

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



**Fire and Emergency Medical Services Department
FY 2022 Performance Oversight Hearing**

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

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 afternoon, Chairperson Pinto, 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 FY2022 and FY2023, to date, performance. My testimony is also available online at fems.dc.gov.



The last several years have been a time of both extraordinary challenges and opportunities for the District of Columbia Fire and EMS Department. At each step along the way, our first responders have unflinchingly provided excellent service to residents and visitors as one of the nation's busiest fire and EMS departments.

In many ways, the last 15 months have represented a return to normalcy for the Department. Call volume has returned to pre-COVID levels, and the streets are again alive across the city. Despite the exhaustion and personal sacrifice from working long hours of overtime during the past three years, our members have consistently stepped up to ensure coverage for all our neighborhoods. Some impacts of COVID-19 have remained, however, including the occasional use of mandatory overtime and historically long hospital drop times. The women and men of this Department meet and overcome these impacts every day. At the same time, we continue to innovate in every service we provide, making us a national leader in fire and emergency medical services.

We are also grateful to Mayor Muriel Bowser, you, Chairperson Pinto, former Chair Councilmember Charles Allen, and the rest of the Council, for consistently providing the resources necessary to make this level of resiliency possible. Today, I will discuss some of the accomplishments of our team in fiscal years 2022 and 2023, to date, and initiatives we have planned for the rest of 2023.

A. FY22-23 Accomplishments

1. Supporting member safety and firefighting operations

One of my goals as Chief is to prioritize the safety of our members through continuous training and ensuring they have access to the resources they need on and off the fire ground.

NFPA 1500: During FY22, each division of the Department participated in an evaluation of our compliance with National Fire Protection Association 1500 (Standard on Fire Department Occupational Safety, Health, and Wellness Program). This comprehensive risk assessment is designed to stress test the health of a department and assists in the development of 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. The report will be used to tackle areas of non-compliance to continue to improve member safety. The report is almost complete and will be rolled out to the Department for review this quarter. I am encouraged by many of the findings of this assessment, and I am confident that we will be able to address any gaps in the coming years.

Fire Operations Center: Throughout FY22, the Department planned the implementation of 24-hour staffing of the Fire Operations Center (FOC) at Engine 16 in Ward 2, an FY23 budget enhancement. Effective October 1, 2022, a captain and a lieutenant work in the FOC around the clock to provide ongoing management of city-wide resources, planning activities, logistical support, and information

sharing during daily operations and major events. This initiative is critical to member safety by ensuring the appropriate allocation of resources citywide and is comparable to similar staffing at HSEMA and MPD, but addresses our unique fire and EMS operations.

Supplies/Apparatus: Promoting a culture of safety involves ensuring our members have the resources they need. In FY22, the Department continued its ongoing replacement of uniforms and structural firefighting gear and modernizing the way we deliver supplies to neighborhood fire stations to ensure units are equipped on calls for service. Due to better budget planning and improved fiscal management, the Department has been able to procure most uniform needs for the first time in several years. We also rolled out online ordering for uniforms, a first for the Department and a priority for our members.

Some of our most visible supplies are the Department's apparatus. International supply chain issues, backlogs among fire apparatus manufacturers with already long lead times, and inflation, all proved challenging for the Department in FY22. But we believe we are turning the corner. The Department continues to receive new equipment in line with the apparatus replacement schedule. Mayor Bowser's and Council's commitment to ongoing apparatus replacement is tremendously important to our members' safety and security, and the service we provide the community. In FY22, the Department placed six FY20 engines into service and 14 ambulances (all ten FY20 vehicles and four of eight FY21 ones). We also placed several support vehicles into service. The Department has also begun to take delivery of zero-emission ambulances, which is the first in what we believe to be a green revolution in fire apparatus over the coming decade.

Compensation: The Department, with the assistance of the Office of the City Administrator and the Office of Labor Relations and Collective Bargaining, was able to negotiate two new collective bargaining agreements (CBA) with our two main labor partners. Members of the International Association of Fire Fighters Local 36 ratified their new CBA in December and the Council approved it shortly thereafter. And the first new CBA with the American Federation of Government Employees Local 3721 in over 30 years is about to be completed.

2. Supporting the physical and mental health of our workforce

The primary goal of any Fire and EMS Chief is to ensure that his or her employees make it to retirement. To that end, the Department in FY22 continued and expanded its support for the physical and mental wellness of our members.

