

GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
FIRE AND EMERGENCY MEDICAL SERVICES DEPARTMENT



Fiscal Year 2020
Budget Oversight Hearing

Testimony of
Gregory M. Dean
Fire and EMS Chief

Before the
Committee on the Judiciary and Public Safety
Council of the District of Columbia
The Honorable Charles Allen, Chairperson

John A. Wilson Building
Room 120
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20004
April 24, 2019
1:00 p.m.

Good afternoon, Chairman Allen, councilmembers, and staff. I am Gregory M. Dean, Chief of the D.C. Fire and Emergency Medical Services Department (the Department). I am here today to testify in support of “A Fair Shot,” Mayor Muriel Bowser’s Fiscal Year 2020 (FY 2020) Budget. For those of you watching from home, my testimony is available on our website at fems.DC.gov.

Recently, Mayor Bowser presented the FY 2020 Budget and Financial Plan, which marks the District’s 24th consecutive balanced budget. This budget does more to make Washington, D.C. a place where people of all backgrounds and in all stages of life are able to live and thrive by making key investments in our public safety, infrastructure, education, affordable housing, the provision of health and human services, economic opportunity, and seniors. These investments reflect the key priorities identified by District residents at Budget Engagement Forums and telephone town halls held during the budget formulation process.

When I appeared before you in February, I testified about our progress in FY 2018 and FY 2019, as well as the ambitious agenda our Department has moving forward. I am pleased to tell you that Mayor Bowser’s FY 2020 budget allows us to keep this agenda on track. My testimony today focuses on how we will use these resources to maintain progress for our Department and also address other historic challenges.

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The Mayor’s FY 2020 gross operating budget for the Department is \$282 million. This is a 9.1 percent increase over the FY 2019 approved gross budget of \$258.5 million. The budget is comprised of \$279.8 million in Local funds, \$1.9 million in Special Purpose Revenue funds, and \$217,135 in Intra-District funds.

The Department’s budget includes the following program enhancements:

- A one-time capital expenditure of \$11.54 million for the purchase of a state-of-the-art Self-Contained Breathing Apparatus system;
- An increase of \$3.45 million and 45.0 FTEs (Full-Time Equivalents) to support an addition of four (4) transport units; and
- An increase of \$250,000 to support employee wellness.

The Department’s operating budget includes several adjustments to reflect actual costs associated with Department functions, which include:

- A net increase of \$11.2 million in local funds, plus \$1 million available in special purpose revenue, to continue our contract with American Medical Response (AMR) to provide transport of Basic Life Support (BLS) patients;
- An increase of \$2 million, across multiple programs, to align the Fringe Benefit budget with projected costs;
- A net increase of \$17.6 million, primarily to reflect the cost of negotiated pay increases for operational employees; and

- A one-time increase of \$1.7 million to cover costs associated with the District's DC Water contract.

The Department's apparatus capital budget for FY 2020 includes \$21.93 million and \$65,407,436 total during the six-year financial plan. This funding provides for the purchase of six engines, four ladder trucks, and ten ambulances in the next fiscal year, as well as a number of specialty service vehicles including rescue squads and command apparatus.

The Department's FY 2020 to FY 2025 capital budget also includes facilities allocations, including: \$3.75 million for a renovation of Engine 23 in Foggy Bottom; \$6.75 million toward the relocation of Engine 26 in Brentwood; and \$3.37 million in scheduled capital improvements at various stations, a \$1 million increase over last year's budget for this purpose.

I would like to highlight several of the proposals contained in this year's capital budget proposal and update you on how we continue to enhance services to our residents and visitors.

A. Self-Contained Breathing Apparatus (SCBA)

Mayor Bowser's FY2020 capital budget includes one-time FY 2020 funding for the purchase of Self-Contained Breathing Apparatus (SCBA) in the amount of \$11.54 million dollars.

The Department must replace its inventory of SCBA, the primary personal protective equipment for firefighters that provides them with a source of clean air while they work in toxic environments like fires and hazardous materials scenes. This equipment is essential to firefighter safety in all situations that pose imminent danger to life and health. Our existing inventory will reach the end of its service life at the end of calendar year 2019.

There is no choice but to fully replace the entire inventory. The new inventory will be National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) compliant and interoperable with that of neighboring jurisdictions, with a life expectancy of 15 years with proper maintenance. To remain compliant with NFPA standards, the Department's new SCBA will need to become operational in January 2020. The Department has developed an aggressive implementation timeline and is working closely with the Office of Contracting and Procurement to ensure that the procurement of this equipment can begin immediately upon final approval of the Mayor's FY 2020 budget. Due to the size of this purchase, we anticipate that the contract will come before the Council for active approval upon its return from summer recess. We look forward to working with you and the members of the Committee to approve this contract.

