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Ombuds Office

2023 Biennial Report



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Introduction

The Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL) Ombuds [Charter](#) requires the Ombuds Office to issue a report every two years to the Laboratory Director. The prior Ombuds [Biennial Report](#) was published in July of 2021, celebrating 25 years of Ombuds history at the Lab. This 2023 report details office transitions and new initiatives over the past two years, along with our ongoing conflict resolution work of one-on-one discussions, classes, presentations, workshops, and facilitations.

The Ombuds Office supports the mission of LANL in myriad ways. We champion the LANL culture statement of “*How* we do work is as important as *What* we do,” and we reinforce LANL’s values of integrity, service, excellence, and teamwork. Accordingly, the mission of the Ombuds Office is to support employees in their work, enhance communication, mitigate conflict, and encourage a positive working environment.

The Ombuds Office adheres to the International Ombuds Association’s ([IOA](#)) Standards of Practice and Code of Ethics (see Appendix). As such, the Ombuds Office is informal, confidential, impartial, and independent. We do not advocate for managers or employees. We don’t tell people what to do; we don’t give advice. All of our services are voluntary.

LANL employees seek out the Ombuds Office as a neutral place where they can collect their thoughts, whether in person, on the phone, or online. We help individuals explore and navigate tough issues. Employees expand their understanding of their options, assess what is within their control, and decide what is in their best interest. The Ombuds Office promotes smart, professional conflict management.

This report highlights the work of the Ombuds Office and provides a closer look at both quantitative and qualitative data, including anecdotal information and endorsements. It concludes with a discussion of further opportunities to expand the reach of the Ombuds Office to more LANL employees.

Staffing

Change and renewed vision transpired for the Ombuds Office for 2022 and 2023. A new manager joined the Ombuds Office in late 2021. As the former director of the Alternative Dispute Resolution Division for a Federal Agency, our new manager brings a wealth of conflict resolution knowledge and leadership expertise to the position.

Though three long-term staff, with a combined 56 years of service to LANL, retired or moved on, two new staff members with a combined 20 plus years of service to LANL joined the Ombuds Office in 2023. Additionally, the Ombuds graduate research assistant (GRA) was converted to a regular position in 2022. The Office now has five full-time equivalent positions. These dramatic changes have led to renewed energy and a fresh vision for the future.

Outreach

The Ombuds Office has impacted a multitude of individuals through its diverse outreach. The events and activities mentioned here represent sustained work throughout each year.

Outreach Activities for 2022 and 2023

Classes - Between 10/1/2022 and 5/31/23, a total of 3,896 participants attended 151 Ombuds-related classes and presentations.

Booths - During the 2022-2023 period, approximately 700 people visited the Ombuds booths at the Lab's fairs for the Worker Environmental, Safety & Security Team, Heart Health Expo, and Mental Wellness. Almost 300 people visited the Ombuds Day booth at the Otowi Building in October of 2022.

Student Circles - Sixty-five summer students attended student circle groups in the summer of 2022, and we had similar numbers for the circles being sponsored for the summer of 2023.

Book Club - Approximately 30 people attended the *Atlas of the Heart* book club which we sponsored with the Lab's research librarians.

Articles - Ombuds staff published articles at least every other month for *LANLToday* or *LeadTime* employee email communications.

Outreach and Special Events	Partnerships & Collaborations
Mission Joy Virtual Event (Tutu & Dalai Lama)	People and Organizational Development's Management Quick Start
Southwest Ombuds Group Symposium	ALD Weapons Production (WP) Succession to Equip Potential Leaders Program
Conflict Resolution speaker, Ken Cloke	ALDWP Mentor-Mentee class
Department of Energy, Alternative Dispute Resolution speakers on Feedback	Laboratory Operations Supervisor Academy Graduate Program
Ombuds Day booth at Otowi	ALD Plutonium Infrastructure New Hire Orientation
Worker Environmental, Safety & Security Team FEST	TA-55 and ALDWP Ombuds Overview
Heart Health Expo	Presentations for American Bar Association, NM Supreme Court, and Leadership New Mexico
<u>Ombuds Day Proclamation by NM Governor</u>	Book Club, <i>Atlas of the Heart</i>

Following are testimonials from various 2022 special events:

MISSION JOY VIRTUAL EVENT

“Wonderful! That was a great movie and I'm feeling happier already!”

