

GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
METROPOLITAN POLICE DEPARTMENT



**On the Nomination of Pamela A. Smith
to the Position of
Chief of the Metropolitan Police Department**

Testimony of
Pamela A. Smith
Acting Chief of Police

Before the
Committee on the Judiciary & Public Safety
Council of the District of Columbia
The Honorable Brooke Pinto, Chair

September 27, 2023
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW, Room 500
Washington, DC 20004

It is the mission of the Metropolitan Police Department to safeguard the District of Columbia and protect its residents and visitors with the highest regard for the sanctity of human life. We will strive at all times to accomplish our mission with a focus on service, integrity, and fairness by upholding our city's motto, Justitia Omnibus -- Justice for All.

Good afternoon, Chair Pinto, members and staff of the Committee, other Councilmembers, and everyone in our great city watching us today. I am Pamela A. Smith, Acting Chief of Police for the Metropolitan Police Department (MPD). I am truly humbled and honored to be here today to testify before you as Mayor Muriel Bowser's nominee to be the next Chief of Police of the Metropolitan Police Department. I want to extend my appreciation to Mayor Bowser for her ongoing support. I approach this assignment with commitment and a strong sense of responsibility for leading the men and women of our great police department.

I would like to thank the members of the Council, all of whom made time to meet with me in August. I am confident that we will be able to work together to support public safety in the District of Columbia. Although we may not always immediately agree on the path, we share the same goal of a safe city for all.

Before I begin talking about the District and the Metropolitan Police Department, please allow me to start our conversation by sharing more about my journey that has led me to this point of my career. I am a native of Pine Bluff, Arkansas, where I spent my formative years as a young person. My experiences gave me an unwavering drive to push through and excel. As a 9-year-old, although I had no vision beyond the city limits of Pine Bluff, I noted in my diary that I wanted to grow up to be a police chief. I'm not sure I understood the magnitude of that journal entry at such a young age, but I have no doubt it planted a seed, giving me hope in the promise of dreams coming true and ultimately, believing that all things are possible.

I grew up in an environment where my father was addicted to drugs and my mother gave birth to her first child as a 16-year-old married teenager. By the time she was 21, she was divorced and left to raise three young children by herself. She was challenged with many issues that she experienced from her childhood, which made it difficult for her, at times, to create a household filled with love or compassion.

As a child, I didn't quite understand how to protect myself or my siblings from some of the physical abuse, but as a teenager, I found solace in attending church. I invited my siblings to attend with me and it was the one place we looked forward to going weekly, to find a place of refuge. It was where I had the opportunity to be of service to others and to not remain focused on the circumstances in my household. Maybe that's why law enforcement was so appealing to me as I carry that same protective spirit with me today as your acting Chief of Police.

I later realized that Pine Bluff at that time did not have a system to assist single mothers, so my mother did not have options for support. Due to her addiction, the Arkansas Department of Human Services eventually removed us from her care and placed us into a foster home. Despite



the fact that my mother was dealing with her own challenges, I would have preferred being home rather than in a foster care system that was not focused on the reunification of our family.

Nevertheless, one of my greatest moments of elation in my young life was having a loving family who saw something special in me and gave me a second chance at life – another chance to find hope in what seemed to me was a hopeless situation, a chance to prove to myself that I could overcome the adversities of life and fulfill those dreams that resonated in my mind. I will forever be thankful for the Thomas family who took me in and adopted me during my last years of high school and helped to provide a sense of normalcy and love in a home I craved for so long. That instilled in me a “pay it forward” gratitude that I apply in all that I do today. Why? Because they took a chance on me!

One of the highlights of my high school career was joining the track team. I was coached by the late, great Andrew Butler at Pine Bluff High School. Coach Butler helped shape me into the strategic thinker that I have been most of my adult life. He reassured me that despite what I was going through, running would help me to win in life. I didn’t receive a trophy if I didn’t win the race, but I was encouraged to train more, study harder, and look within if I was trying to win. He would always tell me not to look at others to accomplish my goals, but to always look within myself. I adopted his coaching style throughout my journey in college at the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff where I was a member of Track and Field and was Three Time All-American in Track and Field. I have used the same techniques when approaching tasks or assignments that are very personal to me.

