Teacher Retirement System of Texas



January 1 - December 31, 2023



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Introduction

TRS established the Ombudsman (Ombuds) role in response to the 87th Texas Legislative session and the resulting Sunset Law, HB 1585. This law requires the Ombuds to assist members and retirees by providing protection and advocacy. The Ombuds must also regularly submit reports to the board, recommending changes to TRS' operations that benefit members and retirees.

The Ombuds listens to members' concerns and complaints and provides help or information to resolve those issues. The Ombuds also analyzes members' concerns, makes referrals, reviews trends in complaints, and ensures fair treatment for all. Members can also contact the Ombuds if they are dissatisfied with the customer service received. The Ombuds, however, is not the first point of contact for members seeking assistance but an additional resource for those who need help to obtain the required help through normal TRS channels. All contacts the Ombuds receive are logged in the Office's Data Collection Site, managed within the Office.

Mission Statement

The Ombuds Office focuses on earning members' trust by gaining their confidence, focusing on accountability, and delivering excellence daily.

INDEPENDENCE

The Ombuds is independent and reports directly to the highest level within the organization.

Standards of Practice

The Office of the Ombuds operates consistent with the International Ombuds Association (IOA) Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice.

CONFIDENTIALITY

All communication is confidential as allowed by law. Information may be disclosed if permission is granted, there's a severe risk of harm or to defend against professional misconduct.

STANDARDS OF PRACTICE

The Ombuds Office operates consistent with the International Ombuds Association's Code of Ethics & Standards of Practice.

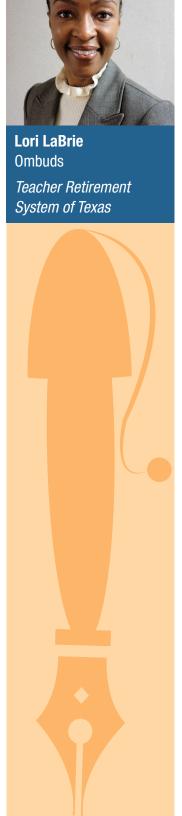
IMPARTIALITY

The Ombuds is a neutral resource that avoids conflicts of interest and does not advocate for any party.

INFORMALITY

The Ombuds is an unbiased resource that doesn't advocate for any party and doesn't participate in any legal proceedings.





A Message from the Ombuds

The TRS Office of the Ombuds presents its annual report for the period between Jan. 1, through Dec. 31, 2023. As the Office enters its second year, we are excited to share our accomplishments, reflections on our interactions with members, statistical data, and plans for future actions. We hope this report will be informative and helpful to all interested parties.

It is important to note that while the Office relishes in its progress, we are grateful for the support of our team members in the Legal & Compliance Department and those on the frontline of our Benefits and Health Divisions for their diligence in helping the Office improve our processes and expand our services to support their efforts to provide services to the two million plus active and retired teachers who depend on TRS.

For the calendar year (CY) of Jan. 1 through Dec. 31, 2023, the Office was delighted to participate in **24** outreach events. Through this effort, the Office engaged with many active and retired teachers who participated in benefits presentations and health fairs offered in person and virtually.

Since its inception in 2021, the Office has assisted **1,991** members and community partners. The Individuals contacting the Office ranged from retired members to those actively working on the frontlines and family members.

Our analysis of the Member Satisfaction Survey (MSS) Report revealed some insightful takeaways where members requested improvements to the Ombuds Office complaint handling process, specifically for filing complaints. The survey results helped the office understand where to focus its attention for the year ahead. The MSS Report provides regular feedback and, in tailoring questions, encourages open and constructive communication, particularly as part of our evaluative strategies.

Introduction

Goals

The goals for preparing this report were to:

- Provide an annual report to the trustees, the executive leaders, and the members to meet the
 expectations set by the International Ombuds Association (IOA) Standards of Practice and those of the
 TRS Board of Trustees.
- Demonstrate how the interactions between the members and the Ombuds and the collaborative efforts between the Ombuds and the Benefits and Health Divisions benefited those served and helped achieve the agency's goal of member engagement, outreach, and customer service.

