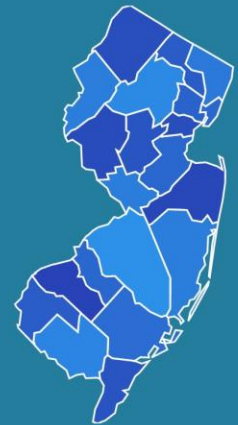


2023 Annual Report

Office of the Corrections Ombudsperson

Independent Prison Oversight for the State of New Jersey



Prepared by

Terry Schuster, New Jersey Corrections Ombudsperson

November 1, 2023

MESSAGE FROM THE OMBUDSPERSON

My hope for the Corrections Ombudsperson Office is to make good on our mandate to help protect incarcerated people in New Jersey from harm and to meaningfully contribute to the continuous improvement of prison operations and services. We hear concerns from people in custody and from their loved ones, observe living conditions in secure facilities, address concerns with Department of Corrections staff and leadership, and increase transparency of the corrections system through public reporting.

Since this time last year, the Office has grown from 11 to 21 staff members. We created new divisions in the Office for community engagement and monitoring of systemic issues, and hired Deputies to head each of those divisions. The new systemic monitoring team conducted facility inspections and our first survey of the incarcerated population at four facilities that had Restorative Housing Units, examining out-of-cell time, programming, work assignments, and access to loved ones. I made 23 site visits this year and staff members have been on-site more than 800 times, averaging two days per week at most facilities and three days per week at New Jersey's two largest prisons. Our staff met face to face with thousands of incarcerated people, including roughly a third of those whose concerns related to personal safety or living conditions.

In this time, we have looked for trends across thousands of phone calls and letters to the Office. We met with hundreds of community members whose loved ones are incarcerated or who are formerly incarcerated themselves, gathering input on priorities for prison oversight. I have been in frequent contact with the Commissioner of the Department of Corrections and her leadership team, heartened by their responsiveness and round-the-clock efforts to solve pressing issues. We also reinforced the Office's independence and the confidentiality of our records and emails by moving our office space and technology outside of the Department of Corrections.

I hold Commissioner Kuhn, her executive team, and the correctional leaders in each facility in high esteem, and have great appreciation for the complexity of their work, taking on a wide array of responsibilities for the people in their care and custody. I am grateful to the Governor's Office and our Advisory Board for their support and guidance, and especially to the members of the Corrections Ombudsperson staff who carry out the important work of this Office, bringing expertise, competence, insight, and a diversity of experiences including lived experience in the state prison system.

This 2023 Annual Report summarizes concerns raised to our Office in the past year and maps out an initial set of priorities for our monitoring and direct assistance in the coming year. It also identifies and assesses internal gaps and changes needed to more fully realize the vision for this Office as outlined in the Dignity Act (P.L. 2019, c. 288).

It is a great honor to be entrusted by the public with this oversight role, and I welcome your continued guidance and feedback.

Thank you,

Terry Schuster
New Jersey Corrections Ombudsperson

MISSION AND MANDATE

The Office of the Corrections Ombudsperson provides independent oversight to protect the safety, health, and well-being of incarcerated people. The Office works to identify and address problems at the individual and system levels to ensure that those housed in New Jersey's prisons are safe, have their health needs met, have access to their loved ones, and are given meaningful opportunities to engage in productive activities, education, and employment to help prepare them to return to the community.

In the Dignity Act, signed into law in 2020 by Governor Phil Murphy, state lawmakers:

- Authorize the [appointment](#) of an Ombudsperson to work with [state-sentenced](#) individuals,
- Outline the Office's [duties](#),
- Give the Office discretion to [investigate complaints](#),
- Direct the Office to [inspect prison facilities](#) and operations,
- Provide [broad access](#) to facilities, people, and records,
- Protect [confidential communications](#) and [prohibit retaliation](#) for working with the Office, and
- Create an [advisory board](#) to support and guide the Office.

BUDGET

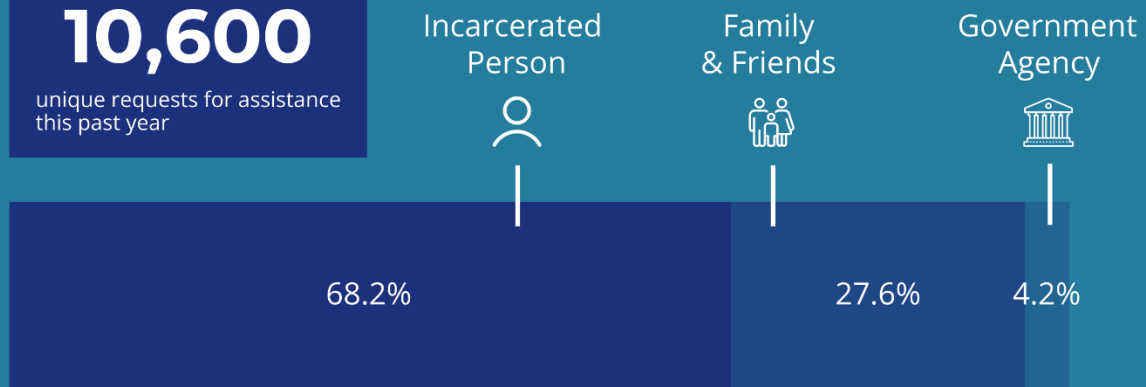
The Fiscal Year 2024 operating budget for the Corrections Ombudsperson Office is \$2,645,000, an increase of \$585,000 from the previous Fiscal Year. The Office has been allotted five additional full-time-equivalent positions, for a total of 26 staff positions. Salaries and wages account for 88% of the Office's budget, and the remainder was appropriated for materials, supplies, equipment, fixed charges, and other services.

