

# OMBUDSMAN STATEWIDE COMMITTEE



**ANNUAL REPORT**  
*Court Year 2023-2024*

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# Meet the Ombudsmen

**MAURICE HART**  
*AOC Probation Services*



**JENNIFER BLACK**  
*Superior Court Clerk's Office*



**VANESSA ROUILLON**  
*Passaic*



**JOY SHEA**  
*Bergen*



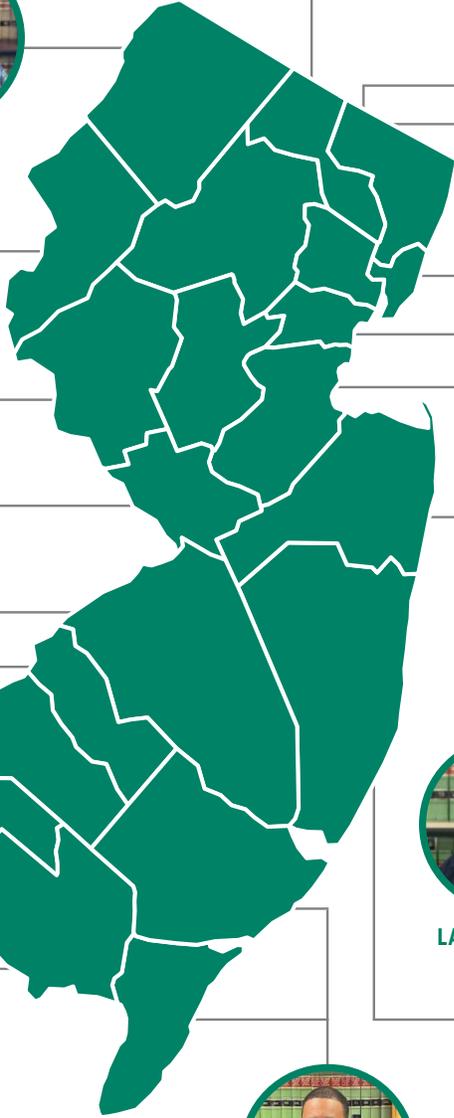
**SARAH HATCHER**  
*Essex*



**JENNIFER SHULTIS**  
*Morris/Sussex*



**ELIZABETH RAIMONDO**  
*Somerset/Hudson/Warren*



**JILLIAN TALERICO**  
*Hudson*

**NATONYA PHILLIPS**  
*Burlington*



**IJEOMA UMORU**  
*Mercer*



**MARIA VELAZQUEZ**  
*Union*



**LUIS HERNANDEZ**  
*Middlesex*



**TENICHA TOWNSEND-MOBLEY**  
*Camden*



**LAUREN WICKE**  
*Monmouth*



**VANESSA CARDWELL**  
*Cumberland/Gloucester/Salem*



**DOMINIQUE BROOKS**  
*Atlantic/Cape May*



**JAMES CASTANEDA**  
*Ocean*

# Overview & History

## MISSION STATEMENT

*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 works with the public to address court users' concerns and provide procedural assistance, outreach, and information in every vicinage. As the liaison to the public in each vicinage, the Ombudsman offers procedural assistance and critical information about court operations, processes, procedures, and services. This office serves a pivotal role in assisting self-represented litigants, receiving and referring complaints from the public, developing and facilitating outreach programs, and making referrals to other agencies or services as necessary.

In the past year, the Ombudsman Program has enhanced its staffing structure and its training program, worked to expand language access resources and support for forms completion, and increased efforts to address the needs of complex litigants.

Ombudsmen continue to guide and assist self-represented litigants, efficiently manage public complaints, develop outreach initiatives, and make strategic referrals to other agencies and services when necessary to ensure comprehensive support to court users.

