

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



**Fire and Emergency Medical Services Department
FY2021 and FY2022 Performance Oversight 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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Good afternoon Chairperson Allen, Councilmembers and staff. I am John Andrew Donnelly, Sr., Chief of the Fire and Emergency Medical Services Department. I am pleased to testify before you today about the Department's FY2021 and FY2022, to date performance. My testimony is also available online at fems.dc.gov.

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Last year I testified about FY20 and FY21 having been an extraordinary time for our Department. I never would have predicted then that one year later we would still be reeling from new phases of the COVID-19 virus. But had I known, I certainly would have predicted that our members would overcome every new challenge with grit and ingenuity and by demonstrating our core values of **Bravery, Accountability, Safety, Integrity, Compassion, and Service**. Today I want to first and foremost thank our employees for their ongoing resilience. We know it is challenging and we do not take their commitment for granted.

As of Monday, 1261 of our members have been infected with COVID-19, with 156 of those members having been infected twice, and tragically, one member having lost his life. During fiscal years 2020 and 2021, the highest number of infections per day was nine infections and 230 total members out on COVID-19 related leave. When the Omicron variant arrived in the District, those records were shattered. In December, on one day we reported 39 newly infected members and reached just under 400 COVID-19-related vacancies during a single shift.

In the face of these numbers, we at times had to temporarily take units out of service to replace sick, exposed, or infected members. But we never scheduled a unit out of service for an entire shift due to COVID-19 absences. When you stop to consider that we have to fill 356 apparatus seats on every shift, that is an overwhelming accomplishment. Despite the exhaustion and personal sacrifice from working long hours of overtime during the past two years, our members stepped up once again to help avert a significant negative impact on service to the residents and visitors of the District of Columbia.

Not every fire and EMS chief can testify to that fact. Many jurisdictions across the country have had to place units out of service for longer periods of time, or even close or consolidate companies due to staffing shortages and other challenges. The fact that we did not is a testament to the strength of our Department and our strong hospital and health care networks, as well as a validation of our tiered EMS system. We are grateful to Mayor Muriel Bowser, you, Chairperson Allen, and the rest of the Council for the funding and support that makes this level of resiliency possible.

In addition to these big picture comments, I want to share with you and the public our latest COVID-19 year "by the numbers":

- During calendar year 2021, we tested 135,920 people for COVID-19 at our firehouses.
- During the Omicron surge, we distributed 37,400 free rapid antigen tests.
- During the month of December, we diverted 11% of patients to the *Right Care, Right Now* Nurse Triage Line (NTL). One out of 20 of these patients was diverted from overwhelmed emergency departments. On January 3rd, at the height of Omicron and during a snowstorm, we beat our previous daily record and diverted 105 patients, or 20.6% of our daily EMS call volume, to the NTL.
- Since vaccines became available in December 2020:
 - 1799, or 87% of our employees, have been fully vaccinated, and
 - 6, or 0.29% of our employees, have been partially vaccinated.

- On December 29, 2021, we adopted the latest Centers for Disease Control guidance, and our employees now return to work within five days of being infected if they were asymptomatic or had minimum symptoms.

We did all this and supported each other in life and at work as we continued with our everyday duties, including responding to an average of 528 calls for service a day, the largest snowstorm in years, numerous First Amendment events, and several two-alarm and fatal fires.

For the third year in a row, we are managing the daily demands of the pandemic while also making progress on many of our key strategic priorities. I will talk about just a few of those now.

Today we regularly divert over ten percent of our daily EMS call volume to the NTL, thanks to our first responders, as well as a reinvigorated partnership with the Office of Unified Communications (OUC). In FY22, we will expand the NTL to allow for diversions of pediatric patients over the age of two. We are doing so in collaboration with our hospital partners, namely Children's National Medical Center, after conducting careful research, and after ensuring that our clinic community is prepared to treat these patients.

