

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



**Fiscal Year 2021 Budget Hearing**

Testimony of  
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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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*Delivery via Video Conference*

Good afternoon, Chairperson 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 Mayor Muriel Bowser's Fiscal Year 2021 (FY 2021) budget. For those of you watching from home, my testimony is available on our website at [fems.dc.gov](https://fems.dc.gov).

The FY 2021 Budget and Financial Plan marks the District's 25th consecutive balanced budget, entitled DC H.O.P.E., Mayor Bowser's commitment to give every Washingtonian a fair shot in health, opportunity, prosperity, and equity. The financial impact of COVID-19 requires us to make sacrifices while maintaining the critical services our residents expect and protecting our most vulnerable neighbors.

This budget reflects the Mayor's priorities for making decisions in this new reality. When I appeared before you in January, I testified about our progress in FY 2019 and FY 2020, as well as the ambitious agenda our Department has moving forward. In the intervening months, the coronavirus pandemic has impacted every part of our lives, not least the operations of the District of Columbia government and of our first responders, including the women and men of the Fire and EMS Department.

During the pandemic and recent First Amendment demonstrations, DC's Bravest have exemplified the Department's core values of "B.A.S.I.C.S.": bravery, accountability, service, integrity, compassion, and safety. I am incredibly proud of their work in the face of extraordinary challenges. The whole agency has engaged to keep our services running. Our Incident Support Team has operated daily since the early days of the pandemic to guide and advise on our overall response. Members in Operations have continued to respond to all calls and adjusted to changing protocols put into place to ensure everyone's safety. Some of our members have become infected with COVID-19, have recovered, and have returned to work to continue to serve the District. On some days, the level of isolated and quarantined members has reached ten percent of our workforce, but we continue to bounce back and maintain sufficient resources to safely respond to our residents in need. The pandemic also has increased the demands on the support divisions of the Department. The logistics and apparatus divisions have made sure our members are adequately supplied with personal protective gear and other equipment and supplies, and that our apparatus is on the streets. Our Fire Prevention Division has shown flexibility and creativity in staying open to deliver their most critical services, and in supporting the Department's pandemic response. We developed an infection control group to track our members' physical and mental health, and to quickly and efficiently make sure our policies are as up to date as possible. And our administrative staff have continued to do the critical work necessary to ensure the Department is fully functioning 24/7 no matter the obstacle.

We know that our Department is better equipped and better resourced than many Departments across the country that are fighting this pandemic. And that is because of the great leadership of Mayor Bowser and her team, not only right now, but for the last five years. The Mayor's and Council's investment in our Department is now paying dividends during our COVID-19 response. For that, we are very grateful.

The pandemic has also affected the District's financial outlook, and Mayor Bowser's FY 2020 supplemental and FY 2021 budgets reflect that reality. The proposed budget continues to

fund the Fire and EMS Department's critical functions and services. My testimony today highlights the proposed FY 2021 budget and provides an update of how we have implemented the FY 2020 budget.



The Mayor's FY 2020 supplemental budget maintains the FEMS local budget at approved funding levels, with only a reduction of slightly less than \$200,000 of cash balance in special purpose fund revenues.

The Mayor's FY 2021 gross operating budget for the Department is \$265.6 million. This is a 5.7 percent reduction over the FY 2020 approved gross budget of \$281.7 million. The budget is comprised of \$261.5 million in Local funds, \$3.485 million in Special Purpose Revenue funds, and \$575,000 in Intra-District funds.

### **A. Operating Budget**

The proposed FY 2021 operating budget maintains funding levels for almost all functions of the Department. Crucially, it will allow the Department to continue hiring to reduce our need for costly overtime, address the Department's retirement bubble, and continue to staff the four new ambulances added in the FY 2020 budget.

The proposed budget includes non-personal services reductions of \$429,910 to address the District's need for savings, which include:

- A net decrease in general expenses (including office supplies and support, professional services fees, and other equipment) of \$43,955;
- A net decrease in travel of \$171,000; and
- A decrease of \$120,596 in services contracts at the Training Academy. This is an FY 2020 savings that was inadvertently carried over into the FY 2021 budget. In FY 2021, we will take these funds from the presumptive disability line, to align that budget with actual claims made.

We are beginning to research ways in which to continue our professional development and other programs that rely on travel and understand the need to do so during these challenging budget times.

Within the proposed FY 2021 budget, we will use an increase of \$1.5 million in special purpose revenue dedicated to EMS Reform to pay for a portion of the Department's contract with its third-party Basic Life Support (BLS) ambulance provider, AMR. This will allow for some local funds savings and will not affect AMR's operations, which are a critical component of the progress the Department has made in managing EMS call volume. There is a net decrease of \$500,000 in local funds for the AMR contract, but we will revisit EMS Reform fund revenue at the start of FY 2021. We are optimistic that there will be funds available that were not able to be certified during budget construction that could be put towards the AMR contract so that services are not impacted.

The Department worked closely with the Executive on proposals for new initiatives in FY 2021 prior to the COVID-19 outbreak. We look forward to revisiting those proposals in the future as the District emerges from the current fiscal situation.

## **B. Capital Budget**

The Department's apparatus capital budget for FY 2021 includes funds for the purchase of 12 ambulance transport units, five engines, two ladder trucks, one rescue squad vehicle, and assorted command and administrative vehicles. This investment, along with the apparatus deliveries the Department expects to take throughout the rest of this calendar year, will put our fleet on its most stable footing in almost a decade.

The Department's FY 2021 to FY 2026 capital budget also includes facilities allocations, including: \$4.75 million for continued architecture and engineering planning for the new Fleet Maintenance Facility to be constructed at DC Village; \$4 million in FY 2021 and \$13.5 million total toward the construction and relocation of a new Engine 26 in the Brentwood/South Dakota Avenue corridor; \$250,000 for planning and \$14.75 million total toward the construction of a new Engine 7; and \$2 million in scheduled capital improvements providing vital life safety repairs and renovations in stations across the District.

