

Seattle Office of the  
Employee Ombud  
**ANNUAL  
REPORT**  
**2022**



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# Executive Summary

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The Ombuds Office's mission is to empower individuals and teams at the City of Seattle to navigate conflict into respectful workplace engagement and to ensure that employees have access to a resource for informally addressing workplace concerns in a fair and equitable manner. OEO team serves as conflict management experts and watches for citywide trends in order to make informal recommendations on process improvement and equitable workplace solutions. In compliance with Ordinance 125175 that states "*OEO must provide analyses of reported concerns and recommendations for policy and rule changes needed to address departmental or system-wide inefficiencies*" we release this Annual Report capturing our analysis of reported trends and offer potential solutions to address underlying issues.

**Increased Outreach and Resolution:** In 2022, we expanded our outreach efforts with training offerings that included 73 live training sessions attended by 1,538 City employees. Our external outreach was also expanded, as we joined the Strong Cities network and connected with other municipalities about Hate Crimes and Crimes of Bias prevention work. Our office has seen, as a result of this outreach, a significant increase in our case numbers, with cases up from 201 cases in 2021 to 299 cases in 2022, an increase of 49%. The nature of reported concerns is not unique and is consistent with previous years, but more City employees know about our services and are choosing to trust us. Despite the substantial increase in our caseload, we have managed to maintain no backlog in our response times and have closed out 97% of the cases opened in 2022. In 73% of our cases, we helped reporters reach either a partial or full resolution to their concerns.

**Emerging Trends:** This year we noted emerging trends in three specific areas of concerns: a desire for workplace culture flexibility, length of time for corrective efforts to be enacted, enhanced leadership capacity, and requests for increased transparency and consistency in HR processes and communication. These trends are discussed in more detail in the report.

**Systemic Trends and Recommendations:** Based on the identified systemic and emerging trends, we make these non-binding recommendations which apply broadly to any department, work unit or team based on our expertise as conflict management professionals. There is further discussion in the report, but the categories are: hiring criteria for managers should ensure people management skills, performance, performance evaluation training should be mandatory, with consistency and feedback from employees, publication and distribution of complaint and investigation procedures, and increased consistency of processes across departments.

As we make informal suggestions to city department leadership on how to improve processes and minimize recurring issues, we also take stock of our own internal capacity, resources, and needs in order to set departmental priorities that are in alignment with our mission to serve employees in an efficient and expedient manner. Our internal priorities areas are to: offer performance management and leadership coaching to employees in managerial roles, launch anti-polarization and hate prevention training, improved outreach, maintain case management efficiency and sustain high performance benchmarks and lead change management efforts for departments during leadership changes.



In this report, we will detail our efforts to be accountable to the system and the individuals we serve and share how we hold ourselves to highest ethical and industry standards of practice. This report will also detail what steps we have taken to attain greater visibility among City staff, how we are conducting our outreach efforts and our plans for being available as City employees return to office after COVID restrictions. In the coming year, we will focus on our 2023 priorities, moving towards a more robust prevention focused coaching program for City staff and managers, improving Change Management protocols, and continuing to focus on moving cases through our office from conflict to resolution.



# Note from the Director

Executive Order 2023-02 went into effect on Monday, February 6<sup>th</sup>, 2023 to sunset the employee, contractor, and volunteer vaccine mandates for the City of Seattle. This is a monumental event highlighting the upheaval caused by a deadly pandemic. Lives impacted, family and work connections disrupted, livelihoods interrupted or lost—we as a community faced all of that and learned everlasting lessons about resilience.

The Office of the Employee Ombud (OEO) offered a safe listening and reporting platform when the mandate and all other pandemic related policies were introduced. We are once again ready to support our community as new realities take shape. Our office received a surge of cases during this year and, as with many employers in the region, we saw turnover of our staff as well. Despite all of these factors, I can share with confidence that we have served City employees with integrity and sustained our efforts to earn employee trust.



By virtue of this report, our charter and our personal outreach efforts, we strive to make sure City employees have greater understanding and trust for the way we handle information provided to us. This year, I was elected to the board of directors of the International Ombuds Association. An organization that provides the baseline for operations and standards of practice for Ombuds working in the US and beyond. This distinct honor is particularly important for a new office like ours because it validates our efforts to uphold the industry standards for conducting ourselves in an honest, impartial, and informal manner.

As the City workforce returns to office, we reaffirm our commitment to be a sincere listening ear. We will be here to offer them guidance on navigating conflict without jeopardizing precious workplace relationships and without escalating the situation. We will offer solutions that are practical and lead to respectful co-existence. For all the matters brought to us that cannot be served by an informal discursive intervention, we commit to serving as a bridge to other City resources that are available to serve employees. I feel fortunate that we have built a community around our place of work. OEO and its staff of six, works diligently to brainstorm process improvement ideas that make our community more equitable, more inclusive, more aware and filled with grace as we reform ourselves.

Best Regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Amarah Khan".

Dr. Amarah Khan



# Office Structure & Updates

2022 represented some of the most challenging and inspiring opportunities since our office was created in 2019. Conflict resolution work requires trust and a depth of knowledge between colleagues that cannot be developed without time to understand each other and build relationships.

This year, we welcomed three new members to our team: Kang Su Kim as Office Coordinator, who joined us in March; Rachel Nicholson as Assistant Ombud for Capacity Building who joined us in May, and Isar Mahanian as Case Manager, who joined us in July. We were also grateful that we were able to make Christopher Artis a permanent member of the OEO team as our Senior Education and Training Coordinator. Christopher recently accepted a position as the Workforce Equity Director in SDHR. We are thrilled that the city will continue to benefit from his knowledge and passion to bring the equity work forward. Each new member has brought their individual style and knowledge to their role, and they have made us a richer team.

Our office also experienced a structural transition as HRIU and OEO reviewed the [ADR Program's founding documents](#) and determined that the OEO has the same mandates of impartiality, confidentiality, and informality. The ADR Program was officially transitioned to be housed in the OEO in 2022. While in general the parameters of service have not changed, there are some differences between OEO and the ADR Program. One is that all OEO staff who handle cases are trained mediators and provide mediation in-house as part of our services, where the ADR Program referred mediations to the Inter-local Group for mediation. Additionally, the OEO has a systemic focus and functions as an independent office, allowing our office more latitude to provide recommendations for systemic issues when they arise.

