



2021

OMBUDS PROGRAM

CONFIDENTIALITY  NEUTRALITY  INFORMALITY  INDEPENDENCE

Executive Summary Ombuds Annual Report

Our Principles:

The NASA Ombuds Program serves civil servants, onsite contractors, and students. Visit the Ombudsman Program home page at <http://ombuds.hq.nasa.gov>.

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 (HQ Ombuds).

The NASA Ombuds 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 Ombuds Association (IOA). NASA Policy Directive 2025.1B, for the NASA Ombuds Program, documents policy and direction.

An Overview of 2021

In 2021 the NASA Ombuds worked within the standards of practice of their role to help visitors remove barriers to performance and mission success. COVID-19 has driven change and workplace uncertainty. During this time, the NASA Ombuds provided an essential service offering a confidential and neutral option for visitors who needed to be heard, gain information, understand and explore their options, receive coaching and/or assistance with referrals or issues requiring escalation. The Ombuds were able to help many visitors gain clarification of new mandates and understand timelines and processes for Return to on-site Work. Visitors expressed fear of the unknown, as well as an inability to keep pace with the multitude of changes and expectations. When working with an Ombuds visitors reported that they felt heard, understood, and valued and that this eased their stress and helped them focus on work priorities and mission. In addition, many Ombuds were able to work successfully with formal resources (e.g., Legal, Office of Human Capital Officer (OCHCO) and Protective Services) to provide feedback on how agency and center-wide communication and messaging were being received by the workforce and where gaps in processes existed. Visitors expressed a significant concern regarding increased workloads and the existence or potential for symptoms associated with burn-out. Although remote work was a positive for many, it often led to boundless work hours and unrealistic expectations for delivery. Ombuds provided

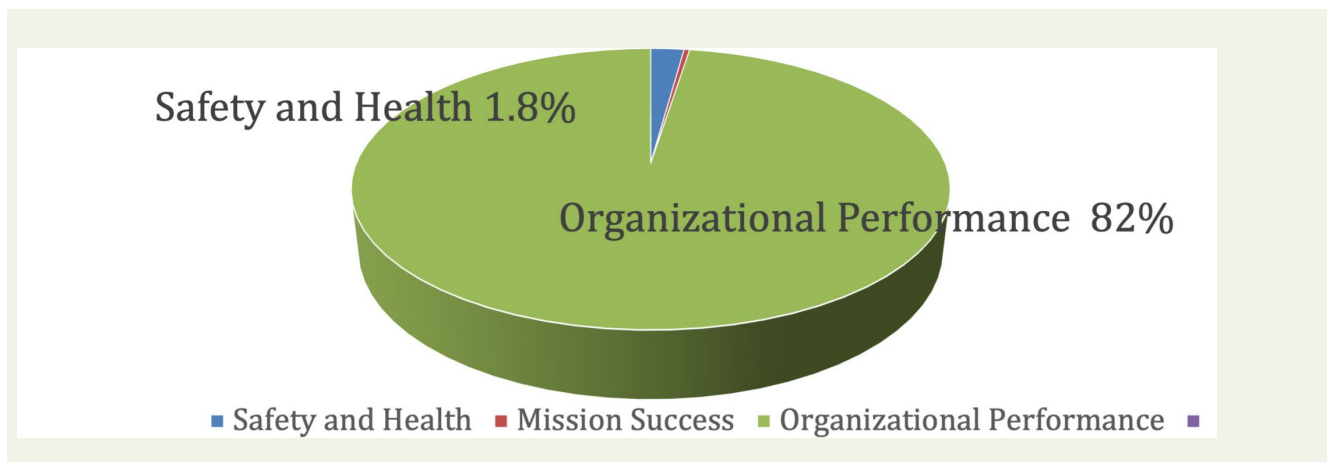
feedback to management regarding workload stress and described causes, but changes were not evident other than recommendations to adopt time management best practices. Those recommendations did not reduce the requirements or demands to accomplish them.

