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Interim Deputy Chief Audit Executive

March 2022

**DeKalb County Government
Code Compliance Administration**

**CODE COMPLIANCE
ADMINSTRATION AUDIT**

FINAL REPORT

Audit Report No. 2019-010-CE

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DeKalb County
GEORGIA



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Interim Deputy Chief Audit Executive

CODE COMPLIANCE
ADMINISTRATION AUDIT
AUDIT REPORT NO. 2019-010-CE

FINAL REPORT

HIGHLIGHT SUMMARY

Why We Performed the Audit

In accordance with the Office of Independent Internal Audit (OIIA) Annual Audit Plan, we conducted a performance audit of the processes surrounding DeKalb County's Code Compliance Administration (CCA) Division.

The objectives of this examination were to:

- Assess the adequacy of internal controls over complaints submitted to Code Compliance Administration.
- Assess the adequacy of internal controls over complaints that were closed by Code Compliance Administration.

How We Performed the Audit

The audit focused on complaints (service requests) submitted to CCA during the period January 1, 2019, through March 31, 2020 (the audit period). Our methodology included, but was not limited to, the following:

- Reviewed CCA policies and procedures.
- Reviewed DeKalb County's related Code of Ordinances.
- Tested a sample of complaints to determine if they were handled in a timely manner and in accordance with policies and procedures.
- Tested a sample of closed complaints to verify that the cases were resolved before being closed and the required documentation was obtained and retained.
- Reviewed the data recorded in the case management system.

Background

The DeKalb County Codes Compliance Administration (CCA) uses a comprehensive approach to promote healthy and safe communities in Unincorporated DeKalb County through investigation of violations and enforcement of county ordinances. CCA has the responsibility for inspections of residential and commercial properties to ensure enforcement with County ordinances. Certified Code Enforcement Officers respond to complaints and patrol their assigned areas proactively to identify code violations. When a violation is found, property owners and/or occupants are then given a specified time to correct the violation. Failure to comply with a Notice of Violation may result in property abatement and/or receiving a summons to appear in court.

Code Enforcement Officers (enforcement officers) enforce the codes that primarily relate to the following chapters in the County's Code of Ordinances:

- Chapter 15 – Licenses, Permits, and Miscellaneous Business Regulations
- Chapter 18 – Nuisances
- Chapter 21 – Signs
- Chapter 27 – Zoning

What We Found

Objectives	Finding Reference
1. Determine the status of the management action plans noted in a prior audit report.	See Figure 6
2. Review standard operating procedures to determine if they are sufficient and align with County codes and division goals and objectives.	Finding #1
3. Analyze case activity to assess the effectiveness of code enforcement operations.	Finding #2
4. Determine if cases are assigned to officers who have the experience, training, and skills needed to complete inspections accurately and timely.	No Exception Noted
5. Verify that the assignment of priority levels is aligned with County codes and standard operating procedures.	Finding #3
6. Verify if complainants are provided with updates regarding their complaints.	Finding #7
7. Verify that cases are handled in a timely manner.	Finding #4
8. Verify that documentation is maintained to support case activity and resolution.	Finding #5
9. Verify that there is continuous monitoring of case activity until complaints are resolved.	Finding #6

What we Recommend

We recommend that Code Compliance Administration Management:

1. Review SOPs and administrative policies and procedures prior to the implementation of application upgrades to ensure issues noted in the prior audit and this audit will be included in the updates.
2. Implement a process to clean up older cases within the application prior to implementing application upgrades, establish specific performance measures, and implement procedures for monitoring and reviewing performance results.
3. Review the business model, SOPs, and priority levels in the Hansen application to ensure they are aligned with expectations and division goals.
4. Implement the required software application to provide complainants with the ability to readily determine the statuses of their complaints.
5. Implement monitoring procedures to help ensure inspection activity occurs according to SOP requirements.
6. Collaborate with the Magistrate Court to help ensure complaints are successfully resolved.
7. Update the County's website to ensure information regarding Code Compliance Administration is accurate, reliable, and complete.

How Management Responded

Management agreed with the findings of this report and have committed to continue to implement the required systems and processes to address them.



TABLE OF CONTENTS

HIGHLIGHT SUMMARY -----2

BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION -----4

AUDIT RESULTS -----5

**FINDING 1: STANDARD OPERATING PROCEDURES AND ADMINISTRATIVE
PROCEDURES HAVE NOT BEEN UPDATED. -----7**

**FINDING 2: PERFORMANCE MEASURES FOR COMPLAINT CASE ACTIVITIES
NEED TO BE ESTABLISHED AND IMPLEMENTED. -----8**

**FINDING 3: PRIORITY LEVELS ASSIGNED TO CASES DID NOT ALIGN WITH
STANDARD OPERATING PROCEDURES. -----9**

**FINDING 4: INSPECTIONS WERE NOT PERFORMED WITHIN THE REQUIRED
TIMELINES. ----- 10**

**FINDING 5: DOCUMENTATION TO SUPPORT FIELD INVESTIGATIONS WAS
MISSING FROM THE HANSEN APPLICATION FILES. ----- 11**

**FINDING 6: SYSTEMS AND PROCESSES FOR SHARING CASE DATA BETWEEN
THE COURTS AND CODE COMPLIANCE ADMINISTRATION NEED IMPROVEMENT.
----- 12**

