

# YOUR CAR WAS TOWED IN THE CITY OF CHICAGO

HERE IS WHAT THE CITY DOESN'T WANT YOU TO KNOW

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*A PUBLIC SERVICE BRIEFING ON CHICAGO'S TOWING SYSTEM  
Your rights. The City's obligations. What actually happens.*

March 2026

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This briefing is based on publicly available statutes, published investigative journalism (WBEZ, ProPublica Illinois, CBS 2, Chicago Sun-Times, Chicago Tribune, Reason), federal court filings, City budget documents, and documented first-hand experience. It is not legal advice.

# 1. THE SCALE OF CHICAGO'S TOWING OPERATION

Chicago operates one of the largest municipal towing programs in the United States. Understanding the scale is the first step to understanding why the system works the way it does and who it works for.

- 93,857 vehicles towed in a single year (2017) — WBEZ analysis of City records
- 32,155 of those vehicles were never reclaimed by their owners — one in three
- ~24,000 vehicles sold to United Road Towing at scrap prices — an average of 66 cars per day
- \$4 million paid by URT to the City for those vehicles — less than \$200 per car on average
- \$22 million estimated actual value of those same vehicles — per NADA trade-in valuations
- \$27 million in revenue from tow fees, storage fees, and scrap sales (2017)
- \$22 million spent to operate the program (83% of revenue) — the City nets roughly \$4.6 million

Chicago tows more cars per capita than Los Angeles, a city with 1.3 million more residents and far greater car dependency.

# 2. FOLLOW THE MONEY: HOW THE TOWING SYSTEM GENERATES REVENUE

## The Fee Structure

When your car is towed by the City of Chicago, you owe the following before it will be released:

Fee	Amount
Towing fee	\$250 (per City website as of 2026; code text says \$150 for vehicles under 8,000 lbs)
Daily storage	\$50/day (per City impoundment notice; code text says \$25/day for vehicles under 8,000 lbs)
Parking citation	\$75–\$200+ depending on violation
Outstanding tickets	ALL outstanding parking/compliance fines must be paid before release
Boot removal (if applicable)	\$100
Maximum storage cap	\$1,500 (but fees accrue daily until cap)

■ **NOTE: The code as published says \$150 towing and \$25/day storage for vehicles under 8,000 lbs. The City’s own website and impoundment notices charge \$250 towing and \$50/day storage. A Nissan Rogue weighs 3,500 lbs. Either the code was amended without the public legal database being updated, or the City is overcharging. Ask for documentation of the current authorized fee at your hearing.**

## **The United Road Towing Contract**

United Road Towing (formerly Environmental Auto Removal) has held towing contracts with the City of Chicago for over 30 years. The current contract is worth an estimated \$60 million over five years. URT faced no competition for its most recent contract in 2016. Its last competitive bid was in 2010, and it was not the lowest bidder.

URT’s revenue comes from two streams: (1) the contract itself, and (2) vehicles that owners don’t reclaim. Under the contract, URT purchases unclaimed vehicles from the City at scrap prices. In 2017 alone, URT acquired roughly 24,000 vehicles this way, paying an average of less than \$200 per car. NADA trade-in valuations placed the total value of those vehicles at over \$22 million.

Documented examples of URT purchases include:

- 2016 Ford Mustang — purchased for \$176.09
- 2014 Audi A3 — purchased for \$147.15
- 2011 Mercedes M-Class — purchased for \$143.33
- 1998 GMC Savana (wheelchair-accessible van with \$10,000 lift) — purchased for \$15.00

■ **The company that tows your car is the same company that buys it at scrap price if you don’t reclaim it. Every day you aren’t notified is another day of storage fees — and another day closer to the point where fees exceed the car’s value and you give up.**

## **3. THE NOTIFICATION PROBLEM: “TOWING WITHOUT TELLING”**

### **What the Law Requires**

Chicago Municipal Code § 9-92-070(a) is unambiguous. When the City tows a vehicle that is currently registered with the Secretary of State, the City must:

1. Ascertain the owner from the Secretary of State within ten days.

2. Send notice of impoundment by certified mail.

The statute says “certified mail” explicitly. Twice. There is no ambiguity. Certified mail requires a tracking number, a delivery attempt, and a signature or notice at the recipient’s address.

