

ANNUAL CALSTRS

OMBUDS REPORT

2023-24

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A MESSAGE FROM THE OFFICE OF THE OMBUDS

The CalSTRS Office of the Ombuds is pleased to bring you the annual *Ombuds Report* for the 2023–24 fiscal year. The purpose of this report is to give the public information regarding services provided by the Office of the Ombuds and to demonstrate how this office serves CalSTRS members.

The office adheres to the International Ombuds Association and United States Ombudsman Association standards of practice, code of ethics and best practices. We also uphold and promote CalSTRS' vision, mission and core values.

The ombuds is available via a secure online messaging system at **CalSTRS.com/ombuds**, telephone, postal and electronic mail, referrals from legislative staff and stakeholder groups, and in person at our West Sacramento Member Service Center. We evaluate each contact to determine if our office's involvement is required or if another business area is best suited to address the inquiry.

One of our roles is to provide feedback to executive leadership to proactively address service delivery questions, concerns and issues. Our office serves as a valuable resource for CalSTRS to identify trends and systemic matters to help leadership successfully manage risk and ensure CalSTRS' values and mission are not compromised. Based on those who contacted our office, we've recommended statutory and service delivery improvements to CalSTRS executive leadership.

As we celebrate our 41st year, we remain committed to serving CalSTRS, our members and our stakeholders in a capacity that reflects our guiding principles—*independence, impartiality, confidentiality and informality.*

MEET THE TEAM



Mark Gini
CalSTRS Ombuds

Mark was appointed as ombuds in 2021, a position that is part of the CalSTRS' Executive Branch. A Sacramento native, Mark joined CalSTRS in 2007 after earning a Bachelor of Arts degree from California State University, Sacramento. His first role was as a customer service representative responding to member inquiries. He became a benefits planning specialist soon after and provided individual planning sessions for members approaching retirement. Prior to becoming ombuds, Mark served as the assistant director of the CalSTRS Service Retirement Division and led a team that ensured retirement applications were processed accurately and timely. Mark is an active member in both the International Ombuds Association and United States Ombudsman Association.



Christina Nguyen
Associate Ombuds

Christina joined the Office of the Ombuds in 2021 as the ombuds coordinator and was promoted to associate ombuds in 2024. A California native, Christina earned a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of California, Davis in 2001. After nearly a decade in the private sector, she joined the State Controller's Office in the Unclaimed Property Division, which was responsible for assisting the public in obtaining unclaimed monies owed to them. In 2018, Christina was appointed as the assistant to the CalSTRS chief benefits officer where she closely worked with directors in the Benefits and Services Branch. As the associate ombuds, Christina advocates for all CalSTRS members and is committed to continuous improvement of CalSTRS' business processes to better meet their needs.

WHAT IS AN OMBUDS?

Arising from a Scandinavian concept of a “people’s representative,” an ombuds is an official appointed to investigate and resolve individuals’ complaints from a neutral, independent viewpoint. Depending on the type of ombuds, the role can focus on conflict resolution, advocacy or complaint investigations.

The CalSTRS ombuds is an advocate ombuds, serving as an advocate for CalSTRS members in resolving problems and conflicts that are more complex in nature that require in-depth research and investigation.

The CalSTRS Office of the Ombuds was established in law in 1984 (Education Code section 22302), which requires our office to make recommendations to the chief executive officer, Cassandra Lichnock, regarding complaints made by school employees, members, employee organizations, the California Legislature and the public regarding actions of CalSTRS employees.

Confidentiality is critical in ombuds dispute resolutions. CalSTRS members must be able to trust us with sensitive personal information when using our services. CalSTRS business areas must also feel confident that they can be forthright with the ombuds about their operations and business practices.

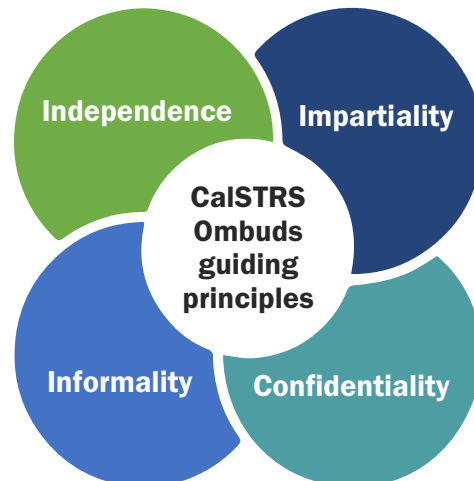
Mission statement

We strive to be truthful and act with integrity, fostering respect for all CalSTRS members and advocating for procedural fairness in the content and administration of CalSTRS’ practices, processes and policies.

