

Minnesota should create a statewide inspector general's office

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Commentaries

Here's a glimpse of what it could do.

By Margaret "Maggie" Sotos

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What do state inspectors general inspect? When John Hunter Raines embezzled \$4.8 million from the Virginia Birth-Related Neurological Injury Compensation Program (a taxpayer-funded account for infants who suffer from brain or spinal cord injuries), he was serving as the organization's CFO.

Luckily Virginia's Office of the State Inspector General (OSIG) was alerted to discrepancies in the organization's accounts. Within a year Raines was entering a federal guilty plea and faces up to a 30-year prison sentence, thanks to efforts spearheaded by OSIG.

Minnesotans are not immune from this type of corruption. The state's Feeding Our Future scandal stole \$250 million taxpayer dollars from hungry children during a pandemic. As a former Minnesota state employee now working at the Virginia Office of the State Inspector General, I strongly urge Gov. Tim Walz to approve the formation of a similar agency in Minnesota.

Inspectors general — or IGs — protect taxpayers from fraud, waste and abuse. They operate with low overhead and political independence, and possess expertise in government systems and law. At this moment when trust in government is low, it is crucial we hold government accountable without disrupting the services that our citizens rely on.

Virginia's OSIG operates with a staff of just 46, and here are a few results and revelations we've provided our citizens in the past year:

- \$51 million in projected savings from adjusted overtime payment policies and scheduling practices.
- \$4 million embezzled from the Virginia Department of Health.
- \$47,827 uncovered in an unemployment benefits scheme.
- \$14,740 of private business' unpaid taxes due to erroneously issued DMV license plates.

IGs exist at every level of governance. This month, the Chicago IG uncovered improper reporting of gifts in the city's mayoral office. In response, the city's corporation counsel updated its policies to publish exactly what gifts have been given to the mayor and where they can be accessed for public viewing. This is an excellent step in protecting the taxpayers of a city historically plagued by fraud. (I'm a Chicagoland native, I come by this cynicism honestly.)

Since IGs operate independently of political parties (or big donors), their loyalty is to taxpayers and the truth. This is inconvenient for those looking to operate outside of the law. But like any good umpire, IGs simply call the balls and strikes; unpopularity is an assumed

risk of the job.

Minnesota DFL Sen. Heather Gustafson's bill SF 856 creates an independent executive branch agency with investigation and subpoena power in Minnesota. It shares bipartisan support in both chambers, and the proposed five-year term of the inspector general ensures an IG insulated from any political party's majority.

Minnesotans know a good deal when they see one (that 11% Menards rebate is money on the table). Let's hope the governor recognizes a Minnesota inspector general for the good deal it is.

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