

## **Delaware Coalition for Open Government Op-Ed The Immediate Need for a Delaware Office of the State Inspector General**

Two recent revelations – the indictment of Delaware’s Auditor of Accounts and the scandal of fraud and resistance to explaining secretive state contracts with a major healthcare-services provider involving many millions of tax dollars – puts the need for a nonpartisan, independent State Office of the Inspector General in the spotlight once again.

The Inspector General not only would be authorized to investigate possible illegal activities of state agency officials, but also could investigate mismanagement issues that otherwise do not rise to the level of a crime but are detrimental to Delaware and its citizens.

Because an Inspector General can act in concert with the Delaware Attorney General or the U.S. Attorney’s Office, a State Office of the Inspector General, promoting ethical and legal behavior and stopping agency mismanagement and abuse of office, would benefit all Delawareans.

It is important to note that citing agency mismanagement is not in any way a condemnation of the many Delaware state employees who serve with integrity and dedication. But when state agencies fail in their missions, exceed their boundaries, or ignore their inherent responsibilities, the public has the right to demand solutions and expect them to be implemented.

Transparency, accountability, and “in the public interest” are essential guideposts to assist Delaware state-agency officials in making decisions and carrying out policies for the well-being, safety, and happiness of Delaware’s citizens, as well as properly using taxpayer money and following state laws.

When state agencies dismiss these guideposts and fail to employ effective internal controls, misconduct, mismanagement, and neglect of office swiftly can lead to conflicting policies and actions and even fraud. Consequently, the Delaware Coalition for Open Government (DeCOG) believes we need a dedicated, nonpartisan, and independent State Inspector General for oversight and investigation of state agencies to stop waste, fraud, and abuse and ultimately to enhance public trust in our government.

Harmful practices and actions – and in some cases, inaction – can be the result of deep-rooted, counterproductive conduct, such as conflicts of interest; quid pro quo; cronyism; nepotism; intimidation; misstatement of facts; or a disregard for our environment, our citizens, and our workforce.

When there are problems such as widespread water pollution; environmental-justice and social-justice issues; questionable property and real estate sales and leases; questionable grants and loans; disruption of public transportation of low-income residents and minorities; agency race, gender, and/or pay discrimination; risks to the health and safety of citizens, including incarcerated persons, and employees; secretive state contracts; and questionable bidding processes, many in the public may perceive them – whether fairly or not – as the result of state-agency mismanagement, neglect of office, or influence by special interests.

By exercising authority to oversee and investigate state agencies and state-funded entities for compliance with their mission and with state laws, an independent, nonpartisan Delaware Inspector General and staff can

- 1) ensure that government agencies act in the public interest and conduct agency affairs with honesty, and integrity.
- 2) uphold the reputation of agencies that are in compliance with the law if wrongly accused of improper or illegal behavior.
- 3) save state taxpayer money – Inspectors General have a history of reducing waste and costly mismanagement errors that are in excess of the cost to fund the office.
- 4) investigate and evaluate state-agency deficiencies to address questionable practices and also to deter or stop waste, fraud, abuse, misconduct, mismanagement, and neglect of office.
- 5) hold agency officials ethically and legally accountable – for actions or, in some cases, inactions – to the principles described in Delaware’s Oath of Office and Code of Conduct.
- 6) recommend legal action regarding official misconduct if laws are broken, as described in the Delaware Criminal Code.
- 7) respond to alerts by resident and state-employee whistleblowers and investigate cited problems.
- 8) recommend changes to state laws, policies, and practices to help rectify systemic problems.
- 9) provide intangible benefits by serving as an alternative resource for concerned employees or contracted staff to report their concerns while motivating state-agency officials to function in the best interests of all Delawareans.

Two-thirds of all states and the District of Columbia have offices of the inspector general. In Florida, for example, every state agency is assigned its own inspector general, including the Department of Environmental Protection, the Department of Transportation, and the Department of Corrections.

Because chronic and unresolved problems are counter to Delaware’s ethical and legal directives and warrant oversight, investigation, and remediation, DelCOG is engaged in outreach at the grassroots, community, and legislative levels to urge creation of an independent, nonpartisan Delaware Office of the State Inspector General.

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