People who asked the Ombudsperson for help this year

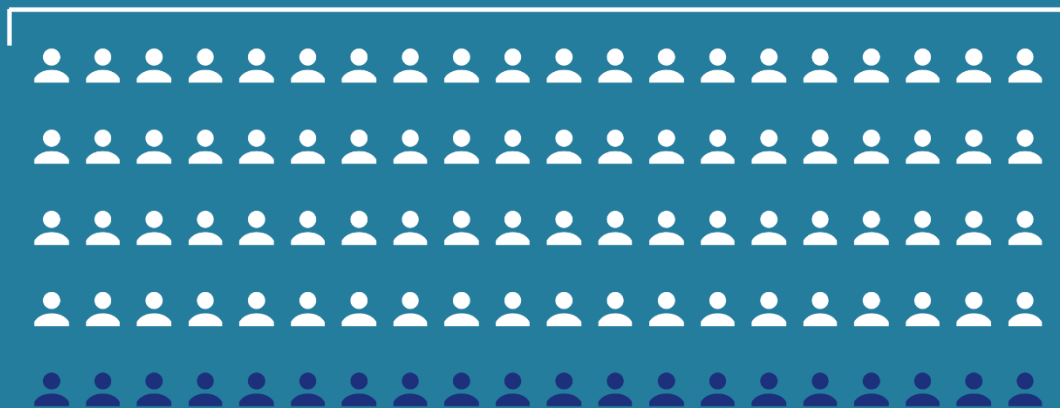
The Ombudsperson office received more than

10,600

unique requests for assistance this past year



Rate of contacts to the Ombudsperson office
September 1, 2022 - August 31, 2023

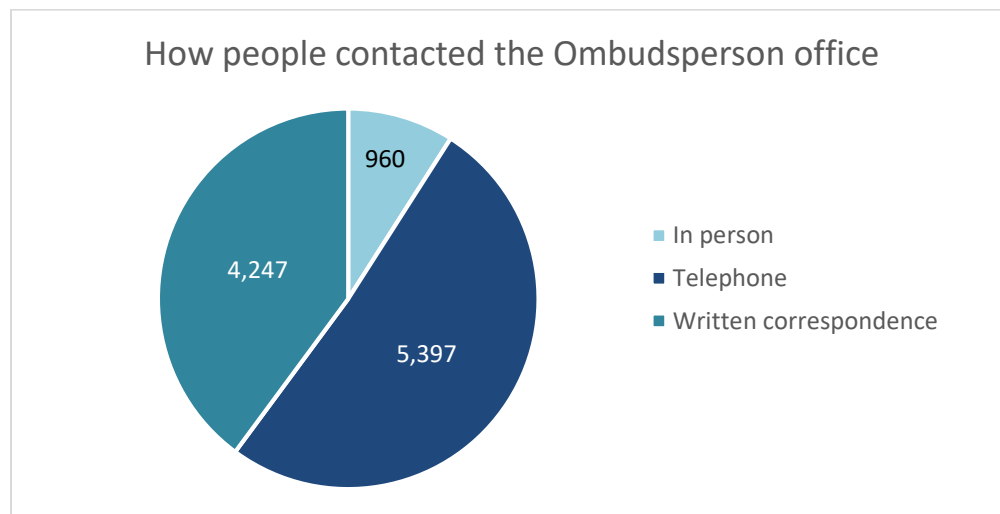


80 requests for assistance for every 100 people in state custody representing **4 contacts for every 5 incarcerated people**, excluding duplicate contacts about the same concern.

REQUESTS FOR ASSISTANCE

Between September 1, 2022 and August 31, 2023, the Ombudsperson Office received 11,938 total contacts. About 1 in every 10 contacts was a repeat request for assistance regarding a concern previously expressed to the Office. The number of unique (non-duplicate) contacts to the Ombudsperson Office this past year was 10,604. All data points in this report reflect unique (non-duplicate) contacts. Each month, incarcerated people and their loved ones made between 700 and 1,000 unique requests for assistance. Just over half (51%) reached out by telephone, and 40% sent letters or other written correspondence. The remainder were in-person communications with members of our staff while they were on-site in a state prison facility. [See Figure 1.]

Figure 1. Method of contact, September 1, 2022 – August 31, 2023



Facilities with larger populations generally produced a higher number of requests for assistance. Two-thirds of the contacts to the Ombudsperson Office were from or about people in the state's three largest correctional facilities: South Woods State Prison, Northern State Prison, and New Jersey State Prison. [See Figure 2.]

Adjusted for facility size, Edna Mahan Correctional Facility had the highest rate of contacts with 193 requests for assistance for every 100 people in custody.¹ [See Figure 3.] People in New Jersey state prisons contacted the Office of the Corrections Ombudsperson at an overall rate of 80 requests for every 100 people in custody. [See Infographic on p. 2.]

¹ Facility population sizes in this report are based on snapshot data from January 3, 2023, available at <https://www.state.nj.us/corrections/pages/OffenderInformation.html>. To adjust for facility size, Figure 3 shows a rate for every 100 people held in custody at each facility. This is done by multiplying the raw rate (# of complaints / facility population) by 100. Figures 2 and 3 also include contacts to the office regarding people in state prisons as well as from state sentenced individuals living in Residential Community Release Programs and county jail facilities.

