

ANNUAL CALSTRS

# OMBUDS REPORT

2021-22



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# A MESSAGE FROM THE OFFICE OF THE OMBUDS

As an advocate for our members, the CalSTRS Office of the Ombuds is pleased to bring you the annual *Ombuds Report* for the 2021–22 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.

Mark Gini assumed the role of CalSTRS ombuds in January 2021 and has since implemented improvements to better the services and experiences of those who contact our office including the following highlights:

- Established Guiding Principles of Practice.
- Redesigned the CalSTRS ombuds webpage.
- Implemented a secure online messaging system.
- Implemented a case management system.
- Adopted professional standards in accordance with the International Ombuds Association.

One of the roles of the ombuds is to provide “upward feedback” to 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 recommended a number of statutory and service delivery improvements to CalSTRS executive leadership.

As we celebrate the Office of the Ombuds’ 39th year, we remain committed to serving CalSTRS and our stakeholders in a capacity that reflects our guiding principles—Independence, Impartiality, Confidentiality and Informality.

# ABOUT THE OFFICE OF THE OMBUDS

The CalSTRS Office of the Ombuds was established in law in 1984 (Education Code section 22302) to serve as an advocate for CalSTRS members and participants. The office provides assistance in resolving problems and conflicts that are not solved through the usual CalSTRS channels. The office is staffed by a professional ombuds and ombuds coordinator who practice in accordance with professional and ethical standards. The CalSTRS ombuds is required to make recommendations to the chief executive officer, Cassandra Lichnock, regarding complaints made by school employees, members, employee organizations, the Legislature, or the public regarding actions of the employees of the system.

The ombuds is accessible and receives inquiries through multiple channels, including through a secure online messaging system on CalSTRS.com, 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.

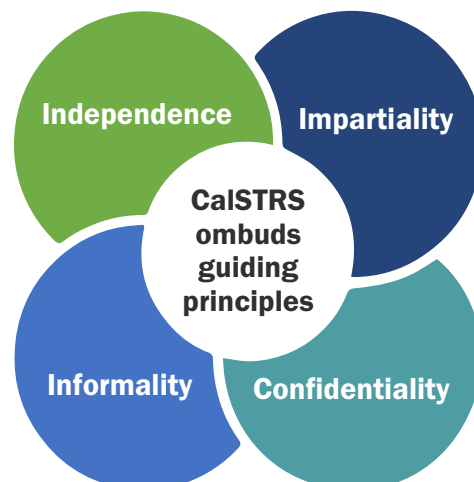
## Mission statement

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.



## MEET THE TEAM

### Mark Gini, CalSTRS Ombuds

As a member of the CalSTRS team for 15 years, I am passionate about helping our educators navigate CalSTRS laws and policies to resolve their problems. Advocating for our members to help them resolve their problems is extremely rewarding. Our educators are the backbone of this state and guide our children so they can grow up to be successful in society. Serving as the ombuds is my way to give back to those educators.