**FINDING 7: WEBSITE ACCESS AND ACCURACY FOR CODE COMPLIANCE
ADMINISTRATION NEEDS IMPROVEMENT. ----- 13**

APPENDICES----- 15

Appendix I – Purpose, Scope, and Methodology ----- 15

Appendix II – Management Response ----- 16

Appendix III – Definitions and Abbreviations ----- 21

DISTRIBUTION----- 22

PROJECT TEAM----- 23

STATEMENT OF ACCORDANCE ----- 24



BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

County ordinances and codes regulate the development, construction, and maintenance of all property in all unincorporated areas. The purpose of the County's codes is to provide minimum standards to preserve the public health, safety, and general welfare by regulating the design, construction, installation, quality of materials, use, occupancy, location, and maintenance of all buildings, structures, grading, and certain equipment. Consistent with this purpose, the provisions of the codes are intended to confer a benefit to the community.

The DeKalb County Codes Compliance Administration uses a comprehensive approach to promote healthy and safe communities in Unincorporated DeKalb County through investigation of violations and enforcement of county ordinances. Code Compliance Administration (CCA) has the responsibility for inspections of residential and commercial properties to ensure enforcement with County ordinances. Certified Code Enforcement Officers respond to complaints and patrol their assigned areas proactively to identify code violations. When a violation is found, property owners and/or occupants are then given a specified time to correct the violation. Failure to comply with a Notice of Violation may result in property abatement and/or receiving a summons to appear in court.

Code Enforcement Officers (enforcement officers) enforce the codes that primarily relate to the following chapters in the County's Code of Ordinances:

- Chapter 15 – Licenses, Permits, and Miscellaneous Business Regulations
- Chapter 18 – Nuisances
- Chapter 21 – Signs
- Chapter 27 – Zoning

In addition, the division promotes clean, healthy, and safe communities within unincorporated DeKalb County. Some of the more common violations identified that adversely impact the county's communities include:

- Weeds/grass.
- Open storage of trash and debris.
- Unregistered/inoperable vehicles, vehicle repairs, parking on unpaved surfaces.
- Parking business vehicles in residential areas.
- Poorly maintained properties that possess sub-standard or dangerous conditions.
- Illegal construction & conversions.
- Vacant/unsecured properties.¹

For a complete description of the County's codes, please visit the municipal code website: [DeKalb County Code of Ordinances](#)

Additionally, CCA management collaborates with select County departments (i.e. Police, Fire) to achieve special operational initiatives designed to mitigate significant nuisance violations that impact cross-sections of the County's communities. These initiatives are referenced in Figure 1:

¹ https://www.DeKalbcountyga.gov/sites/default/files/users/user2778/CodeEnforcementBrochure_2020.pdf



Figure 1: Operational Initiatives



Source: Code Compliance Administration December Report 2019²

In 2019, the initiatives noted above were the focus of CCA’s operations. The Hotel/Motel Intervention Task Force, The Multi-Family Enforcement Team, and the Commercial Corridor initiatives were selected to remain as part of CCA’s future operations. Operational initiatives are identified and selected by the County’s Board of Commissioners.

Officers respond to complaints according to priority. Complaints are prioritized based upon health and safety concerns and are classified as high, medium, or normal priority. Details regarding each classification are shown below:

- High (24-hour response) – used for complaints that are past due with safety issues that have not been addressed in a timely manner or the following reported issues: (a) no heat or conditioned air during reflective seasons, (b) sewage backups, (c) water backflow, (d) electrical hazards, (e) major fire damage, and (f) any inspections requested by management, CEO’s office, or Commissioner’s office.
- Medium (24-48 hours response) – used for complaints regarding, (a) a collapsing structure, (b) major organic growth, and (c) a natural gas leak
- Normal (72 hours) – used for all normally scheduled new and re-inspections except for complaints that involve safety issues.³

AUDIT RESULTS

Many of the management action plans for the recommendations noted in the audit performed by the Finance Department’s Internal Audit function in 2017 had not been

² Code Compliance Administration December Report 2019 – Monthly Report

³ Assignment Protocols and Explanations



implemented. Discussions with management disclosed that the primary reason for the delay in implementation was limitations related to the application used to record service requests and case activities. The implementation status of the recommendations cited in the audit report completed by the Finance Department are shown in the table below:

Prior Audit Findings <i>(Report Summary of Observations)</i>	Management Original Response	Status	Finding Reference
Finding 1 - Standard Operating Procedures were inadequate for properly documenting and inspecting complaints.	"This division will develop a 90-day plan to complete this task, and begin the implementation of the newly adopted practices and policies during Q1, 2018."	Updates were made to the administrative policies and procedures. However, they are still in draft form.	Finding #1 (repeat finding)
Finding 2 – Instances of complaints that were not adequately documented.	"This division will develop a 90-day plan to complete this task, and begin the implementation of the newly adopted practices and policies during Q1, 2018."	Although the SOPs are still not updated, procedures are in place to document fully the information on each service request.	N/A
Finding 3 – Inability to track multiple complaints at the same address.	"This division will develop a 30-day plan (internal) to complete this task, and based on the implementation schedule of the new software will adjust the SOP accordingly. Projected Q1, 2018."	Service requests can be tracked by address to identify prior or multiple complaints.	N/A
Finding 4 – Inconsistency in documenting case files in accordance with existing SOP	"This division will develop a 30-day plan to add an extra layer of reconciliation and a system of checks and balances by administrative staff."	Quality assurance and audits noted in interviews as the action plan to address this finding were determined to not be working during the fieldwork. Also, documentation can be in three different systems that are not linked.	Finding #5 (repeat finding)
Finding 5 – Instances of inadequate follow-up to correspondence	"This division will develop a 60-day plan to complete this task. "	No follow-up procedures are currently in place to provide the complainant with information on the status of the service request. The complainant can track and follow the case online by the service request number which is provided to them at the time the complaint is filed.	N/A
Finding 6 – Misinterpretation of the County Code	"This division has implemented a comprehensive training program with an emphasis and focus on property maintenance, zoning, inspection procedures as well as other codes and ordinances. Within the next 60-days, this division will use subject matter experts (both internal and	Implemented	N/A



Prior Audit Findings (Report Summary of Observations)	Management Original Response	Status	Finding Reference
	external) to conduct comprehensive training sessions that will assist in the pursuit of the division's primary business objectives and regarding long-term growth, operational stability, and organizational change; and develop an assessment tool to further identify the gaps in knowledge and provide individualized training."		
Finding 7 – Instances of inspections that were not timely performed.	"This division will develop a 30-day plan to add an extra layer of reconciliation, and a system of checks and balances by supervisory and administrative staff."	Although management noted the action plan had been implemented, testing noted this is still an issue.	Finding #4 (repeat finding)
Finding 8 – A citizen's ability to determine the violation status is limited (transparency)	"This division will develop a 60-day plan (internal) to update the webpage with processes and provide additional case information; however, based on the implementation schedule of the new software, the additional features will be added to foster greater transparency. Projected Q 1, 201 B. "	The website has not been updated with additional features to determine a violation status. However, complaints can be tracked with the service request number.	Finding#7 (repeat finding)

In addition to the previously identified findings outlined above, the current audit identified continued challenges with code enforcement operations in addressing service requests, complaints, and violations. The specific findings and recommendations are outlined below.

Finding 1: Standard Operating Procedures and Administrative Procedures Have Not Been Updated.

The management action plans, outlined in the 2017 audit report published by the Finance Department's Internal Audit function regarding updating Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), have not been implemented. The CCA's SOPs and administrative policies and procedures related to code enforcement operations are still in draft form. Also, the draft SOPs and administrative policies and procedures did not contain specific guidance regarding the following areas:

- Issuing warnings, court summonses, and warrants.
- Handling urgent circumstances, such as utility, safety, or hazardous violations.
- Handling complaints and violations that remained unresolved.
- Monitoring procedures to verify enforcement officers' daily activity.
- Documenting the results of inspections and investigations.
- Closing case records.

Management indicated that these action plans have been delayed because of needed application upgrades and that functional upgrades to the Hansen application are currently



in process. Documented operating procedures help reduce the possibility of human error and provide guidelines for employees to follow. Furthermore, standard operating procedures help establish consistency over process performance and provide a method to communicate process changes to employees.

Recommendation:

We recommend that CCA management review CCA’s SOP’s and administrative policies and procedures prior to the implementation of the application upgrades to ensure issues noted in the prior audit and this audit will be included in the updates. We also recommend that management consider alternative measures to ensure needed policies, procedures, and guidance for staff are in place if the upgrade of the Hansen application is not implemented within the next year.

Management Response (Code Compliance Administration):

<i>Management Agreement</i>	<i>Description of Management’s ActionPlan to Address Finding</i>	<i>Estimated Timeline to implement Action Plan</i>
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree	The CCA has been operating inadequate legacy systems for over a decade, which has restricted their ability to adopt revised SOPs. The CCA is currently collaborating with DoIT and all key stakeholders to modernize the software platform and integrate three systems into one. The SOPs will incorporate revised business processes and the technology that enables them. The current draft SOPs will be revised and adopted after the new system has been implemented.	SOPs are actively being revised and will be finalized after the new system and associated workflows have been implemented. Target Date: 1 st Quarter 2023.

Finding 2: Performance Measures for Complaint Case Activities Need to Be Established and Implemented.

During our audit, we determined through discussions with management that performance measures were not in place to evaluate the effectiveness and efficiency of enforcement operations. In addition, we determined that CCA employees had not received written performance appraisals since 2010.

