



Baltimore City Fire Department – Biennial Performance Audit FY21-22

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Objective

The **Department of Audits (DOA)** reviewed the **Baltimore City Fire Department's (BCFD)** performance for the fiscal years ending on June 30, 2022, and June 30, 2021. The goal was to assess whether the BCFD's Use & Occupancy (U&O) permit review and annual fire inspection processes are efficient.

Background

Fire Code Enforcement is one of the many significant services facilitated by the BCFD that reduces the likelihood of fires and ensures that buildings meet safety regulations. The Fire Code Enforcement service includes building inspections, plan reviews, and fire safety equipment testing. Fire building inspection is accomplished through two processes: (1) U&O inspection and (2) annual fire inspection.

The fire inspection process for U&O permits and the City agency tracking information:

- Businesses apply for a U&O permit online through the Department of Housing and Community Development's (DHCD) CCE Permit System.
- DHCD forwards the completed application to the Office of Zoning (Zoning) for approval.
- Once approved by Zoning, DHCD refers the fire inspection request to the Office of Fire Marshal (OFM). The referral date is entered in DHCD's CCE Permit System.
- OFM assigns the referral to an inspector. The assignment date is entered in DHCD's CCE Permit System.
- Inspection is conducted. The inspection date is entered in BCFD's Fire Records Management System (FRMS), an internal BCFD database.
- Payment is received. The payment date is entered in Baltimore City Information Technology's (BCIT) 3270 System.
- Completion of the inspection. The completion date is entered into BCFD's FRMS and DHCD's CCE Permit System.
- U&O permit is issued. The issue date is entered in BCIT's 3270 System.

Annual fire inspection permits and City agency tracking information:

- The City issues businesses with 30-day, 60-day, expired, and final renewal notices.

- Businesses make payments to renew permits. The trigger to initiate the fire inspection process is the payment date. The payment date is entered in BCIT's 3270 System.
- Inspection is assigned to an inspector. The assignment date is entered in BCFD's FRMS.
- Inspection is conducted. The inspection date is entered in BCFD's FRMS.
- Completion of the inspection. The completion date is entered into BCIT's 3270 System.
- Annual fire inspection permit is issued. The issue date is entered in BCIT's 3270 System.

Findings

The BCFD does not monitor critical tasks and milestones that would enable it to evaluate the efficiency of the fire permit issuance process for both annual and U&O inspections. Without the ability to monitor the fire inspection permit process, BCFD cannot demonstrate that they are efficiently performing inspections and identify areas to improve. Essential tasks, milestones and dates that must be tracked and readily available in the data include:

- Referral date from DHCD to BCFD and the assigned date to BCFD inspector (for U&O).
- Payment received date and the assigned date to BCFD inspector (for annual fire inspection permits).
- Assigned date to BCFD inspector and the inspection start date.
- Inspection start date and the inspection completion date.
- Inspection completion date and the permit issued date.

Furthermore, BCFD has no established benchmarks to compare the actual time it takes to complete an inspection and issue a permit. Also, BCFD cannot identify and assess the causes of delays for permits. In addition, the data available is wildly insufficient to run accurate reports to support this monitoring and any of the critical tasks and milestones mentioned above because of the following reasons:

- **Data is not readily available.** Necessary, key data points are housed across three different data systems maintained by three different City agencies: DHCD's CCE permit System, BCFD's internal FRMS and BCIT's 3270 System. The result is that the requisite data to run reports and monitor key milestones is not readily available. Furthermore, the systems are old and outdated and cannot "speak" to one another.
- **Data is disjointed.** Due to inconsistent data formats, an overall analysis of the data across the multiple systems is not possible. For example, business names and addresses in one system are not formatted the same in the other systems.
- **Data is not reliable.** Dates in all the systems are manually entered, which is prone to human errors. Additionally, the data has no control mechanisms since the fields are not locked down, which may result in advertent or inadvertent changes.

Specifically, of the 15,012 permits for annual inspections in Fiscal Years 2022 and 2021, we found 1,887 permits were incorrectly recorded.

- **Data is not tracked by business type in the 3270 System.** Tracking this information is essential because inspection turnaround times may be very different depending on the type of business being inspected. For instance, a hospital would take many more days to inspect than a restaurant.

Due to inconclusive data and a lack of established benchmarks, the DOA could not address the audit objective. Based on available data, Audit's analysis indicated the average turnaround time for permits was:

- Fire inspection permits for U&O – 58 days (FY 2022) and 76 days (FY2021)
- Annual inspection permits – 53 days (FY 2022) and 62 days (FY2021)

Recommendations

For both annual and U&O fire inspection permits, we recommend the BCFD Chief require OFM:

- Establish expected turnaround times for key tasks.
- Start tracking dates for key tasks in the respective systems.
- Identify a unique identifier to join data from significant systems.
- Make sure these significant systems have controls to protect data integrity.
- Monitor efficiency and causes of delays.

Without these measures in place, OFM cannot possibly monitor the key milestones that would allow them to evaluate the efficiency of the fire permit issuance process for both annual and U&O fire inspections.

OFM Management agreed to the findings and will be implementing a new permit system in December 2024/January 2025.