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Celebrating three years of the Erie County Waste, Fraud and Abuse Tipline

By:Mark Poloncarz

Date: Thursday July 21, 2011

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Editor:

As your independent fiscal watchdog, I am committed to ensuring that Erie County operates with the highest level of integrity. Unfortunately, however, waste, fraud and abuse of county resources occurs more frequently than most people realize. This misuse of tax dollars hurts everyone by reducing funds for county services like sheriff's road patrols, street repairs, libraries, parks and more.

In July 2008, my office created the Erie County Waste, Fraud and Abuse Tipline as a way to help root out misuse of county tax dollars. Through a form on my office's website and a telephone hotline, county employees, contractors and residents can anonymously report possible abuse in Erie County government. All calls and emails to the tiplines go directly to the comptroller's Division of Audit and Control where professional auditors investigate every single report or allegation.

Since its creation three years ago this week, our auditors have responded to more than 300 tips, a number of which have led to thorough investigations and resulted in substantial discoveries.

Over the past three years, my office has received dozens of tips regarding various benefits frauds, including allegations of food stamp abuse, unemployment compensation fraud and other forms of public assistance abuse. Social Services personnel investigated all the complaints forwarded by the tipline, resulting in thousands of dollars in public benefits savings.

In addition, tipline investigations have:

- Discovered missing county-owned computer equipment that directly led to the resignation of the county employee responsible;
- Revealed that a County Parks employee was going home during the day while on the taxpayers' time and was promptly terminated;
- Accelerated an already-existing investigation by city of Buffalo animal control officers into a dog-fighting ring that was subsequently raided and shut down, and
- Triggered a sales-tax audit by New York state that closed a gas station in the city of Buffalo that was not only cheating on sales tax but also shorting customers on pumped gas.

In conjunction with the formation of the Erie County Waste, Fraud and Abuse Tipline, my office also developed a new whistleblower complaint and protection policy as an added layer of protection for those who contact me to allege abuse in county government. Unfortunately, this policy has not been implemented county-wide by our current county executive.

However, my office will continue to investigate every allegation and pursue any party that engages in wrongdoing against the county and you, the taxpayer.

If you see or suspect waste, fraud or abuse of county resources, don't ignore it. Please take a minute and report your suspicions online at [www.erie.gov/comptroller](http://www.erie.gov/comptroller), by email at [whistleblower@erie.gov](mailto:whistleblower@erie.gov) or by phone at 858-7722.

Mark Poloncarz  
Erie County Comptroller