

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)



(Small) Business Ombudsman Program
Report to Commissioner Johnson, Governor Mills and Legislature for 2022
Prepared by Jake Daniele, 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.”

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: 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 years, DECD and other partner agencies may come to the legislature with recommended statutory changes to better meet the needs of Maine’s small businesses.

2022 Year in Review: Workforce shortages remained a significant pinch point for Maine. With many jobs available and low unemployment rates, businesses tried out new solutions and got creative. Hiring became less about filling a specific position and more about onboarding good people. Businesses across all sectors have discussed a willingness to train someone if the potential employee is committed. Employers are doing whatever they can to attract and retain employees. That includes meeting employees where they are, relocation fees, and remote/flexible work schedules. Companies have even gone so far as renting apartments to subletting them to employees to ensure housing is available. DECD has responded by creating workforce punch lists to guide businesses toward pertinent resources. There is also an inter-agency workforce board that is hosting an employer summit in 2023.

Most business inquiries to the ombudsman were focused on finding the remaining grant money and making sure they did not miss out on opportunities. One initiative being rolled out by the Office of Business Development is the Domestic Trade Program. The consultant position was filled at the end of 2022 and program initiatives such as market data are already being distributed to requesting businesses. Having internal

programs to point businesses to is extremely valuable when there might otherwise not be opportunities for struggling businesses.

The Office of Business Development fielded many calls regarding L.D. 2010 which established an energy rate relief fund. This program created some confusion for business owners and stakeholders. Complaints came in regarding lack of notice about the program, receiving paper forms days before (if not after) they were due, and the circular nature of finding solutions. Utility companies would send businesses to DECD and OBD had to point businesses back to the utility providers to ensure that they qualified. Future programs could be structured with a more business friendly approach. Using multiple avenues to reach out (email, separate mailer-some business owners did not see the attestation in their bill because they use auto pay), or even ensuring someone reaches out to those who have not yet completed the form. The intent of this program was directed at businesses hit hard and those who received money were appreciative. Those who missed out, particularly those who did not receive funds through no fault of their own were frustrated by the roll out and execution of this program. There are also businesses that were eligible for this program but never received funds because the funding ran out.

It is worth highlighting that Business Answers (OBD's online and phone business resource) receives great feedback regarding timeliness and content. OBD has a dedicated staff member who ensures that all requests are addressed and answered promptly. One way that OBD knows that this service is appreciated is that constituents are often impressed to receive a callback from the state and compliment that there is someone on the "other side" of the conversation.

Finally, 2022 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.