

Annual Report

Promoting the Highest
Standards of Justice

mn.gov/obfc

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Message from the Ombuds for Corrections

As we begin a new year, the office continues its important statutory role of promoting “the highest attainable standards of competence, efficiency, and justice in the administration of corrections.”

In 2024, the Office of the Ombuds for Corrections (OBFC) continued our work toward effective resolution of complaints and addressing systemic challenges. We made changes to our office and work structure, including new roles and adding “open” office hours for OBFC staff at most state prisons. Office hours are an addition to the regular facility visits by OBFC staff and provide greater access for incarcerated people to share their concerns.

These changes helped us continue to meet the demands of being a small office with a big job.

We received and responded to 867 complaints from incarcerated individuals, corrections staff, concerned families and community members. Most complaints were able to be resolved quickly through early resolutions, but we also conducted more than 115 in-depth investigations. Both are significant increases over 2023.

Incarcerated individuals, families, and corrections staff continue to face challenges such as deaths, substance use, unmet mental health needs, resource shortages, and aging infrastructure. The OBFC helps address these issues through independent investigations and recommendations to improve policies, enhance safety, and promote equity, accountability, and transparency.

I am pleased to submit the 2024 Annual Report in compliance with [Minnesota Statutes 241.95, subdivision 2](#). The report highlights key aspects of our work, including complaints, investigations, and their outcomes.

We look forward to continued progress in 2025.



Margaret Zadra
Ombudsperson for Corrections

Overview



Mission & Jurisdiction

The mission of the Office of the Ombuds for Corrections is to promote the highest attainable standards of competence, efficiency, and justice in the administration of corrections.

The office is separate and independent from the Department of Corrections (DOC) and has jurisdiction for any facility in Minnesota operated or licensed by the DOC. Details can be found in Minnesota Statutes, [chapter 241](#), sections 90-95.



What We Do

- Review complaints from incarcerated people, concerned family, corrections staff, and community members about Minnesota correctional facilities.
- Initiate, investigate, and resolve individual complaints and systemic issues.
- Make recommendations to agency leadership, the Legislature, and Governor.
- Publish reports.
- Provide information to people who are incarcerated, their family, and community.



Budget

The OBFC has eight full-time staff who receive, investigate, and resolve complaints. OBFC has jurisdiction over 11 prisons and 150 local adult and juvenile facilities statewide, with a typical daily population of over 17,000 persons and over 210,000 intakes and releases a year. The office has a budget of \$753,000 in FY23 and \$ 1.1 million in FY24 from the General Fund.

Given the important work and benefits of the office, the cost is minimal for a significant resource. For comparison, the OBFC budget equals about one-tenth of one percent of the DOC budget.

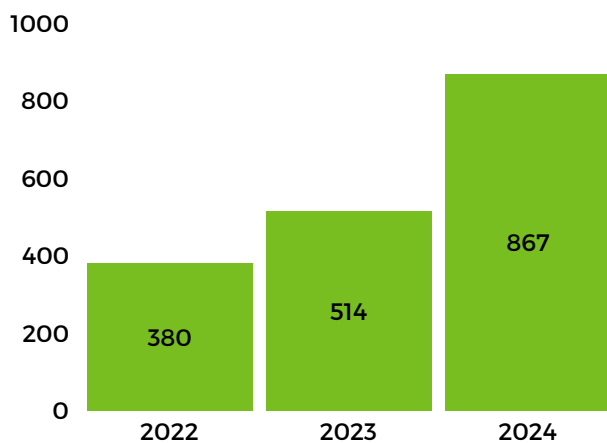
The need for the OBFC's services and the number of in-depth investigations has grown substantially since the office was recreated in 2020. Complaint volume is expected to continue growing, creating a need for additional staff to meet the need and demand for services.

Complaints and Outcomes

The OBFC focuses on receiving, investigating, and resolving complaints from incarcerated people, their families, staff, and the community. Most complaints are quickly resolved or the OBFC provides resources or referrals to the right place; however, an increasing number of complaints are referred for deeper investigation or are used to inform policy investigations.

Complaints in 2024

The OBFC received nearly 70% more complaints in 2024 than in 2023.



