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**Statement of Nathan Kipp, Deputy Inspector General for the Chicago Park District**

On August 12, 2021, the Chicago Park District placed me on an indefinite unpaid “emergency” suspension. Without any prior warning, Human Resources informed me that I was immediately suspended without providing any kind of reason other than the decision had been made at the direction of unnamed officials “from within the Park District organization.” The suspension itself violates Chicago law since only the Park District Inspector General, and not Park District officials, has the authority to recommend discipline for OIG personnel. At the same time, I learned that an unspecified investigation had been initiated against me, though I was given no details about the nature of this purported investigation.

This decision is shocking in many ways, the most prominent of which being that I have done nothing wrong. Up until this point, I have received only positive performance feedback since joining the OIG a year and a half ago. I previously served nearly three years as an Assistant Inspector General for Chicago Public Schools and understand the important public service that independent oversight agencies provide. Our neighborhoods and communities are served best when our public officials observe and honor moral and ethical guideposts.

This meritless action is a clear attempt by Park District officials to impede and obstruct a devastating investigation into widespread sexual assault, sexual harassment, and physical abuse throughout the District’s Beaches & Pools Unit. The timing of my suspension is extremely suspicious because, three business days later, Park District Superintendent & CEO Mike Kelly publicly announced long-delayed disciplinary measures taken in response to the OIG’s ongoing investigation.

My sudden and unjustified suspension will also serve as a chilling effect on the OIG and keep it from determining the full extent of the Park District’s culpability, especially since more work remains to be done. Mr. Kelly’s announcement of the creation of the “Office of Protection,” a half-measure and opaque “reform,” will have the practical effect of eroding the organizational transparency that is needed to conduct appropriate oversight of public departments and public officials, free from undue influence.

Although I recognize the potential that the officials who demanded my suspension may further retaliate against me, my moral and ethical obligations to the Citizens of Chicago, Park District Patrons, and Park District Employees compel me to profess that I have lost all confidence in the OIG’s investigation. To that end, the public must know the following:

- The OIG’s investigation is not independent, as Mr. Kelly falsely assures; instead, the Park District and its Board of Commissioners have repeatedly and successfully exerted improper influence over the OIG, with the apparent goal of ending the investigation prematurely and as quietly as possible;

- The OIG is alarmingly overwhelmed with only one full-time investigator assigned to this multi-faceted case, a fact that directly contradicts Mr. Kelly's rose-colored assessment of the OIG's available resources; and
- For over a year, the Park District and its Board — including Mr. Kelly and Park District Board President Avis LaVelle — have ignored the OIG's several calls for proper personnel resources and subject-matter expertise, thereby hamstringing the OIG by keeping it from performing its necessary investigative functions so as to protect Park District Employees and Patrons from criminal misconduct.

In other words, the OIG's investigation is in dire straits, despite whatever progress Mr. Kelly may claim.

Since the beginning of 2021, I have grown increasingly concerned as I have watched the OIG gradually abandon its role as the Park District's independent oversight agency. Instead, the OIG has been methodically neutered to resemble an internal compliance department that exists to satisfy the Park District's and its Board's demands. I have repeatedly voiced my concerns to colleagues within the OIG, including Inspector General Elaine Little. My concerns were largely dismissed out of hand, but they since have been justified at several levels.

With the OIG's acquiescence, and much to its investigation's detriment, the Park District increasingly inserted itself into the investigation as word spread about the investigation uncovering multiple incidents of severe criminal misconduct. For example, the Park District's new "internal monitor," who supposedly is responsible for overseeing the Beaches & Pools Unit, is an attorney in the District's internal Law Department to whom the OIG has provided real-time information regarding confidential aspects of its investigation. That "internal monitor" has then shared that confidential information with the Beaches & Pools Unit — the very department that the "internal monitor" purportedly oversees, and that is at the center of the OIG's investigation. These improper communications, in turn, have preempted the OIG's ability to pursue certain aspects of its investigation. Put bluntly, by allowing the Park District to meddle in the investigation, the OIG has caused its investigation irreparable harm.

I must be clear on this point: No reputable Office of Inspector General in the City of Chicago, or even in the State of Illinois, operates in this manner. And no respected Office of Inspector General has so abdicated its role as an independent watchdog agency.

