



# Office of Inspector General

U.S. Department of State

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

### Mission and Responsibilities

**Q:** *What is the Office of Inspector General?*

**A:** Congress established the Office of Inspector General (OIG) to be an independent office that operates under the direction of an Inspector General (IG). OIG is required to keep the Secretary of State, the Chief Executive Officer of the U.S. Agency for Global Media (USAGM), and Congress currently and fully informed on matters affecting the U.S. Department of State (Department) and USAGM.

**Q:** *What is the purpose of OIG?*

**A:** The mission of OIG is to promote economy, efficiency, and effectiveness in the programs and operations of the Department and USAGM. OIG accomplishes this mission by conducting independent and objective audits, inspections, evaluations, and investigations. The findings from OIG's work help the Department and USAGM improve programs and operations, as well as prevent and detect fraud, waste, abuse, and mismanagement.

**Q:** *How is the IG for the Department and USAGM chosen?*

**A:** The President nominates an individual, without regard to political affiliation, who must be confirmed by the U.S. Senate. The individual is selected based on integrity and ability in one or more of the following areas: auditing, financial analysis, law, management analysis, public administration, and investigations.

**Q:** *What are fraud, waste, and abuse?*

**A:** **Fraud** is a wrongful or criminal deception that unlawfully deprives the United States of something of value or secures from the United States a benefit, privilege, allowance, or consideration to which an individual is not entitled.

**Waste** is the extravagant, careless, or needless expenditure of Government funds, or the consumption of Government property that results from deficient practices, systems, controls, or decisions.

**Abuse** is managing ineffectively, incompetently, carelessly, or wrongly and includes making poor decisions and breaking rules for personal gain.

**Q:** *Is OIG independent?*

**A:** Yes. The Inspector General Act of 1978 (IG Act), as amended, and the Inspector General Empowerment Act of 2016 provide broad discretionary authority to OIG. Along with the Department of State Authorities Act, Fiscal Year 2017, they mandate the following:

- The IG must have access to all records or other materials available to the Department.
- The IG may conduct any audit, inspection, evaluation, or investigation that he or she deems necessary.
- The President's budget contains a separate budget estimate for OIG, including comments from the IG if the President's budget submission would substantially inhibit the performance of OIG's duties.
- The IG may be removed from office only by the President with written notification to Congress of the reasons for removal not later than 30 days before removal.

**Q:** *How can OIG be independent and also be part of the Department?*

**A:** OIG's responsibilities are focused on oversight of Department programs and operations. To better enable the effectiveness of this oversight, Congress established OIG to act independently from the Department, under the direction of the IG. Here are some examples of OIG independence:

- The IG has sole discretion to carry out audits, inspections, evaluations, and investigations and to do so without interference.
- OIG has direct access to all Department and USAGM personnel records and information. The Department does not have an attorney-client or deliberative-process privilege regarding OIG requests for information.
- Subject to approval by the U.S. Attorney General, OIG has access to Federal grand jury

materials otherwise protected from disclosure under the Federal Rules of Criminal Procedure.

- Department and USAGM personnel are required to cooperate with OIG in all audits, inspections, evaluations, and investigations. They cannot be retaliated against for providing information to or cooperating with OIG.
- OIG responds directly to requests from congressional committees, Members of Congress, and invitations to testify at congressional hearings.
- OIG has a separate appropriation from the Department and makes its own budgetary decisions. The office hires and controls its staff, manages its contract resources, and maintains and develops its own policies.

**Q:** *What are the responsibilities of the Department and USAGM to OIG?*

**A:** The Department and USAGM are required to cooperate with OIG and to provide requested information and documents to OIG in a timely manner. There is no attorney-client or deliberative-process privilege regarding OIG requests for information.

Furthermore, the Department is required to submit to OIG—within 5 business days of becoming aware of the allegation—a report of any allegation of (1) waste, fraud, or abuse in a Department program or operation; (2) criminal or serious misconduct on the part of a Department employee at the FS-1, GS-15, or GM-15 level or higher; (3) criminal misconduct on the part of a Department employee; and (4) serious, noncriminal misconduct on the part of any Department employee who is authorized to carry a weapon, make arrests, or conduct searches.