Common Complaint Subjects

1. Medical Care
2. Treatment for Mental Health and Substance Use
3. Discipline
4. Accessibility
5. Visiting

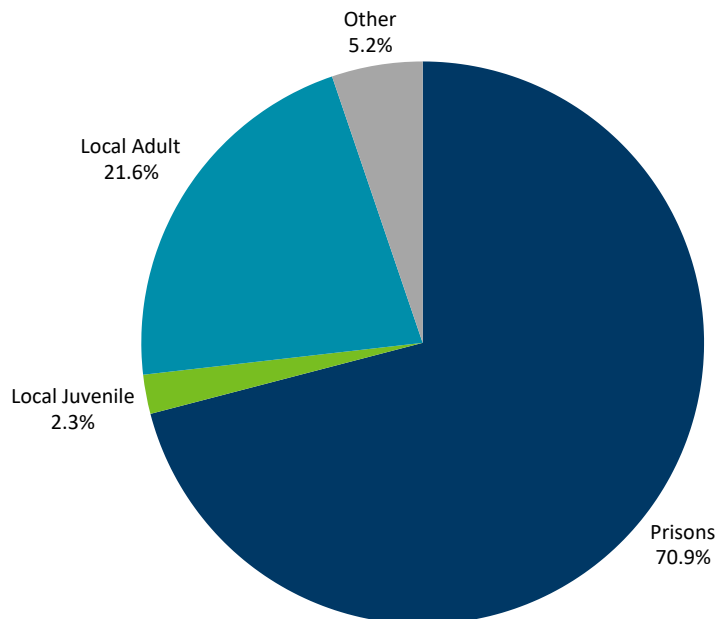
While some areas continue to trend, we consistently see a decrease in areas where we are able to provide intensive, systemic support.

See the appendix for a full list of complaint subjects.

Cases by Facility Type

Seventy percent of complaints in 2024 were from or regarding Minnesota Correctional Facilities (prisons). Another 24% of complaints were regarding local facilities (jails, juvenile detention, half-way houses, etc.).

The remaining complaints were regarding federal facilities, public defenders, probation or parole officers, and other entities not under OBFC jurisdiction. Information and resources about where to file those complaints is provided to complainants whenever possible.



Complaints Regarding Prisons

598

Complaints received by the OBFC from incarcerated persons and others regarding prisons

11

State correctional facilities, including 10 adult facilities and 1 juvenile facility

8,377

Adult and juvenile incarcerated individuals in state prisons

Prison Complaint Process

Incarcerated people in DOC facilities have two options to file complaints and share concerns with the OBFC:

- **Use the OBFC's official form to file complaints by mail.** Correspondence to and from the OBFC is protected, and staff of corrections agencies are not permitted to read it.
- **Meet with an OBFC investigator at the facility.** The OBFC holds regular office hours in most state prisons, providing opportunities for incarcerated individuals to share their concerns in person and for more interaction between facility staff and Ombuds staff. Office hours were piloted in one facility this year and expanded due to their success. Even in facilities where regular office hours are not needed, someone can still request to meet with an ombuds staff.



The office prioritizes cases that address safety and wellness or have a significant effect on well-being for many people.

How Cases Are Resolved

Cases may be resolved by:

- Referring the person with the concern to the appropriate agency or process.
- Providing information or referrals to resources.
- Alerting staff to concerns.
- Affirming agency actions.
- Providing resolution through mediated processes.
- In-depth investigation and recommendations.

Example Outcomes



Medication Pain Management

In multiple cases in 2024, incarcerated individuals contacted the OBFC with concerns because their pain medication for significant injuries had been discontinued after being deemed not clinically indicated. The individuals were provided other prescriptions for pain relief, which were not tolerated or did not manage their pain.

The OBFC requested reviews by prison medical leadership teams, after which the pain medications were reordered. Sometimes the review and requests also provided the incarcerated person with other needed support equipment such as additional pillows, a bed wedge, or ice.



Disability Accommodations

An incarcerated person contacted the OBFC with a request for accommodations. The incarcerated person, who uses a wheelchair, had a challenging time successfully communicating with the medical team at the correctional facility. OBFC staff worked with medical leadership to review the need for adaptive equipment, including equipment for showers.

When the incarcerated person continued to struggle with showers, OBFC staff requested a care conference with the health and security team, who were able to develop a plan for staff to periodically assist the incarcerated person with a shower.



Access to Treatment

Several individuals contacted the OBFC after they were removed from treatment or programming to ask for help being reinstated. The OBFC reviewed their cases and made recommendations for additional review and access to programs. The individuals were able to have their treatment options re-evaluated.

The discussion about the individuals' complaints helped advance opportunities for them to have additional individualized interventions. Individualized responses provide opportunities for incarcerated people to better meet their goals, which ensures healthier outcomes for themselves and their communities.