As I look back on those days, I gained many life lessons – how to find the positive in negative situations, how to face my fears, how to push through adversity and find a way to maintain emotional peace and some sense of normalcy in life, despite the things I could not control.

I’m also grateful that as an adult, I became more accepting of my birthparents. As I grew in my ministry, the Bible scripture to honor your parents convinced me to do just that. I’m grateful I was allowed many years to spend time with my mom and dad to reconcile our relationship before they passed away. Although, they are no longer here, I am confident they would be very proud of all of their children and how we embraced our circumstances to become productive people in today’s society.

These experiences have shaped and molded me into the woman you see in front of you today. So much of what happened in my life is what’s happening in many homes across the country today. As I have had the opportunity to visit with many young people in the last two months, I have seen that some of them are living stories similar to mine. I empathize with them and want to help them as others helped me as a young person. Everyone deserves a chance, and I want to be able to bring that compassion and spirit to my work as the Chief of Police.

Before committing myself to the profession of law enforcement, I spent time as a National Park Service seasonal ranger, a social worker who passionately focused on keeping kids out of the foster care system, a New York City Probation Officer, and a Federal Bureau of Prisons Corrections Officer before joining the ranks of the United States Park Police (USPP) in 1998.



Through service and law enforcement, I believed I found my passion due to my strong desire to serve and help guide others in the right direction. While working for Park Police, I had the opportunity to serve in four different jurisdictions: the District of Columbia, New York, Atlanta, and San Francisco. I worked with local crime fighting strategists in each of these jurisdictions. I rose through the ranks until I retired in 2022 as the first African American woman to serve as Chief of Police in the agency's 230-year history.

I'm proud and appreciative to have served 25 years in law enforcement with a decorated career. I achieved numerous commendations and awards. And I am honored and humbled to have the opportunity to continue this path forward if confirmed to lead MPD as the next Chief of Police.

I joined MPD in 2022 as the first Chief Equity Officer and was able to focus on learning and examining MPD's culture, build relationships across the department, and drive meaningful change, ensuring that diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) remain a priority in the department. While I passionately and thoroughly enjoyed the DEI work, I was proud to answer the call and promotion to the Assistant Chief of Police, Homeland Security Bureau (HSB), where I led the operational and administrative functions of the Special Operations Division, Joint Strategic & Tactical Analysis Command Center, and the Office of Intelligence. This was a great opportunity to reconnect with so many of the local, state and federal partners I had previously collaborated with while at Park Police and an even more meaningful way to continue to strengthen those professional relationships.

* * * *

My past experience has led me to this great honor of being nominated to serve the District of Columbia as the next Chief of Police of the Metropolitan Police Department. It was a privilege to join MPD in 2022, to work with its dedicated team of sworn officers and civilian professionals, in once again serving the great city of the District of Columbia. I come to this position ready to work with members of the community and our partners in non-profits, business, and government to help create a safer city for all that fulfills the promise of our values of equity and inclusion. And my fundamental perspective is that in this position, my role is not to jettison the ongoing good work in the Department, the government, and our neighborhoods, but to build on it and continue the progress, or to bring a new perspective that can help us move to the next level, together. Over the past two months, I have worked with the talented team at MPD to identify top priorities, launch new initiatives, and develop a strategic plan that is now available on our website at mpdc.dc.gov. I am pleased to highlight some of these priorities and initiatives here today.

