

2025 Annual Report

NEW JERSEY OFFICE OF THE CORRECTIONS OMBUDSPERSON

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NOVEMBER 2025 |

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Executive Summary

The Office of the Corrections Ombudsperson (“the Office”) provides transparency and independent prison oversight focused on the safety, health, and wellbeing of incarcerated people. In Fiscal Year 2025, the Office received more than 13,000 contacts from incarcerated people and their loved ones reporting concerns and requesting assistance. Contacts have increased 16% since FY 2023, as the Office has grown and become more visible and accessible. The Office’s staff members conducted more than 1,100 face-to-face interviews with incarcerated people in Fiscal Year 2025 to discuss the concerns flagged in their phone calls and letters. The most common areas of concern related to property, health care, housing, communication with the outside world, and living conditions in prison.

The Office conducted in-depth inspections at [Garden State Youth Correctional Facility](#) and [New Jersey State Prison](#)’s west compound. The reports relating to each of these inspections note concerns related to cell sizes at both facilities, sanitation and needed repairs at Garden State, and a lack of shower privacy in NJSP’s west compound. Summer heat inspections conducted at the five facilities with non-air-conditioned housing units measured high indoor temperatures and humidity, and found administrators and staff making significant efforts to mitigate the extreme heat.

The Office held eight public town hall meetings, attended dozens of community events, and met regularly with the Governor’s Office, legislators, and the Department of Corrections Commissioner.

The Office would like to recognize the leadership of New Jersey Department of Corrections Commissioner Victoria Kuhn, and applaud her efforts to rebuild trust in corrections and improve the wellbeing of staff and incarcerated people. Repairing the reputation of the Department requires both good leadership and meaningful oversight, and the Office is grateful to the Commissioner for her transparency, proactive problem-solving, and collaborative approach.

In the last fiscal year, the Office found many examples of the Department of Corrections taking action to improve operations and services. The Department, for example, made strip searches at the women’s prison more trauma-informed, began video recording large-scale contraband searches of prison cells, changed mail and other processes to curb the flow of contraband into the facilities, and created a new Major position to manage and ensure meaningful use of force reviews. The Department also improved response time to sick call requests, developed plans to expand inpatient drug treatment, established additional reentry partnerships, advanced efforts to issue new tablets that will increase phone and video calls to loved ones, and incentivized good behavior with housing units that offer elevated privileges.

Regular tours of disciplinary housing units showed notable improvements at some RHUs, though problems persist at Northern State Prison’s RHU regarding out-of-cell time and mental health deterioration. Northern State Prison also experienced a series of infrastructure crises this past winter impacting indoor temperatures, hot water, air quality, and plumbing. Thankfully, the Department received capital improvement funds this fiscal year for major repairs and renovations there.

The Department continues to implement the federal Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA), despite recent changes at the national level that eliminated PREA enforcement and resources. Since the introduction of body-worn cameras, investigators have had more evidence to substantiate allegations or determine that they are unfounded, though many PREA allegations involve harassment and abuse by cellmates off camera.

In January 2025, the Ombudsperson Office assigned an Assistant Ombudsperson to make regular site visits to the Residential Community Reintegration Programs (RCRPs, previously called halfway houses) operated by the Department's community partners to help troubleshoot concerns raised by the population and their family members. These programs offer people nearing release the opportunity to work a job in the community or pursue higher education in a controlled setting with case management and reentry supports.

Summary of Recommendations

Throughout this 2025 Annual Report, the Ombudsperson Office makes recommendations and reinforces those of previous Ombudsperson reports, including the following:

- **Double-bunking in small cells.** The Department should develop a strategic plan to assess and limit double-bunking in small prison cells, and the Legislature should adopt minimum standards for the size of single- and double-cells. The Department should take steps to expand the number of single-occupancy cells and utilize single cells, where appropriate, as an incentive for the population. The Department and Legislature should prioritize the demolition and replacement of New Jersey State Prison's west compound, the oldest operating prison facility in the country with cells so small that people in them can touch both walls and the ceiling when they extend their arms.
- **Patient rights.** The Department should inform incarcerated patients in writing of their rights to:
 - Receive primary, specialty, and emergency care,
 - Have their health information kept private under HIPAA protections,
 - Authorize family members to receive information about their care,
 - Be notified of serious conditions requiring treatment,
 - Give informed consent to treatment,
 - Access copies of their medical records, and
 - Request disability accommodations.
- **RHUs.** The Department should adopt policy changes to reduce the number of people held in disciplinary housing units (called Restorative Housing Units or RHUs) to better manage operations and out-of-cell time for that population; stop imposing loss-of-phone sanctions on top of RHU sanctions; install a mental health clinic in the state's largest RHU at Northern State Prison; provide more ways for people in RHU to productively pass the time; and count RHU residents among those in isolated confinement when they are offered minimal out-of-cell time for extended periods.
- **Lockdowns caused by under-staffing.** Recurring lockdowns, when people in prison are kept in their cells and activities are canceled because there is insufficient staffing, should not become normalized. Lawmakers should treat these lockdowns as emergencies, recognizing their profoundly negative impact on people in custody, mandate public reporting, and support the Department with any emergency resources needed to return to normal operations.
- **Heat.** In the summer months, the Department should incorporate the heat index (the real feel considering both temperature and humidity) into its heat mitigation protocol. The Legislature

should fund the installation of air conditioning for all prison facilities that the Department intends to use for the next several decades. Facility leaders should develop alternative summer schedules to allow for increased access to showers; standardize the price of commissary items needed in summer (fans, bottled water, coolers, etc.); and audit housing unit logbooks to ensure indoor temperatures are being recorded every shift.

- **Preventing sexual abuse and harassment.** The Department should analyze common themes in PREA allegations and refine policy and practice to better prevent sexual harassment and abuse. The Department should also utilize the new trauma-informed strip search protocols in the men's prisons, having already implemented them in the women's prison.
- **At Garden State Youth Correctional Facility:** The Department should set benchmarks for increasing participation in jobs, school, and programming; schedule a recurring cell-to-cell inventory of maintenance needs and essential items; and audit kitchen staffing and sanitation.
- **At New Jersey State Prison:** The Department should take steps to increase shower privacy; move some people out of the west compound who can safely be housed elsewhere; and build the capacity to track individual out-of-cell time in General Population housing units.
- **RCRPs.** Lawmakers should increase funding for Residential Community Reintegration Programs (RCRPs) so more people who are nearing release from prison can get work experience and build up financial savings before returning home.

Requests for Ombudsperson Assistance

Contacts to the Ombudsperson Office in Fiscal Year 2025. From July 1, 2024 through June 30, 2025, the Office of the Corrections Ombudsperson received 13,116 contacts—about 50 per workday—from incarcerated people and their loved ones.¹ Contacts to the Office have increased 16% since Fiscal Year 2023 as the Ombudsperson staff have become more visible and accessible in state prison facilities and in public town hall meetings. (See Figure 1.)

