

**Annual Report**  
*of the*  
**Ombudsmen Statewide**  
**Committee**

Court Year 2022 – 2023



NEW JERSEY COURTS

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# Meet the 2024 Ombudsmen



**Dominique Brooks**  
Atlantic/Cape May



**Laura Kursar**  
Bergen



**Natonya Phillips**  
Burlington



**Tenicha Townsend-Mobley**  
Camden



**Sarah Hatcher**  
Essex



**Jillian Talerico**  
Hudson



**Ijeoma Umoru**  
Mercer



**Luis Hernandez**  
Middlesex



**Lauren Wicke**  
Monmouth



**Jennifer Shultis**  
Morris/Sussex



**Vanessa Rouillon**  
Passaic



**Maria Velazquez**  
Union



**Elizabeth Raimondo**  
Somerset/Hunterdon/  
Warren



**James Castaneda**  
Ocean



**Vanessa Cardwell**  
Cumberland/Gloucester/  
Salem



**Maurice Hart**  
AOC Probation  
Services



**Sven Pfahert**  
Superior Court  
Clerk's Office

# Ombudsman Program: Overview and History

*The Ombudsman Program works with the public to address court users concerns and provide procedural assistance, outreach, and information in every vicinage.*

The Ombudsman is a focal point in the vicinage for providing procedural assistance and information about court operations, processes, procedures, and services. The Ombudsman assists self-represented litigants, receives and refers complaints from the public, develops and facilitates outreach programs, and makes referrals to other agencies or services as appropriate.

The mission of the Judiciary Ombudsman Program is:

*To promote an environment of continuous improvement in areas of customer service and equal court access in compliance with court policies and procedures by establishing effective mechanisms for: public information, community relations and court user assistance.*

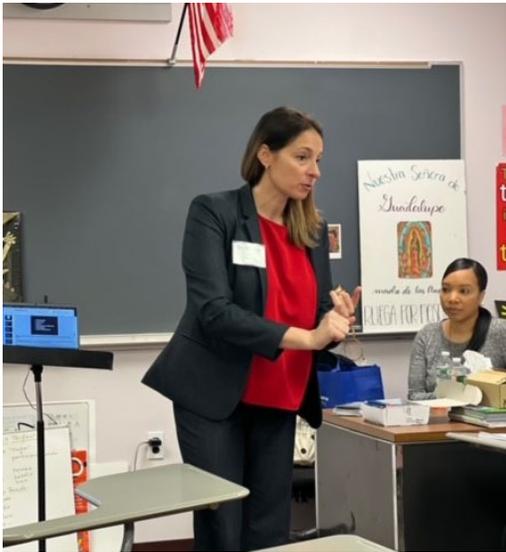
The Ombudsman Program was first proposed by the Task Force on Women in the Courts (now known as Committee on Gender in the Courts, in discussions surrounding the experience of minorities and women in the court system. In 1992, the Task Force on Minority Concerns (now known as Diversity, Inclusion, and Community Engagement) championed this suggestion and authored a report to the Supreme Court on how to enhance the experience and fair treatment of minorities in the court. The report demonstrating a need for an office in the court to provide information on how to navigate the court system and to receive and investigate complaints. A pilot program began in 1997, and in 2005, the Judicial Council approved the program for implementation in all 15 vicinages. Division-specific Ombudsmen were later added for Superior Court Clerk's Office (2016 and Probation Services (2018).

Ombudsman is a Swedish word meaning “representative” and is gender neutral. Within the Judiciary, and in keeping with a long history of providing quality service and to maintain the public’s satisfaction, trust, and confidence, the Ombudsman works to explain court processes, assist the public with forms and procedural guidance, and handle complaints. The Judiciary Ombudsman is a confidential and informal information resource, communication channel, complaint-handler, and a person who helps an organization work for change.



*Morris County Court User Resource Center*

The Judiciary Ombudsman Program has both internal and external customers. Its external customers are members of the public, primarily self-represented court users, as well as attorneys and other stakeholders who rely on court services. Internal customers include all court staff who benefit from the interventions the Ombudsman Program provides, such as divisional staff who spend less time processing deficient or non-conforming documents because of the procedural guidance provided through the Ombudsman’s Office and staff who are able to refer more time-consuming customer service issues to the Ombudsman. Close collaboration between the Ombudsman and divisional management can lead to more effective customer service throughout all vicinage operations. This report highlights some of the accomplishments of the Office of the Ombudsman for the 2022-2023 court year.



