

GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
METROPOLITAN POLICE DEPARTMENT



Fiscal Year 2017
Performance Oversight Hearing

Testimony of
Peter Newsham
Chief of Police

Before the
Committee on the Judiciary & Public Safety
Council of the District of Columbia
The Honorable Charles Allen, Chairperson

John A. Wilson Building
Room 120
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20004
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9:30 a.m.

Good afternoon, Chairman Allen, members and staff of the Committee, and guests. My name is Peter Newsham, I am the Chief of Police for the Metropolitan Police Department, and I am pleased to be here to discuss public safety in the District of Columbia.

I would like to begin by thanking the men and women of the Department, sworn and civilian, who work tirelessly to help others in an increasingly challenging environment where they are working to both connect with the public, and safeguard it. Since I have been given the opportunity to lead this great agency, they have amazed me at their level of commitment, and their professional approach of trying to live up to our motto that “we are here to help.”

Today, I will certainly talk about our officers’ work in the community, but I also want to highlight that while they are creating positive opportunities for engagement with the community, they are also engaged in activities that can be extremely challenging and dangerous. I have asked our officers to be focused on removing illegal firearms from our community, and they have been very successful at doing it. In fact, they recovered almost 2,200 illegal firearms from our neighborhoods. I emphasize to them that when they recover these weapons that must do so safely and respectfully, and they are willing to do that. Unfortunately, in this line of work things don’t always go as planned. As you know earlier this year, two of our officers were shot and seriously wounded while attempting to recover an illegal firearm from our Trinidad neighborhood. When I visited those officers in the hospital, they had two concerns: (1) let my family know I am OK, and (2) when can I get back to work. Those are the type of people that we work on this department serving our community.

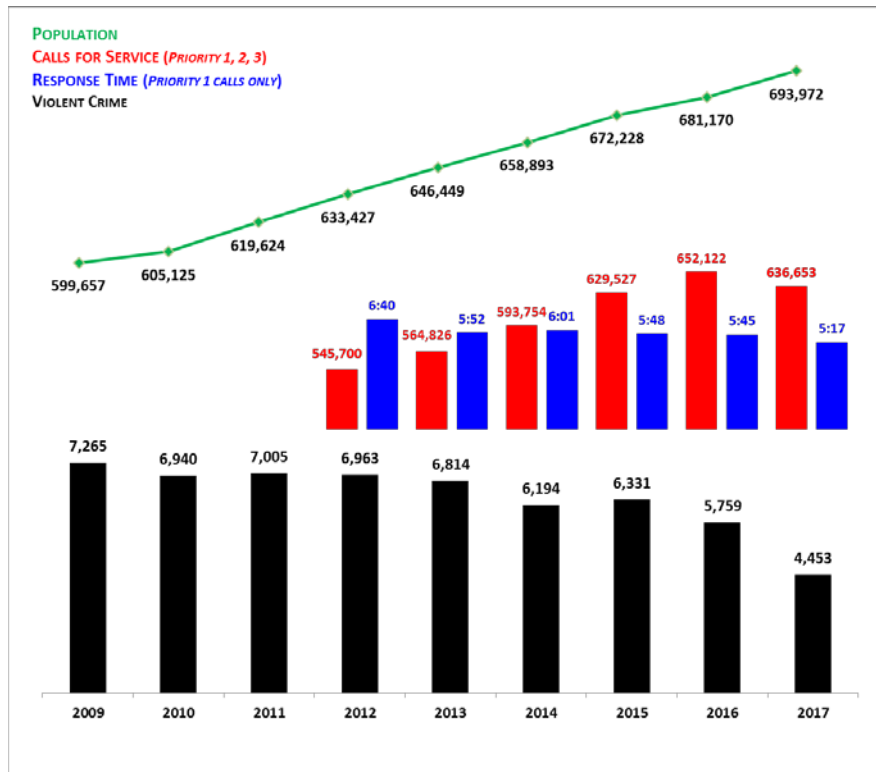
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Looking back on the past year, Mayor Bowser’s Fiscal Year 2017 Budget reflected our deep commitment to DC values by making investments that will provide all residents of the District of Columbia with the opportunity to succeed. Mayor Bowser’s administration remains focused each day on creating pathways to the middle class by investing in education, affordable housing, infrastructure, public safety, and people. I would like to highlight today the significant progress we are making on public safety in the District. The city is safer today than it has been in five decades, with fewer serious violent crimes than any year since 1965.¹

In calendar year 2017, serious violent crime – which includes homicide, sexual assault, assault with a dangerous weapon (ADW), and robbery – decreased 23 percent, compared to 2016. Violent crime dropped across the city, with at least a 9 percent reduction in all seven police

