



# Office of Correction Ombuds Quarterly Report

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*Reporting Period: September 30, 2024 – May 19, 2025*

*Corrections Ombuds DeVaughn L. Ward, Esq.*

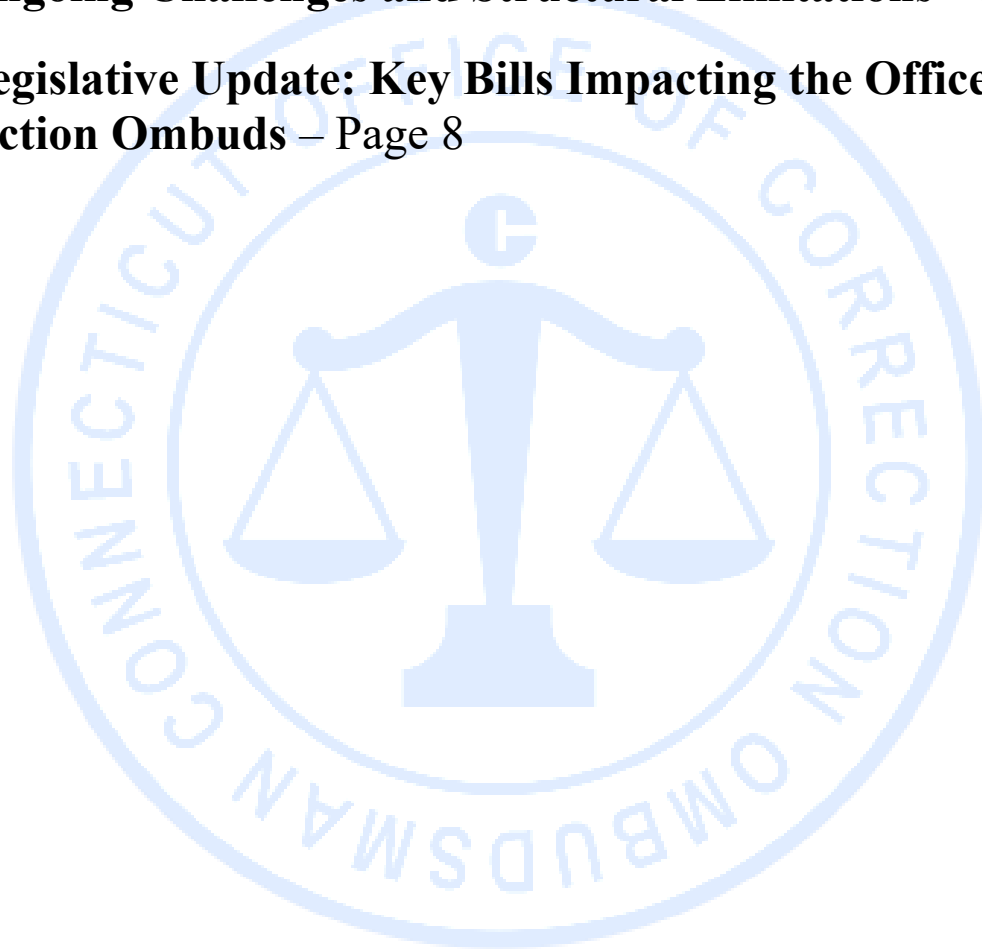
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May 19, 2025

Correction Advisory Committee  
Legislative Office Building, Room 2500  
Hartford, CT 06106

Dear Members of the Correction Advisory Committee,

Please find enclosed a Quarterly Report of the Office of the Correction Ombuds (OCO) covering the period from September 30, 2024 to May 19, 2025.

This reporting period marks momentum in our mission to provide independent oversight of Connecticut's correctional system, consistent with our statutory authority under Conn. Gen. Stat. § 18-81qq. Since September 30, the OCO has formally processed 196 complaints submitted by incarcerated individuals and continues to address a backlog of 189 additional complaints received by mail that remain unreviewed due to staffing limitations.