Further, in the planning phase of the audit, we analyzed case activity information in the Hansen application and determined that complaints were not always addressed in a timely manner, as shown below:

- A significant number of cases (3,080, 20% of cases) were still open. Of these open cases, 825 (27%) have been open for more than four years, 181 (6%) had a high priority level and had been open for almost a year, and 1,753 (57%) had not had any documented activity on the case since the initial inspection.
- The amount of time to close cases ranged from 10 days to more than four years.
- 5,671 (47%) of the cases were closed with no further activity after the initial inspection. Also, the average number of days between the date of the service request and the closing date of the case was 489 days.



GAO-14-704G Standards for Internal Control in The Federal Government 6.07 Management determines whether performance measures for the defined objectives are appropriate for evaluating the entity’s performance in achieving those objectives.

Recommendation:

We recommend that prior to the implementation of the Hansen application upgrades CCA management review their processes and operations to:

- Implement a process to clean up older cases within the application prior to implementing application upgrades.
- Develop specific performance measures for code enforcement activities as well as specific individual performance expectations for each of the officers to help assess operational efficiency and achievement of divisional goals and objectives.
- Develop procedures for monitoring and reviewing performance results so that operational deficiencies can be identified in a timely manner and action plans can be developed to address the problems noted.

Management Response (Code Compliance Administration):

<i>Management Agreement</i>	<i>Description of Management’s Action Plan to Address Finding</i>	<i>Estimated Timeline to implement Action Plan</i>
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree	The CCA, in collaboration with the Law Department and other stakeholders, is reviewing and documenting the process to ensure that the case system is accurate when the new system has been implemented. The SOPs that are adopted after the new system is implemented will incorporate performance measures that are based on industry best practices and in alignment with the county, department, and division goals and objectives. These will also be tied into the annual employee evaluation process to ensure performance expectations are identified and managed.	SOPs are actively being revised and will be finalized after the new system and associated workflows have been implemented. Target Date: 1 st Quarter 2023

Finding 3: Priority Levels Assigned to Cases Did Not Align with Standard Operating Procedures.

During our audit, we determined that the priority levels assigned to cases were not always consistent with the priority levels outlined in CCA SOP’s. The SOP’s designated priority levels as critical, high, medium, and low while the case management (Hansen) application designated levels as high, medium, and normal. Management stated that the levels in the SOP were translated to the levels used in Hansen as follows:

- Critical and high-priority cases per the SOP were assigned a high priority level in Hansen.
- Medium priority cases per the SOP remained as medium in Hansen.
- Low priority cases per the SOP were assigned a normal priority level in Hansen.

However, we were unable to determine if the business model and SOP’s were updated to ensure alignment with the priority levels within the Hansen application. Furthermore, a review of case priorities noted that 89% of the open cases recorded in Hansen had no priority level assigned to them. When priority levels are not aligned with SOP’s,



responses to code enforcement activities, including emergencies or urgent violations, may not be handled within the required timeframe.

Recommendation:

We recommend that CCA management review the business model and SOP’s, and the priority levels provided in the Hansen application to ensure that they are aligned with expectations and division goals.

Management Response (Code Compliance Administration):

<i>Management Agreement</i>	<i>Description of Management’s Action Plan to Address Finding</i>	<i>Estimated Timeline to implement Action Plan</i>
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree	One of the deficiencies of the legacy system that the CCA is using is its inability to align priority levels. The vendor has advised that these issues will be resolved with the system upgrade that is in progress. Once the system is implemented, the CCA leadership will be able to manage and monitor alignment with SOPs.	SOPs are actively being revised and will be finalized after the new system and associated workflows have been implemented. Target Date: 1 st Quarter 2023

Finding 4: Inspections Were Not Performed Within the Required Timelines.

During the audit, we examined a total of 70 cases and determined that inspections were not always performed within the timelines outlined in the SOP’s, as shown below:

- The initial inspections for 29 of the 45 (64%) cases reviewed were not completed within 72-hours, as required by CCA’s policies and procedures.
- The re-inspections for 8 of the 25 (39%) cases reviewed were not completed within the 15-day timeline required by CCA’s policies and procedures.

CCA’s Standard Operating Procedures 2016 Manual stated that the first site visit (initial inspection) should be made the day the complaint is received or a maximum of 72 hours later. In addition, the Code Enforcement Administrative Support Manual, updated March 20, 2018, stated that “All officers are required to give a 15-day compliance (reinspection) date for each warning notice issued”.

Recommendation:

We recommend that CCA management:

- Review timelines outlined in SOPs and administrative policies and procedures and update procedures to ensure response times align with performance measures.
- Implement monitoring procedures to help ensure inspection activity occurs as required by SOP’s and to help resolve issues related to the timeliness of inspections when they arise.



