

2024 ANNUAL REPORT

Office of the Employee
Ombud



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Our office continues to see over 300 cases per year. In 2024, we saw 314 cases with over 1,000 meetings, mediations, coaching sessions, or other contacts with City employees. As noted in previous reports, our cases vary in complexity. Each case represents a unique conflict rather than an individual staff member. Some cases include a single coaching meeting while others include multiple mediations, multi-party shuttle processes, or long-term coaching arrangements.

The above case numbers do not include group facilitation work, which involves substantially more meetings and parties. In 2024, we tracked a total of 24 group facilitations involving 279 staff. Our office was fortunate to have an expert facilitator as a member of our team during the year, which allowed our entire staff to expand our facilitation work and deepen facilitation skills. Group facilitations include larger groups than we support in traditional mediation processes and take on various forms including large scale group dialogues to resolve concerns or facilitation processes designed to help workgroups function more effectively. We have also expanded our work supporting staff retreats as well as facilitating strategic planning efforts.

As we receive concerns, we track and analyze what each individual case or conflict tells us about the larger system. From 2023 to 2024, the trends we observed remained largely constant. In 2024, as in 2023, we tracked concerns in four areas:

1. Leadership Issues
2. Lack of Trust in HR & Investigations
3. Staff Culture
4. Mental Health & Safety Concerns

In the past year, we were able to more closely track our data on identity factors, such as race and gender, which were stated as an overt factor in the 25% and 16% respectively of the conflicts raised in our office. We will continue to track how those identity factors are prevalent in conflicts in future reports.

OEO's capacity-building efforts have continued to expand, particularly with the addition of group facilitation and retreat design. The OEO conducted over 50 training sessions reaching 1,030 participants. We continued previous departmental training partnerships as well as fostering new collaborative endeavors. We look forward to presenting our new training on gender specific impacts on conflict in the workplace in 2025.



NOTE FROM THE DIRECTOR



Some of the principles of ethical leadership and employee stewardship that led to the very creation of The Seattle Office of the Employee Ombuds are now in jeopardy. National and global political movements are at odds with the core truths that motivate us to fight for a more inclusive and respectful workplace. Our response, as always, is to be strategic instead of rhetorical. We are choosing to double down on enlightenment, education and expansion of discourse. For OEO and its small but resilient team, the course forward is certain and resolute--for all things that are divisive in our workplace, we will show up and engage in respectful dialog.

Six years since our inception, we have made great inroads at earning trust and normalizing healthy disagreement. We had always promised City employees the creation of a workplace that is not sterilized of all disagreements. The healthiest of teams disagree and share robustly conflicting views—and we are helping teams across the city channel their disagreements into respectful dialog that enables people to salvage relationships. Our office is designed to match emerging conflict trends with culturally informed learning and capacity building. Having worked in public education, NGO, and government sectors over 20 years, it is my humble estimation that our adopted approach is the singularly most impactful practice in upending the rise of toxic workplace conflict in any industry or area of practice. Our work is only just starting, but we are confident that our interventions during the conflict management cycle and beyond are bearing fruit for the teams involved. Instrumental in the effort is our pilot project on Restorative Justice driven reintegration and healing strategy. We know that going down the formal disciplinary path is at times necessary, but it's equally necessary to allow employees to reintegrate back into a team and for there to be restorative dialog around torn relationships. For 2025, restorative practices are big on our agenda.

As discourse becomes fraught with emotions and distrust, it is ever more imperative that we open ourselves as leaders, managers, and supervisors to listen with the intent to engage. Empty listening that doesn't lead to improvements can erode trust and cause more damage. To that end, OEO is building greater trust with all levels of leadership within the organization to help facilitate change management and transition management efforts. Employees share deeply and freely when meeting with a confidential entity such as OEO, and we have been very successful in delivering that upward feedback without undue risk to the employees. Such efforts are labor intensive and often take multiple forums, avenues, and channels, but we are convinced that they are a huge conflict mitigation pathway because we can allow the organization to foresee what fears, anxieties, and concerns are rising to the top for employees as we go through change in programs, leadership, or practice.

Another priority for our office this year is to model and promote succession planning. Starting with our own small team, we want to promote best practices around preparing for short-term and long-term leadership gaps, so there is continuity and employees do not experience a state of turmoil.



Employees have returned to work three days a week. Gone through a tumultuous election cycle at the national stage. Faced routine and complex workplace crisis but through it all, OEO has heard from them and been able to respond to every call, every email and every inquiry within 1-2 business days. Our commitment for 2025 is to continue to be there, to listen, and to inform the organization of all the things that matter to the City of Seattle employees.

