



USOMBUDSMAN

Promoting and supporting fairness, accountability, and equity in government through the public sector ombudsman.

Winter 2008

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THE RACE IS ON! THE 2008 USOA ANNUAL CONFERENCE TO BE HELD IN LEXINGTON, KENTUCKY

By Beverly E. Reeves, Ombudsman, Austin (TX) Independent School District Chair, Member Services



Photo courtesy of the Lexington Convention and Visitor's Bureau and James Archambeault.

Although it may be difficult to top the beautiful snow-capped mountains, glaciers and moose sightings from last year's conference in Anchorage, Alaska, the Conferences and Training Committee is up to the challenge.

Lexington, Kentucky is the site for this year's Annual Conference and it will be held September 29 – October 3, 2008. The Horse Capital of the World, Lexington is located in the Bluegrass Region and offers a variety of attractions, including horse tracks, Civil War battlefields, and bourbon distilleries.

The 28th Annual Conference will offer a variety of workshops that will enhance your ability to serve as a more effective ombudsman. In addition, pre-conference workshops will be offered including the newly expanded "New Ombudsman Orientation."

Please plan to join us for the 28th Annual Conference in Lexington. You'll be glad you did!



Photo courtesy of the Lexington Convention and Visitor's Bureau and John Ashley.



Photo courtesy of the Lexington Convention and Visitor's Bureau and Lee Thomas.



Photo courtesy of the Lexington Convention and Visitor's Bureau and Eleanor Coonce.

OF CHOCOLATE DROPS AND GOOGLE GROUPS

By Linda Lord-Jenkins
Alaska Ombudsman
USOA President



Shortly after the close of the 2007 USOA Conference in Anchorage I received an e-mail from Gene Raney, Ombudsman in the Virginia Office of Health Benefits. Gene had returned from his post-conference vacation trip around Alaska to learn that a favorite band of his, the Carolina Chocolate Drops, had scheduled two performances in Anchorage in February. He had once seen a performance by the Carolina Chocolate Drops, an African-American string band (guitar, banjo, jug, harmonica, snare & voice) based in the Triangle area of North Carolina, and recommended them as a great show.

Unfortunately, I will be on a plane the evening of the Chocolate Drops' Anchorage performance but I am listening to their "Short Life of Trouble" as I type this message. Their music evokes the 1940s or, for those of us requiring more recent references, the soundtrack from "Oh Brother where Art Thou". Google them and listen.

But this is not a music review. I mention the Carolina Chocolate Drops because I was introduced to them by someone from across the country who I have met personally a handful of times but, by this one e-mailed suggestion, has contributed to the richness of my cultural life. I would surely not have heard of the Carolina Chocolate Drops were it not for that e-mail.

In the Alaska Ombudsman's office, we often rely on e-mail for communications. Our three offices are a minimum of 90 minutes apart by jet. We are able to gather in person as a group only once a year, if that. We use e-mail to check in with other offices, compare cold temperatures, etc. E-mail has become an electronic water cooler around which we gather daily to say hello. Former Alaska Ombudsman Duncan Fowler recognized e-mail as a glue to help bind our three offices together as a team and I agree with that belief. Of course, we primarily use e-mail for more official purposes; we vet letters, staff cases, seek opinions, and alert other staff to emerging issues. It was and is our way of linking our three offices and sharing wisdom.

Similarly, as a member of USOA Board of Directors and of the unofficial fraternity of State Ombudsmen, I have often called upon the wisdom held by far more experienced ombudsmen than myself by sending out e-mail inquiries. I have sought information about whether the federal Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) was

being interpreted in other jurisdictions to limit ombudsman access to records.

I sought information on how other jurisdictions responded to jurisdictional problems. I've asked for information on how other corrections systems handle medication distribution. We've asked for information on how adoption subsidies are handled in other jurisdictions.

Last year I sought information on whether any ombudsman with corrections jurisdiction had studied the cost-benefit savings of an ombudsman complaint system over litigation. That question was raised again recently in connection with a bill to establish a corrections ombudsman office in a state without one.

