

GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
Office of Unified Communications



Fiscal Year 2025 Budget Oversight Hearing

Testimony of
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Office of Unified Communications

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

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John A. Wilson Building
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
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Good afternoon, Chairperson Pinto, members of the Committee, and Committee staff. My name is Heather McGaffin, and I am the Director of the Office of Unified Communications (OUC). I am pleased to testify before you today.

Two weeks ago, Mayor Muriel Bowser presented her Fiscal Year 2025 Budget and Financial Plan, which is the District's 10th consecutive balanced budget, A Fair Shot: Strategic Investments and Shared Sacrifice. This budget advances our DC values and addresses our city's most pressing challenges by making significant investments in our people and our economy.

The FY25 Fair Shot Budget highlights our values: protecting core city services and preserving programs that protect the health and safety of our community; prioritizing programs with a track record of success and that focus on equity; and investing in the pillars of long-term growth. Most importantly, the investments made reflect the priorities identified by District residents during engagement forums held during the budget formulation process.

The Mayor's proposed budget includes funding for strategic initiatives that will help address public safety and public service concerns in a wholistic way. The intentional effort to capitalize on programmatic overlap between the agencies in this budget ensures that all aspects of creating a safer and stronger city are addressed, while enabling OUC to remain a strong partner in efforts to provide District residents with reliable access to city services.

As 911 call volume increases, the need to hire and retain additional call-takers and dispatchers grows. To successfully adapt and keep pace with the changing landscape of the emergency communications environment, strategic investments in programs and staffing and innovative measures must be taken to manage and fund mission critical functions. One of OUC's primary goals is to reduce the reliance on overtime and help address the challenges of burnout and turnover among the dedicated staff.



Recently published reports revealed that OUC's 911 operation is one of the busiest in the country, historically ranking as the 4th busiest behind New York City, Chicago, and Los Angeles. In fact, in 2023, OUC handled approximately 1.77 million 911 calls for service. Along with the hundreds of thousands of visitors who have returned post-pandemic, most callers in need of emergency services in the District are increasingly relying on cellular devices rather than landlines. In fact, in 2021 in DC the 911 operation handled about 1,115.5 wireless calls to 911 per 1,000 residents.

The Mayor's FY25 proposed budget for the agency enables OUC to establish a sustainable and resilient foundation, which will result in enhanced operational efficiency and superior service for all.

The Mayor's FY25 budget for OUC allocates \$63,415,616 in operating funds and supports 425.8 FTEs. This represents a 6.2 percent increase from FY24. The proposed budget also includes a capital budget of \$16,097,229. Additionally, there is \$46.7 million and 419 FTEs in the Local fund. This represents an increase of \$1,029,066 and 12.0 FTEs to expand Emergency (911) operations and staffing. This funding will support six (6) 911 call takers and six (6) 911 dispatchers to help manage the increasing emergency call volume.

The Local Fund also includes an enhancement to Radio Engineering in the amount of \$966,000 for the In-Building Radio Communications Program. OUC is responsible for ensuring that the Distributed Antenna System (DAS) design and installation in each new building aligns with the publicly listed technical requirements. To achieve this, OUC oversees the review and testing processes, which includes collaboration with Fire and Emergency Medical Services (FEMS) Fire Marshals for comprehensive inbuilding coverage testing.



The Special Purpose Revenue fund of \$16.6 million dollars is supported by the Emergency/Non-Emergency Number Telephone Calling Systems Fund. OUC, in collaboration with the OCFO, estimates that the annual costs of operating the 911/311 communications systems will outpace annual revenue collections and deplete the SPR fund balance by the end of 2025. Therefore, an enhancement to the Emergency/Non-Emergency Calling Systems Fund is needed to support ongoing costs. The proposed Hospitality Tax Amendment of 2024 seeks to correct this structural imbalance by generating revenue without directly increasing the tax burden of the residents of the District of Columbia.

The Hospitality Tax is a fair and reasonable approach to obtaining funding to support the operations and enhancements to the 911 operation. It recognizes that visitors to our city benefit from and rely on our emergency and non-emergency systems. As such, it is appropriate for them to contribute to the funding of these services through a tax on their hotel accommodations.

The District's special revenue or 911 fee has remained unchanged since 2000. However, OUC's communications platforms have grown extensively since that time and current annual collections only cover about 20% of the agency's operating costs. Over the last decade, the agency has proposed increases to the 911 fee to offset rising costs. But in FY16, OUC began to explore ways to both change the funding model without further burdening the residents of the District of Columbia and to reduce costs.

In conjunction with OCFO, we have estimated that the annual costs of the 911/311 operating system will outpace annual revenue collections and deplete all the SPR fund balance at the end of 2025. Accordingly, the proposed budget includes a hospitality surcharge on hotels which will enable visitors to the District to share in supporting our 9-1-1 service and facilitate further cost recovery for the District's emergency telecommunications and radio technology. The



Hospitality Tax is a fair and reasonable approach to obtaining funding to support the operations and enhancements to the 911 operations. It recognizes that visitors to our city benefit from and rely on our emergency and non-emergency systems. As such, it is appropriate for them to contribute to the funding of these services through a tax on their hotel accommodations. These surcharges will essentially have no impact on District residents. The new revenue generated will enable the 911 operation to continue to proficiently handle calls for service and dispatch functions, and further improve tech platforms for the Metropolitan Police Department (MPD) and FEMS. The new \$0.80 nightly fee for hotels will generate an estimated \$7.5 million a year. These funds will cover the current shortfall and provide a modest fund balance to support growing costs for years to come.

The Mayor's FY25 proposed budget best positions the agency to bring more innovation to 911 communications in the District and to fulfill its role in helping to enhance public safety for both residents and visitors. The agency particularly looks forward to its continued collaborations with its public safety partners to maintain the integrity of the 911 emergency communications system. Emergency communications are essential to public safety and the Mayor's proposed budget demonstrates our commitment to taking bold steps to safeguard our city.

In the coming fiscal year, OUC also intends to continue its phased approach to enhancing all 311 user platforms. Specifically, the agency will complete regular upgrades such as syncing the appearance of the web portal and mobile application, enhanced access to service request histories, and the addition of dynamic maps and status notes. We are particularly proud to mention that we are working closely with the Office of Disability Rights and DC Public Library to host public 311 platform accessibility testing to ensure that it provides equitable access to all users. Further, OUC will expand its portfolio to add frequently requested and core services to its menu of service request



types. Collaborations that will continue to take shape include those with agencies such as the Department of Buildings to help reconfigure their key business and service request processes.

To cultivate a culture of wellness for our workforce, we recently onboarded our first Wellness Coordinator who is responsible for designing, implementing, and overseeing programs that foster healthy lifestyles and collaborating with stakeholders to tailor wellness initiatives that meet the unique needs of our agency, while ensuring accessibility and engagement. Through this fiscal year and next, we will install a wellness space, host educational workshops, and work to empower OUC employees to make informed wellness decisions that we hope will lead to improved quality of work/life balance and satisfaction.

In closing, the resources allocated to the Office of Unified Communications in FY25 as proposed are vital to achieving its mission to efficiently manage the District's 911 and 311 communications and platforms and support its workforce. The Council and this Committee are critical allies in this effort. I look forward to our continued work together as we make the District safer and stronger.

Before I conclude my testimony, I would also like to mention last week we recognized National Public Safety Telecommunicator's Week. I could not be prouder to lead this team of professionals and I want to publicly recognize them for their critical role in public safety service and their commitment to the profession.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I look forward to answering your questions at this time.