Best Regards,

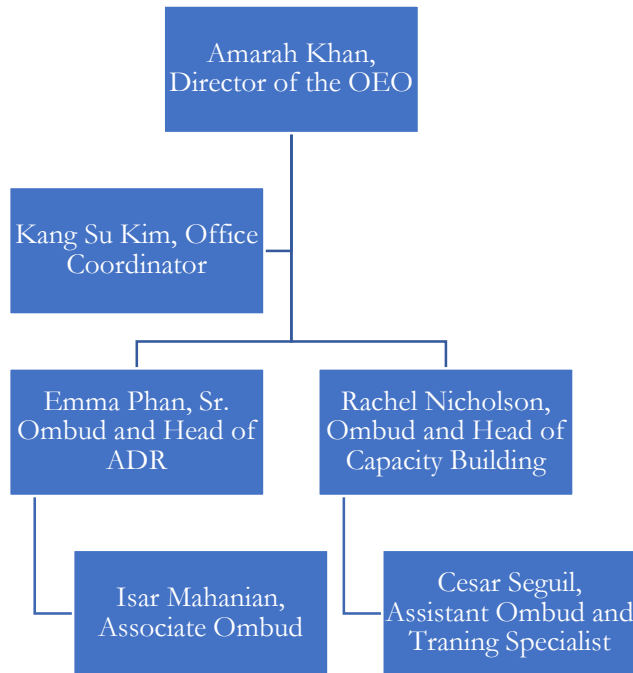
A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Amarah Khan". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Amarah" written in a larger, more prominent script than the last name "Khan".

Dr. Amarah Khan



OFFICE STRUCTURE & UPDATES

Our office has been fortunate to continue to develop our existing team and to build cohesiveness amongst our staff. We had no office departures in 2024, but we did have temporary support for our team from Barb Allen in early 2024 and briefly in Fall of 2024 to cover staff absences. Our team structure remained constant, as per our org chart below. The dual functions of our office have been maintained with a focus on Casework/ADR Services and Capacity Building.



As a staff, we maintain connections in our industry community to bolster our practice and build and develop our skills in the profession, as well as establishing a professional reputation for the City of Seattle and OEO as a whole. Our director, Dr. Amarah Khan, currently serves on the Board of Directors for the International Ombudsman Association (IOA), and both Rachel Nicholson and Emma Phan serve on Committees for the IOA. Dr. Khan also serves on the professional certification board for IOA called CO-OP. Our team traveled to both the IOA Conference in Minneapolis in

March and the United State Ombuds Association (USOA) in Oceanside in October, and staff will attend both events in 2025. We also have staff serving on USOA committees.

In 2024, we maintained stay connected with the Strong Cities network, regularly attending Strong Cities events in Canada, the US, and Europe. Strong Cities is part of the OEO's ongoing work for the Executive Order on Hate Crimes and is a "A global network of cities dedicated to addressing all forms of hate, extremism and polarization." This has allowed us to learn about best practices to combat polarization from our global partners and has continued to keep City of Seattle connected to the Strong Cities network. We will continue this partnership in 2025. We are also expanding our partnerships internally and have convened an informal workgroup of City leaders to meet quarterly and share trends and information on emerging issues pertaining to hate crimes and crimes of bias.

We have also convened a professional network of Ombuds in the greater Seattle area which include many sectors such as local government, higher education, and healthcare. These gatherings focus on strengthening our professional practice and learning from other local Ombuds. As a team, we actively engage in learning and adopting the most recent best practices within our profession. Dr. Khan has been a regular guest lecturer at UW Evans School of Leadership to teach emerging leaders how best to navigate conflict in the workplace.



