

2026 Annual Report

NEW JERSEY OFFICE OF THE CORRECTIONS OMBUDSPERSON

Terry Schuster, Corrections Ombudsperson
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Executive Summary

The New Jersey Office of the Corrections Ombudsperson provides independent prison oversight by investigating complaints and inspecting state correctional facilities. In the last five years, under the direction of Ombudsperson Terry Schuster, the Office has responded to more than 60,000 requests for help from incarcerated people and their loved ones and published 15 reports documenting observed conditions and policy recommendations. It has become more visible and accessible by placing staff on-site in every state prison two to four days per week and holding dozens of town hall meetings across the state.

During this same period, New Jersey Department of Corrections Commissioner Victoria Kuhn and her team provided stable and competent leadership, stewarding the prison system through a period of intense public scrutiny, self-assessment, and reorientation, following the exposure of physical and sexual abuses at the state's only women's prison. This year, the Commissioner was reappointed by newly elected Governor Mikie Sherrill, and the Department passed a major milestone, winding down federal court monitoring after achieving sustained compliance with orders aimed at preventing and addressing sexual abuse.

On other fronts, the Department undertook major recent initiatives to accomplish their strategic goals. Among them, they provided tablets to the incarcerated population that significantly increased access to phone calls, they adopted a new process for mail that has reportedly reduced signs of illicit drug use in the prisons, and they built a larger and stronger network of funded community reentry partners across the state.

This fiscal year, the Ombudsperson Office worked closely with prison administrators and supervisors to look into and address more than 12,000 complaints and allegations. Common concerns related to **property and money** (lost, stolen, or broken personal items, errors in wages or account balances), **classification and housing** (release date calculations, barriers to minimum custody placement, cellmate conflicts spurring requests to transfer facilities), **health care** (delayed responses to sick call requests, inconsistent nurse rounds, help getting prosthetics or medical devices), **outside communication** (slow delivery of legal mail, issues with approved visitors, punishments that take away phone privileges for extended periods), **and conditions of confinement** (sanitation, hot or cold temperatures, discolored water, inconsistent shower access, etc.).

In recent reports, the Office found neat and organized medical and dental clinics at two facilities and offered recommendations for ways to improve infection control and logging of controlled substances and needles. An inspection of Bayside State Prison found the population felt safe and was actively engaged in activities but raised concerns about summer heat and people eating all of their meals inside prison cells. Another report this past year analyzed seven years of data on deaths in custody, noting that most deaths occurred in hospital settings from illnesses and other natural causes, and examining trends in unnatural deaths and deaths of young people in prison.

In other reports published in the last several years, the Office focused on those housed in state prisons without air conditioning; attempted to measure out-of-cell time in disciplinary housing units; criticized sanctions that take away a person's phone calls for longer than six months; described the Department's response to crisis-level conditions in a disciplinary housing unit at Northern State Prison; reported kitchen

sanitation concerns and small double-bunked rooms at Garden State Youth Correctional Facility; and called for the demolition and replacement of a nearly 200-year-old prison compound.

Observations made while inspecting prisons and troubleshooting individual complaints have sparked countless productive policy and practice conversations with Department of Corrections leaders. The Office has raised the following systemic concerns that the Governor, Legislature, and Department of Corrections should contend with, which are discussed in more detail on pp. 15-25 of this report.

1. Prisons can't operate properly when they are understaffed.

The Department raised salaries and hired more than 500 new officers in the last two years. Still, vacant positions and long-term leave have required more overtime and reduced prison activity and programming. New retirements may set progress back, and policymakers should consider additional targeted reductions to the prison population and broader eligibility for minimum-security placements.

2. People are housed two-to-a-cell in spaces designed for only one person.

Cramped quarters, loss of privacy, and fear about personal safety contribute to conflicts between cellmates and disruptions to orderly prison operations. The Department should expand the use of single-occupancy rooms as a behavior incentive where possible, and lawmakers should set minimum square footage requirements for double-occupancy rooms.

3. People in close custody housing units continue to report little out-of-cell time.

Congregate activity and movement are most tightly controlled for those placed in close custody, and the Office continues to hear concerns from people in close custody about limited out-of-cell time. The Office intends to pilot a new inspection tool with the Department for close custody units to assess various standards including out-of-cell time, and urges lawmakers to postpone debate on any revisions to the isolated confinement law pending this data-gathering.

4. New Jersey's prison population is getting older.

Long mandatory minimum prison terms have strained medical resources, requiring long-term planning and a more adaptive health care staffing model. The problem should create urgency around new or expanded release options for older people who have spent decades in prison and those who are terminally ill.

5. Several young people have died unnatural deaths in custody this year.

Between January and July of 2026, four young men in their 20s died in state prisons. Two of these deaths were homicides, and Medical Examiner investigations into the other two remain open. The Department should explore additional steps to help people process these losses, increase transparency, and examine what went wrong.

6. The State still houses people in a nearly 200-year-old antiquated prison.

For more than 100 years, experts have called for New Jersey State Prison's West Compound to be demolished and replaced, a billion-dollar expense that the State cannot avoid indefinitely. Lawmakers should work with the state Treasurer to secure funding, and the Department should move people out of the West Compound who can safely be housed elsewhere.

7. Several regulations that help ensure county jail cells are habitable do not apply to state prisons.

New Jersey already has habitability standards for county jails related to cell size, beds, mattresses, lights, sinks and toilets, showers, fire safety, and meal service. Lawmakers should extend many of these requirements to apply equally to state prisons, provide funding for needed upgrades, and adopt new rules regulating indoor temperatures in prison housing units.

8. Thousands of people are held in prison cells without air conditioning in extreme summer heat.

While most prison housing units are air conditioned, summer temperatures inside some prison housing units measured in the 90s with a heat index that at times felt 10-15° hotter. Funding for air conditioning may not be strategic in the oldest prisons but should be a priority at Bayside State Prison and Garden State Youth Correctional Facility, medium-sized prisons that the State expects to use for the next 50 years.

9. People detained indefinitely for sex offender treatment are not in a treatment setting.

Confining people for decades in the Special Treatment Unit (STU) beyond the conclusion of their prison terms, in a setting that looks and feels like prison, creates hopelessness for those detained, and is ineffective at treating sexual behavioral problems. The State should require that treatment be offered to people who might be civilly committed *before* they have completed their prison terms, transfer jurisdiction of the STU to be operated entirely by the Department of Health in a secure therapeutic setting, and invest more in work-release, supportive community housing, and other supervised step-down options for this population.

10. County jails have problems similar to those in prisons but have no independent oversight.

People in jails file complaints and lawsuits about wrongful deaths, medical neglect, excessive force, sexual abuse, violence, retaliation, under-staffing, heat and cold, sanitation issues, solitary confinement, etc. However, unlike in state prisons, there is no independent oversight body with access and authority to investigate those complaints. Lawmakers should convene a workgroup of stakeholders and national experts to assess the landscape and propose a model for effective statewide jail oversight.

Why Prison Oversight Matters

Independent prison oversight is a key feature of good government. It creates transparency in secure settings whose daily operations are not directly observable by the public, and where state employees are authorized to discipline those in their custody, use restraints and force when necessary, and exercise control over their movement, possessions, nutrition, medical care, and physical living conditions.

Oversight is necessary even when a prison system has excellent leadership and management, as is the case in New Jersey's Department of Corrections, because the simple presence of outside observers can change what happens inside and cue corrections professionals to perform to a higher standard. It also brings fresh eyes to conditions that may have become normalized to those who live and work in them day to day.