We also continue to focus on improving our quality of patient care and patient outcomes. Last year, we revised the firefighter/EMT EMS mentoring program, so our new probationers are better prepared to treat patients on their own and as part of life-saving teams. This year we are going even further, expanding our EMT recruit curriculum from 12 to 20 weeks. This expanded curriculum will include supervised time out in the field, just as we do with our paramedic recruits, and will require that recruits successfully become EMT certified before they can start fire suppression recruit training. It will also include hands on training in our new EMS Simulation Laboratory, which we launched at the former P.R. Harris school in Ward 8.

We also launched a DC Resuscitation Committee (DCRC) that will analyze the state of cardiac arrest outcomes in the District of Columbia. The committee includes Department representatives, as well as representatives from the OUC, DC Health, community health care organizations, and hospitals, covering each link in the chain of the cardiac arrest survival. The DCRC will determine the current challenges in improving outcomes, demonstrate the complexity of the system that responds to and treats cardiac arrest, and foster motivation to drive change for improvement in patient outcomes.

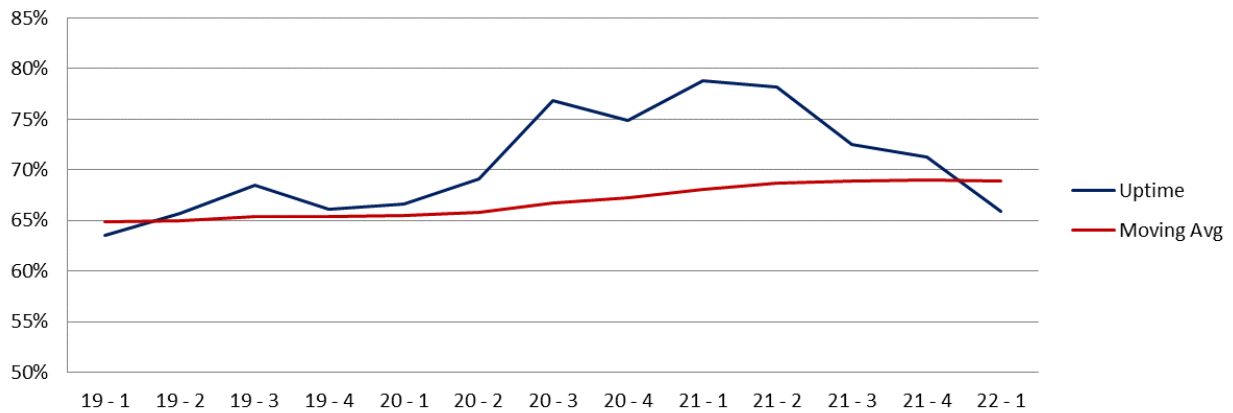
In fire suppression, we continue to focus on fireground command discipline and safety. We updated our Standard Operating Guidelines (SOGs) based on the input of chief officers, company officers, and labor, using National Fire Protection Association's (NFPA) 1561 (Standard on Emergency Services Incident Management System and Command Safety) as a guide. The updated SOGs were issued in August 2021 and training was completed with Command and Company level officers during the fourth quarter of FY21. We shared with you a year ago that we had launched a new command simulation training that allows our chief officers to practice incident command strategies in real time with participation by company officers and OUC dispatchers. Since then, we have gone through several scenarios with the training and we have started a second year of delivering new content.

During FY22, the Department will continue to focus broadly on safety by evaluating its compliance with NFPA 1500 (Standard on Fire Department Occupational Safety, Health, and Wellness Program) and developing a strategic plan to implement improvements where needed. NFPA 1500 specifies the minimum requirements for an occupational safety and health program for fire departments or organizations that

