

**AUDIT OF
RECORDER'S COURT
AUGUST 9, 2024**

AUDIT AUTHORIZATION

An audit of the Recorder's Court was requested by previous Internal Auditor John Redmond and authorized by City Council on October 8, 2019.

BACKGROUND/HISTORY

The Recorder's Court hears traffic, criminal, and city ordinance cases made by the Columbus Police Department, Special Enforcement, Metro Narcotic Task Force, Fire Department, Georgia State Patrol, and the Columbus State University Police Department.

The court's functional responsibility is to set bail, issue warrants, collect fines/bonds, set probation terms, hear and determine if probable cause exists for State/Superior court offenses; they also adjudicate city ordinances and certain state offenses.

AUDIT SCOPE

The scope of the audit included a review of existing policies and procedures in the financial area which meets with customers daily and is responsible for the collection of bonds/fines, and the judicial area, which creates court dockets for three sessions of court daily, Saturday court sessions and four monthly sessions of Environmental Court.

The audit included a review of the flow of customer traffic throughout the building as well as the general maintenance and upkeep of the facility.

GENERAL AUDIT PROCESS

The audit process began with an entrance conference on October 31, 2023, attended by Internal Auditor Donna McGinnis, Chief Clerk Clautretta Fitzpatrick-Williams, Forensic Auditor Benjamin Meadow, and Forensic Auditor Jonathan Smith. The auditors explained the purpose of the audit and Ms. Clautretta provided a departmental overview. The auditors developed an audit program to include a review of and the assessment of management supervision, operations, personnel, internal controls, and facilities. Fieldwork began on January 17, 2024, and concluded on July 25, 2024. An exit conference was held with Clautretta Fitzpatrick-Williams to discuss the findings and recommendations. A draft report was presented to Ms. Clautretta for discussion and response.

A. MANAGEMENT SUPERVISION

AUDIT PROCESS

The auditor reviewed budgetary performance, policies and procedures, and department goals and objectives. Additionally, a payroll audit was conducted, employee interviews, a review of internal controls, and the operation of each division.

AUDIT FINDINGS

By reviewing the financial statements for FY2021 through FY2023, the auditor found that the department is \$197,415 under budget on expenses and revenue was under budget by \$3.3 million. This reflects a drastic decline in cases from a slowly moving backlog caused by pandemic measures subsequently followed by a substantial dismissal of traffic hearings which was done to alleviate the overwhelming caseload.

Performance metrics other than budgetary were not observed but did not seem necessary given workload and assignments were visible and observably tracked within the software. Written policies, procedures, goals/objectives were also present.

A payroll audit was conducted to confirm the physical existence of all paid personnel. No discrepancies were noted.

During employee interviews, it was evident that the job descriptions mostly aligned with the actual duties performed.

Upon observation of employees, it was apparent that they were reasonably proficient at performing their basic tasks. Employees appeared to utilize the available computer software to the extent of its capabilities. We did notice some manual work referring to instances where certain tasks are still carried out printing paper.

Supervisory personnel appeared capable of strategically approving and tracking individuals' time-off to mitigate any overlap that would result in staffing shortages. Resourceful use of software to electronically track and record employees' time on/off with an interactive schedule was observed. Management appears responsibly involved as active participants in the approval process regarding the necessary internal controls pertinent to cash collection. Deposits are made daily by the finance supervisor who also has a designated backup for this function in the event she is not capable.

AUDIT RECOMMENDATIONS

There are no recommendations currently.

B. FINANCIAL OPERATIONS

DUTIES & RESPONSIBILITIES

The financial operations staff is responsible for entering court bonds and fines into the courts accounting system and collection and posting payments from customers in person or by mail. Daily cash reconciliations are performed, and respective bank deposits are made, in addition to processing deposits from credit cards, checks, and online payments.

AUDIT PROCESS

We observed staff performing their daily tasks (i.e. customer interactions, knowledge of fines and citations, proficiency with the use of Enterprise Justice software regarding individual daily batch collections reporting, etc.)

AUDIT FINDINGS

When observing a typical workday in the financial area, staffing in numbers seemed adequate. The staff was assisting customers at the lobby window as phone calls were answered within a reasonable time frame by various team members. (We only observed several calls throughout the day as they were infrequent and minor in occurrence.) It is noted that the drive-through window is not in service and has not been for years, however there was no indication customer service was hindered in any way. Since previous audits, there has been a significant reduction in volume of in-person and over-the-phone customer service interactions which can be attributed to the development of online payment. The link to the Defendant Access payment portal appeared operational and does allow those with outstanding citations to view and pay their balances. (Given the citations have already been processed.) On occasion customers still call to get assistance over the phone for online payment with complaints that Defendant Access software is not user-friendly. The department is anticipating an update to resolve this issue. The link to the payment calculator was also functional. This feature allows customers to determine the amount of their traffic violations based on citation number and other detailed information located on the summons.

