CALSTRS

ANNUAL CALSTRS

OMBUDS REPORT

2025–26

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CONTACT THE OMBUDS OFFICE

Email
Send a secure message at **CalSTRS.com/ombuds**.

Postal mail
CalSTRS
P.O. Box 15275
Sacramento, CA 95851-0275

In person
West Sacramento Member Service Center
Monday through Friday, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.
100 Waterfront Place
West Sacramento, CA 95605

Also available by appointment at our member service centers throughout the state.

A MESSAGE FROM THE OFFICE OF THE OMBUDS

The CalSTRS Office of the Ombuds is pleased to present the annual *Ombuds Report* for the 2025–26 fiscal year. The purpose of this report is to give the public information regarding services provided by the Office of the Ombuds and to demonstrate how this office serves CalSTRS members.

The office adheres to the International Ombuds Association and United States Ombudsman Association standards of practice, code of ethics and best practices. We also uphold and promote CalSTRS' vision, mission and core values.

The ombuds is available via a secure online messaging system at **CalSTRS.com/ombuds**, telephone, postal and electronic mail, and in person at our West Sacramento Member Service Center.

The ombuds is the person CalSTRS members and others talk to if there is a question or concern. We look at each inquiry to see if our office should help or if another business area can handle the matter better.

This fiscal year brought an increase in traffic to both the ombuds office and CalSTRS as a whole, following the launch of CalSTRS' new pension administration system. This significant integration, completed in September 2025, was designed to enhance members' experiences. However, the transition led to some unforeseen challenges, including registration and login difficulties with the online *my*CalSTRS member portal, as well as operational issues that created backlogs in processing benefits. As a result, all member touch points—including the Contact Center, member service centers, social media posts, the Ethics and Compliance Hotline, and the Office of the Ombuds—experienced higher activity.

During the rollout and stabilization of the new system, the ombuds visited member service centers across California, particularly in Southern California. The ombuds met face-to-face with visitors at the Glendale, Irvine and Riverside centers to hear firsthand about their experiences with *my*CalSTRS. These visits were vital for strengthening connections with members, leading to increased engagement after implementation.

One of the key responsibilities of our office is to proactively share feedback with executive leadership to address service delivery questions, concerns and issues. During the transition, the office heard helpful feedback from members about how the new system affected them.

This report highlights the increase in inquiries resulting from the new system. CalSTRS took important steps to address issues that arose during the initial rollout. As we enter the stabilization phase, our office remains a key resource for CalSTRS, helping identify patterns and systemic concerns so leadership can effectively manage risk and uphold CalSTRS' values and mission. We're actively collaborating with the CalSTRS executive team and business area directors to recommend service delivery improvements to enhance the experience of our members and beneficiaries.

As this office celebrates our 43rd year, we remain committed to serving CalSTRS, our members and stakeholders in a capacity that reflects our guiding principles—independence, impartiality, confidentiality and informality.

MEET THE TEAM

Mark Gini | CalSTRS Ombuds

Mark was appointed as ombuds in 2021, a position that is part of the CalSTRS Executive Branch. A Sacramento native, Mark joined CalSTRS in 2007 after earning a Bachelor of Arts degree from California State University, Sacramento. His first role was as a customer service representative, responding to member inquiries. He became a benefits planning specialist soon after and provided individual planning sessions for members approaching retirement. Prior to becoming the ombuds, Mark served as the assistant director of the CalSTRS Service Retirement Division and led a team that ensured retirement applications were processed accurately and timely. Mark is an active member in both the International Ombuds Association and United States Ombudsman Association.

Christina Nguyen | Associate Ombuds

Christina joined the Office of the Ombuds in 2021 as the ombuds coordinator and was promoted to associate ombuds in 2024. A California native, Christina earned a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of California, Davis in 2001. After nearly a decade in the private sector, she joined the State Controller's Office in the Unclaimed Property Division, which was responsible for assisting the public in obtaining unclaimed monies owed to them. In 2018, Christina was appointed as the assistant to the CalSTRS chief benefits officer, where she closely worked with directors in the Benefits and Services Branch. As the associate ombuds, Christina advocates for all CalSTRS members and is committed to continuous improvement of CalSTRS' business processes to better meet their needs.

WHAT IS AN OMBUDS?

Origin of the 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 who helps CalSTRS members with complex issues that require in-depth research and investigation.

The CalSTRS Office of the Ombuds was established in law in 1984 (Education Code section 22302). When a member, school employee, employee organization, the California Legislature or a member of the public make a complaint about an action of a CalSTRS employee, we're required to recommend solutions to the chief executive officer, Cassandra Lichnock.

