

ANNUAL CALSTRS

OMBUDS REPORT

2022-23

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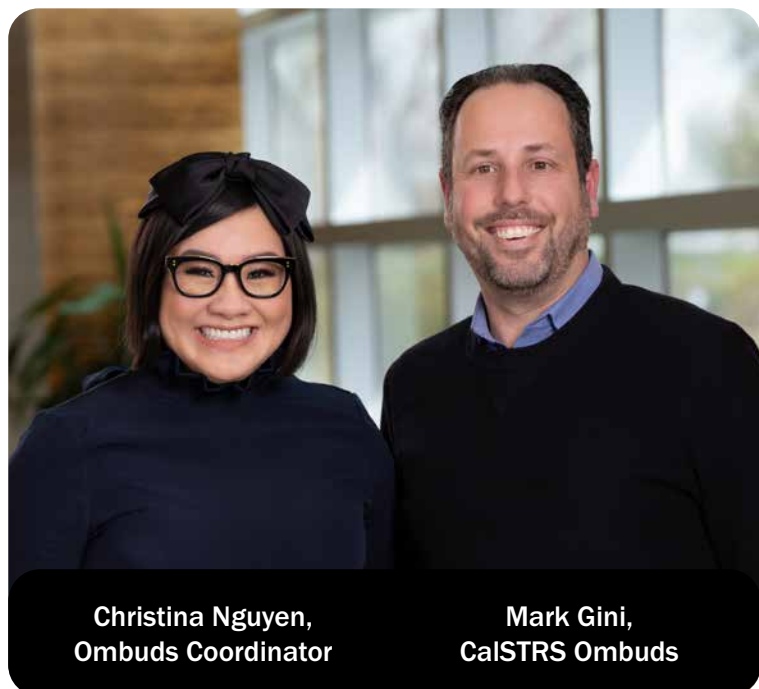
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A MESSAGE FROM THE OFFICE OF THE OMBUDS

The CalSTRS Office of the Ombuds is pleased to bring you the annual *Ombuds Report* for the 2022–23 fiscal year. The purpose of this report is to provide the public with information regarding services provided by the CalSTRS Office of the Ombuds and to demonstrate to our visitors, potential visitors and stakeholders how this office serves the CalSTRS membership.

The office is staffed by an ombuds and ombuds coordinator who practice in accordance with professional and ethical standards.

We are accessible and receive inquiries through multiple channels, including through a secure online messaging system on **CalSTRS.com/ombuds**, mail, direct or transferred phone calls, referrals from legislative staff or stakeholder groups, and in person at our West Sacramento Member Service Center. Each contact is evaluated to determine if the ombuds involvement is required or if it should be handled by existing communication processes established in various program areas.



Christina Nguyen,
Ombuds Coordinator

Mark Gini,
CalSTRS Ombuds

One of the roles of the ombuds is to provide feedback to executive leadership to proactively address service delivery questions, concerns and issues. In this way, our office serves as a valuable early warning system 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 visited our office, we have recommended a number of statutory and service delivery improvements to CalSTRS executive leadership.

As we celebrate the Office of the Ombuds' 40th year, we remain committed to serving CalSTRS and our stakeholders in a capacity that reflects our guiding principles—Independence, Impartiality, Confidentiality and Informality.

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, meaning we serve as an advocate for CalSTRS members and participants in resolving problems and conflicts that are not solved through the usual CalSTRS channels.

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, or the public regarding actions of the employees of the system.

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

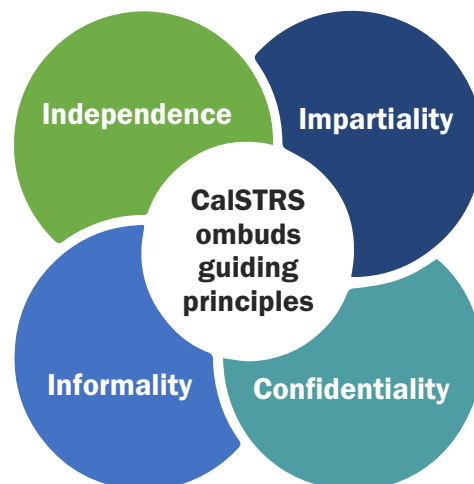
Mission statement

We strive to be truthful and act with integrity, fostering respect for all CalSTRS members and participants, 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 which 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.



