



The NPS Ombuds office is an independent, impartial, informal, and confidential resource to explore resolution of individual and systemic problems affecting the workforce. Ombuds engage NPS employees at all levels by creating a safe place to discuss concerns, understanding all sides of issues, and exploring innovative ways to change and sustain improvements. This in turn can help reinforce a workplace culture that focuses on ethics, respect, teamwork, fairness, civility, responsibility and accountability.

Practical Functions

- Be an independent voice
- Provide a confidential, off-the-record resource
- Be a sounding board and listen to concerns with care and respect
- Raise issues with senior leadership
- Protect the identities of everyone who discusses concerns with the Ombuds
- Provide a place to candidly and safely speak up about controversial issues
- Give everyone the full freedom to voice concerns and frustrations
- Addresses employee fears of reprisal
- Listen and coach others to their own solutions to difficult problems
- Tackles issues long before situations escalate
- Help to make sense of what is going on and get questions answered
- Improve relationships
- Help parties see all sides of a problem
- Elevate situations requiring urgent action
- Support continuous improvement efforts
- Explore strategies for preventing future conflict
- Address problems early to prevent conflict from unnecessarily escalating

Ethical Standards

NPS Ombuds perform all services in full compliance with the International Ombudsman Association standards of practice and code of ethics.

- **Independent.** The Ombuds is outside of the NPS management structure and authorized to address any issue at any level without restriction. Independence extends beyond NPS, whereby Ombuds are fully authorized, and expected, to address issues with Department of the Interior senior leadership and other involved stakeholders as needed. NPS Ombuds have unfettered access to all people and information needed to address issues.
- **Impartial.** Ombuds strive for impartiality, fairness and objectivity in the treatment of people and consideration of issues, which includes avoiding or appearing to take sides in any dispute, conflict or disagreement with respect to the issue raised. Impartiality does not preclude NPS Ombuds from informally recommending changes that could help improve work environments.

- **Informal.** NPS Ombuds are not part of any formal grievance, complaint process, investigative unit or oversight function, nor do Ombuds replace other areas of redress. Employees do not “file a complaint” with the Ombuds, nor does the Ombuds mandate corrective action. Because the Ombuds office is not part of the NPS management structure, Ombuds are not authorized to receive notice to the agency of an alleged violation. Rather, Ombuds provide informal methods for gathering the range of perceptions and help the parties analyze complex issues and highlight opportunities for improvement.
- **Confidential.** Maintaining confidentiality is a non-negotiable, core principle. The promise of confidentiality is often the sole prerequisite for starting a conversation. Along with the other core standards, confidentiality gives people a safe place to talk about difficult issues and to explore resolution options. The NPS Ombuds will not disclose private discussions without permission. This dutiful commitment is provided to all NPS employees and leaders except in the very rare case where there appears to be an imminent risk of serious harm.

In many cases, with permission from visitors, Ombuds can address individual or systemic issues without revealing the identity of the person who came forward. For example, Ombuds frequently find ways for critical information to surface to the proper office in ways that completely protects the source of information. In this way, Ombuds help organizations work toward positive changes on issues that never would have surfaced without the promise of confidentiality and anonymity. Communications between Ombuds and NPS personnel are confidential and protected. Information shared in confidence will not be shared. NPS Ombuds have a duty to resist participating in any formal proceeding about matters brought to their attention.

Listening Tours

To be proactive, NPS Ombuds offer a process that helps check the pulse in select park units. These visits allow a large number of employees to share strengths and successes, areas of concern, flaws, weaknesses and opportunities for positive organizational change in an open and honest manner. Although it is no secret that the Ombuds is visiting and speaking with as many employees as possible, the Ombuds will not share a list of who participated or “who said what.”

Ombuds site visits are completely voluntary and flexible. By taking a broad approach, employees guide the direction of interviews. Typically, the NPS Ombuds will ask three general questions to open up honest and straightforward dialogue: 1) What is working well? Why?; 2) What isn’t working well? Why?, and 3) What improvements would you make? Feedback will be provided to the workforce, and leadership at the site, regional, and headquarters levels as appropriate. This creates a circle of accountability whereby no issues were minimized or filtered.

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