Over the last five years the Ombuds case volume reached a high of 168 cases in 2017 and a low of 98 cases in 2020. In 2021 case volume rebounded to 130 cases. This is a result of Ombud’s expanded efforts in the past year to build awareness of their function and services. In the past year the Ombuds communicated and built awareness of their function by offering agency wide listen and learn sessions, presented at Supervisor Training, drafted periodic reminders of the Ombuds Program in center daily news briefs and presented at division and branch level meetings. During All Hands Meetings Center Directors often referred people to the Ombuds Program as a confidential resource.

Each year Ombuds categorize cases under three main areas: Safety and Health, Mission Success, and Organizational Performance. Since the Program inception in 2004, the Organizational Performance category has accounted for most cases. This proved to be true again in 2021. Organizational Performance cases can consist of performance or discipline issues, job selection, conflict with supervisors or colleagues, policy, compensation, and benefits and more. The category breakdown for cases is provided in the pie chart below. Although Safety and Health and Mission Success categories account for only one in five cases, it is important to remember that their impact on life and mission can be significant. 2021 Safety and Health issues focused on vaccine mandates, timelines, exception processes, colleagues not following protocol, fear of retaliation for having views different than

mandates and fear of returning to site. The Ombuds provided information for their visitors and helped them identify resources if immediate supervisors were not responsive or simply did not know the answers.

The top Organizational Performance sub-categories in 2021 were Conflict with Supervisors, Conflict with Colleagues, Management Behavior, Bullying, and Policy. There is overlap between the first four of these sub-categories as they all point to conflict between people due to disrespectful treatment, inappropriate or ineffective communication and leadership styles, or conflict arising from lack of clear role definition. Over the past three years the Ombuds have been delivering feedback to Center management regarding the large percentage of cases that fall in these categories. A theme that has been recurring in this period is that women in specific places within the organization, feel they are being ignored, not taken seriously as professionals, and not given the same professional opportunities as their male counterparts. Some highly specialized technical and scientific roles have become more complex and time intensive while at the same time leadership direction, communication and support have decreased. Some visitors report that raising these concerns to management is discouraged and ultimately unproductive. The fact that these themes persist indicates that either the messages did not gain traction or that what efforts were undertaken were not effective in changing behavior or producing better outcomes. The Ombuds Program will continue to work with leadership to gain commitment to addressing these concerns, particularly since several of the issues are in direct conflict with NASA’s Mission and its publicly stated commitment to Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Accessibility (DEIA).