“Thank you! I am delighted that you made this film available.”

“Thanks so much. The documentary was fantastic. I am thankful for you showing it for us!!”

“I watched this yesterday and was moved to tears...such an amazing film.”

OMBUDS DAY

“I noticed today is ‘Ombuds Day,’ which would be a good opportunity to thank you again for helping me problem-solve my current situation. I imagine it's not an easy job, as people might often come to the Ombuds office with difficult situations, but I hope LANL reminds you and your colleagues more frequently than 1 day/year how important and helpful your office is to employees.”

CONFLICT RESOLUTION SPEAKER, KEN CLOKE

“It was a great presentation. Thanks very much for bringing it to LANL.”

“That was an absolutely terrific talk!”

“I couldn't be more grateful for your efforts to organize this wonderful event!”

“Thank you for all you do to make LANL a better place to work and for me to deal with conflict here at work or at least EVOLVE in my methodologies.”

Southwest Ombuds Group Symposium

The Ombuds Office sponsored a symposium that gathered ombuds from all over the Southwest region for two days. Additionally, we celebrated Conflict Resolution Month and Ombuds Day in October throughout the Laboratory. Our outreach involves numerous partners inside and outside of the Lab. We have worked with PRISM, the Lab's Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer+ (LGBTQ+) Employee Resource Group (ERG); the Active Bystander ERG; LANL research librarians; the New Mexico Supreme Court; and groups called the National Lab Ombuds and the New Mexico Leaders. Most recently we were asked to participate in the inaugural Human Subjects in Energy



Symposium participants at the D. McKibbin Conference Center

Technology and Policy Research Symposium. In addition, a lead ombuds from another national laboratory reached out to us to help them develop their Ombuds Office. And an ombuds from the National Aeronautics and Space Administration reached out to us to help them develop an Ombuds Office for one of their laboratories.

Initiatives-First Time Events

Highlights

This year we researched best Ombuds Office practices from across the country and integrated an advanced conflict resolution process into our work. In collaboration with the University of New Mexico Ombuds Office, we developed a unique process for supporting groups and teams.

LANL needed a neutral venue for employees who are separating from the Lab to drop off equipment and complete the separation process. The Ombuds Office stepped up and offered to help these employees. This has resulted in a very important support system for the Lab and departing employees.

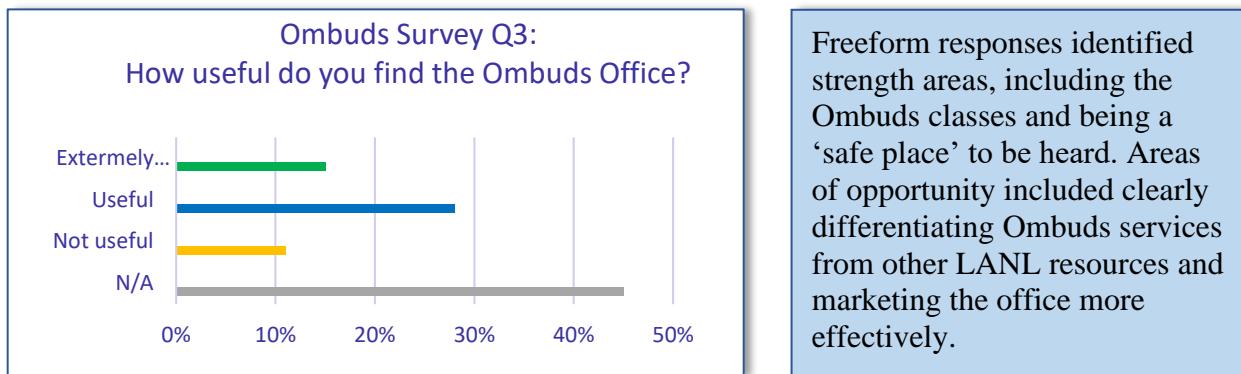
Similarly, we provide on-demand services for people who are upset and “walk in” requesting immediate services. Anecdotally, we have had people call us at 7:00 am on Monday morning after wrestling with an issue over the weekend. We have also had people call us at 7:00 at night concerned about the after hours, well-being of a student. We offer “just in time” services; to the extent possible, we can act as a “safety valve” for people who are seeking assistance.

