

Employee Ombuds Office of Dane County

2024

Term Report

Amended February 27th, 2025

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Presented By:
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Section 1 – A Letter from the Ombuds

Dear Dane County, Personal & Finance - Ombuds Subcommittee,

It has been a pleasure to serve as the Ombuds for Dane County Employees in the second half of 2024. The contract with Defyne LLC started in April 2024, and the office was opened June 11th, 2024, for the service of visitors. I wanted to start by acknowledging that the visitors to the office were employees looking to improve their situations, their relationships, and their employment. It has been my experience in a few short months, that the individuals and groups visiting with the Ombuds office are dedicated, passionate and engaged employees.

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 resolutions. The Ombuds office operates based on four guiding principles: confidentiality, informality, impartiality, and independence. The office is accessible virtually and in person, with convenient scheduling available on the website at www.countyofdaneombuds.com.

Individuals visiting the office had a wide range of topics to discuss, but the majority focused on conflicts within the reporting relationship. This was by no means the only concern, as peer relationships, intrapersonal conflict, and policy issues also surfaced, however the support of the reporting relationship was the primary focus of the Ombuds Office in 2024.

This report will cover data and trends the Ombuds has collected and observed in 2024, including but not limited to fear and accounts of retaliation, concerns in process and policy, inequity in the workplace, and workplace culture. This report will also include recommendations made by the Ombuds for the committee on paths to resolution.

Resolution is not always the goal of the office. Progress and support are much more realistic and obtainable goal for the individuals who visit the Ombuds. The office was able to offer ongoing support to several individuals and groups to see improvement over time. Again, it is with great pleasure that Defyne LLC offers this service to those in the employment of Dane County.

Thank you,
Diana

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Section 2 – Office Outreach and Intake

Outreach

The Ombuds Office established several platforms in 2024 for outreach to the employee base of Dane County.

1. Introductory email - Sent by Amy Utzig on June 3rd, 2024, to all County employees announcing the Ombuds Office.
2. The website - www.countyofdaneombuds.com, was published in May and was viewed 574 times in 2024. This 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.
3. Trainings and Unit Meetings - The Ombuds performed 8 informative introductory meetings and 2 trainings to departmental units, manager trainings and committees, to spread the word to departments and individuals.
4. Word of mouth – Many visitors came to the office as a referral by a colleague or supervisor.

Intake

The Ombuds office hosted 28 unique visitors in 2024. “Unique visitors” are defined as an employee or employees 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. Of the 28 unique visitors, 11 visitors returned to the office two or more times, for a total of 49 office visits hosted by the Ombuds.

The Ombuds office also hosted 6 team facilitations (3 or more people), 1 mediation (2 people), in 2024 and 2 trainings by request.

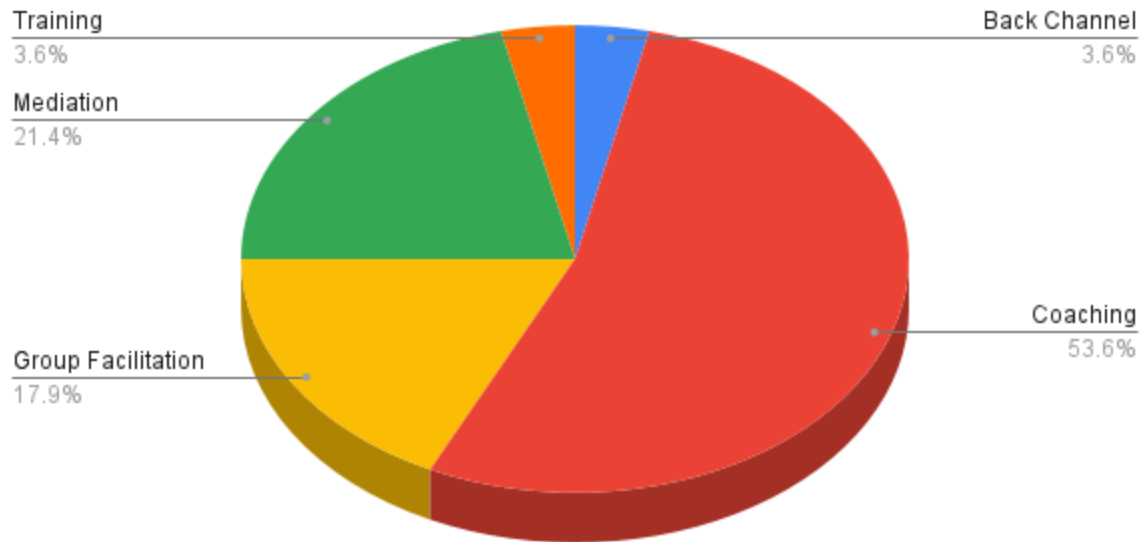
Unique Visitors	28
Total Visits	49
Facilitations	6
Mediations	1
Trainings	2
Est. Total Impact	54

