

Agency Civil Rights Office Shuffle Replaces Director With Ex-Interim Head

Karen Higginbotham, the embattled director of EPA's Office of Civil Rights (OCR), is leaving her post to work elsewhere in the agency and will be replaced in the interim by former acting OCR director Rafael DeLeon while the agency conducts a national search for a new head of the office, which is often under fire from civil rights activists.

In a June 16 memo, an EPA official said effective June 28 Higginbotham will join the Office of Administration & Resources Management as director of the executive resources division responsible for Senior Executive Service pay and other issues. "My thanks to Karen for her many years of dedicated service in OCR," EPA's Diane Thompson wrote.

DeLeon, director of the Office of Cooperative Environmental Management (OCEM), will serve as acting OCR director for up to six months, according to Thompson's memo. "Rafael's prior legal and programmatic experience in the civil rights and [equal employment] field will serve as an important source of experience and institutional knowledge as we initiate the process to recruit a permanent director," according to the memo.

Civil rights activists had called for Higginbotham to be removed after from an appeals court ruling last fall found a "consistent pattern of delay" by EPA in responding to Title VI complaints. And EPA sources have warned that the personnel disputes are hampering Jackson's effort to overhaul the office and speed up complaints processing as part of her broader commitment to equity issues.

In a separate complaint, an OCR assistant director claimed that Higginbotham removed her due to a "false accusation." The employee, Susan Morris, sent letters of complaint to Sens. Mark Warner (D-VA) and Jim Webb (D-VA) (*Inside EPA*, Feb. 19) and asked the U.S. Office of Special Counsel to investigate.

Meanwhile, DeLeon's appointment as interim director is not without controversy, with one EPA source claiming that his past tenure at OCR was a "difficult time" with its own personnel issues. He headed OCR for six months during the Clinton administration.

After leaving OCR in the late 1990s, DeLeon served as the director of the Office of General Counsel's then-new Office of Civil Rights Law and later as director of EPA's Office of Human Resources before moving to the administrator's office to run OCEM in 2005.