

## Miami-Dade's OIG fulfills unique role for county

By M. Mindy Moretti

*Senior Staff Writer*

Nothing in his 33 years of experience with the FBI quite prepared Christopher R. Mazzella for what it would be like to be Miami-Dade County's very first inspector general.

"To do this job, you really have to understand the process," Mazzella noted. "My experience in the FBI did not prepare me for this job. Not to demean the FBI in any way, but when you're the inspector general, you're on the inside looking out, whereas in law enforcement, you have to look from the outside in. So the inspector general has a unique opportunity to really view how things have been done on the most basic levels of government."

And Mazzella has been taking that unique look at the workings of the Miami-Dade County government since the county commission, in 1998, established the Office of the Inspector General (OIG).

The county's OIG is one of the very few inspectors' general programs on the county level and even on the municipal level in the country. Most OIG's are at the state or federal level.

According to Miami-Dade Mayor Alex Penelas, the OIG was established to clean up areas of the county government and maintain a level of transparency throughout.

"It began with the ethics commission, and then we [the county commission, of which Penelas was a commissioner at the time] created the inspector's general office. The commitment to create and fully fund this department is part of our real commitment to honest, transparent government," Penelas said.

The OIG has investigated everything from the current \$300 million performing arts center project to road construction projects to the primary election debacle of 2002.

The office has oversight of more than 40 departments, including Aviation (airport), Transit, Housing, Water and Sewer and Public Works, to name a few. It has the authority to review past, present and proposed county and Public Health Trust programs, accounts, records, contracts and transactions. The OIG is not a law enforcement agency, although it does have subpoena power and works closely with the state's Attorney General.

The Inspector General is appointed by the county's Ethics Commission and can only be removed by a 2/3-majority vote of the commission. While the office is subject to budgetary review by the County Commission, the OIG has been fully funded each year and has even gone from two full-time people to approximately 33.

Mazzella believes the OIG has been so successful because he's been given the latitude to hire the people he sees fit for the job.

"I've fortunately hired great staff, they are very diversified," Mazzella explained. "The most important thing, at least from my perspective, is that I can hire people that I feel have unique backgrounds and experiences É so that we can address problems from a multi-dimensional aspect. You're not just getting one answer, you have a lot of different perspectives."

The OIG operates in a separate building, maintains its own secure Web site and e-mail system and operates a hotline so people can report problems anonymously.

"It's really difficult to say how we generate cases," Mazzella said. "They come from a multitude of sources. Some are public sources, a lot are confidential. Sometimes we do open up cases based on our hotline complaints or through the secure e-mail system, but it could come any way."

One way the office prevents fraud is to have offices within certain departments. For instance, the OIG has a separate office at the airport and onsite at the performing arts center. OIG staff attend selection committee meetings and staff meetings to "push them in the right direction" when the OIG anticipates a problem, Mazzella said.

According to Mazzella, no one particular incident his office has had to investigate has been more shocking than any of the others, but he admits that everything has been an eye-opening experience.

Mazzella noted that the office has had some enormous challenges, including a review of the primary election in September 2002. The OIG completed its 35-page report on the election in about 10 days, which is extraordinarily quick. The report helped the county run a successful election in November 2002, but Mazzella admitted the office's inquiry into elections continues.

"That is an amazing turnaround. I sent all of my inspectors out to other jurisdictions. We had to digest a whole culture of how elections were done in Miami-Dade," Mazzella explained. "We had to review staffing. We had to have a sound knowledge of the new election equipment installed, and, of course, conduct a number of interviews. So to turn that thing around in a seven-day period, to come up with some very, what I would think are, courageous recommendations, was just amazing. Everyone became election experts."

Not everyone is always happy with the results of the OIG, although they admit the office is doing an excellent job.

"I tell people all the time that I don't like reading the headlines in the paper," Penelas noted. "But it's part of cleaning up."

And that is perhaps why there are so few inspector generals at the local level. Bill Lynch, a spokesman with the Association of Inspector's General and Inspector General for the state of Louisiana, noted the greatest drawback to creating an IG at any level is the reluctance of the entrenched government to create one.

"There is a lot of politics involved with creating an inspector general's office," Lynch said. "There are a lot of uncertainties that go into such a program and the reason it hasn't spread any more at the local level, part of it anyway, is that they just don't want people looking over their shoulders."

But for Mazzella, and everyone in Miami-Dade County, having someone looking over your shoulder is the name of the game.

"You do need a watchdog," Mazzella said. "I think we've improved things immensely. We still have a few things looming out there, but we're aware of them and now we're working on being there before something happens."

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## Recent Investigations by the Miami-Dade OIG

■ **In March, a consultant and lobbyist involved in contracts at Miami International Airport was arrested and charged by the State Attorney's Office with 75 counts of illegal credit card factoring totaling more than \$527,000. The scheme to defraud the credit card company spanned at least a two-year period and was detected by the OIG when the office was investigating allegations that the defendant was involved in various unlawful activities, including his business dealings with the county.**

■ **In February, an engineer with the Miami-Dade Fire Rescue Department who was responsible for reviewing and approving fire sprinkler plans for buildings in the county was arrested after the OIG discovered the employee secretly operated two companies that received approximately \$1 million from fire sprinkler companies to draft fire sprinkler plans that were, in turn, submitted to him for review and approval. The employee was charged with bribery, money laundering, perjury, and fraud, to name a few.**

■ **Also in February of this year, a joint investigation between the OIG and the Florida Department of Financial Services' Fraud Division, determined that the county's Division Chief of the Special Taxing Districts allegedly lied about her marital status on county insurance records, thus enabling her former husband to fraudulently obtain medical insurance. The former husband fraudulently received over \$20,000 in insurance coverage and county insurance providers made payments of approximately \$69,000 to various health care providers. The former employee is charged with 21 counts of official misconduct, insurance application fraud and organized scheme to defraud over \$50,000.**

■ **And in November 2002, the OIG and the Florida Department of Law Enforcement began a joint investigation into**

**allegations of misconduct at the county's Tax Collector's Office. The investigation found that certain tax certificate buyers were giving gifts, tips and gratuities to employees of the Tax Collector's Office and the Clerk of the Court's Tax Deed Section. The gifts consisted mostly of cash, checks and gift certificates given during the holiday season. As a result, 23 county employees were suspended or tendered their resignation and two supervisors assigned to the Tax Collector's Office were arrested, one charged with perjury and the other with 15 counts of official misconduct and one count of aggravated white collar crime.**