*The Hudson Vicinage Ombudsman and Pretrial Services Supervisor attended the St. Dominic Academy Career Day in Jersey City, NJ discussing the role of the Ombudsman, Criminal Justice Reform, and jobs within the Judiciary.*

## Spotlight: Hudson Vicinage Ombudsman's Office



*The Hudson Vicinage Ombudsman in collaboration with the AOC Community Relations Officer, attended the Montclair PRIDE event.*



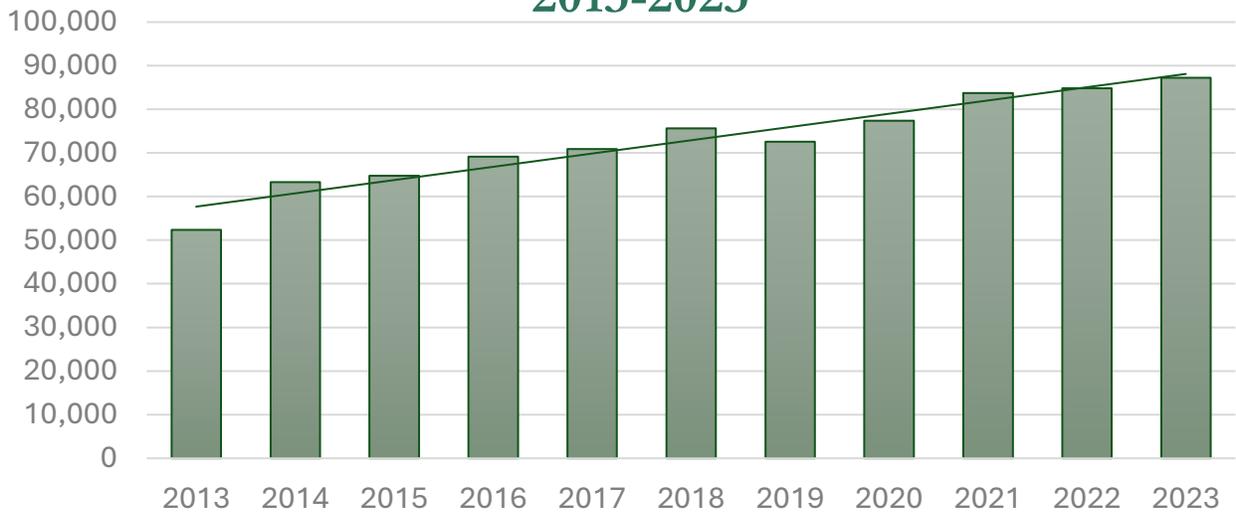
*The Hudson Vicinage Ombudsman and staff attended the Brain Health and Community Resource Fair at Lincoln Park, Jersey City. Over 900 community members were at the event.*

# Statewide Daily Contacts: Ten Year Growth Review

Over the last ten-year period, the number of court users utilizing the services of the Ombudsman Program shows a consistent upward trend. The Ombudsman Program continues to serve more internal and external customers every year. There were 52,385 recorded contacts in 2013 when the program was in its eighth year. In 2023, 87,180 court users utilized the services of ombudsman.

*This is a 66% growth over the ten-year period.*

## Statewide Ombudsman Contacts Ten Year Trend 2013-2023



**Laura Kursar, Bergen Vicinage Ombudsman**

*“In completing my first full year as the Bergen Vicinage Ombudsman, I have found that engaging directly with court users and organizing outreach initiatives has reinvigorated my role within the judicial system, fostering trust and confidence among our community and with court users. The collection of valuable data from these interactions is pivotal in anticipating and meeting the evolving needs of court users.”*

# Statewide Daily Contacts: Mode of Contact

*There are seventeen Ombudsmen serving the New Jersey Courts in each county as well as Probation Services and Superior Court Clerk’s Office. These Ombudsmen track their interactions with court users. Here are some highlights of the total statewide contacts made collectively by all Ombudsmen.*

