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# CHICAGO: “THE CITY THAT SETTLES”

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**An examination of lawsuit-related expenses paid by  
City of Chicago government and a report on the  
public services and jobs lost to lawsuits against the City**



A report compiled by Illinois Lawsuit Abuse Watch



## About I-LAW

Illinois Lawsuit Abuse Watch (I-LAW) is a grassroots, non-partisan watchdog group of concerned citizens, community leaders and small business people interested in a broad range of civil justice issues. I-LAW has more than 15,000 individual supporters throughout Illinois.

Formed in 2002 with the goal of seeing balance, fairness and common sense in Illinois' civil justice system, I-LAW seeks to shine a bright spotlight on special influences and imbalances in Illinois courtrooms. Illinois has long ranked nationally as one of the worst states in the country for legal fairness, and Cook County courts, in particular, have been criticized as magnets for frivolous lawsuits, many having little or no connection to Cook County.

Through a variety of public education programs, I-LAW works to raise awareness about the lawsuit abuse issues in Illinois and urge elected officials to ensure Illinois courts are fair and balanced. I-LAW is concerned that meritless lawsuits in Illinois courts impair the ability of those with legitimate claims to gain access to the state's court system.

Anyone interested in learning more about stopping lawsuit abuse in Illinois or becoming a supporter of I-LAW can visit [www.ILLawsuitAbuseWatch.org](http://www.ILLawsuitAbuseWatch.org).

## Executive Summary

Chicago faces a massive budget crisis, forcing significant service cuts as well as deep layoffs of city workers. The Chicago Public Schools recently announced that it will be cutting \$75 million from its budget and will be forced to lay off approximately 1,000 teachers.<sup>1</sup> Full-day kindergarten was nearly cut,<sup>2</sup> and even such celebratory events as the City's Fourth of July fireworks have been cancelled due to budget constraints.<sup>3</sup>

Newly-elected Mayor Rahm Emanuel has made fixing the City's budget his top priority and is aggressively looking for ways to save money and cut waste. Upon being sworn in, he ordered all city department heads to cut their budgets by 10 percent.<sup>4</sup>

But as Mayor Emanuel looks to cut the budget, one line item he should not overlook is the tens of millions of dollars the City spends responding to – and often settling – lawsuits filed against the City.

Combining judgments, settlements and outside legal counsel costs, **the City of Chicago spent a whopping \$85 million defending against lawsuits in 2010 alone.**<sup>5</sup> That is nearly three times *more* than the \$30 million hole in the 2011 spending plan that the mayor needs to quickly fill.<sup>6</sup>

**In the last three years, Chicago has been hit with 900 lawsuits, which means the City is sued just about every single day.**<sup>7</sup> It has become clear that the City is perceived as an easy mark by some personal injury lawyers and has earned a reputation not as “The City That Works” but as “The City That Settles.”

Shedding that costly reputation and committing to aggressively fighting lawsuits filed against the City of Chicago could help save tens of millions of taxpayer dollars, allowing the City to shore up the budget and avoid even more crippling cuts.

With a record budget deficit and many city services and programs on the chopping block, the City of Chicago can no longer afford to be a passive victim of Cook County's reputation as both the “Lawsuit Abuse Capital of America” and a “plaintiff's paradise.” A 2010 report from Harris Interactive ranked Cook County courts the worst in the country for legal fairness,<sup>8</sup> while another recent study ranked Cook County the fifth-worst “judicial hellhole” in the nation.<sup>9</sup>

There is a culture of lawsuit abuse in Cook County that cannot be ignored. For a nearby comparison, the City of Naperville, in neighboring DuPage County, which has a population of 141,853<sup>10</sup>, spent \$15,375 on judgments and settlements and outside counsel in 2010.<sup>11</sup> In other

words, **the City of Chicago, which is 18 times the population of Naperville,<sup>12</sup> spent 5,528 times what Naperville spent on litigation costs last year.<sup>13</sup>**

The tens of millions of taxpayer dollars wasted fighting and settling lawsuits filed against the City is money that would be much better spent on more worthwhile services, many of which are now being cut due to the City's budget deficit. **Had the City of Chicago's \$85 million expenditure on litigation costs in 2010 been available for other, more worthwhile services and programs, the City would have been able to:**

