### [IOA CONFERENCE OMBUDS TOOLKIT](https://www.ombudsassociation.org/resources-for-conference-contract-ombuds)

**[Sponsoring Organization] Conference Ombuds Frequently Asked Questions**

Below are suggested questions and answers to provide for conference attendees. The suggested responses to the FAQ provided in this template document should be discussed by representatives of the Sponsoring organization and the Ombuds retained to serve as the Conference Ombuds, and they should revise these responses as appropriate for the Conference.

**How do I contact the Conference Ombuds before, during, or after the conference?**

*[Insert contact information, dates, times, and locations to reach the Conference Ombuds.]*

**What is an Ombuds?**

*The name “ombudsman” (om budz man) comes from Swedish and literally means “representative.” At the most fundamental level, an ombuds is one who assists individuals and groups in the resolution of conflicts or concerns. There are a number of different titles or names for this position: “ombudsman,” “ombudsperson” or “ombuds” among others. (For the purpose of this document, the term “ombuds” will be used.) Ombuds work in all types of organizations, including government agencies, colleges and universities, corporations, hospitals and other medical facilities, at news organizations, and at conferences.*

**Are there different kinds of Ombuds?***There are different types of ombuds with different roles, functional responsibilities, and standards of practice including organizational, classical, and advocate ombuds.*

*The organizational ombuds is defined as: “a designated neutral who is appointed or employed by an organization to facilitate the informal resolution of concerns of employees, managers, students and, sometimes, external clients of the organization.”*

*The classical ombuds … “typically is appointed by a legislative body to represent the public with concerns of the public with regards to the conduct of governmental agencies; they conduct formal investigations.”*

*An advocate ombuds is defined as one who “advocates on behalf of a designated population, such as patients in long-term care facilities.”*

**Is the Conference Ombuds an Organizational Ombuds?**

*Yes*

**How does the Conference Ombuds differ from an employee relations or human resources professional?**

*Employee Relations and Human Resource (ER/HR) professionals assist managers and employees of the organization in establishing, following and applying Human Resource-related policies and procedures. They may conduct formal investigations, make or modify policies, and accept formal notice of a claim on behalf of the organization. As a result, the ER/HR professional cannot always extend complete confidentiality to individuals who come forward with issues. The ER/HR professional's role is also not completely neutral because they are part of the management structure and they must directly represent and protect the interests of the organization.*

*An organizational ombuds' function is to provide informal assistance in surfacing and resolving issues. While they can recommend that an organization consider establishing or revising policy, the ombuds plays no formal role in enforcing or deciding to implement policy. The ombuds does not conduct formal investigations. However, they do assist in identifying or creating options for resolution, including referrals to formal channels with investigatory powers. Because they are not part of the management structure of the organization, an ombuds does not accept notice for the organization and can extend near absolute confidentiality (except in the instance of imminent threat of serious harm, as jointly defined by the organization and the ombuds, at the discretion of the ombuds). The ombuds is impartial and does not advocate for the individual, groups or the organization. The only advocacy role is for fair and equitable process.*

*The roles of the ombuds and the ER/HR professional are not competing roles, they are complementary. When the two functions work together in an effective partnership, they can yield tremendous benefit to an organization by maintaining an environment that encourages the use of multiple options to surface and resolve issues and to improve systemic policies and procedures.*

**How does the Conference Ombuds differ from a lawyer?**

*The organizational ombuds role is quite different from that of a lawyer, who is an advocate for their client and associated with more formal processes and the legal system.  An organizational ombuds maintains neutrality and impartiality when working with visitors, while a lawyer must advocate for their client. Though some organizational ombuds may have legal training and experience with issues of the law, ombuds do not provide legal advice.*

**Is the Conference Ombuds the same as a Mediator?**

*No.  While many ombuds are trained as mediators and often use mediation skills and techniques as one of many approaches to problem-solving and conflict management, the ombuds role is broader and connected to the organization. A mediator is typically an outside professional focused on helping people solve a specific issue or problem as compared with the ombuds who has a broader scope of work.*

**What is the background of the Conference Ombuds?**

*[Insert brief biographical statement for the Conference Ombuds.]*

**What sort of issues and concerns come to the Conference Ombuds?**

*A full range of topics come to the Conference Ombuds including, among others:*

* *All types of identity-based concerns*
* *Harassment (including sexual harassment)*
* *Free speech and free expression*
* *Integrity issues / Intellectual property / Research concerns*
* *Conflicts of interest*
* *Problems about the hotel, safety, etc.*
* *Issues related to the organization*

**If I have a concern on someone else's behalf at the Conference may I contact the Ombuds, or is this service only for people who are concerned about themselves?**

*Ombuds welcome those with a serious concern about colleagues or a conference situation as well as those with a complaint about something that affects themselves.*

**Will my communications with the Conference Ombuds be confidential? Are there exceptions to this confidentiality?**

*One of the ethical principles of an organizational ombuds is to hold all communications with those seeking assistance in strict confidence, and does not disclose confidential communications unless given permission to do so. The only exception to this privilege of confidentiality is where there appears to be imminent risk of serious harm.*

**What authority does the Conference Ombuds have? What authority does the Conference Ombuds not have?***The ombuds will serve as an independent, neutral, off-the-record, and confidential resource for conference attendees to discuss any concerns they may have concerning conference related behaviors and activities. The ombuds will be able to provide information confidentially and will provide a safe place for people to discuss their concerns in a confidential way to explore options for any further action. The ombuds will not, however, be authorized to serve as a place where notice of claims can be given to [Sponsoring Organization]. Likewise, the ombuds will not have responsibility or authority to investigate any issues raised.*

**Does the Conference Ombuds report to {Sponsoring Organization] on issues they dealt with at the conference?**

*The ombuds—without breaching the confidentiality of any communications by people using the services—will provide [Sponsoring Organization] with feedback on the nature of issues raised at the conference and any insights or observations about systemic issues relating to the conference or [Sponsoring Organization].*

***Additional Ombuds FAQ are listed on the IOA website at*** [***https://www.ombudsassociation.org/ombuds-faq***](https://www.ombudsassociation.org/ombuds-faq)