

Management and Operations of the Traffic Camera Safety Program

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What the OIG Found

The traffic camera program in New Orleans has been a hotly contested issue among members of the public since inception. Although a well-designed program can improve safety for pedestrians and drivers, evaluators found a lack of appropriate management prevented the program from operating in a manner that would best achieve public safety goals, maintain public trust, and ensure legal compliance. There was no clear ownership of the program, which made it difficult to identify and correct issues with the program, and contributed to a lack of communication and program monitoring. This situation led to issues with ticket issuance and payment handling.

Because no one had responsibility for coordinating with schools to determine when they were open, the program issued tickets in school zones when schools were not in session, in violation of a city ordinance. Similarly, program management misunderstood the legal deadline for issuing citations, causing some tickets to be issued beyond the period allowed by the law. The NOPD review process also had gaps in controls; it lacked quality control checks on issued tickets, even when officers spent less time reviewing tickets than was required by internal policy.

Management breakdowns also contributed to issues regarding the payment of camera tickets. Program managers were aware of but failed to correct an issue in the computer system that prevented tickets from becoming delinquent after drivers did not attend their adjudication hearings. Evaluators also discovered that when people accidentally overpaid on their traffic tickets, the City kept the money and made no attempt to proactively provide refunds, instead relying on citizens to realize they had overpaid and request their money back. The key stakeholders within the program were unaware of this issue.

What the OIG Recommended

To improve the management and operations of the program, the OIG offered the following recommendations:

- The City should develop and implement an appropriate management structure consistent with the ordinance and any other legal requirements. This management structure should ensure clear lines of responsibility and accountability, facilitate communication and coordination among stakeholders, and use data to monitor and improve the program.
- Program officials should assign responsibility to identify and obtain information on school calendars and closures, and coordinate with schools and with the traffic camera contractor to reduce the issuance of invalid school zone tickets.
- The program should revise its controls to ensure that all citations are issued in accordance with the ordinance. The NOPD should strive to improve timeliness of reviewing citations and should track appropriate performance measures.
- The NOPD should revise its policies for review of citations, implement quality controls on approved citations, and work with ATS to obtain appropriate data for monitoring officer performance to ensure a thorough review of tickets.
- The Adjudication Bureau should develop processes to ensure the removal of suspensions. The City should impose penalties for delinquent camera ticket holders and develop clear lines of accountability to resolve future problems promptly.
- The DPW, Project Delivery Unit, and Finance Department, in consultation with the Law Department, should collaborate to refund overpaid money as appropriate; develop systems that comply with the Louisiana Uniform Unclaimed Property Act; and provide notice about overpayments to drivers. They should assign employees the responsibility to review data reports, including the overpayment liability report, so the City can identify and solve emerging problems.

Purpose of This Report

The traffic camera program had a tremendous impact on citizens. In 2017, the program issued over 400,000 citations and the City estimated that it would collect \$24 million in revenue. OIG evaluators assessed the quality of the program's management structure and examined whether it was operating in accordance with applicable laws, policies, and best practices.

Additional Area of Concern

The OIG also commented on the City's decision in February 2019 to change the speed thresholds for traffic camera tickets.

