

International Conference  
of Ombuds Institutions  
for the Armed Forces

**16ICOAF**

2024

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**Berlin**

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The International Conference of Ombuds  
Institutions for the Armed Forces

**The Armed Forces under  
Pressure** | **Ombuds Institutions  
and the Duty of Care  
to Service Members**



Deutscher Bundestag  
Die Wehrbeauftragte

**DCAF** Geneva Centre  
for Security Sector  
Governance



# **The 16<sup>th</sup> International Conference of Ombuds Institutions for the Armed Forces**

**30 September – 2 October 2024, Berlin, Germany**

## **Conference Statement**

As the International Conference of Ombuds Institutions for the Armed Forces (ICOAF) enters its sixteenth year, the conference continues to promote the exchange of experiences and good practices, as well as foster increased cooperation among ombuds institutions.

Jointly hosted by the German Parliamentary Commissioner for the Armed Forces and DCAF – the Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance, the 16<sup>th</sup> ICOAF took place in Berlin from 30 September to 2 October 2024.

Throughout the conference, ICOAF was able to further consolidate and strengthen its role as a platform to promote democratic oversight of the armed forces and prevent maladministration and human rights abuses, as well as to strengthen dialogue and mutual understanding.

This conference statement serves as a compilation of good practices and key reflections discussed during the conference and does not serve as an obligation for conference participants to act upon nor to implement said practices. Ombuds institutions possess specific and unique mandates, and therefore not all good practices may be relevant to all conference participants.

*The Conferees declare the following:*

### **Introduction**

1. Building on the successes of the previous fifteen International Conferences of Ombuds Institutions for the Armed Forces in Berlin (2009), Vienna (2010), Belgrade (2011), Ottawa (2012), Oslo (2013), Geneva (2014), Prague (2015), Amsterdam (2016), London (2017), Johannesburg (2018), Sarajevo (2019), a virtual conference (2020), a hybrid conference hosted from Canberra (2021), Oslo (2022), and Vienna (2023), the 2024 conference was held under theme “The Armed Forces under Pressures – Ombuds Institutions and the Duty of Care to Service Members”.
2. We recognise that ICOAF has established itself as an important international forum to promote and strengthen democratic oversight of the armed forces, with

participants sharing best practices and common aspirations towards preventing maladministration and human rights abuses.

3. Recognising that each national context is unique, we underline the importance of ongoing international dialogue among ombuds institutions to promote and protect human rights and fundamental freedoms within and by the armed forces, as well as to provide mutual support in fulfilling our respective mandates.

### **Understanding Forces – Pressures and Demands on the Military**

4. Participants acknowledged the complexities and interconnectedness of the structural forces at play that account for rising pressures and demands on the armed forces. In the age of the *polycrisis*, multiple risks stemming from climate change, geopolitical flux, disruptive technologies, societal shifts and changing demographics collide and amplify one another and accumulate as a mounting burden on the armed forces.
5. Amid *geopolitical* flux, *technological* disruption, and *societal* shifts, the mounting burden on the armed forces manifests in outdated military equipment and infrastructure unable to meet growing demands, constant pressures on military personnel to acquire new skills amid evolving roles and responsibilities, the need for the military to integrate advanced technologies, and ongoing struggles with recruitment and retention.
6. Recognisant of the heavy burdens shouldered by military personnel – enduring physical hazards, mental strain, and emotional trauma – as well as of the rising pressures and demands, conference participants emphasise the crucial role of ombuds institutions in ensuring the duty of care is upheld by overseeing the armed forces and safeguarding the well-being of service members. Strengthening the resilience of service members is essential to effectively meet the complex challenges of today.
7. Conference participants recognized the importance of adopting a whole-of-society approach to address the challenges stemming from the rising pressures and demands on the armed forces. Acknowledging that these challenges are not confined to the defence sector alone, participants emphasized that effective responses require broad-based support and collaboration across government agencies, the private sector, civil society, and international actors.

