

STATE OF MAINE OFFICE OF THE ATTORNEY GENERAL

Aaron M. Frey, Attorney General



PUBLIC ACCESS OMBUDSMAN ANNUAL REPORT FOR 2023

January 31, 2024

Brenda L. Kielty, AAG, Ombudsman

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
SUMMARY	1
ANSWERING INQUIRIES & RESOLVING DISPUTES	2
OUTREACH & TRAINING	8
STATE AGENCY ANNUAL FOAA REPORTING	9
RECOMMENDATIONS	11
APPENDIX.....	12
5 M.R.S. § 200-I

SUMMARY

Maine's Freedom of Access Act (FOAA) recognizes that government must be accountable to the people and provides a statutory right of access to public meetings and public records. While the principles of open government, transparent deliberations and access to public information are fundamental to FOAA, these interests must be balanced with the need for government to maintain the confidentiality of information to protect personal privacy, security and other legitimate interests.

In 2007 the Legislature created the public access ombudsman position within the Office of the Attorney General. The statute authorized the ombudsman to educate the public and government officials about the requirements of the State's freedom of access law, provide dispute resolution services, answer inquiries and make recommendations for improvements to the law. In 2012 the Legislature funded a full-time ombudsman position.

The ombudsman performs an unusual role in government. Although the ombudsman receives complaints from the public, the ombudsman's job is not to be either an advocate for the complainant or a defender of the government. An ombudsman is an impartial intermediary who provides information, who informally resolves disputes and encourages full compliance with the spirit and the letter of the law.

Program Trends

The ombudsman activity involving question and complaint resolution has grown over the course of the program. A total of 619 contacts were received in 2023 from FOAA requesters and agencies seeking assistance. The number of inquiries and complaints is an increase from the 2022 total of 610.

Like the activity in previous years, the bulk of the contacts were inquiries from private citizens regarding access to public records held by municipal government agencies.

State Agency Annual FOAA Reporting

The Ombudsman Report for 2023 includes data on the annual number of FOAA requests, average response time and the costs of processing FOAA requests for each of the executive branch State agencies. Although incomplete data was reported on some of the indicators, this snapshot of FOAA activity should help inform policy makers and the public on how each agency is generally responding to FOAA requests over the course of a year. This data also illuminates the volume of FOAA requests for these state agencies collectively.

I would like to thank the state agency public access officers for their time in compiling the data necessary for this report and their continued dedication to providing access to public records.

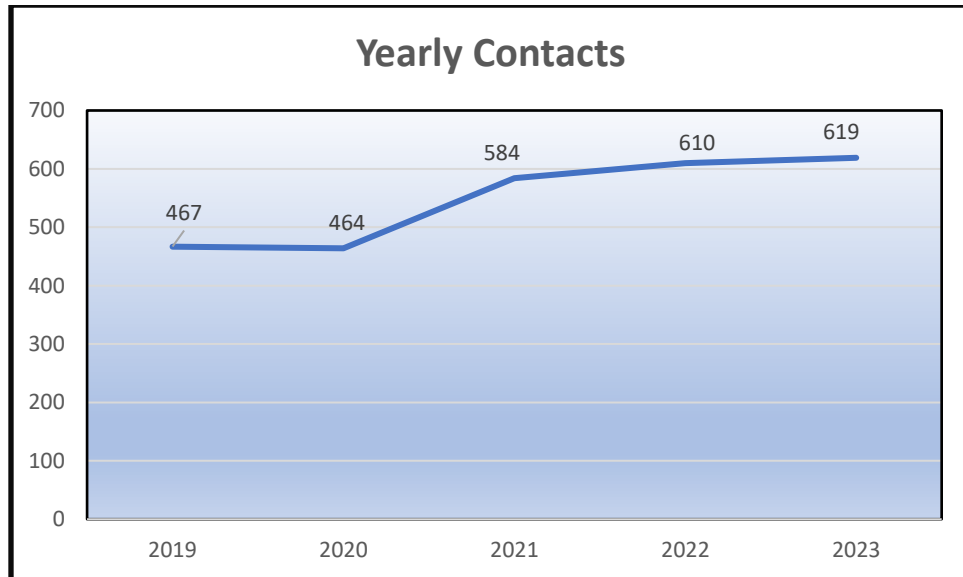
Brenda L. Kielty, Public Access Ombudsman

ANSWERING INQUIRIES & RESOLVING DISPUTES

“The ombudsman shall respond to informal inquiries made by the public and public agencies and officials concerning the State’s freedom of access laws; and respond to and work to resolve complaints made by the public and public agencies and officials concerning the State’s freedom of access laws.” 5 M.R.S. § 200-I(2)(A) and (B).

