that contribute to these asks for help. We recognize the Department of Corrections' leadership, investment, and progress toward addressing concerns we've flagged in previous reports, and frame issues that we believe require ongoing monitoring. We also summarize the steps we've taken over the past year to meet our statutory mandate and improve our effectiveness as a civilian oversight body.

I am grateful for the opportunity to do this work, and for the dedicated team that answers our phones, regularly speaks to incarcerated people and concerned loved ones, tours facilities, and meets with staff and decision-makers at all levels of the Department of Corrections.

Thank you,

Terry Schuster  
New Jersey Corrections Ombudsperson

## Statutory Authority

The Dignity Act (P.L. 2019, c. 288), signed into law in 2020:

- Authorizes the [appointment](#) of an Ombudsperson to work with [state prisoners](#),
- Outlines the Office's [duties](#),
- Gives the Office discretion to [investigate complaints](#),
- Directs the Office to [inspect prison facilities](#) and operations,
- Provides [broad access](#) to facilities, people, and records,
- Protects [confidential communications](#) and [prohibits retaliation](#) for working with the Office, and
- Creates an [Advisory Board](#) to support and guide the Office.

## Budget

The New Jersey Legislature appropriated \$2,806,000 for the Office of the Corrections Ombudsperson in Fiscal Year 2025, a 6% increase from the previous year. The FY25 budget cuts \$173,000 in unused funds for equipment and services and adds \$334,000 for staffing, for an overall increase of \$161,000. Ninety-six percent of the Office's budget is dedicated to staff salaries.

## Advisory Board

The Ombudsperson Office is guided by a citizen Advisory Board, with members appointed by the Governor, Senate President, and Speaker of the Assembly. The Office is currently awaiting new appointments to fill two vacancies on the Board.

In 2021, Governor Murphy appointed Carolyn Chang, an attorney and former Mayor of Westampton Township, and in 2024, he appointed Boris Franklin, a community organizer with New Jersey Together to fill a seat vacated by civil rights attorney Tess Borden. A third seat was recently vacated by Ed Neafsey, who now serves on the Governor's Clemency Advisory Board.

Former Senate President Stephen Sweeney appointed Kathy White, the Chief Operating Officer of Volunteers of America Delaware Valley, and Rob Baran, the Co-Director of the New Jersey Coalition Against Sexual Assault. A third seat was vacated by Patricia Teffenhart, who now serves as Executive Director of the Attorney General's Division of Violence Intervention and Victim Assistance.

In 2021, Speaker Craig Coughlin appointed Gale Muhammad, the Founder of Women Who Never Give Up, and Amos Caley, a pastor and senior fellow at Salvation and Social Justice. He recently appointed Sherri Goldberg, a nonprofit community services director with experience in juvenile and adult corrections. She will fill a seat vacated by Ron Pierce, who now serves as a Deputy Ombudsperson for the Office.

The Board reviews drafts of all public reports by the Ombudsperson Office, helps to organize town hall meetings, and offers guidance for the Office's strategic planning. The Board members held in-person meetings in March and September of 2024.

## Requests for Assistance

The Ombudsperson Office provides independent prison oversight for the state of New Jersey, responding to requests for help from individuals and assessing systemic trends. Between September 1, 2023 and August 31, 2024, the Office received 12,581 contacts, an average of just under 250 contacts per week.<sup>1</sup> The total number of contacts reflect questions and concerns from 3,755 unique individuals. Of these individuals, 2,984 were held in a state prison, representing about a quarter of the total number of people in the custody of the New Jersey Department of Corrections. Most people reached out to the Office only once or a few times. The ten most frequent callers each contacted the Office more than once per week in the last year.

Contact with the Office largely came from incarcerated people themselves. More than 7 in 10 contacts were directly from an incarcerated person. Friends and family of incarcerated individuals made up 21% of contacts to the Office, and the remainder came from community advocates, other government agencies, Department of Corrections employees, or other sources. Most contacts (57%) started with a phone call to the Office. People also reached out to us through the mail or other hand-written correspondence (28%), over email (6%), or in person when our staff were touring housing units (9%).

The Ombudsperson Office has broad authority to access prison facilities, and attempts to investigate, address, and resolve as many concerns as possible in-person. This past year, our staff members were on-site in state prisons a total of 995 times, an average of roughly four staff members in state prisons each weekday. The Office has a field team of 11 staff members responsible for triaging and troubleshooting individual-level concerns and a systemic monitoring team of five staff members that conducts facility inspections and research on system-level trends. The field team members accounted for the bulk of our on-site work, with 912 collective days in the prisons. This averages out to field team members being present at each prison two days per week.

The Office's health care oversight staff made 40 prison site visits to meet with patients and providers. Members of the Office's systemic monitoring team spent 23 days on-site conducting inspections and analysis, and meeting with facility administrators. The Ombudsperson himself made 20 site visits to meet with administrators, tour and inspect facilities, observe special events, and conduct interviews and focus groups with incarcerated people.

When possible, staff members met face-to-face with incarcerated people who expressed concerns related to their living conditions, safety, health, or general well-being. In the past year, the Office conducted more than 1,300 face-to-face meetings to discuss individual-level concerns.

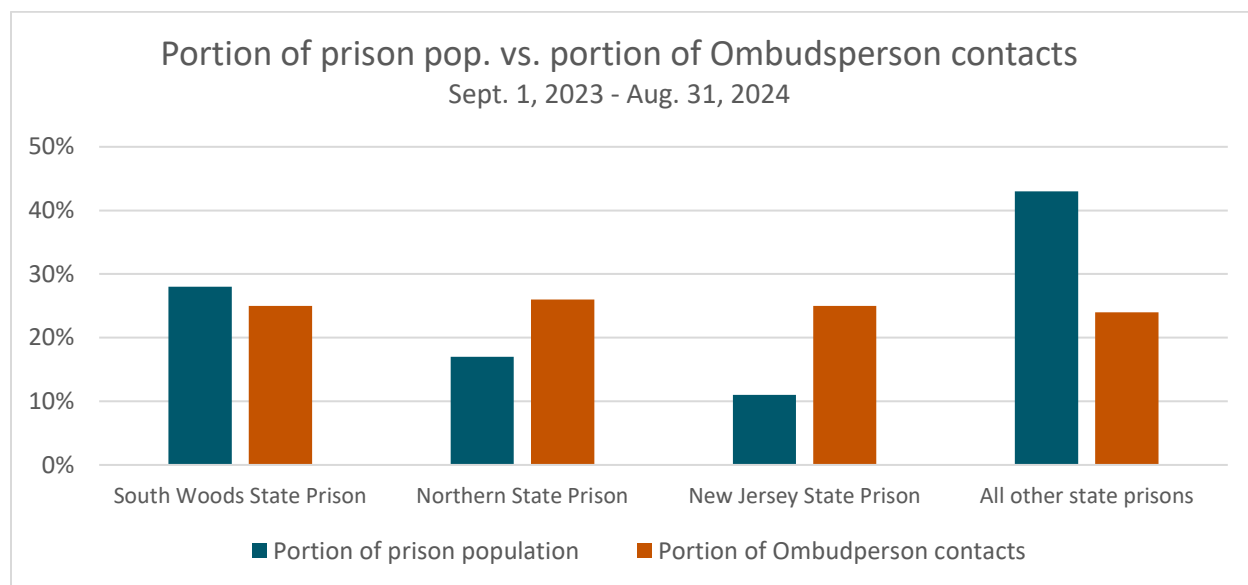
The Office received 8,434 requests for assistance from people held in state prisons, and 541 requests from people held in residential community reintegration programs, county jails, or the Special Treatment Unit

