

GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
Executive Office of Mayor Muriel Bowser



Performance Oversight Hearing on

The Office of the Deputy Mayor for Public Safety and Justice

Testimony of
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Deputy Mayor

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

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11:00 a.m.

Good morning, Chairperson Pinto, members, and staff of the Committee on the Judiciary and Public Safety. I am Lindsey Appiah, Deputy Mayor for Public Safety and Justice. Thank you for this opportunity to offer testimony on the performance of the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Public Safety and Justice (DMPSJ) during Fiscal Year 2023 and Fiscal Year 2024, to date.

DMPSJ provides oversight of the 12 District agencies and the DC National Guard that comprise the public safety and justice cluster to ensure they are efficiently and effectively meeting their core, critical agency mission and functions; working together across our government to advance public safety and justice priorities; and coordinating with our local, regional, and federal partners to enhance the safety of our city. The missions of the agencies¹ of the Public Safety and Justice cluster, are dynamic, complex, yet interconnected. Each plays a critical role in the overall health and functioning of our public safety and justice ecosystem which is centered around prevention, intervention/enforcement, accountability, and rehabilitation. Every day, more than 10,000 dedicated public servants work in our cluster's agencies to improve the quality of life in our District neighborhoods. I would be remiss to not acknowledge their dedication and commitment to the residents and visitors of the District and offer my deepest thanks for their constant hard work. We literally could do nothing without them.

The Mayor continues to charge the entirety of our government with focusing on driving down crime and working to enhance the safety of those we serve. We are acutely aware that there is nothing more fundamental to the flourishing of our city than public safety. This means that DMPSJ's priority in FY23 and FY24 to date has been on rebalancing our public safety and justice ecosystem to ensure that all residents and visitors are safe, victims of crime experience justice, those that harm our community are held accountable, and that we invest in rehabilitation and prevention programs and initiatives aimed at stopping crime before it is committed.

¹ Department of Corrections, Department of Forensic Sciences, Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services, Fire and Emergency Medical Services, Homeland Security and Emergency Management Agency, Mayor's Office on Returning Citizens Affairs, Metropolitan Police Department, Office of the Chief Medical Examiner, Office of Human Rights, Office of Unified Communications, Office of Victims Services and Justice Grants, Safer Stronger DC Office of Neighborhood Safety and Engagement, and DC National Guard.

In FY23, one of DMPSJ's primary focuses was on supporting the PSJ agencies in identifying, and improving performance, of core functions. DMPSJ's emphasis was on "getting back to the basics." One of the most critical components of this process was working to ensure stable, competent agency leadership. In addition to me as a new deputy mayor, we also identified interim or permanent leadership during FY23 and FY24 to date for OVSJG, OUC, DFS, ONSE, DYRS, MPD, and HSEMA. Our PSJ directors are national leaders in their fields and their leadership has allowed us to achieve a number of gains.

In May 2023, Dr. Diaz assumed interim leadership of DFS. With his scientific expertise, experienced leadership and the hard work of the professionals at DFS, in December 2023, DFS received news that following an extensive evaluation, ANSI National Accreditation Board assessment of the lab identified zero non-conformities at the lab and recommended that the Forensic Biology and Forensic Chemistry Units of the lab be re-accredited. We are confident that the agency has a plan moving forward to get remaining units accredited, employees certified in their areas of expertise, and continuous quality improvement to maintain scientific rigor.

Additionally, in July 2023, the Mayor nominated Chief Smith to serve as Chief of MPD. Chief Smith's leadership at MPD had an immediate impact. She made it a priority with leadership that she wants to see officers out in the community, and she started a Robbery Prevention Task Force. This task force deploys officers and resources with more precision in response to active crime taking place. Officers are making more arrests, which is the first part of the system holding the perpetrator accountable. This taskforce's work will transition into the Real Time Crime Center which is slated to be operational at the end of February.

In FY24, DMPSJ will continue to prioritize supporting our agencies to help them meet their mission critical agency functions, effectively and efficiently steward public resources and trust, and serve our residents and visitors with purpose and care.

In FY23 and FY24 year to date, DMPSJ has also worked on making the city safer by coordinating interagency initiatives focused on reducing crime and increasing presence in our neighborhoods that not only help residents be safe, but also feel safe. In FY23, DMPSJ continued to provide

oversight and support for two taskforces – the Multiagency Public Safety Taskforce and the Multiagency Nightlife Taskforce.

In FY23, the Multiagency Public Safety Taskforce supported various neighborhoods on Wednesday and Thursday afternoons by bringing together District agencies and our federal supervisory partners to address a host of concerns from illegal dumping to abandoned vehicles and more. In Calendar Year 2024, the Multiagency Public Safety Taskforce is a force multiplier for MPD’s Targeted Homicide Reduction Partnership Plan, Operation THRIVE (“Targeted Homicide Reduction through Intervention and Violence Elimination”). Operation THRIVE is focused on reducing homicides in 2024 by coordinating resources in areas most impacted by homicide to protect life and stabilize neighborhoods historically plagued by violence. This is a whole-of-government approach and strategic deployment of personnel and resources in neighborhoods affected most severely by non-domestic homicides and contact shootings, Rosedale, Anacostia, and Washington Highlands.