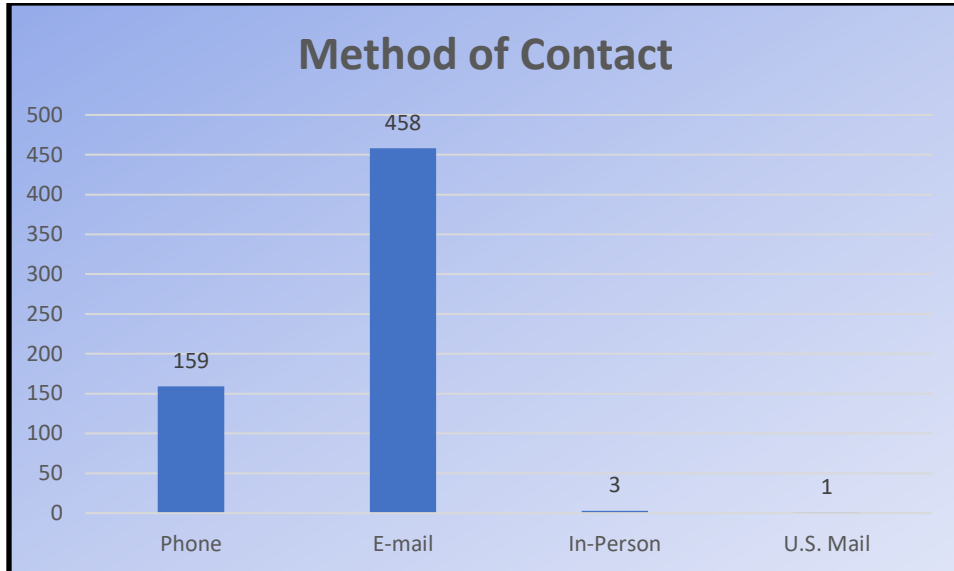
2023 Contacts with the Ombudsman

In 2023 I logged 619 inquiries and complaints. Requests for help ranged from questions about how to file a FOAA request to more complex inquiries regarding situations in which the FOAA issues were only part of a larger dispute or where some fact-finding was necessary before appropriate advice could be given.



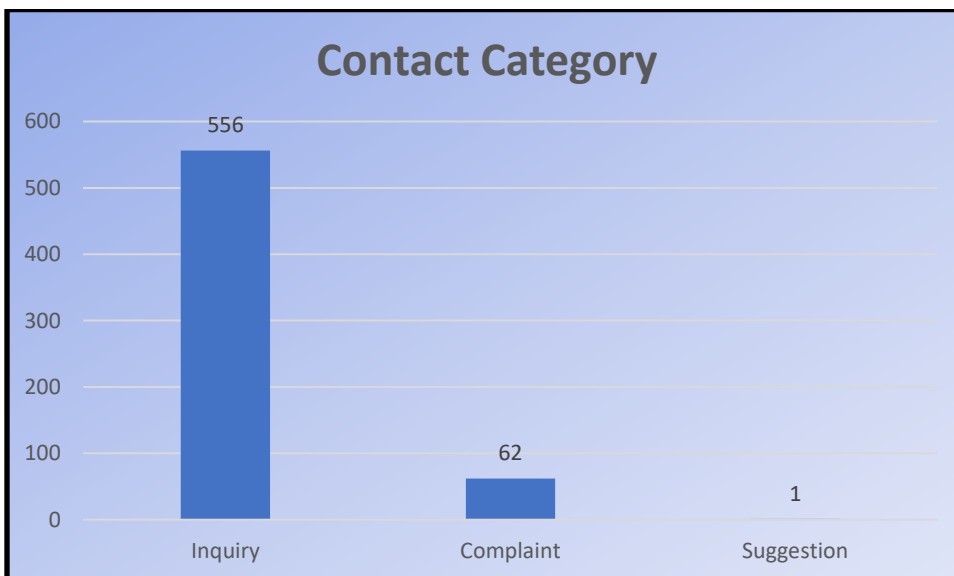
Method of Contact

The bulk of initial contacts was by email (458) followed by telephone (159) U.S. Mail (1) and in-person (3).