- Hire 1,239 police officers;<sup>14</sup>
- Pay for 1,673 teachers;<sup>15</sup>
- Fund the Chicago Alternative Policing Strategy Program (C.A.P.S.) for 17 years;<sup>16</sup>
- Complete rehabilitation projects at 15 high schools;<sup>17</sup>
- Pay for intensive teaching programs for 18,671 students;<sup>18</sup>
- Fund the Chicago Public Schools' Youth Advocacy Program for 17 years;<sup>19</sup>
- Resurface 65 miles of Chicago roads;<sup>20</sup>
- Pay for 1,197 firefighters;<sup>21</sup>
- Hire 1,119 new public health nurses;<sup>22</sup>
- Pay for 2,937 art projects at Chicago senior centers,<sup>23</sup> or
- Plant 155,801 trees.<sup>24</sup>

Fortunately, there is a proven way to significantly reduce the amount of money the City wastes fighting frivolous lawsuits. In 2009, the Chicago Police Department (CPD) and the City's Corporation Counsel Department made the decision to adopt a new policy of fighting, and no longer quickly settling, lawsuits filed against the CPD. And that aggressive, common sense policy worked. According to a report the City's Law Department submitted to the City Council last fall, **the number of lawsuits filed against the Police Department dropped 50 percent from 2009 to 2010, and in lawsuits involving payouts under \$100,000, the City's liability costs had been reduced by more than \$7 million.<sup>25</sup>**

As Karen Seimetz, the City's first assistant corporation counsel, put it:

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“Over time, the word has gotten out. We're not settling cases like we used to.”<sup>26</sup>

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The Police Department's decision to fight litigation has clearly helped save taxpayers money. As Mayor Emanuel seeks to identify waste and possible savings in the budget, he would be well advised to adopt the proven policy that's working for lawsuits filed against CPD and implement it for lawsuits filed against all City departments and agencies.

Chicago could send a clear message to some personal injury lawyers and potential plaintiffs who are merely looking for jackpot justice by demonstrating that lawsuits will be fought aggressively and not quickly settled. The longer the City fails to act on this important issue, the longer potential plaintiffs and aggressive personal injury trial lawyers will continue to target city taxpayers' pockets with frivolous lawsuits against the City.

Mayor Rahm Emanuel should be applauded for aggressively and creatively trying to identify places where he can cut the budget. But with a new lawsuit coming in each and every day on average, he should work quickly to shed the City's costly reputation as "The City That Settles."

# The Culture of Lawsuit Abuse

The City of Chicago sits within the jurisdiction of the Cook County Circuit Courts, which in recent years has become a favored destination for personal injury lawyers looking to hit the jackpot playing the “lawsuit lottery.” The litigation climate has become so bad that Cook County has been ranked the worst local jurisdiction for legal fairness, according to a recent report from the respected non-partisan global market research firm Harris Interactive.<sup>27</sup>

In addition, Cook County is ranked the fifth-worst “Judicial Hellhole,” according to the American Tort Reform Association’s annual “Judicial Hellhole” list.<sup>28</sup> Cook County made its debut on the list in 2005 and has remained a consistent fixture on that list ever since.<sup>29</sup>

According to the 2008 report, one of the reasons Cook County continues to hold a prominent place on the “Judicial Hellholes” list is because:

## Cook County National Rankings:

- Worst local jurisdiction in the nation for legal fairness<sup>i</sup>
- Fifth-Worst “judicial hellhole”<sup>ii</sup>
- Fourth-worst for tort costs and tort law<sup>iii</sup>
- Worst litigation climate in the nation<sup>iv</sup>

**SOURCE:** <sup>i</sup>Harris Interactive, 2010 U.S. Chamber of Commerce State Liability Systems Ranking Study (Mar. 22, 2010); <sup>ii</sup> American Tort Reform Association, 2010 Judicial Hellholes Report (2010); <sup>iii</sup>Pacific Research Institute, 2008 Tort Liability Index (March 12, 2008); and <sup>iv</sup>American Justice Partnership Foundation, 2008 Boardroom Guide to State Litigation Climates (Directorship: June 2008).

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“Plaintiffs’ lawyers and their clients often arrive at the Cook County Courthouse from other Illinois counties and other states with a briefcase and a lawsuit in hand.”<sup>30</sup>

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In other words, Cook County and the City of Chicago have become magnets for lawsuit abuse. In one notable example of junk lawsuits filed in Cook County, a woman filed a lawsuit against the Brookfield Zoo claiming dolphins performing in a show “deliberately” splashed her and forced

her to slip and fall during a visit to the zoo one year ago. She sought damage awards in excess of \$50,000.<sup>31</sup>

In another recent case, a Chicago attorney filed a lawsuit against his former son-in-law claiming his daughter's ex-husband failed to keep his promise to love and honor his daughter. The lawyer wanted to recoup the \$75,000 he spent on the wedding, and he wanted \$1 million more for pain and suffering.<sup>32</sup> Only in Chicago would a father-in-law sue his estranged son-in-law.

