

## Eye on ED Episode 7: Women in Federal Law Enforcement

**[INTRO]** This is Eye on Ed, your source for information about audits, investigations, and other work by the U.S. Department of Education Office of Inspector General. Tune in for the latest news on our efforts to find and stop fraud, waste, and abuse in Federal education programs, operations, and funding.

**[Mari Farthing]** Hello and welcome to another episode of Eye on Ed. I'm your host, Mari Farthing. Today, in celebration of Women's History Month, we're going to talk about women in Federal law enforcement.

In the United States, law enforcement is an indisputably male-dominated profession. According to the National Institute of Justice, women constitute less than 13 percent of total officers and a much smaller proportion of leadership positions. Here at the Office of Inspector General, our numbers are higher than average, as about 29 percent of our law enforcement agents are women and 28 percent of our law enforcement leaders are women. Is that a sign that things are changing? What are the challenges to women in law enforcement? And what are the rewards? And if you are interested in law enforcement, how do you get started?

These are some of questions I'll be asking our guests today—three of OIG's law enforcement leaders. And I'll give you a little sneak preview: each one of them started on the ground floor and worked their way up in the leadership ranks, breaking glass ceilings all along the way. So, glass ceiling breakers, why don't each of you introduce yourself and tell us how long you have been in Federal law enforcement.

**[Yessyka Santana]** Thanks, Mari, what a very insightful intro. I'm Yessyka Santana and I am the Director of Policy and National Initiatives for OIG Investigation Services and I've been in Federal law enforcement with the OIG for almost 25 years.

**[Terry Harris]** I'm Terry Harris and I am the Special Agent in Charge of the OIG Eastern Regional Investigative Office. I've been in Federal law enforcement close to 30 years now.

**[Nicole Gardner]** And I'm Nicole Gardner and I am the Special Agent in Charge of the OIG's Headquarters Operations Office. And I'm the young one of the bunch—I've only been in Federal law enforcement for 20 years.

**[Mari Farthing]** Listeners, let me tell you: this is an impressive group of law enforcement professionals. Yessy was the first Hispanic woman to hold a leadership position in Federal law

enforcement at the OIG. And Terry is the first woman to lead our Eastern Regional Investigative Office. And Nicole is only the second woman to lead our headquarters investigative operations.

Yessy, Terry, Nicole—thank you so much for being here today! So let me ask probably the most obvious question: what drew you to Federal law enforcement and the OIG? Nicole, let's start with you.

**[Nicole Gardner]** Thanks, Mari. For me, I came from a law enforcement family. My dad was a Federal law enforcement officer for 32 years with the U.S. Customs Service in Denver, Colorado. And along with that, I always had the urge to help those in need, particularly children—so beginning a Federal law enforcement career in education was really the perfect fit for me.

**[Terry Harris]** I fell into by accident, honestly! I started way back in 1992 as an Air Force Security Forces member, who was also a K-9 specialist with the opportunity to work not only a bomb dog but a drug dog, which is scary in and of itself, going in to clear a house for a bomb. You know, coming into the Air Force you come in this thing called “open general”—so you get what you get and you don't throw a fit. But lucky for me I was able to be put in law enforcement. That was a turning point for me—it suits my personality. I have this curious nature and I have to know what happened and why it happened. But most of all, I really have this strong sense of right and wrong and I am keenly aware that what I do protects our taxpayer dollars, which in turn allows other young women like myself the opportunity for higher education that would eventually open doors for them in Federal law enforcement.

**[Yessyka Santana]** I'm a combination of Nicole and Terry. My grandfather was a detective in San Juan, Puerto Rico, so he was the first law enforcement officer in our family and I was the second. As a junior in college, I competed and was selected to be an intern with the FBI. I was the first Hispanic intern for the FBI. And it was awesome. Much like what Terry said, law enforcement suits my personality. There is something about justice, education, serving our communities, being a public servant that just moves and inspires me. And this career, I'm grateful to say, has allowed me to do that.

