

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



**Chief of the Fire and Emergency Medical Services  
Department John Donnelly Resolution of 2020 (PR23-0937)**

Testimony of  
**John A. Donnelly, Sr.**  
Nominee  
Acting Fire and EMS Chief

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

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Washington, DC

*Delivery via Video Conference*

## **Statement of John A. Donnelly, Sr.**

Good afternoon Chairperson Allen, Councilmembers and staff. I am John Andrew Donnelly, Sr., Acting Chief of the Fire and Emergency Medical Services Department. I am pleased to testify before you today as Mayor Muriel Bowser's nominee to become Fire and EMS Chief of the District of Columbia. For those of you watching from home, my testimony is available on our website at [fems.dc.gov](http://fems.dc.gov).

Before I begin my remarks, I want to thank Mayor Bowser for providing me with the opportunity to lead the Fire and EMS Department. Mayor Bowser's—and yours, Chairperson Allen—commitment to our success and the safety of the District's residents and visitors, as well as members of the Department, have been critical in ensuring we are both properly resourced and innovative in our delivery of services to our customers.

I would also like to thank my predecessor, Chief Gregory Dean, both for his transformational leadership of the Department during his five years as Chief, and for being a mentor to me personally. I commit to building on the progress we have made and continuing to improve the quality of service delivery implemented under Chief Dean's leadership.

Most importantly, I must thank the women and men of the Department, who show their commitment to our core values of Bravery, Accountability, Safety, Integrity, Compassion, and Service each day. We call them the BASICS, and I would like to be known as a leader who is an example of the Department's Core Values. I believe that following these values is the reason I was selected to lead this great Department in this city of many communities, and I am honored to do so.

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I am a proud resident of Ward 4, living in Manor Park with my wife Germaine and youngest son, who is a senior at McKinley Technology High School. My daughter is a student in New York City studying to be an Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) and my oldest son is an Army Captain deployed to the Middle East. In my free time, I volunteer with Scout Troop 98 in Brookland.

Being a firefighter is all I ever wanted to be. My first experience was as a sixteen-year-old volunteer firefighter at the Allentown Road Volunteer Fire Department in Prince George's County, Maryland. I soon started a career that took me to California as a Forest Fire Fighter, back to the National Capital Region as a Paramedic with Prince George's County Fire Department, and then as Firefighter Paramedic at the National Airport Fire Department. I was hired by District of Columbia Fire and EMS in 1992, achieving the dream job held by many of my role models.

In the District, I have served in every rank and throughout the city in operational and administrative positions, where I have received multiple awards for bravery and leadership. I have served on regional committees focused on coordination and improving the region's fire departments, as well as national committees focused on fire service, hazardous materials, and homeland security issues, where my work has contributed to national policies and industry best practices.

While on the job I attended the University of the District of Columbia and received a bachelor's degree in Fire Science. I later taught in the UDC program. In 2005, I was selected to attend the Naval

Postgraduate School to pursue a master's degree program. In 2007, I received a master's degree in Homeland Security.

As this Committee is aware, DC Fire and EMS is a large and complex agency serving many needs beyond traditional fire and EMS services. In fact, we are the front line of the nation's health care crisis. To meet the challenges our members face every day, I would like to spend a few moments sharing my vision for the Department in the areas of: professional development and member wellness, patient care and outcomes, fire suppression, and fire prevention.

**PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT/MEMBER WELLNESS:** Immediately prior to my selection as Chief, I was Assistant Fire Chief of Professional Development, a position created to ensure our employees are properly trained and supported throughout their careers, professionally and personally. I intend to continue this focus as Fire and EMS Chief.

I would like to acknowledge that COVID-19 has affected all our training programs and we will continue to expand alternatives to our traditional delivery methods to ensure our members receive the training they need to be safe. Our employees have also been asking for improvements to our personnel evaluation process, and we are excited to work in partnership with our unions to do so.

Member wellness is an area of great concern to me. COVID-19 has been hard on our employees with the increased workload and the fear of bringing the disease home to their families. I am happy we were able to implement a peer support program last year, in partnership with Local 36 and Local 3721, and will continue to support this program. We will also expand O2X, our employee wellness program, to assist members in improving their overall health and fitness levels. I believe a fit firefighter/EMT/paramedic is better able to deal with the psychological stresses of this profession and to provide the best service to our residents.

To focus on our core value of compassion, we are implementing Therapeutic Communications training to improve communications with our patients and provide de-escalation techniques to our members who regularly encounter persons in distress. For our supervisors we will continue to implement our continuing education programs, including programs to prepare members for leadership and managerial roles within the Department.