## Statewide Ombudsmen Contacts

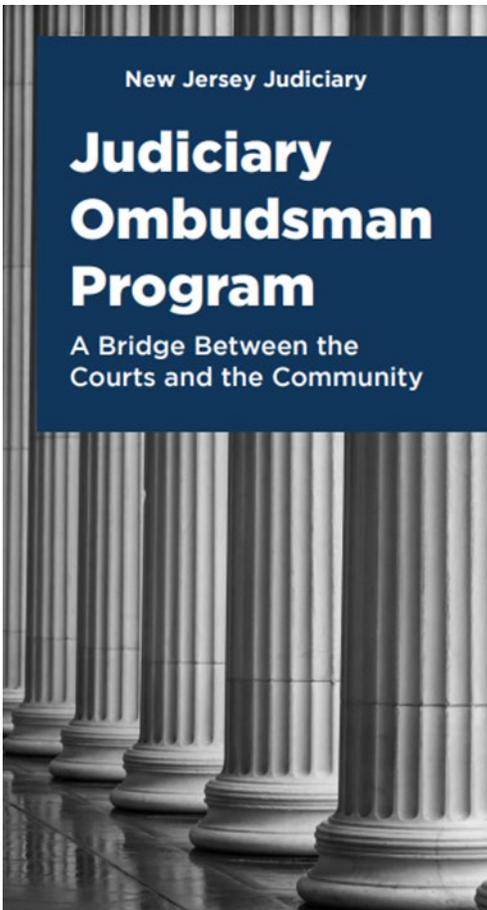
	2022	2023	% Change
Total Contacts	84,778	87,180	+3%
<b>Mode of Contact</b>			
In Person	25,836	35,747	+38%
Telephone/Virtual	36,946	36,512	-1%
Written Communication	21,996	14,912	-32%

There has been a significant increase in ombudsman contacts, particularly in person. This can be attributed to gains in overall interaction with the public, partnerships with trial divisions, and active promotion of Court Users Resource Centers statewide.

The most common mode of contact varies by location. Vicinages that have full-service self-help centers typically have greater numbers of in-person contacts. Demographics also play a role in the mode of contact. For example, vicinages with large urban areas tend to have greater in-person contacts than those vicinages that have mostly suburban and rural areas. Ombudsmen serve as a link between court users and the Judiciary. They communicate with the public in person, by telephone, postal mail, email, and in some cases through virtual platforms.

The 2023 statistics demonstrate a noticeable increase in the “In Person” category, an indication of public preference for receiving assistance by visiting the courthouse in lieu of phone calls or email.

Regardless of the mode of contact, Ombudsmen and their staff work to make themselves available to assist in the manner most helpful to the court users.





*Students enrolled in the Ocean County College Interpreter Training Program got a chance to practice their skills by attending a courthouse tour and participating in a mock trial.*

## Spotlight: Ocean Vicinage Ombudsman’s Office



*The Honorable Laurie C. Poppe helped walnut Elementary School in Toms River celebrate National Read Across America Day by read books to students between 3rd and 5th grade.*



*Ocean Vicinage staff participated in Annual Family Services Outreach Day, organized by the community agency, Ocean Inc.*

# Ombudsman Program Highlights: Forms Assistance

*In April of 2021, Judge Glenn A. Grant, issued a directive allowing designated Judiciary staff to provide non-legal assistance to court users in completing forms. This directive addresses the limited circumstance where court staff could address the needs of court users unable to read or write, individuals with disabilities, and those with language access needs.*

## Statewide Ombudsmen Contacts

	2022	2023	% Change
Forms Assistance	5,610	11,484	+105%
Forms Completion			
ADA	105	187	+78%
Digital Divide	95	61	-36%
Limited English Proficiency	350	1,474	+321%



The Ombudsmen were tasked with implementing the Forms Assistance Policy. Duties include identifying TCA designees for Forms Assistance, training of designees; and serving as a resource for those designees within the vicinage.

In the past year, forms assistance has doubled and reported cases of forms completion through the Ombudsmen initiatives have generally grown. Notably, the number of LEP court users that have received assistance under this program has grown by 321%.