Figure 2. Number of contacts by facility population, September 1, 2022 – August 31, 2023

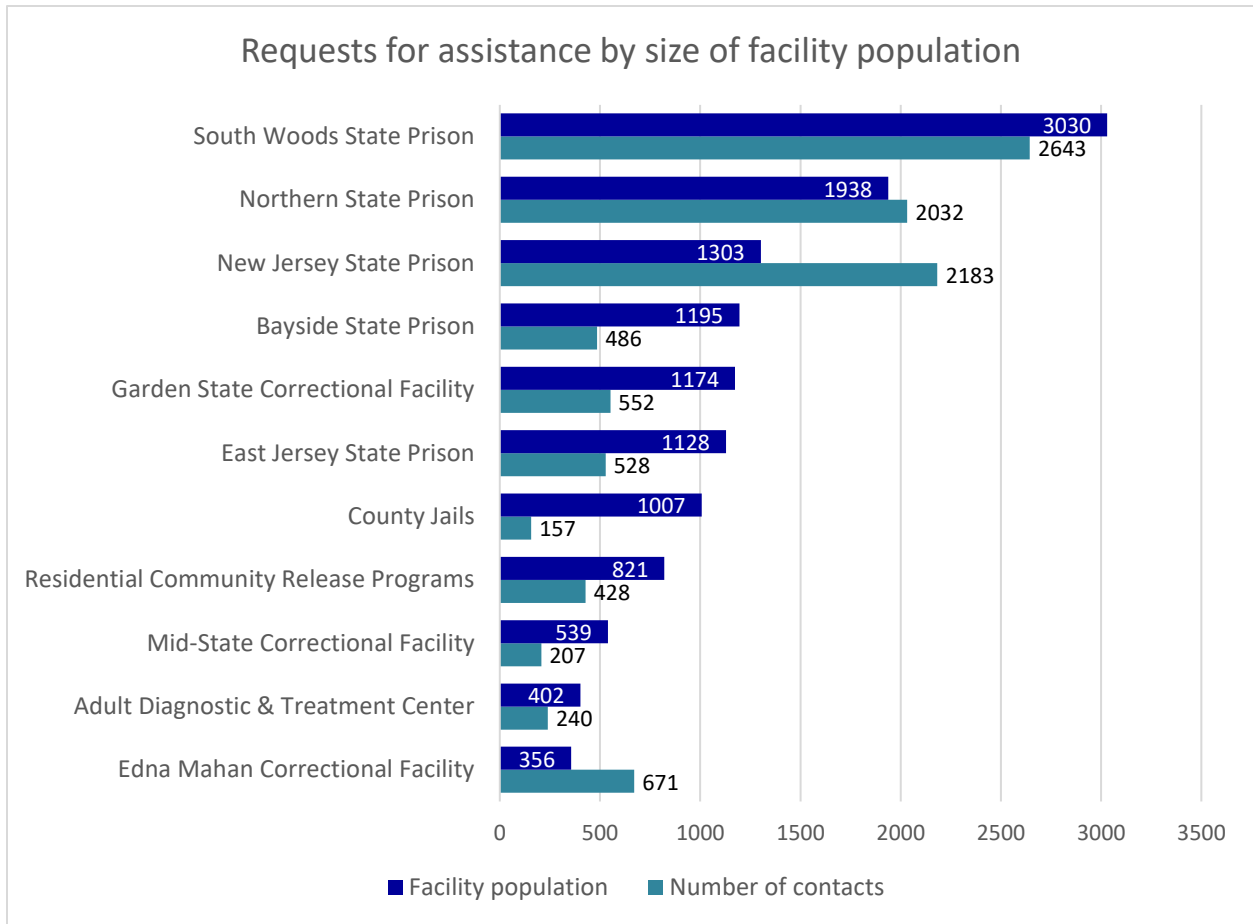
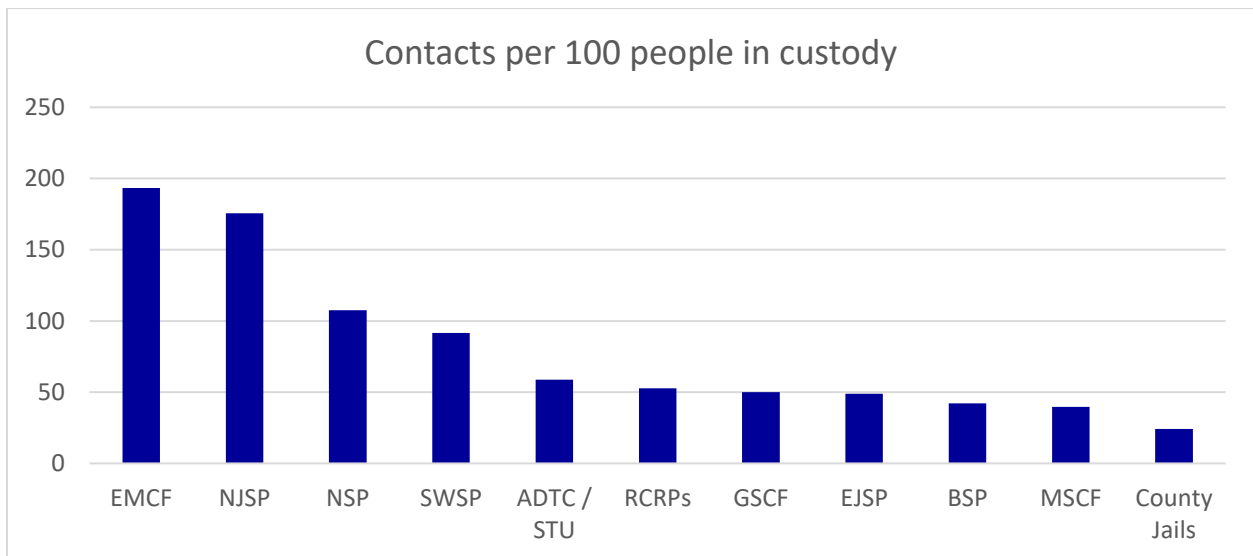


