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# DEPARTMENT OF STREETS AND SANITATION WEED-CUTTING PROGRAM AUDIT FOLLOW- UP

CITY OF CHICAGO  
OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL



JOSEPH M. FERGUSON  
INSPECTOR GENERAL FOR THE CITY OF CHICAGO

LISE VALENTINE  
DEPUTY INSPECTOR GENERAL FOR AUDIT & PROGRAM REVIEW



JOSEPH M. FERGUSON  
INSPECTOR GENERAL

CITY OF CHICAGO  
OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL  
740 NORTH SEDGWICK STREET, SUITE 200  
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS 60654  
TELEPHONE: (773) 478-7799  
FAX: (773) 478-3949

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**JULY 29, 2021**

**TO THE MAYOR, CITY COUNCIL, CITY CLERK, CITY TREASURER,  
AND COMMUNITY MEMBERS OF THE CITY OF CHICAGO:**

The City of Chicago Office of Inspector General (OIG) has completed a follow-up to its July 2020 audit of the Department of Streets and Sanitation's (DSS) weed-cutting program. Based on the Department's responses, OIG concludes that DSS has fully implemented one corrective action, partially implemented one, and has not implemented five.

The purpose of the July 2020 audit was to determine if DSS met its goals of mowing all City-owned vacant land at least 4 times during the growing season, and addressed all overgrown weed complaints within 42 days. DSS is responsible for cutting weeds that have grown higher than ten inches on the public way, as well as City-owned and private vacant land. DSS ward superintendents manage this process by visually surveying their wards, responding to complaints, and providing direction to weed-cutting contractors. Because the problem of overgrown weeds disproportionately impacts the West and South Sides of Chicago, DSS' effectiveness in delivering this service substantially impacts efforts to combat blight in these neighborhoods.

OIG found that although DSS staff were responsible for identifying City-owned vacant lots that require weed cutting, the City did not have a complete or accurate list of such properties. As a result, the Department could not ensure that City-owned vacant lots were cut at least four times per year. Without an accurate list, ward superintendents often entered citations into the Mobile Electronic Ticketing System (METS) for City-owned properties, leaving it up to the Department of Law (DOL) to review and reject these erroneous charges. We also found that DSS staff resolved complaints in a variety of ways, but that flaws in the Department's data system made it difficult to determine the specifics of any particular closed-out complaint work order. Therefore, DSS could not determine if it addressed weed complaints in a timely manner.

Based on the results of the audit, OIG recommended that DSS work with the Department of Planning and Development (DPD) and DOL to compile a complete and accurate inventory of vacant City-owned properties, then provide this inventory to weed-cutting contractors for management. We further recommended that ward superintendents be responsible only for identifying sanitation nuisances in their wards and responding to complaints. Next, we recommended that DSS develop—and clearly communicate to staff and contractors—performance-based weed cutting goals covering both management of City-owned land and complaint response. Lastly, we recommended that DSS improve its data entry practices to

ensure it captures all the information necessary to assess its weed-cutting performance. In its response to the audit, DSS described corrective actions it would take.

In March 2021, OIG inquired about corrective actions taken by DSS in response to the audit. Based on DSS' follow-up response, we conclude that the Department has made some progress on the audit's recommendations, fully or partially implementing two corrective actions, but has not implemented the other five. Specifically, DSS has developed performance-based goals for the weed-cutting process, complaint response, and management of City-owned land; the Department has communicated these goals to staff and contractors. DSS is also actively working with DPD to compile a more accurate inventory of City-owned property. We urge DSS to implement changes for ward superintendents' responsibilities, begin using a route planning tool to optimize routes, address data quality issues in Salesforce, and better link data between the different systems utilized to track weed cutting. Below, we summarize our audit finding and recommendations, as well as the Department's response to our follow-up.

We thank the staff and leadership of DSS for their cooperation during the audit and their responsiveness to our follow-up inquiries.

Respectfully,



Joseph M. Ferguson  
Inspector General  
City of Chicago

## FOLLOW UP-RESULTS

In March 2021, OIG followed up on its July 2020 audit of DSS' weed-cutting program.<sup>1</sup> DSS responded by describing the corrective actions it has taken and providing supporting documentation. Below, we summarize OIG's finding, the associated recommendations, and the status of DSS' corrective actions. Our follow-up did not observe or test implementation of the new procedures; thus, we make no determination as to their effectiveness, which would require a new audit with full testing.