Guiding principles

Our guiding principles were derived from professional standards established by the International Ombuds Association and reflect a commitment to ethical conduct to maintain the integrity of the Office of the Ombuds.

- **Independence:** The ombuds is independent in structure and function to the highest degree possible within CalSTRS.
- **Impartiality:** The ombuds is designated as neutral and impartial. The ombuds will not engage in any situation that could create a conflict of interest.
- **Confidentiality:** The ombuds holds all communications with those seeking assistance in strict confidence, as required by statutes and policy. Confidential member information will be shared with CalSTRS business areas only when necessary to resolve an issue or complaint.
- **Informality:** The ombuds does not make binding decisions, mandate policies or formally adjudicate issues for CalSTRS. The Office of the Ombuds supplements but does not replace any formal complaint or grievance channels at CalSTRS.



Total cases

The office received 461 cases during the 2023–24 fiscal year, which was a significant increase compared to prior years. The increase was largely attributed to the PBI Research Services data event that occurred in June 2023. We received a total of 67 inquiries from members seeking assistance related to that event. We anticipate the total cases for next year will be lower because the data event is not expected to recur.

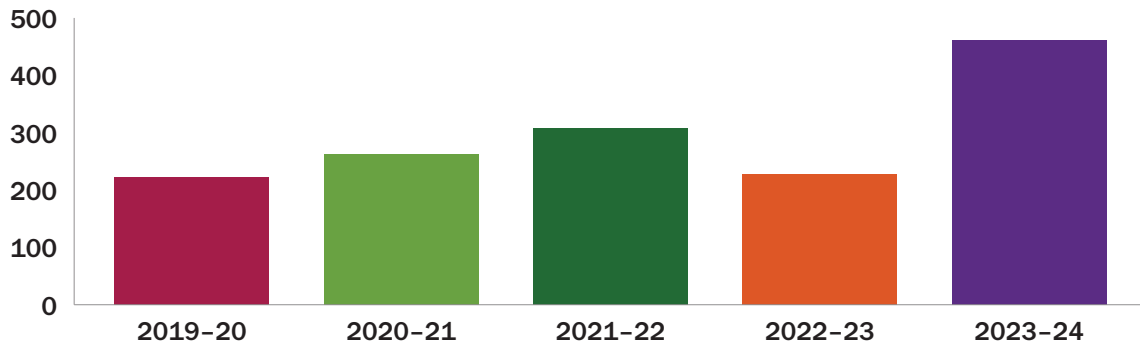
An additional factor contributing to the increase in cases stems from specific member related questions sent through the Ask the CEO portal. These inquiries were previously assigned to business areas for review and response.

With some cases, there is often collaboration with business areas due to the interconnected nature of the member experience. While we aim to provide resolutions independently, the complex nature of some cases often requires collaboration with the business areas to resolve an issue. Of the 461 cases, 90 required some collaboration with business areas. Of the total cases we received, 23 went through the CalSTRS internal appeal process, 23 received a decision letter and 12 requested an executive review.

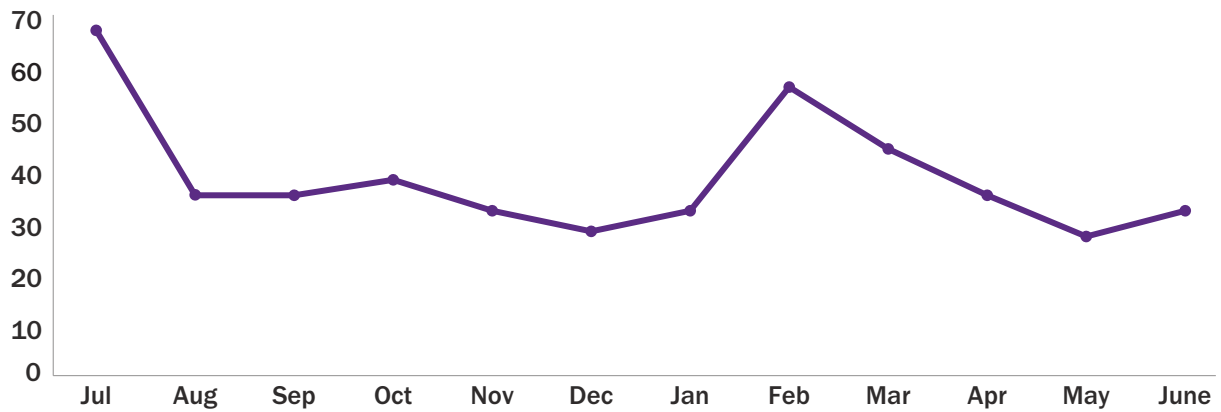
DATA

Total cases (continued)

