

Highlights of [GAO-19-432](#), a report to the Subcommittee on the Legislative Branch, Committee on Appropriations, House of Representatives

## Why GAO Did This Study

Federal whistleblowers—employees who report violations of law, agency mismanagement or ethical violations—help to safeguard the federal government against waste, fraud, and abuse. Whistleblowers can report to various entities, including the Congress. While these reports are a key source of information for federal oversight, whistleblowers can risk reprisal. Therefore, it is important to appropriately handle whistleblowers' information and identity.

The House Committee on Appropriations Report 115-696 included a provision for GAO to identify congressional avenues, resources, and best practices for working with whistleblowers. This report describes (1) how the Congress receives whistleblower information, (2) the policies and training currently available to congressional staff, and (3) key practices that the Congress could consider for receiving and referring information from whistleblowers. GAO interviewed congressional staff, officials from the Office of Special Counsel (OSC) and the Council of the Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency (CIGIE), and selected advocacy groups that have experience working with whistleblowers. GAO analyzed congressional websites and queried congressional staff regarding policies and training on whistleblowers for congressional staff. To develop key practices, GAO reviewed literature, existing procedures, and standards.

GAO is not making recommendations, but is available to assist the Congress with practices for working with whistleblowers. OSC and CIGIE provided technical comments that were incorporated as appropriate.

View [GAO-19-432](#). For more information, contact Michelle Sager at (202) 512-6806 or [sagem@gao.gov](mailto:sagem@gao.gov).

# WHISTLEBLOWERS

## Key Practices for Congress to Consider When Receiving and Referring Information





### What GAO Found

The Congress receives whistleblower information in multiple ways. Congressional staff and advocacy groups said whistleblowers who contact the Congress typically reach out to oversight committees, the offices of their own representatives or senators, or authorizing committees. Congressional staff said some whistleblowers contact and work with multiple congressional offices simultaneously. Congressional office websites GAO reviewed included contact information to provide whistleblowers with multiple options for reporting suspected wrongdoing, including email links, hotlines, and web-based forms.

Congressional staff can access resources for guidance on working with whistleblowers including congressional advice and internal training on oversight, committee-specific training related to handling whistleblower cases, and training from external advocacy groups on techniques for working with whistleblowers. Staff from several committees said direct experience is important for building skills to effectively work with whistleblowers.

GAO identified key practices the Congress could consider when receiving and referring whistleblower information to other committees and federal agencies. These practices can serve as a resource for congressional offices and staff to intake, prioritize, refer, and follow-up with whistleblowers who contact their office or committee. For each step, GAO identified practices to help offices develop guidelines and procedures as well as for communication, including key questions staff can ask the whistleblower.

### Key Practices for Congressional Staff to Consider When Working with Federal Whistleblowers

 <p><b>Intake</b></p>	 <p><b>Prioritization</b></p>	 <p><b>Referral</b></p>	 <p><b>Follow-Up</b></p>
<p><i>Guidelines and Procedures</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop written processes and guidelines, including protocols to keep disclosures secure</li> <li>• Develop a secure tracking system</li> </ul> <p><i>Communication</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Build a good rapport</li> <li>• Be transparent, set expectations, and discuss process</li> <li>• Ask key questions to understand the whistleblower and their disclosure</li> </ul>	<p><i>Guidelines and Procedures</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Set and consider key priorities</li> <li>• Develop written guidelines for priorities and decision making</li> <li>• Document decisions in tracking system</li> </ul> <p><i>Communication</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Routinely evaluate priorities and decisions</li> <li>• Be transparent with the whistleblower about the office's priorities and decisions</li> </ul>	<p><i>Guidelines and Procedures</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create a tip sheet of common options</li> <li>• Document where and when a disclosure is referred or what action was taken</li> </ul> <p><i>Communication</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communicate referral options</li> <li>• Ask permission before sharing personal information</li> <li>• Discuss potential of sharing disclosure publicly</li> </ul>	<p><i>Guidelines and Procedures</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Document expectations for follow up</li> <li>• Periodically evaluate lessons learned</li> </ul> <p><i>Communication</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Set expectations with the whistleblower about future communication</li> <li>• Continue to check in with the whistleblower as appropriate to follow up on their disclosure</li> </ul>

Source: GAO analysis of academic literature, applicable internal controls, and existing procedures and standards. | GAO-19-432