

Employee Ombuds Office  
of Dane County

2025

Term Report

FINAL

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## Section 1 – A Letter from the Ombuds

Dear Dane County Personal & Finance - Ombuds Subcommittee,

The Ombuds Office provides a safe and trusted space to talk about an issue or concern, explore options to help resolve conflicts, and bring systemic concerns to the attention of the organization for resolution. The Ombuds Office operates on four guiding principles: confidentiality, informality, impartiality, and independence.

The Ombuds Office in 2025 saw growing engagement and trust with visitors throughout the year. Upon conclusion of the 2025 term, there were several clear trends that emerged, but the trends did not differ significantly from the 2024 term. As the Ombuds Office continued to capture the voices of employees at all levels of the organization, it became apparent that there were positive paths forward for some but not all. It also became clear that collaboration in problem solving was a distinguishing factor in successful outcomes. As I note often with visitors, you need two willing parties to create growth and change.

In the 2025 report, there is a new section of the report that focuses on education in a cohesive conflict management methodology that will help contextualize the path to resolution for this committee and every reader. It is my hope that this information will continue to influence the culture of Dane County in its leadership and policy making as a governmental employer long after the Ombuds Office's closure at the end of 2025.

Dane County has led the way in positively influencing Dane County employers in positive ways for a long time. I encourage this subcommittee to receive this information in a way that reflects the shared goal of building positive relationships with all employees, focusing on their individual needs and overall satisfaction in the workplace.

The Ombuds Office is not designed to report on positive workplace interactions. It is designed to identify systemic concerns and improvements to systems that do not serve the entity's best interests or the individuals in its employment. By no means does this report reflect the overall status of employment, rather than the action that is needed to grow as an organization and support every employee's wellbeing. What directly affects one, indirectly affects all.

Thank you,  
Diana

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## Section 2 – Office Accessibility and Intake

### Accessibility

The Ombuds Office improved several methods of accessibility in 2025.

1. The website [www.countyofdaneombuds.com](http://www.countyofdaneombuds.com), was accessible to all employees and publicly. It was viewed 821 times in 2025, reaching 642 unique visitors. The website lists details of the Ombuds office, an FAQ, and allows Dane County employees to schedule directly with the Ombuds, either virtually via zoom or in person. It also lists open office hours and office closures.
2. Signs were posted on all floors of the City County Building near elevators. These signs had information on the Ombuds Office, direct contact information, as well as a QR code to the website. These signs were also distributed to several other County buildings to be displayed in breakrooms and common areas.
3. Directional signs were also added to the CCB common areas to allow for visitors to find the office with more ease.

### Intake

The Ombuds office hosted 74 unique visitors in 2025. “Unique visitors” are defined as an employee of Dane County who independently, or with representation of an Employee Group Representative, scheduled a meeting with the Ombuds to discuss a topic or concern privately. The office hosted 98 total office visits. 17 visitors returned one or more times. 88 of these visits were scheduled directly through the website offering efficiency and accessibility to visitors.

The largest difference from the first term of the Ombuds Office, is that the Ombuds hosted 21 facilitations and mediations in 12 months in 2025. This is 33% increase from the 7 that were hosted in 2024 over 6 months.

Unique Visitors	74
Total Visits	98
Facilitations	12
Mediations	9
Trainings	1
Back Channel Meetings	5
Est. Total Impact	175 employees

Even though the Ombuds Office only engaged approximately 175 employees throughout the year, or approximately 6% of the workforce, it is important to remember that 6% of the workforce needed support and received it through the services of the Ombuds Office.

Before and after this service was/is available, those individuals would not/do not have professional resources dedicated to resolving conflict. It is the Ombuds hope that a new Ombuds Office will be established to continue to provide services to employees in the future.

#### Virtual and In Person Visits

Approximately 80% of one-on-one visits were conducted virtually, and 20% were attended onsite. There was one onsite visitor during open office hours that did not have a pre-scheduled appointment that needed additional privacy for a sensitive issue. 85% of facilitations and mediation were conducted in person.

Having this flexibility allowed differing benefits to both those who attended in person and virtually. In person meetings allowed for privacy for visitors who did not have a confidential space to have a virtual meeting and access for those that did not have a County issued work computer. This provided a space to remove themselves from their normal surroundings and seek engagement in face-to-face conversations. Those who chose virtual meetings benefited from taking meetings from home in a hybrid work environment, no commute to and parking at the City County Building, and the accommodation needed for people with disabilities.