Virtual and In Person Visits

Of the 28 unique visitors, 75% requested virtual meetings for the intake visit, with 25% attending a visit in person at the City County Building Ombuds Office. No visits were conducted during open office hours in person.

Section 3 – Case Outcomes and Statistics

Case Outcomes by Unique Visitors



Slightly over half of the Ombuds visits by unique visitors resulted in Coaching. “Coaching” is defined as a single visit where options were generated and there was either no follow up necessary or continued coaching visits occurred. These cases did not have any further action, such as mediation, facilitation, back-channel diplomacy, or training.

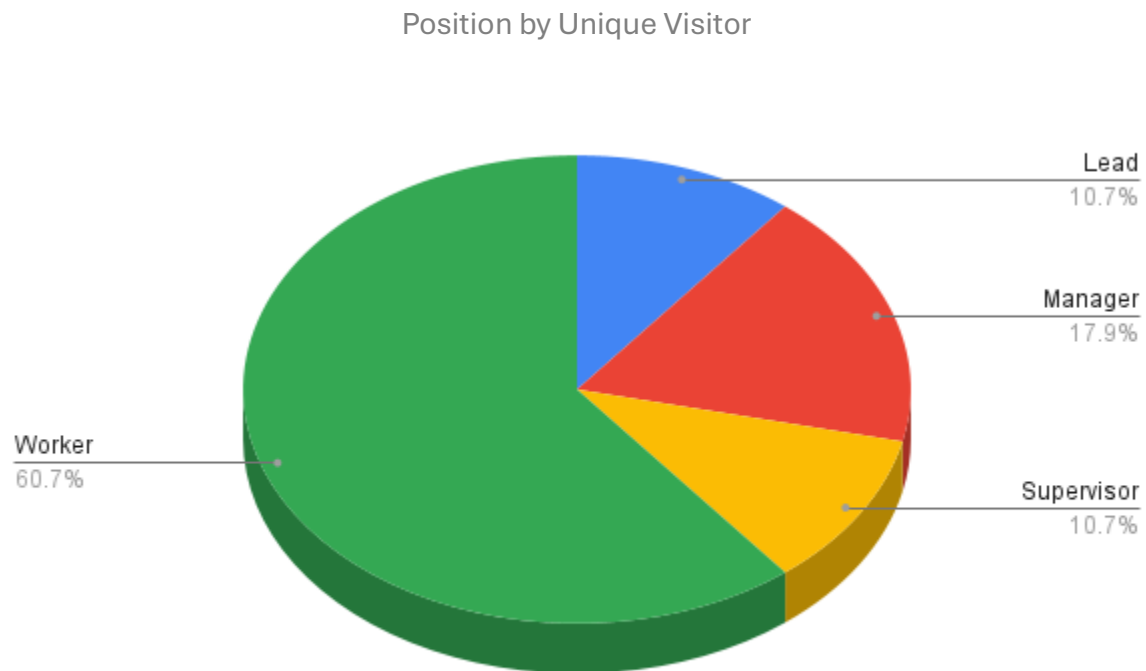
Mediation was the next most utilized outcome. Mediations are offered as a potential outcome when visitors have a conflict with one individual or want to voice concerns with the aid of the Ombuds to a supervisor. After an individual requests a mediation, the other individual is contacted and offered an initial intake meeting. This supports the Ombuds commitment to impartiality. Note: Several mediations took place in 2025 as a result of 2024 meetings and were not counted in the intake data in 2024.

