

MINUTES

Committee for Office Oversight for the Office of Water Advocacy & Customer Appeals (WACA)

Committee Members

Council President Zeke Cohen (Chair), Dana Moore, Mayor's Office, Inspector General Isabel Cumming, Comptroller Bill Henry, Councilman Paris Gray, Councilwoman Odette Ramos, Councilman Jermaine Jones



Monday, September 8, 2025
4:00 PM

Du Burns Council Chambers, 4th Floor City, Hall
and Virtually via Webex

Board Members

In Attendance

Zeke Cohen, Chairman
Dana Moore, Mayor's Office
Odette Ramos, Councilwoman
Paris Gray, Councilman
Isabel Cumming, Inspector General
Jermaine Jones, Councilman
Timothy Goldsby, Comptroller's Office

11 Attendees online at 4:13pm, including Emily Opilo and WJZ

- Council President Zeke Cohen nominated himself as Chair
- He made a motion to close nominations, which was seconded by Inspector General Isabel Cumming and approved by unanimous vote.
- The nomination was approved by unanimous vote.
- Chief of the Water Advocacy and Customer Appeals Mills made a presentation and took questions, including the following:
 - Advocacy, investigation and determination are their functions.

- Every investigation goes into a framework of introduction -> evidence collection -> analysis of evidence -> customer advocate report -> document retention.
- Chief Mills triages all cases and sorts them into 4 tiers based on expectation.
- Data metrics:
 - 371 disputes/investigations: 72 are active, 52 are closed, 248 are in queue, 9 reports in review, 7 reports in progress.
 - 66% of cases are unassigned.
 - \$1.3 million doled out in relief dollars.
- Council President Cohen asked for more details on the outlier cases:
 - \$880k was a shopping center in South Baltimore – issues stemming from meters assigned incorrectly
 - \$220k was an independent school in Northwest Baltimore that had a “legacy agreement” that was not honored initially by DPW.
- IG Cumming asked about the status of the \$884k adjustment:
 - 3 appeals from WACA to ECB since 2023, all returned in favor in the customer.
 - WACA is unsure of the financial outcome of cases – they make a recommendation, but Finance implements it
- District 9 has the highest number of disputes, followed by disputes from Baltimore County. District 7 is 3rd highest.
 - IG Cumming – “does the county have their own Advocacy board? Are they aware that this is available?” Chief Mills was unsure.
 - CP Cohen asked for verification of this number.
- 11 of 69 recommendations made by WACA are “in progress.” There is a committee that is reviewing the applications.
- Water 4 all:
 - Only 11% of Water 4 All applications are renewed year-over-year, but a workgroup is meeting regularly to think about ways to up this number.
 - From FYs 2022-25, 19,640 total applications with 12,968 approvals, discounts totaling \$12.371 million.
 - Most common reason for Water4All denials (62%) is customers not responding to requests for additional information.
- Chief Mills’s asks:
 - Would like to see dedicated office space for public-facing functions and confidential conversations.
 - Additional staff.
 - Data collection tools.
 - He also notes that direct “read only” access to billing platforms would assist investigations.
 - Guidance on Art. 24 section 2-20 of Baltimore City Regulations (COBRA).

- Marketing support for awareness.
 - DeKalb County, GA is modeling their office from ours.
- Council President – why only 16% of recommendations in implementation?
 - Chief Mills – DPW has been standing up a taskforce to hear and implement these recommendations. They say they need more context.
 - DPW Chief of Staff LaToya Curtis – there is ongoing conversation, we haven't declined 84%, not clear on what is needed.
 - CP requests list of recommendations submitted, those implemented, those in progress – 48 hours.
- Ramos – 248 investigations are in the queue, why is this?
 - Mills – Limited capacity, have a staff of 4. We do our best to help people solve simple issues without having to do a full investigation. Encourage customers to resolve leaks before continuing forward with investigations, leaving some in the queue that have been addressed in a nominal way with limited customer interactions.
- Ramos – How do you receive referrals?
 - Mills states that referrals come from:
 - Decline letter gives option to appeal.
 - Councilmember referrals.
 - Direct customer appeals.
 - State legislators have reached out on behalf of customers.
 - Mills recommends to some customers that they should reach out to customer service before continuing with a dispute.
- Ramos points out that the process is not working as intended.
- Gray – how does DPW track if landlords are passing on water costs? Should it have a better tracking mechanism? People are experiencing shut offs because of this.
 - Mills – For Water4All, they simply need to show record of tenant bill
 - Curtis – DPW does not track this information, there is no way to tell that without the landlord telling us.
- Gray – how is the City informing residents about their rights regarding shut-offs in Tax Sale? Can we include Water 4 All information in Tax Sale mailers or bills?
 - Curtis – Water bills are not a part of Tax Sale. We can do some more advertising on that and Promise Pay.
 - Mills -- Water 4 All information has been included in water bill mailers, we have done robo calls, community events also advise about this program too.
- CP – Do you have a marketing budget for this?
 - Mills – No, I am making a request for FY27 budget.
- IG Cumming – 248 in queue. Have these been onboarded?
 - Mills – yes.
 - Cumming – you will never catch up at this pace. What is your plan?

