

Office of Citizen Relations

Helping people navigate government agencies

Solving problems, getting results.

In New Jersey, when residents bring concerns, questions and complaints to a government agency, they have an ally on their side to help them cut through the red tape.

The Department of the Public Advocate, reinstated in 2006, is here to represent the interests of residents who need help solving problems with government agencies, and who are having trouble being heard.

To date, the Public Advocate's Office of Citizens Relations has fielded 3,020 complaints regarding New Jersey state and local government agencies, as well as private entities. Some complaints were handled by a simple telephone call to the appropriate agency. Other complaints were serious enough to warrant a full investigation. In either case, Public Advocate representatives make sure that when it is appropriate, government renders prompt justice against itself. The Office of Citizen Relations handles a broad spectrum of cases, from tax problems to obtaining housing and transportation.

No problem is too small or too large. We are here to serve the taxpayers of New Jersey.

When you feel you have no where else to turn, turn to the Public Advocate.

Here are some examples of the many ways in which the Office of Citizen Relations has helped residents resolve problems.

A place to call home

A.D., New Brunswick

A single mother of two and cancer survivor, A.D. and her two children were living with her brother and were about to become homeless in the fall of 2007. Desperate and ill, A.D. called the Public Advocate's Office of Citizen Relations for help.



"It is as much the duty of government to render prompt justice against itself, in favor of citizens, as it is to administer the same between private individuals."

-Abraham Lincoln

Just in time for the 2007 Holiday season, A.D. and her children moved into an apartment.

A.D. was already approved for a subsidized apartment in New Brunswick but she needed assistance from the city. Unfortunately, communication between A.D. and her city caseworker was breaking down. A.D. was having trouble obtaining the documents and funding she needed to move into her new apartment. She needed a third party involved to troubleshoot the situation.

OCR Advocate Representative Victoria Myrick was able to make sure that A.D. provided welfare officials with all of the documents they needed to process her paperwork. Myrick also ensured that welfare caseworkers expedited A.D.'s paperwork so that she and her two children could secure an affordable apartment.

Finally, after more than two months of waiting, and just in time for the 2007 Holiday season, A.D. and her children moved into an apartment in New Brunswick. Due to her illness, A.D. has experienced subsequent hospitalizations. But now, when she is discharged, A.D. returns to a home of her own.

The check is in the mail

J.K., Cherry Hill

It was late January of 2008 when J.K. contacted the Office of Citizen Relations, asking for assistance in obtaining her 2006 homeowner rebate check.

J.K.'s husband passed away that year and because the rebate was in her late husband's name, she still had not received the check. Despite contacting the appropriate office and sending all the necessary forms, the Cherry Hill resident had yet to receive a response.



An OCR Advocate Representative investigated the issue by contacting the Division of Taxation and reviewing all relevant documentation. In March 2008, J.K. finally received her check.

“[The matter] was handled so well despite me telling you my story once and having told the Division of Taxation my plight more than eight times,” the registered nurse wrote in a subsequent thank you note.

A voice for the people

R.D., Denville

R.D., a small business owner in Denville, Morris County, saved \$117,000 due to the efforts of the Public Advocate's Office of Citizen Relations.

Told he owed \$145,000 to the New Jersey Department of Labor (DOL) in unemployment taxes, R.D. and his accountant, K.H., had argued

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unsuccessfully for years that the DOL needed to undertake a more accurate accounting of his DOL tax exposure. The \$145,000 tax bill, they maintained, was based on an auditor's estimate and had no factual basis. Their complaints to DOL were not being addressed.

It wasn't until OCR Representative Steven Walker got involved, and was able to reach individuals in the DOL legal department, that R.D. got some relief. DOL did an accurate accounting of how much he owed -- \$28,000 -- and R.D. made payment arrangements to clear up the matter.

R.D. is a father of 10, and seven of his children are still at home. Because of the dispute with DOL, R.D.'s bank accounts were frozen and he almost lost his home before the Public Advocate got involved.