¹ This data is according to Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Uniform Crime Report (UCR) crime statistics, which allows a historical view of crime with more consistent definitions. The FBI UCR definition of rape did change significantly in 2013, with males finally being acknowledged as possible victims of rape. Thus the numbers prior to 2012 would be undercounted by today’s standards. Other crime data presented here and in most MPD sources is according to D.C. Official Code crime definitions. These definitions and figures better reflect local judgements and how agencies in the District criminal justice system report crimes, make arrests, and prosecute suspects.





districts. Homicide and sexual assault decreased 15 percent, ADWs decreased 18 percent, and robbery fell 27 percent. This continues a trend since 2015. Violent crime in the District is 28 percent lower than in 2014, and MPD response to priority one calls for service is 12 percent lower, while at the same time, total calls for service increased 7 percent and the District’s population grew 5 percent. Serious property crime – which includes burglary, motor vehicle theft, theft from autos, other theft, and arson – also decreased 9 percent in 2017, compared to 2016.

Whenever I give information regarding the remarkable progress we have made in reducing crime in our city, I feel it is important to note that these reductions, although important, are not soothing to the victim of a crime or a family who has lost someone to violence in our city. The statistics are to illustrate the progress we have made, but I am mindful that every violent crime is one too many and every violent crime impacts not only a person, but a family and the community where it occurs. In other words, we are making progress, but will still have work to do.

There are many factors which help to make our city safer, but a strong relationship between the community and police is absolutely essential to success. Strengthening our relationship, our legitimacy and increasing trust is my top priority as the Chief of Police. This is a message that I have delivered to the entire Department, and do so with each class of new recruits. In any interaction with members of our community, including stops, warrants, or arrests, we require our officers to treat everyone with respect and dignity. We know that often we are interacting with individuals or families on the worst day of their lives. That is all the more reason why I expect



MPD officers to try to communicate with residents to explain what is happening or has happened during a police interaction. What is often even more helpful is sharing information and educating our community about the law and law enforcement in advance, in less stressful situations. To that end, MPD has significantly increased its community engagement and communication.

Governments, particularly public safety agencies, have to be able to reach their constituency through a variety of methods. That is why MPD has worked to expand its methods of communication. We have expanded our reach through various social media platforms, providing information about crimes, missing persons, and general public safety information. MPD now has 200,000 twitter followers, making us the most followed agency in the District government. We also established an MPD presence on Periscope, Instagram, and Snapchat to reach a larger audience and appeal to younger audiences as well. Periscope has enabled us to capture real-time press conferences and updates from Command members on the scene of criminal incidents and provide them to the public on the various social media platforms.

At the same time, MPD has worked to engage specific groups that can help to inform the community. In December 2017, MPD began publishing a quarterly newsletter to provide Advisory Neighborhood Commissions with pertinent information about MPD to stay updated and share with constituents. The newsletter highlights relevant statistics and crime trends, initiative spotlights, featured MPD members, key points of contact, upcoming events, and ways for the community to be involved. Also in December, MPD hosted members of the media at our Tactical Village Media Day on December 13, 2017. After receiving an abbreviated training on use of force issues, media members were able to experience an incident as a police officer in a simulated exercise. This helped the participants understand the often dangerous encounters police face while on duty.

The Department has also strengthened or established more “high-touch” methods of community outreach. Our Special Liaison Branch is our consistent presence serving communities that have been historically underserved. In 2017, we worked closely with community leaders and members to build new relationships and maintain existing ones. Our Special Liaison Branch (SLB) continued to support our communities that are historically underserved, including the African, Asian, deaf and hard of hearing, Latino, and LGBTQ communities. In 2017, we worked to expand the impact of SLB and MPD by reaching out to religious minority communities, in particular the Muslim and Jewish communities. The early work to build relationships became even more important as the District saw a marked increase in anti-Semitic graffiti and several anti-Muslim hate crimes. We also focused on outreach to immigrant communities, translating into seven languages a flyer reassuring our immigrant communities that the District supports them, and that our officers will not ask about immigration status. At the same time, MPD issued guidance to our officers reminding them that there had been no change to our longstanding policy prohibiting enforcement of civil immigration matters.



We have refocused our ride-along program to provide more meaningful learning and engagement during the experience. We also offer a more intensive experience through our Community Engagement Academy, a 7-week program that allows community members to learn firsthand about police operations. Through this initiative, MPD provides participants with a personal view of the positive aspects and challenges that confront officers on a daily basis. Topics include youth and family services, use of force discussions, specialized policing, and a tour of the United States Holocaust Museum Memorial. In 2017, 75 community members completed the Community Engagement Academy.