Total ombuds cases

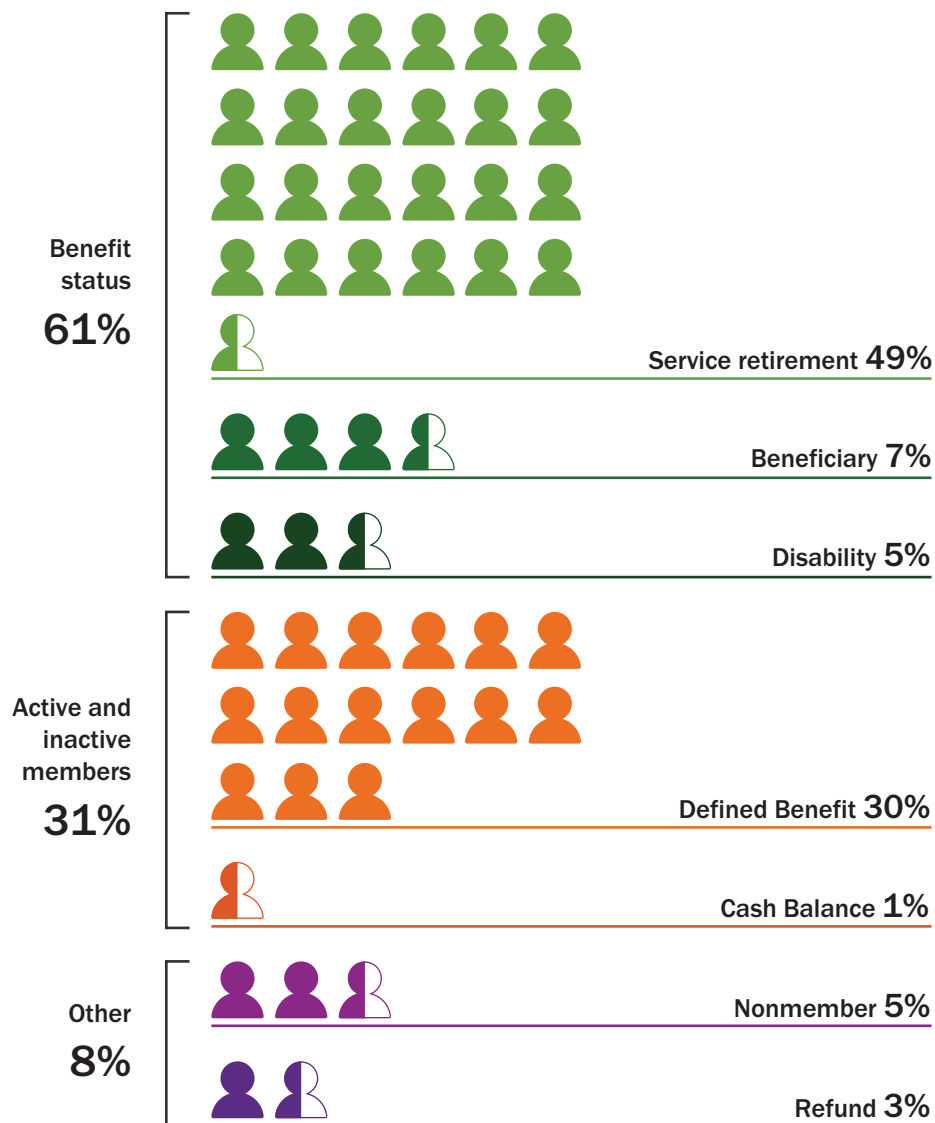


Total ombuds cases (FY 2023-24)