**Q:** *What are the responsibilities of Department and USAGM employees to OIG?*

**A:** Department and USAGM employees are required to cooperate with OIG in all audits, inspections, evaluations, and investigations. They shall report known or suspected fraud, waste, or abuse to OIG's Office of Investigations in a timely manner, and they may not be retaliated against for their assistance.

**Q:** *What are the responsibilities of Department and USAGM contractors to OIG?*

**A:** Like the Department and USAGM, contractors are required to provide requested information and documents to OIG in a timely manner. Similarly, contractor employees must also cooperate with OIG in all audits, inspections, evaluations, and investigations. They shall report known or suspected fraud, waste, or abuse to OIG's Office of Investigations in a timely manner, and they may not be retaliated against for their assistance.

**Q:** *What are OIG's responsibilities to the Department and USAGM?*

**A:** OIG is required to keep the Secretary of State, the Chief Executive Officer of the USAGM, and Congress fully and currently informed concerning fraud and other serious problems, abuses, and deficiencies in Department and USAGM programs and operations.

**Q:** *What is a Seven-Day Letter?*

**A:** The IG can use a Seven-Day Letter to inform the Department, USAGM, and Congress of particularly serious or flagrant programmatic or administrative problems that contribute to fraud, waste, abuse, or mismanagement in agency operations and programs. Upon receipt of the Seven-Day Letter from the IG, the Secretary of State or USAGM's Chief Executive Officer must send it within 7 days to the appropriate oversight committees of Congress with a report on the subject of the letter.

## Audits and Inspections

**Q:** *What professional standards apply to OIG's audits, inspections, and evaluations?*

**A:** OIG's audits conform to the Government Accountability Office's *Government Auditing Standards: 2024 Revision*, also known as the "Yellow Book." Inspections conform to the Council of Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency's *Quality Standards for Inspection and Evaluation* (December 2020), also known as the "Blue Book."

**Q:** *What work does OIG's Office of Audits perform?*

**A:** The Office of Audits supports the Department and USAGM in improving management; strengthening integrity and accountability; and ensuring the most efficient, effective, and economical use of resources. Audit work focuses on areas of concern such as physical security at

overseas posts; financial and IT security and management; contracts, acquisition, and grants management; human capital and administrative issues; and high-risk programs and operations in the frontline states of Afghanistan, Iraq, and Pakistan.

**Q:** *What is an audit objective?*

**A:** Audit objectives may vary widely, and audits may have more than one objective. Objectives can include the following:

- Assessments of the effectiveness, economy, and efficiency of a bureau, office, or program
- Internal controls, including the plans, policies, methods, and procedures adopted by management to meet its missions, goals, and objectives
- Compliance with laws and regulations
- Prospective analysis

**Q:** *How does OIG decide what to audit?*

**A:** OIG may decide to perform an audit based on a number of factors:

**High-priority issues.** Some audits are based on issues that OIG has determined to be high priority for the Department or USAGM, as communicated in the annual *Inspector General's Assessment of Management and Performance Challenges* report to the Department, USAGM, and Congress.

**High-risk issues.** OIG may initiate an audit if it uncovered significant issues during a previous review, or if it identifies a high risk of fraud, waste, abuse, or mismanagement in a program or office.

**Interest.** If the issue or program is of interest to Congress, the Secretary, senior Department officials, USAGM officials, or the current administration, OIG may be asked to perform an audit.

**Internal input.** Information from OIG's other offices also helps prioritize OIG's audits.

**Legal mandate.** The audit may be required by law. For example, every year OIG assesses the effectiveness of the Department's IT security controls under the Federal Information Security Management Act of 2002.

**Follow-up work.** OIG also conducts follow-up reviews to determine the level of compliance with prior audit report recommendations.

**Q:** *What work does OIG's Office of Inspections perform?*

**A:** The Office of Inspections provides the Secretary of State and Congress with independent assessments of the operations of the Department, its more than 270 posts abroad, and related activities. OIG schedules an inspection of each Department overseas post and domestic bureau operation under the Foreign Service Act of 1980, which sets forth three broad areas for inspections: Is the post or bureau achieving the U.S. foreign policy goals and objectives?

Are resources being used and managed with maximum efficiency, effectiveness, and economy? Does the administration of operations meet the requirements of applicable laws and regulations, and have internal management controls been implemented and maintained to ensure quality of performance and reduce the likelihood of fraud, waste, and abuse?