This report includes information regarding office operations, services, member experiences, operational progress, and recommendations. These observations and conclusions include:

Previous Years Observations and Conclusions:

Throughout 2023, the Ombuds Office reviewed its observations from the previous year (2022) Annual Report. These observations and conclusions included:

- 1. The Office proposed to increase its outreach to educate members about the Office as an additional resource and spread awareness of its existence.
- 2. The Office proposed strengthening relationships and building collaborative partnerships with the Benefits and Health Divisions.
- 3. The Ombud's conducted a customer service survey to gauge the effectiveness of its services.
- 4. The Office proposed increasing its participation in the benefits and health training, continuing education, fairs and presentations to enhance the services provided by the Ombuds and broaden knowledge surrounding their programs and services.

Operations

Office Activities for 2023

The Benefits and Health Divisions invited the Ombuds office to participate in the annual presentations and fairs. The office joined multiple counselors during their benefits presentations, which were conducted in person or virtually for all active or retired members. Members could ask questions, share their experiences, and provide suggestions.

The Ombuds office also accompanied the health team to its annual health fairs offered to active and retired members across Texas. Members learned how the office assists members and stakeholders with their health and benefits-related inquiries, asks questions, and provides their feedback.

Additionally, the office participated in the TRS-Care Retirees Advisory Committee (RAC) Meeting, providing information about members' health insurance concerns and discussing its outreach efforts.

Finally, the Ombuds Office traveled to several TRTA fall conferences to greet attendees and speak with them about the office's services.