Contact demographics

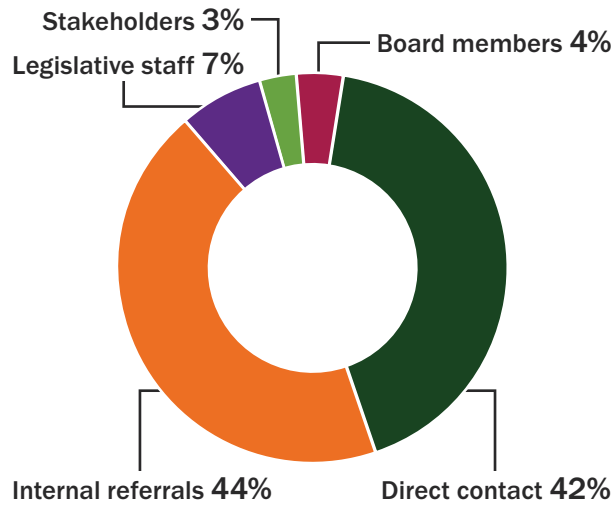
The demographics of members who contact the ombuds office has remained consistent over the years with a slight decrease from those receiving a disability or survivor benefit. The majority of contacts are from those in benefit status, specifically receiving a service retirement benefit. The next highest group is those who are active or inactive in CalSTRS Defined Benefit Program.



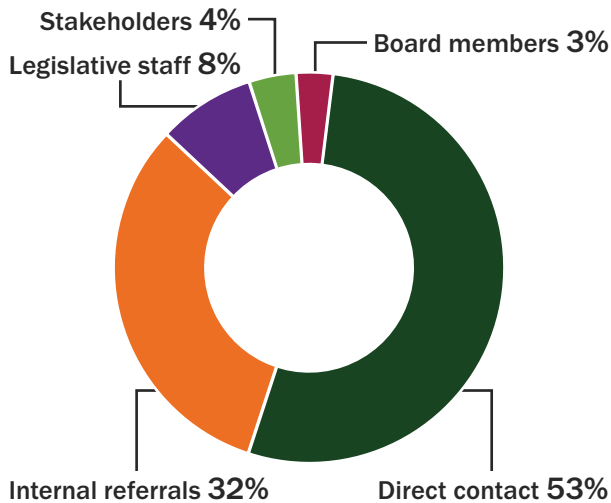
Breakdown of inquiry methods

Historically, most of our contacts originate from our secure messaging system on **CalSTRS.com/ombuds**. This year, more referrals came from other internal business areas, with the majority of contacts referred by the Contact Center. This resulted from the increase in escalations due to the PBI Research Services data event as most of our cases related to that topic were referred by the Contact Center. Absent that event, the majority of our cases were from members directly contacting us through our secure messaging system.

