

State of New Hampshire

Office of the Right to Know Ombudsman

State House Annex, Rm. 313 25 Capitol Street Concord, NH 03301 Telephone: (603) 271-3277

Thomas F. Kehr

NH Senate Finance Committee State House 107 North Main St. Concord, NH 03301

April 18, 2023

Dear Chairman Gray and Honorable Members of the Senate Finance Committee:

The Office of the Right to Know Ombudsman (also known as the "RKO") was established in June of 2022 by Laws 2022, Ch. 250 (HB 481-FN-A). See Attachment 1. The office was first staffed, however, on January 27, 2023, when Thomas F. Kehr assumed the duties of the Ombudsman (nominated: 12/7/22; appointed: 12/21/22, for a term beginning 1/27/23). The office consists of a single individual, employed at unclassified Labor Grade GG, step 5 (\$100,256.00 annual salary). See Attachment 2. According to the legislation which formed it, the office is intended to provide a "simpler, less expensive, and faster" alternative to the superior court in disputes involving alleged violations of RSA 91-A, the New Hampshire "Right to Know Law." Actual operations began on January 27, 2023, with the Ombudsman not only establishing a physical presence in office space assigned by the Secretary of State but also fielding various inquiries, beginning the intake of cases, establishing internal procedures and formulating the beginnings of a web page. https://www.sos.nh.gov/administration/office-right-know-ombudsman Attachment 3 hereto. The proposed budget for FY24/25 was introduced to the House on February 14, 2023. At that time, the office had been in operation for approximately two weeks. The newly-appointed Ombudsman has had no personal role in the formulation of the office's proposed budget until March 28, 2023, when he was called to an April 18 hearing before the Senate Finance Committee. The Office is currently scheduled to expire at the end of the 2025 fiscal year. See Attachment 1, Laws 2022, Ch. 250: 7.

This letter is offered as a brief explanation of the Office's evolution to date.

The RKO has now been in existence for almost ninety days. It began without equipment, internal procedural infrastructure, or a history of performance. It is, however, administratively attached to the Department of State pursuant to RSA 21-G:10. <u>See</u> Laws 2022, Ch. 250: 3 (RSA 91-A: 7-a). The Secretary of State's Office has graciously provided

office space, a computer terminal and two monitors, a phone line, a printer and use of a photocopier. Certain small items on hand at the office (Room 313 of the State House Annex) have been loaned by the Department of Administrative Services. conference table, 8 chairs, a backup recording device and a wall clock were obtained by the Ombudsman through the state surplus program of RSA 21-I: 12, I (a) (6), meaning that the items were originally purchased by another agency, ultimately declared "surplus," and transferred to the RKO at no additional public cost. The cost to the Ombudsman's office itself was \$95. Through the Secretary of State, the RKO requested the purchase of a digital recording device for creating the required record of hearings and one law book (purchased so as to reduce trips to the New Hampshire State Library, an excursion which leaves the office unattended for those wishing to file pleadings or contact the RKO). Fortunately, the office space provided by the Secretary of State features a window through which pleadings may be deposited in the absence of the Ombudsman. See Attachment 4 (listing state property on hand at the Ombudsman's Office). All materials and furnishings found in Room 313 that are not listed in Attachment 4 are the personal property of the Ombudsman, temporarily pressed into service so as to enable the RKO to undertake its operations without delay.

The Ombudsman is charged both with hearing disputed cases arising under RSA 91-A and with writing formal administrative rules pursuant to the processes of RSA 541-A (the Administrative Procedures Act). The rules, which will ultimately be approved by the Joint Legislative Committee on Administrative Rules ("JLCAR"), will relate to procedures for streamlining the resolution of complaints arising under the Right to Know Law; hearing procedures; and "other matters necessary to the proper administration of RSA 91-A:7-a through RSA 91-A:7-c." See RSA 91-A: 7-d. At present, the office is honing and documenting its internal procedures and drafting administrative rules while simultaneously reviewing complaints and scheduling hearings. In cases presently pending before the office, the RKO's operations are guided by the provisions of applicable statutes and - as required by RSA 541-A: 30-a, II - the "model rules" for adjudicative proceedings developed by the Department of Justice (Chapter Jus 800 of the NH Code of Administrative Rules). The Jus 800 rules specify that materials be submitted to the office in hard copy. See Jus 804.02. It has quickly become clear that one of the office's main expenses will be postage and copying. The RKO is required by statute to itself notify governmental agencies of complaints filed against them. See RSA 91-A: 7-b, II. This requires photocopying and mailing of such documents as a claimant may wish submit to the office. The RKO has now been assigned a mail code and appropriate official envelopes have been ordered. To date, postal services that have been trackable according to mail code have not been discretely reported in the state's accounting system, but likely amount to under \$10 per case at this

¹ A pre-rulemaking public comment hearing was held by the RKO on March 1, 2023.

time. Increased postal expenditures are expected on each, as well as on future cases. To date the Secretary of State, Corporations Division, has kindly allowed the RKO the use of its photocopier without charge. Copying expenses will undoubtedly increase in the future as well.

In the approximately 90 days that the RKO has been in existence, it has evolved from experience gained in actual operations. As of this date, 10 cases have been filed. In addition, the office has received approximately 25 inquiries which may or may not become cases, as well as a number of requests for informal discussion. Complaints filed with the office must generally be accompanied by a \$25 filing fee, which is paid to the general fund and therefore not shown as agency-specific revenue on *Attachment 6* hereto. There is currently no ability for the office to accept electronic filings or electronic payments. The single-person office does not have the capacity to develop and monitor procedures for such payments, nor to accept credit/debit card payments, at this time, although the Ombudsman anticipates that he may in the future explore options for such processes.

Since 10 complaints have been formally docketed, the RKO's revenue since January 27, 2023 has been \$250, paid to the general fund. Given the nature of the office, it is not possible to gauge at this time whether this constitutes a reliable trend. The RKO was in part conceived as a means of reducing issues surrounding RSA 91-A, and formally deciding those "Right to Know" matters which could not be resolved between a citizen and a governmental unit (be it the state, a city, a town or another entity covered by the Right to Know Law). This being the case, it is possible that the existence of the office will ultimately decrease the number of disputes between citizens and governmental units, and thus decrease any general fund revenue generated by the office. On the other hand, if the office is ultimately viewed as a swift, cost effective alternative to the judiciary, then filings, revenue and workload might increase.

The RKO operates under short statutory time frames when addressing cases. <u>See</u> RSA 91-A: 7-b. Since it has no staff other than the Ombudsman himself, the office's operations would necessarily temporarily cease if the Ombudsman were to become ill or disabled. If he faces a conflict of interest in a particular case, the case would be unable to be heard by the RKO and therefore have to be pursued in Superior Court.