---

<sup>1</sup> For purposes of this report, the Ombudsperson Office has excluded duplicate contacts in which a person reached out to the Office to check in about a pending complaint. The total number of contacts for the year including duplicates is 13,079.

for people civilly committed for sex offenses.<sup>2</sup> Looking just at contacts from people in state prisons, there are three facilities—Northern State Prison, New Jersey State Prison, and South Woods State Prison—that each accounted for one quarter of contacts to the Office, with the other six facilities accounting for the remainder (see Figure 1). The highest rates of contact per 100 people in custody came from New Jersey State Prison, Edna Mahan Correctional Facility, and Northern State Prison (see Figure 2).

**Figure 1. Facilities holding half the prison population accounted for three-quarters of Ombudsperson Office contacts.**



**Figure 2. Highest rate of contact to the Ombudsperson Office, by facility population.**

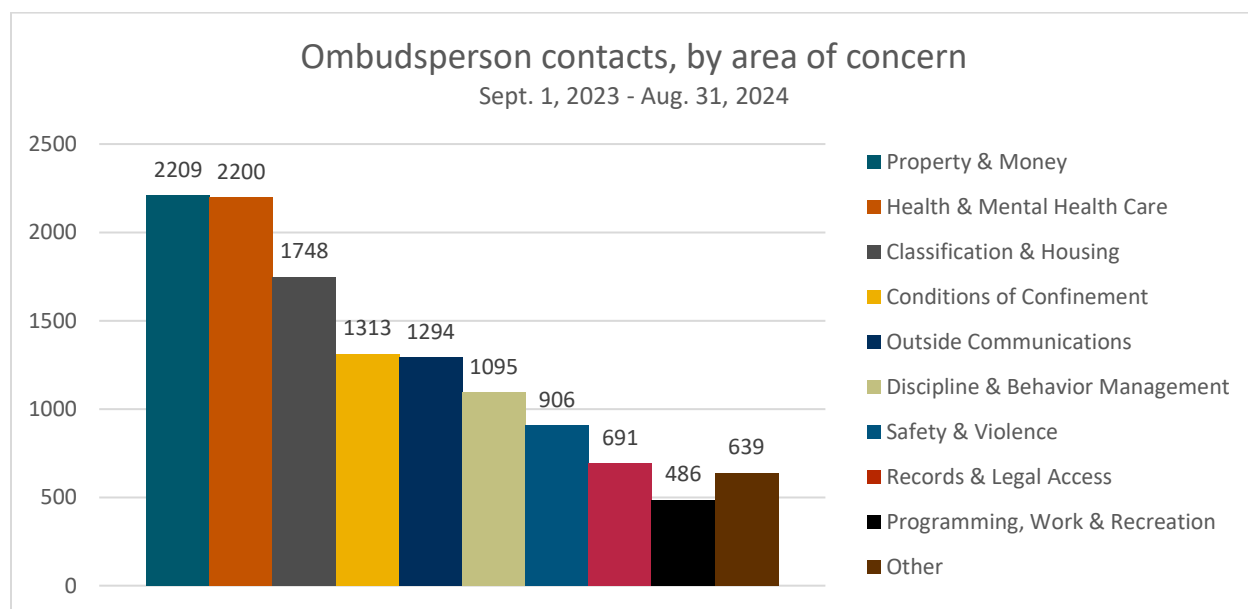


<sup>2</sup> The Ombudsperson Office’s jurisdiction to investigate complaints in county jails is limited to allegations from people in jail who are serving state sentences. NJAC §52:27EE-27.

Incarcerated people and their loved ones reached out to the Ombudsperson Office most commonly with concerns about property or health care (see Figure 3). Property concerns often included worries about missing or damaged personal belongings after transferring to a new housing unit, issues with commissary purchases not arriving, and work wages being miscalculated or garnished for fines. The Office addressed more than half of these property-related concerns by providing the individual with information and technical assistance on navigating Department of Corrections processes. In a small portion of these property-related cases, Ombudsperson staff referred the concerns to facility leaders or took additional steps to investigate and resolve them.

Health care complaints included issues related to medication refills, lack of responsiveness to sick call requests, accessing specialist care, transportation to off-site appointments, and lack of follow-up care following labs, appointments, or medical procedures. More than a quarter of health-care-related contacts came from family members or friends. While a small portion of these contacts did not require any action on our part, the Office summarized and referred the large majority of concerns to Rutgers University Correctional Health Care (UCHC), the Department’s health care provider, and followed up with patients and providers to learn more about whether and how the issues were resolved.

