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Profile in Public Integrity: Hubert Sparks

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Profile in Public Integrity:

Hubert Sparks

Inspector General

Appalachian Regional Commission



Hubert Sparks was appointed the first inspector general of the Appalachian Regional Commission in 1989 and was also the first inspector general of the Denali Commission. Previously, Sparks served 29 years in oversight roles at Offices of the Inspector General at the Departments of Agriculture, Homeland Security, and Veteran's Affairs. He is a member of the Council of the Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency and served on the President's Council on Integrity and Efficiency. A native of Brooklyn, New York, Sparks holds a B.B.A. in accounting from the City College of New York.

You have worked in auditing and oversight in the Federal Government for 45 years. What have you learned about fighting waste, fraud, and corruption that you wish more people understood?

Public and employee identification of fraud, waste and abuse plays a major role in effective oversight. Government managers need a cultural change to recognize that credible input is a public service rather than an action to retaliate against, despite the various laws intended to protect whistleblowers.

Within the inspector general community, we need more understanding that oversight responsibilities do not cease within an Office of the Inspector General (OIG). Independent assessments of key operational elements and identification of actual monetary savings would improve OIG audit efficiency, effectiveness, and credibility and contribute to the fight against fraud, waste, and corruption.

The Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) is a unique Federal-State partnership, promoting development in a historically under-served region stretching across 13 different states. What are some of the challenges you've faced as a watchdog at the ARC?

The challenges inspectors general face include maintaining independence, exhibiting integrity, congressionally mandated audits, using staff efficiently, obtaining positive results, and securing funding. Inspectors General also face a challenging responsibility to report to both agency management and Congress. This direct reporting requirement has been compared to "sitting on a barbed wire fence," which is particularly true at smaller offices, where the agency head is empowered to appoint and terminate the inspector general. OIGs can successfully address this challenge through early orientations of new senior officials about OIG authorities, responsibilities, and processes.

Inspectors General and OIG staff are often not the most popular persons within an agency. Oversight agencies provide overall benefits to the agencies they oversee, but unfortunately often encounter a natural reluctance to embrace independent oversight. We receive skeptical looks when we say, "We are here to help." Thus, it is important to recognize that there will be disagreements and to establish positive independent relationships.

Managing implementation of significant recommendations is a challenge for all OIGs. Although OIGs have strong powers, we do not have the authority to order agencies to do anything. At smaller offices, positive relationships increase contacts with senior agency officials and afford opportunities to gain acceptance and implementation of recommendations.

The [ARC](#) has no singular Agency Head. Rather, the ARC is led by one Federal Co-Chair and the Governors of the [13 Appalachian states](#). However, during my lengthy tenure there has been no interference by these officials or their subordinates. We make OIG reports readily available and utilize regular and open communications with ARC officials and staff to provide timely input about intended reviews and results. We also address meetings of Federal and State Program Managers to highlight OIG issues and recommendations and emphasize OIG independence and responsibilities.

Another significant challenge for all OIGs is the gap in audit skills related to performance auditing, which constitutes the bulk of OIG audits. Accounting is not the only, or even the primary, qualification or competency required to successfully conduct a performance audit.

At the Department of Homeland Security OIG, you helped audit recovery efforts following hurricane Katrina. What can government agencies do better to provide oversight in emergency situations?

Based on working on Katrina issues for the Homeland Security OIG immediately after Katrina I have stated that the OIG audit response to this catastrophe was also a disaster. This can be attributed to limited coordination between OIGs and between OIGs and state and local oversight entities as well as untimely reporting and the absence of an OIG disaster recovery plan. A recent OIG internal study about OIG responses to disasters has identified various actions and recommendations to improve oversight of disasters including increased coordination as well as increased data sharing, computer matching, and funding.

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Effective communication is a primary element of effective coordination. Emphasizing the issues noted above could further improve oversight in emergency situations. Disaster recovery plans that coordinate and pool resources from federal, state, and local oversight entities could significantly improve timely identification and reporting of schemes, frauds, and delayed or improper agency recovery actions. A joint command center in a major disaster area could further facilitate timely exchange of information between oversight agencies, redirect efforts as needed, and reduce redundant efforts. Recovery personnel from non-oversight agencies should be included to help identify priority areas of oversight.

There are more than 70 federal inspectors general who serve as watchdogs for diverse departments, agencies, and programs. In what ways do inspectors general like you collaborate and share knowledge?

OIGs collaborate and share knowledge through one-on-one communication on specific issues impacting a few OIGs and through the Council of Inspectors General ([CIGIE](#)) and its various [committees](#). CIGIE provides information including results of cross-agency reviews and professional guidance, through direct communication or web-based resources. CIGIE holds monthly meetings in which agency representatives speak about high-impact issues. CIGIE also holds an annual conference in which significant issues, such as cross-agency reviews, receive attention as well as input from Executive and Congressional Branch representatives. Committees meet regularly. For example, the Audit Committee collaborates with the Federal Audit Executive Council on studies of issues of importance to the audit community.

An ad-hoc group of smaller inspectors general meets periodically to identify, discuss and act on issues of primary importance to these offices.

Although inspectors general have limited time available, their attendance either in-person or online at significant committee meetings would improve the decision process and timely responses to new issues.

America’s oversight system is unique—most other countries have a centralized oversight agency, while we have independent watchdog offices within various government departments. What are some of the benefits and drawbacks of our decentralized oversight system?

There are legitimate arguments about centralization and decentralization. On balance, I support decentralization if the OIG operates in a totally independent manner. The advantages of decentralization include the direct availability of OIG staff with expertise about the agency they oversight, direct and continuous access to agency officials and staff, confidence of agency staff to communicate issues to a home-based OIG, and assurance that each agency will receive significant oversight. Furthermore, the exchange of information on operations and important issues by the dozens of OIGs, through CIGIE or one-on-one contacts, permits a diversity of input that may not be available in a more centralized environment.

On the other hand, a centralized oversight system might provide additional staff to quickly address needed oversight issues and reduce concerns about the independence of individual OIGs.

In sum, OIGs provide significant benefits to the government and taxpayers. Maintenance of integrity, independence and the willingness to recognize, accept, and act on issues impacting efficiency and effectiveness remain the bedrock of OIG success. Since OIG authorities are some of the most powerful in the Federal Government they must be used judiciously to avoid impressions that we’re just looking for a “gotcha” rather than agents of positive change as expressed in the [OIG Vision Statement](#).