

CHICAGO PARK DISTRICT

INTERNAL REVIEW OF THE DOUGLASS PARK SHOOTING

Executive Summary of Findings and Next Steps



July 15, 2025

**Review of the Douglass Park Shooting
Summary of Findings and Next Steps
Chicago Park District
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Introduction, Purpose, and Scope

On the evening of June 26, 2025, a devastating act of violence occurred at Douglass Park when former Chicago Park District lifeguard Charles Leto fatally shot 15-year-old Marjay Dotson and seriously injured 14-year-old Jeremy Herred. This unthinkable tragedy has shaken the Park District to its core and profoundly impacted the North Lawndale community, our staff, and the families of those harmed. Park District leadership strongly supports the prosecution of Leto and remains committed to pursuing justice for the victims of this heartbreaking tragedy.

As we continue to grieve with the victims and those who loved them, the Park District immediately launched a comprehensive internal review to understand what happened, identify any systemic failures, and chart a clear path toward a safer and more accountable future. The review was initiated by General Superintendent and CEO Carlos Ramirez-Rosa and led by the Park District's Law Department. It was guided by three key principles: thoroughness, transparency, and accountability.

The review was initiated the day after the shooting and spanned two weeks. It included a comprehensive review of documents including emails, incident reports, text messages, personnel records, and numerous employee interviews. Though some interviews remain ongoing, and General Superintendent and CEO Ramirez-Rosa emailed all Park District employees requesting that anyone with additional information come forward, we are now sharing this summary of our findings to date, accompanied by documents, to ensure full transparency about what we know, what we've learned, and what steps we are taking next.

Key Findings

1. Hiring and Background Checks

Charles Leto was hired by the Park District in June 2023 as a seasonal lifeguard and became a year-round employee in September 2023. In both instances, Leto passed required criminal background checks, which are conducted through Accurate Biometrics—an FBI-authorized fingerprint contractor also used by Chicago Public Schools and other major agencies.

The Park District receives background check results from both the Illinois State Police and FBI, and then receives RAP Back (Record of Arrest and Prosecution Back) from the Illinois State Police, which provides updated records for any convictions that occur after an employee's initial background check. The February 2023 incident where Leto shot two of his neighbor's dogs, killing one—now widely reported in the media—did not result in an arrest or criminal charges and therefore did not appear in his background checks or a RAP Back. His attorney confirmed in court that Leto had no criminal history.

Under Illinois law, employers may not make hiring or employment decisions solely based on an

arrest record to deny employment unless there is a conviction or additional supporting evidence to conduct an individualized assessment. At the time of hire, there was no indication to the Park District that Leto had engaged in violent or reckless conduct involving a firearm.

2. Violation of Rules Prohibiting Firearms; Swift Employment Action against Leto

The Park District has a clear and longstanding prohibition forbidding employees carrying or storing firearms on park property or while conducting Park District business, except where directly required as part of an employee's duties—specifically for authorized security officers with formal approval to carry a firearm. This is reinforced through signage, training, the Park District's Violence in the Workplace Policy, and the Park District's Employee Code of Conduct. These rules are well understood by staff, including Beaches and Pools personnel.

On June 27th—one day following the shooting—the Park District took immediate action by placing Charles Leto on unpaid emergency suspension. The Park District then moved swiftly to terminate his employment under the process outlined in the collective bargaining agreement. Upon being notified that the Park District had scheduled a corrective action meeting that could lead to his termination, Leto chose to voluntarily resign. He has been placed on the Park District's Ineligible for Rehire list, making him ineligible for employment at the agency.

3. Complaints and Leto's Conduct History

Leto's personnel file did not contain formal complaints or records of disciplinary action. However, following interviews and document review, the Park District identified at least five instances involving verbal altercations where patrons or staff raised concerns about Leto's behavior at two locations. All these incidents were addressed at the local park level through oral reprimands or redirection. None were escalated, documented in the central disciplinary system maintained by the Park District's Human Resources Department (HR), or tracked across assignments—limiting the ability of supervisors or departments to detect patterns or consider progressive discipline.

North Region, Gill Park (May 14, 2024): A verbal disagreement occurred between Leto and a senior swim patron over an open pool door. The situation was resolved onsite and did not result in discipline.

North Region, Gill Park (January 2025): Leto engaged in a verbal altercation with a parent, where Leto reportedly screamed at the parent for unknowingly violating a pool rule by using a phone on the pool deck. The Park Supervisor resolved the matter onsite by speaking with the parent and orally reprimanding and coaching Leto after Leto admitted his behavior was inappropriate for the situation.

North Region, Gill Park (April 11, 2025): Leto engaged in a tense exchange of words with the head lifeguard over a moved towel. The head lifeguard emailed the Park Supervisor to document the interaction and referenced unspecified prior interactions with Leto. The Park Supervisor spoke with Leto to provide feedback and to try to ease tensions between Leto and the lifeguard supervisor.