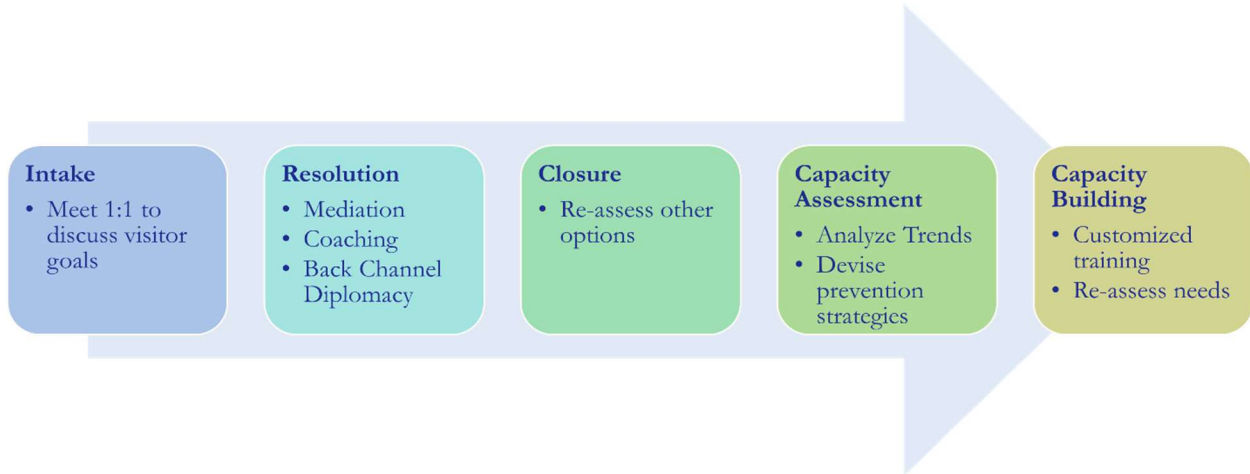
As we shared with the coalition of Seattle unions, OEO will continue ADR's work by providing voluntary and confidential mediation, conciliation, and facilitation services and by providing conflict management trainings.





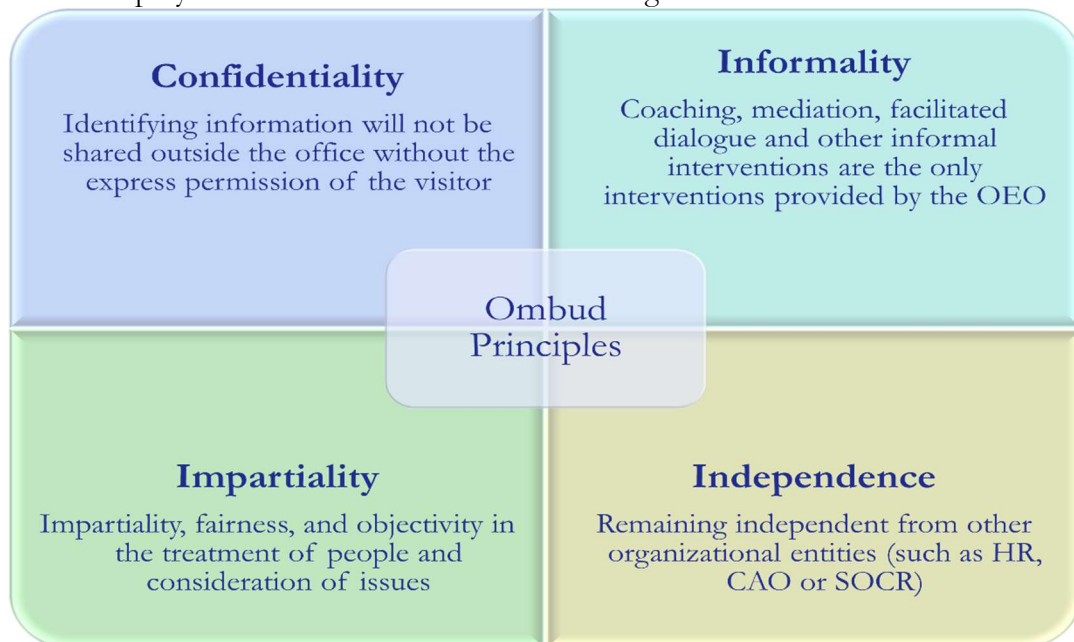
# Case Management Process

Given the complexity of cases, this case management process, particularly in intake and resolution phases, will vary based on the needs and goals of the visitor.<sup>1</sup> What remains a constant is that employees reporting concerns are empowered to decide what path to resolution they wish to take.



# Office Tenets

The Office of the Employee Ombud has four main tenets that guide our work.



<sup>1</sup> In this report, any City employee (referred to as visitor, reporter, or client) who reports a unique incident/concern adds a new data point to our system, allowing the ability to track issues or behaviors to identify trends.





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# Outreach

The Ombuds profession has been around for centuries, yet the efficacy of our work is not well known to everyone. In this section, we detail our efforts to reach City of Seattle employees, as well as the efforts we make to stay visible and informed about the community of practice as Ombuds. Internal outreach includes a review of the efforts we have undertaken to connect directly with employees across the City so they can better understand our work and how we can assist them. Our external outreach efforts are focused more on ongoing professional development of our staff and establishing our office in the broader ombud industry and among like professionals. Our office is doing innovative work, particularly in the area of hate crimes and crimes of bias and has been connecting with other cities around this work.

Our outreach efforts are largely guided by either the existence of active conflicts or based on the relationships we have been building with City departments over time. This approach appears to be successful as demonstrated by our caseload numbers, up by 49% (201 cases in 2021, and 299 cases in 2022). Ultimately, our message to all stakeholders has been consistent: not all conflict can be resolved, but all conflict can be managed. OEO is proud to serve as the primary conflict management resource for the City of Seattle.

## **Internal Outreach to City Staff**

We strive to make ourselves available to join any staff or team meeting as needed to introduce our office and share more about who we are and what we do so that we can increase awareness and usage of the Ombud office, its processes and what it offers.

We have also attended other large group gatherings, such as the Union Coalition Meeting, where we presented on the office transition of the Alternative Dispute Resolution program, which is now housed in the OEO. Meetings such as the Coalition Meeting, allow us to connect with Union Representatives, who may hear complaints or concerns from their members that they cannot resolve through a grievance process. We have also presented to HR teams at the City, who may also hear from staff about a conflict or concern that might benefit from OEO assistance.

We also continue to maintain our network of Points of Contact within most city departments. We ask each Department Head to name a Point of Contact to serve as a liaison with our office; helping us determine who might be able to answer questions in a case, providing information about department culture and history, and presenting cases and trends we have seen to their leadership.

Finally, our trainings and capacity building efforts are highly effective outreach, since City employees can self-select a training topic that is of interest to them and then learn more about how our office functions and how we can assist them during the session. We have found that many participants will connect with the OEO as the result of learning about our office for the first time through training.

## **External Professional Groups**

We maintain our contacts with external groups to remain credentialed and current with the network of professionals. All of the staff in our office who take cases are members of the International



Ombuds Association (IOA), an international network of organizational ombuds working in all sectors including government, higher education and the private sector. All of our staff attended the IOA conference virtually in April 2022. Three of our staff are CO-OP certified through the IOA, which is a recognition of our expertise in the ombud field in particular. Rachel Nicholson on our team will be representing our office at the 2023 IOA Conference in Seattle. Our Director, Dr. Amarah Khan, was recently elected to serve on the IOA Board of Directors.

The OEO team has begun courses through Erickson Coaching International to attain coaching certifications in 2023. We have also all joined the International Coaching Federation to further our professional connections to other coaches.