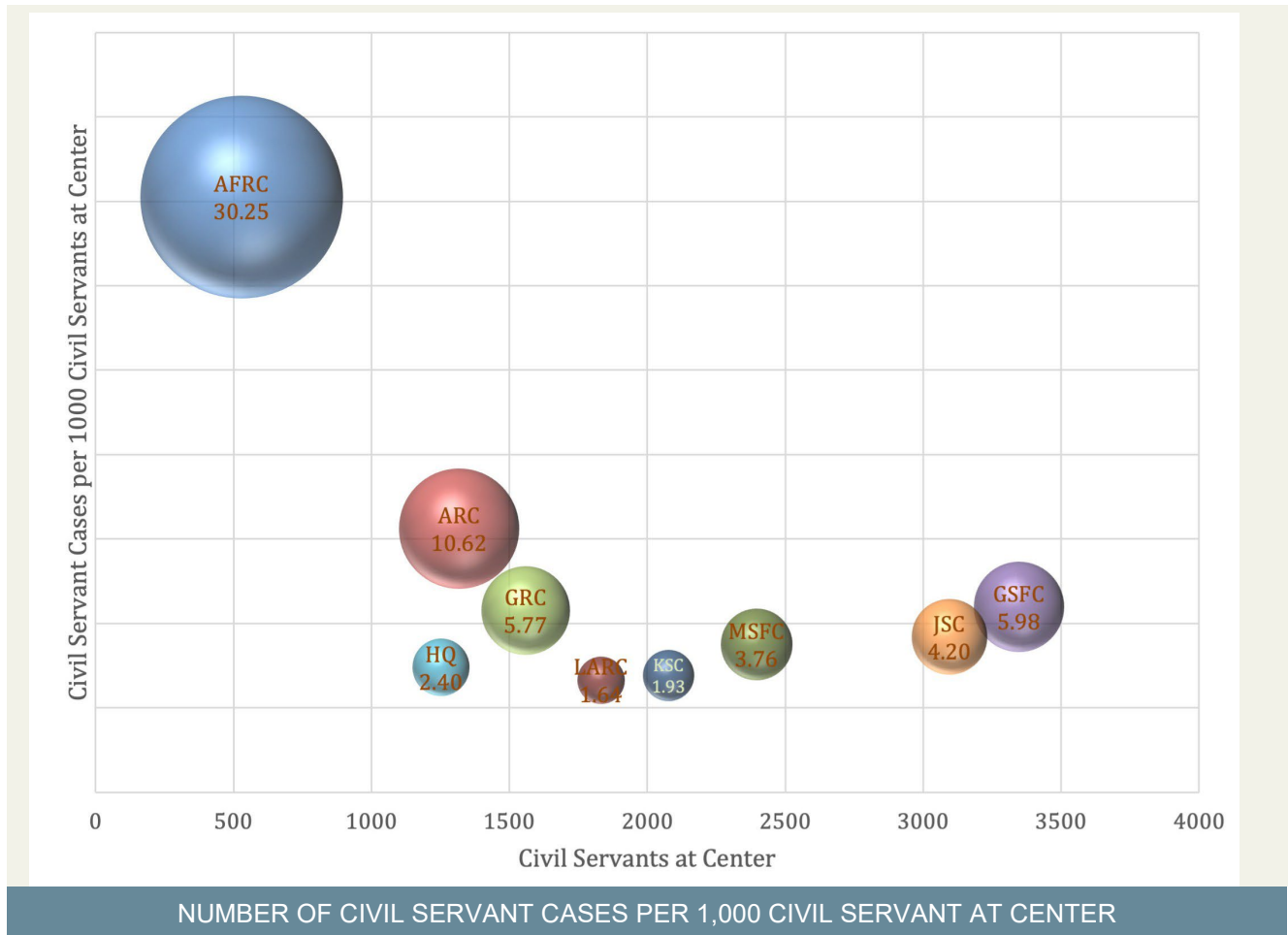
The final top subcategory under Organizational Performance is Policy Issues. Besides the abundance of COVID-19 related policy questions, the Ombuds assisted visitors with questions around job selection processes, payment for professional memberships, DUI arrests, and use of prescribed medical marijuana. The Ombuds can add value in these cases because they can research policies and their implementation while protecting the identity of the visitor.

