Federal Housing Finance Agency Office of Inspector General



## FHFA's Controls Over Background Investigations and Adjudications Were Ineffective

### ..... EXECUTIVE SUMMARY......

#### **PURPOSE**

Civil service regulations require personnel who perform or seek to perform work for, or on behalf of, the executive branch to undergo a preemployment background investigation. Within the Federal Housing Finance Agency (FHFA or Agency), the Office of Facilities and **Operations Management** (OFOM) and the Office of **Human Resources** Management (OHRM) manage the investigation process for contractor and federal employees, respectively.

We conducted this audit to determine whether FHFA's controls were effective in ensuring timely initiation of background investigations and adjudications for its federal and contractor employees.

#### **RESULTS**

We found that FHFA's controls over its background investigation process and adjudications of federal and contractor employees were ineffective for ensuring compliance with federal requirements and timeliness of reviews. Specifically, FHFA's processes to conduct preemployment screenings, initiate background investigations, and perform adjudications were not established in Agency policies and procedures. Additionally, the Agency lacked a tracking mechanism and sufficient documentation to monitor the progress of background investigations from initiation through adjudication.

Accordingly, we are reporting two findings in this report.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS

We made two recommendations to address our findings. In a written response, FHFA management agreed with our recommendations.

This report was prepared by Heath Wolfe, Director of Audit Operations, with the assistance of James Lisle, Audit Director, and Abdil Salah, Assistant Inspector General for Audits. We appreciate the cooperation of FHFA staff, as well as the assistance of all those who contributed to the preparation of this report. This report has been distributed to Congress, the Office of Management and Budget, and others and will be posted on our website, <a href="www.rhfaoig.gov">www.rhfaoig.gov</a>, and <a href="www.oversight.gov">www.oversight.gov</a>.

James Hodge Deputy Inspector General for Audits /s/

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## ABBREVIATIONS .....

C.F.R. Code of Federal Regulations

FHFA or Agency Federal Housing Finance Agency

FY Fiscal Year

GAO Government Accountability Office

Green Book GAO's Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government

IAM Identity and Access Management

OF-306 Declaration of Federal Employment, Optional Form 306

OFOM Federal Housing Finance Agency Office of Facilities and Operations

Management

OHRM Federal Housing Finance Agency Office of Human Resources

Management

OPM United States Office of Personnel Management

OTIM Federal Housing Finance Agency Office of Technology and

Information Management

PIV Personal Identity Verification

## BACKGROUND.....

#### **Federal Requirements for Background Investigations and Adjudications**

Civil service regulations<sup>1</sup> require personnel who perform or seek to perform work for, or on behalf of, the executive branch—including federal employees, military members, and contractor personnel—to undergo a background investigation. The purpose of the investigation is to determine whether they are suitable for government employment or fit to perform work for, or on behalf of, the government. Covered personnel must also undergo background investigations to determine if they are eligible for a personal identity verification (PIV) credential, which permits logical and physical access to federally controlled information systems and facilities. Additionally, personnel may need background investigations to determine if they are eligible to access classified information or hold a sensitive position.

The United States Office of Personnel Management (OPM) issued regulations that establish criteria and procedures for making determinations of suitability for federal employees and fitness<sup>2</sup> for contractor employees. Federal agencies designated to conduct and adjudicate suitability and fitness under OPM's regulations are required to follow OPM's Suitability Processing Handbook.<sup>3</sup>

## FHFA's Processes for Background Investigations and Issuing Access Cards and Credentials

FHFA's background investigation process is decentralized within the organization. The process includes pre-employment screening prior to onboarding of federal and contractor employees, background investigations, and adjudications. Within OFOM, the Security and Transportation Operations Branch initiates the pre-employment screenings for contractor employees by providing them with the Declaration of Federal Employment, Optional Form 306 (OF-306), along with a document outlining acceptable forms of personal identification for submission. Separate from OFOM, FHFA's OHRM initiates the pre-employment screenings of federal