Management Response (Code Compliance Administration Management):

Management Agreement	Description of Management's Action Plan to Address Finding	Estimated Timeline to implement Action Plan
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree	After the system is upgraded and the SOPs have been revised and adopted, the CCA leadership will have the tools in place to ensure that response times and other inspection and code compliance functions are tied to key performance indicators (KPIs). This will ensure that the CCA can manage people and processes in alignment with administrative policies and procedures.	SOPs are actively being revised and will be finalized after the new system and associated workflows have been implemented. Target Date: 1 st Quarter 2023

Finding 5: Documentation to Support Field Investigations Was Missing from The Hansen Application Files.

During our audit, we reviewed documentation in case files to verify the statuses of the cases and noted that documentation to support initial inspection and reinspection was not always in the case management (Hansen) files. Also, the documentation to support closing the cases was not always maintained in the case file. Our review of a sample of 25 cases noted the following:

- 13 (52%) of the cases did not have photographs to show an image of the violations.
- 10 (40%) of the cases did not have the officer's signature affixed to the case documentation.
- All (100%) of the cases did not have inspection forms available online for our review.

We determined that some of the discrepancies were the result of enforcement and inspection activities being recorded in two separate systems. Officers document all inspection and case details in the ArcGIS Workforce/Survey 123 inspection application. Upon closure of the case, the information has to be manually copied from the Survey 123 inspection application into the Hansen application by administrative staff.

It should be noted that this finding was included in the report issued for the audit performed by the Finance Department in 2017. However, management expects this issue to be addressed with the implementation of the Hansen mobile module which will allow enforcement officers to upload inspection information and documentation in the field.

Recommendation:

We recommend that CCA management:

- Implement monitoring and supervisory oversight procedures to ensure appropriate evidence is maintained to support case closures.
- Provide training to staff members regarding the preparation and retention of documentation needed to evidence case activities and statutes.
- Enhance the existing case management system to ensure enforcement activities and documentation are captured within a single system to minimize discrepancies.



Management Response (Code Compliance Administration Management):

Management Agreement	Description of Management's Action Plan to Address Finding	Estimated Timeline to implement Action Plan
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree	<p>The legacy system did not have automated or integrated field investigation capabilities to effectively support associated processes. As the CCA moves forward this will be resolved by providing CCA staff with the ability to upload documents, photos and electronically submit e-citations in real time utilizing the new system. The revised SOPs will be developed with supporting oversight procedures to ensure that evidence and documentation supports case closure.</p> <p>Staff training has been included in the software upgrade implementation plan, and ongoing training will be provided to staff as needs dictate. The new system being implemented will have all appropriate integrations, eliminating manual entries and discrepancies. Residents will benefit by having greater transparency and access to their case. They will be able to submit complaints and track the case status with relevant documentation and photos that can be submitted online in real-time.</p>	<p>SOPs are actively being revised and will be finalized after the new system and associated workflows have been implemented.</p> <p>Target Date: 1st Quarter 2023</p>

Finding 6: Systems and processes for sharing case data between the Courts and Code Compliance Administration Need Improvement.

During the audit, we reviewed seven cases that were submitted to the County Magistrate Court for resolution and noted that only one of these cases was resolved through payment of the citation issued by the court and that the other six cases had not been resolved. In most of the cases, the property owners had not appeared in court. This information was not recorded in the Hansen case records. Currently, Code Enforcement procedures require the enforcement officers to update the case information in Hansen. However, Court and CCA electronic systems are not integrated, and manual processes are not in place for the timely sharing of case data and follow-up on these cases from the beginning through a resolution to ensure that the most up-to-date information is included in the CCA records. If this information is not included in the case record, the information provided to the residents regarding the status of complaints and cases may not be accurate.

Recommendation:

We recommend that CCA management continue to work with the Courts to improve the integration of electronic systems and implement procedures to help ensure timely sharing and follow-up on case information. This will help ensure CCA case records are current.



Management Response (Code Compliance Administration Management):

<i>Management Agreement</i>	<i>Description of Management's Action Plan to Address Finding</i>	<i>Estimated Timeline to implement Action Plan</i>
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree	The CCA has an excellent working relationship with the court system. However, as stated above, the challenge is the lack of electronicsystems integration and the manual processes that are required in order to transmit/share data. The legacysystem does not allow for automated collaboration between the courts and the CCA. Currently, citations are delivered by hand to the Magistrate Court. The new system will allow for a two-way integration that allows for automatic transmittal of citations to the court and the passing back of case dispositions to the CCA electronically as well.	Coordination between the courts and the CCA will be enhanced through the automated integration thatis being implemented once the system upgrade has completed. Target Date: 1 st Quarter 2023

Finding 7: Website Access and Accuracy for Code Compliance Administration Needs Improvement.

The Code Compliance Administration is not easy to access on the DeKalb County website and contains outdated information. A review of the website noted the following information is incorrect and needs to be updated.