CASE OUTCOMES & STATISTICS

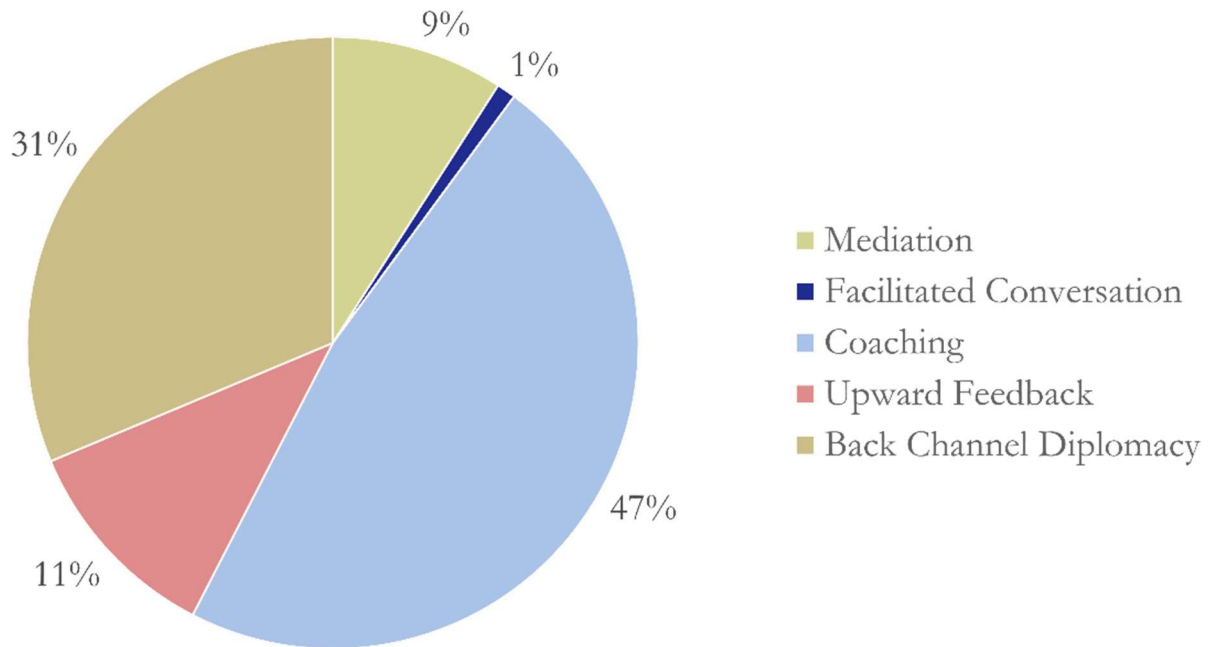
In 2024, the Office of the Employee Ombud tracked a total of 314 cases. This year we also tracked how many meeting, mediations, or other contacts we had with all parties involved in our cases, which came to a total of over 1,040. This new statistic is in an effort to capture the complexity, time and effort each case requires. Given the complexity of cases, our case management process (including the intake and resolution phases), varies based on the needs and goals of those involved. What remains a constant is that employees sharing concerns are empowered to decide what path to resolution they wish to take.

This year, we fully transitioned to our new case management software, Case IQ, which allows more comprehensive tracking and data reporting than our previous software. As we have further developed our case tracking capacity, we have continued to refine how we demonstrate the differing complexity of cases and better illustrate the work that our office is doing yearly.

2024 At A Glance			
Total Cases: 314	Backlog Cases: 0	Cases Closed: 90%	Number of case engagements: 1,040+
Trainings provided: 50	Participants in trainings: 1,030+	Group Facilitations: 24	Participants in Group Facilitations: 279