Our goal is for the equipment to be delivered in November 2019. The Training Academy is finalizing its training schedule to ensure that over 1,800 operational employees receive hands-on instructions on the new equipment prior to deployment.

B. Transport Unit Staffing for 45 FTEs

The proposed budget includes \$3.45 million to support the staffing of four additional ambulance transport units to our daily operational deployment, totaling 43 units per shift. This enhancement is prorated and includes vacancy savings to hire 30 Firefighter/EMTs and 15 Firefighter/Paramedics. The Department anticipates it will be able to train these additional FTEs within its existing training calendar by ensuring that each class begins at capacity. The additional FTEs will be brought into operations throughout the latter part of FY 2020. The Department's existing fleet of ambulances will support the addition of these in-service units without additional apparatus purchases within FY 2020.

Mayor Bowser has prioritized improving access to care across the District. FEMS has undertaken several initiatives since 2015 to improve EMS performance. These efforts have included the use of a third-party ambulance provider to supplement our resources dedicated to transporting and treating Basic Life Support (BLS) or low acuity patients. These investments have improved the performance of the Fire and EMS Department across the board: increased frequency, quality, and number of EMS training hours; improved ambulance response times; created an ambulance reserve fleet; maintained vehicles more effectively; and improved patient outcomes. The District's cardiac arrest survival rate has increased every year since Mayor Bowser's first year in office.

Nonetheless, the District's EMS call volume remains one of the highest per capita call volumes in the nation. With this enhancement, we seek to absorb the increasing call volume from the District's growing population and help address increased hospital drop time and unit availability challenges associated with the closure of Providence Hospital. The Department will locate these units in areas where they are most likely to impact persistent high call volume and longer response times.

C. Overtime and Hiring

The Department has made significant progress in reducing its ongoing overtime costs in FY19. As you are aware, structural factors drive the Department's overtime spending, namely Paid Family Leave (PFL) and the need to fill every apparatus seat vacancy during every shift. We continue to address these challenges through our laser focus on hiring and effective management of our resources.

Hiring: We believe the reduction in overtime spending year-to-date is due, in part, to our continued progress hiring Firefighter/EMTs and Firefighter/Paramedics over and above attrition. We have increased our operational strength every year since FY 2016.

Paid Family Leave (PFL): PFL has had an outsized impact on the amount of leave used by FEMS employees since the program began and still accounts for a significant amount of the Department's overtime spending. Unlike most other agencies in the District, when FEMS operations employees go out on PFL, each vacated apparatus seat must be backfilled. These seats are filled on overtime at 1.5x pay.

Since FY18, the Department has put management controls into place to reduce spending associated with PFL and to ensure that the program is being implemented consistent with the law. These controls include requiring members to make efforts to schedule leave in advance whenever possible and encouraging members to schedule appointments outside of their regular tours of duty. We continue to monitor the program, and the results are encouraging. Based on year-to-date data, we project a reduction in PFL usage in FY19 and that the average number of PFL hours used per month will decrease for the first time since the inception of the program.

D. Apparatus

At our Performance Oversight Hearing last month, I testified about the significant progress that we are making in the purchase and delivery of new apparatus. Planning for the replacement and delivery of apparatus can be difficult to explain given the significant amount of time it takes from the dollars appearing in a budget to a new piece of apparatus being in service in a station. Mayor Bowser's FY 2020 budget continues to deliver on her commitment to replacing our aged fleet and to building a sustainable apparatus replacement program.

We have already achieved this with our ambulances and, within the next few months, will have done so with our engines. Last month, the new 95' Seagrave Tower Ladder went into service. By the end of FY19, we expect to begin to take delivery of the three FY 2018 ladders, with another four scheduled to be delivered in calendar year 2020. We are finalizing bid proposals on our Rescue Squad vehicles and will be prepared to begin to replace that portion of our fleet in the next fiscal year. This new apparatus should increase the Department's fire apparatus reserve capacity, as well as the "up time" for engines and ladder trucks.

In order to sustain a replacement program, however, we cannot let up with regular, consistent purchases of each type of apparatus over time. It may be tempting to change, for example, an allocation of 12 ambulances to move up the purchase of two ladder trucks a year early. This would set off a cycle that is hard to remedy in the "out" years, however. In just a few years, 10 percent of our ambulance fleet would be out of cycle for replacement, and we would have to buy twice as many ambulances all at once when it comes time to replace them. This would be in addition to replacing the ladders. Ambulances are workhorses, running 24/7/365, and they wear out quickly. In this hypothetical, the Department would be put into a position we have been before: to keep using what would by then be our oldest, most-used, and out-of-warranty ambulances without having purchased the newer replacements needed in the out years.