**Figure 3. Most common areas of concern expressed to the Ombudsperson Office.**



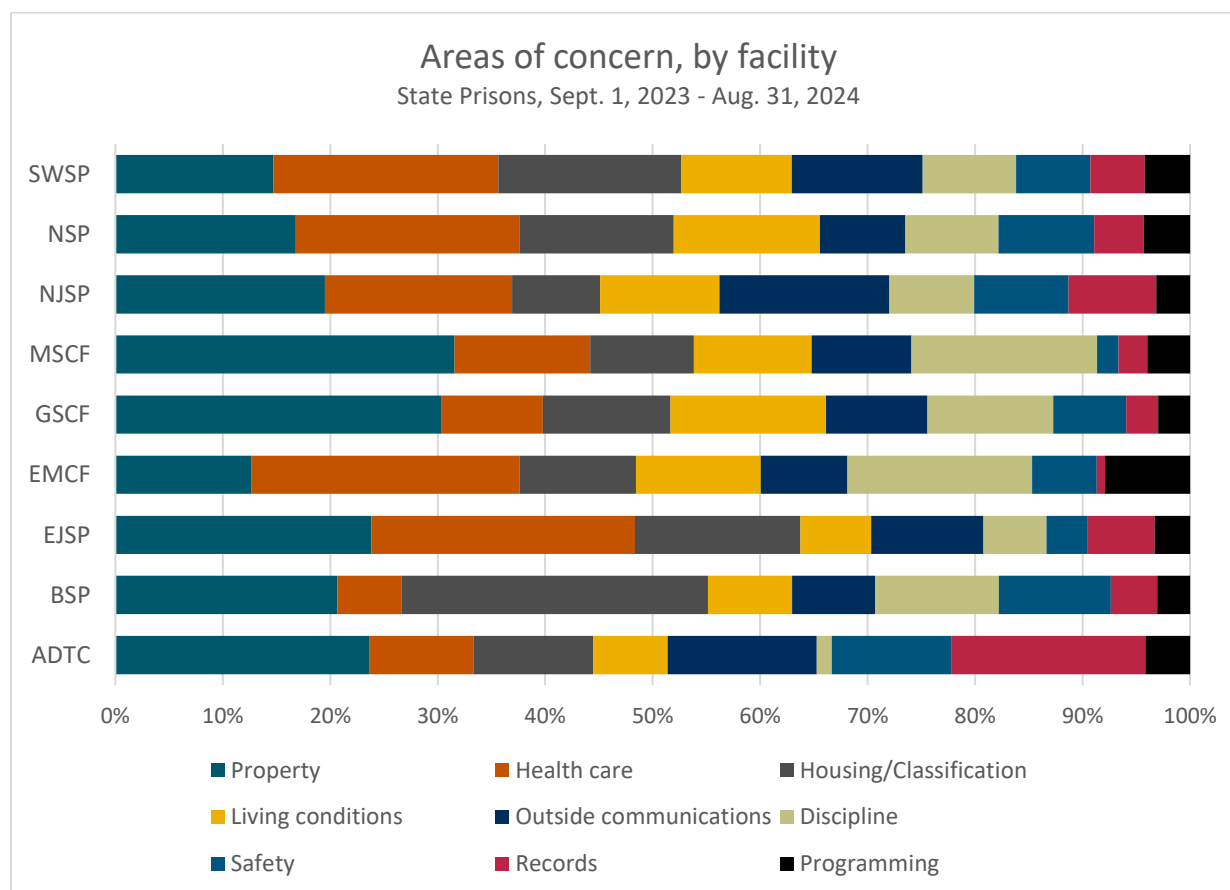
Many people also reached out to the Ombudsperson Office with concerns about their housing and their conditions of confinement (see Figure 3). Housing complaints included concerns about untimely reviews of a person’s custody status (i.e., minimum, medium, or close custody) by a facility’s classification staff, requests for help with transfers to another facility or halfway house, questions about how a release date was calculated, and conflicts between cellmates. Conditions of confinement concerns related to a range of topics including sanitation, plumbing, air quality, laundry, pest control, out-of-cell time, indoor temperatures, food portions and quality, and disability accommodations.

The Office was contacted 2,675 times this past year by people in the community who have loved ones incarcerated in New Jersey prisons or residential community reintegration programs. The most common

area of concern from friends and family was health and mental health care. Family members also reached out in large numbers with concerns about facility transfers, family visitation, and missing property. The Ombudsperson Office is a resource for family members wanting to understand or navigate Department processes, and in more than 40% of these contacts, staff members were able to address the concern by sharing information. The Office doesn't share confidential, privileged, or sensitive information, and most contacts from friends or family members led to follow-up directly with the incarcerated person and decision-makers at the facility.

Each state prison facility houses a unique population, and the concerns expressed to the Ombudsperson Office reflect that (see Figure 4). Health care issues represented the most common area of concern at South Woods State Prison, for example, where the Department operates an Extended Care Unit for people needing long-term care, end of life care, dialysis, or special mental health observation. Health care was also the top concern at the women's prison, Edna Mahan Correctional Facility. At the Adult Diagnostic and Treatment Center, a state facility for people convicted of sex offenses, a larger portion of the population was concerned about legal records compared to the other facilities. At a maximum security prison like New Jersey State Prison, people expressed more concerns about communication with the outside world compared to other facilities. Notably, allegations related to violence and personal safety were not among the top three most commonly reported areas of concern at any prison facility, and made up less than 10% of contacts from eight of the nine prisons.

**Figure 4. Areas of concern by prison facility.**





Five state prison facilities operate Restorative Housing Units (RHUs) for people serving disciplinary sanctions, and the remaining four facilities regularly hold people awaiting RHU placement. About 1-in-5 contacts to the Ombudsperson Office over the last year came from a person in an RHU placement. Their most common areas of concern related to missing property, health care access, the discipline system, and conditions of confinement in the RHU.

---

1 in 5 

About 1 in 5 contacts to the Ombudsperson Office over the last year came from a person in a Restorative Housing Unit (RHU) placement. The most common concerns were related to missing property, health care access, the discipline system and conditions of their confinement.

---

The Ombudsperson Office is attempting to more comprehensively track our own actions to resolve issues, to refer issues to other investigators or decision-makers, and to help individuals in custody better understand Department processes and advocate for themselves. Quantifying whether the Office's actions were decisive in resolving problems is difficult, particularly when facility administrators and other leaders in the Department of Corrections are already aware of a problem that Ombudsperson staff have flagged for their attention and are either working to address it or have already resolved it. Based on internal case management notes, the Office estimates that its actions were decisive in resolving about 1,250 concerns brought to our attention in the past year, which represents 9.9% of total contacts.

A large portion of contacts (39.6%) the Office addressed by providing people with information they needed to navigate the system and advocate for themselves or for their loved ones. Another 29.7% we referred to Department leaders, internal investigators, or service providers with varying levels of follow-up. This includes just over 500 complaints flagged for the Department's Special Investigations Division (SID) in the last year relating to fears or allegations of abuse, retaliation, or sexual victimization; and more than 1,600 patient concerns flagged for the Department's health care providers. In 19.6% of contacts, the Office determined no violation had occurred or no intervention was necessary by the Office, and only 1.2% of contacts to the Office remain pending or unresolved at the time of this report.

Figure 5. Infographic: Summary of Corrections Ombudsperson contacts



Data reflects contacts to the Corrections Ombudsperson from September 1, 2023 - August 31, 2024.

## Takeaways from Oversight of New Jersey Prisons

Individual complaints and requests for help inform and steer the Office's monitoring of prison conditions, but our oversight activities also involve day-to-day observations, conversations with Department leaders about trends and priorities, and participation in task forces and collaborative problem-solving. Staff and leadership at all levels of the Department of Corrections have worked hard to manage the state's prisons, make strategic decisions to address known problems, and respond to emergent issues as they arise. The Annual Report is an opportunity for the Ombudsperson Office to report on some of these efforts, and to highlight progress and areas of concern that impact the whole prison population as well as developments that are relevant only to certain sub-populations in custody. What follows are some of our collective takeaways from the last year.