Figure 3. Rate of contacts by facility, September 1, 2022 – August 31, 2023



Top concerns expressed, by facility



Housing & Classification



Property & Money

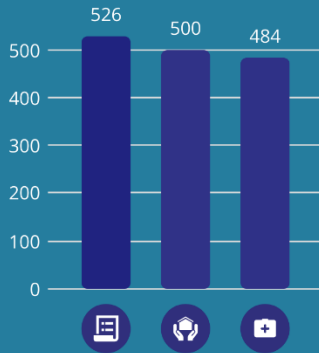


Medical & Mental Health

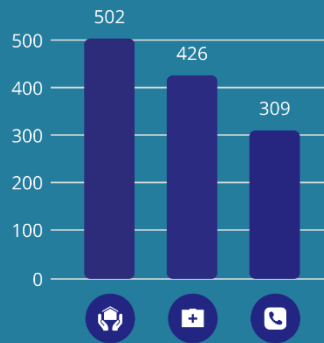


Outside Communications

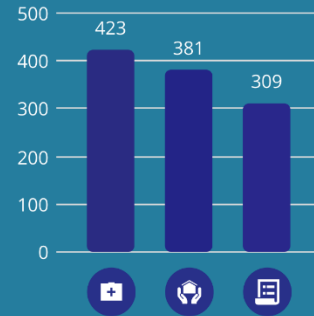
South Woods State Prison



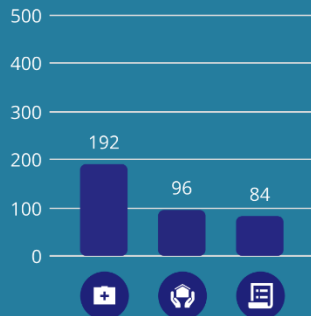
New Jersey State Prison



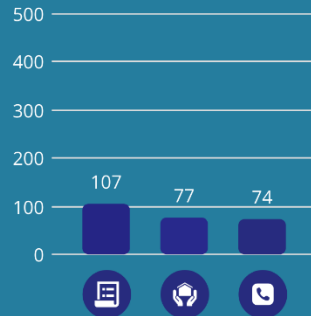
Northern State Prison



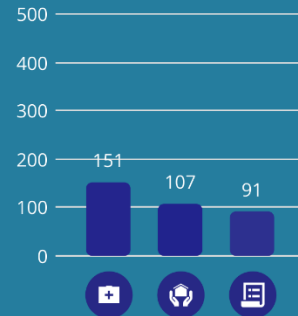
Edna Mahan Correctional Facility



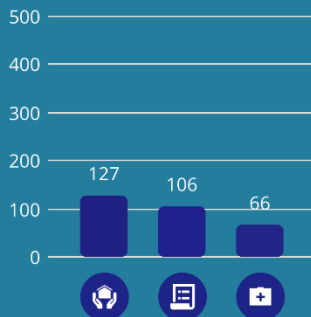
Garden State Correctional Facility



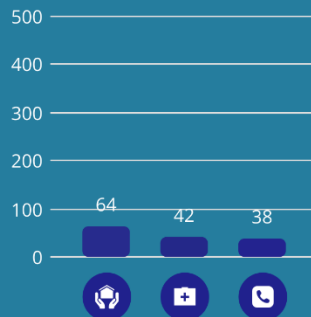
East Jersey State Prison



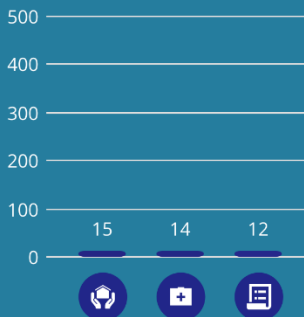
Bayside State Prison



Mid-State Correctional Facility



Adult Diagnostic & Treatment Center



The top five reasons that people reached out to the Ombudsperson Office were to express concerns related to property (2,016 contacts), health care (1,948 contacts), housing and classification (1,618 contacts), telephone, mail, and electronic communication with people on the outside (1,055), and personal safety (840 contacts). The next three most common reasons for contacting the Office were discipline and behavior management (764 contacts), conditions of confinement (684 contacts), and legal access or records (659 contacts). People contacted the office in fewer numbers with concerns related to programming, work, and recreation (375 contacts), parole (188 contacts), gender identity accommodation (98 contacts), concerns regarding county jail conditions (88 contacts), and other miscellaneous issues (271 contacts). The infographic on p. 5 illustrates the top three categories of requests for assistance that the Ombudsperson Office received from each facility.

The Office of the Corrections Ombudsperson provided information and technical assistance in response to a large portion (44%) of this year's contacts, as well as direct assistance that resolved concerns for 9% of the contacts. The office referred 34% to the Department of Corrections, Rutgers University Correctional Health Care, or other entities. We found 10% to be unsubstantiated or otherwise determined that no violation had occurred. In 3% of cases, the request for assistance was withdrawn or the issue had been resolved prior to the Ombudsperson Office's involvement. Less than 1% of requests for assistance were still open and pending as of September 7, 2023.

The primary focus of the Ombudsperson Office's oversight is to ensure the safety, health, and wellbeing of incarcerated people. Safety concerns ranged from name calling and bullying, to more serious threats, assaults, and applications of force. The number of safety concerns at each location was roughly proportional to the size of the facility, with larger prisons generally producing more safety-related contacts. A third of all safety-related concerns were communicated to the Office by a family member or friend about an incarcerated person. The Office referred nearly four out of every five safety-related allegations to the facility Administrator and/or the Department's Special Investigations Division (SID).

A closer examination of health-care-related concerns similarly shows that about a third were communicated to the Office by a family member or friend. In the last three months of this reporting period (June through August of 2023), the Corrections Ombudsperson Office was contacted nearly 500 times with concerns related to health and mental health care. The largest portion of health-related contacts (45%) involved people wanting to be seen by a provider or waiting for follow-up information or test results from a health care appointment. Other trends involved issues regarding prescription medications (17%) or people waiting for specialist appointments like oncology, cardiology, surgery, ophthalmology, etc. (17%). The remainder of health-related contacts involved a variety of topics like transportation for appointments and requests for copies of medical records.

