

Good afternoon, Chairman Ervin, Vice Chairman Lee, and members of the City Council. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to present the Department of Law’s 2024 proposed budget request for your consideration.

This summer, I had the pleasure of meeting with many of you during a series of informative sessions organized by Committee on Finance Chairman Dowell. During those meetings, we discussed the various roles and responsibilities of the Law Department, particularly those functions that directly impact your constituents. For the benefit of those who were not able to attend these informative sessions and for others in this Chamber today, I would like to give you a brief overview of our department.

As many of you know, the Law Department is responsible for defending the City of Chicago and the laws and policies approved by this body by providing legal representation to the City, its officials, and its agencies. As Corporation Counsel, I oversee one of the largest law practices in the city, with 285 attorneys who support clients in the following practice areas: Appeals; Affirmative Litigation; Aviation, Environmental, Regulatory & Contracts; Building & License Enforcement; Collections, Ownership & Administrative Litigation; Constitutional & Commercial Litigation; Employment Litigation; Federal Civil Rights Litigation; Finance & Economic Development; Labor; Legal Counsel; Legal Information & Prosecutions; Public Safety Reform; Real Estate; Revenue Litigation; Risk Management & Compliance; and Torts.

Defending the cases brought against the City is not just a legal obligation but a moral imperative, and we approach this responsibility with the utmost care and diligence to ensure we are upholding our fiduciary duty to you and the taxpayers of Chicago. We exercise this fiduciary responsibility by conducting careful risk analysis of legal matters to determine if it is in the City’s best interests to settle litigation matters or to bring them to trial. As we go about this risk analysis work, we know how important it is to make strategic investments in a professional workforce with expertise that can successfully represent the City in legal matters.

Retaining a Professional Workforce

One way we will invest in our workforce is through incentive tools to retain experienced attorneys. I was surprised to learn when I came to the department that we did not pay attorney license fees for our attorneys, which is inconsistent with other City departments with attorneys on staff. I am pleased to say the Law Department is proposing a 2024 budget that both fully funds ARDC fees for the department and decreases non-personnel spending by almost \$100,000. We were able to identify spending decreases by utilizing zero-based accounting practices for the department’s non-personnel budget. We are also establishing a Continuing Legal Education Committee that is tasked with developing a robust and substantive training plan for Law Department attorneys at all levels of their careers, because I know from my career that legal expertise is built over time with experience, mentorship, and consistent and regular professional development participation. I have also asked our HR administration to identify and offer supervisory and leadership training opportunities for our senior attorneys.

Recruitment Initiatives

Recruitment of qualified attorneys is a priority for me but so is building a workforce that reflects our communities and offers recruitment opportunities to talented diverse attorneys. While I am pleased to announce that in July when I came before this body during my confirmation hearing, we had 37 attorney vacancies; today we are down to 25 attorney vacancies. I fully acknowledge that our recruitment of diverse attorneys is not meeting department goals, nor my own. As a black woman, I know the challenges diverse attorneys experience in legal recruitment. Our Director of Attorney Recruitment and Professional Development has built a monthly recruitment email list of over 600 recipients. She is targeting diverse professional bar and law student associations with extra marketing. She has, and continues, to attend career fairs and law school career events to build a diverse candidate pool. I am personally attending and scheduling speaking engagements at local bar associations and law schools to talk about the unique career opportunities at the Law Department. We are starting to see the fruits of the department's focus on recruiting diverse attorneys particularly among our pipeline efforts, as we have just made the first employment offer to a former Summer Law Clerk. This young woman of color participated in our 2022 cohort, the first year of the department's revised Summer Law Clerk program that targeted diverse law students.

Protecting Chicagoans

As government lawyers, we are charged with safeguarding the interests of the City, and our role extends far beyond mere defenses, but also includes a proactive commitment to prosecuting those individuals or entities that harm our city and its residents. We take this responsibility very seriously, as evidenced by the civil lawsuit we filed this summer against Kia and Hyundai for their failure to include auto-theft prevention technology in many of their entry-level models. Their unlawful conduct resulted in a steep increase in vehicle thefts, reckless driving, property damage, and a wide array of related violent crime throughout the city. Many Chicago residents have been victimized by Kia and Hyundai's negligence and we are holding the automakers to account.

We also took legal action against a property management firm for engaging in unfair and predatory rent-to-own practices that targeted disenfranchised communities. And we stepped up our efforts to hold an environmental polluter accountable after they knowingly released harmful contaminants into Chicago's air, water, and soil.

By actively prosecuting those who try to bring us harm, we are sending a strong message about our core values as a City: we will not tolerate actions that jeopardize the safety and security of our communities.

In closing, I commit to you that I will continue to work with all of you and the City departments we represent to ensure the best outcome in all legal matters. Your support of our proposed 2024 budget will assist us in meeting that goal. Thank you, Chairman Ervin and the members of the Budget Committee and Council members, for the opportunity to address you. I'm now happy to answer any of your questions.