The Ombudsman, who is subject to the executive branch code of ethics, must, by law, also be a member of the New Hampshire Bar and pursue appropriate continuing legal education, See RSA 91-A: 7-a, I and IV. This being the case, he is subject to the provisions of various codes of ethics and is currently required to incur personal educational and membership expenses. Since the RKO performs a quasi-judicial function, *ex parte* contact

with the Ombudsman regarding cases is generally prohibited. The RKO must nonetheless perform roles similar to those of a clerk of court or judicial administrative assistant. At times, the embodiment of all functions in one individual poses practical difficulty. It is at this time unclear whether the office could realistically be managed by a single individual should the current trend in filings remain constant or increase. To date, initial complaint processing alone (including docketing of operative statutory dates and issuing notices) has generally consumed 1 to 3 hours of RKO time per matter, immediately upon filing, which filings occur on an unpredictable basis. Actual time spent reviewing pleadings, scheduling, preparing for and holding both informal prehearing conferences and formal hearings, maintaining files, drafting rulings, conducting administrative functions and other matters necessary to the day to day operation of the office (including the creation of a clear record should a case be appealed) will vary greatly depending upon the particular claims that citizens wish to file, and the complexity of the issues presented.

Given the timing of the budget cycle and the date that the RKO was first staffed, the new Ombudsman has necessarily not been involved in the formulation of the proposed budget now under consideration by this committee. At least one striking discrepancy is evident. The line for personnel expenses, which relates solely to the Ombudsman himself, contains an appropriation of \$84,630 for FY 2024 and \$89,655 for FY 2025. See Attachment 5. The RKO's current salary is \$100,256.00. See Attachment 2. Accordingly, the figures for personnel expenses are incorrect for both FY 2024 and FY2025. Alteration of those figures also results in an increase in the estimates allocated to benefits. Current expenses that have been reported for the brief period of the RKO's existence are shown at Attachment 6, but a number of expenses, likely amounting to a few hundred dollars, have not yet been processed through the reporting system. For the reasons set forth in this letter, it is questionable whether a reliable trend can yet be seen as emerging.

Respectfully submitted,

Thomas F. Kehr

Right to Know Ombudsman

ATTACHMENTS

Right to Know Ombudsman, 4/18/23

- 1. HB 481-FN-A, with fiscal note
- 2. Salary Information
- 3. Web Page
- 4. Property Inventory
- 5. House Budget
- 6. RKO expenditures reported to date, FY 2023



CHAPTER 250 HB 481-FN-A - FINAL VERSION

5Jan2022... 2126h 04/21/2022 1554s

2022 SESSION

21-0614 05/04

HOUSE BILL

481-FN-A

AN ACT

establishing the office of the right-to-know ombudsman and making an appropriation

therefor.

SPONSORS:

Rep. DiLorenzo, Rock. 17; Rep. Langley, Hills. 8; Rep. G. Sanborn, Graf. 6; Rep.

Hopper, Hills. 2; Rep. Cushing, Rock. 21; Rep. M. Smith, Straf. 6; Rep. Weyler, Rock.

13; Rep. Ulery, Hills. 37; Sen. Rosenwald, Dist 13; Sen. Giuda, Dist 2

COMMITTEE:

Judiciary

AMENDED ANALYSIS

This bill establishes the office of the right-to-know ombudsman and an alternative, administrative process to resolve right-to-know complaints. The bill includes a prospective repeal date of July 1, 2025.

Explanation:

Matter added to current law appears in bold italics.

Matter removed from current law appears [in brackets and struckthrough.]

Matter which is either (a) all new or (b) repealed and reenacted appears in regular type.

CHAPTER 250 HB 481-FN-A - FINAL VERSION

5Jan2022... 2126h 04/21/2022 1554s

21-0614 05/04

STATE OF NEW HAMPSHIRE

In the Year of Our Lord Two Thousand Twenty Two

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establishing the office of the right-to-know ombudsman and making an appropriation therefor,

Be it Enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives in General Court convened:

- 1 250:1 Statement of Intent. The purpose of this act is to provide the public with a simpler, less 2 expensive, and faster alternative process to resolve complaints under RSA 91-A.
 - 250:2 Right-to-Know; Violation. Amend RSA 91-A:7 to read as follows:
 - 91-A:7 Violation.
 - In order to satisfy the purposes of this chapter, the courts shall give proceedings under this chapter high priority on the court calendar. Such a petitioner may appear with or without counsel. The petition shall be deemed sufficient if it states facts constituting a violation of this chapter, and may be filed by the petitioner or his or her counsel with the clerk of court [or any justice thereof. Thereupon the clerk of court or any justice shall order service by copy of the petition on the person or persons charged. Subject to objection by either party, all documents filed with the petition and any response thereto shall be considered as evidence by the court. All documents submitted shall be provided to the opposing party prior to a hearing on the merits. When any justice shall find that time probably is of the essence, he or she may order notice by any reasonable means, and he or she shall have authority to issue an order exparte when he or she shall reasonably deem such an order necessary to insure compliance with the provisions of this chapter].
 - II. In lieu of the procedure under paragraph I, an aggrieved person may file a complaint with the ombudsman under RSA 91-A:7-a and in accordance with RSA 91-A:7-b.
 - III. A person's decision to petition the superior court forecloses the ability to file a complaint with the ombudsman pursuant to RSA 91-A:7-b.
 - IV. A person's decision to file a complaint with the ombudsman forecloses the ability to petition the superior court until the ombudsman issues a final ruling or the deadline for such a ruling has passed.
 - 250:3 New Sections; Office of the Ombudsman; Complaint Process; Appeals. Amend RSA 91-A by inserting after section 7 the following new sections:
 - 91-A:7-a Office Established. There is hereby established the office of the right-to-know ombudsman to be administratively attached to the department of state under RSA 21-G:10. The ombudsman shall be appointed by the governor and council and shall have the following minimum qualifications:
 - Be a member of the New Hampshire bar.
 - II. Have a minimum of 5 years full-time practice of law in any jurisdiction.
 - III. Be experienced with and knowledgeable of the provisions of this chapter and all New Hampshire laws regarding right-to-know.

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CHAPTER 250 HB 481-FN-A - FINAL VERSION - Page 2 -

IV. Annually, complete a minimum of 3 hours of continuing legal education courses or other training relevant to the provisions of this chapter.

91-A:7-b Complaint Process.