Clearly, the Cook County courts have become a favorite destination for personal injury lawyers across the country to file their lawsuits in the hopes of cashing in by playing the "lawsuit lottery" here.

The culture of lawsuit abuse goes well beyond nonsensical lawsuits such as a father suing his estranged son-in-law. The culture of lawsuit abuse extends as well to the City of Chicago, which is often a target of litigation. In fact, the city of Chicago is sued nearly every single day.<sup>33</sup>

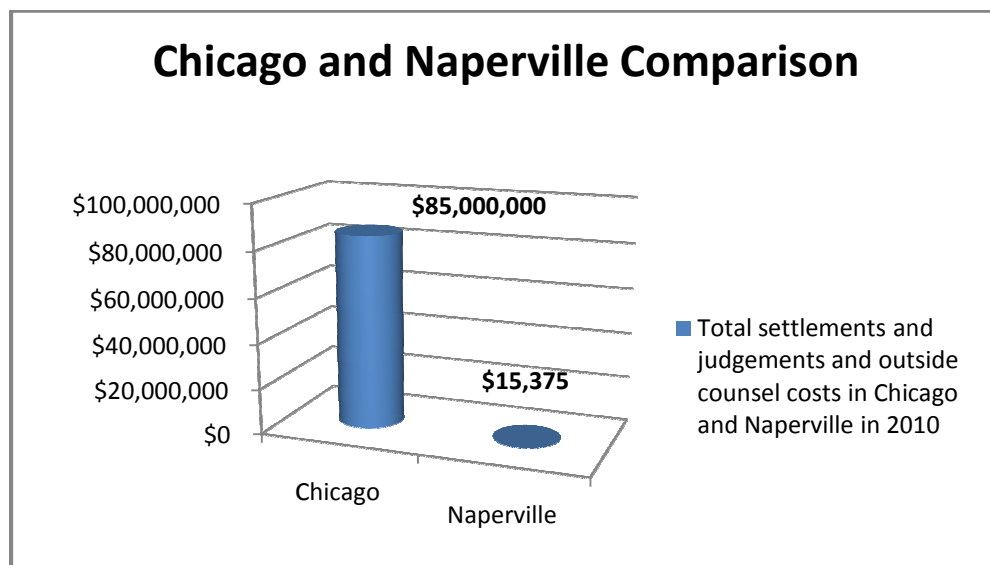
**In 2010, the City of Chicago spent a total of \$85 million on judgments and settlements, fees and costs and outside legal counsel.**<sup>34</sup> Of that \$85 million, the City of Chicago spent nearly \$26 million for just outside legal counsel costs.<sup>35</sup>

The culture of lawsuit abuse in Cook County is costing Chicago taxpayers too much money and is adding to Chicago's ballooning budget deficit. As Mayor Rahm Emanuel looks to reduce costs, he should strongly consider ways to reduce litigation costs. Some recommended steps are outlined in the final section of this report.

## “The City That Settles”

In 2010, the City of Naperville, one of the largest Chicago suburbs, spent \$15,375 on judgments and settlements and outside counsel.<sup>36</sup>

By comparison, the City of Chicago spent \$85 million on judgments and settlements and outside counsel in 2010. **In other words, even though Chicago has 18 times as many people as Naperville, the City of Chicago spent 5,528 times what Naperville spent on judgments and settlements and outside legal counsel costs.**<sup>37</sup>