Confidentiality is critical as we help solve problems. CalSTRS members must be able to trust us with sensitive personal information when using our services. CalSTRS business areas must also feel confident that they can talk honestly with the ombuds about their operations and business practices.

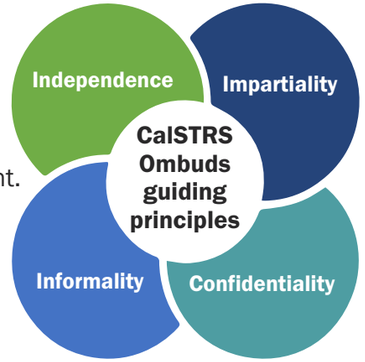
Mission statement

We strive to be truthful and act with integrity, fostering respect for all CalSTRS members and advocating for procedural fairness in the content and administration of CalSTRS' practices, processes and policies.

Guiding principles

We created our guiding principles based on professional standards established by the International Ombuds Association and the United States Ombudsman 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.
- **Impartiality:** The ombuds is neutral, impartial and does not engage in situations that could create a conflict of interest.
- **Confidentiality:** The ombuds holds all communications with those seeking assistance in strict confidence. We share member information with a CalSTRS business area only when necessary to resolve an issue or complaint.
- **Informality:** The ombuds does not make binding decisions, set policies or make final decisions on cases. The office does not replace the regular methods of reporting complaints or grievances at CalSTRS.