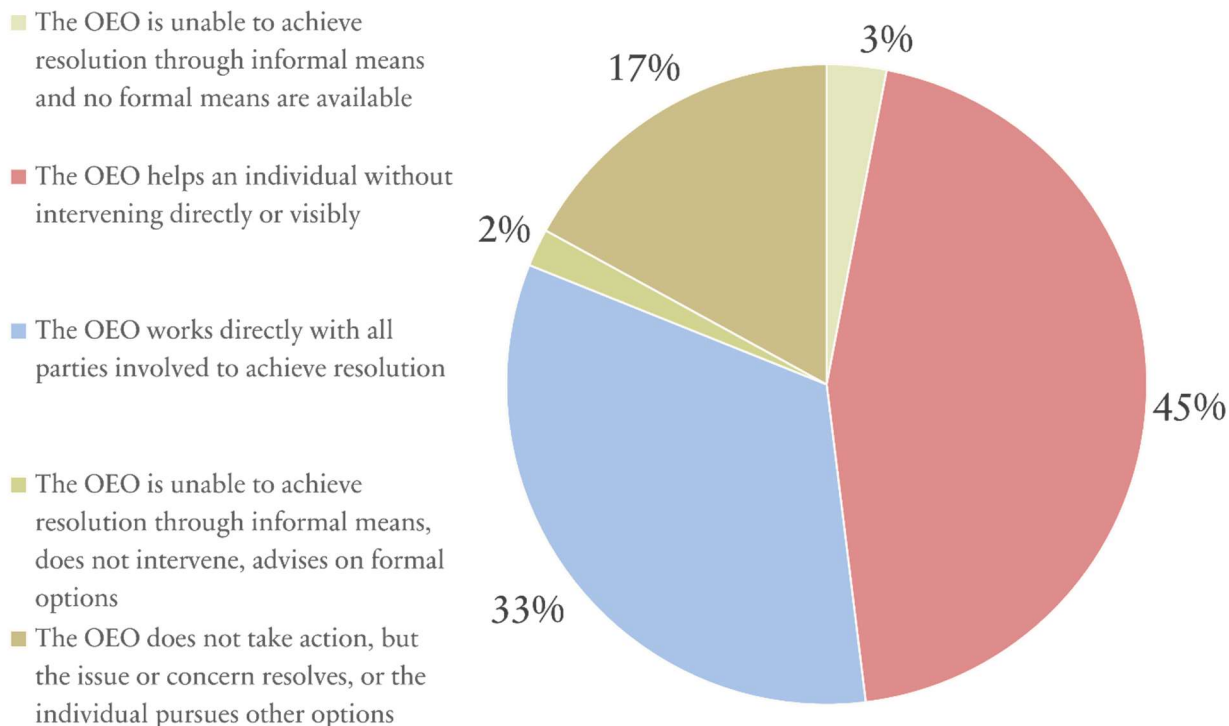
Case Interventions

Our work is highly customized to meet the needs of the visitors to our office. Therefore, our intervention strategies vary. A detailed description of the intervention types can be found in our previous [reports](#). In 2024, our office engaged in the following intervention strategies:



Case Outcomes by OEO Intervention

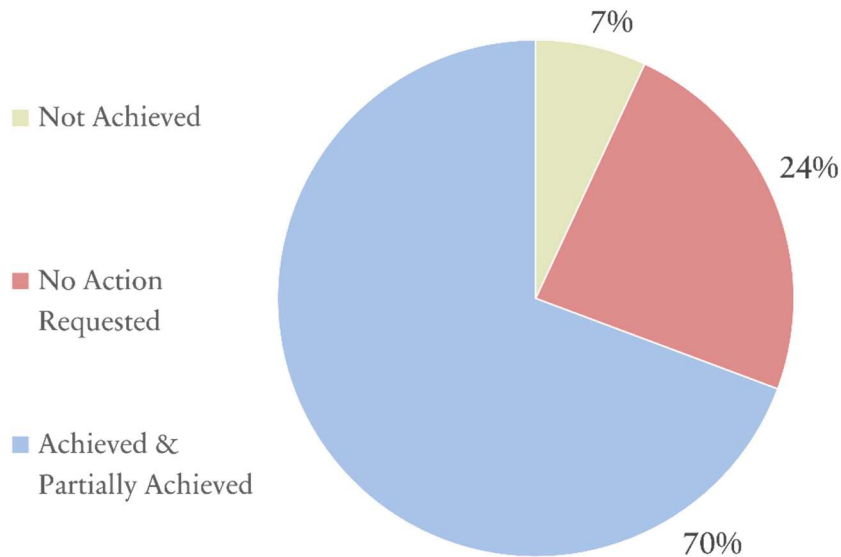
The OEO tracks case outcomes in two ways. The first, detailed in the table below, is the manner in which the OEO intervened. As noted, there are times when we will intervene directly with our informal process, and times where we will either not intervene, or use back-channel diplomacy or other efforts which keep the visitor's identity anonymous. In all cases, we note the systemic and emerging trends that come to our office and include those in our analysis.