The Office’s field team conducted on-site work at every prison facility multiple days per week, totaling more than 1,000 staff days in the field. On other days, the field team was answering calls and letters at the Office’s call center in Trenton. The Office’s systemic monitoring team that conducts facility inspections spent an additional 87 staff days on-site in state prisons.

In January 2025, the Ombudsperson launched a new initiative to make regular site visits to Residential Community Reintegration Programs (RCRPs, previously called halfway houses). Between January and July, the Office made more than 60 site visits to 12 RCRPs across the state. As a result of the Ombudsperson Office’s increased visibility, RCRP contacts to the Office increased 52% from Fiscal Year 2024 to Fiscal Year 2025. (See Figure 2.)

Figure 1. Ombudsperson contacts, FY 23-25

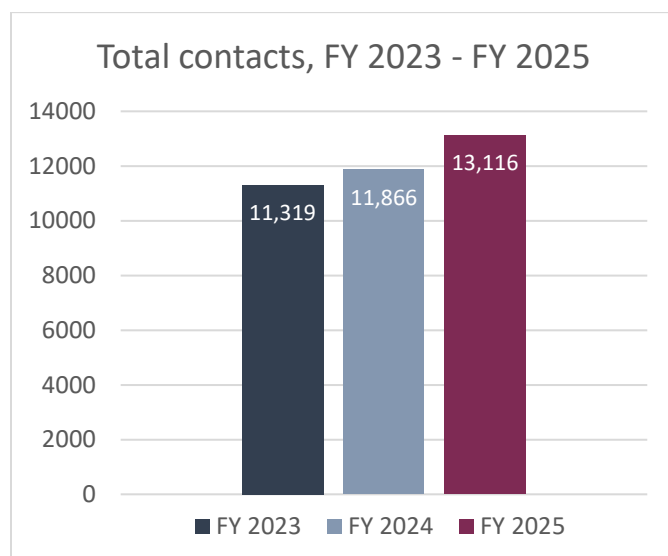
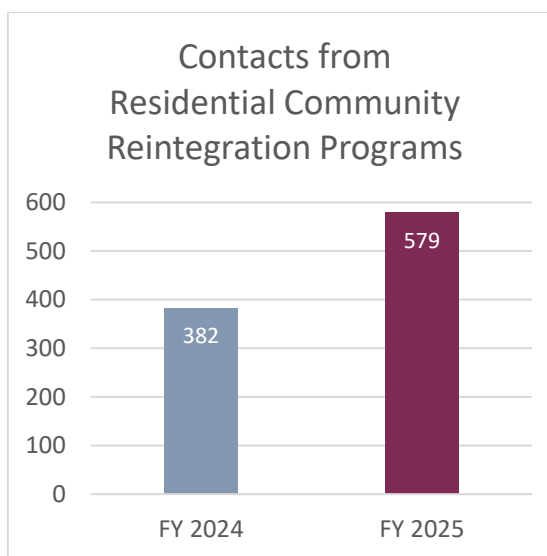


Figure 2. RCRP contacts, FY 24-25



¹ Previous Annual Reports summarized Ombudsperson contact data from September 1 through August 31. This 2025 Annual Report shifts the data analysis to align with the Fiscal Year: July 1 through June 30.

Seventy percent of contacts to the Office came from the state’s three largest facilities (South Woods State Prison, Northern State Prison, and New Jersey State Prison). (See Figure 3.) New Jersey State Prison accounted for the highest total number of contacts. It also had the highest rate of contacts with nearly two contacts per person incarcerated at the facility. (See Figure 4.) People housed at the state’s only women’s prison, Edna Mahan Correctional Facility, also contacted the Office at a high rate. The Ombudsperson Office received 667 contacts from people at Edna Mahan (not including calls from their family members), which amounts to 1.7 contacts per person incarcerated there. (See Figures 3 and 4.)

In June 2025, the Ombudsperson Office started tracking contacts requiring translation and interpretation between English and other languages spoken by incarcerated people and their loved ones. The Office has staff members who are bilingual in English and Spanish; staff members use a live telephone-based interpretation service for other languages. In June and July, 33 total contacts (1.5%) required translation and interpretation. In accordance with [a new state law](#) on language access, the Office is also working with the Treasury Department on plans for translating vital documents into languages that are commonly spoken in New Jersey.

Figure 3. Number of contacts by facility, Fiscal Year 2025

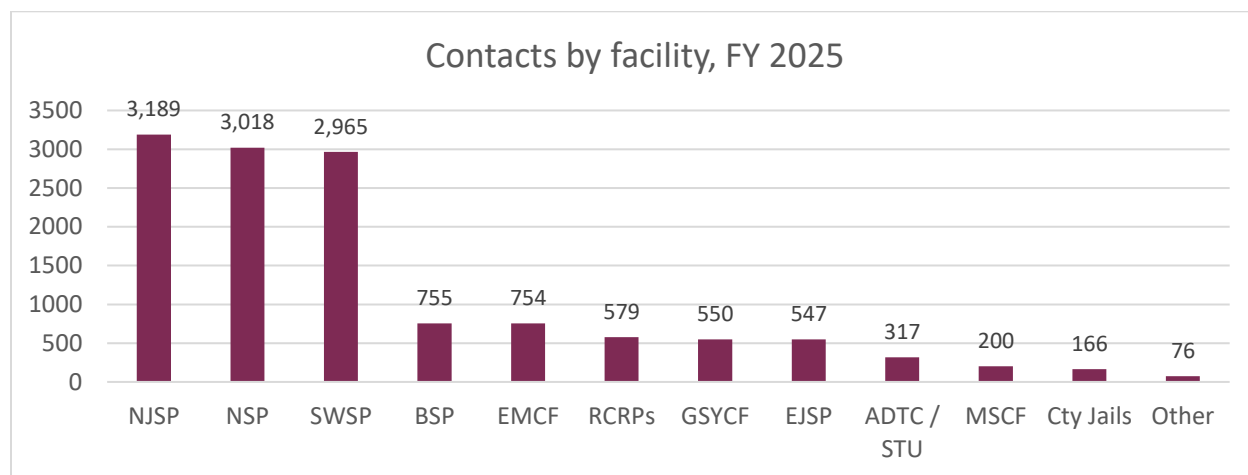
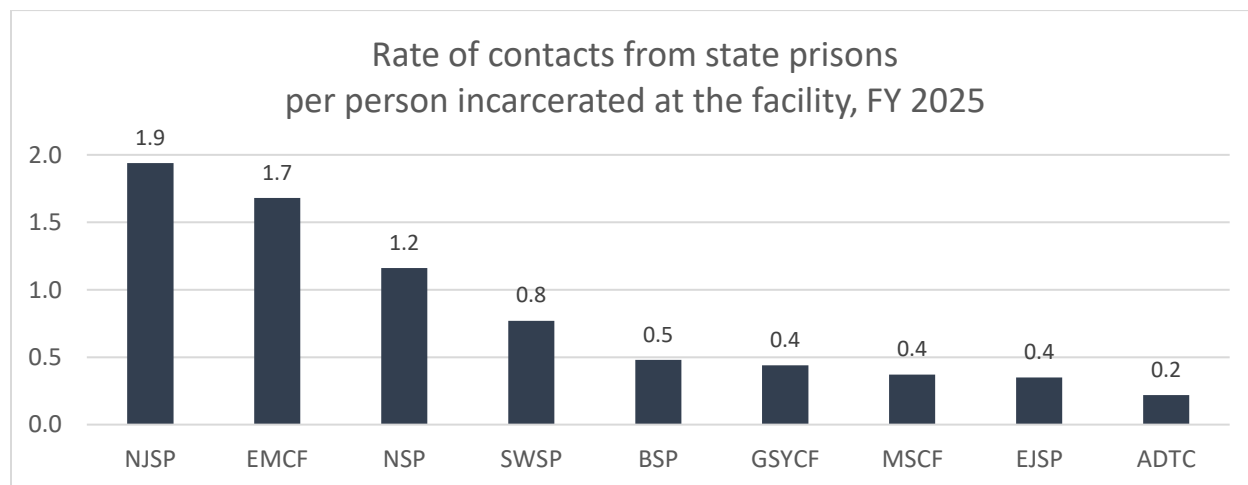