DATA

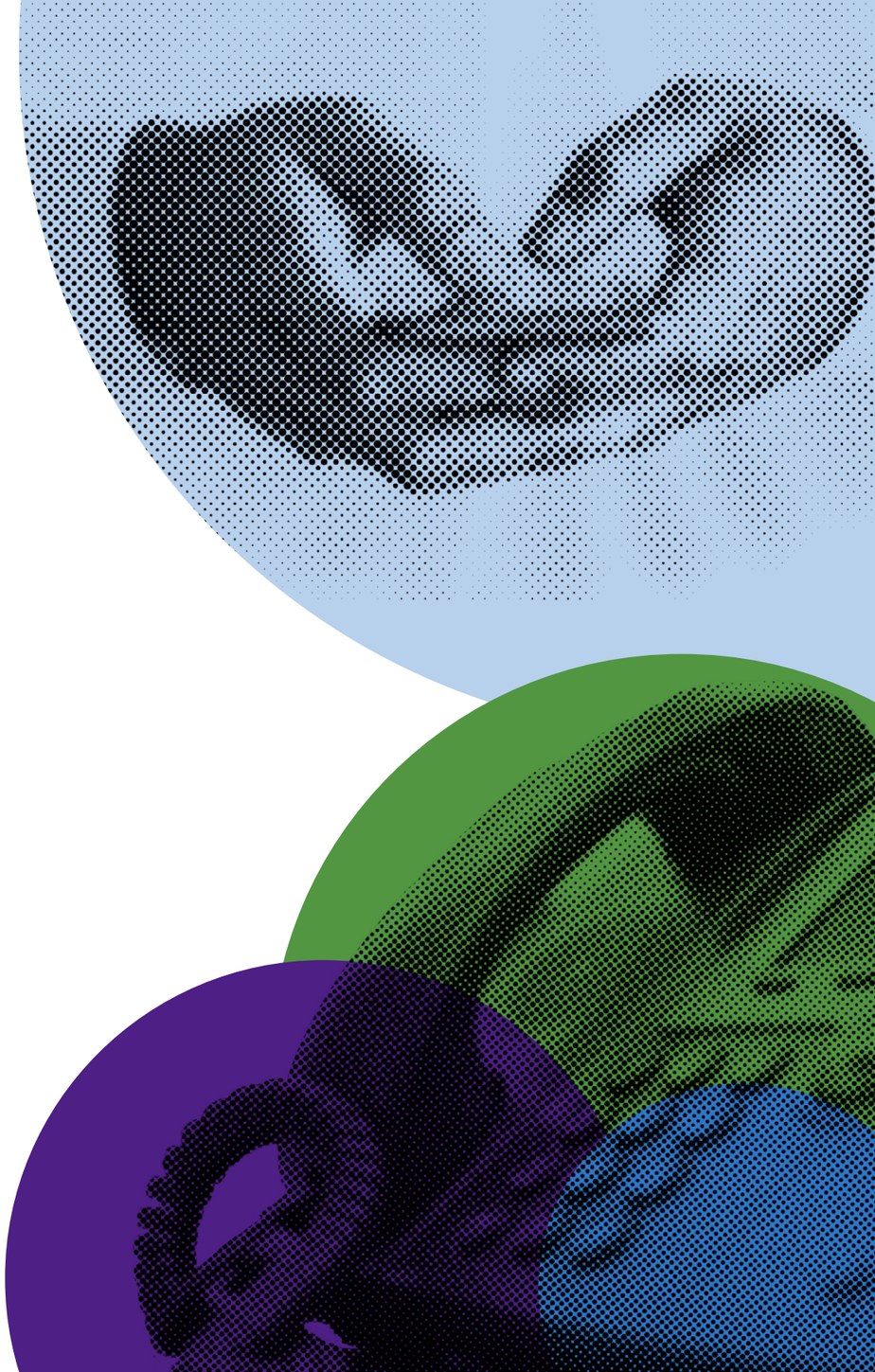
Total cases

The office received 1,147 cases during the 2025–26 fiscal year. The increase in cases is due to the impacts of CalSTRS' new pension administration system. Before the new system, we averaged 25 cases per month. After launching the new system, we averaged 118 cases per month.

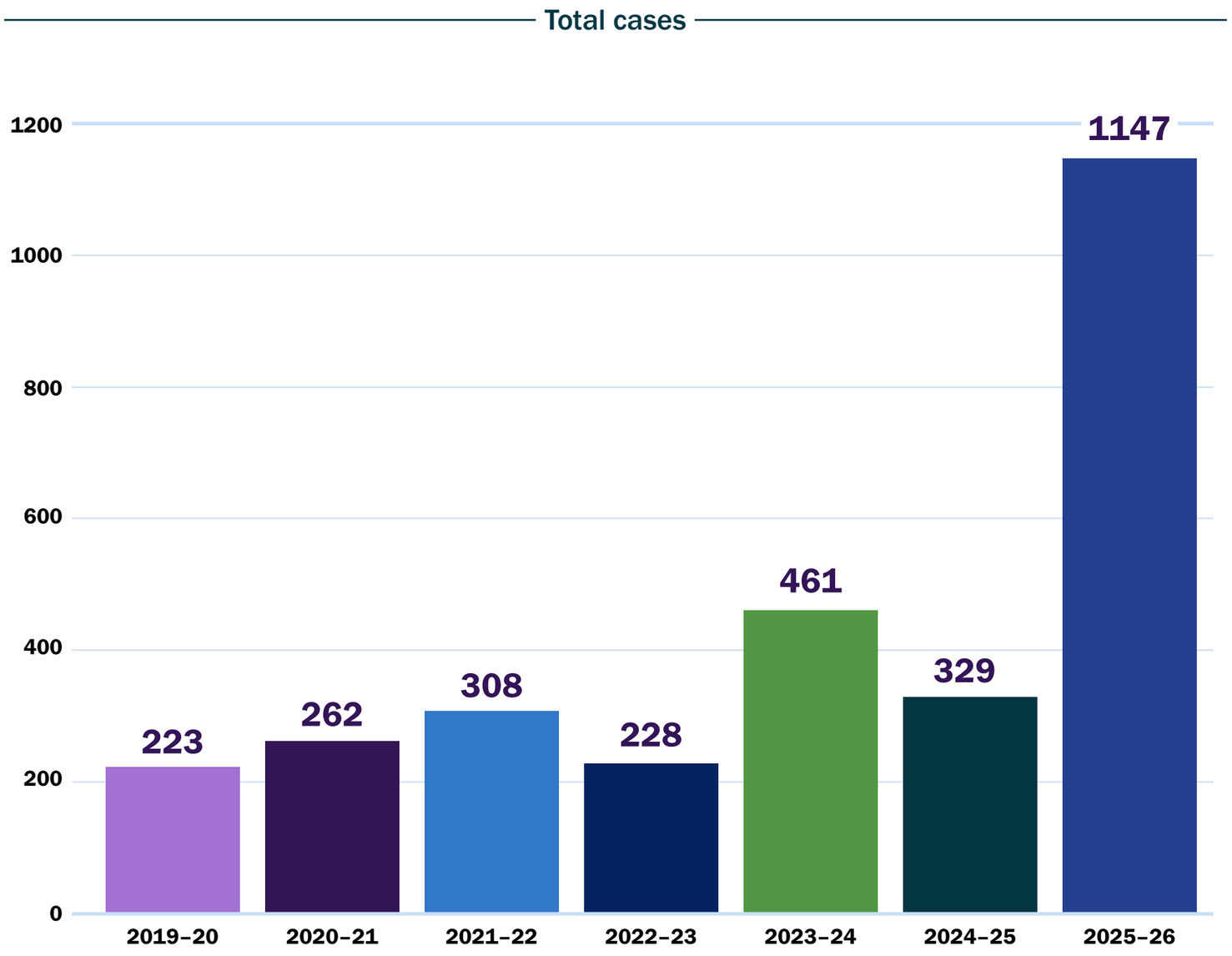
To manage the increased volume of contacts, the office developed a collaborative approach with business areas to address ombuds cases in which members expressed frustration due to limited access to their caseworker or analyst. Because the ombuds office includes two people, we asked our business partners to handle escalated member complaints about how services were delivered. Of the 1,147 cases received, the ombuds office sent 27% to the respective business area for resolution.

