

GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
Executive Office of Mayor Muriel Bowser



Fiscal Year 2023 Performance Oversight Hearing
District of Columbia Fire and Emergency Medical Services

Testimony of
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Before the
Committee on the Judiciary and Public Safety
Brooke Pinto, Chairperson
Council of the District of Columbia

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Good morning, Chairperson Pinto, Councilmembers, and staff. I am John Donnelly, Sr., Chief of the Fire and Emergency Medical Services Department. I am pleased to testify before you today about the Department's FY2023 and FY2024, to date, performance. My testimony is also available online at fems.dc.gov.

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The work of the Department, and the progress we have made in Fiscal Years 2023 and 2024 would not have been possible without the dedication and hard work of the 2,100+ individuals of Fire and EMS. I am grateful for their service to the residents and visitors of this community, and to each other. Our members' dedication to excellence has been nothing short of remarkable. I want to take a moment to recognize the work that each of them does by sharing some numbers with the Committee.

This year has been historically busy, with an average of 575 responses each day. In FY23, the Department responded to almost 210,000 [209,701] incidents – 14,000 more incidents than in FY22. Included in these incidents are 67 CPR saves where our patients left the hospital in good health, a third alarm fire at the quarters of Old Engine 12, and eight second alarm fires. The Training Academy graduated 141 cadets and recruits and issued 2,455 certificates from the International Fire Service Accreditation Commission (IFSAC). We inspected 6,145 fire hydrants and conducted 10,901 building inspections. We implemented a new Record Management System and upgraded our apparatus tablet computers in over 250 of our 400 apparatus. We took delivery of nine Engines, five Ladder Trucks, 18 Ambulances, and two Rescue Squads.

In cooperation with the Department of Behavioral Health, we opened the DC Stabilization Center. Just two weeks ago, we rolled out an initiative to bring blood to the scene of penetrating trauma victims to enhance the life-saving care we deliver even before we leave for a hospital. We hired our first ever behavioral health coordinator to ensure our members receive the support needed from a very demanding career. We also implemented an online ordering system for members' uniform needs fulfilling a long-term goal of our membership. And the Facilities Division continues to upgrade fire house gym equipment, kitchens, and HVAC systems and completed 2,767 service tickets to improve the quality of life in our facilities.

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A. Managing historic call volumes while seeking to address system capacity concerns

The Department's call volume in FY23 was just several hundred calls short of our busiest year ever. That increased volume continued into FY24, where in January 2024 alone, we had several days with call volumes rivaling our historic summer highs, including one day with about 800 calls. I am proud to say the Department has been able to respond quickly and safely even in the face of increasing call volume. However, the Department must prepare and evolve how we deliver service in a city that is once again growing and thriving.

1. *Hiring to the staffing factor*

One of the Department's most significant successes in FY23 bore fruit in FY24. Mayor Bowser and Council provided the Department with 50 new FTEs to allow us to hire over attrition and bring us closer to our staffing factor. As a result, in January, we were able to hire 85 new firefighter-EMT and firefighter-paramedic recruits who are entering their second month at the Training Academy. These new members will be in firehouses across the city by the end of this summer.

Force strength at the staffing factor will address very valid workload concerns of the members, reduce our reliance on structural overtime to fill daily operational vacancies, and in the long term begin to address our overtime costs.

Mayor Bowser has tasked every agency with ensuring young people can achieve their fullest potential and pursue their dreams safely. The Department continues to hire well-qualified candidates – many of whom are District residents – for all-hazards firefighting and medical training. We expect to start another class of up to 45 new recruits in May.

2. *Collaborating to create alternative pathways to care*

The Department continues to prioritize the delivery of appropriate care in settings appropriate for each patient. The *Right Care, Right Now* Nurse Triage Line continues to ensure our patients receive quicker and appropriate care by scheduling quick medical appointments in neighborhood clinics or providing self-care instructions.

Fire and EMS and the Department of Behavioral Health celebrated the opening of the D.C. Stabilization Center in November. The D.C. Stabilization Center is the medical facility to which all patients with a suspected chief complaint of alcohol or substance use, who meet certain criteria, are transported. The Center offers low barrier access to therapeutic substance use disorder (SUD) treatment and Crisis Stabilization services on a 24/7 basis to adults 18 years and older. The facility is equipped with 16 24-hour stay beds and six beds for up to a 72-hour period. It is staffed with medical providers, nurses, medical assistants, licensed clinical social workers, and peer specialists. The first months of operation have been a resounding success. This month, the Department transported its 1,000th patient to this facility. These patients received appropriate care in a purpose-built facility all while building capacity in our city's overstretched emergency departments.

3. *Addressing drop times*

Even as the Department diverts patients away from hospital emergency rooms with NTL and the Stabilization center, we are still experiencing very long drop times at hospitals. Long patient transfer times – the amount of time ambulances and medic units are committed from the time of arrival at a hospital emergency department to the point the hospital assumes care of the patient – drive down unit availability and the Department's overall readiness.

