

Transcript: “A Message from the Inspector General: Audit of ATF’s Management and Oversight of Confidential Informants” March 2017

Hello, I’m Michael Horowitz, Inspector General for the U.S. Department of Justice.

Today, our office released a report on ATF’s management and oversight of confidential informants. We found that while ATF’s policies were generally aligned with the Attorney General’s Guidelines for confidential informants, its oversight of the confidential informants program required significant improvement.

One of the most serious deficiencies we identified in the program was how ATF stored and managed its information about confidential informants. We found that critical program information was highly compartmentalized and often kept only in hard copy, and the system ATF used to store electronic information was unsophisticated. As a result, ATF could not efficiently obtain accurate and complete information about its program as a whole, and therefore it could not manage the program efficiently, or judge the overall value of informants.

Similarly, we found that ATF could not easily identify and track total payments made to individual informants. That’s a problem for many reasons, including that providing complete and accurate payment information to prosecutors is critical to ensuring that the government meets its disclosure obligations in criminal cases.

ATF also did not keep reliable information about some of its higher-risk informants. This included foreign national informants, whom ATF can sponsor for temporary legal status in the United States. In fact, we could not even determine how many foreign confidential informants ATF had sponsored. Without more reliable information, we do not think it is possible for ATF to ensure appropriate coordination with the Department of Homeland Security.

Finally, we found that ATF did not adequately manage its process for conducting mandatory reviews of higher-risk confidential informants, and therefore it was not able to ensure that it had provided the level of oversight that is required by the Attorney General Guidelines.

This is the second time in less than a year that my office has identified serious concerns about the management and oversight of a Justice Department confidential informant program. Informant programs are unquestionably important to law enforcement, but they also come with significant risks. My office will continue to be vigilant in helping to ensure that they are appropriately overseen.

To learn more about today’s report, and to see our other reports on Justice Department confidential informant programs, please visit our website, oig.justice.gov.

Thank you for joining us.