These inquiries have brought me valuable information, resource material, and more than a little encouragement.

Let's face it; we often need that help and encouragement. Ombudsmen are an unusual breed in government. Our role incorporates elements of teacher, social worker, investigator, judge, and jury. There aren't that many of us and we must keep our own counsel. We can't share with our partners or friends when we leave the office at night. So, who can we consult when we have questions about our unique role in government? Other ombudsman. But how to do that?

USOA has five different chapters organized by jurisdiction: Education, Families and Children, Municipal, Health, and Corrections. During each USOA conference, time is set aside for members of these chapters to meet and discuss issues important to them. These Chapter meetings provide an excellent opportunity for people to meet, make contacts and 'network.' Sometimes different chapters have similar interests. In Anchorage, Health and Corrections chapters met together to discuss the issue of mental health care in prisons, a growing issue in both jurisdictions.

But what happens when folks leave the conference rooms and return home? USOA established the Google groups lists to make it easier for members with questions to communicate with others from their field. USOA members can sign up for any or all of the Google groups, even if their jurisdictional focus is specifically addressed by only one of the groups. As a general jurisdiction ombudsman, I have interests addressed by the Education, Families and Children, Health and Corrections Chapters and am members of all groups.

The Google groups are one of the benefits from USOA membership in USOA. I encourage all USOA members to take advantage of the USOA Google groups to ask questions, bounce ideas, vent frustrations, and seek advice.

You might just learn about a cool African-American guitar, banjo, jug, harmonica, snare & vocal band worth watching.

DAYTON ASSISTANT OMBUDSMAN VISITS NEW LATVIAN OMBUDSMAN OFFICE

By Brandy Alexander, Assistant Ombudsman
Dayton (OH) Joint Office of Citizen Complaints

While many of you gathered in Alaska for the 2007 USOA Conference, I had the privilege of participating in a Rotary Group Study Exchange to Sweden and Latvia. The Group Study Exchange (GSE) program of The Rotary Foundation is a unique cultural and vocational exchange opportunity for young professionals. The program provides travel grants for teams of 3-5 individuals with the purpose of providing an educational experience that promotes international understanding and professional development. For four weeks, team members experience the host country's institutions and ways of life, observe their own vocations as practiced abroad, and develop personal and professional relationships as they live with host families and attend Rotary club meetings throughout the host district.

The highlight of my vocational experiences was a visit to the Office of the Ombudsman in Riga, Latvia on September 27. The Latvian Ombudsman Office was established in January 2007, and it grew so much during its first months that it moved from the Latvian National Human Rights Office into its own office in July 2007. Ombudsman Romans Apsitis and his staff have been busy hosting many representatives of the European Union and other organizations, and I was welcomed and hosted by Sabine Vilums, of the Information and Communication Division. As we toured the new offices, I was introduced to lawyers of various departments including Children's Rights, Human Rights, Discrimination Prevention, and Good Administration. All of the staff expressed their excitement about the positive response that the office has received, their accomplishments in influencing policy changes, and the continued growth and hiring of new staff that is expected in 2008.

Because the Dayton Ombudsman Office was established in 1971 and is well known in the community, I was very interested in how the Latvian Ombudsman Office is making citizens aware of their services and the types of complaints that they receive. I learned that they have yet to produce any brochures or public advertisements and do not have their own web site, but word of mouth has already produced a significant response. The office received over five thousand written applications and oral consultations for assistance during their first year, with the most frequent inquiries dealing with the right to housing, right to a fair and public trial, right to good administration, right to social security, and general requests for information. In addition to written applications and phone calls, the Latvian Ombudsman Office schedules appointments to meet with citizens and staff also accepts walk-ins. They explained that, like any office, they prefer scheduled appointments, but they understand that citizens come to them from varied circumstances, and the office wants to set an example of good administration by having an open-door policy and being accessible to all citizens seeking to voice their concerns.