Figure 4. Contact rate for each state prison, Fiscal Year 2025



A large majority of contacts (80%) came directly from incarcerated people. (See Figure 5.) Sixteen percent of contacts were from their loved ones, and four percent came from community advocates, government agencies, or other sources. (See Figure 5.) More than half of contacts to the Office were made by telephone, 25% came in the form of hand-written letters, 11% were initiated by incarcerated people in-person when Ombudsperson staff were touring facilities, and 5% of contacts were emailed to the Office. (See Figure 6.)

Figure 5. Source of Ombudsperson contact

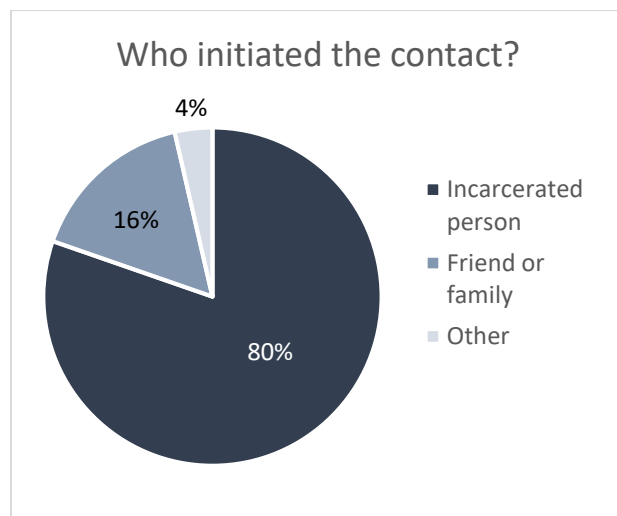
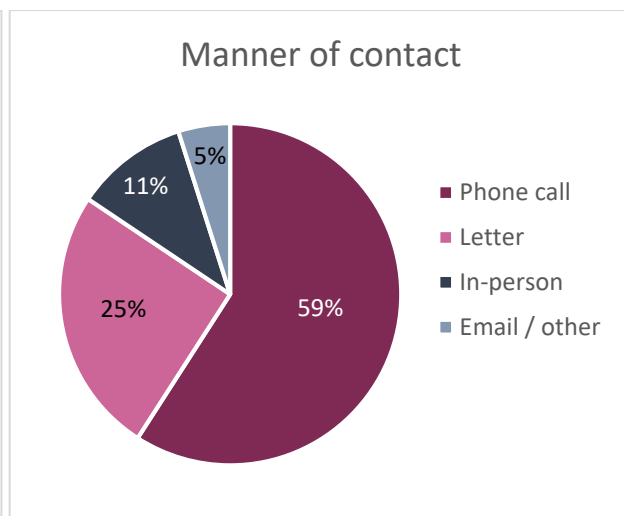
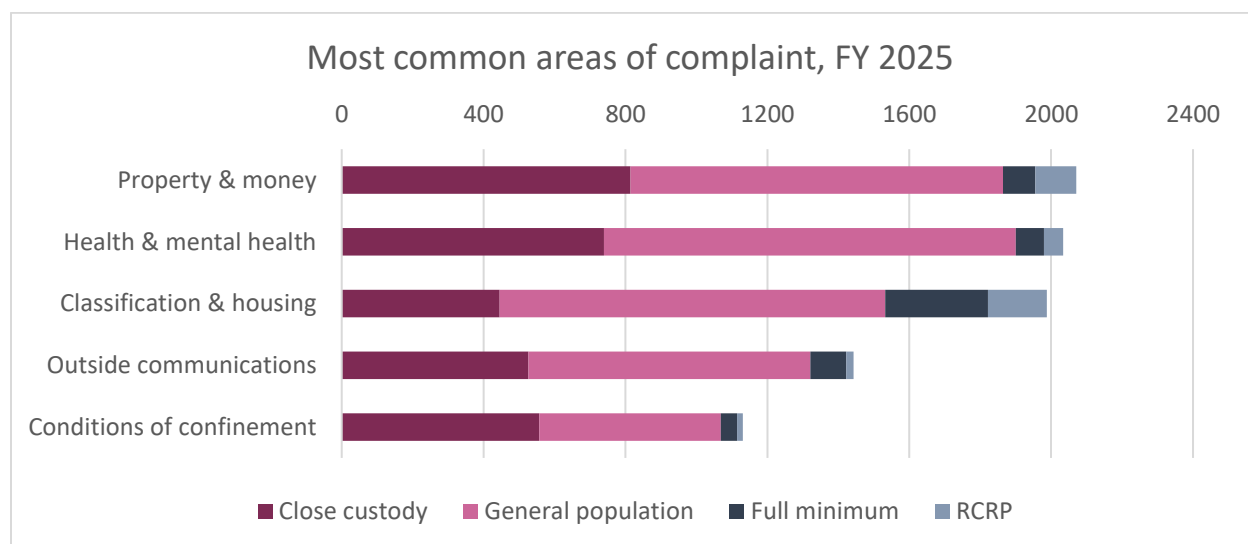


Figure 6. Method of contacting the Ombudsperson



About half of all contacts from incarcerated people came from those classified as General Population, 38% came from people in close custody (RHU disciplinary housing, protective custody, and other highly controlled settings), 6% came from people classified as full minimum custody, and 5% came from people in residential community reintegration programs. The top five areas of complaint were 1) property and money, 2) health and mental health care, 3) classification and housing, 4) outside communications, and 5) conditions of confinement. (See Figure 7.)

Figure 7. Top five areas of concern, by custody status, Fiscal Year 2025



Examples of contacts to the Ombudsperson Office. People contacted the Office to express a wide variety of concerns. Below are some examples that illustrate what led people to reach out to the Office.