### Staffing challenges

For roughly three years, the Department of Corrections has been operating state prisons with hundreds of correctional officer vacancies. Planned leave and staff call-outs in addition to general under-staffing cause prison administrators in at least half of the facilities to routinely cancel programming, recreation time, and other activities that involve time out of cells and housing units. This is particularly common on weekends and during the summer and winter holiday seasons. Officers working mandatory double-shifts express exhaustion and burnout, and the incarcerated population gets exasperated with inactivity. Mandatory trainings for correctional police officers also pose a logistical challenge when facilities are under-staffed. Lockdowns and reduced activity days impact out-of-cell time not only in close custody settings, but also in the prisons' general population housing units, meaning people who aren't demonstrating security or behavior problems often feel as if they are being punished anyway. The population is also almost entirely double-locked, meaning nearly everyone has a cellmate—something that union leaders point to as a source of increased conflict and disruption.

Although the staffing challenges persist, the Department has taken significant steps to recruit and retain personnel. Their recruitment campaign ads on billboards, public transportation, social media, and Internet search platforms have driven more traffic to the Department's website, increased applications for officer positions, and had a notable impact on the diversity of candidates, increasing the portion of female and non-white applicants, for example. Their efforts have generated larger class sizes at the Training Academy. They have launched three Academy classes this year instead of two. They have also allowed recruits to commute rather than take up residence at the training facility and created incentives for staff to recruit new colleagues. They fought for and secured salary increases for officers and launched a variety of wellness initiatives for their staff.

To further alleviate the strain on staff, the Ombudsperson Office recommends that the Department continue to explore expanding eligibility for incarcerated people to be stepped down into minimum custody settings, and work with the Legislature to eliminate unnecessary barriers that prevent people from being placed in residential community reintegration programs.

## Old infrastructure / new technology

The Department of Corrections has enormous infrastructure needs that impact its indoor temperatures, water and air quality, plumbing and electricity, and various other aspects of its operations, security, and programming space. Some people in state custody are housed in facilities built in the 1800s. Thousands are housed without air conditioning or in facilities without the electrical infrastructure that could support air conditioning. At Garden State Correctional Facility, for example, buckets are scattered throughout the prison every time it rains to catch water dripping through the roof, and tarps are used to protect computers, supplies, and other equipment from the rain. The Department estimated a need for \$589 million in capital improvements in Fiscal Year 2025 and nearly \$1 billion over the next seven years, but the state's Capital Budgeting and Planning Commission recommended funding only \$23 million, about 4% of what was requested for the current fiscal year.<sup>3</sup> This means the Department is making do, adapting its own policies, and attempting to implement new laws and directives without the programming space it needs and with very few options for moving people when conditions on a housing unit become uninhabitable.

A bright spot over the last year has been improvement in the Department's technology infrastructure. Recent upgrades to telehealth equipment should improve patients' access to specialist health care. Officers on every shift are now equipped with body-worn cameras. Facilities have been getting new computers and educational technology, and the Department is installing the connectivity infrastructure needed to support personal tablets for each incarcerated person to make phone calls, file requests and grievances, and access educational materials, music, and entertainment.

## Gaps in health care services

Everyday health care needs for the incarcerated population are addressed by on-site nurses, doctors, and health care staff provided through Rutgers University Correctional Health Care (UCHC). UCHC also provides skilled nursing care, extended nursing care and palliative care, and special mental health observation for patients in the Extended Care Unit at South Woods State Prison. Other specialty, emergency, and acute care is provided off-site or via telehealth appointments by sub-contracted hospitals and providers. This year, the Ombudsperson Office took steps to begin monitoring health care services, and made initial observations related to everyday care (medication refills and sick call requests), extended care (the needs of bed-bound patients), and off-site care (missed appointments).

**Medication refills.** A common area of complaint to the Ombudsperson Office was medication refills, particularly for "keep on person" medications that incarcerated people are allowed to have in their possession. Instructions for refills or reorders are not printed on the back of the medication blister packs and patients aren't prompted to request a refill when their supply gets low. In dozens of phone calls and in-person interactions with incarcerated people, Ombudsperson staff heard confusion about the proper method to get a refill, which was also apparent from a review of electronic inquiries and grievances. Additionally, we discovered notable instances of delays in ordering refills that had been properly requested. In January 2024, the Ombudsperson Office had a productive discussion with UCHC and the

---

<sup>3</sup> State of New Jersey Commission on Capital Budgeting and Planning, Fiscal Year 2025 Seven Year Capital Improvement Plan (July 2024), available at <https://www.nj.gov/treasury/omb/publications/25capital/FY25-SCIP.pdf>.

Department's Health Compliance Unit about this topic, which led to medication refill instructions being communicated out to the full incarcerated population. In the months following this communication, the Ombudsperson Office received significantly fewer complaints regarding medication refills. UCHC has committed to ongoing patient education and re-education about the process for requesting and receiving refills.

**Sick call requests.** Policy dictates that requests from patients to be seen by a nurse when they are ill or injured must be reviewed and triaged by UCHC nurses within 24 hours, and patients with clinically indicated requests must then be scheduled and seen within 24 hours.<sup>4</sup> The Ombudsperson Office conducted a series of audits that revealed timely responses to sick call requests from patients in six of the nine state prisons. At the other three prisons, however—which happen to be the largest three—a significant portion of cases received an untimely response.<sup>5</sup> At South Woods State Prison, for example, between January and March 2024, 21% of electronically filed sick call requests were not opened until 3-7 days after they were filed, and another 14% were not opened for 8 days or longer. More recent audits showed a trend of improved performance at South Woods State Prison between April and June 2024, and again between July and September 2024. They showed worse performance, however, with regard to timely responses at New Jersey State Prison and Northern State Prison. The Ombudsperson Office has met on a quarterly basis with UCHC leadership and the Department's Health Compliance Unit to discuss this data and seek potential explanations and solutions.

**Call buttons.** Ombudsperson staff made multiple unannounced visits this year to the Department's Extended Care Unit at South Woods State Prison to meet with bed-bound patients. One area of concern that surfaced, and that the Department has since addressed, was the inability of bed-bound patients to call for help when they needed it. Complaints from people in the Extended Care Unit described times they had been left in soiled clothes and bedding for several hours, or times they had been unable to access as-needed pain medication because they couldn't get the attention of a nurse or patient assistance tech. In May 2024, in response to our referral of these complaints, the Department instituted a call bell system, and the Ombudsperson Office conducted follow-up visits in June, observing prompt response times when call buttons were activated.

**Wound care.** The Ombudsperson Office met with bed-bound patients and patients recovering from surgeries who expressed complaints about substandard wound care that caused pain, discomfort, odor, and signs of possible infection or worsening of surgical wounds and bed sores. UCHC has investigated the allegations and taken initial steps to address wound care training with nursing staff, and the Department's Health Compliance Unit is monitoring the issue in concert with the Ombudsperson Office.