- Code Compliance Administration is listed as a part of the Planning and Sustainability Department.
- In another section of the County’s website, Code Enforcement is located as a part of the Beautification Unit’s “Keep DeKalb Beautiful” initiative within the Sanitation Department, although this was dismantled in 2018.
- Complaint submissions were located within Planning and Sustainability’s ‘ePermitting portal’ although Code Enforcement has not been a part of this department since 2015.
- The absence of a direct link to the Code Compliance Administration makes access to service requests and case information difficult.

Management noted that there have been numerous changes in the organizational alignment for Code Compliance Administration and that this has created challenges with keeping information current. Citizens need to be able to easily find needed information. Also, the accuracy of information is important to ensure the website's credibility. Furthermore, the website's credibility helps provide residents confidence in the County’s programs and operations.

Recommendation:

We recommend that management update the website to ensure the following:

- There is a direct and consistent link to reach Code Compliance Administration information.
- Information on the website is accurate, reliable, and complete.
- The status of service requests and cases is easy to determine.



Management Response (Code Compliance Administration Management):

Management Agreement	Description of Management's Action Plan to Address Finding	Estimated Timeline to implement Action Plan
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree	The CCA has hired a consultant to update the website. This effort is a collaboration among the CCA, the CEO's Office of Communications, and DoIT. Information on this website will be accurate, reliable, and complete, and will be designed to highlight the new citizen portal that will provide real-time access to create a service request, add relevant documentation and photographs, update the request, and monitor the request through closure.	Target Date: 1 st Quarter 2023



APPENDICES

Appendix I – Purpose, Scope, and Methodology

Purpose

The objectives of this examination were to:

- Assess the adequacy of internal controls over complaints submitted to Code Compliance Administration.
- Assess the adequacy of internal controls over complaints that were closed by the Code Compliance Administration.

Scope and Methodology:

The scope of our audit focused on complaints submitted to the Code Compliance Administration during the period of January 1, 2019, through March 31, 2020.

Our methodology included, but was not limited to, the following:

- Reviewed CCA policies and procedures.
- Reviewed DeKalb County's related Code of Ordinances.
- Tested a sample of complaints to determine if they were handled in a timely manner and in accordance with policies and procedures.
- Tested a sample of closed complaints to verify that the cases were resolved before being closed and the required documentation was obtained and retained.
- Reviewed the data recorded in the case management system.



Appendix II – Management Response



Chief Executive Officer

Michael L. Thurmond

March 7, 2022

Mr. Lavois Campbell
Interim Deputy Chief Audit Executive
Office of Independent Internal Audit
1300 Commerce Drive, Suite 300
Decatur, Georgia 30030

RE: **Management Response to “Code Compliance Administration” Audit Report**

Dear Mr. Campbell:

This letter provides additional background, context and programmatic details in support of the County’s management response to the attached December 17, 2021, Code Compliance Administration Audit Report.

The Great Recession, from 2007-2009, dramatically increased the number of residents who lost their homes due to bank foreclosures. In 2008, DeKalb County formed a task force to gather public input to find ways to address the growing blight caused by the recession. Thousands of homes were left vacant and unattended, increasing the number of blighted private properties throughout the county.

Between 2011 and 2016, a series of management decisions impacted the operational effectiveness of the Code Compliance Administration (CCA):

- The division was transferred from the Police Department to the Department of Planning and Sustainability.
- A reorganization was implemented.
- New leadership was hired.
- The county embarked upon a Permitting Improvement Project to upgrade its permitting technology system, which also serves the CCA.
- The department was transferred from the Department of Planning and Sustainability to the Beautification Unit.
- Accusations of impropriety and unethical behavior led to changes in management.
- The CCA was transferred for a third time and made a stand-alone division.

In 2017, DeKalb County CEO Michael Thurmond’s administration inherited a CCA that was plagued by mismanagement, dysfunction, low morale, unethical behavior and lack of public trust.

DeKalb residents demanded more focus and resources be invested in county code compliance and beautification efforts to address the litter and blight throughout the county.

Tim Hardy was hired in August 2018 as deputy director of the CCA.

Board of Commissioners

District 1
Robert Patrick

District 2
Jeff Rader

District 3
Larry Johnson

District 4
Steve Bradshaw

District 5
Mereda Davis Johnson

District 6
Edward “Ted” Terry

District 7
Lorraine Cochran-Johnson



CEO Thurmond's administration determined that the code compliance efforts were hindered by staffing shortages, outdated technology, lack of funding and insufficient policies and procedures. These systemic problems have been the subject of various reform initiatives since the early 2000s, all of which have yet to resolve the long-standing issues.

Technology Limitations

The CCA and the Department of Innovation & Technology were excluded from involvement in the design and implementation of the legacy case management system. Thus, the CCA is using a software system that does not allow for the documentation, assignment and disposal of service requests due to a lack of electronic system integrations.

As explained in management's response to Audit Finding No. 6, CCA employees must hand deliver all citations for ordinance violations to the DeKalb County Magistrate Court clerk who then must manually enter each citation into the court's electronic case management system for adjudication.