- **Property and money.** As in previous years, the most frequent reason people requested assistance from the Office in Fiscal Year 2025 was for concerns related to their personal property and money. People transferring from one facility to another reported not receiving their clothing or property for several weeks after the transfer. For transfers in which people did not pack up their own belongings, they contacted the Office claiming that items like personal televisions, tablets, and fans went missing or were stolen. People reached out to the Office when their claims for reimbursement of lost or damaged property were denied without explanation. They also called the Office to request help getting refunds for unfulfilled commissary orders and to report the commissary being out of stock for necessities like toothpaste, socks, and underwear. Additionally, the Office got calls and letters about fines being imposed and money being deducted from accounts that were believed to be incorrect or unfair.
- **Health and mental health.** People contacted the Office with complaints about not receiving their medication or getting the wrong dosage. At times, patients who went to the hospital and came back with new prescriptions or diagnoses reported not getting the prescribed medication or follow-up treatment at the prison. Patients asked for assistance after multiple requests for hearing aids, dentures, a medical mattress for a back injury, or a special diet related to a health need. People contacted the Office in large numbers about delayed, missed, or canceled specialist appointments. Those with dental concerns complained that providers were able to pull teeth but not provide crowns or conduct root canals. Incarcerated people and their family members also called the Office requesting mental health care and psychiatric evaluations, or questioning protocols related to forced medication.
- **Classification and housing.** Incarcerated people contacted the Office with complaints about being moved to facilities in the southern part of the state when their families lived in northern New Jersey. They called hoping to learn the status of facility transfer requests. The Office received complaints about the Department's Classification Division not granting people full minimum custody status, and long wait times to be placed in a Residential Community Reintegration Program (RCRP). People asked for help from the Office when they believed good time credits or work credits weren't being applied to their prison terms, or when they were concerned that an incorrect interpretation of their criminal sentence might keep them in prison past their proper release date.
- **Outside communications.** Incarcerated people and their family members requested guidance from the Office when they had problems with their telephone PIN or kiosk login. They complained of difficulty adding a person to their phone or visit list and reported broken phones and kiosks. People contacted the Office to report their mail being slow or undelivered, particularly after the transition to mail scanning and copying through the vendor Pigeonly. People who had been punished with loss of phone privileges expressed distress about not being able to speak with their loved ones. Their family members often called the Office concerned that they hadn't heard from the person and wanting to know if they were okay. The Office also received complaints about difficulties scheduling visits or getting visitors approved.

- **Conditions of confinement.** People contacted the Office in large numbers about unsanitary conditions, suspected mold, and lack of cleaning supplies. At times they reported very cold or very hot temperatures, discolored water, rodents, or flooding and sewage on the floor. Nearly 300 contacts in FY 2025 were complaints about cell confinement for extended periods without a shower or any out-of-cell movement. At times, people also reported not getting a shower after being exposed to OC spray, or when needed to keep wounds and injuries clean.
- **Safety and violence.** Safety concerns accounted for 7.4% of Ombudsperson contacts in FY 2025. This category was not among the top five most common reasons that people reached out to the Office. More than half of safety-related contacts came from people held in close custody settings (including disciplinary confinement, protective custody, and some other highly controlled settings). Incarcerated people and their loved ones called the Office to report assaults, sexual abuse, and retaliation. People expressed a desire to transfer to a different facility because they feared for their safety at their current placement. Callers reported being bullied, harassed, or targeted by staff and other incarcerated people, and some requested to remain anonymous for fear of retaliation.

Triaging and addressing concerns. The Office has authority to conduct formal investigations that involve reviewing video footage, records, and other evidence, interviewing witnesses, and making public findings. The Dignity Act, however, also directs the Office to address and resolve complaints at the lowest level possible, for example, providing information and technical assistance, or referring a concern to the relevant supervisor or administrator.

The Office conducted more than 1,100 face-to-face interviews with incarcerated people to discuss their concerns. The staff recorded 172 contacts that required some level of formal or informal investigation, 100 contacts that led the Ombudsperson staff to research Department of Corrections policy they were not previously familiar with, and 51 that required a physical inspection of the living conditions about which the person complained.

The Office's call center and field team categorized how concerns brought to the Office were triaged and addressed. In just over 14% of contacts, these staff members noted that no violation took place or the contact required no intervention by the Office. About half of the contacts to the Office could be redirected by providing the person who reached out with information, guidance, or technical assistance on how best to advocate for themselves or their loved one. Staff members referred and handed off about a quarter of contacts to facility administrators, the Department's Special Investigations Division, or health care providers at Rutgers University Correctional Health Care. In 11% of contacts, Ombudsperson staff members intervened and noted that the Office was decisive in getting the problem resolved.

The Ombudsperson Office was able to address nearly all contacts (93%) within two weeks. Five percent of cases were left pending for 15-30 days, and 2% of cases required more than 30 days to gather relevant information and resolve.

Ombudsperson Office Activities

Transparency and communication with DOC leaders. The Commissioner of the Department of Corrections and her leadership team met every other month with the Ombudsperson to share information, updates about Department priorities and policy changes, and progress on strategic and operational goals. Facility administrators notify the Office of deaths, emergencies, major incidents, facility maintenance that disrupts schedules, and days in which under-staffing led to reduced activity or lockdowns. Ombudsperson staff assigned to individual facilities are often invited to attend administrative or department head meetings and have regular and frequent access to administrators. The Ombudsperson Office and the Department's Special Investigations Division (SID) also collaborated on an MOU to govern the Office's audits of SID investigations.

Internal development of the Ombudsperson Office. In Fiscal Year 2025, the Office developed inspection standards and tools for General Population housing units as well as medical clinics and infirmaries. The Office revised internal policies about confidentiality, triage of contacts, and documentation of incidents observed in the state prisons. The Department accommodated learning sessions for the Ombudsperson leadership team focused on large-scale search operations, cell extractions, riot response, and fire safety and evacuation protocols. The Office also sent six staff members to the annual conference for the National Association for Civilian Oversight of Law Enforcement in Minneapolis, MN in October 2024.

Community engagement. The Office held in-person public meetings this year in Camden, Millville, Newark, Paterson, and Trenton, and held three virtual public meetings over Zoom. Most of these meetings were attended by 20 or more people, and nearly all of the attendees had incarcerated loved ones. Meetings were structured as town halls with opportunities for people to ask questions or express grievances, and the Ombudsperson and staff members from the Office listened, took notes, answered questions when they were able to, and offered to look into the concerns expressed. Common concerns related to environmental conditions in the facilities (water, pests, leaks, hot and cold temperatures); lockdowns and isolation; drug use in the prisons; issues their loved ones were having getting medication refills or specialist appointments; family members feeling panicked and having difficulty getting information when a loved one was in the hospital; and requests for more programs and shorter wait times for residential community reintegration programs.