Oversight authority is often put in place during times of crisis. An earlier iteration of the New Jersey Office of the Corrections Ombudsperson was established after riots in the 1970s at what were then called Trenton State Prison and Rahway State Prison. The Office's powers were expanded in 2020 after extensive physical and sexual abuse was exposed at Edna Mahan Correctional Facility.

Today the Office plays both a traditional ombudsman role, investigating and mediating complaints of individuals against an institution—in this case, complaints of mistreatment from people in state prisons—and also an Inspector General role, looking more globally and systemically at prison conditions, services, operations, policy compliance, and outcomes.

While there are some overlaps, these oversight activities serve different purposes than those of other entities like court-imposed monitors, accrediting bodies, and the media. Incarcerated people and their loved ones can call the Ombudsperson Office, ask questions, get guidance on navigating the system, and trust that an independent government agency with access to prison facilities and records will look into their concerns. The Office helps to spot and troubleshoot problems early before they escalate or lead to costly litigation. It makes objective findings and recommendations that can help the Department refine policies, develop strategic plans, and continually improve.

In the last several years, for example, the Office's recommendations have helped narrow the types of rule violations that will land people in a disciplinary housing unit, shorten zero-tolerance sanctions that cut off a person from contact visits with their family members, expand training for nurses in wound care, provide call bells to bedbound patients, launch a new paralegal training program, and provide 1,200 people at one facility with pillows.

This year, the work of one Assistant Ombudsman to protect a blind incarcerated person from being exploited by a cellmate led to a statewide policy revision that now better protects all people in prison with disabilities. The work of another Assistant Ombudsman raised the wages for people in Residential Community Reintegration Programs who were participating in drug treatment to be equitable to the wages of those pursuing treatment in prison.

The Office's independent findings have also armed lawmakers with information about emerging problems and positive developments to guide their budget and policy decisions.

It takes both strong corrections leadership and meaningful oversight to prevent and address problems in confinement settings, continually improve operations and services, and build public trust.

New Developments in New Jersey Corrections and Prison Oversight

Department of Corrections Commissioner, Victoria Kuhn, was reappointed under Governor Sherrill and confirmed by the New Jersey Senate.

Federal court monitoring of the high-profile lawsuit about sexual abuse at the women's prison came to a successful conclusion. The court found meaningful supports for those incarcerated at the prison, and lasting transformative changes in the facility's culture, policies, training, and investigations.

The incarcerated population has vastly broader access to call their loved ones now that the Department has introduced new tablets capable of making phone calls, a project more than three years in the making.

A new Road to Reentry program was introduced and hundreds of incarcerated people have already completed it. Interpreters were hired so people with limited English proficiency could participate in programs and education. The Department also hosted its first statewide Mother's Day and Father's Day events.

Forty-one community partners spanning every New Jersey county received reentry funding, and the Department started auditing to ensure they're meeting expectations for reentry supports and services.

The Department hired a new Managing Physician, and their contracted health care provider hired a new Director of Quality Improvement, both of whom have taken on extensive collaborative efforts to improve access to care for the incarcerated population.

The Department reported dramatic decreases in emergency room trips and disciplinary charges related to illicit drug use after instituting a new process that prevents contraband from entering prisons through the mail.

Stewarding the prison system through a period of intense public scrutiny, the Commissioner and her team have provided stable and competent leadership and taken meaningful steps toward more transparency. A new Board of Trustees was assembled and brought fresh expert eyes to the State's prison operations. The Department invited the Ombudsperson Office to audit its internal affairs investigations to ensure they were fair, objective, accurate, and complete. They also offered the Office a seat at the table in policy conversations about protecting incarcerated people with disabilities, improving how people in prison are classified for safe housing, and preventing self-harm and suicide.

At the same time, the Ombudsperson Office launched inspections of prison infirmaries and medical clinics, designed new tools to inspect the most secure close-custody settings, monitored summer heat mitigation measures during a year of extreme weather events, and published its first ever report on deaths in custody.

People with complaints and allegations of mistreatment utilized the Ombudsperson Office as an objective investigator and intermediary. Notably, the number of contacts to the Office dropped 3% in Fiscal Year 2026 compared to Fiscal Year 2025, including fewer complaints from the population at Edna Mahan, and fewer complaints statewide about discipline, safety, and health care.

There was real progress to celebrate this past year, and there are interesting and difficult problems for policymakers to turn to next.

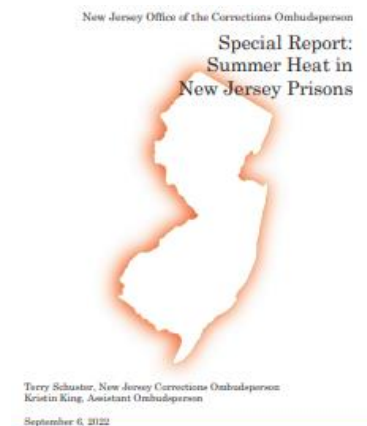
A Recap of the Last (Nearly) Five Years

Ombudsperson Terry Schuster was appointed to a five-year term starting in May 2022. With broader powers under the Dignity Act to inspect prisons and investigate complaints, and with independence to publicly report its findings, the Ombudsperson Office has since addressed more than 60,000 requests for help from incarcerated people and their loved ones. Ombudsperson staff have been on-site in each state prison two to four days per week, hosted 32 town hall meetings in communities across the state, and published 15 reports (detailed below).

The Office now has a larger field team, call center, inspections unit, and community network. It has nurses on staff with expertise to monitor health care concerns. Presence of the Ombudsperson staff on-site has provided regular access and exposure to daily prison operations, activities, maintenance, and emergency responses. The Office is visible not just to those in prisons, but also to the sizeable population in Residential Community Reintegration Programs (RCRPs), which Ombudsperson staff visited more than 100 times in FY2026.

The Office has utilized departmental data, records, interviews, and surveys to monitor policy compliance in the prisons. It has drawn on state archives to give historical context to prison design, budgeting, and planning. This year, the Office began auditing the Department's internal investigations into contraband, professional misconduct, deaths in custody, use of force, and sexual harassment and abuse.

The Ombudsperson has engaged leaders at the Department of Corrections in policy discussions on a wide variety of topics including staffing, living conditions, food service, isolation, medical care, legal access, programming, discipline, and many more. The Office has also learned from Department leaders about search operations, treatment for people convicted of sex offenses, emerging trends in street drugs, and countless other areas where the Department has developed specialized expertise.



As the Ombudsperson's published findings and recommendations have created a record of conditions, concerns, bright spots, and successes, they have informed local media, educated the public, and armed lawmakers with objective information about a part of government that operates outside of public view. Many of the findings described below in summaries of the Office's reports have since been addressed by the Department of Corrections. The Office's report on [Summer Heat in New Jersey Prisons](#) (September 2022) identified roughly 3,500 people housed in state prisons without air conditioning in the summer, measured indoor temperatures as high as 94°F, and reported on the actions taken at each facility to mitigate the heat. The report called on lawmakers to fund air conditioning in facilities the State intends to use for decades to come,

expand the definition of "heat-sensitive" individuals for purposes of heat mitigation to include people who are older or who have physical and health vulnerabilities, provide ice several times a day and free personal fans, and take inventory every spring of ice machines in need of repair and items that will be needed to manage heat in the summer.

