

State of New York
Office of the Welfare Inspector General



2020 Annual Report

Andrew M. Cuomo
Governor

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Office of the New York State Welfare Inspector General's (OWIG) mission is to investigate fraud, abuse, and illegal acts perpetrated within New York State's public assistance system, which includes programs administered and funded by New York State, the federal government, and local social services districts, or by contractors or recipients of public assistance services.

In 2020, OWIG was presented with unprecedented challenges resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. OWIG adapted quickly to these challenges, adopting procedures to ensure the ongoing safety of the public and staff, while simultaneously continuing to investigate public assistance fraud and fulfill OWIG's mission. Throughout 2020, New York State courts had severely limited functionality due to COVID-19 restrictions on the congregation of groups of people in public and private places. In addition, many government offices and local Departments of Social Services (DSSs) pivoted to remote work environments, adding additional challenges to conducting investigations. Despite these challenges, OWIG continued to investigate significant cases resulting in criminal prosecutions throughout New York State and provided substantial regional and statewide support to stakeholders to identify, investigate, and prosecute public assistance fraud. The 2020 OWIG Annual Report demonstrates the successful execution of OWIG's mission.

OWIG reinforced its statewide presence in 2020, receiving complaints from nearly every county in the state.¹ In 2020, OWIG reviewed 343 allegations of public assistance fraud, fostered the arrest of four individuals, worked with local DSSs to collect improper payments, and collaborated with local prosecutors in the sentencings of six additional defendants stemming from OWIG's criminal investigations. These investigations uncovered \$305,763 in fraud or improper social service benefits payments. Additionally, OWIG continued to partner with federal, State, and local law enforcement, and with local social services districts, to investigate fraudulent schemes. For example, in 2020, OWIG completed an investigation with the Suffolk County District Attorney's Office resulting in the arrests of two Long Island women for the theft of more than \$107,000 in Medicaid, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and cash public assistance benefits.

¹ In 2019, OWIG received complaints from 49 of the 62 counties in New York State.

OWIG also continued to assist local social services districts in fighting public assistance fraud. Each local district maintains a unit responsible for investigating fraud and abuse in public assistance programs. OWIG supports these units by providing training, equipment, counsel, and staff to enhance their efforts. In more complex investigations, OWIG and local social services districts conduct joint investigations. In other circumstances, OWIG's investigative findings are referred to local social services districts with the recommendation that they complete public assistance benefit eligibility analyses and calculate the amount of overpayments received by targets of investigations.

The Offices of the New York State Inspector General, led by New York State Inspector General Letizia Tagliafierro, are comprised of the Office of the New York State Inspector General, OWIG, and the Office of the New York State Workers' Compensation Fraud Inspector General. These three offices often work together and complement each other in the successful pursuit of fraud investigations statewide.

PURPOSE AND SCOPE OF ANNUAL REPORT

New York State Executive Law section 74(6) mandates that OWIG submit an annual report to the Governor, State Comptroller, Attorney General, and Legislature summarizing the activities of the office for each calendar year. Consistent with OWIG's mandate, this report provides an overview and summary of OWIG's activities and accomplishments for 2020, including: benefits fraud exposed by OWIG, significant prosecutions resulting from OWIG referrals, outreach and training, and investigations and reviews commenced by OWIG.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

In 1992, Executive Law section 74 established OWIG and empowered it to investigate and prosecute fraud, abuse, and illegal acts involving social services programs and funds administered and funded by New York State, the federal government, and local social services districts. These programs comprise several state and federal public assistance programs, including Temporary Assistance (which is comprised of Family Assistance and Safety Net Assistance), Home Energy Assistance Program (HEAP), Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Supplemental Security Income (SSI), and Medicaid.

Each public assistance programs is designed to address the specific needs of the indigent: Temporary Assistance provides allowances for basic grants, home energy, shelter, and fuel;² HEAP assists with the cost of home heating;³ SNAP, which is administered by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Food and Nutrition Service, provides nutrition assistance;⁴ SSI provides monthly payments to low-income individuals who are age 65 or older, blind or disabled;⁵ and Medicaid provides medical coverage to individuals who are unable to afford medical care.⁶ Eligible recipients receive SNAP and cash benefits by Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) and access them using an EBT card, also known as a Common Benefit Identification Card (CBIC).