Complaints Regarding Jails and Local Facilities

201

Complaints received about
local correctional facilities

150

Jails and local correctional
facilities

5,900

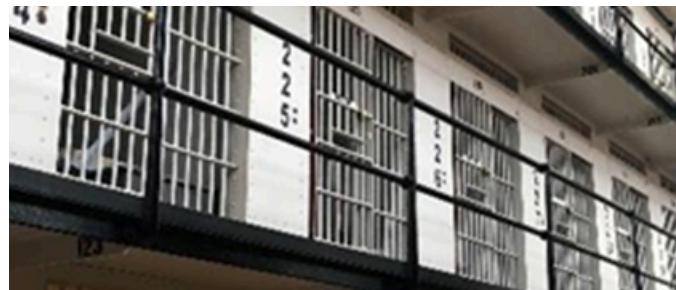
Incarcerated individuals

Jurisdiction for Local Facilities

[Minnesota Statutes, 241.91](#) gives the OBFC jurisdiction to investigate local adult and juvenile correctional facilities. However, the statute also requires the office not duplicate adult complaint investigations with Minnesota Department of Corrections Inspection and Enforcement (I&E), which also has jurisdiction.

The OBFC and the DOC entered into an interagency agreement to avoid duplication of services. The agreement provides that I&E has primary jurisdiction for local facility compliance complaints. This is important as it ensures local facility compliance with rules that govern those facilities.

The OBFC may investigate systemic and discretionary policy issues or complaints that I&E does not investigate and may make recommendations for change.



The OBFC is often utilized by people who have not been successful resolving their issues elsewhere. They are seeking help with processes they may find confusing and intimidating.

A key part of the office's daily work is sharing information, explaining processes, connecting people to resources, and talking with those who are worried about their loved ones.

How to File a Complaint with the OBFC

Visit mn.gov/obfc/complaints for information about filing a complaint about a local facility or if you are a staff member, family member or community member with a complaint about any state prison or local correctional facility.

Example Outcomes



Mistreatment

The OBFC received a call from a county jail facility staff who was deeply concerned about the treatment of an incarcerated person and what they felt were inadequate actions to address it. The staff had already reported concerns internally and to the sheriff. There was no known record of the incident being reported to DOC's Inspection and Enforcement (I&E) unit, but it was later found that an initial report from the jail to I&E was made. However, the initial report did not include some of the profoundly troubling details that were shared with the OBFC, and I&E did not review the report further at that time.

Our office took the anonymous report from staff and developed an urgent report to I&E to review the matter further. The I&E investigation led to the resident's transfer to another facility and the jail being placed on a conditional license. The OBFC worked with I&E, the jail, and other law enforcement to ensure better review, investigation, and resolution. Our office visited the jail as part of an ongoing review of the situation.



Mental Health

Jail personnel requested the OBFC's assistance with an individual who had been incarcerated in the county jail for nearly three years with severe mental illness. The person was under civil commitment as mentally ill and dangerous and had been placed on a waiting list for a secure treatment facility.

Jail staff said their facility, while doing their best to meet their needs, was not able to provide the intensive help this person required, and staff and the resident were frustrated by the incredibly long wait time for placement as well as challenges to getting information about the placement. The OBFC collaborated with the social worker at the jail and the mental health case worker. Soon after, they were able to be admitted to the secure treatment facility.

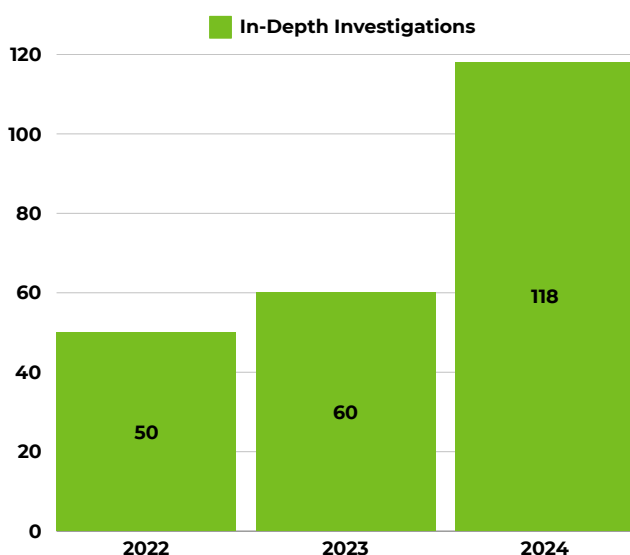
This facility is among a growing number of jail administrators and staff who have contacted the OBFC with concerns about increasing wait times for jail residents who are often languishing while awaiting more appropriate placement.