## What the City Actually Does

Based on documented evidence from a February 2026 tow:

The City sends impoundment notices as presorted first-class bulk mail under USPS Permit No. 3238. This is institutional mass-mailing — the same method used for junk mail and marketing flyers. There is no tracking number, no signature requirement, no delivery confirmation, and no return receipt.

The existence of a USPS bulk mailing permit means this is not a one-off clerical error. The City has obtained and maintains a permit specifically for sending these notices as regular bulk mail instead of certified mail as the statute requires. This is a systemic policy choice.

In the documented February 2026 case:

- Vehicle towed: February 20, 2026
- Notice of impoundment generated: February 26, 2026 (six days later)
- Notice received by owner: February 28, 2026 (eight days later, by regular mail)
- Vehicle already retrieved and all fees paid before the notice arrived
- Storage fees of \$50/day were accruing the entire time

## Why This Matters

If the City sent certified mail, vehicle owners would receive delivery attempts within days and have a tracking number to verify when the notice was sent. Certified mail creates a paper trail that protects both the City and the owner. Bulk mail has no tracking, no delivery confirmation, and no accountability.

At \$50/day in storage fees across approximately 94,000 annual tows, every day of notification delay generates substantial revenue for the system. The financial incentive to delay notification — or to use a method that cannot be tracked — is enormous.

*“Towing without telling, that is literally taking peoples’ cars without giving them any notification by mail.” — Attorney Jacie Zolna, Santiago v. Chicago*

## 4. THE SIGNAGE PROBLEM: CITATIONS WITHOUT PROPER SIGNS

Many parking-based tows in Chicago are issued under Chicago Municipal Code § 9-64-150(b), which prohibits parking in locations designated as hazardous by the Commissioner of Transportation. The

statute has a critical element that is frequently ignored:

*“The commissioner of transportation is authorized to determine places in which the standing or parking of vehicles would create an especially hazardous condition...and to erect and maintain appropriate signs giving notice that standing or parking is prohibited. It shall be unlawful to stand or park any vehicle in violation of any sign erected or maintained pursuant to this subsection.” — Chicago Municipal Code § 9-64-150(b)*

The sign is a statutory element of the offense. No sign, no violation. A sign that exists but is illegible is the same as no sign under Illinois state law:

*“No provision of this Act for which official traffic-control devices are required shall be enforced against an alleged violator if at the time and place of the alleged violation an official device is not in proper position and sufficiently legible to be seen by an ordinarily observant person.” — 625 ILCS 5/11-305(c)*

This means:

- If there is no sign on the block face or curb segment where you parked, the citation is invalid.
- If a sign exists but is faded, weathered, rusted, or otherwise not “sufficiently legible to be seen by an ordinarily observant person,” the citation cannot be enforced.
- If a sign’s directional arrow is illegible, there is no way to know which direction the restriction applies.

**■ IMMEDIATELY after your car is towed, go to the location and photograph every sign (and the absence of signs) on the block face. Photograph faded text, rusted poles, missing arrows, and any gaps in signage coverage. These photographs are your most powerful evidence at a hearing.**

## **5. THE TOW BASIS: CHECK YOUR HEARING NOTICE**

Chicago Municipal Code § 9-92-030 lists nine different legal bases for towing a vehicle, labeled (a) through (i). Each has different requirements. The hearing notice you receive will state which subsection the City is relying on. This is your first and most important thing to check.

### **Common Subsections**

Subsection	Basis	What City Must Prove
(b)	Hazard or obstruction	Vehicle was “unlawfully parked so as to constitute a hazard or obstruction to the normal movement of traffic”
(c)	Enumerated violations	Vehicle was parked in violation of specific listed code sections (e.g., 9-64-150(b)). No proof of hazard required.
(f)	Tow zone	Vehicle was “parked illegally in an officially designated and marked ‘tow zone.’” Requires actual marked tow zone.