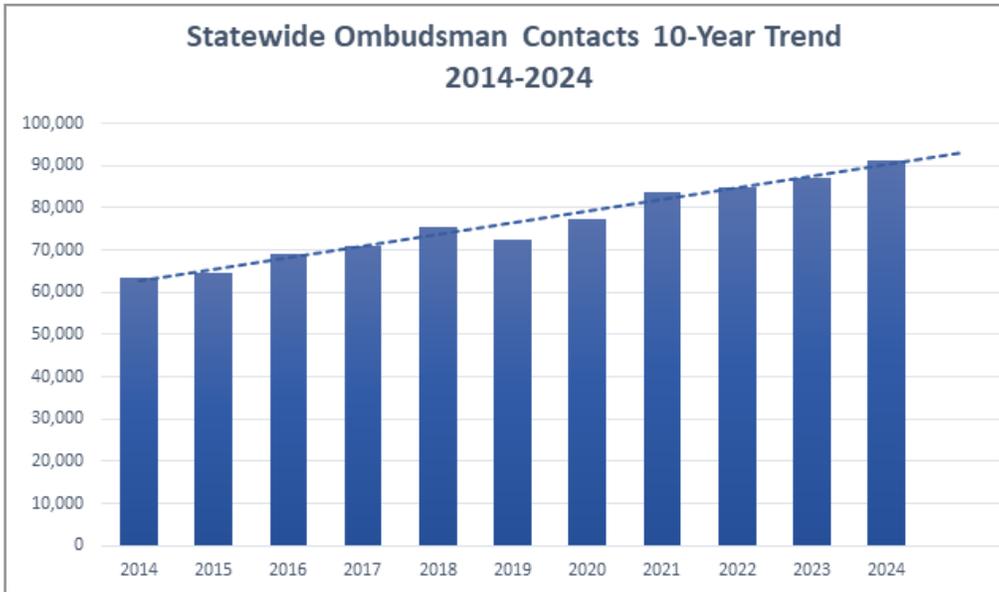
The accomplishments outlined in the pages that follow reflect a continued commitment to enhancing court access and dedication to providing quality service to court users that has become a hallmark of the Ombudsman Program.



# Statewide Daily Contacts

## TEN YEAR GROWTH REVIEW

Ombudsmen communicate with the public in person, by telephone, postal mail, email, and in some cases through virtual platforms. In the past year, contact with the public from the Ombudsman’s office has consistently increased.



In 2024, ombudsmen in the 17 court vicinages - as well as Probation Services and the Superior Court Clerk’s Office - recorded 91,310 contacts. That represents a 4.7 percent growth from 2023. Those contacts were more often made in person in 2024. While telephone and written communications declined from 2023 to 2024, in-person contacts increased 23 percent.

## MODE OF CONTACT

While the most common mode of contact can vary by location, vicinages that have full-service self-help centers typically have greater numbers of in-person contacts. The demographics of vicinages are also a factor in the mode of contact. Large urban areas typically have a greater percentage of in-person contacts than suburban and rural areas.

The statewide percentage of in-person contacts has increased significantly in each of the past two years. That coincides with the creation and promotion of Court User Resource Centers, gains in overall interaction with the public.

Offering different ways to contact the local ombudsman office continues to serve as an effective approach for communicating with as many court users as possible (see pages 8 and 9).

## STATEWIDE OMBUDSMEN CONTACTS

	2023	2024	% Change
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>87,180</b>	<b>91,310</b>	<b>4.7%</b>
<b>Mode of Contact</b>			
<b>In Person</b>	<b>35,747</b>	<b>43,833</b>	<b>23%</b>
<b>Telephone/Virtual</b>	<b>36,512</b>	<b>34,129</b>	<b>-7%</b>
<b>Written Communication</b>	<b>14,912</b>	<b>13,348</b>	<b>-10%</b>

## CATEGORICAL TRENDS

The Ombudsmen track their interactions with court users by various types of assistance provided. Assistance provided by ombudsmen was tracked by several categories: bilingual staff assistance, court forms, general court information, expungement, and online applications. The largest increases by category were for forms assistance (46 percent) and bilingual staff assistance (36 percent). Across all categories, assistance increased 6 percent from 2023 to 2024.

Forms Assistance involve providing clerical and technical assistance from staff to different types of court users, including self-represented litigants, to complete Judiciary forms. Forms Assistance provided to court users increased by 46% in 2024 reflecting a continuous trend from the prior year. Significantly, the Ombudsmen provided 40,000 court forms to court users. Across all categories, assistance increased 5 percent from 2023 to 2024.

## STATEWIDE OMBUDSMAN CATEGORICAL TRENDS

	2023	2024	% Change
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>203,791</b>	<b>215,156</b>	<b>6%</b>
<b>Bilingual Staff Assist</b>	<b>10,298</b>	<b>13,995</b>	<b>36%</b>
<b>Court Form</b>	<b>35,077</b>	<b>40,004</b>	<b>14%</b>
<b>Court Information</b>	<b>85,058</b>	<b>88,120</b>	<b>4%</b>
<b>Expungement/Online app</b>	<b>369</b>	<b>404</b>	<b>9%</b>
<b>Forms Assistance</b>	<b>11,484</b>	<b>16,730</b>	<b>46%</b>
<b>Interpreter Needed</b>	<b>1,139</b>	<b>1,383</b>	<b>21%</b>

# Ombudsman Program Highlights

## COURT USER RESOURCE CENTERS

Court User Resource Centers, which operate in every vicinage under the leadership of the Office of the Ombudsman, serve an essential role in providing critical services and improving access for court users throughout the state.