Investigations and Reports

In about three-fourths of the cases from 2024, the OBFC was able to conclude preliminary investigations through early resolution. Despite the frequency of early resolutions, in-depth investigations increased significantly in 2024.

Investigations in 2024

In-depth investigations increased 96% from 2023 to 2024.



Investigations are expanding in scope and impact.

Not only is the volume of cases increasing, but the agency's work has become substantially more complex.

The OBFC faces more investigations related to:

- The rights of incarcerated persons
- Systemic issues
- Staff well-being
- Unexpected deaths and near-deaths

Cases are resolved with informal recommendations when possible. Informal recommendations can often be implemented more quickly and collaboratively than formal, published recommendations. The office balances the transparency of our work with the vulnerability of the populations we serve, while protecting private, confidential, and security data.

Systemic Investigations

In-depth investigations into systemic issues are significantly more labor-intensive, and the timeline is often outside the scope of providing immediate resolution for individuals. However, systemic changes provide perhaps the greatest opportunity to meet the organization's mission by strengthening procedures and practices that reduce the risk of objectionable actions of the administrative agency.

Following are examples of systemic investigations conducted by the OBFC.



Rights of Incarcerated Persons

Access to Spiritual and Religious Care

The OBFC has heard concerns from incarcerated indigenous Minnesotans regarding access to and handling of cultural or spiritual initiatives and events in prisons and jails. Federal law provides special protections for prisoners' religious exercise, including spiritual and cultural traditions of indigenous people.

While individual concerns are addressed as they arise, the pattern of complaints led the OBFC to issue an informal recommendation that the Department of Corrections require attendance at Tribal State Relations Training for staff who are doing significant work with cultural and spiritual events or making decisions affecting incarcerated indigenous people. The OBFC also recommended follow up training specific to justice-involved indigenous Minnesotans.

Collateral consequences

The OBFC has received many concerns from incarcerated individuals about unexpected consequences of accepting disciplinary charges. These consequences often impacted their ability to connect with loved ones through visits and phone calls, and their ability to complete programming.

Some incarcerated people were surprised to face non-contact visiting bans and phone restrictions lasting a year or more, even when their disciplinary actions did not involve phone or visit misuse. Many said they would not have waived a hearing and signed for discipline if they had known about these extra restrictions.

The OBFC found that the collateral consequences of discipline are often overly burdensome, and that current punitive and restrictive consequences may not provide additional intended safety measures. The OBFC made informal recommendations to the DOC to review policies to update so that there are not unintended or overly burdensome consequences or restrictions related to in-person visiting, video visiting, and phone access, and programming, and the office is continuing work with the DOC on these issues.



Medical Care

Medical concerns are one of the top reasons people ask for help from the OBFC.

In 2024, the OBFC identified an issue where medical holds, which are intended to be used only temporarily for medical care, were preventing otherwise eligible incarcerated individuals from transferring to minimum-security facilities. This was preventing access to work release programs which prepare for life post-incarceration.

One example involved an incarcerated person who was denied minimum security placement due to a medical hold even though they were otherwise eligible for minimum, which in turn caused them to be denied work release. Eventually, due to work from the office they were transferred to the Challenge Incarceration Program (CIP) which was able to accommodate medical needs. They were later able to be able to transfer to a minimum-security facility and be approved for work release.

In another instance, the OBFC helped an individual who had faced a three-year medical hold due to diabetes, obesity, and high blood pressure. Documentation showed they had improved their health, lost weight, and had stable blood sugars. After the OBFC requested a medical review of his case, the medical hold was lifted, and they were able to be put on the list for minimum security.

Following these and other cases, the OBFC worked with the DOC which led to better processes including:

- Monthly reviews for all medical holds.
- Medical evaluations to confirm if holds were medically necessary.
- Clarifying guidelines for medical holds.
- Ensuring medical holds align with the Americans with Disabilities Act.

A medical staff member later shared appreciation for this collaborative work with the OBFC because clarifying medical holds gave their facility clear guidelines, and medical holds are now used to prevent a transfer only when an incarcerated person has a medical need that requires follow up medical appointments outside the facility.



Corrections Staff Well-Being

Corrections staff are exposed to high stress, assaults, violence, secondary trauma, and difficult conditions. The OBFC reviews concerns about staff assaults, safety and wellbeing, compassion fatigue, and trauma.