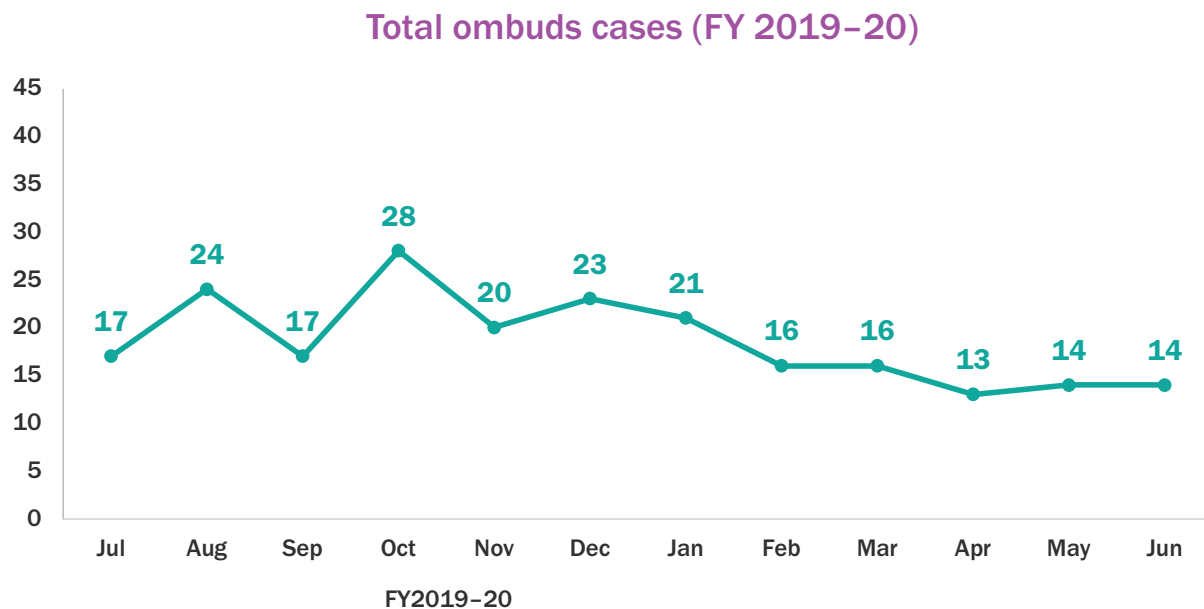
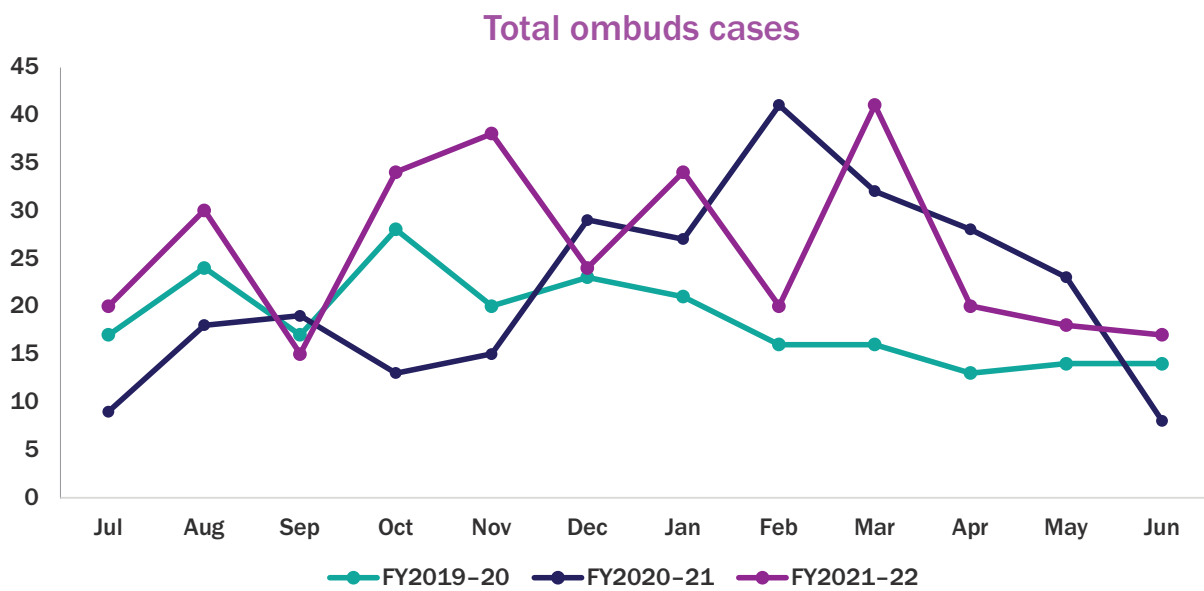
### Christina Nguyen, Ombuds Coordinator

As CalSTRS ombuds coordinator, it is my goal to provide sincere care to our members by serving as a resource in exploring options to address their issues and concerns. Being an advocate for educators allows me to give back to the professionals who taught, mentored and guided me throughout my academic career. Educators devote their lives to their work in teaching, supporting and guiding students. In return, I am dedicated to ensuring their benefits are accurate to allow for a well-deserved and happy retirement.