2022 Ombuds Survey

During the past two years, the Ombuds Office developed a method for better quality control and participant feedback. We created a LANL-wide survey for employees to rate and give feedback on Ombuds Office services. This survey was advertised in *LANLToday*, was mentioned at every Conflict Resolution Month event in 2022, and was placed on the internal website as “Top News” for a week.

During October of 2022, 592 Laboratory employees responded to this anonymous survey. The survey contained two questions that employees responded to in a freeform text field, and a third question that asked: *How useful do you find the Ombuds Office?* As shown in Figure 1, of those who have used our services, 89% found the Office useful or extremely useful.

Figure 1. Results of 2022 survey question about Ombuds Office usefulness.



As a result of the survey, it became clear that the Ombuds Office has been undermarketed. Some had never heard of it or confused it with other offices. In response, we designed two Ombuds “cartoons” that were released to LANL employees as public service announcements. These provided employees with a clear idea of the value provided by the Ombuds Office and the multitude of services offered. Thereafter, we designed a promotional video of the Ombuds Office for all employees.

We also designed a new, permanent survey which appears under each Ombuds Office staff signature-line and on our website, the results of which are reviewed regularly. This is critical feedback for us as we have a sustained commitment to improving the quality of our services.

Addressing Student Needs

Working with our GRA over the student term shed light on issues such as isolation that some students experience. This same GRA designed and initiated Share, Ask, Fun, and Engage (SAFE) Circles for LANL students to meet other students. These Circles provide the Ombuds Office with important feedback. We also coordinated an Ombuds Office introductory course and skill-building classes for the students, and organized two book club meetings on managing conflict. We will continue to coordinate and partner with Students Programs and the Post-Doc Office to make the student experience more inclusive, constructive, and meaningful.

Services

The Ombuds Office’s mission is to help employees explore conflict resolution options and effective communication approaches. Our services include: (1) listening and problem solving, (2) skill building through presentations and classes, and (3) customized processes, which include workshops, listening sessions, team building, and facilitated conversations.

Coaching and Problem Solving

The Ombuds Office serves about 600 employees a year, excluding presentations and other outreach programs. These one-on-one discussions include some of the following elements:

- Acting as a sounding board for problem solving and self-reflection

- Building conflict competency skills
- Exploring and identifying the best resolution options
- Preparing and practicing for difficult conversations
- Coaching on developing leadership competencies and strengths
- Referring to policies and other programs, such as the Employee Assistance Program, Human Resources-Employee Relations, or the Employee Concerns Program

Our responsiveness is one of our unique contributions. People often ask us how quickly they can speak with us. Our goal is to respond immediately—we try to meet people on the same day or the next day if requested. Ombuds staff will rearrange their schedules and work on their day off if needed. We consider our responsiveness to be one of our greatest strengths.

Skill Building through Presentations and Classes

Between October 1, 2022, and May 31, 2023, 3,896 participants attended 151 Ombuds-related classes and presentations. Attendees consistently remarked on the exceptional helpfulness of these events. Our Psychological Safety class is a popular and valued offering that we can now provide more often as one of our new staff members recently became certified to teach it.

Every year, each Ombuds staff member creates and vets at least one new course offering for the Lab. We design these courses in response to specific requests and trends we want to address. In 2022, we developed courses titled: Negotiation in the Workplace and Resilience at Work. We also offered classes on empathy, respect, and engagement. In 2023, we offered new classes on Being Intentionally Conscious, Conflict Management Styles 101, and Difficult Conversations.

The Ombuds Office has a robust lending library covering conflict management, leadership skill development, and many related topics. We have various audio books and stay current with the *Harvard Business Review*. Some of the topics our resources cover include information on how to reduce bullying in the workplace, how to de-toxify a workplace relationship, and how to apologize.