These subsections are not interchangeable. If the hearing notice says your car was towed under subsection (b) (hazard/obstruction) but the only citation you received was for a sign-based parking violation under § 9-64-150(b), the City used the wrong legal basis. Subsection (c) — not (b) — is the correct tow authority for 9-64-150(b) violations. Subsection (b) requires the City to prove your car was a hazard or obstruction to traffic. If your car was in a parking space, it was not obstructing traffic.

**■ Read your hearing notice carefully. Compare the tow basis to the citation. If they don't match, that mismatch is potentially dispositive — the City authorized the tow under a code section whose elements it cannot satisfy.**

## 6. YOUR RIGHTS: WHAT THE CITY MUST DO AND WHAT YOU CAN DO

### Your Right to a Hearing

Under § 9-92-080(a), you have the right to request a hearing even if you have already paid all fees and retrieved your vehicle. Paying does not waive your right to challenge the tow. If the tow is found to be erroneous, § 9-92-080(b)(i) states that “no fees shall be assessed for any tow or storage with respect to a tow which has been determined to be erroneous.” You are entitled to a full refund.

### How to Request a Hearing

You must request a hearing within 15 days of the date on the Notice of Vehicle Impoundment. The request must be made at the Automotive Pound where the vehicle is/was impounded. Hearings are held at the Department of Administrative Hearings, 400 W. Superior Street, Chicago.

### What to Bring

- Photographs of the location where you were parked, including all signage (and absence of signage)

- The Notice of Vehicle Impoundment (and the envelope it arrived in)
- The parking citation
- The hearing notice
- Any parking permits displayed on the vehicle
- A written statement of your arguments, with copies for the hearing officer
- If someone else is appearing on behalf of the vehicle owner: a notarized authorization letter

## Key Arguments to Consider

1. **Wrong tow basis.** Does the hearing notice subsection match the citation? Does the City's stated legal basis match the facts?
2. **No sign / illegible sign.** Was there a sign on the specific curb segment or block face? Was it legible? Was the directional arrow visible?
3. **Not blocking anything.** If the tow claims hazard/obstruction, was the vehicle actually obstructing traffic, a driveway, or an alley?
4. **Notification failure.** Was the notice sent by certified mail as required? Check the envelope. If it says "PRSR FIRST CLASS" or bears a permit number, it was not certified.
5. **Valid permit.** If you had a valid residential parking permit for the zone, present it.
6. **Fee reduction for storage.** Even if the tow is upheld, if the City failed to notify you properly, argue that storage fees should be reduced or eliminated because you would have retrieved the vehicle immediately if properly notified.

## 7. ACCESSING EVIDENCE: EXPECT OBSTACLES

The tow company photographs your vehicle at the time of towing. These photos are critical evidence that can confirm or disprove the City's stated basis for the tow. In practice, accessing these photographs before your hearing is extremely difficult.

Documented obstacles as of February 2026:

- **In-person request at the auto pound:** Photos visible to owner but copies not provided.
- **Online citation portal:** Non-functional. A City Clerk employee confirmed the portal is "broken" by phone.
- **Phone requests:** City representative stated turnaround of 1–3 weeks (longer than the 7-day contest window). Hung up when asked for his name.
- **FOIA requests:** Statutory response deadline (5 business days, extendable to 10) typically falls after the hearing date. One FOIA officer responded within hours — not to produce records, but to announce a preemptive extension, misstate the statutory deadline, and suggest the requestor "withdraw your petition."

■ **FILE YOUR FOIA REQUESTS THE DAY YOU LEARN OF THE TOW.** Even if the City won't produce records before your hearing, the FOIA request creates a paper trail. At the hearing, tell the officer you attempted to access the City's evidence through every available channel and were unable to. Request that the tow company's photographs be produced at the hearing, or request a continuance pending the FOIA response.