External oversight of close custody settings creates transparency and accountability for humane treatment in places where the population has very restricted movement and limited access to programming and outside communications. People in Restorative Housing Units (RHUs) and RHU overflow units, serving disciplinary sanctions for serious rule violations, accounted for significant portions of the Office's workload, including 31% of contacts from Garden State Correctional Facility, 29% of contacts from Northern State Prison, 20% of contacts from Edna Mahan Correctional Facility, 19% of contacts from South

Woods State Prison, and 16% of contacts from New Jersey State Prison.² [See Figure 4.] The Office received a total of 1,829 requests for assistance in the past year for people in the Department’s RHUs. The most common concerns pertained to disciplinary processes, health care, personal safety, property, and living conditions. Safety-related concerns in the RHUs were fairly steady throughout the year, averaging about 70 requests for assistance per month, but spiked to nearly 100 in May because of a single search operation in the RHU overflow unit at Garden State Correctional Facility. [See Figure 5.]

Figure 4. Percentage of contacts from the RHUs, by facility, September 1, 2022 – August 31, 2023

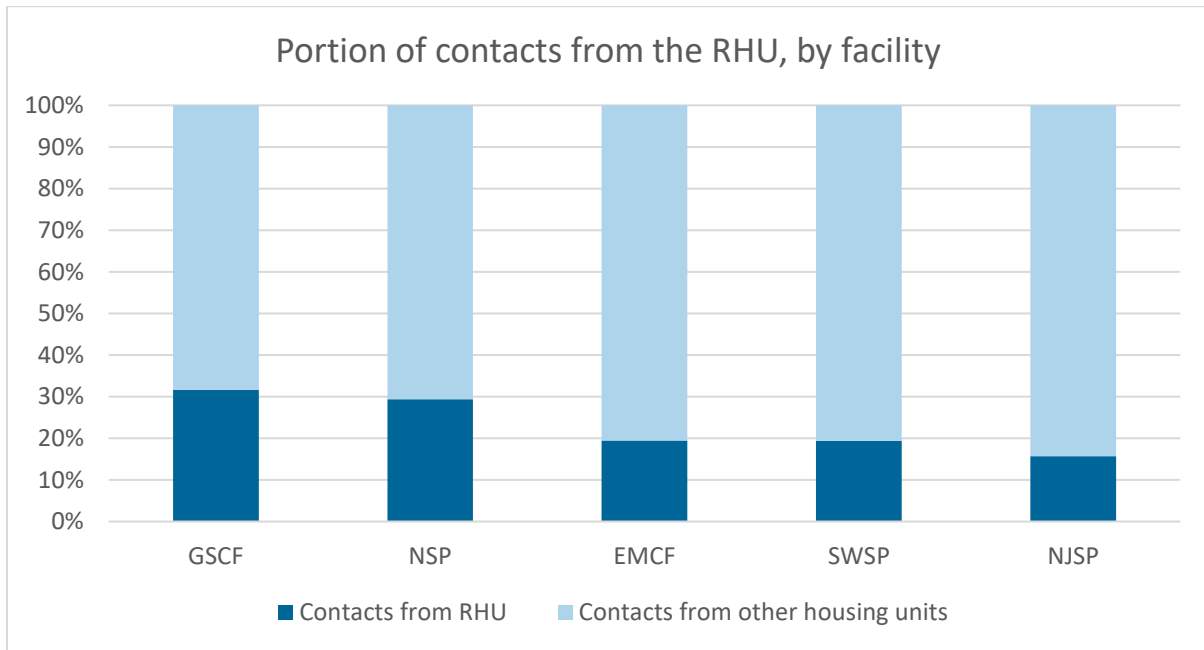
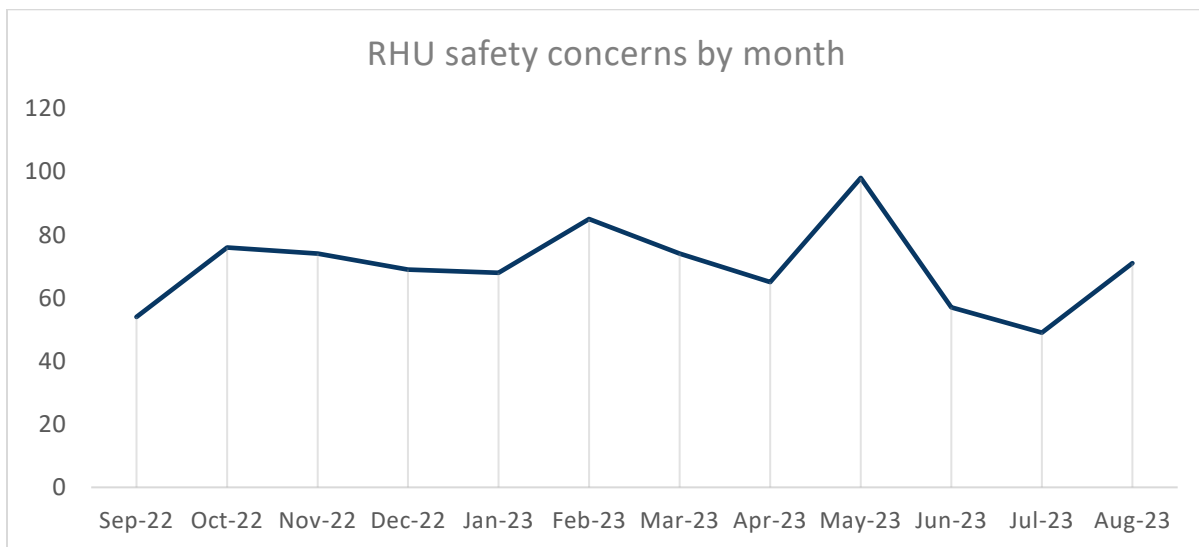


Figure 5. Safety-related contacts from the RHUs, by month, September 1, 2022 – August 31, 2023



² A notable exception is the small Restorative Housing Unit at the Adult Diagnostic & Treatment Center, which produced no contacts to the Corrections Ombudsman Office this past year.