Finally, the capital budget includes \$4 million for the purchase of equipment used throughout the Department to provide lifesaving cardiac assistance. The Department's inventory of this equipment is aging or at the end of its service life and this investment reflects the Mayor's and Department's commitment to improving patient outcomes across the District.

The Department's capital budget plan reflects the District's strategy to ensure our sustained financial health, and we look forward to continuing to work closely with the Executive to ensure that our investments in apparatus replacement and facilities modernization continue in the out-years of the capital plan.

## **C. Budget Support Act Provision**

The Mayor has made a policy determination that our providers should continue to transfer care to a third party for BLS care and transport. Accordingly, the Mayor proposes removing the sunset or expiration of the statutory authority for allowing for a third-party provider to operate in the District. The Council included a sunset provision for this authority in 2015 when the concept was very new in the District and our EMS system was facing grave challenges that risked the quality of our patient care. Since then, the third-party provider contract has been the foundation of our reform of the EMS system, not only with the BLS transport provision but with the establishment of the *Right Care, Right Now* Nurse Triage Line. The statutory authority has been critical in freeing up FEMS resources to respond to patients with life threatening injuries and illnesses. In turn, the Department has improved our EMS system by measures including patient outcomes, unit availability, ambulance response times, ambulance reserve and "up time," and increased number, frequency, and quality of EMS training hours.

Our improvements have received national attention and we must continue this momentum. Our high call volume has not gone away and is not likely to in the future. Since the original legislation was enacted in 2015, our call volume has increased by three percent and our population has increased by four percent. We believe our EMS system has evolved into a system that makes more medical and financial sense than the old one, a system that preserves our most specialized resources for our most critical patients and that uses supplemental, more efficient resources for lower acuity patients. We ask that the Council support our recommendation to keep this successful system in place indefinitely.

#### **D. FY 2020 Budget Implementation**

I would like to update the Committee on the Department's implementation of the FY 2020 budget, including placing four new ambulances in service, self-contained breathing apparatus (SCBA), and the apparatus replacement plan.

Additional ambulance transport units: Mayor Bowser has prioritized improving access to care across the District. FEMS has undertaken several initiatives since 2015 to improve EMS performance. As I mentioned earlier, the FY 2020 budget included funding to support the staffing of four additional ambulance transport units to our daily operational deployment, totaling 43 units per shift.<sup>1</sup> The Department placed these units in areas where they are most likely to impact persistent high call volume and longer response times. Our data indicates that the placement of the four new ambulances in service in May 2019 allowed the District to avoid negative impacts from the 2019 closure of Providence Hospital, the K-2 surge, the annual summer call volume surge, and the cumulative increase in call volume over the last four years. In fact, in February 2020, typically one of our lowest call volume months, EMS call volume increased by 11 percent compared to the last four-year average. We believe that the four new ambulances have allowed us to absorb this increase but remain vigilant about what this summer's call volume will bring as the District reopens.

Self-contained breathing apparatus: Mayor Bowser's FY 2020 capital budget included one-time funding for the purchase of SCBA in the amount of \$11.54 million dollars. The Department is replacing 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.

The Department has completed the purchase of the next generation of SCBA. The manufacturer, Scott, has received required safety approval for the facepieces, has begun production, and the Department is in final planning stages for training and changeover to the new SCBA system. As you know, a portion of the Department's inventory expired at the end of the

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<sup>1</sup> The Department suspended training in March. Three recruit classes were affected, with recruits temporarily reassigned throughout the Department for manpower or field training, with some assigned to distance learning. The cadet class was suspended with cadets assigned a course of remote learning for all but the fire ground training portion of that course. We are in the process of reactivating the Training Academy for modified operations, however, and will keep the Committee informed of developments. Because this has delayed the hiring of the 45 employees needed to staff the new ambulances, we will need to continue to use the additional PS funds to fund staffing the ambulances with overtime until the cadets are fully trained and certified.

calendar year 2019. We worked with Scott to provide temporary equipment while the manufacturer sought NFPA certification of the new equipment to ensure that members were able to use unexpired equipment compliant with NFPA standards. Delivery of the equipment has begun and will ramp up this summer.

Apparatus: At our Performance Oversight Hearing, I testified about the significant progress that we are making in the purchase and delivery of new apparatus, establishing and maintaining a consistent reserve fleet capability across ambulances, pumpers, and ladder trucks simultaneously, and performing preventative maintenance on all assets at all required intervals.

The Department is continuing the procurement of FY 2020 vehicles, including six engines, five ladder trucks, and ten ambulances, as well as several specialty service vehicles including rescue squads and command apparatus. Of note to the Committee, we are taking delivery of seven new FY 2018 and FY 2019 ladder trucks this calendar year, all of which are expected to be in service by the end of December. The low call volume during COVID-19 and the hard work of our Apparatus Division has resulted in a dramatic improvement in up time for vehicles across the board. This has been an opportunity to do needed preventive maintenance. Ladder truck availability will continue to fluctuate until the new ladder trucks are placed in service. In total, the Department is in the process of purchasing or awaiting delivery of over 60 vehicles across the fleet as of the end of May 2020.

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Mr. Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to testify on the implementation of the FY 2020 budget, and of the Department's FY 2021 proposed budget.

I am confident the members and staff of the Fire and EMS Department will continue to deliver excellent services to the residents of the District of Columbia as we all work together to address the significant budget conditions in which we find ourselves. The Mayor, 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 collaboration to ensure the District successfully navigates the challenging environment ahead.

My team and I are available to answer any questions.