Group Facilitations 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.

Collectively, Group Facilitations and Mediations were utilized approximately 40% of the time. This is a promising number for the Ombuds office, as it shows commitment to acting on the issues at hand. This started conversations and raised concerns in a way they could be addressed.

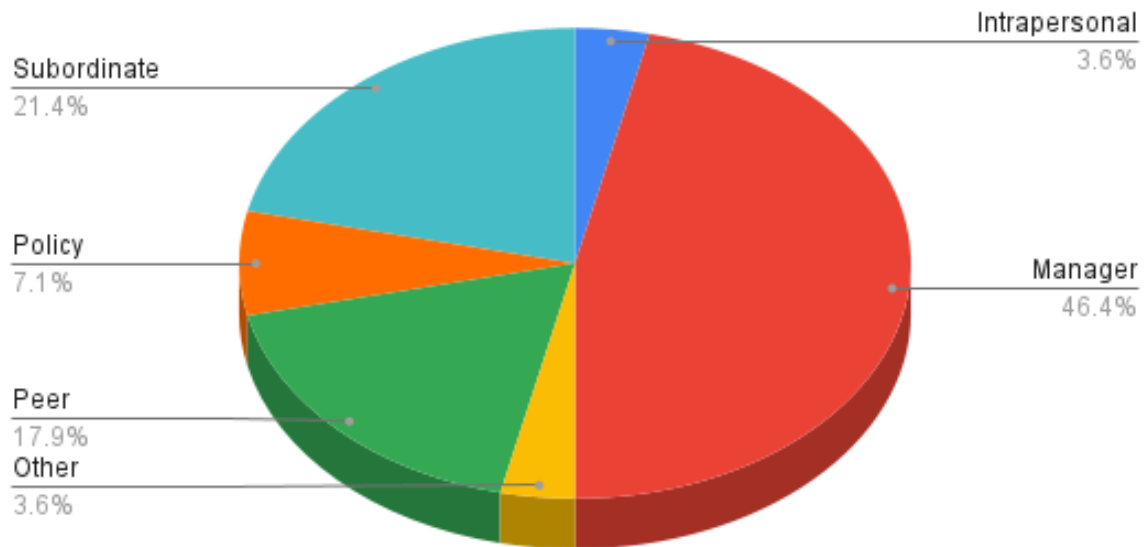
Training is offered when an issue is identified that needs support through education. This is generally a manager or supervisor that has identified a weakness in the team and requests a training because of the visit, or as the intention in visiting the Ombuds office.

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.



Approximately 60% of unique visitors were employees of Dane County with no supervisory or management responsibilities. The other 40% of visitors had supervisory responsibilities in some capacity. This is a good balance, as it shows that everyone feels comfortable visiting the office and utilizing the services of the Ombuds.

Primary Conflict by Unique Visitors



As mentioned in the letter from the Ombuds, one of the first identified trends by the office in 2024 was the reporting relationship. In this graph, “Manager” is defined as someone who the individual reports to or reports through who is at a higher hierarchical position to them. Combining this with the visits concerning a subordinate position, the reporting relationship was highlighted in 68% of all visits to the office.

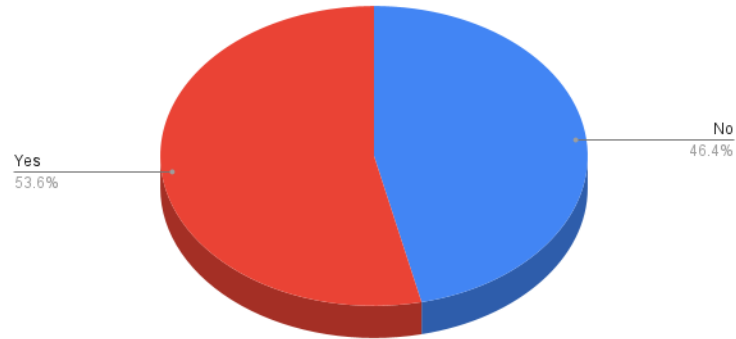
Only 18% of visits focused on peer-to-peer relationships at the County and often revolved around Group Facilitation visits.

