

Message from the Ombudsman

We received over 5300 new contacts in 1998. This is the second highest annual volume of inquiries in the history of the office. I believe it reflects two factors: one is our concerted effort to outreach; the second is the growing population in Iowa's prisons and correctional programs. Outreach is important. It allows us to inform more Iowans about our services and gives them the opportunity to use us if the need arises. This last year my staff and I made presentations to a variety of groups across the state. I appeared on WHO TV's morning program. And, of course, we operated our information booth in the Varied Industries Building during the Iowa State Fair. We routinely make presentations to the State Jailers School at the Iowa Law Enforcement Academy. These opportunities bring us many new and different contacts whom we might not otherwise be able to assist.

Iowa's increasing prison, correctional program and jail population generates a large number of inquiries and complaints to our office. Corrections related complaints closed during 1998 accounted for over 22% of our caseload. New corrections and jail-related complaints received during the year reached closer to 25% of our cases. Extension of our toll-free telephone service to Iowa's prisons facilitated part of this increase - but the proportions of these complaints have been steadily increasing for several years. It is now much more efficient, cost effective and productive to do most of our corrections intake by telephone than during in-person interviews at the institutions. For example, an intake trip to the Men's Penitentiary in Fort Madison requires 8 hours of driving time for each visit. That time can be better used if the initial contact is by telephone - even more so than in writing - because many times a complaint or inquiry can be resolved with a brief telephone conversation and immediate response. I continue to keep a close eye on the impact corrections complaints have upon the overall operation of the office.

Child support issues once again dominated our Human Services contacts. Child and Adult Protective Services and Social Work contacts ranked third of those inquiries and complaints. Municipal and County issues each account for a consistent 10% of our caseload and have done so for several years.

Interestingly, complaints about Municipal and County governments are the greatest source of our Public Records and Open Meetings issues. We don't hear many Public Records or Open Meetings complaints about state government anymore. And the ones we do hear are usually addressed quickly and satisfactorily by working with the agency and the Iowa Attorney General. But local governments vary in their understanding and conformity with Iowa's laws calling for open government. Challenges in these arenas will continue to be important work by my staff.

During 1998 I issued a report critical of the Environmental Protection Division of the Department of Natural Resources. That report chronicled the need for a greater commitment and proactive administration of Iowa's laws regulating sewage discharges into surface waters by small communities and subdivisions.

In early 1999 I released a report recommending a need to change the way complaints about police officers are handled by the Des Moines Police Department.

Those were two important issues, however, I still find that our most rewarding work is done quietly, without the necessity of issuing a report when the agency or official moves quickly and responsively to rectify a wrong or otherwise accommodate a citizen's situation. The majority of case examples in this annual report reflect that way of doing business.

A significant task undertaken in 1998 and completed in early 1999 was a review of the Child Protection System mandated by SF 2359. We relied upon the policy-consulting firms of State Public Policy Group (SPPG) and Child and Family Policy Center (CFPC) to conduct this research and prepare the report. The review, how it was conducted and the major conclusions it reached is reported elsewhere in this Annual Report.

Nineteen ninety-eight was a busy year for the Citizens' Aide/Ombudsman. Nineteen ninety-nine is well on its way to be just as challenging.

In my 1997 Newsletter I reported on the report I issued in November of that year about inadequate regulation of nursing homes by the Department of Inspections and Appeals. During the 1998 Legislative Session one of my recommendations, to develop a nursing home report card, was passed statutorily. Since then my office has worked with DIA and others to implement an Internet web based report card system for Iowa. An it is important to note that the fines imposed and monies collected by the DIA have markedly increased over the past three years.

As one of the oldest established ombudsman offices in the United States we are often contacted by legislators and other officials wanting information about how an ombudsman functions or assistance in creating an ombudsman's office. I believe this is an important responsibility - it provides us the opportunity to show off the quality government we have in Iowa.

In January 1998 we were visited by Andrew So, Ombudsman for Hong Kong. Mr. So was the second Ombudsman for Hong Kong and faced the challenges of transfer from British rule to that of The People's Republic of China. During his visit we exchanged ideas on how to administer ombudsman offices and how to best address and resolve complaints. Hong Kong was the birthplace of Deputy Citizens' Aide Ruth Cooperrider, and his visit gave her an opportunity to renew contact with her homeland. Later in the year Ruth traveled to Hong Kong to re-unite with her birth family. During that trip, she was able to reciprocate a visit to the Hong Kong Ombudsman.

We were also visited by Katarzyna Maria Piekarka, a member of the Polish Parliament, who was interested in learning how an Ombudsman protects children's rights. Later in the year I saw Ms. Piekarka on CNN speaking about some of the concepts and ideas we exchanged.

Also during 1998 we hosted three government officials from Japan; Susumu Michikawa, Shinichi Hamasaki and Kyoko Il who were interested in Iowa's agricultural processes and production and how we respond to complaints from farmers and the agricultural sector.

Another group to meet with our office included Georgi Kourtev, Press Secretary to the President of Bulgaria, Biliana Detcheva-Gountcheva, Information Directorate; and Daniela Feralieva-Simeonova, Advisor. Mr. Kourtev said his country wants to establish a national ombudsman which they see as a fundamental office in a developing democracy.