

2017 Budget Hearing Statement
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Department of Administrative Hearings
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Good Morning Chairman Austin, Vice Chairman Ervin and members of the City Council. Thank you for the opportunity to speak before you today about the Department of Administrative Hearings (DOAH), what we have achieved this year, and what we plan to accomplish in 2017.

The mission of DOAH is to provide quality administrative hearings for the City in a timely and efficient manner, with respect for the dignity of individuals and their due process rights. DOAH is an independent entity that hears cases relating to violations of the Municipal Code, the Chicago Park District Code, and the Chicago Transit Authority Code.

The Department maintains an exceptionally high level of service to the public. We have accomplished this through cross-training personnel and employing various efficiencies.

The Department hires and trains outside attorneys to adjudicate cases and serve as Administrative Law Judges. In 2015, these Administrative Law Judges presided over 662,675 hearings, which was a 5 percent increase in hearings over the previous year. The Department hears cases under four categories: Buildings, Municipal, Environmental Safety/Consumer Affairs, and Vehicles.

The Department also remains committed to assisting *pro se*, or “self-represented,” litigants to effectively navigate the administrative hearing process. The help desk at the Central Hearing Facility, which is staffed and independently operated by attorneys from the Coordinated Advice & Referral Program for Legal Services -- known as CARPLS -- is open four days a week. CARPLS is a non-profit legal aid service that provides low-income clients direct access to experienced attorneys through legal aid hotlines and court-based help desks. The help desk provides support to these *pro se* litigants by educating them about their legal rights and remedies, providing them with practical “how to” advice to present their side of the case, and providing assistance in preparing motions. As CARPLS attorneys have become more experienced in a wider variety of municipal code violations, the services provided by the help desk have expanded to almost every type of violation adjudicated by DOAH. The help desk, which is jointly funded by the City and the Chicago Bar Foundation, assisted 2,023 low-income respondents from 7/1/15 through 6/30/16. This represents a 30% increase over the 1,555 clients that were helped during the previous year.

A second source of assistance for respondents continues to be provided by the Telephone Language Line Interpretation Service, known as the “Language Line.” This service is available for respondents whose first language is not English. All the hearing rooms at the Central Hearing Facility and neighborhood hearing sites provide access to

Language Line interpreters. This service enables respondents to understand and fully participate in the administrative hearing process by providing ready telephone access to interpreters who are skilled in more than 170 languages. The average time to connect to an interpreter is under one minute. This service promotes efficiency by eliminating the need for continuances caused by the absence of an interpreter. It also minimizes the inconvenience to non-English speaking respondents who frequently relied on the schedules of family members or friends to serve as interpreters.

The Language Line service is also available at DOAH information desks at all of its facilities through the use of dual handset telephones. In this way, both our customer service staff and the non-English speaking respondent are able to more effectively communicate once they are connected to the interpreter. In 2015 there were 40,353 minutes of interpretation service – which is an increase of 17% percent over the number of interpretation calls in 2014. The 2016 Language Line usage is projected to increase at the rate of 2.23% over 2015.

Quality training for staff and Administrative Law Judges continues to be a key component to our successful operation. Since 2007, DOAH has been certified annually by the Illinois Supreme Court’s Continuing Legal Education Board--known as the MCLE Board-- to provide mandatory continuing legal education to our Administrative Law Judges. Certification by the MCLE Board must be supported by a proven track record and this certification validates the quality of the Department’s past and present training program.

DOAH will host a professionalism training program in the spring of 2017. The program, which was developed by the Illinois Supreme Court’s Commission on Professionalism, has been presented at courthouses throughout the state. This professionalism program will be tailored to DOAH’s individual and unique needs and will challenge staff to consider the administration of justice from the perspective of a person visiting the courthouse. It will bring together ALJs, DOAH court clerks and security personnel to focus on ways to increase their professionalism and provide service to those who need to access the administrative adjudication system.

I would also like to highlight several initiatives which became operational at DOAH in 2016.

In January 2016, the new ‘E-request’ website went live at DOAH. This upgrade provides more convenient methods to request an in-person hearing and contest vehicle violations. In the past, in-person hearing requests could only be requested by U.S. Mail, via phone call, or by personally delivering a written request to one of the payment or hearing locations; and ‘contest-by-mail ‘ (CBM) hearings could only be requested and conducted by U.S. Mail or by personally delivering documentation (including evidence) to DOAH. On average, DOAH adjudicates 150,000 CBMs annually, and all CBM documents must be manually scanned upon receipt. The new ‘E-request’ website

enhances customer service by allowing vehicle owners to request an in-person hearing via the website or to contest tickets by scanning, uploading and submitting their supporting documents via the website. This E-request enhancement will also substantially reduce the manual scanning of documents received by U.S. Mail. As of August 31, 2016, 36,400 Respondents have used the new E-request service.

In March 2016, DOAH implemented a series of measures to reduce continuances and promote more consistent monitoring of older Buildings cases. First, the respondent's copy of continuance orders now includes language specifying the requirements to be met by the respondent prior to the next hearing. (For example, if they are to return on the continuance date with proof of a permit application, proof of zoning variance application, or other similar documents, that is specified in the order.) Further, Department of Buildings representatives familiar with cases now appear in the courtroom to advise the ALJ on the status of the respondent's remedial action. DOAH has also identified, trained and assigned certain ALJs within its Buildings Hearings Division to follow older pending cases.

DOAH remains committed to achieving the Department's core mission in 2017 – providing a forum for fair and impartial adjudication; maintaining an exceptionally high level of courteous, respectful and prompt customer service for the public; and responding effectively to the needs of the enforcing departments and respondents.

Thank you.