Contacts Included Inquiries, Complaints and Suggestions

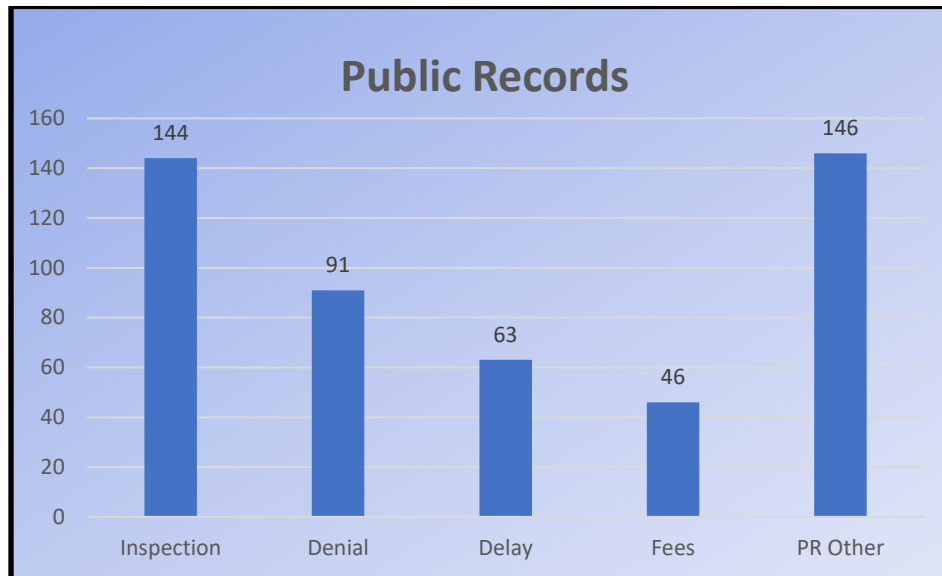
The 619 contacts included general inquiries (556), complaints (62) and suggestions (1). Contacts that were characterized as complaints involved a substantial controversy between the parties with specific relief or remedy sought by the complainant.



Contacts Concerning Public Records

Of the contacts about public records (488), the most common questions concerned:

- Basis for a denial
- Confidentiality exceptions
- Reasonable response times and delay
- Production or inspection of public records
- Fees and costs for public records



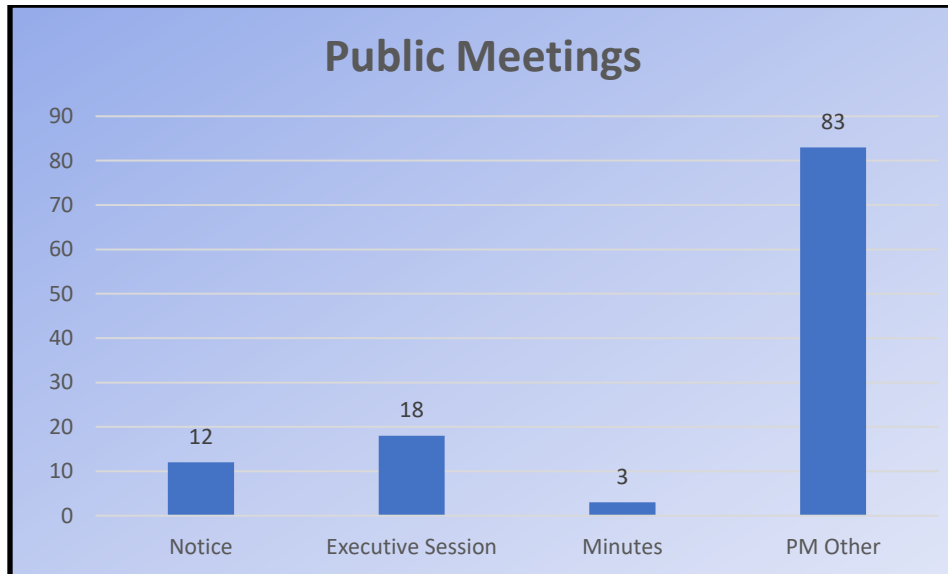
All other public records contacts concerned either a combination of issues or a narrow subset of the listed categories. The “Other” category includes the following kinds of questions:

- Retention and destruction of records
- Confidentiality of specific documents prior to a FOAA request being made
- Access to records normally part of discovery
- General information on making a FOAA request
- Mandatory FOAA training for officials
- Whether an entity is subject to FOAA
- Asking for a document rather than asking for the answer to a question
- Legislation and case law
- Asking an agency to compile data or create a document
- Burdensome FOAA requests
- Due diligence of an agency in searching for records

Contacts Concerning Public Meetings

Of the contacts concerning public meetings (115), most questions concerned:

- Use of executive session
- Remote participation notice and attendance
- What constitutes a meeting

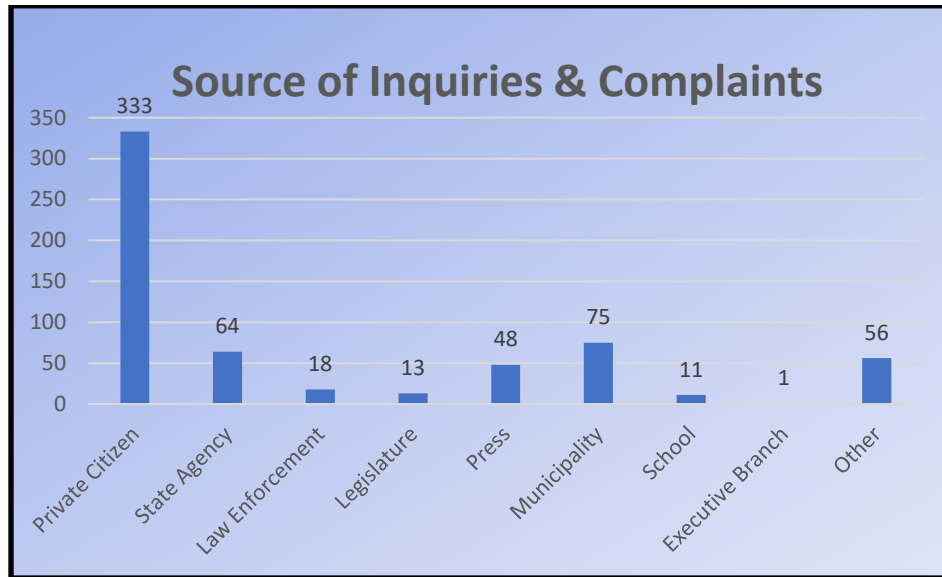


All other public meetings contacts concerned either a combination of issues or a narrow subset of the listed categories. The “Other” category includes the following kinds of questions:

- Whether an agenda is required
- Public comment period during public meetings
- What entities are subject to FOAA

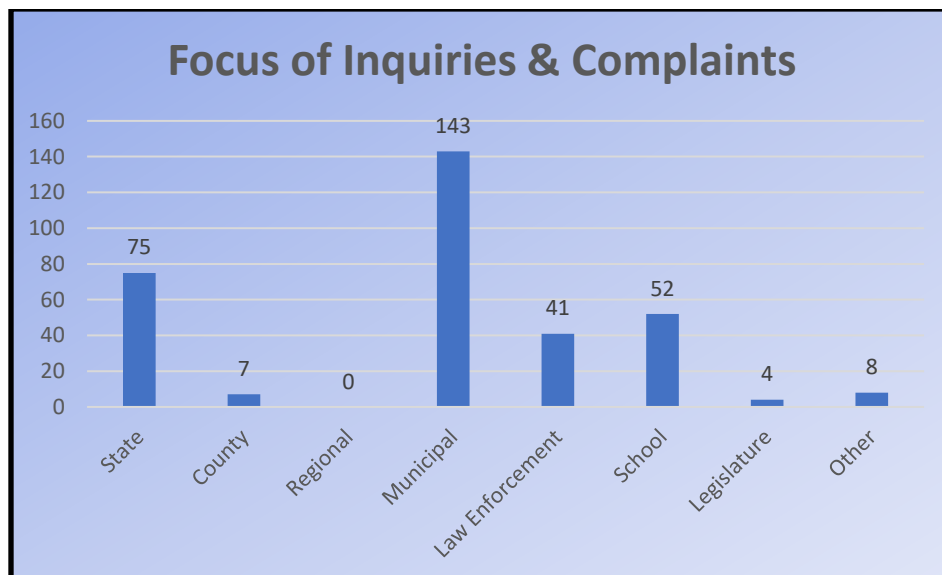
Source of Inquiries, Complaints and Suggestions