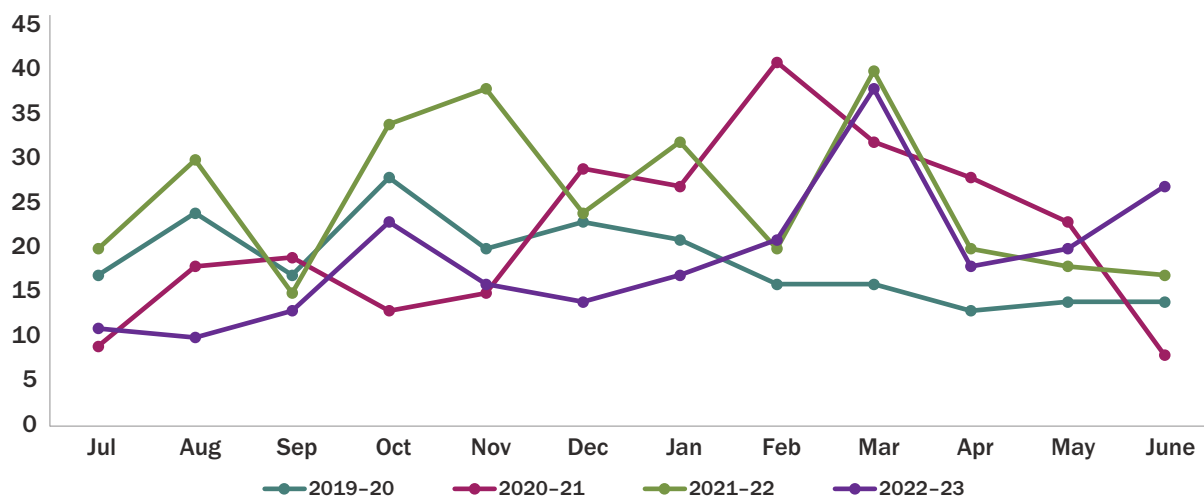
Total cases

The office received 228 contacts during the past fiscal year. This was a significant decrease compared to prior years. During this reporting period, we saw a considerable drop in receivable-related inquiries as AB 1667 was implemented and shifted the responsibility of overpayment collection from members to the party responsible, primarily employers. CalSTRS has also seen a decrease in applications for service retirement compared to prior years. As our most common case types are related to general service retirement questions, the decrease in ombuds cases can be correlated to the decrease in CalSTRS members entering retirement. Also, CalSTRS business areas have added more resources and have had a focus on customer service and quality control. These factors usually lead to less escalations that are routed to the ombuds office.

There is often collaboration with business areas due to the interconnected nature of the member experience. While the ombuds strives to provide a resolution independently, the complex nature of the cases often requires collaboration with the program areas to resolve an issue. Of the 228 total cases, 91 required some collaboration with program areas.

Of the total cases we received, 11% went through the CalSTRS internal appeal process—26 receiving a Decision Letter and 13 requesting an Executive Review.