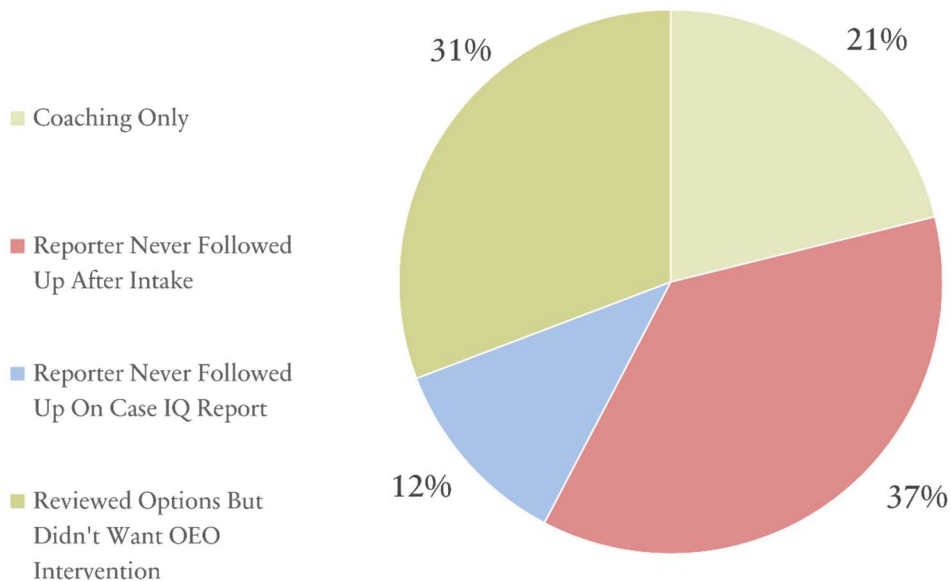
Case Outcomes by Requested Resolution

When an employee shares a concern, we first work with them to identify their respectful resolution of that concern. From there, we determine a path forward to achieve resolution with the employee. These can change over time. Despite the wide variety of respectful resolutions sought through our office, only a small number (7%) are not achieved. Many of those cases either require a formal process or the employee opted to pursue different options outside of OEO intervention. The OEO halts our process or steps back if the employee has simultaneously engaged formal resources. Even when a resolution is “not achieved,” the OEO makes every attempt to work within the confines of the informal process to support the employee.





Of those cases marked as “No Action Requested”, we have determined the following subcategories describing why the OEO did not take action:

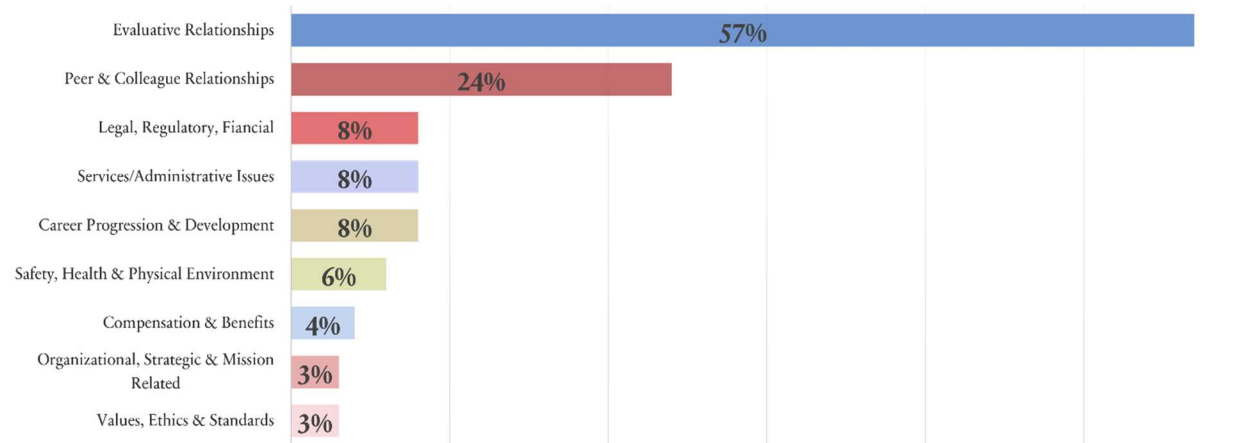


Reporting Categories

The OEO follows the International Ombud Association’s (IOA) Standards of Practice which includes using the IOA’s [Uniform Reporting Categories](#) to identify and track our cases. Each of our cases may be designated in one or more categories. For example, an individual who is upset with their manager as well as their performance evaluation may be categorized as “Evaluative Relationships”. However, if their evaluation could hinder future career prospects, it may be also considered an issue of “Career Progression & Development.” The graph below provides a



breakdown of the categories for our cases and the frequency with which each category appeared in our cases.