The report outlines substantial interagency engagement and legislative advocacy. OCO held over 30 stakeholder meetings with partners including the Department of Correction, Office of Policy and Management, Disability Rights CT, and the DMV. We conducted outreach to institutions such as UConn, Wesleyan, and Eastern Connecticut State University, and participated in convenings with other ombuds offices nationwide.

Additionally, this period included site visits to 13 correctional institutions across the state. Photographs from these tours are included in the report highlighting the current conditions of confinement and the necessity for oversight.

The report also summarizes key legislative developments. House Bill 6864 includes a initial budget appropriation to support OCO staffing and infrastructure. Senate Bill 1541 proposes enhancements to OCO authority, including subpoena power, a reformed budget process, and body camera planning. Senate Bill 1543 supports DOC reform initiatives, including a pilot body scanner program, while Senate Bill 1394 mandates annual evaluations of healthcare delivery in correctional settings. Each of these bills reflects the General Assembly's growing commitment to transparency and reform.

We also note several persistent challenges, including limited staff capacity to meet the increasing volume of complaints, limited budget and difficulty accessing funding, delays in record access due to conflicting interpretations of HIPAA, and a lack of a centralized case management system. These barriers directly impact our ability to meet the legislative mandate for timely and thorough oversight.

We thank the Advisory Committee for its partnership and continued support. I look forward to your review of the report and welcome the opportunity to discuss its contents further at the next meeting.

Respectfully submitted,  
DeVaughn L. Ward, Esq.  
Correction Ombuds  
Office of the Correction Ombuds

## **II. Ombudsman Activities and Services During the Reporting Period**

### **Complaint Intake and Case Management**

Since September 30, 2024, the Office of the Correction Ombuds (OCO) has formally received and addressed 196 complaints from incarcerated individuals. Additionally, 189 complaints received by mail have yet to be reviewed or addressed due to capacity constraints. This volume underscores the pressing need for increased staffing and systemic support.

Of the 196 complaints formally addressed, MacDougall-Walker Correctional Institution accounts for the highest number by facility, with medical issues being the most frequently reported concern across all locations.

### **Interagency and Stakeholder Engagement**

Between September 2024 and May 2025, the Office of the Correction Ombudsman undertook a broad range of interagency collaborations, stakeholder engagements, and institutional oversight activities while advancing its internal infrastructure. This period included meetings with individuals on hunger strike at MacDougall-Walker CI, discussions with officials from the Office of Policy and Management, the Department of Correction (DOC), the Governor's Office, and the Office of the Child Advocate, as well as consultations with the DOC Legal Director and legislative staff. The office participated in numerous working groups on issues such as workforce safety, correctional health services, and body-worn cameras, while also collaborating with advocacy organizations including Disability Rights CT, Yale Medical Legal Partnership, and the ID Card Coalition. Testimony was provided before several legislative committees, including Public Health, Judiciary, and Government Oversight. Site visits to the New Jersey Correction Ombuds Office and the University of Texas convening of correctional ombuds programs further informed the office's oversight practices.

Simultaneously, the Ombudsman visited nearly every correctional facility in the state—Corrigan, Osborn, Hartford, Cheshire, York, Walker, Bridgeport, New Haven, Garner, Carl Robinson, Manson Youth Institute, Willard-Cybulski, Brooklyn, and MacDougall-Walker—engaging directly with wardens and staff to address issues such as mail delays, medical access, and facility conditions. The office also expanded academic and workforce partnerships through presentations at Eastern Connecticut State University, recruitment efforts at UConn's Schools of Public Policy and Law, and training engagements at the Maloney Training Center. Internally, the office made significant progress toward public transparency and accessibility by developing and launching its official website.