We believe the changes being made to the system and the way we serve members will help things get back to normal. This means we should be able to handle most cases on our own in the future.

We continue to reach out to member groups to increase awareness of the services we provide. Additionally, we're expanding our internal outreach to CalSTRS business areas to promote our office and highlight our advocacy work.



DATA


Total cases
1200
1000
800
600
400
200
0
223
262
308
228
461
329
1147
2019–20
2020–21
2021–22
2022–23
2023–24
2024–25
2025–26

DATA

Contact demographics

The demographics of members who contacted the ombuds office has remained consistent to prior years. Most active member inquiries were related to employer reporting issues. Recently enacted legislation (Assembly Bill 1997, McKinnor 2024) aims to simplify employer reporting by updating definitions of membership and creditable compensation. We anticipate fewer inquiries related to those issues when that state law goes into effect on July 1, 2027.

Benefit status
55%

Service retirement 40%

Beneficiary 11%

Disability 4%

Active and inactive members
39%

Defined Benefit 38%

Cash Balance 1%

Other
6%

Nonmember 3%

Refund 3%

DATA

Breakdown of contact methods

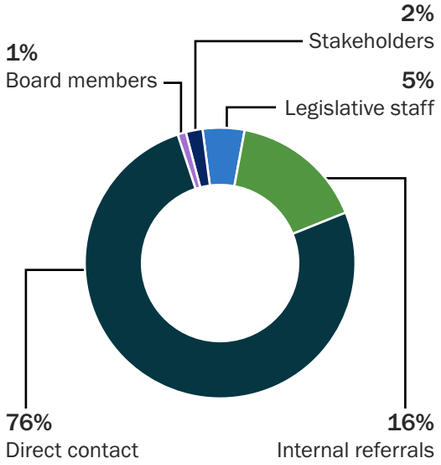
Most of the inquiries we receive come from our secure messaging system at **CalSTRS.com/ombuds**. Over time, the amount of inquiries received through this webpage has increased, reflecting the expanded outreach we've made to our member organization groups.

This year, the growth of inquiries is largely due to the discontinuation of the unsecure message portal on **CalSTRS.com**. Prior to the the new system, CalSTRS had an unsecure message portal for members who could not access their *my*CalSTRS account. The Contact Center oversaw and maintained this portal. During the transition to the new system, challenges arose that prompted CalSTRS to temporarily remove that portal. As a result, members could not electronically contact CalSTRS using that method.

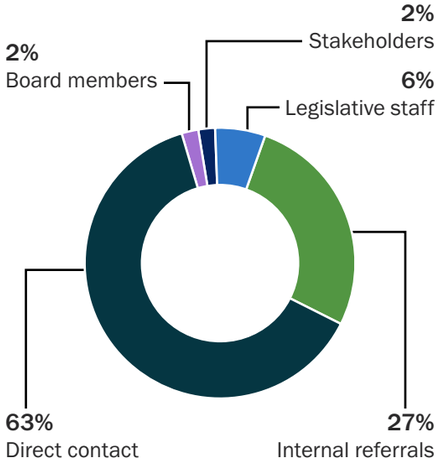
The Ombuds Inquiry form, however, remained available and allowed members to send inquiries directly to our office. This resulted in an extreme increase in inquiries because members used this form for general communications.

For general questions or matters concerning communication with a caseworker, we worked with the right business areas to transfer cases accordingly. We expect that once the system stabilizes, the unsecure message portal will be reinstated, which likely will result in fewer general inquiries submitted via the Ombuds Inquiry form. Most internal referrals continue to originate from the Contact Center and member service centers, since these are the main ways our members reach out to us.