- I. Any party aggrieved by a violation of this chapter shall have the option to either petition the superior court or file a signed, written complaint, along with a \$25 fee, with the office of the ombudsman, established under RSA 91-A:7-a. The ombudsman shall have the discretion to waive the \$25 fee upon a finding of inability to pay. Any signed, written complaint filed with the ombudsman shall attach, if applicable, the request served on the public agency or official and the written response of the public agency or official. The complaint shall be deemed sufficient if it states facts constituting a violation of this chapter.
- II. Once a complaint has been filed and provided by the ombudsman to the public body or public agency, the public body or public agency shall have 20 calendar days to submit an acknowledgment of the complaint and an answer to the complaint, which shall include applicable law and, if applicable, a justification for any refusal to or delay in producing the requested governmental records, access to meetings open to the public, or otherwise comply with the provisions of this chapter. This 20-day deadline may be reasonably extended by the ombudsman for good cause.
 - III. In reviewing complaints, the ombudsman shall be authorized to:
- (a) Compel timely delivery of governmental records within a period not less than 14 days or more than 30 days unless an expedited hearing is warranted, regardless of medium and format, and conduct a confidential in-camera review of records where the ombudsman concludes that it is necessary and appropriate under the law.
 - (b) Compel interviews with the parties.
- (c) Order attendance at hearings within a reasonable time if the ombudsman determines that a hearing is necessary. Such hearings shall be open subject to the provisions of RSA 91-A.
 - (d) Issue findings in writing to all parties.
- (e) Order a public body or public agency to disclose requested governmental records within a reasonable time, provide access to meetings open to the public, or otherwise comply with the provisions of this chapter, subject to appeal.
- (f) Make any finding and order any other remedy to the same extent as provided by the court under RSA 91-A:8.
- IV. The ombudsman may draw negative inferences from a party's failure to participate and comply with orders during the review process.
- V. The ombudsman shall determine whether there have been any violations of this chapter and issue a ruling within 30 calendar days following the deadline for receipt of the parties' submissions. This 30-day deadline may be extended to a reasonable time frame by the ombudsman for good cause. The ombudsman may also expedite resolution of the complaint upon a showing of good cause. Rulings on expedited complaints shall be issued within 10 business days, or sooner where necessary.
- VI. The ombudsman shall, where necessary and appropriate under the law, access governmental records in camera that a public body or public agency believes are exempt in order to make a ruling

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CHAPTER 250 HB 481-FN-A - FINAL VERSION - Page 3 -

concerning whether the public body or public agency shall release the records or portions thereof to the public. The ombudsman shall maintain the confidentiality of records provided to the ombudsman by a public body or public agency under this section and shall return the records to the public body or public agency when the ombudsman's review is complete. All records submitted to the ombudsman for review shall be exempt from the public disclosure provisions of RSA 91-A during such review.

VII. Nothing in this section shall affect the ability of a person to seek relief in superior court under RSA 91-A:7, I in lieu of this process.

91-A:7-c Appeal and Enforcement.

- I. Any party may appeal the ombudsman's final ruling to the superior court by filing a notice of appeal in superior court no more than 30 calendar days after the ombudsman's ruling is issued. The ombudsman's ruling shall be attached to the document initiating the appeal, admitted as a full exhibit by the superior court, considered by the judge during deliberations, and specifically addressed in the court's written order. Citizen-initiated appeals shall have no filing fee or surcharge. The public body or public agency shall pay the sheriff's service costs if the public body or public agency, or its attorney, declines to accept service. Nothing in this section shall prevent a superior court from staying an ombudsman's decision pending appeal to the superior court.
- II. On appeal, the superior court shall treat all factual findings of the ombudsman as prima facie lawful and reasonable, and shall not set them aside, absent errors of law, unless it is persuaded by a balance of probabilities on the evidence before it that the ombudsman's decision is unreasonable.
- III. If the ombudsman's final ruling is not appealed, the ombudsman shall, after the deadline has passed, follow up with all parties, as required, to verify compliance with rulings issued.
- IV. The ombudsman's final rulings which are not appealed may be registered in the superior court as judgments and enforceable through contempt of court. If such action is necessary to enforce compliance, all costs and fees, including reasonable attorney fees, shall be paid by the noncompliant public body or public agency.
 - 91-A:7-d Rulemaking. The ombudsman shall adopt rules pursuant to RSA 541-A relative to:
 - I. Establishing procedures to streamline the process of resolving complaints under this chapter.
 - II. Hearing procedures.
 - III. Other matters necessary to the proper administration of RSA 91-A:7-a through RSA 91-A:7-c.

250:4 Appropriation; Applicability.

- I. The amount necessary to pay for the position of ombudsman established in RSA 91-A:7-a as inserted by section 3 of this act is hereby appropriated to the department of state for the biennium ending June 30, 2023. This appropriation shall be nonlapsing and is in addition to any other funds appropriated to the department of state. The governor is authorized to draw a warrant for said sum out of any money in the treasury not otherwise appropriated.
- II. The governor and council are authorized to search, nominate, and confirm the ombudsman to have the confirmed nominee available to assume the duties of the ombudsman position on July 1, 2022.
 - 250:5 Right-to-Know; Violation. Amend RSA 91-A:7 to read as follows:
- 91-A:7 Violation.

CHAPTER 250 HB 481-FN-A - FINAL VERSION - Page 4 -

[II. In lieu of the procedure under paragraph I, an aggrieved person may file a complaint with the ombuderman under RSA 91-A:7-b and in accordance with RSA 91-A:7-c.

III. A person's decision to petition the superior court ferecloses the ability to file a complaint with the embudsman pursuant to RSA 91-A:7-c.

IV. A person's decision to file a complaint with the ombudsman forecloses the ability to petition the superior court until the ombudsman issues a final ruling or the deadline for such a ruling has passed.]

250:6 Repeal. RSA 91-A:7-a through 91-A:7-d, relative to the office of the ombudsman, complaint process, appeal and enforcement, and rulemaking, is repealed.

250:7 Effective Date.

- I. Section 4 of this act shall take effect upon its passage.
- II. Sections 5 and 6 of this act shall take effect July 1, 2025.
- III. The remainder of this act shall take effect July 1, 2022.

Approved: June 24, 2022

Effective Date:

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- I. Section 4 effective June 24, 2022
- II. Section 5 and 6 effective July 1, 2025
- III. Remainder effective July 1, 2022

HB 481-FN-A- FISCAL NOTE AS INTRODUCED

AN ACT establishing the office of the right-to-know ombudsman and making an appropriation therefor.

