

# MAINE STATE LEGISLATURE

The following document is provided by the  
**LAW AND LEGISLATIVE DIGITAL LIBRARY**  
at the Maine State Law and Legislative Reference Library  
<http://legislature.maine.gov/lawlib>



Reproduced from electronic originals  
(may include minor formatting differences from printed original)



Department of Economic  
& Community Development

## **(Small) Business Ombudsman Program**

### **Report to Commissioner Johnson, Governor Mills and Legislature for 2021**

**Prepared by SarahJoy Chaples, Small Business Development Manager, Office of Business Development**

Summary of Statutory Charge of Small Business Ombudsman Program: “The program is established to: resolve problems encountered by businesses dealing with other state agencies; facilitate responsiveness of State Government to small business needs; report to the Commissioner and the Legislature on breakdowns in the economic delivery system, including problems encountered by businesses dealing with state agencies; assist businesses by referring businesses and persons to resources that provide the business services or assistance requested; provide comprehensive permit information and assistance; and serve as a central clearinghouse of information with respect to business assistance programs and services available in the State.”

In 2021, The Small Business Ombudsman role at DECD reverted back to the Small Business Development Manager from the Director of Economic Development Coordination role.

**Statutorily, the ombudsman shall report to the Governor and the joint standing committee of the Legislature having jurisdiction over economic development matters about the program with any recommendations for changes in the statutes to improve the program and its delivery of services to businesses on an annual basis.**

**Overall recommendations:** 2021 was a year of dichotomy for Maine’s small businesses. With the influx of recovery funds from CARES Act as well as other financial provisions, there were opportunities for growth in some sectors. Others struggled to remain solvent. Opportunities for both sides of this dynamic were severely impacted by workforce challenges, both in number and talent, and supply chain disruptions. The Office of Business Development within DECD met with businesses, assisting them with identifying supports and resources to help them stabilize, grow, or even start.

Throughout 2021, DECD’s ombudsman and Business Development team has been primarily focused on business supports and information connected to the pandemic. We do not have any specific **statutory** changes to recommend for this legislative session, as the DECD team, in partnership with the other appropriate State agencies, are still working to implement many of the elements of the ombudsman program that are outlined in statute, which are further supported by the Actions recommended in the [10-Year Economic Development Strategy](#) within Strategy Area F: Maintain Stable and Predictable Business Rules. As part of this work over the coming year, DECD and other partner agencies may come to the legislature with recommended statutory changes to better meet the needs of Maine’s small businesses.

In efforts to address the workforce challenges faced by small businesses, DECD has worked with numerous agencies to develop strategies that will support talent attraction and workforce engagement, including Dept. of Labor, Dept. of Health and Human Services, and Maine Revenue Service. Key strategies include:

- Creating a pathway to remote working that is easily accessible for employers and employees
- Navigation of Maine’s workforce incentive tools/packages
- Advocating for small businesses in the creation stages of programming for workforce development

We continue to receive complaints in terms of business voicing concerns around interactions with licensing and permitting agencies generally fall into a “cultural” category, namely that the State continues to move too slowly on decisions and that state employees do not always seem to be inclined to “help businesses get to a yes.” Part of the work of the strategic plan is around promotion of innovation, so finding innovative solutions to allow State employees to work smarter, not harder, and also doing some key work around culture and climate, will hopefully improve some of these interactions.

Finally, 2021 continued to show the economic disparities experienced by Mainers from under-represented communities, including immigrants, BIPOC, and people from geographically dispersed and disconnected parts of the State. DECD’s business ombudsman program is committed to focusing time and energy to reaching under-represented business owners in Maine with resources, support, and information.