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OSC Alerts The President and Congress of Fraudulent FEMA Travel Reimbursements during Hurricane Irene Response

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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WASHINGTON, D.C./October 30, 2018 – The U.S. Office of Special Counsel (OSC) today sent [a letter](#) to the President and to Congress alerting them that Paul Swindells, a Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) logistics manager, falsified documents in the aftermath of Hurricane Irene to fraudulently obtain significant government travel reimbursements. A whistleblower, a former FEMA support branch director, notified OSC of the fraudulent reimbursements and also asserted that FEMA managers were aware of this deception and facilitated the employee's duplicity. An investigation by the Department of Homeland Security fully substantiated the whistleblower's allegations.

"When tragedy strikes, it is unconscionable that some federal employees see an opportunity to defraud taxpayers for their own financial benefit," said **Special Counsel Henry J. Kerner**. "Such deception undermines public trust in disaster relief efforts. I thank the whistleblower for coming forward, and am pleased to see all three FEMA employees were proposed for termination, and that corrective action was taken to deter future wrongdoing."

The investigation found that Mr. Swindells, in coordination with his supervisors, conspired to generate a false driving route that made Mr. Swindells seem eligible for travel reimbursement during FEMA's disaster response. This falsified document created the appearance that his home address was sufficiently distant from his FEMA duty station to meet agency reimbursement eligibility requirements. As a result, Mr. Swindells received approximately \$31,500 in reimbursed expenses. The [agency report](#) stated that his repayment was based on misleading information and was improper.

In response, FEMA carried out a variety of disciplinary and corrective actions. Notably, Mr. Swindells and his two supervisors will be issued proposed notices of termination. FEMA also indicated that it may pursue civil action with the Department of the Treasury to recoup the improper payments. FEMA is also in the process of updating its travel manual to include specific reimbursement compliance requirements.

The U.S. Office of Special Counsel (OSC) is an independent federal investigative and prosecutorial agency. Our basic authorities come from four federal statutes: The Civil Service Reform Act, the Whistleblower Protection Act, the Hatch Act, and the Uniformed Services Employment & Reemployment Rights Act (USERRA). OSC's primary mission is to safeguard the merit system by protecting federal employees and applicants from prohibited personnel practices, especially reprisal for whistleblowing, and to serve as a safe channel for allegations of wrongdoing. For more information, please visit our website at www.osc.gov.