

Opportunities for Expanding Chicago Digital

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The opportunity

The [Mayor's 2023 Budget Recommendations](#), based on Gartner's IT Modernization recommendations, calls for a significant increase in authorized headcount for IT staff at the City of Chicago. Under the current budget, AIS has an IT staff of about 80. The new budget authorizes 140 positions, nearly doubling it. This increase presents a huge opportunity for the City of Chicago to build up its internal capacity to deliver resident-focused digital services that meet the needs of all Chicagoans.

Background

In 2019, I wrote a [memo for the Lightfoot Transition Team](#) on Good Governance calling for the creation of a Digital Services Team at the City, replicating the successful models of [18F](#) and [United States Digital Service](#) agencies at the federal level, as well as state and city-level digital agencies in [Massachusetts](#), [California](#), [Austin](#), and [San Francisco](#).

By creating a Digital Service Delivery Team, the City can address the challenges of poor and inaccessible resident services and under-delivering external contractors by following industry best practices and build services in-house that put the needs of residents first by:

- Making online services available to all Chicagoans
- Letting users guide their work and focus on the resident experience
- Developing quicker and less expensive than before
- Building and releasing code as open source to prevent costly vendor lock-in
- Collaborating as peers with policy and program owners through a design and delivery process that is truly inclusive that delivers real results for residents

Recent progress

Over the past 4 years, significant efforts have been made to build a community of practice within the City of Chicago called [Chicago Digital](#). This cross-departmental group of City staff and vendors have already delivered 20 resident-focused digital tools and programs by putting resident needs first and not going through the typical IT procurement process of giving entire projects to typical City IT vendors. By utilizing product management methods

to incorporate resident centered design and research, City staff identified non-IT vendor pool partners that helped deliver new services that the existing IT vendor pool could not.

Staffing and recruiting

The 2019 DoIT/AIS merger did considerable damage to both the reputation and morale for the City's IT team. In many ways, the merger was an indication that technology, innovation and resident services were not a priority and seen as on par with the management of physical assets like buildings and cars. No other major city initiated a merger like this in recent memory. To the extent possible, this merger should be undone and a separate agency for Digital Services / DoIT restored.

The 2023 Recommended Budget outlines a clear division of planning, delivery, support, and security for the expanded IT headcount at AIS. Significant effort should be put into recruiting designers, software engineers, strategists, and product managers to fix technical problems, build products, and improve public service through technology.

By leaning into the Chicago Digital initiative and expanding its headcount, visibility, and authority, the City could move very quickly to becoming a leader in resident services, enabling Chicago residents to have positive and consistent interactions with their City through well designed, thoughtful, and accessible digital services.