

Federal whistleblower takes embattled job in Montgomery County

By Victor Zapana, Published: December 8

Edward Blansitt isn't shy about taking on people in high places.

As deputy inspector general at the Commerce Department, he lodged a complaint against his own boss, a presidential appointee, who was forced to resign in face of Blansitt's allegations.

Now he is probing government waste and malfeasance in one Washington's wealthiest suburbs.

Earlier this year, Blansitt was appointed Montgomery County's inspector general, inheriting a job that has generated more than a little friction from officials in Maryland's most populous jurisdiction.

The third person to hold the job in the 14 years it has existed, Blansitt succeeded J. Thomas Dagley, who left the job in April — halfway through his four-year term and amid acrimonious relations with county leaders.

County officials say they hope that Blansitt, who is 62 and could be reappointed after he finishes out Dagley's term, will strike a different tone than his predecessor did.

Whether Blansitt can or will could become clearer over the next few months, as he releases his first batch of public reports. In his first report this week, his office concluded that Montgomery needs better oversight of the county fleet.

Tensions between inspector general and county officials have flared periodically. The first inspector general, Norman D. Butts, resigned after he clashed with the county executive and his office survived a legislator's threats to abolish it.

More recently, Dagley penned an editorial in September in which he chided top Montgomery officials, saying they "have grown too accustomed to operating behind closed doors and avoiding the tough questions."

Blansitt says he hopes not to be a sensational or adversarial presence in the county. But he knows criticism is inevitable, and he is prepared for it. "I think they wanted someone with a thick skin," he said.

Montgomery is one of only a handful of local governments across the nation with an independent watchdog. The District has one, who has been criticized for staying low-profile while other investigative agencies look into possible improprieties by Vincent C.

Gray's (D) mayoral campaign and administration. Prince George's has been considering the creation of an inspector general position to help curb corruption in a government notorious for it.

Montgomery County Executive Isiah Leggett (D) has said he supports the position and frequently notes that he sponsored the 1997 legislation creating it. But the relationship between the two hasn't always been amicable.

In 2007, Leggett quietly proposed that the inspector general's office be transferred to the executive branch from the legislative branch. Dagley said that would threaten the office's independence, and Leggett later abandoned the idea. In 2010, Dagley told council members that he had encountered political interference during his investigations — an assertion that Chief Administrative Officer Timothy Firestine said was “not grounded in reality.”

Blansitt became inspector general after a life-long career in federal government that began with a job as a statistical assistant at the Bureau of Mines. He worked his way through the bureaucracy, working in the National Science Foundation and the Commerce Department. (Through his work, he has visited presidential libraries and the South Pole.)

In 2004, Blansitt received Commerce's highest honor, the Gold Medal. He considered retiring the following year but decided to stay.

That's when the trouble started.

Blansitt worked for Johnny E. Frazier, who had served as the department's top watchdog since 1999. Though he was Frazier's deputy, Blansitt approved Frazier's work travel expenses. In 2006, Blansitt was suspicious of a week-long trip Frazier took to New York and Boston and he asked the inspector general to justify the travel.

Frazier did not provide a reason that satisfied Blansitt, according to federal documents detailing the investigation, so Blansitt told his boss in September 2006 that he had filed a complaint with what was then called the President's Council on Integrity and Efficiency.

Frazier soon demoted Blansitt and Allison C. Lerner, Frazier's counsel at the time, according to the federal documents. Frazier assumed that Blansitt had sought Lerner's advice before filing the complaint, according to the documents. Blansitt said he did seek legal advice, but not from Lerner.

The Office of Special Counsel soon became involved and investigated the possible violation of federal whistleblower protection laws. The House Energy and Commerce committee and the president's council also did their own investigations on Frazier.

During the inquiries, “the office suffered so much turmoil,” Blansitt said. Many staff members were interviewed by investigators. According to the federal documents,

officemates hurled allegations that Lerner and Blansitt in those interviews, saying their close relationship was detrimental to the office.

Blansitt also was described as a “nasty” co-worker, and in a June 2007 letter sent to the deputy Commerce secretary and provided to The Washington Post by Frazier, eight senior officials in the inspector general’s office said Blansitt “alienated and demoralized” employees.

Blansitt doesn’t dispute that he was a tough boss. “I would say ‘demanding’ is a fair word,” he said, adding that he was not abusive.

Frazier resigned in 2007 in the face of the investigations. Blansitt and Lerner were reappointed to their jobs, and two years later, he retired his federal post and taught accounting at a community college.

At the time, Lerner became chairman of a Montgomery panel that would interview and vet inspector general candidates. Lerner told Blansitt about the application and later recused herself when he was interviewed.

On April 26, the Montgomery County Council appointed Blansitt as inspector general. Beating 42 other applicants, he now makes \$140,000 and leads an office with six employees and more than \$650,000 in its budget. He said he hopes to be reappointed after the partial term ends.

In an interview, Frazier said Blansitt finally had what he wanted. “Ed wanted to be an IG more than any thing else,” said the former inspector general, who lives in Potomac and now volunteers in the District. “I am very glad that he has this job now, because he is the boss. He is the number one. I think he wanted my job.”

Asked to respond, Blansitt said, “There’s nothing to be gained from rehashing anything else.”

His old colleague, Lerner, who is now the inspector general at the National Science Foundation, said the Frazier episode was a formative experience for her and for Blansitt. “What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger,” she said, “and I think that it did for both of us.”