



The Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act, H.R. 748, signed into law by President Donald Trump on March 27, committed over \$2 trillion to efforts to blunt the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the United States. It is reportedly [the most expensive](#) piece of stimulus legislation in U.S. history.

The law also created three key oversight bodies to scrutinize the spending, lending, and other efforts mandated by the law and related measures. But for those bodies to be effective, Congress needs to pay attention to some crucial details about how they're formed and how they function.

Here's what Congress needs to know about those oversight provisions: What they are, what they are supposed to do, and what members of the legislative branch need to keep a close eye on, if they want those efforts to work.

The Basics

The CARES Act created three oversight bodies:

- Office of the Special Inspector General for Pandemic Recovery
- Pandemic Response Accountability Committee
- Congressional Oversight Commission

KEEP YOUR EYE ON: The three bodies have overlapping mandates. That can be helpful—if they play well together—to ensure issues don't get lost between disparate authorities. But if they get locked in turf battles, progress can grind to a halt, and agencies can play one against the other. Congress needs to make sure the organizations establish strong relationships and work toward the common goals of transparency and accountability.

Office of the Special Inspector General for Pandemic Recovery (SIGPR)

BUDGET: \$25 million [[Sec. 4018\(g\)\(1\)](#)]

PURPOSE: To scrutinize the actions of the Treasury secretary in distributing \$500 billion in aid under the CARES Act [[Sec. 4018\(c\)\(1\)](#)].

HIGHLIGHTS:

- The special inspector general to head the office is to be nominated by the president, “as soon as practicable” after Treasury starts spending its \$500 billion, and then confirmed by the Senate [[Sec. 4018\(b\)\(1-2\)](#)].
- The nominee must have “integrity and demonstrated ability in accounting, auditing, financial analysis, law, management analysis, public administration, or investigations” [[Sec. 4018\(b\)\(2\)](#)].
- The law gives the special inspector general subpoena authority [[Sec. 4018\(d\)\(1\)](#)].

KEEP YOUR EYE ON: If a nominee ever materializes. There’s nothing to force the president to name a candidate to fill this post. Trump has made no public commitment to abide by the act (if you don’t count signing the bill into law). *ALSO:* Once in place, can the special inspector general get answers out of Treasury? In [a signing statement](#) he attached to the law, the president said he won’t abide by a key provision in the legislation that would require the special inspector general to notify Congress “without delay” if any agency is “unreasonable” in denying a request for information.

Pandemic Response Accountability Committee (PRAC)

BUDGET: \$80 million [[Division B, Title V](#)]

PURPOSE: To oversee all spending, lending, and other outflows appropriated under the law, and under any past or future COVID-related measures [[Sec. 15010\(b\)](#)]. That oversight includes:

- preventing and detecting fraud, waste, abuse, and mismanagement [[Sec. 15010\(b\)\(1\)](#)];
- mitigating major risks that cut across agencies [[Sec. 15010\(b\)\(2\)](#)]

HIGHLIGHTS:

- The committee is composed of inspectors general from relevant agencies, including the Departments of Defense, Education, Health and Human Services, Homeland Security, Justice, Labor, and Treasury, as well as the Small Business Administration. The Treasury Inspector General for Tax Administration and the new special inspector general for pandemic recovery are also members [[Sec. 15010\(c\)\(2\)](#)].
- It’s housed under the Council of the Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency, the government-wide coordinating body for inspectors general [[Sec. 15010\(b\)](#)].
- The [chair of the committee](#), acting Pentagon Inspector General Glenn Fine, will also serve as a member of the committee [[Sec. 15010\(c\)\(1\)](#)]. (Fine’s full title in his role at

the Pentagon: principal deputy inspector general performing the duties of the inspector general.)

- The committee is to alert the special inspector general for pandemic recovery to suspected fraud or other misconduct.
- The committee is empowered to obtain testimony from non-government witnesses by subpoena [[Sec. 15010 \(e\)\(3\)\(A\)\(ii\)](#)].

KEEP YOUR EYE ON: Who actually runs the joint. The law gives great authority to the committee’s executive director and deputy director, who will manage its day-to-day operations, including investigations. So their agendas, personalities, and ethical judgment will largely set the tone and focus for the organization (or lack thereof). Both positions are chosen by the committee chair “in consultation with” leaders of Congress.” [[Sec. 15010 \(c\)\(3\)\(B\)\(i\)\(I\)](#)] That means you’re supposed to have a say! We don’t know if you’ll get that chance, though, as Trump bristled at this requirement in his [signing statement](#).

Congressional Oversight Commission

BUDGET: “such sums as may be necessary for any fiscal year” [[Sec. 4020\(g\)\(1\)](#)]

PURPOSE: To oversee Treasury’s and the Federal Reserve’s implementation of the law, and to assess the effectiveness of the programs set up through pandemic-related legislation to improve our financial wellbeing and transparency measures. [[Sec. 4020\(a\)\(1\)\(A\)](#)]

HIGHLIGHTS:

- The commission is to have five members, led by a chairperson [[Sec. 4020\(c\)](#)].
- The Senate majority and minority leaders, House speaker, and House minority leader each choose one member [[Sec. 4020\(c\)\(1\)\(A-D\)](#)].
- The Senate majority leader and speaker of the House appoint the chair, in consultation with Senate and House minority leaders [[Sec. 4020\(c\)\(1\)\(E\)](#)].
- The commission can convene hearings, call witnesses, take testimony, hire staff, and meet regularly [[Sec. 4020\(e\)\(4\)](#)].
- The chair is empowered to obtain information from any agency by request [[Sec. 4020\(e\)\(4\)](#)].

KEEP YOUR EYE ON: What the Fed’s up to. Congress uniquely exempted the Federal Reserve from some of the law’s broad public transparency measures, giving the Fed the option to blindfold the electorate and the media [[Sec. 4009](#)]. The commission’s authority to oversee and report on the conduct of the powerful but secretive Fed is a key check on the infamously accountability-resistant body.

Other Important Provisions

Cash for Pandemic Response Accountability Committee inspectors general: The law appropriates almost \$120 million in additional funding to offices of inspector general at agencies included in the Pandemic Response Accountability Committee, ranging from \$35 million to the Treasury inspector general to \$750,000 to the Department of Agriculture inspector general.

Government Accountability Office mandate: The Government Accountability Office received a statutory mandate to conduct oversight and audits of federal stimulus-related activity generally, and to report annually to Congress on that work [[Sec. 4026\(f\)](#)].

Timely Treasury reports: The law requires the Treasury Department to report to Congress on financial assistance extended, including repayments and delinquencies. The agency must post its reports on its website a week after submitting them to Congress [[Sec. 4026\(b\)\(1\)](#)].