Policy based concerns was primarily individuals who were raising a concern with new policy implemented or benefits and pay scale.

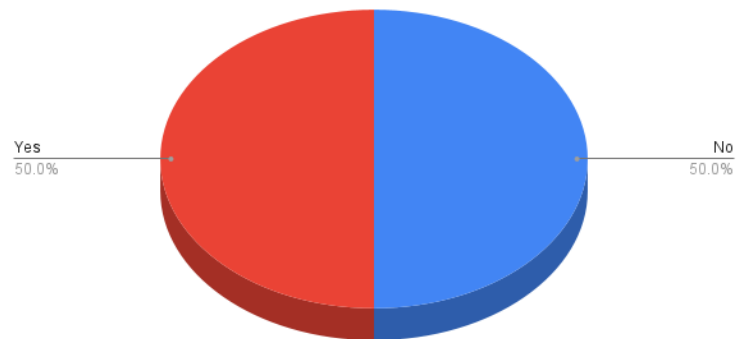
Intrapersonal visits included individuals who were seeking council on a decision they needed to make and desired a sounding board to talk through their concern.

Section 4 – Systemic Trends

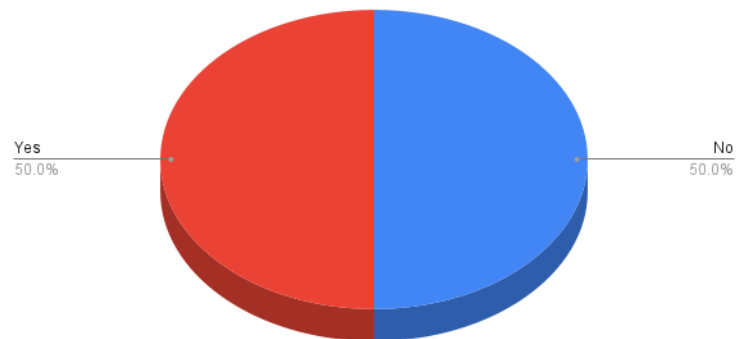
Retaliation Discussed by Unique Visitor



Accounts of Inequity in the Workplace by Unique Visitor



Accounts of Poor Workplace Culture by Unique Visitor



Over half of the visits included accounts of retaliation, targeting, and unfair treatment or discussed fear of retaliation for taking action to resolve conflicts in the workplace or filing grievances. 50% of visits talked about inequity, including two visitors discussing discrimination, and half of visits talked about accounts of poor workplace culture.

First, this highlights the value the Ombuds office offers. Individuals regularly commented on concerns even visiting the office. Their concerns stemmed from management acting if they were found to have “complained” and this highlights a lack of willingness to address issues directly on behalf of management and employees. Many visitors made accounts of defensive and fragile management, where complaints were taken personally, or retaliation and targeting were commonplace. Individuals described feelings of unfair treatment, gossip, lies being spread about them, and micromanagement.

To clarify, it is not the assignment or the expectation of the Ombuds office to determine if something is or is not retaliation, unfair treatment or discrimination. This report is not stating visitors experienced retaliation, inequity, or poor workplace culture. It is the objective of the Ombuds office to share the experience and perceptions of its visitors.

This is important, primarily because there is a different perception of what constitutes retaliation from individual visitors and County processes. The Ombuds received multiple visitors who had participated in grievance processes for a variety of reasons, who later came to the office to discuss how to handle the targeting and retaliation. Of the visits where retaliation or fear of retaliation was discussed, less than half had Employee Group Representation during the visit.

This report will dive deeper into the following separate, but compounding issues here.