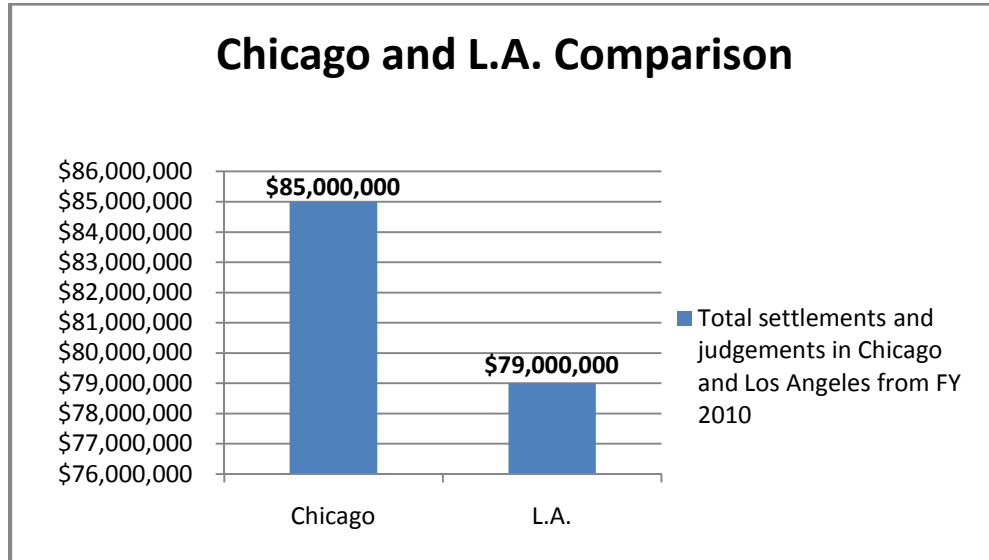


Source: Chicago Law Department Judgment and Settlement Payout requests FY 2010/City of Naperville

In a time of deep recession, when all county and municipal budgets are squeezed, Chicago is spending an unbelievable 5,528 times more money on litigation expenses than nearby Naperville, with whom it competes for residents and businesses.

Comparing Chicago to a smaller city is one thing, but how do the litigation costs in Chicago compare to other large cities?

Los Angeles has a population of 4,094,764 people, which is about 1.4 million more people than the City of Chicago<sup>38</sup> and yet Chicago paid out \$6 million more than the City of Los Angeles spent on litigation costs from in 2010.<sup>39</sup>



Source: Chicago Law Department Judgment and Settlement Payout requests FY 2010/City of Los Angeles

In addition, the City of Chicago paid out an incredible \$26 million in outside legal counsel in 2010, which is about 13 times what the City of Los Angeles paid in outside legal costs last year.<sup>40</sup>

Chicago has built a reputation as “The City That Settles.” The longer local leaders ignore the city’s lawsuit problem, the bigger the problem will become. It is to be expected that a city the size of Chicago might dwarf the litigation costs of a city the size of Naperville, but the City of Chicago should not have significantly higher litigation costs than a city with a population that has 1.4 million more people in it. Chicago’s leaders must take steps to address the amount of money being spent on litigation.

## The Cost of Lawsuit Abuse

This year the City of Chicago did not sponsor a Fourth of July fireworks display as result of economic issues.<sup>41</sup> It is estimated that the move saved the City of Chicago \$110,000 (excluding security costs).<sup>42</sup>

The \$110,000 for fireworks is just a drop in the bucket compared to the \$85 million the City of Chicago spent on judgments, settlements and outside legal costs in 2010.

But that is just one minor example of City programs that and services that could be restored if the City's litigation costs are slashed. Money spent on litigation is money that could be spent for more worthwhile expenses such as hiring more police officers and new teachers. Had the City of Chicago's \$85 million expenditure on litigation costs in 2010 been available for other, more essential projects, the City could have been able to:

- Hire 1,239 police officers;<sup>43</sup>
- Pay for 1,226 teachers;<sup>44</sup>
- Fund the Chicago Alternative Policing Strategy Program (C.A.P.S.) for 17 years;<sup>45</sup>
- Complete rehabilitation projects at 15 high schools;<sup>46</sup>
- Pay for intensive teaching programs for 18,671 students;<sup>47</sup>
- Fund the Chicago Public Schools' Youth Advocacy Program for 17 years;<sup>48</sup>
- Resurface 65 miles of Chicago roads;<sup>49</sup>
- Pay for 1,197 firefighters;<sup>50</sup>
- Hire 1,119 new public health nurses;<sup>51</sup>
- Pay for 2,937 art projects at Chicago senior centers,<sup>52</sup> or
- Plant 155,801 trees.<sup>53</sup>

The sales tax rate in Chicago is now the highest of any major municipality in the country.<sup>54</sup> One reason taxes are so high is because of the out-of-control litigation environment, which essentially creates a "lawsuit tax" on Chicago residents who are being asked to foot the bill for the lawsuits that arrive almost daily against the City of Chicago. Money being spent on litigation means less money for more worthwhile projects such as hiring new teachers or repairing roads.

But beyond lost government services, one of the most profound ways the litigation climate impacts Chicago, as well as the rest of the state, is the job market.

