

**Name:** Barbara Fair

**Title:** Director

**Organization or Agency:** Stop Solitary Ct

**Topic:** Meeting Date Not Listed

NA

### **Testimony:**

I am speaking to the how I see the operation of the ombuds office thus far. In speaking with DOC staff and several incarcerated family members and friends the ombuds comments have been favorable. He has visited facilities, met with staff and a few incarcerated persons. He has actually assisted some people with concerns they have. He was seen during the legislative session and actually came up with a piece of legislation SB1541. I must acknowledge he has come around to adopting the language of many advocates from defining incarcerated people as such as opposed to inmate. I have met with DOC administrators who have told me he has come into facilities during evening and weekends, which is outside the usual 9-5. He has managed to increase the ombuds budget to over \$800,000 and increasing the length of the ombuds position from 2-4 years beginning 2027. I and he have faced challenges in building a good working relationship and I'm hoping that will not become a barrier to us working as a strong team in support of incarcerated people. For me that's my focus. It was my focus when I suggested to our organization a few years ago that we reinstitute the ombuds office, with a major difference. The ombuds office would operate as an independent entity no longer under the umbrellas of the Dept Of Corrections. We established under the PROTECT Act an advisory board that would play a major role in how the office operated. I knew without an independent supervisory component dedicated to the wellbeing of incarcerated people success was not possible. A lot of time and effort led to the reestablishing of the ombuds office. Long, long story short due to government intervention the process was circumvented and the people were not able to get the ombuds they wanted and so here we are today. I read Atty Ward's plan for the office and compared it to what he has actually accomplished and it has left me with grave concerns about this office being any better than when it was under DOC. Atty Ward stated he planned to within 0-30 days to secure office, purchase computer, set up IT and create policies for data privacy for review, develop job descriptions for associate ombud, investigators and admin staff by day 30. 31-60 days develop admin procedure Act for handling complaints, implement data tracking system and manage complaints and investigations ,prioritizing severity, urgency and impact.. Also identify key stakeholders, including incarcerated people across the state, correctional staff, advocacy groups, and legislators . Develop engagement plan for incarcerated people and staff via meetings, forums, tablets, and outreach sessions at each facility to explain the office of ombuds role and procedures. public awareness campaign launched by day 75. By day 120 training sessions completed by staff along with performance metrics established and communicated to staff. Conduct comprehensive review of current statutes, policies and procedure and providing areas for immediate policy or procedure change based on initial assessments. Complete semi annual report by day 120. Longer term, >120 days hire medical consultant to ensure DOC standards of health care is compliant with state and federal law. Survey incarcerated people about time out of cell, lockdowns, programming, work assignments and access to loved ones. Major concerns in doing a comparative read from the 120 day plan for OCO and where we are now 9 months later should be of concern to anyone who is taking this office seriously. Consistent complaint that having no staff is the barrier to completion of promises made is hollow since the ombuds office has had from Sept, 2024 to now \$200,000 solely for hiring staff. The barrier to hiring staff is blamed on the governors administration and so that is of major concern. The fact that in March incarcerated people received a message from OCO that he would not be accepting complaints until Fall is concerning. Of greater concern is the lack of active supervision and accountability for all the months since the office opened. What are the in office hours? How can concerned citizens reach the ombuds since the phone number given is never answered? Email is not the best avenue for reaching the OCO in an immediate emergency and how long will it take to read and respond to 385 complaints? It's been 9 months already. The quarterly reports leave me with more questions than answers about what the office is actively accomplishing. I am left wondering if this time around will be any more effective than the first

time when the ombuds was described by incarcerated people as "useless" to them. I want so much for this office to be a real support to some of the most unheard and unseen across this state and let us not forget the incarcerated include children as young as 14. In addition many are individuals suffering from mental illness and addiction and need professional help not a cage and state sanctioned abuse. I'm left challenged with the thoughts of whether this office can provide the needs very much needed. Because I have given so many hope for relief, the success of this office is very personal to me.