



# NEWS RELEASE

From New York State Inspector General  
**Catherine Leahy Scott**

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: Jan. 6, 2016  
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## **FORMER TOP STATE PRISON INTERNAL AFFAIRS OFFICIAL PLEADS GUILTY TO CRIMINAL COERCION FOR INAPPROPRIATE SEXUAL CONDUCT WITH SUBORDINATE EMPLOYEE**

ALBANY – New York State Inspector General Catherine Leahy Scott announced the guilty plea of a former top official at the Department of Corrections and Community Supervision (“DOCCS”) for the sexual exploitation and abuse of a subordinate employee.

James A. Ferro, former Director of Operations for the Special Investigations Unit (“SIU”) in the state Department of Corrections and Community Supervision (“DOCCS”), pleaded guilty Tuesday afternoon to the crime of Coercion in the Second Degree, a misdemeanor, culminating an investigation by Inspector General Leahy Scott that found repeated inappropriate and unwanted sexual conduct by the defendant and led to an overhaul of the State prison system’s internal affairs unit.

Immediately after pleading guilty he was sentenced to 120 hours of community service, a \$1,000 fine and conditional discharge, meaning if he fails to meet the conditions of his sentence he may be resentenced to up to one year in jail. The guilty plea was entered after jury selection and opening statements at his trial in Albany County Court on charges including Forcible Touching, Official Misconduct, Coercion in the Second Degree, misdemeanors, and Harassment in the Second Degree, a violation.

“The defendant’s guilty plea makes clear his criminal culpability for the years of torment, abuse and reprehensible conduct he subjected his subordinates to while in his role overseeing investigations of misconduct within the New York State prison system,” said Inspector General Leahy Scott. “As my investigation uncovered, he used his position with impunity to exploit, intimidate and punish any person who attempted to expose his criminal conduct. He violated the public trust and disgraced his office.”

Inspector General Leahy Scott’s investigation into Ferro’s conduct, which involved several victims and was perpetuated repeatedly for years, led to Ferro initially being placed on administrative leave in April 2014 and ultimately being criminally charged last January. Allegations included Ferro touching the genitals of a subordinate employee through clothing, repeatedly touching his own genitals in front of subordinates and repeatedly touching or intruding upon subordinates while they were using the toilet facilities. He also threatened employees with retaliation when his authority was questioned. Ferro threatened employees – often former DOCCS corrections officers promoted to SIU to investigate allegations of misconduct within the prison system

– with sending them back to the prison facilities from which they came to work alongside the corrections officers they were charged with investigating.

The investigation also found that Vernon Fonda, Ferro's direct supervisor, failed to effectively address complaints employees made against Ferro that he was made aware of. Fonda retired from State service shortly after the investigation commenced.

Prior to the investigation, the SIU was known as the DOCCS Inspector General's Office. DOCCS is responsible for more than 54,000 individuals under custody held at 54 state facilities, and 36,500 parolees supervised throughout seven regional offices. The SIU investigates cases of alleged misconduct by DOCCS employees.

Ferro's plea was before the before the Hon. Peter Lynch of Albany County Court.

Inspector General Scott thanked New York State Attorney General Eric Schneiderman for the successful prosecution of this case.

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