

2020 Budget Hearing Statement
Patricia Jackowiak, Director
Department of Administrative Hearings
Tuesday November 5, 2019

Good Morning Chairman Dowell 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 2020.

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 retains and trains outside attorneys to adjudicate cases and serve as Administrative Law Judges. In 2018, DOAH conducted 665,294 hearings. As of 9/30/19; these Administrative Law Judges have presided over 422,728 hearings this 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 client’s 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 1,472 low-income respondents from 7/1/18 through 6/30/19.

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 also 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 might otherwise need to rely 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 2018, there were 34,356 minutes of interpretation service in 31 languages. As of 9/30/19, there were 27,087 minutes of interpretation service in 27 different languages.

Quality training for staff and Administrative Law Judges continues to be a key component to our successful operation. In addition to ongoing civility and customer service training, DOAH conducts annual training programs for its ALJs. These programs address evidentiary and procedural matter, recent case law, judicial demeanor and common legal and situational issues which may arise during the proceedings.

I would also like to highlight an ongoing customer service initiative which became operational at DOAH in 2016 and continues to be substantially used by the public.

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 CBM hearings 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 uploading and submitting their supporting documents via the website. This E-request enhancement substantially reduces the manual scanning of documents received by U.S. Mail. In 2016, 73,385 respondents used the new E-request service. In 2018, there were 132,880 Respondents who availed themselves of this customer service enhancement. As of 9/30/19; there were 89,396 e-requests filed by Respondents.

Another customer service enhancement which DOAH is planning to test in the 4th quarter 2019, is to send text message reminders to respondents regarding their upcoming court dates. Respondents who misplace their citations either call DOAH to obtain the court date or fail to appear on their original court date.

Consequently, they receive a default judgment. These particular Respondents must then appear and seek to vacate their default judgments. It is anticipated that the text message reminders will serve to increase appearance rates on the initial court dates, thereby obviating the entry of default judgments. In addition, DOAH expects to achieve additional staff efficiencies resulting from a reduction in the number of motions to set aside default judgements filed in the courthouse. This will also decrease the wait time for customers who seek assistance at the Courthouse's main information desk.

DOAH remains committed to achieving the Department's core mission in 2020 – 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.