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> See Title 5 Code of Federal Regulations (C.F.R.) Part 731.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Title 5 C.F.R. Part 731 defines suitability determination as a decision by OPM or an agency with delegated authority that a person is suitable or is not suitable for employment in covered positions in the federal government or a specific federal agency. Fitness is defined as the level of character or conduct determined necessary for an individual to perform work for a Federal agency as an employee in the excepted service, as a contractor employee, or as a nonappropriated fund employee.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> OPM's Suitability Processing Handbook (September 2008) defines adjudication as an examination of a person's character or conduct over time, resulting in a favorable or unfavorable determination of their employment suitability, eligibility for access to classified information, materials, or areas, or for their retention in federal employment. In January 2025, OPM issued an updated version of the handbook.

employees by providing them with the OF-306, authorizations for fingerprints and credit check, and a tentative offer letter.

Once a prospective contractor or employee returns the required documents, OFOM or OHRM staff reviews them for completeness before forwarding to FHFA's third-party service provider for pre-employment screening. The third-party service provider makes a risk-based pre-employment determination. If the outcome is positive, the employee is onboarded and a background investigation is initiated. A suitability or fitness adjudication is made based on the investigative outcome. During the scope of this audit, the third-party service provider initiated and adjudicated all background investigations.

OFOM's Security and Transportation Operations Branch is also responsible for managing FHFA's physical access cards and PIV credentials (processed by the third-party servicer) issued to the Agency's federal and contractor employees.<sup>5</sup> Physical access cards permit entry to FHFA's controlled facilities and PIV credentials permit both physical and logical access to the Agency's controlled information systems and facilities. PIV and logical access are contingent upon the outcome of pre-employment screening. FHFA uses its Identity and Access Management (IAM) system to manage the onboarding of federal and contractor employees.

#### **OPM's Review of FHFA's Suitability Program**

OPM conducted a review of FHFA's suitability program for the period October 1, 2019, through September 30, 2021. The review included FHFA's pre-employment screenings and adjudications of federal and contractor employees.<sup>6</sup> OPM did not assess the timeliness or quality of investigation requests because they were performed by the third-party service provider.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Per the OPM Suitability Processing Handbook (September 2008), applicant suitability screening is conducted prior to selection for the position and the initiation of the required investigation. Screening involves review of application materials to identify any potentially disqualifying suitability issues and referring applications in cases involving potentially disqualifying issues to qualified adjudicators for a determination of whether the known information is in fact disqualifying.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> FHFA's *Personnel Security Standard* (issued on May 6, 2021, and updated November 30, 2022) states that OFOM is responsible for managing access control, including issuing, collecting, and maintaining temporary identification badges and activating or deactivating access cards. The standard also states that the Contracting Officer's Representative is responsible for submitting new contractor employees' onboarding information in the Agency's IAM system (for background check purpose, equipment, etc.) and shall provide updates as necessary, including terminations.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Before initiating this audit, we met with OPM officials to ensure that our audit did not duplicate their review. OPM's review did not include the timeliness of the background investigation process.

In its report dated May 15, 2023, OPM determined that the Agency's pre-employment screenings were appropriate but identified areas for improvement that included, among other things, suitability reviews and determinations and policies and procedures.<sup>7</sup>

### OBJECTIVE AND SCOPE .....

We conducted this audit to determine whether FHFA's controls were effective in ensuring timely initiation of background investigations and adjudications for its federal and contractor employees. The scope of this audit covered the period from October 1, 2021, through September 30, 2022.

For details on our audit methodology, see Appendix I.