**[Mari Farthing]** It's so interesting how you all came to this career or how this career came to you! So tell us a little about the job itself. What does being a Federal law enforcement officer at the OIG entail?

**[Nicole Gardner]** Well Mari, we're Federal agents just like the FBI. The only difference is our jurisdiction: the FBI can investigate any Federal crime; however, ED OIG agents can only investigate crimes related to the Department of Education's programs, operations, and funding.

We operate under what is called statutory law enforcement authority. So what does that mean? That means we carry firearms, conduct search warrants and arrest warrants, we interview witnesses and subjects just like other law enforcement agencies. We also use traditional law enforcement techniques, like conducting surveillance and doing undercover operations. Terry, is there anything that I missed?

**[Terry Harris]** I would only add that as investigators, we also work closely with our prosecutors at the Federal, State, and local levels. We bring them our cases and investigations for them to prosecute and adjudicate. And of course, we're involved in cases from cradle to grave—that's law enforcement speak for from the beginning of the case to the end of the case—conducting our investigations all the way through the sentencing phase. That might entail us also having to testify at the sentencing or during the course of an investigation and at trials. Yessy, what about you? Anything you want to add?

**[Yessyka Santa]** Yeah, I would add that we also partner with other law enforcement agencies at the local, State, and Federal level. And many times, our investigations will begin with a call from the FBI or other law enforcement agency. They look to us as the experts in Federal education fraud. Those are important relationships that we foster and many of our cases were successful because of those important partnerships. Another important relationship we have is with members of the public. Lots of our cases begin with calls from them, too. Teachers or school administrators who see something in their school that doesn't look right and they report it to us.

**[Mari Farthing]** So in the course of a normal day, you carry firearms, conduct searches and arrests warrants, and work with prosecutors to put the bad guys behind bars. Now let me ask you this, do you think there are advantages to being a woman in your line of work?

**[Terry Harris]** Now we get to these hard questions! So, this is a tricky one. I'm not sure that I would have answered this question the same way had you asked me this 15 years ago. Today, the advantage I see now is that there is an expectation, that yes we can! We can do this, whereas, years ago, we were underestimated and not considered to be able to do this job. Whereas today, that expectation has allowed us to reach career highs that were once unavailable to us. So, the actual advantage now is that we no longer have to fit this mold in a career dominated by men by having to suppress who we are as women. Those of us that have a softer side maybe are just as valued and respected for what we bring to this table, and it's not just based on our gender.

**[Yessyka Santa]** I agree with Terry. As a woman in law enforcement, I feel I always brought empathy and understanding to the table. And we all know how important that it is in this

career, in this field of law enforcement. And because of that, I was able to deescalate certain situations and obtain confessions from the people I was investigating.

**[Nicole Gardner]** I just echo everything that Terry and Yessy said. I think that everyone has unique traits that they bring to the table that improve the overall performance of an agency. For me, I bring the ability to communicate with others, and that gives me the advantage for talking with witnesses and wrongdoers.

**[Yessyka Santana]** Yeah, Nicole, and I think that's the key. Women continue to be underrepresented in law enforcement and in leadership positions. The advantages we think we bring to law enforcement today—our empathy, communications styles, and skills—were not viewed as strengths or advantages at all a decade ago. But now they are. And the three of us are living examples of that. Each of us came in on the ground floor, stayed true to ourselves, our values, and our unique traits and strengths. We worked hard, and now the three of us are in leadership positions.

**[Mari Farthing]** So now let's do the reverse. What are some of the challenges you have or face as a woman in Federal law enforcement?

**[Nicole Gardner]** Mari, that's a very interesting question. Honestly, I think that implicit bias is in every profession and that women face it every single day. However, in law enforcement it might be a little more of an uphill battle. As you know, most women are smaller statured than their male counterparts, and they may face more challenges—for instance, qualifying with their firearm or completing defensive tactics training. Much like the FBI, we are required to complete law enforcement training and to meet certain requirements to maintain our law enforcement status. So I think that although the bias exists, I do think it's unintentional.

