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Independent Oversight for Los Angeles: Where an Inspector General Fits

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Executive Summary

Los Angeles already has auditors, commissions, and oversight bodies, but homelessness spending routinely crosses institutional boundaries that none of them is built to follow. This article asks not whether Los Angeles needs an Inspector General, but what kind of independent oversight its homelessness system actually requires.

San Francisco's Proposition C offers the clearest recent precedent: voters placed a new Inspector General inside the Controller's Office rather than creating a standalone agency, pairing investigative authority — subpoena power, search warrants, mandatory employee cooperation — with an existing Controller framework that already benefits from protected baseline funding. BeaconStone believes Los Angeles should seriously consider strengthening its own independently elected Controller's Office along similar lines, rather than building an entirely new bureaucracy.

BeaconStone's recommendation rests on five design principles any model should be tested against: follow the money, follow the claims, follow the outcomes, follow up, and make the results public. A homelessness oversight function should be able to trace public dollars across departments, contractors, and subcontractors; verify performance claims against underlying evidence; track whether recommendations are implemented; and publish findings in terms the public can understand.

As Los Angeles continues its Charter Reform process, BeaconStone urges the Charter Reform Commission and City Council to evaluate any Inspector General proposal against these criteria — independence, records access, jurisdiction that follows public money, reliable funding, freedom from political interference, and a mechanism for public follow-up — rather than treating the title "Inspector General" as a solution in itself.

Los Angeles Does Not Suffer From a Lack of Oversight

The City has auditors, commissions, oversight committees, compliance requirements, performance reports and multiple institutions charged with protecting public resources. Yet when it comes to homelessness, accountability remains fragmented across a system in which money, responsibility and service delivery routinely cross organizational boundaries. That distinction matters.

The challenge is not simply whether Los Angeles needs more oversight. The more useful question is whether it has the right kind of independent oversight for a system this large, decentralized and consequential.

An Inspector General could help fill that gap. But creating an Inspector General is not as simple as adding another office to Los Angeles government. Where the office sits, what it can investigate, how far its jurisdiction extends, how its independence is protected and how it interacts with existing oversight institutions may ultimately matter more than the title itself. Fortunately, Los Angeles does not have to invent the concept from scratch.

There Is More Than One Inspector General Model

"Inspector General" describes a function, not a single organizational structure. Existing models illustrate several different approaches.

Departmental oversight. An Inspector General can oversee a particular government department or institution. Los Angeles already uses this model through the Police Commission's Office of the Inspector General, which provides independent oversight of the Los Angeles Police Department.

Program or funding oversight. An Inspector General can also be attached to a specific public initiative. Measure ULA provides a Los Angeles example — the measure established a Citizen Oversight Committee and an Inspector General serving as its lead staff member to support oversight of programs financed by ULA revenue.

Public-integrity oversight. An Inspector General can have a broader mandate to investigate fraud, waste, abuse and misconduct across government.

Financial and performance oversight. An Inspector General can also be integrated into an existing auditing institution, combining investigative authority with financial auditing, performance analysis and access to government records. San Francisco has recently adopted an important version of this last approach.

Each model solves a different accountability problem. The question for Los Angeles is therefore not simply *should Los Angeles have an Inspector General?* It is: what accountability problem are we trying to solve, and which model gives an independent oversight institution the tools necessary to solve it?

Los Angeles Already Accepts the Principle of Independent Oversight

Inspector Generals are not foreign to Los Angeles government. The Los Angeles Police Commission's Office of the Inspector General provides independent oversight and analysis of the LAPD. Measure ULA separately established an Inspector General role connected to its Citizen Oversight Committee. Los Angeles is also engaged in a broader reconsideration of its governing structure through the Charter Reform process, including proposals involving government accountability and Inspector General functions.

The existence of these models establishes an important principle: when public power, public money or public confidence warrants independent scrutiny, Los Angeles already recognizes the legitimacy of creating institutions specifically designed to provide it.