Of the 619 inquiries, complaints and suggestions, 333 came from private citizens, 64 from state agencies, 18 from law enforcement agencies, 13 from the Legislature, 48 from members of the media, 75 from municipal officials, 11 from school districts, 1 from the executive branch and 56 from others including attorneys and commercial requesters.



Focus of the Inquiries, Complaints and Suggestions

Most of the inquiries and complaints concerned municipalities (143) and state agencies (75). The remainder concerned school administrative units (52), law enforcement agencies (41), county agencies (7), regional agencies (0) and the Legislature (4). Others (8) concerned individual requesters, commercial requesters, and various quasi-municipal and public entities. The focus of the inquiries and complaints continues to be dominated by municipalities, as could be expected based on the number of municipal entities in the state.



Outcomes Reached as Result of Contact with Ombudsman

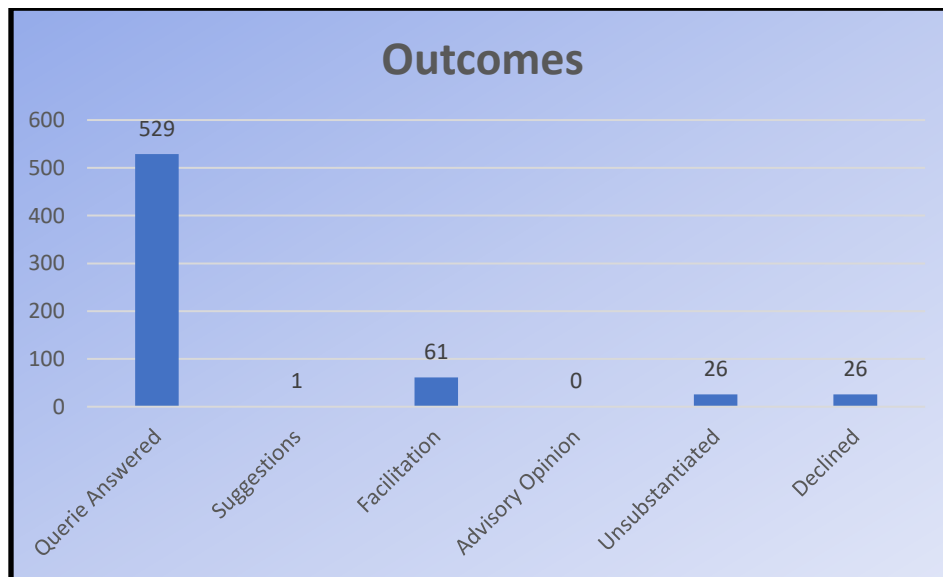
A contact may be logged as “resolved” for the following reasons:

- Complaint was deemed unsubstantiated
- Informal discussions or facilitation resulted in an agreement on how to proceed
- Agency offered an acceptable remedy
- Complaint was withdrawn
- Complainant failed to produce requested information
- Ombudsman determined there was other good cause not to proceed

A contact may be logged as “declined” if the subject of the dispute was outside the scope of authority of the ombudsman or related to a matter that was the subject of an administrative or judicial proceeding. In 2023 a total of 26 cases were declined.

Many of the inquiries were answered either immediately or within a matter of days. The 619 contacts included 529 answers to inquiries and 61 facilitated resolutions.

There were no advisory opinions issued in 2023.



OUTREACH & TRAINING

I provided remote and in-person FOIA trainings and presentations to a variety of governmental entities, such as Inland Fisheries & Wildlife, the Maine Water Utilities Association, Maine Library Association and the Maine Public Utilities Commission. As with last year, there was more demand for one-on-one training resources this year and those are logged as inquiries in the data.