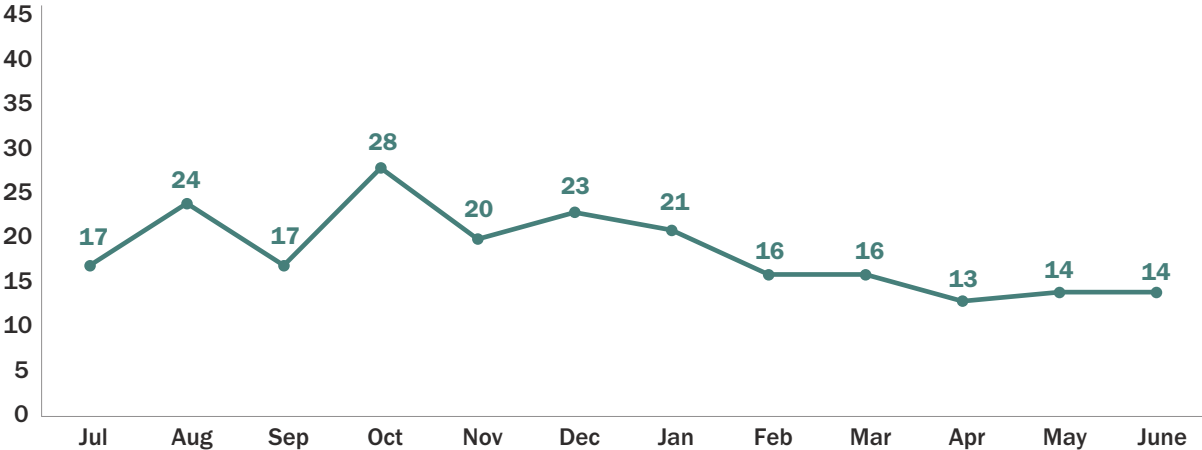
Total ombuds cases



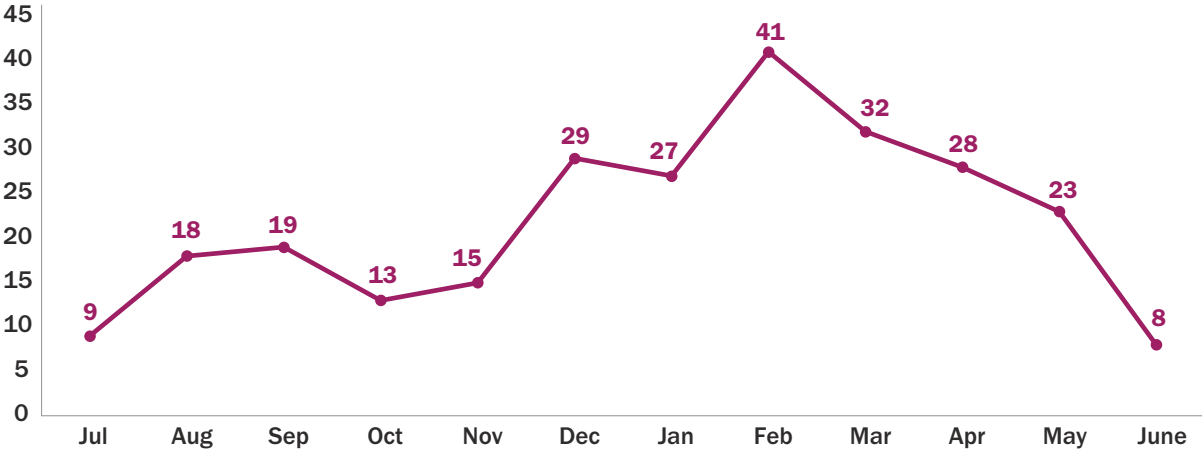
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Total cases (continued)

Total ombuds cases (FY 2019-20)



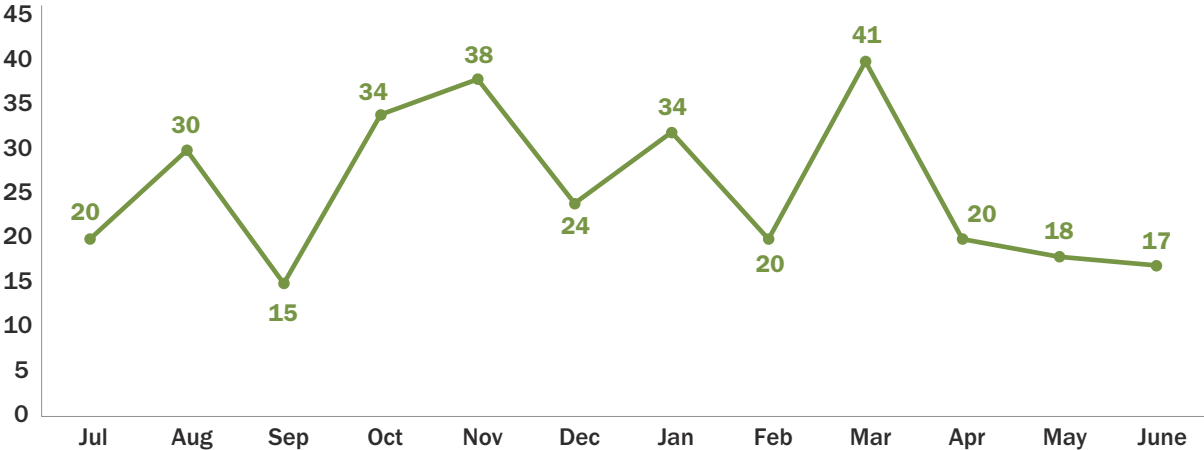
Total ombuds cases (FY 2020-21)



