

ALASKA STATE OMBUDSMAN

Streamlines investigations and reduces bottlenecks using i-Sight software

SNAPSHOT

The Alaska State Ombudsman was established by the Alaska Legislature in 1975. Its mission is to investigate citizen complaints about administrative acts of state agencies and determine appropriate remedies.

As part of its Strategic Plan 2017-2022, the Alaska State Ombudsman set a goal to conduct efficient and effective investigations that are completed and reported in a timely fashion. This included a strategy that the Ombudsman source and implement a case management system to support investigations and workflow.

THE CHALLENGE

Until 2019, the Alaska State Ombudsman was using a custom-built system that had been implemented in the 90s.

- > The system was unreliable and crashed often.
- > There were no tools to monitor workflow, caseloads or bottlenecks.
- > It lacked an effective search function.
- > There weren't enough fields to collect the required information.
- > Reporting was limited, with no way to build custom reports.
- > Reporting results were inconsistent
- > The IT department was spending far too much time on support and maintenance.



THE SOLUTION

The Ombudsman needed an efficient, secure case management solution to manage complaints but also as a way to supervise and manage the workflow of her team in real time. The agency needed a system that was:

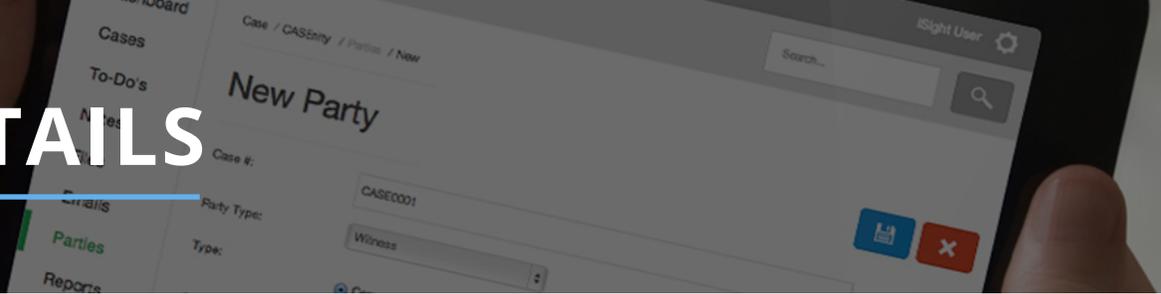
- > Secure, to be compliant with their high confidentiality standard
- > Intuitive, so that new staff could be on-boarded quickly, with little training
- > Configurable, to match the agency's work processes
- > Able to meet the requirement for a robust reporting system
- > Flexible, to allow more than one investigator to be assigned to a case
- > Efficient, to ensure investigators could continue with their daily tasks without waiting for the Ombudsman's input

THE RESULT

Since implementing i-Sight:

- > 94 per cent of complaints have been reviewed and closed within 60 days
- > Cases stay on track as investigators follow the workflow, uploading case notes and evidence files and creating alerts when something needs to be reviewed
- > Investigators can work on their cases when they are out of the office, even in rural parts of Alaska
- > Secure access roles ensure there is no danger of exposing information to unauthorized people
- > New and existing employees have been up and running quickly, with high adoption rates for the new technology
- > Case-linking has saved the team hours of time and effort

THE DETAILS



The Alaska State Ombudsman was established by the Alaska Legislature in 1975. Its mission is to investigate citizen complaints about administrative acts of state agencies and determine appropriate remedies. It is a non-partisan and independent organization.

The Alaska State Ombudsman is also a resource to the Legislature. The Ombudsman may issue investigative reports and submit recommendations for changes in state laws to address citizen complaints. The Ombudsman can also contract with municipalities and school districts to provide local ombudsman services.

As part of its Strategic Plan 2017-2022, the Ombudsman set a goal to conduct efficient and effective investigations that are completed and reported in a timely fashion. This included a strategy that the Ombudsman source and implement a case management system to support investigations and workflow.

THE CHALLENGE

Until 2019, the Alaska State Ombudsman was using a custom-built system that had been implemented in the 90s. Over time, the system had become unreliable. Frequent crashes meant that the team couldn't be confident that their work would be saved.

The existing system offered no tools to monitor workflow, case loads, or bottlenecks in the investigation process. There wasn't an effective search function, and a limited number of fields was available for collecting information.

Reporting capacity was limited. There was no mechanism to build custom reports. Standard report results had become inconsistent. "I would run the same report with the same parameters on the same morning and get different results," said Kate Burkhart, the Alaska State Ombudsman.