I continue to serve as the Attorney General's designee to the [Maine Archives Advisory Board](#). The Board serves in an advisory role to the Maine State Archivist and reviews proposed records retention schedules and issues related to proper records management for both Maine state and local government. The right of access to public records provided in the Freedom of Access Act is dependent on the capture, preservation and management of public records. I am grateful to be able to participate in the work of ensuring that our records management systems serve the needs of not only government and persons seeking records today, but also future generations who will witness in the permanent archival collections the aspirations and challenges of our era.

STATE AGENCY ANNUAL FOAA REPORTING

Pursuant to [5 M.R.S. § 200-I\(2\)\(F\)](#) the Ombudsman report for 2023 includes data on the number of FOAA requests, average response time and the costs of processing FOAA requests for each of the executive branch State agencies.

Method

Each reporter was asked to submit data on key FOAA response indicators and include any other explanatory information relevant to their FOAA program. The absence of uniform FOAA tracking across agencies, variations in data collection and incomplete reporting limit the accuracy of the compiled data for some indicators.

Although the statute refers to “requests for information” which could include a set of data much broader than FOAA requests, reporting was limited to requests that were processed within an agency’s FOAA procedures. This does not include the large volume of requests for information that agencies handle in the normal course of business and that do not implicate the FOAA response procedures.

The “average” response time was reported based on the set of timeframes listed below.

The “costs” of processing requests could include multiple criteria to assess the use of agency resources. As a baseline the data included the amount billed as fees for FOAA requests.

Agencies that could calculate the actual hours spent responding to FOAA requests included that data.

Key FOAA Response Indicators

1. Number of FOAA requests received in 2023
2. Response time 0 – 5 days
3. Response time 6 – 30 days
4. Response time 31 – 60 days
5. Response time greater than 60 days
6. Response time greater than 6 months
7. Response time greater than 1 year
8. Amount of fees and costs for FOAA requests
9. Amount of agency hours spent responding to FOAA requests

STATE AGENCY 2023 FOAA REPORTING

AGENCY	FOAA REQUESTS RECEIVED	RESPONSE TIME 0-5 DAYS	RESPONSE TIME 6-30 DAYS	RESPONSE TIME 31-60 DAYS	RESPONSE TIME >60 DAYS > 6 Months > 1 Year	FEES CHARGED	AGENCY HOURS TO RESPOND	PENDING 2023 REQUESTS
Administrative & Financial Services								
Agriculture, Conservation & Forestry	153	97	41	9	5 1 0	\$3675	375	0
Corrections	80	29	36	8	1 2 1	\$184	n/a	0
Defense, Veterans & Emergency Management	3	2	1	0	0 0 0	n/a	4	0
Economic & Community Development	18	8	7	1	0 0 0	\$112	Average 0.93 per request	0
Education	184	51	78	25	18 1 0	n/a	231	0
Environmental Protection	208	108	61	19	6 13 0	\$ 900	533	15
Health & Human Services	459	149	133	75	73 11 2	\$ 4,213	783	0
Inland Fisheries & Wildlife	53	15	22	6	5 3 2	\$ 213	91	0
Labor	29	16	10	2	1 0 0	\$150	27	0
Marine Resources	28	4	10	5	1 2 1	\$ 525	80	0
Professional & Financial Regulation	89	40	44	5	0 0 0	n/a	169	0
Public Safety	1562	885	290	159	201 49 10	n/a	820	0
Transportation	70	14	30	7	12 1 0	\$ 425	n/a	3
TOTALS	2,936	1,418	763	321	322 83 16	\$ 10,397	3,130	18

RECOMMENDATIONS

The ombudsman is in a unique position to suggest improvements to the FOAA process and is mandated by statute to make recommendations concerning ways to improve public access to public records and proceedings.

Remote Participation

There is a developing need to examine whether the current remote participation provisions serve the contemporary needs of both the public and governmental agencies. This portion of the statute has evolved since the COVID-19 pandemic as the expectations of the public and members of public bodies, as well as the technological capacity of agencies, have changed.

In 2022 the section 403-B provision, enacted a year earlier, that a remote meeting policy include the expectation that members be physically present unless not “practicable” was removed. While the local policy may impose expectations for individual member in-person attendance and reflect the local sentiment that face-to-face meetings are preferable, the statute no longer favors that policy choice.