SYSTEMIC TRENDS & RECOMMENDATIONS

OEO's Role in Recommendations and Systemic Analysis

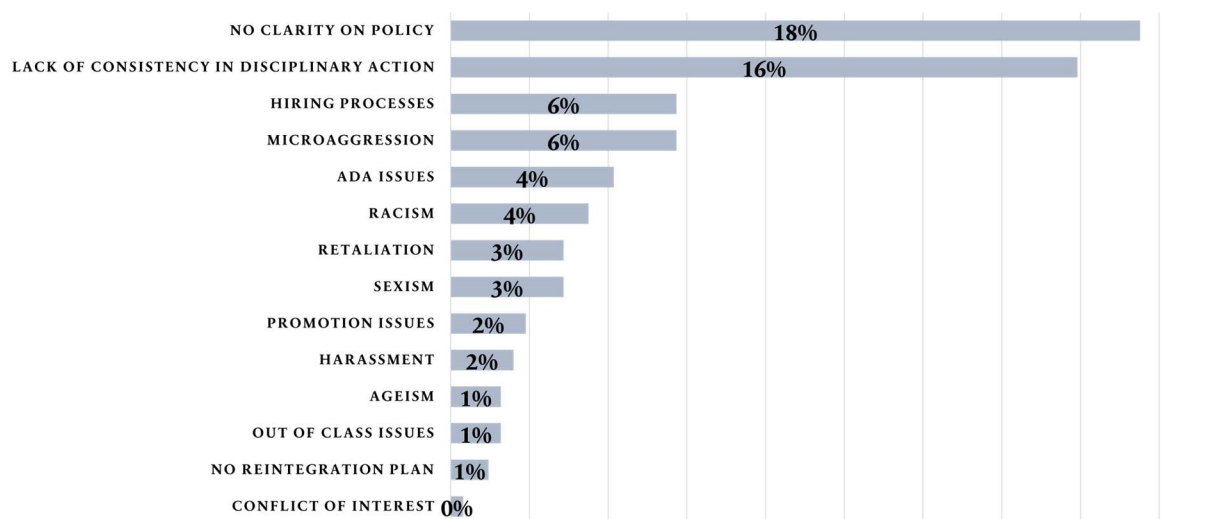
As detailed in previous reports, our mandate includes discussion and analysis of systemic issues and recommendations where applicable. The trends, as we observe them, are not exhaustive and they are based on the reports our office receives, so they are not necessarily representative of the full City population. Please see our 2022 and 2023 Reports for more information. Our recommendations, which are based on those observed trends, are informal and focused on conflict mitigation.

Frequency of Information Sharing

OEO staff does not wait until the conclusion of this Annual Report to share trends and information with city leaders. We have monthly point of contact meetings with most city departments where a designated leader meets with us and is informally apprised of trends, concerns and emerging issues. These reports are anonymous and apply to the essence of cumulative complaints so departments can devise corrective action points on key concerns. The OEO director meets regularly with a MO liaison and shares emerging issues. The director also maintains regular communications with cabinet members in order to alleviate concerns as they are reported to us.

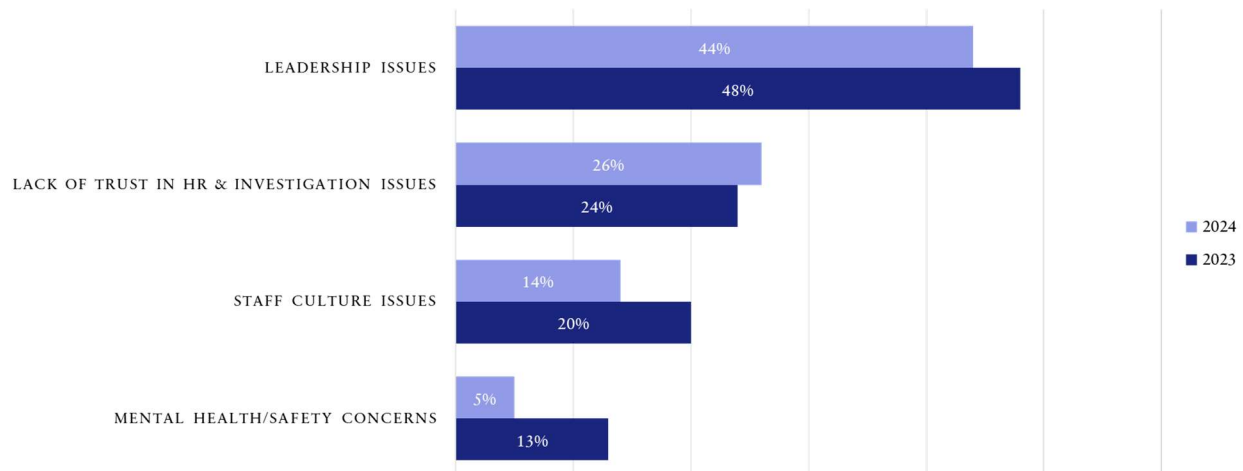
2024 Citywide Trends

Each of our previous reports has provided data on ten trends that have remained constant since our office opened. Of our 314 cases in 2024, we saw each citywide trend appear in the following percentage of cases. Please note that some cases represent multiple trends.