According to Crain's Chicago Business, the top employer in Chicago is the United States government.<sup>55</sup> In fact, the top five employers in Chicago are all government employers.<sup>56</sup>

- **In 2009, Illinois lost 709 manufacturers and <sup>57</sup> in Chicago alone, the number of industrial jobs fell 8 percent.<sup>58</sup>**
- **In November 2009, Illinois had 5.7 million nonfarm jobs, down from the 6 million nonfarm jobs in the state in 1999.<sup>59</sup>**
- **While Illinois lost 367,000 jobs in 2009, the rest of the country gained 1 million jobs.<sup>60</sup>**
- **The unemployment rate in Cook County is currently at 10.8 percent.<sup>61</sup>**

While the litigation environment is not the only the reason for the lackluster economy, it clearly is a factor. With more and more jobs disappearing, taxpayers need elected officials to make Chicago and Cook County a destination for jobs and opportunities – not a hotspot for lawsuit tourists.

## Recommendations for Reform

**This report is not intended to serve as an indictment of the City of Chicago. Rather the purpose of this report is to encourage Mayor Rahm Emanuel and other community leaders to take concrete steps to change the City’s costly reputation as “The City That Settles.” Mayor Emanuel should be applauded for working vigilantly to cut waste in the City’s budget, and he should look no further than the Chicago Police Department’s policy for a way to sharply reduce the amount of taxpayer money wasted on lawsuits.**

In 2009, the Chicago Police Department and the City’s Corporation Counsel office made the decision to adopt a new policy of fighting, and no longer quickly settling, all lawsuits filed against the Police Department. And that aggressive, common sense policy worked: According to a report the City’s Law Department submitted to the City Council last fall, **the number of lawsuits filed against the Police Department dropped 50 percent from 2009 to 2010, and in lawsuits involving payouts under \$100,000, the City’s liability costs had been reduced by more than \$7 million.**<sup>62</sup>

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Chicago could send a clear message to personal injury lawyers and potential plaintiffs merely looking for jackpot justice that lawsuits will be fought aggressively and not quickly settled. The longer the City fails to act on this important issue, the longer there will be potential plaintiffs and aggressive personal injury trial lawyers who will continue to target city taxpayers’ pockets with frivolous lawsuits against the City.

But as Mayor Emanuel faces the problem of costly lawsuits filed against the City, he is already moving to cut litigation costs in another area. He appointed Stephen Patton to be the City's new Corporation Counsel, and Patton has said one of his goals in his new position is to cut down on outside counsel costs as a means of saving taxpayers money.

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“I want to look at ways we can provide the same or better representation at lower costs.”<sup>64</sup>

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As stated earlier, the City of Chicago spent a whopping \$26 million on outside legal counsel in 2010 compared to the City of Los Angeles, which spent just over \$2 million in 2010 on outside legal counsel and to Naperville, which spent a paltry \$375 for outside legal counsel.<sup>65</sup> Clearly there is a need to address the amount of money spent on outside legal counsel.

It is encouraging that Mayor Emanuel's handpicked Corporation Counsel is looking to cut litigation costs. The next step is for the mayor to ask each of his department heads to take the same common sense, cost-cutting attitude towards lawsuit costs. By adopting the Police Department's aggressive lawsuit-fighting policy citywide, Chicago can serve notice that it is no longer an easy mark for aggressive plaintiffs and personal injury lawyers and can shed its budget-busting reputation as “The City That Settles.”

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Noreen S. Ahmed-Ullah, “Chicago Public Schools to cut central office’s budget by \$75 million” (ChicagoTribune.com, June 3, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Azam Ahemed, “CPS won’t raise elementary class size, will restore kindergarten” (ChicagoBreakingNews.com, June 28, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> Fran Speilman, “Chicago cancels July 4 fireworks, leaves show to Navy Pier” (ChicagoSuntimes.com, June 1, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> Charles Thomas, “Rahm Emanuel announces \$75 million in budget cuts” (ABCLocal.go.com, May 17, 2011).

<sup>5</sup> 2010 Judgment and Settlement Payout Requests (CityofChicago.org).

<sup>6</sup> Kristen Mack and Hal Dardick, “Emanuel to send out layoff notices today” (ChicagoTribune.com, July 15, 2011).

<sup>7</sup> Ameet Sachdev, “Chicago Corporation Counsel Seeks to bring more work in House” (ChicagoTribune.com, May 17, 2011).

<sup>8</sup> Harris Interactive, 2010 U.S. Chamber of Commerce State Liability Systems Ranking Study (March 22, 2010).