We participate and learn from the work of the United States Ombuds Association (USOA), a group dedicated to foster the establishment and professional development of public sector ombuds. Our director serves on the Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging committee and also attended the USOA conference in September of 2022.

The City of Seattle joined the Strong Cities Network in 2022, and our Director presented in Amsterdam in November of 2022 at the Strong Cities Network's Transatlantic Mayoral Dialogue on Preventing Hate, Extremism and Polarization, and Safeguarding Local Democracy. Dr. Khan gave one of the keynote addresses at the event titled "Preventing Hate and Polarization at the Workplace." She participated with other leaders in an exchange of experiences, shared lessons, and best practices around challenges to public safety and local democracy, as well as discussing how these challenges are increasingly interconnected and how cities can establish more preventive responses to these challenges.

This coming year we will explore the development of a local, Seattle based community of practice where conflict management professionals from tech, business and public institutions can meet and discuss solutions to common challenges.









# Accountability & Impact

The OEO sees its mission statement as a guidepost to create impact and lasting change for the employees of the City of Seattle. We measure our success by our progress towards this mission. So much of our work happens behind the scenes and via informal discussions, there are some broad criteria for OEO to measure its success:

1. Number of cases reported and the average uptake in reporting each year.
2. Number of reporters returning to seek assistance or referring someone to OEO.
3. Number of cases reaching desired resolution and the average duration of case cycle.
4. Number of departments/employees attending trainings on topics focused on prevention of harm.
5. Number of systemic trends indicated in our data and the effective reporting of those trends.
6. Feedback data received from training attendees.

As seen on page 16 of this report, we provide our assessment criteria. In August 2022, the OEO had a staff retreat to critically examine our work and impact. We are excited to share below our updated mission statement, which can also be found on our website, and our office's commitment to anti-racism.

## **Ombuds Office Mission**

Empower individuals and teams to navigate conflict into respectful workplace engagement. The mission of the Office of the Employee Ombud is to ensure that employees have access to a resource for informally addressing workplace concerns in a fair and equitable manner. The Ombud Office carries out this mission by way of several complementary approaches:

- We view conflict as an opportunity for dialogue and to transform perspectives.
- We do not shy away from difficult conversations, particularly those about race, gender, and other identities.
- We seek to identify the underlying systemic issues that are generating conflict and to address them through capacity building instead of one-time solutions.

The OEO has been committed to anti-racism since its inception in 2019. We took the opportunity at this year's retreat to document this long-held commitment publicly and in written form on our website, and share it here as well:

## **Commitment to Anti-Racism**

We believe racism is real, persistent, and contributes to other forms of oppression. We acknowledge our own internalized racism, educating ourselves on anti-racism and applying this knowledge to our practice. The OEO prioritizes team conversations about race and has created a culture of respectful and challenging discourse. We validate the experiences of all visitors to our office.





## How We Monitor Systemic Trends

With each unique case we receive, the OEO strives to serve the individual and at the same time improve our workplace culture citywide. We do this by resolving individual concerns and also analyzing each individual case as a means of learning about larger patterns, trends, and themes throughout the system. This frequent systemic review helps our office to advocate for meaningful change and improvement in City policies and procedures. As a confidential resource, we cannot share specifics of the cases brought to our office, which at times makes it difficult to demonstrate the impact of our work. In this section, we will detail our efforts to be accountable to the system and the individuals we serve and share how we hold ourselves to highest ethical and industry standards of practice.

A substantial measure of impact and accountability is our commitment to monitoring and affecting systemic trends. Throughout the lifecycle of a case from intake to closure, OEO team tracks and documents trends or systemic issues presented by the case. These are shared with the entire team, and we consult on new and emerging trends and any interventions or recommendations we would like to make. Another way to affect change on systemic issues is through our regular Point of Contact meetings. We ask each Department Head to assign a staff member, often their Head of HR or a Chief of Staff, to be available for regular meetings with our office. These monthly meetings are crucial to exchange information (generally anonymously) and to support the success of any department-wide or localized changes to improve workplace culture. As with each City department, the OEO Director reports to a member of the Mayor's E-Team and gives bi-weekly verbal summaries to her superiors on emerging issues and systemic concerns.

## Case Audits

Each staff member of the OEO that handles cases goes through a routine audit process. Every two weeks, all open cases are reviewed by other team members. During those audits, we exchange input, strategies, review any impediments to resolution, ensure consistency of service across our cases, note any trends, and determine whether there is connection to be made with our capacity building function. We audit our case note process in our online system, EthicsPoint, to ensure note taking methodology is consistent and information is anonymized while also retaining information necessary for tracking systemic trends.

## Training Evaluations

As referenced above, the OEO case management cycle includes assessing whether there could be some intervention in the form of training, or other capacity building initiatives to prevent future conflicts of a similar nature. Discussed in more detail in our [Capacity Building](#) section below, we have developed a number of trainings and interventions. Each training and intervention is followed by an evaluation to help us assess whether the information provided is helpful, relevant, and usable by the participants.

As we receive that feedback, we continually change and update our capacity building initiatives based on the data we collect. We also monitor each case and continue to assess where our training efforts need to change and grow to meet the changing needs of the City. The relationship between cases and training needs occurs in conversations during case audit, but also during monthly trend review



meetings to specifically look at the data compiled and what overarching systemic trends we see. For example, we began to see a repeated concern in our cases that staff, particularly those that work frontline with the public, were working with individuals who may have experienced trauma, and that they did not have the skills or experience to deescalate when situations became heated. We developed our Trauma Informed Care training to address that concern and are continuing to refine that training to address the concerns that staff have brought to our office.

On average, 96% of participants who took our post-training survey said that the quality of the training was either good or very good, Additionally, 86% said the training they participated in refreshed them with new ideas. Below you will find some testimonials about the effectiveness and quality of our trainings:

*This training has been the most impactful I've attended yet and would recommend it over other trainings to my colleagues.* -Preventing Racism Participant

*So much valuable information and suggestions. Will make you reconsider how you've handled situations in the past and changes you'll make for the future.* -Effective Management Participant

*"Refreshingly interactive and the content is useful in both your personal and professional life.* - Conflict Management Participant



