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Inspector general online to clean up

By Mike Hasten

mhasten@gannett.com BATON ROUGE — Inspector General Sharon Robinson wants to make it easier for state employees and the general public to file complaints or ask questions about suspicious state agency operations.

Robinson said that after serving 16 years in the Legislative Auditor's Office, she has experience ferreting out questionable activities. To help, she has established an online complaint form at her office's Web site.

The Web site said "Any person, including public employees, may file complaints or provide information concerning the operation of state government with the Office of State Inspector General. Complaints may be filed anonymously." Questions can be submitted online, through the mail, by telephone or in person.

Robinson is only the second person to hold the position since it was created April 1, 1988, by former Gov. Buddy Roemer. She was appointed to the post by Gov. Kathleen Blanco in March, 13 months after the original inspector general, Bill Lynch, died.

Blanco said the new complaint form is "in keeping with our 'Stamp Out Fraud' campaigns. Citizens now have an efficient, cost effective way to fight fraud and waste in our state government."

Robinson said her office is ready to investigate all complaints but "not everything is at the level that we need to open an investigation. Some can be handled with a phone call and others are sent to other agencies to straighten out.

"Sometimes things are not as bad as people think," she said, "but we always do something to follow up."

Prior to Robinson's appointment, the Public Affairs Research Council urged the governor to put the Office of State Inspector General into state law and increase its powers.

Currently, the inspector general is appointed under an executive order by the governor, who has veto authority over any report submitted for final approval.

Among PAR's suggestions were that the inspector general be named by an independent panel and not the governor, be able to investigate any alleged wrongdoing in state government and be able to release findings without being screened by the governor.

"The governor can now quash or censor any I.G. report without explanation," the PAR report said. "The statute should ensure that there are no limits on what can be investigated. Legislation should include provisions that protect the I.G. from removal from office for purely political reasons."

"All of those suggestions went by the wayside," said PAR President Jim Brandt. "The staff has been depleted over the years (from 29 to 12) and it's still the governor's decision when and whether to release reports. The Inspector General's Office should be able to release reports on its own, not subject to the governor's review."

Brandt recalled how Lynch ran into trouble under former Gov. Edwin Edwards. After Lynch compiled reports critical of Medicaid funding and higher education spending, "the entire executive branch of government was off-limits."

Robinson said in the past, agencies have been aware of being investigated, but if nothing illegal or improper was found, they never were informed, so the charges hung over their heads. She wants to establish a policy that informs agencies of the results of the investigations, good or bad.

The most common complaints are employee grievances, she said, and most of those are forwarded to Civil Service. Many complaints are filed about wrongdoing in an agency after an employee has been disciplined.

Lately, she said, her office has been wrapped up in allegations about small boards and commissions not following open meetings and records laws, so her office has been conducting seminars to educate appointees.