### **Academic Engagement**

Ongoing collaboration with Yale Medical Legal Partnership, DMV, and reentry organizations on identification and driver's license access for individuals reentering the community. Academic

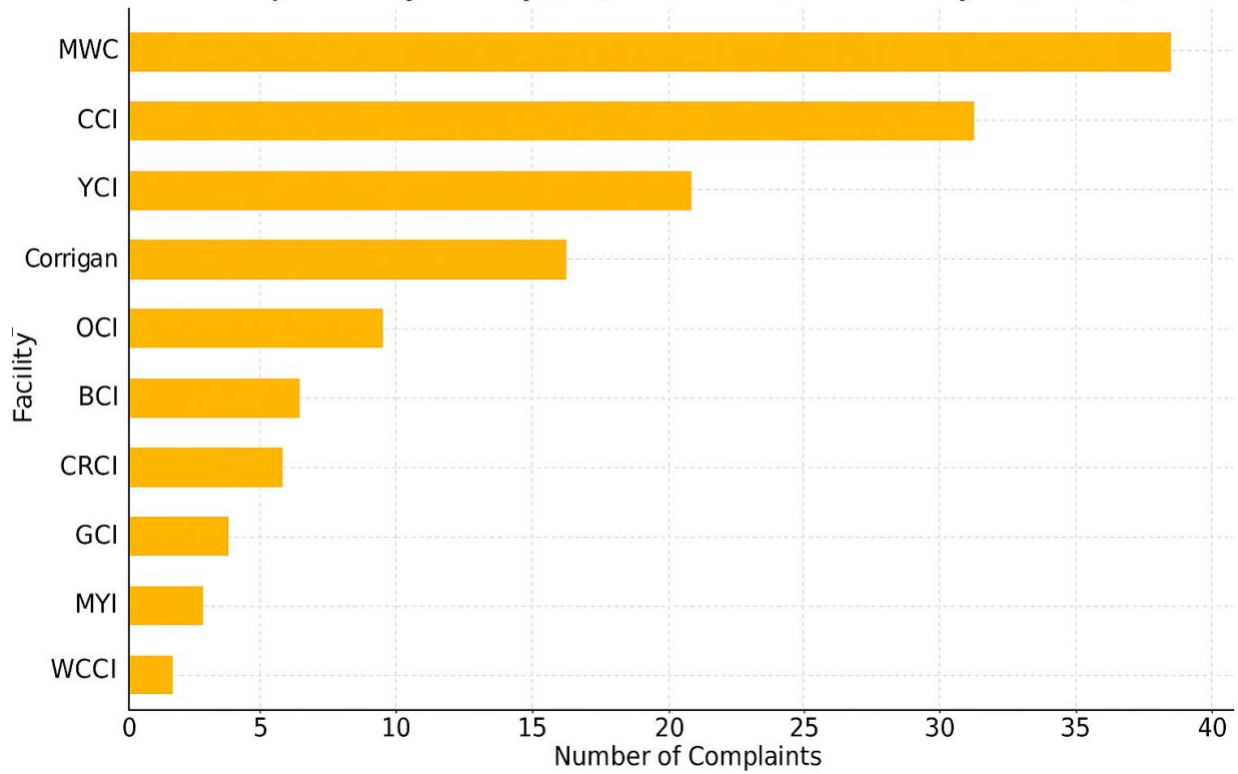
outreach to Eastern Connecticut State University and UConn Schools of Law and Public Policy regarding intern development.

