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Meza strives for transparency

As an executive inspector general, he investigates state claims of misconduct

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Ricardo Meza knows his job title probably leaves some people wondering exactly what he does.

Appointed in 2010, Meza serves as one of the state's five executive inspectors general, positions created by the legislature in 2003 to independently investigate allegations of fraud, waste, abuse, misconduct and other violations of the Illinois State Officials and Employees Ethics Act.

Meza's office holds jurisdiction over about 175,000 employees, appointees and officials in 40 executive branch agencies and departments, 300 state boards and commissions, nine public universities and four regional transit boards.

"My favorite part of this job is that every day, we are trying to uncover misconduct," Meza said. "It's a nice responsibility because you know you and your staff are getting paid to do the right thing."

And if he didn't have enough on his plate with investigations and employee ethics training sessions, Meza wants to further increase the transparency and visibility of his office this year.

He said both have been top priorities of his since Gov. Patrick J. Quinn appointed him to the post in September 2010. The Illinois Senate two months later confirmed Meza's appointment to a term that will expire in June 2013.

Prior to joining the office, Meza, 47, worked at the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF) as its Midwest regional counsel in Chicago for about five years. Before that, he served as a federal prosecutor in Illinois and Texas.

"I want to make people more aware of what we do and elevate our visibility in the state," he said, adding that a lot of people outside state government don't know much, if anything, about his office.

"I report to the citizens of Illinois. I don't report to the governor or the Illinois General Assembly," he said. "The more the public knows, the better."

To increase his office's visibility, Meza



Ricardo Meza worked to reduce his office's backlog of pending investigations from 264 in July 2010 to 102 in June 2011. Ben Speckmann

revamped its website when he took over.

With some help from his technology department, Meza changed the website's format to allow complaints to be filed online for the first time ever. Within four to five hours of the change, Meza said, the office received its first online complaint.

Along those same lines, Meza's office now issues monthly newsletters to better update the public on its work and he said he tries to get out "to talk to various groups to let people know about the office and what we do."

In the year and a half he's been at the office, Meza said he managed to accomplish his goal to reduce the backlog of pending investigations at his office. The office's fiscal year 2011 annual report shows that the number of pending investigations dropped from 264 in July 2010 to 102 by June 2011.

The report also reveals that while the number of pending investigations decreased, the amount of complaints made to the office increased from 1,171 in fiscal year 2010 to 2,041 last fiscal year.

Meza also plans to initiate some changes in

the legislature this year. He said his office supports House Bill 3831, which would allow for the release of certain reports even when the state Ethics Act does not mandate their release.

The bill's sponsor, Rep. Fred Crespo, D-Streamwood, said Meza and he believe the measure would close a loophole in the system and create more transparency.

Crespo said Meza's initiative on this measure shows his dedication to the office's mission and to the public. He said Meza "is now on the radar screen" and working to increase transparency in a state that has earned a reputation for corruption in recent years.

Cook County Circuit Judge Jesse G. Reyes said Meza possesses the perfect combination of skills to be an effective inspector general.

"He's always been, in my view, a very dedicated and devoted public servant even back in the day when he was a law student," said Reyes, who served as a mentor of Meza's throughout his career. "I think he is doing an outstanding job. I'm very proud of him."