## RESULTS .....

We found that FHFA's controls were ineffective for ensuring timely initiation of investigations and adjudications as well as compliance with federal requirements. As noted above, in the course of its review OPM identified areas for improvement that included, among other things, suitability reviews and determinations and policies and procedures. During the scope of this audit, the Agency was in the process of addressing areas of improvement identified in OPM's 2023 report; we found certain corrective actions remain incomplete as of February 2025. Specifically, FHFA lacked policies and procedures to govern its background investigation process and adjudications, including criteria for timeliness. Additionally, we found the Agency lacked a tracking mechanism and sufficient documentation to monitor the progress of background investigation processing to adjudications. Accordingly, we are reporting the following two findings.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> OPM found that FHFA's use of a third-party service provider for adjudicative determinations was inconsistent with regulations and OPM guidance. An FHFA official told us that, in response to the OPM finding, the Agency established a suitability program, which now includes performing the adjudicative determinations.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Our audit focused on FHFA's processes for background investigations and adjudications of new federal and contract employees. FHFA, however, has a separate process for conducting background reinvestigations of current employees, which was not the focus of this audit. FHFA-OIG Audit Report, <u>Audit of the Federal Housing Finance Agency's Information Security Programs and Practices Fiscal Year 2024</u> (July 30, 2024) (AUD-2024-006), highlighted specific findings related to background reinvestigations and the delegation of adjudications by FHFA and FHFA-OIG.

## Finding 1: FHFA Lacked Policies and Procedures to Administer Its Background Investigation Process and Perform Adjudications

FHFA's processes to conduct pre-employment screenings, initiate background investigations, and perform adjudications were not established in Agency policies and procedures. Although FHFA made changes to its pre-employment screenings and adjudication processes, those changes had not yet been established in policies and procedures. An FHFA official told us that, as of February 2025, policies and procedures were drafted but were not finalized. During the audit, we noted that OFOM and OHRM issued separate procedures for their own staff outlining the steps for pre-employment screenings, but they were not comprehensive. Specifically, there were no documented controls to assign roles and responsibilities, establish specific procedures, or develop metrics to measure operational effectiveness (including criteria for timeliness), among other things.

As required by 5 C.F.R. 731.103, agencies exercising authority under delegation from OPM must adhere to OPM's requirements and implement policies and maintain records demonstrating that they employ reasonable methods to ensure adherence to OPM's issuances. In addition, the Government Accountability Office's (GAO) *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government* (Green Book) requires that management should document the internal control responsibilities of the organization in policies. Furthermore, management should design control activities in response to the entity's objectives and risks to achieve an effective internal control system. Those control activities are the policies, procedures, techniques, and mechanisms that enforce management's directives to achieve the entity's objectives and address related risks.

OFOM's Associate Director could not explain why the Agency had not established policies and procedures for its background investigations and adjudications processes. He stated that he had only been in his position for a short time, but agreed they were needed. It has been nearly two years since OPM recommended that FHFA develop policies and procedures, yet they are still not complete. The continued absence of well-defined policies and procedures governing the background investigation and adjudication processes increases the risk that Agency staff may not execute their responsibilities efficiently, effectively, or in compliance with federal requirements.

#### Recommendation

We recommend OFOM's Associate Director, in coordination with OHRM:

1. Finalize and implement policies and procedures for the Agency's administration of the background investigations and adjudication processes for federal and contractor employees that (a) are consistent with regulations and implementation guidance issued by OPM; (b) assigns roles and responsibilities; (c) establishes specific procedures; and (d) measures operational effectiveness criteria.

## Finding 2: FHFA Did Not Have a Tracking Mechanism and Sufficient Documentation to Monitor the Progress of Background Investigations and Adjudications

We found that OFOM and OHRM lacked a reporting mechanism and sufficient documentation to track and monitor the progress of the Agency's background investigation process from initiation to adjudication. FHFA manages the onboarding of federal and contractor employees using its IAM system, but it does not track background investigations and adjudications. For this audit, OFOM staff could only reconstruct key processing dates of contractor employees' pre-employment screenings on a spreadsheet based on a review of Agency email records. Additionally, neither OFOM nor the Contracting Officers' Representatives recorded when contractor employees onboarded with the Agency. OHRM staff was unable to provide similar records documenting the initiation and progress of background investigations and adjudications for federal employees. These two offices also did not have a tracking mechanism or system to connect the issuance of an employee's physical or logical access card to the favorable adjudication of the employee's background investigation.

The Federal Records Act<sup>9</sup> and Title 36 C.F.R. Part 1222<sup>10</sup> require each federal agency to make and preserve records necessary to document the agency's policies, decisions, procedures, and essential transactions, as well as to protect the legal and financial rights of the federal government. In addition, FHFA's Records and Information Management Policy requires all employees and contractor personnel to manage the Agency's information, including records, throughout its lifecycle to facilitate and document FHFA's mission and functions. GAO's Green Book also states that agencies should design controls and use quality information to achieve their objectives and respond to risks.