The centers assist individuals, particularly those who lack legal representation, in navigating the often complex processes of the court. By offering guidance on completing forms, understanding court procedures, and accessing available services, the centers help ensure that all residents receive equitable support, regardless of background or financial means.

Additionally, Court User Resource Centers contribute to greater court efficiency. By helping court users understand procedural requirements and providing guidance with properly completing necessary documents, these centers reduce procedural errors and instances of incomplete filings. This assistance allows cases to move forward more quickly, reduce unnecessary delays, and streamline administrative work so that the Judiciary can operate more effectively.

The centers also play a crucial role in educating the public. Procedural information and resources are provided that help individuals make informed decisions about their legal matters. While ombudsmen do not offer legal advice, the center does provide guidance specifically tailored to the needs of self-represented litigants. For example, staff at the centers make sure that litigants have access to the forms and instructions required to participate fully in the court process.

Court User Resource Centers ensure that residents across New Jersey benefit from consistent and reliable support, underscoring the Judiciary's dedication to fairness and community engagement and fostering public trust. By ensuring that all court users have access to reliable information and guidance, the centers uphold the Judiciary's fundamental commitment to the equitable administration of justice for every resident of New Jersey.



SARAH HATCHER



### *Essex Vicinage*

**Empowering the Public** Ombudsman and staff offer clear, accessible information so court users can make informed decisions about their legal matters—even if representing themselves.





DOMINIQUE BROOKS



### Atlantic/Cape May Vicinage

**Atlantic County CURC:** The Court User Resource Center in Atlantic County maintains public PC's and tablets to assist court users' who do not possess the technology capabilities to appear for virtual proceedings.

**Cape May CURC:** Cape May's Court User Resource Center employs the use of a DTEN terminal to provide remote assistance to court users.



JOY SHEA



### Bergen Vicinage

The vicinage streamlined court operations by helping users understand requirements. The ombudsman and staff reduce errors and delays—making the legal process work better for everyone.



# Ombudsman Program Highlights

## OUTREACH

Judiciary ombudsmen 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 receive feedback from court users. And they staff resource or self-help centers where court users can receive one-on-one assistance on issues ranging from initial filings through final disposition and post-dispositional matters.

The 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 public, such as outreach events that 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.

In 2024, the Judiciary Ombudsman Program facilitated 538 such events, interacting with 21,873 participants. Here are some events from 2024:



The Atlantic/Cape May Vicinage held an expungement outreach event at Mount Zion Baptist Church in Pleasantville, helping 63 court users file for expungement.

*April 2024*



Essex Vicinage celebrated Law Day by engaging nearly 1,600 Essex County students in a countywide Mock Trial Program and Art, Writing, and Video Contest, with winning submissions recognized at the annual Law Day Awards Ceremony.

*May 2024*



The Somerset/Hunterdon/Warren Vicinage Office of the Ombudsman hosted students from Bound Brook High School for a tour of the Somerset County Courthouse in Somerville and a Q&A session with Superior Court Judge Robert Ballard.

*May 2024*



Monmouth Vicinage Ombudsman Lauren Wicke visited Lunch Break, a local non-profit in Red Bank, to share information about the Judiciary.

*July 2024*



Ocean Vicinage staff from the Office of the Ombudsman spent an afternoon at the Ocean Country College job fair informing students of job opportunities with the courts.

*August 2024*



Students from the SOAR Summer Bridge Program visited Superior Court Judge Michael Paul Wright at the Morris County Courthouse.

Staff also discussed civics and provided students a tour of the historic courtroom. The event was organized by Ombudsman Jennifer Shultis and resource center staff member Fernando Vega.

*August 2024*

# Ombudsman Program Highlights

## OUTREACH (CONTINUED)



Burlington Vicinage Ombudsman Natonya Phillips (second from left) provided court procedural guidance to attendees at the annual Expungement Clinic organized in Burlington County at Tabernacle Baptist Church.

*October 2024*



Staff from the Cumberland/Gloucester/Salem Vicinage's Office of the Ombudsman hosted eighth-grade students from the Bridgeton ExCEL Program as part of its Classroom to Courtroom Program.

*October 2024*



Camden Vicinage Ombudsman Tenicha Townsend Mobley (far right) helped vicinage staff set up an information table at a resource fair hosted by the Community Network Association of Camden County.

