

GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
Office of Unified Communications



Fiscal Year 2024 Budget Oversight Hearing

Testimony of
Acting Director Heather McGaffin

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

March 29, 2023



Good afternoon, Chairperson Pinto, members of the Committee, Committee staff, and councilmembers. My name is Heather McGaffin, and I am the Acting Director of the Office of Unified Communications (OUC). I am excited to be here and appreciate this opportunity to discuss the agency's proposed FY24 budget. As a city, we have spent the last three years responding to and recovering from the pandemic. The investments made in DC's Recovery Plan have translated to more jobs, lower unemployment, more tourism, and the opportunity to experience the very best of what DC has to offer. This FY 2024 Fair Shot Budget acknowledges the economic realities we face by prioritizing the most critical investments needed to make our city a place people want to call home, do business, and visit. I am immensely grateful to Mayor Bowser for providing OUC with the resources needed to execute its role at the highest level to ensure efficient emergency and non-emergency communications and reliable access to city services and information.

I do want to begin by recognizing all the employees of the OUC who continue to demonstrate their dedication to serving the public by answering the call. To put this commitment in perspective, last year our DC 911 call takers and dispatchers handled 1.3 million 911 calls, which is 100,000 more calls than the previous year. On average, each 911 call taker handled 18,309 calls. We also dispatched first responders from MPD and FEMS more than 801,000 times. In addition to processing tens of thousands of non-emergency police reports, we provided lifesaving care by providing first aid, CPR and baby delivery instructions and hosting text-to-911 sessions with thousands of callers.

Last year, our 311 customer service representatives (CSRs) handled 1.6M calls and facilitated the processing of over 409,000 city service requests. On average 311 CSRs handled



26,600 calls each last year. We prioritized meeting District residents where they are by maintaining platforms that allow them to request city services in the ways that they decide are most convenient for them. Twitter is one of the most popular methods of engagement with 311, and our dedicated social media team continues to set the standard for excellence in customer service.

In FY24, through our participation in the Harvard Kennedy School's Alternative 911 Emergency Response Implementation Cohort, we will continue to receive the technical support needed to help institutionalize a progressive and more appropriate processes in an expanded 911 diversion program. This includes our mental health call management, which will increase the volume of calls being transferred to the Department of Behavioral Health's (DBH) Access Help Line and away from police dispatch.

The entire OUC workforce understands the tremendous responsibility of this workload, and take their role in helping to maintain safe, clean, and engaged communities across the city very seriously. The Mayor's Proposed FY24 budget for OUC demonstrates the Executive's commitment to ensuring that the Agency has the resources it needs to do just that.

The OUC's FY 2024 Mayor's Proposed Operating Budget of \$59,688,459 is a 2.4 percent decrease over the FY 2023 Approved Budget. The operating FTEs of 415 represents a reduction of 8 FTEs which were non-operational, vacant positions, over last year.



We are pleased to report that investments made in the FY23 budget, in the form of additional FTEs for 911 Operations, enabled us to reduce the span of supervision by adding 5 Assistant Watch Commanders within the Division. We are also in the final phase of executing a comprehensive plan to attract and retain emergency operations personnel with these resources, which will include adding staff to shifts with the intent of reducing strain and burnout, which can lead to errors. Further, we anticipate that we will be able to reduce the reliance on overtime.

In fact, so far this year we have established new partnerships and implemented innovative programs with the goal of recruiting qualified staff to fill 911 Operations vacancies. We have identified funds and are procuring consulting services to assist the agency with developing and implementing hiring and retention strategies. Also, in addition to traditional means of recruitment for hard to fill positions, we also now regularly share our vacancy announcements with public safety cluster agencies in the city, across the region and nation, community action groups and ANC's, as well as with city council members. This has served to multiply our reach and the number of impressions and interest in employment with OUC. We also collaborated with DCHR to create a 90-day continuous recruitment and onboarding cycle, and we are in the development phase of creating an attractive incentive package for new employees and for referrals from incumbent employees.

Currently, there are 39 vacant 911 Operations positions consisting of 28 911 call takers and 11 dispatchers. With this continuous recruitment plan, our goal is to fill all of these current vacancies by the end of FY24. We intend to integrate these new team members, first by supporting non-emergency functions so they can get acclimated with the operations environment and then



matriculate through the Agency's Training Academy. The Academy consolidates all education, training classes, and courses necessary for the success of OUC team members providing non-emergency, emergency, and associated support services to District residents and visitors. As part of this balanced approach to adding capacity, to assist with onboarding of these new hires and to provide professional development for our employees, in FY23 we increased our training staff to include 3 FTEs, who have helped us improve our ability to identify performance challenges and gaps and address them immediately. These team members are essential to the execution of our 90-day continuous recruitment and onboarding cycle.

The past few years have been layered with grief, trauma, and uncertainty for all of us. Workforce wellness continues to be top of mind, as we understand how important mental and physical health is for both incumbent and new employees. When coupled with the intense workload and daily exposure to human suffering as a part of our job, there is a cumulative toll that cannot be ignored. For the first time, the Agency has a worksite wellness coordinator and we have engaged a community partner that will facilitate workshops this Spring on emotional recovery and strategies for sustaining self when continually exposed to human suffering. We will also continue to identify resources to host additional related programming onsite.

The proposed FY24 budget also includes a capital allotment of \$7.1M to support the replacement of portable radios for MPD and FEMS, construction of the 4D Tower, renovation of the Public Safety Communications Center (PSCC), and for the FirstNet Distributed Antenna System (DAS) and the bi-directional amplifiers.



There is \$2.5M in our operating budget for the ongoing support of Next Generation 911 and related enhanced public safety communications services. To be specific, this funding will provide support for core services, systems and databases related to the transfer of 911 calls and call data in the National Capital Region (NCR), enhanced call routing, and upgraded telephony denial of services management. The proposed budget also includes an enhancement of \$400,000 to support OUC's call center workstation enhancement project. This project will involve upgrading 911 and 311 hardware such as computers and monitors.

Mayor Bowser's proposed FY24 budget provides the Office of Unified Communications with the resources necessary to efficiently manage the District's 911 and 311 public safety and public service communications platforms. We appreciate the committee's strong support of our work and I look forward to exploring new ways of providing the best service possible to the residents of the District of Columbia. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I look forward to answering your questions.

