

Despite pandemic, agency handling city fines still going strong

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Joni Kletter is not superstitious.

“But maybe I should be,” said the city’s new commissioner of the Office of Administrative Trials and Hearings.

Kletter was appointed to helm the somewhat obscure, but crucial, agency that adjudicates all city-issued summonses on Friday, March 13.

Her first week on the job was an orientation by fire.

Monday, the day city schools closed due to the pandemic, was her first full day in the role. She spent three days in her new office before the [pandemic](#) brought the entire city to a grinding halt.

“We had a few internal meetings Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday. I did my best just to get up to speed on everything that was going on,” said Kletter, [who will](#)

[be the special guest speaker at Crain's New York Business's forum on July 21st.](#)

Unlike many other city agencies, OATH did not shutdown.

The agency has been going full throttle throughout the outbreak, processing an average of 1,000 summonses a day and holding more than 14,000 remote hearings for the past four months.

“We had to figure out how we were going to transition from all of these in-person hearings that we normally do in five different borough offices to an online system, and we had to do it quickly,” she said.

Some ideas were better than others.

“During some of those meetings we were talking about having tape recorders next to our cell phones to be able to record the hearings because they have to be recorded,” Kletter said. Instead, they contracted with a tech company that was able to record the calls and organize hearing participants.

Not even a pandemic can stop city inspectors from their appointed duties, and the Department of Sanitation is no different.

So most of the hearings have dealt with sanitation fines to building owners and co-ops.

The good news for property owners is that OATH is an impartial arbiter of city rules and regulations.

Most of the summonses— 70% of the sanitation fines, for example—were dismissed.

“We really encourage folks that challenge the summons to participate in our hearings,” Kletter said. “Especially now, because it's so easy to do. You only need to pick up the phone ... and schedule a hearing and engage in our process.”

Kletter may be new to the job, but she's old hat when it comes to the law. After clerking for two judges in Brooklyn federal court she went on to practice labor law for the next eight and half years, often appearing before the administrative law judges to defend city employees accused of violating city rules. In 2015, she went to work in the Mayor's Office of City Legislative

Affairs, which she calls “the most difficult job I'll ever have.” It was there she hammered out language in council bills and worked with various city agency heads before they went before the council.

“Those ... are budgetary and legislative hearings on everything from misconduct to homelessness, to budget to child welfare issues and that was just an incredibly challenging, but fascinating, job,” she said.

When Kletter is not wrestling a large city bureaucracy through a pandemic, she spends her time in Brooklyn, where she said playing with her kids in their backyard has helped cope with the lockdown.

“I just try to get outside and play with them,” she said “We have a little pool that we set up, and I entertain my kids as much as I can so they're not just watching television all day.”