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State's welfare-fraud force is a farce

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ALBANY — As the state looks to root out Medicaid abuse, the office charged with investigating fraud in the program has shrunk to just four people.

The state Office of the Welfare Inspector General is half the size it was in 2007 and about a third its size of a decade ago.

There are just two special investigators left on staff — down from six in October 2007.

“New York state, the largest recipient of federal money for its Medicaid program, really ought to have a more robust beneficiary- fraud investigative staff,” said Robert Sadowski, a former assistant US attorney in Manhattan now in private practice representing fraud whistle-blowers.

“The governor and state Legislature should put the tools back into fighting fraud and increase the size of that office,” added state Sen. Martin Golden (R-Brooklyn), a former city cop.

Inspector General Sean Courtney said that he's requested more staff since taking the job in 2007 but that “it's a difficult time in state government for hiring people.”

“As people have left here, I've been unable, with maybe one or two exceptions, to hire replacements,” he added.

As the sole lawyer working in the \$1.6 million-a-year office — half of it federally subsidized funds — Courtney is the only one who can actually prosecute cases. He acknowledged the number of cases going to prosecution has declined.

“We refer many cases” to local law enforcement, he said. “We're a clearinghouse, in some respects.”

OWIG handled 217 investigations in 2007 but merely 109 last year.

A government spokesman said Gov. Cuomo “will carefully examine the function in the upcoming budget” but added OWIG has focused in recent years on “larger, more complex investigations involving frauds with systemic implications.”

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