Above: Citywide trends as a percentage of cases. Below: Emerging Trends as a percentage of cases per year





Our 2023 Report focused on four larger patterns of Emerging Trends: Leadership Issues, Lack of Trust in HR processes and Investigations, Staff Culture, and Mental Health and Safety Concerns. The chart above shows how trends have shifted from 2023 to 2024 by their percentage of our overall cases.

The only trend which saw a major change year to year was Mental Health and Safety Concerns, where we tracked more than a 50% decline. As we observe our trends year to year, we are mindful that they are derived from a self-selected reporting population. That said, these trends have stayed relatively constant and give us a starting point to work with City partners on identifying areas for change. One trend where we have been particularly active in supporting improvements is in the area of City leadership capacity, particularly in the form of trainings. COVID related budget challenges continue to introduce delays in expanding training efforts. OEO collaborates with a citywide community of practice focused on capacity building and professional growth to meet the needs of our employees at all levels of the organization.

In previous years, we had noted a lack of meaningful feedback to staff, especially feedback provided in conversations outside of the normal performance evaluation annual cycle. We have tried to bolster the skills of our managers and target trainings to improve the capacity of both leaders and staff to have challenging and ongoing constructive performance conversations. We also noted a concern about HR investigations and lack of trust in formal processes, and we have worked with our HR partners throughout the City to ask questions about their departmental investigations processes. We have seen some HR teams moving to memorialize their procedures, which we hope will address some of the ongoing confusion about investigations and rebuild trust. We have presented our reintegration protocol to HR leaders, which is our effort to support staff and their teams as staff return from disciplinary action or leave after a formal process. Finally, we continue to closely track and monitor safety concerns, which may have decreased in frequency over the last year, but which nonetheless represent a serious concern.

Each of the above trends also has a number of sub-categories which we have observed, and which were included as Emerging Trends in our 2023 Report, detailed below:

1. Leadership Culture



- a. Leadership effectiveness
 - b. Trust building
 - c. Culture of fear & competition
 - d. Leadership accountability
 - e. Staffing & workload issues
- 2. Understanding Formal HR Processes and Building Trust
 - a. Consistency in investigations
 - b. Lack of understanding of hiring and firing processes
- 3. Staff Culture
 - a. Performance management & feedback
 - b. Perceptions of insubordination
 - c. Staff & workload issues
- 4. Mental and emotional wellbeing & safety
 - a. Safety concerns
 - b. Emotional wellbeing

For more information about last year's emerging trends and subcategories, please see our [2023 Report](#).

Emerging Trends

As we look back at our 2024 cases for Emerging Trends, one of the things we are beginning to observe with more frequency are instances where a visitor stated that they experienced disrespectful behavior, either from a manager or a colleague, and that this behavior was part of a long unaddressed pattern. As we began to look into the issues, we found that depending on the severity, frequency, and observability of the behavior, there was sometimes a struggle for managers to identify, document, and provide meaningful performance management. Even when managers were actively engaged in coaching employees, generally, it took some time for changes in behavior to occur. Staff who had reported the concerns did not see any change and would become increasingly frustrated that their concerns were going unaddressed. While there were some cases where mediation or further dialogue improved the issue, there were others where the behavior, which included things like raised voices, ignoring a colleague or coworker, or disregarding their input or contributions to a team, merited some intervention by management to state expectations and ensure that those expectations were being adhered to.

We were also able to more closely observe the cases in which identity was a factor explicitly noted by the reporter or involved parties. Our new case management system allowed for greater information tracking in this area. When we cross-referenced, we found that race was overtly identified as a factor in the conflict in 23% of our cases. As an example, we have observed cases where performance management is justified, particularly in terms of behavioral issues, but the lack of ongoing performance management has led to blatantly disrespectful behavior. When we ask about this lack of ongoing feedback, it is reported that it is not occurring because of either the racial identity of the manager or that of their subordinates. In other words, a manager might be afraid to coach, or performance manage a staff member because of that staff member's race. Gender, the next most commonly identified identity factor in conflicts reported to our office, was present in 16% of cases.



As an example, we have seen cases where the employee experience is gendered and at times age related. Some lines of work are still heavily male dominated and must diversify in an equitable way. We will continue to track and monitor all identity factors and consider how they contribute to conflict in future reports.



CAPACITY BUILDING

Every year, we analyze patterns of common challenges and concerns employees have in the workplace. This data informs our capacity building efforts which are primarily through education and outreach. Our current training catalog can be found on [SharePoint](#).