North Region, Gill Park Text Chain (April 17, 2025): In a group text for pool staff to communicate scheduling and shift assignments, Leto requested to transfer work locations and raised concerns about unequal treatment due to his military status; in response, the Park Supervisor provided Leto with contact information for HR and the Office of Prevention and Accountability (OPA). Another individual on the text chain asserted that Leto yelled at parents and coworkers and couldn't manage his emotions. The Park Supervisor reported the text thread to Community Recreation leadership, HR, and OPA. In response to Leto's complaint about scheduling and work hours, he was transferred to Welles Park in the North Region, after which, he never reached out to HR or OPA.

Central Region, Austin Town Hall (May 29, 2025): Leto banged on a locked bathroom door he believed was occupied by another employee, which was instead occupied by a patron. The patron reported that Leto displayed unprofessional and aggressive behavior that made them feel threatened and unsafe and asked the Park District to address the matter. Supervisors spoke with the patron and Leto about the incident. Leto expressed regret for his conduct and accepted a voluntary transfer to Sheridan Park.

To date, the Park District has found no records of complaints against Leto during his time working at other locations, including North Avenue Beach in the Central Region, or Welles Park and Sheridan Park in the North Region.

4. Leto's Summer Assignment and Prior Safety Incidents at Douglass Park Pool

In summer 2024, Leto worked as the head lifeguard at Douglass Park pool and reported multiple safety incidents involving disruptive teen patrons. These included fireworks fired at staff, verbal threats, and altercations. In response, the Park District's Beaches and Pools leadership coordinated with the Park District's Security Department to assign a fixed-post officer to the park and increase mobile security patrols. After these measures, no additional safety incidents were reported during the summer of 2024.

For summer 2025 location assignments, Leto initially requested to return to Douglass Park as the head lifeguard. Later, in May, he emailed requesting reassignment to North Avenue Beach due to lingering concerns from the previous summer at Douglass Park. He was advised to follow up with the region supervisor, which Leto said he would do but no documentation indicates that he followed up other than advising the region supervisor that he was likely looking for other work and did not expect to still be working with the Park District that summer. He ultimately accepted the Douglass Park assignment and returned as the pool's head lifeguard when outdoor pools opened on June 21st.

Before the start of the 2025 outdoor pool season, the Douglass Park Supervisor and Beaches and Pools leadership exchanged emails to coordinate the pool schedule. The Park Supervisor expressed concern about the pool being open on Sundays when the fieldhouse was closed and requested additional security coverage on Sundays. The final staffing list for Douglass Park pool included seven lifeguards: Charles Leto as head lifeguard, a senior lifeguard serving as second-in-command, and five seasonal lifeguards. From the first day the pool opened on Saturday, June 21, 2025, to the day of the shooting on Thursday, June 26, 2025, Park District Security Officers visited Douglass

Park eighteen times including twice on Thursday. Most of the security log entries reference a pool check, noting no problems. In the initial days of the pool season, Leto did not raise any further safety concerns, and there were no incident reports submitted by staff or complaints reported by patrons prior to the shooting.

5. The Park District's Response to Other Safety Incidents

As part of this internal review, the Park District examined whether there were broader patterns or systemic failures involving staff bringing weapons into the workplace or making violent threats—and whether the Park District failed to respond appropriately in such cases. The review identified at least three incidents during the same period as Leto's employment where staff violated the Violence in the Workplace Policy. In each of these cases, the Park District took immediate and decisive action:

In August 2024, the Park District immediately terminated a seasonal employee after a coworker reported that he had brought a firearm to a park, which was stored in a bag in his locker. The former employee was added to the Park District's Ineligible for Rehire list.

In September 2024, the Park District immediately terminated a park attendant after a coworker reported that the attendant had brought a handgun into the fieldhouse in the attendant's purse; the attendant had a valid concealed carry license. The former employee was added to the Park District's Ineligible for Rehire list.

In February 2025, the District placed an employee on unpaid emergency suspension after a coworker reported feeling unsafe. After the employee violated the terms of the emergency suspension, which prohibited the employee from visiting Park District property, and additional behavioral concerns, the Park District filed for a workplace protection order and ultimately secured a two-year ban. The individual's employment with the Park District was terminated and they were added to the Park District's Ineligible for Rehire list.

These examples reflect the Park District's commitment to decisive action when it receives credible and actionable information involving safety violations.

6. Need for Improved Communication and Coordination Across Departments

Employee interviews highlighted the need for stronger communication and coordination across a number of departments, especially at park locations with pools. With the summer season staff assignments resulting in changes to assigned work locations, fieldhouse staff and year-round pool staff operate under separate reporting structures, which can lead to uncertainty of responsibilities including roles with respect to staff oversight. Staff expressed a desire for more intentional collaboration to ensure clear and seamless operations and improved safety and support.