I recognize that I have begun my tenure as the District is facing some critical public safety challenges. But that also means there is an opportunity to have a significant impact in our community and the Department. The most pressing concern that I have heard from community members since being nominated is the increase in robberies and carjackings and the fear that this creates. Homicides and shootings are also up this year, leading to a 36 percent increase in DC



Code index violent crime so far this year.¹ Much of this was driven by a sharp uptick this summer. While we have a lot of work to do to overcome the violence we have seen in our community this year, I believe the initiatives that I will brief you on today are helping to interrupt this cycle and make our city safer. Looking at the past 30 days compared to the prior 30 days, homicides are down 37 percent, carjackings are down 27 percent, and robberies are down 23 percent.²

In 2023, we have seen too many groups of youth and young adults committing strings of carjackings and robberies. From my first day as the Acting Chief of Police, I have been working with the MPD team and our partners to develop and deploy tactics that will help us to interrupt these patterns and make our streets safer for everyone in Washington. The week after my nomination, I launched the Violent Crime Suppression Initiative. Originally focused on just robberies and carjackings, the initiative focuses additional resources in the areas and at the times when our robberies, carjackings, and shootings occur. To ensure a high level of citywide coordination, each operation is led by a designated Incident Commander, and the Joint Operations Command Center is activated. This facilitates communication across police districts, ensuring that officers operating in one district have current information about emerging crime patterns in other districts.

As with many of MPD's initiatives, our public safety partners are also involved in and support this effort. During the operational period, MPD coordinates with federal law enforcement agencies, local university police departments, Metro transit police, and agencies from surrounding jurisdictions. This partnership is critical to MPD's ability to impact violent crime and increase safety for our communities.

In 2023, almost two-thirds of all arrests for carjackings have been youth under 18 years of age. Three-quarters of the carjackings have been committed while armed with a gun, increasing the risk to the community substantially. While the overwhelming majority of youth in the District have no involvement with crime, when some children as young as 12 are engaging in carjackings and other dangerous crimes, victimizing individuals and communities while increasing their own risks for later criminal involvement or victimization, it is clear that the current strategies are not an effective deterrent. MPD has continued to arrest juveniles for crimes when appropriate, and the Council and prosecutors have taken recent steps to try to address this concerning trend. In July, the Council enacted legislation to ensure that youth engaged in the most serious crimes may be detained pending trial – where they can receive appropriate supportive and rehabilitative services. A month ago, the US Attorney for the District of Columbia (USAO) reinforced that, when a 16 or 17-year-old is charged in a spree or pattern of armed robberies, prosecutors should strongly consider prosecuting that juvenile as an adult. So far in 2023, the USAO has charged nine juveniles as adults for armed robberies, including armed

¹ Homicide, sex abuse, assault with a dangerous weapon, and robbery, through September 24, as of September 25, 2023.

² Current 30 days (08/26/23 through 09/24/23) compared to prior 30 days (07/27/23 compared to 08/25/23).



carjackings. While these steps may be necessary, our preference is to work with youth to deter at-risk behavior.

As I highlighted earlier, my commitment to working with at-risk youth comes in part from my childhood, and also from my early professional career when I served as a social worker in New York. I know that we need to support at-risk youth and their families both before they get involved in delinquent or criminal behavior, as well as after any involvement in the juvenile justice system. In a new step to help reach some of the youth before they are involved in crime, earlier this month we partnered with the Department of Rehabilitation Services (DYRS) to address youth who are violating DC's juvenile curfew law. DYRS is operating a curfew center so that when police pick up a youth violating curfew who cannot be immediately turned over to their parents or guardian, the youth and their families can be assessed for services and support. This is critical when we are seeing groups of youth staying out late in specific areas where we have also seen pattern robberies and carjackings. To be clear, curfew violators are not arrested and do not have an arrest record. Our goal is to get youth off the street to reduce their risk of becoming a victim of or getting involved in violent crime. This month, MPD has picked up 28 youth violating curfew, of which half have been taken to DYRS.