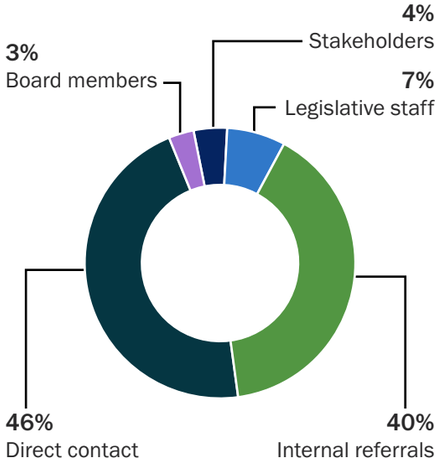
Fiscal year 2025–26



Fiscal year 2024–25



Fiscal year 2023–24



Case types

Each year, we expect to receive inquiries related to members transitioning from active employment to retirement. Unfortunately, we also expect inquiries related to other life-changing events that result in disability or survivor benefits. These stressful events for our members and beneficiaries sometimes escalate to the level of the ombuds.

During fiscal year 2025–26, most inquiries were about the new system. The main topics fell into three groups:

_my_CalSTRS login and registration help
This topic saw the biggest rise in ombuds cases, with 323 related to *my*CalSTRS access and usability—much higher than the previous average of fewer than five cases per year. The office communicated members' frustrations and concerns to the executive team, aiming to improve the portal during the stabilization phase.

Operational backlog
Due to the three-week transition period in September 2025 in which business areas were not able to work at full capacity, many business areas faced backlogs. Also, unexpected system issues significantly strained service levels for members. Members' key concerns were delays with survivor benefit payments, refunds and service credit purchases.

Difficulty accessing services
Launch of the new system greatly affected the Contact Center. Prior to implementation, members usually reached representatives within one minute. After implementation, wait times averaged several hours. This led to more contacts with the Ombuds Office, primarily due to limited access to the Contact Center and no ability to send unsecured messages. The increase in inquiries was closely linked to problems with *my*CalSTRS access and operational backlogs.

Breakdown of topics by business area

Contact Center: 36% of cases

Ombuds cases related to the Contact Center primarily focused on accessing Contact Center services and the usability of *my*CalSTRS. Increased processing times, attributed to operational backlogs and challenges with *my*CalSTRS accessibility for members, resulted in overflow contacts and general dissatisfaction regarding hold times to reach a Contact Center agent. Despite extended wait times, members consistently reported high levels of satisfaction with agents upon resolution, reflecting the resilience and commitment of Contact Center staff. These positive interactions helped keep satisfaction high as members got used to the changes in *my*CalSTRS.

To address increased call volumes and further enhance response times, the Contact Center recruited additional staff. With ongoing system stability improvements and the increase in resources, Contact Center wait times steadily declined, leading to a reduction in Customer Service-related ombuds cases.

Case types (continued)

Accounting: 19% of cases

There were three themes for ombuds contacts related to our accounting business area:

Refunds

After the new system went live, members who left their jobs had to wait longer to get their refund payments. This was due in part to a new process requiring employers to certify terminations through the Secure Employer Website, which initially led to increased employer errors and contacts to the ombuds office. With additional training and support from our Employer Services Division, employers are becoming more comfortable using this new process.

The refunds team also faced delays because some benefit calculations required manual intervention. Strict quality controls ensured payment accuracy, which is especially important because these are final payments. However, these issues extended processing times, which lead to more inquiries and hardship requests from members urgently needing funds. The ombuds office worked with accounting to expedite payments for those eligible under CalSTRS' emergency payment policy.

Service credit purchases

Members purchasing service credit often need employers to certify leaves of absence, which can lead to increased errors and inquiries. Employer Services provided extra training and support, gradually addressing these issues. The team also faced delays and backlog due to the new system, which resulted in extended processing times for billing statements. The ombuds office saw more inquiries because of these delays, mainly from members retiring at the end of the school year. The team then prioritized issuing billing statements to soon-to-be retirees, improving timeliness for those most in need, though a backlog remained at the end of the fiscal year.

Taxes and 1099-Rs

More retired members contacted the ombuds office regarding Form 1099-R because they could not access it through their *my*CalSTRS account. Typically, these inquiries start with the Contact Center, but due to account access problems, retired members turned to the ombuds office instead. The ombuds team helped members find the right area in *my*CalSTRS to get the digital form or mailed them a duplicate 1099-R.

Once members are comfortable with the new portal, retired members will be able to retrieve their forms via *my*CalSTRS or will contact the Contact Center, reducing inquiries on this topic.

