

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



**Bill 26-358, “First Responder Retention
Efforts Amendment Act of 2025”**

Testimony of
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Before the

Committee on the Judiciary and Public Safety
The Honorable Brooke Pinto, Chairwoman

December 4, 2025
John A. Wilson Building

I am John Donnelly, Chief of the District of Columbia Fire and Emergency Medical Services Department. I appreciate the Council’s continued commitment to supporting our first responders and ensuring the safety and resilience of our city, and I am pleased to testify in support of Bill 26-358, the “First Responder Retention Efforts Amendment Act of 2025.”



This legislation proposes to eliminate the mandatory retirement age of 60 for sworn employees of DC Fire and EMS and the Metropolitan Police Department. This is a critical step forward in modernizing our personnel policies and ensuring that we do not prematurely lose highly skilled, experienced, and dedicated public safety professionals.

Under current law, uniformed DC Fire and EMS employees must retire at age 60 unless granted a waiver by the Mayor.¹ In 2021, the Mayor delegated that waiver authority to the Fire and EMS Chief. However, the waiver process remains limited in scope.

From 2020 through early 2025, the Department did not seek waivers to process retirements beyond age 60, following guidance from the DC Retirement and Relief Board (DCRRB). At DCRRB’s direction, the Department has now resumed seeking waivers. Since 2015 there have been 187 retirees under the age of 60, 165 over the age of 60, and five recent waivers were granted.

These figures reflect a consistent trend: most of our members retire before reaching the mandatory retirement age. Yet, there are exceptional individuals who are both willing and capable of continuing to serve beyond 60. The current law does not reflect the realities of today’s workforce or the operational needs of our Department.

DC Fire and EMS already has robust systems in place to ensure the health and readiness of our personnel:

- **Annual Medical and Functional Fitness Assessments** – All firefighters undergo annual evaluations aligned with NFPA 1582 standards to ensure they are physically capable of performing their duties.
- **Operational Competency** – Our performance evaluation system ensures that only those who meet high standards of leadership and operational effectiveness remain in service.
- **Certification Requirements** – Personnel must maintain all required licenses and certifications, such as NREMT or paramedic credentials.

These safeguards ensure that age alone is not a barrier to safe and effective service.

Throughout my tenure in the fire service, I have seen the value of experience firsthand countless times. The leadership, mentorship, and calmness under pressure of these veteran employees are irreplaceable assets. They help train the next generation, stabilize high-stress incidents, and contribute to a culture of excellence.

¹ D.C. Code § 5-712(b).

Retaining such individuals strengthens our Department’s operational effectiveness and institutional knowledge. It also helps us better manage workforce transitions and avoid the “retirement bubble” that could otherwise strain our staffing and training pipelines.

The Department also acutely recognizes the toll that age takes on a physical profession like ours. Should this legislation pass, DC Fire and EMS will formalize a clear, objective framework for evaluating continued service beyond age 60 by evaluating National Fire Protection Association standards, nationwide best practices, and collaboration with our labor partners. This approach will ensure safety, fairness, and operational readiness for our most seasoned veterans.



Councilmember Pinto, as you noted in introducing this bill, these changes will help DC Fire and EMS retain our most experienced members longer, mitigate retirement bubbles, and better anticipate future staffing needs. I fully endorse this vision. Continued support and investment from the Council are essential to ensuring the stability of our public safety agencies and empowering our most seasoned professionals to train and mentor the next generation.

Thank you for the opportunity to present this testimony. I am happy to answer any questions.