

**GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
OFFICE OF UNIFIED COMMUNICATIONS**



**Public Oversight Roundtable
On
“9-1-1 Operations at the Office of Unified Communications”**

Testimony of
Acting Director Karima Holmes

Before the
Committee on the Judiciary and Public Safety
Charles Allen, Chairperson
Council of the District of Columbia

John A. Wilson Building
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
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(virtual)

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9:30am

Good afternoon, Chairperson Allen, members of the Committee, Council, staff, and viewing public. I am Karima Holmes, Acting Director of the Office of Unified Communications (OUC). I want to thank Mayor Bowser for her continued confidence and unwavering support of me and the men and women who proudly serve the residents and visitors of the District of Columbia at OUC.

Before I continue with my testimony, I would again like to take a moment to express heartfelt condolences to the families of the loved ones at the center of the incidents being discussed today. They remain in our thoughts as their losses are grieved.

While our testimony today will be focused on the time since I returned to OUC as Acting Director in March 2022, I do want to acknowledge that in my previous capacity as the Director, I worked closely with you, Chairperson Allen, and your fellow members of the Committee on the Judiciary and Public Safety to explore ways to enhance the services provided by the OUC. Your support, which included funding for critical programs, like T-CPR certification, has helped to enable the next generation transformation underway at the Agency to ensure we remain a premier Emergency Communications Center (ECC) capable of handling the calls of the future, today.

With that being said, it is important that I begin by stating that under no uncertain terms and despite any claims to the contrary, DC911 is NOT in crisis. Whether it be one (1) of the 2.2 million 311 calls we receive annually, or a text, or tweet for non-emergency city service; or one (1) of the 1.4 million 911 calls for police, fire or emergency medical services handled each year; or one of the over twelve (12) million push to talk transmissions we receive from first and emergency responders with the Metropolitan Police Department (MPD), Fire and Emergency Medical Services (FEMS) and the twenty-seven (27) other law enforcement entities who have access to the over 8,000 radios we maintain -- we answer the call.

In answering the call, however, OUC recognizes that we serve in a human-centered service industry. The men and women I lead at the OUC understand the significant responsibility and trust placed upon them to answer the call. Further, this responsibility and trust require a constant evaluation of technology, training, policies, resources, industry best practices, redundancies, systems, feedback, and the leadership necessary to mitigate the impact on people who rely on us to get it right every time we are called upon.

Nevertheless, human error is a factor and unfortunately, even in the best of circumstances, mistakes will occasionally be made. Handling our calls accurately 99.99% of the time, translates to over 150 mistakes annually. Since the beginning of my current tenure through the end of FY22, we have documented 50 sustained complaints about 911 services.

Blown addresses have been a particular concern of mine. A blown address occurs when first responder units are dispatched to an incorrect incident location. There have been times when our call takers entered incorrect locations, and others when callers have provided inaccurate location information. Since March 2022, through the end of the fiscal year there have been 17 instances where there was a call taker error and 3 when the caller provided incorrect location information.

My administration has executed the appropriate corrective action in all these cases, and we have added related safeguards to our dispatching system to prevent this from happening.

Our goal is to make zero (0) mistakes, which is why we thoroughly investigated the four (4) tragic incidents which are the subject of this roundtable to understand what occurred and implement solutions, so we reduce the likelihood that they occur again.

Please note that in the report issued by the ODCA auditors they stated, and I quote, “It is the opinion of *FE* that the judgements and conclusions of the internal investigation processes are sound, and that appropriate efforts have been made to ensure that where appropriate, corrective action has occurred. There is an ongoing effort to identify and resolve internal procedural matters and improve call processing methodologies.” The auditor’s report also stated, and again I quote, “*FE* found established policies in place to ensure that all investigations are conducted in a timely and thorough manner” and “It is the opinion of *FE* that investigations are conducted in a thorough and open manner with all aspects of the event in question reviewed in detail. A full report is prepared for each situation along with recommendations for improvement.”

For additional context around blown addresses, during my 13-month absence I am aware of a total of 42 blown addresses that were documented by the Agency.

