

State of New York
Office of the Inspector General



Investigation into
Misconduct at the Canal Corporation

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Inspector General

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The New York State Thruway Authority's Office of Audit and Management Services referred to the Inspector General two complaints alleging that Canal Corporation employees engaged in improper conduct at two worksite locations where employees are permitted to stay overnight. The Inspector General found that Wesley Wright misused Canal Corporation residences at Delta Reservoir and North Lake Reservoir, and that Jason Watson misused a vessel docked at the Lysander maintenance facility.

Wright retired after the Thruway Authority filed disciplinary charges against him. Disciplinary charges were also filed against Daniel Cornmire, a supervisor, for failing to monitor Wright's conduct. Cornmire subsequently retired before discipline was issued. Watson, a seasonal employee, was not rehired.

The Inspector General recommends that the Canal Corporation take measures to enhance security of its properties and ensure that all employees are familiar with policy prohibiting unauthorized persons from entering Canal Corporation property.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The Canal Corporation maintains and operates the 524-mile canal system that includes the Erie, Champlain, Oswego and Cayuga-Seneca canals. At several remotely located reservoirs that provide water to the canal system, the Canal Corporation maintains houses where designated employees are allowed to reside pursuant to specific terms of use. The Canal Corporation also permits designated employees to stay overnight on docked vessels where canal maintenance is being performed.

INSPECTOR GENERAL'S INVESTIGATION REVEALS MISUSE OF RESERVOIR HOUSES AND BOAT SLEEPING AREA BY CANAL CORPORATION EMPLOYEES

Delta Reservoir and North Lake Reservoir House Matters

As a Canal Corporation Water Supply Tender 1 assigned to monitor the Delta Lake Reservoir, Wesley Wright was authorized to reside in a house owned by the Canal Corporation at the site. Wright's wife was the only other person authorized to reside in the house with him. Wright was also responsible for monitoring the North Lake

Reservoir, but did not have permission to reside in the house maintained by the Canal Corporation at that location.

The Inspector General's investigation found that from 2010 through 2014, the Canal Corporation obtained information that on multiple occasions, Wright violated the terms of his authorized use of the Delta Reservoir house and used the North Lake Reservoir House without permission. In 2010, Wright was verbally counseled after it was learned that his adult son, the son's wife, and their infant child also had been living in the Delta Reservoir house. In 2013, the Canal Corporation learned that Wright was again allowing his son to reside with him in the Delta Reservoir house; it also found evidence that a woman, known to be a companion of Wright, and her children were staying at the house at times when Wright's wife was not present. As a result, in September 2013 the Canal Corporation directed Wright's superiors to counsel Wright and to monitor use of the house. As directed, Wright was again counseled.

On May 14, 2014, Canal Corporation employees found evidence of persons staying at the North Lake Reservoir house, which they reported to Canal Corporation Section Superintendent Daniel Cornmire. No action was taken. On July 8, 2014, Canal Corporation officials touring reservoir sites visited the North Lake Reservoir house, where they found Wright's female companion and her children at the residence.

Responding to these discoveries, the Canal Corporation Deputy Director, in a July 10, 2014 memorandum, ordered Wright to have his personal acquaintances immediately vacate all Canal Corporation facilities. The Canal Corporation also changed the locks on the North Lake Reservoir house. The Inspector General provided evidence obtained in its investigation to the Canal Corporation, and in November 2014 the Canal Corporation suspended Wright and served him with a Notice of Discipline seeking his termination. Wright resigned his employment on March 15, 2015. Based on evidence obtained in the Inspector General's investigation, disciplinary action was also commenced against Cornmire for failing to properly monitor Wright's conduct following Wright's 2013 counseling. Cornmire retired on March 4, 2015. Three other supervisors, Brian Swift, Philip White, and Stephen Thorp, were counseled for failing to monitor Wright's behavior, also as a result of the Inspector General's investigation.

Lyons Maintenance Facility Matter

Jason Watson was hired by the Canal Corporation as a seasonal employee for the summer of 2012. Watson was assigned to the Lyons maintenance facility, where he worked on several boats, and he stayed overnight during the work week on a boat docked at the site. While Canal Corporation employees in Watson's position are permitted overnight use of a boat when away from their home port, Lyons is Watson's home port in this instance and, therefore, his overnight use of the boat was not permitted. Further, Canal Corporation Maintenance Directive 2003-2 bars unauthorized persons from Canal Corporation property, including "vessels."

In August 2012, the Canal Corporation became aware of video recordings showing Watson and other individuals engaged in sexual activities on a Canal Corporation tugboat and derrick boat. The videos were accessible on Watson's personal webpage until he removed them. The Canal Corporation advised the Inspector General that it did not rehire Watson as a seasonal employee and rejected his application for full-time employment.

The Inspector General's investigation further found that facility and vessel keys were provided to full-time and part-time employees at the Lysander maintenance facility, regardless of whether they needed access. One of the tugboat captains assigned to the Lysander site also testified to the Inspector General that he allowed guests to board the boats, provided they did not stay overnight.

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Inspector General's investigation found that Wesley Wright misused the Canal Corporation residences at Delta Reservoir and North Lake Reservoir and that Jason Watson misused a vessel docked at the Lysander maintenance facility. The Inspector General recommends that the Canal Corporation take measures to enhance security of its property, including ensuring that keys are provided only on an "as needed" basis consistent with defined job duties. The Canal Corporation also should ensure that all employees are familiar with policy prohibiting unauthorized persons from entering Canal Corporation property, and regional managers should conduct periodic, unannounced checks of worksites to ensure compliance with policy.

Based on the Inspector General's investigation, the Canal Corporation filed disciplinary charges against Wright, for misuse of the residences, and Daniel Cornmire, a supervisor, for failing to monitor Wright's conduct. As a result of the Inspector General's investigation and disciplinary charges, Wright and Cornmire both later retired. Three other supervisors were counseled for failing to properly monitor Wright. Wright is no longer residing on Canal Corporation property, and the Canal Corporation ensured that his personal belongings were removed. The Canal Corporation did not rehire Watson, a seasonal employee.

The Canal Corporation also advised that it has discontinued the practice of providing housing to employees charged with maintaining, monitoring, and managing levels at northern reservoirs within the Corporation's jurisdiction. It further advised that it is taking additional measures to enhance the security of facilities and vessels that have not undergone such security enhancements in the last five years.

As a result of this investigation, the Inspector General conducted training to all executive staff and senior managers at the Canal Corporation on best practices and obligations related to ethics, supervision of staff, and the proper utilization of state resources.