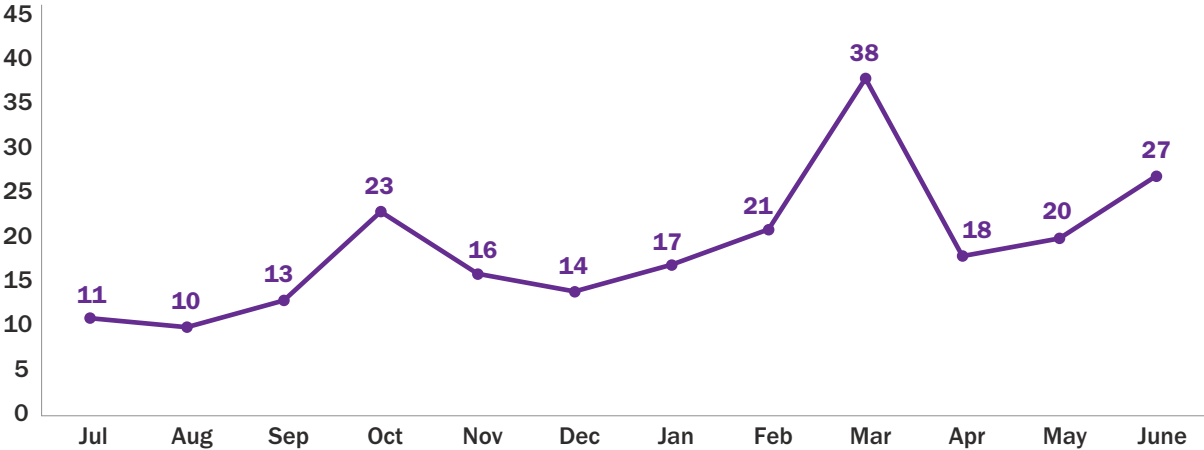
DATA

Total cases (continued)

Total ombuds cases (FY 2021-22)



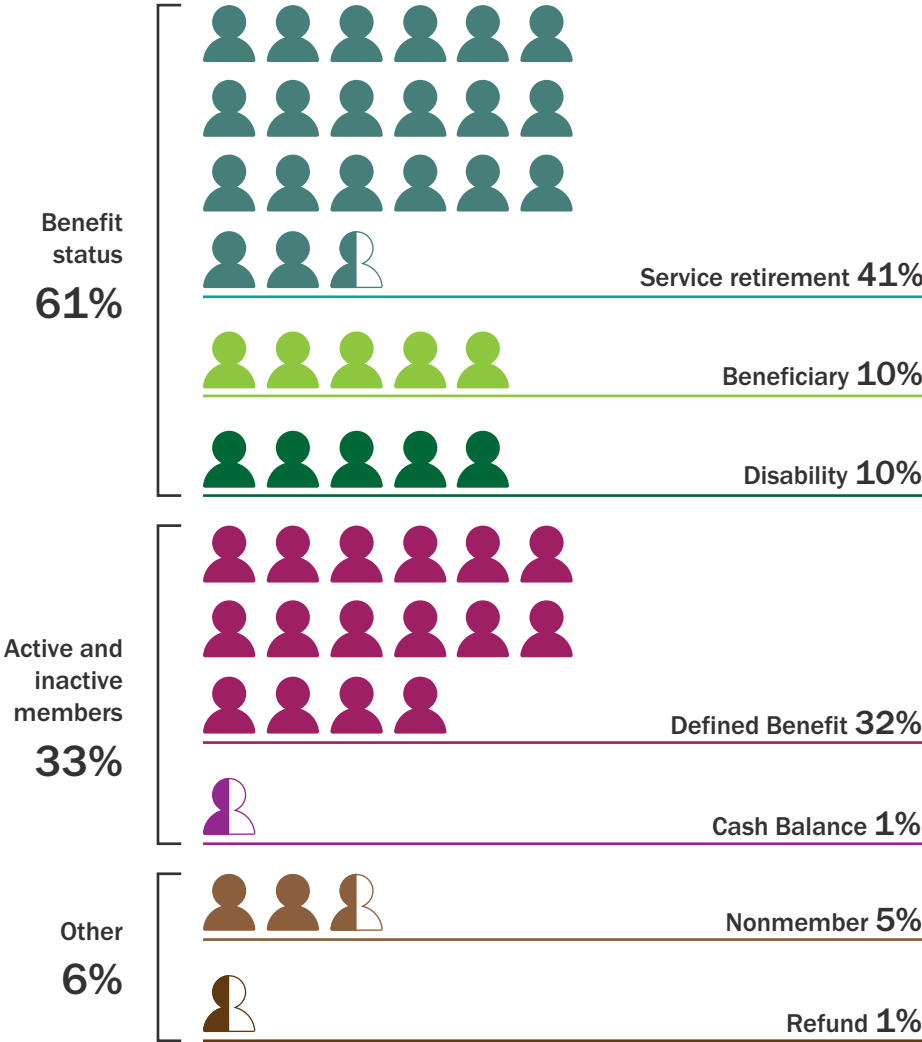
Total ombuds cases (FY 2022-23)