Cash management procedures are uniform, and a policy is in place to lock cash drawers when unattended. Bank deposits are made daily. Tills are also balanced daily all-inclusive of cash payments, credit cards, and checks. These measures create a proper system of accountability and greatly reduce the risk of theft.

AUDIT RECOMMENDATIONS

There are no recommendations currently.

C. JUDICIAL OPERATIONS

DUTIES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Judicial operations consist of preparing dockets for each court session, scheduling court appearances on outstanding bonds, assist with court proceedings, and enter case dispositions for Georgia Crime Information Center (GCIC) reporting. The function also consists of processing state and superior court bonds.

AUDIT PROCESS

We observed staff performing their daily tasks (i.e. preparing dockets, customer interactions, knowledge of fines and citations, proficiency and use of Enterprise Justice software and the GCIC system).

AUDIT FINDINGS

After observing employees, it was apparent that they were proficient at performing their basic tasks. We observed some manual work.

GCIC reporting to the state is consistently current and up to date. No backlog persists. Multiple employees are also certified for performing GCIC reporting and regularly rotate to handle the workflow.

Four copies of case information are printed and handed out to the Judge, DA, public defender, and the court clerk before every individual hearing. This same data is already available within Enterprise Justice reporting software.

Regular software issues and inconsistencies were noted with the use of Tyler systems. Complaints of overall generally sluggish performance in Enterprise Justice were unanimous among judicial staff. As a result, there is a lag in the workflow. The automated transmission of traffic violation data intermittently fails from Enforcement Mobile, (citation recording software), to Enterprise Justice for days up to weeks at a time. As a result, docket information is manually recorded by staff and is duplicated when the upload is suddenly and randomly received. The removal of such duplication must be done manually and can take hours to resolve.

Weekly conference calls with Tyler representatives are ongoing and are led by the assistant chief clerk, however not much progress has been made thus far in resolving persistent technological issues.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Judge, DA, public defender, and in-court clerk should all have assigned city issued laptops to access pertinent case details before and during every hearing.

Advocate to arrange an extensive in-person meeting with Tyler IT representative(s) to develop system issue fixes.

Recorders Court should consider software alternatives which are evidently more effective and efficient when utilized in other county court systems.

D. FACILITIES MAINTENANCE

SCOPE

The scope of the audit included a review of the building, its safety, upkeep and appearance. The activity at Recorder's Court includes a staff of twenty-three employees and welcomes a copious number of citizens daily.

PROCESS

The auditors and recorder's court Chief Clerk completed a walk-through of the facility to identify and document areas that are ill-maintained and/or in disrepair.

FINDINGS/RECOMMENDATIONS/AUDITEE RESPONSES

Recorder's Court has inconvenient, inadequate parking with poor access. The parking lot has forty-seven spaces of which seven are designed for handicapped parking. The white lines that designate the parking perimeters are significantly faded, and a few spaces are very difficult to discern. The perimeter stripes need to be repainted.

There is a considerable amount of overgrowth of grass and weeds sprouting up through many of the cracks which in some instances present tripping hazards. These areas should be trimmed and treated.

The concrete walkways have weeds and grass sprouting through the joints in between the individual slabs. It is recommended to trim the growth and apply treatment.

Both lawns need mowing and trimming. There should be landscaping on a routine basis. Estimates provided by the Public Works department's services were ~\$590 on a bi-weekly basis to address all landscaping needs.

Public restrooms were found to be poorly illuminated and improperly cleaned. Service costs were estimated at ~\$50 for repairs.

Many of the courtroom chairs are frayed and damaged. Some seats do not fold back upward creating a traffic impediment. If the chairs are difficult to repair and maintain, we suggest installing a non-fabric alternative or pews.

There are scuffs and damage covering the walls. In addition, there is wiring hanging on the outside of the walls from the ceiling. The wiring needs to be re-routed inside of the walls and the walls should be painted. Service estimates were ~\$600 in materials and would require three people at around ten days to complete.

The courtroom carpet appears soiled and retains an unpleasant odor although it is routinely maintained. The carpet should be replaced, however suggested repairs are estimated at ~\$20,000 and five days of labor for each of the two courtrooms.

In an active courtroom it was observed that the judge and public defender were barely audible during the session. New and improved audio equipment should be installed to ensure ADA compliance.

There are a few non-functioning lights among the lampposts. Consequently, the walkway is poorly illuminated and can pose a safety hazard and security risk for employees who arrive early mornings and vacate late evenings during the absence of sunlight. The public works department estimates repair costs at ~\$600

The employee work area was notably cold in the winter and hot and humid during the summer. Contract bids for the purchase or repair of an HVAC unit should be considered, however suggested repair estimates are ~\$25,000 to include six individuals at ten days to complete. Replacement costs are markedly higher at ~\$70,000 and would require six people one month to complete.