The Office's report about [Out-of-Cell Time in Restorative Housing Units](#) (October 2023) relied on survey data and housing unit activity logs to find that people held in disciplinary housing units (RHUs) were

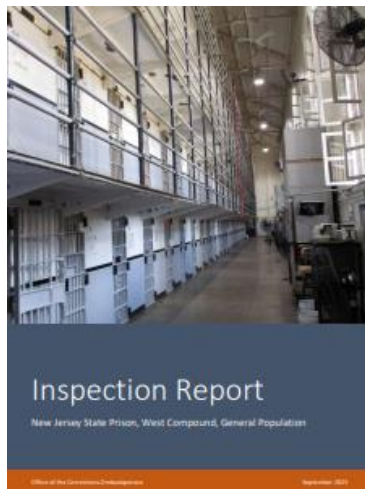
offered less than four hours out of their cells on an average day. The report broke down the number of RHU sanctions during a four-month sample period for assaultive behavior (481 sanctions to RHU time) versus drug-related charges (208 sanctions to RHU time) or refusing orders (389 sanctions to RHU time). It described security precautions followed in the RHUs, physical space limitations, a demanding set of legal and schedule requirements, and disruptive incidents and emergencies that made out-of-cell time difficult to ensure for the roughly 750 people who were housed in RHUs on an average day. The Office recommended setting and monitoring performance goals related to out-of-cell time, issuing fewer and shorter RHU sanctions, creating schedules for the RHUs that anticipate and make up for daily disruptions, curbing the use of sanctions on top of RHU time that take away opportunities for recreation, and exploring options for retaining consistent line staff and supervisors on the units.

Another special report assessed access to loved ones through [Visits and Phone Calls](#) (April 2024), describing the restrictions on family visits during the COVID pandemic, and rebounding numbers of visits as those restrictions were lifted. It used survey data and telecoms data to report how many incarcerated people got in-person or video visits. Survey respondents described why phone calls were important to them, saying things like “It calms me down to talk to one of my kids” and “It gives you purpose and something to look forward to.” The Office found that nearly 2,400 people, however, had their phone privileges taken away in 2023, including 475 people punished with loss of phone for longer than six months. The Office recommended placing more limitations on when phone privileges can be taken away and for how long, given the counter-productive impacts on incarcerated people and their loved ones.



Hundreds of complaints and a series of inspections led the Office to publish a report on conditions in the [Northern State Prison Restorative Housing Unit](#) (October 2024). Inspectors observed people held in cells with large piles of trash, without access to cleaning supplies, soap, toothpaste, or regular showers. Large numbers of people reported having only two pairs of underwear and inconsistent laundry service. The unit provided no indoor recreation and offered outdoor recreation only twice per month. Additionally, a sample of temperature logs showed extended periods when indoor temperatures in the RHU fell and stayed below 55°F. The Office recommended establishing clear minimum standards in state law for the habitability of prison housing units, and made repeated follow-up inspections to monitor and support responsive remedial efforts by the facility’s administration. The report also described serious issues with access to health and mental health care, and documented two deaths by suicide and 16 other self-harming incidents in a three-month period. It recommended alternative placements for those with special needs, audits to ensure health care access for those in the RHU, and public reporting of self-harm incidents and suicides in these disciplinary housing units.

A report on general population housing units at [Garden State Youth Correctional Facility](#) (April 2025) diagrammed double-bunked cells with less than 18 square feet of usable floor space. The report referenced historical records that clarified the cells were designed to house one person rather than two. It also described a change beginning in 2013 in how a prison's capacity gets reported to lawmakers, that eliminated a distinction between "standard" and "sub-standard" prison cells that was once used to track and prevent crowding. The change gave the appearance of nearly doubling the facility's capacity without adding any new buildings. The inspection found that a majority of people housed at the prison had no pillow, identified a sizeable portion of the population that was not engaged in school or programs, and described plumbing problems that created sanitation concerns in the prison's kitchen. The report noted the responsiveness of the facility's administration to the sanitation, food service, and bedding concerns, and recommended strategic planning efforts to limit double-bunking in small cells and to increase participation in programs, school, and work assignments.



In an inspection report on [New Jersey State Prison's West Compound](#) (Sept. 2025), the oldest operating prison in America, the Office described shockingly small cells measuring just four feet by seven feet, housing units with no air conditioning, no day room, and no recreation space, and toilets and showers that left people exposed without adequate privacy. The report recounted 100 years of correctional leaders, policymakers, and subject-matter experts calling for the closure of the West Compound, and urged lawmakers to prioritize funding for its demolition and replacement. The Office recommended moving people out of the West Compound who could safely be housed elsewhere. It also acknowledged that state law has no minimum humane standard for the size of prison cells, and called for the state to adopt one similar to [the county jail standard](#).

An inspection report of the general population housing units at [Bayside State Prison](#) (June 2026) found the incarcerated population active and engaged in exercise, work, and programming. They had ample out-of-cell time, fresh air, and natural light. In survey responses, people reported feeling safe and most reported never witnessing fights or drug use. The report includes side-by-side photographs of the prison's housing units, cells, and dining hall from 1972 just after the prison opened and from 2025 when the Office conducted its inspection. As seen in the photos, cells initially designed for single-occupancy are double-bunked today, leaving less than 20 square feet of floor space per person. People now eat all their meals in those cells rather than in the dining hall, a space that is now used for records storage. The report noted that Bayside has heat in the winter, but no air conditioning in the summer, and measured indoor temperatures ranging from 84°F to 94°F. Bayside is still a



relatively new facility, and the Office continues to urge lawmakers to provide funding for air conditioning. The Office also recommended reopening the dining hall or offering congregate space outside of prison cells for people to eat meals.

The Office published a seven-year data analysis of [Deaths in Custody](#) (December 2025) incorporating County Medical Examiner determinations on cause and manner of death for the 336 people who died while serving state prison terms between 2018 and 2024. The majority of these deaths were from natural causes like cardiac disease, cancer, COVID-19, or other respiratory issues, and most occurred in a hospital setting. About a third of all people who died in custody were housed in the Department's Extended Care Unit at South Woods State Prison, where they were receiving end-of-life care or other advanced nursing care. One in every seven deaths in custody, however, was an unnatural death, including overdoses, suicides, homicides, and accidents, and most of these occurred at Northern State Prison and New Jersey State Prison. The Office highlighted the deaths of people age 25 and younger, nearly all of whom died from unnatural causes. The Office also found that 15% of people who died in prison had less than one year left to serve before being released.



In 2026, the Office began inspecting medical and dental clinics, starting with those at [Mid-State Correctional Facility](#) (May 2026) and [Bayside State Prison](#) (August 2026). At both facilities, inspectors found clean well-stocked patient exam rooms, and neat and organized medical records. Health care staff were trained and certified to respond to emergencies. Monitoring by the Ombudsman Office spurred health care staff to begin documenting routine inspections of first aid kits. The Office observed medication storage and processes for administering daily medications, and offered some recommendations for ways to improve logging and tracking of controlled substances and needles, and notes for improving infection control practices.

Prior to this FY2026 Annual Report, the Ombudsman Office published annual reports in [2022](#), [2023](#), [2024](#), and [2025](#) that shared statistical information and descriptions of calls and letters received, actions the Office took to investigate and address the allegations raised, emerging trends and bright spots in prison operations and programming, major concerns and takeaways, and priority areas for independent oversight. The reports shared the Office's budget, strategic planning and growth, community engagement activities, and new initiatives. The 2023 Annual Report, for example, announced the hiring of staff with correctional health care expertise and the launch of the Ombudsman Office's systemic monitoring unit, the 2024 report explained how the Office created a new inspection tool for prison housing units, and the 2025 report described a new initiative to monitor Residential Community Reintegration Programs (RCRPs). Recurring themes across the reports included observations and concerns about under-staffing, old infrastructure, illicit drug use in the prisons, access to health care, conditions in Restorative Housing Units (RHUs), and lost and stolen personal property.