**Transport to off-site care.** Missed off-site medical appointments have been a recurring theme in complaints from the incarcerated population. Patients scheduled for surgery, chemotherapy, or other specialist office visits have contacted the Ombudsperson Office when a lack of transportation or staff

---

<sup>4</sup> New Jersey Department of Corrections Internal Management Procedure MED.IMHC.017.

<sup>5</sup> For purposes of the audit, a nurse's review of an electronically submitted sick call request was considered timely when it was opened within 48 hours of being submitted. An audit of sick call requests that were submitted electronically via JPay between January and March 2024 showed untimely responses to 28% of requests at Northern State Prison, 34% of requests at New Jersey State Prison, and 35% of requests at South Woods State Prison.

cause them to miss appointments. Other issues like last-minute refusals by patients also lead to missed appointments. To proactively prevent and address these issues, UCHC's appointment schedulers now meet on a biweekly basis with the Department's transportation staff to improve coordination of off-site care. Specialist consults are supposed to be scheduled within 60 days of when orders are placed, something that has become more difficult as wait times even for patients in the community have increased. The Department's audits of UCHC show large portions of consults failing to meet the 60-day standard, including some very long delays in needed care. This is a topic the Office intends to monitor more closely in the coming year.

### A recent increase in suicides

In the last year, there have been five confirmed suicides by people in state prisons. There were four suicides the year before, and none in the two years prior. In March 2023, the Department convened an internal task force of subject matter experts to examine suicides and self-harming behavior. The Ombudsperson Office was invited to participate in that taskforce this year. This is an issue that the Department takes very seriously and will continue to prioritize in the coming years. We appreciate the opportunity to be at the table with the Department, looking at data, case examples, and relevant research, and developing recommendations for policy and practice change.

### Half the women's prison population relocated

While plans and preparations for a new women's prison are in development, the Department undertook a partial relocation of the population at Edna Mahan Correctional Facility. Over the course of 2023, roughly half the population was moved from the Edna Mahan main campus, where minimum custody housing units had significant infrastructure problems and no air conditioning, to a satellite facility a short distance away that formerly operated as the William H. Fauver Youth Correctional Facility. Prison administrators took great pains to communicate with the population about the move, manage expectations, and address concerns that surfaced.

At the time of the move, the population expressed anxiety about access to services and medical care, mandatory strip searches for those traveling between the two campuses, separation from long-term peers, and having reduced privacy, personal space, and property in a dorm setting compared to the cottages where they were previously housed. Today, about a year after the move, those who were relocated primarily express concerns about the loss of personal space and restrictions on their movement.

People housed at the satellite facility sometimes need to travel to Edna Mahan's main campus for their work assignment, educational and vocational programming, health care needs, or family visits. This daily movement between campuses adds an operational and logistical challenge that other state prison facilities don't face. People at the satellite facility who are taking GED or general education courses can go to class on-site, but those taking college-level courses have to travel to the main campus. People at the satellite can get medications or see the nurse for sick call, but those needing optometry, dental care, or an infirmary stay need to be transported to the main campus. At times, transportation issues have interrupted or delayed attendance at work, classes, or visits. People also expressed concerns that the restraints and strip searches required for secure transport between facilities might deter people from seeing the doctor or participating in college classes. The facility's leadership has been responsive to these



concerns, and has taken steps to minimize invasive searches, especially for those going to the main campus for work detail, school, and vocational classes.

### Investigating physical and sexual abuse allegations

The Department has an internal affairs unit with roughly 100 officers called the Special Investigations Division (SID) that investigates allegations of abuse and staff misconduct, among other things. SID investigators receive extensive additional training over and above what custody officers receive and are structurally independent from the custody staff chain of command. The Department created a Special Victims Unit (SVU) within SID specifically to investigate allegations of sexual abuse and harassment. While open investigations are deemed confidential, the Ombudsperson Office has participated in monthly reviews of completed SVU investigations.

The Department has remedied several of the deficiencies found in the federal litigation over sexual abuse of people incarcerated at Edna Mahan Correctional Facility. In August 2024, the federal Department of Justice joined the New Jersey Department of Corrections in asking the court to terminate certain provisions of the consent decree, a settlement agreement laying out deficiencies to be remedied under the court's supervision. This motion recognized durable compliance with several of the court ordered changes related to direct supervision of people in custody, sexual abuse responses and crisis intervention, physical plant requirements, and education of the incarcerated population about their rights. Other provisions of the consent decree will remain intact and subject to ongoing court oversight.

In June of 2024, the Office of the State Comptroller released a [report](#) finding evidence of incomplete and ineffective SID investigations, based on a sample of investigative files from three facilities between 2018-2022. That report concluded with a referral of the concerns to the Ombudsperson Office for ongoing monitoring and oversight. Both the Commissioner and the Assistant Commissioner who oversees SID came into their positions after the 2018-2022 audit period, and have developed new policies, procedures, and training that are responsive to findings in the Comptroller's investigation and report. The Department developed a new internal audit process for each of SID's units and a new senior-level review process for every staff misconduct case. The Department is currently expanding trainings for SID investigators and supervisors, revising policies on preserving evidence and investigation files, and reopening two investigations that were featured prominently in the Comptroller's report. The Department has welcomed our proposal of recurring independent audits of SID investigations by the Ombudsperson Office, which we're presently memorializing in a Memorandum of Understanding between the two agencies.

### Expanded programming, education, and mentoring

This past year, the Department launched a computer coding program at Garden State Correctional Facility, introduced a trauma-informed recovery program at Northern State Prison and South Woods State Prison (including a cohort facilitated in Spanish), expanded the Reconnecting Children and Parents (RECAP) program to East Jersey State Prison, and continued successful pilots like the entrepreneurship program. The Department hosted Program Fairs at all but two facilities, aimed at recruiting participants who had

not previously engaged in programs.<sup>6</sup> The fairs were set up like vendor expos with tables and spokespeople, including peer spokespeople who had completed the programs.

The Department and their university partners continue to provide college education to people in state prisons. The Department is building the technology infrastructure that would allow participation in online courses, and will be rolling out new tablets to the incarcerated population. Among other functions, the tablets will contain 25,000 hours of free educational material. The Department is also working to develop a new peer mentoring initiative that would train currently and formerly incarcerated people to help those in the facilities who may need extra support and guidance.

### Steps to address the needs of transgender people in custody

The Department implemented a new policy this year delineating how people who identify as transgender can purchase specified gender-affirming and gender-appropriate items (clothing, make up, etc.) in any prison facility. The Department hired a gender specialist who provides individualized and group supportive counseling at two facilities, and began including a transgender staff member in the PREA Accommodation Committee (PAC), the process for determining whether a trans person will be housed at a men's or a women's prison.

