

Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND GOVERNMENT REFORM

2157 RAYBURN HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING

WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6143

MAJORITY (202) 225-5074
MINORITY (202) 225-5051
<https://oversight.house.gov>

February 21, 2025

The Honorable Donald J. Trump
President of the United States
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Ave N.W.
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Trump,

I write to express my deep alarm regarding your appointment of recently confirmed Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Secretary Doug Collins to serve simultaneously as acting director of the Office of Government Ethics (OGE). This dual appointment presents a fundamental conflict of interest that undermines the very purpose of OGE's institutional independence. I strongly oppose this dual appointment and urge that you reinstate Senate-confirmed OGE Director David Huitema or revert to the established line of succession to ensure that OGE maintains its vital independent status.

In the wake of the Watergate scandal, Congress established OGE in 1978 under the Ethics in Government Act as an independent agency charged with providing oversight of executive branch ethics.¹ As a function of the agency, OGE's Compliance Division regularly monitors individual agency ethics programs to ensure alignment with applicable federal ethics laws, rules, and regulations.² In November 2024, the Senate confirmed David Huitema to serve as OGE Director. Your decision to terminate him on February 10, 2025, four years before his term's scheduled expiration and without a public explanation raises serious concerns about your administration's intentions to comply with federal ethics requirements.

Although OGE initially stated that it "is reverting to an Acting Director," Shelley Finlayson, to fill the vacancy as outlined in its succession plan, reports emerged on February 10, 2025, that you intended to name VA Secretary Collins to serve concurrently as Acting OGE

¹ Congressional Research Service, *Office of Government Ethics: A Primer* (Jan. 31, 2025) (online at <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF10634/8>); Office of Government Ethics, *OGE and the Inspector General Community* (July 17, 2015) (online at www.oge.gov/web/oge.nsf/Resources/OGE+and+the+Inspector+General+Community).

² Office of Government Ethics, *Organization* (online at www.oge.gov/web/oge.nsf/about_organization) (accessed Feb. 12, 2025).

Director.³ Despite no public statement from the Administration clarifying this appointment, OGE subsequently confirmed that the appointment was made.⁴ This arrangement fundamentally compromises OGE's independence and creates multiple opportunities for actual or a perceived appearance of conflicts of interest.

Under this arrangement, Secretary Collins is responsible for directing and overseeing OGE's ethics compliance reviews of an agency that he simultaneously leads. As the acting director of OGE, Secretary Collins oversees a program that includes review of his own financial disclosure submissions for potential conflicts of interest. This dual role fundamentally undermines the fair and rigorous development of ethics rulemaking as any determinations Secretary Collins makes may affect his concurrent role at the VA. At a minimum, this appointment creates a perceived appearance of a conflict that cannot be ignored. Any efforts by the acting director to influence or block ethics rulemaking and compliance reviews will have a chilling effect on agency ethics officials.

This dual role also presents practical time and resource allocation disruptions for an individual who is managing competing demands and statutory obligations of two vital federal leadership positions. The position of VA Secretary, tasked with overseeing, protecting, and improving the lives of America's veterans, is an obligation that demands a leader's full attention. Our nation's nearly 16 million veterans deserve a VA Secretary who will not split their time or take their attention away from tackling the daily challenges veterans face in accessing critical health care benefits, education opportunities, and financial assistance.⁵

Public trust in government is already at historic lows.⁶ Americans deserve a federal government that works for them and that uses every tool available to rid federal programs of waste and corruption. Secretary Collin's dual appointment will further erode that trust, as neither office will receive the undivided attention and truly independent leadership it requires. The integrity of government oversight and ethics demands a clear division between those conducting

³ Office of Government Ethics, *Press Release: OGE has been notified that the President is removing David Huitema as the Director of OGE. OGE is reverting to an Acting Director. Please see OGE's Organizational Leadership webpage.* (Feb. 10, 2025) (online at <https://oge.gov/web/oge.nsf/Resources/OGE+has+been+notified+that+the+President+is+removing+David+Huitema+as+the+Director+of+OGE.+OGE+is+reverting+to+an+Acting+Director.+Please+see+OGE's+Organizational+Leadership+webpage.++#>); *Trump Removes Top Government Ethics Czar*, CNN Politics (Feb. 10, 2025) (online at www.cnn.com/2025/02/10/politics/office-of-government-ethics-david-huitema-trump/index.html); U.S. Office of Government Ethics, *Agency Leadership* (online at https://oge.gov/web/oge.nsf/about_leadership) (accessed Feb. 15, 2025).

⁴ U.S. Office of Government Ethics, *Agency Leadership* (online at https://oge.gov/web/oge.nsf/about_leadership) (accessed Feb. 21, 2025).

⁵ U.S. Census Bureau, *Veterans Day 2024: November 11* (Oct. 16, 2024) (online at www.census.gov/newsroom/facts-for-features/2024/veterans-day.html).

⁶ Pew Research Center, *Public Trust in Government: 1958-2024* (June 24, 2024) (online at www.pewresearch.org/politics/2024/06/24/public-trust-in-government-1958-2024/).

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oversight and those being overseen. Your decision to comingle these roles undermines this essential principle.

Again, I strongly oppose this appointment. I urge that you remove Secretary Collins as acting director of OGE immediately and reinstate Director Huitema, or follow OGE's succession protocol to maintain the agency's independence until a permanent, Senate-confirmed director assumes the office.

The Committee on Oversight and Government Reform is the principal oversight committee of the House of Representatives and has broad authority to investigate "any matter" at "any time" under House Rule X. If your staff have any questions regarding this request, please contact Committee Democratic staff at (202) 225-5051.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Gerald E. Connolly", with a stylized flourish extending from the end of the signature.

Gerald E. Connolly

Ranking Member

Committee on Oversight and Government Reform

cc: The Honorable James Comer, Chairman
The Honorable Doug Collins, Secretary, Department of Veterans Affairs