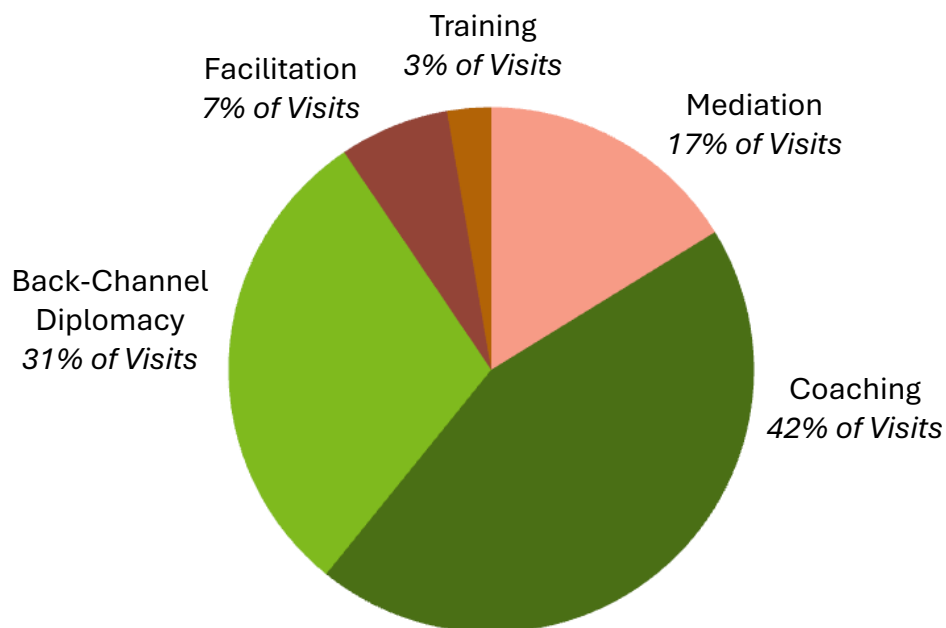
It would be my recommendation future Ombuds Offices would remain hybrid for ease of access, accommodation, and preference.

## Section 3 – Case Outcomes and Statistics

*“I utilized the ombuds office to assist with communication with management regarding several concerns. It provided an opportunity to help organize what I wanted to relay to the manager, and a safe place to have a discussion about difficult workplace topics. This led to management making real changes to culture and expectations within the unit. The morale of the unit was so low before, and it has improved with the changes implemented. Without the ombuds, I would not have talked to management and don't believe they would have taken my concerns seriously if I had.”*

*-Anonymous, Dane County Employee*

### Outcomes Based on Unique Visitors



**Coaching** is defined as a unique visitor where options were generated and there was either no follow up necessary or continued one-on-one support was provided. These cases did not have any collaborative action, such as mediation, facilitation, back-channel diplomacy, or training. Coaching is an essential part of the Ombuds Office services and sits at an ideal balance in 2025.

The reason coaching remains an essential service to employees is because individuals need a place to be allowed to assess options and process their environments externally without losing their agency in decision making. Coaching is designed to empower

individuals to self-assess, make decisions, and take actions that represent themselves in a positive light that they are proud of and confident in. Coaching is also designed to help the visitor evaluate their own accountability, ability to influence, and how their previous actions have impacted the conflict at hand.

Often when seeking the advice of colleagues or close friends, the individual providing advice is doing so from their own value system and experience. When meeting with the Ombuds, the goal is to reflect back to the visitor their own values in the situation and to challenge them to seek new perspectives and options for action. Self-reflection is a necessary step in accountability and forward progress in relationship building.

On many occasions, visitors commented that just being heard was a huge benefit of the Ombuds process.

The coaching goal outlined in the 2024 Term Report for the Ombuds Office in 2025 was forty five percent (45%) or less. In 2025, the Ombuds Office was able to make that goal. The less expected result is that the focus in 2025 shifted from coaching outcomes to back-channel diplomacy as the second highest outcome. Unique visits that lead to Mediation, Facilitation, and Training remained very similar percentages to the previous Term Report.

**Back-channel diplomacy** is utilized when someone wishes to remain anonymous and raise a concern or when a concern calls for special attention from administration or leadership. This saw a sharp increase from less than 4% in the previous term to almost a third of the outcomes. There are several reasons for this by the assessment of the Ombuds.

First and foremost, instead of one person bringing forward an issue, several people would bring the same concern through multiple unique visits. This allowed the Ombuds to see alignment and trends in the unit or across the County. It also illustrates that individuals were utilizing the Ombuds Office with a more united goal of impact. Sometimes, in the assessment of the Ombuds, that was done effectively, and sometimes it was done by flooding the office in an attempt to control narrative. Both levels of effectiveness achieved the goal of raising the issue, however the Ombuds is an impartial party and does not represent one side of an issue but rather is poised to help support employees through option generation and information sharing.

Also included in the approximately 31% of visits were the invites made by the Ombuds of back-channel diplomacy and accepted by members of the administration, employee group representatives, and high-level department leadership.

In contrast, there were still a larger number of singular visits in 2025 than 2024 that shared high priority or urgent concerns, that were addressed anonymously. The Ombuds was able to lend a respectful and respected voice to these concerns with the goal of offering new perspectives and actionable input.

The positive evidence of this outcome shows that the employee base was able to build trust with the Ombuds Office to be able to achieve action and give a voice to their concerns. Even though the result was not always in favor of the employees raising concerns, having the knowledge and feedback loop to better comprehend their situation outcomes did reduce frustration and increased clarity on behalf of those bringing concerns to the Ombuds Office.

**Mediation** was the next most utilized outcome. Mediations are defined as two or more willing participants come together to discuss a historical event or ongoing concern.