Popular Classes	New Presentations & Team Building
The 4 Stages of Psychological Safety	Empathy (2022)
How to Raise Your Emotional IQ	Build Resilience, Thrive at Work (2022)
Negotiation Skills in the Workplace	Conflict Management Styles 101 (2023)
Decision Making Skills	StrengthsFinder Assessment (2023)
The Power of a Positive No	Intentionally Conscious (2023)
DISC Personality Profile	Difficult Conversations (2023)

Customized Processes

The Ombuds Office tailors its services to meet the visitor's needs. Someone may want a facilitated discussion between two people with an Ombuds Office member present, or a larger group conversation—we generate options to manage group conflict. We work with managers who seek to build stronger teams. We also customize workshops to include team listening sessions, strategic planning, and teambuilding. We conducted 31 group facilitations initiated by managers and 27 facilitated conversations over a 17-month period from 2022 to 2023.

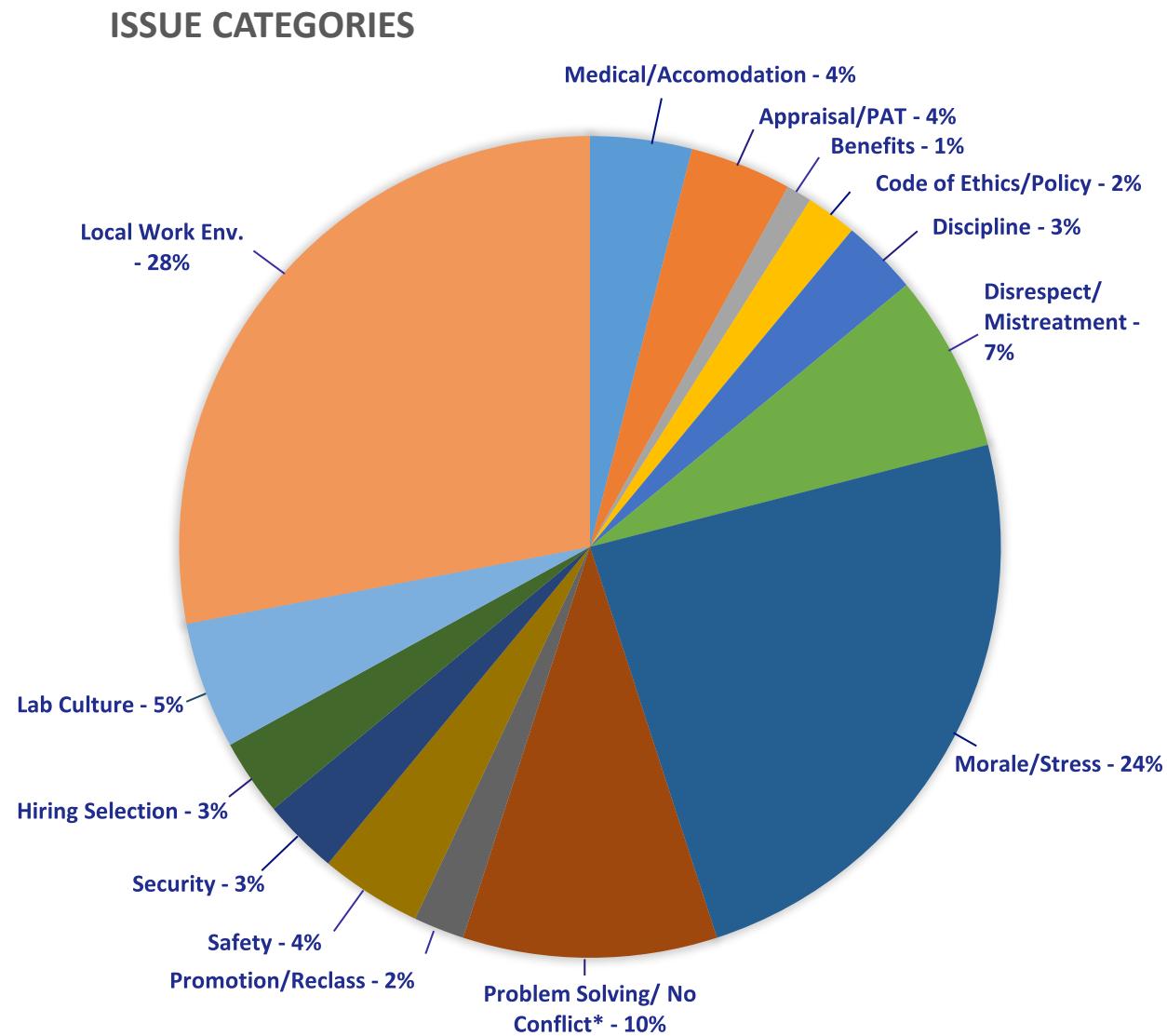
Data Collection

Visitors' Issues by Category

When people visit the Ombuds Office, we collect data on the various issues they want to discuss. As shown in Figure 2, categories of issues are varied. Starting in April 2022 'problem solving' was added and since that time, 13% of visitors report no conflict and often