In New York State, local social services districts provide or administer publicly funded social service and cash assistance programs. New York State is divided into 58 local social services districts, including the five boroughs of New York City that comprise one district. Outside of New York City, each social services district corresponds to one of the other 57 counties in the state. OWIG's jurisdiction includes government employees and agencies that administer social services programs, recipients of public assistance benefits, and contractors that receive public funding for privately administered social services programs.

INVESTIGATIONS

In 2020, OWIG received complaints from nearly every county in the State. From January 1 to December 31, 2020, OWIG reviewed and processed 343 allegations of public assistance fraud. This number represents a decrease from 2019, in large part due to the challenges faced by each local DSS, OWIG's law enforcement partners, and the general public due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Many offices were closed and workers pivoted to remote work environments with limited access to their offices and its resources. Still, OWIG's investigations resulted in the arrest of four individuals and the sentencings of six additional defendants stemming from OWIG's criminal investigations. These investigations uncovered more than \$292,600 in fraud or

² New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance, Temporary Assistance Source Book, Chapter 2, Section B, Family Assistance, and Section D, Safety Net Assistance (June 27, 2016),

<http://otda.ny.gov/programs/temporary-assistance/TASB.pdf>

³ Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance Home, Programs, Home Energy Assistance Program (HEAP), <https://otda.ny.gov/programs/heap/>.

⁴ <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-snap>.

⁵ Social Security Administration Supplemental Security Income Booklet, August 2017, <http://www.ssa.gov/pubs/EN-05-11000.pdf>.

⁶ https://www.health.ny.gov/health_care/medicaid/#definition.

improper social service benefits payments. This amount, combined with \$13,163 in improper benefit payments identified by the local social services districts as a result of referrals made by OWIG, resulted in \$305,763 of improper payments being identified.

During 2020, OWIG received complaints from various sources including telephone, online submission, email, mail, and personal delivery. Each complaint is evaluated by OWIG's Case Management Unit, executive staff, and senior management. OWIG conducts a preliminary analysis of complaints to compare the reported information against records of the Welfare Management System, a computerized database operated and maintained by the New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance (OTDA) that contains a complete benefits history for each applicant or recipient. Following this analysis, OWIG may open an investigation of the allegations, close those lacking jurisdiction or enough information to warrant an investigation, or determine that the matter is appropriate for referral to a local social services district or agency for further action. For these referred matters, OWIG remains involved with the investigation by reviewing progress reports from the local district or agency and providing resources such as staff and investigatory equipment.

When an investigation is opened from a complaint, OWIG assigns a multi-disciplinary team including an attorney, investigator, and auditor to conduct each investigation. If OWIG establishes evidence of fraud and improper benefit payments, it conducts an analysis to determine the amount overpaid by the social services program, which is then confirmed by the local social services district. Funds may then be recovered through criminal prosecution and civil recoupment by the local social services district.

When evidence of criminality is discovered, OWIG partners with the appropriate prosecutorial agency to pursue prosecution. Thereafter, OWIG remains involved with the investigation by offering additional resources and support to all aspects of the prosecution, including hearings, trials, and appeals. OWIG also encourages its prosecutorial partners to seek full restitution for the fraud uncovered by OWIG.

In addition to criminal penalties, an individual engaged in Temporary Assistance or SNAP fraud may be subject to civil sanctions following an Administrative Disqualification Hearing. After referral and with the assistance of OWIG, OTDA conducts an Administrative Disqualification Hearing to determine whether a program recipient has committed an Intentional Program Violation by making false or misleading statements, misrepresentations, or otherwise

concealing or withholding facts relevant to eligibility. Individuals may waive a hearing and enter into a Disqualification Consent Agreement, whereby the accused admits to committing an Intentional Program Violation and consents to the imposition of sanctions. Intentional Program Violation offenders must pay restitution of any improperly received benefits and may be disqualified from receiving the relevant public assistance benefit for a specified period. In egregious and/or repeated cases involving Temporary Assistance, the individual may be barred for a period of five years, and in egregious and/or repeated cases involving SNAP, the individual may be barred for life. These administrative sanctions provide the state with a cost-avoidance savings equivalent to the amount that the beneficiary would have received.