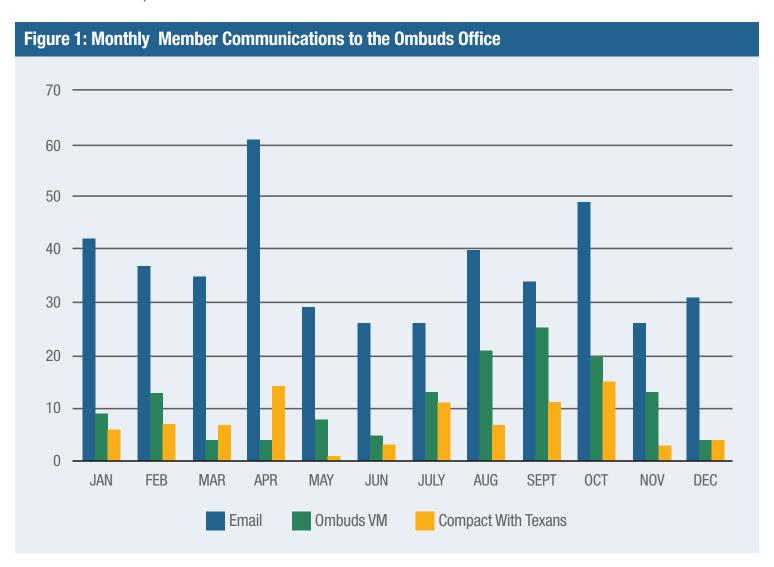


Caseload

Ombuds Communications

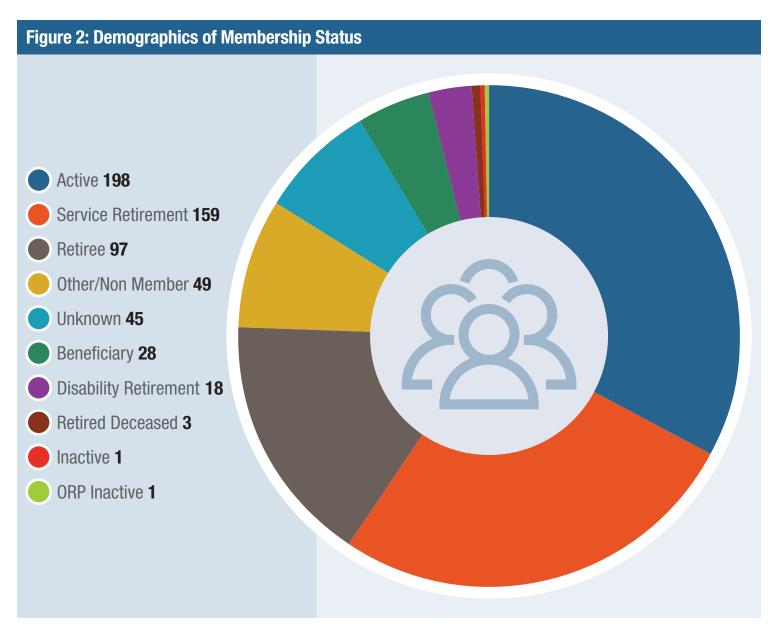
During June 2021, the Ombuds Office received multiple requests for assistance; by the end of the year, there were **661** communications. For CY2022, there was a modest increase, bringing the total to **666** communications, while traffic remained consistent for CY2023, and the year ended with **664** communications to the Office. Since its establishment in 2021, the Ombuds Office has assisted around **1,991** active, retired, and community stakeholders.

In CY 2023, the Ombuds Office received **664** communications, of which **436** were emails, **139** were telephone and voice messages, and **89** were Compact with Texans emails. Members usually contacted the Office using the Ombuds email account and the Compact with Texas portal; however, in 2023, members contacted the Ombuds more frequently through the offices' email and dedicated phone. The Office reviewed, responded to, or referred all matters within one or two days, well within the agency's five-day requirement, and all submissions received equal priority and attention. The business units resolved all communications that met the criteria for complaints.



October had the highest number of communications, with **84** requests for assistance, while June had the lowest, with only **34** requests. On average, the Office received approximately **55** monthly requests from members, non-members, and family members. By the end of the year, members had contacted the Office with **343** concerns or questions related to benefits, **157** health insurance inquiries, **164** general information requests regarding appeal statuses, and submissions of documents for retirement and refunds. The Office is focused on enhancing its customer service and increasing member engagement.

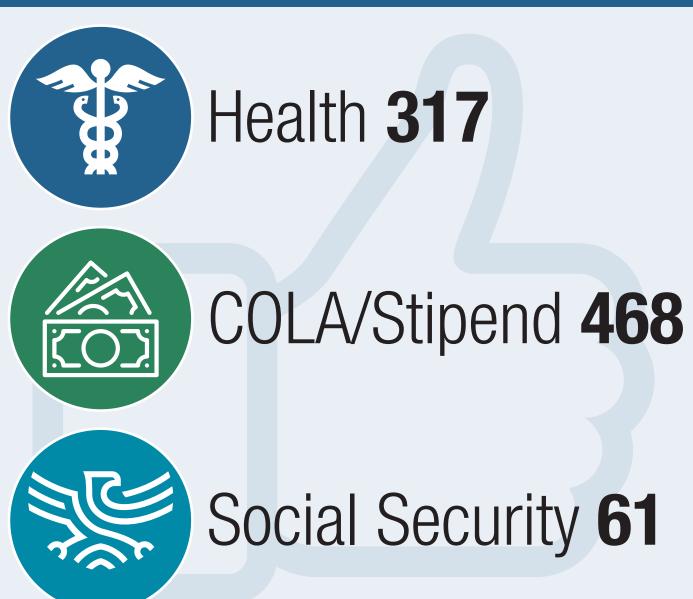
Figure 2 below shows the breakdown of member types contacting the Ombuds per month. Among all members who contacted the Office, the most submissions came from active members, with **198**. The second largest group was service retirement members, with **159** contacts. As expected, the least number of submissions came from inactive members.



