



Teacher Retirement System *of* Texas

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# OMBUDS ANNUAL REPORT

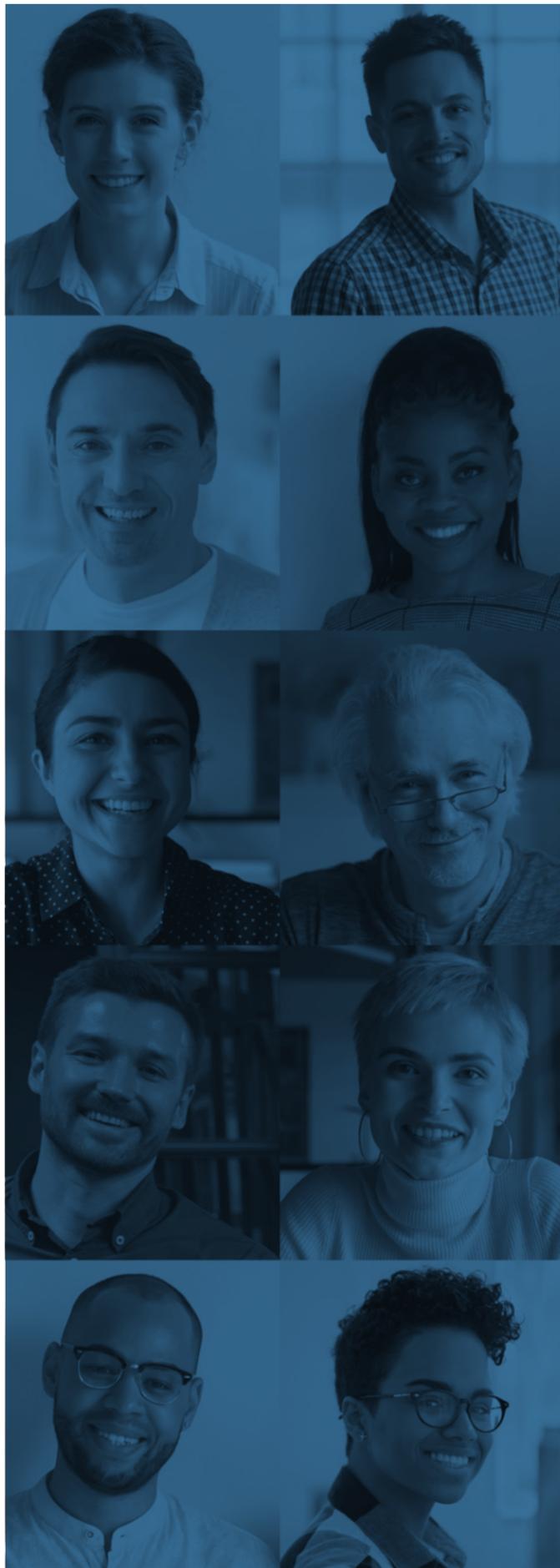
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January 1 – December 31, 2022



# OMBUDS ANNUAL REPORT 2022





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## A MESSAGE FROM THE OMBUDS

In response to the actions of the 87<sup>th</sup> Texas Legislative session and the resulting Sunset Bill, **HB 1585**, TRS Board of Trustees selected a permanent Ombuds that began in November **2021**. This is the first official report since the Ombuds Office’s inception and covers the 12 months from **January 1 to December 31, 2022**. The information in this report outlines the type of issues raised and provides an overview of the Office’s highlights, including observations on the role of the Ombuds. TRS Ombuds Office follows the International Ombuds Association (IOA) Standards of Practice and Code of Ethics of neutrality, informality, confidentiality, and independence. The Ombuds is neutral and informal and aims to support the interests of its members, stakeholders, and the agency. The informality means that the Office aims to resolve issues early and at the lowest level and does not accept legal notice on behalf of TRS. To learn more about the Ombuds office, please visit the website at <https://www.trs.texas.gov/Pages/ombuds.aspx>.