Mediations are offered as a potential outcome when visitors have a conflict with one or more individuals or want to voice concerns with the aid of the Ombuds to a supervisor, direct report, or peer. After an individual requests a mediation, the other individual(s) are contacted and offered an initial intake meeting. This supports the Ombuds commitment to impartiality. Mediations can have two or more intake visits as often several people have unique experiences to inform the mediation process for the Ombuds.

The Ombuds Office meditates in what is referred to as a “facilitative” mediation practice, which means the focus is on building relationships first and for better understanding of the current situation for improved long-term cooperation. The goal of the mediation is not to negotiate the tradeoff of terms or to end with a written agreement, but rather to give the individuals involved the tools to approach current and future concerns in a respectful, healthy way that will be received with positive intent and create interactions that result in better cooperation and future outcomes.

Most mediations last two hours for the initial session and take one to three sessions to complete the mediation and follow up to monitor progress. As the Ombuds Office is not a required step of any formal process, willing participation for the initial meeting and ongoing support relied on all parties’ commitment to furthering the conversation.

Mediations had two very distinct results in 2025, particularly when there was a hierarchical component of mediations. Employee concerns that were addressed with supervisors or higher ups and that were met with authoritative decision making, defensiveness, or belittling the concern had almost no positive results. In contrast, when there was an expectation for feedback from leaders and acknowledgement or validation of the concern at the onset of the conversation in a genuine way, significant progress and resolutions were reached.

When mediations saw the most beneficial outcomes, both parties were willing and able to share openly in a safe space about their core needs that were not being met in the workplace and work collaboratively, with the assistance of the Ombuds, to generate solutions that meets everyone needs, rather than a compromise where needs are not considered, only outcomes.

Note: Several mediations took place in 2025 that were scheduled in the previous term. Some of the data was split between the two reports for outcomes.

**Group Facilitations** are when a small group, ranging from 4-15 people in 2025, gather to discuss a lack of unit or cross departmental cohesion that can be the result of a visit and result in visitors. Following a group facilitation, individuals are offered to meet with the Ombuds one-on-one for further support.

In 2025, all group facilitations were initiated by management of departments or units. These were longer term commitments spanning several weeks to multiple months with regular meetings to build trust with the Ombuds, as well as with other participants in the facilitation. The Ombuds Office found group facilitation to be extremely effective and a high value to teams and the organization in culture and communication improvement. Management participation and the championing of these initiatives were a strong factor in their success.

These sessions included training and models that helped contextualize the patterns that were occurring and offering tools for early intervention and noting of the cycle beginning so that it may be more proactively addressed both in between facilitations and after the involvement of the Ombuds. They also included opportunities to discuss specific scenarios in a group and to have candid conversations about historical situations that did not yet feel resolved for one or all.

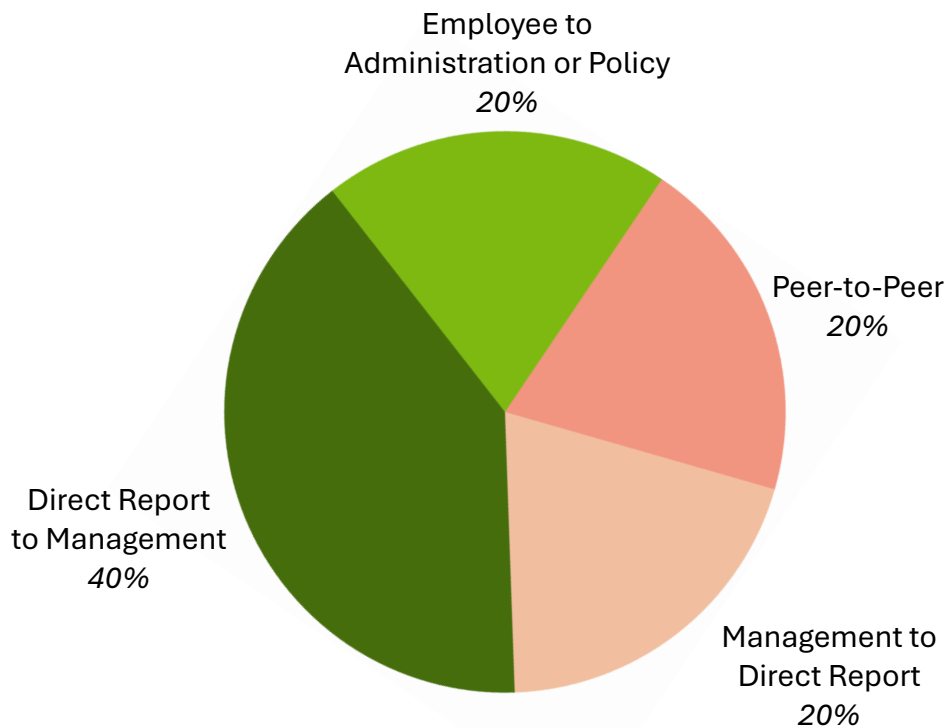
Group facilitations focused on long term behavior change and trust building within a unit. They were often noted to create relief amongst participants who were already applying outside of their unit or the County due to day-to-day stressors and effects on individuals' mental health. These interactions created positive retention trends and stability in day-to-day work. Following up after group facilitation, managers reported more levity in their teams as well as higher productivity and better alignment of achieving common goals.