WHAT WE'VE OBSERVED IN THE STATE PRISON SYSTEM

AREAS OF CONCERN / PRIORITIES FOR MONITORING

Over the last year, certain concerns repeatedly voiced by the incarcerated population have not been entirely resolved and merit more robust attention. Many, if not all, of these concerns are shared priorities for the Department of Corrections and the Office of the Corrections Ombudsperson.

We have great confidence in the Department to address the areas of concern described below. Their staff and leaders have demonstrated know-how, talent, and shared values. We appreciate their commitment to transparency and the steps they've taken to ensure a good working relationship with the Ombudsperson Office and other external oversight entities. We hope the Ombudsperson Office can be a valuable and collaborative thought-partner as the Department continues to seek resolution to these problems.

Under-staffing and its consequences

Staff vacancies, long-term leave, call-outs, an increase in retirements, and a drop in applicants—particularly for correctional police officer positions—impact those who work and live in our state prisons in a variety of ways. Staff members are routinely mandated to work double-shifts. The incarcerated population is packed into fewer housing units, sometimes leading to or exacerbating interpersonal conflicts and logistical difficulties in placing people according to their needs. Programming, job assignments, and family visitation may be canceled when a facility has insufficient staff on a particular shift, and people spend more time idle in their cells rather than engaged in purposeful activity. The Ombudsperson Office strongly supports pay increases for correctional police officers, whose contract is currently being negotiated, to improve recruitment and retention of professional custody staff. Safe and humane operations may require lawmakers to take further action to reduce the number of people incarcerated in state prisons in addition to changes that will stabilize and increase staffing.

Drug use and air quality

In New Jersey and in correctional settings across the country, synthetic drugs like K2 are entering prisons, being consumed by incarcerated people, and exposing those who live and work in the facilities to smoke and chemicals in the air. Staff and residents alike have expressed concerns about headaches and other symptoms, particularly for people with health vulnerabilities like asthma. The Ombudsperson Office received more than 100 contacts in the last year related to exposure to K2 smoke, and Assistant Ombudspersons routinely smell burning paper and chemical odors when touring housing units. Department and facility leaders have taken the issue seriously, employing strategic security measures to disrupt avenues for the contraband entering facilities, confiscate K2 and other controlled substances, and deter people from using, selling, and distributing them. Where possible, within the limitations of the physical infrastructure, they have also taken steps to improve ventilation. However, this remains a serious problem requiring ongoing action and oversight.

Lost and stolen property

People reached out to the Ombudsperson Office about personal property and money more than any other area of concern, accounting for 2,016 contacts between September 1, 2022 and August 31, 2023.

Hundreds of people requested help with departmental processes to find, repair, or reimburse lost or stolen property, often following a housing transfer within the Department of Corrections. In the coming year, the Ombudsperson Office intends to focus some of its systemic monitoring and data collection efforts on this process of securing and delivering people’s possessions and the difficulty people have in getting replacement items or refunds. Our staff have also been invited to participate in the Department of Corrections’ internal task force on property-related concerns.

Patient access to health care

A significant number of incarcerated people and their families contacted the Ombudsperson Office about pending requests to be seen by health care providers, accessing follow-up information about test results and labs, wait times for specialist appointments, and medication refills. Nearly one in five contacts seeking assistance from the Ombudsperson Office relate to health care concerns. At three facilities—Northern State Prison, Edna Mahan Correctional Facility, and East Jersey State Prison—health and mental health services were the most common reason people reached out to our Office. This volume of contacts does not necessarily suggest inadequate care—the best health care systems in the country field and address frequent concerns from patients—but patients in state custody don’t have the freedom to choose their providers, and the quality and timeliness of their care can have serious implications for their health and wellbeing. Moving forward, the Office aims to prioritize the monitoring of health care services through inspections, document review, data collection, and patient interviews to support the Department and Rutgers University Correctional Health Care with continuous quality improvement.

Risk management practices

The Department of Corrections must manage disruptive behavior and protect the incarcerated population and their own staff from potential violence. This is no easy task and an enormous amount of time and effort is spent attempting to ensure safety and security in the state’s institutions. One area of concern that the Ombudsperson Office hopes to prioritize this coming year is finding a better balance between removing opportunities for incarcerated people to harm others and ensuring they are not so deprived of activity, stimuli, and necessities that their living conditions become bleak, unhealthy, or inhumane. In the last year, the Ombudsperson Office has observed policy changes in the Restorative Housing Units (RHUs) that include taking away bottled water, commissary food items, containers for shampoo and other personal care items, and place extreme limits on pens, phone calls, photographs, and electronics. We have observed punishments that take away a person’s ability to go outdoors. We’ve seen people serving long disciplinary sanctions in housing units designed for temporary holds, spending months or years without electrical outlets.

In contrast to the trauma-informed approaches to creating safety that the Department has so effectively instituted at the women’s prison, these risk management efforts in the men’s prisons involve a high degree of deprivation and require regular and ongoing monitoring. The Ombudsperson Office recently published a report examining out-of-cell time in the Department’s RHUs, and will soon issue a separate report focused on practices that limit visitation and telephone calls.

