

# Legislature's move to starve state Inspector General Stephen Street's office financially is wrong and likely illegal: An editorial

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Some Louisiana lawmakers want to eliminate the state Office of Inspector General by erasing its funding from the budget. That ill-conceived move would deal a blow to Louisiana's efforts to curb corruption. It is also likely illegal, and legislators need to restore the money.



File photo State Rep. Joe Harrison of Napoleonville is leading the effort to strip funding from the state inspector general's office.

At the urging of Rep. Joe Harrison of Napoleonville, the House Appropriations Committee on Wednesday removed the \$1.7 million that Inspector General Stephen Street's office was to receive in the upcoming fiscal year. That would force the office to shut down June 30.

Rep. Harrison argued that the inspector general's office "is pretty much redundant." He said other law enforcement agencies including the state's attorney general, the Louisiana State Police and the legislative auditor's office, can take up its functions. But the inspector general is the only entity exclusively tasked with rooting out wrongdoing in the state's executive branch. In the 2010-11 fiscal year alone, its probes found \$3.2 million in fraud and waste, almost double the office's budget that year. The findings included almost **\$230,000 wasted in non-refundable airfare tickets** the state never used, leading to changes in travel policies; \$400,000 in overtime paid to Jefferson Parish public school workers in violation of overtime limits and **\$1.6 million stolen from a police retirement system**. Several investigations led to indictments and convictions.

Rafael Goyeneche, president of the Metropolitan Crime Commission, said the other agencies Rep. Harrison mentioned have their own backlog of pending cases. "This representative is living in fantasy land," Mr. Goyeneche said. "Eliminating the inspector general would have a chilling impact."

Former Gov. Buddy Roemer created the state inspector general in a 1988 executive order. But it was Gov. Bobby Jindal who signed the office into law in 2008, as an independent agency. That same year, Gov. Jindal appointed Inspector General Stephen Street.

The governor's office didn't respond to an e-mail Thursday seeking his position on the IG funding. But the governor has the political muscle to have legislators restore the money in the budget. He should make sure lawmakers fix this mistake.

After all, defunding the IG's office is likely illegal. The 2008 law said the Legislature "shall make adequate appropriations" for the IG to work "efficiently and effectively." The law also said the inspector general's salary can't be lowered by the governor or the Legislature during the IG's term, which currently ends in 2014.

These provisions were put in place precisely to prevent lawmakers from pulling the rug from under the inspector general's office on a whim. That's what Rep. Harrison and others want to do, and that would be bad for Louisiana.