

Opening Statement of Chairman Ron Johnson
“Improving the Efficiency, Effectiveness, and Independence of Inspectors General”
February 24, 2015

As prepared for delivery:

Good morning and welcome.

Inspectors General (IGs) are statutorily tasked with a mission “to promote economy, efficiency, and effectiveness” at their agency and “to prevent and detect fraud and abuse.” It is no coincidence that the mission is almost identical to the goals that Ranking Member Carper and I developed for our Committee: “to identify/reduce/eliminate duplication, waste, fraud, and abuse within government” and “increase the efficiency and effectiveness of federal agencies.”

The Inspector General Act is clear: IGs are to be independent from the agency, have access to all records available to the agency, and make their work readily available to the public. It is Congress’s job to ensure they are meeting these obligations and have the tools and resources necessary to fulfill their mission.

IGs can have significant positive effect on the federal budget, and are a powerful ally to Congress in providing oversight of agency use of funds and ferreting out improper payments. For example, Inspector General O’Carroll at the Social Security Administration estimated his office last year alone saved \$552 million through their investigations. Additionally, O’Carroll’s office identified more than \$5 billion in Federal funds that could be put to better use, over \$1 billion in questioned costs, and over \$21 million in civil monetary penalties and assessments.

Last year, then-Chair of the Subcommittee on Financial and Contracting Oversight Claire McCaskill and I issued a report that highlighted the importance of IG independence. The report detailed findings against former acting Inspector General Charles Edwards, and showed what can happen when an IG post is left vacant and an acting IG is vying for the position. It is unsurprising that independence may be compromised if the person deciding who gets the permanent job is the President, rather than an independent arbiter.

There are currently eleven agency vacancies, totaling 15 percent of the IG offices. Most troubling is the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). The President has known since November 2013 that the VA IG was stepping down that December. Yet the President has failed to nominate someone for the position. My letter to the President asking him to appoint a permanent VA Inspector General has been ignored. As have similar letters sent last year by House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs Chairman Miller and then-Chairman Carper and Ranking Member Coburn of our Committee.

While the post remains vacant, the VA continues to be embroiled by scandals that are threatening our veterans’ safety. Most recently, reports have come to light that at least three veterans have died after treatment at a facility in my own state, the Tomah, Wisconsin Veterans Affairs Medical Center (VAMC). Two of those deaths were connected to the alleged over

prescription of opioids. Not only was my office never briefed or provided with a report the VA OIG was putting together last year about the Tomah VMAC allegations, but the office has refused to provide my staff with documents related to that investigation. The VA OIG has even gone so far as to argue that the Department would have to approve parts of the response before sharing the documents with Congress. It is critical that the President swiftly appoint a permanent, independent IG to that post.

I appreciate the witnesses coming in to explore these and other challenges IGs face today. Additionally, I look forward to introducing legislation, hopefully this week, with Senators Grassley and McCaskill that will address many of the issues discussed today and that will provide more tools and greater independence for Inspectors General.