*Staff from the Morris/Sussex Vicinage Ombudsman’s Office (above) and the Hudson Vicinage Ombudsman’s Office (right) perform Forms Assistance.*

# Ombudsman Program Highlights: Outreach

Judiciary Ombudsmen help facilitate access to the courts in several different ways. They educate the public by explaining how courts serve the community and how specific court processes work. They also receive court user feedback on how well the courts are working and in what areas courts can do better. Many vicinages have a resource or self-help center where court users can receive one-on-one assistance from Ombudsman staff who are specifically trained to provide procedural assistance in multiple docket types across divisions. Ombudsmen and staff respond to questions on issues ranging from initial filings through final disposition and post-dispositional matters.

The Judiciary Ombudsman Program works collaboratively with the Office of Litigant Services and Outreach, as well as with the Supreme Court Advisory Committee on Diversity, Inclusion, and Community Engagement program, to establish and maintain important connections to the communities served by the court. Outreach events are designed to introduce court-based topics in a community setting for all education levels and interests. In this report, community outreach is divided into four main areas: public education seminars and webinars, commemorative events, student audience events, and court tours.

## Number of Events

Commemorative Events

15

Public Education Seminars

180

Student Audience Events

189

Court Tours

90

18,371

Total Participants

## Ombudsman Outreach

Student Audience Events - 40%

Public Education Seminars/Webinars - 38%

Court Tours - 19%

Commemorative Events - 3%



*The Cumberland/Gloucester/Salem Vicinage Office of the Ombudsman, in collaboration with the Vicinage Interpreter's Unit and the Cumberland Sheriff's Department, hosted 4<sup>th</sup> grade students from the immersion classroom at Buckshtem Road Elementary School. The students participated in a field trip designed for them, done **entirely in Spanish!***



## Dominique Brooks

*Atlantic/Cape May Vicinage  
Ombudsman*

*“Through our vicinage’s expungement program and events in which we partner with community and nonprofit organizations, we have helped more than 125 petitioners file for expungements in the past year. That is 125 fresh starts for people that have turned their lives around and are eager to shed the stigma of a past criminal record which often has a negative impact on employment and housing opportunities. Not only does it feel wonderful to be able to help in this way, but it speaks volumes of our involvement in the community and positively influences the public’s perception of the court.”*

## Commemorative Events

Commemorative events integrate Judiciary staff into the community and offer helpful information while commemorating a notable event. While such celebrations vary in activities and scope, Ombudsmen generally collaborate with county and state bar associations to present programming that engages the community and recognizes the state or national event. Such events may include “Court Night” programs, writing and art contests, naturalization ceremonies, and theme-based symposiums for members of the community. Due to the pandemic, most 2021 events were celebrated virtually, including Law Day, Veteran’s Day, Opening of the Court, Professionalism Day, Bring your Child to Work Day, Adoption Day, Hispanic Heritage, and Black History Month.

## Public Education Seminars / Webinars

Community outreach includes education efforts designed to facilitate access to court services through the dissemination of information on court-related topics. These efforts create opportunities for the public to learn about the courts from court personnel. At the same time, court personnel learn first-hand about the public’s needs and concerns.

Public education events include seminars, workshops, or information tables focused on a court-related topic. They also include legal education webinars and speaker’s bureau events aimed at educating the public about various areas of law, process, procedure, and other areas of interest. Topics frequently addressed include tenancy, divorce, domestic violence, foreclosure, re-entry, and expungement. Outreach events can include multi-topic seminars, collaborative events not limited to court information, and events where the Ombudsman might partner with a community organization such as Legal Services, county and state bar associations, or a public library. Ombudsmen also offer community information sessions on specialized areas of interest, such as Criminal Justice Reform, social media, and bullying.



**Maria Velazquez**  
Union Vicinage Ombudsman

*“I recently had the opportunity to connect with Homeschool Group in Union County and was able to organize a courthouse tour with them. The homeschool students were from 7th – 9th grade and had tons of questions throughout the visit. They expressed their excitement to being welcomed as a tour group. They were able to have a Q&A session with the Prosecutor’s office, observe live Criminal Court hearings, Q&A session with a Criminal Superior Court Judge and a walking tour of the Union County Jail. The homeschool educational experience was enhanced by this outreach opportunity I was able to facilitate with them.”*

## Student Audience Events

Student audience events include any event where the target audience members are students in local schools, including colleges and universities. These events include career outreach (job fairs, career presentations), Asian Hispanic/Minority Recruitment events (Courts in the Community, Careers in the Judiciary), mock trials, school/judge outreach programs (One Judge/One School, Classroom to Courtroom or Our Courts, Our Schools), and court tours.