# THE OFFICE OF THE OMBUDS

HB 1585 requires the Ombuds to assist members and retirees by providing protection and advocacy and submitting regular and annual reports to the board recommending changes to TRS's operations that benefit members and retirees. To that end, the Ombuds has worked diligently with the business units to enhance member and retiree experiences by maintaining a high focus on accountability while delivering excellent customer service. The Office prides itself on being impartial and fair, ensuring equitable service to everyone's concerns and complaints, and assisting to make resolving issues regarding their pension and health insurance benefits easier.



The Ombuds utilizes a SharePoint system that the office manages. The workflow consists of the following:

- Review all email and phone call communications.
- If possible, provide the information or assistance needed.
- If the matter requires a more detailed response, forward it to the appropriate TRS division leader.
- Provide follow-up as necessary.

The Ombuds is accessible through multiple channels, including the Ombuds office intake form, the Compact with Texans (CWT) intake form, direct or transferred calls, email, the ombud's phone line, and referrals from stakeholder groups. The office also engages with active and retired members and, if necessary, escalates their concerns. The Office explains TRS' processes for customer service, complaints, and appeals, and, if necessary, addresses questions directed at the agency and questions regarding their rights and responsibilities under the applicable benefit and health programs if member/retiree is either unable to obtain the information through normal TRS channels (e.g., telephone counseling center) or is dissatisfied with the information or customer service received through those channels. While most matters are resolved swiftly and informally, should a case rise to the level of a complaint, the Ombuds is there to help.

The data received through the various touchpoints, sources and processes are aggregated to provide upward feedback to the divisional leaders, the leadership team, and ultimately the Trustees to report on emerging trends and act as a possible early warning system.

The Ombuds can provide information on policies and procedures and advocate for fair treatment and process. However, the effectiveness of the office hinges on the relationships forged with the agency's business unit leaders and their teams (Benefits and Health and Insurance), who work diligently to address all concerns presented to the Ombuds that fall within the law, statute, or the agency's purview. The Office cannot underscore these individuals' importance and value to this important process.

The Ombuds adheres to the standards of practice of informality, impartiality, confidentiality, independence, and the ethical standards of the International Ombuds Association (IOA). Please review IOA's website for more information about their guiding principles at <http://www.ombudsassociation.org>.



# HIGHLIGHTS

In 2021, from June to December, members and retirees presented approximately **661** communications to the Office; **136** were determined in coordination with the business units to be verified complaints. Comparatively, in 2022, the Office processed **666** communications, with **225** verified as complaints in coordination with the business units. From November 2021 through December 2022, the total combined communications to the Office from active members, retirees, beneficiaries, teacher association representatives, and ISD administrators totaled **1,327**. The agency currently has 1.9 million members, with the total complaints received for the calendar years 2021 and 2022 representing less than 1% of its membership.