The Latvian Ombudsman Office looks to other Ombudsman in the European Union for support and guidance as they establish themselves. I extended an invitation for them to contact members of the USOA and consider sending a representative to our conference next year. I appreciate the hospitality of the Latvian Ombudsman Office, and on behalf of the Dayton Ombudsman Office, I wish them all the best as they seek to promote the continued development and understanding of the Ombudsman role in Latvia.

Brandy Alexander has worked as Assistant Ombudsman at the Joint Office of Citizen Complaints in Dayton, Ohio since October 2005.



Photo: (Left to Right) Elina Dzalbe, Legal Advisor, and Sabine Vilumsone, Project Manager, at Latvian Ombudsman Office with Brandy Alexander of Dayton Ombudsman Office.

PUBLIC SCHOOLS CHAPTER CHANGES NAME AND LEADERSHIP

By Beverly E. Reeves, Ombudsman, Austin (TX) ISD,
Chair, Member Services

During the 2007 Annual Conference, attendees gathered for USOA Chapter Meetings. For the Public Schools Chapter, the first thing on the agenda was a presentation by representatives of the Anchorage School District on issues relating to No Child Left Behind (NCLB). After the presentation, members discussed a proposal to change the Chapter name. The proposed name change, from Public Schools to Education, would make the Chapter more inclusive of all ombudsmen who work in the educational field. This proposal was approved unanimously.

The last order of business was to elect new Chapter Chairs. Dana Abrams, Ombudsman for St. Paul Public Schools and Adie Simmons, Director of the Education Ombudsman Office for the Governor of Washington, were elected as the new Chairs of the Education Chapter.

2007 USOA ANNUAL CONFERENCE: I WAS THERE. WHERE WERE YOU?

By Gerald R. Papica, Ombudsman
Tennessee Commission on Children and Youth
Chair, Conferences & Training

As far as I am concerned, the last week of September 2007 was a highly momentous occasion. Since 2001, I have attended and co-organized all the USOA Annual Conferences held in Concord, Chicago, Honolulu, Portland, Nashville, Des Moines, and Anchorage. You have to take my word if I state, "There has not been an annual convention that did not leave a very pleasant imprint in my memory." The readers might readily surmise that I am a conference junkie. To tell you the truth, I detest, more or less, yearly meetings or gatherings. Often times, they bore me to death and, at other times, they put me to sleep without any effort. If you have not been to a USOA annual function, you are seriously depriving yourself the opportunity to greet, meet, and sit with your fellow ombudsman. To learn, network, and enjoy have been the credo of every USOA annual convention.

"North to the Future" is Alaska's state motto. The 1967 legislature adopted it during Alaska's Purchase Centennial Celebration. When I first heard this motto upon my arrival in Anchorage, I easily identified it with how USOA, as an organization, should navigate its future. The future is where the ombudsman profession will thrive the best. As our constituents learn about the importance of what we do, being creative in resolving issues and getting out of the box characterized a trendy development. In the not so distant past, who could have imagined that the public sector ombudsman profession would play a crucial role in addressing societal issues pertaining to governance and fairness? The positive impact that we bring to the future depends on how we prepare for it. There is no school or formal education that gives you an ombudsman degree. Actually, you probably have to go through a lot of schooling and several professions in order to be an effective, confident ombudsman. Adequate experience and knowledge relating to sociology, psychology, public administration, social work, law, advocacy, mediation, etc. are essential in the profession. You have to use one or all disciplines to get a good handle of your ombudsman cases. All these things belong to the future.

Did you know how the Alaska state flag was selected? The story is a very inspiring one as a young boy created it and eloquently explained why he designed the flag in such a pattern. I would love to tell you the entire story but space and time do not allow me to do it. Just like Alaska's state motto, I can handily relate the intriguing story to the ombudsman profession but this topic is for another article.

You are probably wondering right now, why I included a brief history of Alaska, the site of the 2007 USOA Annual Conference. "Inspiration" is the operative word and the reason why

I bantered on a couple of topics exclusive to Alaska. Once in while, if not all the time, we need inspiration as well as motivation to stay on top of our chosen profession. This is the main reason why I would not miss a USOA Annual Conference. The post-conference good feeling stays with you for a very long time. As you will agree, this state of being needs to be nurtured.