### **Support and Care Prior to Deployment – Families of Service Members**

8. Participants acknowledge the crucial role of families of service members, who provide essential support to ease the burden and help manage the challenges of military service. Conversely, family strain may also significantly affect service members' well-being and performance. As armed forces personnel increasingly

face the prospect of deployment and endure higher levels of psychological and physical demands, supporting families of service members is essential in safeguarding the duty of care.

9. Conference participants emphasized that one of the greatest challenges faced by the families of service members is the lack of timely and accurate access to information. Whether regarding deployment details, the status of their family member, or available support services, a lack of information can lead to increased stress and uncertainty. Ensuring families are well-informed and have direct channels for timely updates is essential to reduce their emotional burden and strengthen their overall resilience.
10. Depending on their mandate, ombuds institutions can advocate for the needs of family members by providing channels for their concerns, overseeing the effectiveness and accessibility of family support services – such as counselling, financial assistance, and healthcare resources – or by identifying systemic issues and promoting policy changes that directly address the unique challenges families of service members face. Regular exchanges with family members enable ombuds institutions to better understand their evolving needs and ensure that support services remain relevant and responsive. Mentorship programmes and training workshops may further support families and contribute to better awareness and engagement. Ombuds institutions that extend their scope towards service members' families – in their broadest sense – contribute to the resilience and readiness of deployed individuals.
11. Conference participants recognised shifts in family structures of service members, with shifting gender roles, economic pressures, and evolving cultural and social norms. Ombuds institutions play a crucial role in ensuring this diversity is reflected in legal frameworks and policies governing the armed forces, with direct implications for who is recognised as family, can lodge complaints, and access support services.

### **Support and Care During Deployment – Women in the Armed Forces**

12. Participants emphasized the importance of ensuring that the duty of care within the armed forces extends to all members, regardless of gender, age, or background. However, they acknowledged that women, in particular, face unique challenges and are often subject to discriminatory policies and practices. Ombuds institutions are therefore instrumental in advocating for the rights and needs of women in the armed forces, as well as ensuring equitable access to care and support.
13. Safeguarding the duty of care for women in the armed forces requires that ombuds institutions address gender-specific grievances and oversee military policies and practices to promote inclusivity and sensitivity to gender differences, striving to



be gender responsive. Through the use of their oversight mechanisms, ombuds institutions can work to rectify shortcomings and foster an environment that supports equal opportunities, fair treatment, and access to necessary resources for women at all levels of service.

14. Participants emphasized the importance of addressing both military policies and the discourses that shape the lived experiences of women in the armed forces. It is crucial to resist essentialist narratives that narrowly define women's roles, focusing not on eliminating differences but on empowering diverse individuals and tailoring policies to the specific military context and the unique challenges women face. This approach requires strong leadership, addressing disincentive structures, effectively communicating policy changes, measuring outcomes rather than outputs, and institutionalizing change to position the military at the forefront of social progress. Ombudsman institutions should routinely evaluate the impact of these policies on women in the armed forces, ensuring continuous adjustments based on their findings to maintain a proactive and supportive approach.
15. Participants emphasised the need for ombuds institutions to have measures in place that protect complainants, especially the most vulnerable, from reprisals and repercussions in order to maintain the integrity of the complaints handling process. This requires robust safeguards, strict confidentiality, and fostering a culture that encourages reporting without fear of retaliation.
16. Promoting diversity within ombuds institutions for the armed forces is essential to better understand and address the challenges faced by female service members. Diversity within ombuds institutions introduces a range of perspectives and experiences, strengthening their capacity to advocate effectively for equitable treatment and support for all service members.