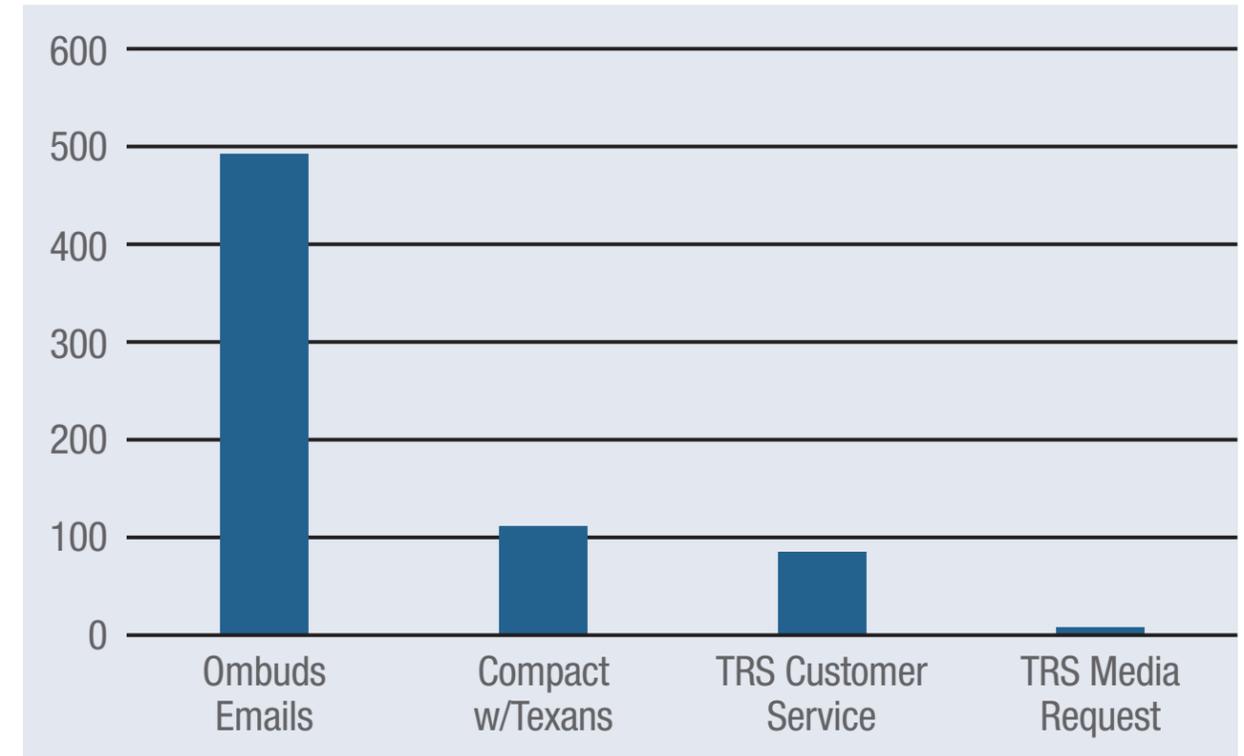


## Tracking and Reporting

The following represents the percentage of the **666** communications that were emails, voicemails, and Compact with Texans (CWT). For 2022, **70%** were emails, **14%** were voicemails, and **16%** were from the CWT site. In looking at the data, the percentage of emails and voicemails were not indicators of unique occurrences. Instead, they represent a more general usage of this group reaching out to the

Ombuds instead of contacting the business units first. Alternatively, the emails received via CWT indicate members seeking to file their complaints specifically with the Ombuds. However, less than 2% of those transmissions were determined in coordination with the business units to be verified complaints.

## Total Ombuds Communications for 2022



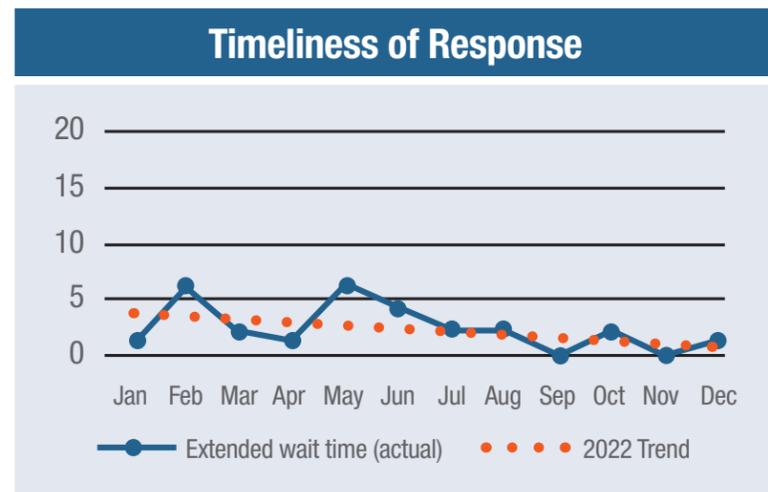
\*Figure 1-Ombuds Communications 2022

After examining the concerns submitted to the Office (e.g., emails and calls), the type of concern was also reviewed to determine what trends, if any, emerged. It was noticed that, similarly to the previous year, members were concerned with call hold times, the turn-around time to receive feedback on a transaction and seeking clarification on the information provided.