**Training** is offered when an issue is identified that needs support through education, most commonly found in larger groups or whole departments. This is generally a manager or supervisor that has identified an opportunity for improvement in conflict management and communication in the team and requests a training because of the visit, or as the intention in visiting the Ombuds Office. The singular training the Ombuds provided to the County during the 2025 term was hosted during a regular all department meeting and helped the management achieve ongoing growth opportunities for their team. There was a training that was initiated during this term but was scheduled after the contract conclusion that was funded and hosted by the individual department, not as a part of the Ombuds contract.

All these outcomes serve the diverse needs of unique situations. Offering one without the other and without long term access risks temporary results and a lack of sustainable change. The confidentiality and informal nature the services provide a much lower barrier to entry, although not nonexistent, for people to begin engaging in assistance at the County.

The result of these processes also reduces escalation and the use of formal process when applied effectively, although oftentimes formal process is pursued after visiting the Office. The Ombuds Office provides valuable resources to the County. In public meetings, it has been reduced to an hourly financial investment both by the Ombuds Office and Administration. This inherently minimizes the value of the impact the Ombuds Office makes and the security and wellness of employees.

### Unique Visitors by Hierarchical Position



This graph reflects one similar to the 2024 Term Report, with the vast difference in the increase of Employee reporting concerns of **policy or administrative practices** in 2025. The previous year reporting only showed an approximate 7% of conflicts relating to policy, whereas in 2025 this increased to 20%. The County experienced significant budget impacts and future concerns around budget in 2025, which attributed to this set of visits. As you will find later in the report, the “Bump” policy was also commonly a concern.

When policy changes in frequency of use or by establishing new protocol, it is expected that concerns around those policies will bring additional visitors to the office. Policy changes are made for the betterment of the organization, but often time effect different employees with inconvenient or unintentional negative consequences.

In the Ombuds' assessment, some of these policies could be improved or more effectively communicated prior to deployment with additional inputs in decision making that would reduce employee impact, stress and potentially gain more buy in. That said, it would be near impossible to consider the impact on every employee at the scale in which the County operates. It is an unfortunate truth that there are significant tradeoffs for the advancement and betterment of the overall population of employees.

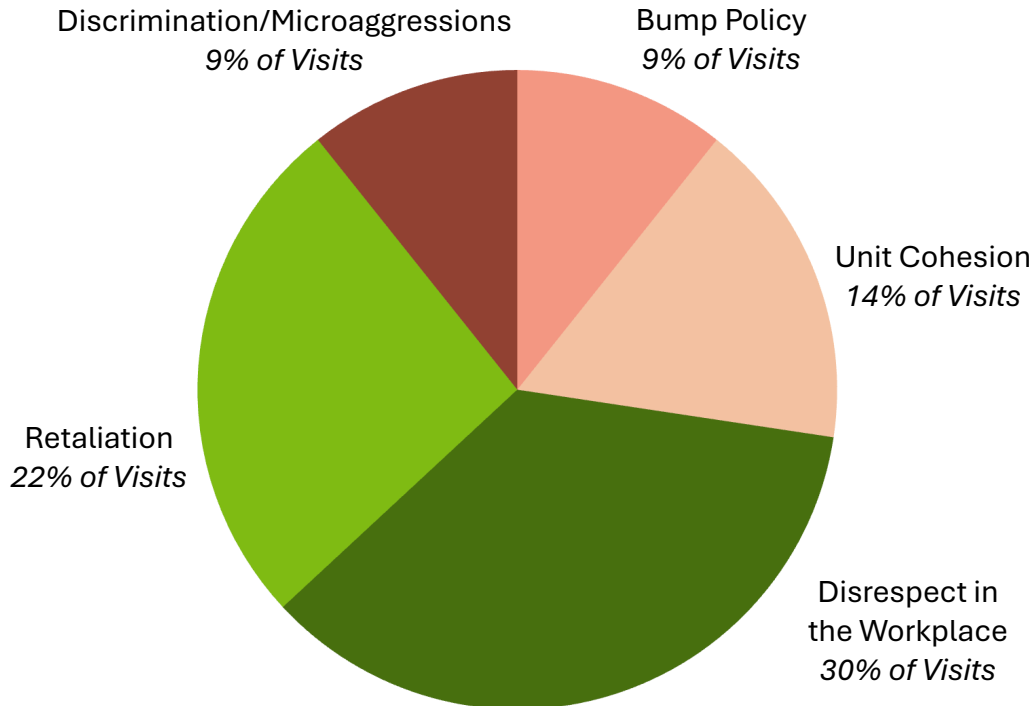
One group of people that the Ombuds saw with significant less influence in policy making and consideration when creating policy was non-managerial employees that were not represented by Employee Groups.

The **reporting relationship** continues to be the highlight of the data with approximately 60% of visits. Non-managerial employees' concerns about management are double management concerns about direct reports. This points to a strong narrative that managers have more effective, accessible, and proven formal methods of raising concerns about their direct reports than non-managerial employees have in concerns around management.