### **Support and Care After Deployment – Veteran Aftercare**

17. As the scope and complexity of military operations continue to evolve, so do the stress factors associated with deployment. Participants, therefore, underscored the critical need for comprehensive mental and physical health support systems that are widely accessible to returning service members. They emphasized the importance of ombuds institutions in actively addressing gaps in the duty of care, particularly in upholding and strengthening support for veterans with physical and mental health concerns.
18. An effective regulatory framework is essential for providing meaningful support to service members returning from deployment with physical and psychological injuries. Participants agreed that ombuds institutions can play a crucial role in ensuring that post-deployment programs are designed to facilitate long-term recovery, promote sustained well-being, and rehabilitation. This includes not only

immediate care but also ongoing access to resources that aid in managing long-term health concerns.

19. Participants noted the importance of viewing health concerns through an integrated care approach that addresses both the physical and psychological impacts of military service, recognises the interplay between them in the recovery process, and ensures support systems are equipped to handle the complex and multifaceted health challenges veterans face. Ombuds institutions can identify gaps where physical and psychological concerns are not adequately integrated, provide channels for veterans about fragmented care, and facilitate cooperation between various healthcare providers.
20. Participants underscored the importance of addressing value orientations and moral injury in the healing process and suicide prevention efforts for veterans. Ombuds institutions can play a pivotal role in ensuring that care frameworks include support for the emotional and ethical dilemmas that veterans may face, particularly those stemming from the moral complexities of military service. By fostering dialogue and creating avenues for veterans to process moral injury, institutions can contribute to comprehensive mental health care and reduce the risk of suicide.
21. Participants highlighted the increasing medical care needs of veterans as they age, emphasizing the importance of healthcare systems being adaptable to the evolving health demands of veterans over time. As veterans grow older, the physical and psychological injuries sustained during military service can intensify, requiring more specialized and long-term care. Ombuds institutions can help that veterans have continued access to appropriate healthcare resources, including age-related support, to maintain their well-being and quality of life over time.
22. Ombuds institutions can act as key intermediaries in the broader network of veterans' associations, military organisations, and healthcare providers to facilitate communication and coordination efforts and build a cohesive and comprehensive care ecosystem for veterans.

### **Beyond the Uniform – Paving the Pathway to Civilian Life**

23. Participants recognised the unique challenges that veterans face when transitioning from military to civilian life, including the loss of camaraderie, the need to create new routines, difficulties in managing everyday necessities, and securing stable employment. Participants further stressed the importance of tailored support services to address these challenges and underscored the role of ombuds institutions in overseeing and advocating for comprehensive transition programs.

24. The complexities of reintegration, such as adjusting to civilian work environments, acquiring new skills, and navigating bureaucratic processes for benefits, were highlighted as key areas where veterans need support. Participants emphasized that ombuds institutions can help bridge these gaps by advocating for simplified processes and offering guidance to ensure veterans receive the assistance they are entitled to.
25. Participants recognized that facilitating a smooth transition to civilian life has far-reaching implications, noting that strengthening support services for veterans not only directly benefits individuals but also increases the appeal of a military career. They emphasized the crucial role of ombuds institutions in advocating for policies that facilitate effective reintegration, thereby helping to mitigate the pressures on the armed forces arising from recruitment and retention challenges thus reducing the distance between the military and society.

## **Conclusions**

26. ICOAF is a platform to exchange information, good practices and experiences among the ICOAF partner institutions. The participation of over 100 participants, representing over 40 countries is evidence of the platform's growth. It calls upon DCAF to explore future avenues to strengthen effective cooperation.
27. Participants call upon DCAF to continue its efforts in providing support to individual participating institutions, particularly through capacity-building exercises and peer-to-peer exchange.
28. Participants request DCAF to continue exploring how the international exchange of information and experiences between ombuds institutions can be further enhanced, particularly when it comes to peace operations, while at the same time respecting the particularities of national legal and institutional frameworks of ombuds institutions.
29. ICOAF remains open to relevant institutions from countries that have not participated at previous conferences.
30. The seventeenth ICOAF will take place in Pretoria, South Africa from 8 to 10 October 2025.

Berlin, 2 October 2024