Walker "rolled up his sleeves and he dived in," K.H. told the office after the matter was resolved. "Steven is the best, he really is. He cares. I'm sure he went far from his duties."

When it rains, it floods

C.D. and J.D., Bergenfield

For 14 years, every time there was the threat of a storm, C.D. and J.D. feared that their house would flood.

Their chronic flooding problem was the result of inadequate storm drains and pipes along their property. The pipes were half the recommended size and could not support the deluge of water flowing from local streets past their home. The water backed up and leaked into their house.

"The last flood resulted in nine inches of dirty, foul-smelling street water in our furnished first floor." the D.'s



wrote in a 2006 letter to the editor in their local newspaper.

A report from the borough engineer recommended that the town hire an outside contractor to replace the 12-inch clay pipes with 24-inch pipes. However, the repairs were estimated to be costly-- about \$175,000 -- and the borough never issued a bid request for the repairs. To further complicate the matter, there was disagreement regarding who should pay for the repair.

"We have met with three mayors, attended countless council meetings and work sessions, sent many letters, published our plight in our town newspaper, sent a DVD showing the aftermath of one of the floods, and one of the near misses, and hired an attorney as a last resort. All to no avail," J.D. said.

"We will not have to be a prisoner in our own home for the fear of flooding."

As a last resort, J.D. contacted the Office of Citizen Relations and sent copies of all the relevant documentation, including a 1994 handwritten letter to the mayor.

An OCR Representative investigated the matter and spoke with several town officials and others.



"Miraculously, within one week, we returned home only to hear a message on our answering machine from the borough administrator. She relayed that they would like to talk to us to take a proactive approach to correct this issue immediately. [She] told us that the project will begin this fall, after she puts the project out to bid," they said. The borough finished the new drainage system in March 2008.

"We will not have to be a prisoner in our own home for the fear of flooding. Thank you for restoring our faith that government can and does help the people," the D.'s said in a thank you letter they sent to OCR.

[Link to independence](#)

L.O., Laurel Springs

Going to work was never hard for Special Education teacher L.O. Not even when she was diag-

nosed with a progressive degenerative disease in 1993. During the next nine years, she kept driving herself to her job in a Berlin Township school.

But the time came when she needed her husband or her stepfather to drive her to work. Then she learned she could apply for NJ Access Link, a service that the State provides to people with disabilities.

After filling out an application, L.O. had her initial assessment interview in April 2007. She later learned, however, that her application was denied because she did not provide "specific information" about the barriers she faced on her way to the regular bus stop from home.

Left without transportation to work, and with the school year about to begin, L.O. contacted the Public Advocate in September 2007. Advocate Representative Elizabeth Hulse was able to facilitate an exchange of information between L.O. and NJ Access Link that expedited L.O.'s approval.



"A three month process was concluded within 24 hours of speaking with OCR," L.O. said after the problem was resolved. "I was granted services from Access Link, and I have been able to continue working as a teacher in Berlin Township without undue hardship to my

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family," she said in a thank you letter to the Public Advocate Ronald K. Chen.

"I feel grateful and sorry I didn't call you sooner," L.O. said during a recent telephone conversation with OCR.

L.O. is now retired, but she still uses NJ Access Link on a regular basis, after getting a little help from her friends at the Office of Citizen Relations.

Health insurance and the collection agency

I.A. and A.S., Cranford, NJ

After reading about the Public Advocate in a local newspaper, I.A. contacted the Office of Citizen Relations for help in resolving a medical billing dispute.

In May 2006, I.A. and his wife, A.S., underwent identical medical procedures one week apart. The insurance carrier covered I.A.'s claim completely, but A.S.'s claim was only partially paid, leaving a balance of more than \$650.

The matter was simply an error in processing the claim, but I.A. was unable to resolve the problem between the hospital and the insurance carrier, and subsequently a debt collection agency became involved.

According to Citizen Relations Advocate Representative Kisha Saffron, no party would claim

responsibility for correcting the error.