Transgender women living in men's prisons report that it's easier than it used to be to get gender-affirming health care, to establish strip search preferences, and to choose a cellmate with whom they feel safe. However, some gender-affirming surgeries have been delayed because Rutgers University Correctional Health Care continues to seek a specialist provider. The need for surgery is determined by health care providers and approval for payment follows the same standards as New Jersey Medicaid coverage. Trans women continue to report threats, name calling, and harassment from other people in custody, peers exposing their genitals, and incidents involving physical and sexual abuse. The Department investigates all allegations of abuse and harassment and has expanded the staff and leadership responsible for implementing and overseeing Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA) standards. Personal safety and mental health issues have also contributed to serious incidents of self-harm among the trans female population.

People who have applied for housing in accordance with their gender identity continue to report that the PAC hearing can feel like an interrogation, with a stronger focus on their genitalia and reproductive capabilities than on their personal safety. The trans population appreciates the Vulnerable Housing Unit and the transgender-specific support group being offered at Garden State Correctional Facility, and in focus groups with the Ombudsperson Office have suggested expanding them to additional men's facilities. They also recommend providing key information in each facility's Handbook about gender-affirming policies and processes.

### Concerning conditions in disciplinary housing

The Department addresses institutional rule violations and violence with a formal disciplinary hearing process, issuing sanctions that often include sending a person to a close custody Restorative Housing Unit

---

<sup>6</sup> Two facilities did not host Program Fairs this past year, New Jersey State Prison and the Adult Diagnostic and Treatment Center.



(RHU) for a period of time. The Ombudsperson Office has prioritized monitoring of the RHUs because of the extensive restrictions placed on people's freedom of movement, physical activity, possessions, phone calls, and access to services. When RHU beds are scarce, facilities that don't operate RHUs utilize other prison cells for RHU overflow. Because they are not designed to accommodate recreation or congregative interaction time in accordance with RHU security requirements, people held in these RHU overflow beds are often subjected to periods of time with very little activity out of their cells.

In October of 2023, the Office [reported](#) on the very limited out-of-cell time offered to people in the RHUs, using both survey data and official logs. We published [a new report](#) in October of 2024 following a series of inspections at the Northern State Prison RHU. It described the Department's progress in addressing living conditions there that were unsanitary and that failed to meet the basic needs of the population. The report recommended steps to reduce the population on the unit, improve health care access for those living there, establish minimum standards of habitability for prison housing units, and publicly report certain RHU data.

### Recently overhauled treatment program for people convicted of sex offenses

The Department operates the Adult Diagnostic and Treatment Center (ADTC) for people convicted of sex offenses with specialized treatment teams of psychologists and social workers from Rutgers University Correctional Health Care. The treatment program was extensively revised within the last two years to better align with the latest research in the field. People sentenced to ADTC and those who transfer to the facility voluntarily receive intensive individualized treatment and maintenance, tailored to their risk level, cognitive abilities, and offending patterns. People housed at ADTC speak very highly of the program and the group facilitators. The treatment team at ADTC makes efforts to identify people in other facilities who are high-risk for sexual re-offending, and who may be subject to civil commitment at the end of their prison sentences, to persuade them to transfer voluntarily to ADTC in order to participate in the programming.

### High-needs population held in protective custody

Protective Custody (PC) is a secure and highly-controlled setting in prison designed for a small number of people who are housed separately from the prison's general population for their own safety. The people in PC are vocal and have contacted the Ombudsperson Office in disproportionate numbers. They're also a high-needs population: More than half have been identified with needs related to mental health, susceptibility to sexual victimization, or vulnerability to deterioration if placed in isolation.

In a forthcoming inspection report, the Ombudsperson Office will share observations about how PC operates and how it is experienced by those in custody. The units are clean, orderly, and provide opportunities for each person to engage in basic daily activities. They operate as close custody housing units with very controlled movements and little out-of-cell time. Disciplinary records show significant reductions in drug use and violence after placement in PC, an outcome measure that suggests behavior stabilizes when personal safety needs are met. Our forthcoming recommendations will focus on making PC more active, less isolated, and better supported with programming.

### More reentry supports

For the last year, the Department has piloted a financial incentive program for people reentering the workforce through residential community reintegration programs. Maintenance fees that were historically collected out of their paychecks can now, for those who opt into the program, be held in a trust account and disbursed to the person when they are released from custody. These savings can help individuals pay for housing, transportation, and other reentry needs. The Department has also fostered and funded an extensive community of reentry partners across all counties in the state who provide links to housing assistance, job skills training, employment, case management, health insurance, mental health counseling, and other wrap-around services. Each facility hosts Reentry Day events for those who are within six months of release from prison to meet providers offering services in the county they're returning to, learn about their offerings, and share their contact information.

### Increased wages and incentive payments for incarcerated people

Responding to concerns expressed by the incarcerated population about the increased cost of items in the commissary, in April 2024 the Department raised daily wages for all job assignments performed by people in custody by an average of 25%, and standardized pay rates across facilities. They also revised internal management procedures to mandate a full review of wages and costs to the incarcerated population every two years. Before this year, wages for the incarcerated population had not increased since 2001.

Payment for skilled labor and para-professional jobs now range from \$3.00-\$7.50 per day, and hourly wages for those working in DeptCor industries (building furniture, making clothes, producing street signs, etc.) now range from \$0.55/hour to \$1.00/hour. A large portion of the incarcerated population is assigned to clean housing units in lower paying job titles called "cell sanitation" and "tier sanitation," earning \$1.60-\$3.00 per day.

Before Fiscal Year 2024 ended, the Department also issued behavior incentive payments of \$15-\$20 each month in April, May, and June to most of the population as a reward for remaining free of disciplinary charges.

### Preventing personal property from going missing

Each time an incarcerated person moves to a new housing unit or transfers to another facility, there is the potential that their property may get lost or damaged. These problems are particularly common during non-routine moves in which the person him/herself is not present when their belongings are inventoried and packed. To examine property issues and improve related policy, the Department created a Property Task Force. The Ombudsperson Office was invited to participate and supported the group with findings from an inspection of property rooms, packaging rooms, and log books at South Woods State Prison. The Task Force collaboration was very productive, and resulted in a wide range of actionable recommendations. The Department is now exploring potential policy and practice changes related to transport timelines, supervision and recording of pack-ups, database tracking of personal electronics, clarifying what medications and medical devices are permitted in overnight bags, and tracking property claims that request replacement of items or reimbursement.

## Increased visits and phone calls, but people punished with “loss of phone”

Each year, the Department of Corrections accommodates millions of phone calls and electronic messages from incarcerated people to their loved ones, as well as thousands of video visits and hundreds of thousands of short “videograms.” In 2023, the Ombudsperson Office tracked in-person visits and reported earlier this year that they have increased significantly post-COVID. The Department attempts to accommodate in-person visits even on days when programming and recreation are canceled because of staff shortages. The Department is also nearing a rollout of free personal tablets in the facilities that will allow people to make calls to friends and family members without waiting in line for pay phones. This will dramatically expand the incarcerated population’s access to loved ones.

