

OCTOBER 2019

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# CITY OF CHICAGO OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL

## ADVISORY CONCERNING INEFFICIENT TREE TRIMMING OPERATIONS AT THE BUREAU OF FORESTRY





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## VIA ELECTRONIC MAIL

John Tully  
Commissioner  
Department of Streets and Sanitation  
121 North LaSalle Street, Room 1107  
Chicago, Illinois 60602

*RE: Inefficiency at Bureau of Forestry, Tree Trimming Operations, OIG File #19-0719*

Dear Commissioner Tully:

The Office of Inspector General (OIG) writes to advise you of its identification of the ongoing inefficient use of City resources at the Department of Streets and Sanitation's (DSS) Bureau of Forestry and an opportunity to immediately improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the City's urban forestry program. The issue was identified during an OIG investigation involving the Bureau of Forestry, which is responsible for trimming trees and responding to tree emergencies throughout the City.

Before the advent of 311 in 1999, DSS used a grid-based approach, which involved dispatching crews to trim all the trees in grid-sized sections of the City. This systematic approach allowed DSS to trim City trees on a five-year, rotating schedule.

DSS currently trims City trees using a reactive, 311 request-based approach. Accordingly, the City relies on residents' calls to 311 to identify trees in need of trimming, rather than using a systematically proactive, arboriculturally based approach. When residents want a tree in their area trimmed, they call 311, their request is logged, and, if the request does not involve an emergency, DSS handles the request in the order it was received. Since DSS crews must travel throughout the City to handle individual 311 requests, they spend more time traveling and fewer City trees are trimmed. In addition, since some area residents do not regularly call 311 to request tree trims, many City trees have not been trimmed in over 10 years.

In 2009, in order to better understand this problem and bring attention to the issue, the Bureau of Forestry hired Monitor Group, an independent management consulting firm, to review DSS' 311 request-based trimming program and explore the

benefits of returning to a grid-based trimming program.<sup>1</sup> Based on its review, Monitor Group found that the 311 request-based approach was, indeed, inefficient and ineffective, as the Bureau of Forestry spent 75% of its time addressing 311 requests, and 40% of parkway trees (approx. 206,000) had not been trimmed in 10 or more years.

According to the report issued on May 1, 2009, a grid-based approach would make the Bureau of Forestry much more efficient—reducing the average crew’s travel time by 35% and the average cost per tree trim by 60%. The decrease in travel and equipment setup and teardown time for DSS employees would also result in more of the City receiving much-needed tree trimming services, because DSS could increase its daily tree trims per crew by 147%. This would result in 87% more addresses receiving services over the course of a year. Notably, many major cities, including New York City, Toronto, and Los Angeles, as well as Chicago’s neighboring communities of Evanston, Oak Lawn, and Park Ridge, use a proactive, cyclical or grid-based approach to trimming trees.

The benefits of more efficient tree trimming are significant and could lead to additional cost savings for the City. Appropriate trimming helps maintain the health and life of the City’s urban forest, a critical asset to, among other things, the mitigation of the urban heat island effect and excessive storm water runoff, which will be ever-mounting concerns as a result of climate change, and on which the City presently spends millions each year to maintain. Additionally, storm damage caused by untrimmed parkway trees represents a potential liability for the City and can cause significant disruption to City residents in the event of property damage, utility interruptions, and street closures. More efficient trimming would also likely result in a reduction of 311 requests over time, since City trees would receive more regular maintenance.

In 2009, Monitor Group interviewed 19 of the 50 aldermen in office at the time and found significant support for a more efficient grid-based approach if appropriate considerations were made to allow for some continued reactive 311 requests and emergency trimming. The report recommended the City work closely with aldermen to ensure equitable trimming across wards, prioritize certain grids within each ward, and develop a resident education plan so area residents know what to expect.

Despite Monitor Group’s overwhelming findings in favor of a grid-based approach, DSS continues to trim trees based on requests it receives from 311, and, according to a supervisor with the Bureau of Forestry, many areas of the City still have not received tree-trimming services in over 10 years. The Bureau of Forestry supervisor noted that

