



2019

OMBUDSMAN PROGRAM

CONFIDENTIALITY  NEUTRALITY  INFORMALITY  INDEPENDENCE

ANNUAL REPORT

Our Principles:

Confidentiality—The Ombuds maintains complete confidentiality as to the identity of visitors, except in situations that present an imminent risk of harm to an individual, damage to property, or a crime.

Neutrality—The Ombuds is an advocate for a fair process. The Ombuds is not an advocate for the visitor and is not an advocate for management.

Informality—The Ombuds functions outside all formal management, administrative, or criminal processes. The Ombuds assists the visitor in accessing appropriate formal systems, offices, or processes as needed. The Ombuds does not serve as an agent of notice to NASA.

Independence—The Ombuds is not encumbered by line management functions and, in his or her role, reports to the Center Director (Center Ombuds) or Headquarters Executive Director (HQ Ombuds).

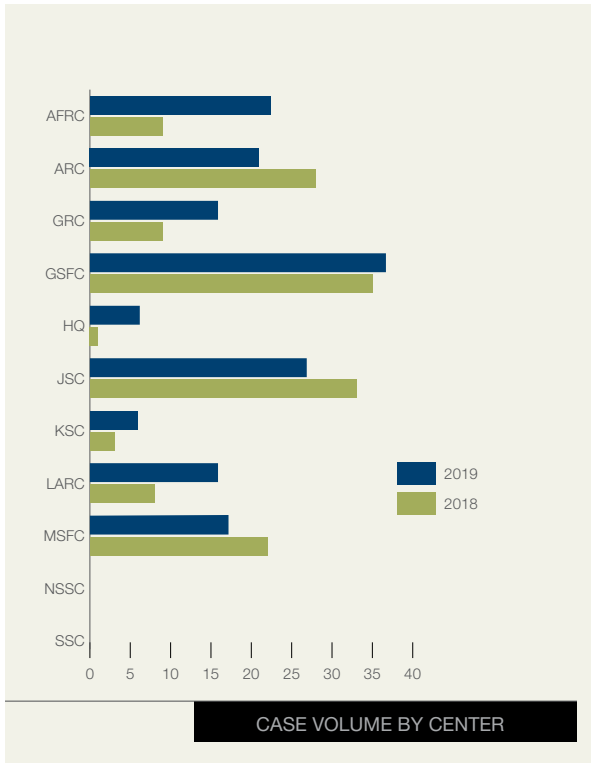
The NASA Ombudsman Program serves civil servants, onsite contractors, and students. The program differs from formal resources like Human Resources, unions, the Office of Diversity and Equal Opportunity (ODEO), and Office of Inspector General (OIG) in that it provides an opportunity to raise concerns in an “off-the-record” manner.

An Overview of 2019

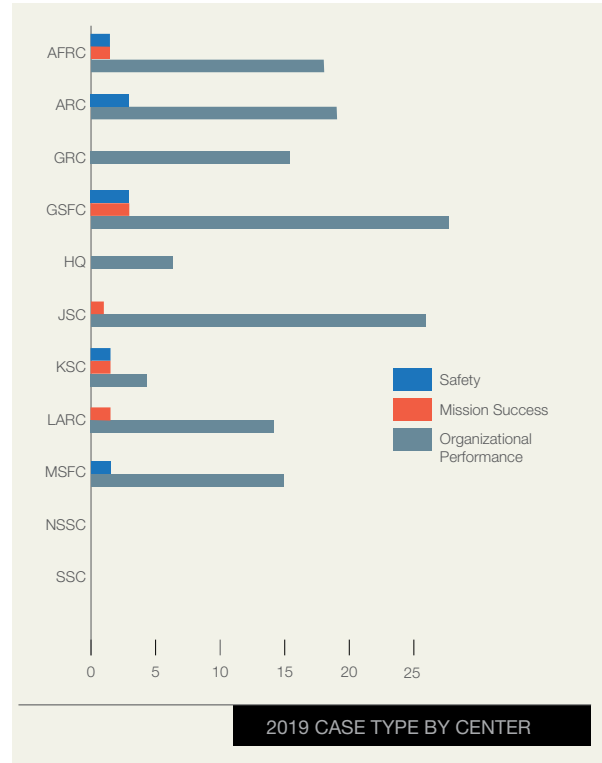
The NASA Ombudsman Program is based on the principles of confidentiality, neutrality, informality, and independence, as laid out by the Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice established by the International Ombudsman Association. An Ombudsman (hereinafter referred to as Ombuds) is a neutral professional who is appointed by their Center Director or the Executive Director of NASA Headquarters (for Headquarters Ombuds) to facilitate the informal resolution of concerns of employees, including civil servants, contractors, and students. NASA Policy Directive (NPD) 2025.1B, the NASA Ombudsman Program, documents the program policy and direction.

In calendar year 2019, the NASA Ombuds saw a total of 169 visitors. This was a 14 percent increase in volume from the previous year. Of the total 169 cases, 67 percent were civil servants, 32 percent were contractors, and 1 percent were students or individuals categorized as “other.” This compares to the 2018 distribution of 75 percent, 23 percent, and 2 percent, respectively.