*October 2024*



Judge Chanel Hudson engaged students at Nicholas Murray Butler School no.23 as part of the Union Vicinage Classroom to Courtroom Program.

*November 2024*



Students from the Passaic County Technical Institute learned about careers in the Judiciary and spent time with Judge Sohail Mohammed.

*December 2024*



Hudson Vicinage Ombudsman Jillian Talerico (right) assisted Bayonne Youth Center members with distributing meals to Bayonne Housing Authority residents.

*December 2024*



Mercer Vicinage Superior Court Judge Sherry Wilson and Ombudsman Ijeoma Umeoma (far right) visited Joyce Kilmer Middle School in Trenton as part of the Vicinage's One Judge, One School Program. Judge Wilson spoke to students and staff at an assembly in commemoration of Laura Wooten, the longest-serving poll worker in the state of New Jersey, who died in 2019.

*December 2024*



Middlesex Vicinage criminal division senior staff and Ombudsman Luis M. Hernandez (far right) visited Quibbletown Middle School in Piscataway where they taught civics and gave a presentation on careers in the Judiciary.

*December 2024*

# Ombudsman Program Highlights

## ACCESS AND FAIRNESS

The Judiciary Ombudsman Program strives to help facilitate equal access to the courts, helping to meet the needs of the public regarding access to legal assistance, technology, and language services.

	2023	2024
<b>Representation</b>		
Self-represented	79,333	85,037
Represented by Counsel	913	980
Attorneys / Others	6,934	1,106
<i>Percentage of self-represented court users to total contacts</i>	91%	95%
<b>Technology Room Use</b>		
	590	554
<b>Language Access Assistance</b>		
Bilingual staff assisted	10,298	13,995
Interpreter needed	1,139	1,383
<i>Percentage of LEP users to total contacts</i>	13%	18%

In 2024, ombudsmen across the State assisted 85,037 court users who chose not to retain or could not afford legal representation. This is a seven percent increase in self-help court users assisted compared to the previous year, and accounts for 95 percent of the contacts with the public in 2024.

In 2024, as the courts continued to transition back to in-person proceedings, the use of technology rooms dropped by eight percent. However, it is worth noting that 554 court proceedings were able to continue because needed assistance was provided to court users who faced technology-related challenges.

Court users are increasingly turning to the Ombudsman Office for assistance from bilingual staff with court processes, forms, and resources. Bilingual staff assisted more than 13,000 individuals with interpreting services in 2024 – a 36 percent increase from the previous year. In addition, ombudsmen provided assistance in linking more than 1,300 individuals with interpreting services.

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## Conclusion

The Judiciary Ombudsman Program continues to evolve to meet the changing needs of court users.

Ombudsmen in every vicinage have assisted the public with navigating the expungement process, with filling out court forms, and with overcoming obstacles related to lack of access to legal representation, technology, and language services.

It is the goal of the Ombudsman Program to fulfill the Judiciary’s goal of providing equal access to all through exceptional customer assistance, without crossing the line into legal advice. There has been an increase in court interaction.

In 2024, the statewide ombudsman committee continued to work on staff training and on standardizing functions related to forms and the collection of customer service data. In addition, ombudsmen continued to take the lead in expanding outreach activities and providing general information to the public.

In 2025, the ombudsman program will make it its goal to continue to provide exceptional service and foster equal access to the courts through the following efforts:

- Standardize the services and resources available in each court-user resource center. These centers should have updated forms and resource information for a wide variety of customer service needs.
- Establish quick response protocol for language assistance with the local vicinage interpreting office for emergent applications.
- Identify new initiatives to serve as a resource for the public.

# Ombudsman Directory

## ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE OF THE COURTS

Maurice Hart 609-815-3810 ext. 16357 [ProbationHelp.Mailbox@njcourts.gov](mailto:ProbationHelp.Mailbox@njcourts.gov)  
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## ATLANTIC/CAPE MAY

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## CAMDEN

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## CUMBERLAND/GLOUCESTER/SALEM

Vanessa Cardwell 856-878-5050 ext. 15159 [CumGloSalHelp.Mailbox@njcourts.gov](mailto:CumGloSalHelp.Mailbox@njcourts.gov)

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## MORRIS/SUSSEX

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## OCEAN

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## PASSAIC

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## SOMERSET/HUNTERDON/WARREN

Elizabeth Raimondo 908-332-7700 ext. 13240 [SomHunWrnHelp.Mailbox@njcourts.gov](mailto:SomHunWrnHelp.Mailbox@njcourts.gov)

## UNION

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*A current list of ombudsmen to contact in each vicinage can be found [here](#).*



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**FEBRUARY 2026**