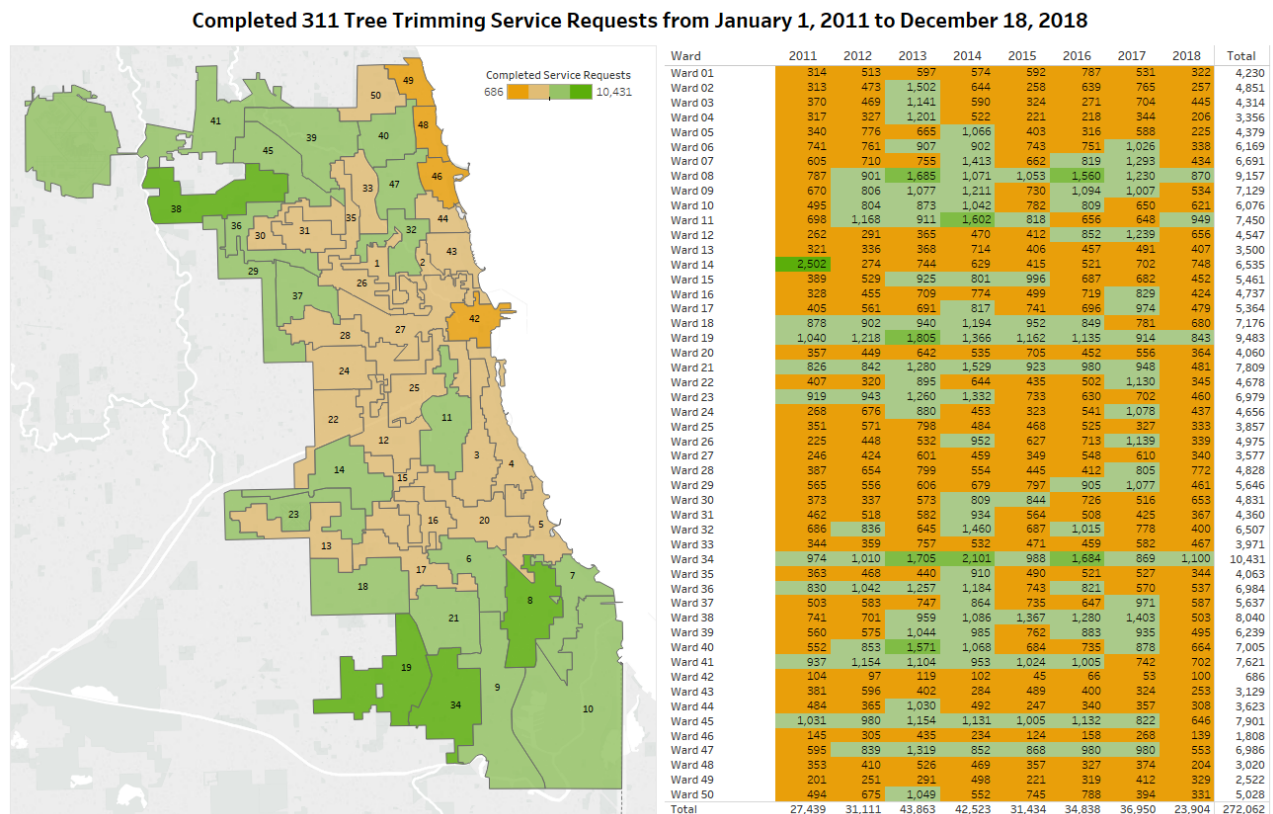
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<sup>1</sup> In January 2013, Monitor Group was acquired by Deloitte and is now known as Monitor Deloitte.

the conditions described in Monitor Group’s report have not improved since 2009. The 311 request-based approach has also resulted in significant backlogs, since the Bureau of Forestry only trims trees from approximately June through December and spends the remainder of the year removing trees. As it stands, any requests DSS receives after June 30, 2019, outside of tree emergencies, will not be addressed until 2020.

The concerns raised by Monitor Group are further supported by OIG analysis, which revealed that certain wards receive significantly more tree trimming services than others, as displayed below.