**Q:** *How does OIG decide what to inspect?*

**A:** OIG plans inspections using a risk-based approach that considers a variety of factors, including the post's resources, size, threat profile, foreign assistance funding, and other data from sources such as the Integrated Logistics Management System, Global Financial Management System, Consular Consolidated Database, and the United Nations World Risk Index. This approach allows the office to focus its resources on higher risk posts that warrant increased oversight and to tailor inspections to appropriately target risk at specific posts. OIG's inspections also focus on issues of high priority for the Department, as communicated annually in the *Inspector General's Assessment of Management and Performance Challenges* report to the Department and Congress. In addition, OIG conducts follow-up reviews to determine the level of compliance with prior inspection report recommendations.

**Q:** *Does OIG have the authority to inspect USAGM broadcasting grantees (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Radio Free Asia, and Middle East Broadcasting Networks)?*

**A:** Yes. OIG has the same authorities to oversee the programs and operations of USAGM as it has with respect to the Department under the IG Act. USAGM's programs and operations include its grantees. OIG's authority regarding USAGM is codified at 22 U.S.C. § 6209a(a).

**Q:** *Does OIG inspect or audit broadcasting content for USAGM operations?*

**A:** OIG is prohibited from evaluating the content of USAGM broadcasting entities. The IG must “respect the journalistic integrity” of covered broadcasters and “may not evaluate the philosophical or political perspectives reflected in the content of broadcasts.” This obligation is codified at 22 U.S.C. § 6209a(b).

**Q:** *Does the Department, USAGM, bureau, or office have a chance to respond to and rebut OIG findings in an audit, inspection, and evaluation?*

**A:** Yes. During the fieldwork stage, OIG will usually discuss preliminary findings with staff associated with the unit being reviewed. It is important that Department or USAGM staff work with OIG while it conducts fieldwork to ensure that all information is factually correct and to quickly resolve any issues or miscommunications.

After fieldwork is completed, OIG will issue the draft report. Usually, the organization being reviewed has 10 business days to return written comments. The response is an opportunity to provide updates on steps already taken to address a proposed action or to point out areas of disagreement with OIG findings or recommendations. While writing the final report, OIG will consider the response to the draft and will revise the report as appropriate.

**Q:** *What happens when the final report is issued?*

**A:** The principal of the operating unit or office being examined, along with other stakeholders, receives an electronic copy of the report via email. A small number of hard copies may also be sent to primary stakeholders. OIG also sends electronic copies of reports to staff on pertinent congressional committees and subcommittees. Finally, a copy of the report is posted on the OIG website. If the report contains proprietary information or other information that is not appropriate for public release under applicable law, it may be redacted, or OIG may clear only the abstract of the report for public release.

## Investigations

**Q:** *How is OIG’s Office of Investigations different from OIG’s other offices?*

**A:** Generally, an investigation is conducted to resolve specific allegations, complaints, or

information concerning possible violations of law, regulation, or policy. In contrast, an OIG audit, evaluation, or inspection is conducted to examine organizational program performance or financial management matters, typically of a systemic nature.

**Q:** *Who are OIG investigators?*

**A:** OIG’s Office of Investigations comprises trained, credentialed, and sworn special agents—criminal investigators who are Federal law enforcement officers. They are responsible for conducting criminal, civil, and administrative investigations of fraud and a variety of other allegations affecting the operations or administration of programs, contractors, and grantees of the Department and USAGM.

**Q:** *What work does OIG’s Office of Investigations perform?*

**A:** OIG investigates a variety of matters, including allegations of fraud involving Department and USAGM grants and contracts, criminal wrongdoing and administrative improprieties in the administration of programs and operations, and serious allegations of employee misconduct. Along with the U.S. Office of Special Counsel (OSC), OIG investigates alleged reprisals against whistleblowers.

OIG initiates investigations based on referrals from the OIG fraud, waste, and abuse hotline; referrals from the Department, USAGM, the Department of Justice, and other government and law enforcement agencies (including other OIGs); congressional requests; and referrals resulting from inspection, evaluation, and audit work.

**Q:** *What is an employee’s obligation during an OIG investigation?*

**A:** Employees must provide accurate and complete information to OIG. To prevent even the appearance that they are withholding pertinent information, employees should avoid narrowly construing interview questions or record requests, and promptly provide requested records. Even when only a general question or issue is posed, the employee should still respond with specific information that could be relevant.