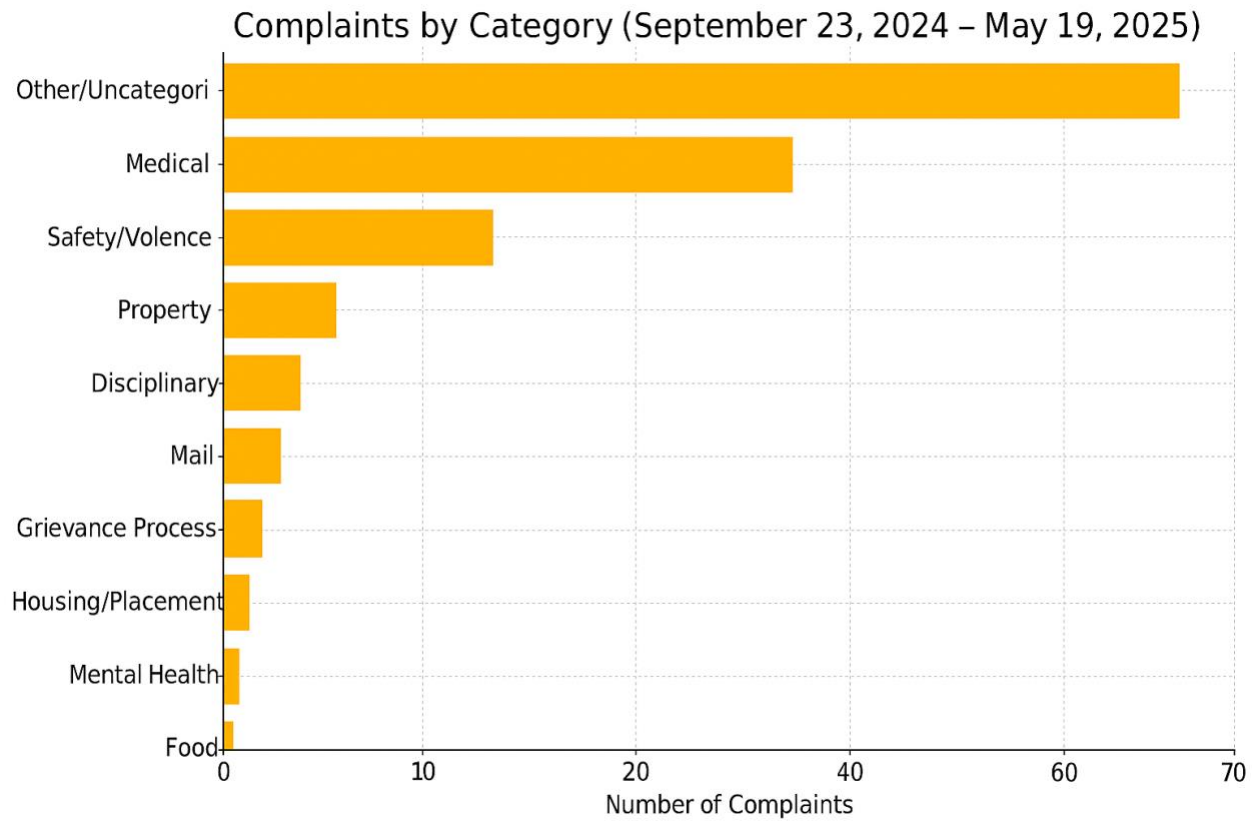
### **National Collaboration and Comparative Oversight**

Site visit to New Jersey Correction Ombuds Office and Eden Women's Facility (March 4–6, 2025). Participation in University of Texas national convening of Correction Ombuds (March 27–29, 2025).



Complaints by Facility (September 23, 2024 – May 19, 2025)





### **III. Ongoing Challenges and Structural Limitations**

#### **A. Staffing and Hiring Delays**

Although the Office has been operational since September 2024, the Correction Ombudsman remains its sole employee. The posting for an Office Assistant—the first step toward securing administrative support—closed on April 22, 2025, with over 200 applications received. That pool has since been narrowed to 41 candidates, though interviews and final selection are still pending.

The process of hiring a state employee is considerably more complex than in the private sector. It involves collecting applications, reviewing them for minimum qualifications, and then determining whether any bargaining units have priority rights to the position. Only after this process concludes can candidates be selected for interviews. For a position to be posted, it must be funded in the state budget and approved by both the Department of Administrative Services (DAS) and the Office of Policy and Management (OPM). Notably, on March 10, 2025, Governor Lamont instituted a statewide hiring freeze, which resulted in the initial Office Assistant posting being rescinded and subsequently resubmitted for approval.

