Report of Investigation:

Former

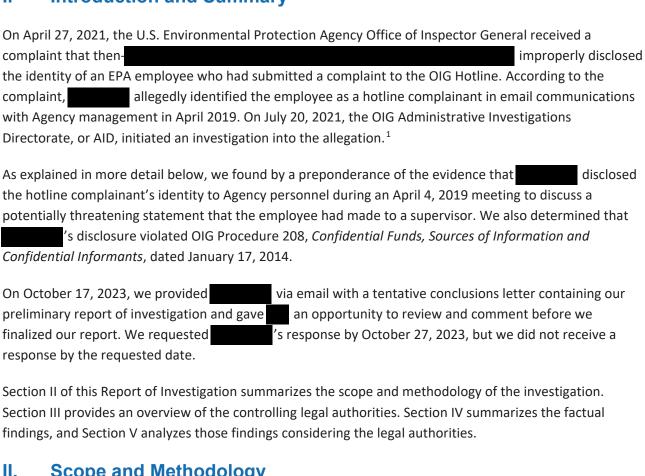
Office of Inspector General, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

November 6, 2023 | 24-N-0007



REPORT OF INVESTIGATION: **FORMER** OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL U.S. ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY

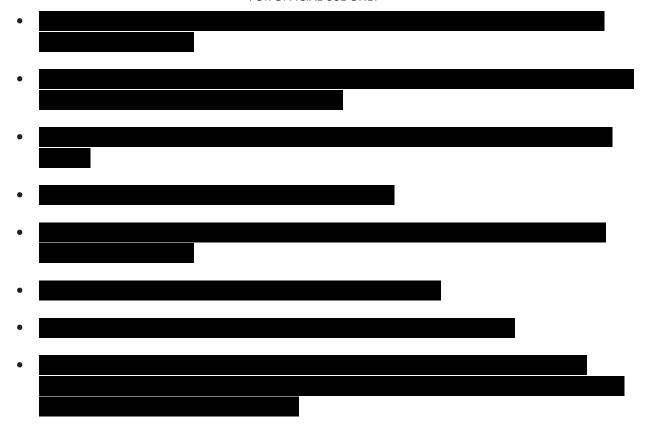
I. **Introduction and Summary**



Scope and Methodology

During our investigation, we interviewed and eight other current and former EPA employees who had information relating to the allegation or who were identified as having knowledge relevant to the allegation:

retired from government service on 2021. retirement was announced prior to the initiation of this investigation.



We also reviewed the email communications of relevant personnel, OIG Hotline records, the case file and other documentation from the OIG Office of Investigations, and relevant OIG policies and procedures.

III. Legal Authorities

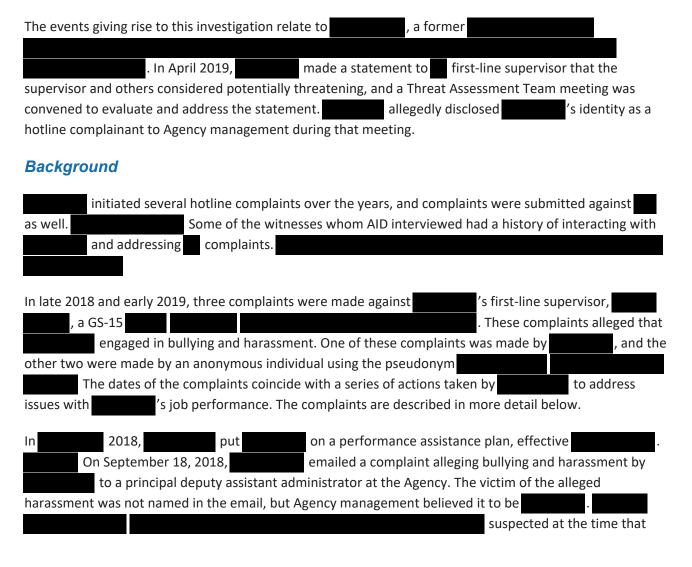
Under section 7(b) of the Inspector General Act of 1978, as amended, 5 U.S.C. § 407(b), an inspector general is prohibited from disclosing the identity of an agency employee who has submitted a complaint or provided information to the inspector general, except in two situations: (1) when the employee has provided consent or (2) when "the Inspector General determines such disclosure is unavoidable during the course of the investigation." Inspector General Act of 1978, as amended, 5 U.S.C. § 407(b); see also OIG Procedure 208, Confidential Funds, Sources of Information and Confidential Informants, dated January 17, 2014, Section 2.1.² If the release of information provided by an employee complainant could reveal the identity of the employee, then the OIG must keep that information confidential to the same extent as the employee's identity. OIG Procedure 208, Section 2.1(b). The OIG's confidentiality procedures apply to "all releases of information." Id., Section 2.1(d) (emphasis in original). Even within the OIG, the identities of employee complainants may be released only on a need-to-know basis. Id. If an employee consents to the