Safety and Mission Success issues accounted for 11 percent of the cases, down from the 21 percent experienced in 2018. The 11 percent is more consistent with years prior to 2018. The spike in safety cases in 2018 was driven by one situation at



Centers' total population varies across the agency.



one Center. Examples of safety issues include not following procedures for safekeeping of materials or people, incomplete inspections, and HVAC breakdowns creating unsafe work environments for workers. Mission Success cases involve any issue that could potentially impact quality or timing of work directed for a mission. In 2019, this included work relationships, workload and communication breakdowns, which negatively impacted project success.

The majority of cases across all Centers were related to “Organizational Performance” (89 percent), a category that includes several sub-categories such as interpersonal conflict, management behavior, bullying, career development or job fit, harassment and discrimination, and policy-related issues. Over the years, the Organizational Performance category has consistently been where the majority of NASA’s cases fall.

The following are messages from cases in the categories of Safety, Mission Success, and Organizational Performance.

Safety and Mission Success

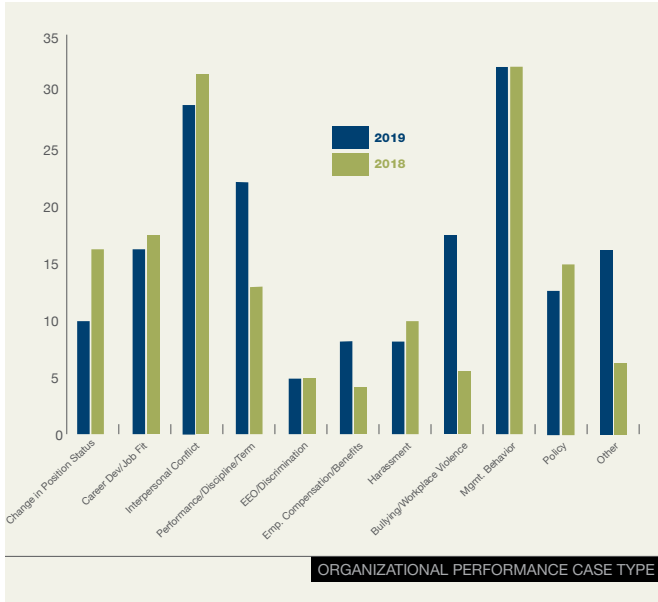
- As in the past, issues were raised about lack of adherence to project protocols, including missing paperwork and timeliness of report submission, and its impact on safety and mission success.

The Ombuds was given permission to alert formal resources without revealing the source of the information.

- Aging facilities have resulted in issues being raised regarding employee safety and satisfactory work environments.
- During the end-of-year holiday season, an issue was raised about the safety of having alcohol in the workplace, especially in labs.
- Multiple working relationship breakdowns negatively impacted communication and action toward safety concerns.

Outcomes

- In one Center, an audit was conducted that resulted in major problems being identified. Corrective action was taken. At another Center, the Ombuds was able to bring the issue to the appropriate Safety organization, and a Human Safety Specialist corrected the situation.
- Research is taking place on various alcohol policies within the Agency with potential for updates to these policies.
- The appropriate Facilities organization is ensuring that employee safety and work environment concerns are taken into account when prioritizing maintenance projects in aging facilities.
- In all cases, the Ombuds was able to coach the individuals to help improve communication between conflicting parties.



Management Behavior and Bullying

- Visitors raised issues regarding conflicts with supervisors as well as situations between civil servants and contractors and among team members.
- Situations where visitors reported bullying, retribution, and intimidation increased from previous years. In some cases, specific managers or employees were called out, but in other cases the behavior seemed to be seen as acceptable within a whole group. NASA Security was called in when behavior resulted in a breakdown of working relationships and safety risks were identified.
- In particular, women reported more disrespectful treatment than their male peers in the Agency. Women brought forward concerns regarding not being recognized, not being promoted, or being given unjust performance reviews.

Organizational Performance

Interpersonal Conflict

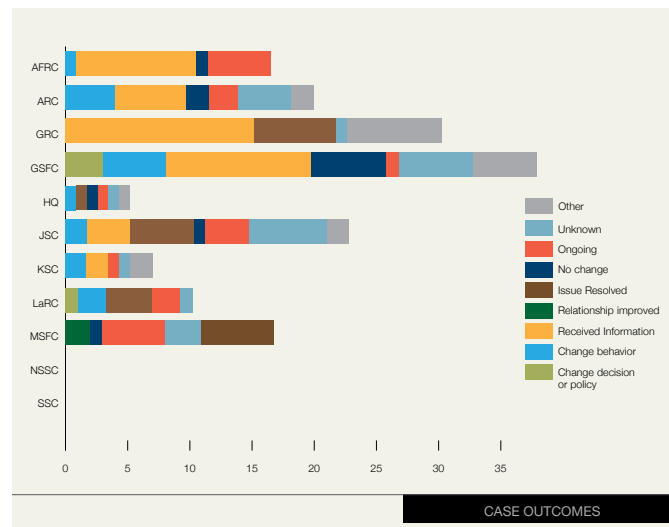
- Allegations were reported regarding conflicts between supervisors and direct reports, but some also included situations between civil servants and contractors and among work groups.
- Conflicts with supervisors generally resulted from supervisors reportedly not defining roles clearly, communicating in a negative manner, or publicly being unsupportive.
- Conflicts resulted from different perceptions of work performance.
- An “us vs. them” environment often triggered conflicts between civil servants and contractors when contractors felt mistreated or denied common respect.
- Conflicts between peers pointed to work ownership or control issues.