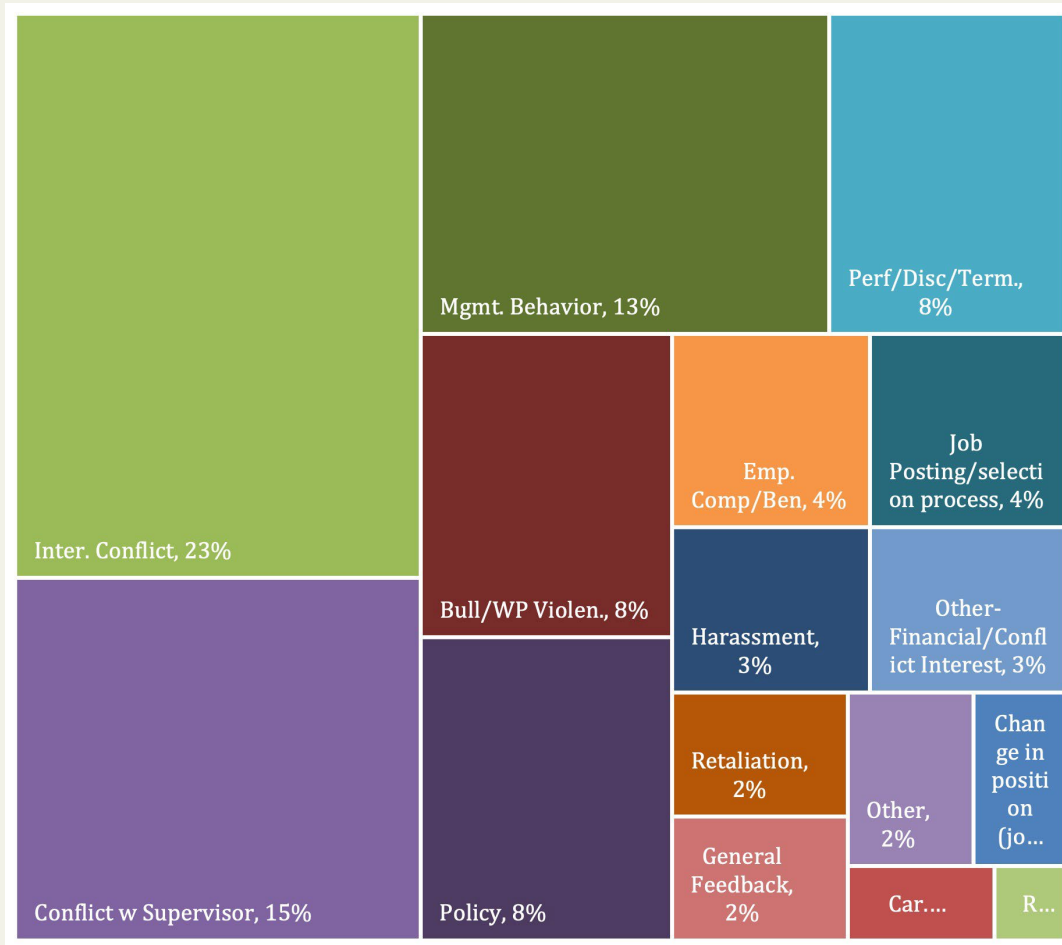
In addition to tracking case categories the Ombuds collect data on the demographics of their visitors including Job Status (Civil Servant, Contractors, Other), Tenure with NASA and Gender. In the last two years the percentage of cases from contractors has decreased and it is believed that the Ombuds may need to reach out more directly to make sure contractors are aware that the Ombuds Program is a resource they can use. The usage by males and females is not significantly different (as seen in pie chart on page_). The demographics also point to the fact that employees tend to use the Ombuds services mostly in their early years in the agency (0-5 years) and in the

later years (20 + years). The explanation for this may be that these are times of major transitions, either learning about the culture and practices of the agency or times when seasoned employees begin to plan their final career moves or retirement. The Ombuds have helped people navigate these transitions and relationships within and across the organization.

The Ombuds have some challenges in tracking outcomes of cases because it is up to the visitor to decide what happens next. If the action sits with the visitor, the Ombuds may not get an update on case progress. Ombuds do follow up with their visitors and when they are able to connect, we know that visitors benefit from being heard, receiving coaching, and understanding options. Visitors often receive information and referrals from the Ombuds that they may not know how to access on their own.

In 2021 Usage per 1,000 Civil Servants significantly grew year over year at four Centers. Glenn's incidence tripled and Ames', Armstrongs' and Kennedy's doubled. The increases seem to reflect a return to "normal" state. Usage decreased by 9% at Goddard, 25% at Headquarters and 40% at Langley. Decreases cannot be explained at this time.