Member wellness is also one component of our focus on our core value of safety. In the short term, additional efforts will continue to focus on driving safety and including the use of vehicle cameras in our driver evaluation programs. We will also not let off the gas on ensuring our members have the Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) they need to perform their work and to be protected from viruses, cancer-causing substances, and other hazards. COVID-19 has provided challenges in the area of PPE, but under Mayor Bowser's and the Council's leadership, our agency's partners ensured that we did not run out of supplies as many fire departments across the country did. And in 2021, the Department will implement the upgrade of self-contained breathing apparatus which was made possible by the support of Mayor Bowser and you, Chairperson Allen.

**IMPROVING PATIENT OUTCOMES:** We will continue to prioritize improving all patient outcomes, with a particular emphasis on those time-sensitive illnesses and injuries where our care makes the most difference: in cardiac arrest, heart attacks, trauma, and stroke. We will do so by focusing on patient assessment by our Basic Life Support (BLS) providers, continuing training and support of our Advanced

Life Support providers, establishing a health data exchange with the city's hospitals, and updating Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) that will allow the Department to measure our performance against national standards.

To that end, for example, in fiscal year 2021, we have an initiative to improve and expand pre-hospital stroke screening. All suspected stroke patients will be effectively screened to ensure that they are transported to the hospital that can offer the best care for their type of stroke. Most of our stroke patients are from Wards 7 and 8, so this initiative will improve the health outcomes and wellness of residents in those neighborhoods.

The Council's approval of our ability to hire AMR in 2016 stabilized an EMS system that was in crisis and has allowed us to focus on improving every aspect of our operations. Within two years, we taught tens of thousands of people hands-only CPR and the District's cardiac arrest survival rate doubled compared to 2014. Members have done tremendous work in continuing to deliver excellent pre-hospital care throughout this year, and the *Right Care, Right Now* Nurse Triage Line (NTL) is continuing to successfully divert patients for whom a hospital may not be the best option. The Mayor's and Council's support of these and other programs show that innovative ideas can both save lives, as well as bring budget savings with relatively small investments. We estimate that NTL now reduces transports by the equivalent of at least two fully staffed BLS ambulance transports annually.

And we are implementing a health data exchange with District hospitals to be able to both share patient hospital outcomes with the members who treated the patient in the field. This will help us track areas of care needing improvement, know where we need more Department-wide training, or pinpoint opportunities for peer-based individualized training.

**FIRE SUPPRESSION:** In fire suppression we will continue our movement toward the National Incident Command System by implementing simulation-based command training, creating new policy, and continuing to implement our company-level training requirements. This year we are also updating our Standard Operating Guidelines to improve operational discipline and safety.

We also support our Operations Division by maintaining our members' facilities, equipment, and vehicles. In FY 2020 we saw dramatic, customer service-driven improvements in our logistics division, distributing new uniforms and maintaining reliable levels of supplies. By staying on our apparatus replacement schedule and investing in the training and support of our Apparatus Division employees, we are now meeting our vehicle "up-time" goals more consistently than we have in five years.

**FIRE PREVENTION:** Fire prevention is the key to reducing fire deaths in the city. We will continue to explore ways to incorporate our Operations Division personnel into the inspection of the over 10,000 buildings in the District of Columbia to ensure they are fire safe. We will also continue to provide fire safety and prevention education to our high-risk communities, including seniors, young children, and residents of high rise, high-density buildings.

In closing, I would like to touch on two areas that impact each topic I have discussed: interagency partnerships and employee engagement.

**INTERAGENCY PARTNERSHIPS:** We cannot do the work we do in Fire and EMS without the collaboration and support from our sister agencies and regional partners. My vision includes maintaining the Department's partnerships with these agencies, with focus on the Office of Unified Communications,

Department of Public Works, Metropolitan Police Department, Department of Health, Homeland Security and Emergency Management Agency, Department of Human Resources, and Department of General Services.

**EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT:** The last part of my vision is also the most important. I will maintain multiple pathways of communications within the Department, ensuring that great ideas and issues from our personnel are heard and considered by management. COVID-19 forced the Department to adopt new communications platforms and strategies which have proved very effective. I will continue to use these and other methods to communicate with our workforce.

We want our workforce to be reflective of our community. Our employees represent many interests and are all passionate about the jobs they do. Diversity is already one of our strengths, but I recognize that there is more work we can and should do. As a first step in this ongoing dialogue, I plan to host a series of forums for our employees to discuss our differences and similarities to promote cross cultural respect and understanding.

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Mr. Chairman, I have dedicated almost thirty years to the Fire and Emergency Medical Services Department, and I have never been more excited about our potential. We have made tremendous strides working collaboratively with the Mayor, the Council, our labor partners, and our entire workforce. The next years will be challenging but I look forward to continuing that collaboration. Thank you for the opportunity to testify and I look forward to answering any questions you or members of the Committee may have.