

DRAFT II/ CITIZENS' REPRESENTATIVE GUEST EDITORIAL

by Paul V. Phillips, Citizens' Representative, State of Oregon

There has been much discussion in the last month, both press and public, about the ombudsman programs of the State of Oregon. There are two such programs, both housed in the Governor's Office. One is the Long Term Care Ombudsman position, which receives and acts on citizen complaints about state-licensed nursing homes. The other---much larger---program is the Citizens' Representative program which receives and acts on citizen complaints that relate to many other aspect of state government or state agency activities.

Because re-examination of the state's ombudsman programs has been widely suggested because of recent personnel changes in the separate Long Term Care position, it is important for Oregonians to be aware of the past and current history of the larger program, formerly known as simply the "Ombudsman". It is especially important to make clear the reason for the 1981 name change from "Ombudsman" to "Citizen's Representative", and the stature of the office since the name change was made.

In 1969, Governor Tom McCall formed the Ombudsman's Office in Oregon. The first Ombudsman, Mark O. Haggard, was and is an impressive renaissance man who popularized the office as an advocate for the people. There have been many holders of the office since Mr. Haggard departed, but---as the current holder of the post--- I am now proudly beginning my third year of service---a relatively long period of continuity after many years of change.

Two years ago, in response to many legislative requests and in an effort to revitalize and raise the profile of the office, Governor Atiyeh changed its title. Instead of "Ombudsman" it was renamed "Citizens' Representative" to clearly reflect its function as an advocate for every citizen of the state. The title "Ombudsman" remains popular with the press, but twelve years of experience showed beyond a doubt that the term was not in general use among Oregonians, and the function of the office was confused and misunderstood by too many citizens.

Since the name change, the growth in responsiveness and services provided by this office has been dramatic.

In four years under Governor Atiyeh, the Citizens' Representative/Ombudsman program has handled almost twice as many citizen complaints as were handled during the entire nine-year prior history of the post. Between 1970 and 1979, for example, some 11,000 citizens were assisted in solving their problems with state government through the program. Since 1979 however, we have assisted over 20,000 citizens in just four years. Citizen complaints in the current biennium (since the name change was made) are up over 28%. Last year, this office served seven times the number of citizens served by Oregon's first Ombudsman.

Furthermore, in the last four years our office has been aggressively offering its services to Oregon legislators, inviting them to refer any constituent with a problem or conflict involving any agency of state government. We also handle increasing numbers

of referrals from U.S. Congressmen and Senators.

The role of the Citizens' Representative has been greatly expanded under Governor Atiyeh. We now sponsor and promote programs that encourage citizen volunteerism, and administer vital programs designed to help the needy and helpless in Oregon. One of these programs, Oregon Food Share, has been critical to many Oregonians during the current hard economic times. Last year alone, Oregon Food Share collected and distributed more than one million pounds of food for Oregon's needy citizens. Our office has administered this program effectively through coordinating the selfless efforts of food distributors, state employees, wholesalers, and countless generous public service groups.

Some recent discussion has suggested that this office can only be effective and truly "independent" under the wing of the Legislature or elsewhere in state government. Governor Atiyeh firmly believes that it is far better to have state government's "complaint department" within the office of the chief administrative supervisor, rather than under loose or part-time supervision anywhere else. As one editorialist put it: "One advantage of an ombudsman inside government is that it puts the official close enough to the agencies to get an insider's perspective and an insider's contacts."* * (J. Wesley Sullivan, Salem Statesman-Journal, January ___, 1983)¶ We couldn't agree more.

When Governor Tom McCall established this post, he said "it is based on an underlying, basic presumption that government can be more viable, responsive, and human from within as well as without."

That is the job we are trying to do---and I am proud to say that the Office of the Citizens' Representative is performing more vigorously than ever before---investigating complaints, tackling conflicts between citizens and agencies whenever they arise, and serving Oregonians promptly and well.

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