Social Media Comments on Large-Scale-Agency Issues

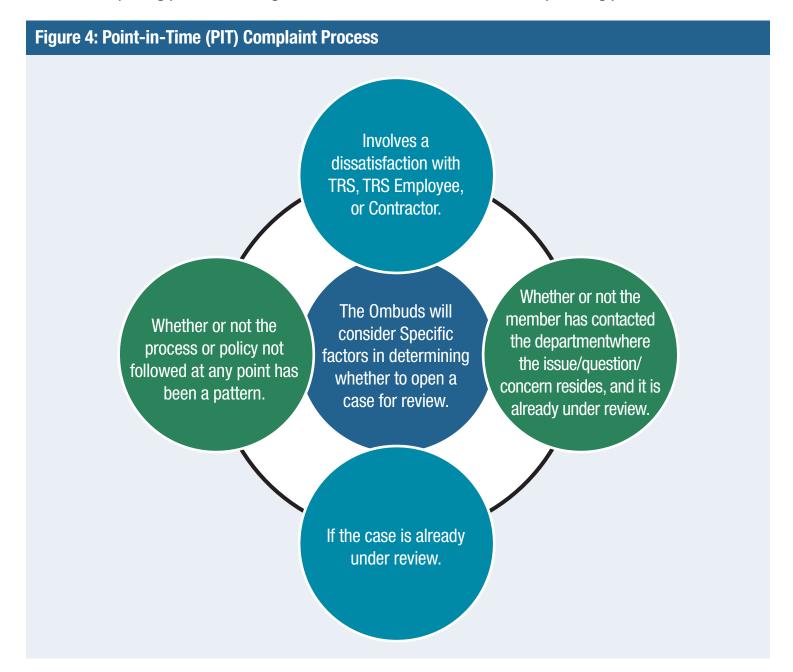
For the past year, the Ombuds Office included "Hot Topics" via the quarterly report to the Board of Trustees. TRS's Communications Department uses social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter to share important updates and announcements to help keep members informed. As a result, members often reach out to TRS on these platforms to ask questions or express concerns, which TRS calls "Hot Topics." TRS Communications Department monitors the social media platforms for these hot topics, answers low-level queries, and escalates to the appropriate office when necessary. Figure 3 shows the most popular social media topics posted for CY 2023.

Figure 3: Social Media Comments on Large-Scale Agency Issues "Hot Topics"



Point-in-Time (PIT) Complaints

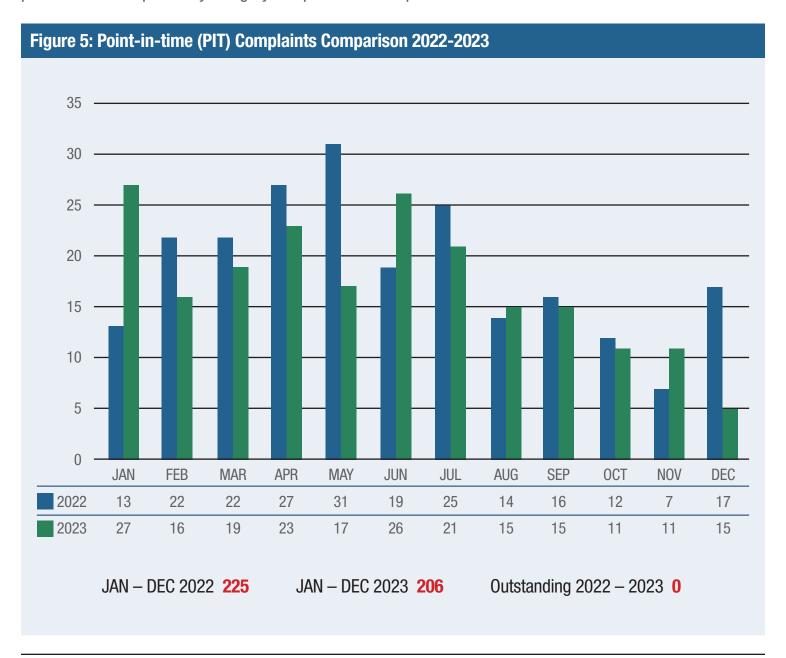
As mentioned, TRS has two types of submissions: communications and complaints. Complaints differ from communications as they involve a member being dissatisfied with TRS, a TRS employee, a TRS contractor, or actions (or inaction) in service that (1) requests or implies that TRS respond or take some action or (2) is received by the Ombuds and is determined by the Office to be a complaint (as guided by the TRS complaint categories). Recall that communications are a general dissatisfaction with TRS regulations (e.g., statutory constraints for COLA disbursements) or a routine question. It is essential to note that PIT complaints are reported on a rolling basis when made to TRS; they are classified into several categories and subcategories used in the reporting process. See Figure 4 for more info on the Ombuds complaint log process.