DATA

Population of contacts

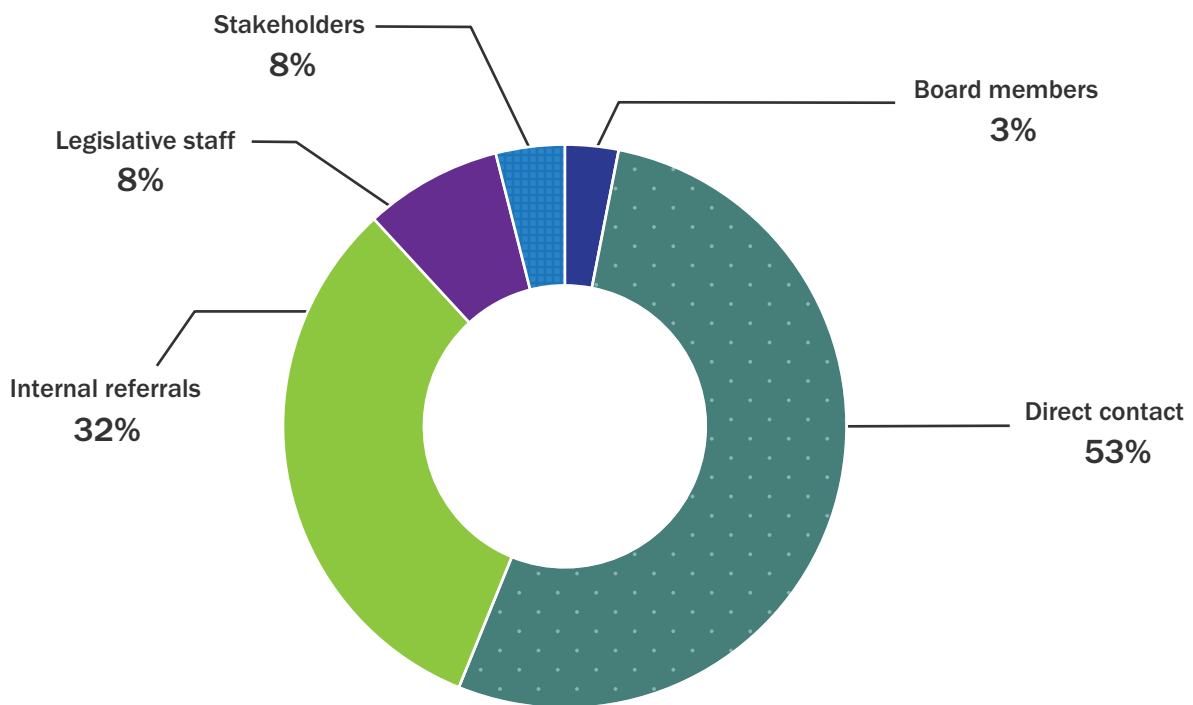
The following infographic is a breakdown of the population of members who contacted the Office of the Ombuds during the past fiscal year. The majority of contacts are from those in benefit status, specifically receiving a service retirement benefit. The next highest group is those who are active or inactive in the CalSTRS Defined Benefit Program.