request pro-active team-building activities, presentations, and consensus-building skills. For the review period 10/1/21 - 5/31/23, the percentage of '*no conflict/problem solving*' was only 10% since it was not tracked prior to 4/1/22. The two highest categories of identified issues were '*local work environment*' (28%) followed by '*morale/stress*' (24%). More than one issue may be checked while working with a visitor.

Figure 2. Categories of issues by percentage, 10/1/2021 - 5/31/23

*Problem solving as of 4/1/2022



Manager vs. Non-Manager Numbers

There was an increase of 9% in the number of managers contacting the Ombuds Office. In 2020-2021, managers made up 20% of our visitors. During 2022-2023, that percentage increased to 29%. Post-pandemic, managers were requesting more team building and group work as employees returned to the office and new employees were hired.

Pandemic-Related Issues

Most Laboratory employees were asked to telework at the start of the pandemic in March 2020 through mid to late 2021. When return-to-office policies were promulgated in early 2022, some managers encountered resistance from employees. Ombuds staff supported these managers with

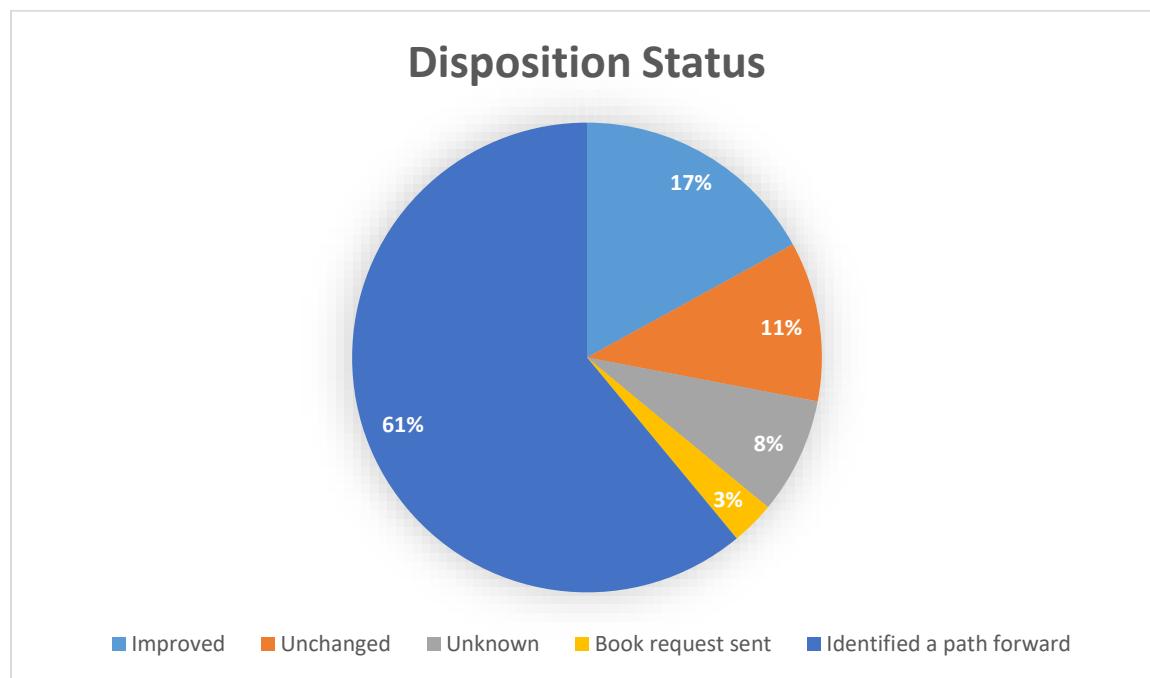
accountability-conversation coaching and helped employees raise their concerns and needs effectively.