DISTRIBUTION OF ORGANIZATIONAL PERFORMANCE SUB-TYPES

The Top Five subsets for 2021 are Interpersonal Conflict, Conflict with Supervisor, Management Behavior and Bullying and Policy. All the Top Five subsets (except Policy) relate to how people treat each other.

of this feedback. Visitors reported being less stressed about the process after conversations with the Ombuds.

The following are case highlights in the categories of Safety, Mission Success, and Organizational Performance. The issues below are only a subset of all cases.

Safety/Health and Mission Success

Issue: Visitors raised concerns related to filling out forms for exemptions to COVID-19 mandates, as well as lack of clarity on exemption deadlines and consequences for not meeting those deadlines.

Outcome: The Ombuds were able to seek clarification from NASA process experts and relay information to the visitors. Some Ombuds were able to proactively give feedback to process owners regarding complexity of forms or unclear communication. Changes were made because

Issue: A few individuals raised concerns in early 2021 regarding being asked to work on-site with others who were either unvaccinated or would not consistently wear masks. These visitors perceived hostility from colleagues and supervisors for speaking out and they felt their health was at risk.

Outcome: The outcomes of these cases varied. In some instances, the Ombuds was successful in coaching the visitor to have conversations with ODEO or higher-level management. In at least one situation the visitor chose to leave NASA.

Issue: Contractors were unclear as to what COVID-19 mandates applied to them or who to go to if they had COVID-19 protocol issues.

Outcome: The Ombuds were able to reach out to Contract Officers to get information for the contractors. In other instances, the Ombuds referred contractors back to their own companies.

Issue: The Ombuds received calls from individuals who disagreed with NASA’s approach to COVID-19 and wanted to express their beliefs around the virus and strategies for mitigation. In some instances, visitors expressed concerns with being asked to provide NASA with what they termed “confidential medical information.”

Outcome: The Ombuds listened and explained that the mandates were for all Federal Government agencies, not just NASA. NASA was obligated to follow certain protocols. The Ombuds did not agree or disagree with opinions of visitors and helped them focus on what was controllable.

Issue: Visitors raised concerns at one Center regarding lack of policy for how to handle risks derived from lengthy shifts.

Outcome: Ombuds were able to connect visitors to resources and shared relevant practices already in effect at NASA.

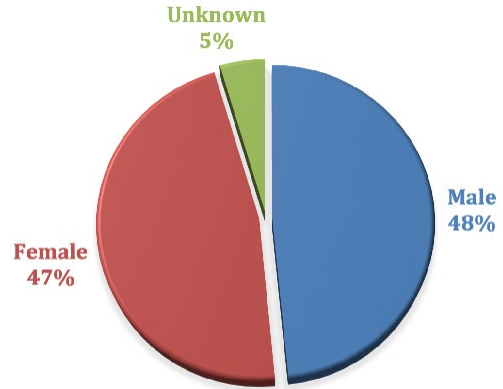
Organizational Performance

Interpersonal Conflict – Conflict with Supervisor

Issue: Reports of supervisors using inappropriate language including swearing, name-calling, and threats.

Outcome: In these cases, the Ombuds offered visitors the option of going to ODEO or higher-level management so that behavior could be documented and addressed. Whenever, senior management publicly described what appropriate behavior looks like, situations improved.

Issue: Visitors have voiced that conflict resulted when their supervisors did not provide adequate training to set them up for success. Other cases of conflict with supervisors occurred when the visitors felt supervisors did not clarify expectations up front or frequently changed those expectations. When expectations were not clear, disagreements often occurred around performance levels. Finally, visitors shared that micro-managing supervisors negatively impacted their job satisfaction, motivation, and creativity.



