GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
Office of Unified Communications

Fiscal Year 2027 Budget Oversight Hearing

Testimony of
Director Heather McGaffin

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

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1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20004

Good afternoon, Chairperson Pinto, members of the Committee, Committee staff, and Council members. My name is Heather McGaffin, and I am the Director of the Office of Unified Communications (OUC). Mayor Bowser's proposed FY27 Budget, Grow DC, was formulated with three key considerations in mind: how to drive growth in our economy to fund the services and programs residents count on, how to keep families in DC and attract new residents, and how to create a business environment that draws new investment and creates new jobs.

We are navigating a pivotal moment that demands a more deliberate approach to growth. The federal dollars that once expanded our programs in unprecedented ways have been exhausted, and federal workforce reductions have introduced new pressures on our economy and commercial corridors. That being said, it's important to be clear: DC is still growing. Revenues have slowed, but the city maintains a strong financial foundation on which we can build by making the kinds of strategic and targeted decisions that will allow DC to continue growing while delivering the high-quality services our residents depend on. Grow DC acknowledges the economic realities we face by prioritizing the most critical investments needed to ensure that our city continues to be a place people want to call home, visit, and do business in.

I am immensely grateful to Mayor Bowser for providing OUC with the resources needed to execute its role at the highest level in providing efficient emergency and non-emergency communications and reliable access to city services and information. I want to recognize the employees of OUC who demonstrate their dedication to serving the public by answering the call. To put this commitment in perspective, last year our 911 call takers and dispatchers managed 1.4 million 911 calls and dispatched first responders from the Metropolitan Police Department (MPD) and DC Fire

and EMS (FEMS) approximately 900,000 times, making the District's 911 call center one of the busiest in the country, historically ranking as the 4th busiest center behind those of New York City, Chicago, and Los Angeles. In addition to processing tens of thousands of non-emergency police reports, professionals at OUC provided lifesaving care by providing first aid, CPR and baby delivery instructions, and by hosting text-to-911 sessions with thousands of callers. The entire OUC workforce understands the tremendous responsibility of this workload and takes their role in helping to maintain safe, clean, and engaged communities across the city seriously.

Last year, our 311 customer service representatives handled over 850,000 calls and facilitated the processing of nearly 900,000 city service requests in coordination with dozens of our DC government agency partners. Additionally, our 311 social media team processed tens of thousands of requests posted on X last year.

I also want to take a moment to acknowledge the feedback we have received about the 311 mobile app and web portal. We understand how frustrating it is when the user experience does not meet expectations. Since these issues were flagged, we have been collaborating with the developer on fixes, and I want to assure you that updates are on the way. In the meantime, if you're willing, we ask that you use and share our feedback form, which can be found on the bottom left corner of the 311 online portal at 311.dc.gov, so we can understand exactly what you are seeing. This will help us conduct additional testing more thoroughly and make sure the updates truly solve the issues. Your patience and insights are appreciated and are critical to making improvements to the app and the web portal. I'm also pleased to announce we will invite a group of residents from all eight wards to serve as beta testers of the enhanced platforms before

launch. Lastly, as always, you can submit a service request by calling 311, alerting us via X at @311DCGov, or visiting the online portal at 311.dc.gov

At OUC, we are committed to giving each resident and visitor the peace of mind that we are here when they need us most, whether that is for non-emergency help or in their most dire time. With investments in recruitment, technology, and training, we have achieved 97% of 911 calls being answered in 20 seconds or less. This performance exceeds the national 9-1-1 call processing standard which mandates that 90% of all 9-1-1 calls arriving at the Public Safety Answering Point (PSAP) shall be answered within 15 seconds, also that 95% of all 9-1-1 calls should be answered within 20 seconds. Notably, we also saw a 31% increase in the number of agency held records requests and are proud to share we fulfilled 100% of them within legislated timeframes.

In FY26, major investments were made in technology and capital projects for OUC. It is important to note that the OUC's budget does not just fund 311 and 911 call processing and dispatch, but also all the radios, mobile data terminals, and other public safety communications tools used across the city by MPD and FEMS, including the upkeep of all 10 radio tower sites across the city. This is an immense and necessary part of public safety that ensures responder safety.