As a result, the CCA's legacy case management system consists of manual interface and electronic components, including:

1. The case management system which is the system of record (Infor Public Sector);
2. A mobile smart forms/mapping tool used for collecting data while out in the field (ArcGIS Survey123);
3. The Magistrate Court's case management system (Benchmark);
4. A paper-driven case filing system; and
5. The hand delivery of paper case files to the State Court solicitor-general.

The lack of integration and automation has resulted in tedious case documentation, increased/duplicate data entry and corresponding data entry errors, lost/missing case files, duplication of inspections, lost productivity and issues with data accuracy.

The administration conducted a root-cause analysis and has determined that the operational effectiveness of the CCA and code enforcement process has been severely hampered by a myriad of challenges associated with a technology system that is obsolete and poorly designed.

This legacy technology system continues to restrict and hinder the county's ability to provide high quality code compliance services to its citizens.

Historical technology missteps include:

- The CCA and the Department of Innovation and Technology were not consulted when decisions were made about development and implementation of the case management system.
- The legacy system was not designed to generate reports, statistics and trend identifications specific for the CCA.
- The legacy system does not have automated or integrated field investigation capabilities designed to support associated processes.
- The CCA uses ineffective and inefficient manual interfaces or "workarounds" due to the lack of integration between three systems.

In preparing its response, the county has found numerous flaws in the reporting capabilities of the legacy system and the resulting reports that were audited. The county



is utilizing a software system that does not allow the CCA to effectively capture, assign and dispose of service requests due to a lack of system integrations. Thus, the county is unable to accurately validate the data contained in the reports transmitted to the internal auditor.

For example, the reports retrieved from the system still list as “open” cases which:

- Are barred by the applicable two-year state of Georgia statute of limitations;
- Are awaiting trial in the DeKalb County Magistrate Court or State Court; and
- Have been adjudicated and are awaiting demolition or abatement of the nuisance.

The technological shortcomings and flaws in the legacy system prevent the administration from verifying the accuracy of the number of “open” cases cited in this audit.

Misunderstanding/Confusion Regarding the Role, Responsibilities and Authority of the Code Compliance Administration

As audit findings are considered, it appears there is fundamental misunderstanding and confusion regarding the role, responsibilities and authority of the CCA, which is one of several divisions and branches of government that work collaboratively to reduce the number of code violations in DeKalb County.

The CCA is responsible for investigating code complaints, negotiating resolution of potential code violations, writing citations, and preparing documents for civil in rem lawsuits. The solicitor-general is responsible for prosecuting alleged code violations, the county attorney is responsible for filing civil in rem lawsuits and the DeKalb County courts are responsible for processing the various cases, holding bench or jury trials as necessary and entering orders or sentences on those ordinance and civil cases.

The CCA is not authorized to determine if a code violation has occurred, schedule a case for hearing before a court nor issue a final order by the court. This fundamental misunderstanding is best illustrated in Audit Finding No. 2 and its conclusion regarding the length of time cases are open, “from 10 days to 4 years.” The CCA cannot dictate the actions of other officials and the courts which are critical components of the code enforcement process.

Leadership

In 2018, the administration directed new leadership in the CCA to identify issues, target opportunities for improvement, develop a strategy, and oversee the implementation of a comprehensive corrective action plan.

Funding/Staffing Enhancements

Since 2017, CEO Thurmond and the Board of Commissioners have invested more than \$15.8 million in enhancements to improve DeKalb’s code compliance process. Since 2018, the CCA employees have received 16.25 percent in salary increases.



Highlights include:

2018

- Funded 10 code compliance officers, one senior code compliance officer, and one code compliance supervisor, \$506,000.
- Funded four refuse collectors, \$158,500.
- Continuation of Operation Clean Sweep, \$879,000.
- Enhanced roadside maintenance—more frequent mowing, 350,000.

2019

- Increased maintenance of county property and right-of-way, \$1.8 million.
- Funded nine vacant positions—five code compliance officers, two senior code compliance officers, one administrative assistant and beautification director, \$425,000.
- Restored funding to FY19 level for maintenance & mowing, tree trimming, herbicide, right-of-way mowing, litter removal, \$1.8 million.

2020

- Funded increase in title searches and postings in legal organ to facilitate In Rem civil suits to obtain court orders to abate and abolish abandoned and dilapidated properties.
- Increased part-time salaries in Magistrate Court to address backlog of Evictions, Nuisance and Abatement ordinance cases.
- Leveraged \$1.1 million in federal funds through DeKalb County Community Development for demolition and abatement, and the funding of two code compliance positions.
- Performed a Comprehensive Property Condition Survey of Unincorporated DeKalb County, \$362,000, completed in September 2020. (Note: For the first time, the county was able to identify all properties subject to abatement or demolition).
- Worked with MARTA to clean up and beautify bus stops in the county
- Purchased small rear loader and grapple truck to expedite MARTA bus shelter litter abatement.
- Funded technology enhancements to allow Magistrate Court to conduct virtual court proceedings for code enforcement cases.
- Funded pandemic-related front-line pay for code compliance officers.