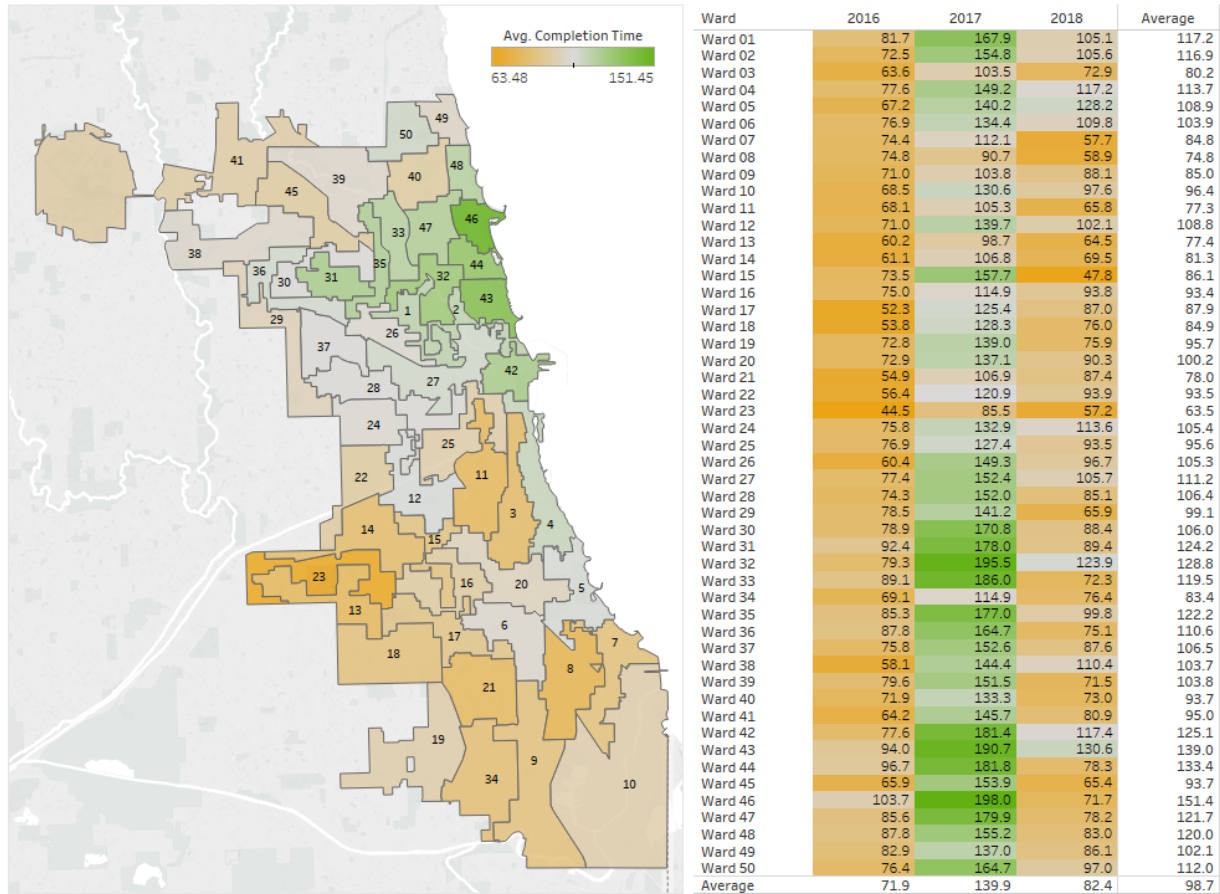
FIGURE 1: OIG ANALYSIS OF COMPLETED 311 TREE TRIMMING SERVICE REQUESTS



The variation in services received between the wards is noteworthy. For example, between January 1, 2011, and December 18, 2018, DSS completed 10,431 tree trim service requests in the 34th Ward, which is more than the 46th (1,808), 48th (3,020), and 49th (2,522) wards combined. DSS also takes longer to complete tree trimming service requests in certain wards, as displayed below.

FIGURE 2: OIG ANALYSIS OF AVERAGE SERVICE REQUEST TIMES IN DAYS TO COMPLETION

**Average Service Request Time in Days to Completion from January 1, 2016 to December 18, 2018**



The data shows that some wards wait much longer for DSS tree trimming services. For example, between January 1, 2016, and December 18, 2018, the average service request time to completion for tree trimming in the 23rd Ward was 63.5 days, while it took an average of 151.4 days in the 46th Ward, 139 days in the 43rd Ward, and 133.4 days in the 44th Ward.

Transitioning to a grid-based approach to tree trimming would reduce these inequities, because all the City’s trees would be trimmed on an ongoing, cyclical basis. Given the tremendous benefits of an arboriculturally appropriate, grid-based approach to tree-trimming, OIG urges DSS to review the 2009 Monitor Group report—which further describes the benefits of adopting this approach and includes detailed implementation recommendations—and take the necessary steps in order to optimize its use of City resources, more effectively maintain and preserve the urban forest as a critical City asset, and better and more equitably serve City residents.

Respectfully,



Joseph M. Ferguson  
Inspector General  
City of Chicago

cc: Maurice Classen, Chief of Staff, Office of the Mayor  
Candace Moore, Chief Equity Office, Office of the Mayor  
Tamika Puckett, Chief Risk Officer, Office of the Mayor

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- administrative and criminal investigations by its Investigations Section;
- performance audits of City programs and operations by its Audit and Program Review Section;
- inspections, evaluations and reviews of City police and police accountability programs, operations, and policies by its Public Safety Section; and
- compliance audit and monitoring of City hiring and employment activities by its Hiring Oversight Unit.

From these activities, OIG issues reports of findings and disciplinary and other recommendations,

- to assure that City officials, employees, and vendors are held accountable for violations of laws and policies;
- to improve the efficiency and cost-effectiveness of government operations; and
- to prevent, detect, identify, expose, and eliminate waste, inefficiency, misconduct, fraud, corruption, and abuse of public authority and resources.

## AUTHORITY

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.

*Cover image courtesy of the Department of Fleet and Facility Management.*

### PUBLIC INQUIRIES:

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