CASES RESULTING IN PROSECUTION, CONVICTION AND/OR SENTENCING

Montgomery County Roofer who Pled Guilty to Public Assistance Fraud and Workers' Compensation Fraud Sentenced

On January 3, 2020, Joseph Kellogg Sr., a Montgomery County roofing contractor who pled guilty to felony welfare fraud and workers' compensation fraud charges in 2017, but never appeared for sentencing, was sentenced to one and one third to four years in prison on each of two felony counts, to be served concurrently.

Kellogg had pled guilty in April 2017 in Montgomery County Court to the workers' compensation crime of Failure to Secure Compensation and Offering a False Instrument for Filing in the First Degree, both felonies. Kellogg had been out on bail pending sentencing. However, he never appeared for sentencing and a warrant was issued for his arrest. He was arrested by the Amsterdam Police Department with assistance from the New York State Police.

Kellogg, a residential roofing contractor in Amsterdam, filed four separate building permit applications that included fraudulent certifications stating that he had no employees and as such was exempt from obtaining workers' compensation insurance. The Inspector General's investigation determined that Kellogg used several employees on his roofing job contracts related to the permit applications, at one point employing 11 individuals on two simultaneous projects.

Kellogg was additionally charged with felony false filings when it was determined that he earned income from his roofing business but failed to disclose that income in an application for SNAP benefits.

The matter was prosecuted by the Montgomery County District Attorney's Office.

Buffalo Man Charged and Convicted in \$6,500 Public Assistance Fraud

On January 8, 2020, Donald White of Buffalo was arrested and charged with Grand Larceny in the Third Degree, Welfare Fraud in the Third Degree and Offering a False Instrument for Filing in the First Degree, in connection with an investigation conducted by OWIG and the Erie County Department of Social Services.

The investigation found that White lied on his application for SNAP benefits, falsely claiming he was unemployed when he was working at a health care agency. White's falsification allowed him to collect \$6,497 in SNAP benefits that he would not have qualified for had he accurately reported his employment income. White pleaded guilty to one count of Welfare Fraud in the Fifth Degree and received a conditional discharge. White also agreed to pay restitution in the full amount of \$6,497.

The matter was prosecuted by the Erie County District Attorney's Office.

Bronx Woman Sentenced in \$116,000 Public Assistance Fraud

On February 3, 2020, Elena Marrero of the Bronx was sentenced for stealing more than \$116,000 in public assistance benefits. An investigation conducted by OWIG found that Marrero misrepresented herself to the New York City Human Resources Administration (HRA) for years as an impoverished single mother of four living alone when she was, in fact, living with and supported by the father of her children, who was gainfully employed. Marrero was initially arrested in June of 2019 pursuant to the investigation and pleaded guilty in December 2019.

OWIG found that since 2014, Marrero consistently filed for public assistance benefits, including cash assistance, SNAP, and Medicaid, claiming to be a single mother of four with little income. Marrero's public assistance application filings with HRA failed to disclose, as required, that she lived with a domestic partner, the father of her four children, who earned a living with careers at both the City of New York Sanitation Department and Fire Department. Her filings also failed to disclose income she made in 2016 and 2017 working at a pizza franchise. In total, Marrero received \$39,590 in cash assistance, \$22,736 in SNAP assistance, and \$54,636 in Medicaid benefits to which she was not entitled.

Marrero was sentenced to five years' probation and paid \$10,000 in restitution upon sentencing. Marrero has been ordered to pay an additional \$20,000 in restitution over the course of her probationary period, and a civil judgement of \$86,693 was entered against her for the remaining amount of benefits she stole.