<sup>9</sup> American Tort Reform Association, 2010 Judicial Hellholes Report (JudicialHellholes.org, Dec. 14, 2010).

<sup>10</sup> Press Release, “U.S. Census Bureau Delivers Illinois’ 2010 Census Population Totals, Including First Look at Race and Hispanic Origin Data for Legislative Redistricting” (2010Census.gov, Feb. 15, 2011).

<sup>11</sup> City of Naperville Freedom of Information Act Request, June 6, 2011.

<sup>12</sup> Evann Gastaldo, “Chicago’s population dips below 1920 level” (Newser.com, Feb. 16, 2011).

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<sup>14</sup> 2009 City of Chicago, Annual Appropriation Ordinance pg. 137 (CityofChicago.org).

<sup>15</sup> Careers at CPS (CPS-humanresources.org)

<sup>16</sup> 2011 City of Chicago Program and Budget Summary, Pg. 149 (CityofChicago.org).

<sup>17</sup> City of Chicago Contracts and Awards, Contract: 24349 Specification Number: 95915 (webapps.cityofchicago.org).

<sup>18</sup> Chicago Public Proposed Budget 2010-11, Pg. 113 (CPS.edu).

<sup>19</sup> Chicago Public Proposed Budget 2010-11, Pg. 355 (CPS.edu).

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- <sup>20</sup> Jon Hilkevitch, “Federal funding pours into potholes, road resurfacing, reconstruction” (ChicagoTribune.com, May 11, 2009).
- <sup>21</sup> 2009 City of Chicago, Annual Appropriation Ordinance pg. 174 (CityofChicago.org).
- <sup>22</sup> 2009 City of Chicago, Annual Appropriation Ordinance pg. 111 (CityofChicago.org).
- <sup>23</sup> Forthcoming Public Arts Projects (CityofChicago.org).
- <sup>24</sup> Department of Streets and Sanitation Bureau of Forestry Tree Guarantee, Audit 2010, Pg. 2 (ChicagoInspectorGeneral.org).
- <sup>25</sup> Frank Main, “‘Astonishing’ drop in lawsuits against city cops” (Suntimes.com, Nov. 9, 2010).
- <sup>26</sup> IBID
- <sup>27</sup> Harris Interactive, 2010 U.S. Chamber of Commerce State Liability Systems Ranking Study (March 22, 2010).
- <sup>28</sup> American Tort Reform Association, 2010 Judicial Hellholes Report (JudicialHellholes.org, Dec. 14, 2010).
- <sup>29</sup> American Tort Reform Association, Judicial Hellholes Report (2005-2008).
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- <sup>32</sup> Shia Kapos, “Attorney Carey Stein files suit to get money back for daughter's failed marriage” (ChicagoBusiness.com, April 7, 2010).
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- <sup>40</sup> City of Los Angeles City Attorney’s Office Freedom of Information Act request, June 6, 2011
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- <sup>43</sup> 2009 City of Chicago, Annual Appropriation Ordinance pg. 137 (CityofChicago.org).
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- <sup>50</sup> 2009 City of Chicago, Annual Appropriation Ordinance pg. 174 (CityofChicago.org).
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- <sup>54</sup> Lawrence Summers, “Major metropolitan sales Tax Rates” (TaxFoundation.org, Aug. 19, 2010).
- <sup>55</sup> Crain’s Chicago Business staff, “Chicago’s Largest Employers” (ChicagoBusiness.com, Mar. 22, 2010).
- <sup>56</sup> IBID
- <sup>57</sup> Mary Ellen Podmolik, “Illinois loses 709 Manufacturers in 2009” (ChicagoTribune.com, Jan. 11, 2010).
- <sup>58</sup> IBID
- <sup>59</sup> Chicago Tribune staff, “The jobs crisis” (ChicagoTribune.com, Jan. 8, 2010).
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- <sup>61</sup> Illinois Department of Employment Security, “Local Area Unemployment Statistics” (lmi.ides.state.il.us, May, 2011).

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<sup>62</sup> Frank Main, “‘Astonishing’ drop in lawsuits against city cops” (Suntimes.com, Nov. 9, 2010).

<sup>63</sup> IBID American Tort Reform Association, 2008 Judicial Hellholes Report (2008).

<sup>64</sup> Ameet Sachdev, “Chicago Corporation Counsel Seeks to bring more work in House” (ChicagoTribune.com, May 17, 2011).

<sup>65</sup> City of Naperville Freedom of Information Act Request, June 6, 2011.