# DATA

## Total cases

The Office of the Ombuds received 311 contacts during the past year. This was an increase compared to prior years. The office has done more outreach over the past year to communicate the services we provide to our members and stakeholder groups. This outreach correlates to the increase in contacts to the office.

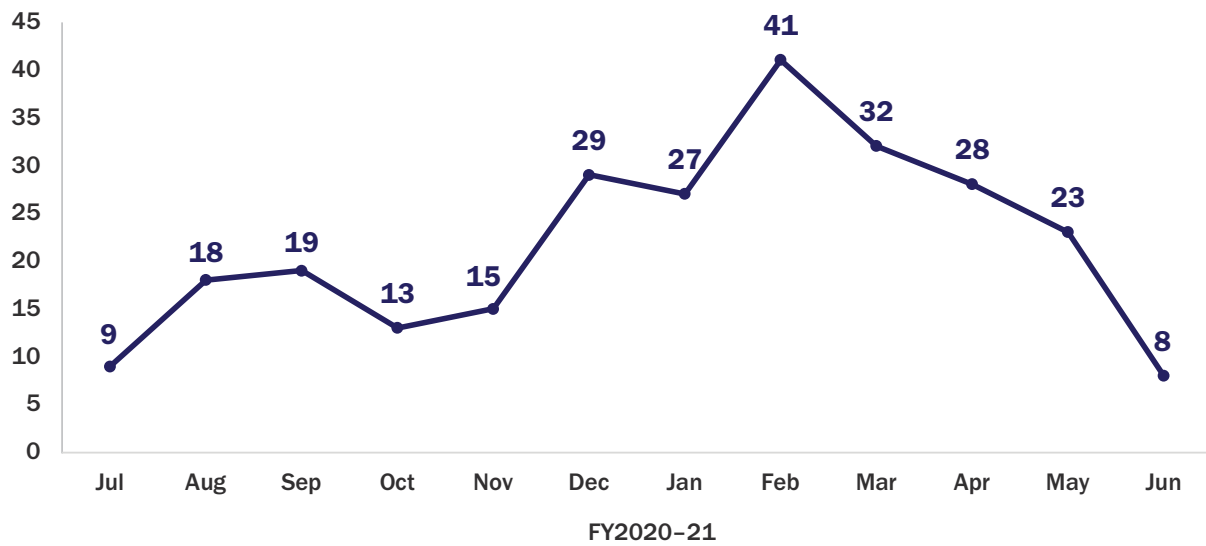




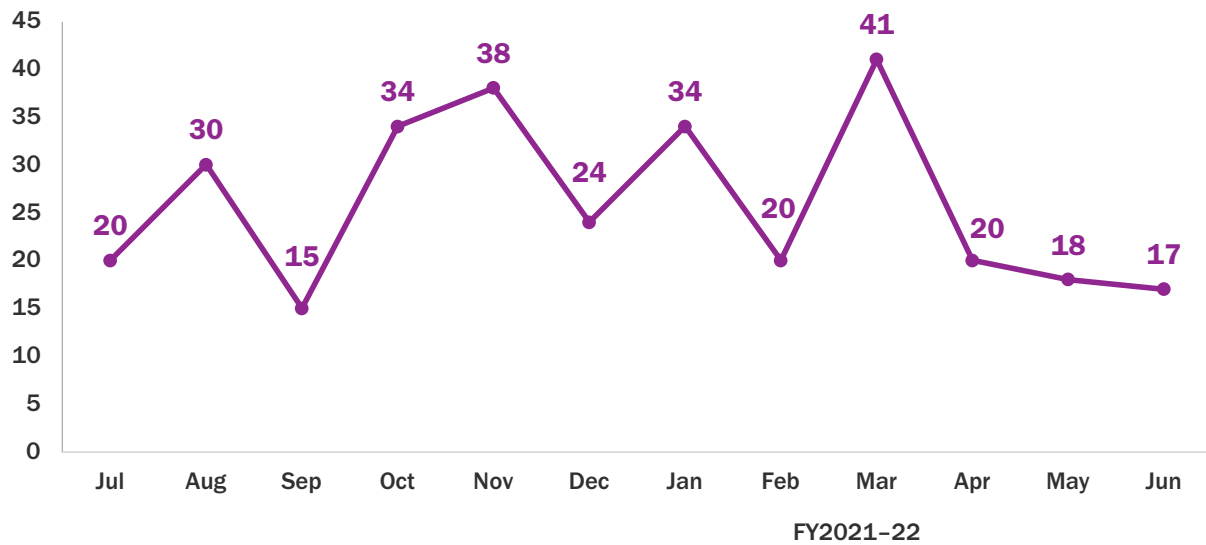
# DATA

## Total cases (continued)

### Total ombuds cases (FY 2020-21)



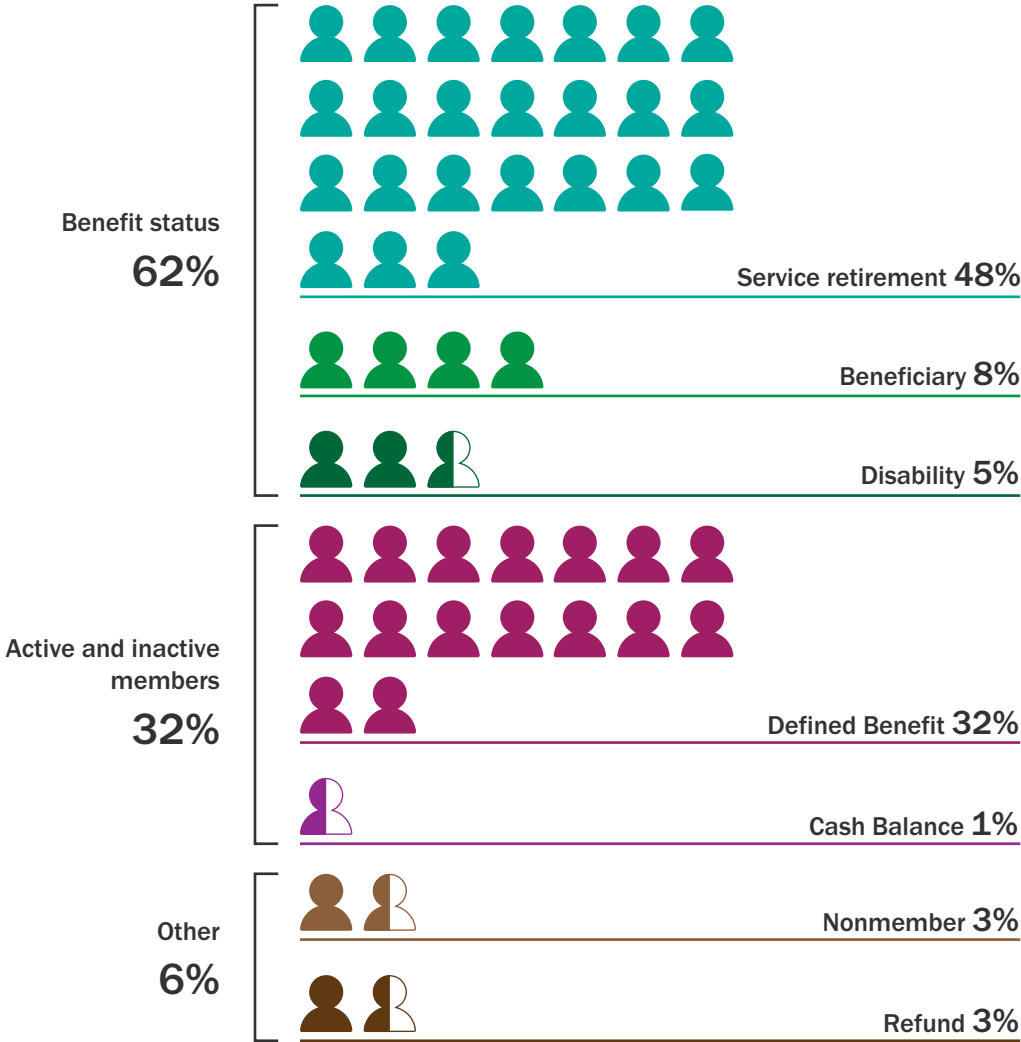
### Total ombuds cases (FY 2021-22)