What We Heard This Year from Incarcerated People and Their Loved Ones

Between July 1, 2025 and June 30, 2026, the Ombudsperson Office received 12,693 contacts—nearly 50 calls and letters per workday—from incarcerated people and their loved ones. The total number of calls in FY2026 was 3% lower than the previous fiscal year, with notable reductions in contacts about discipline, safety, and health care, and fewer complaints from people at Edna Mahan Correctional Facility. The Office, however, anticipates an increase in the coming year, as tablets capable of making phone calls throughout the day have been provided to incarcerated people in each of the state prisons. In the month of June alone, for example, after tablets were distributed in all but one facility, the Office’s prison hotline received 55% more phone calls than in the previous June.

More than 9,000 of the contacts came from the three largest facilities: New Jersey State Prison, Northern State Prison, and South Woods State Prison. (See Figure 1.) The Office received more than two contacts for every person housed at New Jersey State Prison, one contact for every person housed at Northern, and 0.7 contacts for every person housed at South Woods, the largest state prison.

Figure 1. Contacts by facility, FY2026.

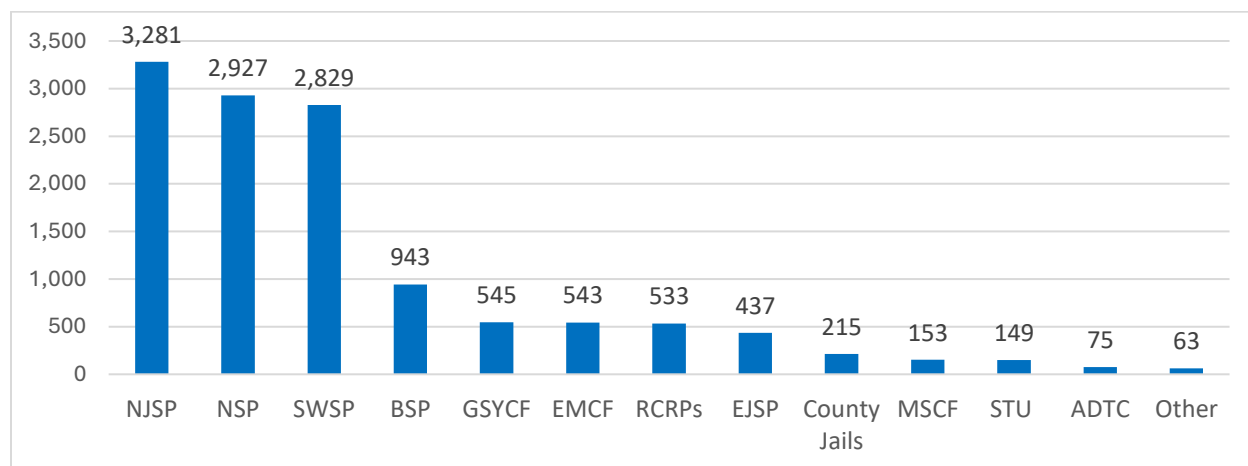


Figure 2. Who initiated the contact?

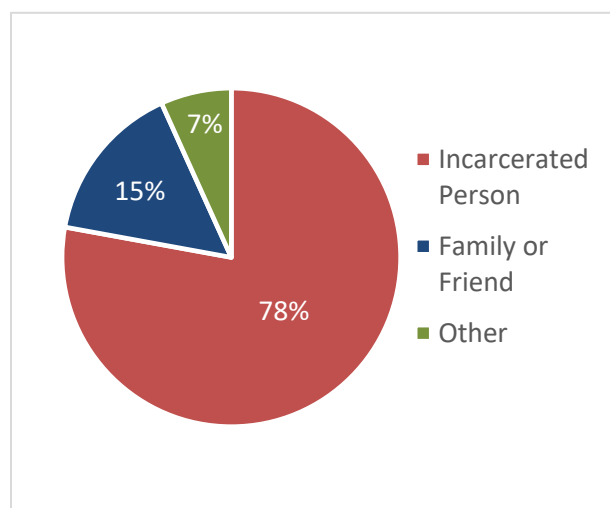
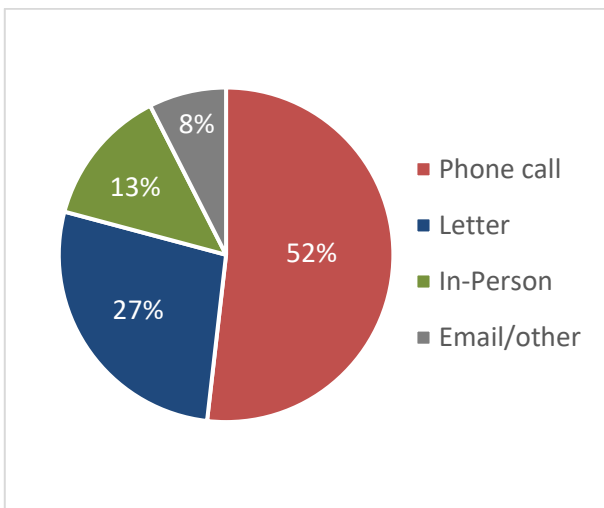


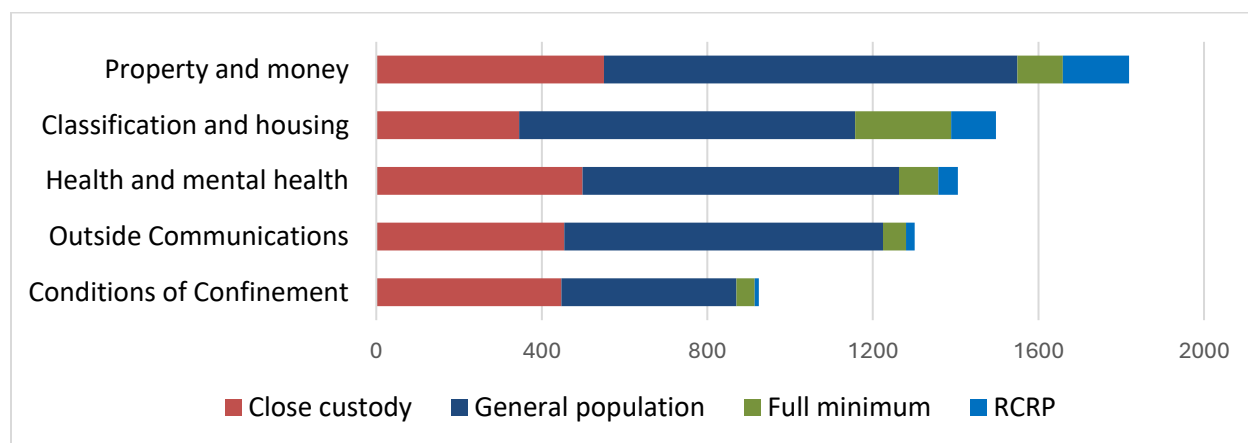
Figure 3. How did they contact us?



Slightly more than half (51.5%) of contacts to the Office were from people in a general population custody status, 36% were in close custody (disciplinary housing, protective custody, and other highly controlled settings), just under 10% were from people in a full-minimum security placement, and 5% were in RCRPs.

Incarcerated people complained most often about property and money, classification and housing, health and mental health care, communication with the outside world, and living conditions in the prisons. (See Figure 4).