O2X: In FY22, the Department continued its work with the O2X Human Performance team. In collaboration with the Facilities Division, five new weight rooms were built out in stations citywide. Over 100 employees, about 5% of our workforce, participated in the second annual Transformation Challenge, which included work out and nutrition goals. O2X also conducted over 1000 rehabilitation/training sessions, over 600 training sessions with recruit and cadet classes, 500 individual one-on-one trainings, and 250 strength training consultations. We are already seeing measurable results with employees losing excess weight, improving their overall health, and reducing the amount of time off duty due to injuries and illnesses.

Peer Support Team: The Department's Peer Support team, developed in collaboration with our two largest unions, assisted over 200 members, including providing support at Engine 1 and Truck 2 following the death of an active member. The team conducted training for every recruit, cadet, and

supervisor class that was held in FY22. A pilot program entitled “Wellness Wednesday” was conducted in May and June with great success. This team also has two fully trained K9's with three more in training.

3. Improving patient health outcomes

As one of the largest healthcare providers in the District, the Department is committed to continuous improvement of patient care and outcomes. In FY22, we continued our innovative work diverting low-acuity patients from emergency departments while improving our preparedness to care for our most critically ill and injured patients.

Emergency department diversion: The Department’s *Right Care, Right Now* Nurse Triage Line continues to provide more appropriate care to 911 callers who may not need to go to the emergency room. This April marks the five-year anniversary of the NTL. From the program’s inception through December, almost 60,000 patients have been diverted to a nurse. Almost 13,000 have been referred to neighborhood health clinics. Another 8,000 patients have been given self-care instructions. These diversions are critical to ensuring the Department has the resources available to respond to life-threatening emergencies citywide.

The Office of the Medical Director also undertook a review of the types of calls that have a track record of successful diversion and those that might be good candidates for diversion. We are rolling out new call types appropriate to the nurse and conducting refresher training for OUC call takers to encourage diverting calls to the nurse. We are also piloting pediatric referrals and expanding access to telehealth through the nurse, instantaneously linking patients with doctors via video.

New cardiac monitors: The Department transitioned to using new Advanced Life Support (ALS) cardiac monitors and Basic Life Support (BLS) Automatic External Defibrillators (AED) during FY22. This equipment is carried to the patient’s side in most incidents and is a critical diagnostic tool for our providers. The new monitors are consistent with our overall strategic goal of improving EMS, especially sudden cardiac arrest survival, including:

- Improving the quality of our chest compressions;
- Minimizing pauses in those compressions;
- Avoiding hyperventilation;
- Understanding and improving our BLS resuscitation skills; and
- Maximizing the data we measure to guide improvement.

In addition, all Department ALS and BLS cardiac monitors are equipped with an audio recording system. The purpose of the audio recording system is to allow for real-time medical control and supervision of patient care and improve patient care and provider performance through training, remediation, and commendation of excellent provider performance.

These investments in cardiac equipment have a direct impact on our residents. During the pandemic, our overall rate of cardiac arrests increased dramatically, and our overall survival rate, unfortunately, declined. Both these trends occurred across the country. I am happy to report today that despite this, for those cases where EMS can make the most difference in survival (referred to as Utstein 1 and 2 measures), the District’s survival rates remained at or above the national average throughout the pandemic. And in FY22, our overall survival rate returned to above average.

EMS Simulation Lab: New technology, methodology, and practices are being established every year, and thanks to the commitment of the Mayor and Council, the Department is at the forefront. During FY22, the Denise Beales Immersive Lab and Education Center was opened and has become a vital part of our training experience at the academy. This lab, located at our facility at P.R. Harris School, contains a complete ambulance and is used for EMT training, recruit and “return to Operations” training, paramedic field training and evaluation, conflict resolution, and de-escalation training, among other uses. The immersive lab allows recruits to train in a controlled, interactive environment that simulates patient scenarios before they go out onto real ambulances.

EMS training and mentoring: During FY22, the Department also redesigned the EMS training and mentoring program for new firefighter EMT recruits to improve the quality of instruction and increase the time spent in the Training Academy. This includes 14 weeks of classroom training and six weeks on an ambulance. To date, the success rate of students is 87%, and on average each student is spending 90 hours training in the simulation lab.