The most frequently expressed concerns related to family visits. Attendees at the Office's public meetings complained of having to call multiple times to make a visit appointment; being held in the rain without umbrellas while waiting for visits to start; invasive search procedures for people visiting loved ones; getting yelled at by officers during visits or while waiting for visits to start; arbitrariness in how the dress code is enforced; and visit times starting late or otherwise being cut short. They also expressed a hesitancy to complain for fear of retaliation. Public complaints on this topic prompted the Office to conduct unannounced monitoring of weekend visitation at East Jersey State Prison in May 2025 to observe and troubleshoot the concerns. The Ombudsperson Office also attended dozens of meetings with advocacy organizations; joined events hosted by the Returning Citizens Support Group, Meet 'em at the Gate, and the Office of the Public Defender; attended *Comer* resentencing hearings for adults initially sentenced to long prison terms as children; and helped facilitate the New Jersey Community and Corrections Working Summit. The Office's leadership attended Governor Murphy's clemency announcements and met with the Governor's Office and legislators throughout the year to discuss the Office's work.

Noteworthy Department of Corrections Initiatives

There are many examples of the Department of Corrections taking action and making decisions this past year to improve operations, services, and responsiveness to their staff and incarcerated population. Some highlights include:

Updating the transportation fleet. In response to complaints from people in custody about being transported to court, medical appointments, and other facilities in cargo vans, the Department has secured funding and taken steps to purchase new buses and vans with windows, higher ceilings, and seats that face forward.

Recording large-scale search operations. To increase accountability for officers conducting large-scale search operations in prison facilities, and to protect officers from false allegations of misconduct, the Department updated their body-worn camera policy – cameras must now be activated during the entirety of these searches.

Expanding inpatient drug treatment. The Department currently contracts for long-term residential and intensive outpatient drug treatment programs at Mid-State Correctional Facility with counseling provided seven days a week. Participants report that the programs are high quality and very impactful. To make this programming available to more custody levels and participants, the Department plans to relocate the program to a different facility.

Improving response time to sick call requests. In FY2024, the Office found untimely responses to sick call requests at the three largest state prisons (South Woods State Prison, Northern State Prison, and New Jersey State Prison). This significantly improved in FY2025 with sustained internal monitoring by the Department's Health Compliance Unit. At New Jersey State Prison, for example, an Ombudsperson audit showed only 29% of electronic sick call requests between April and June of 2024 were opened within 48 hours. By the same time in 2025, timely responses to sick call requests at New Jersey State Prison had increased to 93%. Similarly, at Northern State Prison, timely responses to electronic sick call requests increased from 45% between April and June of 2024 to 88% between April and June of 2025. Notably, at six of the nine state prisons, nearly every electronic sick call request over the past year was opened in a timely manner.

Creating a new position to review use of force. To comply with the Office of the Attorney General's policy on police use of force and to ensure incidents are reviewed by qualified managers for potential excessive force, the Department created a new Correctional Police Major position at its central office.

Expanding reentry partnerships. With NJLEAD grant funding for community partners, the Department has helped more than 1,300 people gain stability upon reentry with housing, employment, transportation, and other reintegration needs. This year, the Department selected 42 community partners from roughly 100 applicants to receive a total of \$7 million in grants. These included grant awards for ten new applicants who had not previously partnered with the Department of Corrections.

Supporting and celebrating legal advocacy by the incarcerated population. This year marked the Inmate Legal Association's 50th anniversary. In an event convened at New Jersey State Prison, members of the organization who have provided legal assistance to incarcerated peers gathered to celebrate education and mentorship, honor their elders, and recognize one another's years of service.

Taking steps to curb the flow of contraband into facilities. In an effort to address systemic problems with controlled substances entering the prisons through mail, the Department launched a partnership with the vendor Pigeonly to scan and send copies of letters to the incarcerated population. Because thousands of people communicate with loved ones in prison through the mail, this initiative required a large-scale effort to communicate the change and give clear guidance on how to write to people in prison. The Department also makes extensive efforts to search cells, issue sanctions for drug possession, investigate how contraband was introduced into the facility, and revise policy and practice to better prevent drugs from entering state prisons.

Expanding access to loved ones through phone and video calls. After several years of exploration and preparation, the Department is implementing a new telephone system and issuing tablets to the incarcerated population that are capable of making phone calls throughout the day. This will dramatically expand phone access beyond the communal telephones currently used that are only accessible during recreation periods. The tablets will also enable video calls (by appointment); store photos and music; access the commissary, grievance system, and legal resources; provide free educational material; and offer games and entertainment packages for an extra cost.

Shortening and streamlining the process for restoring contact visits with family members. Certain “zero tolerance” rule violations in prison used to be sanctioned with loss of contact visits for at least a year. In response to advocacy by the Ombudsperson Office, the Department significantly shortened the period of time a person would lose contact visits with loved ones and made restoration of contact visits automatic (rather than requiring people to apply and complete programming). The new sanctions are 90 days for the first zero tolerance incident and 180 days for any subsequent zero tolerance violation.

Designing a new women’s prison facility. With funding and support from state lawmakers, the Department has engaged an architect and construction team to design and build a new women’s prison to replace the Edna Mahan Correctional Facility, and broke ground on the site for the new prison in October 2025. The design phase will include open sessions to gather input from key stakeholders.

Adopting a more trauma-informed approach to strip searches. Officers conduct pat-down and strip searches of the incarcerated population as a means to detect weapons and contraband. The Department has revised its policies to authorize cross-gender searches only in emergencies, and to segment strip searches at the women’s prison so that the person being searched is covered on top when they’re being stripped below the waist, and covered on bottom when they’re being stripped above the waist. The Ombudsperson Office recommends using this strip search protocol in the men’s prisons too.

Incentivizing and rewarding good behavior with additional privileges. At several prisons, the Department designated a housing unit for people who have earned elevated privileges. This includes an academic-focused housing unit at Garden State Youth Correctional Facility, an honors dorm at the Edna Mahan satellite facility, a senior living unit at East Jersey State Prison, and units at Northern State Prison and South Woods State Prison with specialized equipment, furniture, commissary, and privileges.

Engaging and re-activating prison Boards of Trustees. The Department continues to engage an active Board of Trustees for the women’s prison and filled three vacant seats on that Board with community members who have relevant experience and expertise. The Department also took steps this year to reactivate a Board of Trustees for the men’s prisons by nominating seven new members, including two members with lived experience of incarceration.

Observations and Recommendations

Ombudsperson facility inspections. Garden State Youth Correctional Facility houses young adults who are generally serving short sentences. The Ombudsperson Office inspected the facility in July 2024 and conducted a series of follow-up visits through December of that year. The Office then published an [inspection report](#) in April 2025. The Office found common spaces, cells, and kitchens in need of extensive repair and deep cleaning. The physical conditions and drainage in the kitchens where food is prepared were particularly concerning. Originally designed for single occupancy, the cells in most of the units are quite small and have been double-bunked for several decades. The facility's Administration was very responsive to the Office's initial findings and took decisive and immediate steps to remedy several areas of concern. They continued to make repairs and improvements in the months after the Office published the inspection report.