Given the protracted nature of the state's hiring process, and absent changes in administrative procedures or exemptions, the Office is not expected to reach full staffing capacity until at least the second quarter of 2026. These delays pose a significant barrier to fulfilling OCO's statutory mandate and responding to the volume and complexity of complaints in a timely manner.

#### **B. HIPAA and Access to Incarcerated Person's Records**

The Office of the Correction Ombuds (OCO) continues to dispute the Department of Correction's (DOC) position that HIPAA requires a signed release for each individual case before the Ombuds Office can access health records or any other information contained within an incarcerated person's file. DOC has taken the position that OCO must obtain express written consent from each incarcerated individual before accessing not only medical or mental health records, but also disciplinary histories, housing assignments, incident reports, and other core data that are essential to oversight.

OCO firmly maintains that this interpretation is inconsistent with national correctional oversight practices and the statutory framework set forth in Conn. Gen. Stat. § 18-81qq, which grants the Ombuds broad authority to access any and all records necessary to investigate complaints and evaluate conditions of confinement.

In other jurisdictions—such as New Jersey, Texas, and Michigan—correctional ombuds offices have real-time access to the same electronic databases used by correctional staff. These systems allow oversight personnel to monitor disciplinary actions, housing placements, grievances, and medical alerts without delay or the need for individual authorizations. This seamless access is widely recognized as essential to timely and effective oversight and reflects national best practices in correctional accountability.



To support its position, OCO provided DOC with a formal legal opinion issued by the New Jersey Attorney General's Office, which affirms that ombuds offices are legally permitted to access confidential incarcerated person information under HIPAA's oversight exemption. As of the date of this report, DOC has yet to respond to or engage with this legal guidance. This impasse continues to impede the Office's ability to independently and effectively investigate complaints and monitor institutional practices.

### **C. Complaint Backlog**

Due to limited capacity, 189 complaints received by mail have not yet been reviewed. Since September 30, 2024, the Office has formally taken 196 complaints. Formal intake entails logging the complaint, associated facility, and individual into a tracking spreadsheet, and providing some form of response. However, the backlog continues to grow. Without staffing and administrative support, the Office cannot meet the expectations outlined in its enabling legislation. This backlog not only hampers responsiveness but also undermines trust in the accessibility and effectiveness of the Ombudsman process for incarcerated individuals and their families.

### **D. Absence of a Case Management System**

The Office currently lacks a centralized tracking or case management system due to limitations in the initial budget, which allocated only \$6,000 for annual operating costs. As a result, complaints are managed manually through spreadsheets and email, significantly hindering the ability to track outcomes, monitor trends, assign staff, or coordinate follow-up. This absence not only impairs responsiveness and transparency but also contrasts sharply with modern oversight practices in other states. Implementing a case management system is a foundational step toward building institutional capacity and ensuring accountability.

### **III. Legislative Update: Key Bills Impacting the Office of the Correction Ombuds & Correctional Oversight**

#### **A. Ombuds Advocacy in the 2025 General Assembly**

During the 2025 legislative session, the Correction Ombuds testified on over a dozen pieces of legislation impacting the rights and conditions of confinement for incarcerated individuals. These bills addressed a broad array of issues, including solitary confinement, medical and mental health access, disciplinary procedures, facility transparency, and family communication.

A notable advocacy success was the removal of a proposal to eliminate free electronic messaging for incarcerated persons from the Legislature's budget proposal. This reversal followed sustained testimony by the Ombuds Office and advocacy from stakeholders. Although the amended budget still requires approval by both chambers and the Governor's signature, this action reflects a legislative commitment to preserving access to family and legal communication for those in custody.

#### **B. House Bill 6864 – State Budget for the Biennium Ending June 30, 2027**

House Bill 6864 appropriates \$790,799 for Fiscal Year 2025–26 and \$763,692 for Fiscal Year 2026–27 to support the operations of the Office of the Correction Ombuds (OCO). These funds are dedicated to core staffing and foundational infrastructure, marking the first comprehensive budgetary investment in the office since its statutory reestablishment.

