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Inspectors general: Funding, access create hurdles for corruption investigations in Louisiana

BY ELIZABETH CRISP | ECRISP@THEADVOCATE.COM JAN 30, 2017 - 5:00 PM



Advocate staff file photo by TRAVIS SPRADLING -- State Inspector General Stephen Street.

Elizabeth Crisp

Louisiana Inspector General Stephen Street is bracing for the threat of another round of budget cuts, and he said he sees his job as one that sets him up to be an easy target.

"At the end of the day, people get mad," Street told the Press Club of Baton Rouge on Monday. "If you do the job right, it results in that reaction."

Street has served as the state's inspector general, a job within the executive branch tasked with investigating public corruption and fraud, since 2008. His second six-year term will expire in 2020.

During that time he's faced repeated threat of cuts. Street's office has shrunk from 17 positions to 13 in the past two budget cycles.

Now the state is preparing for yet another mid-year budget cut. Gov. John Bel Edwards is expected to call legislators into a special session Feb. 13-23 to shore up a \$304 million shortfall.

Edwards, a Democrat, hasn't unveiled his recommended cuts, but the governor is asking the Legislature to pull \$119 million from the state's reserves to lessen the blow. Already, some legislators, particularly Republicans in the House, have questioned whether that is the best route.

Street said he hasn't heard of a specific threat to his budget this time around but worries because the corruption investigations his office leads are politically unpopular.

"Whenever you have a very large and very real budget deficit, it provides political cover," he said.

Street, who was joined by New Orleans Inspector General Ed Quatrevaux and Jefferson Parish Inspector General Dave McClintock at Monday's luncheon, said his budget, after years of cuts, offers little wiggle room.

"We've explained to (Commissioner of Administration Jay Dardenne) what our situation is," Street said. "We're known for complex criminal investigations that take time to work."

Street's office has been involved in investigations of allegations of misuse of funds in the Department of Wildlife and Fisheries and the Department of Corrections.

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The Inspector General's Office typically doesn't comment on ongoing investigations, so Street declined to say what specifically could be at risk if his budget is further slashed.

Meanwhile, Quatreraux said that his term will come to an end during the mayor's election in New Orleans – "not the best time."

"We're very much concerned over that," he said of the potential to get sucked up into the political process.

Quatreraux pointed to the effort undertaken by Louis Armstrong New Orleans International Airport to improve its contracting process, following an audit.

The airport is now saving \$25 million a year on contracts.

"That \$25 million used to go to corruption, and they'd pass it on to the airlines," he said. "They're not doing that anymore, and we're getting record numbers of travelers."

Quatreraux noted that former President Ronald Reagan fired a whole slate of inspectors general shortly after taking office but quickly restored most of them.

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"It takes people to make these things work," he said.

McClintock was appointed as the first inspector general of Jefferson Parish in 2013 – a position created after a corruption scandal that led to prison time for former Parish President Aaron Broussard.

"Inspectors general play an important and vital role in combating public corruption as well as inefficiency and waste," McClintock said. "What also comes with that is attacks on inspectors general."

He said funding isn't his biggest problem at this point, as the office has a dedicated millage. But access has become a significant hinderance.

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"Access to data is vital to all of us," he said.

McClintock said faced several hurdles when he joined the office – from access to emails to reviewing security footage. He joked that the cleaning crew had more access than he was given.

"Right now, I can't swipe into a single door in the parish," he said.

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