To maintain the public's trust and confidence in the OUC, we are committed to understanding all the facts and to speaking the truth. That is what transparency and integrity are all about, and why as an Agency we appreciate the opportunity to discuss these incidents publicly.

Again, as I mentioned previously, our testimony today will reflect upon my time as OUC’s Acting Director and will be based on my experience and the guidance of my executive team since my return on March 7, 2022.

Immediately upon my return, once our Agency was able to regain personnel authority from the DC Office of Human Resources in April 2022 after having lost it following a climate assessment conducted during the previous agency leadership’s tenure. I established an executive team comprised of subject matter experts, filling positions that had been vacant throughout my absence of just over one (1) year. These team members include the 911 Chief of Operations, the Chief of Professional Standards and Development, the Chief of Special Operations and Investigations, the Chief of Staff, and the General Counsel. We have also recruited and onboarded two classes of 911 call takers to begin to fill the fifty-seven (57) vacancies in 911 Operations following an unusual spike in voluntary separations last year.

My team and I understand the critical importance of maintaining connectivity for our vast operation, ensuring that the critical information that we are processing related to literally hundreds of incidents per hour, from the caller to the call taker and the dispatcher, to police and fire and emergency medical responders in the field, is done in the most accurate and effective manner possible. These are high stakes circumstances we operate in every second of every day and we are now poised to continue to meet this challenge head on.

For this reason, we are grateful for constructive feedback that helps reduce errors and improves performance and I continue to welcome the audits conducted by the DC Auditor. Accordingly, when I returned to the helm of the OUC in March 2022, we began to tackle the recommendations included in the ODCA's October 2021 report by creating a roadmap for improvement.

To clarify the order of events around the audit activities, the first follow up to the audit occurred in May 2022, fifty-nine (59) days after my arrival back at the agency. The results of that follow up were not made public until early September month or approximately four (4) months later. Following that, during the week of September 12, 2022, OUC again welcomed the auditors back to the OUC and proudly shared our accomplishments made during the 130-day period since May 2022 when the first follow up occurred. Though we have not yet received that report, I can tell you that in these last 190 days, my newly installed, executive leadership team, and I have made significant progress and have completed twenty (20) of the Report's thirty (30) recommendations. An additional five (5) of the recommendations will be completed upon the integration of our new dispatching protocol system and the other five (5) we anticipate will be completed within the next 6 months after we recruit and onboard additional qualified personnel and work with our partner agencies to reduce the number of event types.

The most current version of our roadmap, as well as performance data and other information can be found on our website at ouc.dc.gov.

I conclude my testimony today with quoted text from the Summary of the First Follow Up report by the DC Auditor: "Recent changes to the OUC management team, including the return of the former Director to serve as Acting Director as well as the hiring of a new Chief of 9-1-1 Operations, have been viewed as positive changes by the front-line staff." The summary continues, "As stated in the initial Audit report, the issues that continue to challenge call-taking and dispatch operations are rooted in established processes and habits that will need to be changed to improve service to citizens and responders serviced by the Agency." My leadership team and I understand that laying the foundation for the next generation of 911 as we are involves evolving our people, processes, and training to effectively tackle these challenges. The summary statement concludes by acknowledging "indications of effort and movement" and we are steadfast in our commitment to continuing this upward trend.

This is a pivotal time for all the 6500 ECCs across the US. As 9-1-1 centers handle higher call volume for increasingly extreme and dire circumstances, the public safety communications industry has been collectively engaged in determining how all 9-1-1 centers can best execute their missions to serve as the vital link between the public and first responders.

The fact is that OUC continues to be a trailblazer in public safety communications. Just last week we hosted benchmarking visits from both the White House and representatives from South Korea, and hosted tours for dozens of other organizations and individuals across the National Capitol Region, as well as Councilmembers Elissa Silverman and Anita Bonds. We are grateful that they were able to make the time to visit. At this time, I would also like to formally reextend the open invitation to the members of this Committee to visit OUC and witness first-hand the lifesaving work that we do and see how much progress has been made.

I am confident that OUC's leadership team now in place and all the passionate, dedicated professionals that answer the call each day at OUC are capable and committed to carrying out our mission and providing the best service possible to DC residents and visitors. My executive team and I are available to take your questions at this time. Thank you.