Similar to finding one above, OFOM's Associate Director could not explain why the Agency had not established a mechanism to track the background investigations process and adjudications, contractor employee onboarding, and issuance of physical access cards or PIV credentials. He acknowledged that the Agency needed a tracking system. He also stated that he becomes aware of a delayed background investigation only when a FHFA office or division contacts him to inquire about the status.

Without a tracking mechanism or system, FHFA's management lacks ready access to the information needed to fully exercise oversight of the Agency's background investigation and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> See 44 U.S.C. § 3101.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Titled Creation and Maintenance of Federal Records.

adjudication processes. This increases the risk that delays are not detected and addressed timely. While our testing did not identify any employees who were granted physical or logical access to the Agency and its systems before pre-employment screenings and adjudications were completed, the absence of a tracking system increases the risk that this could go undetected if such an event occurred.

#### Recommendation

We recommend OFOM's Associate Director, in coordination with OHRM:

2. Establish and implement a reporting mechanism or system to monitor the progress of background investigations of federal and contractor employees to include adjudication determinations, onboarding of contractor employees, and the issuance of physical and logical access cards.

### FHFA COMMENTS AND OIG EVALUATION.....

We provided FHFA management an opportunity to review and provide technical comments to a draft of this audit report. We considered those comments in finalizing this report. In a written response, FHFA management agreed with our recommendations and included the following planned corrective actions:

- 1. FHFA's Personnel Security Branch drafted a Personnel Security Policy that reflects best practices across several agencies and is currently under review within the Agency. The Office of the Chief Operating Officer will finalize its review by May 15, 2025. This policy will be subject to review by the labor union.
- 2. FHFA will complete a review of responses to its Requests for Information to acquire a new Case Management System. The Agency is considering all solutions and will make a determination on the most efficient path forward by December 31, 2025.

We consider FHFA's planned corrective actions responsive to the recommendations. FHFA's written response, in its entirety, is included as Appendix II to this report.

#### APPENDIX I: METHODOLOGY.....

To accomplish our audit objective, we performed the following procedures:

- Reviewed Executive Order 13467 (June 30, 2008), Reforming Processes Related to Suitability for Government Employment, Fitness for Contractor Employees, and Eligibility for Access to Classified National Security Information.
- Reviewed Title 5 C.F.R. Part 731, which establishes the criteria and procedures for making determinations of suitability and for taking suitability actions regarding employment in the federal government.
- Reviewed the Federal Records Act and Title 36 C.F.R. Part 1222, which establish
  criteria for federal agencies to make and preserve records necessary to document
  agency policies, decisions, procedures, and essential transactions, as well as to protect
  the legal and financial rights of the federal government.
- Reviewed GAO's Green Book (GAO-14-704G; September 10, 2014) and determined that the control activities, and information and communication components were significant to our objective, focusing on the underlying principles that management should: (1) design control activities to achieve objectives and respond to risks; (2) implement control activities through policies; and (3) use quality information to support the internal control system.
- Reviewed the following FHFA guidance related to the background investigation process of federal and contractor employees:
  - FHFA's Organizational Optimization Assessment-Blueprint Report (October 31, 2020)
  - o FHFA's *Personnel Security Standard* (May 6, 2021, and November 30, 2022) issued by Office of Technology and Information Management (OTIM)<sup>11</sup>
  - FHFA's Physical and Environmental Protection Standard (May 6, 2021) issued by OTIM
  - o FHFA's intake process flowchart (dated November 4, 2021)
  - OFOM's New Onboarding Request for Contractors Standard Operating Procedure (OFOM-0034; August 1, 2022, and September 20, 2023)

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> In November 2024, OTIM was renamed to the Office of the Chief Information Officer.