- a) Perception and Proving Retaliation
- b) Win/Lose Situations
- c) Fear of Retaliation
- d) Distrust of Administration

Perception and Proving Retaliation –

In the accounts that the Ombuds fielded from individuals, retaliatory behaviors were described and the suggestion of acting on or reporting those instances often were met with hesitation, rejection, or fear. This makes the reporting process unreliable, discouraging, and one that individuals likely are resistant to engage with. This leaves individuals scared to raise their voice against unfair treatment, which in turn supports unfair treatment to occur.

There is a perception of systemic issues around raising retaliation grievances, or any grievance for that matter, in a system that benefits when retaliation or other concerns are denied. The very fact that the administration is the one to hear the retaliation complaints,

when they would be then held responsible for resolving the problem and hold the liability of admitting retaliation, gives the appearance of a biased system. This system is predisposed to leave individuals raising concerns ousted and unsupported and has created greater distrust and power imbalance in the workforce of and between administration and has increased the fear of retaliation to a detrimental point.

Again, as a disclaimer, it is not my purview to determine what or is what not retaliation, however, it is in the experience of the Ombuds office, that the perceived retaliation is just as draining to the individual, as legally defined, proven retaliation by the grievance process. In some instances, it is even worse because their experience is not being recognized or validated. It is also noted that the Ombuds saw a limited number of cases in 2024, and although was the office was uniquely positioned to accommodate those with fear of retaliation, does not reflect the full voice of the population of the employees of the County.

Win/Lose Situations –

The Ombuds witnessed a great number of scenarios where individuals were put in win/lose scenarios with no collective effort to solve the problem. Grievance processes were one example of this and elicits a “Win” or “Lose” response. Another example is when Employee Groups engage, and managers feel they cannot coach individual employees in their reporting structure when they feel they have just cause to do so. There are little resources provided to encourage ongoing conversation, collective problem solving, or positive and ongoing workplace relationships.

Fear of Retaliation –

This concern deeply impacts workplace culture and identifies a lack of psychological safety in the workplace for visitors. Psychological safety is described as a shared belief among employees that they can openly express their ideas, concerns, and opinions without fear of negative consequences or judgment, allowing them to take risks, ask questions, and admit mistakes without repercussions, fostering a culture of open communication and collaboration; essentially, feeling comfortable to be themselves at work without fear of retribution.

Without the feeling of safety in the workplace; progress, motivation, innovation and wellness are hard to achieve. These are concerns that individuals bring home with them and effect their ability to engage with happiness outside of work as well. This increases burnout, disengagement, absenteeism, and even turnover.

When fear of retaliation exists, feedback stops or becomes one sided. Creating a culture of 360-degree feedback is important to the individuals employed by Dane County because when feedback is given and received in a candid, caring, and solution-oriented way, individuals and organizations can grow and improve. To further explore this concept, I offer up that not all fear of retaliation came from management to direct reports. There were also

instances of peer-to-peer concerns around retaliation for raising concerns and voicing constructive feedback against administration.

Distrust of Leadership and Administration –

All this bleeds into the final topic, distrust of leadership and administration. In the Ombuds experience, employees love their jobs and appreciate their benefits greatly, but don't trust that the administration is looking out for their best interests. Several visits included concerns around administrative practices that seemed unfair, where individuals in administration were personally biased against individuals, or non-responsive completely. There is confusion about when and how things happen during formal processes, such as the collective bargaining process and formal investigations. A lack of transparency, although may be necessary, creates anxiety for individuals engaging in these processes.

Section 5 - Recommendations

- 1) The Ombuds recommends that grievance processes move into a sliding scale accountability system. Currently, in the process, people compete with one another, often time in a direct reporting relationship, and one individual wins and one loses. If the system shifted to an accountability model that ranked accountability, the problem solving could become more cooperative, and address issues more holistically. It is rare in my experience of working in conflict or relational issues that one person is 100% correct, and one person is 100% wrong. There is often shared accountability, or partial fault and although it may not be 50/50, asking ourselves what the split is, instead of a definitive judgement, might open more conversations about problem solving than shutting down the concerns and ideas addressed in grievance processes.

This is particularly important in grievances that do not have enough evidence to prove the offence, but the behavior isn't supported by the County's best practices and values. This would allow for coaching to prevent further issues or escalation.

