

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



Public Roundtable  
on  
Bill 25-344, “Office of Unified Communications Transparency and Accuracy  
Amendment Act of 2023”

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, Committee members, staff, guests, and the public. My name is Heather McGaffin, and I am honored to be the Director of the Office of Unified Communications (OUC). I have served in this capacity since February 2023. I am pleased to testify before you today on the OUC Transparency and Accountability Amendment Act of 2023 and some of the issues the legislation touches upon.

The key to any successful 911 system is based upon a trifecta of people, technology, and training. OUC is a system, a system serving not just the community but other systems within the government as well. A system that in Fiscal Year 2023 was relied on nearly 1.8 million times. While OUC is considered a leader in our industry, I fully recognize individually we must be excellent. To put things in perspective, the District's 911 call center is one of the busiest in the country, historically ranking as the 4<sup>th</sup> busiest center behind those of New York City, Chicago, and Los Angeles. We must always be building upon the trust and confidence our community has in us.

The first and most important part of our 911 system always has been and will always remain the people who work at OUC. I want to take a moment to recognize the more than 300 employees who make up the OUC team. Each one of them is a dedicated professional charged with answering the call, either on 311 and 911, or in a support role for the two most used telephone numbers in the District of Columbia. A majority of the team at OUC are Washingtonians. They are family members, friends, and neighbors to those who rely on this system each day. Each day they show up to answer the call. They come here with the goal to answer, process, and dispatch the calls quickly and accurately. Each call is unique – sometimes we meet people in their worst moments when we're giving them CPR instructions for a loved one in their home and sometimes, we meet them at their best when they're welcoming a new baby into the world in the middle of a donut shop. But regardless of the situation, they carry those calls with them, each one. Call takers and



dispatchers are humans, and they are not immune to feelings, stress, and burnout; but they are dedicated in each moment of immense pressure.

As I approach nearly two decades in working in public safety communications, I can confidently say that the staff at the OUC are some of the most dedicated 911 professionals in the business. Each day they show up to work in one of the most stressful and sometimes thankless positions.

It's my job, as the Director, to make sure their needs are taken care of so they can perform. It's my job to make sure they have the right resources, the right training, and have access to wellness so they can continue to serve. It's also my responsibility to make sure we have a solid pipeline of people, so they can take the time they need to rest, recuperate, and process the hard work they do each day.

In the "Pulse of 911 Survey" published earlier this summer, the National Emergency Number Association, known as NENA, along with an industry leader unveiled an eye-opening report with feedback from a majority of the more than 6,600 911 Centers in the United States. I share this information with you to highlight challenges faced by centers across the country, including some at the OUC. While I am committed to positioning the Office of Unified Communications to serve the residents and visitors of the District in an exemplary manner, I think it is important to bring context to the current state of our industry:

- 82% of centers reported being understaffed and struggling with hiring and retention, with respondents citing stress and low pay as the top obstacles to attracting and keeping staff. The data also shows a growing shortfall in younger workers to replace those who are retiring or burning out.



- 83% of participants say their centers experience higher than usual call volumes on multiple days each week.
- Fewer than half of call takers can gain accurate location information from mobile callers.
- 74% of centers revealed that their 911 centers are plagued by staff burnout, with many others exhibiting mental health warning signs such as anxiety, fatigue, and low energy levels.
- Around 38% felt ill-prepared to deal with an active shooter situation, 25% felt they lacked training for mental health calls, and 18% were uncomfortable managing civil disturbances or bias-related events.

It's these exact challenges we're working to minimize, because as a large center, the survey suggested that our issues are amplified because of sheer size and call volume.

Since I was confirmed as Director in May, our new recruitment practices have allowed us to reduce the number of vacancies for call takers from 36 in May to five today. We have hired more call takers in the past eight months than were hired in the entirety of 2021 and 2022 combined. This is credited to our partnership with Acting Director Charles Hall and his team at DCHR to keep positions open continuously, the \$2,500 hiring bonus, and the development of the Agency's Prospect Day that I initiated in May. Since May, we have tested, interviewed, and background checked more than 436 prospective candidates. Our most recent class of recruits is 23 in total; they will complete their classroom training in November and then start on the job training. They should be independently working and contributing to the staffing by January 2024. We also currently have 56 people in suitability testing now for a class beginning in November. This will allow us to promote current call takers to dispatcher positions in police and fire dispatch and not feel the effects of doing so in call taking.



With the Mayor's support, OUC launched our Junior Academy in March – we are building the next generation of first responders. Over twenty students from more than 15 high schools across the District have participated in our first few cohorts. The students receive an overview of 911 and 311 communications and call handling simulations, a mock CritiCall test, the national pre-employment test for 911 call takers and dispatchers, an overview of MPD Patrol Services/Specialized Policing Units and Station Tour, a fire command simulation at Engine House 22, and a graduation ceremony and certificate of completion.

