

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



Fiscal Year 2024 Budget Hearing

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

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Good morning, Chairperson Pinto, councilmembers, and staff. I am John A. Donnelly, Chief of the District of Columbia Fire and Emergency Medical Services Department. I am pleased to testify in support of Mayor Muriel Bowser's Fiscal Year 2024 (FY24) budget. For those of you watching from home, my testimony is available on our website at FEMS.DC.gov.

The Fiscal Year 2024 Proposed Budget and Financial Plan, *A Fair Shot*, reflects many tough choices, and it was formed with an eye towards how we get the best outcomes for our residents at this challenging time. The administration's FY24 investments are strategic, prudent, and focused on ensuring an equitable comeback for Washington, DC. We are fortunate that even in tight times, the District remains well-resourced and able to continue delivering world-class programs and services.

Before I begin, I would like to recognize and thank the employees of Fire and EMS for their care and diligence in delivering services to the residents and visitors of the District of Columbia. The hard work and dedication of the 2,300 employees of D.C.'s Bravest – firefighter EMTs and Paramedics, and civilians – has earned our Department the trust that is the basis for the significant investments the Mayor has proposed.



The FY24 proposed gross operating budget for the Department is \$327,321,290, which funds 2,267 employees. This is a 3.5 percent increase over the FY23 approved gross budget of \$316 million. The budget is comprised of \$260.3 million in Local funds and \$63.9 million in federal resources.

A. Local Funds Budget

The proposed Local funds budget includes an increase of \$2,713,020 and 7.0 FTEs. The following is a summary of our operating budget enhancements:

1. District of Columbia Paramedic School (\$1,235,500)

The Department will lead an effort to develop a District of Columbia Paramedic School. Mayor Bowser has committed \$1,235,500 and two FTEs to support this effort. The school will accept its first students in the summer of 2024.

This enhancement is an example of Mayor Bowser's commitment to preparing our residents for solid middle-class health care professional careers. A national paramedic shortage is exacerbated locally by pent-up demand, a lack of training options, and existing paramedic burnout. 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 Department has a goal of hiring or training 70 new paramedics per year to fill new positions and vacancies through promotion, attrition, and retirement. Currently, we hire an average of 30-35 paramedics per year.

While the Department has built-in demand for paramedics, and we know that we have EMTs who would take advantage of the D.C. Paramedic School, training in paramedicine provides portable advanced health care skills for students. It is both a pathway into fire departments regionally, but also a steppingstone for students to pursue other advanced medical degrees like registered nurse, physician assistant, or medical doctor.

This enhancement will create a D.C.-based training program, in partnership with a District college or university. The goal for graduates is 100% job placement and preference from the D.C. Fire and EMS Department, assuming the graduates otherwise meet our qualifications. Others would be hired by surrounding fire and EMS departments, private ambulance services, and local healthcare facilities, or enter the national workforce to become a paramedic in another city.

In the coming weeks and months, the Department will convene District agencies and health care stakeholders to select a willing and qualified grantee institution of higher education to operate the paramedic program independent of the Department. The grantee will fund the program through \$250,000 startup costs plus the subsidized cost of tuition. The \$250,000 grant would be awarded in FY24, with the first class scheduled to begin in late summer 2024. Fire and EMS will make its state-of-the-art EMS simulation lab available and bear the additional costs for expansion. Fire and EMS will provide technical support, and separately run a selection process for selecting Department employees for admission to the program.

2. Fleet Maintenance Operations (\$1,181,148)

The Mayor allocated \$1.2 million and two FTEs to supplement the operations of the Fleet Maintenance Program. The age and repair costs of the fleet have increased for a variety of reasons including supply-chain issues and industry-wide delays in manufacturing. The Apparatus Division requires this enhancement to account for the inflationary costs of repair and maintenance, and to hire qualified mechanics to manage the increased workload of older vehicles remaining in service due to the national backlog of ambulance and fire truck orders which are outside the District's control.

3. Fire Prevention Division Staffing (\$296,372)

The Department will add three FTEs to the Fire Prevention Division for additional Fire Inspectors to focus on Fire Code inspection and compliance.

Approximately 24,000 individual businesses are in license categories subject to business license renewal and Department inspection every two years. To achieve full compliance, the Department would conduct 12,000 inspections annually. The Department's inspectors, in addition to their other responsibilities, currently conduct up to 50% (up to 6,000) of these inspections annually. Adding additional personnel will allow more of these businesses to be inspected to ensure they meet fire and life safety codes.

While population growth in the District may have slowed during the COVID-19 pandemic, construction has continued apace. New developments, higher population density, and altered existing structures all present a potential fire and life safety hazard to the community. Fire Code

compliance inspections help ensure structures are maintained as required, and that community members are safe. The Department currently has 31 inspector and inspector technician positions to detect fire hazards and ensure compliance with District law.

4. *Reductions*

The Local budget includes a reduction of \$382,116 and 5.0 FTEs to account for vacancy savings in personal services across multiple programs (one Grade 15 manager, two Grade 9 logistics technicians, and two vacant entry-level firefighter/EMTs).