The Multiagency Nightlife Task Force brings a whole-of-government approach to address identified violent crime, quality of life, nuisance activities, and regulatory concerns that were occurring in three identified nightlife areas: U Street NW, H Street NE, and the Connecticut Avenue NW corridors.

Both multiagency efforts continue to help us to decrease crime in the targeted areas in which they work.

In FY24, DMPSJ assumed operational lead for the District’s Safe Passage program. Safe Passage supports students as they travel to and from school. For School Year 23-24, Safe Passage provides support to 48 schools in eight priority areas including one metro station. PSJ distributed approximately \$8.5M in grant funding to four community-based organizations which funds 235 staff for this school year. Safe Passage Ambassadors – trained and trusted adults from community-based organizations – are assigned to schools and work to build relationships with school staff, students, families, and community members. Notable changes to the program model this year include redefining and providing a uniform standard of procedures for all Safe Passage

Ambassadors deployed in the community and enhanced data reporting used to capture unusual incidents within Safe Passage priority areas.

Additionally, in Calendar Year 2023, PSJ also continued coordination of the Public Safety Go Teams which consisted of non-law enforcement government employees – credible messengers, community engagement specialists, violence interrupters, staff from the Mayor’s Office of Community Relations and Services, and others – to be present in hotspot neighborhoods during key holiday weekends. PSJ also coordinated Resource Pop-Ups in schools and community to meet the needs of at-risk youth.

Most recently, DMPSJ supported the opening of the Safe Commercial Corridor Hub in Chinatown. The hub will be staffed by multiple outreach teams that cover public safety, human services, behavioral health, and community relations. The Chinatown hub, staffed by outreach teams, will be open Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. Staff will have direct insight and be able to respond more quickly to real-time challenges in the community.

Finally, DMPSJ is finalizing grant agreements with recipients of the FY24 Safe Commercial Corridor Grant Program. DMPSJ is distributing approximately \$1.1M in grants to support public safety and public health evidence-based activities within the Downtown, Shaw, or Adams Morgan commercial corridors. We will announce the grant recipients in the next several days.

In addition to programmatic efforts, my office spent a significant amount of time examining the District’s legislative landscape in FY23. This examination included our own assessment but also meeting in many different forums with stakeholders and residents in all parts of our city, across all eight wards, representing all sectors. What was clear was that there were gaps that required commonsense policy proposals and a rebalancing of our public safety ecosystem, particularly around accountability for those committing crime in our city.

In May 2023, Mayor Bowser introduced the *Safer Stronger Amendment Act of 2023*. We appreciate your leadership, Chairperson Pinto, in advancing the *Prioritizing Public Safety Emergency Amendment Act of 2023* in July, which had immediate impact in uplifting and advancing justice

for victims of crime and helping us to start to reverse unacceptable levels of crime and violence in our city. In October, Mayor Bowser proposed the *Addressing Crime Trends Now Amendment Act of 2023* to address additional gaps in our system and we are grateful that many of our proposals were included in your Secure DC Omnibus Amendment Act of 2024.

We are grateful for your leadership and Council's partnership in advancing Secure DC, which prioritizes the safety of our community and sends a clear message: if you commit a crime in DC, if you hold a gun to someone in DC, if you bring violence to our neighborhoods – there will be swift and certain consequences. We must act with urgency to pass and implement common-sense legislation that will rebalance our public safety ecosystem and make our communities safer.

I would like to address a few points on *Secure DC* before the Council takes the second vote on the omnibus on March 5, 2024. Drug-Free Zones will not allow MPD to randomly break up any group of people in DC. They will allow the MPD Chief to thoughtfully address open-air drug markets so that communities can reclaim public spaces. Additionally, this bill will not ban hoods or hijabs but will give MPD a common-sense tool to engage those wearing masks in our community who intend to do harm.

The Executive is calling on Council to remove the amendment added that will end the expansion of holding adults before trial who have been caught committing a violent offense. The expansion of the rebuttable presumption related to pretrial detention has been an important tool in helping us to increase the safety of our communities. As of February 26, 2024, we have seen a substantial increase in those charged with weapons offenses being held pretrial. We have seen a corresponding 28% decrease in assaults with dangerous weapon compared to 2023. When a person is caught committing a violent crime in our city, commonsense requires that we ask our judges to first consider keeping that person off the streets as they await trial.

Also, we must keep the threshold for first degree organized retail theft at \$500. We must take seriously the effect that organized theft is having on businesses and the residents who depend on those businesses. MPD and prosecutors must have the tools they need to hold people accountable when they target businesses.

As we reflect on what happened in 2023 with the state of crime, I am fully cognizant that we cannot repeat last year. We must reduce crime and increase safety. When I look at the numbers for the first 45 days of 2024, there is reason for cautious optimism. We are experiencing decreases in homicide, assault with a dangerous weapon, burglary, motor vehicle theft, and theft from auto when compared to this time in 2023. Violent crime is down 11% and total crime in the District is down 12%. While it is early, we are making progress in helping residents be and feel safer. But I know that there is much more work to be done. And I am confident that with the continued hard work of our PSJ agencies and the partnership of Council and our community, we will continue to drive down crime and ensure our city is one in which everyone can flourish.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify on my Office's performance. I welcome any questions you may have.