These two recruiting programs have quickly gained national attention in the public safety communications industry and in August I was proud to present details of our success to attendees at the national 911 program's State of 911 webinar. I have also shared the work we're doing here with Congressional staffers and national lawmakers on a regular basis to help advance 911 across the entire nation. As a leader in the industry, we are doing things like participating in thought leadership and contributing to national standards development committees.

We must continue to find ways to recruit and retain talent as high call volume remains a constant issue for our center. In the past fiscal year, we have experienced a 13.75% increase in total call volume and a 11.41% increase in 911 calls. In addition to higher-than-normal call volumes, we are also receiving calls that are more complex and require more interaction with the caller. Telephone misuse is also extremely high with no consequences to the callers for spamming or prank calling 911. We are one of the 54% of centers nationwide experiencing a greater number of abandoned calls. All of these factors made me prioritize the addition of a wellness coordinator to our staff within the next month, to ensure we are prioritizing the physical and mental health while they are at work.



The second piece to the system is the technology. In addition to investing in our people, we recognize that we must also invest in technology. When it comes to technology, we are very fortunate to have a great support system in the Mayor's Office and OCTO to integrate new technologies. However, wireless carriers are not being held responsible for a lack of call delivery with location. So, while there is often conversation about how accurate locations are, only about 60% of our calls come with initial wireless phase II addresses, which enable us to pinpoint a caller's location. The public safety communications industry is working with the FCC and carriers to deliver this more frequently and quickly. We are a part of that conversation and will remain so for the good of our residents and visitors. With 86% of our 911 calls being wireless, reliable location is not only helpful, but necessary. We have demonstrated our support through our affiliation with the Council of Governments and the National Association of State 911 Administrators.

Our employees need the right tools to process calls and while we do currently have a call processing protocol in use, the system is end of life with no vendor support or upgrade available. Elements of the system are broken, and it does not meet the needs or standards set forth by the industry in its current state. Therefore, I made the decision to implement a standards-based call processing system that meets all the needs of our community and the agencies we serve. This was not done in a vacuum and is supported by our partners at MPD, FEMS, and DBH. They have been a part of the process since the inception and will continue to be until full implementation.

As much as technology is an asset to our system, it can also create hurdles. For example, advancement in private technology has also added to increased call volume, with 53% of centers reporting the number of abandoned calls has greatly increased because of talk technology that prompts connected devices to dial 911 with an open line. For example, the technology in your



home with a voice assistant device or the watch on your wrist can inadvertently connect with 911 if the device decides this prompt has been made. The impact of these devices is real, and we experience it each day at our call center.

The final piece of this trifecta is training. In Fiscal Year 2023, the members of the OUC participated in more than 22,600 hours of training. Our training department was redeveloped in June 2022 and has been thriving since. While training is only one piece of the puzzle, it is a piece that at OUC is working well. We have aligned our policies and procedures to national standards and best practices. We have adopted 33 of the 37 national standards from the Association of Public Safety Communications Officers (APCO) and have plans to implement the remaining four within the coming six months, with the introduction of new call processing protocols and technology. All applicable minimum training standards have been adopted. Additionally, OUC has adopted the applicable NENA standards. Since February 2023, all of our training staff have become national certified using NENA and APCO courses.

Our employees are also now T-CPR certified, which has greatly increased our CPR instruction rates. The national average is 50% according to the American Heart Association, and last month, our center was at 89% accuracy in identifying the need for CPR, starting CPR timely, and giving instructions exactly.

As the situations we handle become more complex, so must our training. A continuing education policy has been developed and all 311 and 911 operations employees must now participate in 40 hours of continuing education, 16 more hours than the national standard. 311 and 911 operations supervisors must now participate in 48 hours of continuing education, again more than the national standard. Eight of those hours are mandated geography training with a hands-on



element. Additionally, we are ensuring our employees are provided training and resources to ensure their physical, mental, and emotional well-being remains intact.

Each of the above discussed pieces of our system are helping us to make progress in our service delivery. In FY 2023, the OUC answered 77.86% of all 911 calls in 15 seconds or less and 89.14% of all 911 calls were answered in less than 40 seconds. While the national standard is that 90% of calls are to be answered in 15 seconds or less, the national trend is that 911 centers are unable to attain this goal regularly. While we note there is work to do here, the majority of 911 calls are being answered swiftly and we will continue to work to lower wait times.

I do want to address the notion, included in today's notice for the public hearing, that OUC has implemented less than a third of the recommendations in the 2021 DC Auditor report. It's simply inaccurate.