The debate over homelessness accountability therefore need not begin by asking whether independent oversight is appropriate. A better question is whether the structure of Los Angeles' homelessness system demands a form of oversight specifically capable of following money, contracts, performance claims and outcomes across institutional boundaries.

San Francisco Offers an Important Model

In November 2024, San Francisco voters approved Proposition C, amending the City Charter to establish an Inspector General within the Controller's Office. The measure received approximately 61 percent of the vote, according to certified election results.

Its organizational placement is significant. Rather than creating an entirely separate agency, San Francisco placed the Inspector General within an established institution responsible for auditing, financial integrity and government performance. The Inspector General can initiate and lead investigations involving potential fraud, waste and abuse and coordinate investigations with other government accountability institutions.

Proposition C also expanded the Controller's investigative powers, including the ability to subpoena witnesses and compel evidence related to City functions and activities — including from people and organizations that have, or are seeking, contracts, grants, leases, loans or other agreements with the City. The Controller may also execute search warrants where permitted by state law, and City employees have a duty to cooperate with Inspector General investigations.

The structure also benefits from an unusual degree of funding protection. San Francisco's City Services Auditor, established through an earlier voter-approved Charter provision, receives a baseline equal to two-tenths of one percent of the City's overall budget. The new Inspector General function was incorporated into that existing accountability framework.

The result is a powerful combination: institutional independence, access to records, investigative authority, jurisdiction extending beyond government employees and a protected source of resources. Those characteristics are more important than the title "Inspector General." They determine whether an oversight institution can actually do its job.

Why Homelessness Presents a Different Accountability Problem

Los Angeles' homelessness system is unusually difficult to oversee because public money does not remain within a single government department. It moves. Funding can originate with the federal government, the State of California, Los Angeles County or the City of Los Angeles. It can move through government departments, regional structures, nonprofit service providers, housing organizations, contractors, subcontractors and vendors before services ultimately reach people experiencing homelessness. Responsibility becomes distributed along the way.

Traditional auditing can tell the public a great deal about what happens inside a particular government agency. But accountability becomes more difficult when responsibility crosses institutional boundaries. That is why jurisdiction matters.

An effective homelessness accountability system should be capable of following public money wherever the legal authority attached to that money permits it to go. If an organization receives City taxpayer dollars to provide homelessness services, financial and performance records associated with that public funding should be subject to independent examination. If that organization subcontracts portions of the work, appropriate accountability requirements should follow the funding downstream. And when a publicly funded program reports that it has achieved particular results, an independent institution should have the ability to examine the evidence underlying those claims. The principle is straightforward: jurisdiction should follow the money.

Following the Money Is Only Half the Job

Financial accountability is essential, but it is not sufficient. A homelessness program could conceivably spend every dollar exactly as authorized and still fail to accomplish what policymakers intended. That creates a second accountability question: who independently verifies performance?

Government agencies and contractors routinely publish statistics describing their activities. Those statistics may be completely accurate — but activities are not necessarily outcomes. Beds provided, outreach contacts made, referrals issued and people enrolled in programs are meaningful measures of work performed. They do not necessarily tell taxpayers whether people remained housed, whether services reached the intended population, whether an intervention produced lasting improvement or whether one approach worked better than another.

Independent oversight should therefore examine both sides of the equation: what did we spend, and what did we achieve? And ultimately: did the expenditure produce the outcome the public was told to expect?

The people running a program should not have exclusive control over how its success is defined and presented. That principle does not presume corruption, dishonesty or incompetence — it recognizes a basic feature of institutions: organizations naturally develop their own metrics, incentives, assumptions and definitions of success. Independent verification protects taxpayers. It also protects effective programs by providing credible evidence that they actually work.

Where Should This Function Sit?

