

Correction Advisory Committee  
MEETING MINUTES  
Thursday, February 20, 2025  
6:00 PM Zoom Remote Meeting

The following committee members were present:

Tadhg Dooley  
Marisol Garcia  
Scott Semple  
Andrew Giering  
Melvin Medina  
Benjamin Howell

Other attendees included:

Interim Ombudsperson DeVaughn Ward  
Ron Pierce (New Jersey OCO)  
Terry Schuster (New Jersey Corrections Ombudsperson)  
Gale Muhammad (NJ Representative)  
Barbara Fair (Stop Solitary CT)

### **I. Convene Meeting**

The meeting was called to order at approximately 6:40 PM by Chair Tadhg Dooley.

### **II. Remarks by the Chairs**

Introductory remarks were made by Chair Dooley and Chair Garcia. The Chairs thanked New Jersey colleagues for attending and welcomed committee members.

### **III. Review and Approval of January Minutes**

There was no vote on minutes due to lack of quorum at the time and the fact that the previous January meeting primarily consisted of an executive session.

### **IV. Update from the Interim Ombudsman**

Chair Dooley noted that Devaughn Ward, previously serving as Interim, was officially nominated by the Governor to become the permanent Corrections Ombudsperson.

### **V. Update on Permanent Ombuds Nomination**

Ombudsman Ward shared that the website is now live and includes a complaint intake form; over 350 complaints have been received with approximately 60–70 having been resolved. He also noted that a significant backlog exists. He said that many complaints received via mail have not yet been reviewed so he is considering a temporary pause on intake due to capacity limits.

He was approved to hire one office assistant; the job posting is forthcoming. The Governor's proposed budget flat-funds the office at \$400,000. He is requesting \$800,000, which would allow for the hiring of essential staff (assistants, investigators, attorney, and medical consultant) and a file management system; the Governor's office has expressed no opposition to the requested increase. He met with the Governor's staff as well as the chairs of the Appropriations Committee and stated that advocacy efforts are continuing.

He is actively monitoring legislation affecting DOC practices. He supports bills on ending strip searches, the reporting of excessive force, and removing application barriers for housing. He stated that he opposes SB 1309 (fines for disciplinary infractions). He has proposed new language that would restore subpoena powers and require independent reporting of staff assaults to the State Police.

Ombuds Ward raised systemic concerns about the DOC's healthcare system, including inadequate staffing and outsourcing oversight to a third-party (NaphCare). He also discussed the need for comprehensive review of DOC healthcare delivery, particularly regarding aging incarcerated populations.

Ombuds Ward discussed his complaint management system needs. He also submits acknowledgment of complainants. He then compares his to New Jersey's ombudsperson's operations. He shares his vision for future staffing and legislative strategy.

## **VI. Update on Findings**

The consensus from committee members is that Ombuds Ward role needs support to be able to accomplish the goals of the office. Members acknowledged the need for proper intake triage, public communication, and analytic capacity. Chair Dooley also asked if it was possible to issue an interim acknowledgement when complaints are received until an official system has been instituted.

## **VII. Remarks from the Office of the New Jersey Corrections Ombudsperson**

NJ representatives praised CT's emerging efforts. They

NJ annual report shared as a model.

Emphasized importance of complaint management systems and data-driven reporting.

Terry Schuster, New Jersey Corrections Ombudsperson, explained that their office began with 10 staff, and they now have 25. Staff are divided into individual complaints (largest division), systemic issues (inspections, trends, e.g., food, healthcare), and external affairs (public/legislative engagement). He said that staff are regularly present in all prisons; each prison has 1–2 assigned staff to maintain relationships and respond quickly to complaints. The office receives 250 complaints/week and caseloads are limited to 20–50 per staff; specialized staff like nurses handle healthcare issues. Regarding systemic oversight, they developed an inspection tool with DOC input to ensure buy-in and piloted it at Garden State Youth Correctional Facility.

He encouraged patience in building capacity and suggested using a "listening tour" approach to gather input and manage expectations early on. He also advocated clear communication with incarcerated individuals and the public about what the office can/can't do. If Ombuds Ward is under-resourced, he emphasized picking key focus areas when planning for long-term growth and cited examples from other states like Indiana and New York.

Ron Pierce, from the New Jersey Office of the Corrections Ombudsperson, was strongly supportive of strategic planning and expanding resources. He also recommended implementing a triage approach for complaints to manage the volume as trust in the office grows. He shared that hiring panels initially scoffed at the idea of needing 25 staff—something that is now a reality in NJ—so he advised persistence despite initial resistance. He encouraged optimism and long-term vision, noting that initial “no” answers on funding can change.

New Jersey State Representative Gail Muhammad emphasized that New Jersey reformed its oversight through legislation by moving the Ombudsperson's Office out of DOC control. She voiced strong support for transparent communication with communities and stakeholders and stressed the importance of engaging with the public, being truthful about limitations, and using community support to leverage increased funding. She urged the Connecticut Office of the Corrections Ombuds to focus on visibility and relationship-building as a path to gaining community trust and influencing legislators.

## **VIII. Public Comment**

Barbara Fair thanked the New Jersey delegation for attending the meeting but expressed deep frustration and concern regarding the progress and transparency of the Connecticut Office of the Corrections Ombuds under DeVaughn Ward. She criticized what she perceives as a lack of progress in the first five to six months of the office's operation, stating that while no one expects full results overnight, some progress should be visible by now. She explained that her working relationship with Ombuds Ward has deteriorated. She doesn't believe Ombuds Ward is doing enough outreach and that she has taken it upon herself to keep incarcerated individuals informed through monthly newsletters and community engagement. She continues to advocate on legislation related to out-of-cell time (currently under threat of being reduced) and asserts she will remain active even without collaboration from the Office of the Correction Ombuds. Finally, she affirmed her commitment to not letting the OCO initiative fail, citing the hard work

that went into establishing it and emphasizing that her loyalty lies with incarcerated individuals and not DOC.

#### **IX. Adjournment**

The meeting was adjourned at 8:35 PM.