Needs of the transgender population

The New Jersey Department of Corrections has taken significant steps to provide gender-affirming housing, property, and health care services for transgender people in custody. Federal Prison Rape

Elimination Act standards highlight the extraordinary vulnerabilities of this population in secure facilities, particularly trans women housed in men’s prisons. Many of the concerns expressed by this population to the Ombudsperson Office relate to the pace of reforms—things like the slow roll-out of gender-affirming items available for purchase through the commissary and delays or interruptions in specialist health care. The Department has created a special process to consider housing accommodation requests for people identifying as transgender or non-binary, including an appeal process. The Department has also created a Vulnerable Population Unit at Garden State Correctional Facility that aims to provide some additional measures of safety for people beyond those in other General Population housing units. Both the Department of Corrections and Rutgers University Correctional Health Care have implemented staff training related to the unique needs of transgender people. Still, the Ombudsperson Office hears concerns from transgender women about bullying, harassment, and fears for their safety in men’s prisons. We also hear consistent concerns that housing determinations place more emphasis on a person’s genitalia and reproductive capabilities than on their safety. For these reasons, the Office will continue to prioritize monitoring in this area.

BRIGHT SPOTS

Operating in part as a resource line for incarcerated people and their families, the Ombudsperson Office naturally hears many complaints and negative feedback about experiences in state prison. These insights are invaluable to our efforts to better meet the needs of incarcerated individuals and improve conditions, but we recognize that they do not provide a complete or comprehensive view of how the Department of Corrections is operating, performing, and progressing. The Department has quite a lot to be proud of in recent years, and we want to highlight a few bright spots that directly relate to the wellbeing of the incarcerated population.

[Edna Mahan Correctional Facility](#)

First and foremost, the Department of Corrections has invested significant resources into policy and culture change at Edna Mahan Correctional Facility, the state’s only women’s prison. In response to litigation, in-depth reporting, and public concern over violence, victimization, and lack of oversight at the women’s prison, the Department has instituted staff training in trauma-informed care, developed a Special Victim’s Unit to investigate allegations of sexual harassment and abuse, activated and appointed members to a citizen oversight board, enhanced programming, and taken other significant steps to normalize staff interactions with the incarcerated population and to empower the population to come forward with concerns. Facility leaders have expressed a commitment to transparency and creating safety through respectful communication and attention to the needs of the population, offering a blueprint for enhancing safety throughout the state prison system.

[Summer heat](#)

In September 2022, the Ombudsperson Office issued a special report on summer heat in our state prisons that assessed the number of people in cells and dormitories without air conditioning, measured indoor temperatures, and gathered insights from the incarcerated population on what could be done to mitigate the heat. The Department of Corrections was responsive and cooperative during our heat monitoring and took significant steps in the last year to address the issue, including strategic planning for moving people out of the non-temperature-controlled housing units at Edna Mahan Correctional Facility and capital infrastructure investments at Garden State Correctional Facility that will help make air conditioning

possible. The administration at Bayside State Prison fixed ice machines and provided the population with personal coolers for ice. Each cell in the non-air-conditioned West Compound at New Jersey State Prison now has a fan. The Department's operations team and health care providers increased information and education for staff and incarcerated people about mitigating heat and recognizing heat-related illness. The Department was aggressive in fixing and replacing broken air conditioning systems this summer, was responsive to specific concerns flagged by the Ombudsperson about heat in the close custody unit at Garden State Correctional Facility, and took several other steps to treat indoor temperatures as a priority. Old buildings and systemic infrastructure needs will continue to make temperature control a chronic problem in need of mitigation, management, resources, and oversight.

Programming and reentry

The Department of Corrections continues to provide highly sought-after programs like the substance use treatment programs at Mid-State Correctional Facility and Edna Mahan Correctional Facility, the therapeutic community for Veterans at East Jersey State Prison, and the NJ-STEP college program in multiple facilities throughout the state. Participants in these programs describe them as life-altering and many people released from prison in New Jersey continue to praise these programs as central to their success. Other offerings focusing on trades, entrepreneurship, and behavior change are in high demand, and religious and educational programs are widely available. The Department increased the number and scope of its reentry and reintegration partners, including both funded and unfunded relationships with community-based organizations and supportive services. Notably, several of these partner organizations are led by formerly incarcerated individuals. As pandemic-related limits on class sizes and congregate activity have lifted, there is a high level of need and interest in professional- and volunteer-led programming and reintegration support and related tools and technology. We look forward to the Department's continued expansion and investment in this priority.

STRATEGIC PLAN PROGRESS

A year ago, the Ombudsperson Office outlined a strategic plan for implementing our statutory mandate under the Dignity Act. Since then, the Office has grown, transformed, relocated, and taken important steps to build trust and value among the incarcerated population, the Department of Corrections, and the public. Below is a summary assessment of our progress and internal priorities for the coming year.

Systemic monitoring

In the last year, the Office has launched a division to conduct facility inspections, analyze trends, and engage with the Department of Corrections on potential changes to policy and practice that could improve conditions of confinement. The division is now fully staffed with a deputy ombudsperson, two assistant ombudspersons, a nursing consultant, and a data analyst. Earlier this spring, the division conducted 4 unannounced facility inspections, which included anonymous surveys of 811 people in General Population housing units and 264 people in Restorative Housing Units. These inspections and supplementary data and document review have informed two thematic reports, one focused on out-of-cell time in the Restorative Housing Units and another (forthcoming) focused on access to loved ones, both with recommendations for policy reform. In the coming year, this team will begin systemic evaluations related to priority areas of concern like property and health care.

Health care expertise

In the last year, the Ombudsperson Office has hired two staff members with health care expertise—one to field requests for help navigating health care services in state prisons, and the other to assess health care services system-wide. The Ombudsperson Office cannot offer a second medical opinion or share medical information with a patient's family members, but these staffing additions will help our Office ask better questions of both patients and providers and engage more meaningfully in direct assistance and monitoring. The office aims to use its access to patients, providers, and documentation to help ensure compliance with health care standards and address any barriers to needed care.