The conference last year began with a two-day pre-conference workshop entitled "New Ombudsman Orientation" and a one-day pre-conference workshop on "Dealing with Unreasonable Complainant Conduct." Attendance for both workshops was phenomenal as it surpassed the number of participants in previous pre-conference workshops. There were four plenary sessions that included, "Apology and the Ombudsman," "Town Hall Meetings: Issues Forum," "Systemic Investigations for Smaller Offices," and "If I Knew Then What I Know Now." The six concurrent sessions were, "Reaping Technology's Benefits; Avoiding its Pitfalls," "Launching a New Ombudsman Office," "Ethics and the Ombudsman," "Can You Evaluate Ombudsman Operations?," "Current Events on the Legal Horizon," and "Challenges to Impartiality in Investigation and Intervention." As the readers will observe, these topics reflected what we need to amplify or enhance our skills in this field.

The conference evaluations forms that we received mirrored a very successful conference that most attendees enjoyed. Linda Lord-Jenkins and her office hosted the conference. They did a super, outstanding job. On behalf of every conference participant, thank you very much!

We recently started planning for the 2008 USOA Annual Conference that will be held September 22nd to October 3rd in Kentucky, the Blue Grass State. When you see me in Lexington, ask me how the state got its nickname then attend all of the wonderful workshops and plenary sessions. If I missed you last year, I hope to see you in the fall. See ya'll later!



Members of the USOA Board preparing to dine.

2007 USOA ANNUAL CONFERENCE PHOTO HIGHLIGHTS



Inuit Dancers perform at the Alaska Native Heritage Center.



Brooke Ricker and Betsy Lusk, the "Killer 'B's'" always happy to help.



Chris Wheeler provides tips on dealing with unreasonable complainers.



Andre Marin, Sue Haslam, and Gareth Jones, after presenting, "Systematic Investigations for Smaller Offices".



Michael Hostina giving keynote address.



Conference attendees discussing topic.



Conference attendees enjoying lunch.

PAST PRESIDENT'S FAREWELL

By Ruth Cooperrider
USOA Immediate Past President
State of Iowa Office of Citizens'
Aide/Ombudsman

Every well-run organization depends upon interested and involved members for its success.



As Immediate Past President, I was asked to share some parting thoughts with you. First, I want to say it's been a privilege and rewarding experience to serve as President of USOA. Second, I left the presidency with great optimism that USOA will continue to grow in members, stature, and vitality. It is most encouraging to know our assets have almost doubled in the last four years.

I would like to take this opportunity to share three recent experiences, two of which occurred while attending the Annual Conference in Anchorage, that reinforce my optimism. The first was a chance meeting that led to an outreach opportunity. I promised myself an Alaska King Crab dinner before I left Anchorage, so after the conference I dined out at a local eatery with several others. As we were getting ready to leave after that savory meal, I struck up a conversation with a lady at the table behind me. It turned out she is a leadership analyst for the New Mexico State Senate and was attending a National Conference of State Legislatures' seminar in Anchorage that week. That conversation spawned an interest that has led to the USOA connecting with a couple of New Mexico senators on creating a general jurisdiction office or expanding the ombudsman role in that state. There is similar interest in governmental ombudsmen across our nation, and this is good for the USOA.

The second experience occurred during a meeting of members of the International Ombudsman Institute (IOI). Much of the discussion focused on the creation of more core and specialized trainings for ombudsmen, and perhaps coordinating or collaborating with other ombudsman associations with mutual interest. The USOA Board has discussed developing such trainings and I hope it will come to fruition.

The third experience was an indirect benefit of working for Iowa Ombudsman Bill Angrick, who is also the current IOI President. A delegation from the Control Yuan of Taiwan wanted to visit Bill and exchange information about the work of ombudsman in their respective offices. As usual, I took the opportunity to tout the work of the USOA and to invite the delegation members to our 2008 Annual Conference. This experience was reminiscent of a visit by a delegation from the Republic of China's State Bureau for Letters and Calls that I hosted for the USOA in 2005. There have been other exchanges and visits by ombudsman offices from within and outside the United States to other USOA member offices in recent years. As USOA's visibility and stature increase in the ombudsman world, it is good for the USOA.