**[Terry Harris]** That's a great answer, Nicole. For me, I think one of the biggest challenges we face as women in law enforcement is the constant comparison to other women in our profession, whether that's good or bad. As Nicole said, bias exists, whether it's unintentional or not, it's there. But if you're following in the footsteps of an outstanding professional woman—and that's phenomenal, we definitely want those women out there—but it's a lot of pressure to have to reestablish yourself as an individual at that point. But then, on the other hand, what if you are following behind someone that had the opposite experience, and all they've seen is the negative of women in law enforcement. Then you have to be that one individual that can stand out and prove to them that you're not your gender, and that your gender is not just one person.

**[Yessyka Santana]** That’s right, and I will say this: many times I found myself in a room in meetings filled with all men. I was the only woman. So, I think one of the things is that “imposter syndrome,” where we’re wondering, “how did this happen?” But staying true to yourself—for me staying true to myself, my values, the work ethic. But I do want to talk about another challenge that the three of us face, and that’s the work-life balance. We are all mothers, wives, caregivers, and there is a balancing act you have to do. Sometimes takes a while to figure it out. I know for me, it took me a while! You have to learn how to leave a case at the office so when you are home you can be in the moment with your family and not feel that by doing so, you are limiting your opportunity to rise within the organization.

**[Mari Farthing]** Those are really great points and I appreciate how you each spoke about your challenges and how you overcame them. But in spite of those challenges, what has made Federal law enforcement a rewarding career for you?

**[Yessyka Santana]** I’ll go first. Just being able to serve others, to effect positive change in education and in our agency. But I must say the most rewarding has been the camaraderie with my colleagues, the relationships, and the friendships that I’ve developed throughout the years. I’ll always have that with me.

**[Terry Harris]** Absolutely, Yessy, absolutely. You know I’m a straight shooter, so definitely stopping criminals from taking our taxpayer dollars that were aimed at educating our children. But also the rewarding thing is being able to have a legacy that you leave behind—and that legacy is not built on the cases that I’ve accomplished, or how many people that I put in jail, or how much money I got recovered, but the legacy is being able to see that I had an impact on those that have come behind me and what they have succeeded, and what their successes are, and then in turn, those that come behind them. That’s probably the most rewarding thing that I have ever had.

**[Nicole Gardner]** Yes, Terry’s right on. For me, the most rewarding part of the job is watching the next generation of women come up the ranks. When I became a supervisor 7 years ago at a different law enforcement agency, I was the only woman supervisor in my organization. Today, I’m fortunate to be with ED OIG where 28 percent of our law enforcement leaders are women.

**[Mari Farthing]** All three of you touched upon how important it is to look forward to the future generations of women that are coming into these jobs. So how important is it for you to have connections to other women in your career? As someone who has risen to leadership positions, how do you do that? Terry do you want to start?

**[Terry Harris]** Sure—and this is a great segue, finishing up Nicole’s train of thought in which she’s talking about bringing up the next generation of women. And we do that through mentorships and open and honest conversations. And I really do mean open and honest conversations. I don’t mean the “filler” conversations, but those deep, heart-to-heart conversations. You share your experiences, whether they’re good or bad. You want them to be able to avoid some of those mistakes—not all of them, because mistakes are good and you have to learn from them. You try to build on those relationships and help the next generation that’s coming up behind you understand and navigate the trials that we had to navigate coming up. Because our paths were not as hard as those that were before us either, and so we definitely want to make that path a little straighter. So, again when I’m talking about mentorship and honest and open conversations, I don’t just mean with women who are in law enforcement positions. You really want to have a balance. You want to look outside of just law enforcement, you want to seek mentorships from peers and superiors and even subordinates who are outside of Federal government, in the civilian sector, running Fortune 500 companies, women in the military who are at the high ranks of their careers. So you really want to get a balance when we talk about leadership, because it’s not leadership for just women in law enforcement. We want to build that groundwork for women in leadership as a whole.