Figure 4. Most common complaint categories from incarcerated people, by custody status, FY2026.



Note: This graph represents only contacts directly from incarcerated people, and does not include calls and emails from their loved ones.

Below are some examples of contacts in each of these categories, plus examples of safety concerns. Safety was not among the top five most common reasons people reached out to the Ombudsperson Office in FY2026. It accounted for seven percent of total contacts to the Office, and is included here because, as a category, it is always an oversight priority.

Property and money

The most frequent reason people requested assistance from the Office in FY2026 was for concerns related to their personal property and money. People in close custody settings frequently contacted the Office alleging lost, stolen, or broken property. Complaints from those in general population often focused on errors in wages, incorrect account balances, and delayed or unfulfilled commissary orders. The Ombudsperson Office is often unable to help a person find lost items, but was able to resolve about one in five complaints related to property and money. In other cases, Ombudsperson staff offered direction to incarcerated people for filing property claims or pursuing other available remedies, or referred the person's concerns to decision-makers at the prison who could be more helpful.

Classification and housing

People asked the Ombudsperson Office for help understanding or questioning their parole eligibility date or max-out date. They called with concerns about not being given jail credits, and asked for direction when they needed information about a court judgment or detainer, or correcting their record when a detainer had been lifted. Quite a few contacts were from people

who believed they were entitled to full minimum-security status or who were awaiting approval for placement in an RCRP or the inpatient drug treatment program at Mid-State Correctional Facility. People also called when they had conflicts with a cellmate and wanted to be relocated, and to allege that “keep separate” orders were being violated.

Health and mental health care

People contacted the Office about delayed responses to sick call requests, or being inaccurately marked as a no-show or refusal when they were never called in to be seen. At times, they complained about staff conduct, expressed dissatisfaction with the level of care they received, or reported nurses not making enough rounds in the infirmary or not responding in a timely way to call bells in the Extended Care Unit. Patients frequently called about specialist appointments that were missed, canceled, or that had yet to be scheduled. People complained about transportation issues for those off-site appointments. The Office got requests for help getting devices like medical boots, back braces, and denture replacements. People asked for guidance on how to request copies of their medical records or how to get their health information shared with a family member. Some callers were asking to be seen by mental health care providers or were otherwise expressing feelings of hopelessness, depression, and anxiety, which the Office always immediately refers to facility administrators and mental health providers as a precaution against self-harm. About half of health-care-related contacts were referred to the quality improvement team at University Correctional Health Care for investigation and follow-up. More than a third of health-care-related contacts could be addressed by providing the patient with information or guidance on how to advocate for themselves. The Office identified more than 150 health-related concerns that were resolved when the Ombudsperson Office took action on behalf of the patient. Others required no intervention at all either because the health care provider was already aware of and addressing the issue, or because no violation had occurred.

Outside communications

The Office heard concerns about slow or delayed delivery of legal mail, and requests for help getting an attorney’s phone number approved for privileged phone calls. Incarcerated people complained about their loved ones not being approved for visits or having phone call privileges taken away as a disciplinary punishment. The Office was alerted to telephones and kiosks that were not working and that needed to be serviced by the Department’s vendors, difficulty with telephone PINs, and issues with new tablets that impacted phone calls (weak signal, broken microphone or headphones, etc.). The Office was able to affirmatively resolve more than 300 of the 1,300 contacts related to outside communications. In other cases, the Office provided information and/or referred the concern to the Department or their telecoms vendor.

Conditions of confinement

People complained to the Ombudsperson Office about extreme temperatures, loss of power, pests and insects, and discolored water coming out of the sink. They reported maintenance concerns related to leaking toilets, broken lights, and inoperable windows, and sanitation concerns about showers and common areas. The Office received about 250 contacts in FY2026

about cell confinement and inconsistent access to showers. These complaints have informed the Office's new inspection tool for close custody settings. A large portion of complaints also related to food (delayed meals, cold food, small portions, etc.). Assistant Ombudspersons frequently went on-site to directly observe the issue that was complained about. Most concerns about living conditions were addressed by providing information or referring concerns to facility administrators and maintenance crews. Many of the prison buildings are old, and even newer ones have maintenance issues when fully occupied. The Department has been proactive with maintenance and responsive to concerns raised by the Office. Ombudsperson staff identified 150 concerns about living conditions that were resolved because the Office drew attention to them.

Safety and violence

More than 800 calls and letters related to safety concerns. People contacted the Ombudsperson Office to report assaults, retaliation, and sexual harassment. They described other incarcerated people extorting, threatening, or attempting to harm them. People called to request help getting placed in protective custody because of past violence or continuing threats of violence. Some contacts were requests to speak with the Special Investigations Division (SID) to report an incident or tip, provide an update about an ongoing investigation, or learn how an internal affairs investigation was resolved. More than half of safety-related contacts came from people held in disciplinary confinement, protective custody, or other close custody setting. Approximately 70% of safety-related complaints were immediately referred to SID or the facility administrator. Others did not require action or could be resolved by providing information and policy guidance.

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

Assistant Ombudspersons handling individual complaints spent nearly 1,100 staff days on-site in state prisons and RCRPs in FY2026, and helped full-time office staff answer hotline calls when they were not in the field. They often recorded one or more information-gathering steps as part of the complaint resolution. For example, staff members conducted more than 1,900 face-to-face interviews with incarcerated people to discuss their concerns, looked up Department regulations or policies they were unfamiliar with in more than 100 cases, conducted 77 physical inspections to confirm complaints about living conditions, and undertook more than 600 informal investigations.

The Ombudsperson himself conducted 20 prison listening tours, and members of the Office's systemic monitoring team spent 98 staff days on-site for announced and unannounced inspections.

Each contact was logged and tracked in the Office's case management system. In nearly 16% of contacts, staff members noted that no violation took place, or the complaint did not require intervention by the Office. About half of the contacts to the Office could be redirected by providing the complainant with information, guidance, or technical assistance on how best to advocate for themselves or their loved ones. Staff members referred and handed off another 16% of contacts to facility administrators, SID, or health care providers. In 14% of contacts, an Assistant Ombudsperson's intervention was integral to resolving the complaint. In fewer than 2% of cases, the Office's staff looked into and substantiated the details in a complaint but no satisfactory resolution was achieved.

Ten Issues Policymakers Should Grapple With

1. Prisons can't operate properly when they are understaffed.

The Ombudsperson Office's top concern for several years running has been understaffing in the state prisons. Daily operations are constrained by hundreds of officer vacancies and nearly as many people out on long-term leave. The problem may get worse with current staff who are eligible to retire this year with full pensions. Lockdowns and days with limited activity have become common on weekends and around holidays as officers who have worked mandatory overtime shifts several days during the week call out sick. The State Auditor [found](#) that overtime pay to New Jersey corrections officers increased 59% just between 2022 and 2024, even with a steady prison population. About a quarter of overtime hours in 2024 were mandatory.

The Department of Corrections has invested in recruitment and has graduated more than 500 new officers from their Training Academy in the last two years. The Department has also improved retention numbers by focusing on staff wellness initiatives and working with the officers' union to raise starting salaries for new recruits and senior corrections officers. Closing the officer vacancy gap will take time and continued efforts. Because understaffing leads to consolidated officer posts in the prisons, reduced services, and cancelled activities, it results in incarcerated people being more locked-down and less engaged in rehabilitative programs.