These are just a few of the reasons USOA members should be proud and optimistic about the future of the association.

In closing, I would like to thank members of the Board of Directors for their support throughout the past two years and wish the new USOA President, Linda Lord-Jenkins, the best in leading the association to the next level.

DELEGATION FROM THE CONTROL YUAN OF TAIWAN VISITS IOWA

By Bill Angrick and Ruth Cooperrider

On November 26, 2007, Iowa Ombudsman, USOA member, and International Ombudsman Institute President Bill Angrick and his staff hosted an official delegation from the Control Yuan of Taiwan. The visitors included Secretary General Shan-Liang Tu, Senior Advisor Ron-Yaw Chao, and Secretary Claudia Lin. The visit enabled the offices to exchange information about their operations and to learn different ways of carrying out the ombudsman's responsibilities.

The Control Yuan is one of five governmental branches of government for Taiwan and is independent from the legislative, executive, and judicial branches. The Control Yuan operates as a general jurisdiction ombudsman office, and with a staff of approximately 200, is a much larger operation than most ombudsman offices in the United States and Canada. The office has a chief ombudsman and other appointed ombudsmen who are responsible for different subject matter areas.

Dr. Chao gave a slide show presentation about the history, organizational structure and functional process of the Control Yuan. Iowa Ombudsman Bill Angrick spoke about the work of his office and noted the offices deal with similar issues and experience similar challenges. Iowa Deputy Ombudsman Ruth Cooperrider, who is the immediate Past President of the USOA, shared information about the USOA and extended an invitation to the delegation to attend the USOA's 2008 Annual Conference.

For more information about The Control Yuan, visit their web site at <http://www.cy.gov.tw/eng/index.asp>



(From left to right): Claudia Lin (Secretary), Ron-Yaw Chao (Senior Advisor), Ruth Cooperrider (Iowa Deputy Ombudsman), Bill Angrick (Iowa Ombudsman), Shan-Liang Tu (Secretary General)

SBA HOLDS REGULATORY FAIRNESS FORUM

By Kristie Hirschman, Assistant Ombudsman - Small Business
Iowa Citizens' Aide/Ombudsman Office

The United States Small Business Administration National Ombudsman, Nicholas Owens, held a Regulatory Fairness Forum for Small Business in Des Moines, Iowa on September 5, 2007. Mr. Owens, members of the Region VII Regulatory Fairness Board and representatives of trade associations received comments about compliance and enforcement of regulations by Federal agencies at the forum. The Iowa Citizens' Aide/Ombudsman's Office was represented by Kristie Hirschman, Assistant Ombudsman for Small Business. Ms. Hirschman also met with Mr. Owens to promote membership in the United States Ombudsman Association and to discuss their office's case management system.

Robin Matsunaga, Ombudsman for Hawaii, attended a similar forum in Honolulu on July 19, 2007. Following the forum, Mr. Owens and a member of the Region IX Regulatory Fairness Board visited the Hawaii Ombudsman Office to learn about the operations of the office, including its new case management system. Mr. Matsunaga and Mr. Owens also discussed matters such as ombudsman standards, coordination of efforts to deal with cross-jurisdictional citizen complaints, and services available to governmental ombudsman offices from the USOA.

USOA EDITORIAL INFORMATION

The purpose of USOMBUDSMAN is to communicate the activities, goals, and mission of the United States Ombudsman Association and to publish diverse information and views on matters significantly related to the ombudsman profession. Statements of fact and opinion do not represent the opinion or endorsement of the USOA unless they are specifically identified as USOA policy.

For information regarding content of USOMBUDSMAN and/or submission of articles and announcements, please contact the editor, Beverly E. Reeves, at breeves@austinisd.org.

SAVE THE DATE!!!

The 2008 USOA Annual Conference will be held September 29 through October 3, 2008 in Lexington, Kentucky.



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