Many employees reached out to us regarding the COVID-19 vaccine mandate toward the end of 2021 into early 2022. The uptick in these issues included concerns related to policy, respect in the workplace, and how to talk about masks and vaccines. Ombuds staff responded by writing an article for *LANL Today* encouraging respect for all mask wearers.

Issue Disposition

In April 2022, the Ombuds Office started tracking whether and how issues were resolved. The majority of visitors who visited the Ombuds Office relayed that their situation had improved, or that they understood better how to move forward. Figure 3 shows the disposition results from the period, 4/1/22 – 5/31/23. One may infer from Figure 3 that visitors who reported an ‘improved’ situation or who ‘identified a path forward’ found talking to an Ombuds staff useful. Those who did not follow up or anonymously contacted the office were deemed ‘unknown’ under disposition. Seventy-eight percent of Ombuds visitors identified a path forward or saw their situation improve after working with our office.

Figure 3. Percentage of visitors’ disposition status



Visitor Endorsements

The Ombuds Office started capturing endorsements in January of 2022. The following section lists just a few of the unsolicited, anonymized endorsements we have received from visitors.

“Thank you for helping me reframe issues so I am now ready to speak with my employee. I could have not said it better.”

“The office situation is much better.”

“Thank you for empowering me to see things differently.”

“Thank you! You are gifted at helping people see POSSIBILITIES!”

“Thanks again, you are the master facilitator.”

“After you did teambuilding, my team has been functioning much better, much improved dynamics.”

“I can’t thank you enough. I don’t know what I would’ve done without Ombuds.”

“You guys are seriously the best group at the Lab. I appreciate you so much.”

“I came here unsure about my next step; by talking to you, I realize I can move forward.”

“You are a miracle worker.”

Success Stories

The Ombuds Office has been helping managers and staff across the Lab deal with difficult issues. Many employees will successfully resolve conflict after working with us—we help people reframe issues and gain perspective such that they may be able to see another point of view and move on.

The Ombuds Office protects confidentiality. While we do not share specific examples or information about cases, themes do emerge. The following regularly encountered examples demonstrate how we have helped people successfully navigate their concerns.

Improved Treatment

The Ombuds Office is a solid resource for employees who want to improve their relationships with colleagues at the Lab.

An individual expressed feeling disregarded at meetings when someone made a statement about their limited knowledge. Ombuds staff listened and explored several options. After a conversation with the manager, the visitor reported back that they felt heard and acknowledged. A follow up a few weeks later revealed that the workplace situation had improved.

Improved Communication

The Ombuds Office assists both employees and managers construct and practice sensitive and uncomfortable conversations. These include the following anonymized examples:

A manager requested help in advance of a difficult conversation with an employee.

Ombuds staff brainstormed ideas and gave feedback while the manager mapped out the sensitive conversation. The manager reported that they felt comfortable with the difficult topic and were grateful for the practice and resources provided.

An employee requested coaching to prepare for a conversation with their manager about expectations, career goals, and a request for better communications to minimize misunderstandings. The employee reported back that they had a good conversation and established a plan for more frequent communication with their manager.

Areas of Opportunity

The Ombuds Office's strengths include our one-on-one discussions with employees, presentations and classes, and customized facilitations. An area of opportunity is to publicize the value, principles, and scope of our office more widely for greater understanding.

As such, our ongoing focus will be to:

- promote the Ombuds Office as a proactive, creative, problem-solving resource through our open house, booths, publications, and website;
- clarify the operating principles of the Ombuds Office through our outreach materials, individual consults, and introductory classes;
- differentiate our services from other LANL resources and programs as we market and advertise our services and meet with individual visitors;
- continue to identify and respond to emerging trends through published articles and new classes;
- encourage more managers to contact the Ombuds Office for new ideas, feedback, and support by conducting direct outreach and publishing testimonials, and
- create and develop more opportunities to partner with other LANL resources and other ombuds offices through greater networking and pro-active support.