The **peer-to-peer relationships** remained steady in percentage from last year. These visits provided the ability to resolve without escalation to management, or on the recommendation of management. Some of these visits were supervisory peers as well.

## Section 4 – Systemic Trends

### **Top Trends of Topics Discussed by Visits**



This chart shows how frequently a visitor discussed each of the above topics. There were many more topics discussed through the Ombuds office, but these top trends became the highlights of the 2025 year. Some of these topics regularly overlapped, like retaliation and disrespect in the workplace, where both topics were commonly talked about during the same visit.

**Disrespect in the workplace** was from management to direct reports but also came at the peer-to-peer relationship level. Disrespect was also a common theme of small group facilitations and mediations, and was not tracked in this chart. Visits leading up to mediations and facilitations were tracked.

In the Ombuds assessment, disrespect caused the most inner turmoil for visitors and often lead to actual or perceived retaliation and discrimination. People often spoke about feeling burned out by relationships that included disrespect, and the Ombuds frequently coached on how to advocate and have hard conversations around disrespect as well as boundary setting. Disrespect is perceived in different ways and often the intention is different than the impact; however, the impact is the concern. If you asked 10 people to define disrespect, you would get as many definitions, making it hard to pin down a specific and actionable path forward to avoid future concerns on a large scale.

Disrespect is detrimental to the individuals experiencing it. Disrespect leads to disengagement and absenteeism. Having a culture that is not received as respectful is strongly attached to an individual's value system, which creates strong resistance and disillusionment with their environment.

**Retaliation** was a strong theme of the 2024 Term Report and did not go away in 2025. There were split circumstances in which visitors engaged the Ombuds Office on this topic. Approximately one third of visitors discussing retaliation with the Ombuds were seeking an initial consult on how to handle the situation. These individuals doubted their circumstances more openly questioning if their experiences were legitimate and openly discussed concerned about entering formal process due to additional consequences that might occur and a lack of trust that the systems of the County would acknowledge their experience in a way that would create an improvement of the culture.

The second set of visitors, around two-thirds of concerns raised around retaliation, were individuals who had already entered formal process or had conclusions from investigations that they felt did not acknowledge or understand their experience and felt there the system did not serve in a nonbiased way for the employee's concern. In several visits, visitors expressed that the conclusion of an investigation was influenced by hierarchical bias and were dismissive of or intentionally damaging to their own reputation. Trusting the employee's voice was frequently commented on in a negative way.

In either of these scenarios, concerns around taking the first step or additional steps were perceived by the visitor to be at their own personal risk or advancement at the County. The fear of consequences was only overcome by the strong values of the individual to make things right or fair, not only for themselves but for colleagues and future employees. It is the Ombuds assessment that the individuals who proceeded with additional steps were doing so despite the consequences that may affect their careers or livelihood, not out of hope for better results, rather documentation.

In these scenarios, evidence became more relevant than their feelings about the experience. Outside of the Ombuds position, situations were tracked extensively and submissions for investigations were drafted carefully. In all the visits the Ombuds took, none had positive results in seeking an affirmative retaliation rulings. This aligns with the offerings of the Ombuds Office, as an affirmative conclusion would have eased the need for resources.

The Ombuds role in these scenarios became assessing and identifying where systemic issues impacted the overall performance of the neutrality and effectiveness of the system.

**Unit cohesion** was the next most common concern of visitors. These visits most frequently focused on micromanagement, information guarding, or distrust of other team members. Some of these concerns resulted in small group facilitation. It was common that these involved general culture issues around seniority or shifts in the team's size or management

structure. The concerns brought by or supported by management had the best outcomes for impactful change.

**Discrimination and microaggressions** became a relevant trend in 2025, however, it was not an overwhelming statistical factor. The visitors who came with discrimination concerns often did not want it directly addressed or it was a factor in the concern, not the primary concern of the visit. The frequency of visitors with interracial interpersonal concerns and mediation were higher, as well as multi-generational issues and ageism.

The multi-generational visits focused primarily on the discontent of the performance of people in different stages of their career, seniority over performance-based advancement, and different backgrounds and styles of public vs private experience prior to employment at the County. In the Ombuds assessment, the County will have increasing concerns around generational values and will experience significant culture shifts in the coming years as a significant population of employees retire and younger generations are recruited. If culture shifts and policy do not adapt to generational values, there will be more opportunity of lower retention rates in the future.

Conflict comes out these concerns of value differentials in many ways; however, some that surfaced in 2025 were around loyalty, work ethic, and differing thought processes on authority in the workplace.

Finally, the **“Bump” policy** was the most frequently discussed policy as a point of stress or confusion for teams and individuals. The Bump policy allows for the placement of employees that held positions that were eliminated, including project based such as COVID response teams. The policy allows these employees to “bump” employees of less seniority out of current or vacant positions to retain the employee with higher seniority. Employees who have been bumped, would then have the opportunity to bump into another position at the County that they meet the basic qualifications for and held seniority over the current employee in that position. Of the concerns raised to the Ombuds Office, all the situations addressed were regarding vacant opportunities, not replacement opportunities.