*The Bergen Vicinage Ombudsman presented “Courts in the Community” to more than 800 students at Norwood Middle School (7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders) and Garfield Elementary School (4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> graders). The presentation provides an overview of the New Jersey as well as different career paths available within the Judiciary.*





### Beth Raimondo

*Somerset/Hunterdon/Warren  
Vicinage Ombudsman*

*“Over the past four months, both the staff of the Office of the Ombudsman and judges have actively participated in more than 12 outreach programs. These initiatives were tailored for students ranging from grades 1 through 12, collectively impacting more than 600 young individuals. The activities encompassed partaking in mock trials, observing court proceedings, receiving comprehensive insights into the legal system and available career paths within it, touring the courthouse, discussing the importance of voting, delving into the intricacies of criminal justice reform, and engaging in question-and-answer sessions with the Judges. These concerted efforts have significantly broadened students' understanding of the judiciary and unveiled potential avenues of employment they might not have previously considered.”*

## Court Tours

A key aspect of public education involves school visits, tours, and other on-site court education programs. Judiciary Ombudsmen spend a great deal of time connecting with students by participating in programs that explain the functions and history of the court and by providing interactive court tours.



*Students from Bound Brook High School visited the Somerset Superior Court for a tour of the courthouse. Their journey began with an interactive session of questions-and-answers with Civil Presiding Judge Robert Ballard. Following this, they were guided by staff from the Office of the Ombudsman, through a comprehensive tour that offered valuable insights into the operations of various divisions, potential career paths, and the responsibilities of judges and staff. Students were also briefed on the Hall-Mills Murder trial and had the opportunity to examine evidence firsthand.*





*The Atlantic/Cape May Office of the Ombudsman and Probation staff joined together for restorative projects for homes in the Atlantic City area.*



*Along with members of the FACE Community Outreach Team, the Atlantic/Cape May Office of the Ombudsman provided assistance with expungement petitions, addressed municipal court matters with Municipal Division assistance, and provided information about volunteers program and veteran services offered by the Judiciary.*

## Spotlight: Atlantic/Cape May Vicinage Ombudsman’s Office



*Along with members of the FACE Community Outreach Team, the Atlantic/Cape May Office of the Ombudsman supported this event by providing court related information.*



*In support of the annual event, Probation staff joined the Atlantic/Cape May Ombudsman, Dominique Brooks, and Ombudsman Office AS3 Karen Michael in working with local community organizations to conduct surveys with the homeless population in Atlantic and Cape May. Ombudsman Office staff also tabled at the follow up event where people experiencing homelessness could come and receive hygiene, food, and clothing support. At that event, staff provided expungement and municipal case assistance and gave out clothing donations.*

# Ombudsman Program Highlights: Access and Fairness

*The Judiciary Ombudsman Program strives to ensure equal access to court processes for all court users. The program addresses challenges associated with the lack of resources related to representation, technology, education, and the capacity to speak English.*

## Statewide Ombudsmen Contacts

	2022	2023	% Change
<b>Representation</b>			
Self-Represented	72,822	79,333	9%
Represented by Counsel	934	913	-2%
Attorneys/Other	8,176	6,934	-15%
<i>Percentage of self-represented court users to total contacts</i>	<b>86%</b>	<b>91%</b>	<b>6%</b>
<b>Technology Room Use</b>			
	825	590	-28%
<b>Language Access Assistance</b>			
Bilingual Staff Assisted	6,890	10,298	49%
Interpreter Needed	1,140	1,139	<1%
<i>Percentage of LEP court users to total contacts</i>	<b>10%</b>	<b>13%</b>	<b>3%</b>

Last year, Ombudsmen across the State assisted 79,333 court users who chose not to retain or could not afford legal representation. This is a 9 percent increase in the number of self-help court users assisted the previous year, and accounts for 91 percent of the total contacts for the year. In 2023, many court proceedings transitioned from virtual back to in person proceedings, either completely or in a hybrid fashion. In the years since the start of Covid, Ombudsman Offices have served the vital purpose of ensuring the ability of all court users to participate in court processes through the management and use of technology rooms. While the transition to in-person proceedings made the use of technology rooms less of a necessity, they were still used 590 times statewide in 2023.