In 2024, for example, the OBFC worked closely with prison leadership after a correctional officer was targeted and severely injured in an assault and a second officer was injured trying to assist. The incident was compounded by other recent staff assaults and near assaults that reminded staff of the 2018 death of correctional officer Joseph Gomm, who was killed by an incarcerated person.

The OBFC prioritized ensuring there are resources available for staff and incarcerated individuals and ensured that facility responses to the incidents were consistent with policy, procedure, and the facility operating guides.



Unexpected Deaths and Near Deaths in Facilities

Despite best efforts, unexpected and preventable deaths and near fatal incidents continue in Minnesota correctional facilities, and they are often linked to high needs of the population served by corrections or systemic issues in facilities. The OBFC is monitoring fatalities and near fatalities and continues to do significant work on the issues that contribute to these incidents in local and state facilities.

Reports

The OBFC initiated numerous systemic investigations and reports informed by complaints or about process issues. Many investigations and reviews of DOC and local facility policies result in informal recommendations, which often result in faster implementation than longer process public reports. However, in some situations, public reports may be more effective.

Following are examples of reports published in 2024 and some recommendation implementation updates from prior years.

Crumbling Conditions Create Crisis in Minnesota Prisons

February 2024

This brief report highlights the critical need for the state to invest resources into maintaining and updating correctional facilities and to replace obsolete prisons to protect the safety and health of staff and incarcerated people.



In the 2024 Legislative session, Ombudsperson Margaret Zadra presented about the conditions of Minnesota prison infrastructure at both the Minnesota House of Representatives and Minnesota Senate Capital Investment (bonding) Committees and later testified about these infrastructure concerns at both the House and Senate Public Safety Committees. [Learn more and watch the House Capitol Investment presentation.](#)

Family and Friends of Incarcerated Pilot

May 2024

The OBFC initiated a project in collaboration with the DOC to create a Family and Friends of Incarcerated pilot group designed to strengthen loved ones' positive support of incarcerated individuals. The meetings were a helpful resource for families and friends to share concerns and gain a better understanding of prison processes.



The Friends and Family of Incarcerated Pilot report recommended:

- Continuing the meetings for facilities and expanding them to all facilities.
- Formalizing an annual DOC agency-wide community meeting open to all.
- Reviewing and providing regularly updated information for families.

The DOC agreed to continue and expand the group, along with the other recommendations.

DOC Grievance Policies

Fall 2024 Update

In Fall 2024, the DOC made summary grievance data available to the public, including numbers and types of grievances filed, rates of acceptance and return, and outcomes and appeals. A grievance is the way that incarcerated people communicate their needs and seek resolution of issues with DOC staff.



The grievance data was made public as a response to an OBFC report in October 2021 that concluded that the DOC grievance process for incarcerated people to communicate their needs and requests was unnecessarily difficult to navigate, lacked many important components, and could be significantly improved through a thorough and inclusive review and revision process. OBFC's recommendations included publishing summary grievance data to promote transparency.

[See the DOC's summary grievance data.](#)

Sexual Assault Investigation

December 2024 Update

In December 2022, the OBFC reported on an investigation related to several allegations of sexual assault or sexual harassment by staff in state prisons and made several recommendations to improve processes. One critical recommendation was prioritizing officer-worn body cameras to ensure safety for incarcerated people and staff.



The Department of Corrections accepted all of the recommendations in the report and began working towards implementing them, including a request for legislative funding for officer-worn cameras. In December 2024, the Department of Corrections implemented the pilot project to provide about 800 body-worn cameras for corrections officers at the Shakopee, Stillwater, and Lino Lakes prisons. [Learn more about the pilot project in this KARE11 story.](#)

Legislative Recommendations and Request

2024

The Minnesota Legislature enacted a recommendation by the OFBC for changes to the State Correctional Facilities Security Audit Group, which was formed in 2021 to help ensure safer living and working conditions inside prisons.

Changes to [Minnesota Statutes, 241.021, subd. 1h](#) are designed to enhance the group's effectiveness and include:

- Expanded membership to include representatives with additional expertise and designation of a chair.
- Flexibility to meet at least twice per year and review multiple security audits at each meeting.
- Clarification that meetings are exempt from open meetings laws because the group reviews data classified as security information.

The updated State Correctional Facilities Security Audit Group helps highlight creative remedies that facilities use to address security needs and identifies needs for training, staffing and external resources.