FISCAL IMPACT: [X] State [X] County [X] Local [] None

		Estimated Increase / (Decrease)					
STATE:	FY 2021	FY 2021 FY 2022		FY 2024			
Appropriation	\$0	Indeterminable Increase	Indeterminable Increase	\$0			
Revenue	\$0	Indeterminable	Indeterminable	Indeterminable			
Expenditures	\$0	\$0 Indeterminable Indeterminable Increase Increase		Indeterminable			
Funding Source:	[X] General Branch Facility Imp 490:26-h)	[] Education provement Fund (RSA	[] Highway [X 490:26-c} and Technol	[] Other - Judicial ogy Fund (RSA			

COUNTY:

Revenue	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0	
Expenditures		Indeterminable	Indeterminable	Indeterminable	

LOCAL:

Revenue	Revenue \$0		\$0	\$0	
Expenditures	\$0	Indeterminable	Indeterminable	Indeterminable	

METHODOLOGY:

This bill would amend RSA 91-A:7 concerning petitions to the superior court regarding Right-to-Know violations and would establish an alternative complaint resolution process and a \$25 filing fee, which may be waived. The Ombudsman's final ruling would be appealable to the superior court. The Ombudsman would be administratively attached to the Department of State. The Governor and Council are authorized to search, nominate and confirm the Ombudsman to assume duty on July 1, 2021. The office would sunset on July 1, 2024. The bill appropriates funds, that will not lapse, to the Department of State necessary to fund the position for the biennium ending June 30, 2023. State appropriations, revenue, and expenditures will be impacted by an indeterminable amount.

The Department of State assumes the position of Ombudsman would be unclassified with a salary established pursuant to RSA 94 and an unknown amount required for office space, equipment and supplies. Therefore, the Department is not able to determine the State expenditures associated with establishing this office.

The Judicial Branch is unable to determine how many complaints would be filed with the Office of the Ombudsman that are filed with the Superior Court under current law. The filing fee for a Superior Court complaint is \$280 of which 30% is deposited in the judicial branch information technology fund and 6% is deposited in the judicial branch facility improvements fund. For the last 3 years, a total of 40 Right-to-Know complaints were filed (17 in 2018, 10 in 2019 and 13 in 2020 as of December 2020). For each complaint filed with the Office of Ombudsman that would be otherwise filed with the Superior Court, no filing fee would be

charged, representing a loss of revenue to the court system. The filing fee for a complaint filed with the Office of the Ombudsman would be \$25 under the bill. If an appeal is made with the Superior Court from a decision of the Office of the Ombudsman by a citizen, no filing fee or surcharge would be charged. It is expected, however, that the total decrease in fees would be less than \$10,000 per year. Appeals to the Superior Court would be de novo, meaning essentially appeals from the Office of the Ombudsman would take the same resources as if the complaint had been originally filed with the Superior Court. The Judicial Branch assumes, however, that some cases filed with the Office of the Ombudsman would not be appealed to the Superior Court, but is unable to determine how many would or would not be appealed.

The New Hampshire Municipal Association assumes because the ombudsman process would be less formal than a trial in superior court, the process may be less expensive for litigants than the current process. If so, the Association indicates the bill could reduce municipal expenditures for legal fees. However, the Association suggests a less formal process may encourage filing of more right-to-know complaints. The Association states the effects are likely to vary significantly among municipalities and the impact on municipal expenditures cannot be determined. The Association states there should be no impact on municipal revenues.

AGENCIES CONTACTED:

Department of State, Judicial Branch, and New Hampshire Municipal Association

QUICK RESULTS

December 21, 2022 GOVERNOR AND COUNCIL MEETING

APPROVED ITEMS: #'s 1A-5A, 5C-135, 139-140, Late Item A

FAILED ITEM: #5B

WITHDRAWN ITEMS: #'s 136, 137, 138

ITEM REMOVED FROM THE TABLE AND APPROVED: #96A

CONFIRMATIONS

The Governor and Council confirmed the following:

Assistant Commissioner, Department of Transportation - RSA 21-L:5

David M. Rodrigue, Sanbornton Succeeding: William J. Cass, Laconia

Salary: LG, KK, \$137,878.00

Effective: December 21, 2022 Term: February 28, 2026

Board of Licensing for Alcohol and Other Drug Use Professionals - RSA 330-C:3

(Master Licensed Alcohol and Drug Counselor)

Joni O'Brien, East Wakefield

Reappointment

Effective: December 21, 2022

Term: January 28, 2026

Board of Licensure of Interpreters for the Deaf, Deafblind, and Hard of Hearing - RSA 326-I:3

(Recommended by N.H. Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf)

Nicole Sargent, Hillsborough

Succeeding: Rosemary Ford, Nashua

Effective: December 21, 2022

Term: October 10, 2025

Board of Licensure of Interpreters for the Deaf, Deafblind, and Hard of Hearing - RSA 326-I:3

(Recommended by N.H. Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf)

Grace Warwick, Manchester

Succeeding: Ashley G. Woods, Manchester

Effective: December 21, 2022

Term: October 10, 2025

Board of Natural Scientists - RSA 310-A:81

(Soil Scientist)

Gregory W. Howard, West Ossipee

Vacancy

Effective: December 21, 2022

Term: June 30, 2026

Deputy Commissioner, Banking Department - RSA 383:1

Michael Moranti, Bedford

Succeeding: Raeleen Blaisdell, Dover (resigned)

Effective: December 21, 2022

Term: August 1, 2024

Salary: LG, GG, \$110,682

Division of Ports and Harbors Advisory Council - RSA 12-G:44

Christopher D. Snow, Rye

Reappointment

Effective: December 21, 2022 Term: December 16, 2026

Family Mediator Certification Board - RSA 328-C:4

(Nom. by the NH Conflict Resolution Assoc.)

Briana M. Coakley, Portsmouth

Succeeding: Keely Noyes, New Boston

Effective: December 21, 2022 Term: September 6, 2025

Fire Standards and Training Commission - RSA 21-P:26

(Full-time Career Fire Chief)

Donald DeAngelis, Epping

Succeeding: Robert M. Buxton, Hudson (resigned)

Effective: December 21, 2022 Term: November 12, 2024

<u>Public Water Access Advisory Board</u> - RSA 233-A:2 (Power Boating) Robin B. Saunders, Sunapee Succeeding: Gene H. Porter, Nashua

Right to Know Ombudsman - RSA 91-A:7-a (Chapter 250, 2022) Thomas F. Kehr, Concord Vacancy

Salary: LG GG \$100,256.00

<u>Site Evaluation Committee</u> - RSA 162-H:3 (Public Member)
James Jalbert, Rollinsford
Succeeding: Robert A. Baines, Manchester

Effective: December 21, 2022 Term: October 27, 2025

Effective: January 27, 2023 Term: July 1, 2025

Effective: December 21, 2022 Term: September 20, 2026





New Hampshire Department of David M. Scanlan





Home > Administration > Office of the Right to Know Ombudsman

Office of the Right to Know Ombudsman

Information on the Right to Know Ombudsman

91-A:7 Violation --

I. Any person aggrieved by a violation of this chapter may petition the superior court for injunctive relief. In order to satisfy the purposes of this chapter, the courts shall give proceedings under this chapter high priority on the court calendar, Such a petitioner may appear with or without counsel. The petition shall be deemed sufficient if it states facts constituting a violation of this chapter, and may be filed by the petitioner or his or her counsel with the clerk of court.

II. In lieu of the procedure under paragraph I, an aggrieved person may file a complaint with the ombudsman under RSA 91-A:7-a and in accordance with RSA 91-A:7-b.