Training

We delivered 50 trainings to over 1,030 participants in 2024, which included pre-scheduled, citywide sessions offered once a month as well as sessions requested directly by individual departments. Our most popular topics were *Conflict Management* (14 sessions) and *Effective Feedback* (11 sessions).

For 2025, we plan to increase our citywide offerings to twice a month so that every topic is offered 3 times a year. This way, employees will have more time and date options to choose from that accommodate their schedules.

Data from our participant feedback surveys revealed about 93% of participants rated the quality of the sessions as good or very good. Additionally, 90% of respondents stated that they would recommend the training they completed to their colleagues. Our team is committed to making learning opportunities a valuable and positive experience for all, so we continuously review this feedback to adapt and revise our trainings.

Partnerships

Building on the success of 2023's partnerships, the OEO continued delivering *Conflict Management* to seven of SPU's Supervisor Training Cohorts in 2024. OEO continued our presence at SPL all-staff day, delivering abridged versions of both *Conflict Management* and *Effective Feedback*. Additionally, OEO continued its partnership with SFD in delivering *Divided We Fall* at both the Battalion Chief and Captain's academies. We are working on a new partnership with SFD in 2025 that will include a train-the-trainer model on the topics of *Conflict Management* and *Appreciating Cultural Differences*.

New partnerships in 2024 included delivering our entire catalog to the City Clerk's office and conducting a series of *Conflict Management* trainings for the 911 Center floor supervisors. We also partnered with the EEO division of SDOT to create a customized version of *Addressing Discrimination and Harassment* for staff members who may not have access to the online training on this same topic produced from SDHR.

We also were grateful for the opportunity to collaborate with SDHR on their new Anti-Harassment and Discrimination and New Employee Orientation e-learning. Our goal in helping support this training is to ensure that employees know how OEO can help in harassment or discrimination situations, and when to seek other channels for support.

We are excited to pilot our newest training in 2025 focusing on how gender issues contribute to conflict. We have and will continue working with our focus groups, comprised of individuals from various city departments and the City's LGBTQIA+ affinity group, to refine the content and make it effective and applicable to our workforce.



We are thankful for our city partners are looking forward to continuing many of these partnerships in 2025.

Group Facilitation & Restorative Practices

As stated in our 2023 Annual Report, our casework identified a need for more group facilitation and restorative practices.

OEO focused on increasing our group facilitation offerings in 2024, reaching 14 different groups, with a total of 24 facilitations involving 279 staff. Some of these groups were in the heat of conflict, while others were hoping to reset expectations in a retreat-style setting. We have been piloting the use of many group facilitation techniques for a variety of purposes including trust-building, problem-solving, and mediation, as well as radically participative [Liberating Structures](#) to transform teams and conflict situations.

Additionally, OEO continues to engage in restorative efforts, which focus on strengthening relationships between individuals as well as communities. Restorative practices are needed particularly around the conclusion of formal processes, and in cases of organizational transition. In 2024, we presented our Restorative Justice Pilot Project to our City HR Partners. We have also presented this material to individual departments, and they have begun to identify opportunities for partnership. We are hopeful to continue to build out this work in the coming year.



2025 PRIORITIES

Priority 1: Monitor case flow and operations to ensure consistency in case management.

- We will continue to modify our Case Management software, Case IQ, to continually improve our data collection and analysis work.
- We will continue our routine case audits and weekly team case huddles to ensure consistency among our process and level of service to all staff who visit our office.

Priority 2: Maintain our training catalog.

- The OEO meets regularly with partners who develop training content for employees. We will continue that collaboration and our own data analysis work to ensure that trainings offered to City staff are consistent and timely.

Priority 3: Engage in frequent information sharing with City leaders.

- We will focus on sharing trend analysis and observations with department leaders and MO leadership and brainstorm strategies to address issues. We will also increase efforts to provide role clarity and situational awareness of the OEO.



CONCLUSION

Many in our City feel that the divisions in our communities are only deepening and becoming more entrenched. It can be hard to see where dialogue alone can resolve those issues. It can be hard to continue to push forward in conflict resolution work when we feel the limits of informal resolution in an unfair or unjust system. However, we continue to believe that observing trends, offering recommendations, and partnering with our City colleagues is and continues to be a viable means to mitigate and resolve conflict. Dialogue must continue, and our hope is to foster the conditions under which staff can feel safe to continue to engage in that dialogue.