DATA

Breakdown of inquiry methods

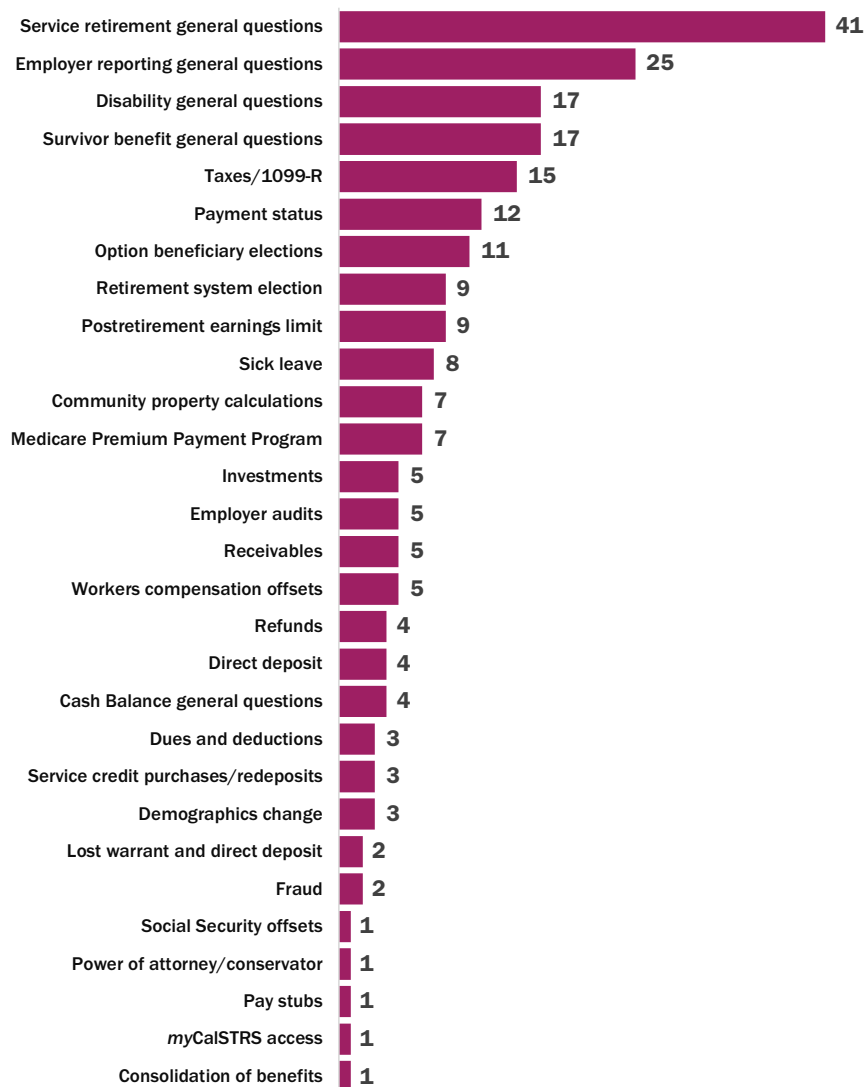
The following chart is a breakdown of how the inquiries were initiated with the office. Most of our contacts originate with a secure messaging system on **CalSTRS.com/ombuds**. The second most common is through referrals from other business areas within CalSTRS, with the majority of contacts referred by the Contact Center.



Types of cases

There are common inquiries that the Office of the Ombuds receives, which can be considered natural as our members transition from active employment to preparing for their first retirement benefit. Also, life changing events that result in a disability or survivor benefit are stressful times for our members and beneficiaries, which sometimes escalate to the level of the ombuds.

The top five types of cases the ombuds oversaw this past fiscal year were issues related to service retirement benefits, employer reporting, disability benefits, survivor benefits, and taxes/1099-Rs. Below is a breakdown of all topics.



CONTACT US



Please visit [CalSTRS.com/ombuds](https://www.calstrs.com/ombuds) for information on the CalSTRS 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.

[Send a secure message directly to the Office of the Ombuds](#)

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®
HOW WILL YOU SPEND YOUR FUTURE?