- FHFA's Hiring Process Standard Operating Procedure (23-305; November 24, 2023)
- FHFA's Records and Information Management Policy (Policy No. 207; January 7, 2021)
- Reviewed OPM's final report on the review of FHFA's personnel suitability program (May 15, 2023), OPM's *Suitability Processing Handbook* (September 2008). We considered OPM's review when designing the objective and scope of our audit and sought to avoid duplication to the extent possible. In addition, we reviewed OPM's follow-up report of FHFA's corrective actions regarding the Agency's personnel suitability program (December 5, 2024).
- Reviewed GAO's report on its audit of FHFA's financial statements for fiscal year
  (FY) 2022 to determine whether any deficiencies were reported regarding FHFA's
  background investigations process of federal and contractor employees. We also
  inquired with GAO's staff about the scope and results of any testing of the Agency's
  background investigations process performed during the audit period. According to
  the GAO report and staff, no deficiencies were identified.
- Reviewed FHFA's FY 2022 Performance & Accountability Report (November 8, 2022).
- Reviewed the Service Level Agreements for FYs 2022 and 2023 between FHFA and its third-party service provider.
- Reviewed the system and organization controls 1 (SOC 1) type 2 report that examines the suitability of the design and operating effectiveness of FHFA's third-party service provider's controls for the period August 1, 2021, to June 30, 2022.
- Interviewed and obtained written responses from FHFA's OFOM and OHRM personnel to understand their processes regarding FHFA's pre-employment screenings, background investigations and adjudications of federal and contractor employees. OFOM personnel included: the Associate Director, Supervisory Program Analyst, Senior Personnel Security Specialist, and Senior Program Analyst. OHRM personnel included: the Senior Advisor, Human Capital Client Services and Systems Branch Chief, and Supervisory Human Resources Specialist for Client Services.
- Reviewed FHFA's third-party service provider report listing the Agency's 111 federal and 159 contractor employees with initiated and completed pre-employment screenings during FY 2022. Among other things, the report included the dates when the service provider received the pre-employment screening forms from FHFA and

when the service provider completed the screenings and issued its pre-employment adjudications. We reviewed the report to determine whether FHFA's third-party service provider processed the Agency's pre-employment screenings, including pre-employment adjudications, timely as required by the FY 2022 Service Level Agreement. We did not test activities performed by the third-party service provider as part of this audit of FHFA's controls.

- Obtained and reviewed a report for FY 2022 from FHFA's OFOM listing the contractor employees processed for pre-employment screenings and adjudications. Among other things, the report included the following: (1) date of request in the Agency's IAM system; (2) date when the OF-306 was received by the Agency; (3) date when FHFA submitted the pre-employment screening request to the Agency's third-party service provider; and (4) date when the service provider completed the pre-employment screening and issued its adjudication. Since OFOM did not issue its *New Onboarding Request for Contractors Standard Operating Procedure* (OFOM-0034) until near the end of our audit period and those procedures did not include criteria for timeliness, we could not test whether FHFA initiated contractor employees' FY 2022 pre-employment screenings in a timely manner.
- Requested a report for FY 2022 from FHFA's OHRM listing the federal employees
  processed for pre-employment screenings and adjudications. OHRM staff could not
  provide records documenting the initiation of federal employees' pre-employment
  screenings.
- Obtained and reviewed a report for FY 2022 from FHFA's OTIM, listing the creation
  dates and times of network accounts for federal and contractor employees. We
  compared these dates against when the pre-employment screenings and adjudications
  were completed by the Agency's third-party service provider to ensure that employees
  did not receive access before the screenings and adjudications were completed.
- Obtained and reviewed a report for FY 2022 from the United States General Services Administration's USAccess system, which showed the issuance dates of PIV credentials to FHFA's federal and contractor employees. We compared these dates against the completion of their pre-employment screenings and adjudications to determine if PIV credentials were issued before the screenings and adjudications were completed.
- Obtained and reviewed a report for FY 2022 from FHFA's IAM system listing the federal and contractor employees along with the Agency's approval dates. We compared this report against the completion of the pre-employment screenings and