2021

- Funded ATV for moving path trails.
- Continued funding for street sweeping.
- Invested approximately \$100,000 to enhance the CCA's case management software system to efficiently and effectively track and manage code violations and cases.
- Funded four new positions (crew supervisor, crew leader, and two crew workers) to support curb bumping efforts.
- Funded three Magistrate Court judge positions.

2022

- Increased training and conference fees, \$56,700.
- Added four vehicles for code compliance officers, \$56,000.
- Funded one vacant and one new position, \$101,000.
- Funded six vacant positions in Beautification, \$139,600.



Policies and Procedures

The CCA acknowledges that some of its standard operating procedures need to be reviewed and revised.

The CCA, in collaboration with the Department of Innovation and Technology and all stakeholders, is in the process of:

1. Implementing technology enhancements,
2. Vetting and cleaning up historical data, in conformity with industry best practices.
3. Developing and/or revising standard operating procedures based on streamlined business processes which are being enabled by a modernized software platform and the enhanced capabilities it provides.

Accomplishments and Goals

Despite the myriad of challenges the CCA faced in the code enforcement process, DeKalb County accomplished the following:

- Demolished or abated more than 450 properties prior to the pandemic.
- Completed 13 abatement and demolition cases in 2020 and 92 abatement and demolition cases in 2021.
- Performed a Comprehensive Property Condition Survey of Unincorporated DeKalb County, \$362,000, completed in Sept. 2020. (Note: For the first time, the county was able to identify all properties subject to abatement or demolition.)
- Established a Comprehensive Commercial Corridor Inspection program to sweep commercial thoroughfares throughout unincorporated DeKalb County over a 5-year period. As of March 2020, the team had completed sweeps on Memorial Drive, Candler Road and 20 percent of Glenwood Road.
- Performed best-in-class Hotel-Motel regulatory compliance sweeps.

A more detailed list of accomplishments is included [here](#) and in the attached presentation.

DeKalb County's goal is to build a best-in-class, state-of-the-art code compliance and enforcement case management solution. The administration will assemble an executive team, including the Law Department, the Department of Innovation and Technology, external experts, internal stakeholders, and other relevant partners to review existing standard operating procedures, and continue to invest in the success of the CCA.

If you have any questions about this response, please contact me.

Sincerely,

Zachary L. Williams
Chief Operating Officer
DeKalb County

A more detailed list of accomplishments is included [here](#).



Appendix III – Definitions and Abbreviations

Acronyms and Abbreviation

OIIA: Office of Independent Internal Audit

CCA: Code Compliance Administration

SR: Service Request

Key Definitions

HANSEN: The software used by CCA to document key information regarding service requests, including:

- Case Number
- Service Request Date
- Inspection Dates
- Name of Officer Assigned
- Service Request Priority
- Address of the Complaint Property
- Details Regarding the Complaint
- Documentation Attachments

Assignment Type: Code inspection, re-inspection, court inspection, sweep, other

Location: Violation address

Assign: Officer that Hansen auto assigns for the area

Priority: High, medium, normal

Due Date: Deadline for inspection

ID: Service request number

Description: Comments from Hansen (include the nature of the violation, water info, zoning info, owner info, and any other relevant info)

Attachment: Attach any necessary files or photos

DeKalb County 311 Call Center: 311 is DeKalb County's phone number for government information and non-public-safety-related emergency services. 311 is available to DeKalb County residents, business owners, and visitors.

Personal Service: to speak with the owner or tenant and complete or provide the service.

GACE: The Georgia Association of Code Enforcement (GACE) is a professional organization dedicated to establishing responsible Code Enforcement throughout local Governments in Georgia and the professional development of its members.

SOP's: A standard operating procedure is a document containing step-by-step instructions to guide employees on how to perform a technical, repetitive process within an organization.

Abatement/In-Rem: Refers to the process of something ending or becoming less than it was at a prior time. The suppression or termination of a nuisance. The abatement program includes a process administrated by the Code Enforcement Unit to address blighted properties within unincorporated DeKalb County.



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3/11/2022
Date



STATEMENT OF ACCORDANCE

Statement of Accordance

The mission of DeKalb County is to make the priorities of the citizens of DeKalb County; the priorities of County government - by achieving a safer DeKalb, building stronger neighborhoods, creating a fiscally accountable and more efficient county government, and uniting the citizens of DeKalb County.

The mission of the Office of Independent Internal Audit is to provide independent, objective, insightful, nonpartisan assessment of the stewardship or performance of policies, programs, and operations in promoting efficiency, effectiveness, and integrity in DeKalb County.

This performance audit was prepared pursuant to DeKalb County, Georgia – Code Ordinances/Organizational Act Section 10A- Independent Internal Audit. We conducted this performance audit in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

This report is intended for the use of the agency to which it was disseminated and may contain information that is exempt from disclosure under applicable law. Do not release without prior coordination with the Office of Independent Internal Audit.

Please address inquiries regarding this report to the Office of Independent Internal Audit at 404-371-2765.