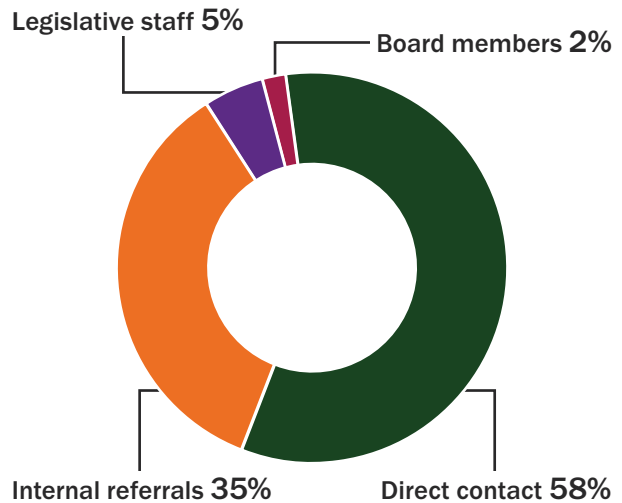
FY 2023-24



FY 2022-23



FY 2021-22

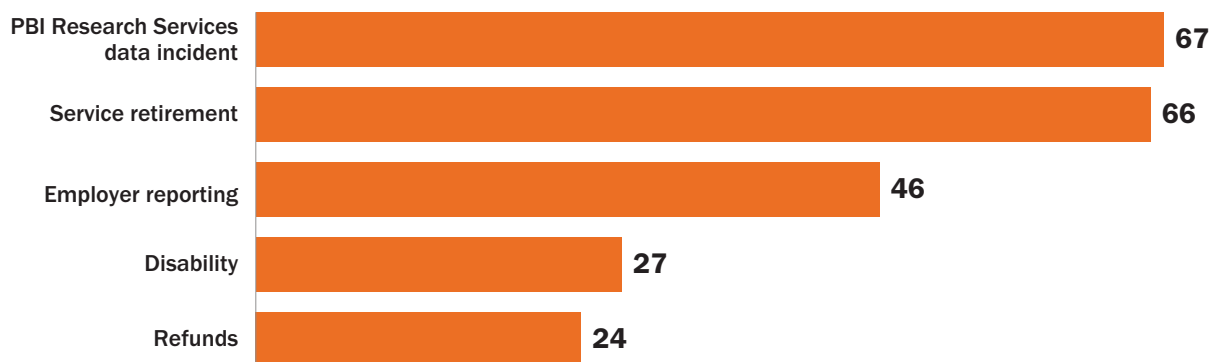


Case types

There are common inquiries that the Office of the Ombuds receives, which are considered to be expected events as our members transition from active employment to retirement. Unfortunately, life changing events that result in a disability or survivor benefit are also expected. These stressful events for our members and beneficiaries sometimes escalate to the level of the ombuds.

The top five case types we responded to were related to the PBI Research Services data event, service retirement benefits, employer reporting, disability and refunds.

Top five cases

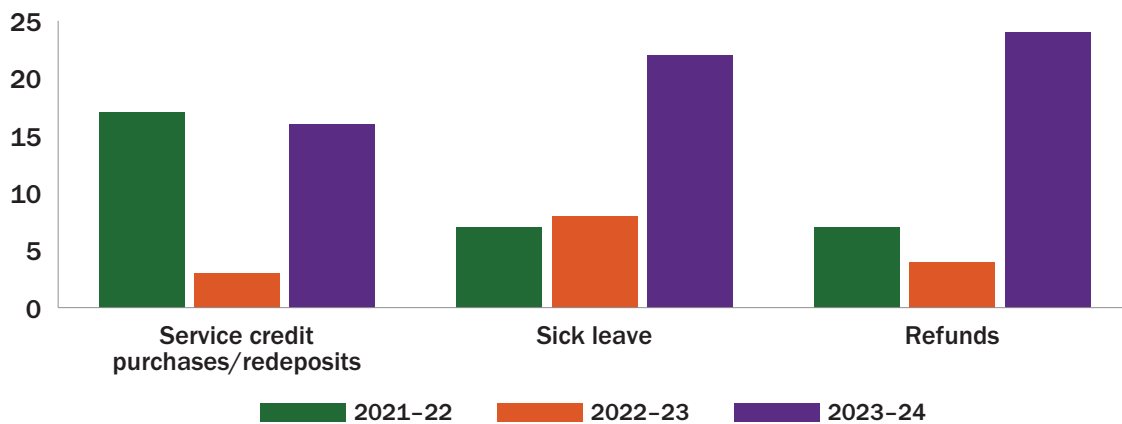


Case types (continued)