The Bronx County District Attorney's prosecuted the matter.

Middletown Woman Pled Guilty and was Sentenced for Using a False Identity to Wrongfully Obtain Public Assistance Benefits

On February 13, 2020, Jennifer Calderone of Middletown pled guilty to the charge of Welfare Fraud in the Third Degree and was sentenced to a one-year term of probation and ordered to pay \$4,135 in restitution. Calderone had previously been arrested in August 2019 on charges that she stole more than \$4,000 from the State by using a false identity to work while also receiving public assistance benefits under her real name.

The investigation conducted by OWIG, with assistance from the Orange County Department of Social Services, found that Calderone falsely submitted multiple written certifications to receive SNAP benefits while simultaneously working at a local food packing company. Calderone used a false identity, date of birth, and social security number to work, while at the same time submitting written certifications to the Orange County Department of Social Services stating that she was not working or receiving any income. These misrepresentations caused her to fraudulently receive \$4,135 in SNAP benefits to which she was not entitled.

The Orange County District Attorney's office prosecuted the matter.

Brooklyn Man Sentenced for Using False Identity to Steal Public Assistance Benefits

On February 25, 2020, an individual last known as "Glen Cooper," a/k/a "Glendon Cooper," of Brooklyn, was sentenced for illegally using the name, date of birth, and social security number of another person to obtain more than \$21,000 in benefits from public assistance programs to which he was not entitled.

An investigation conducted by OWIG, the United States Department of Labor's Office of Inspector General, the United States Social Security Administration's Office of the Inspector General, and the New York State Department of Labor found that from April 2017 to April 2019, Cooper submitted applications for unemployment insurance benefits on five separate occasions, varying the information slightly each time to avoid detection. Based on the false information submitted, Cooper's applications for unemployment insurance benefits were approved and he received three debit cards with balances totaling \$17,035.

In addition to unemployment benefits, Cooper also applied for public assistance benefits using similarly fraudulent information. Through these misrepresentations, in 2017 and 2018,

Cooper received a total of \$3,079 in Medicaid benefits, \$960 in SNAP benefits, and \$448 in Safety Net Assistance benefits.

The investigation found that the person whose identity had been assumed was born and had resided in California his entire life. His birthdate and social security matched those the defendant used when applying for unemployment and Medicaid benefits in April and July 2017, respectively.

Cooper pled guilty to the charges of Access Device Fraud and Theft of Government Services. He was sentenced to time served, three years' supervised release with continuous GPS monitoring, and 100 hours of community service. Cooper was also ordered to pay full restitution. The case was prosecuted by the United States Attorney's Office for the Southern District of New York.

Williamsville Woman Arrested, Convicted, and Sentenced for Stealing \$37,000 in Public Assistance Benefits

On August 14, 2020, Thomasina Sardina was arrested and pled guilty to stealing \$37,249 in SNAP benefits by underreporting her income and submitting forged paystubs.

An investigation conducted by OWIG found that between February 2012 and July 2015, Sardina falsified her SNAP benefit applications by failing to report her employment income and later underreporting her income. Sardina concealed her earnings as a patient service representative for a local healthcare provider and submitted forged paystubs in support of her applications for SNAP benefits. Sardina would not have qualified for the SNAP benefits had she accurately reported her income.

Sardina, who was ordered to pay full restitution in the amount of \$37,249, received a conditional discharge. The case was prosecuted by the Erie County District Attorney's Office.

Two Suffolk County Women arrested in theft of \$107,716 in Public Assistance Benefits

On September 21 and September 22, 2020, respectively, Suffolk County residents Chaniesha Simmons and Rhonda Quick were arrested and charged with Welfare Fraud in the Fourth Degree pursuant to an investigation conducted by OWIG, which found that combined, the pair stole over \$107,000 in Medicaid, SNAP, and cash public assistance benefits.

