

**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  
**Chris Geldart**  
Acting Deputy Mayor

**Before the**  
Committee on the Judiciary and Public Safety  
Charles Allen, Chairperson  
Council of the District of Columbia

March 11, 2021  
9:30 AM

Good morning Chairperson Allen, members, and staff of the Committee on the Judiciary and Public Safety. I am Chris Geldart, Acting Deputy Mayor for Public Safety and Justice. I appreciate the opportunity to discuss the work done by this office during Fiscal Year 2020 and thus far in Fiscal Year 2021.

The Office of the Deputy Mayor for Public Safety and Justice oversees and coordinates the work of the District's public safety agencies which include: Office of Neighborhood Safety and Engagement, Fire and Emergency Medical Services Department, Metropolitan Police Department, Homeland Security and Emergency Management Agency, Office of Unified Communications, Office of Victim Services and Justice Grants, Office of the Chief Medical Examiner, Department of Forensic Sciences, Department of Corrections, Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services, Office of Human Rights, and Mayor's Office of Returning Citizens Affairs. My office also interacts and coordinates regularly with independent agencies, federal entities, the court system, and our regional partners.

This year's performance oversight hearing is unique given the ongoing COVID-19 public health emergency. I want to give my deepest appreciation for the work being done every day by each member of our public safety cluster. We have mourned the deaths of several agency employees, supported a sizeable number of our first responders who contracted and recovered from coronavirus, and stayed the course in answering the call for help every day in every way. We owe them an incredible debt of gratitude for their dedication and service to the District.

While each of the agencies in my cluster made significant achievements in FY20, our work was dominated by three large-scale emergencies: responding to COVID-19 and its impacts on our residents and first responders; civil unrest and insurrection; and developing a new comprehensive strategy to reducing gun violence.

### ***Ensuring Public Safety During the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency***

The District's response to the COVID-19 pandemic required a tremendous leadership from our agencies and mayoral investment in agency infrastructure to rapidly expand our response capabilities and meet the needs of our residents and employees.

The Homeland Security and Emergency Management Agency led the coordinated actions and working with DC Health, the Office of Contracts and Procurement, the Department of Public Works, and the DC National Guard, operationalized the District Logistics Center to store, manage, and distribute supplies such as personal protective equipment, water, and surge mass care equipment. Having these resources on hand, with systems in place to manage and distribute them, was essential to protecting frontline workers as they interacted with residents. It also allowed the District to safely staff agencies, either in the field or virtually, and to continue to deliver services to meet the vital needs of our residents.

With minimal notice, HSEMA also led the relocation the District's Emergency Operations Center (EOC), and its Joint Information Center (JIC), to the Health Emergency Coordination Center, located at DC Health, to better coordinate our COVID-19 response. From the EOC and JIC, the District was able to establish critical response elements including: a citywide testing program at

both fixed sites and rotating locations, including a number of fire stations; expanded social services support through grocery pickup and meal delivery; expanded mortuary capacity; the creation of a 437-bed alternate care facility at the Convention Center; and the establishment of on-demand virtual family assistance for each family who lost a loved one to COVID.

Thanks to Mayor Bowser's continued investment in the Department of Forensic Sciences, the Public Health Lab (PHL) was designated by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) as a Tier 1 laboratory. This designation represents the PHL's readiness to respond to acts of bioterrorism or threats of emerging diseases and in March 2020, the PHL was activated for COVID-19 testing and quickly expanded to a daily, and sometimes 24/7, operation.

The PHL's initial capacity was 25 samples a day. That increased to 600 samples a day by the end of March 2020, and they can now process 1,200 samples a day, with an average turnaround time of two days for our frontline employees. This increased capacity allows DFS to process samples from testing at fire stations, the Police and Fire Clinic, and mobile testing units supplied to long-term care facilities, nursing homes, and homeless shelters. Accurate, accessible testing has been a valuable tool to help residents and District government agencies manage exposure, illness, and recovery outside of hospitals.

I want to thank our frontline workers across government who have kept our city running and provided critical assistance to our residents and businesses. I also want to take this moment to remember the residents and employees lost this past year. This has been a tough year – and we're not done yet. But I am confident we can build ourselves up stronger than before.

### ***Responding to Civil Unrest and Insurrection***

Our responsibility as the nation's capital requires us to host large groups who come here to express their First Amendment rights. Each year, the District hosts hundreds of peaceful demonstrations, ranging from a few people outside an embassy to hundreds of thousands marching down Pennsylvania Avenue. Over the past year, several demonstrations turned violent, resulting in the loss of life, property destruction, and the ongoing armed encampment around the US Capitol.