State leaders should provide the Department with support and resources for continued recruitment and retention of officers, and consider taking action to ensure Police Training Commission fitness standards do not unreasonably [discriminate against female recruits](#). As the Ombudsperson recently wrote in an [NJ.com OpEd](#), if the state can't hire and train more corrections officers than are retiring, lawmakers must take more steps to reduce the incarcerated population so that prisons can operate safely.

The Department should also examine its classification rules and outcomes, consider expanding eligibility for incarcerated people to be stepped down into empty beds in minimum custody settings, review the large number of people who currently qualify for full-minimum but who are classified as gang-minimum, and work with the Legislature to eliminate barriers that prevent some people from being placed in RCRPs.

2. People are housed two-to-a-cell in spaces designed for only one person.

The Office's inspections of [Bayside State Prison](#) and [Garden State Youth Correctional Facility](#) found cells designed for single-occupancy that today are each used to house two people. At Bayside, double-bunking resulted in less than 20 square feet of unencumbered floor space per person, and at Garden State, only 18 square feet per person. Although New Jersey [regulations require](#) county jail cells to have a minimum of 25 square feet of unencumbered floor space for each occupant, no such standard exists for state prisons—a problem that lawmakers should remedy.

Beginning decades ago when tough-on-crime laws drove up prison populations, the Department placed most of the incarcerated population with a cellmate. This practice continued following recent research findings on suicide risk management and prevention. Double-bunking also enables the Department to focus staff resources on a smaller number of housing units, which is a priority during periods of short-staffing. The Department continues to examine self-harm and suicide incidents and trends, and has invited the Ombudsperson Office to participate in a task force focused on this topic.

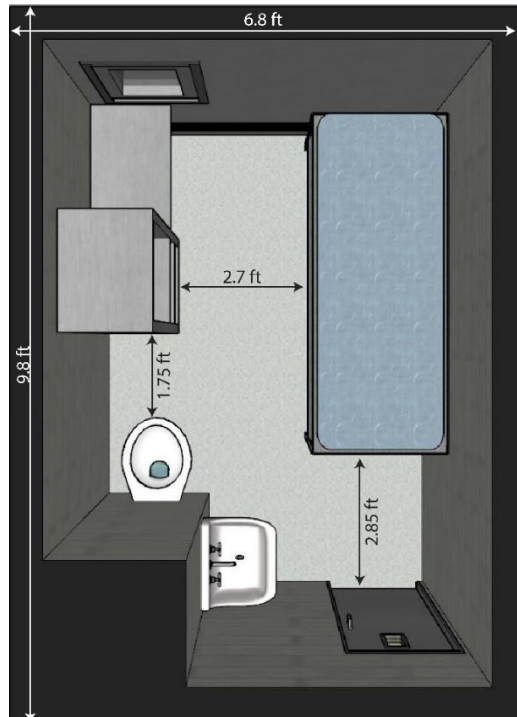


Diagram of double-bunked cell at Garden State Youth Correctional Facility.

One point of feedback that the 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 to have 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 prisons, the Office regularly hears staff and supervisors suggest that the facility would run more smoothly with more single-occupancy rooms.

As an initial step, the Department has established Elevated Privilege Units that reward students, elders, and model prisoners with recreational and living space amenities and, in many cases, their own room. The Office encourages the Department to further expand the use of single-occupancy rooms as a behavior incentive in each facility to the extent possible within bed space constraints. Lawmakers and the Department should adopt standards into law or state regulations that set minimum space requirements for multiple-occupancy cells in existing facilities and in future construction, as well as policies that restrict time in sub-standard cells to sleeping hours and population count times, with limited exceptions as needed for secure prison operations. The Office also recommends a narrower application of double-bunking as a suicide prevention measure to those who are at higher-risk for self-harm, and more investment in other types of prevention measures.

3. People in close custody housing units continue to report little out-of-cell time.

Prisons must operate securely for the safety of the incarcerated population, staff, and the public. Movement of the population and times when they can congregate are controlled to minimize opportunities for interpersonal violence, particularly with individuals who have engaged in recent violent or disruptive behavior. This reality can hamper efforts to engage incarcerated people in purposeful activity, programming, school, work, vocational training, and treatment. Regular activity is easiest to accommodate for those classified for minimum-security custody or general population housing, and requires more careful planning for those in more secure close custody settings.

Seven years ago, state lawmakers passed a landmark law [prohibiting isolated confinement](#) in New Jersey prisons and jails, with limited exceptions, and requiring public reporting about those who are subjected to the types of isolated confinement that are permitted under the law. In the time since, while there has been internal tracking and public reporting by the Department of Corrections about the new law's implementation, and some reporting from the Ombudsperson Office about areas of concern, there has not been a comprehensive assessment of compliance successes, challenges, and outcomes.

In 2023, the Office issued [a report](#) expressing concern about out-of-cell time in disciplinary housing units (RHUs) at New Jersey State Prison, Northern State Prison, and South Woods State Prison, relying on surveys of the incarcerated population and available housing unit logs over the course of a week at each facility. In these three facilities, both the self-reported data and the official logs showed hundreds of people being offered less than four hours out of their cells on the average day. Notably, the small RHU at a fourth facility, Edna Mahan, did not have the same problem.

An [inspection report](#) the following year about the largest RHU in the state found one or more wings of the unit locked down on most days, the complete elimination of indoor recreation on the unit, and less out-of-cell time than envisioned in Department policy. This past year, the Office again received hundreds of complaints about cell confinement in RHUs with little activity or movement for extended periods.

To more thoroughly and collaboratively assess out-of-cell time and compliance with various policies and regulations in the most secure close custody settings, the Office recently developed a new inspection instrument, and intends to pilot it collaboratively with the Department in the coming year. While there have been calls to amend the Isolated Confinement law, it is vital that any statutory changes be grounded in objective findings. The Office urges policymakers to allow time for thorough and well-vetted independent data gathering before considering any revisions to the Isolated Confinement Restriction Act.

4. New Jersey's prison population is getting older.

More than 200 people in New Jersey prisons are age 70 or older. Another 750 people in state prisons are in their 60s. This older segment of the incarcerated population has [grown significantly](#) in the last decade because of mandatory minimum sentences. [More than 1,700 people](#) in state prison have a mandatory prison term lasting 30 years or longer.

Even as the prison population has gone down, prison health care costs have gone up—something the Department [attributes directly to the aging population](#)—and the Department's health care providers are [reporting](#) patients with more complex medical needs and a higher prevalence of chronic and comorbid conditions.

The Department does not operate a nursing home but has an Extended Care Unit (ECU) at South Woods State Prison with roughly 50 medically complex patients on an average day. They are people living with paralysis, mobility limitations, incontinence, and other conditions requiring standby or full assistance with activities of daily living. They are also people undergoing cancer treatments, receiving post-operative care and wound care, managing chronic diseases that require ongoing skilled nursing, or receiving end-of-life care. Of the 336 [people who died in Department of Corrections custody](#) between 2018 and 2024, a third were being housed in the ECU when they passed away.

As the aging population has increased the strain on medical resources, the Ombudsperson Office has raised concerns with the Department and its health care providers about their capacity to respond to patients ringing call bells for medical assistance in the ECU, particularly on the overnight shift, and have called for a health care staffing model in the ECU that can regularly adjust based on the number of patients and the acuity and complexity of their needs, similar to staffing models in community-based long-term care facilities.

The Department must assess today what staff and physical space it will need a decade from now to accommodate the disability, mobility, and long-term care needs of its aging population, as well as their end-of-life care. Lawmakers should expect continued increases in health care-related costs that cannot be covered by federal Medicaid or Medicare dollars. They should also consider existing policy proposals to expand compassionate release, and to allow older incarcerated people who have served significant prison time to appear before a judge for potential resentencing.