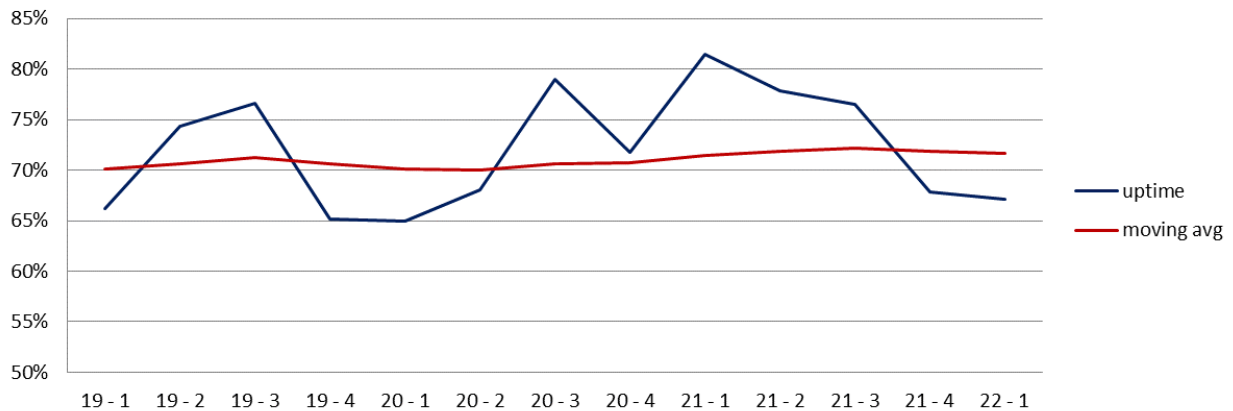
provide rescue, fire suppression, emergency medical services, hazardous materials mitigation, special operations, and other emergency services.

In the area of equipment, our apparatus continues to be better maintained and more available than in years past. In FY21, for the first time, we reached our up-time goals for *every type of vehicle* (ambulances, ladder trucks, and engines) at various months throughout the year, despite COVID-19 global supply chain challenges. In fact, we reached our year-long goal of down time of 25% or lower for ambulances and engines for the first time. Down time for ladder trucks was consistently in the 40th percentile until FY21, when it reached 29% for the year. This accomplishment is evidence that the Mayor’s and Council’s dedication to keeping our Department on its apparatus replacement schedule pays off where the rubber hits the road – the ability to quickly respond and provide life-saving services to our customers.

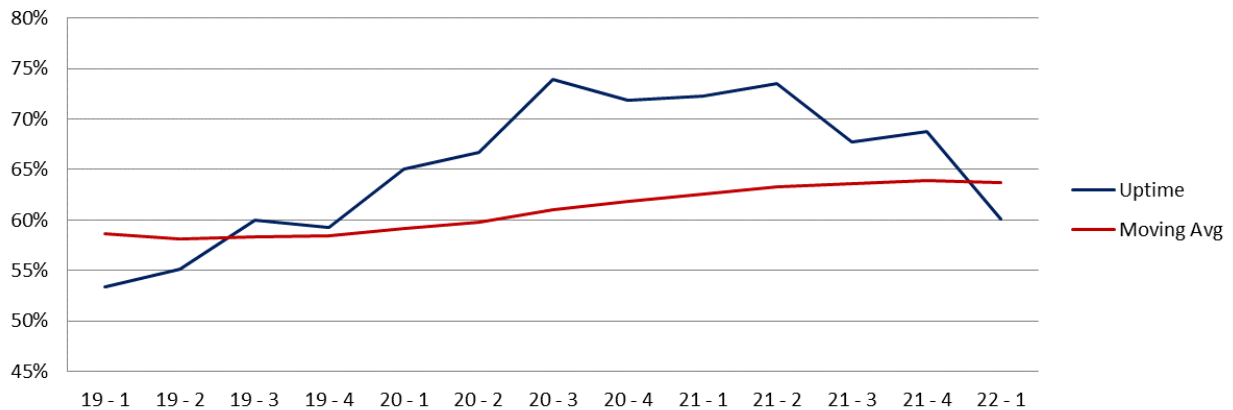
Pumper Uptime by Quarter



Ambulance Uptime by Quarter



Ladder Truck Uptime by Quarter



Thanks to an FY22 budget enhancement, all our engines now have thermal imaging cameras which improve our first responders’ ability to find victims in fires, and to anticipate rapidly evolving fire conditions. We also are in the process of evaluating and purchasing rope escape equipment for each of our riding positions on fire apparatus, for members to use to escape from an upper floor in the event of deteriorating safety conditions. As a member of this Department for over thirty years, it is truly heartening to be able to purchase this life safety equipment after it has been recommended in various local and national line of duty death reviews over the years.