# 2022 at a Glance

## Statistics

**299 Cases**

**Backlog:**

**0 cases**

**Cases Closed:**

**97%**

**Average working  
days cases open:**

**35**

## Systemic Trends

Discrimination  
complaints

Consistency and clarity in  
discipline and policies

Hiring & Promotion  
processes

Fear of Retaliation

Out Of Class Issues

ADA Issues

Reintegration plans

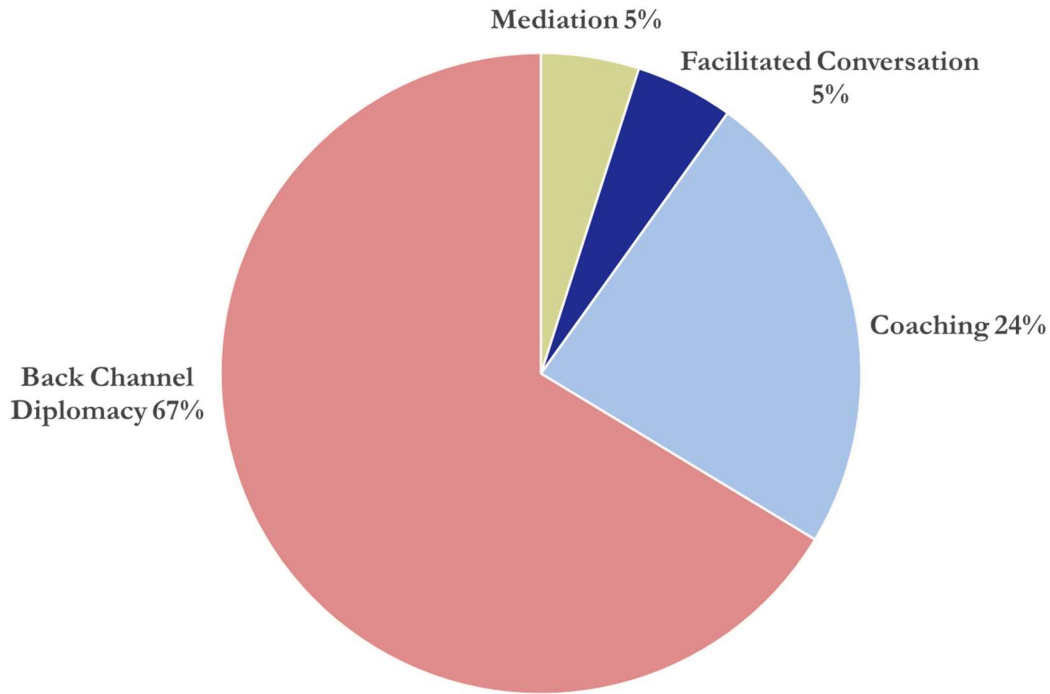
Conflicts of interest

## Case Resolution






In the year 2022, we achieved either partial or full resolution on 73% of our cases, while 20% had no action requested, and 7% did not achieve resolution.

## OEO Case Interventions

As mentioned above, our process is highly customized to meet the needs of the visitors to our office. In 2022, our office engaged in the following intervention strategies:



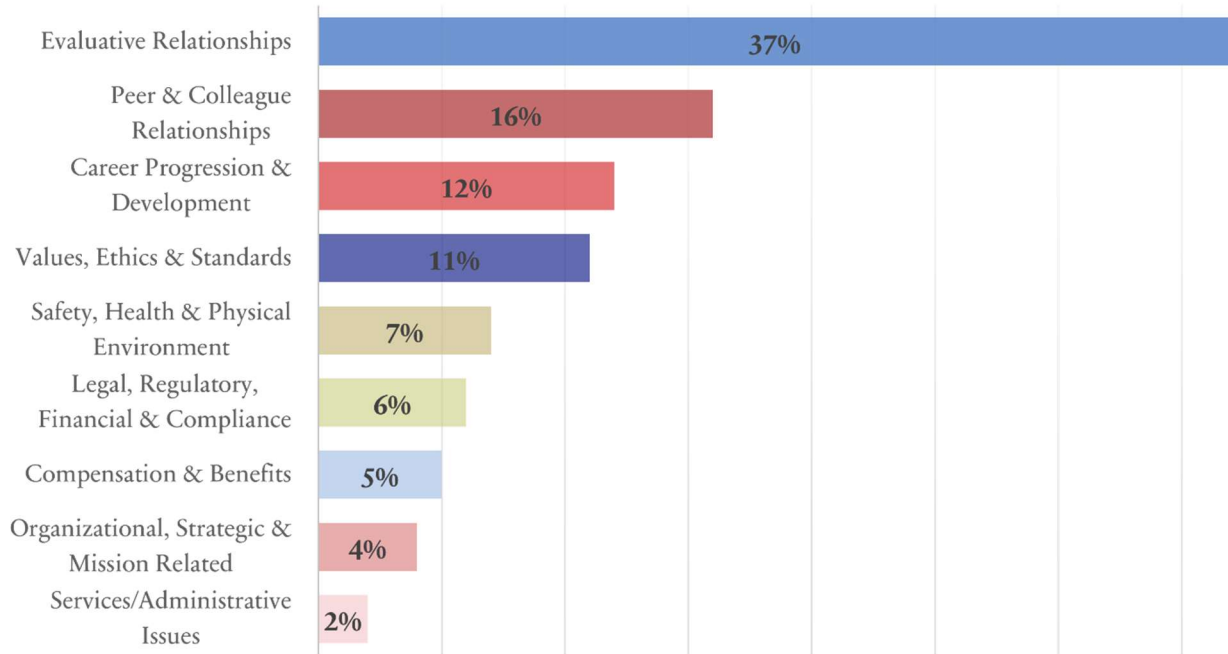
## DEFINITIONS

 <p><b>BACK CHANNEL DIPLOMACY</b></p> <p>Raising a concern to leadership without identifying the reporter of that concern. The goal is to work with leadership to provide information such that they can address and resolve concerns within their unit.</p>	 <p><b>COACHING</b></p> <p>Working directly with the visitor on their own communication and conflict resolution strategies to help them resolve conflicts without direct OEO intervention or involvement.</p>	 <p><b>FACILITATED CONVERSATION</b></p> <p>Convening a large group dialogue or listening session designed to help resolve issues within the group itself, or to raise concerns to leadership.</p>	 <p><b>MEDIATION</b></p> <p>Facilitating a small group dialogue, usually 2-3 people only, designed to help the individuals involved address harms they have caused to each other</p>	 <p><b>** TRAINING OFFERED</b></p> <p>Working with the leadership in a unit to identify issues within their unit that could be improved or resolved through a training or other capacity building effort developed by the OEO and customized to unit-specific needs. This was included in our first two Annual Reports but has since become standard practice in all cases.</p>
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## IOA Reporting Categories



The OEO practices to the standards of the International Ombud Association (IOA). We track issues using the IOA Standard Reporting Categories. Each case may include more than one category. For example, in a case where an individual is upset about their relationship with their manager and their performance evaluation, we might characterize the case as being both an issue of “Evaluative Relationship” but also, if their performance evaluation could hinder future career prospects, might be an issue of “Career Progression & Development.” Full descriptions of IOA categories are available at the IOA [website](#).



## Referring a case for formal process

The OEO will conduct a case intake with any current staff member at the City of Seattle. We listen to the individual's story and help them determine the best course of action to achieve their desired resolution. If the visitor is engaged in a formal process, the OEO does not intervene. We can offer support before and after any formal processes. Other entities across the city might refer cases to our office. The OEO may also refer visitors to other offices if we feel a formal solution is required for the employee's desired resolution or if we have exhausted all informal avenues. The OEO operates with a spirit of collaboration and connection with other city departments. We often see cases passed between different entities such as the Office of Civil Rights, HRIU, departmental HR or SDHR.