III. A person's decision to petition the superior court forecloses the ability to file a complaint with the ombudsman pursuant to RSA 91-A:7-b. IV. A person's decision to file a complaint with the ombudsman forecloses the ability to petition the superior court until the ombudsman issues a final ruling or the deadline for such a ruling has passed.

Thomas F. Kehr was appointed to the Office of the Right to Know Ombudsman on January 27, 2023 for a term through July 1, 2025. The telephone number of the office is (603) 271-3277. The office's email is Thomas.kehr@sos.nh.gov. Its physical address is Room 313, State House Annex, 25 Capitol Street, Concord, NH 03301. The office is unable to provide legal advice to callers and cannot address particular disputes by email or telephone. Those wishing to bring a dispute to the Ombudsman's attention must do so by submitting the required filing fee and a hard-copy complaint to the address above, using the complaint process of RSA 91-A: 7-b Section 91-A:7-b Complaint Process. (state.nh.us).

To learn more about the Office of the Ombudsman please visit the following:

RSA 91-A:7(a-d)

Frequently Asked Questions	
Notices	AA.
Resources	
Hearings	



New Hampshire Department of State David M. Scanlan

Secretary of State

107 North Main Street | Concord, NH | 03301

Phone: 603-271-3242 | elections@sos.nh.gov Phone: 603-271-3246 | corporate@sos.nh.gov Phone: 603-271-4650 | vitalrecords@sos.nh.gov NH Web Portal - NH.gov

Campaign Finance

Voter Information Look-up

NH Quickstart

NHVRINweb

COVID-19 Resources

NH Government Careers

NH Travel & Tourism

ReadyNH.gov

Transparent NH







Home > Administration > Office of the Right to Know Ombudsman > Frequently Asked Questions

Frequently Asked Questions

Office of the Ombudsman Frequently Asked Questions

Q: How do I file a complaint with the Ombudsman's Office?

A: Complaints, together with the \$25.00 fee set forth in RSA 91-A: 7-b, I, should be submitted to the Office of the Right to Know Ombudsman, Room 313, State House Annex, 25 Capitol Street, Concord NH 03301. Complaints must be signed and submitted in writing. Checks for the filling fee should be made out to "Treasurer, State of New Hampshire." The Ombudsman is unable to accept review of matters by telephone.

Q: Does the Right to Know Ombudsman work for the Secretary of State?"

A: No. The Right to Know Ombudsman ("RKO") is an independent agency administratively attached to the Secretary of State's office under RSA 21-G: 10 Section 21-G:10 Administratively Attached Agency. (state.nh.us).

Q: Can the Ombudsman provide me with informal advice regarding a Right to Know request?

A: No. Parties appearing before the Ombudsman's Office (and any person wishing to speak with the office, even without the filing of a complaint) should clearly understand that the Ombudsman is not their representative, and does not provide legal advice or representation. The Ombudsman serves in a neutral, quasi-judicial capacity and is tasked with resolving disputed matters that come before the office.

O: Who is the Ombudsman?

A: Thomas F. Kehr has been a New Hampshire attorney for over 35 years. He is a graduate of the University of New Hampshire – Durham (BA in History) and Rutgers University School of Law – Camden (NI). During law school, he served as a summer law clerk to the NH Supreme Court. Upon graduation he became a law clerk to the NH Superior Court, ultimately becoming the senior (supervisory) law clerk to that court. He then entered private practice at a Concord, NH law firm, where his work focused on civil litigation at the trial and appellate levels, in both state and federal courts. While engaged in private practice, he also served as an attorney member of the NH Workers' Compensation Appeals Board. Mr. Kehr opened his own practice, and ultimately formed a partnership which focused on civil litigation. He started his career with the state in 2002, serving for 20 years as Policy and Procedures Administrator for the Department of Administrative Services, while active as a member of the US Coast Guard Auxiliary in New Castle, NH. He has served as the presiding officer in numerous adjudicative proceedings and public comment hearings, and is experienced in the processes of RSA 541-A (the NH Administrative Procedures Act). Mr. Kehr is an avocational historian, focusing primarily upon the early revolutionary period in the New Hampshire seacoast. He was appointed New Hampshire's first Right to Know Ombudsman on December 21, 2022, for a term beginning on January 27, 2023 and ending on July 1, 2025, at which time the Office of the Ombudsman will expire by law (Laws 2022, Ch. 250:6-7 hillText.aspx (state.nh.us)).



New Hampshire Department of State **David M. Scanlan**

Secretary of State

107 North Main Street I Concord, NH | 03301

Phone: 603-271-3242 | <u>elections@sos.nh.gov</u>
Phone: 603-271-3246 | <u>corporate@sos.nh.gov</u>
Phone: 603-271-4650 | <u>vitalrecords@sos.nh.gov</u>

TDD Access: Relay NH <u>1-800-735-2964</u>

NH Web Portal - NH.gov

Campaign Finance

Voter Information Look-up

NH Quickstart

NHVRINweb

COVID-19 Resources

NH Government Careers

NH Travel & Tourism

ReadyNH.gov

Transparent NH



New Hampshire Department of

David M. Scanlan







Home > Administration > Office of the Right to Know Ombudsman > Notices

Notices

Notices from the Office of the Ombudsman

March 17, 2023: RKO General Procedural Order 1 (pre-Rulemaking)



February 17, 2023: Request for Advance Public Comment in This is a pre-process hearing as shown at the top of the following rulemaking flow chart. Subsequent steps in the process will be as outlined: https://www.gencourt.state.nh.us/rules/process/Rulemaking%20Flow%20Chart%20APPROVED%209-20%20corrected%204-

February 7, 2023: This web site is under development. The Ombudsman's office is currently organizing its operations. In the near future, the office will be holding a public hearing regarding the establishment of its administrative rules. Notices of rulemaking proceedings will appear on this page and in the New Hampshire Rulemaking Register, found here https://www.gencourt.state.nh.us/rules/register/default.aspx



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State of New Hampshire

Office of the Right to Know Ombudsman

State House Annex, Rm. 313 25 Capitol Street Concord, NH 03301 Telephone: (603) 271-3277

RKO General Procedural Order 1 (Pre-Rulemaking)

(March 17, 2023)

This is a General Procedural Order applicable to all cases now pending before the Office of the Right to Know Ombudsman.

As all claimants and respondents in all cases now pending before the office have been advised, the RKO is currently developing procedural rules, and until such time as those rules can be adopted (a formal statutorily-mandated procedure that is likely to take a minimum of several months), the processes which guide proceedings before this office will be informed by the provisions of RSA 91-A: 7-b and, pursuant to RSA 541-A: 30-a, V, the model procedures relating to adjudicative proceedings adopted by the NH Department of Justice in the administrative rules known as "Jus 800." These rules may be found on the nh gov website by clicking "laws and rules," then clicking "Code of Administrative Rules" and then scrolling down to the link entitled "Jus." The statutory underpinnings for these rules may be found at RSA 541-A: 31 – 36.