"The claim had gone to collections, collections said I needed to talk to the hospital, the hospital said I needed to talk with the insurance carrier, the insurance said it was a hospital issue and so forth," Saffron said.

After multiple conference calls with the family, hospital, insurance carrier and collection agency, a supervisor at the hospital who was responsible for collections saw the mistake and finally cleared the outstanding balance.

Birth Certificate Trouble

Hudson County

Over a period of several months, the Office of Citizen Relations received numerous calls from constituents, mainly senior citizens, who needed a copy of their birth certificate in order to meet the six-point identification check necessary to obtain a driver's license or to get a passport.

When we looked into it, we learned that because of the closure of the Hudson County Office of Vital Statistics, these individuals were being required to travel to Trenton in order to obtain certified copies of their birth certificates.



"I would certainly recommend the Department of the Public Advocate if someone needs help when dealing with government agencies."

How do I contact Citizens Relations?

Mailing Address:

***Citizen Relations
New Jersey Department of
the Public Advocate
P.O. Box 851
240 West State Street
Trenton, NJ 08625-0851***

Email:

PublicAdvocate@advocate.state.nj.us

Phone: 609-826-5070

Fax: 609-984-4770

OCR was able to establish an agreement with the State Bureau of Vital Statistics under which senior citizens would not be required to travel to Trenton, but instead could expedite their application for the certified birth certificate over the phone. OCR also worked with the Motor Vehicle Commission and was able to reach a resolution that permitted individuals to use alternative forms of identification.



Another taxing situation

R.C and V.C., Somerset

"People need to know about you," says R.C. when talking about the Department of the Public Advocate's Office of Citizen Relations. "I think this is a good service you have."

A Somerset resident, R.C. contacted the Office of Citizen Relations in Aug. 10, 2007 after he and his wife, V., found out that the New Jersey Division of Taxation was not properly crediting the scheduled tax payments they had been making via credit card.

"We sent them checks, they said we didn't, so we decided to pay with credit card instead," R.C. explains. They received an invoice for taxes owed for their 2005 in-

come tax return, although they had already made the payment. After trying to solve the problem unsuccessfully, R.C. called the Office of Citizen Relations.

"Once you guys got involved, they acknowledged they had made a mistake," R.C. recalls. "I would certainly recommend the Department of the Public Advocate if someone needs help when dealing with government agencies."

During the summer and fall of 2008, the Office of Citizens Relations will be taking its show on the road to introduce this important service to citizens throughout the state. OCR Advocate Representatives will be on hand to listen and to assist citizens with their concerns.

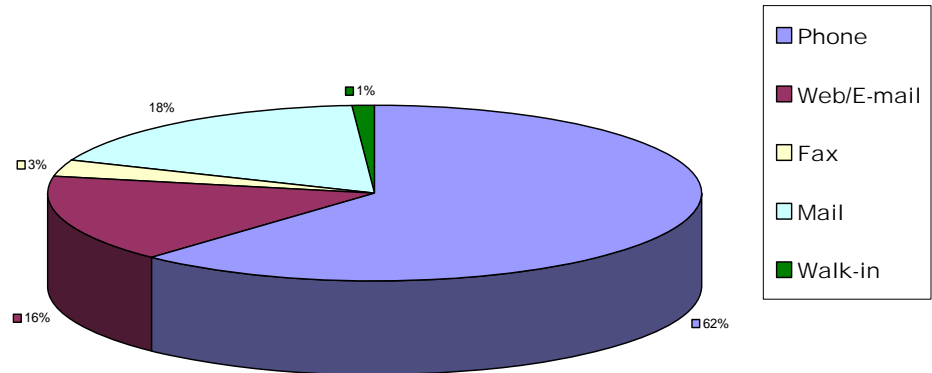
Please check out the Department of the Public Advocate website at www.njpublicadvocate.gov to find out when the Office of Citizens Relations will be visiting a community center near you.