The role and scope of the OEO remains in the sphere of influence and informal processes. For the 299 cases worked in 2022, the OEO referred out less than 2% of those cases, meaning that the vast majority of cases went beyond an intake to assess options or provide coaching. Our office does not have the enforcement authority to change policy, render discipline, or engage in formal investigations. However, we have built trust and respect across the city and our collaboration with senior leaders does provide some channels for creating change.

This section offers more transparency on how we work internally to ensure we are staying true to our mission. Many of our case resolutions require systemic change which our office does not own but can recommend, support, and guide, whenever leaders and departments are ready to do so. Our strategy to impact change as informed by our case data, is to conduct ourselves within the scope of our informal status.



# Case Outcomes

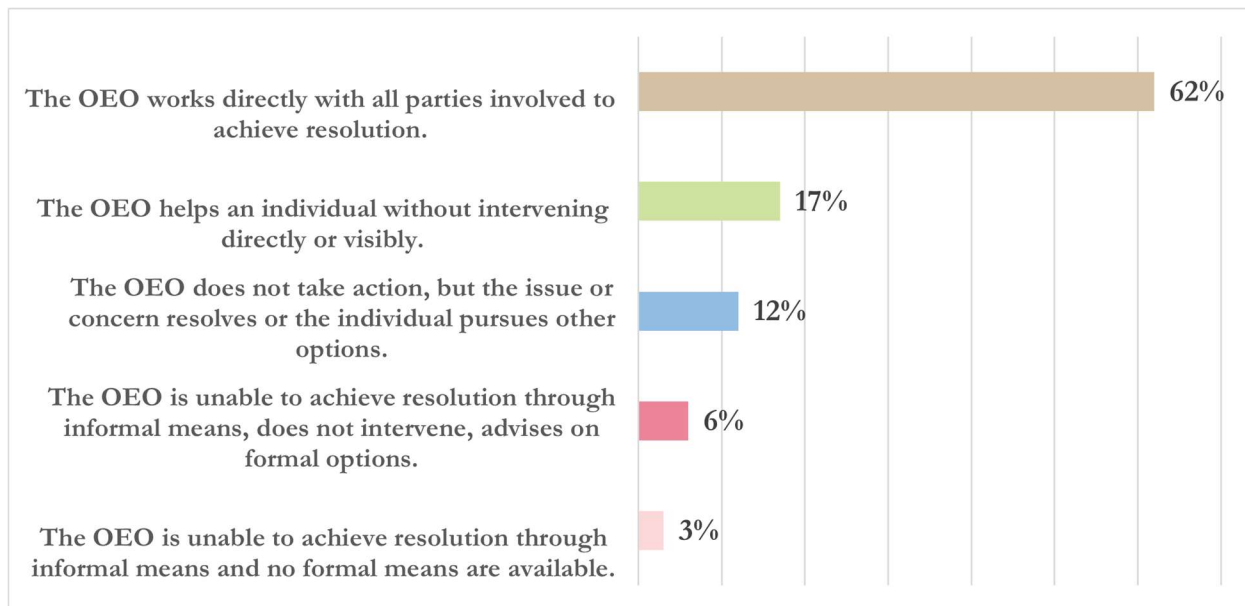
There are two predominant metrics by which the OEO tracks case outcomes. First, we track how the OEO intervenes with each case that comes to the office. There are five categories we use to describe our interventions:

- 1) Working directly with all parties to achieve resolution.
- 2) Helping an individual without intervening directly or visibly.
- 3) Taking no action, but the issue resolves due to other factors, or the individual pursues other options on their own.
- 4) Advising visitors on formal options when we are unable to reach a resolution informally.
- 5) Acknowledging when we are unable to achieve resolution through informal means and no formal means are available.

The goal of tracking these outcomes is to understand the types of interventions most commonly used as we are supporting employees across the city with their concerns.

Second, we measure the outcome of the case by tracking whether the respectful resolution sought by the employee utilizing OEO's help is achieved. There are 4 categories for outcomes by respectful resolution: 1) Achieved, 2) Partially Achieved, 3) Not Achieved, and 4) No Action Requested. While there are instances where an employee requests resolutions which the OEO cannot help achieving, we do work hard to help each visitor achieve a resolution or improve their situation as a result of engaging with the OEO process.

## Case Outcomes by OEO Intervention



It should be noted that case outcomes by resolution and case outcomes by intervention categories are somewhat, but not entirely correlated. For cases where there was no direct involvement with the parties, for example, their respectful resolution may have been achieved but would have been logged as “No Action Requested” in terms of case outcomes by resolution. For cases in 2022, 62% were resolved fully or partially by direct involvement of the OEO. This means the OEO had permission to work with others across the city to resolve a case. This could be through back-channel diplomacy, mediation, or facilitated conversation. 17% of cases involved the OEO helping an individual without a direct or obvious intervention.

For example, if we coach an employee through a conflict and their conflict resolves, we helped without a direct intervention. If there is a policy question, we might ask a leader some questions to get clarity, but we did not ask for the employee’s respectful resolution in those spaces. 12% of our case outcomes involved the OEO not taking action, but the issue resolved itself. Sometimes employees come to the OEO and discuss a concern but ask that we not do anything, or do not give us permission to take action. They may take action themselves to resolve their concerns, or their concerns might resolve naturally. In 6% of our cases, we were unable to achieve a resolution through the scope of our office, but we advised the visitor on other formal options.

This could mean directing people to formal processes through their own HR department, or HRIU or SOCR because their respectful resolution would not be within our scope. For example, if someone wants to file a formal complaint about their coworker, our office would be unable to do so, so we would refer them to their own HR department. In 3% of our cases, we were unable to achieve a resolution through informal means and no formal means were available. For example, someone might have an issue with a city-wide policy and our office could have conversations with leaders about it, but ultimately, we cannot change policy and if the City leadership were unable or unwilling to change the policy, there might be no formal options for the visitor to achieve resolution.

Looking ahead in 2023, the OEO will be revisiting the categories used to track intervention. As our cases are increasing, we are finding that there are other applicable outcomes beyond the five we have already identified. For example, one common outcome is that the OEO does intervene visibly and with multiple parties, but the issue either does not resolve or partially resolves. Other potential introductions of new categories of outcomes are 1) a resolution is achieved, but not necessarily as a result of our intervention, 2) a systemic intervention occurred, but the particular case issue and reporter was kept anonymous, and 3) no intake occurred because the reporter did not respond or did not want to meet with an ombud.

The OEO is going to introduce another metric in 2023 to monitor its effectiveness. A survey will be sent out to all visitors once OEO engagement has ended. It will be voluntary to complete, but we hope to provide another tool to better understand the impact of our work from the perspective of the individual employees who use our office. While we get many testimonials of how much better employees feel after working with us, it will be very helpful to quantify and measure with more numerical data the impact of our office.