The statute now allows the entire body to meet remotely if there is an “emergency or urgent situation” that warrants providing no in-person option for either members or the public. Should the “emergency or urgent situation” language be repealed to more accurately reflect the prevailing acceptance of electronically conducted public meetings? If the statute is neutral as to the reasons why an individual member of a public body participates in a public proceeding, should the statute be mute as to the reasons the entire body would choose to do the same?

Public meetings in Maine are now conducted as either in-person, fully remote, or hybrid. Members of the public are offered a remote option only if any of the members of the body participate by remote methods. There is no requirement to offer a hybrid meeting with no remote participation by members, even though there may be a need and desire by members of the public to attend remotely. Should the statute require, across all governmental agencies in the State, that every meeting be hybrid to the extent that the public is always allowed to attend remotely, if this is within the technological capacity of the governmental body?

APPENDIX

5 M.R.S.A. § 200-I

§ 200-I. Public Access Division; Public Access Ombudsman

1. Public Access Division; Public Access Ombudsman. There is created within the Department of the Attorney General the Public Access Division to assist in compliance with the State's freedom of access laws, Title 1, chapter 13¹. The Attorney General shall appoint the Public Access Ombudsman, referred to in this section as “the ombudsman,” to administer the division.

2. Duties. The ombudsman shall:

A. Prepare and make available interpretive and educational materials and programs concerning the State's freedom of access laws in cooperation with the Right to Know Advisory Committee established in Title 1, section 411;

B. Respond to informal inquiries made by the public and public agencies and officials concerning the State's freedom of access laws;

C. Respond to and work to resolve complaints made by the public and public agencies and officials concerning the State's freedom of access laws;

D. Furnish, upon request, advisory opinions regarding the interpretation of and compliance with the State's freedom of access laws to any person or public agency or official in an expeditious manner. The ombudsman may not issue an advisory opinion concerning a specific matter with respect to which a lawsuit has been filed under Title 1, chapter 13. Advisory opinions must be publicly available after distribution to the requestor and the parties involved;

E. Make recommendations concerning ways to improve public access to public records and proceedings; and

F. Coordinate with the state agency public access officers the compilation of data through the development of a uniform log to facilitate record keeping and annual reporting of the number of requests for information, the average response time and the costs of processing requests.

3. Assistance. The ombudsman may request from any public agency or official such assistance, services and information as will enable the ombudsman to effectively carry out the responsibilities of this section.

4. Confidentiality. The ombudsman may access records that a public agency or official believes are confidential to make a recommendation concerning whether the public agency or official may release the records to the public. The ombudsman's recommendation is not binding on the public agency or official. The ombudsman shall maintain the confidentiality of records and information provided to the ombudsman by a public agency or official under

this subsection and shall return the records to the public agency or official when the ombudsman's review is complete.

5. Report. The ombudsman shall submit a report not later than January 15th of each year to the Legislature and the Right to Know Advisory Committee established in Title 1, section 411 concerning the activities of the ombudsman for the previous year. The report must include:

- A.** The total number of inquiries and complaints received;
- B.** The number of inquiries and complaints received respectively from the public, the media and public agencies or officials;
- C.** The number of complaints received concerning respectively public records and public meetings;
- D.** The number of complaints received concerning respectively:
 - (1)** State agencies;
 - (2)** County agencies;
 - (3)** Regional agencies;
 - (4)** Municipal agencies;
 - (5)** School administrative units; and
 - (6)** Other public entities;
- E.** The number of inquiries and complaints that were resolved;
- F.** The total number of written advisory opinions issued and pending; and
- G.** Recommendations concerning ways to improve public access to public records and proceedings.

6. Repealed. Laws [2009, c. 240, § 7, eff. June 2, 2009.](#)

Credits

[2007, c. 603, § 1; 2009, c. 240, § 7, eff. June 2, 2009; 2013, c. 229, §§ 1, 2, eff. Oct. 9, 2013.](#)

Footnotes

[1 M.R.S.A. § 401 et seq.](#)

5 M. R. S. A. § 200-I, ME ST T. 5 § 200-I

Current with legislation through the 2021 First Regular Session of the 130th Legislature.