The old system was static and could not keep pace with Windows. "Every time we would install a Windows update, we would break something," said Burkhart. "Then our IT department would have to use chicken wire and duct tape to put it back together." Because of the frequency of Windows updates "there was always the fear the this would be the one that would break it permanently. Our IT staff were spending mountains of time on support and maintenance, way beyond what could be expected of them," said Burkhart.

THE SOLUTION

"When I took office, we were reasonably and justifiably criticized for being slow. In our strategic plan we set ourselves a benchmark of closing all complaints and investigations within 12 months of receipt," explained Burkhart. "We needed something that would help streamline the processes that investigators use, but also address where the bottleneck in our process really is: with final review by the Ombudsman herself."

The Ombudsman needed an efficient, secure case management solution to manage complaints but also as a way to supervise and manage the workflow of her team in real time. Additional functions to perform quality assurance were also important.

"I try to maintain a team of highly competent people," said Burkhart. "My preference is to give staff the tools they need to do the work as well as possible and then monitor from 10,000 feet." A robust case management platform would allow investigators to get on with their daily tasks, while providing a mechanism for the Ombudsman to monitor workflow and performance.

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From soup to nuts
the entire
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was great.**

**– Kate Burkhart,
Alaska State
Ombudsman**



THE SOLUTION

The Alaska State Ombudsman needed a system that was:

- › Secure, to be compliant with the agency's high confidentiality standard;
- › Intuitive, so that new staff could be onboarded quickly, with little training;
- › Configurable, to match the agency's work processes;
- › Able to meet the requirement for a robust reporting system; and
- › Flexible, to allow more than one investigator to be assigned to a case.

Through a competitive procurement process, the Ombudsman chose i-Sight.

"A tight RFP and working with a consultant and IT experts to make sure the bids were responsive helped us ensure that we got a good vendor in the end," said Burkhart, noting that i-Sight's pricing was transparent from the beginning, and didn't have to be revised, which she considered to be a good sign.

THE RESULTS

Six months after implementing i-Sight, the Alaska State Ombudsman reports that 94 per cent of complaints received since the day i-Sight went live have been reviewed and closed within 60 days. This is due in large part to a streamlined workflow and a reliable platform that's accessible from anywhere at any time.

The intake team enters new case information into i-Sight as complaints are received. Cases can be stored for the regular weekly review or flagged with a to-do for the Ombudsman to review immediately. The Ombudsman can then escalate the case or return it to the queue for regular review.

Once a case is assigned, the investigator follows the workflow in i-Sight, uploading case notes and evidence files as they go. For work processes that require review of correspondence, the investigator creates a to-do to alert a peer or the Ombudsman. The Ombudsman can view cases and monitor case activity and progress.

"I can see what's going on. If things need to be fixed or updated I can either do that or use the to-do function to make sure it gets done," said Burkhart. "And I really like that we've got that management review function where I can just go in and look everything over. If the complaint file is complete, I can check a box, put a little comment in there that says 'looks good' and we are off to the races. I don't have to bother anyone. I can do quality review on my couch in the middle of the night if I want to."

The ability to access i-Sight remotely helps investigations stay on track and prevents delays when someone is out of the office. "When we send a team to do outreach in rural communities in Alaska, they can take a laptop, log in, and enter new complaints — maybe even resolve complaints — all from a remote location," says Burkhart.

With secure access roles, there's no danger of exposing information to unauthorized people. "Alaska is a small state and it's not unusual for us to have conflicts, either professionally or personally, with a complaint," explained Burkhart. "It's been really easy for me to be able to deny access when there is a conflict of interest, so that we ensure that all complaints are reviewed objectively."

i-Sight's user-friendly interface has resulted in high adoption rates and fast onboarding. "We hired a new intake person in June, so she had no involvement with i-Sight prior to go-live and she was a master user just four months in," said Burkhart.

The case-linking feature is saving the team hours of time and effort. When a complainant is linked to more than one complaint, all the cases can be linked. And when a grievance is filed about a previous decision, the case can be reviewed with a few clicks.

The business analytics (Yellowfin) was a big draw, because it provides a comprehensive reporting function. "It provides so much reporting capacity, it is a little daunting once you start using it. We're slowly but surely learning the basics, and we get additional training as we go. We should be confident in all the report functions within 12 months of implementation," said Burkhart.

When it came time to implement i-Sight, Burkhart was nervous. "The State of Alaska has had multiple big IT projects over the last 10 years and almost every single project had some big issue when they went live. So, I was really scared about this. But I had nothing to worry about," she said.

"Our contractor, who is part of a software consulting and development company, said that he had never worked with a better company. We had no barriers... and there was no over promising. From soup to nuts the entire experience was great."