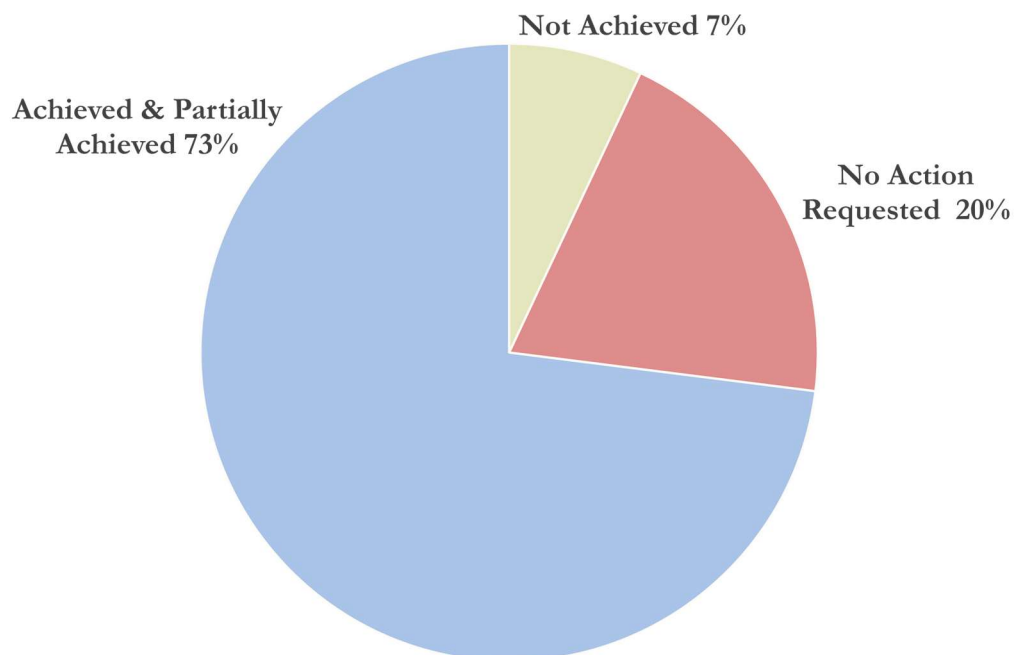


## Case Outcomes by Expected Resolution

When a visitor comes with a complaint or concern, the OEO works to identify what the reporter's "respectful resolution" to the situation would be. We then determine a path forward to achieve resolution with the employee. Sometimes employees ask for information or clarity about a process, or sometimes their respectful resolution is an improved relationship with a coworker.

Overwhelmingly, we can achieve or partially achieve the desired resolution. Sometimes employees want us to be aware of a concern, but they do not want any action to be taken on the matter.

A small percentage of resolutions are not achieved. In many of those cases, we are unable to achieve resolution because the requested resolution requires a formal process or because it could be harmful to others, such as granting an exception to an established policy. It is important to note that even though a resolution is "not achieved" that does not mean the OEO did not make every attempt to work within the confines of the informal process and support the visitor.



Experience has shown that people's respectful resolutions may also change over the course of the case. This can happen especially when employees first come to us, and they are feeling very raw about their situation and ready to take action. Sometimes employees change their mind because some cool-down time sets in and they realize they want a different approach, or after consulting with one of the ombuds they realize consequences (positive or negative) that different approaches may have. Upon closure of a case, each ombud will review the original or modified respectful resolution and determine whether it was achieved completely, partially, not achieved, or no action was taken. Part of the employee survey that the OEO is launching in 2023 will also capture whether the employee feels their issue was resolved, and how they felt about the services they received.





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# Systemic Trends & Recommendations

We have made substantial changes to our systemic trends monitoring and are now tracking systemic trends more quickly as we see them emerge in our cases. This year, we noted emerging across some departments in three specific areas of concerns reported by employees:

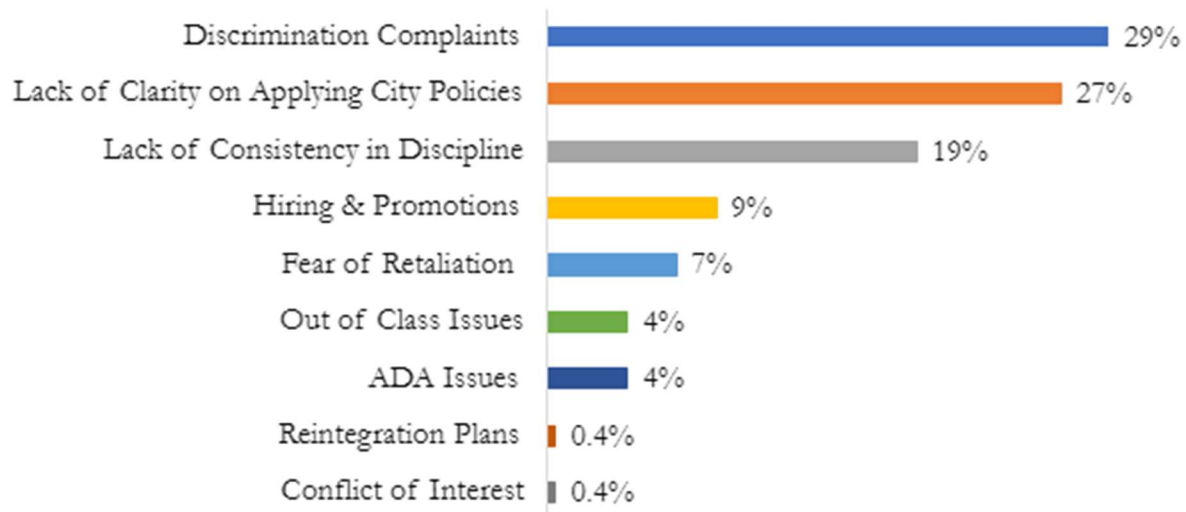
- Workplace Culture has become too rigid and corrective efforts are taking a long time.
- Leadership Capacity needs enhancing since people are often promoted without learning effective people management skills.
- HR Processes & Communication need to be more transparent and consistent to restore trust.

We continue to monitor ongoing complaints (reported in previous OEO reports) regarding Workplace Discrimination, Clarity on Policy, and Consistency in Disciplinary Action.

Based on the systemic trends and the emerging trends, we are making the following generic recommendations to City leaders that should be helpful to any department, work-unit or team. Our recommendations are non-binding and are based on our expertise as conflict mitigation professionals. Providing recommendations is an industry standard of best practice for systemic improvements and prevention strategies.

## 2022 Systemic Trends & Recommendations

In our previous reports, we have tracked citywide trends year-to-year that have remained consistent since our office began taking cases in 2019. Of the 299 cases the OEO worked in 2022, here are systemic trends that were noted by visitors.



## Emerging Trends & Recommendation

Over the past year, OEO has gained more staff support and capacity to build better systems to analyze our trends and synthesize data. As a result, we have begun an ongoing process of tracking emerging trends and have expanded the trends we are actively monitoring.