In October 2024, the Office inspected the West Compound of New Jersey State Prison, and conducted follow-up meetings and re-inspections in the six months that followed. The Office published its final [inspection report](#) for this facility in September 2025. Nearly 200 years old, the West Compound is the oldest operating prison facility in America. More than 600 people, most of whom have very long sentences, live in its general population housing units. For more than 100 years, correctional leaders, policymakers, and subject-matter experts have called for it to be demolished and replaced. Prison cells in the West Compound have no hot water and, with the exception of 4-wing, all of the cells are very small. The cells in 7-wing are shockingly small, measuring just four feet by seven feet. Housing units in the West Compound have no air conditioning, no day room, and no recreation space, and toilets and showers in the housing units leave people exposed without adequate privacy.

Most people in the general population of the West Compound had a job assignment and were enrolled in religious services and activities. Records showed people getting out of the cells for showers, meals, and access to the JPay kiosks. Small groups of people from each housing unit went out to the yard every other day and to the indoor gym once or twice a week. The facility also maintained an active law library and provided education and programming to a small number of participants. The housing units were not designed to accommodate indoor recreation, and current record-keeping does not contain sufficient information to determine how much time people in the general population are confined to their cells.

In its Garden State Youth Correctional Facility report, the Office recommended:

- **Developing a strategic plan to assess and limit double-bunking in small cells,**
- **Setting performance benchmarks for participation in jobs, school, and other programming,**
- **Conducting recurring cell-to-cell inventories of maintenance needs and missing items, and**
- **Utilizing a new food services supervisor role to routinely inspect and audit kitchen staffing, sanitation, food temperature control, and meal and beverage service.**

In its New Jersey State Prison report, the Ombudsperson Office recommended:

- **Prioritizing and funding the demolition and replacement of the West Compound,**
- **Adopting state standards for the size of prison cells,**
- **Taking steps to increase shower privacy,**
- **Moving some people out of the West Compound who can safely be housed elsewhere, and**
- **Building the capacity to track out-of-cell time for individuals housed in general population.**

Residential Community Reintegration Programs. In response to feedback at public town hall meetings, the Ombudsperson Office began making regular site visits to Residential Community Reintegration Programs (RCRPs). A full-time Assistant Ombudsperson was assigned to troubleshoot concerns raised by the population and their family members, and work with on-site staff and the Department's Office of Community Programs to contextualize and resolve concerns. Issues that commonly came up were related to employment sites, transportation, identification cards, money, check-in calls, interactions with staff, and disciplinary punishments.

While the RCRPs differ from one another, they all offer opportunities for people nearing release from prison to work jobs in the community or pursue higher education in a structured and controlled setting with counseling, case management, and other supports and reentry services. RCRP residents get help with employment readiness, financial and computer literacy, parenting classes, addiction recovery, and other needs. They have an opportunity to earn and save money for their return to the community, gain stability, and navigate the challenges of reentering the workforce, and this opportunity comes packaged with staff who can coach residents and hold them accountable for work performance and attendance.

The RCRPs sometimes have staff shortages or other operational problems. Some of the complaints the Office receives are reactions to the stress of reentry and the strict rules in RCRPs, but program participants overwhelmingly had positive things to say about their experiences. In exit surveys, participants generally gave the RCRPs high marks for helpful programs, staff professionalism and responsiveness, and good opportunities for employment, education, and reconnecting with families. The rewards that come with a successful job interview, a first paycheck, money in the bank, or a family visit that's not inside a prison are incredibly meaningful to people as they prepare to return home.

Because state funding for RCRPs has remained steady while costs have gone up, the Department has had to reduce the number of RCRP beds in their contracts with community partners. The number of beds for females is staying the same, but beds for males will decrease by about 100 when the new RCRP contracts become effective.

The Ombudsperson Office recommends that lawmakers increase funding for these Residential Community Reintegration Programs.

Officer recruitment, retention, and impacts of under-staffing. During several periods this last year, officer vacancies, family and medical leave, and call-outs for vacation and sick days have left some prison facilities with critical staffing shortages, resulting in reduced activity or lockdowns for the incarcerated population. At Northern State Prison, for example, the administration locked down part or all of the facility for 15 days in December 2024, 10 days in January 2025, and 12 days in February 2025.

The Department continues to treat staffing as its top priority, and has seen positive results from its strategic recruitment and retention efforts. Officers continue to retire when they become eligible, but retention of officers pre-retirement has improved. Applications have increased, Training Academy classes have grown, and new recruits are placed in the facilities based on staffing needs. After a Training Academy graduation in February, for example, staffing shortages at Northern State Prison were mostly resolved until the summer months.

When facilities experience short-staffing, Department leaders and administrators consolidate as many staff posts as they safely can before reducing services. They have been creative in attempts to spread out

the impact of staffing shortages by rotating which housing units get locked down and which ones maintain access to exercise, showers, and phones.

At East Jersey State Prison and South Woods State Prison, Department leaders adapted weekend schedules to allow 2nd shift officers to leave at 6:00 p.m. rather than 10:00 p.m., which has resulted in fewer staff call-outs on Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays. (Officers are less likely to call out on 1st shift, because they know if they are mandated to work overtime on 2nd shift, they'll at least get to leave by 6:00.) It's an imperfect solution, as the earlier lock-in times for the population mean less out-of-cell time and fewer family visit slots on the weekends, but the more stable staffing generally results in fewer outright cancellations of visits, programs, and recreation.

Because staffing-related lockdowns impact prison operations so profoundly, lawmakers should treat them as emergencies, support the Department with any emergency resources needed to return to normal operations, and mandate public reporting.

Internal and external oversight of health care services. The Department's Health Compliance Unit has a robust system for auditing the health care services provided to incarcerated people by Rutgers University Correctional Health Care (UCHC). The Unit's audits and continuous quality improvement activities recognized providers for their successes and also drew attention to problems needing corrective action. This year, for example, Health Compliance Unit audits drew attention to issues with untimely sick call responses, chronic care appointments, and medication orders. They found inconsistencies in processes like nurses making infirmary rounds, mental health clinicians providing follow-up care for people released from suicide watch, and patients getting medications upon release from prison. They also actively engaged with UCHC and the Department's Central Transportation Unit to troubleshoot high numbers of canceled or missed specialist appointments. On the positive side, the Health Compliance Unit audits found consistent compliance with physicals, mammograms, physician rounds, suicide watch evaluations, and mental health discharge appointments. They also found improved performance in clinical protocols for people receiving care for HIV.