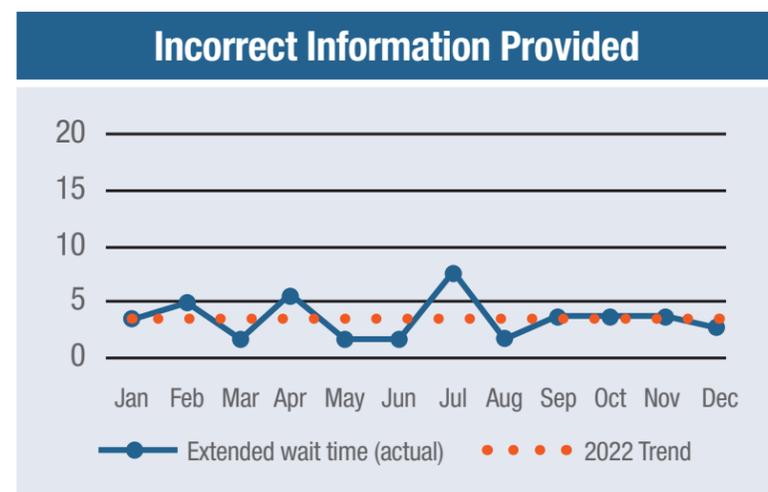
The top trending communications topics for 2022 remained the same as those identified in 2021: *extended wait time, timeliness of response, and incorrect information provided/entered*. However, the corresponding numbers showed a more downward trend. This descent is due in part to the approval of additional full-time employees in customer service and the opening of the new regional office in El Paso, which is anticipated to translate into a more positive trend in these categories.



\*Figure 2- Extended Wait time Complaint Category Trend 2022



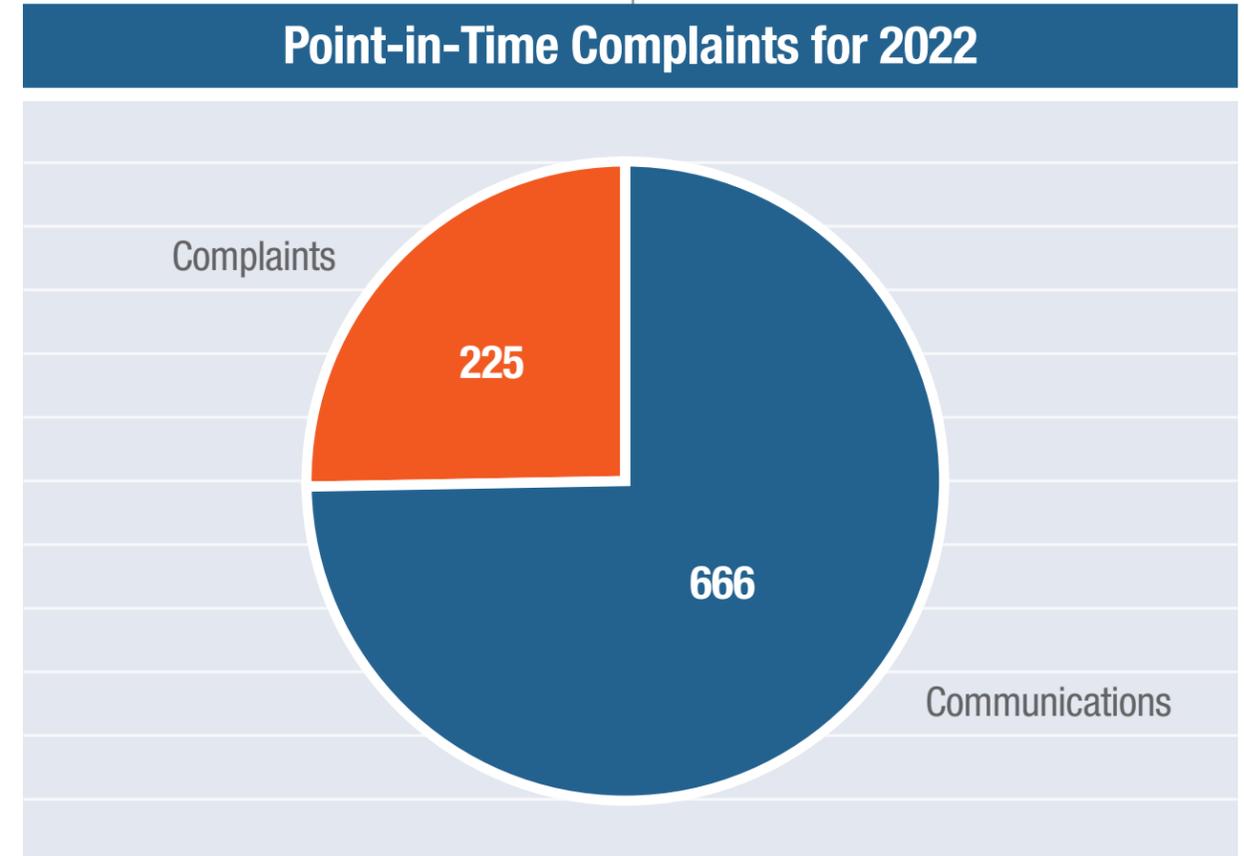
\*Figure 3 – Timeliness of Response Complaint Category Trend 2022



