

LETTERS

Whistleblowers' reality

In a recent *Federal Times* op-ed, Special Counsel Scott Bloch wrote: "There is good news for whistleblowers coming to the Office of Special Counsel. Last year, OSC's dedicated staff doubled the number of substantiated, valid whistleblower claims over prior years." ["OSC protects whistleblowers as they shine light of truth," May 23 issue.] Bloch's statement wrongly gives federal employees the impression that his office would defend them if they disclosed corruption or mismanagement.

Even under the best circumstances, the challenges whistleblowers face are insurmountable. Once an employee highlights the agency's faults, he or she is traditionally targeted for reprisal by superiors.

Their desks are moved to the basement. Their computers are confiscated. They are given projects that fall far short of their qualifications. They are suddenly "caught" doing something wrong, usually something petty and meaningless. Co-workers are told the whistleblower is not to be trusted. And whistleblowers who seek employment elsewhere — inside or outside the government — may find that they have been blacklisted in their profession.

For these and other reasons, the Project On Government Oversight (POGO) has advised federal employees not to blow the whistle, at least publicly. The risks are simply too great. We have seen so many honest and conscientious employees lose their job responsibilities, career, house, marriage or family. In most cases, these individuals have stumbled into a controversy with little appreciation for the lengths that government bureaucrats will take to crush criticism.

During Bloch's tenure the situation appears to be worsening for whistleblowers, contrary to his public statements. For example, Bloch makes the misleading claim that OSC has doubled the number of whistleblower cases that are referred to agencies for investigation. In fact, those referrals have been almost cut in half when

they are measured against the total number of cases processed by OSC. Referral rates are not a meaningful indicator of whether OSC is meeting its mission. Referrals don't equal remedies, particularly since they go back for more study by the agency under scrutiny.

The system for protecting whistleblowers through the OSC has been flawed for many years. Few whistleblowers get the protection they need. Almost none get protection once their cases are appealed to the federal courts, where, according to the nonprofit Government Accountability Project, whistleblowers have won 1 out of 102 cases since 1994.

Federal employees should not have to sacrifice their lives and liberty for telling the truth about government operations. There are anonymous ways to alert the public and the authorities to danger, corruption and fraud: working through intermediary organizations such as the media, Congress and investigative outfits like ours.

The laws protecting federal workers are weak; the office charged with protecting them is ineffective; and the whole nation suffers when corruption and waste go unchecked. The time has come for Congress to take a serious look at how whistleblowers are treated and whether lawmakers' vision of employee protection has been implemented as intended. Nothing could be more important for our nation's ability to protect itself, and to ensure that our increasingly scarce taxpayers' dollars are well spent.

DANIELLE BRIAN, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,
PROJECT ON GOVERNMENT OVERSIGHT
Washington

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KEN CEDENO

FOR THE RECORD

'Asking employees to make life-altering decisions in just 10 days may be construed as very insensitive.'

George Voinovich, R-Ohio

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