Outcomes

- The Ombuds often coached visitors on how to best communicate with other individuals, providing an unbiased perspective. In some cases, the Ombuds was given permission to escalate the issue to Human Resources (HR), management, or Legal. When concerns were taken to formal resources, investigations may have taken place. Results of investigations included moving people into more appropriate roles or coaching individuals to be more successful in their current roles.

Outcomes

- In 2019, the Ombudsman Program saw more action taken against leaders who were responsible for creating toxic or disrespectful work environments, sometimes moving them to nonsupervisory roles. On the other end of the spectrum, the Ombudsman Program did see individuals who chose to move to new roles or leave the organization when they felt a positive outcome was unlikely. In rare situations, the manager, once alerted, owned the issue and changed the behavior.
- The Ombuds frequently coached individuals to have difficult conversations with their managers, HR, or higher levels of management.
- In addition, the Ombuds made sure civil servants were aware of the Agency’s formal processes available to them.



Career Development/Job Fit

- Some visitors perceived that younger employees and men of various ages are selected more often for open positions, especially for higher-level positions.

Outcomes

- Raised the concern with Center and Headquarters management for their investigation and action.

Policy

- Over the last several years, visitors have raised questions or concerns about consistency in the telework policy's execution. Although this trend continues, the number of concerns has decreased. Several inquiries were made this year regarding implementation of a new weather-and-safety leave policy directly related to the broader telework policy.
- Other policy questions focused on the blocking of Gmail and Comcast at some Centers and the resulting impact on communication flow between individuals and projects, travel-related policies, the drinking of alcohol in lab environments, the acceptability of spouses working in same work group, and the new tax on relocation costs.
- Several issues were raised regarding NSSC's policies and practices: alleged timeliness issues around booking travel and repayment of travel expenses (especially for international travel), the accuracy of retirement calculations, inaccurate billing for insurance, and errors in withdrawal and match payments for Thrift Savings Plans (TSPs).
- The Ombuds heard concerns about the Mission Support Future Architecture Program (MAP) initiative. Visitors were confused regarding who fulfills different roles and where to go for

information. They also expressed concerns about workload, as the perception is that positions have gone away or are not being filled. Some spoke of the process creating a more competitive environment at the Agency, thereby diminishing collaboration.

Outcomes

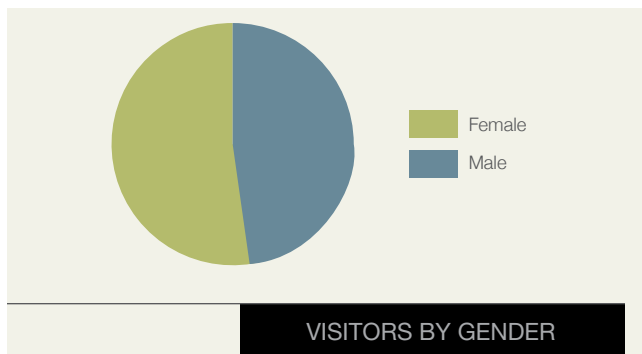
- The Ombuds often researched information for individuals or referred visitors to the right resource to correct possible errors.

Messages from Contractors

- A significant theme contractors raised is the "us vs. them" environment they experience when working with civil servants.
- Contractors alleged that pay and support decreased under new contracts while workload increased.
- Other concerns focused on undefined work expectations and standards, as well as retribution for raising concerns about safety or questioning management decisions.

Outcomes

- Contractors were either coached or referred to the Procurement Ombuds, their Contracting Officer, or their own company.



Ombudsman Program Priorities for 2020

In 2020, the Ombuds Team will focus their efforts on:

- Continuing to stay on top of organization changes and understand formal resources and procedures available to our visitors.
- Following up with formal resources to understand action being taken on previously raised issues.
- Continuing to build awareness and understanding of the Ombudsman Program and the support we can provide in raising concerns and resolving issues.
- Meeting with Center and Headquarters management to share trends and recommendations on a timely basis.
- Building better understanding within the contractor population of what the Ombuds can and cannot do for them and help them identify other resources to assist them.
- Continuing to build the skills of the Ombuds team around conflict resolution and communication strategies.
- Updating the Ombudsman Program NPD and creating a NPR.
- Executing an Agency-wide survey of the Ombudsman Program.

For more information on NASA's Ombudsman Program and a list of Center Ombudsmen, visit our Web site at <https://ombuds.hq.nasa.gov>.