

The Role of Investigators at the USDA Office of Inspector General

September 6, 2018

ANGELA: Hello, I'm Angela Eng with the Department of Agriculture's Office of Inspector General, or USDA OIG for short. The Secretary of Agriculture established USDA OIG administratively in 1962, and Congress later established USDA OIG legislatively under the Inspector General Act of 1978. I am here with Special Agent-in-Charge Beth Dinkins, and she is going to tell us a little more about the role of Criminal Investigators in USDA OIG. Beth, thanks so much for being here today.

BETH: Thank you for having me. I'm happy to be here.

ANGELA: Please tell us more about yourself. Where did you come from and how did you get to be a Supervisory Criminal Investigator with USDA OIG?

BETH: I attended college in Ohio as a fashion-merchandising major, and I realized I wanted to pursue a different path. Then the Criminal Justice program caught my eye, and I changed my major. My senior year, I was selected as one of four students nationwide to perform an internship at the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center in Glynco, Georgia, also known as FLETC. While there, I met an instructor who had been a Criminal Investigator (more commonly known as a Special Agent) with the USDA OIG, and he recruited me as a series 1811 Criminal Investigator. After I graduated from college in 1992, the USDA OIG hired me as an entry-level Special Agent. I have spent my entire career, 26 years total, as a Special Agent with USDA OIG; the last 16 of which as a Supervisory Special Agent.

ANGELA: What sort of education and/or training do you need to qualify for the position of Criminal Investigator with the USDA OIG?

BETH: A college degree is required, but it does not have to be in the field of Criminal Justice. There are certain other minimum qualifications applied against applications by OIG's Human Resources and Management Division. Upon being hired, entry-level Special Agents complete the 3-month Criminal Investigator Training Program at FLETC, encompassing, in part, legal, defensive driving, firearms, and use of force training. Upon graduation from FLETC, new Special Agents attend the Inspector General Criminal Investigator Academy for 4 weeks of specialized training for OIG Special Agents, also at FLETC. Throughout the course of a career, our Special Agents receive mandatory periodic firearms and use of force training, as well as specialized training related to techniques on how to conduct various complex types of investigations. As a Special Agent with the USDA OIG, I exercise the authority to make arrests, execute warrants, and carry firearms as authorized by the Agriculture and Food Act of 1981. Additionally, I exercise the authority to administer oaths, so I can take sworn statements from witnesses and subjects of investigations.

ANGELA: So your working title is "Special Agent-in-Charge." What does that mean?

BETH: I'm currently the Special Agent-in-Charge of the Northeast Region for the Office of Investigations. As such, I am the supervisor for a large geographic region stretching from Maine to Virginia. My staff is responsible for all of the complaints and investigations involving fraud, waste, and abuse and mismanagement in USDA programs and operations within 13 states.

ANGELA: What exactly do "agricultural" Criminal Investigators do? What types of allegations do you investigate?

BETH: Well Angela, USDA OIG Special Agents conduct investigations involving fraud, waste, abuse, and mismanagement in USDA programs and operations. Examples of the USDA programs we oversee include farm loan and subsidy programs, feeding programs such as the School Breakfast and National School Lunch Programs, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children, also known as WIC, and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, also known as SNAP.

ANGELA: What are some examples of fraud, waste, abuse, and mismanagement you might encounter in the programs and operations you just mentioned?

BETH: In farm programs, we often discover farmers selling the crops they pledged as collateral for a USDA loan they received. In school feeding programs, we frequently find instances where day care centers and schools inflate the number of students they claim to be feeding and in order to receive reimbursement for children not fed.

ANGELA: What is the most high-profile investigation you have worked on?

BETH: Well, we also conduct animal cruelty and animal-fighting investigations as regulated under the Animal Welfare Act, so the most high-profile case I worked on is definitely the Michael Vick dog-fighting investigation. At the time, in 2007, I was an Assistant Special Agent-in-Charge and an investigator working for me received information that Michael Vick, the then star quarterback of the Atlanta Falcons football team, was involved in a dog-fighting operation in Virginia. After performing some preliminary work, we initiated an investigation and executed a search warrant at a property owned by Mr. Vick in Surry County, VA. The press reported at length on the investigation.

ANGELA: Oh, wow. What sorts of evidence did you recover?

BETH: Well, most notably we recovered the carcasses of dead dogs buried on the property. In addition, we seized different types of exercise equipment and veterinary supplies that are often associated with training dogs for fighting purposes and treating the injuries they sustain because of the fighting. Following the execution of the first search warrant, the investigation progressed quickly. Within just a couple of months, Mr. Vick and three of his associates were charged by a Federal Grand Jury with violations of Title 18 United States Code § 371—Conspiracy to Travel in Interstate Commerce in Aid of Unlawful Activities and

Sponsoring a Dog in an Animal Fighting Venture. Most of the dogs seized from Mr. Vick's property were placed with various animal rescue organizations for rehabilitation and placement. Mr. Vick paid almost \$1 million in restitution for the care of the dogs as part of the sentence for his crimes.

ANGELA: What kinds of qualities do you look for in an applicant or potential USDA OIG Criminal Investigator? What advice would you give someone interested in a career as a Criminal Investigator with USDA OIG?

BETH: The important qualities we look for include attention to detail and the ability to multitask. Typically, our Special Agents carry an inventory of approximately 10 to 15 active investigations and it is important to be able to focus on one or more of them at any given time to ensure all of our investigative work receives the attention necessary. Our investigators need to be flexible and able to change gears to work on something other than what they may have had in mind at the time. Additionally, I would say excellent writing skills are critical. Most all of the work we do, whether it entails undercover SNAP-trafficking transactions or interviewing witnesses, results in the need to document our findings in writing.

For someone who is interested in a career with the USDA OIG, I would recommend spending some time researching the USDA and USDA OIG public websites. There they can learn about the many and varied agencies, programs, and operations that constitute USDA and its work.

ANGELA: Beth, thank you so much for telling us about your career and the amazing work the USDA OIG Criminal Investigators do. For more information about the USDA OIG, please visit us at www.usda.gov/oig, or find us on Twitter at OIG USDA.