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New Studies Recommend Ombuds Programs for Protecting Victims of Sexual Harassment and Discrimination

*Four major reports recommend ombuds programs for federal agencies,
STEM-focused organizations and corporate employers*

Seattle, WA (June 23, 2020) – The [International Ombudsman Association](#) (IOA) today pointed to reports by a growing number of prominent research organizations that recommend ombuds programs for confronting sexual harassment and discrimination in the workplace, and for helping whistleblowers and others who come forward with concerns over misconduct.

Recent studies by the Urban Institute, the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, the National Academy of Sciences, and the University of Massachusetts Amherst build on decades of work among experienced ombuds who offer victims and complainants a resource that is confidential, informal, neutral and independent. Engaging an ombuds is often an attractive resource for people to obtain guidance on what their options are before they decide whether or how to take action. An ombuds' ability to protect victims' privacy and control, say experts, is an important distinction from reporting channels that require official notifications, formal investigations, record-keeping and resolution processes.

“Like people who are reluctant to report something to the police, many people don’t know what an investigation will involve or how it will turn out, and they’re afraid the law and an organization’s policies won’t be able to protect them,” said IOA Executive Director Chuck Howard, who addressed employee reporting obstacles in a recent article for the [Harvard Business Review](#). “Yes, whistleblower-protection laws and anti-retaliation policies exist, but people know that far too often, whistleblowers are penalized and retaliation occurs anyway. They need an alternative to help deal with such issues, and that’s what an ombudsman provides.”

The Harvard Business Review in April published a lengthy examination of sexual harassment programs and [why they backfire](#), based on a groundbreaking [study](#) by the U.S. National Academy of Sciences. The study found that mandatory harassment training programs can actually increase fear of retaliation, and recommends the establishment of ombuds offices. The study cited the success of MIT’s ombuds office that handled 500 complaints each year during the 1980s and reflected a desire among 90% of reporting individuals for an informal, confidential process.

The report from the University of Massachusetts Amherst, “[What Works](#),” recommends that employers adopt a “menu of alternatives, including ombuds programs,” where victims may find a resource that has “substantial freedom in how they help employees resolve problems in the workplace.” Too few organizations, the authors stated, use ombuds programs to “regularly address harassment and discrimination.”

The Urban Institute points to the use of ombuds as a way for victims to avoid reliving the trauma of sexual harassment brought about by investigations. The Institute’s [report](#) on STEM workplaces said that “given the confidential, informal, and impartial nature of the [ombuds’] role, targets can share what they feel

comfortable sharing, knowing that it does not commit them to anything, and they retain control over what happens next." The report cited previous studies that found the "fact that so few come forward to report harassment suggests that they feel unsafe or uncomfortable doing so." It also cited one study that found "the majority of respondents who had previously reported harassment said they would never come forward again" and that "research shows workers who come forward with concerns actually fare worse: they leave the organization sooner, face barriers to advancement, and often feel like they have ended their careers." Even more significantly, the Urban Institute report found that studies "have found that the majority of employee workplace harassment complaints were met with retaliation."

The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights recommended that Congress establish a federal ombuds program, empowered to help sexual harassment complainants "who may not have adequate recourse through available channels where existing agency structures may be compromised by conflicts." The Commission's April report, "[Federal #MeToo](#)," cited IOA's description of the duties of organizational ombuds, who "work with individuals and groups in an organization to explore and assist them in determining options to help resolve conflicts, problematic issues or concerns, and to bring systemic concerns to the attention of the organization for resolution."

"There seems to be a growing consensus around the value of ombuds programs as an important tool to help organizations combat sexual harassment and discrimination – as well as to help people and their organizations deal with conflict and other issues – in a variety of academic, government and corporate workplace settings," said Howard. "I'm optimistic that more employers will embrace this model in the future."

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About IOA

The International Ombudsman Association (IOA) is a member-led, professional association committed to supporting organizational ombuds worldwide. The association's 800-plus members help others safely navigate conflict and change in corporations, educational institutions, non-profit organizations, government entities and non-governmental organizations across the globe. IOA provides professional development, networking, mentoring and other resources, as well as an engaging [annual conference](#). Learn more at ombudsassociation.org.