<u>SIG Lessons Learned Alert No. 3 – Process Protects</u>

All organizations have standard operating procedures (SOP), internal controls (IC), and processes as a framework for operations, from perfunctory matters at the front line unit level to long-range planning at the executive level. The common thread in my 30 year FBI career, from the front-line investigative squad to Chief Inspector for Operations & Audits, was a general frustration by personnel with administrative rules and resulting paperwork. All organizations demand managers build these operational and control frameworks, but, in my experience, skilled and experienced managers in this area are at a premium inasmuch as SOPs and ICs can be as much an art as it is a science. A mentor of mine often noted to find that SOP and IC cost/benefit point is not easy, "don't overcomplicate something that is simple, yet don't oversimplify something complicated."

A recent review depicted both extremes of SOPs and ICs where one party strongly asserted the inadequacy of IC documentation was equivalent to operational failure, while the other party had a casual approach of claiming to follow SOPs and ICs but "just not documenting." Neither was correct. SOPs and ICs are not magic formulas for success, or doom operations if non-existent. In common sense terms, well defined SOPs & ICs along with expected documentation drives, on average, higher performance; the lack of SOPs & ICs and documentation inherently leads, on average, to lower performance. If designed correctly, SOPs and ICs not only improve performance, but also simplify future execution through standardization and provide organizational credibility of professionally operating, particularly beneficial after something goes wrong. When something goes wrong, which always does sooner or later, the lack of an SOP or IC tends to lead to finger pointing towards incompetence, rather than an honest error from which to learn.

A quick example may be a helpful reminder. There was a dangerous law enforcement SWAT operation which was launched without an operational plan and resulted in a law enforcement officer accidentally shooting and killing a fellow officer. An operational plan would not have guaranteed preventing this tragic accident, but I am almost certain it would have impacted one of five individual small errors likely changing the trajectory of operation and preventing the multiplying and cascading effects of these mistakes leading to this catastrophic failure. This is an extreme example, but it illustrates that having a plan and following a plan reduces the likelihood of failure and if it occurs, which it will sooner or later, those involved can professionally learn from their mistake rather than the suffer the appearance of incompetence for operating without a plan.

Investing, as well as periodically testing and reexamining, in SOPs and ICs is a win/win because "process protects." The upside is likely enhanced performance that also protects the downside when things go wrong. I feel we need to arm our managers, particularly first-line supervisors, with this information so we can attune them to the critical need to develop these process building skills, pragmatically examine their current SOPs and ICs through a cost/benefit optic, tamp down the unhealthy noise, and see SOPs and ICs for what they are if established correctly—operational assets. It should also be highlighted that public sector managers have a higher burden in this

SOP and IC arena than the private sector, because we have a fiduciary role by being entrusted with taxpayer funds to prudently manage.