This is where the policy discussion becomes more complicated. Los Angeles has several potential models: a broad, standalone Inspector General providing citywide public-integrity oversight; an Inspector General associated with another independent commission; a specialized homelessness Inspector General established separately; or enhanced investigative and performance-oversight capabilities placed within the independently elected Los Angeles City Controller's Office.

There are legitimate arguments for each structure. BeaconStone believes the last option deserves particularly serious consideration. The City Controller is already Los Angeles' elected auditor and chief accounting officer. The office conducts financial and performance audits and maintains a Fraud, Waste and Abuse function, and has participated extensively in the current Charter Reform process.

The Controller's office has already demonstrated why the question of investigative authority matters. In 2024, a dispute arose after the office sought non-financial records from a City-funded homelessness-services vendor as part of a fraud, waste, and abuse investigation — a conflict that drew City Council attention and underscored how much an Inspector General's practical authority depends on its subpoena power.

San Francisco's experience therefore deserves close examination. Rather than building an entirely new bureaucracy, Los Angeles could consider strengthening an existing independent accountability institution and giving it additional investigative tools appropriate to the complexity of modern government contracting.

But institutional placement should not be predetermined. The better test is functional. Whatever model Los Angeles ultimately chooses should be evaluated against several questions: Does it have sufficient independence? Can it obtain the records necessary to conduct meaningful investigations? Can its jurisdiction follow public funding beyond City departments when legally permissible? Can it independently evaluate performance claims and outcomes? Does it have reliable funding? Can it publish findings without political interference? And can it follow up to determine whether recommendations were actually implemented?

The Los Angeles Problem Extends Beyond City Hall

There is another complication that no serious proposal can ignore. Los Angeles homelessness policy is not controlled by the City alone. Los Angeles County operates enormous health, behavioral-health and social-service systems. Regional homelessness institutions, state and federal agencies, nonprofit providers and private contractors add additional layers.

A Los Angeles City Charter amendment cannot simply grant a City Inspector General unlimited authority over independent County departments, state agencies or other governments. Any proposal that pretends otherwise would create expectations the institution could not legally fulfill. But that does not make meaningful oversight impossible — the City's strongest leverage is the public money and contractual authority it controls.

City contracts, grants and funding agreements can potentially require recipients to maintain appropriate records, provide standardized performance information and cooperate with authorized audits and investigations as conditions of receiving public funds. Where legally appropriate, those requirements can extend through subcontracts. That suggests another important principle: accountability should travel with public money.

Over time, agreements between the City, County and other governmental institutions could potentially expand information sharing and coordinated oversight. The goal should not be jurisdictional empire-building — it should be eliminating accountability gaps created when public money crosses institutional lines.

A New Inspector General Should Not Become Another Silo

Los Angeles already has auditors, ethics officials, departmental oversight bodies, law-enforcement investigators, prosecutors and specialized accountability structures. A new or expanded Inspector General should not duplicate all of them. Its mandate should require coordination and referral: suspected criminal conduct can be referred to appropriate prosecutors, ethics matters can be coordinated with the Ethics Commission, and department-specific issues can be shared with existing oversight institutions. San Francisco explicitly built this principle into its model by requiring coordination between the Inspector General and other accountability agencies. Los Angeles should do the same.

The distinctive responsibility of a homelessness accountability function should be systemic: following public money across programs and contractors, investigating potential fraud, waste and abuse, testing reported performance against underlying evidence, identifying structural weaknesses, and explaining its findings publicly. That last responsibility matters enormously — accountability is of limited value if only government insiders can understand it.

Oversight Cannot End When the Report Is Published

Government frequently produces excellent reports. Recommendations are issued. Officials respond. Headlines appear. Then public attention moves elsewhere. Three years later, a much harder question often remains unanswered: what happened? Were the recommendations implemented? Did the reform work? Did the same problem recur? Did outcomes improve?