In a [Special Report](#) from the Ombudsperson Office, we published information about a concerning trend in which a large portion of the incarcerated population had their telephone privileges taken away as a disciplinary measure, including hundreds who were unable to call loved ones for extended stretches of time. In 2023, nearly 2,500 people were sanctioned with loss of phone, including 475 people who were prevented from making calls for longer than six months. Notably, because disciplinary sanctions may arise out of incidents involving a fight or an application of force, the family members who are cut off from communication are often extremely concerned about their loved one’s wellbeing, and distressed that they can’t speak with him or her on the phone. Because “wellness checks” are not part of the job responsibilities for the Department’s program and support services staff, family members regularly call the Ombudsperson Office asking us to check in on a loved one who can’t communicate by phone, a request that we often don’t have capacity to accommodate.

In our report, the Office recommended that the Department and state lawmakers place limitations on disciplinary punishments that take away a person’s phone calls while in state prisons, balancing the need for accountability with the value of contact with loved ones. The Office further recommends that the Department develop internal capacity to perform wellness checks when family members are worried about the wellbeing of their loved ones.

## A high-volume remedy system

When incarcerated people have questions, requests, or complaints that they can’t resolve directly with the custody staff on their housing unit, they can file an inquiry or grievance on paper or electronically using a JPay kiosk, flagging it to the attention of decision-makers in different divisions of the facility (administration, classification, mental health, food services, etc.) or the Department’s central office. The Department receives far more questions, requests, and complaints internally than the Ombudsperson Office receives. In the last year, for example, more than 377,000 inquiries and grievances were communicated electronically over JPay—roughly 30 times the number of contacts to the Ombudsperson Office. They were most frequently directed to the law library, facility administrators, mental health, classification, the facility’s business office, and social services. An effective remedy system is a key measure of a well-functioning prison facility, and in the coming years, the Ombudsperson Office aims to inspect facility-level inquiry and grievance responses.

## Steps the Ombudsperson Office is Taking to Become More Effective

### Auditing the Special Investigations Division

The Department's Special Investigations Division (SID) investigates deaths in custody as well as tips and allegations related to contraband, excessive force, sexual assault and harassment, retaliation, and staff misconduct—topics of huge importance to the safety and wellbeing of people in custody. By law, many of the allegations that come from incarcerated people and their loved ones to the Ombudsperson Office must be reported to SID for investigation, and the Office historically has not had a formalized process to track the results of those investigations or review the evidence gathered and steps taken by SID and the Department to reach conclusions on the merits of the allegations.

The Ombudsperson Office will soon launch a recurring independent audit of SID investigations, to provide public assurance that they are thorough, objective, and impartial; and when concerns are identified, to recommend targeted changes in policy and practice. The Office is working in collaboration with the Department to establish the parameters of the auditing process. The current limited staff capacity within the Ombudsperson Office will necessarily impact the scope and frequency of these audits, which will be randomized and narrowly drawn rather than comprehensive.

### Monitoring medical records and engaging health care administrators

In the last year, the Ombudsperson Office has begun holding quarterly meetings with the leadership of Rutgers University Correctional Health Care (UCHC) and the Department of Corrections Health Compliance Unit to discuss case studies and trends in patient requests for assistance. These meetings are an initial foray into collective problem-solving around issues like the timeliness of sick call responses, protocols related to keep-on-person medications, staff training on wound care, and access to health care services for those held in restrictive settings like the Restorative Housing Units. In the past year, out of an abundance of caution, the Ombudsperson Office sought individual patient releases to access medical records. With new guidance from the Department of Law, the Office will proceed as a Health Oversight Agency under the HIPAA privacy rule, meaning individual patient releases are not necessary to access records for an investigation or inspection.

### Formalizing an inspection tool to monitor prison conditions

The Dignity Act mandates regular inspections of all Department of Corrections facilities and public findings based on observations, interviews, surveys, record reviews, statistical analyses and other measures. The law requires the Ombudsperson Office's inspection reports to apply legal requirements, best correctional practices, and other criteria to assess conditions and operations, and to identify systemic problems and possible solutions.<sup>7</sup> The Office's initial inspections following enactment of the Dignity Act were thematic, examining summer heat, out-of-cell time, and access to loved ones through visits and phone calls. This past year, the Office developed a standardized facility inspection tool grounded in state regulations, Department policy, and national best practices. [The inspection tool](#) sets criteria for scoring sanitation, living conditions, fire safety, and food safety. Over time the tool will evolve to monitor additional aspects

---

<sup>7</sup> NJSA §52:27EE-28.2.

of operations, services, and correctional practices. Inspection reports utilizing the new tool will be published in the coming years.

### Launching site visits to Residential Community Reintegration Programs

The Ombudsperson Office has historically focused resources on monitoring secure prison facilities. However, members of the public have called on the Office at town hall meetings to play a more meaningful role in oversight of Residential Community Reintegration Programs (RCRPs), known colloquially as halfway houses. With a growing staff, the Ombudsperson Office is now launching a new initiative to make regular site visits to all RCRPs contracted with the Department of Corrections. The Office will conduct both announced and unannounced visits, troubleshoot concerns raised by individuals participating in the programs, meet regularly with RCRP directors, and share observations about policy and practice with the Department's Office of Programs.

### Expanding community engagement through town hall meetings

In 2023, the Ombudsperson Office held a large virtual town hall and five regional town halls to share the Office's 2022 Annual Report and to gather public input about priorities for the Office's oversight activities. With the addition of a Deputy Ombudsperson for external affairs, the Office has been able to expand this outreach in 2024 with town hall meetings in Newark, Jersey City, Paterson, Elizabeth, Long Branch, New Brunswick, Trenton, Camden, and Atlantic City.

Through these meetings, the Office heard from hundreds of community members about their personal experiences and the experiences of their loved ones with incarceration in New Jersey. We faced tough questions about our accessibility and our approach to implementing the provisions of the Dignity Act. We also heard urgent calls to analyze deaths in custody, to exercise more intensive oversight over health care services, and to lobby for expanded jurisdiction in order to monitor conditions and alleged abuses in county jails.<sup>8</sup>

### Creating an interactive data dashboard for the public

Civilian oversight of prisons is a means to create transparency in a part of government that is generally inaccessible to the public. The Annual Report distills takeaways from the Office's case management system, summarizing contacts to the Office over the previous year while protecting confidential communications. Because complaints to the Ombudsperson Office represent a proxy for whether the incarcerated population is concerned about a particular issue, the Office regularly receives media questions about the frequency of complaints and contacts on particular topics. To increase transparency and accessibility of our case management system data, the Office has created an [interactive data dashboard](#) on the Ombudsperson Office's website. The dashboard currently includes data on contacts to the Office between September 1, 2022 and August 31, 2024, and allows members of the public to query

---

<sup>8</sup> The Office has jurisdiction over state-sentenced incarcerated people, some of whom are housed in county jails, but the large majority of whom are held in the custody of state prisons. See NJSA §52:27EE-27. The Office does not currently have jurisdiction to investigate concerns from people in county jails who are awaiting trial or serving an incarceration sentence of less than a year.

and sort the data by year, facility, area of complaint, the source of the contact, and method of outreach (in person, in writing, or by phone). The user can also see the number of contacts each month and the rate of contacts at each facility per 100 people in custody. This will allow journalists, lawmakers, and members of the public to research and cite Ombudsperson contact data without having to formally request information from the Office. Each year the Office will supplement the dashboard with the most recent case management system data relied on for that year's Annual Report, allowing the public to track trends over time.

