Frequently Asked Questions

What does the term Ombudsman mean?

It is a Swedish term that means, designated neutral. Ombudsmen practice in a variety of environments including academic institutions and the military.

Can you guarantee that no one will know that I contacted your office?

The Ombudsman pledge to you is that they will conduct themselves and their function so as to personally protect your confidentiality. What they can't guarantee or control is the behavior of others. Two risk factors that anyone who comes to the Ombudsman Office must consider:

The Ombudsman can't control what others do and say. If an individual chooses to share with anyone that they have spoken to an Ombudsman, the Ombudsman cannot control the subsequent behavior of others with whom an individual has entrusted confidential information.

If an Ombudsman is asked to help surface an issue anonymously, the Ombudsman cannot always fully assess the inherent risk associated with surfacing specific information to a specific individual. While the Ombudsman will not reveal the name of the source of the information, there may be a risk that the content of the information indirectly points to the inquirer or to a small group of employees. Again, it is a matter of what the Ombudsman can control. The Ombudsman cannot control what the receiver of the message knows or may think they know. They can't prevent individuals from trying to guess who calls them. It is important that the visitor assess the risk before giving the Ombudsman permission to go forward. The Ombudsman will always repeat back to you what you have agreed to, i.e. who will be spoken to and what the Ombudsman will say.

Can I contact your office using a confidential email?
Due to the limitations of current technology, confidentiality cannot be assured at this time when using email. Accordingly, the Ombudsman refrain from discussing issues via email and encourage visitors to contact them by phone. If the visitor wishes, the Ombudsman will use email to set up appointments to speak to an Ombudsman and to respond to some requests for information or referrals to a formal resolution resource.

Can I confidentially document a complaint with your Office?

You can contact an Ombudsman confidentially. But consistent with the informality and neutrality practices of the Office, communication to or with the Office of the Ombudsman does not put the Agency on notice and no documentation is retained by the Office. If you desire to document an event, action or concern with the Agency, the Ombudsman can help by discussing the formal options that you may want to consider.

Who can use the services of the DoDEA Office of the Ombudsman?

The DoDEA Office of the Ombudsman is available to all student-connected stakeholders of DoDEA (e.g., employees, students, trainees, contractor workforce, etc.) at every level.

DoDEA contractors may also consider consulting their contract supervisors and any support provided by the contract organization.

What is an Organizational Ombudsman?

An organizational ombudsman (a gender-neutral term) is an independent and neutral person who helps people within a particular organization to identify and informally resolve individual, group, and system-level concerns. Ombudsmen use their knowledge of conflict theory and organizational dynamics to identify underlying causes of problems and disputes -- and then provide tools and strategies to address them. Importantly, ombudsman do not define outcomes or act without permission from people or groups with whom they consult.

How is the Office of the Ombudsman different from Employee Relations (ER)?

DODEA Employee Relations (ER) staff offer technical advice and assistance on all matters related to employee conduct, performance, and work-related medical concerns. ER staff serve as representatives for and advisors to management. ER specialists are available to conduct training sessions on a variety of topics, from leave and attendance management to preventing violence in the workplace. Occasionally, we refer managers to ER for assistance.

To whom does the Ombudsman report and how does this reporting relationship help support the independence of the Office?

The Ombudsman reports to the DoDEA Director. This reporting relationship was designed so that the Ombudsman has no other agenda other than trying to ensure fairness in Agency processes.

How does the Ombudsman differ from the Office of Special Counsel (OSC)/Office of Inspector General (OIG)/Government Accountability Office (GAO)?

The GAO is an independent, nonpartisan agency that works for Congress. Often called the "congressional watchdog," GAO examines how taxpayer dollars are spent and provides Congress and federal agencies with objective, reliable information to help the government save money and work more efficiently.
OSC's primary mission is to safeguard the merit system by protecting federal employees and applicants from prohibited personnel practices, especially reprisal for whistleblowing.

The DoD OIG serves as an independent and objective office in DoD to:

- Conduct, supervise, monitor, and initiate audits, evaluations, and investigations relating to programs and operations of the Department of Defense.
- Provide leadership and coordination and recommend policies for activities designed to promote economy, efficiency, and effectiveness in the administration of, and to prevent and detect fraud and abuse in, such programs and operations.
- Provide a means for keeping the Secretary of Defense and the Congress fully and currently informed about problems and deficiencies relating to the administration of such programs and operations and the necessity for and progress of corrective action.

The DoDEA OIG provides a neutral perspective to management on issues regarding practices, through conducting investigations, inspections, and audits. The DoDEA OIG operates and maintains the DoDEA Hotline, which is a confidential and formal reporting system for individuals to report fraud, waste, abuse, and mismanagement.

These options are neutral, independent formal processes. The DoDEA Ombudsman is an informal process. Talking to the Ombudsman does not put the Agency on formal notice. The Ombudsman is not the owner or enforcer of policy. The Ombudsman may influence decisions but is not a formal investigator or decision maker. The Ombudsman does not keep notes, break confidentiality or gossip. The Ombudsman also helps visitors generate options, weigh the pros and cons, escalate issues in the organization with permission of the visitor, and deals with a wide range of issues and concerns.

**Since the Ombudsman does not investigate, or make decisions, what good are they anyway?**

The Ombudsman helps the visitor determine the focus of their concern, options for resolving the issue and prepares the individual to communicate effectively regarding his/her issue. In addition to meeting with visitors, the Ombudsman helps senior agency leaders be more effective by sharing general trends, as long as the message is not contributed to any one visitor.

**How can I be sure that you are free to keep our conversation confidential?**

The Ombudsman reports to the DoDEA Director. This reporting structure allows them the freedom to surface concerns and protect confidentiality without fear of retribution. The Director recognizes and supports the independence of the Office and allows it to function as an effective part of the governance of the Agency. The Ombudsman are also bound by a Professional Code of Ethics that places upon them the responsibility of maintaining strict confidentiality regarding matters that are brought to their attention.

**What steps do you take to protect confidentiality?**

The Office has several processes and procedures in place to protect the identity of anyone who contacts an Ombudsman for assistance. The Ombudsman will not confirm or deny that they have spoken to an individual without permission. Similarly, the Ombudsman will never help surface a specific issue to anyone without the permission of the inquirer.

**If I call, do I have to give you my name?**
Absolutely not. (However, more than 99% of callers do share their name.) You can remain completely anonymous, or you can identify yourself with a fictitious name if it makes the conversation less awkward. But please remember that the office works off-the-record, so if you do share your name, the Ombudsman keeps no permanent documentation that you contacted their office.