## FOIA Contact Information

- Department of Administrative Hearings (DOAH): File via City portal at [chicago.gov/FOIA](https://chicago.gov/FOIA)
- Department of Streets and Sanitation (DSS): [DSSfoia@cityofchicago.org](mailto:DSSfoia@cityofchicago.org)
- Chicago Department of Transportation (CDOT): File via City portal at [chicago.gov/FOIA](https://chicago.gov/FOIA)

Under PA 104-0438 (effective January 1, 2026), FOIA requests submitted by email must contain the full request in the body of the email, not in an attachment.

## 8. THE LAWSUITS: WHAT COURTS HAVE FOUND

### **Santiago v. City of Chicago (Case No. 1:19-cv-04652, N.D. Ill.)**

Filed in July 2019 by Andrea Santiago, a senior citizen with multiple sclerosis confined to a wheelchair. Santiago's specially equipped van — with a \$10,000 wheelchair lift — was declared abandoned and towed while legally parked on her street. She received no notice by mail. The City sold her van to United Road Towing for \$15. URT then sold it to a scrap yard for \$615. The van and the wheelchair lift were destroyed.

A federal judge granted class action status in November 2020, certifying two classes:

- **Tow Class:** All individuals who, since June 2017, had vehicles towed as “abandoned” when the vehicle lacked current registration.
- **Vehicle-Disposal Class:** All individuals who, since June 2014, had vehicles towed and disposed of by the City.

The City appealed the class certification to the Seventh Circuit. The case remains active as of early 2026.

### **Institute for Justice v. City of Chicago (April 2019)**

A separate federal class action challenging the City's Vehicle Impoundment Program (VIP), under which police seize vehicles used during the commission of offenses including DUI, driving on a suspended license, littering, and playing loud music. The suit alleges that innocent owners are fined and their cars held even when criminal charges are dropped. One plaintiff's Cadillac was seized

because a passenger had drugs in his pocket. The suit argues the impound system violates both the U.S. and Illinois Constitutions.

## **City Council Reforms (2020–2025)**

Responding to the WBEZ investigation and public pressure, the City Council passed reforms in 2020 including storage fee caps and a temporary halt on debt collection. In April 2025, the Council unanimously passed “Rogue Towing 2.0,” allowing police to seize predatory tow trucks and giving victims the right to file civil lawsuits against rule-breaking operators. The measure passed 50-0. Despite these reforms, the core infrastructure of the City’s own towing program — including the notification system and the URT contract — has not been fundamentally altered.

## **9. THE STRUCTURE: HOW IT ALL FITS TOGETHER**

Step back and look at the system as a whole:

1. The City tows your car.
2. Storage fees of \$50/day begin immediately.
3. The City does not notify you by certified mail as the law requires. It uses bulk first-class mail.
4. Every day of delayed notification is another \$50 in fees.
5. Every channel for accessing evidence or contesting the tow is broken, slow, or obstructive.
6. If you can’t pay or don’t know your car was towed, storage fees accumulate until they exceed the car’s value.
7. After 21 days, the City can sell your vehicle.
8. The City sells the vehicle at scrap price to United Road Towing — the same company that towed it.
9. Even after the City takes and sells your car, you still owe all outstanding fees.
10. URT has held this contract for 30 years, often without competitive bidding.

**This is not a system with occasional failures. It is a system whose failures are the mechanism by which revenue is generated. The notification delay is not a bug. It is the business model.**

## **10. WHAT YOU CAN DO**

### **Immediately After Being Towed**

1. Photograph everything at the tow location: signs (and absence of signs), curb markings, driveway positions, your parking permit, and the general streetscape. Do this immediately — conditions can change.

2. When retrieving your vehicle, ask to see the tow company's photographs. Note what they show. If you can photograph the screen, do so.
3. Keep the envelope your impoundment notice arrives in. Check the postage. If it says "PRSR FIRST CLASS" or has a permit number, it was not certified mail.
4. File FOIA requests immediately to DSS, DOAH, and CDOT for tow photos, operator reports, and signage records.
5. Request a hearing within 15 days, even if you have already paid fees and retrieved the vehicle.