4. Focus on hiring and training high-quality recruits

New Firefighter/EMT exam: The Department has engaged in a multi-faceted effort to utilize the investments made in Fire and EMS by the Mayor and Council to be able to fill operational seats, reduce the costs of structural overtime, and hire above attrition due to retirements. Beginning in August 2022, the Department started offering the firefighter/EMT test both in-person and virtually – from anywhere in the country. In partnership with National Testing Network, we are switching from one exam every few years to ongoing, more frequent testing with shorter waits in between application periods. Under the new model, we waive the test fee for District residents. The Department plans to open a testing window every six months, and to update the registry accordingly.

5. Community engagement and fire prevention

Educating members of the community about fire safety is a critical component of what we do. Young people and “seasoned citizens” are most impacted by fire in the District, and the Fire Prevention Division focused on specialized training for both age cohorts as a strategic initiative in FY22. Fire educators conducted 158 presentations that included daycares, schools, seniors, and the business community. Educators reached 1,037 children in our vulnerable age group of daycare – kindergarten and reached 1,361 seniors. To date in FY23, educators have conducted 59 presentations and reached 440 children in our vulnerable age group of daycare – kindergarten and have reached 500 seniors. During this time, the section has continued to conduct in-person and virtual presentations and partner with various agencies.

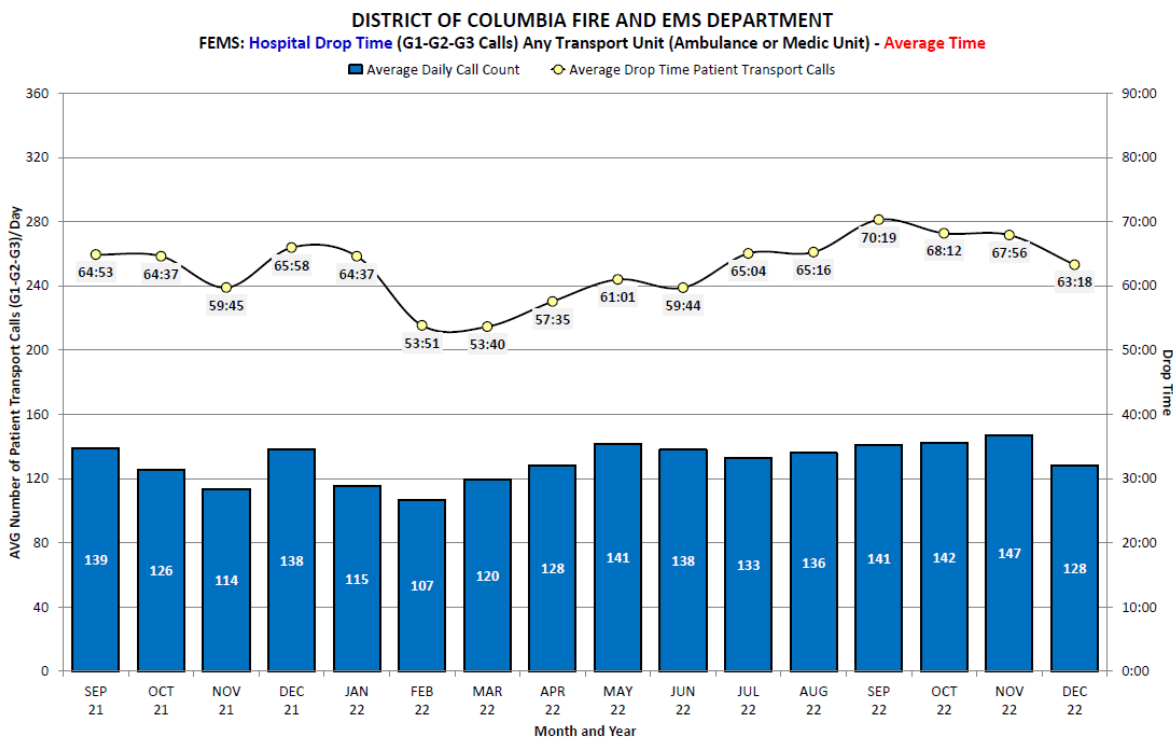
For FY22 and FY23, educators are teaching cooking and fire safety and have included “hoarding safety” in our Senior Fire Safety initiative. In addition, the Education Section and the DC Firefighters Burn Foundation have created a fire and burn safety booklet and safety kit to distribute to our seniors during presentations.