OWIG's investigation determined that Quick, while collecting public assistance benefits from the Suffolk County Department of Social Services, was employed as an unlicensed home

aide for an elderly couple. She allegedly did not report the income she received, resulting in an overpayment of \$38,371.26 in Medicaid benefits from January 2014 to December 2016; an overpayment of \$29,285.20 in Public Assistance cash benefits from January 2014 to January 2017; and an overpayment of \$12,357 in SNAP benefits. In total, Quick received \$80,013.46 in benefits to which she was allegedly not entitled.

The criminal charges against Quick are currently pending. The matter is being prosecuted by the Suffolk County District Attorney's Office. The defendant is presumed innocent unless and until proven guilty in a court of law.

The investigation also found that Simmons, while collecting public assistance benefits from the Suffolk County Department of Social Services, was employed as a licensed home health aide. She did not report the income she received, resulting in an overpayment of \$15,550.52 in Medicaid benefits from January 2014 to December 2016; and an overpayment of \$12,148.00 in SNAP benefits from March 2014 to January 2017. In total, Simmons received \$27,698.52 in benefits to which she was not entitled.

On October 26, 2020, Simmons pled guilty to the charge of Welfare Fraud in the Fifth Degree and was sentenced to a conditional discharge. In addition, Simmons was ordered to pay restitution to the Suffolk County Department of Social Services.

Former Employees of a Long Island Group Home for the Disabled and their Accomplices Pled Guilty to the Theft of SNAP Benefits from Residents

In 2019, nine individuals, former employees of a Brentwood residential facility for disabled adults and their accomplices, pled guilty and/or were sentenced for their involvement in the theft of SNAP benefits belonging to residents of the facility. This scheme, uncovered in an OWIG investigation that concluded in June 2018, found that the stolen SNAP benefits were used by the employees and others to purchase groceries for their own personal consumption. The investigation resulted in the arrests of 13 individuals linked to a scheme.

OWIG's investigation found that these individuals stole and/or used the SNAP Electronic Benefits (EBT) cards belonging to residents at a facility on the grounds of the Pilgrim State Hospital in Brentwood. The residential facility is one of several operated by the nonprofit Federation of Organizations, which has numerous locations throughout Long Island and New York City. Some of the residents' stolen EBT cards were shared among those charged and used at local large grocery stores and wholesale clubs to make bulk purchases totaling nearly \$8,000.

The purchases included such items as king crab legs, steaks, chicken wings, racks of ribs, baby formula, and a pallet of Red Bull energy drink cases, among other items.

The investigation was completed in 2020 with the convictions of the final two individuals:⁷

- Marla Hayes, a former case manager at the residential facility who earlier pled guilty to the charge of Criminal Possession of Stolen Property in the Fourth Degree, was sentenced on March 11, 2019 to five years of probation, 100 hours of community service, and payment of \$1,169 in restitution.
- Sasha Quintanilla, a former case manager at the residential facility, pled guilty to the charge of Criminal Possession of Stolen Property in the Fourth Degree on November 15, 2019. At that time, Quintanilla was placed on interim probation and ordered to perform 140 hours of community service and pay \$330 in restitution. As a result of her successful completion of these conditions, Quintanilla's final sentencing took place on December 4, 2020.
- Alejandro Khoury, a former rehabilitative associate at the residential facility, pled guilty on November 15, 2019 to the charge of Criminal Possession of Stolen Property in the Fourth Degree. Khoury was placed on interim probation and ordered to perform 140 hours of community service and pay \$330 in restitution. As a result of his successful completion of these conditions, Khoury's final sentencing took place on December 4, 2020.
- Vipul Shah pled guilty to the charge of Criminal Possession of Stolen Property in the Fifth Degree on July 23, 2019. On January 7, 2020, Shah was sentenced to three years of probation, 140 hours of community service, and payment of \$239 in restitution.
- Candice Collins, on August 15, 2019, pled guilty to the charge of Petit Larceny. Collins was sentenced on October 10, 2019 to three years of probation and payment of \$190 in restitution.

⁷ Four defendants in this investigation received adjournments in contemplation of dismissal.