- Mills – increasing staffing capacity.
- IG Cumming – would like explanations for cases not granted.
 - Mills -- Will be granted by end of week.
- Jones – How long does it take for an investigation to resolve?
 - Mills – depending on tier, tier 1 up to 3 weeks, tier two up to 3 months, tier 4 in excess of that. Longest tier 4 was 8-9 months. Delay is not always due to our own administrative burdens; it is with others too.
 - We have a fellow starting on 9/15 who will work on Tier I cases.
- Jones -- How much additional staff would you need to clear the backlog? This will get worse if we promote it, which we should.
 - Mills -- 4-6 additional staff.
- Moore – Astounding number of investigations. The code is clear on who adjusts bills. Is it not clear in practice?
 - Mills – it has not been clear in practice, it is not clear who in the finance department will do this, they are not doing so thus far.
- Moore – any opportunity to partner with OECR or its counterpart in the County?
 - Mills – not directly, but we are part of DPW Office of Equity and Environmental Justice.
- Goldsby – Mills, you said WACA should have direct read only access to the billing and customer support platforms. Data is important to timely resolving cases. What is the process like and how much access do you have to data during the course of an investigation?
 - Mills – when a customer advocate begins a dispute, any support tickets are Citi works, access to UMAX, but in some cases it is quicker for people at DPW to download dozens of documents at once and we have to do so one by one. Once all info is gotten, it goes in our share drive. The customer advocate goes through their questions and works through the customer statement and this info. At that time, an advocate might up the case’s priority list based on the data.
- Goldsby – is there a slowdown in the investigation process because you need to request data?
 - Mills -- Yes, it is most efficient to have to pull it yourself.
 - WACA has direct UMAX access, but the front-end development is different from our view.
 - Access to CityWorks for work orders.
 - Unable to see customer service tickets.
- Goldsby – 133 property types “not identified.” How can we help identify these properties
 - Mills – at least 60% are because we did not document this at the start of office existence. Our Fellow will work on identifying all property types.
- Cohen – when will we resolve cases where determination was made but relief not granted? Cohen requested:

- Request for update.
- Request to assign \$ value to all denied cases – by next meeting.
- Request for processing time for all completed cases – by next meeting.
- Request for breakdown of how cases are referred to office.
- Ramos – would like to see slide 12 – case outcomes – reproduced for the DPW customer service office. By next meeting. Will follow up in an email with this request.
- Ramos – clarification on Water 4 All slide 20, does 185 mean who renewed the year prior?
 - Mills – Renewed applications refer to the prior year.
 - Ramos – requesting clarification on renewal numbers. Alarmed by low renewal rate. Want to compare this to BH2O numbers as well. I also want to understand outreach
- Ramos -- How many houses have you gone to?
 - Unclear from Chief Mills' response.
- Ramos – How many Spanish speakers do you have on staff?
 - Mills – One, we are also working on translating materials for Spanish speakers.
- IG Cumming -- had questions on how investigations are pursued based on previously mention tier system. IG is going to meet with him about how investigations are conducted.
- IG Cumming – is your information on water bills?
 - Mills – not currently, refining the process and getting it to where it needs to be.
- Testimony from:
 - Jorge Aguilar, Food & Water Watch
 - Good experience working with Chief Mills and WACA Office.
 - Debt relief issue intended for Water4All has not been implemented.
 - Courtland Merkel, Maryland Volunteer Legal Service
 - Facilitates meetings between Water4All, DPW, Advocates.
 - People don't know that they need to re-apply for Water4All.
 - Jaime Lee, University of Baltimore School of Law/Right to Water Coalition
 - Priorities: Water4All renewal, debt forgiveness, additional staffing for WACA. All go hand in hand.

Prepared by: Ethan Hasiuk, Office of the Council President

Minutes Approved:
 Date: April 27, 2026
 m.m.c.

Vote: 7 Yeas
0 Nays