

Podcast: "What is the EPA OIG Hotline?"

Jennifer: Hello. I'm Jennifer Kaplan with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Office of Inspector General. I'm the deputy assistant inspector general for the OIG's Office of Congressional and Public Affairs, which includes our hotline operation. That's the topic of this podcast. I'll ask my colleague to introduce himself.

Kevin: My name is Kevin Collins and I'm the EPA OIG's hotline coordinator.

Jennifer: Thanks, Kevin. You and I are talking today because for so many people an OIG hotline is just an impersonal toll-free telephone number on the internet. To get us started, please explain why our hotline exists.

Kevin: The EPA OIG maintains a hotline that is available to anyone with information about potential wrongdoing relating to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency or the U.S. Chemical Safety and Hazard Investigation Board. We also encourage suggestions for the OIG to assess the efficiency and effectiveness of programs at either agency.

Jennifer: Good summary. Please tell our listeners what you do as our hotline coordinator.

Kevin: Sure. My job entails reviewing every communication that comes in to determine whether the subject matter falls under the EPA OIG's jurisdiction and, if so, where I should refer it.

Jennifer: Okay, let's break that down a little. What types of wrongdoing fall under the EPA OIG's jurisdiction?

Kevin: Well, there are five keywords. They're fraud, waste, abuse, misconduct, and mismanagement. If at least one of these applies, an office of inspector general is likely the appropriate place to go. But remember that the EPA OIG only addresses wrongdoing specifically related to the EPA or the Chemical Safety Board.

Jennifer: Those keywords are helpful, Kevin. Can you be even more specific about what might constitute wrongdoing?

Kevin: Yes, the bulk of allegations tend to fall into a handful of broad categories. Those are:

- Criminal activity.
- Fraud relating to EPA contracts, procurement, and grants.
- Mismanagement and waste of resources.
- Theft and misuse of government property.
- Misconduct by employees, including high-level political and career officials.
- Computer crimes.
- And a lack of efficiency and effectiveness in agency programs.

Jennifer: Thank you. You mentioned earlier that it's your job to figure out where to refer a complaint. What are your options?

Kevin: Well, it depends on the nature of the allegation.

If it appears that criminal activity or misconduct might be involved, the OIG will open an investigation.

An audit is a second option. An audit is appropriate to identify potential fraud, waste, or abuse; assess program compliance and management of agency processes; identify opportunities to improve human health and the environment; or offer recommendations for cost savings and efficiencies.

A third possibility — the OIG might pursue an evaluation to assess the design, implementation, and measurement of a program, including its effectiveness and results.

My role as the hotline coordinator is to send a complaint to the right place within the EPA OIG – or outside of the OIG – for a decision about whether to take action.

Jennifer: You touched on referrals outside of the EPA OIG. What do you mean?

Kevin: The EPA OIG Hotline receives a lot of complaints that aren't related to the EPA or the Chemical Safety Board at all but should be made to other agencies – whether the agencies are in the federal government or at a state or a local level. I do my best to steer the complainant to the right place. I also receive complaints that have to do with the EPA and Chemical Safety Board programs or decisions but don't allege any type of fraud, waste, abuse, misconduct, or mismanagement. Those complaints I refer to appropriate management officials in other offices at the EPA or the CSB.

Jennifer: On that note, Kevin, I imagine that it might be difficult for someone with information to figure out whether to contact the OIG Hotline or another agency office. You've provided some keywords that can help point complainants to the OIG. Are there also topics that, typically, should be reported to a different EPA office?

Kevin: Yes, Jennifer, there are. Incidents of pollution must be reported directly to the EPA – not to the OIG. Incidents of pollution might include dumping of waste and hazardous chemicals; the storage of hazardous waste; asbestos removal, storage, and disposal; release of hazardous chemicals or substances into the air; lead hazards; radon risks and testing; pesticide poisoning; and indoor mold growth. The EPA website has a drop-down menu on each of its web pages. At the top of each EPA web page there is menu listing labeled Report a Violation. When you click on that, you'll see two options, Environmental Violations or Fraud, Waste and Abuse. The Environmental Violations tab takes you directly to a form for reporting environmental problems. The Fraud, Waste and Abuse tab takes you directly to the OIG Hotline complaint form.

