



Cabbage: City Council Has New Committees. Now It's Time to Reform Committee Staffing.

Description

At a special session of Chicago's City Council on March 30, the body adopted a new slate of committees and chairpersons — 28 total, up from the council's existing 19. In a sign of an increasingly independent legislature, the vote took place without the input of Chicago's next mayor, who will be elected April 4. Both candidates have indicated a willingness to work with a more independent city council, but neither has weighed in on the underlying issue that makes committee chairships such valued prizes: the budget and staffing that comes with the appointment.

Thursday's Council session did not include any budget amendments, meaning the funding and staffing for the new committees has yet to be determined. Council has an opportunity here to eliminate the long-standing practice of letting individual committee chairs control the hiring, firing, and supervision of committee staff, and replace it with a centralized model of professional support staff that serves the Council as a whole body.

City Council's current budget breaks out funding for individual committees, each with its own "Personnel Services" line item. The 2023 budget passed last October includes approximately \$5.6 million in appropriations for the 19 committees that existed at the time. Committee allocations average around \$300,000 per committee, ranging widely from \$120,000 at the low end to over \$1 million annually for the powerful Committee on Finance.

Committee chairs hire and fire as they please from their committee budgets. Committee employees aren't included in the city salary database, and the exact number of employees working for a committee at any given time, along with information such as their salaries and dates of hire, can only be obtained through FOIA, a lengthy process that often results in redacted or refused documentation. In some cases the committee may not even have proper records to hand over — a [2021 Inspector General audit](#) found that multiple committees failed to keep accurate employee timesheets or retain attendance records as required under the Local Records Act.

That same audit also revealed what most Council-watchers already knew: committee staff members are frequently assigned to work on non-committee tasks, including constituent services in the chair's

ward. Regular alderpersons only get three full-time employees to work in their ward offices, and many current and former alderpersons have gone on-record saying it isn't enough. Although the mixed duties aren't technically allowed under state law, chairpersons have historically supplemented that workforce with their committee staff.

A system of patronage jobs controlled by individual chairpersons encourages competition for leadership positions, turning them into a bargaining chip in council power struggles. In the meantime, regular alderpersons make do with insufficient ward staff and little to no legislative support. The council employs a small Legislative Reference Bureau and Council Office of Financial Analysis, but both are undersized relative to other major cities, and each is controlled by a single alderperson (the President Pro Tempore and the chair of the budget committee, respectively).

City Council will need to either amend the existing budget or wait until the 2024 budget to staff its new committees. Alderpersons should take a page from other legislatures, including those of most other major American cities: eliminate the practice of individual committees hiring their own staff, and instead budget for aides, legal counsel, financial analysts, and other professional support staff assigned to a centralized legislative support office. To further eliminate power struggles within council, the staff should be overseen by an appointed director confirmed by the body, rather than a single alderperson as part of a leadership role. If wards require additional staff to respond to constituent needs, Council can expand the number of ward office positions, to the benefit of all 50 members and their constituents rather than just those fortunate enough to chair a committee.

Council has taken an important step in showing its independence by naming a slate of committee chairs without waiting for the new Mayor to name his picks. Now it's up to Council to show the public that it can be trusted with that independence, by reforming the practices that turned committee assignments into tools of mayoral control in the first place. The budget will have to be reworked either way now's the time for Council to take advantage of the opportunity to centralize, professionalize, and democratize their resources, eliminating the patronage and winner-take-all politics that defines the current committee structure.