

Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

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August 7, 2023

The Honorable Kevin H. Winters
Integrity Committee Chairperson
Council of Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency
1717 H Street, N.W., Suite 825
Washington, D.C. 20006

Dear Inspector General Winters:

I write to convey serious concerns regarding allegations that the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Inspector General Sean O'Donnell abused his authority, wasted government funds, and executed his duties in a manner that suggest he lacks the independence and integrity required of an inspector general (IG). I request that the Council of Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency's (CIGIE) Integrity Committee investigate these allegations.

Contrary to CIGIE standards and the professionalism expected of federal IGs, multiple whistleblowers allege that Mr. O'Donnell created a hostile work environment and engaged in conduct that undermines the integrity reasonably expected of an IG.¹ For example, Mr. O'Donnell, who reportedly wears a collegiate ring from Texas A&M University, stated during a meeting with senior staff in the EPA Office of Inspector General (OIG) that the ring "got him into the bedroom" with women. At least two female staff and one male official were disturbed and expressed discomfort with this statement. Mr. O'Donnell has also made statements with respect to the race and gender of individuals hired to the OIG. Specifically, Mr. O'Donnell allegedly told staff that white males are the minority in the OIG and that one hiring official within the OIG did not want to hire white men. Mr. O'Donnell also allegedly made offensive and inappropriate comments when he introduced a staff member from West Virginia stating, "at least they can read and write."

OIGs derive much of their credibility to perform their work to prevent and detect fraud and abuse by demonstrating their ability to efficiently and effectively use and account for public funds.² OIGs also have a responsibility to ensure their own operations are fiscally responsible. According to multiple whistleblowers, within several months of his confirmation as the EPA Inspector General, Mr. O'Donnell said he planned to move an EPA OIG all-hands meeting

¹ Council of Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency, *Quality Standards for Federal Offices of Inspector General* ("Silver Book") (Aug. 2012) (online at www.ignet.gov/sites/default/files/files/Silver%20Book%20Revision%20-%202012r.pdf).

² 5 U.S.C. § 402 (Inspector General Act of 1978).

planned for early summer to December and that he would like to move the meeting to “someplace warm.” Even after the meeting was postponed because of the coronavirus pandemic, on multiple occasions throughout 2021, Mr. O’Donnell allegedly reiterated his intent to host an all-hands meeting someplace warm stating, “everyone going someplace warm is an imperative.” He allegedly tasked EPA OIG staff to find a warm and desirable location for the meeting, which included official travel to scout facilities for the event. In December 2022, EPA OIG hosted a three-day symposium at a resort in Orlando, Florida, which all EPA OIG staff were instructed to attend. Mr. O’Donnell instructed senior staff that if there were any “grumble berries” who did not want to attend the all-hands event, they were to be instructed that the event was “mandatory.”

EPA OIG maintains 11 field offices across the country, all of which are located more than 400 miles from Orlando, Florida—the location of the all-hands event.³ As a result of the decision to hold the all-hands meeting in Orlando, between 250 and 300 EPA OIG employees who attended the event were required to fly, extending the three-day event by two additional days to accommodate for travel. According to whistleblowers, total costs to attend the event were approximately \$1,500 per person. EPA OIG expended additional funds to shuttle employees between the airport, hotel, and conference facilities.

Event materials describe it as a “symposium” to “connect, engage, listen [and] learn.”⁴ EPA OIG staff, however, were also encouraged to bring their families to the event because of its proximity to the Walt Disney World Resort. During the five-day event, the EPA OIG also hosted a “Holiday Get Together” for employees and their families. After the holiday event, Senior Executive Service staff within the EPA OIG instructed other staff not to share any videos taken at the event.

The Inspector General Act recognizes independence as one of the most important elements of an IG’s effectiveness.⁵ According to whistleblowers, Mr. O’Donnell expressed viewpoints that indicated a partisan predisposition. For example, Mr. O’Donnell allegedly discussed on several occasions that he was close with the Trump White House. Mr. O’Donnell allegedly said that he had been over to the White House and that he was close to John McEntee, who served as a personal aide to former President Trump and the Director of the White House Office of Presidential Personnel.⁶ According to one whistleblower, they perceived the statements to be an attempt by Mr. O’Donnell to inflate his authority and power. Mr. O’Donnell also allegedly expressed concerns about a draft EPA OIG report because the former Administrator of EPA, Andrew R. Wheeler, appointed under former President Trump “didn’t like” the report. In light of Administrator Wheeler’s concerns and contrary to the requirement

³ Environment Protection Agency, Office of Inspector General, *Investigations Offices* (online at www.epa.gov/office-inspector-general/investigations-offices) (accessed May 16, 2023).

⁴ Environment Protection Agency, Office of Inspector General, *EPA OIG 2022 Winter CELL Symposium* (Dec. 6-8, 2022).

⁵ Government Accountability Office, *Inspectors General: Independence Principles and Considerations for Reform* (June 8, 2020) (GAO-20-639R) (online at www.gao.gov/assets/gao-20-639r.pdf).

⁶ Executive Office of the President, *Annual Report to Congress on White House Office Personnel* (June 26, 2020) (online at <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/July-1-2020-Report-FINAL.pdf>).

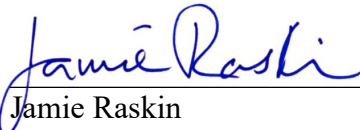
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that IGs are independent, Mr. O'Donnell significantly delayed the issuance of the report and sought to minimize the results and the findings.

Inspectors General play a crucial role in the oversight community and are the only officers of their kind in the executive branch who report both to the agency head and to Congress. Congress and the American public must be confident in an Inspector General's ability to effectively meet the demands of the job. We request that the CIGIE Integrity Committee open an investigation into these serious allegations.

Please provide confirmation of acceptance of this letter. If you have any questions, please contact Oversight Democratic staff at (202) 225-5051.

Sincerely,



Jamie Raskin
Ranking Member

cc: The Honorable James Comer, Chairman