\*Figure 4 – Incorrect Information Provided Complaint Category Trend 2022

The total number of Point-in-Time complaints, including those presented to the Ombuds, Benefits, and the Health and Insurance division from January 1 to December 31, 2022, was 225. The chart below shows the percentage of communications considered complaints and how that number compares to communications received in the Ombuds office for the year. The Office uses a list of Complaint Categories that represent the issues a member brought to the attention of the Ombuds.

The Ombuds office works in coordination with the Benefits and Health Insurance divisions for resolution determining how and if the agency can help while also remaining compliant with all laws and statutes. As a result, the quarterly reports are important for informing of members' concerns, pointing out trends, and acting as an early-warning system to the agency and Trustees to monitor the system's interactions with members and retirees.



\*Figure 5—Total Point-in-time Complaints vs Communications Received for 2022

# OUTREACH



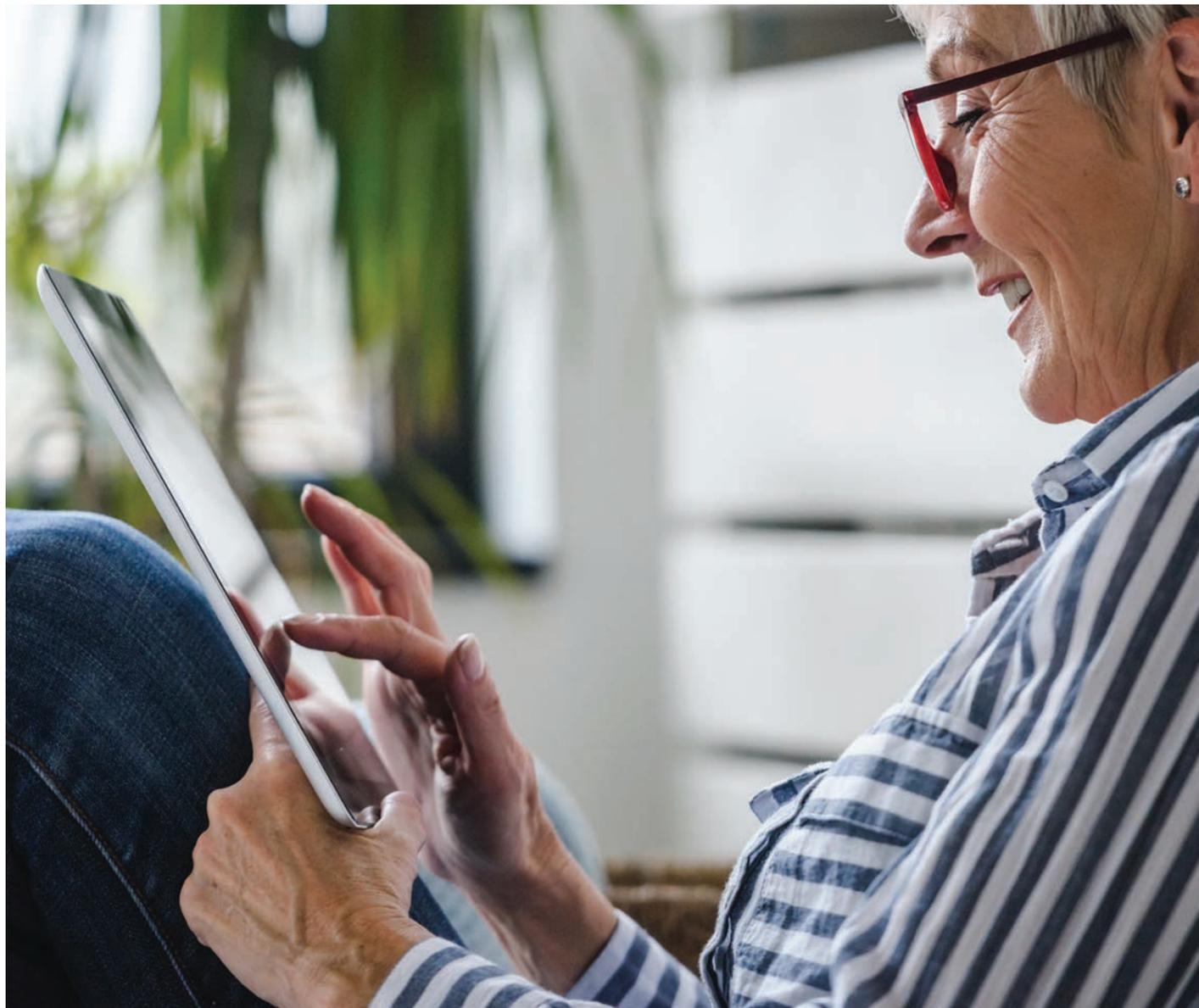
The Ombuds made efforts to ensure that the members, public education associations, business units and community partners know about the office and its services and will continue to do so as this is an ongoing process. This includes attending business unit meetings and training, public education association conferences/meetings, and other outreach efforts that provide exposure and opportunities to bring awareness to the office.

An example of this past year's efforts include the following: from September to October 2022, the Ombuds teamed up with Benefits, Health and