Service Retirement: 15% of cases

Based on what we heard from members, those starting a service retirement benefit were hardly affected by the new system. There was an increase in ombuds cases because of new legislation restricting how far back a retirement date can be chosen. Starting January 1, 2026, members cannot select a retirement date more than 270 days before their application is received. Previously, no such limit existed if the date was after the last day of work or service credit purchase. This rule has led to more members requesting earlier dates, which the ombuds office reviews and assists with appeals if needed. Postretirement earnings limits, both the annual limit and the 180-day separation requirement, are also frequent concerns, with members seeking guidance on how these affect their benefits.

Case types (continued)

Survivor Benefits: 13% of cases

Most of the cases we handled from survivors of deceased members involved waiting for an application or a form to be processed before survivor benefits can be paid. The team faced a backlog due to the implementation of the new system, which significantly increased the processing time—survivors waited up to 180 days for their payment. Caseworkers' limited visibility to the types of cases assigned to them restricted their ability to prioritize certain payments.

During the stabilization period, improved reports from the new system allowed the team to focus on cases involving ongoing monthly payments to beneficiaries. Some cases arose because survivors had difficulty reaching the Contact Center or their caseworker. We referred these directly to the caseworker for follow-up assistance. In situations where financial hardship was evident—particularly for option beneficiaries and surviving spouses who depend on monthly payments as their main income—we requested these cases be expedited.

Employer Reporting: 9% of cases

Most cases we received related to employer reporting are for service credit or creditable compensation reporting discrepancies. Recently passed legislation (AB 1997, McKinnor 2024) aims to simplify employer reporting by updating definitions of membership and creditable compensation. While we anticipate fewer employer reporting issues once the law goes into effect on July 1, 2027, inquiries may remain steady for the foreseeable future, as most of our cases relate to old reporting.

Members also requested our involvement in getting unused sick leave reported at retirement, since it's ultimately included in the calculation of their service retirement benefit. With the new system, employers now report this information through the Secure Employer Website. Though this was not a significant number of ombuds cases, we collaborated with the Employer Services Division when certain employers needed assistance and guidance on the new reporting process.

We also heard from members who requested assistance with their unused sick leave being transferred between employers, which is outside of CalSTRS' jurisdiction. Since the Office of the Ombuds cannot assist with sick leave transfer requests, we often encouraged members to work directly with their employers to facilitate the process. We also referred members to their union representative for additional support.