An effective Inspector General should therefore do more than investigate and publish. Recommendations should be tracked publicly. Agencies should report whether recommendations were accepted, rejected or implemented. Significant findings should receive follow-up review. Public-facing data should make it increasingly possible for residents, journalists, policymakers and researchers to understand not merely what government promised to do, but what happened afterward. Accountability requires memory.

Oversight Should Identify Success, Too

Independent oversight is sometimes portrayed primarily as a mechanism for finding wrongdoing. That is too narrow. Los Angeles also needs credible evidence about what works. If one housing intervention produces substantially better long-term outcomes than another, policymakers should know. If a nonprofit provider consistently achieves strong results at reasonable cost, independent verification strengthens the case for investing in it. If an innovative program succeeds, credible outside evaluation can help it survive changes in political leadership.

An effective accountability system therefore does more than expose failure — it helps government identify success, learn from it and direct scarce resources toward interventions that produce results. That is particularly important in homelessness policy, where every ineffective expenditure represents not merely wasted money but a missed opportunity to help someone leave homelessness.

The Opportunity Before Los Angeles

Los Angeles is already reconsidering its governing Charter. It already operates Inspector General models. Its elected Controller already performs financial, performance and fraud-related oversight. And San Francisco has now created a stronger Controller-based Inspector General model that Los Angeles can observe, evaluate and learn from.

At the same time, homelessness remains one of the region's most difficult public-policy challenges and one of its most significant tests of public confidence. That creates an opportunity. Los Angeles does not necessarily need another institution whose purpose is to manage homelessness. It needs an institution — or a stronger version of an existing one — capable of independently examining the institutions that do.

The exact architecture deserves serious debate. So do subpoena authority, jurisdiction, appointment procedures, funding protections, relationships with County government and safeguards for institutional independence. BeaconStone does not begin with the assumption that there is only one acceptable organizational chart. We begin with a set of accountability principles: follow the money, follow the claims, follow the outcomes, follow up, and make the results public.

Independent oversight should not exist simply to tell Los Angeles what went wrong. At its best, it can tell us what works, what does not, why — and what government should do differently as a result. For a crisis this consequential, that is not an unreasonable expectation. It is the minimum the public should demand.

Sources & Further Reading

BeaconStone Foundation believes public-policy arguments should be grounded in evidence that readers can examine for themselves. The following primary and official sources provide background for the Inspector General structures, authorities and Los Angeles governance issues discussed in this article.

- **San Francisco Proposition C (November 2024)** — San Francisco voters approved Proposition C to amend the City Charter and establish an Inspector General within the Controller's Office. Certified results: San Francisco Department of Elections
- **San Francisco Controller — Inspector General Implementation Status Update, July 17, 2025** — Describes implementation of Proposition C, investigative authority, subpoena powers, and coordination with other investigative agencies. Read the report
- **San Francisco Charter — City Services Auditor** — Establishes the Controller's auditing framework and baseline funding mechanism (0.2% of the City's annual budget). View the Charter provision
- **Los Angeles Police Commission — Office of the Inspector General** — Los Angeles' existing Inspector General model for independent LAPD oversight. oig.lacity.org
- **City of Los Angeles — Measure ULA Citizen Oversight Committee** — Established a Citizen Oversight Committee and Inspector General structure for ULA-funded programs. housing2.lacity.org
- **Office of Los Angeles City Controller** — LA's independently elected auditor and chief accounting officer. controller.lacity.gov
- **Los Angeles City Council File 24-0636** — Primary City records documenting the 2024 subpoena dispute referenced above. View the file
- **Los Angeles Charter Reform Commission** — Ongoing consideration of government accountability, Controller authority, and Inspector General concepts. reformlacharter.lacity.gov

These examples do not establish that Los Angeles should simply copy another city's Inspector General. They demonstrate that different jurisdictions have developed different institutional structures to solve different accountability problems. BeaconStone will continue updating these source notes as Los Angeles Charter Reform develops and additional Inspector General proposals become available.