A similar opportunity for younger members of our community was launched last fall in partnership with the DC Police Foundation. The Expeditioners Program provides middle school and high school students who are interested in a possible career in law enforcement with an inside look at what police do every day. The program is available for two age groups: Junior Expeditioners in 6th to 8th grade, and high school expeditioners, in the 9th grade up to 20 years of age. Sessions are led by selected officers who have been both nominated by their commanders and have volunteered their time.

Of course, we hope that through the Expeditioners Program, more young District residents realize that they would like to become police officers. Young adults who graduated from a District high school can join MPD's Cadet Program, through which they can work part-time for two years while both learning about MPD and police work and earning up to 60-credit hours at the University of the District of Columbia.

In Fiscal Year (FY) 2017, MPD worked to fully staff the program at 35 cadets for the first time in at least two decades. And, with the support of Mayor Bowser and the Council, the age of eligibility was expanded – from a maximum of 20 years of age to the current 24 years of age – to encourage more District graduates to join MPD. The response has been overwhelmingly positive. With additional hiring authority in FY2018, we now have 71 cadets, of which 39 are in the expansion group, age 21 to 24.

The Cadet Program also represents an important opportunity to recruit more women to law enforcement. The demographics of MPD more closely resemble the racial and ethnic demographics of the city we serve than any other major city police department. The one exception is in gender. Currently, 22 percent of MPD's sworn officers are women, significantly higher than the national average of 13 percent. But I believe we can continue to recruit strong female candidates to serve their community in law enforcement. Our cadets, of which 52 percent are young women, will help us to get there.

This Cadet Program is one of Mayor Bowser's important long-term investments in her priorities of developing pathways to the middle class and strengthening police-community relations. It is also an investment in ensuring that MPD is appropriately staffed. I am pleased to report that in FY17, MPD recorded the first growth in sworn staffing since FY13, with 84 additional officers.



A number of initiatives have contributed to this success, including the Police Officer Retention Program, which supports student loan forgiveness for current officers. The Mayor initiated funding for this program in FY16 and FY18. So far, more than 130 officers have taken advantage of the program. The Six-Month Rental Assistance Program was launched in FY18 for new recruits and provides a \$1,000 housing allowance for six months so they can get established in the District and deepen their knowledge and experience with the communities they serve.

Mayor Bowser has also shown a strong commitment to civilianization, which allows MPD to keep more officers focused on operational assignments or tasks. MPD has more than 100 additional civilians over the past three years. In addition, the Mayor's FY18 budget included funding for a professional public relations campaign to recruit, hire, and retain high quality employees. This is more important than ever, as low unemployment rates and competing hiring efforts in many law enforcement agencies can make recruitment a continuing challenge.

Technology investments can play an important role in building community trust. The body-worn camera (BWC) program supports transparency, accountability, and community trust. More than 3,200 BWCs are assigned to officers and sergeants in patrol and other units with frequent public contact. Lieutenants and captains in patrol also have BWCs. Having the BWC video available to show the public how exactly our police officers are conducting themselves has been invaluable to reassuring communities that MPD is accountable. The cameras also support training efforts and, anecdotally, help improve efficiency in internal investigations by providing documented evidence to support or refute claims.

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Lastly, I would like to briefly discuss school safety, an issue which is likely on many peoples' minds. Since 2004, in the wake of a homicide at a school, MPD has been working in close partnership with DC Public Schools (DCPS) on school safety. DC Public Charter Schools (DCPCS) has also joined the partnership. Today, we have 106 specially trained School Resource Officers (SROs) and sergeants working in our schools every day. We have 313 security officers working in DCPS schools every day. We have weapons abatement efforts at our secondary schools, along with video cameras and other tools for supporting school safety. In addition to the schools, we have strong partnerships with Metro Transit Police, the District Department of Transportation, and the Department of Parks and Recreation to ensure that our students have safe passage to and from school. All of our SROs are also trained in active shooter response, and, in light of the questions being raised in the wake of the Florida shooting, we will be working to ensure that MPD members are prepared for one-person response. I am looking forward to working with Interim Chancellor Amanda Alexander to ensure that the entire District team devoted to the safety of our children is as prepared as we can be.

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In closing, I would like to thank the Mayor and the Council for their leadership in the District, and for supporting our officers. I appreciate the opportunity to share our accomplishments and look forward to continuing to work with the Committee. This concludes my testimony, and my staff and I are happy to address your questions at this time.