As of October 1, 2023, we have completed 90% of the recommendations in the audit. Each month since late summer 2022, OUC has tracked and published our progress towards addressing the audit findings on our website. That progress is updated monthly. This audit has now spanned three directors, and therefore some of the responses to the original audit are no longer valid or applicable. For example, recommendation #3 under the technology-centric recommendations states, "assess and improve the integration of the scripted protocols into the call handling process." The agency agrees with this recommendation and has been working toward implementation of a standards-based solution with final implementation expected by the end of calendar year 2023.

The main goal of our agency is to be available to the public in their time of need, whether the situation is emergent or otherwise. We will achieve this goal by improving processes and being transparent and accountable to the public.





We are committed to expanding our OUC roadmap in FY24 and have begun the process of developing a strong, transparent strategic plan for the future, including making sure we are consistent with meeting the needs of our community. Two ways we will inform that plan are through:

- A Top-to-Bottom Operational Assessment

It is a time of great change in the public safety communications space and, as such, it is an opportune time to evaluate and adapt. To assist us in doing so, OUC will be engaging with an external consultant with expertise in organizational redevelopment and strategic planning specific to emergency communications centers similar in size and structure to perform a full operational assessment of agency operations. The assessment will be holistic and will provide recommendations and solutions for systematic change and sustainability in the years to come.

- The Pursuit of Accreditation

While accreditation is not necessary for validating high quality operations in the public safety communications space, we believe that it would be of benefit for OUC's continuous quality improvement. Currently, public safety communications centers are accredited by [The Commission on Accreditation for Law Enforcement Agencies \(CALEA\)](#). CALEA's Public Safety Communications Accreditation Program provides a communications center, with a process to systemically review and internally assess its operations and procedures; requires organizations to collect and analyze important data for the purpose of making sound operational and administrative business decisions, creating leadership and practitioner



accountability; and helps the center to focus on quality assurance, interoperability, emerging technologies, risk analysis, asset security, resources access, contemporary training, and a range of other operational functions.

It is imperative that residents of the District have confidence in our work and that we are held accountable when service is not meeting standards. I know, for some, that instilling confidence will take time and I will continue to look for ways to strengthen that confidence. I believe that overall, we merit a great deal of confidence now and I'd like to tell the positive stories of what we do, even as we reflect on unfortunate and tragic incidents and systems that call out for improvement.

I also understand a great want of the community is for the OUC to be clearly transparent on all events and calls that come into the 911 center. Accordingly, we recently met with and received guidance from the Board of Ethics and Accountability's Office of Open Government. The purpose of the meeting was to gauge where we are in alignment with their mission to advance transparency in government operations and promote civic engagement.

In that vein, we are proud of the launch of our first of its kind performance dashboard, which provides insight into the work of the city's first, first responders by providing performance data on 911 call handling, dispatching, staffing, diversion programs, 911 misuse, and very importantly, findings about performance concerns. This is a beta site, and we are working to test and improve it daily.

I also clearly understand that a lot of information that is said on a 911 call is both personal and confidential to the person saying it or parties involved. There is often medical information and other sensitive information given on 911 calls that may endanger the individual if released to



someone other than them. OUC is committed to operating with the highest degree of transparency possible; however, we will also act responsibly to protect the public from unwarranted intrusions on their privacy.

In response to other requirements of the Bill, the Agency is a participating member of the Domestic Fatality Review Board and has been since early summer when we were first invited to do so. Therefore, legislation in this area is unnecessary, but not burdensome.

OUC is committed to providing equitable access to 311 as well, however, it is important to know that OUC neither creates nor maintains service requests. We have been deeply engaged in efforts to partner with agencies such as DDOT and DPW to make certain that our 311 system, the conduit to our city services, allows for the most convenient reporting of residents' issues. Service requests are owned, managed, and completed by the relevant agencies. Service requests mentioned in the legislation are owned by DPW. We work in partnership with them daily; but the ask in this legislation is not one that OUC has the capacity to see through.

OUC is committed to operating with the highest degree of justified confidence. As only one of the nation's 1,100 NENA certified emergency number professionals, I more than most understand the challenges facing 911. I understand the industry, I understand this center and where we were, where we are, and where we are going.

We are grateful for the testimony shared today by members of the public and we continue to encourage the use of our performance feedback form, which is on our website, at [ouc.dc.gov](http://ouc.dc.gov). Using the form, we welcome concerns, suggestions, or complaints about our programs. Through our online feedback form, monthly virtual lunch and learn sessions, participation in ANC and other community meetings, and community engagement academy, we invite more collaboration with



the public. We are striving to provide the best service possible, and we look forward to strengthening our relationships with all our stakeholders today and going forward.

Chairperson Pinto, and committee members, thank you for your time. This concludes my written testimony, and we look forward to answering any questions the committee may have.