² This version of OIG Procedure 208 was in place at the time of the events described in this report. It was revised on March 17, 2021.

disclosure of his or her identity, the investigating agent is required to document that consent. *Id.*, Section 2.1(c).

The OIG does not have policies or procedures governing how the inspector general is to exercise the authority set forth in section 7(b)(2) of the Inspector General Act to disclose the identity of a complainant when it is unavoidable during an investigation. Witness testimony obtained in this investigation revealed that such authority is rarely, if ever, exercised by the OIG and has not been invoked the past several years.

IV. Factual Findings



the complaint had been sent by . testified to AID that asked the person who raised the concerns but never responded. ³
's performance assistance plan was in effect until 2018. On or around that date, submitted an OIG Hotline complaint against and alleging harassment, fraud, and other misconduct (Hotline Complaint 2019-0041). In a complaint, alleged that had been verbally abusive and threatened and others with retaliation if they complained about what was happening in the office, requested whistleblower protection.
On performance, 2019, received a closeout memorandum stating that performance under the performance assistance plan had been unsuccessful. On March 30, 2019, emailed an EPA OIG employee with another complaint against part and a leging that was discriminating against, verbally abusing, and retaliating against an unnamed subordinate. This complaint was forwarded to the OIG Hotline, which referred it to the OIG's Office of Investigations (Hotline Complaint 2019-0208).
On , 2019, put on a performance improvement plan. During a meeting with to discuss the plan, made the alleged threatening statement. According to emails drafted by after the meeting, came by office , and when asked to sign the plan, that informed supervisor, , what had happened. also informed Labor and Employee Relations Division Specialist
The information was subsequently shared with others. expressed the view that the statement could "easily be construed as a threat of violence." suggested reporting it to the OIG and convening a Threat Assessment Team meeting. The information was also provided to , an OIG special agent in the Office of Investigations in Research Triangle Park, North Carolina, and from there it was forwarded to , an OIG special agent in Washington, D.C.
On April 1 and 2, 2019, there were several emails exchanged between Special Agent and others within the Office of Investigations, including about the recent OIG Hotline complaints relating to and the threatening statement made to . The two OIG Hotline complaints relating to and were
³ According to, the Agency initiated an investigation under EPA Order 4711, <i>Procedure for Addressing Allegations of Workplace Harassment</i> , dated November 20, 2015, in response to the complaint. When asked by AID to confirm whether such an investigation took place, the Office of Human Resources was unable to locate any record that such an investigation had occurred. ⁴ The Office of Investigations did not open an investigation into Hotline Complaint 2019-0041 when it was made but eventually consolidated it and Hotline Complaint 2019-0208 into a threat investigation of in April 2019. See footnote 6 below;