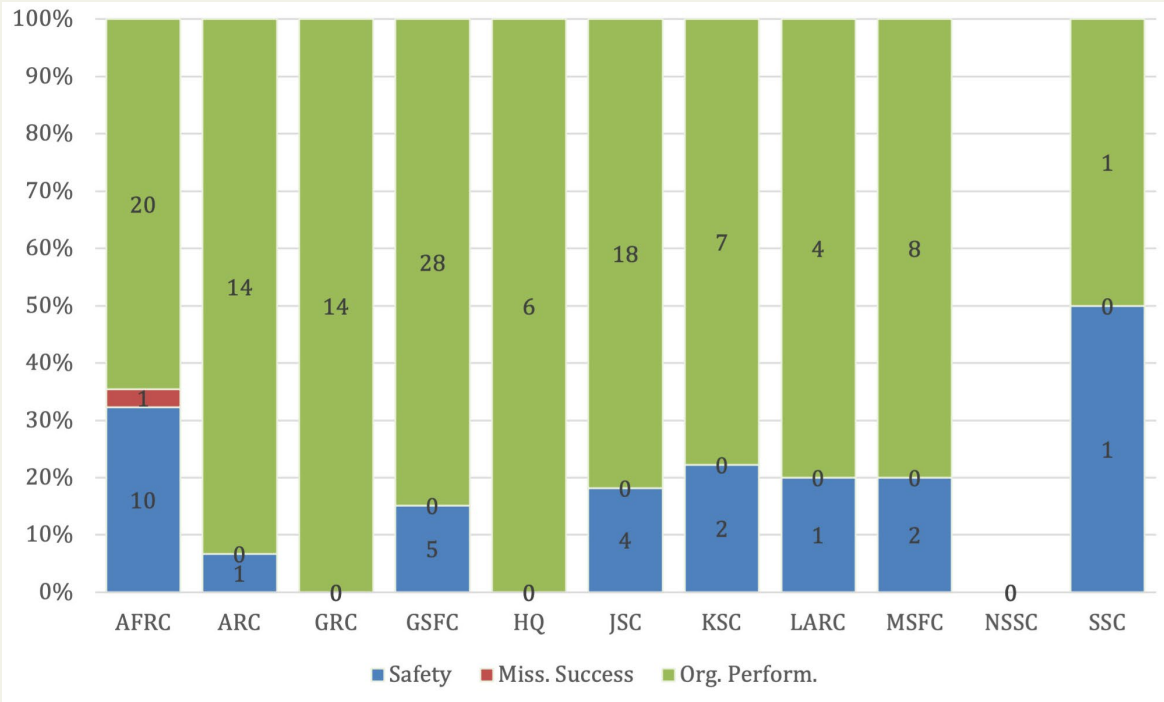
VISITORS

It appears in many cases the supervisor ineffectiveness was due to lack of skill or training versus malicious intent.

Outcome: The Ombuds provided various options in these situations, up to and including identifying possible mentors to support the visitors. When expectations hadn’t been as clear as necessary the Ombuds either facilitated conversations between the supervisors and visitors or coached visitors on how to advocate for themselves.

Issue: Visitors described supervisors who seemed to target them and displayed bullying behaviors.

Outcome: Many of these cases involved supervisors who were new to their role. The Ombuds coached visitors to have constructive conversations with supervisor or next level management. Whenever visitors chose to take formal action, the Ombuds referred them to the Office of Chief Human Capital Officer (OCHCO). In some instances, the Ombuds conducted facilitated conversations between visitors and supervisors, which were effective in resolving issues. For visitors who needed a sounding board with whom to discuss their situation, the Ombuds were able to provide a safe place for this to happen while coaching the visitors on coping strategies.



DISTRIBUTION OF CASE TYPE BY CENTER

The percentage of Safety cases rose in 2021 versus 2020 due to the existence of COVID-19 related concerns. Organizational Performance cases still made up the majority of cases.

Interpersonal Conflict – Conflict with Colleague

Issue: Many of the cases were concerns within project teams with visitors perceiving contributions, both in quantity and quality to be uneven among team members.

Outcome: The Ombuds offered coaching and facilitation to overcome resistance.

