



# **NATIONAL SCIENCE FOUNDATION OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL**

**2021 FACT SHEET**

# ALLISON C. LERNER, INSPECTOR GENERAL

Allison C. Lerner assumed the duties as Inspector General of the National Science Foundation (NSF) in April 2009, reporting to the National Science Board and the Congress. As head of the Office of Inspector General, she recommends policies for promoting economy, efficiency and effectiveness of NSF programs and operations. She leads efforts to prevent and detect fraud, waste, and abuse; improve the integrity of NSF programs and operations; and investigate allegations of misconduct in science.

Ms. Lerner was appointed in November 2005 as Counsel to the Inspector General at the Department of Commerce, a position through which she acted as the IG's principal legal advisor and managed the office's staff attorneys and provision of legal services.

Ms. Lerner began her federal career in 1991, joining the Office of Inspector General at Commerce as assistant counsel, and has been a member of the senior executive service since 2005. During her tenure at Commerce, she served as special assistant to the IG, Deputy Assistant Inspector General for Auditing, and Acting Assistant Inspector General for Auditing. Prior to joining the federal government, she was an associate at a law firm in San Antonio, Texas.

In June 2011, Ms. Lerner was designated by President Obama as a member of the Government Accountability and Transparency Board. She has chaired the Council of the Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency since January 2021 and served as its vice chair from January 2015 through December 2020.

Ms. Lerner has been honored by the President's Council on Integrity and Efficiency (PCIE) with three awards for excellence: in 2001, for her work reviewing the Department of Commerce's management of 5,000 intra-agency and special agreements worth over \$1 billion; in 2002, for her assistance in a complex investigation of false claims submitted under a financial award from the National Institute of Standards and Technology; and in 2005, for her review of a controversial study that recommended significant structural changes to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Office of Finance and Administrative Services.

Ms. Lerner received her law degree from the University of Texas School of Law and a B.A. in liberal arts from the University of Texas. She is admitted to the bar in both Texas and the District of Columbia.





## WHAT WE DO

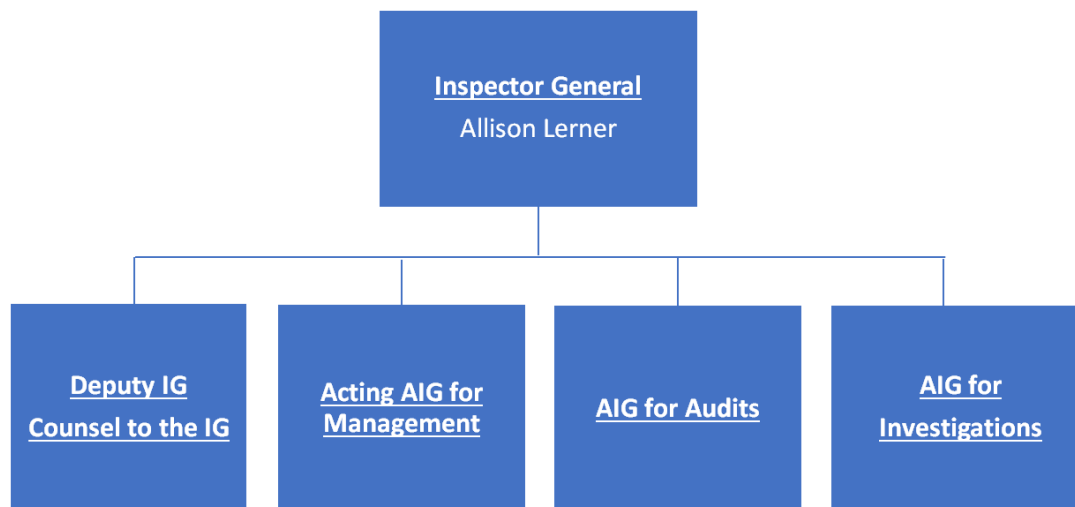
**We provide independent oversight of the National Science Foundation to improve the effectiveness, efficiency, and economy of its programs and operations and to prevent and detect fraud, waste, and abuse.**

The National Science Foundation (NSF) Office of Inspector General (OIG) is an independent and objective oversight authority established in 1989, in compliance with the Inspector General Act of 1978, as amended. The Inspector General reports directly to the National Science Board and Congress.

We are organized into four offices with varied responsibilities: the Immediate office (Executive office and Counsel), Office of Audits, Office of Investigations, and Office of Management.

- We share our findings and make recommendations to improve effectiveness, efficiency, and economy.
- We prevent and detect fraud, waste, abuse, and whistleblower reprisal within NSF or by individuals who receive NSF funding.
- We investigate allegations of research misconduct.
- We keep NSF, the National Science Board, and Congress fully informed of our findings and recommendations, as well as the agency's progress in implementing corrective action.

# OUR ORGANIZATION



## WHO WE ARE

We are dedicated professionals from many disciplines: auditors, special agents, program analysts, management analysts, data analysts, attorneys, scientists, human resource specialists, budget analysts, and IT specialists.

## GET IN TOUCH

WEB: [oig.nsf.gov](http://oig.nsf.gov)

EMAIL: [oigpublicaffairs@nsf.gov](mailto:oigpublicaffairs@nsf.gov)

CALL: 703.292.7100

MAIL: 2415 Eisenhower Ave. Alexandria, VA 22314

Follow us on Twitter: @NSFOIG



# WHAT DO WE AUDIT?

We audit NSF award recipients to detect improper spending or noncompliance with federal and NSF requirements. We tailor each audit depending on an auditee's unique risks. We also conduct internal audits of NSF's programs to identify ways to improve systems and operations.