5. Several young people have died unnatural deaths in custody this year.

Medical Examiners found the large majority of deaths (83%) in New Jersey prisons between 2018 and 2024 to be from illnesses and other medical issues. One in every seven deaths during that period, however, was an overdose, suicide, homicide, or accidental death. When broken out by facility, the Ombudsperson Office [found](#) that most unnatural deaths happened at Northern State Prison or New Jersey State Prison.

County Medical Examiners have ruled three custodial deaths to be homicides between January and April of this year. In addition to Medical Examiner investigations, all in-custody deaths are also referred to the county prosecutor. At least three additional unnatural deaths that occurred in state prisons over the summer are still pending investigation—including a suspected suicide and two more suspected homicides. Of these six deaths, two took place at Northern State Prison, three at Garden State Youth Correctional Facility, and one at South Woods State Prison. Four of the six deaths were young men in their 20s.

Tragic deaths of young people are traumatic for prison staff and the peers and families of those who died. The Department offers peer counseling for staff and mental health services for incarcerated people upon request. It also issues an annual health care delivery and outcomes report that provides statistics on deaths in custody. Given the concentration of deaths this year at Garden State, the Department should consider if there are more steps they can take to help people process the losses, to increase transparency, and to better understand what went wrong to help prevent more unnatural deaths in the future. The Department already takes deaths in custody very seriously, conducts high-quality confidential investigations in partnership with prosecutors and Medical Examiners, and has convened a task force aimed at prevention of self-harm and suicide.

6. The State still houses people in a nearly 200 year-old antiquated prison.

The West Compound of New Jersey State Prison is the oldest operating prison facility in America. It is nearly 200 years old, and for at least the last 100 years, correctional leaders, policymakers, and subject-matter experts have called for it to be demolished and replaced. Prison cells in the compound have no hot water and the cells are very small. The cells in one of the prison wings are just four feet by seven feet, small enough that people living in the cells can extend their arms and touch both side-walls. Housing units in the West Compound have no air conditioning, no day room, and no recreation space, and toilets and showers leave people exposed without adequate privacy.

A five-member [Commission](#) created by the New Jersey legislature in 1917 to investigate prison conditions called the prison “antiquated and inadequate... much too small for decent living.” The Commission found the buildings “wholly unsuited for the present needs either of the inmates or of the officers,” and recommended replacing it with a new prison with suitable living conditions and space for work and recreation. In 1952, following a series of public hearings and an inquiry into a riot at New Jersey State Prison, a [Committee](#) of officials and experts issued a report to then-Governor Driscoll that called the prison “one of the most archaic in the United States,” and recommended building a new facility. The Historic American Building Survey took photographs and recorded extensive documentary evidence about the building in the 1980s because it was slated for demolition. The Department of Corrections itself [requested](#) capital funds to demolish and replace the West Compound as recently as 2011, citing “antiquated housing units” and class action litigation over living conditions.

The publication of the Ombudsperson Office’s [inspection report](#) for the West Compound was the first time this Office has publicly called for a facility to be demolished and replaced. The topic of replacing this prison briefly surfaced at [legislative budget hearings](#) with the Department of Corrections this year, and the Department reported that the price tag for construction of a new state-of-the-art maximum security prison will be substantial—likely in the vicinity of \$1 billion.

The State cannot avoid this expense indefinitely. Lawmakers should begin working with the Department of Corrections and the New Jersey Treasurer to explore avenues to secure funding for a project of this scale.

In the meantime, the Department should consider moving people out of the West Compound who can safely be housed elsewhere. As the Office noted in its report, hundreds of people in the general population had overrides of low classification scores based on the length of time they had left to serve before becoming eligible for release. Many of these individuals have no recent disciplinary violations and can likely be housed safely in other settings.

7. Several regulations that help ensure county jail cells are habitable do not apply to state prisons.

When inspecting the disciplinary housing unit at Northern State Prison, the Office [found](#) repeated and extended periods of time in which indoor temperatures on the unit were unreasonably cold or hot. When temperatures were very hot, people housed there could not use fans or be provided with bottled water, because of internal protocols that the Department had put in place to address misbehavior.

People are housed for extended periods in rooms with no electrical outlets in the disciplinary housing unit at South Woods State Prison. Prison cells housing two people each at [Garden State Youth Correctional Facility](#) had only 18 square feet of unencumbered floor space—hardly enough room to do a push-up. The space between the bottom and top bunk was 29 inches, which prevented average size people from sitting upright. At [Bayside State Prison](#), two-person cells were only slightly larger, and since the closing of the facility's dining hall, the population ate all three daily meals inside their cells.

State regulations include standards for county jails related to [cell size, beds, lights, sinks and toilets; mattresses; fire safety; showers](#); and [meal service in common areas](#); but nothing in New Jersey law or regulations applies these same standards to state prisons.

Concerning conditions persist, in part, because state law lacks meaningful standards on what makes a prison housing unit habitable. Additionally, without sufficient resources to build or procure habitable facilities, conditions like those long-deemed unfit in New Jersey State Prison's [West Compound](#) become the norm.

There are some differences between jails and prisons that may justify different standards, but lawmakers should extend relevant county jail standards to apply also to state prisons, allowing an implementation period and some temporary exceptions if necessary, and providing funding for needed upgrades. They should also establish habitability standards for indoor temperatures in prison housing units. If exceptions are carved out permitting people to be housed in sub-standard conditions, the state should impose clear mandates that limit the amount of time people are confined in those conditions, and that further restrict sub-standard cells to single-occupancy rather than double-occupancy.

8. Thousands of people are held in prison cells without air conditioning in extreme summer heat.

In 2022, the Office published a [special report](#) on summer heat in New Jersey prisons, finding roughly 3,500 people living in prison housing units with no air conditioning. In the time since, those at Edna Mahan Correctional Facility who were living without air conditioning were moved to a temperature-controlled satellite location that previously operated as the William H. Fauver Youth Correctional Facility, and the portions of the Adult Diagnostic and Treatment Center that were previously without air conditioning now have portable A/C units. Today, 80% of the beds at Garden State Youth Correctional Facility (not including reception), and 100% of the general population beds at Bayside State Prison, the west compound of New Jersey State Prison, and East Jersey State Prison are in housing units with no air conditioning.

In 2022 and each summer since, the Office has measured temperatures in the 90s inside prison cells during tours on random summer days, and monitored staff efforts to mitigate the heat with fans, ice, extra showers, and precautions for heat-sensitive individuals. When humidity levels are high, the “real feel” (calculated using the National Weather Service [Heat Index Calculator](#)) can be 10-15° hotter, which is dangerously hot for people who are held in state custody and unable to leave.

Because installing air conditioning in old buildings often requires electrical system upgrades, new roofing or windows, duct work, insulation, asbestos abatement, and fire protection upgrades, the cost to ensure temperature-controlled prison housing units is more than the price of the chillers themselves. In 2022, the Department of Corrections estimated the costs at \$64.7 million for Bayside State Prison, \$78 million for East Jersey State Prison, \$70.8 million for Garden State Youth Correctional Facility, and \$82.5 million for New Jersey State Prison—a total of \$296 million.

The Ombudsperson Office recommends that the Governor and state lawmakers prioritize funding for air conditioning at two medium-sized prisons that that Department of Corrections can reasonably expect to utilize for the next 50 years: Bayside State Prison and Garden State Youth Correctional Facility. These projects have a combined estimated cost of \$135.5 million.

