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The following is a statement from Inspector General Joseph M. Ferguson regarding the recent arbitration decision on Fire Prevention Bureau employees found to have been stealing from the City:

Last year, after a lengthy investigation, my office determined that firefighters assigned to the Fire Prevention Bureau routinely lied on their mileage reimbursement requests in order to defraud the City out of money. The IGO recommend that most of these employees be terminated. The Chicago Fire Department instead imposed lengthy unpaid suspensions.

Last week an Arbitrator reduced those suspensions, arguing that because the scheme was so wide-spread it amounted to a de-facto work rule tacitly condoned by the Bureau's supervisors.

The Arbitrator's decision expressly found the IGO's investigation to be thorough. We established widespread, long-running theft and falsification by scores of sworn personnel of the Chicago Fire Department. These findings notwithstanding, the Arbitrator's decision also includes a lengthy and gratuitous criticism of the IGO. The Arbitrator argued that our recommendation to terminate the employees was "draconian ... Like the Queen of Hearts in Lewis Carroll's 'Alice in Wonderland,' whose only response to any perceived misconduct was the overly cruel mandate, 'Off with their heads,' in the end, those bellicose commandments which are not followed ultimately make that individual a powerless figure who is not to be taken seriously[.]"

City residents struggling to understand the Arbitrator's opinion may be reminded of another quote from Alice in Wonderland: "It would be nice if something made sense for a change." I can sympathize with that sentiment. The idea that stealing, fraudulent falsification of official records – and lying – is acceptable because everyone else is doing it is patent nonsense. Any child knows better. These firefighters did not engage in conduct that unknowingly brought them in technical violation of some obscure and misunderstood City rule. Rather, they admitted to routinely and systematically lying in order to steal money from the City – and, ultimately, from Chicago tax payers. While that certainly violates a number of City rules, that conduct is also criminal, inherently and obviously wrong. It cannot be excused just because supervisors, as equally "culturally challenged" as their charges, found it acceptable. And let's be clear: the supervisors did not even tell these firefighters their conduct was acceptable—they told them that they would not get caught if they filled out their paperwork in a specific manner. Unfortunately, if not for the dedicated work of my staff, that was probably true.

The Chicago Fire Department has a long and proud history of service to our City. However, bravery in service to the public does not put them above the law, or excuse them from their moral and fiduciary obligation to the people of this City. Just as I would fire an IGO employee for stealing or lying, I would again recommend the Fire Department terminate firefighters who steal from the City they are sworn to protect. The certifications and testimony of Fire Prevention Bureau inspectors are relied upon by law enforcement, and their work is used by numerous regulatory bodies to ensure the safety of millions. When government allows those who steal taxpayer money to keep their taxpayer funded jobs, we do grievous damage to the public trust, and especially the trust placed in the honest, dedicated employees of the CFD. The Arbitrator argued that our termination recommendation “demean[s] and denigrate[s]” the Fire Department. He has exactly backwards—it is the reprehensible conduct of these Fire Prevention Bureau employees that demeans and denigrates the work and sacrifice of their fellow firefighters.

In the end, if the Arbitrator thinks I owe some sort of apology for recommending that employees who are proven to be liars and thieves be terminated, let me dispel that delusion—no apology is necessary and none will be forthcoming. I would do it again tomorrow – anything less and I would stand rightfully accused of failing my duty as Inspector General. And if the Arbitrator, or anyone else, thinks I am going to back down from investigating other City employees who lie and steal, or from recommending their termination if the evidence supports it, let me be crystal clear—I will not. Chicagoans can be assured that we will continue to work tirelessly to protect their interests and resources from City employees who put their own selfish desires ahead of the duty they owe the City and its residents.

At its core, the IGO operates from a very simple belief: City employees who lie, cheat or steal in the performance of their official duties have forfeited the honor to be City employees and should be terminated. Nothing that happened last week changes our commitment to that fundamental principle, and I am confident that our documented track record in upholding that principle ensures we will continue to be taken very seriously by those who would believe and act otherwise.

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