I am committed to working with families, neighborhoods, and community and government partners to engage with youth to keep them safe and deter them from becoming involved with crime. To support this focus, I have realigned our resources within the Youth and Family Engagement Bureau to create the new School Safety and Community Engagement Division.³ The new division supports a safety strategy in and around our schools as well as community events and outreach initiatives designed for both youth and adults. The division will work to assist District families through meaningful engagement, facilitating connections to essential services and accessible resources, and extending community outreach efforts. We are also bringing Officer Friendly – a positive symbol of MPD for generations of Washingtonians – back to our schools and our neighborhoods.

Of course, having a community engagement division does not change the fact that our patrol officers are engaging with the community every day in every neighborhood. We know that we must be intentional in our efforts to build relationships and trust. Residents want to see officers not just at events, but on our streets. That is why I have directed all of our patrol districts to conduct at least one scheduled community walk each week, providing an opportunity for patrol leaders to hear directly from a variety of community members and to see neighborhoods streets through their eyes. Agency partners are also frequently joining our walks so they can follow up on issues needing attention, such as lighting, trees, and trash. This focus does not stop with community walks; patrol district leaders are working to spend more time in the neighborhoods with community.

³ The new School Safety & Community Engagement Division combines previously distinct units, including the School Safety Division, Youth Intervention and Prevention (YIP), Side by Side Band, and community affairs/events.



Not only does this build relationships, but it also reinforces to our officers the behavior and policing we want to see. About a quarter of our sworn members have been on the Department for less than six years; their perspective and experience has been shaped by COVID and large demonstrations, online meetings and January 6th. On the positive side, they have seen first-hand why MPD must always be prepared to support the city through major changes and emergencies. However, we must also ensure these officers see and understand the foundations in law enforcement, such as good community policing.

To help address communities facing more entrenched issues related to narcotics and disorder, we have launched Multiagency Police and Community Together, or MPACT. MPACT is a 3-phase effort where first MPD conducts enforcement initiatives in partnership with other law enforcement and criminal justice agencies. The second phase is engagement, which exemplifies the whole of government approach by bringing resources and services directly to the community. This second phase is critical to the sustainability of the effort. Lastly is celebration, through which the community can enjoy their neighborhood with their neighbors and public servants. These efforts have taken place around the city, including in Shaw, Minnesota Avenue, and Gallery Place / Chinatown.

Community members have also raised concerns about safer streets for all from speeding and reckless driving. To help address this, MPD is conducting Traffic Safety Compliance Checkpoints throughout the city at least twice a month. The high-visibility checkpoints focus on promoting safe driving, providing education, traffic violation enforcement, along with taking suspected impaired drivers and unsafe drivers off the road. During these checkpoints, MPD has stopped 800 vehicles, issued nearly 600 traffic tickets and 400 warning tickets, made 35 arrests, and given away 23 child car seats.

While these are concerns raised in many community meetings in the past two months, it is important to recognize that there is great diversity in our communities. Diversity in demographics, national origin, sexual orientation, ability, and others can contribute to a diversity of concerns and priorities. We are continually working make sure that the needs of all of our community members are met. For instance, in August and September we were pleased to host 60 residents in a Community Engagement Academy (CEA) conducted in Spanish. Each week during these periodic Academies, participants learn about a different aspect of MPD's work, including recruit training, patrol services, common policing scenarios, and use of force. To help serve our community members with limited English proficiency, this month we also launched a new process to ensure that parties involved in a police incident or traffic crash can request a translated report. And in 2024, we will develop refresher training on issues of importance to the LGBTQ+ community to be delivered in 2025 to ensure our members are well prepared to welcome and support the large numbers of visitors expected to travel to DC as we host World Pride 2025.

We are also committed to working to meet the needs of community members facing chronic or crisis behavioral health challenges. MPD is an active partner with the Department of Behavioral Health (DBH), Fire and EMS, the Office of Unified Communications, and local hospitals to try



to reduce criminal involvement and unnecessary emergency room visits for these individuals. I have already met with Dr. Bazron to discuss our ongoing partnership with DBH. We are particularly looking forward to the launch of the DC Sobering and Stabilization Center and new DBH behavioral health professionals who will be joining our Co-Response Team, all expected to launch this fall. Just this morning we learned that MPD has been awarded a grant by the Department of Justice that will allow us to expand the co-response pilot into the Seventh District. We are also wrapping up our two-year project to ensure all members have been trained in either Mental Health First Aid (20 hours) or as Crisis Intervention Officers (40 hours).