B. Areas of Focus in FY23

1. Addressing drop times and ambulance availability

Despite the significant successes the Department achieved in FY22, challenges remain. One of the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic is a critical shortage of emergency department workers

in hospitals and a lack of boarding space at hospitals. In the District, this phenomenon is vividly illustrated by long drop times and decreased ambulance availability. The Department defines the “drop time” as the period our providers must wait at a hospital before the hospital assumes care of a patient. Prior to COVID, the Department’s drop times were generally in the 40–45-minute range. At the end of FY22, the average drop time exceeded 70 minutes for the first time.



The secondary effect of long drop times is decreased ambulance availability. The Department seeks to maintain a minimum number of ambulances available to respond to the most critical emergencies. Our current unit availability challenges are comparable to 2015 before we started contracting with AMR for BLS transport. We have been working closely with the Mayor, the Deputy Mayor for Public Safety and Justice, the Deputy Mayor for Health and Human Services, the D.C. Hospital Association, and our partners at the Department of Health, to alleviate hospital overcrowding and long drop times. It is critical that we see progress before our call volume increases as the weather warms.

2. Hiring to staffing factor to manage overtime

The Department has for many years focused on ways to balance its operational needs with staffing realities. Fire and EMS has a current operations staffing need of 1.41 FTEs for every apparatus seat that needs to be filled every day on every shift, known as a “staffing factor” or “fill ratio.” Since each seat must be filled 100% of the time, any type of leave creates the need to backfill a seat on overtime at the cost of 1.5x the salary rate. This is a unique problem to the Department — other agencies can leave open positions vacant without incurring overtime. However, Fire and EMS must fill every seat on every shift every day to maintain a constant level of services, including adequate response times for life-threatening emergencies.

The Mayor and Council budgeted for an additional 50 FTEs in FY23, bringing us closer to our staffing factor than we have been in many years. To be able to hire and train these new employees, the

Department's Recruitment Office and Training Division have developed plans to significantly expand the size of classes we can train at our facility. We are currently hiring for the remaining FY23 classes and have set a goal to double the size of classes run through the Academy to up to 70 students.

We believe the Department's hiring initiatives will have a long-term impact on our overtime spending. We will use the resources provided by Mayor Bowser and Council to hire the most qualified applicants to drive down overtime spending. Hiring and training take time and resources, but we have made significant progress.

3. Diversity, equity, and inclusion

Finally, the Department recognizes two of the primary visible examples of our values are the diversity of our workforce, and the compassionate care we provide the members of this community. The fire service generally, including our Department, has a history of structural bias, racism, and gender discrimination. We work hard every day to overcome this legacy, but its impact remains. The diversity goal of the Department is to construct an organizational climate where diversity, equity, and inclusion improve the culture and operations within the fire service.

The Department was honored to be selected to be a pilot cohort agency by the Mayor's Office of Racial Equity (ORE), established by Mayor Bowser in 2021. The office's draft analysis of our efforts found the Department has "robust [diversity, equity, and inclusion] plans ... goals and objectives [that] map clear targets and chart a path to achieving them through a strengths-based approach, a whole-of-agency commitment, and the meaningful engagement of residents and stakeholders. The D&I/EEO strategy for FYs 2020-2023 provides a robust foundation on which to build and strengthen the agency's racial equity work."

In FY22, the Department conducted a series of trainings for our members titled, "Leading with Awareness." The goal of the interactive trainings was to provide members an understanding of how organizational culture impacts the success of delivery of Department services, gain knowledge of the science of bias, the characteristics and impact of bias, and have an awareness of their own biases and ways to combat it to ensure fairness and consistency. A majority of our 2000 members and employees participated in the training, and we will have the remainder of the workforce trained in FY23.



Chairperson Pinto, when I meet with both new recruits and veterans of the Department, I discuss our Core Values of **Bravery, Accountability, Safety, Integrity, Compassion, and Service**. These values, the BASICS, guide every interaction with the public and each other. I am consistently impressed by, and grateful to, our workforce – both in the community and in administrative capacities throughout the Department – for their commitment to the District of Columbia.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify today and I, and members of my team, are available to answer your questions.