Visibility

The Ombudsperson Office continues to respond to thousands of requests by telephone through our resource line as well as written correspondence. We have increased the number of live operators answering the phones and have received funding to hire one more. Because so many people attempt to call our Office during similar windows of time (for example, recreation time blocks when people typically have access to communal telephones), we continue to encourage people who get a busy signal to reach out to us in writing. People can do this by dropping Request For Assistance forms in our secure mailboxes throughout the facilities or by sending confidential legal mail to our office at P.O. Box 855, Trenton, NJ 08625.

This year, the assistant ombudspersons on our field team were physically present in the prison facilities an average of two days per week, totaling more than 800 on-site visits this past year. They use this time to tour housing and programming spaces, meet with incarcerated individuals, troubleshoot concerns with staff and administrators, and respond to requests for assistance. The Legislature and Governor have also funded our Office to hire additional assistant ombudspersons to better meet the demand for assistance in the state's largest prison facilities.

Community engagement

The Ombudsperson hosted a virtual public meeting a few days after releasing the 2022 Annual Report to discuss the Office's strategic plan and to launch a tour of town-hall-style public listening sessions with community members, formerly incarcerated people, and families impacted by the incarceration of loved ones. These meetings were hosted in partnership with community-based organizations in Camden, Trenton, Newark, Atlantic City, and Millville, and provided the Ombudsperson Office with tremendously important insight, history, and guidance. The Office recently hired a deputy ombudsperson for community engagement who has lived experience with incarceration and who will broaden and deepen this important outreach to increase both access to and trust in our Office. We also hope to partner with the Department of Corrections as they expand their community engagement efforts.

Independent technology and office space

In the last year, the Ombudsperson office has moved its email, case management system, electronic and paper files, IT support, and office space out of the Department of Corrections. This move will ensure the confidentiality of our communications and documents, and should address public concerns about the Office's independence as an oversight body. The Ombudsperson Office has new computers and a new case management system. In the coming year, we hope to redesign our website, improve our call center technology, and develop more user-friendly and interactive data tools for members of the public who are interested in our work.

Access to information

Facility administrators and other senior leaders in the Department of Corrections now directly notify the Ombudsperson Office of significant events like deaths, emergency room trips, plumbing and HVAC outages, under-staffing levels that interrupt daily activities, and others that could reasonably lead to a high volume of calls to our Office. This timely and detailed information helps us better respond to concerns and support the Department in combatting misinformation before it spreads. The Ombudsperson Office accesses information about the population in custody through the Department's ITAG database and can view the population's requests and grievances through the JPay inquiry and remedy system. The Department provides data and documents to the Ombudsperson Office in response to individual requests. This includes access to information contained in policies, directives, rulings, datasets, and other information not readily available. The Ombudsperson field team is also on-site in the facilities multiple days each week, and gathers important information through observation and direct communication with staff and administrators. As we continue to seek additional records and information necessary to carry out the Office's mandate, we look forward to working with the Department in the coming year to negotiate appropriate access.

Investigations

The Dignity Act directs the Ombudsperson Office to conduct impartial investigations into matters impacting the health, safety, welfare, or rights of incarcerated people.³ The law contains limitations of the Office's access to records and information when a complaint is being investigated internally by the Department's Special Investigations Division.⁴ The Ombudsperson Office received FY24 appropriations to

³ N.J.R.S. § 52:27EE-28.1.

⁴ N.J.R.S. §§ 52:27EE-28.1-28.3.

hire investigators and will develop internal guidelines with input from the Department on exercising the Office's investigatory powers.

The role of external oversight versus internal management

Many people reach out to the Ombudsperson Office with day-to-day requests or grievances that should in practice go directly to a housing officer, custody or social work supervisor, classification officer, administrator, or health care provider. The Department's inquiry and remedy systems exist to allow those managing and operating the facilities to look into and resolve concerns directly. One thing we've had to communicate to those who contact us is that the Ombudsperson Office is an independent oversight body, not a secondary or replacement grievance system.

A priority for the Office moving forward is to more clearly delineate our focus on oversight activities that 1) help protect incarcerated people from harm, and 2) examine alleged breakdowns in systems designed to serve and manage those in custody. Rather than giving a person his max-out date, we should be ensuring that the facility's classification staff is responsive to the population. Rather than handling a person's property claim, we should be ensuring that the Department's property claim system is working as designed. Many of the problems that may occur in prison do not require assistance or investigations from the Ombudsperson Office, and our involvement may in fact create more or unnecessary work for facility administrators. Our goal for the coming year is to be more selective and judicious about what issues we take on, raise awareness about the Office's role as an external oversight body, and better focus our resources on examining issues that impact the safety, health, and well-being of incarcerated people.

CLOSING REMARKS

We hope the New Jersey Office of the Corrections Ombudsperson can become a national model for independent prison oversight. Lawmakers and the public need neutral and unbiased information about how tax dollars are being spent, and assurance that those removed from society for a period of time are protected from harm and treated with humanity. Civilian oversight of corrections creates transparency in a system that is intentionally closed off from the outside world, gives incarcerated people and their families someone to call when they have concerns about living conditions, and ensures that policy decisions are monitored for their impact on people held in state custody. We are grateful for the opportunity to do this important work.

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CONTACTING THE OFFICE

The Office of the Corrections Ombudsperson provides independent prison oversight to protect the safety, health, and well-being of incarcerated people.

People in state prisons can contact us in writing by placing correspondence in secure Ombudsperson mailboxes at each facility, or sending legal mail to:

Office of the Corrections Ombudsperson

P.O. Box 855

Trenton, NJ 08625

The office also operates a small call center, where people can reach us on a variety of hotlines, including:

- (555) 555-5555 from any phone in the state prison system
- (800) 305-1811 from any halfway house contracted with the state
- (888) 909-3244 for family members and friends of the incarcerated population
- (609) 633-2596 for the general public

Members of the public are encouraged to reach us by email at info@oco.nj.gov, and to visit our website: www.nj.gov/correctionsombudsperson/.