



The City of New York  
Department of Investigation

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**KEYNOTE REMARKS FOR DOI COMMISISONER MARGARET GARNETT  
CITY & STATE ETHICS AND ACCOUNTABILITY SUMMIT  
10 A.M., DECEMBER 13, 2018, 36 BATTERY PLACE, NY, NY**

Thank you for inviting me to be the keynote speaker at today's conference. It is such a privilege to open up a day where "ethics" and "accountability" are the themes; where we, as investigators, prosecutors, integrity professionals, legislators, advocates and journalists, get the rare opportunity to hear from a variety of voices on how we can improve our work and advance the cause of government and business integrity.

It's a particular privilege because I'm just three days into my tenure as the Commissioner of the New York City Department of Investigation, where "ethics" and "accountability" are not just a theme but are the cornerstones of the agency's mission — an agency with a legacy of rooting out government corruption that stretches back more than 145 years.

With three days under my belt, I can tell you that I am still getting acquainted with the staff and the work of the agency. But it is already clear to me that it is work that has a vast and meaningful impact on the City, its operations, and the faith people have in their government and those who govern. I've been a prosecutor for most of my legal career, first as an Assistant United States Attorney in the Southern District of New York, and then as Chief of the Criminal Division at the New York State Attorney General's office. And I have really loved being a prosecutor — it has been an absolute passion for me. But one aspect of being a prosecutor is hard and sometimes frustrating — and that is being limited to doing your cases, with almost no ability to think about broader issues or do anything about them. What is exciting about DOI is its dual role as both a criminal investigator and an oversight agency that is charged with identifying systemic issues of waste, mismanagement, or vulnerability to fraud, and then proposing changes to fix them. So we are not only solving cases, but also working to solve problems. For me personally, it is so gratifying to be able to combine two long-standing interests — on the one hand, my love of investigating, of solving puzzles, unraveling mysteries; and, on the other hand, my deep interest in government and how it works, and how to make it work better. And I think that, for DOI as an agency, that combined mission enables us to serve the City in a much more compelling way than if either part of the mission stood alone.

When we talk about ethics and accountability in government, when we talk about oversight, we are so often talking about the wrongdoer. The building inspector who cuts corners so he can get to his unauthorized second job. The procurement agent who takes kickbacks to steer contracts to a favored company. The director of a community organization who takes City money meant for kids in need and spends it instead on luxuries for herself. And when you're an investigator building a case, chasing down a tip or following the money, you can't help but be focused on the perpetrators, on the people who are betraying the public trust. That's a natural instinct and even a valuable one for our work.

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But we are living in a time when it has become fashionable, across the political spectrum, to run down public servants and government workers. To mock public employees as incompetent or people who just couldn't cut it in the private sector. To spin wild conspiracy theories about a "deep state" acting for their own interests. To reject long-accepted standards of ethics and transparency in government as something that is trifling or is only for suckers, easily pushed aside. Regardless of your politics, this is a dangerous and disturbing trend, which undermines the fabric of our common democratic life. Now of course this doesn't mean that those of us involved in ethics and oversight work should hold back from exposing wrongdoing or incompetence, wherever we find it. But I do think it is vitally important that we also be voices for the dignity and value of public service. And those two messages are not incompatible — to me, they are really about the same thing.

I grew up in a military family, where my father was a career army officer who went to West Point, and so had begun his life in public service at age 18. And both of my parents were military kids too, with their own fathers, my grandfathers, having gone to West Point as teenagers and dedicated the rest of their lives to public service as military officers. So I absorbed these ideas about the dignity and value and deep satisfaction of public service from a very early age. I sometimes jokingly say that every bite of food I ever put in my mouth, every article of clothing I put on, from birth to age 21, was paid for with other people's tax dollars. But that is really just a shorthand way of saying that my family's public service is core to who I am, and as a kid I didn't know any other way of being a grown-up than to serve the public, and to do so with the essential values of duty and honor.

So it is perhaps no surprise that as an adult myself I have continued to believe deeply in the dignity and value of a life in public service. And it is not hard to see examples of this all around us every day. Firefighters who put their own lives in danger to save the lives of others. Sanitation workers who do a dirty exhausting job so that we have clean streets and hygienic waste disposal. The benefits officer who takes extra time to patiently help a struggling client fill out the necessary forms. The teacher who stays late to work on improving the lessons for the next day. The clerk in the marriage bureau on Worth Street who learns how to say congratulations in eight languages so she can add to the joy of the day for her customers in our diverse City.

Now, of course the work we do at DOI is first and foremost for citizens. To hold public officials accountable, to ensure public money is spent lawfully and not wasted, to push City agencies to work better. And to build faith in honest government. But I think it is just as important to remember that when we talk about honest government, what we're really talking about is the thousands of City employees who are doing the right thing every day. And we are working for them too.

At a place like DOI, it is not hard to forget the basic goodness of public service, because all you have to do is look around you, at the career investigators and lawyers and auditors and staff who are working so hard, with such dedication, to find the truth and ultimately improve City government for their neighbors. I've been fortunate to grow up professionally in places that are marked by this kind of dedication to the truth, to honesty, to following the facts without fear or favor, guided only by what is in the public interest. We're in what seems like a dark time for the truth, when the idea of objective facts is under assault. But I've never been prouder to be a prosecutor and investigator, and now to lead an agency that is full of truth-tellers — people deeply committed to integrity, honest government and bringing the truth to the public.

So, ethics and accountability are not just platitudes, not just nice words we use in a mission statement. They are meaningful principles that are the foundation of greater honesty and independence; the foundation of holding ourselves to higher standards also, and with a measure of humility, allowing us to scrutinize the facts fairly and exercise our power justly and thoughtfully. Demanding of ourselves that we strive to do the right thing, in the right way, for the right reasons, every day.

These are the values that have always guided me. These are the principles that will continue to guide me as DOI Commissioner. I'm so excited to get to work.

Thank you.

*DOI is one of the oldest law-enforcement agencies in the country and New York City's corruption watchdog. Investigations may involve any agency, officer, elected official or employee of the City, as well as those who do business with or receive benefits from the City. DOI's strategy attacks corruption comprehensively through systemic investigations that lead to high-impact arrests, preventive internal controls and operational reforms that improve the way the City runs.*

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