



Fighting corruption

Public Officials: First Line of Defense Against Fraud

By the Auditor of State's Office

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It's easy to think that catching bad guys is a job for police officers and detectives. But in reality, we all play an essential role when it comes to identifying and catching criminals.

More often than you would think, law enforcement agents depend on tips from eye witnesses when opening up high profile investigations. This is especially true with the type of crime that we deal with here at the Auditor of State's office. The tips we receive come from concerned citizens who may not even know that they are participating in the first line of defense against government fraud.

One of my key jobs as the Ohio Auditor of State is to protect Ohio taxpayers from crimes related to the theft of their tax dollars. Our office has our own law enforcement division known as the Special Investigations Unit (SIU). Their sole mission is to serve as a single source of expertise for investigating fraud in government. Fraud is defined as lying, cheating or stealing to gain something of value. In government, that “something of value” is tax dollars. As you know, the majority of government workers are honest and hard-working. Unfortunately, some are not. SIU is specially equipped to bring the bad actors to justice, from initial complaint to criminal conviction.

Our financial audit team and SIU work in a similar way to the security system set up in your home. The job of the security system is to give you an overview of your home and alert you if there’s a problem. In the same way, state auditors look at your local government’s finances and alert you if anything looks suspicious. When your security system identifies a problem, they contact the police. When the state auditors find fraud, they call SIU.

But in addition to the professionals, there is another key player in the fight against government fraud – you. It is the watchful eye of the public servant that most often protects taxpayers from becoming victims of fraud. State auditors are limited to only examining governments once per year, at most. No such limit exists for government employees or members of the community. Every day that you walk into work or government meetings, you are in an ideal position to identify fraudulent behavior. But, if you suspect fraud within your township, how can you take action against it?

That is where SIU and the Auditor’s office steps back in. If you find yourself needing to report suspected government fraud, our Fraud Hotline may be of use. When we receive a legitimate tip from the Fraud Hotline, it goes directly to the Special Audit Task Force. This group of investigators and auditors evaluate tips and complaints. If the task force decides the tip involves fraud, theft, or non-compliance, it will go to the SIU for investigation. If not, we are able to forward tips on to other local, state, or federal agencies.

The bottom line is this – we need your help. Whenever the Auditor’s office brings a corrupt official to justice, often times it only happened because a public servant was courageous enough to send in a tip.

The founding fathers designed our government to be of the people, by the people and for the people. When government collects funds from Ohio’s people, government is responsible to use those funds for the people’s benefit. But sometimes, leaders in government get it twisted and think that tax dollars belong to them. During my first few months as your Auditor, SIU has caught quite a few of these misguided miscreants.

One recent case involving the Village of Lincoln Heights exemplifies the importance of submitting tips. The case involved a village manager who used a village credit card to spend over \$70,160 of taxpayer dollars on personal purchases. Expenses charged to the card included trips to New York City, amusement park tickets, and electric bills. SIU was able to act quickly to put together the evidence that eventually led to an indictment. This March, the manager pled guilty for her crimes and was ordered to repay the over \$70k in findings.

The case in Lincoln Heights and other cases like it, serve as reminders of why the Auditor's office needs a law-enforcement division. It is the teeth of the Auditor's office and it gives us the ability to help prosecute those who betray public trust. More important, these cases remind us why we need honest, watchful government employees who are willing to submit a tip.

The Auditor's office cannot be everywhere at once, but with your help, we can cover a lot of ground. Your tip could be the one that brings a corrupt official to justice and saves tax-payers from paying for someone's misdeeds.

If you suspect fraud in your local government, contact the Fraud Hotline at 1-866-372-8364 or email fraudohio@ohioauditor.gov. Together, we are better able to serve the people of Ohio.