

Tips for Solving Problems on Your Own*

These tips are intended to provide information and practical advice on how to work with government to resolve problems on your own before you contact the Ombud or another organization for help.

Conflicts, disagreements, and differences of opinion can happen. Trying to resolve a problem on your own is often the best first step in these situations. Sometimes taking the time to talk and listen to the other side is all that is needed.

Remember that the organization won't know there is a problem unless you tell them. Give them a chance to fix it.

The following are some strategies and suggestions that can help.

Make sure you understand the problem

- Think about the situation and ask yourself what happened that seemed unfair to you. Was it how a decision was made (the process)? Was it the decision itself? Was it how you were treated? Was it a combination of factors?
- Gather all of the relevant information you need to explain your concern. This might include the names of people you have spoken to and when; any emails, letters, or other documents that have to do with the situation; and other details.
- Consider what questions you would like the government organization to answer. It might be helpful to write them down first if you are planning to contact them by phone or in person.
- Be clear about what you want to happen as a result of your complaint. For example, do you want an apology? a refund? a service or benefit that was refused? a change to procedures? something else?
- Pick worthwhile fights. Complaints and disputes can take a lot of time and energy. Most of us have to "choose our battles" carefully. Before pursuing a complaint, ask yourself what are your goals, and what are the possible benefits? Are they worth your effort?

Talking to the government organization

Sometimes a telephone call is a good way to start, especially if you are not sure where to direct your complaint. Different government organizations might have different complaint procedures. Some may ask you to put your complaint in writing, especially if it is complicated or there is a lot of information about the issue. If you think it would be helpful to speak with someone from the organization in person, you can ask for a meeting.

Here are some tips for telephone and in-person conversations:

- Be prepared. Have relevant information handy. Know what questions you want to ask. Be ready with dates times, names, decisions and actions that relate to your complaint.
- Talk to the right people. Try to make sure you are talking to the right person about your complaint. If the first person you talk to does not have the authority to change the decision or action you are complaining about, don't get angry. Instead ask to speak to someone who has the power to make changes. If you do not feel that the person you are talking to is addressing your

concerns, ask to speak to that person's supervisor or manager. Keep going until you feel you are being understood and that your concern is being taken seriously.

- Be calm and courteous. When you are making a complaint, start by explaining that you have a problem or concern and that you need help to solve it. Treat others as you like to be treated. Working with the government representative at this stage can be a helpful and effective way to get information about the decision or action you feel was unfair.
- Be reasonable. Remember that the person you are dealing with may have other pressures and demands on them. Although having many responsibilities and tasks does not excuse poor customer service, the person you are speaking to may have many priorities that all need to be addressed. Complaint processes sometimes take longer than expected. If you are feeling frustrated, try to be patient and give the organization a chance to fix the problem.
- Listen. Listen carefully to the person you are speaking with. He or she may be giving you very important information. Do not interrupt. Do not get distracted by whatever else is going on around you, or by thinking of arguments you want to make when the person stops speaking. Ask questions to make sure you understand their message. Even if the person you are talking to cannot solve the problem, they can probably give you useful information.
- Ask questions. Ask why the organization made the decision or took the action it did. Ask staff to tell you which rules, policies or laws they are following, and politely ask for copies. Ask for explanations when you do not understand a policy or procedures. Some policies and procedures are quite complex, and you are not expected to be an expert or understand everything right away.
- Ask for action. Ask the person how long it will take to deal with your concern. If your concern is urgent, be sure to say so, and explain why.
- Keep records. Some complaints can be very complicated. You may need to gather and understand a lot of information. Take notes and keep track of the names of people you have spoken to, when you spoke to them, and the result of each conversation. Also keep copies of documents like emails or letters that you may have received about your issue or the decision you believe is unfair.

Writing to the government organization

- Make sure your letter or email is clear and respectful. Try to summarize in a sentence or two what your complaint is about. Include enough information for the organization to understand why you are unhappy, but don't overdo it. Stick to the main facts and provide only as much detail is necessary to understand and resolve the problem. Keep your language respectful. If your request is reasonable and you have contacted the right person, you are more likely to have your complaint resolved.
- Include important information:
 - Date
 - Your name and contact information
 - What happened?
 - When did it happen?
 - Why do you think it is unfair or wrong?
 - What should the organization do to fix the complaint?
 - Copies of documents or information you have to support your complaint

- Ask for a response. Ask for the organization to acknowledge in writing that they have received your letter or email . Ask for an estimate of how long it will take to deal with your complaint. If your concern is urgent, be sure to say so, and explain why.
- Keep records. Keep copies of all letters, emails, and other documents you receive as well as details of all telephone calls or meetings. You might need to provide evidence of your dealings with the organization if you decide to seek help from the Ombud or from another agency. If you have a lot of records, keep them organized so you can find things easily.

Following up

If you do not hear back from the organization within a reasonable time, call them to check on your complaint. If the organization cannot resolve your complaint, ask if there is an appeal process or another organization who can look into your complaint.

Read letters and information about your complaint carefully. Pay attention to the details. Some decisions have formal appeal processes. Letters and other documents might have important information about procedures and deadlines for appeals. If you are not sure how to prepare an appeal, contact the appeal body and ask questions.

Need help?

If you follow these suggestions but still cannot resolve a problem with an NWT government organization, call or write to the Office of the Ombud. We may be able to help.

*We gratefully acknowledge that much of the information and advice in this document is borrowed from publications of other Canadian and international ombuds offices, in particular the Manitoba Ombudsman, Saskatchewan Ombudsman and Queensland Ombudsman.