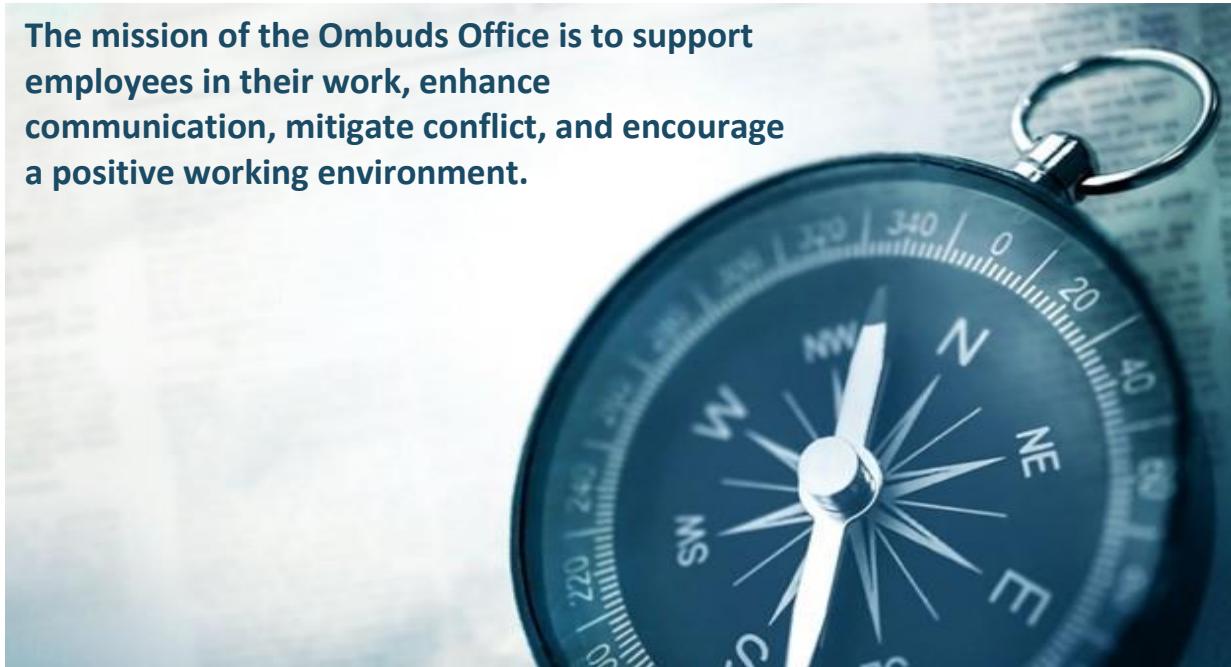
The Ombuds Office seeks to provide its services to the widest audience possible at LANL. As employees learn more about us, the more comfortable they will become using our services. Our aim is that as people use the Ombuds Office to address workplace challenges, they will experience greater personal and professional development.

Conclusion

The Lab has experienced significant change over the last two years. During that period, the Ombuds Office has worked to strengthen its services and its impact as a valuable resource for the LANL worker. We have served about 600 people per year and twice that with our presentations and classes. Additionally, we have offered numerous team-building and group facilitations.

The Ombuds Office has experienced new faces and new ideas after the departure of three, long-term Ombuds staff; nonetheless, we have identified many strengths and many opportunities to continue supporting the Lab. The Ombuds Office has provided consistent, sterling services for our visitors as reflected in this biennial report.

The mission of the Ombuds Office is to support employees in their work, enhance communication, mitigate conflict, and encourage a positive working environment.



Appendix

OMBUDS OFFICE INFORMATION

Ombuds Office Internal Webpage [Ombuds](#)

Ombuds 2022 [Charter](#)

Ombuds Flyer [Ombuds Flyer \(pdf\)](#)

Who are You Going to Contact Poster [Who Are You Going to Contact?](#)

[2021- LANL Ombuds-Report.pdf](#)

CONTACT OMBUDS

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OTHER

International Ombuds Association (IOA) <https://www.ombudsassociation.org>

[IOA Standards of Practice](#)

[IOA Code of Ethics](#)

DOE Technology Partnership Ombudsman [DOE Technology Partnership Ombudsman](#)