Issue: Condescending communication between co-workers also resulted in conflict. Females reported they felt male colleagues spoke to them disrespectfully because of their gender. Extreme examples of conflict between colleagues resulted when communication included threats and name-calling. The Ombuds have noted that in the current remote work environment, especially when the cameras are off thus reducing the opportunities of eye-to-eye contact, there seems to be more occurrences of disrespectful behavior.

Outcome: In these situations, either facilitated conversations between the co-workers took place or training was provided. In several situations the relationship improved. Issues that involved contractor-to-contractor were more

challenging to resolve although coaching proved to be successful in a few instances.

Management Behavior

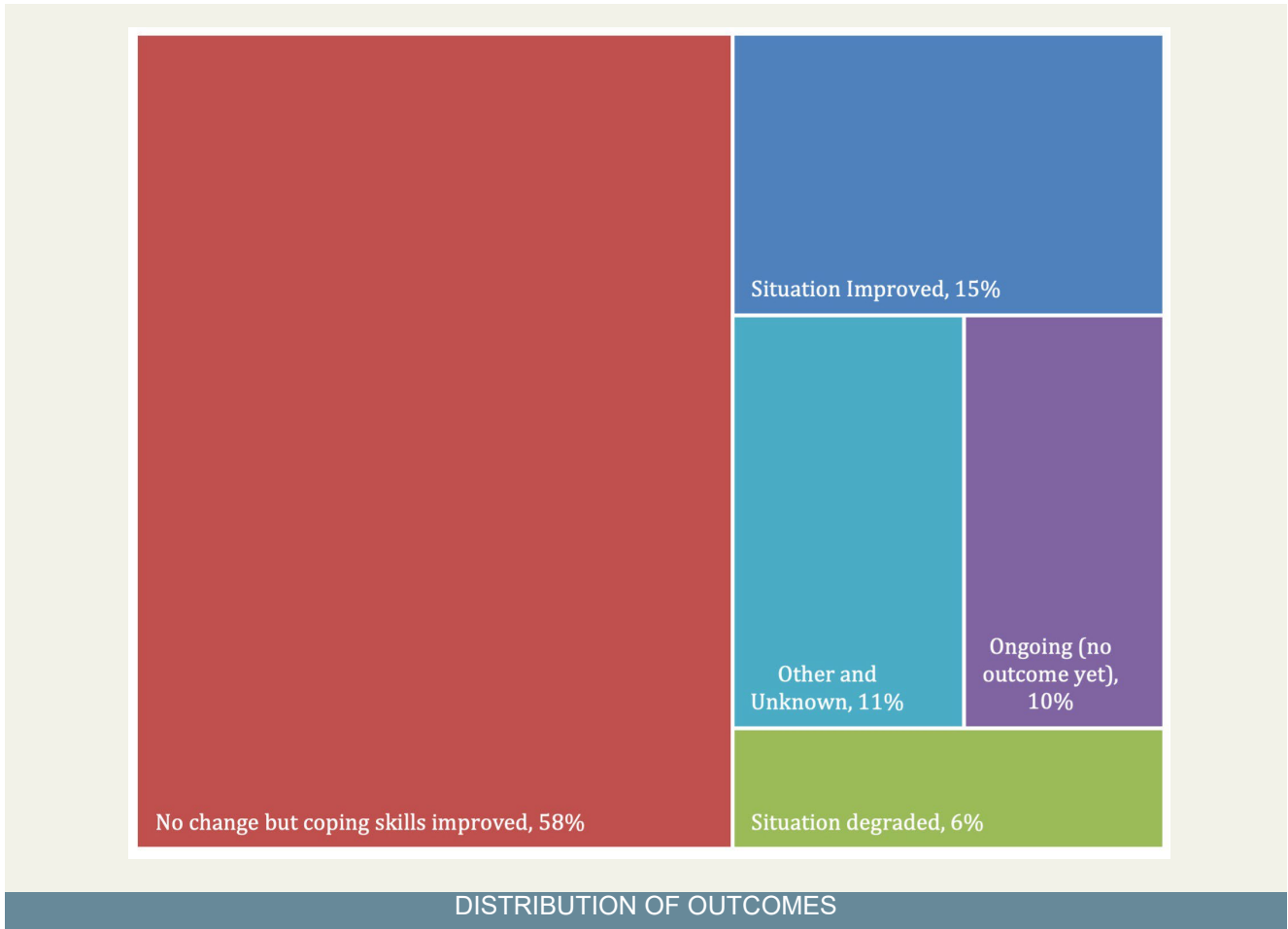
Issue: Many of the cases related to women feeling that they are not being taken seriously or actively developed. There have been direct statements such as, “women don’t belong in a particular “discipline.” Others report that male supervisors are more readily disrespectful to female workers than to their male counterparts.