### 1. Department Culture

Throughout our office's tenure, we have been asked to consult on issues of departmental culture because of our role as an objective and neutral entity. These were smaller requests and tended to include smaller units or areas within a department that were looking to make lasting cultural changes. As we have gained more trust and visibility, our office has begun to receive requests with wider scope, encapsulating bigger groups and divisions. Often these situations are brought to us by department leadership, who feel stymied in initiating cultural changes and are asking for an objective entity to support and assess the root causes of some of the challenges in their divisions.

Often, our office begins by spending time with the staff in direct listening sessions, 1:1 chats, or small group discussions to better understand the issues and to gather up observations and recommendations for leadership on impactful next steps. The more large-scale efforts we engage in, the more we find ourselves recommending improved Leadership Capacity and HR Processes & Communication, two emerging trends discussed below, as a means to make lasting cultural changes.

### 2. Leadership Capacity

Many managers are put in supervisory positions because of their excellent work as individual contributors, which does not always translate to excellent work as a steward of human capital. In many of our cases we hear about a lack of leadership capacity. This includes managers who self-identify as lacking skills as well as supervisees expecting more from their leaders. This lack of skills is not necessarily an individual's fault and not unique to any one department- many of these lapses can be attributed to systemic issues that manifest in leadership problems. We see this trend in two main areas: communication and process awareness.

Process awareness is the capacity a leader has to implement performance management and corrective action in a timely manner. The OEO often hears from individuals with concerns about fairness in both areas. This can be a result of management not understanding either of these processes and lacking the resources to receive training on these areas. For example, employees have shared their confusion when they receive a mid-level performance review. When they ask their manager about their review, they are told that the manager never gives anyone the highest marks. This is not a written policy, nor a directive from central HR, but rather a practice that a manager has made in place of directives from senior leadership. The manager has not taken time to communicate their practices to employees, who are then surprised and frustrated to learn about the practice during the annual review process.

Another aspect of performance management we have heard about is that there are no opportunities in the standard evaluation process for individual contributors to give feedback





upwards towards management, thus perpetuating their feeling that their management does not care about their feedback, and potentially allowing existing problems in their leadership to persist. We have repeatedly encountered instances of lapses in documenting what should be standard management practices. Managers and supervisors across departments and at all levels of the organization sometimes fail to document behavior, performance, timelines and other agreements and start doing so only when they are faced with a conflict. That lack of documentation often makes it very hard to initiate corrective action or relationship repair.

### **Generic Recommendations for all City Departments:**

- Review hiring criteria for managers to ensure that both technical and managerial skills are included in the selection process.
- Make performance evaluation training/Q&A mandatory for all new managers- a sort of “New Manager Orientation.”
- Review all performance evaluation processes to ensure consistency.
- All performance evaluations should provide a mechanism for employees to give feedback to their managers. Additionally, retaliation protections must be reinforced, so employees feel comfortable giving their managers feedback.

If managers form a consistent practice of effectively giving and receiving feedback, they will ensure everyone on their team can grow and perform at their best. In addition to unsatisfactory performance evaluations, we also hear from employees that their supervisors bring up issues in their performance evaluations that they have never heard before. Supervisors do not feel equipped to have these conversations outside of a performance evaluation. We will offer our office’s support in addressing this issue with the following:

- The OEO will develop in partnership with SDHR, a Holistic Leadership Training series in 2023, building on existing content on effective feedback and situational leadership.
- The OEO will work towards coaching certification in 2023 to increase management capacity by offering more supervisors individualized coaching. Our goal is to offer every leader a chance to succeed, but also provide decision makers the opportunity to part ways with employees who chose not to align themselves with City values despite coaching and correction.

## **3. HR Processes & Communication**

Many individuals who visit our office are mistrustful or wary of internal HR. They see HR as working for management, not for them, and they do not feel that they will get their needs met by engaging with HR in their department. HR, in serving a compliance function as part of their role, is often tasked with having challenging conversations with both staff and leadership about following policies and procedures. They also have to communicate how staff and leadership must act in order to follow all relevant laws and regulations. HR also receives complaints first from many staff when there is a conflict or concern, and staff may not have a clear understanding of what they are looking for or what HR in their role can reasonably accomplish.



As we have begun analyzing what many employees describe as a loss of trust in departmental HR, we have found clear areas for improved communication and better publicized processes that could create more consistency and build more trust among staff over time.

In addition, staff are aware of the differences in policies and procedures department to department, and those inconsistencies create perceptions of unfairness among staff, who see they might get different treatment if they worked for another department.

**Recommendations for Rebuilding trust:**

HR teams across the City should provide clear communication to follow up on complaints received by them. That communication should include an outline of the process and a clear demarcation of where a complaint is in that process (e.g., insufficient information to proceed to investigation, needs additional discussion or review, proceeding to investigation, or closing out due to noted reasons).

- All complaint and investigation procedures should be outlined and available for staff to review in a centralized location before they submit a complaint.

Our office has also noted impacts of previously terminated employees who were re-hired by a different department. There are policies surrounding review of application materials and personnel records within the hiring process, but these are inconsistently applied. Candidates with a disciplinary record including serious or minor infractions should be made known to the hiring authority so they can take appropriate steps and effectively reintegrate the employee into the workforce.

We have already begun to offer our office's support in addressing this concern by: Partnering with Central HR who drafted a potential solution that is under review with the SDHR policy team. In the coming year, we will continue to monitor these discussions and help the department move this solution forward.



# Capacity Building

The OEO is divided into two functions or “wings”- case management and capacity building. Though these are separate, we collaborate to inform both of our approaches. For example, we use data from case management to guide the development of specific capacity building efforts based on the trends we are seeing. Capacity building includes not only our training, but also facilitation, involvement in networks and outreach, and performance coaching.

## Training



Our training vision for 2023 consists of two main pillars- awareness and action. The overall goal of our training catalog is to increase the inclusivity of our workplace. To do so, we will be adding a Holistic Leadership Series to our action pillar to address the leadership capacity issues we have identified as systemic. We will also bolster our awareness pillar with a training on Gender Justice.

In 2022, the OEO trained over 1500 City of Seattle staff over the course of 73 sessions. These 73 sessions were all “live,” meaning either occurring in-person or over Microsoft Teams/Webex with a real-time and active facilitation. The OEO found that course content was better received through discussion with the facilitator and other participants rather than through a self-lead module. As a result, we cemented the switch to only offering live classes from 2022 forward. On a rotating basis, the OEO offered via Cornerstone four classes: Bystander Intervention, Conflict Management, Preventing Discrimination and Harassment, and Preventing Discrimination. We also facilitated the following trainings at the request of specific units and/or departments: Cultural Intelligence, Divided We Fall: Preventing Polarization in the Workplace, Effective Management, Giving and



Receiving Feedback, and Trauma-Informed Care (2022 Priority 3). Below is a breakdown of class attendance. Further information on each of these courses can be found on our website.