# DATA

## Population of contacts

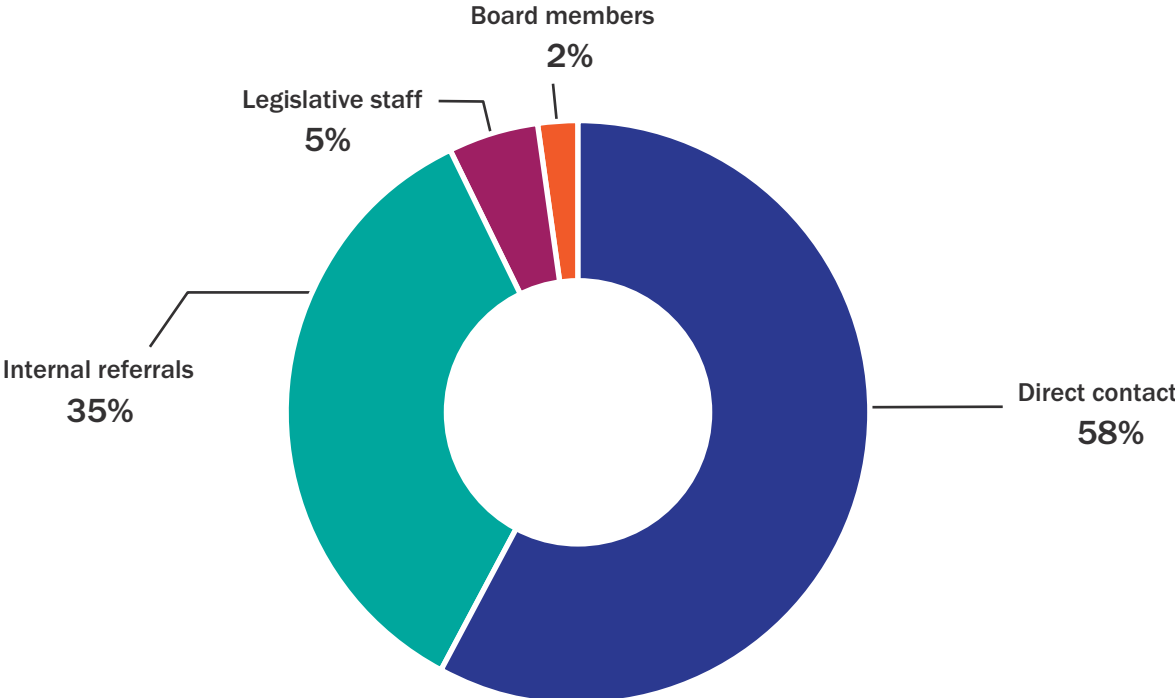
The following infographic is a breakdown of the population of members who contact the Office of the Ombuds. The majority of contacts are from those in benefit status, specifically receiving a service retirement benefit. The next highest group is those who are active or inactive in CalSTRS Defined Benefit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





### Breakdown of inquiry methods

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.