A seemingly harmless and effective way to retain employees at the County did have negative consequences on teams and individuals. In several examples, the open positions had internal candidates or limited term employees that were hopeful to advance their careers in the department that had the open position. This impacted not only the individuals who applied for the positions, but also teammates, peers to the position, and management.

Additionally, individuals in departments affected by bump policies who were previously unaware of the potential for the bump, became concerned that their positions were also at risk of being bumped. This caused a lack of job security for departments affected by the potential of being bumped or demoted.

## Section 5 – Educational Content

The Ombuds Office operates to help bring understanding and resolution to individual concerns of conflict in the workplace as well as systemic trends that it recommends be addressed by the organization. The Ombuds Office also strives to educate visitors on conflict methodologies, common language, and self-awareness in situations that arise in interpersonal working relationships. Several key tools of education arose across many situations that could be applied in a variety of situations.

County employees being educated and adopting these methodologies on a wider scale would decrease opportunities for inequity and increase cohesion between cross departmental differences that arise.

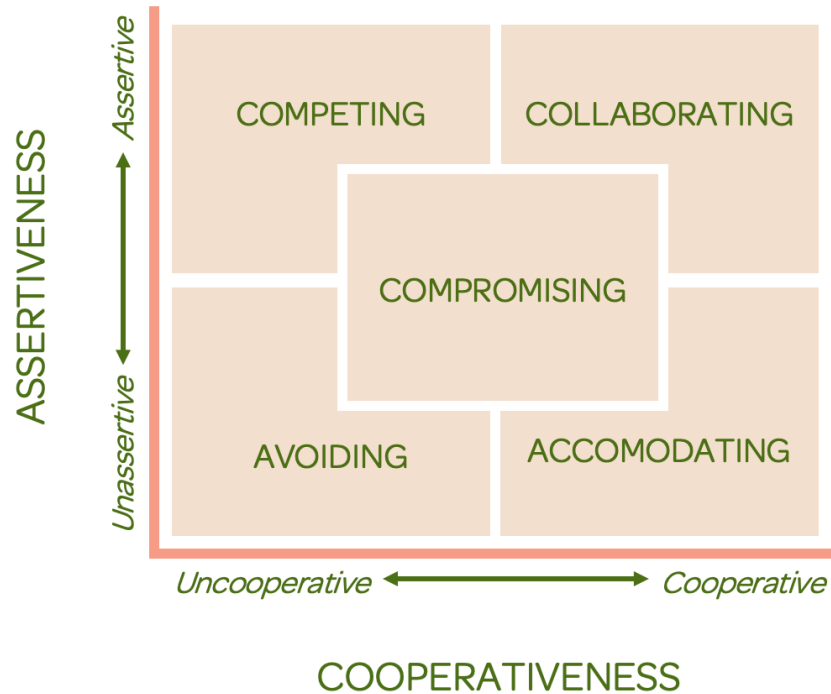
The first concept that will be shared in this report is **willing participation**. As mentioned, seeking willing participation is a requirement of the Ombuds Office as it is an informal office. This limits the Ombuds in some ways to seek or guarantee participation; however, it also encourages positive outcomes when parties are willing to address complex issues. In several instances throughout 2025, employees did not wish to participate in or continue conversations or to mediate. Although this is generally unsatisfying to the willing participant, it is additional information on the context of their situation.

Willing participation is not only an individual or peer level interpersonal conflict. Power and authority also heavily influence the outcomes in these dynamics. Those in hierarchical or systematic power also need to choose to participate to address concerns. As previously mentioned, concerns addressed with willing parties were often resolved with less defensiveness or authoritative action, and more cooperative option generation.

Willing participation is not defined by presence or force. This concept is defined by the desire to listen, clarify, understand, work together, and a desire to resolve a problem collectively and build relationships. As highlighted in the 2024 Term Report, in not doing so, we create win-lose scenarios that puts individuals or groups of people at odds or creates an “Us versus Them” mentality. There is significant language identification of an “Us versus Them” mentality between management and direct reports and employees and Administration. This is made evident by visitor concerns and the competitive nature of problem solving at the County witnessed by the Ombuds.

When this mentality does not exist in power structures, it is when management or hierarchical power take on a leadership style that is one to serve and empower employees rather than instruct or demand individual’s actions to receive compliance. Wielding authority often leads to an “Us vs Them” bias that is seemingly unresolvable for those who answer to it.

A common model taught by the Ombuds, specifically in small group facilitation and trainings is called **The 5 Conflict Approaches**. This model is also called the Thomas-Killman Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI) which was developed by psychologists Kenneth W. Thomas and Ralph K. Kilmann.



Opposing parties fall into certain categories based on situations, natural tendencies, and power structures. There is a time and a place for each of these conflict approaches; however, they will always impact the outcomes of a conflict. Charting the assertiveness and cooperativeness of each person or entity involved in a conflict will bring awareness to the situation at hand.