The IG Act authorizes OIG to “have access to all records, reports, audits, reviews, documents, papers, recommendations and other material available to the Department that relate to

Department programs and operations.” The same authorization applies to USAGM. OIG is authorized to access electronic records and data systems, such as computers.

Corrective action could include ordering a promotion; canceling a disciplinary action; or paying back pay, compensatory damages, or attorney’s fees.

## Whistleblower Protection

**Q:** *Who can be a protected whistleblower in the U.S. Government?*

**A:** To be a protected whistleblower under the Whistleblower Protection Act, you must be a current employee, former employee, or applicant for employment to a position in the executive branch of Government in the competitive service, excepted service, Foreign Service, or in the career Senior Executive Service, that makes a protected disclosure.

Although the process for remedying retaliation is different, employees of a federal contractor, subcontractor, grantee, or subgrantee, as well as personal services contractors, also enjoy protection against retaliation for whistleblowing.

**Q:** *What is whistleblower retaliation?*

**A:** Whistleblower retaliation is personnel action in response to a protected disclosure of information and includes actions that could adversely affect the whistleblower:

- Non-promotion
- Disciplinary action
- Detail, transfer, or reassignment
- Unfavorable performance evaluation
- Decision concerning pay, benefits, or awards
- Significant change in duties, responsibilities, or working conditions

**Q:** *Where can I report a whistleblower complaint or a complaint of whistleblower retaliation?*

**A:** Complaints can be made to OIG or OSC, an independent Federal investigative and prosecutorial agency with the responsibility to receive, investigate, and prosecute allegations of whistleblower retaliation. Unlike OIG, OSC has authority to seek corrective action from the Department and USAGM by filing a complaint with the Merit Systems Protection Board to enforce corrective action for the whistleblower and initiate disciplinary action against the individual responsible for the retaliation.

**Q:** *What protections do I have if I report a questionable or suspicious activity to OIG?*

**A:** Federal law prohibits Government personnel from retaliating against an employee who acts as a whistleblower by reporting suspected wrongdoing or mismanagement to OIG. Agency officials may not “take or fail to take, or threaten to take or fail to take, a personnel action with respect to any employee or applicant for employment” because the person has disclosed information that he or she reasonably believes is evidence of (1) a violation of any law, rule, or regulation or (2) gross mismanagement, a gross waste of funds, an abuse of authority, or a substantial and specific danger to public health or safety. The law also protects employees of Federal contractors and grantees from reprisal if they make such a disclosure.

## Evaluations and Special Projects

**Q:** *What work does the Office of Evaluations and Special Projects perform?*

**A:** In 2014, OIG established a new office—the Office of Evaluations and Special Projects—to strengthen OIG’s oversight of the Department and USAGM and to improve OIG’s capabilities to meet statutory requirements of the Whistleblower Protection Enhancement Act of 2012. The office is responsible for reviewing allegations of administrative misconduct by senior officials and issuing management alerts to highlight urgent need for corrective actions and capping reports on thematic areas of concern. The office also conducts special evaluations and reviews, including responses to congressional inquiries. The work of this office complements the work of OIG’s audits, investigations, and inspections by developing a capacity to focus on broader systemic issues.

**Q:** *What professional standards apply to OIG’s evaluations?*

**A:** Like OIG’s inspections, evaluations conform to the Council of Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency’s *Quality Standards for Inspection and Evaluation* (December 2020), also known as the “Blue Book.”

## Management Alerts and Management Assistance Reports

**Q:** *What are management alerts and management assistance reports?*

**A:** Management alerts and management assistance reports are memoranda sent to senior officials of the Department or USAGM that address high-risk or systemic issues identified by multiple OIG audits or inspections or other oversight entities, such as the Government Accountability Office. Management alerts often address matters that require immediate attention to mitigate a high risk of financial loss or a serious threat to the safety or security of Department or USAGM personnel, facilities, or other resources. Management assistance reports include recommendations to take specific steps to mitigate the risks OIG identified.

### **HELP FIGHT FRAUD, WASTE, AND ABUSE**

**1-800-409-9926**

[stateOIG.gov/HOTLINE](http://stateOIG.gov/HOTLINE)

If you fear reprisal, contact the OIG Whistleblower Ombudsman to learn more about your rights.

**[WPEAOmbuds@stateoig.gov](mailto:WPEAOmbuds@stateoig.gov)**