Even more troubling is Mr. Kelly's statement that he expects that the OIG will issue its final investigative report "by September," and only after the OIG completes investigations of three remaining individuals. I am perplexed why information regarding the status of the OIG's ongoing investigation was shared with Mr. Kelly given that he, himself, should be considered a person of interest in the investigation. Because he received the first complaint of sexual misconduct in February 2020, he is a material witness. Moreover, he is a potential subject of the OIG's investigation because of, among other things, his admitted six-week delay in reporting that same complaint to the OIG, and his apparent abuse of authority when allegedly asking the complainant in

April 2021 to keep him “in the loop” of any future contact that she may have with OIG investigators. Despite these alarming facts, the OIG has not sought to interview Mr. Kelly, and I am not aware of any intention for the Office to interview Mr. Kelly. Again, this is not how responsible and independent Offices of Inspectors General conduct investigations.

Mr. Kelly’s September deadline is also indicative of the Park District’s intent to minimize the criminal activity that pervades the Beaches & Pools Unit. Given the expansive scope of the systemic issues discovered, and the sheer number of allegations of egregious misconduct that the OIG has thus far received, I can attest that the overarching investigation is much larger than the mere three individual investigations that Mr. Kelly claims remain. To be sure, the OIG has received actionable complaints against dozens of individuals who have allegedly engaged in sexual misconduct or physical abuse, and who are currently employed with the Park District. Ending the investigation in September will preempt any further investigation into those claims.

Indeed, Mr. Kelly’s September deadline suggests that he is not interested in receiving a thorough and comprehensive OIG report that details the Beaches & Pools Unit’s myriad systemic deficiencies, as well as the extent and severity of sexual and physical abuse among Lifeguards. Because of the rushed deadline, the OIG’s report will either be woefully deficient, or it will be an outright whitewash prepared with the sole intention of ending the investigation as quickly and quietly as possible. The former scenario is unacceptable under any circumstance, though I fear that the Park District has already taken steps toward the latter. This is untenable.

Now that I have been suspended, the OIG has only one individual investigating this massive and unprecedented matter on a day-to-day basis. While serving as Interim Inspector General one year ago, I informed both Mr. Kelly and Board President LaVelle of my concerns regarding the OIG’s severe staffing shortcomings. Those concerns were wholly ignored, and Mr. Kelly dismissed them again on Monday for unexplained reasons. When viewed in the larger context of the Park District’s repeated influence over the OIG’s investigation, I am left to conclude that the District and its Board have intentionally refused to provide the OIG with necessary resources to prevent it from uncovering the full extent of the criminal misconduct within the Beaches & Pools Unit.

After Mr. Kelly’s press conference on Monday, the Cook County State’s Attorney’s Office confirmed to the media that the City of Chicago Office of the Inspector General has provided it with information regarding the Park District OIG’s investigation of the Beaches & Pools Unit. I enthusiastically welcome this news. And I am thankful that a truly independent and respected Inspector General has seen fit to contact the State’s Attorney’s Office regarding the investigation.

I implore State’s Attorney Kim Foxx to intervene and direct her office to assume all control over the OIG’s investigation. The dozens of survivors of sex crimes that have been brave enough to come forward deserve their justice, and all future Park District Lifeguards deserve to work in an environment free from the fear of being sexually assaulted, physically abused, or harassed. The involvement of the State’s Attorney’s Office is the only readily available way to achieve these vital goals. It alone can ensure that the investigation will be staffed with the necessary resources and expertise, while also rescuing it from the Park District’s and its Board’s undue influence.

In hindsight, I am not surprised that I have been suspended. The perfunctory “reason” for my suspension reveals that it is just another example — albeit a less egregious example — of the Park District’s ongoing improper influence over the OIG’s operations. Chicago law explicitly states that the Park District Inspector General has the sole authority to recommend discipline for OIG personnel. So I was surprised to learn from HR personnel that it was not Inspector General Little who had ordered my suspension, but rather mysterious, unidentified officials from the Park District’s Administration.

Inspector General Little has not spoken to me regarding my suspension, even though the Park District’s HR Policies and Procedures compel her to do so. To the best of my knowledge, she has not objected to the unnamed officials’ demand to place me on suspension; I imagine that I would be back at work if she had. Her silence is telling. It leads one to question whether she was directed by the unidentified officials to forfeit her independence as Inspector General by not objecting to their demands to suspend me, just as she has overseen the OIG’s abdication of its role as the Park District’s independent oversight body.