Data also shows an increase in the number of instances in which Ombudsmen assisted court users who do not speak English as their primary language. Where demographics warrant and staffing resources permit, Ombudsmen Offices in the vicinages include bilingual staff, particularly in those vicinages with full-service self-help centers. In 2023, bilingual staff assisted in 10,298 matters statewide, while interpreters were used in 1,139 customer service interactions with Ombudsmen. Language access comprised 13 percent of the total contacts in the Ombudsman Office, up from just 10 percent the previous year.

# Ombudsman Program Highlights: Probation and JOBS



**Maurice Hart**  
*AOC Probation Services  
Ombudsman*

*Office of Probation Services created an ombudsman position in May 2018. The Probation Services Ombudsman is the point person for providing the public with information about probation services and programs, such as the Intensive Supervision Program (ISP).*

Like the vicinage ombudsmen, the Probation Services Ombudsman serves as a liaison to the community, identifying community resources such as educational opportunities, recovery/substance abuse services, employment, housing, mental health services, and other support services for probation clients. The Probation Services Ombudsman also provides procedural assistance to probation clients and facilitates the resolution of complaints. Court users are referred by mail, e-mail, and phone. The Probation Services Ombudsman can meet court users by appointment at community outreach events.

*“The Office of Probation Services Ombudsman Unit has assisted the Judiciary Opportunity for Building Success (JOBS) Program since the inception of the program in 2019. Statewide implementation of the JOBS Program took place in December of 2021. Probation Services Ombudsman Unit has been instrumental in connecting probation clients across the State to thousands of employment opportunities. Through outreach efforts, the JOBS Program has established relationships with 257 employers who are currently open to hiring probation clients.”*

**Ombudsman assists in the effort to promote the JOBS Program**

**New Jersey Courts**  
Independence • Integrity • Fairness • Quality Service

**Judiciary  
Opportunities for  
Building  
Success Program**

**Are you looking for a job or training that  
could lead to a better job?**

**The Judiciary Opportunities for Building  
Success “JOBS” Program can help.**



*The Cumberland/Gloucester/Salem Ombudsman's Office runs a robust school outreach program called Classroom to Courtroom. Students enjoy field trips to the courthouse, learn about Judiciary careers, Criminal Justice Reforms, and participate in a mini mock trial.*

## Spotlight: Cumberland/ Gloucester/Salem Vicinage Ombudsman's Office



*The Cumberland/Gloucester/Salem Ombudsman's Office leads the Take Your Child to Work Day event. This full day program is supported and attended by the Sheriff's Department, Prosecutor's Office, and Public Defender's Office.*

# Ombudsman Annual Report: Conclusion and Program Forecast

*The Judiciary Ombudsman Program continues to serve an increasing number of self-represented court users facing a variety of challenges while pursuing resolution of issues that require interaction with the Courts. When court users face challenges related to lack of representation, language barrier, or lack of technology, the Ombudsmen work to assist by bridging the gap in court services. Although Ombudsmen cannot provide legal advice, they can and do provide information, answers, procedural guidance, and referrals to non-court services, thereby effectively enhancing access to justice.*

A key focus for the Ombudsman Program in 2023 involved helping court users navigate the hybrid environment of remote and in-person court, and providing access and fairness tools to court users needing to go to the courthouse to get assistance.

Where there were challenges related to technology, disability accommodations, language limitations, or representation, Ombudsmen acted to ensure equal access for all.

In addition, Ombudsmen have taken the lead in expanding outreach activities, providing general information to the public and actively engaging an increased number of contacts through different activities throughout the year.

Data trends in this report support a forecast of increasing interaction with more in-person contacts, increased efforts, and initiatives related to providing equal access and quality service to court users.

## The Ombudsman Program can meet this projected need by pursuing the following:

Evaluate staffing needs to address increased contact with public.

Expand customer service initiatives by training trial division front line staff.

Use more volunteer staff for outreach activities.

Increase the presence of bilingual staff and establish quick response protocol for language assistance .

Maintain and/or expand Self Help Centers in the vicinages; ensure all forms and resources are up to date.

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**JULY 2024**