Insurance, Investments, and members of the leadership team to travel across Texas to meet with **17** Texas Retired Teachers Associations (TRTA) and Austin Retired Teacher Associations (ARTA) in **17** different cities to introduce the Ombuds office, get acquainted with the **400+** members, answer questions, and document concerns to provide feedback to the agency/Trustees. The meetings went well, as some members expressed appreciation for the one-on-one time and the ability to personally address their concerns to the agency's representatives.



# OBSERVATIONS



## Observation 1



Since the Office is still reasonably new, much time and effort went into setting up, organizing, and equipping it, making its presence known, and communicating its functions. The year ahead remains focused on fulfilling the Office's goals of strengthening relations with the business units, more training, continuing education, and networking with Ombuds from other retirement systems and state agencies. The Office kicked off the new year by participating in Benefits' five-week training and will also attend the 18th Annual International Ombuds Conference April 3-5, 2023, to network, enhance professional skills, and learn about new techniques, innovations, and changes in the field.

## Observation 2



During the Office's consultations with various members, it was noticed that awareness and understanding of the Ombuds office are still developing and necessary. Although many have a general perception of the Office, there is still an expectation of services beyond the Ombuds' purview. An Ombuds does not have decision-making authority. As a result, continuing to provide member outreach to listen, offer information, answer questions, and educate on how the Office serves as an informal resource is vital to its identity and existence.