The Jus 800 rules are not specific to the operations of the office established under RSA 91-A: 7-a and, in all cases, the provisions of operative statutes would take precedence over any administrative rule. Interim adjustments in the application of the Jus 800 rules may be in order while this office deals with cases pending prior to the adoption of RKO rules. RSA 91-A:7-b imposes certain time frames which direct application of Jus 806.01 (c) may render incapable of ordered application. That rule provides that objections to written motions shall be filed within 30 days of the motion (a motion being a "request to the presiding officer [here, the Ombudsman], for an order or ruling directing some act to be done in favor of the party making the motion, including a statement of justification or reasons for the request." See Jus 802.01 (d). Unlike Jus 800, New Hampshire Superior Court Rule 13 (a) provides that objections to motions must be filed within ten (10) days. The Ombudsman concludes that a general ten (10) day response period is more conducive to the expeditious operations of this office than is the 30 day period of Jus 800, and therefore establishes 10 days as the normal objection period in cases pending before this office prior to the adoption of its administrative rules.

The formulation of RKO administrative rules is informed in part by proceedings occurring in this office prior to formal RKO rule adoption. Pursuant to RSA 541-A: 11, this office held an optional public comment hearing on subject matters of possible rulemaking on March 1, 2023, with a public comment deadline of March 15, 2023. Input received during that optional process will be assessed by the RKO in formulating its initial rulemaking proposal. When that Initial Proposal is finalized, it will be presented for further public comment through the normal rulemaking processes of RSA 541-A. See NH Drafting and Procedure Manual for Administrative Rules, Chapter 3, Part 2 (available on the website of The Office of Legislative Services, Administrative Rules, under the link to "Resources"). Notice of rulemaking proceedings will be issued through the standard processes of RSA 541-A, and will also be posted on the evolving RKO website.

Themas F. Kehr

Right to Know Ombudsman

REQUEST FOR ADVANCE PUBLIC COMMENT ON SUBJECT MATTER OF POSSIBLE RULEMAKING

	Rule Number	Rko 100, 200, 500 and potentially others (If applicable)
1. Agency Name & Address:	2. RSA Authority:	RSA 91-A: 7-d; RSA 541-A: 16, I
Office of the Right-to-Know Ombudsman Room 313, State House Annex 25 Capitol Street Concord, NH 03301	3. Federal Authority: 4. Type of Action: Adoption Amendment Repeal Readoption Readoption w/an	X
5. Short Title: NH Right-to-Know Ombudsn	nan Rules	

IN ACCORDANCE WITH RSA 541-A:11, VIII THIS AGENCY IS SOLICITING PUBLIC COMMENT ON A SUBJECT MATTER OF POSSIBLE RULEMAKING UNDER ACTIVE CONSIDERATION PRIOR TO FORMALLY PROPOSING RULES IN THE RULEMAKING PROCESS. WHERE, WHEN, AND HOW PERSONS MAY PROVIDE COMMENT ARE INDICATED BELOW.

6. (a) Summary of the subject matter, or summary of the rule if drafted, and the effect on those regulated:

RSA 91-A:7-d requires rulemaking by the Office of the Right-to-Know Ombudsman, an agency created in 2022 and first staffed on January 27, 2023. The Office is in part intended to be an alternative to the judicial system in cases involving disputes under RSA 91-A. The new office is charged with reviewing complaints made to it regarding alleged violations of the "Right-to-Know" Law and, accordingly, must establish procedures for carrying out its functions, including but not limited to "procedures to streamline the process of resolving complaints," and "hearing procedures." See RSA 91-A: 7-d. Pursuant to RSA 541-A: 16, I, the office is also required to adopt organizational and procedural rules. In light of the duties with which the new office is charged, the Ombudsman wishes to obtain public input regarding how it is believed the new office might most effectively perform its functions. The Ombudsman wishes to afford this opportunity for public input before proposing its first set of rules. Additional public input will be solicited when the rulemaking process itself begins. The rules initially proposed after the pre-process hearing noticed here will include, at least, rules relating to agency organization and procedures relating to hearings. Public comment may suggest the need for additional rule topics. The anticipated rules would impact parties who may appear before the Ombudsman, including private citizens and public entities, as well as the Office of the Ombudsman itself. This notice is intended to request input by any interested person or entity.

In view of the foregoing, the types of rules which the Ombudsman currently believes will be written with public input are:

- Organizational rules (required by RSA 541-A: 16, I(a)), commonly known as "Chapter 100 rules";
- Procedural rules (required by RSA 541-A: 16, I(b)-(d)), commonly known as "Chapter 200 rules"; and
- Ombudsman's ethical standards, commonly known as "Chapter 500 rules."

Other chapter numbers will be reserved for matters which may arise.

6. (b) Brief description of the groups affected:

Individuals involved in disputes with public bodies or agencies regarding RSA 91-A, as well as public bodies or agencies involved in such disputes, and the Office of the Right-to-Know Ombudsman itself.

7. Contact person for copies, questions, and receipt of comment including requests to accommodate persons with disabilities:

Name:

Thomas F. Kehr

Title:

Right to Know Ombudsman

Address:

Room 313, State House Annex

Phone #:

(603) 271-3277

25 Capitol Street

Fax#:

NA

Concord, NH 03301

E-mail:

Thomas.Kehr@sos.nh.gov

TTY/TDD Access: Relay NH

1-800-735-2964 or dial 711 (in NH)

8. Deadline for submission of comment in writing or, if practicable for the agency, in the electronic format specified: March 15, 2023, 4:30 PM

Fax

⊠E-mail

⊠Other format (specify):

In this pre-rulemaking proceeding, <u>hard copy</u>, rather than electronic, submissions are strongly preferred.