DATA

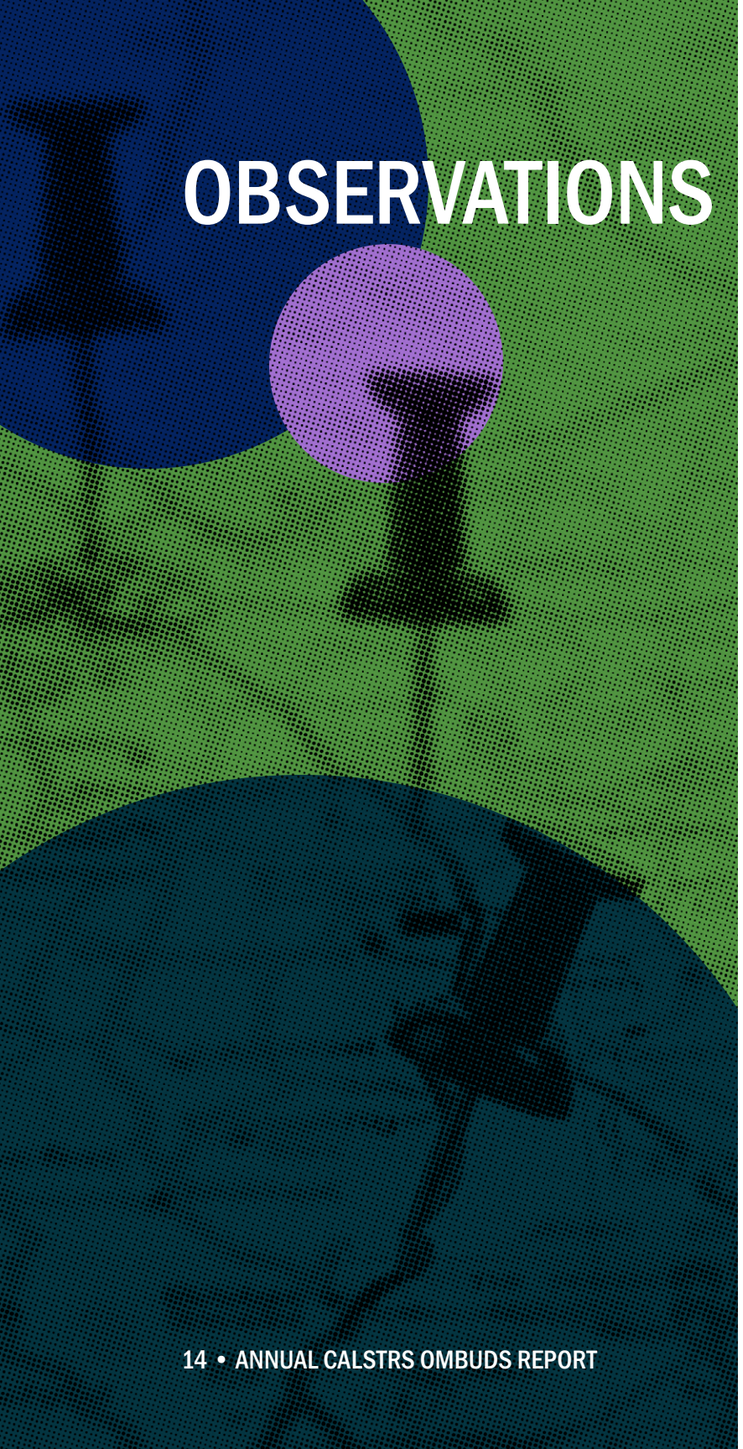
Disability Benefits: 5% of cases

Most ombuds contacts related to disability benefits were from members seeking assistance through the application process, either during the initial review or during the Executive Review—an appeal process should their original disability application be denied.

Disability benefit applications undergo a rigorous review process that involves extensive medical documentation, records of reasonable accommodations from the employer, and coordination with the workers' compensation carrier if the disability resulted from a workplace injury. The process may also include an independent medical evaluation to confirm the extent of the impairment. Due to the complexity of the review, the application and appeal process can be lengthy—initial reviews may take up to five months, and appeals can extend longer than a year. We continue to work with our partners in Disability Services to assist and educate our members, while also looking at opportunities to streamline the process.

Community Property: 3% of cases

The new system impacted members and ex-spouses seeking benefit estimates during divorce proceedings. Since CalSTRS benefits are considered community property, CalSTRS must participate if a member's account is or could be divided due to a divorce. Most divorcing members require an estimate regarding how their account might be split. This process was designed to be automatic in the new system, but initial challenges led to delays in generating estimates. As a result, the ombuds office received complaints about these delays. The team responded by implementing system improvements that addressed the issue and began working through the backlog. Several months post-implementation, the frequency of these complaints decreased and are now stable.



OBSERVATIONS

Looking ahead to 2026–27

Ongoing pension system stabilization

As detailed in this report, the ombuds office experienced substantial impacts directly attributable to the implementation of the new system. Since implementation, the office regularly communicated member experiences to the CalSTRS executive team and division directors, particularly those affecting service delivery during the system's rollout. Most cases were related to difficulties accessing CalSTRS staff, particularly via the Contact Center. However, there were also complaints associated with *my*CalSTRS registration and accessibility. Additionally, operational backlogs contributed to the increase in cases.

CalSTRS has taken steps to improve service to our members:

Increased staffing
CalSTRS hired additional personnel to manage higher call volumes and to improve response times.

Made operational improvements
CalSTRS allocated resources to address operational challenges that contributed to the heightened call frequency.

Implemented system fixes
CalSTRS implemented numerous fixes and planned ongoing improvements. We expect a significant reduction in ombuds cases related to the new system and *my*CalSTRS over the coming fiscal year.

Visibility at member service centers

The ombuds visited multiple CalSTRS member service centers to address increased foot traffic and gather member feedback regarding their experiences with CalSTRS services. These in-person interactions offered valuable insights and narratives that the ombuds shared with senior leadership during efforts to enhance services and drive operational improvements.