Observations

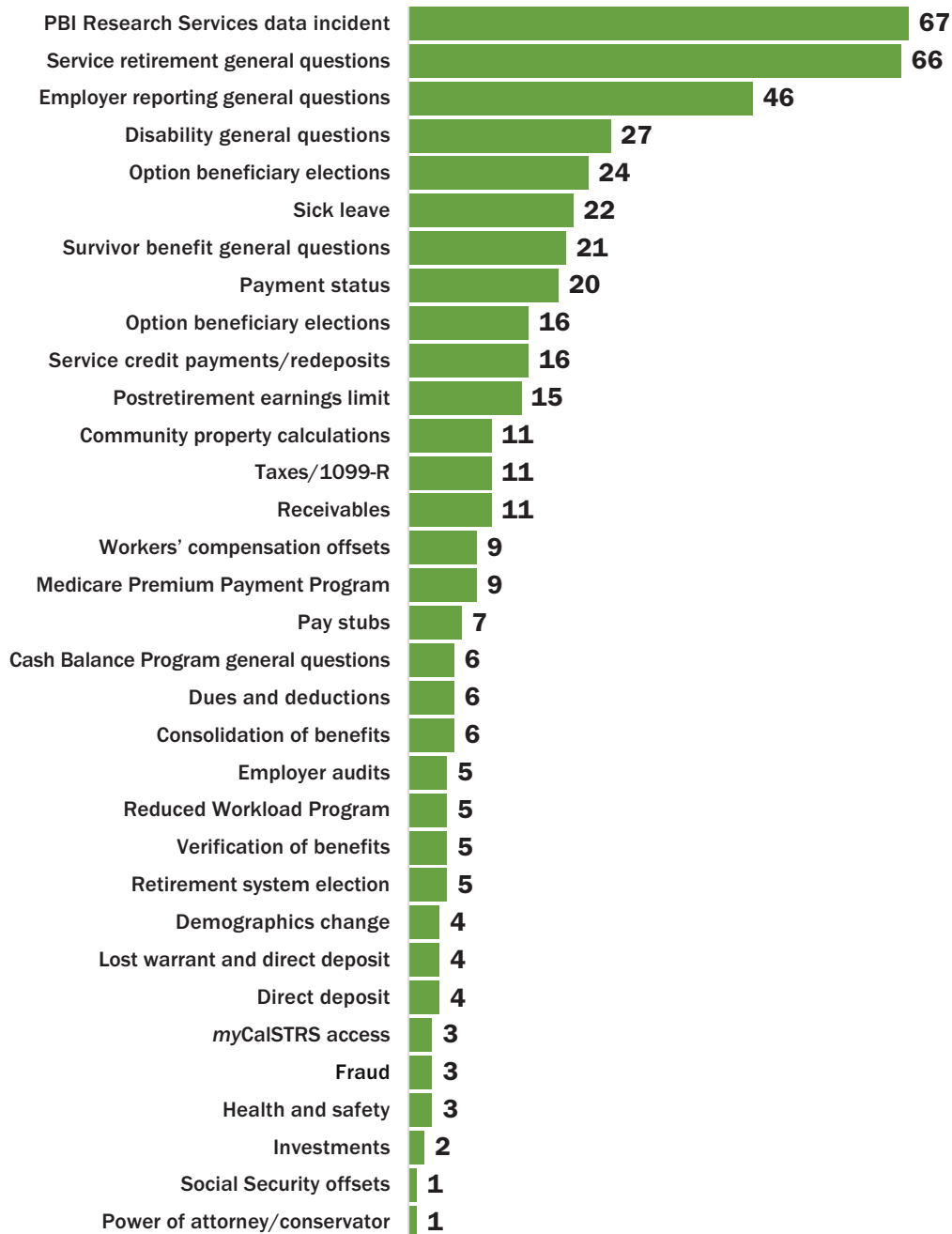
We saw significant increases in three case types compared to the prior year—service credit purchases/redeposits, sick leave and refunds:

- Service credit purchases/redeposits:** When comparing cases related to service credit purchases over the prior three years, the number of cases were consistent with the 2021–22 fiscal year. When investigating potential causes, we found that the number of purchase requests slightly increased compared to prior years. The Financial Services Branch continues to meet production timelines of issuing a billing statement within 25 business days. We'll partner with the Financial Services Branch to explore opportunities for improvement should these cases continue to increase.
- Sick leave:** We received inquiries from members requesting assistance transferring unused sick leave between their employers. CalSTRS is not involved with sick leave transfers for active members. Our office communicates our role in the process to internal and external stakeholders to set realistic expectations of services we provide. If passed, a current legislative bill (Assembly Bill 2134) will make sick leave transfer easier for our members, and will likely reduce the amount of inquiries related to sick leave.
- Refunds:** More members requested their payments be expedited due to financial hardship. The current processing goal to issue a refund payment is 25 days. We reviewed the processing timelines from the Financial Services Branch and found that 99% of refund payments were issued before 25 days.



Case types (continued)

Below are all case types the Office of the Ombuds received in the 2023–24 fiscal year.



CONTACT US



Visit [CalSTRS.com/ombuds](https://www.calstrs.com/ombuds) for information on the Office of the Ombuds services and to submit a secure online message directly to the ombuds.

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CalSTRS ombuds

The CalSTRS Office of the Ombuds provides assistance in resolving problems and conflicts that are not solved through the usual CalSTRS communication channels. We are a resource for members with CalSTRS-related concerns seeking assistance with resolving problems, disputes, or complaints.

The [Ombuds Inquiry Form](#) is used to send a secure message directly to the Office of the Ombuds. The details of your submission will only be accessed by authorized CalSTRS staff.

Our role

As an advocate for CalSTRS members, the ombuds provides independent, impartial, confidential, and informal assistance to those that contact the office. Our mission is to be truthful, act with integrity, foster respect for all CalSTRS members and advocate for procedural fairness in the content and administration of CalSTRS' practices, processes and policies.

CalSTRS ombuds guiding principles of practice

Contact the CalSTRS ombuds

Send a secure message directly to the Office of the Ombuds.

Ombuds Report

This report provides the public with information regarding services provided by the CalSTRS Office of the Ombuds and to demonstrate how this office serves the CalSTRS membership.



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HOW WILL YOU SPEND YOUR FUTURE?