Prior to COVID, the Department's average drop times were generally in the 40–45-minute range, still above our goal of 20 minutes. In FY23, the average drop time for Department and AMR units has grown to over 67 minutes.

As we have in the past, the Department used several best practices in FY23 to mitigate the effects of long drop times. Supervisors are dispatched to facilities with extended waits to attempt to effect transfers of care. EMS Liaison Officers embedded at the OUC manage hospital destinations to ensure equitable emergency department distribution. In April, the Department began a six-month Hospital Liaison Officer (HLO) program to use Department personnel to assist in the intake process in the ED, and to release Fire and EMS and AMR units more quickly to go back into service during the regular summer surge of call volume. The HLO evaluated the patient's condition, and if the patient met certain criteria, he/she was transferred directly to the waiting room. The Department ultimately placed HLOs in three facilities and saw drop times improve citywide before discontinuing the pilot in October. During FY24, we continue to work with our interagency partners and hospitals to address this ongoing challenge.

B. Continuing to innovate as a national EMS leader

EMTs and paramedics perform dozens of life-saving interventions every day and night throughout Washington, DC. As one of the largest healthcare providers in the District, the Department is committed to improving patient care and outcomes. In FY23 and 24, we continued our efforts at EMS reform so our residents and visitors can be confident in the care we provide.

1. Cardiac arrest survival

The Department's focus on cardiac arrest survival resulted in survival rates for incidents suspected of having a cardiac cause increasing ten percent across the Utstein-1 and Utstein-2 criteria from FY22 to FY23. These criteria are internationally agreed upon metrics for benchmarking cardiac arrest performance. This translates to twenty more patients being discharged from the hospital neurologically intact in 2023 compared to 2022. We had 69 neurologically intact survivors in 2023, the highest number of survivors the Department has had since it began tracking outcomes in 2011.

2. Low Titer O+ Whole Blood Initiative

During FY24 Q2, the Department rolled out its Low Titer O+ Whole Blood Initiative. In the coming weeks, several of our EMS Advanced Life Support supervisors will be able to respond to the scene of penetrating trauma incidents and be prepared to begin blood replacement before a patient even leaves to go to the hospital. Our goals with the program are two-fold: First, to not waste any precious blood. And second, to bring life-saving interventions, improving clinic outcomes to every patient in every corner of the District.

Looking at the numbers, we project that we may have the opportunity to transfuse and positively change outcomes in about 400 patients per year with this new program.

3. Opioid response teams

In FY23, in collaboration with the Department of Behavioral Health, the Department deployed Opioid Response Teams to focus on harm reduction efforts. Teams consist of four EMTs or paramedics paired with two Community Outreach Specialists (COS). The teams complete follow-up visits to scenes to provide Narcan kits and education, including referrals to city resources capable of providing long-term help. They also have access to real-time notifications when first responders are on an opioid-related use incident within the District. In FY23, the Department spent \$400,000 of our million-dollar emergency medicine budget on Narcan.

4. New patient care reporting system

During FY23 Q3, the Department deployed a new electronic patient care reporting software system, TripTix, along with all new mobile data terminals in Department response apparatus. The TripTix system offers the Department several benefits and upgrades to improve the speed, accuracy, and completeness of our patient care reports. These include laptops with detachable keyboards and laser barcode scanners; quicker lookup to facilitate patient encounters; and seamless integration with our cardiac monitors to provide better patient care documentation to receiving facilities.

C. Training the next generation of paramedics

In FY24, Mayor Bowser allocated funding and two FTEs to establish a paramedic school in the District, addressing the critical need for local training opportunities. The District currently lacks a paramedic program, making this initiative crucial in light of a national paramedic shortage. This shortage is acutely felt in the District where the Department competes with several large regional jurisdictions to fill paramedic vacancies, and the District of Columbia is the only state without a paramedic program. The Mayor's commitment to investing a million dollars underscores her dedication to preparing residents for solid middle-class health care professional careers. The Department aims to hire or train 70 paramedics annually to address shortages exacerbated by pent-up demand, limited training options, and burnout. Despite an initial lack of applications in FY24 Q1, the Department is actively engaging with local educational institutions to identify suitable partners for the paramedic school. Recognizing the urgency, the Department has already initiated conversations and plans to send EMTs to existing local paramedic programs in the coming months.

D. Fostering member wellness

In FY23 and FY24, to date, the Department continued to expand our employee behavioral health programming to bolster our existing peer support team efforts. The three-pronged approach of outreach, prevention, and response is introduced to every Academy class and reinforced on Wellness Wednesdays through firehouse visits to discuss the Wellness initiative and provide education and tips around behavioral health, posttraumatic stress, and resilience.