OFFICE OF CITIZEN RELATIONS

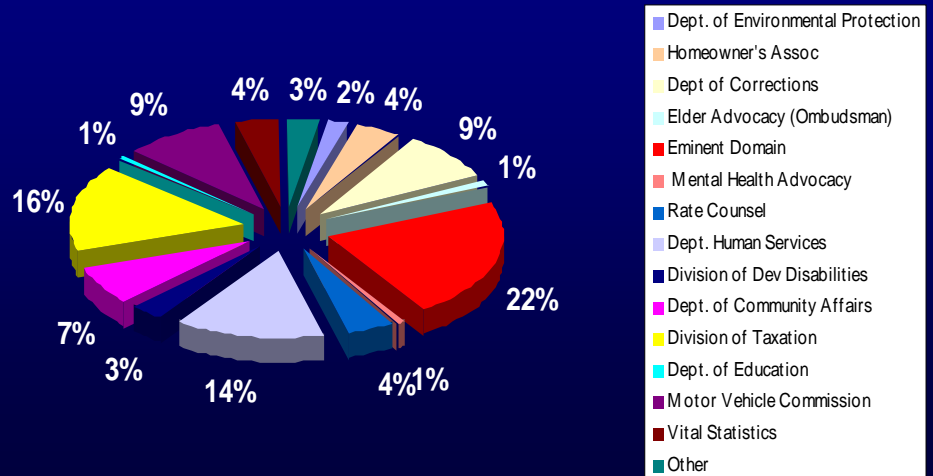
The Office of Citizen Relations is mandated by statute (N.J.S.A. 52:27EE-16) to investigate and respond to citizen complaints regarding the administrative action or inaction of state and local government agencies. The mission of the office is to make government more responsive to citizens, especially those citizens who are unable to represent themselves. Specifically, the Office of Citizen Relations gives the public a way to: 1) Express their dissatisfaction with a decision, action or policy of a government agency; 2) Seek information about a government agency and/or program; 3) Report bureaucratic delays, inadequate or confusing responses to citizen inquiries; and 4) State concerns about the manner in which an agency addresses a problem or treats a citizen.

OFFICE OF CITIZEN RELATIONS

REQUEST FOR ASSISTANCE



DATA ANALYSIS



During 2007, the OCR fielded more than 2,300 requests for assistance. Along with complaints about eminent domain (22%) and correctional issues (9%), some other significant issues during the first year include cases involving the NJ Division of Taxation (16%), the Motor Vehicle Commission (9%), the NJ Department of Human Services and its Division of Developmental Disabilities (17%) and the NJ Department of Community Affairs (7%).

Letter from the Public Advocate

Dear Fellow Citizens:

During its first 18 months of operations, the Office of Citizen Relations solved a wide range of thorny problems for New Jersey residents who felt they had no place else to turn. Many of these people were desperate and needed help obtaining services or satisfaction from public agencies.

As you can see in the chart below, OCR has a role in successfully resolving more than two-thirds of the inquiries directed its way. OCR staff work diligently to establish good working relationships with staff in public agencies so that the agency can address systemic issues identified as part of the conflict resolution process. We would not be able to resolve the problems and complaints that come our way without the trust and cooperation of these agencies, all of which are trying their best to be responsive to citizens.

Still, there are times when a citizen needs someone who isn't close to the problem to intervene. In these instances, the Office of Citizen Relations is there for you. Donna Jago, our director of Citizen Relations, and her staff work to solve problems and get results for you. If you ever need assistance, I hope you won't hesitate to call us at 609-826-5070.

Sincerely,

Ronald K. Chen
New Jersey Public Advocate



Ronald K. Chen became the first Public Advocate of New Jersey in 13 years when the Department of the Public Advocate was restored in 2006. As a member of the Governor's Cabinet, he is charged with providing advocacy for a number of specific constituencies, including elder citizens, people with disabilities, mental health consumers, and ratepayers, and is generally given standing to represent the public interest in legal proceedings.