The apparatus replacement program is designed to allow the Department to purchase as many of each type of vehicle as practicable while also "smoothing out," or avoiding the need to order complete batches of equipment in the same year. A vehicle fleet comprised of vehicles of different ages permits replacement on a regular, manageable rate and allows the fleet to be able to absorb any number of contingencies. We are on track, and I thank the Mayor and the Council for giving the Department the resources it needs to continue this program.

E. New Fleet Facility

The Capital Improvement Plan includes \$43.5 million beginning in FY21 for the costs associated with the construction of a new FEMS Fleet Maintenance facility at DC Village. This new facility will address capacity constraints and deficiencies with the current 1960s-era facility. As you know, Mr. Chairman, this will also allow the current site to be repurposed for other uses.

The new facility will provide the FEMS Apparatus Division the capacity to perform the mandated preventative maintenance, repairs, commissioning, and other vehicle upgrades required by the manufacturer. This project will extend the life cycle of all of FEMS vehicles and keep the fleet in front-line service. In addition, it will allow FEMS to store enough vehicles in a “ready reserve” status so, when vehicles go out of service, another vehicle will be on standby to allow the company to return to active duty.

The Department of General Services commissioned a site feasibility study for this project, which the Department will provide to the Committee. The feasibility study found that the site at the DC Village meets all program requirements at a lower cost and a better value than the alternatives presented. The 278,784 square feet (6.4 acres) site is adjacent to the WMATA Shepherd Parkway Metrobus facility and the D.C. Impound Lot. It is currently in use as a bus parking facility for the Office of the State Superintendent of Education. This function could be retained on site if reconfigured. The Department looks forward to continuing to work with the City Administrator, the Department of General Services, our labor partners, and this Committee as planning for the new facility progresses.

I would also note on this topic that in the coming weeks, the Department’s new reserve storage facility at Adams Place, NE will become operational. I conducted a walk-through of the facility earlier this month and we are awaiting a Certificate of Occupancy. This facility will bring immediate relief to the existing Fleet Maintenance Division by relocating out-of-service apparatus from the roads around the Half Street, SW facility.

F. Wellness

The proposed budget also includes \$250,000 for continuation of the Department’s employee wellness initiative. This proposed contract will help the agency provide programming to its staff focused on strength and conditioning, nutrition, sleep, stress mitigation, and resilience for post-traumatic stress. This is expected to result in net savings by reducing costs of injuries and back-filled salary costs. The Department was able to take advantage of this program in the past, and it was very well-received by our members. We are pleased that it will operate again in FY 2020.

G. Nurse Triage

The *Right Care, Right Now* Nurse Triage Line reached its one-year milestone on April 19. This program transfers 911 callers with minor injuries and illnesses to a nurse, who assesses the patient then refers eligible patients to either self-care or to walk-in appointments at neighborhood clinics using non-emergency transportation. Our goals with this initiative are two-

fold: first, to get patients with non-emergency conditions to more appropriate health care than hospital emergency rooms and, second, to preserve the Department's and hospitals' resources for those patients with life threatening illnesses and injuries.

We are pleased to report that we think those patients who are referred to a clinic or self-care are getting a better health care experience than they would in an emergency department. The overwhelming majority of comments from patients the nurse speaks to within 24 hours of their call to 911 are positive. The patients are getting fast, non-emergency transportation and talk to the nurse of their plans to rely on the clinics for non-emergency care in the future. This is the long-term culture change that we are working towards for thousands of patients across the city. That scale of change will take time, but as long as this program remains a safe and positive experience for patients, it will be worth it. Thus far, we have diverted 1,200 patients from emergency rooms.

I have noted to the Committee before that the numbers of patients referred to the program has been lower than we anticipated. We continue to review the program's operations during the first year to determine ways to increase the volume of calls that are referred to the nurse. In March, we began the second phase of the pilot to allow our field providers to refer patients to the nurse after arriving on a scene and doing an in-person assessment of the patient. This gives the nurse additional information, including vital signs, before referring the patient to a clinic or self-care. It also has a positive effect on the responding unit as well, which will quickly return to service rather than waiting at the hospital. Field providers from the second and fourth battalions are trained in this process and we are currently expanding that training to the rest of the battalions in the city.

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In closing, I am proud of the progress we are making as an agency, but we have even more work to do. The resources allocated by the Mayor to the Fire and Emergency Medical Services Department will play a critical role in supporting residents' efforts to reach and remain on the pathway to the middle class.

Mr. Chairman, thank you for giving me the opportunity today to explain our Department's FY 2020 budget. The Council and this Committee are critical allies in this effort, and I appreciate your work to ensure we operate efficiently and effectively. I look forward to our continued work together to achieve our shared goals and give all residents a fair shot to benefit from Washington, D.C.'s continued prosperity. My team and I are available to answer any questions.