Next Steps

While the internal review did not identify a clear, foreseeable warning that Leto would commit such an unprovoked and horrific act, it did uncover systemic weaknesses in documentation, employee support, departmental coordination, and violence prevention. In response, the General Superintendent and CEO is directing the Park District to implement the following reforms:

1. Enhanced Safety Training, Weapons Prohibition Awareness and Policy Reform

- Expand safety training programs to include de-escalation, mental health response, trauma-informed care, and active shooter scenarios; continue to build upon current efforts with external partners to build a healing-centered framework at the Park District.
- Install clear signage in English and Spanish about the prohibition of weapons, including firearms, and instructions for staff and the public to report violations—including anonymous reporting options—to OPA.
- Continue to move forward with the Park District’s review of its Firearm Policy for Park District Security Officers.
- Expand the definition of weapons in the Violence in the Workplace Policy to be more inclusive of other types of prohibited weapons (knives, BB guns, toy guns and knives, razor blades, and items that resemble weapons).

2. Expanded Security Coverage

- Immediately after the incident, a fixed-post security officer was placed at Douglass Park, and mobile patrols were increased across pools.
- The Park District is now working to expand security coverage and is assessing its current security staffing model and security camera system and use.
- Currently, Security Officers must be off-duty or retired law enforcement officers. This model can be unreliable during peak summer months, when officers may be called back to active law enforcement duty.
- The Park District will explore allowing qualified non-law enforcement personnel to serve as Park District Security Officers—creating a dependable and community-focused presence.
- Moving forward, the Park District will require supervisors and region managers to complete a pre-summer season risk assessment, including a review of prior incidents and any anticipated gaps in coverage. Any identified concerns will be reviewed by Security leadership. As part of this process, supervisors should also evaluate and, where appropriate, adjust their own staff schedules to ensure adequate on-site coverage during all open pool hours, including Sundays. Scheduling flexibility should be used proactively to close known operational gaps.

3. Community Engagement and Localized Safety Planning

- The Park District will work with employees and stakeholders to develop a Douglass Park Safety Plan, identifying community-informed strategies to improve safety and prevent future safety incidents. This collaborative planning process will serve as a model for similar

efforts at other parks across the city.

- Provide training and resources for employees to improve cultural competency and better integrate our employees into the communities where they work. Cultural competency refers to the ability of staff to understand, respect, and effectively interact with people from diverse cultural backgrounds, identities, and lived experiences. Training will support employees in developing awareness of community histories, building trust across differences, and engaging patrons in a respectful, informed, and inclusive manner.
- Support park patrons by providing additional awareness of OPA and how to anonymously report concerns and complaints.

4. Stronger Disciplinary Oversight and Recordkeeping

- Centralize tracking of verbal warnings, coaching (targeted training and redirection for employees), and patron complaints to track patterns of behavior across park assignments and ensure conduct concerns are escalated when appropriate and addressed appropriately.
- Ensure supervisors directly address employees' behavioral or conduct concerns and avoid transferring employees and instead coach employees to better meet expectations.
- Develop annual employee reviews for non-Union employees and work with the Park District's labor partners to also implement annual reviews for Union employees.
- Partner with a Human Resources consultant to ensure full implementation of these reforms and progressive discipline process.

5. Improved Departmental Coordination and Employee Support

- Strengthen coordination and communication across departments at park locations to ensure clear roles, shared expectations, and more effective support for safe pool operations.
- Identify the Park Supervisor as the appropriate point of contact to serve as a liaison for the community at local parks so that lifeguard staff remain focused on water safety responsibilities.
- Ensure that when employees make complaints or voice safety concerns, their feedback is acknowledged and taken seriously, the Park District takes timely and appropriate action, and roles in responding to employees are clearly defined.
- Provide additional training and resources to supervisors to better recognize signs of employee distress and escalate appropriately for support services and intervention.

6. Expansion of the Lifeguard Explorers Program

- The Park District will work to expand the Lifeguard Explorers Program, a year-round, stipend-supported training initiative for youth ages 15–22.
- The program serves as a vital pipeline for cultivating future lifeguards from diverse backgrounds and communities, particularly those who have been historically underrepresented in aquatics.
- Expansion efforts will include increased program numbers, improved recruitment efforts in under-resourced areas, and deeper partnerships with high schools, community colleges, job-training programs, and other youth-focused organizations.
- This expansion is part of the Park District's broader strategy to diversify its lifeguard

workforce, strengthen community representation and trust, and create safe and inclusive beaches and pools.

Conclusion

While nothing in Charles Leto's employment history, background checks, or conduct records pointed to a violent act of this magnitude, the internal review identified several shortcomings that demand urgent and sustained attention. These reforms—many of which are already underway—represent just the beginning of a sustained effort to build safer, more supportive park spaces across our city.

This executive summary, shared alongside supporting documents, reflects our current findings and our commitment to transparency, accountability, and reform. As remaining interviews are completed, we will continue to evaluate additional opportunities for improvement. We remain committed to being an accountable and responsive public agency. To that end, we invite the public to submit comments and feedback regarding this summary and our recommendations or information to support the internal review to: LCA@chicagoparkdistrict.com. If you would like to share feedback or information anonymously, please email OPA@chicagoparkdistrict.com.

To the family of Marjay Dotson, to Jeremy Herred and his loved ones, and to the entire North Lawndale community: we are grieving with you. We will not forget. And we will work every day to ensure that our parks are safe, supportive, and healing spaces for every child, family, and community we serve.