- One individual pled guilty to the charge of Disorderly Conduct on December 20, 2019, and was sentenced on this same date to a Conditional Discharge and ordered to pay \$400 in restitution.⁸
- Another individual pled guilty on December 4, 2019 to the charge of Disorderly Conduct. Prior to her guilty plea, this individual completed 140 hours of community service and paid restitution in the amount of \$101. She was sentenced to a Conditional Discharge on the same date as her guilty plea.⁹
- Yet another individual pled guilty to the charge of Disorderly Conduct on December 4, 2019. Prior to her plea, this individual completed 140 hours of community service and paid \$433 in restitution. She was also sentenced to a Conditional Discharge on the same date as her guilty plea.¹⁰
- Kareem Clark pled guilty to the charge of Petit Larceny on August 6, 2019. Clark completed 100 hours of community service prior to his plea. On November 7, 2019, Clark was sentenced to a Conditional Discharge and ordered to pay \$2,547 in restitution.

The cases were prosecuted by the Suffolk County District Attorney's Office.

INITIATIVES

OWIG often bases its investigations on trends, patterns, and vulnerabilities identified through ongoing comprehensive analyses of complaints received and available public assistance data. In 2020, these analyses resulted in the continuance of OWIG's initiatives to combat the theft of SNAP benefits intended for recipients in vulnerable populations and to eliminate SNAP trafficking. OWIG has also expanded an initiative from 2019: a focus on public assistance fraud involving the use of identity theft.

Inter-agency Partnership Combats Social Service Fraud

In 2020, OWIG partnered with the Office of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority Inspector General (MTA IG) and the New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance (OTDA) to identify employees who are unlawfully receiving social service

⁸ Pursuant to New York State Criminal Procedure Law section 160.50, the record of this action was sealed.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

benefits. To execute this collective mission, OWIG and the MTA IG entered into an agreement establishing a commitment towards identifying ineligible MTA employees who are collecting social service benefits. Using data analytics, OWIG and the MTA IG developed specific criteria comprised of fraud indicators gleaned from past investigations to identify MTA employees potentially receiving benefits illegally. As part of this initiative, OWIG and the MTA IG, with the assistance of OTDA, seek to hold ineligible employees accountable, disallow benefits, and deter future fraudulent behavior. This multi-agency effort will continue through 2021.

SNAP Trafficking and Benefits Theft

The investigation and prosecution of those found to be engaged in SNAP trafficking and the theft of SNAP benefits continued to be a priority for OWIG in 2020.

Federal and state governments can pursue civil penalties for SNAP trafficking. The United States Department of Agriculture's Food and Nutrition Service can permanently bar a retailer found guilty of SNAP trafficking from continued participation in the SNAP program. State agencies must also investigate any recipient alleged to have committed an intentional SNAP violation and ensure that appropriate cases are acted upon through administrative disqualification hearings or by a court of appropriate jurisdiction.¹¹ Thus, SNAP trafficking investigations not only identify fraud but also result in the prevention of future fraudulent acts by those implicated in an investigation.

In 2020, OWIG continued to partner with local and federal law enforcement organizations, including the United States Department of Agriculture's Office of the Inspector General, the United States Department of Homeland Security, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, various United States Attorney's offices, local prosecutors, and local Departments of Social Services to conduct SNAP trafficking and theft investigations.

In addition, OWIG is continuing its efforts to investigate SNAP trafficking that involves the "delivery route" store classification. In neighborhoods where SNAP benefit recipients have limited access to large food retailers, the United States Department of Agriculture's Food and Nutrition Service permits mobile stores classified as "delivery routes." Delivery routes can be essential to SNAP benefit recipients living in areas where residents do not live near or have access to supermarkets or other food retailers that carry affordable and nutritious food. Delivery

¹¹ 7 C.F.R. section 273.16(a)(1).

routes, in theory, eliminate recipients' need to travel, bringing the supermarket to the recipient along with healthy food options. As the delivery route store classification is vulnerable to SNAP fraud, in 2020, OWIG continued several important investigations related to delivery routes in collaboration with our federal partners.