### Increasing communication with the officers' union

Officers are charged with an enormous number of responsibilities to ensure that people in custody are safe, get their basic needs met, and have opportunities to engage in daily activities. They are often the first points of contact when an incarcerated person has a problem or needs help with something, and they provide valuable observations and experiences for policy discussions. The effectiveness of any oversight body relies on a well-rounded understanding of how prisons operate and what sort of fix may be most practical for any given problem. It also relies on problem-solving participation and buy-in at all levels of staff and leadership within the Department. The wellbeing of the incarcerated population directly contributes to the wellbeing of officers in the facilities, and the living and working conditions are shared.

Ombudsperson staff members interact with officers every time we're in the facilities. We rely on them for our own ability to safely move about the facilities, and get valuable insights from them into the dynamics on a particular housing unit and the daily operations of each prison.

In an effort to better understand their collective perspectives, to increase their understanding of our mission and goals, and to build a stronger working relationship, the Office hosted a meeting with the President and regional vice presidents of the correctional officer's union, PBA Local 105, in May of 2024. In the time since, we've sought their input and reactions to our draft reports and policy recommendations, and have reached out to union leaders after serious assaults on staff and other incidents impacting officers' wellbeing.

### Hiring more staff to expand our reach in the prisons and in the community

Our staffing priority this past year has focused on supporting our field team and call center. This includes those in our office who regularly tour facilities to speak with incarcerated people and administrators, and who answer letters and phone calls from people requesting help. Assistant Ombudspersons, particularly those assigned to troubleshoot concerns at the largest state prisons or at multiple prisons, have been stretched thin with large and complex caseloads. They've also been pulled into our Trenton office multiple days a week to help answer calls from family members with incarcerated loved ones. The confidential helpline for incarcerated people has been staffed by only three people, an insufficient number to keep up with our high call volume. A recent internal audit of our call center data, for example, showed 42% of

incarcerated people who attempted to call the office were unable to get through to a live operator, and those who did get through often made multiple attempts because the lines were busy.<sup>9</sup>

To address these internal needs, the Ombudsperson Office has hired three full-time and one part-time Assistant Ombudspersons in the last year, as well as a clerk typist to support the call center. The Office has also hired a bilingual Analyst Trainee to support the Deputy Ombudsperson who oversees community engagement, and two graduate student interns to work with our field team and systemic monitoring team.

### Triaging requests for assistance

With a new Deputy Ombudsperson over our call center and field team, the Ombudsperson Office has begun refining our process for intake and triage of individual-level concerns. These internal protocols establish actions that must immediately be taken for concerns related to safety, violence, emergencies, and extreme conditions of confinement. They identify a second tier of concerns that may require immediate action, at the discretion of the Assistant Ombudsperson, on behalf of individuals who are vulnerable or subjected to certain levels of confinement, and a third tier of concerns that the Office won't engage with until the incarcerated person has utilized the Department's internal inquiry and grievance system and the Department has had sufficient time to respond. The Office is also revising internal procedures for handling confidential and sensitive information, including clarifying and standardizing what information can and cannot be shared with family members who reach out to the Office for assistance.

### Expanding staff training and education

In the past year, the Office has provided day-long trainings for Ombudsperson staff on conflict resolution and on Prison Rape Elimination Act standards. Our staff have observed Department of Corrections trainings on de-escalation, suicide prevention, and meeting the safety and health needs of LGBTQ individuals, and received a training from the Department's Special Investigations Division on narcotics entering state prisons.

Our staff joined Commissioner Kuhn and members of her executive team on a site visit to "Little Scandinavia," a housing unit at Pennsylvania's State Correctional Institution in Chester where officers have been trained in Norwegian-style corrections with a significant focus on trust-building and humanized/normalized interactions between staff and the incarcerated population. The Office has also sent staff to attend national conferences on correctional mental health care, civilian oversight of law enforcement, and investigating deaths in custody.

Much of the training planned for the upcoming year will be focused internally on improving the quality and consistency of our case management.

---

<sup>9</sup> The Ombudsperson Office audited telephone records between April 1, 2024 and July 31, 2024, excluding calls placed on weekends or after normal business hours. During that period, 755 unique individuals made completed calls and spoke with a live operator at the Ombudsperson Office, out of 1,290 total individuals who attempted to reach the Ombudsperson Office by phone from a state prison.

In addition to topical and thematic trainings, the Office has also connected with correctional oversight bodies across the country to learn more about their practices and offer our assistance. This included hosting staff from Washington State’s Office of the Corrections Ombuds for two days of cross-training, dozens of conversations with oversight practitioners in other states, and outreach and support to lawmakers creating correctional oversight bodies in Connecticut, Maryland, Michigan, and Virginia.



## Ombudsperson Staff

### Corrections Ombudsperson:

Terry Schuster

### Field Team:

Deputy Ombudsperson Roshunda Simmons

John Blakeslee

Mary Ann Conte

Megan Farrell

Carla Gardner

Daneta Graham

Michael Holley

Anissa Jett

Karen Leonard

Melissa Matthews

Ezekiel Mfon

Amy Southwick

Amber Washington

### Systemic Monitoring Team:

Deputy Ombudsperson Danielle Romano

Alex Cocco

Rachel Fromhold

Kristin King

Oludamilola Ogunnubi

### External Affairs:

Deputy Ombudsperson Ron Pierce

Luis Torres

### Call Center and Support Staff:

Asa Bell

Michelle Berry

Jack Caffrey

Lauren Sagar

Kelly Santizo

## Contacting the Office

The Office of the Corrections Ombudsperson is on-site multiple times per week in each state prison facility. People in state prisons can speak with us in person, contact us in writing (on-site mailboxes or legal mail), or call our office. Friends and family with incarcerated loved ones, community members, and state officials can reach us by phone or email.

Office of the Corrections Ombudsperson

P.O. Box 855

Trenton, NJ 08625

Email: [info@oco.nj.gov](mailto:info@oco.nj.gov)

Website: [www.nj.gov/correctionsombudsperson](http://www.nj.gov/correctionsombudsperson)

Main line: (609) 633-2596

Confidential prison hotline: (555) 555-5555 from any prison phone

Confidential halfway house hotline: (800) 305-1811