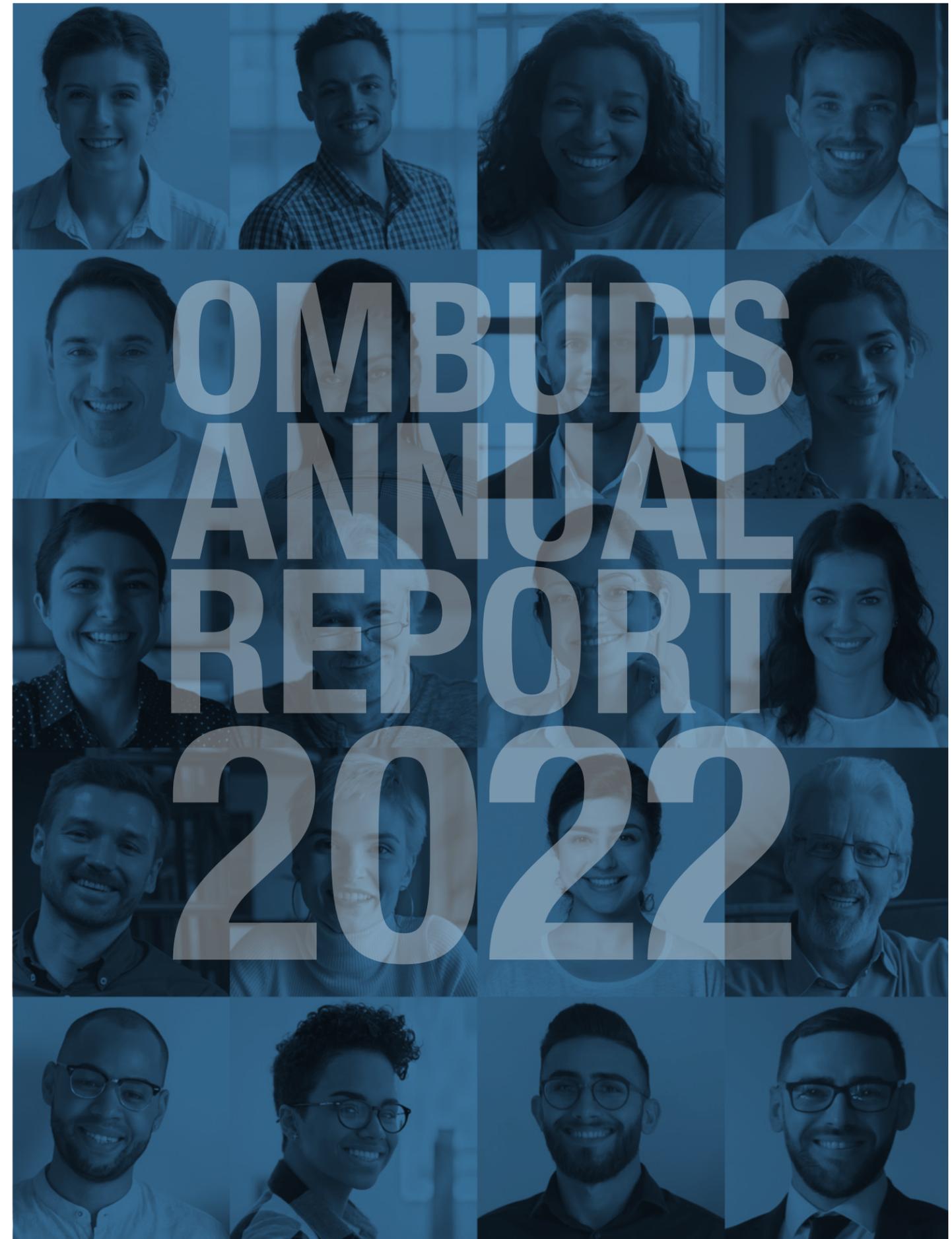
## Observation 3



The Office is working with the Communications Department to add a customer service satisfaction survey to the Ombuds webpage to ensure the Office remains member focused and centered, and encourages a feedback loop to gauge the effectiveness of its services.

# CONCLUSIONS

As the Office continues to gain its identity and work with members and business units, areas of general concern may emerge that call for a more profound response. Until then, the information provided is an indicator of the current trend data, highlights the members' concerns, and shows the steps taken by the agency to address and resolve them.



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