

Argonne National Laboratory

Integrating the Ombuds Office into the Argonne Community

This Action Applies to Rubric Item # 13: Providing Anonymous and Nonmandatory Reporting Resources and Tools

Background:

In 2015 and 2017, Argonne conducted climate surveys to discover how employees felt about working at Argonne. One of the findings indicated that many employees were reluctant to raise workplace concerns through existing Argonne channels. One response by Argonne management was to create the Argonne Ombuds Office. In 2018, the Laboratory Director formed a search committee to conduct a national search for Argonne's first Organizational Ombuds. In March 2019, the Ombuds Office opened.

Description of Work:

Once the new Ombuds Office opened, the goal moved from creation to implementation. Specifically, the Laboratory Ombuds goals for the first 6 months of operation were as follows:

1. Draft and obtain approval for an Ombuds Office Charter.
2. Reach out to Argonne employees and educate them about the role of an Ombuds.
3. Develop working relationships with key personnel across all directorates to effectively assist employees in using the Ombuds Office.
4. Establish the credibility of the Ombuds' role by protecting confidentiality and providing excellent service to visitors to the Ombuds Office.

An Ombuds Charter that adheres to the Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice of the International Ombudsman Association is critical for providing an anonymous and nonmandatory reporting resource for targets of sexual harassment and other problematic behaviors. The Ombuds drafted a Charter that defines the standards of practice, privileges, responsibilities, and limitations on authority of the Ombuds and the Ombuds Office at Argonne. The Ombuds worked with the Argonne legal department to ensure that the Ombuds is a confidential, informal, impartial, and independent resource for members of the Argonne community with workplace concerns. In particular, the Charter states that the only exception to confidentiality is if the Ombuds determines there is an imminent risk of serious harm. The Charter also makes clear the Ombuds Office is not a reporting office. Thus, the Argonne

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Ombuds does not report sexual harassment, and when targets of sexual harassment speak with the Ombuds, they remain in control of what to do next. The Laboratory Director and the Ombuds signed the Charter on June 26, 2019.

One of the most significant Ombuds activities that led to many employees using the Ombuds Office were the 32 presentations about the role of the Ombuds given in the first 6 months after opening to various Argonne groups. Shortly after many of these presentations, a participant made an appointment with the Ombuds. The Ombuds also collaborated with Creative Services to write and print brochures, create an intranet site, and develop an Ombuds e-poster for campus-wide announcement postings at Argonne. In addition, the Ombuds spoke weekly about the role of the Ombuds at new employee orientation sessions and at various other meetings.

During the first 6 months at Argonne, the Ombuds initiated 62 informational meetings with Argonne employees. This total does not count ongoing meetings the Ombuds continued to have with leaders. These meetings helped the Ombuds understand Argonne's culture, which assisted the Ombuds in working with visitors to the Ombuds Office. The meetings also set the foundation for strong working relationships with key personnel at Argonne, receiving referrals, and helping the Ombuds guide visitors.

Ultimately, the success of the Ombuds Office is determined by the Ombuds' ability to help visitors with any type of workplace concern and build trust. In order to aid visitors, the Ombuds needed to listen for understanding, be patient, reframe, ask reflective questions, coach, develop options, strategize, mediate, and informally inquire into situations. By using these skills, the Ombuds was able to help most visitors with their issues.

After the first full year of operation, the Ombuds published an Annual Report containing nonidentifiable statistics. A positive sign that indicates the successful establishment of the Ombuds Office is that in the first year the Ombuds handled 184 cases brought by visitors, resulting in 331 sessions. Of the 184 cases, the Ombuds handled 19 cases with a visitor who had a previous case during the year. Colleagues referred 20 visitors to the Ombuds. The positive word of mouth helped the Ombuds Office develop a reputation for providing a safe and confidential space to raise any type of workplace concern, including concerns about sensitive topics such as sexual harassment.

In the future, the Ombuds plans to draft and launch a Laboratory Ombuds satisfaction survey for users of the Ombuds Office to complete. In addition, the Ombuds will design and conduct several trainings related to conflict management and difficult conversations. The Ombuds will continue to reach out to Argonne employees and educate them about the Ombuds role by collaborating with the communications division and giving more presentations to various employee groups. Finally, the Ombuds will pursue continuing education and interactions with other Ombuds at other organizations in order to provide the most updated services to the Argonne community.

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