The Ombuds report is based on data received in the business units and Ombuds office and serves as an annual testament to the agency's dedication to transparency and responsiveness toward its members.

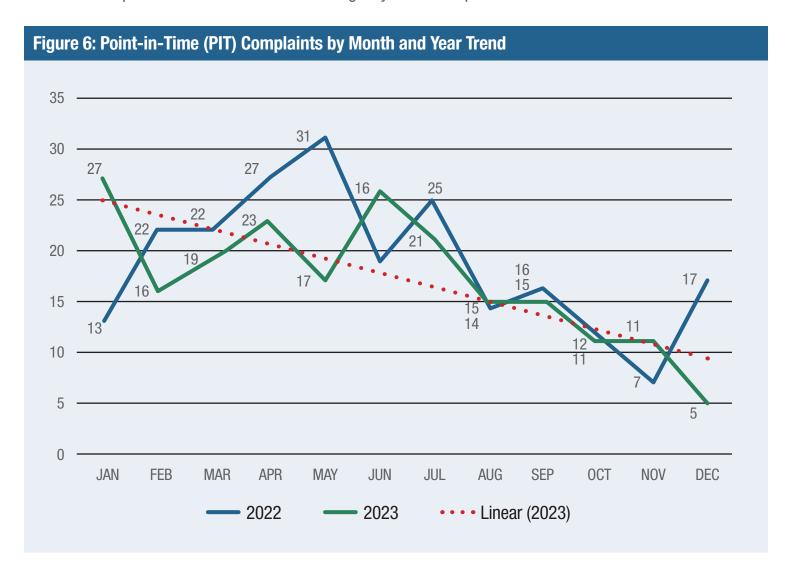
The Ombuds Office is responsible for responding to the emails and phone calls received in the office regarding TRS services. The Ombuds tries to assist members and evaluate their concerns during initial contact. The subject matter experts and business divisions assist if further action is necessary. The subject matter experts and Ombuds offices work together to address the members' needs in a coordinated effort.

In CY2023, the Ombuds Office received **664** communications. Out of these, **206** were confirmed as substantiated complaints. The business units resolved all complaints. Figure 5 in the report illustrates the point-in-time complaints by category and provides a comparison to the statistics from 2022.



Complaints Received by Month Trend

The chart displayed in Figure 5 illustrates a decline in PIT complaints from **225** in 2022 to **206** in 2023. Similarly, Figure 6 shows the monthly rise and fall of PIT complaints in 2022 and 2023, which helps compare the trends over time. The benefits division credits the improvement in PITs from 2022 to 2023 to increased funding, which allowed them to hire, recruit, and train more counselors in crucial areas. Consequently, this effort led to improved customer service for the agency's 2 million plus members.



Point-in-Time (PIT) Complaints by Category

The Ombuds and business units use a complaint classification system to categorize the submissions received from members. This helps in reporting and tracking of complaints. Figure 7 below compares the complaint categories that were trending for 2022 and 2023. As the chart shows, the top three categories for both years were extended wait time, timeliness of response, and incomplete information provided. However, for 2023, even though the number of complaints in a particular category increased compared to 2022, the chart indicates a steady decline and an overall downward trend in the number of complaints received for the year.