In 2021, OWIG will build upon efforts of prior years in partnership with the United States Department of Agriculture Office of the Inspector General, federal and local law enforcement, and county Departments of Social Services to identify, investigate and prosecute delivery route fraud schemes.

Welfare Fraud Involving Identity Theft

In 2020, OWIG and the Office of the New York State Inspector General began a social services fraud initiative across the State that involved State employees' use of fraudulent names, dates of birth, and social security numbers in order to collect public assistance benefits. To combat identity theft in the various public assistance programs, OWIG partnered with agencies including the United States Social Security Administration's Office of the Inspector General, the United States Department of Labor's Office of Inspector General, the New York State Department of Labor Special Investigations Unit, the New York State Department of Motor Vehicles, various federal and local prosecutors' offices, and the local Departments of Social Services. This multi-agency approach allows the investigative team to work together and provides access to records and information unique to each agency that can then be shared and used in pursuing cases of welfare fraud and identity theft.

In 2021, OWIG will continue to focus on public assistance fraud crimes involving identity theft and continue to develop these cases with our investigative partners.

OUTREACH AND TRAINING

In 2020, although training opportunities were limited due to the COVID-19 pandemic, OWIG continued to identify opportunities to provide training, promote awareness, and develop partnerships to enhance efforts at detecting and prosecuting public assistance fraud in New York State. OWIG has been a prominent member of the New York Welfare Fraud Investigator's Association (NYWFIA) and has both participated in and served as a leader at NYWFIA training events. NYWFIA provides support and training to its membership, consisting of investigators, administrators, prosecutors, eligibility workers, and claims and recovery specialists from local and State agencies that fight fraud, waste, and abuse in social services programs. Each year,

NYWFIA conducts both annual and regional trainings regarding New York State Social Services Law and policies, as well as skills training. OWIG also continues to present industry-specific, one-on-one investigative training to the local social services districts around the State.

In 2020, OWIG continued its relationships with its State and federal investigative and prosecutorial partners through its participation in various interagency task forces. OWIG also continued its membership in several organizations that address public assistance fraud, including the Western, Central, and Metropolitan Regional Health Care Fraud Task Forces. In addition, OWIG is a member of the Document and Benefit Fraud Task Force led by the United States Department of Homeland Security, and the Electronic Crimes Task Force sponsored by the United States Secret Service's Buffalo Field Office. OWIG also participates in a multi-agency Suspicious Activity Report Task Force, examining detailed financial reports for indicators of potential welfare fraud. These task forces include law enforcement and private sector professionals who combine intelligence and resources to combat public assistance and other types of fraud. OWIG also worked closely with its State partners, including the New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance, New York State Department of Labor, and New York State Department of Motor Vehicles, to successfully identify fraudulent activity.

In addition, OWIG continued its membership in other welfare fraud fighting organizations such as the New York Public Welfare Association and the national organization, the United Council on Welfare Fraud. OWIG also maintains its statewide visibility through its continued participation in the New York Prosecutors Training Institute, which "provides comprehensive continuing legal education, training, advice, and assistance to New York State prosecutors."¹² OWIG and local department of social services districts continued to discuss collaboration, successful investigative techniques, and the efficient and thorough oversight of New York State's welfare programs throughout 2020. In addition, OWIG met with local and federal prosecutors in furtherance of the office's efforts to improve fraud detection and successfully prosecuted welfare fraud crimes.

In 2021, OWIG will continue to partner with outside organizations to provide virtual trainings and conduct proactive initiatives to raise awareness and target public benefits fraud throughout New York State.

¹² <http://www.nypti.org>.

CONCLUSION

The OWIG 2020 Annual Report documents the successful execution of OWIG's mission to investigate fraud, abuse, and illegal acts perpetrated within the department of social services or local social services districts, or by contractors or recipients of public assistance services, which involve social services programs administered and funded by New York State, the federal government, and each local social services district. In 2021, OWIG will continue to promote government efficiency and integrity through its education and outreach efforts and pursue proactive initiatives to curtail fraudulent activities and yield significant savings to New York State.