Outcome: The Ombuds coached individuals to have conversations with their supervisors, higher management or ODEO. In some instances, the visitor gave the Ombuds permission to escalate the issues to senior management. At this point in time the visitors report no real change.

Bullying/Workplace Violence

Issue: Visitors wanted information on where to take bullying/harassment claims. They did not know what resources were available to them.

Outcome: The Ombuds was able to clarify resources and processes. The visitors felt there were barriers to their use of these resources.



The Ombuds have not always been able to track down outcomes of many of their cases due to lack of follow-up or challenges of seeing real change in short periods of time. Visitors often report even if the situation doesn't improve, the availability of the Ombuds Program allowed them to vent and develop strategies to move forward.

2021 Case Outcomes

Issue: Visitors reported that supervisors behaved in a bullying and intimidating manner.

Outcome: Outcome varied from employees choosing to leave the organization to the Ombuds escalating concerns to senior management pointing to how the lack of action creates the perception that this behavior is acceptable in the organization. So far, we cannot report clear positive shift in climate.

Policy

Issue: Visitors brought several questions about accommodation/exception process. Many, but not all, of these were due to COVID-19 regulations.

Outcome: The Ombuds were able to help visitors understand the policies and practices and successfully apply. Whenever the Ombuds found errors in the forms or documentation they alerted relevant policy owner.

Issue: Visitors raised various questions regarding selection process for job openings. Questions ranged from understanding how decisions are made to compete jobs, and what happens after offers are extended.

Outcome: The Ombuds was able to research questions and successfully provided information to visitors.

Issue: Other visitors had questions about policies regarding who is granted payment for professional memberships, consequences of DUI arrest, authorship concerns or use of prescribed medical marijuana.

Outcome: In all cases the Ombuds researched the questions and provided information to visitors.

Ombuds Program Priorities for 2022

In 2022, the Ombuds Team will focus their efforts on the following:

- Develop work plans to address deficiencies identified in the 2022 NASA Ombuds Survey.
 - » The survey was set to be released in 2021 but was delayed due to administrative issues. The Survey was issued in March 2022 and received over 3,000 responses.
- Enhance awareness of the program.
 - » The Ombuds had many opportunities to expand outreach in 2021. The Ombuds presented to new supervisors in the HR 101 Program, all agency listen and learn sessions, to the Agency Office of Communications Staff (OCOMM), to SMD Senior Staff, and several department level presentations. In 2022 the Ombuds will continue to expand awareness activities.
- Support the re-installment of the JPL Ombuds Program.
- Fill vacancies created by retiring or transitions of current Ombuds to new assignments.
- Continue training efforts for all NASA Ombuds
 - » In 2021 the Ombuds had two All Ombuds training sessions focusing on skills for dealing with abrasive leaders, coaching visitors around microaggressions and building trust. Ombuds also share best practices during monthly team meetings.
- Continue to share critical messaging with management regarding key topics.
 - » The Ombuds met frequently with management to share themes and trends and follow up to confirm actions taken. The Ombuds will continue to do this in 2022.

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