

Report on Research Compliance Volume 18, Number 7. June 24, 2021 Now Hiring (Again): ORI Leader Joins Secretary's Office; Findings Plummet

By Theresa Defino

In 2014, David E. Wright, then-director of the HHS Office of Research Integrity (ORI), was so fed up with various problems and what he called dysfunction at the HHS Office of the Assistant Secretary for Health (OASH) that he quit his job. Wright had been at the agency that investigates allegations of research misconduct in studies funded by Public Health Service agencies, including NIH, for just two years.

ORI's findings of fabrication, falsification and plagiarism can mean a range of sanctions against investigators, including permanent debarment from federal programs. The agency can also require retractions of papers that include fraudulent data.

In something of a twist, last month Elisabeth Handley left ORI to join OASH as the PDASH—the principal deputy assistant secretary for health. Handley was ORI's director after Kathryn Partin, Wright's troubled successor. Handley leaves at a time when ORI employees are still teleworking and the agency has only issued one finding so far this year; it issued 10 last year.^[1]

Handley's departure also puts an end to a short period of stability among the four leadership positions in ORI and again means HHS will have to hang another vacancy sign. In the past, it has taken HHS several years to fill the top posts in this pivotal federal agency following departures. Handley was in the job permanently for just 15 months; she had previously served as the interim director since July 2019.^[2]

HHS Announced Promotion

In a June 2 announcement to HHS staff that was shared with RRC, Rachel Levine, the assistant secretary for health, said Handley "brings vast leadership experience from within HHS."

Levine briefly mentioned that Handley had been the ORI director and talked more about her previous experiences with the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services and at other HHS agencies.

As PDASH, Handley "shares responsibility with the Assistant Secretary for Health and the OASH Chief of Staff, for planning, coordinating, and directing substantive program matters; policy and program development; and determining and setting legislative and program priorities covering the full range of public health activities within the OASH to help lead Americans to healthier lives," Levine said.

It is not clear when Handley left ORI and whether she was acting as the PDASH before her permanent appointment. A blog post on the ORI website dated June 7 called her the "former" director of ORI and said she had accepted the job as PDASH.^[3] Wanda Jones is the acting ORI director.^[3] Jones has been pinch-hitting at ORI since December 2017, when HHS removed Partin as director. The sole misconduct finding so far this year, as it appears in the *Federal Register*, lists Jones as the acting ORI director.^[4] The notice is dated Jan. 29.

Handley's appointment in March 2020 marked the first time since 2016 that ORI had a permanent director, deputy director and directors of its two divisions: the Division of Investigative Oversight (DIO) and Division of

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