### FINDING:

**DSS does not meet its goal for preventing the overgrown weeds that contribute to blight on the South and West Sides of Chicago**

#### OIG Recommendation 1:

DSS should develop meaningful performance-based goals for the weed-cutting process, both for complaint response and management of City-owned land. Then, the Department should clearly communicate these goals to the necessary staff members and contractors.

#### Status of Corrective Action: **Fully Implemented**

DSS changed the performance goal for addressing weed-cutting complaints in Salesforce (the 311 system) from 42 days to 21 days. The new weed-cutting contracts signed in early 2021 require vendors to complete service requests for City-owned lots within seven days, and requests for private lots within three days, of assignment. DSS held meetings with ward superintendents and contractors to communicate these performance expectations. The Department also communicated the expectation that each City-owned lot will be cut at least four to six times per season, and the goal of cutting each City-owned lot once a month.

#### OIG Recommendation 2:

DSS should work collaboratively with DPD and DOL to compile a complete and accurate inventory of vacant City-owned land.

#### Status of Corrective Action: **Partially Implemented**

In its response, DSS stated that it is working with DPD to compile an accurate inventory of vacant City-owned land. DSS instructed ward

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<sup>1</sup> City of Chicago Office of Inspector General "Department of Streets and Sanitation Weed-Cutting Program Audit," July 23, 2020, <https://igchicago.org/2020/07/23/oig-finds-that-the-department-of-streets-and-sanitation-does-not-meet-its-goals-for-weed-cutting-impacting-safety-and-services/>.

superintendents to report to DPD any inaccuracies in the City lot list found during their surveys. DSS stated that, after the 2021 weed-cutting season, it will maintain the updated lot list, conduct a yearly review, and share it with DPD.

**OIG Recommendation 3:**

DSS should contract out all aspects of managing weed cutting on City-owned properties so that ward superintendents are no longer responsible for identifying such sites.

**OIG Recommendation 4:**

Ward superintendents' sole responsibilities regarding weed cutting should be to survey their wards to identify private vacant properties with overgrown weeds and to respond to weed complaints.

**OIG Recommendation 5:**

If DSS continues to provide weed-cutting contractors with daily HDX sheets (i.e., a list of lots to cut), it should use a route planning tool to optimize ward superintendents' survey routes.

**Status of Corrective Action 3, 4, and 5: Not Implemented**

DSS has neither implemented changes to ward superintendents' responsibilities nor contracted out all aspects of weed cutting for City-owned locations. In its response, the Department stated that ward superintendents are still responsible both for surveying City-owned and private vacant properties to identify sites with overgrown weeds, and for routing lot locations for the contractors. DSS stated it does not intend to purchase a route planning tool. OIG maintains, however, that if DSS intends to continue providing weed-cutting contractors with daily HDX sheets, it should use such a tool to optimize ward superintendents' survey routes. OIG also maintains that the Department should work toward contracting out all aspects of managing weed cutting on City-owned properties.

**OIG Recommendation 6:**

DSS should align its Salesforce data entry design and controls to meet program needs and ensure the system is capturing necessary data, then train ward superintendents and sanitation clerks to close out work orders in a manner that fully and accurately captures complaint outcomes.

**Status of Corrective Action: Not Implemented**

DSS is working with EKI Consulting to develop new software for internal tracking of weed-cutting operations. The Department stated that it has not sought to improve data quality in Salesforce because it will not use that system as a source for internal tracking data. OIG maintains that DSS should fix the data entry design and controls for weed-cutting complaints in Salesforce so that community members can use it to see the outcome of their complaints.

**OIG Recommendation 7:**

DSS should ensure that Salesforce work orders and citations entered in METS are linked to one another (for example, with common incident numbers) so that the Department can accurately track and evaluate performance at each phase of the complaint response process.

**Status of Corrective Action: Not Implemented**

In its response, DSS stated that the address of each lot will be the common identifier between data systems. However, during the audit, OIG found it is impossible to use addresses to link data between METS and Salesforce. OIG urges the Department to address this recommendation by creating a common identifier, such as an incident number, to link METS, Salesforce, and the new software in development with EKI Consulting.

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OIG's authority to produce reports of its findings and recommendations is established in the City of Chicago Municipal Code §§ 2-56-030(d), -035(c), -110, -230, and 240.

### PROJECT TEAM

Samuel Díaz, Performance Analyst  
Cameron Lagrone, Chief Performance Analyst

### PUBLIC INQUIRIES

Communications: (773) 478-8417 | [communications@igchicago.org](mailto:communications@igchicago.org)

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