The audits may be performed by OIG staff or by Independent Public Accountants or other government auditors with OIG staff monitoring their work.

## HOW DO WE SELECT WHAT TO AUDIT?

Each fiscal year, our Office of Audits publishes an annual work plan. The plan contains audits mandated by legislation, as well as discretionary, risk-based audits of NSF's programs, contracts, cooperative agreements, and grants to universities and other institutions.



We ensure the selected audits and reviews align with our identified management and performance challenges for NSF. In accordance with the Reports Consolidation Act of 2000, our office is required to update and publish an assessment of NSF's "most serious management and performance challenges facing the agency ... and the agency's progress in addressing those challenges." We use the management challenges and a risk-based assessment to determine what audits, inspections, or reviews should be included in the plan. Since our discretionary audits and reviews are not mandated by legislation, we have the flexibility to adjust the plan to address any emerging circumstances or to respond to requests from Congress or other stakeholders.

# WHAT TO EXPECT IF YOU'RE AUDITED

All NSF employees and offices are expected to cooperate fully and promptly with all OIG requests for documents, interviews, briefings, and other information and materials. This includes ensuring openness and transparency in grant administration and management practices by:

- Refraining from activity that might inhibit communication or cooperation with OIG;
- Respecting the rights of NSF employees and encouraging them to speak directly and confidentially with OIG; and
- Ensuring documentation is easily and readily provided by NSF staff and by awardees.

Documents should be retained in accordance with federally mandated retention periods or longer if documentation is involved in an ongoing investigation. When an institution accepts an NSF award, it agrees to maintain records and supporting documentation for its expenditures.

## HOW WE COMMUNICATE DURING AUDITS

Throughout the audit process, auditors regularly communicate with the person or organization being audited (auditee). At key points during the audit, we provide opportunities for auditee feedback on our findings and potential recommendations to ensure that our reports are accurate, fair, and balanced.

### Key Points in the Audit Process

- Engagement Letter - A letter announcing the start and scope of the audit.
- Entrance Conference - A formal meeting to discuss the audit objectives, process, and time frames.
- Notice of Preliminary Findings and Recommendations - A written summary of audit finding(s). The auditee may provide informal feedback. (for internal audits only; external auditees receive a discussion draft)
- Exit Conference - A formal meeting to discuss the audit results and any recommendations.
- Draft Report - A draft report sent to the auditee for formal written comments, which are included verbatim in the final report.
- Final Report - A final report detailing the results of our audit and recommendations. We provide a copy to the auditee and Congress, and we post the report on our public website and [oversight.gov](https://www.oversight.gov).
- Corrective Action Tracking - We track corrective actions when we issue recommendations. We inform Congress, NSF, and the public about progress.

# WHAT DO WE INVESTIGATE?

We investigate allegations of wrongdoing involving organizations or individuals that receive awards from, conduct business with, or work for NSF. When possible, we work in partnership with agencies and awardees to resolve issues.

We conduct our investigations according to the Council of the Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency's Quality Standards for Investigations.

## SOURCES OF ALLEGATIONS

Anyone may confidentially contact us to report potential wrongdoing. Sources include: Principal Investigators/CO-PIs, NSF staff, OIG Office of Audits, merit review panelists, contractors, ex-partners and disgruntled former employees, university administrators, other government agencies, and anonymous hotline callers or informants.

## THE INVESTIGATIVE PROCESS

The investigative process includes multiple steps, and they are not always in the same order. Here is a glimpse of some of the steps we may pursue.







# WHISTLEBLOWER PROTECTION

Whistleblowers perform an important service for the public and NSF when they report evidence of wrongdoing. All NSF employees, contractors, subcontractors, awardees, and subawardees are protected from retaliation for making a protected disclosure. Reports concerning wrongdoing by NSF employees or within NSF programs can always be submitted directly to the Hotline.

If you have any questions about whistleblower rights and protections, or are concerned that you have experienced retaliation for blowing the whistle, you may contact the NSF OIG Whistleblower Protection Coordinator at [ombudsman@nsf.gov](mailto:ombudsman@nsf.gov).

Individuals who believe they have been improperly retaliated against may contact:

- The U.S. Office of Special Counsel: OSC is an independent agency enforcing whistleblower protections, safeguarding the merit system and providing a secure channel for whistleblower disclosures. Information on filing a complaint with OSC may be found at: <http://www.osc.gov>.
- The Merit Systems Protection Board (MSPB): Certain employees may be able to appeal directly to MSPB. More information on whistleblower MSPB appeals is available at: <https://www.mspb.gov/appeals/whistleblower.htm>.
- Our office via 800.428.2189 or our online complaint form [oig.nsf.gov/hotline](https://oig.nsf.gov/hotline).



# THE ROLE OF INSPECTORS GENERAL

Nearly every federal agency has an Inspector General. There are 75 federal IGs. Approximately half are appointed by the President subject to Senate confirmation, and approximately half are appointed by the agency head.

According to the Inspector General Act of 1978, as amended, the role of an IG is to prevent and detect waste, fraud, and abuse relating to each agency's programs and operations and to promote economy, efficiency, and effectiveness in the agency's operations and programs.

IGs are nonpartisan and are selected without regard to political affiliation. IGs are required by the IG Act to keep both their agency heads and Congress fully and currently informed about problems and deficiencies in their agencies' programs and operations, as well as the necessity for and progress of corrective action.

Under the IG Act, IGs are given broad statutory authorities, including access to all agency records and information. IGs also have the authority to subpoena relevant documents and information from non-federal organizations and individuals.

IGs report to agency heads and to Congress.