The appropriation supports the hiring of at least five key positions, including an Advance Nurse Practitioner, two Office Assistants, an Investigator, and an Associate Ombuds. This level of funding reflects the General Assembly's recognition of the importance of building out the office's investigative and monitoring capacity. As of May 6, 2025, the bill has been reported out of the Legislative Commissioners' Office and is tabled for the House calendar.

#### **C. Senate Bill 1541 – Oversight Authority and Structural Reforms**

Senate Bill 1541 proposes several critical enhancements to strengthen the authority and independence of the Correction Ombuds:

- **Subpoena Power and Informal Hearings:** Grants OCO the ability to issue subpoenas and conduct informal hearings during the course of investigations. This aligns Connecticut's ombuds framework with national standards and supports robust, independent fact-finding.
- **Independent Budget Submission:** Requires OCO's budget to be submitted separately through the Office of Policy and Management (OPM) to the General Assembly, thereby preserving the office's autonomy and insulating its funding from executive agency influence.
- **Use of Force Oversight:** Expands the statutory definition of "use of force" to include mechanical restraints, chemical agents, canines, chokeholds, less-lethal munitions, and

forcible extractions. This ensures consistent incident reporting and facilitates OCO oversight in accordance with best practices.

- **Body Camera Feasibility Study:** Directs the Department of Correction to develop a plan and cost analysis for implementing body-worn cameras among correctional staff, to be reported back to the Legislature.
- **Legal Access for Incarcerated Individuals:** Streamlines the process for incarcerated persons to file claims under Conn. Gen. Stat. §§ 4-160 and 4-165, strengthening access to remedies for civil rights violations.

SB 1541 has received favorable reports from both the Judiciary and Appropriations Committees. As of this writing, the bill is tabled for the Senate calendar (Calendar No. 419, File No. 800).

#### **D. Senate Bill 1543 – Correctional Policy Reform and Pilot Programs**

Senate Bill 1543 advances a range of policy reforms aimed at improving conditions of confinement, healthcare access, and staff safety:

- **Body Scanner Pilot Program:** Authorizes \$500,000 in bonding to procure, install, and train staff on two full-body scanners, intended to reduce reliance on invasive searches and enhance contraband detection.
- **Mental Health and Medical Access:** Requires evidence-based mental health screenings at intake and mandates immediate access to care when warranted. Also expands policies enabling incarcerated individuals to authorize third-party access to their health records.
- **Ban on Nutraloaf:** Prohibits the use of nutritionally punitive food such as "nutraloaf" as a form of discipline, bringing Connecticut into compliance with evolving constitutional standards.
- **Staff Assault Documentation:** Enhances DOC's internal tracking and reporting requirements for assaults on correctional staff while preserving mechanisms for accountability and oversight.

As of May 13, 2025, SB 1543 has been favorably reported and tabled for the Senate calendar (Calendar No. 420, File No. 801).

#### **E. Senate Bill 1394 – Oversight of Healthcare Services**

Senate Bill 1394 focuses on expanding oversight and transparency in correctional healthcare delivery:

- **Annual Healthcare Evaluations:** Mandates yearly reviews of medical services provided in DOC facilities, including metrics on timeliness, health outcomes, and staffing sufficiency.
- **Policy Audits and Expert Review:** Requires periodic audits of DOC's medical protocols and directs engagement with independent medical professionals to ensure adherence to public health standards.
- **Transparency and Public Reporting:** Obligates DOC to publish summary data on healthcare performance and establish ongoing quality improvement efforts. The bill also

supports OCO's authority to review, evaluate, and report on healthcare delivery across the system.

SB 1394 was reported out of the Legislative Commissioners' Office on March 13, 2025, and is currently on the Senate calendar.