We recognize that all of these efforts, while comprehensive, may not be sufficient to reverse longer trends in violent crimes, traffic safety, and community relationships. However, they illustrate how a willingness to continually work together to assess and try new approaches will be successful in the long run. That is what I am committed to bringing to MPD and our communities.

* * * *

In addition to focusing on pressing community needs, it is critical that MPD continue to address employee well-being. These are good investments by the city because public servants who are healthy and well can better serve and support the community. As you know, I came to MPD as its first Chief Equity Officer. I was able to listen to voices throughout the Department, sworn and civilian, of every rank and grade. Our work in the diversity, equity, and inclusion, or DEI, space continues, but we are making important strides forward. In that role, I recommended a fundamental restructuring of how the Department handles Equal Employment Opportunity, or EEO, issues. While all allegations are initially handled by the EEO office for intake and preliminary assessment of whether the allegation is an EEO issue, the investigation, if merited, will be handled by the Internal Affairs Division, a team that is experienced in thorough investigations. This change, which was implemented this summer, will help to ensure that every employee with concerns is heard and respected. In addition, based on my successful track record at Park Police in expanding the diversity in promotions and sworn and professional leadership, I will be examining ways to enhance this at MPD.

The Department is also focused on both the physical and mental health and wellness of our members. My experience in New York on 9/11 and its aftermath reinforced for me the importance of helping law enforcement to cope with the challenging social issues they see every day. Shortly after January 6th, then Chief Robert Contee conducted a public debrief with Dr. Beverly Anderson, the head of our Employee Assistance Program, to help destigmatize seeking support for mental wellness and encourage our members to do so as well. In October, I will host my own conversation with Dr. Anderson that will be broadcast live for MPD members. This reinforces the discussions I have consistently had with members about the importance of paying attention to their own wellness and mental health. In addition, under my leadership as the Chief Equity Officer, we expanded the Department's Chaplain Corps from one to six faith leaders from our communities volunteering to serve and support our members. We are also working to establish a peer support program.



These internal initiatives align with the assessment of MPD organizational culture by the Police Executive Research Forum (PERF). Upon the request of then Chief Contee, PERF identified opportunities for improvements and suggested options to help address the issues raised. PERF recommended working to strengthen inclusivity in our organization, support the well-being of our members, and enhance our internal communications, which align with my priorities as well.

I know that these efforts will make MPD a better place for our employees to work and thrive. This is vital as we face the lowest staffing levels in 50 years, with challenges in both recruiting and retention, mirroring trends in law enforcement and the labor market generally across the nation. At Park Police, I was able to successfully expand recruitment by mobilizing a sworn recruitment team, which I am putting in place at MPD. We need to reinvigorate recruiting efforts that had pivoted to marketing and virtual platforms during the pandemic. I have added sworn members back to the recruiting team to support in person engagement with prospective recruits and to help with more specialized recruiting. We have also increased employee bonuses for referring individuals who successfully complete the Cadet Program (\$2,000) or recruit training (\$5,000). Direct recruitment by dedicated MPD employees is certainly one of the most effective ways to attract energized and committed new officers. Efforts this year are paying off, with attrition to date down 16 percent compared to last fiscal year, and 21 new officers starting this past Monday, the largest class in more than a year. This gives reason for some optimism in this critical area.

* * * *

In closing within and outside, thank you for the opportunity to speak before you today. I am passionate about serving the city and the Department so that the District will be a safe and vibrant city for all residents and visitors. With my experiences both within and outside MPD, I bring a fresh perspective and energy to my work. I appreciate your consideration of my nomination and am happy to answer any questions you have.

