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Democracy Dies in Darkness

Trump replaces HHS watchdog who found ‘severe shortages’ at hospitals combating coronavirus

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By [Lisa Rein](#)

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President Trump moved to replace the top watchdog at the Department of Health and Human Services after her office released a report on the shortages in testing and personal protective gear at hospitals during the [coronavirus](#) pandemic.

In a Friday night announcement, the White House nominated a permanent inspector general to take the reins from [Christi A. Grimm](#), the principal deputy inspector general who has run the office since January.

The White House [nominated](#) Jason Weida, an assistant United States attorney in Boston, as permanent inspector general. The announcement said Weida was chosen because he has overseen “numerous complex investigations in healthcare and other sectors.” He must be confirmed by the Senate.

Grimm’s removal follows a purge of high-profile federal officials and inspectors general whose work has been critical of the president. Inspectors general at large agencies serve at the pleasure of the president, but they are considered independent monitors for waste, fraud and abuse.

Trump laced into Grimm at a news conference in April, after her staff [report](#) found “severe shortages” of testing kits, delays in getting coronavirus results and “widespread shortages” of masks and other equipment at U.S. hospitals.

The president demanded to know who wrote the report, calling the findings “wrong.” He then accused reporters of having withheld that Grimm had worked in the Obama administration.

“Where did he come from, the inspector general? What’s his name? No, what’s his name? What’s his name?” Trump responded on April 6, when asked about the report, which he said was politically biased. He then attacked Grimm on Twitter, writing, “Why didn’t the I.G., who spent 8 years with the Obama Administration (Did she Report on the failed H1N1 Swine Flu debacle where 17,000 people died?), want to talk to the Admirals, Generals, V.P. & others in charge, before doing her report.”

Grimm is a career investigator and auditor who joined the inspector general’s office, one of the federal government’s largest, in 1999 when Bill Clinton was president. She has served in Republican and Democratic administrations and is not a political appointee.

She took over the inspector general’s office in an acting capacity in January from another acting official, who retired.

A spokeswoman for the IG’s office said Grimm will remain in her current role as principal deputy inspector general. “HHS OIG has for more than 40 years held a deep commitment to serving taxpayers and the beneficiaries of HHS programs,” Tesia Williams said in a statement. “Our professionals have risen to a variety of challenges, including our groundbreaking work fighting the opioid epidemic and health care fraud, as well as oversight of the planning, response, and funding for COVID-19. We will continue to serve the American people by ensuring that their health and welfare are protected.”

A White House spokesman, citing personnel decisions, declined to comment.

Sen. Patty Murray (D-Wash.) criticized the president’s decision. “We all know the President hasn’t told people the truth about this virus or his Administration’s response, and late last night, he moved to silence an independent government official who did,” she said in a statement. “The President cannot be above oversight, no matter how he denies, attacks, and fights against it.”

Grimm’s report came as Trump was facing widespread criticism for his administration’s response to the pandemic. Its findings were based on a survey of 343 hospitals in 46 states. Auditors did their research during five days at the end of March.

The report said its findings were “not a review of HHS response to the covid-19 pandemic” but were intended “as an aid to HHS as it continues to lead efforts to address the public health emergency.”

But the auditors’ conclusions amounted to the first official critique by the federal government of the health-care system’s capacity to cope with the flood of infected patients. And by substantiating complaints about inadequate equipment, the report called into question Trump’s claims that hospitals and state officials were making inaccurate claims about their needs or being greedy.

In the past few weeks, Trump has fired a prominent inspector general who pushed to investigate a whistleblower complaint that led to his impeachment on charges of abuse of power and obstruction of Congress in the controversy over aid to Ukraine.

He nominated a White House lawyer to oversee the massive spending Congress authorized to jump-start the economy during the pandemic, a decision critics have called a conflict of interest. The president also moved to block a prominent inspector general from assuming the leadership of a panel of federal watchdogs overseeing pandemic spending.

Trump has cleared out other officials he said were not loyal to him in the months since his impeachment trial ended in an acquittal by the Senate, largely along party lines. Among other nominations the White House announced Friday was a replacement for Marie Yovanovitch, the former ambassador to Ukraine. Yovanovitch was forced out a year ago, viewed as an obstacle to White House aides as they tried to pressure the Ukraine government to investigate Trump's Democratic political rivals.

Keith Dayton, Trump's nominee to replace Yovanovitch, serves as director of the George Marshall Center in Germany and as a senior U.S. defense adviser to Ukraine. After serving 40 years in the U.S. Army, Dayton retired in 2010 with the rank of lieutenant general before accepting his latest assignments.