**[Yessyka Santana]** I think Terry hit the nail on the head with mentorship! I have mentored women—and men—in law enforcement and also men and women who aspire to be in law enforcement. For me, it’s very rewarding to help and share my experience with others. Those connections, as Terry said, are key.

**[Nicole Gardner]** Can I add on to this? I would like to say that Terry—she’s a visionary!—it’s about open and honest conversations, but not just with women. We need to have open and honest conversations with our male counterparts and to help them understand and to bring a shared meaning to everybody’s experience, not just one side of the story. So I would add on that we should have these relationships that continue across gender lines and across any lines that we think are put in the sand. A lot of the growth that we’ve had lately is because we’re having conversations with men in leadership positions and that they understand that it’s important to bring both sides to the table and to have more women in these roles.

**[Terry Harris]** Way to bring that home, Nicole!

**[Mari Farthing]** Okay, so you brought up the importance of relationships and specifically mentorships. If a woman were to come to you who is looking for a job in Federal law enforcement or who is currently serving in Federal law enforcement, what advice would you give her?

**[Nicole Gardner]** For me, I would tell women that you don't have to be "one of the guys" to be a good officer. When I began my career, I thought that I had to be the male version of myself in order to succeed. Gosh, was I wrong. Law enforcement needs everyone's unique traits and characteristics. The world needs you, exactly how you are right now.

Also, I would say that bias doesn't just start with male law enforcement officers. Even female officers tend to be biased against one another. Studies show there are only 2 seats out of 10 at the senior leadership table for women. That number is probably fewer and lower in a male-dominated field like law enforcement. So women feel like—and I did too—that we have to compete with one another to get a seat at the table. Well, I got news for you ladies—there's eight other seats.

**[Yessyka Santana]** That's right, Nicole. I particularly want women to know that there is room for them in the field of law enforcement. The three of us have broken some ceilings, and if I can speak for Terry and Nicole, we're proud of how hard we worked and what we have been able to accomplish. But there are more ceilings that need breaking. The Federal law enforcement community needs more women and women in leadership positions.

**[Mari Farthing]** That really comes back to mentorship that you had all spoken about earlier and representation and the idea that "if you can see it, you can be it." It is so important to have diversity in all parts of our agencies to let people know what is possible for them.

**[Terry Harris]** Yes, and it's not just gender diversity. As a woman of color who has been in law enforcement now for nearly 30 years, I have met few and far between other women of color in this career field. And those I've actually met? We've gravitated towards each other for mentorship and guidance on navigating this career field. I would definitely like to see people of color be more represented in Federal law enforcement and be a role model for our community, as well as to demonstrate that law enforcement has enough room for everybody. This is when the change is actually going to begin, because we've definitely encountered some difficult times recently and over the years. However, if we have more people of color and minorities represented, we'll be able to mitigate that perception of what a person is and how law enforcement interacts with the general populace.

**[Yessyka Santana]** Absolutely. As a Hispanic woman, I will say that Hispanics continue to be severely underrepresented in government and in leadership positions. I think it's important for women to give back to the community and to inspire others to seek opportunities in law enforcement. For example—so when I was a special agent in New York, I founded a chapter for the Hispanic American Police Command Officers Association. And here in Atlanta, I also cofounded a chapter as well. Because, like we all have said, law enforcement agencies have to

represent the communities they serve. That's very important and the key to diversity. So even for communities that are underrepresented and feel like maybe they don't belong in law enforcement, I have something to tell you: you do belong. This is a place for you. And, look—being in Federal law enforcement has been a dream job, I just love it. And working in ED OIG is possible the best kept secret in government!

**[Mari Farthing]** Well Yessy, it's not the best kept secret any longer! You just let the cat out of the bag that OIG is the place to be! And I'm happy to share with our listeners that we are hiring! We currently have positions available both for full-time law enforcement agents and interns. You can read more about these positions on the career page on our website, where you can also find examples of our investigative cases and results. And if you would like to talk with Yessy, Terry, or Nicole, we've included their bios and contact information in the transcript to this podcast.