In this past fiscal year, the Ombudsperson Office met quarterly with the Department's Health Compliance Unit, reviewed patient medical records several times per month when warranted by patient complaints, toured the Extended Care Unit to interview patients with clinical health care needs, surveyed the incarcerated population about their access to care, and developed an inspection tool for infirmaries and other clinical spaces in prisons. Many of the Office's independent observations were substantiated by the Department's own audit findings and continuous quality improvement activities—things like sick call response time and transportation to specialist appointments. The Office also flagged concerns about unlocked and unmarked boxes for sick call slips; problems with the call bell system and nurse rounds in the Extended Care Unit, access to care for people housed in disciplinary housing units; and untimely family notifications when patients were hospitalized. The Ombudsperson Office plans to launch its first infirmary and clinic inspections in FY 2026.

In the coming year, the Department plans to clearly define health care roles and responsibilities, including the role patients play in attending their appointments and treating health care providers with respect.

As part of this initiative, the Ombudsperson Office recommends that the Department definitively spell out the rights that patient have, including those related to:

- Receiving primary, specialty, and emergency care,
- Participating in health care decisions and giving informed consent,
- Being notified of serious conditions requiring treatment,
- Privacy rights under federal HIPAA regulations,
- Options to authorize providers to inform family members about their care,
- Receiving copies of medical records, and
- Requesting disability accommodations.

Conditions in disciplinary housing units. Over the past three years, the Ombudsperson Office has reported concerns about living conditions, out-of-cell time, and understaffing in Restorative Housing Units (RHUs) where incarcerated people are segregated due to disciplinary infractions. This past year, the Department developed and distributed an RHU Handbook. In all facilities with RHUs, staff and administrators continue to take action to address violent behavior, property damage, and disruptions, and have stepped up efforts to communicate important information with the population. Staff have described feeling demoralized by assaults with bodily fluids, which the Department reports have increased substantially, and many staff members have expressed their hopes that advocacy for improved conditions will include more attention on the safety and wellbeing of staff.

Conditions in the RHUs at South Woods and New Jersey State Prisons have notably improved. In both facilities, people detained in the RHUs now report getting regular showers, recreation time, telephone access, window visits with family members, laundry services, and access to social workers, health care providers, and programming.

In October 2024, the Ombudsperson Office published [an inspection report](#) about dangerous and disturbing conditions in the state's largest RHU at Northern State Prison. This past year, the Office has observed some clear improvements there related to showers, telephone access, laundry services, and access to social services. People in this RHU, however, still get no indoor recreation, infrequent outdoor recreation, and very little out-of-cell time. Notably, the building design of Northern State Prison's RHU is different from those in South Woods State Prison and New Jersey State Prison, and more staffing is required for the secure and controlled movement of incarcerated people.

The Office continues to field an extraordinary number of complaints from the Northern State Prison RHU about isolated confinement, drug use, mental health deterioration, long delays in due process hearings, and the inability of people to get officers' attention when they need assistance or help. This disciplinary housing unit experienced two suicides and a homicide in 2024, and a very serious suicide attempt in 2025.

In past reports, the Ombudsperson Office has recommended policy changes to reduce the number of people held in RHUs, and to stop imposing loss-of-phone sanctions on top of RHU sanctions, because phone calls are already restricted as part of the RHU Level system. The Office continues to support and recommend these policy changes, and appreciates the Department's consideration of them. The Office also recommends that the largest RHU be outfitted with an on-site mental health clinic where people experiencing psychological distress can be seen quickly in a secure and confidential setting.

The Department [has argued](#) that New Jersey's Isolated Confinement Restriction Act (ICRA) does not apply to RHUs, because the schedule allows for four hours or more of out-of-cell time, and because the policy states that people in the RHU shall not have their activity, movement, and social interaction severely

restricted. This argument, however, does not align with the objective observations of the Ombudsperson Office.

The RHU population, and in particular the people in Northern State Prison's RHU, are confined to their cells nearly all day every day, and should be counted among the number of people experiencing isolated confinement. They should also be given more tools and resources to productively pass the time.

Preventing and addressing sexual abuse and harassment. For the last 15 years, the federal government has supported and enforced implementation of the Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA) regulations through facility audits, public reporting, and a national resource center. In April of this year, however, the President and federal Department of Justice cut all funding for the National PREA Resource Center and its activities, including the center's support for facility PREA audits. The Department of Justice reassigned all attorneys who were investigating unconstitutional prison conditions, and the Acting U.S. Attorney for New Jersey at the time disbanded the civil rights division in her office, including the attorneys who had brought federal litigation against the New Jersey Department of Corrections for sexual abuses at Edna Mahan Correctional Facility.

These changes decimated the national infrastructure for preventing and addressing sexual abuse and harassment in prisons, and removed a large pool of resources and subject matter experts for prison systems in New Jersey and elsewhere. Admirably, the New Jersey Department of Corrections continues to enforce the law, schedule PREA audits, and follow their internal policies on preventing and addressing sexual abuse and harassment. The Department also continues to carry out its obligations under the Edna Mahan consent decree, which remains in place and enforced by a court-appointed Federal Monitor.

There are several promising signs that individuals feel comfortable reporting abuse and harassment. Incarcerated people can report allegations directly to the Department's Special Investigations Division (SID). Allegations also routinely come in through other sources like social services, health care providers, disciplinary hearing officers, and the Ombudsperson Office. Language interpretation services are used when needed to communicate with an alleged victim. Investigations have led to discipline and prosecution of staff members and contractors, as well as perpetrators among the incarcerated population. SID has a Special Victims Unit that investigates allegations of sexual abuse, harassment, and retaliation. Their completed investigations get a second layer of review by an interdisciplinary committee that includes the PREA Compliance Unit, DOC Operations, and the Health Compliance Unit. The Ombudsperson attended this committee's reviews of completed PREA investigations in January, April, May, and August 2025.

Since the introduction of body-worn cameras, there has been more evidence available to substantiate an allegation or determine that it was unfounded. Still, most allegations remain unsubstantiated because the alleged incidents happened inside cells without video footage or witnesses. At some facilities, many potential witnesses refuse to speak with SID, either because of a culture among the incarcerated population that discourages cooperation with investigators or because they fear some form of retaliation. This appears to be particularly pronounced at Bayside State Prison.

A large portion of PREA allegations involve exposures, propositions, and unwanted touching by cellmates. Many also describe cellmates engaging in violent or threatening behavior after consuming illicit substances like K2. As in past years, there continue to be large numbers of PREA allegations from gay and transgender incarcerated people, including reports of sexual advances, threats, slurs, targeting, and harassment.

The Ombudsperson Office recommends analyzing trends like these in PREA allegations to refine policy and practice and better prevent harassment and abuse.

Summer heat and humidity in facilities without air conditioning. In September 2022, the Ombudsperson Office published a [special report](#) on summer heat in state prisons. The Department of Corrections has since issued an internal directive to mitigate excessive summer heat when indoor temperatures reach 86°F or warmer. In June and July, the Ombudsperson Office visited the five state prisons with non-air-conditioned housing units to monitor compliance with this directive, and found administrators and staff making significant efforts.² The Office counted ice machines and confirmed they were working, measured temperatures and humidity, and checked commissary stock for fans, bottled water, ice coolers, and cooling towels. At all five facilities, fans were operable on housing units, accessible windows were opened, the population was provided with increased access to ice at no cost, and educational flyers about recognizing the signs of heat-related illness were posted and distributed. There were, however, inconsistencies at a few facilities in documenting temperatures in housing unit logbooks, and most facilities did not adjust the schedule to allow for increased access to showers.