## **At the Hearing**

1. Be concise and organized. Hearing officers process dozens of cases daily. Aim for under 5 minutes.
2. Lead with your strongest argument. If the tow basis doesn't match the citation, say so first.
3. Present photographic evidence of signage failures.
4. Present the impoundment notice and envelope as evidence of notification failure.
5. If the City's tow photos would support your case and you haven't received them, request production at the hearing or a continuance.
6. If the tow is upheld, argue for reduction or elimination of storage fees based on notification failure.

## **Beyond the Hearing**

File a FOIA request to DSS requesting certified mail records, USPS expenditures, and the department's mailing policy for impoundment notices. If the City cannot produce evidence that it sends impoundment notices by certified mail as required by § 9-92-070(a), that is evidence of systemic statutory noncompliance.

**Report to the Santiago attorneys.** The Santiago v. Chicago class action (Case No. 1:19-cv-04652) was filed by attorney Jacie Zolna with Myron M. Cherry & Associates, LLC. If you have evidence of notification failures — especially the envelope showing bulk mail instead of certified mail — it may be relevant to the class action. Contact: [jzolna@cherry-law.com](mailto:jzolna@cherry-law.com) • (312) 372-2100

**Contact media.** WBEZ broke the original investigation and continues to cover this issue. The Chicago Sun-Times and Chicago Tribune have covered the 2025 reforms. Block Club Chicago covers neighborhood-level enforcement.

**FBI Public Corruption Tip Line.** Chicago field office: 312-421-6700. Online: [tips.fbi.gov](https://tips.fbi.gov). If you have documented evidence of systemic statutory noncompliance that benefits a specific contractor, this may be relevant to federal public corruption investigators.

## **11. KEY STATUTES: QUICK REFERENCE**

Statute	What It Says
Chicago Mun. Code § 9-92-030(b)	Tow authority for vehicles “unlawfully parked so as to constitute a hazard or obstruction to the normal movement of traffic.” City must prove hazard/obstruction.
Chicago Mun. Code § 9-92-030(c)	Tow authority for vehicles parked in violation of enumerated sections including 9-64-150(b). Does not require proof of hazard.
Chicago Mun. Code § 9-64-150(b)	Prohibits parking in hazardous locations. Requires Commissioner to “erect and maintain appropriate signs.” Sign is statutory element of offense.
Chicago Mun. Code § 9-64-100(c)	Prohibits parking where vehicle will “block vehicular access to or use of a driveway.”
Chicago Mun. Code § 9-92-070(a)	City must send notice of impoundment “by certified mail” within ten days.
Chicago Mun. Code § 9-92-080(a)	Owner may request hearing even after paying all fees. Payment does not waive right to contest.
Chicago Mun. Code § 9-92-080(b)(i)	“No fees shall be assessed for any tow or storage with respect to a tow which has been determined to be erroneous.”
625 ILCS 5/11-305(c)	Illinois state law: sign-based restrictions cannot be enforced if sign is “not in proper position and sufficiently legible to be seen by an ordinarily observant person.”

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## A FINAL NOTE

This briefing is based on publicly available statutes, published investigative journalism, federal court filings, and documented first-hand experience with Chicago’s towing system as of early 2026. It is not legal advice. If you need legal representation, consult an attorney licensed in Illinois.

The purpose of this document is to ensure that every person whose car is towed in the City of Chicago knows what the law requires, what the City actually does, and what they can do about it. The information asymmetry between the City and individual vehicle owners is the system’s greatest advantage. This document exists to close that gap.

**If you found this useful, share it. Every person who knows their rights is one less person the system can exploit unchallenged.**

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Key Sources: WBEZ Investigation (2016–2019) • Santiago v. Chicago, No. 1:19-cv-04652 (N.D. Ill.) • Chicago Municipal Code Ch. 9-64, 9-92 • 625 ILCS 5/11-305 • CBS 2 Investigators • Reason Magazine • ProPublica Illinois • Chicago Sun-Times • Chicago Tribune