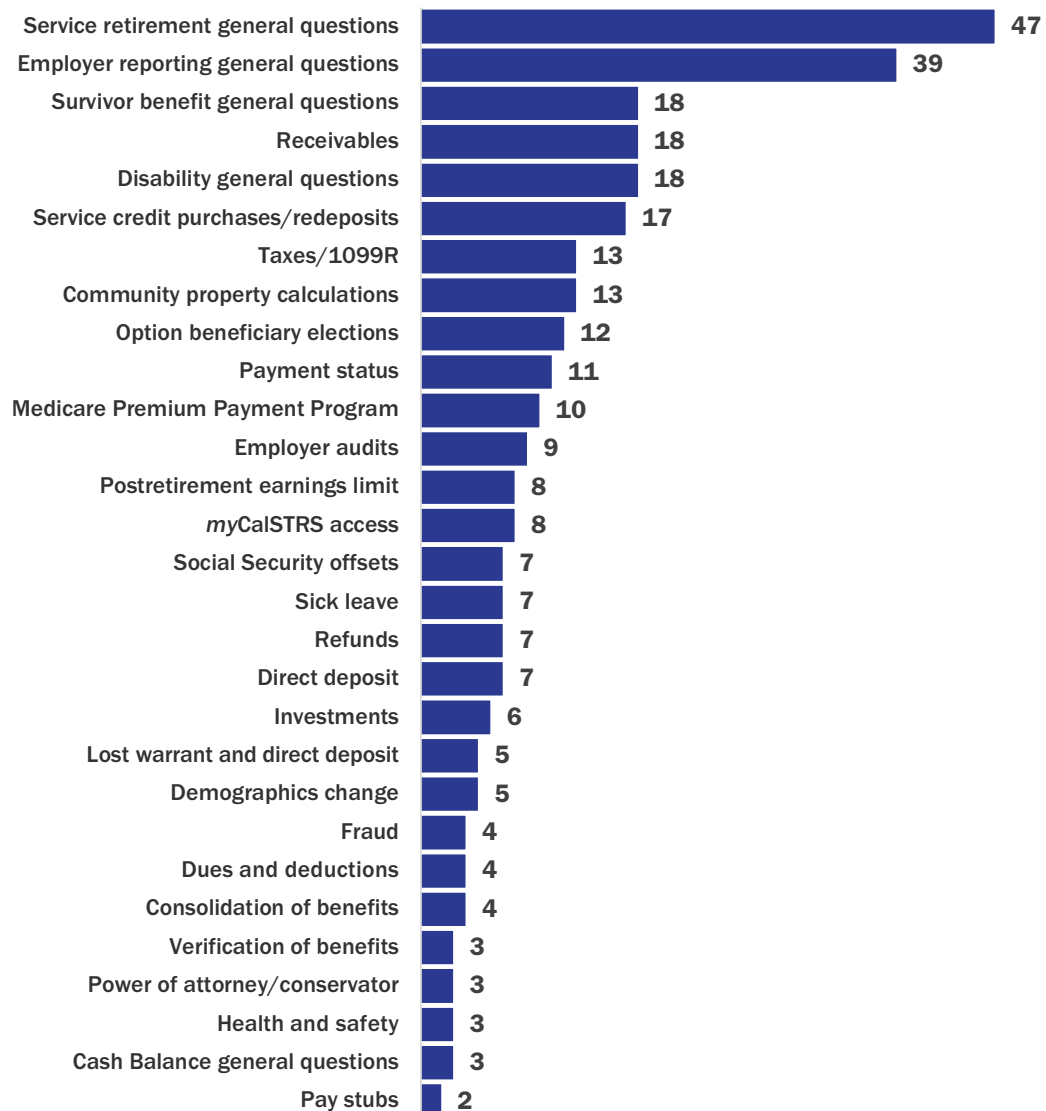


There is often collaboration with business areas due to the interconnected nature of the member experience. While the ombuds strives to provide a resolution independently, the complex nature of the cases often requires collaboration with the program areas to resolve an issue. Of the 311 total cases, 75 required some collaboration with program areas.

## 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 year were issues related to service retirement benefits, employer reporting, survivor benefits, receivables and disability benefits. 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.

The screenshot shows the CalSTRS website interface. At the top left is the 'CALSTRS.' logo. To the right is a red button labeled 'myCALSTRS login'. Below the logo is a navigation menu with links for 'Members', 'Retirees', 'Employers', 'Forms & publications', 'News', 'Investments', 'About', and 'Contact'. There are also icons for accessibility (a star) and search (a magnifying glass). The main content area features a heading 'CalSTRS ombuds' and a sub-heading 'Send a secure message directly to the Office of the Ombuds'. Below this is a section titled 'Our role' with a paragraph of text.

**CALSTRS.** [myCALSTRS login](#)

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Contact us

## 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<sup>®</sup>  
HOW WILL YOU SPEND YOUR FUTURE?