Course Title	Sessions	Participants
Bystander Intervention	10	338
Conflict Management	10	157
Preventing Discrimination & Harassment	8	113
Preventing Racism	10	141
Cultural Intelligence	1	16
Divided We Fall	4	58
Effective Management	6	163
Giving and Receiving Feedback	10	210
Trauma-Informed Care	14	342
<b>Total</b>	<b>73</b>	<b>1538</b>

The OEO’s newest training, Divided We Fall: Preventing Polarization in the Workplace, is a direct result of an Executive Order signed by previous Mayor Jenny Durkan to combat hate crimes and crimes of bias in Seattle ([Executive Order 2020-01: Addressing Hate Crimes and Crimes of Bias](#)). This Executive Order named the OEO as one of the departments responsible for addressing these issues. Working group sessions following this order tasked the OEO with conducting a city-wide training on preventing hate and polarization in the workplace. Course objectives include:

- Educate participants on the psychological and social influences that cause us to resist exposure to dissenting viewpoints.
- Equip participants with the critical thinking/research skills to separate mis/disinformation from credible, objective sources of news and data.
- Teach practical communication techniques to help participants confidently engage in constructive, good-faith conversations with people who hold differing views.
- Equip people to address conflict in the workplace in a constructive manner.

Divided We Fall is different from other anti-polarization trainings as it has no “agenda.” The OEO is not forcing participants to believe in certain things or trying to change anyone’s mind. Instead, we focus on building relationships with people and being able to communicate an individual’s own values. The course is structured around many conversations with a partner in which participants build relationships through discussion topics. Most of the class is discussion-based to give participants the experience of building a relationship with someone, regardless of their beliefs on



polarizing topics. It allows participants to practice having conversations with people they may disagree with and to learn from those individuals and conversations. From our multiple pilot sessions, we have heard that participants enjoy this format and found it helpful to their learning.

Following several pilot sessions and after fine-tuning the content, the OEO is partnering with Seattle Fire Department in 2023 to deliver Divided We Fall to all 1400 SFD staff. We are excited to present this content to as many City employees as possible throughout the rest of the year, aligning with 2022's priority of developing and rolling out anti-extremism training.

In addition to our new course, the OEO has also implemented optional brainstorming/Q&A sessions following unit/department specific trainings. This gives course participants the chance to digest the material and ask any clarifying questions. It gives space for discussion for specific scenarios participants are struggling with and provides a safe place to discuss both interpersonal issues and systemic issues at large. The OEO will often separate these sessions by management level, so participants feel more comfortable expressing concerns.

## Facilitation

The OEO also serves as a resource for facilitating conversations around difficult topics. In the 2022 year, those topics have included race and social justice, management effectiveness, and overall departmental climate. One format the OEO uses to better understand dynamics and patterns within a group is by facilitating listening sessions. In these sessions, the OEO listens to the concerns of staff members as a group, often without management present, and then identifies patterns and offers recommendations to help management come up with solutions to address the issues.

In addition, the OEO has assisted in facilitating racial affinity caucus groups and discussions around departmental climate surveys. In all of our group facilitations with staff, the OEO helps identify underlying and larger issues within groups, provides recommendations, and offers possible solutions.

## Coaching

In order to build the capacity of our City's leaders, the OEO will expand our offerings to include a more robust coaching program. Early 2023, OEO staff members have already started undergoing coaching training through Erikson Coaching International, a nationally renowned and International Coaching Federation Certified program. Though OEO staff have been coaching City employees informally during the course of our Conflict Management cycle, this enhanced effort will increase our skills and ability to provide a more structured coaching approach—one that is focused on prevention of recurring conflict. This aligns with our overall capacity building direction and goal of improving management capacity across the city. It also aligns with 2022's priority of increasing the OEO's capacity in identifying managerial skills that could help prevent team conflict. Finally, correction and ensuring a respectful workplace is part of our mandate and extending performance is another means to achieve that mandate.

## Executive Order

As addressed in the previous section, the OEO was named in Mayor Durkan's Executive Order 2020-01: Addressing Hate Crimes and Crimes of Bias. Following discussions after this declaration,



the OEO was tasked with creating a training around anti-polarization/extremism, contributing to a project regarding discipline data sharing. We were also asked to continue efforts to work on the Humanize the Workplace project, which was a project to provide better responses to larger societal events that may be traumatizing or upsetting to staff.

While creating the Divided We Fall training, we met with various subject-matter experts from across the world, including the FBI, Department of Homeland Security, as well as independent polarization researchers. During the research phase, we connected with the Strong Cities Network, which brings together stakeholders from all over the world to discuss approaches to preventing targeted violence, hate motivated incidents, polarization, and radicalization.

On November 3, 2022, with the approval from the Mayor's office, the City of Seattle joined the Strong Cities Network. As an official member City, Dr. Khan traveled to The Hague in the Netherlands to be a keynote speaker in the Strong Cities Network's Trans-Atlantic Mayoral Dialogue on Preventing Hate, Extremism, and Polarization and Safeguarding Local Democracy. The City's approach to preventing radicalization through our discussion-based course was well-received and many members of the Network wanted to learn more. As a result of this reception, Assistant Ombud Rachel Nicholson and Senior Training & Education Coordinator Christopher Artis were invited to and participated on a panel at the Network's conference in Denver in December 2022- Strengthening Transatlantic City-Level Cooperation against Extremist and Hate-Motivated Violence.

Insights from both conferences were profound, and the OEO is working towards making our membership in this Network more well-known to other City stakeholders. An exciting outcome of Seattle's participation in the SCN is the ongoing discussion with Seattle Department of Education and Early Learning to bring an interactive game called 'Harmony Square' to Seattle Public Schools. This computerized gaming module is designed for middle to high school aged students who can learn about inclusion, anti-racism and anti-polarization messaging from a gaming platform. Developed by researchers at Cambridge and piloted in Swedish schools, this learning tool is being hailed as an early intervention against youth radicalization and extreme division.



# 2023 Priorities

OEO has set the following priority areas of growth and focus for itself:

**Priority 1:** Offer performance management and leadership coaching to City leaders, Managers, and Supervisors.

- The entire OEO case management team will be completing coaching certifications in the coming year, and hope to be able to offer coaching to the City by late 2023.

**Priority 2:** Launch Anti-Polarization and Hate Prevention training for City of Seattle employees.

- This training is now finalized and being piloted in several City departments. We hope to launch more broadly in late 2023.

**Priority 3:** Better outreach to City staff so they can avail themselves of Ombud services.

- Our goal is to focus on City staff housed outside the downtown core. We had to curtail some of the outreach and visibility work during COVID. OEO will resume this effort in 2023.

**Priority 4:** Maintain case management efficiency and sustain our high performance benchmarks on scheduling and processing employee concerns.

- We are still maintaining a zero case back log and an average of 35 working days to close a case.

**Priority 5:** Lead Change Management efforts for City departments as they go through leadership or procedural changes.

- OEO is in a unique position to offer confidential listening sessions prior to and after significant changes are on the horizon for a City department.



# Conclusion

In the coming year, we will focus on our 2023 priorities, moving towards a more robust coaching program for City staff and managers, improving Change Management protocols, and continuing to focus on moving cases efficiently through our office, from conflict to resolution.