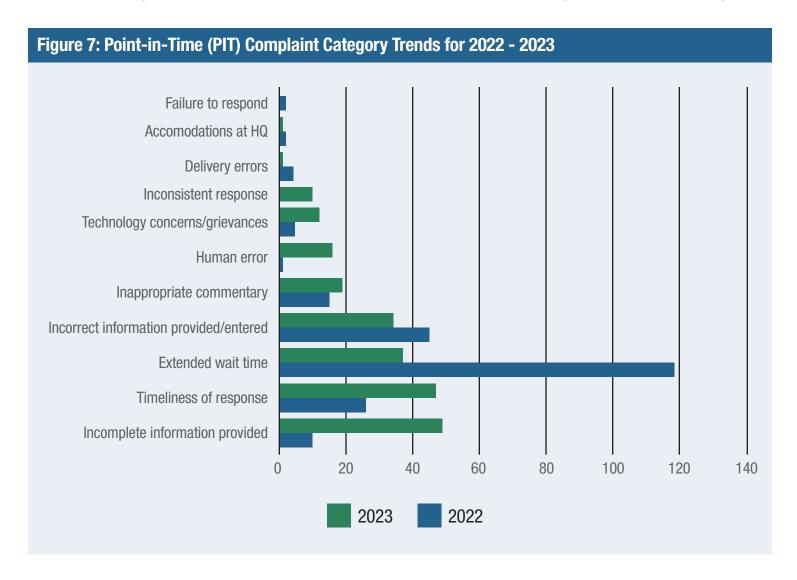
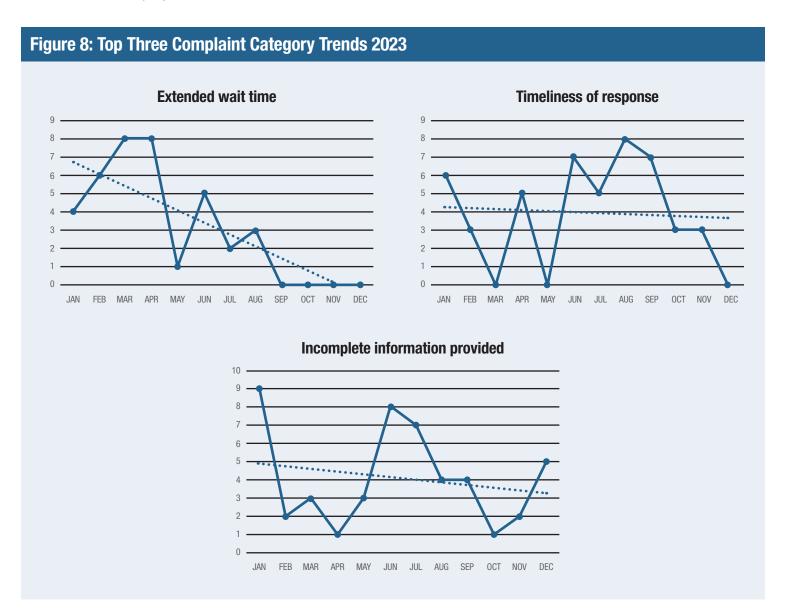


