

Louisiana Inspector General questions lawmakers' motives seeking to defund his agency

by Rebekah Allen

rallen@theadvocate.com

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State Inspector General Stephen Street on Monday questioned the motives of lawmakers who attempt to shut down an agency dedicated to fighting public corruption, adding that recent attacks on his office prove the need for protected funding.

While ultimately the funding for his office was quickly restored in the ongoing legislative budget process, Street said that as long as his office continues to be effective at rooting out waste and corruption it will be the target of lawmakers who want to see it shut down.

“If you do your job right, there are folks who will come after you and it’s going to happen regularly,” Street said of his job at the Press Club of Baton Rouge on Monday. He said as recently as 2012, the House passed a budget that effectively shut down his office, but the dollars were restored by the Senate.

Those two recent efforts to cut his office, he said, demonstrate a need to protect the dollars for the inspector general through a dedicated funding stream.

“It is something that will spare our state quite a bit of embarrassment over the long haul,” Street said. “Louisiana still has a reputation, whether fair or not, of a place where public corruption is not only tolerated but celebrated with a wink and a nod.”

Last week, the [House Appropriations Committee removed all funding for the Office of the State Inspector General](#) from the annual budget, which would have dismantled the agency and its ongoing investigations. The agency is slated to receive \$792,193 in the next fiscal year starting July 1.

But when the budget reached the full House for debate, the funding was restored.

Lawmakers who pressed for the funding to be cut argued that the Inspector General’s Office, which is charged with investigating waste, fraud and corruption in state agencies, is a duplication of services already provided by the state Attorney General’s Office and the Legislative Auditor’s Office.

“The question about redundancy is raised all over the country,” Street said. “Sometimes it’s a legitimate concern but sometimes it’s a subterfuge for people who want to shut down the office for other purposes.”

He said that his office is highly effective, with a 96 percent success rate in federal criminal prosecutions, which has saved the state several millions in fraudulent payments and waste.

He stressed that his office is nonpolitical, does not run for office (unlike the attorney general) and has law enforcement designation (unlike the legislative auditor).

But he acknowledged that the three organizations do overlap in terms of what they investigate and there’s nothing that the Inspector General’s Office investigates that the other agencies are precluded from investigating.

Street said their successful investigations have “definitely angered people in government circles,” which is all the more reason they should be preserved.

“Why is it that they would want to shut us down,” he said. “What is it we could be doing that would anger them at that level?”

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