Yessy, Terry, Nicole thank you so much for taking the time to talk with us today and to share your thoughts and experiences on being a woman in Federal law enforcement.

**[Yessyka Santana]** Thank you Mari, thank you for having us for this awesome opportunity!

**[Terry Harris]** Thanks! I really enjoyed being here today.

**[Nicole Gardner]** Mari, thank you so much for having me, I had a total blast. And Yessy and Terry, it's always a pleasure.

**[Mari Farthing]** And to our listeners, thanks for tuning in! Until next time, I'm Mari Farthing with the U.S. Department of Education Office of Inspector General, and this has been Eye on ED.

## Guest Bios and Contact information

**Yessyka Santana** has served as Director of Policy and National Initiatives with the U.S. Department of Education Office of the Inspector General (ED OIG) since 2018. Before that, she served as the Special Agent in Charge in Atlanta, Georgia, leading the Southeastern Region from December 2010 through October 2018. Yessyka attended Rutgers University in Newark, New Jersey. She majored in political science and minored in psychology and Spanish and received a bachelor of arts and science with high honors. She began her career with the U.S. Department of Education in 1993 when she was recruited as an Institutional Review Specialist in New York City. She became a Special Agent with ED OIG in 1996. As a Special Agent with Education, she



conducted multi-million-dollar investigations involving postsecondary schools, local districts, and students. You can reach her at [Yessyka.Santana@ed.gov](mailto:Yessyka.Santana@ed.gov).

**Terry Harris** has been a Special Agent for 19 years and has worked in law enforcement for 27 years. She began her law enforcement career in the in the United States Air Force in January 1992 as a Security Police K-9 Handler. In 2001 she joined the Air Force Office of Special Investigations, serving in various positions throughout her career. In 2005, she served as a Deputy Branch Chief, Central Systems Fraud Unit, overseeing and investigating major procurement fraud affecting the Air Force. In 2007, she served as the Acting Resident Agent in Charge for the Joint Criminal Investigation Task Force, Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, conducting complex counterintelligence and counterterrorism investigations. In 2011, as the Special Agent in Charge, of a large unit, she supervised investigations involving counterintelligence, contract/loan fraud and felony criminal investigations affecting Air Force and Department of Defense resources. In 2013, she assumed the position of Deputy Desk Chief, Fraud Integration Desk, where as a subject matter expert, she monitored and directed investigations of fraud, waste, and abuse focused on white collar crime. Following her retirement from active duty, Terry, joined the IG community. She is an adjunct instructor for the Council of the Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency IG Academy and teaches in both the IG Investigator Training Program and the Transitional Training Program, sharing her extensive knowledge of contracts, and administrative remedies. Terry completed her undergraduate studies at the University of New Orleans, Louisiana, followed by a master of arts in criminal justice at the University of Alabama and a master of business administration at the University of Washington. You can reach her at [Terry.Harris@ed.gov](mailto:Terry.Harris@ed.gov).

**Nicole Gardner** currently serves as the Special Agent in Charge of Headquarters Operations for the Department of Education, Office of Inspector General (ED OIG). In this role, Nicole oversees ED OIG's Hotline, and Headquarters Operations. Prior to her current position, Nicole served in several roles at the Department of Energy Office of Inspector General, including Hotline Assistant Special Agent in Charge, Operations Officer, and Special Agent. Nicole began her Federal career as a William H. Helm fellow with the U.S. Department of Agriculture in 2001. In this capacity, Nicole helped prevent the spread of foot and mouth disease to the United States by interviewing international passengers, inspecting international luggage, and confiscating prohibited items. Nicole was also selected to complete a 90-day detail at the U.S. Department of Agriculture Plant Protection and Quarantine Laboratory in Gulfport, Mississippi. During the detail, Nicole conducted research into the trace element analysis of imported commodities. You can reach her at [Nicole.Gardner@ed.gov](mailto:Nicole.Gardner@ed.gov).