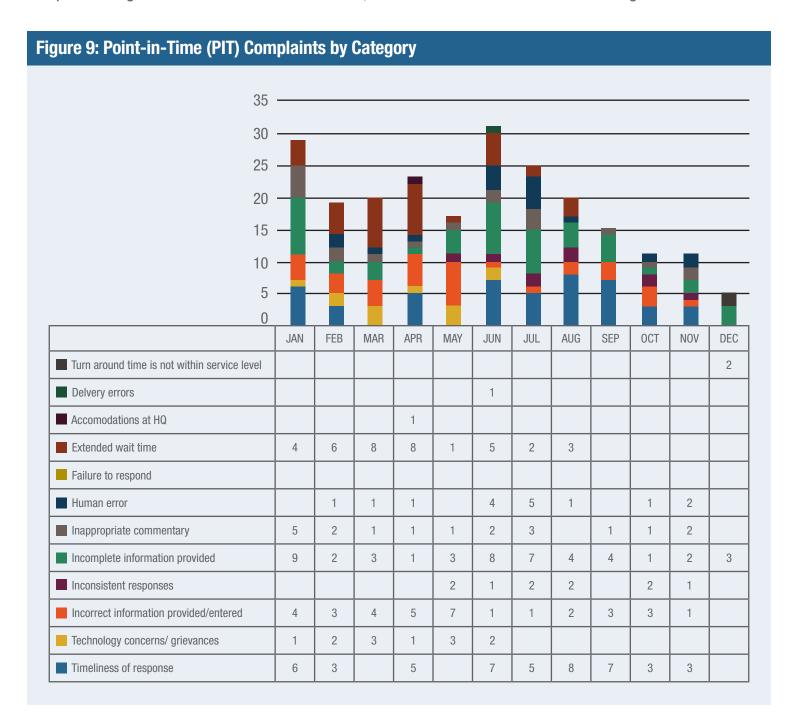
Figure 8 provides insight into the three most common complaint categories previously mentioned. These categories are as follows:

- 1) extended wait time (2022: 117; 2023: 37),
- 2) timeliness of response (2022: 27; 2023: 47), and
- 3) incomplete information provided (2022: 12; 2023: 49).

The graph shows how the numbers of complaints vary over time, due to factors like call surges, service demands, and employee turnover.



The PIT Complaints by Category graph in Figure 9 below shows the various complaint categories contained in the previous figures 7 and 8 and is used to show the total number of complaint categories per month for the entire year. The chart is important because it demonstrates that a member's complaint can have multiple complaint categories contained in one submission, which is crucial information for tracking trends.



Member Satisfaction Survey Findings

In the 2023 survey, active and retired members mentioned areas where the Ombuds Office complaint handling process could be improved. The most common areas of improvement for both member types included response time, follow-up, and timely communication. One in five members expressed satisfaction with the complaint-handling process, regardless of their member status. Additionally, active and retired members reported that they were less likely to rate their experience of contacting the Ombuds Office to file a complaint as satisfying.

To address these concerns, the Office has already implemented steps to improve the complaint-handling process. These steps include updating the website to make finding the intake form and other important links easier and ensuring that all matters referred out have received a follow-up within the five-day processing time frame. The Office is focused on meeting the members' needs by implementing processes with their needs in mind.



Recommendations for FY 2024

The agency is committed to providing excellent customer service to its two million plus members, but there may be times when it falls short of meeting this objective. To address such situations, the Ombuds Office acts as a neutral and informal platform for members to voice their concerns and complaints. Additionally, it helps the agency identify trends that may require attention. The following observations are noted for CY 2024:

- The office is currently reviewing its complaint intake process to determine how to simplify the process to make it easier for members to present their concerns to the office.
- The Office will partner with the business units to continue to explore improvements to customer service.



Contact Information

Ombuds:

Direct Phoneline: 833.873.2331

Email: Ombuds@trs.texas.gov

Ombuds Office Intake Form: https://www.trs.texas.gov/Pages/ombuds.aspx



To ensure a prompt response to your inquiries and complaints, we recommend that you first contact the relevant customer service department directly to address your concerns before contacting the Ombuds.

Benefits:

TRS Benefits Member Services: 1-800-223-8778

Hearing Impaired: Dial Relay Texas 711 or 1-800-735-2989

Health Care Programs:

TRS-Care General Questions: 1-888-237-6762

TRS-Care Standard: 1-866-355-5999

TRS-Care Medicare RX prescription drug coverage: 1-844-863-5324

TRS-Care Standard Pharmacy: 1-855-778-1459

TRS-Active Care Customer Service – Medical BCBSTX: 1-866-355-5999

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Contact Informtion:

Teacher Retirement System of Texas

Office of the Ombuds

Lori LaBrie

Email: 0mbuds@trs.texas.gov

Phone: 1-833-873-2331

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