- adjudications to ensure FHFA's approval occurred after the screenings and adjudications were completed.
- Selected a random sample using a standard interval and tested 26 of FHFA's universe of 159 contractor employees' pre-employment screenings initiated and completed screening adjudications during FY 2022. Our sample could not be projected to the universe of the 159 contractor employees. The testing included reviewing the following supporting documentation to confirm that FHFA's third-party service provider and OFOM's reports were accurate: (1) date of request in the Agency's IAM system; (2) date when the OF-306 was received by the Agency; (3) date when FHFA submitted the pre-employment screening request to the service provider; and (4) date when the service provider completed the screening and issued the pre-employment adjudication.
- Assessed the reliability of data received for this audit by (1) reviewing the data for obvious errors and incompleteness, (2) reviewing existing information about the data and the systems that produced it, (3) interviewing Agency officials knowledgeable about the data; and (4) obtaining documentation which supported the data reliability. We determined that the data were sufficiently reliable for the purposes of this report.

We conducted this performance audit between February 2023 and March 2025 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

<b>APPFNDIX II:</b>	FHFA MANAGEMENT	RESPONSE
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## **Federal Housing Finance Agency**

#### **MEMORANDUM**

TO: James Hodge, Deputy Inspector General for Audits

FROM: Jason Donaldson, Associate Director of Agency Operations

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DONALDSO
Date: 2025.03.27

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JASON DONALDSON
Date: 2025.03.27

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SUBJECT: OIG Draft Report: FHFA's Controls Over Background Investigations and

Adjudications Were Ineffective

DATE: March 27, 2025

Thank you for the opportunity to review and respond to the above-referenced draft audit report (Report) by the Office of Inspector General (OIG). The audit objective was to determine whether FHFA's controls were effective in ensuring timely initiation of background investigations and adjudications for its federal and contractor staff.

In 2018, FHFA transitioned its Personnel Security program (Program) to a third-party service provider to execute the process from pre-employment screening through final adjudication determinations for federal and contract staff. As noted in the Report, in 2023 the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) found that FHFA's use of a third-party service provider for adjudicative determinations for covered positions was inconsistent with OPM regulations and guidance, and made several recommendations to improve the Program.

To bring adjudicative determinations in-house, FHFA established a Personnel Security Branch (PSB) within the Agency, hired additional personnel security specialists, and began the process to acquire a Personnel Security Case Management (Case Management) System. FHFA employees now make all final adjudication determinations for covered positions.

FHFA agrees with the two recommendations in the report and proposes the following corrective actions:

**Recommendation 1:** Finalize and implement policies and procedures for the Agency's administration of the background investigation and adjudication processes for federal and contractor employees that (a) are consistent with regulations and implementation guidance issued by OPM; (b) assigns roles and responsibilities; (c) establishes specific procedures; and (d) measures operational effectiveness criteria.

**Management Response**: FHFA agrees with the recommendation. The PSB has drafted a Personnel Security Policy (Policy) that reflects best practices across several federal agencies and

is currently under review within the Agency. The Office of the Chief Operating Officer (OCOO) will finalize its review of the Policy by May 15, 2025. The Policy is subject to review by the labor union.

**Recommendation 2:** Establish and implement a reporting mechanism or system to monitor the progress of background investigations of federal and contractor employees to include adjudication determinations, onboarding of contractor employees, and the issuance of physical and logical access cards.

**Management Response**: FHFA agrees with the recommendation. The Agency has sent out Requests for Information to acquire a new Case Management System and is currently reviewing responses. FHFA is considering solutions and will make a determination on the most efficient path forward by December 31, 2025.

I appreciate OIG's recommendations to strengthen the Agency's controls over pre-employment background investigations and adjudication determinations. If you have any questions relating to this response, please contact Alexandra Donerson, Audit Liaison for the Office of Facilities and Operations Management.

cc: Marcus Williams Toni Harris John Major

# Federal Housing Finance Agency Office of Inspector General

To report potential fraud, waste, abuse, mismanagement, or any other kind of criminal or noncriminal misconduct relative to FHFA's programs or operations:

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• Fax: 202-318-0358

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400 Seventh Street SW Washington, DC 20219