consolidated with

's alleged threatening statement for investigation by the Office of

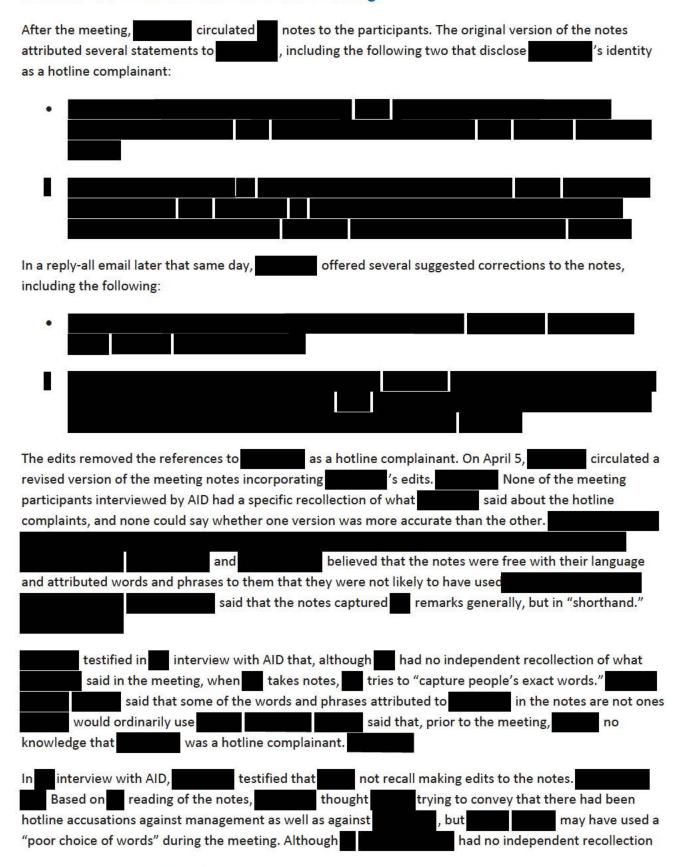
Investigations. The Threat Assessment Team Meeting A Threat Assessment Team meeting was convened on April 4, 2019, to discuss and evaluate statement. A Threat Assessment Team is "a multi-disciplinary team of agency employees or contractors (e.g., [Employee Assistance Program]) established at each location to evaluate threats and allegations of threat impacting the workplace, including allegations of violence." The team includes representatives from the Agency's security, human resources, employee assistance, and other offices. It convenes on an ad hoc basis to, among other things, assess the potential seriousness of work-related incidents, evaluate a person's ability to carry out any stated intentions of committing violence, identify ways of deescalating the situation, and provide strategies to Agency management to prevent escalation and remediate the impact of any incidents on the workplace. The OIG collaborates with the Threat Assessment Team, investigating workplace incidents and responding to criminal activity in the workplace, including threats. It was during the Threat Assessment Team meeting that 's identity as a hotline complainant. The meeting was held by conference call, and it was led by , who served as The following individuals participated as well: Although some of the participants in the meeting were familiar with testified had never met or dealt with complaints,

This version of HR Bulletin 17-005B was in place at the time of the events described in this report. It was updated on November 20, 2019. While the bulletin covers the use of a Threat Assessment Team for domestic violence situations, former testified that a team could also be convened in this situation.

In the Threat Assessment Team meeting, discussed referred to as "red flags." The participants were asked to provide any information they had on perspectives. They also discussed options for addressing the situation.
AID conducted interviews with each meeting participant, and none had a specific recollection of what said about whether was a hotline complainant.
In interview with AID, testified had no recollection of the meeting itself. Even after being shown email exchanges about the meeting, had no independent recollection of attending or of any discussion about did not recall any discussions with Agency management, anything about role in the meeting, or any questions asked by Agency management. only recalled being named as a hotline complainant reviewed the Office of Investigations case file in advance of interview with AID for this investigation.
In fact, none of the participants had a recollection of the meeting itself, except not only recalled the meeting generally but also remembered that shared some information with the group about concerns that had been raised to the OIG, including concerns about the treatment of recalled saying, "Thank God it was a management issue." did not recall that attributed the complaints to or disclosed that the hotline calls had been made by None of the participants recalled knowing in advance of the meeting
whether was an OIG Hotline complainant. and were the only attendees whose notes of the Threat Assessment Team meeting were available for this investigation. testified in interview with AID that it was practice to take meeting notes. may have taken notes of the Threat Assessment Team meeting but may have discarded them before about this investigation.
's notes are brief and contain only a single, nonrelevant reference to any statements by the "OIG." 's notes are more extensive and are the primary evidentiary basis for understanding what occurred.
⁶ The Office of Investigations opened a threat investigation regarding's statement on April 4. It conducted interviews of relevant witnesses, including, and determined that the evidence was inconclusive. On July 18, 2019, the complaint was recommended for closure. 7

the handwritten notes.