We also made progress filling everyday needs that may seem mundane, but that help us function better every day. In FY21, we nearly finished installing and replacing all on-board emergency vehicle cameras. Training and quality control processes will be implemented as soon as installations are completed. In addition, our members now have new duty uniforms, winter coats, and boots, improving their safety and professional appearance. We are also in the process of implementing our new Department-wide Records Management System, which will modernize our reporting and data analytics in every Department discipline.

In fire prevention, our focus continues to be educating our most vulnerable populations on prevention and fire safety. Tragically, in FY21, our recent trend in increasing fire fatalities continued, with 12 total fatalities. All but one of those deaths involved vulnerable populations—persons over 60 or under the age of 12. To address the needs of these populations, we continue to offer targeted fire prevention education. Last fiscal year, we completed our *What’s Cooking, Seniors* initiative. Working with the Department on Aging and Community Living (DACL), we delivered education on cooking safety to seniors at 65 virtual and in person events. We also continue our monthly *All Hands on Prevention* events where we go door to door in neighborhoods across the city, handing out smoke detectors and doing fire safety inspections.

During FY22, we again will collaborate with DAAC and other community partners, such as independent and assisted living senior residential buildings, to deliver a public education program entitled *Pathway to Safety*. This program will focus on hoarding and safety tips on how to declutter and reduce fire safety hazards, including escape planning in case of fire, electrical and home heating fire prevention, smoking and oxygen safety, smoke alarm/carbon monoxide alarm maintenance, and fall prevention. Our Operations Division will receive training on how to recognize hoarding situations and report them appropriately, and materials will be developed for members to provide residents information about resources that are available throughout the District.

We have reviewed the preliminary factors around the recent tragic fatal fires in Philadelphia and New York City, and shared them with our command staff as a training tool. I recently met with Director Ernest Chrappah of the Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs (DCRA) to discuss how we can work together to combat similar potential vulnerabilities here. We also recently re-reviewed the 2019 Kennedy Street fire report. We have a standard referral process for issues that go cross-agency to DCRA and maintain a good working relationship in general.

In FY21, the Department's O2X wellness program continued to drive engagement and promote a healthier workforce, with Training Academy workout sessions, individual sessions with incumbent employees, and over 85 group sessions in firehouses. The first full quarter with O2X On-Site Specialists (OSS) was very successful, with measurable impact. In the first quarter of FY22, firefighters completed over 1,000 workouts at the Training Academy (TA) and over 250 firefighters participated in group workouts at their respective firehouses. The O2X Team visited all 6 battalions, stopping by 33 firehouses this quarter for workouts, cooking demos, and manual therapy.

In FY21, we provided an implicit bias course, called *Leading with Awareness*, for all our chief officers and senior civilian managers. The course was well-received, and our goal is to provide it to 50 percent of the rest of the workforce in FY22, and to the remaining 50 percent in FY23. In January, we hosted the first ever promotional exam workshops to provide access to exam-taking tips to all our employees, in an effort to level the playing field for career advancement in our Department. In CY 2021, we also held two town halls on diversity, equity; and inclusion (DEI); convened a Diversity Advisory Committee; and published a DEI vision statement.

We have experienced a significant retirement bubble during the performance period. While this does present some challenges in terms of the loss of experience, it also presented an opportunity to promote energetic, educated, and bright leaders. We are staying on our aggressive recruit hiring schedule to keep up with attrition. And we have embraced our new leaders and are focused on developing their skills and planning for future retirements so that our vision and leadership team remains strong well into the future.

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Before I complete my statement, I want to mention the tragedy in Baltimore last week that resulted in the tragic loss of three fellow firefighters – Lt. Paul Butrim, Kelsey Sadley, and Kenny Lacayo -- and critical injuries of a fourth firefighter, John McMaster. I cannot imagine Baltimore's loss and want to publicly convey our condolences and support, on behalf of the District.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify today and I am available to answer your questions.