In FY23 Q4, the Department hired a Behavioral Health Coordinator to provide clinical and administrative direction to a comprehensive Behavioral Health and Wellness Program. The coordinator collaborates closely with the Peer Services Team, accompanies the team members on Wellness Wednesdays, and responds to critical incidents and potentially traumatic events to assist with debriefing members.

The Peer Support Team is a collaboration between the Department and our unions and runs a 24/7 helpline and is activated to respond after critical incidents. Team members assist fellow members through active listening, modeling healthy coping skills and behaviors, and lessening the stigma around discussing emotions, mental health, and trauma. In FY24 Q1, the Peer Support Team hosted an International Association of Firefighters training for a new class and the team now has over 50 members, including a Peer Support Team Coordinator, three Team Leads, BHC/Team Clinician, and four canines.

E. Prioritizing operational and medical skills training

Continuing skills training is essential to ensure the safety of both personnel and the communities they serve, adapt to evolving challenges, and maintain the highest standards of professionalism and effectiveness in emergency response. In FY23 and 24, Fire and EMS worked to ensure our professionals are prepared to address any issue we encounter.

1. Operations training

In FY23, Chief Officers practiced incident management in our command simulator and our In-Service Training Office implemented an annual training day for each company to practice their skills and receive updates to Standard Operating Guidelines and safety practices.

In addition, the Department holds accreditation to provide training across 41 diverse disciplines. As I mentioned earlier, in FY23, we issued a total of 2,455 individual IFSAC certifications, covering various levels of fire and EMS training, including supervisory training, incident command competency, Standard Operating Guideline awareness, and simulation lab training. Each Chief Officer participated in numerous hours of simulations and an annual education was implemented for all members. Leadership and Development Training accounted for 54,000 [53,956] hours, Emergency Medical training reached 137,000 [137,227] hours, In-Service Training hours amounted to almost 50,000 [48,854] at the Training Academy, and 64,000 [64,444] hours of training were completed in the firehouses and on the streets of the district. Special Operations training comprised over 10,000 [10,366] hours.

2. Continuing medical skills training

The Department also continued its commitment to ensuring the skills of our Advanced Life Support providers are cutting edge by conducting quarterly Paramedic Grand Rounds sessions for all paramedics. This year, we conducted sessions on stroke identification and care, labor and delivery in the field, neonatal care and resuscitation, and new protocols and procedures for caring for critically injured and ill patients.

F. Improving community connections and public health and safety education

Finally, the Department dedicates significant resources to improving community connections, increasing fire safety across the District, and improving health outcomes by directing patients to the right care and ensuring we can protect our neighbors through strategic placement of Automated External Defibrillators (AED) and education about CPR. We believe being present in our community makes all of us safer and improves our recruitment by showing people who we are and what we do.

1. Automated External Defibrillator Incentive Program

This quarter, the Department is finalizing the roll-out of the Automated External Defibrillator Incentive Program. The program is modeled after the Mayor's successful Private Security Camera Incentive Program, to reimburse small businesses, places of worship, small multi-unit apartment/condominium buildings, and non-profit organizations for their purchase and registration of AEDs across the District.

2. Racial Equity Action Plan progressing ahead of schedule

The Department was one of the first large District agencies to submit its complete Race and Equity Action Plan. This plan presents the Department's vision of how to make race, equity, and the other key elements of inclusion and equality an important part of the Department's culture. Fire and EMS built several strategic objectives on which to focus. The practices were: (1) Improved recruitment focused on diversity, (2) Empowering Women to Lead and related external messaging, (3) Applying DC resident preference points in exam process, (4) New exam process, and (5) New Summer Youth Employment Program. We are at the beginning stages of implementing several of these initiatives.

3. Community engagement and prevention

In FY23 and FY24, to date, the Fire Prevention Division conducted door-to-door home fire safety visits and smoke alarm installs during All Hands-on Prevention and Return to the Scene outreach efforts. In FY23, members visited 5,797 residences and in FY24, to date, members visited 1,683 residences. These visits include presentation of literature targeted to the specific community and hazards identified in that community.

The Department's Hands on Hearts hands-only CPR education program is enhancing its services to train and provide Narcan to reverse the effects of opioid overdose. This program has trained almost 100,000 residents since 2015. The Media and Community Relations Divisions conducted over 1,500 community events during the performance period. And the Department is also approaching 100,000 X, formerly known as Twitter, followers.

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Our members are committed to the Department's core values of Bravery, Accountability, Safety, Integrity, Compassion, and Service, and have integrated those values into everything we do – from the back step of an engine to delivering care in a medic unit to maintaining our apparatus and logistics supply chains. Thanks to Mayor Bowser's and the Council's commitment to our workforce and the community's safety, the Fire and EMS Department had a remarkable record of performance in FY23 and 24.

Chairperson Pinto, thank you again for the opportunity to testify today and I, along with members of my team, are available to answer your questions.