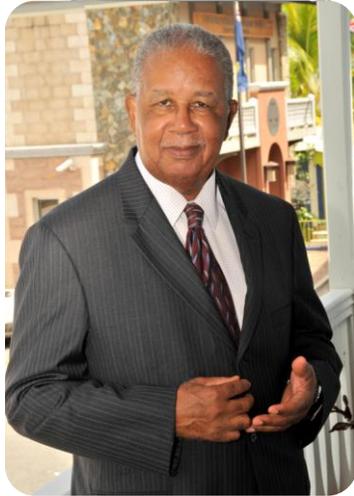


From the Virgin Islands Complaints Commission Nine Guidelines for Resolving Your Own Complaints



“What steps have you taken to resolve the problem?” That is often one of the first questions we ask people who contact us with a complaint. Under law, the Complaints Commissioner is not allowed to investigate when people have available a right of appeal to another body set up by law. The Commissioner also does not usually investigate if the complainer has not given the department or agency a chance to deal with the complaint. Disputes and grievances can often be resolved with simple, honest communication, certainly not all the time, but enough that it is almost always worth trying *before* filing a complaint with the Complaints Commission.

Here are some basic, important guidelines to follow when you are trying to resolve any “consumer” problem, whether it involves a government agency or not.

- 1. Be pleasant, persistent, and patient;** The wheels of government usually move, but not always quickly. We have found the citizens who are best able to get problems resolved have three core traits in common: they treat everyone with respect and courtesy; they don’t give up easily; and they realize that most problems are not resolved overnight.
- 2. Exercise your appeal rights; but first, use the complaints system in place.** Does the problem involve a decision or action that has a formal appeal process? If you are not sure, ask the agency. The right to appeal usually has a deadline. Respond well before the deadline and consider sending your appeal by registered mail, or deliver in person and get a receipt. If you cannot write before the deadline, call to see if you can get an extension or if you can appeal by telephone or email. But first, ask to see the agency’s **service charter**, which will usually have information on how to complain. If they do not have a charter, still ask for their complaints procedure.
- 3. Choose the right communication mode;** If you are not filing a formal appeal, decide whether you want to contact the agency in person, over the phone, or through a letter or e-mail. Go with the mode you are most comfortable with, unless the problem is urgent, in which case you will probably want to rule out a letter or e-mail.
- 4. ‘Strategize’;** Plan. Before making contact, consider who your likely audience will be. Will it be someone who can actually fix the problem to your satisfaction? If not, your initial goal might be along the lines of patiently explaining your concern, listening to the response, and then politely asking to speak with a supervisor—perhaps even more than once!
- 5. Be prepared.** Be sure to have any relevant information available before contacting the agency. If you want face-to-face contact, we recommend you call first. A short phone call could save headaches and wasted time, such as finding that the person you need to talk to is sick that day.
- 6. Plan your questions.** Write down your questions before calling or visiting the agency.

7. ***Know your rights and the law.*** Be sure to specifically ask which law, rule, or policy authorized the agency's actions. Then ask for a copy of the law, rule, or policy (so you can read it for yourself, to see whether you agree).
8. ***Keep records.*** Take good notes of all conversations, including by telephone. This should include the person's name and title, the time and date, what they told you and name of any other person present. Keep all records received from the agency, even envelopes. Also keep copies of any letters, faxes, or e-mails you send to the agency.
9. ***Read what is sent to you.*** Carefully read everything from the agency, front and back including the fine print! If all that fails, do contact us. Our office has authority to investigate complaints about most government agencies and departments. Major exceptions include the courts, the House of Assembly and the Cabinet (but we may investigate the House office and the Cabinet Office.). We do not have authority to investigate any judge, magistrate or public prosecutor. Nor can we investigate police action taken to investigate crime or protect the security of the Territory. Outside of that, we can investigate complaints against the police.

[Based on a publication by the Citizens'Aide/Ombudsman of Iowa].