Notes of the Threat Assessment Team Meeting



of the meeting, it was possible had a "slip of the tongue" and inadvertently referred to the fact that had made a hotline complaint.
Our review of the case file found no documentation that consented to the disclosure of identity, as would be required by OIG Procedure 208. There was likewise no documentation in the OIG's investigative files that the inspector general had determined that disclosing 's identity was unavoidable. Then-Acting Inspector General testified that he had no recollection that such a determination had been requested or made.
The Alleged Disclosure Comes to Light
On 2019, proposed that 2019 email responding to the proposed removal, disclosed status as a hotline complainant to the division director and others. served as the decision-maker for that proposed removal, and on 2019, accepted 's recommendation of proposed removal. The removal became effective on 2019.
In the course of responding to an administrative action, learned from during a Threat Assessment Team Meeting on April 4, 2019, that the OIG Hotline "has been busy with many accusations concerning the asked about this statement in an interview with AID, affidavit was based on the corrected notes and not an independent recollection of what the meeting. So used the edited version of the notes because understood that version to be the "correct" version.
The OIG first learned of the alleged disclosure on August 27, 2020, in an attachment to a letter from 's congressional representative. In response, the Office of Investigations conducted a preliminary review of to anyone outside the OIG about the former employee. Then-Assistant Inspector General for Investigations confirmed that the Office of Investigations did not investigate further. After the OIG's receipt of the April 27, 2021 hotline complaint, the Office of Investigations conducted another email search and located email communications between and Agency personnel concerning that supported the complaint's allegation. These email communications were provided to AID, which then initiated this investigation. 8

⁸ A review of how the Office of Investigations handled the August 27, 2020 allegation was not included in the scope of this investigation.

V. Analysis and Conclusions

The analysis in this investigation encompasses three separate questions:

- 1. Was 's status as a hotline complainant confidential?
- 2. Did disclose 's complainant status outside the OIG?
- 3. If there was a disclosure, was it made in violation of OIG procedures?

For the reasons set forth below, we answer all three questions in the affirmative.

1. Was 's status as a hotline complainant confidential?
's complaint of November 8, 2018, was entitled to confidentiality protection under section 7(b) of the Inspector General Act. The Inspector General Act affords confidentiality to Agency employees who submit a complaint to the OIG. 5 U.S.C. § 407(b); see also OIG Procedure 208, Section 2.1. At the time of the hotline complaint, was an employee of the EPA, submitted a complaint to the OIG Hotline. In fact, the hotline referral itself mentions that protection" as part of hotline complaint. As such, submitted a complainant was entitled to confidentiality.
2. Did disclose 's complainant status outside the OIG?
None of the meeting participants had a specific recollection of what said in the meeting about 's status as a hotline complainant. The analysis of this question thus comes down to two pieces of evidence: 's notes and 's suggested edits. The key question is which one of those pieces of evidence more accurately captures 's words. For the reasons explained below, the original notes appear credible, and thus it is more likely than not that did disclose 's identity as a hotline complainant in the April 4, 2019 Threat Assessment Team meeting.
as a hotline complainant:
The fact that there are two places in the notes where is recorded as referring to as a
hotline complainant tends to suggest that in fact make the disclosure and that the statements in the

testified that did not have a specific recollection that

in the notes, but did say that, when taking notes, "I really try to capture

said the

notes were not simply the result of an interpretation or a one-time error on the part of

