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Profile in Public Integrity: David Harper

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Profile in Public Integrity:

David Harper Inspector General of Albuquerque



David Harper was appointed as the Inspector General of Albuquerque, New Mexico, this past April. Prior to becoming Inspector General, Harper served for over three decades in the Air Force Office of Special Investigations (AFOSI), conducting and overseeing financial investigations resulting in recoveries of over one billion dollars. Most recently, he served as AFOSI's Chief of Economic Crimes Investigations. In that capacity, he directed staff support to the more than 200 AFOSI field and regional offices and oversaw over 500 financial crime investigations. Harper previously served as Special Agent-in-Charge of the AFOSI regional office in Boston, Massachusetts. He holds a B.S. in criminal justice from California State University-Sacramento, a M.P.A. from California State University-Dominguez Hills and is a Certified Inspector General, a Certified Fraud Examiner, and a Certified Financial Crimes Investigator. Harper received his CIG certification through the Association of Inspectors General Chicago Institute in July 2016.

Prior to becoming the Inspector General of the City of Albuquerque, you spent three decades investigating financial crimes with the Air Force Office of Special Investigations, where you took part in investigations that recovered more than one billion dollars in taxpayer funds. What lessons did you take away from this work?

I believe the most important lesson was the need to work as a team together with a number of partners ranging from other investigative offices to auditing organizations and prosecutors. Additionally, it's important to have a thorough understanding of the issues of the allegations, what violations occurred, and what evidence would be needed to support a prosecution or settlement. To this end, it's essential to have good research and organization, to prioritize the issues, and to collaborate with the prosecutor or trial counsel to ensure a successful outcome. Key to all of this was to always remember we were serving the public and protecting their hard-earned money.

In April, you became Albuquerque's first permanent inspector general in three years. What are your plans for revitalizing oversight in the fast-growing city?

I have several areas of focus, with priorities for each of those areas.

Internally, I am working to establish standards, policies, and processes, which were not established at the time that this office became an independent office within the City Government. The City Council will be revising the Inspector General Ordinance in the near future, so I am seizing this opportunity to socialize important changes to the Ordinance to increase not only resources and capabilities, but also to expand what this office can do for the Citizens and City Government, such as engaging in more inspections with a focus on enhancing processes and ensuring compliance with State and Federal law.

I also hope to increase the size of the office staff: additional investigators, a fraud analyst, an inspector, and a forensic auditor. Along with this, I have established investigative priorities: 1) Major Procurement Fraud, 2) Corruption, and 3) Systemic Occupational Fraud.

Finally, I have launched a community outreach plan that involves attending community meetings, such as neighborhood association meetings, Council constituent meetings, addressing business groups, such as the Chamber of Commerce, and meeting with nonprofit organizations that receive City funds. Other awareness raising efforts include working with the Information Technology office to develop a smartphone app for reporting fraud, developing a new tip line, and looking towards the use of social media to raise awareness.

You have suggested that your office might benefit from periodic peer review, in which an inspector general from a different city might help review your office's work. Could you tell us more about this idea and its potential benefits?

The City Inspector General Ordinance, which was first established in 2007 and significantly revised in 2011, requires the Albuquerque Office of Inspector General to adhere to Association of Inspectors General professional standards and undergo a quality review every three to five years. However, as of this date, this office has never undergone such a review. When the City Council appointed me to this position, I made a commitment to them and the Citizens of Albuquerque to ensure this office underwent a peer review as soon as practical.

An Inspector General from another agency could provide benefit by giving an objective and unbiased assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of this office, to help us know where to focus improvement efforts. Additionally, such an assessment would also reassure the community with a "report card" of how we are doing. The "report card" is essential for establishing credibility and giving citizens confidence that our office has the ability to protect the public trust, and to assure the City Council of our competence and ability to provide oversight of City Government spending and operations.

New Mexico is one of only seven states that lack a statewide ethics commission or inspector general. What challenges does this present for your office, and how do you plan to address those challenges?

A lack of a statewide oversight agency impacts the public's perception of accountability at the state level, which can also spill over into the Albuquerque community, which represents 25% of the State's population. Additionally, the establishment of a statewide oversight agency would contribute to the "tone at the top" resulting in greater public confidence that elected leaders and appointed officials are more likely to embrace important ethical principles.

I fully support legislation to create a State Office of Inspector General and to strengthen existing accountability laws and establish new laws to make it easier to investigate fraud and corruption. I also believe in toughening penalties for committing fraud and corruption. The Majority Whip of the State Senate has invited me to testify on the value of a State Inspector General during the upcoming legislative session, next January.

CAPI's mission is to improve the capacity of public offices and practitioners to deter, identify, and combat corruption. What can CAPI do to help offices like yours?

CAPI's work to support and engage public offices like the Albuquerque OIG is valuable and most appreciated. I believe CAPI can best assist by providing the results of studies and supporting statistics on the value of having oversight agencies at all levels of government. Specifically, such support would help us advocate for the creation of a State Inspector General in New Mexico during the next legislative session. Such studies would be extremely valuable if they quantified benefits, such as public funds saved or recovered. I am also in the process of working with the Albuquerque City Council on revising the City Inspector General Ordinance, so similar support would prove beneficial for this office, as well.