9. Public hearing scheduled for:

Date and Time:

10:00 AM, Wednesday, March 1, 2023

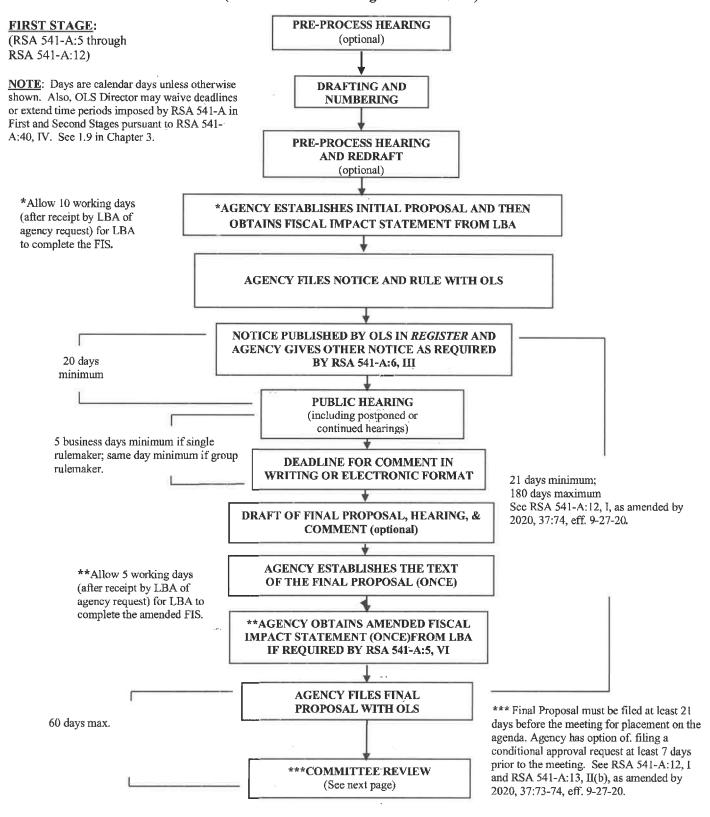
Place:

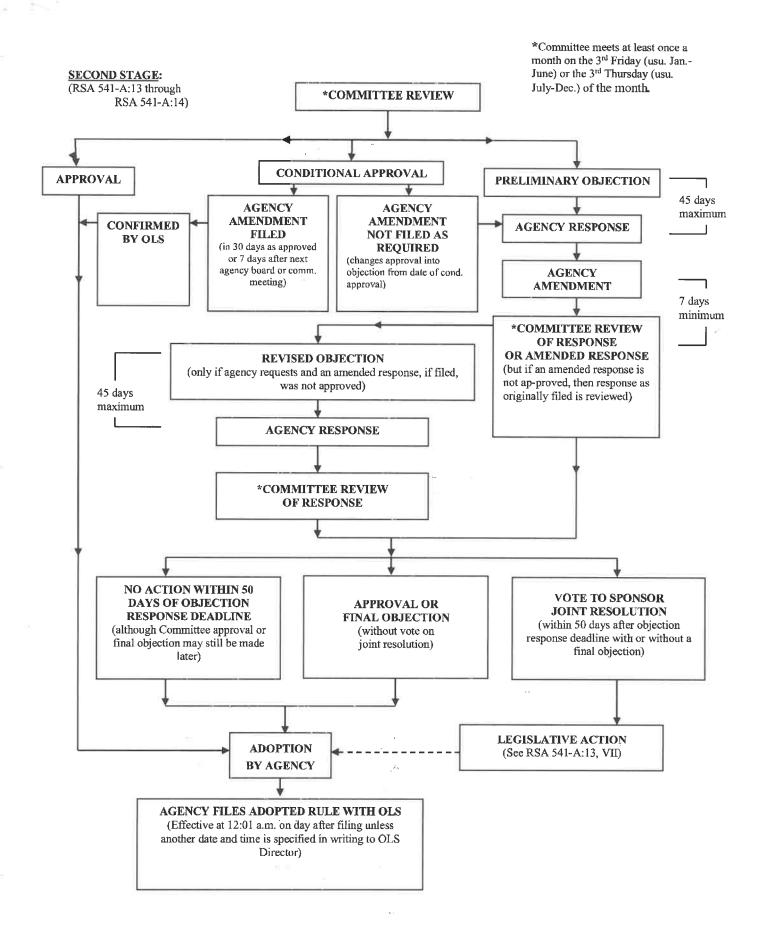
Room 405, State House Annex

25 Capitol Street

Concord, NH 03301

SUMMARY OF PROCEDURE FOR ADOPTION OF REGULAR RULES (See RSA 541-A:5 through RSA 541-A:14)







New Hampshire Department of State

David M. Scanlan







Home > Administration > Office of the Right to Know Ombudsman > Hearings

Hearings

Notice of Hearings

Hearings scheduled for April and May



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Secretary of State

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AN OFFICIAL NEW HAMPSHIRE GOVERNMENT WEBSITE

NOTICE OF RKO CASE HEARINGS

(Schedule Issued: April 7, 2023)

The following hearings in contested cases will be held by the Office of the Right to Know Ombudsman ("RKO") in Room 313 of the State House Annex, 25 Capital Street, Concord, NH.

As a general matter, unless otherwise ordered, the hearings in these contested cases are open to observation by the public. This does imply a right to participate in the hearings or offer public comment during the proceedings. Observers may not participate in hearings unless they have been admitted to the case as a party or intervenor in advance of the hearing. See Jus 809.01.

The presiding officer in these matters will be Thomas F. Kehr, Esq., NH Right to Know Ombudsman.

Dates are subject to change.

DATE/TIME

MATTER NAME

RKO DOCKET NUMBER

April 21, 2023, 1:00 PM

In Re: Town of Newbury -001

RKO 2023-003

Prehearing conference: 4/11/2023, 1:00 PM

April 25, 2023, 1:00 PM

In Re Town of Milford - 001

RKO 2023-004

Prehearing conference: 4/14/2023, 1:00 PM

May 1, 2023, 1:00 PM

In Re Town of Deering - 001

RKO 2023-006

Prehearing conference: 4/19/2023, 1:00 PM

May 9, 2023, 1:00 PM

In Re NH Department of Transportation – 1 RKO 2023-001

Prehearing conference: 4/27/2023, 1:00 PM

Thomas F. Kehr, Right to Know Ombudsman, Room 313 State House Annex, 25 Capital St., Concord, NH 03301; (603) 271-3277; Thomas.kehr@sos.nh.gov

RKO OFFICE INVENTORY

April 18, 2023

Provided for RKO use by Secretary of State:

Cubicle partitions

Laptop with carrying case and cables

2 monitors with stands

Keyboard with mouse

Annex and State House key cards

Door key, customer window key and key to "secured" cupboard in cubicle

24 first class stamps

4 reams of printer paper obtained (3 now used)

Black filing cabinet

Printer with metal cabinet (stand)

Procured by SOS upon Request from RKO

Small Sony IC recorder (ICD-PX470) with small cable (Digital recorder with computer download capability)

NH Practice series book, vol 13 – Municipal law (not yet received)

On loan from DAS:

Office cubicle chair

Bates stamp (likely nonfunctional)

Gray metal garbage can (offered as permanent transfer to RKO)

One cassette tape (now used and to be retained at RKO)

Two large capacity black loose-leaf binders, one medium capacity white and one small capacity blue.