I would also like to take a moment to mention the renovation of the Public Safety Communications Center (PSCC), OUC's secondary operations site. This project represents the critical capital investments Mayor Bower made in public safety through the years that help ensure long-term operational continuity and resilience for the District's emergency communications infrastructure. This multi-phased project modernized and expanded the facility to fully support 911, 311, and

Radio/Mobile Data Computing operations, addressing urgent needs in mechanical systems, spatial planning, and technology infrastructure. The project truly exemplifies the District's commitment to delivering resilient, modernized infrastructure for public safety operations by providing enhanced operational capacity, workforce flexibility, and technological infrastructure aligned with the evolving demands of first in class emergency communications.

The Mayor's Proposed FY27 budget for OUC enables us to meet the demand of a growing and thriving DC with the resources it needs to do just that. The Mayor's Proposed Operating Budget for OUC in FY27 is $60,186,154, a 6.9 percent decrease from the FY26 Approved Budget, and supports 413 FTEs. Last year, the strategic investments made by Mayor Bowser in our workforce not only enabled OUC to reduce the speed of answer for 911 calls down from 15 seconds to an average of 4 seconds, it also enabled the attainment of APCO's Agency Training Program Accreditation. This accreditation confirms that OUC's training program aligns with APCO American National Standards (ANS) and its curriculum, materials, and documentation meet rigorous, nationally recognized benchmarks. It also ensures that our 911 professionals receive effective initial and ongoing training aligned with best practices, so we deliver consistent, reliable, and professional service, especially as technology evolves and call volumes increase.

Additionally, investments in the workforce allowed for pay parity for 311 and 911 employees whose salaries were disparate within the divisions, as well as increased pay for 911 call takers so they are now paid at a starting rate of $61,313, which is higher than their counterparts across the National Capital Region. Funding the entry level call taking position in this manner provides the means for us to build a solid foundation that allows for career ladder growth for the individual

employee while remaining competitive in the region to attract and retain the best talent. Please go to careers.dc.gov and look for our Telecommunications Equipment Operator position posting. We would be excited to have you join our team.

The proposed FY27 budget includes $20.03 million in operating funds to support the 41 FTEs of the IT Division and maintenance support and equipment costs for these different facets of the public safety system in the District. Additionally, in FY27, the $9.44 million capital budget will fund uninterrupted power supply replacements at the Unified Communications Center and our secondary site, the PSSC, upgrades to the 311 service request platform, Computer Aided Dispatch enhancements, deployment of 160 emergency communications consolettes, replacement of 500 portable radios for DC government agencies, upgrades to radio tower sites across the city, and replacement of aging fleet vehicles. Additionally, the proposed $9.4M in FY27 capital funding will be used to address several critical needs across our emergency communications and support infrastructure. This funding will go toward replacing aging radio and dispatch equipment, upgrading our CAD and 311 service platforms, and making needed improvements to the electrical and communication systems that keep services running reliably. It will also support the replacement aging fleet and other essential system upgrades. Together, these investments help maintain reliable service and strengthen the systems we rely on every day.

To support the ongoing operating cost of the public safety answering point including personnel and administration of 911 systems and the technology, infrastructure, and interoperability enabling 911 call handling and dispatch, the Public Services Hotel Occupancy Fee Amendment Act of 2026 is also proposed in Grow DC. Annual costs have outpaced 911 fee revenue collections since 2016

causing the Agency to rely on the fund balance and an infusion of revenue from Events DC to cover operating costs. FY 2027's budget fully depletes the fund balance and the annual shortfall in revenue versus expenditures is estimated to be $7 million. This subtitle assesses an 80 cent-per-night fee for occupied hotel rooms. It recognizes visitors to our city use our emergency and non-emergency systems and will fully close the $7 million gap without imposing the full burden on the residents of the District. As we continue to welcome record numbers of visitors, not only will this fee help us to thrive as a world-class city, but it will also ensure that we are able to continue to provide world-class services as an agency.

OUC remains committed to being innovative, resilient, and steadfast in serving the residents and visitors of this incredible city. We are proud that our center is one that other jurisdictions look to and reference when they are upgrading technology, implementing new programs, and collaborating about new ideas. I look forward to answering questions you may have at this time.