2025

In 2025, due to the broad, varied and growing needs of incarcerated Minnesotans and the communities we serve, the OBFC will request funding for additional staff.

Increasing staff will better address the well-being and safety concerns of staff and incarcerated people, allow for more effective and more equitable service, more comprehensive support for incarcerated persons and their families, and greater benefit to Minnesotans.



Task Forces and Groups



State Correctional Facilities Security Audit Group

Chair

The State Correctional Facilities Security Audit Group helps ensure safe and secure conditions in Minnesota's state prisons. It creates security standards for state correctional facilities, reviews inspection reports, and provides recommendations to the Commissioner of Corrections. The Ombudsperson for Corrections is a member of and chair of the group.

Learn more about the State Correctional Facilities Rulemaking Advisory Committee on the [Minnesota Legislative Reference Library webpage](#).



Chapter 2911 - Jail Facilities Rulemaking Advisory Committee

Member

In 2021, the Hardel Sherrell Act was enacted in response to the 2018 death of Hardel Sherrell in Beltrami County Jail and other deaths and concerns in jails. The legislation required rulemaking with specific areas of focus, including:

- Mental health and substance use disorder treatment.
- Suicide prevention.
- Medication management.
- Discharge planning.
- Well-being checks.
- Procedures for segregation and overdose emergencies.

As a committee member, the Ombudsperson provides advice and input on rules that affect the safety and well-being of people held in jail in Minnesota.

Learn more about the Chapter 2911 Committee on the [Department of Corrections webpage](#).



United States
Ombudsman Association

United States Ombudsman Association

Public Safety Chapter Co-Chair

The United States Ombudsman Association supports ombudsman and ombudsman organizations in improving the operation of ombudsman offices throughout the United States. In 2024, the Ombudsperson was named co-chair of the Public Safety Chapter and working towards developing collaboration on issues for justice-impacted youth in corrections.

Learn more about the United States Ombudsman Association [online](#).

Conclusion

Incarcerated Minnesotans, their families, and corrections staff face challenging conditions within Minnesota's local and state correctional facilities. Amid the challenges, this office sees opportunities to continue work toward a more effective, just, and equitable corrections system.

We look forward to advancing our mission through independent, impartial investigations; comprehensive reports; and recommendations that help resolve complaints and enhance policies.

Appendix: Complaint Subjects by Facility Type

Complaint subjects are listed below by facility type. Each complaint may include multiple complaint subjects so total of complaint subjects does not equal number of complaints per type of facility.

Complaint Subject	DOC Facilities	Local Adult Facilities	Local Juvenile Facilities	Other
Accommodations including those for aging and disability	58	32	4	2
Agency Communication	36	18	5	1
Assault: Assault by Incarcerated Person	18	1	-	1
Assault: Assault by Staff	15	26	1	1
CIP Denial	1	-	-	-
Communication Costs (Phone and Video Calls)	5	11	-	1
Conditions in Facility	31	23	4	1
Death Review	7	6	2	-
Dental Care	11	3	-	-
Discipline	85	28	3	2
Discrimination	26	9	1	1
Early Release Denial	9	-	-	-
Education	18	-	-	-
Food Service	13	9	1	-
Grievance Process	83	9	3	-
Harassment by Incarcerated Person	23	1	1	-
Harassment by Staff	67	38	6	5
Hearing and Release Unit (HRU)	3	1	-	2
IP Compensation	10	3	-	-
Knowledge Sharing with Other Professionals	1	6	12	6

Appendix: Continued

Complaint Subject	DOC Facilities	Local Adult Facilities	Local Juvenile Facilities	Other
Legal Mail and Legal Calls	15	6	1	-
Library Access or Policies	8	-	-	-
Mail	27	3	-	-
Medical Care	119	68	7	7
Mental Health Care	42	35	7	2
MnSTARR	3	-	-	-
Other	25	21	4	18
Placement (Facility, Unit, or Cell)	63	20	7	-
PREA Policy or Procedures	11	4	-	-
Privileges	16	4	4	-
Programming	17	1	2	-
Property	40	5	2	-
Religious Accommodation or Programming	27	3	1	-
Retaliation	24	10	-	-
Staff Safety	17	3	4	3
Sexual Abuse and Harassment	17	14	2	-
Substance Use Disorder Treatment	3	11	2	-
Systemic	21	14	6	2
Transgender Policies	13	3	-	-
Visiting	43	3	-	-
Water Quality	9	2	-	-

The Office of the Ombuds for
Corrections contributes to safer
and more just communities for
all Minnesotans.

Contact

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