The non-air-conditioned portions of East Jersey State Prison and New Jersey State Prison were built in the 1800s and early 1900s, should not be slated for continued use in the decades to come, and therefore would not justify the significant investment for air conditioning.

Pending state funding for air conditioning at the Bayside and Garden State facilities, the Office encourages the Department to notify the Governor and legislature annually of summer high temperatures and heat index measurements inside non-air-conditioned prison housing units.

9. People detained indefinitely for sex offender treatment are not in a treatment setting.

The Special Treatment Unit (STU) is a facility operated by the Department of Corrections with treatment services provided by the Department of Health for people civilly committed for sex offenses following the completion of their prison terms. Because the Corrections Ombudsperson's jurisdiction is limited to "state sentenced inmates," the Office does not have statutory oversight authority over the STU. A 2012 litigation settlement previously authorized the Ombudsperson Office to establish a system for receiving and investigating complaints from residents in the STU. That settlement has since been terminated, but the population still sometimes contacts the Office with complaints that then get referred to the Department of Corrections or Department of Health. This past year, STU residents contacted the Office about 150 times.

Investigative reporting in 2024 described the STU as a "[shadow prison](#)," and in 2026, [an event](#) at Rutgers Law School assembled civil rights attorneys to question the constitutionality of indefinite confinement of people past the conclusion of their criminal sentences.

A portion of residents in the STU live in a therapeutic community setting, and currently about 20% of the STU population is on a release track, with a graduated process for furloughs and release planning. The segment of the resident population in the therapeutic community sounds relatively hopeful when they speak to the Ombudsperson Office and can see a pathway home.

The rest of the STU population lives in a dark multi-level prison building that was formerly used for disciplinary confinement. This population is a mix of people who refuse to participate in treatment and people who have not progressed in treatment, in many cases for periods lasting much longer than their initial prison sentences. People who sentencing judges thought would be out of prison in their 30s or 40s are still confined in the STU today in their 50s and 60s.

The prison setting, and the cycle of being assigned to repeat the same treatment curriculum for years on end, makes it difficult for many individuals to stay motivated or to picture a positive law-abiding future for themselves in the community. STU residents describe peers who have stopped bathing and taking medication, who don't get out of bed, or who have attempted to harm themselves.

Setting aside the question of its constitutionality, an equally important question is the STU's effectiveness. The therapeutic community setting in the STU appears to be a place where meaningful treatment can happen, and the other parts of the STU are less effective treatment settings. As one resident reported to the Ombudsperson Office, "Six to eight hours a week we're in therapy. The rest of the time, we're in jail."

People who might land in the STU should get a chance to engage in treatment *before* the conclusion of their prison sentences. The Adult Diagnostic and Treatment Center (ADTC) is a state prison that has a very good sex offender treatment program, but [state law](#) identifies its target population as those who engage in repetitive and compulsive behavior who are amenable to treatment. Many of the people whom courts place at ADTC under this standard have engaged with child pornography but have not engaged in [the types of predatory violence](#) that would make them susceptible to potential civil commitment in the STU after their prison terms expire. People who will be candidates for civil commitment often get no sex offender treatment during their prison terms, though they can request to voluntarily transfer to ADTC.

Some residents at the STU claim they had no idea that civil commitment was even a possibility until the moment their prison sentences ended, and they were transferred to the STU pending court hearings.

Lawmakers should work with the Departments of Health and Corrections on changes to the law that would enable people who may be subject to civil commitment to engage in the treatment program at ADTC during their prison terms. This may help them demonstrate sufficient progress in treatment and behavior modification to avoid involuntary civil commitment post-prison.

A more effective Special Treatment Unit would be set in a psychiatric hospital and fully operated by the Department of Health. Meaningful mental health therapy requires a treatment setting, and the State can't reconcile telling residents that they are not prisoners while housing them in prison cells and supervising them with corrections officers. Lawmakers should relocate the STU and revise statutes and regulations to assign full operational control of the STU to the New Jersey Department of Health.

To be successful, the State needs significantly more supportive community housing, work release, and other step-down options that are less restrictive than a prison or psychiatric hospital for people with sex offense convictions returning home. The state has made notable investments in reentry services, but has very few halfway-house-type settings that would allow people with sex offense histories to demonstrate trustworthiness in a supervised group home, reenter the workforce, and take partial steps toward community reintegration. Any plan to safely reduce indefinite civil commitment must include resources for less restrictive alternative settings.

The Office also recommends that lawmakers establish independent oversight over the Special Treatment Unit, similar to duties currently held by the Long-Term Care Ombudsperson or by the Corrections Ombudsperson.

10. County jails have problems similar to those in prisons but have no oversight.

All of the same types of incidents and conditions that have justified the creation of independent oversight for state prisons exist in county jails too. People in county jails have complained or litigated about excessive force, sexual abuse, violence, retaliation, unnatural deaths in custody, and problems related to under-staffing, isolation, sanitation, heat and cold, food, health care, bedding, etc. However, there is no independent statewide oversight body with access and authority to investigate these complaints.

The Office of the Corrections Ombudsperson received more than 200 contacts this past year from people in county jails or from their loved ones, but has no jurisdiction over the jails. The state Department of Corrections has a county services division that inspects jails for compliance with state regulations, but it also has no jurisdiction or capacity to investigate complaints.

For all the reasons stated at the beginning of this report why independent oversight matters—to protect the safety, health, and wellbeing of incarcerated people; to hold corrections officials accountable, give them feedback, and help them identify priorities for strategic planning; to give elected officials objective information to guide their policy and budget decisions; to help avoid costly litigation and resolve problems more quickly; and to create transparency and earn public trust—these things also matter at the county level.

Lawmakers should commission a landscape assessment of county jails with the goal of proposing a model for effective statewide jail oversight. This process could, for example, identify existing jail standards, statutes and ordinances, organizational structures, conditions, litigation, and stakeholders. The legislature should appoint an expert panel to begin convening with wardens, county and municipal leaders, impacted individuals and families, and national experts in corrections and oversight to inform the assessment.

About the Office

Authority

The [Dignity Act](#), signed into law in 2020, authorizes the [appointment](#) of an Ombudsperson to work with [state prisoners](#), outlines the Office's [duties](#), gives it discretion to [investigate complaints](#), directs it to [inspect prison facilities](#) and operations, provides [access](#) to facilities, people, and records, protects [confidential communications](#), [prohibits retaliation](#) for working with the Office, and creates an [Advisory Board](#) to support and guide the Office.

Budget

The New Jersey Legislature appropriated \$3,004,000 for the Office in Fiscal Year 2026, a 3.8% increase from the previous year. Ninety-five percent of the Office's budget is dedicated to staff salaries and wages.

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.

Address: Office of the Corrections Ombudsperson, P.O. Box 855, Trenton, NJ 08625

Email: info@oco.nj.gov

Website: www.nj.gov/correctionsombudsperson

Main telephone line: (609) 633-2596

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

Confidential RCRP hotline: (800) 305-1811

Advisory Board

The Board consists of nine members, with three each 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. 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 three full board meetings in FY2026, and toured Garden State Youth Correctional Facility after the Office published an inspection report about conditions there.

The current Advisory Board members include:

Carolyn Chang and Boris Franklin, appointed by former Governor Phil Murphy,

Kathy White and Rob Baran, appointed by Former Senate President Stephen Sweeney, and

Gale Muhammad, Amos Caley, and Sherri Goldberg, appointed by Speaker Craig Coughlin.

Ombudsperson Office Staff



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Deputy Ombudsperson for the Field
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