Jennifer: I'd like to touch on a very important point here. What should people do if they – or their community – experience a health crisis as the result of an environmental problem and believe that the EPA is not taking appropriate action?

Kevin: Thank you for raising this point, Jennifer. I'll underscore the answer: If there is a life-threatening emergency, always call 911 before doing anything else. If there is a matter of public safety or concern that the EPA or the Chemical Safety Board isn't taking appropriate or swift enough action, no matter the circumstances, then it is critical that individuals with information contact the OIG Hotline.

Jennifer: All right. Shifting gears here, sometimes would-be complainants are intimidated or fear retaliation. Say I decide to contact the hotline. You mentioned an online form. Is that the best way to get in touch? And what rights do I have?

Kevin: Good questions, Jennifer. Yes, the most efficient way to contact the OIG Hotline is through the electronic form I mentioned. You can get there either going through any of the EPA webpages or the OIG's own website at EPA-DOT-gov-forward slash-oig. The form provides the ability for a person to remain anonymous, maintain their confidentiality, or enter their contact information. The form really helps people to provide specific information about an issue such as the dates, locations, exact problems, additional details, etc. Filling out the web form also assists our office in being able to process and ultimately act on or refer an issue appropriately.

Other speedy ways to file a hotline complaint are by email and telephone. Some complainants wish to remain anonymous, and that's okay. However, anonymity can impede an investigation and the possibility of success of prosecution because the OIG doesn't have a way to verify

the information or to ask follow-up questions. Confidentiality for federal employees works a little differently than other complainants, but the bottom line is that the OIG will protect a complainant's identity from disclosure to the extent possible, especially when requested to do so. In the course of an investigation, the inspector general may determine that it is necessary to disclose the identity of a complainant. It's especially important that federal employees understand that there are laws that protect them against retaliation for engaging in whistleblowing activities.

Jennifer: On average, Kevin, how many contacts does the EPA OIG Hotline receive annually?

Kevin: We typically receive more than 2,000 complaints, comments, and suggestions every year.

Jennifer: Are you able to respond to every single one of those calls and messages?

Kevin: Realistically, I'm not able to respond to all of them. I prioritize complaints within the EPA OIG's jurisdiction, make referrals to other government agencies when appropriate, and try to provide information to complainants when a matter should be directed elsewhere. Unfortunately, it isn't possible to address everything that falls outside the bounds of our ability to help.

Jennifer: Thank you, Kevin. In closing, please share with our listeners several easy ways to contact the hotline. Let's start with the online form.

Kevin: The form is on the EPA OIG's website in the section all about our hotline. Go to [www.epa.gov/epa-dot-gov-forward/slash-oig](http://www.epa.gov/epa-dot-gov-forward/slash-oig). Click on "Contact the OIG Hotline." The online form is one of the options available.

Jennifer: There is also a toll-free telephone number listed there but please say it aloud, as well.

Kevin: Our toll-free phone number is 888-546-8740.

Jennifer: And the email address to reach the EPA OIG Hotline is . . . ?

Kevin: [OIG\\_Hotline@epa.gov](mailto:OIG_Hotline@epa.gov)

Jennifer:           Once again, for our listeners, all of the same contact information is available on the  
OIG's website. To learn more about the EPA OIG Hotline and the EPA Office of Inspector General's work,  
please visit [www-DOT-epa-DOT-gov-FORWARD SLASH-oig](http://www-DOT-epa-DOT-gov-FORWARD_SLASH-oig) and be sure to follow us on Twitter at epaig.

Kevin, thank you so much for joining me to humanize the EPA OIG Hotline by letting  
people know exactly what it's for, how it works and that there is an actual, caring person on the other  
side.

Kevin:            Anytime.