A mediation concept that strongly plays into the positions taken by someone in the 5 Conflict Approaches is whether the relationship with the other party or the outcome of the conflict is more important. If a party is more concerned with the relationship in a conflict, it will increase cooperation and has the potential to decrease the assertiveness of getting their own needs met, likely having an outcome of accommodation. If the outcome of the situation is highly valued or important to the party, then assertiveness will increase and cooperativeness will decrease, likely leading to a competitive conflict approach.

The further away the two parties stand in their priorities of relationship or outcome, the more imbalance exists. A strong attachment to outcome often results in a lack of willingness or cooperativeness. Parties with the most available resources (time, money, energy, etc.) and the least to lose in the relationship win.

Avoiding is not uncommon. This is often how conflicts simmer in units, departments, and organizations, before boiling over into competitive approaches. A lack of assertiveness or cooperation can lead to resentment, not feeling understood or a lack of understanding from the other party. On the opposite side of the chart, collaboration, an often overused word that lacks common meaning or context, is the primary goal in conflict resolution. In the middle is where fair trade happens and compromise occurs.

Collaboration is where progress is made. If both parties can be transparent and assertive about their needs, while willingly participating in a cooperative nature, the results have an exponentially higher chance of resolution. This creates healthier outcomes and builds long-lasting and positive relationships. It is the goal of mediation and facilitation, as well as coaching, to create collaborative environments and participation; however, it takes the skills of both parties to be aware of their current positions and how to actively move toward a desirable state.

On the flip side, two or more competitors often lead to high conflict situations with no resolution, and hierarchical authority wins at the expense of the relationship and sets individuals up for worse future outcomes. This is where retention is at the highest risk and disengagement in goals is more prevalent.

These are not concepts only applied to the County. These are concepts that occur in all interpersonal relationships, in the workplace, and otherwise. Bringing awareness to power dynamics, assertiveness, and cooperation is the key to understanding the success rate of relationship building and positive outcomes. It is important to balance relationships and outcomes and increase assertiveness and cooperation to achieve healthy culture and environments in the workplace. When all these factors are in place, feedback is welcome, psychological safety is strong, and wellbeing for all is centered. Conflict will still exist, however, the conflict will be productive, respectful, and mutually beneficial.

## Section 6 – Recommendations

### **1. Systems for Managerial Feedback from Direct Reports**

Openness to feedback was a concern identified and a recommendation made in the 2024 Term Report. After further discovery and perspective on this issue throughout visitor engagement in 2025, a clearer recommendation will be made as the Ombuds' top recommendation to the County.

Feedback, as currently utilized in most common situations, especially in formal processes, is documented from a managerial employee to a direct report. An example of this is a coaching note or taking disciplinary action. As far as the Ombuds is aware, launching a formal investigation is the first step in behavioral correction to a supervisory manager and, as mentioned previously, is met with concern or fear from most visitors.

Feedback is most effective when it goes both ways. This creates balance, sustainability, and open communication. Performance notes and feedback given to supervisors and higher-level management from non-managerial employees would benefit the overall understanding of the effectiveness and approval of the leadership at the County. It would allow tracking of performance of an individual leader and cross-departmental trends for the County. Allowing these concerns to be documented without an investigative ruling for reprimand would create a full view of satisfaction and relationships at the County.

This also creates a lower barrier to access for employees to document and express concerns earlier in a concern, which can create faster action and prevent repeated error. It may also open managers up to verbal feedback in a more proactive attempt to meet the needs of the employee base.

The Ombuds understands that this practice could result in the targeting of managers all the way up to retaliatory behaviors by non-managerial employees, which could prevent progress on this recommendation. However, the employee voice is an asset to the County, and if done so in good faith, could create a much more cooperative environment, earlier intervention, and the opportunity to deescalate prior to more high stress formal processes.

This also addresses the gap between effective management and defined or provable violations of policy. There are many situations that live in the grey area that do not reach the threshold for discrimination, retaliation, or other offenses, that are also not supported or promoted positive behaviors by the County, as has been illustrated by the results of many investigations and grievances brought to the Ombuds.

It would be the Ombuds recommendations that these performance notes would carry similar weight to coaching notes and go through a similar process.

## **2. Ongoing and Proactive Resources for Unit Cohesion Support**

In the assessment of the Ombuds, the most successful and valuable service provided to visitor support in 2025 was manager sponsored small group facilitation for units who had issues with peer-to-peer and hierarchical concerns. Having this service advanced positive environments and improved the wellbeing of those who participated. These also created wider long-term impacts than individual mediation and coaching because entire teams were equipped with common language and the ability to advocate on common ground. Bystanders of a conflict are often forgotten in the equation of repair, but are effected, and their perspectives should be considered.

These educational, sometimes emotional, facilitations created safe spaces that allowed people to express issues and cooperatively problem solve on day-to-day stressors in the workplace. Often, the concerns that were preventing productivity and creating a lack of cohesion had built up over time and wore down resilience, including but not limited to, interpersonal working relationships. These facilitations built trust, challenged individuals, and created buy in and accountability from all participants to commit to lasting improvement.

Having facilitation available as a resource to management in an informal and non-disciplinary nature, allows them third party intervention as needed. Facilitation as a resource allows management to sit on the same side of the metaphorical table as their employees instead of opposing them. When a facilitation is done well it changes the perspective to the unit vs the problem, instead of the unit vs management. This allows for more progress to be made, and management can offer more support and less directives.