B. Medicaid Revenue Allocations

In FY23, the Department continues to benefit from Medicaid cost reimbursement for ambulance transport. We recover the actual cost of providing EMS care and transport for Medicaid patients, rather than receiving flat transport fees, under this system. This change has resulted in a significant new revenue stream for the District and the EMS system.¹ In the budget book, these funds are shown as grants, and more accurately reflect reimbursement of medical expenses for the previous year.

The Mayor and the Department allocated anticipated Medicaid revenue to fund several priorities.

1. *Structural Firefighting Gear/Personal Protective Equipment (\$2,538,989)*

The Department will increase its investment in the purchase and replacement of structural firefighting gear/personal protective equipment (PPE). Structural PPE is among the most critical safety equipment used by every firefighter, providing protection from thermal, physical, environmental, and bloodborne pathogen hazards encountered during structural and proximity firefighting operations. Structural PPE is the primary physical protection for firefighters from exposure to cancer-causing products of combustion.

The Department provides each member in the Operations Division with two complete sets, which cost approximately \$10,650.54 total for each member. In FY24, we also must outfit up to 300 new members with PPE – or 600 additional sets – in addition to our ongoing replacement of damaged, condemned, or old PPE.²

¹ This revenue is reimbursement for services provided on calls for service; Medicaid revenue alone is not a reliable substitute for local funding of Fire and EMS services.

² The Department has invested in commercial gear washers in most fire stations, and within every geographically based fire battalion, both to allow for more regular cleaning of PPE and to ensure they can remain in service for their entire life, thereby maximizing the District's investment. The expected life of structural PPE, according to the National Fire Protection Association standard, is ten years, after which PPE should be destroyed.

2. *Training Academy Specialized Training and Supplies (\$303,566)*

For several years, the Department has trained a maximum of 120 recruits and 25 cadets due to resource limitations at the Training Academy. Beginning in FY23, the Department committed to train 240-300 total candidates: This significant increase in throughput at the Academy is possible due to the resources provided by Mayor Bowser to address attrition (mostly due to end-of-career retirements) and overtime challenges. This enhancement will increase funding for the actual materials and supplies needed to train recruits, cadets, and existing members in continuing education training. These supplies will ensure the delivery of mandated training and improve member safety.³

3. *Third-Party Provider and Nurse Triage Line Program Specialist (\$128,816)*

The Department will add one new contract specialist responsible for managing the third-party Basic Life Support transport provider and *Right Care, Right Now* Nurse Triage Line contract. This enhancement will provide full-time management of the contract responsible for 40-50% of the Department's call volume and which is a critical component of reducing the use of our area hospitals' emergency departments. The AMR contract is one of the Department's largest and requires a dedicated specialist to ensure we are good stewards of the District's budget. We also believe this additional layer of oversight will improve the availability of life-saving resources for visitors and residents of the District of Columbia.

4. *Atmospheric Monitoring Equipment for Engine Companies (\$55,000)*

This enhancement supports our cancer reduction initiatives by providing multi-gas detection capability to all 33 Engine Companies. These meters will provide an additional level of safety to the members of the Department and the citizens and visitors we serve. Multi-gas monitors are essential for first responders to know that the atmosphere in hazardous environments is healthy and safe. The Department uses multi-gas meters on all Ladder Trucks and Battalion Chief Vehicles to detect the levels of oxygen, carbon monoxide, hydrogen cyanide, and flammable gas. Without the multi-gas meters, Engine Companies must request and/or wait for the arrival of a Ladder Truck or Battalion Chief to monitor the atmosphere.

5. *Police and Fire Clinic (shift)*

The FY24 budget proposal includes a shift of \$4.3 million (\$4,306,752) from Local Funds to the Department's Medicaid revenue to support the operations of the Police and Fire Clinic.

C. Capital Budget

The Department's capital budget for FY24 includes funding sufficient for apparatus purchases consistent with the Department's apparatus replacement plan. The Department continues to invest in fire apparatus engineered and built to provide maximum safety, longevity, and durability. These state-of-the-art vehicles allow us to provide maximum water flow for

³ Items include training supplies; books, manuals, reference materials; CPR supplies; Class A material (cloth, wood, paper, rubber, and many plastics); and engineering material.

building fires and the ability for our ladders to reach 100' in our high-rise occupancies. We are purchasing specialty vehicles such as our Mobile Command Unit, Mass Decontamination Units, and four new Heavy Duty Rescue Squads to support the Special Operations Division. The Department has incorporated green idle reduction technology to conserve fuel, reduce operating costs, improve operator safety and comfort, and protect the environment.

The Department's facilities capital program provides funding for small scheduled capital improvements, continued planning for the Engine 26 relocation (\$3.5 million), and full funding for the new Fleet Maintenance Reserve Facility at Blue Plains. The construction of this facility by FY26 will allow the Department to vacate the existing site at Half and M Streets, SW.



Chairperson Pinto, thank you for the opportunity to testify on the Department's FY24 proposed budget. The resources allocated by the Mayor will enable us to continue the transformation of the Fire and EMS Department. The Council and this Committee are critical allies in this effort, and I appreciate your work to ensure we operate a world-class Department. I look forward to our continued collaboration as we do so. We are available to answer any questions.