Over the course of the last year, we have seen several unprecedented and deeply disturbing incidents:

- A President using military and federal law enforcement personnel to violently clear peaceful demonstrators from a public park so he could stage a photo op outside a historic church.
- A large number of outside protestors who came to our city with the intent of violently confronting police officers, destroying property, and creating an "autonomous zone".
- Hundreds of commercial and retail storefronts across the city boarded up to prevent looting and property damage.
- A President inciting a crowd of supporters with conspiracy theories and encouraging violence against members of Congress fulfilling their constitutional duties to certify the election results.

- A sizeable portion of downtown being turned into an armed fortress, surrounded by razor wire fencing and patrolled by thousands of National Guard troops.

Mayor Bowser has repeatedly urged Congress and the federal government to deescalate the security posture around our federal buildings. The razor-wire topped fencing around the Capitol needs to come down. And while we greatly appreciate the assistance of National Guard troops from around the country, it is time for them to return home. I completely agree with Mayor Bowser's call for a national commission to investigate the intelligence and operational failures around the domestic terrorism attack on the US Capitol on January 6.

I want to echo the Council's recent ceremonial resolution recognizing and honoring the Metropolitan Police Department for its heroism on January 6. We had hundreds of MPD officers who rushed to protect the US Capitol by foot, bike, car, and even commandeered Metro buses. Dozens of officers were injured during the hours-long battle to regain control of the Capitol from violent insurrectionists. The January 6 domestic terrorism attack was the first time the US Capitol has been violently breached since the War of 1812. It was the men and women of the Metropolitan Police Department that immediately responded to protect the Capitol, the former Vice President, and the members of Congress, and the certification of the election. I am proud of their heroism and the entire nation owes them its gratitude.

### ***Responding to a Second Public Health Emergency: Gun Violence***

We have been facing two concurrent epidemics in the District: COVID-19 and gun violence. While COVID-19 is now trending in the right direction, last year gun violence and homicides reached a 12-year high with 198 homicides (86% of them committed with a firearm) and 922 people shot. Last month, Mayor Bowser announced the launch of our new comprehensive violence prevention strategy called, Building Blocks DC. As part of this strategy, the Mayor established a Gun Violence Prevention Emergency Operations Center led by Linda Harllee Harper, our new Director of Gun Violence Prevention.

The Gun Violence Prevention EOC will apply the same whole of government approach we have been using in our COVID-19 response. In partnership with impacted communities, the Gun Violence Prevention EOC is taking a public health approach to reduce gun violence by focusing on the small number of people and places that are most at risk of being involved in gun violence. As part of this effort, the Director and the EOC will work to connect District residents to trauma services, housing, jobs, education, and other critical supports. The Building Blocks DC initiative is a big, bold idea. It will require the active participation of staff from agencies throughout the District government, community-based organizations, and, above all, the residents of our focus neighborhoods.

Building Blocks DC has three goals: (1) Build up people; (2) Build up places; and (3) Build up sustainably. First, we will work to identify individuals most at risk of being impacted by gun violence. We will work with them to build individual and family success plans with wraparound supports from other government agencies. Second, research shows a small number of city blocks are where almost half of all gun violence is happening. We will focus on those blocks, building them up by linking communities and agencies to restore confidence, improve city services, and

identify investment needs. Third, we will develop neighborhood action plans and capacity building for community-based organizations. Partnering with residents is the only way to sustain these efforts and rebuild communities.

Because we need to regularly assess the impacts of our efforts, our EOC team will be tracking and analyzing data to gauge effectiveness. We need to be transparent in celebrating focus areas where our efforts are having a demonstrable, sustained impact in reducing gun violence – as well as acknowledging where it's not working so we can recalibrate our efforts.

### ***Upcoming Challenges in FY21***

During FY 2021, we will continue to coordinate the District's COVID-19 response and recovery. This will require adjusting District operations as needed to safely maintain core services and manage the vaccine roll-out. We will continue to coordinate and support the Building Blocks DC initiative. And we will continue to make sure our public safety agencies have all they need to continue to ensure the safety of our city, its residents, and its businesses.

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Chairperson Allen, in the interest of time, I did not detail the work of all 12 agencies within the public safety cluster, but I am proud of their work, their dedication, and the impacts they are having on the lives of our residents.

We appreciate the opportunity to share our accomplishments and our plans for continuous improvement. I welcome your questions at this time.