interview with AID,

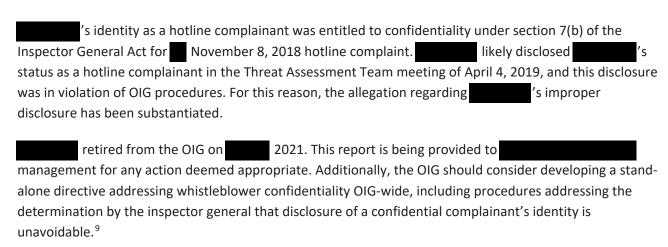
exact words attributed

people's exact words." conceded that may have "written it based on interpretation," but said:
I tried to capture the notes as I hear them. I'm not perfect and I'm not a robot and I can't keep up with everybody as fast as they go. So could there be errors? Yes. Am I more likely to capture the exact words? Yes And sometimes I'm wrong My inclination is I tend to try and capture exactly what I hear.
also told AID that some of the words attributed to are not words or phrases would likely use. For example, in the phrase "accusations by and potentially others," that "accusations" was not word and that would not have said "potentially others" either. If these statements are true, then they would tend to support the conclusion that some of the discussion.
In addition, had no knowledge prior to the meeting that was a hotline complainant. was also not aware of any reason why would have known that was a hotline complainant before the April 4, 2019 Threat Assessment Team meeting. 's inclusion of 's status as a hotline complainant in notes also suggests that heard it for the first time in the meeting.
Despite these indicators of the reliability of the original notes, there is evidence in the record that raises questions about their accuracy in general. Two meeting participants testified that the notes did not accurately capture their words. One participant, pointed to one statement attributed in the notes (" and said, "Those are definitely not my words." did not think ever used the word "veracity" in a meeting in life. It seemed to that was "free" with the language in notes: "Some of it might be, like, a summation of what I said. I think maybe got a little free with the language that put in it. Took liberties with — wit some of the language that attributed to me."
When another participant, was asked by AID whether some 's notes accurately reflected typically uses:
I may have said this, but it's not the way I would have said it. It's not the way I speak "Conduct based action" is not a phrase I would have used. I wouldn't have put it that way. didn't do a very good job of memorializing my remarks When I say that, that's not because I have a recollection of what I actually said. I don't have a recollection of that. I'm saying that just based on my speech habits.

Despite their concerns about the accuracy of the notes, neither nor specific recollection of what said in the meeting. and likewise had no recollection of what or anyone else said in the meeting. And was able to state only that the notes generally captured own remarks, in a kind of "shorthand." For these reasons, we give only limited weight to statements.
's edits also call into question the reliability of said in the meeting. Although it is possible that said in the meeting. Although it is possible that said in the meeting. Although it is possible that said in the meeting. Although it is possible that said in the meeting accuracy, they also had the potentially self-serving effect of eliminating the references to said as a hotline complainant. In sinterview with AID, had no recollection of making the edits and could not speak to reasons for doing so. The possible existence of a self-serving motive does not necessarily mean that sedits were inaccurate, but it does constitute one factor in weighing their credibility as a record of said in the meeting.
Although there is evidence on both sides, the balance of the evidence tips the scale in favor of original notes. The notes were taken during the meeting itself, and testified that it was practice to take down the participants' words as they were spoken. According to testimony, tried to capture the actual words. 's edits had the potentially self-serving effect of eliminating the references to status as a hotline complainant, which calls into question their accuracy as a record of what was said in the meeting. For this reason, we give less weight to those edits. Finally, although did not have a specific recollection of said in the meeting, may have made a "slip of the tongue."
For these reasons, we find that it is more likely than not that disclosed disclosed 's identity to Agency management in the April 4, 2019 Threat Assessment Team meeting.
3. If there was a disclosure, was it made in violation of OIG procedures?
Section 7(b) of the Inspector General Act sets forth two situations in which a hotline complainant's identity may be disclosed: when the complainant has provided his or her consent to the disclosure, or when the inspector general "determines the disclosure is unavoidable during the course of the investigation." 5 U.S.C. § 407(b); see also OIG Procedure 208, Section 2.1. Under OIG Procedure 208, if the complainant has provided consent, then it must be documented in the case file. OIG Procedure 208, Section 2.1(c). Neither the Inspector General Act nor OIG Procedure 208 provides an exception to these requirements for Threat Assessment Team meetings.
Our review of the case file found no documentation of security of the case file found no documentation of security was unavoidable. The acting inspector general at the time testified that he had no recollection that such a determination had been requested or made. Testified that if the acting inspector general had given approval for the disclosure, it would be documented in files. As such, the record supports a finding

here that any disclosure of 's identity as a hotline complainant would have been in violation of OIG procedures.

VI. Conclusion



⁹ While OIG Policy & Procedure 208 contains provisions on confidentiality, including summaries of various statutes that afford confidentiality to certain complainants, it is only applicable to Office of Investigations employees.



Whistleblower Protection

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

The whistleblower protection coordinator's role is to educate Agency employees about prohibitions against retaliation for protected disclosures and the rights and remedies against retaliation. For more information, please visit the OIG's whistleblower protection webpage.

Contact us:



Congressional Inquiries: OIG.CongressionalAffairs@epa.gov



Media Inquiries: OIG.PublicAffairs@epa.gov



EPA OIG Hotline: OIG.Hotline@epa.gov



Web: epaoig.gov

Follow us:

X

X (formerly Twitter): @epaoig

in

LinkedIn: linkedin.com/company/epa-oig



YouTube: youtube.com/epaoig



Instagram: @epa.ig.on.ig