Throughout the state, staff members reported that ice machines, even when they were working, could not reliably keep up with demand on the hottest days, and sometimes broke down. This reduced the amount of ice distributed to the incarcerated population. The Department has been attentive and responsive to the need for ice and spent more than \$400,000 on supplemental ice and ice machine purchases and maintenance between Fiscal Years 2022 and 2025.

The Department's heat mitigation protocol directs facility administrators to take action when indoor temperatures are 86°F or warmer. Housing unit temperatures, however, can feel much hotter than the actual temperature when the humidity is high. For example, the Ombudsperson Office measured temperatures in non-air-conditioned cells at Garden State Youth Correctional Facility on July 3rd, 2025, which ranged between 81° - 84°F. With indoor humidity levels ranging from 67 - 72%, the "real feel" in those prison cells was between 85° - 90°F.³ Similarly, during a tour of Bayside State Prison on June 24th, cell temperatures measured 84° - 94°F. However, with indoor humidity levels ranging from 57 - 74%, the "real feel" in those cells was 92° - 108°F.

The Office recommends incorporating the Heat Index of temperature and humidity into the Department's heat protocol and initiating mitigation efforts when the "real feel" is 86°F or warmer.

The Ombudsperson Office continues to recommend that the Legislature fund air conditioning for facilities that the Department intends to use for the next several decades. The Office also recommends:

- **Standardizing the price of commissary items across facilities for items that help mitigate heat (fans, bottled water, cooling towels, etc.),**
- **Developing alternative summer schedules that allow for increased access to showers, and**
- **Routine auditing of housing unit logbooks to ensure indoor temperatures are being recorded.**

² Some or all of the housing units at Bayside State Prison, East Jersey State Prison, Edna Mahan Correctional Facility, Garden State Youth Correctional Facility, and New Jersey State Prison are not air conditioned.

³ Real feel calculated using the National Weather Service Heat Index Calculator, https://www.weather.gov/epz/wxcalc_heatindex.

Emergency response and infrastructure repairs at Northern State Prison. This past winter, Northern State Prison experienced a chain of infrastructure failures and emergencies that impacted indoor temperatures, hot water, air quality, and plumbing, and that required three large-scale evacuations. On January 22, 2025, boilers and heating coils broke that had supplied heat to the facility's General Population housing units, infirmary, psychiatric stabilization unit, kitchen, and other buildings. The facility's leadership took immediate measures to secure contractors, deliver extra blankets, and communicate with the tier representatives for the incarcerated population. Supplemental heat was connected to the HVAC systems in several buildings, and two housing units used portable heaters for the following month, which ultimately led to condensation and the need for mold remediation.

During the same time period, high carbon monoxide levels caused by the hot water boiler in one of the housing units led to a brief evacuation followed by a three week period in which that unit had no hot water. A minor electrical fire in the same housing unit two weeks later required a second evacuation. At the end of February a major plumbing crisis required an entire wing of the RHU to be quickly depopulated. Repairs for this plumbing problem are ongoing.

The Northern State Prison administration acted quickly and decisively to address each of these problems, with support from the Department's operations leadership and business office, and the Legislature recently provided funding for a significant number of capital improvement needs at Northern State Prison (heating and air conditioning, electrical infrastructure, roofs and windows, steam and sewer lines, etc.).

Concerns about double-bunking prison cells. Beginning more than a decade ago, the Department placed most of the incarcerated population with a cellmate, following research findings on suicide risk management and prevention. Double-bunking also generally enables the Department to focus staff resources on a smaller number of housing units, which is a priority during periods of short-staffing. One point of feedback that the Ombudsperson Office hears regularly from both staff and incarcerated people is that double-bunking can contribute to other problems, particularly when out-of-cell time is limited. Incarcerated people express concern about loss of personal space and privacy, and fear about cellmates who are sexually predatory, violent, engaging in drug use, or experiencing symptoms of mental illness. In particular, people who have spent many years incarcerated often make the case that they would prefer having their own room. Officers can point to many examples of people who pick up disciplinary charges for refusing a cellmate or making threats of harm if they are placed with a cellmate, and at some facilities, the Ombudsperson Office regularly hears staff and supervisors suggest that the facility would run more smoothly with more single-occupancy cells.

As the Department expands incentive structures and continues to reassess how best to use available prison beds, the Ombudsperson Office recommends taking steps to increase the number of single-occupancy cells and utilizing single cells as an incentive for the population.

People civilly committed for sex offenses after completing their criminal sentences. The Department of Corrections operates a Special Treatment Unit (STU) for people civilly committed for sex offenses, and partners with the state Department of Health to provide psychoeducational treatment and counseling. The state law that established this unit and the processes for admitting and releasing people came under scrutiny this year, with investigative journalists describing the unit as a "[shadow prison](#)," highlighting cases in which [innocent people](#) have been held in the unit for extended periods and drawing attention to [due process concerns](#).

The Ombudsperson Office regularly tours the Special Treatment Unit and refers complaints from residents to the Departments of Corrections and Health. The residents are paid at least minimum wage for their labor. They wear street clothes, have fewer restrictions on their property, and can purchase grocery deliveries twice a month. One of the most notable things the Office has observed when touring the Special Treatment Unit is the sheer amount of personal property residents have. People are housed in unlocked single cells in what used to be a disciplinary housing unit of East Jersey State Prison or in an Annex building with dormitory rooms. The Annex dorms in particular were crowded with densely packed bunk beds and large quantities and piles of personal property and food. The combination of old infrastructure and overstuffed living spaces leads to regular issues with plumbing, hot water, heat, air conditioning, sanitation, rodents and other pests, which the Department of Corrections responds to with maintenance teams and contractors. The facility administration is now addressing these concerns with a new policy that limits the amount of personal property each resident can have, requires property to be kept in approved storage bins, and institutes new rules for food packages.

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 \$2,895,000 for the Office of the Corrections Ombudsperson in Fiscal Year 2026, a 3% increase from the previous year intended to cover union-negotiated pay increases. Ninety-five 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 General 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 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 initially 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 more recently appointed Sherri Goldberg, a nonprofit community services director with experience in juvenile and adult corrections, to 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 had recurring individual check-ins with Ombudsperson leadership, held full Board meetings in September 2024 and February and May 2025, and began organizing a Board site visit to Garden State Youth Correctional Facility.

Ombudsperson Staff

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Call Center and Support Staff

Executive Assistant Lauren Sagar

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Jack Caffrey

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 Ombudsperson staff in-person, contact them in writing (through on-site mailboxes or legal mail), or call the office. Community members and friends and family members who have incarcerated loved ones can reach the Office by phone or email.

Office of the Corrections Ombudsperson

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