MOST POLICY INITIATIVE

DATE October 29, 2026
SUBJECT Substance Use Treatment Facility Ombudsperson Programs

MEMO

An ombudsperson is an officer within an organization that receives client complaints, helps resolve them, and identifies systemic problems (Meyerson et al. 2026, Gottehrer & Hostina 1998). Ombudsperson standards of practice call for independence from the organizations and agencies they oversee (Gottehrer & Hostina 1998).

An ombudsperson keeps complaints confidential to protect the client from retribution. In residential SUD treatment, patients may rely on the facility for housing and have limited contact with other support systems, such as family and work (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment 2014). Patients in court-ordered treatment may face consequences if they leave.

Six states and the District of Columbia have offices that take complaints from people in SUD treatment and their families (**Figure1**). Four of these states (MN, WA, WV, WY) have ombudsperson offices separate from the state agency that oversees SUD treatment facilities.

Two states (MO, NJ) and the District of Columbia have offices within the agency that oversees SUD treatment programs. MO's Department of Mental Health's constituent services office takes these complaints. NJ and the District of Columbia also have ombudsperson offices within their state behavioral health agencies.

Five states (CA, CO, CT, NY, TX) have behavioral health ombudsperson that focus on access to treatment and insurance problems rather than complaints about treatment facilities.

In all states, SUD patients and families can direct complaints about an SUD treatment facility to the facility's patient advocate, the state licensing agency, or the state protection and advocacy system (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration 2024). These systems advocate for the rights of people with mental health conditions, though their exact organization varies by state. In MO, the system is Missouri Protection and Advocacy Services.

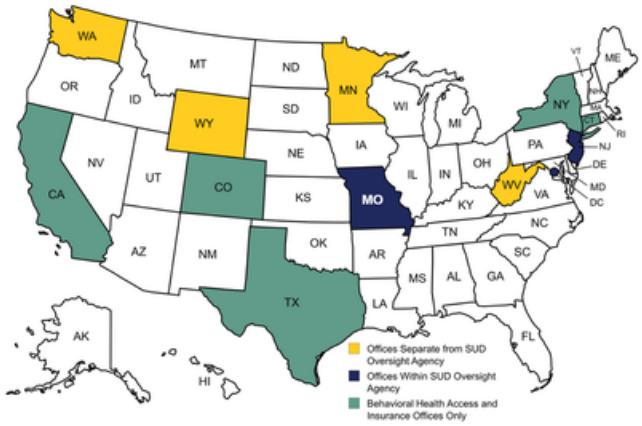

Figure 1. Ombudsperson offices relevant to substance use disorder (SUD) treatment. Six states and the District of Columbia have ombudsperson offices that take complaints from patients in SUD treatment and their families. MN, WA, WV, and WY (yellow) offices are separate from the agencies that oversee SUD treatment facilities. DC, MO, and NJ (blue) have offices within the agencies that take these complaints. CA, CO, CT, NY, and TX (green) have behavioral health ombudsperson that assist with access and insurance issues, but do not receive complaints about treatment providers. Map made with mapchart.net

MOST Policy Initiative
238 E. High St. 3rd Floor
Jefferson City, MO 65101

573-340-6663
www.mostpolicyinitiative.org