With limited funds for 2026 Ombuds operations, it would be my strong recommendation to proceed with a singular facilitator ad hoc that could offer these services moving forward.

## **3. Focus on Building Relationships Between Administration and Employees**

This is a notably difficult stance to take in a large, hierarchical, government organization. However, if the mindset shifts from “How do we manage employees?” to “How do we build relationships with employees?”, there can be a significant amount of effective growth.

The common practices the Ombuds has witnessed in problem solving at an administrative level is negotiation. These negotiations, or compromises, often take

place with Employee Group Representatives and have proven to yield successful outcomes at times. However, the competitive nature of the negotiation in reaching the outcome often deteriorates relationships, thus creating an “Us versus Them” mentality as mentioned in the educational section of this report.

There are two necessary components to accomplish relationship building. One, the self-awareness and transparency to identify a need. Once the true needs are identified, both sides must be assertive and willing to share those need instead of the solutions they think will suffice in meeting their own needs. If both parties are willing and able to seek the awareness of the needs they bring to the table at the negotiation, negotiation becomes collaboration.

Secondly, when balancing relationships versus outcomes, building strong relationships must outweigh the outcome by both parties involved the majority of the time. If everything is important, nothing is important. Another factor in this is resources. In a time of limited budget and resources, this becomes even more crucial as often outcome attachment is highly connected to resource distribution.

If employees at all levels of the organization and department, including those working in Administration, can see themselves as equals in the values of the workplace, the County is more likely to find themselves on the same side of the problem instead of negotiating. Values like openness, care, wellbeing, and respect can help contextualize the need and bring collaborative solutions. Identifying and naming the common goal, serving the public and employees as well as the immediate outcome at hand, will help the County employees sit alongside each other in building relationships and positive outcomes.

Without formal mediation or facilitation in these processes, this can be difficult but is not unobtainable. When met with a potential outcome, or solution, to a problem during negotiation, simple questions like “What need does that fulfill Administration?” will help coach each party through a more productive conversation. In return, the need of the employees being represented or directly, can be shared.

As a warning, a need is not, “I need *you* to do XYZ.” That is a solution. The solution might first look like this in this hypothetical example, “I need you to eliminate two positions from your department.” A need is the benefit of the solution and may look more like, “We need an outcome that reduces personnel budget for this department by 10%.” In this example, there are many ways to reduce budget and allocate resources, and one of which will likely meet the needs of the opposing party as well.

An opposing need may look like, “We need to reduce overtime and burnout in this department and create job security.”

Once needs are established, option generation can begin. This may look like many different things, but it might include surveying employees to understand where systems and tasks take up the most time and drive the least amount of value for the public. It could be that simpler tasks could be delegated to a lower paid position which frees up time for higher paid positions. It may look like understanding how much overtime is being paid out, and if a new position would reduce overall costs. It may look like analyzing the service that is being offered to the public for use and value. It may look like all these or something completely different.

When you place two or more needs at the forefront, it places both parties on the same side of the problem and allows them to collaborate on a solution. It does take resources and time to assess the options, much like the Ombuds Office took resources. However, achieving a higher outcome that satisfies and considers the needs of both parties will benefit long term the individuals and the relationships and reduce the “Us versus Them” mentality.

The Ombuds recommendation is to take the first step and reflect on how to build relationships. Ask the first question. Empower others to do the same. Put in the work upfront to reduce waste and conflict that comes out of uncollaborative solutions. Find efficiency. Do it together.

## Section 7 – Conclusion

In this report, the final deliverable concluding the contract between Defyne LLC, acting as the County’s Employee Ombuds Office, I wish to leave you with a few parting thoughts. The Ombuds Office delivered significant value to individuals, units, and departments in only 18 months of service to the employees of Dane County and had a great potential to expand its impact over coming years.

That said, it did very little to impact systemic change. Programs, like and Ombuds Office, require more than just ordinances and funding to be successful in positive cultural change. They need executive and board level sponsorship and a willingness and desire to listen, clarify, understand, work together, and a desire to resolve a problem collectively and build relationships.

At every level of the organization, willingness and cooperation appear to be in low supply. The continued positioning to stay in control wears on individuals and systems. The County needs not only to promote willingness and cooperation, but to model it at the core of its operation.

Resistance creates resiliency and strain. As a public institution, the County needs services like the Ombuds Office to bring a neutral voice to the forefront of decision making. In every attempt to correct course by employees and the risk they take to identify issues, there is the intention of mutually beneficial outcomes.

In society, our systems serve people in power. In a public institution, the people employed need to have influence on systems that create safety in diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging. Sharing power at all levels of the organization is the only way to make change effectively. Listen to the voices of those who are willing to give it.

When the County is truly willing to sponsor an Ombuds Office and commit to effective progress, it is my final recommendation to reinstate an Ombuds Office. I often hear in my field that people are not ready for change. The reflection in my response is always the same, “Who is not ready for change? Because I can guarantee the people who are being repressed by the current systems have been ready.”



Thank you,  
Diana Greene

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