- 2) Education and training should be provided on non-defensive leadership. It is an inherent part of human behavior to defend oneself, but it is ultimately at the risk of a lack of progress. Training to managers around anti-retaliation recovery from negative feedback and grievances could teach them how to respond and improve communication in leadership. Providing resources for both management and employees after grievance processes, such as supportive mediation, would benefit rebuilding the relationship and continuing progress.
- 3) Creating a culture of feedback improves psychological safety in the workplace. Visitors that reported positive reporting relationships felt that the one-on-one feedback was supported with their manager/direct reports. Encouraging and holding individuals accountable to one-on-one meetings with their manager/direct reports and providing training and tools on what one-on-one meetings could look like would help not only strengthen that relationship, but also improve equity across the workplace.
- 4) Most organization want high performing teams. Recognizing that high performing teams exist when diverse backgrounds come together in respectful communication and collaborative idea sharing to solve problems together, not against one another, is key. When individuals perceive authority as distant, disconnected, and not interested in their best interest, trust deteriorates. The Ombuds would suggest a more concerted effort from leadership and Administration to communicate out recent events at the County and updates to policy. This could be an employee newsletter, a blog, town halls, or another form of mass communication that would

allow more regular check ins and opportunities for employees to provide feedback in anonymous surveys.

With approximately 68% of visits to the office having to do with the reporting relationship, we need to provide tools, resources, and care when navigating the direct relationship to not create further divides. Without clear systems in which individuals can disagree with the power and authority of the County, and get a fair platform, these issues will only deepen.

Section 6 - 2025 Priorities

The Ombuds Office has set 3 top priorities for 2025.

1. Increase pace of visits and outreach.

The goal of the office is to increase the average to 6% usage of Dane County employees in 2025. That would be an estimated 180 visits in 2025, or an average of 15 unique visitors a month. This effort will include sending emails to the employee base, releasing trainings, improved signage, and encouraging word of mouth and building reputation amongst County employees.

2. Increase non-coaching outcomes.

Coaching is not a bad outcome and will never go away, however the Ombuds would like to engage in more Back-Channel Diplomacy, Mediation, and Facilitation in 2025. The goal would be coaching outcomes would be 45% of visits or less. It is the Ombuds belief that this number was high in 2024 because people were afraid to act on concerns.

3. Receive feedback from visitors.

The Ombuds, up to this point, has not surveyed visitors of the office to gain helpful insights into improvements and feedback. The Ombuds would like to launch in 2025 an opportunity for individuals who visit the office to provide candid, anonymized feedback about their experience.

Launching the program and gaining trust with individuals and visitors was a huge goal for 2024. In 2025 program growth is essential. Not only does the Ombuds need to increase visitors, but also relationships across the County so back-channel diplomacy meetings are respected and well received. Collaboration amongst more departments to use the Ombuds services will give the data more holistic insights into the County.

Section 7 – Conclusion

The Ombuds provided a safe and trusted space to talk about issues and concerns in 2024. Issues raised, and discussed in this term report are subject to confidentiality.

This office has allowed for individuals to voice their concerns in an anonymous fashion so that this subcommittee can address issues related to the County. I urge you to take this report seriously, remove defensiveness from its reception, and consider all avenues to move forward in a way that will allow for improved workplace relationships.

As the Ombuds office builds trust with the employees of Dane County as an independent, impartial, confidential, and informal source, the program is growing. This allows for an objective look at the unique experiences and systemic trends experienced by individuals for the Ombuds subcommittee to address. This first 6 months of the Ombuds office being open has been a great foundation, however the program needs to continue to expand to have the intended impact.

Thank you,

Diana Greene



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Diana Greene (formally Diana Pastrana) is the founder and visionary of Defyne LLC offering Ombuds and conflict management services to organizations. Diana is an Inclusion Institute Certified Diversity Practitioner (IICDP), a trained Ombuds through the International Ombuds Association (IOA), and holds a certificate of Conflict Resolution from Cornell University. She has over a decade of experience working in different industries to help build stronger, more inclusive teams.