HB 0001	04/07/2023 VERSION NO): 02	FISCAL YEAR 2024	FISCAL YEAR 2025 PAGE 96
01 GENERAL GOVERNMENT 32 STATE DEPT 32 STATE DEPT 324010 VITAL RECORDS 5153 VITAL RECORDS IMPROVEMEN	T FUND	(CONT.) (CONT.) (CONT.) (CONT.) (CONT.)		
039 Telecommunications 046 Consultants 050 Personal Service-Temp/Appointe 060 Benefits 070 In-State Travel Reimbursement 080 Out-Of State Travel TOTAL			6,000 2,000 30,000 151,141 2,500 6,000 1,097,862	6,000 2,000 30,000 158,213 2,500 6,000 1,110,549
ESTIMATED SOURCE OF FUNDS FOR VITAL RECORDS IMPROVEMENT FUN 003 Revolving Funds TOTAL SOURCE OF FUNDS			1,097,862 1,097,862	1,110,549 1,110,549
EXPENDITURE TOTAL FOR VITAL REG	CORDS		1,758,008	1,790,940
FEDERAL FUNDS GENERAL FUND OTHER FUNDS TOTAL ESTIMATED SOURCE OF FUNI	DS FOR VITAL RECORDS		172,603 487,543 1,097,862 1,758,008	178,032 502,359 1,110,549 1,790,940
EXPENDITURE TOTAL FOR STATE DE FEDERAL FUNDS GENERAL FUND OTHER FUNDS TOTAL ESTIMATED SOURCE OF FUNI			12,328,518 1,159,264 2,806,472 8,362,782 12,328,518	12,617,190 1,183,223 2,875,931 8,558,036 12,617,190
01 GENERAL GOVERNMENT 32 STATE DEPT 70 RIGHT-TO-KNOW OMBUDSMAN 700010 RIGHT-TO-KNOW OMBUDSMAN 7052 RIGHT-TO-KNOW OMBUDSMAN	AN			
011 Personal Services-Unclassified 020 Current Expenses 060 Benefits TOTAL			84,630 5,000 39,044 128,674	89,655 5,000 41,579 136,234
ESTIMATED SOURCE OF FUNDS FOR RIGHT-TO-KNOW OMBUDSMAN				

HB 0001	04/07/2023 VERSION NO: 02	FISCAL YEAR 2024	FISCAL YEAR 2025 PAGE 97
01 GENERAL GOVERNMENT 32 STATE DEPT 70 RIGHT-TO-KNOW OMBUDSMAN 700010 RIGHT-TO-KNOW OMBUDSMAN 7052 RIGHT-TO-KNOW OMBUDSMAN			
GENERAL FUND TOTAL SOURCE OF FUNDS		128,674 128,674	136,234 136,234
EXPENDITURE TOTAL FOR RIGHT-TO GENERAL FUND TOTAL ESTIMATED SOURCE OF FUNI	-KNOW OMBUDSMAN OS FOR RIGHT-TO-KNOW OMBUDSMA	128,674 128,674 N 128,674	136,234 136,234 136,234
EXPENDITURE TOTAL FOR STATE DE	PT	12,464,525	12,760,757
FEDERAL FUNDS GENERAL FUND OTHER FUNDS TOTAL ESTIMATED SOURCE OF FUNI	OS FOR STATE DEPT	1,159,264 2,942,479 8,362,782 12,464,525	1,183,223 3,019,498 8,558,036 12,760,757
01 GENERAL GOVERNMENT 84 REVENUE ADMINISTRATION DEP 84 REVENUE ADMINISTRATION DEP 840010 REVENUE ADMINISTRATION 7884 ADMINISTRATION			
 010 Personal Services-Perm. Classi 011 Personal Services-Unclassified 018 Overtime 020 Current Expenses 022 Rents-Leases Other Than State 024 Maint.Other Than Build Grnds 026 Organizational Dues 027 Transfers To Oit 028 Transfers to Plant & Property 030 Equipment New/Replacement 		883,376 633,802 1 145,000 5,265 1 15,000 4,837,879 611,690 215,000	897,847 644,433 1 150,000 5,265 1 16,000 5,027,562 639,891 220,000
 038 Technology - Software 039 Telecommunications 043 Debt Service 046 Consultants 049 Transfer to Other State Agenci 050 Personal Service-Temp/Appointe 060 Benefits 066 Employee training 		1 116,000 1,653,936 280,000 5,593 64,700 753,025 8,340	1 116,000 1,603,205 445,440 5,922 67,000 787,793 10,000



Class	ACCOUNT-2	ACCOUNT-DESC-2	Sum of GLT-DEBIT-AMT
011-Unclassified Salary	500126	Salary Unclassified	15,424.00
011-Unclassified Salary Total			15,424.00
020-Current Expense	500200	Supplies (Consumable)	95.00
	500216	Postage	5.59
020-Current Expense Total			100.59
060-Benefits	500601	Fica (Permanent)	945.38
	500602	Health Ins Benefit (Perm)	2,952.12
	500603	Life Ins Benefit (Perm)	1.88
	500604	Employees' Retire (Perm)	2,241.12
	500605	Dental Benefits (Perm)	145.52
	500624	PFL Ins Benefit	31.92
	500631	Medicare Coverage Permanent	221.09
060-Benefits Total			6,539.03
Grand Total			22,063.62

	QL201 Date 04/ Time 03:	:32		Statement of Appropriation	s by Office			Fiscal Year 2023	Periods From 1 to 10 Period Beg 07/01/22 En	Page 1505 d 04/30/23
Company 0010 General Fund Agency 070 EIGHT-TO-HEUM OMBUDINAN Organization 7052 EIGHT-TO-HEUM OMBUDINAN		MBTDSMAN MBTDSMAN	BUR/DIV Sub-Org Acct Unit	7000 RIGHT-TO-KNOW OMBU 001 RIGHT- 70520000	DSMAN TO-KNOW OMBODSMAN					
		Appropriation	Est Revenue	Expenditures	Revenue	Encumbrances	Transfers	Lapsed	Bal Fed	Available Rate
		SERVICES UNCLASEIF 39,000.00	0.00	15,424.00-	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	23,576.00 .39
	020 CURRENT E	XPENSES 5,000.00	0.00	100.59-	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	4,899.41 .02
	030 BOUTFMENT	NEW REPLACEMENT	8.80	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0,00	7,000.00 0.00
	050 PERSONAL S	SERVICE TEMP APPOI	0.00	0.80	0.00	0_00	0.00	5.05	0.00	10,000.00 0.00
	060 BENEFITS	22,000.00	0.80	6,539.83-	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	19,460.97 .29
	070 IN STATE T	TRAVEL REIMBURSEME 1,000.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	1,000.00 0.00
	Sub-Org	84,000.00	0.00	22,063.62-	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	61,936.38
	***Organizatio	84,000.00	0.80	22,863.62-	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	61,936.38
	Activity	84,000.00	0.00	22,063.62-	0.00	0.00	0.05	0.05	0.00	61,936.38
	33*Agency***	84,000.00	0.00	22,063.62-	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	61,936.38