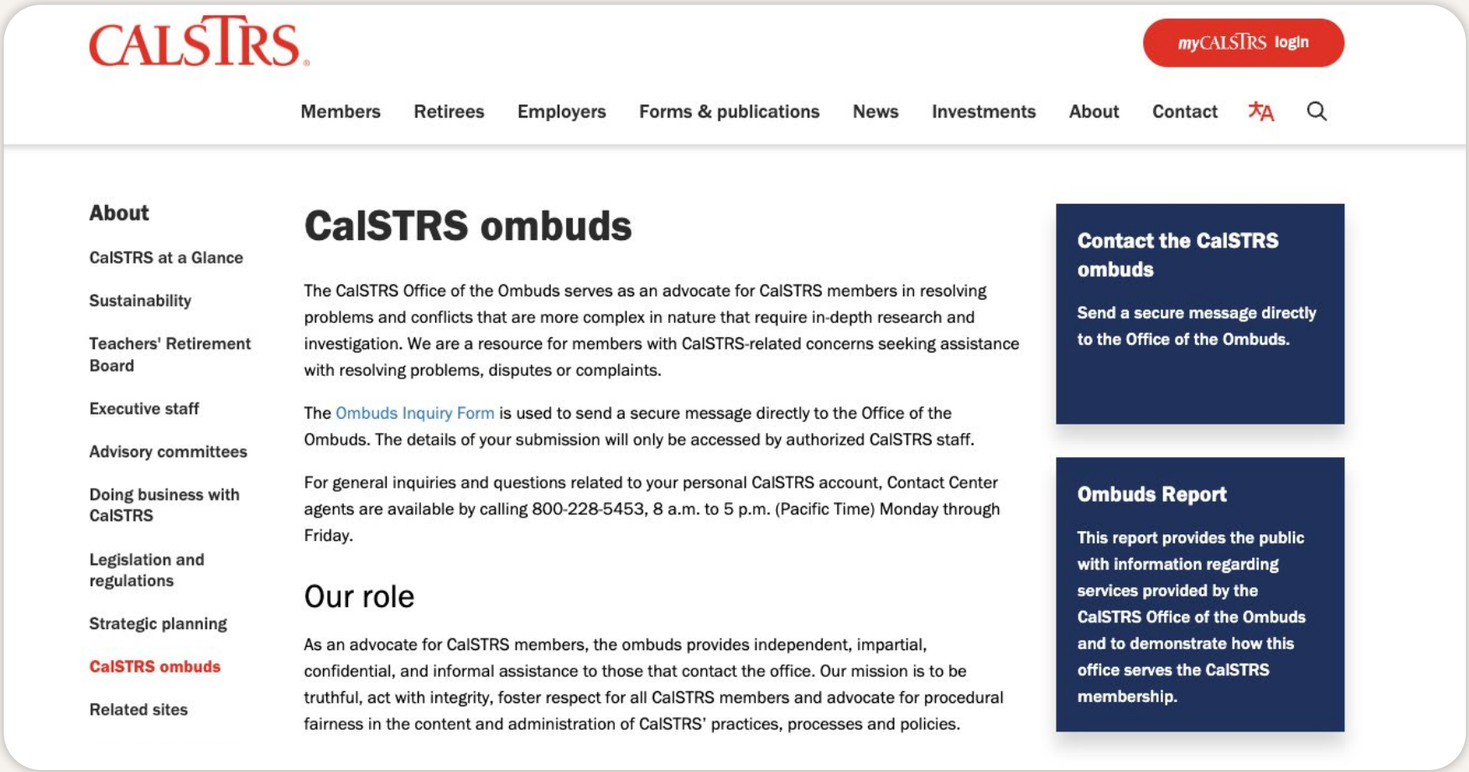
While this helped stabilize the system, the objective for the coming fiscal year is to further increase the office's visibility and presence at member service centers. Our aim is to engage more frequently with members who request our services, provide support, and continue to collect feedback from visitors.

Board elections

The ombuds also serves as the board election coordinator for our three active member representatives on the Teachers' Retirement Board. The nomination process opens in September 2026, concluding with elections, if needed, at the end of 2027. Coordinating a contested election involves numerous tasks, but these responsibilities will not disrupt the ombuds' service to members. The office monitors workload and will add resources to maintain the office's high service standards if needed.

CONTACT US

Visit **CalSTRS.com/ombuds** for information on the Office of the Ombuds services and to submit a secure online message directly to the ombuds.



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myCALSTRS login

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CalSTRS ombuds

The CalSTRS Office of the Ombuds serves as an advocate for CalSTRS members in resolving problems and conflicts that are more complex in nature that require in-depth research and investigation. We are a resource for members with CalSTRS-related concerns seeking assistance with resolving problems, disputes or complaints.

The Ombuds Inquiry Form is used to send a secure message directly to the Office of the Ombuds. The details of your submission will only be accessed by authorized CalSTRS staff.

For general inquiries and questions related to your personal CalSTRS account, Contact Center agents are available by calling 800-228-5453, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. (Pacific Time) Monday through Friday.

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.

Contact the CalSTRS ombuds

Send a secure message directly to the Office of the Ombuds.

Ombuds Report

This report provides the public with information regarding services provided by the CalSTRS Office of the Ombuds and to demonstrate how this office serves the CalSTRS membership.