

# Records Show City Ombudsman Received “Unprecedented” Volume of Employee Complaints About Office of Community and Civic Life

 [wweek.com/news/2020/08/31/records-show-city-received-city-ombudsman-received-unprecedented-volume-of-employee-complaints-about-office-of-community-and-civic-life/](https://www.wweek.com/news/2020/08/31/records-show-city-received-city-ombudsman-received-unprecedented-volume-of-employee-complaints-about-office-of-community-and-civic-life/)



By Nigel Jaquiss |

Published August 31 at 2:08 PM

Updated August 31 at 5:20 PM

The city of Portland's ombudsman today released a memo suggesting the problems that roiled the city's Office of Community and Civic Life last year are far from being resolved.

That bureau, formerly known as the Office of Neighborhood Involvement, is best known for funding and overseeing the city's 95 neighborhood associations. Under the leadership of Commissioner Chloe Eudaly, the bureau received a new name and sought to reorient the city's relationship with those neighborhood associations and to address concerns expressed by Eudaly and other critics that it had historically been unwelcoming to people of color, renters and younger Portlanders.

The issue became such a bone of contention that Mingus Mapps, a former college professor who says he was fired from a midlevel management job at OCCL for objecting to a management directive, ended up challenging Eudaly in the May primary and will face off against her in a November runoff for her seat.

In an email to OCCL employees released this afternoon, City Ombudsman Margie Sollinger, who works in the City Auditor's Office, noted that the concerns bureau employees brought to her office were extraordinary. (Citizens and city employees often end up communicating with the ombudsman's office when their concerns fall on deaf ears elsewhere.)

"The volume and nature of complaints our office received was unprecedented, prompting us to recommend that the city hire an outside investigation to review the issues you and others raised," Sollinger wrote to unnamed OCCL employees in an Aug. 31 email *WW* obtained under a public records request.

Sollinger expressed concern in her email today that city officials—she did not say who—had sidelined her request for an independent assessment of the complaints.

"The city agreed to our recommendation and had been working to secure a third party to conduct the review," Sollinger wrote. "Unfortunately, late last week, I learned that the review has not been designed as I expected and its purpose has changed to the point that I don't believe it will be responsive to the many allegations you raised.

"Rather than being employee-centered, it instead appears to be intended as a tool to help management achieve the organization's goals. Given what I've heard from many of you, I am skeptical that Civic Life can succeed in transformative organizational change without first undertaking a process to redress all of the harm done, including holding accountable anyone found to have engaged in unethical, improper or other misconduct."

Sollinger declined to turn over the complaints that OCCL employees filed with her office, citing an exemption in the state's public records law that protects documents that are submitted to government agencies with the understanding they'll be kept confidential.

In a memo written last December, Sollinger summarized the numerous complaints to her office "alleging serious problems with the bureau's work environment."

"The individuals we heard from defy categorization," Sollinger added. "They include: people who work(ed) for many years at the bureau and others who came on more recently; both genders; white and people of color; administrative, programmatic and management-level employees; and employees in various divisions across the bureau."

Here's what they told her:

*Some common themes we heard:*

- Poor leadership from Director Suk Rhee, lack of regard for people*
- Problematic and unqualified managers/supervisors*
- Lack of effective change management, constant turmoil*
- High rate of employee turnover, including employees leaving on own volition*
- Unethical hiring and contracting practices*
- Lack of internal communication and guidance*
- Bullying, harassing, and retaliatory behaviors*
- Inability of HR investigations and grievances to resolve problems*
- Inability or unwillingness of leadership to address problems*

"The concerns we heard are well beyond ordinary workplace tribulations or expected growing pains associated with change," Sollinger wrote. "Many are (were) excited about changes to Civic Life, but subsequently became disturbed by the director's methods for achieving that change and the collateral damage to peoples' lives, the work environment, and ultimately the ability of the bureau to live up to its mission.

"Employees expressed being at their wit's end, going on medication, experiencing mental and physical health problems, needing to go on leave, hiring lawyers, dreading going to work and looking for other jobs."

Eudaly's spokesperson, Margaux Weeke, said in a statement that Eudaly is well aware of employees' concerns and is working to address them.

"Civic Life became aware of complaints to the ombudsman late last year, and immediately addressed her recommendations by working with the ombudsman, Bureau of Human Resources, and city attorney to hire an independent firm with cultural competency skills to conduct an organizational assessment of the bureau. That assessment will begin in the coming weeks, and Civic Life will share relevant findings publicly once they are available," Weeke said.

"When Mayor Wheeler assigned Commissioner Eudaly the Office of Community & Civic Life (then the Office of Neighborhood Involvement) it was following a deeply concerning 2016 audit of the bureau—this audit clearly demonstrated that the bureau needed to undergo systemic change. Commissioner Eudaly selected Director Rhee for her role in order to lead on the difficult reforms that Civic Life needs—they have been working together to improve the bureau's culture and service to the community—but institutional change is difficult. Commissioner Eudaly appreciates the ombudsman's recommendation and is looking forward to living up to our anti-racist values as a city and a bureau, and to continue being an accountable workplace."

#### About Nigel Jaquiss

News reporter Nigel Jaquiss joined Willamette Week in 1998. He covers politics. □