

ONE HUNDRED EIGHTEENTH CONGRESS
Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND COMMERCE
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WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6115
Majority (202) 225-3641
Minority (202) 225-2927

October 30, 2023

The Honorable Muriel Bowser
Mayor of the District of Columbia
John A. Wilson Building
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, DC 20004

Dear Mayor Bowser:

We are writing to express our deep concern about the chronic issues and mismanagement within the Washington, D.C. 9-1-1 system. As the Chairs of the Committee and Subcommittee with jurisdiction over emergency communications, we are concerned by the numerous issues plaguing the Washington, D.C. Office of Unified Communications (OUC).

Slow responses, missed calls, and staffing shortages have had tragic consequences and will continue to endanger lives unless remedied. The OUC has a record of grave mistakes that have contributed to the deaths of adults, children, and animals.¹ The OUC sent firefighters to the wrong address for a report of a newborn in cardiac arrest,² canceled a call for service about a child unconscious in a hot car,³ and mischaracterized a handful of emergency calls.⁴ Washington, D.C. recently reached a staggering 200 homicides for this year, further emphasizing the importance of accurate and rapid emergency medical services (EMS) response.⁵

The OUC has failed to dispatch assistance to where the emergencies are occurring. On April 20, 2023, a 9-1-1 call at 10:26 p.m. reported that a car had plunged into the Anacostia

¹ Ally Schweitzer, *D.C.'s 911 System Struggles To Pinpoint Where Emergencies Are Happening, Audit Says*, DCist (Oct. 19, 2021), <https://dcist.com/story/21/10/19/dc-911-system-struggles-to-pinpoint-where-emergencies-are-happening-audit-says/>.

² Paul Duggan, *D.C. firefighter sent to wrong address for infant in cardiac arrest who was later pronounced dead*, The Washington Post (July 28, 2022), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2022/07/28/dc-911-mistake-baby-dead/>.

³ Emily Davies, *D.C. investigating response to 911 call after death of 3-month-old boy*, The Washington Post (Aug. 13, 2022), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2022/08/13/boy-dead-car-911-call/>.

⁴ Mark Segraves, *DC 911 call center made errors during response to tragic District Dogs flood, director says*, NBC Washington (Aug. 22, 2023), <https://www.nbcwashington.com/news/local/dc-911-call-center-made-errors-dispatching-to-the-tragic-district-dogs-flood-director-says/3408424/>.

⁵ Jillian Smith, *Over 200 homicides: DC's tragic milestone announced after teen, man killed in separate shootings*, Fox 5 Washington DC (Sept. 26, 2023), <https://www.fox5dc.com/news/200-homicides-dc-hits-tragic-milestone-after-1-teen-1-adult-killed-by-gun-violence-tuesday/>.

River below the Frederick Douglass Memorial Bridge.⁶ The 9-1-1 call center mistakenly dispatched emergency crews to the 11th Street Bridge, located roughly a mile and a half away.⁷ Police units arrived at the Memorial Bridge at 10:30 p.m. and it took the crew an additional five minutes to determine that they were dispatched to the wrong spot.⁸ The crew finally arrived at the correct location at 10:42 p.m., some 16 minutes after the initial call.⁹ The most troubling fact of this scenario is that OUC reported this incident as “coded properly,” despite the misdirecting emergency services to the wrong location.¹⁰

The OUC has failed to prioritize emergencies, leading to deadly delays. On August 14, 2023, during a heavy rainstorm, OUC received a call at 5:06 p.m. reporting that both staff and dogs were trapped in a northeast D.C. dog daycare center due to flooding.¹¹ After a third call at 5:18 p.m., the firefighters arrived on scene at 5:21 p.m. Rescuers entered the building at 5:30 p.m. while a near simultaneous call at 5:31 p.m. reported that they had still not been rescued and were waiting for assistance.¹² After the incident, OUC stated that the dispatcher coded the flooding as a water leak and was unable to designate this incident as flooding as the system had no code for flooding.¹³ The lack of correct call prioritization in this case resulted in the tragic death of 10 dogs.¹⁴

The OUC has failed to answer 9-1-1 calls. On September 2, 2023, from midnight until 12:06 a.m., emergency calls went unanswered at the D.C. 9-1-1 call center and the emergency radio channel.¹⁵ During this period, a shooting occurred that injured multiple people and left first responders with outdated and limited information.¹⁶ A medical unit close to the incident was unable to signal that they were closer than the responding emergency medical services (EMS) unit.¹⁷ Disturbingly, this information was learned from X (formerly Twitter), instead of from the OUC.¹⁸

⁶ Emily Venezky, *DC's 911 call center reports 'call handled properly' to find crashed car in Anacostia River*, WTOP News (July 29, 2023), <https://wtop.com/dc/2023/07/dcs-911-call-center-reports-call-handled-properly-to-find-crashed-car-in-anacostia-river/>.

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ Stephanie Ramirez, *DC mayor faces scrutiny over 911 delays during fatal flooding at doggy day care*, Fox 5 Washington DC (Aug. 23, 2023), <https://www.fox5dc.com/news/dc-mayor-faces-scrutiny-over-911-delays-during-fatal-flooding-at-doggy-day-care/>; *see also* Segraves, *supra* note 4.

¹² *Id.*

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ Dave Statter, @STATter911, Twitter (Sep. 2, 2023, 12:28AM), <https://twitter.com/STATter911/status/1697828892625576163>; Dave Statter, @STATter911, Twitter (Sept. 2, 2023, 8:30am), <https://twitter.com/STATter911/status/1697950071663231061>.

¹⁶ *Id.*

¹⁷ *Id.*

¹⁸ *Id.*

The OUC has failed to hire and retain enough staff for its call centers.¹⁹ A recent report stated that 40 percent of D.C. 9-1-1 center shifts were understaffed during the month of August.²⁰ This understaffing leads to long wait times, showing that multiple callers were kept on hold for three or four minutes.²¹ While staffing shortages are certainly a cause for concern, the continued understaffing shows a lack of awareness of the severity of an issue leading to continuous failures by D.C. officials.

The OUC has failed to implement urgent audit recommendations. A 2021 audit described “inadequate supervision of call-taking and dispatch operations...and insufficient management follow-up on after-action reviews,” and issued urgent recommendations.²² A year later, the auditor reported that the 9-1-1 center had made almost no progress addressing its concerns.²³ Further, the audit’s review of priority medical calls from September 2021 to August 2022 revealed the OUC was not meeting national standards on “time-to-answer” measures or “answer to notification” on about half of the calls. From August 2021 to August 2022, the OUC was not in compliance with the 60-second answer to notification requirement for any part of the period.²⁴ These delays are the difference between life and death for Washington, D.C. residents.

Unfortunately, the above failures are not out of the ordinary for the OUC. The previous Republican Leader of the Committee on Energy and Commerce wrote a letter to you on October 8, 2020, regarding similar safety concerns and, like many who call 9-1-1 in D.C., never received a response.²⁵

We request a copy of the 2021 OUC audit and an immediate briefing on the changes, anticipated or enacted, that the OUC will take to correct these systemic failures. Please respond to schedule this briefing by no later than November 17, 2023. Please contact Giulia Leganski or Slate Herman at (202) 226-3641 to schedule the briefing.

Sincerely,

¹⁹ Emily Davies, *40% of D.C. 911 center shifts understaffed last month, data shows*, The Washington Post (Sept. 8, 2023), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2023/09/08/dc-911-center-staffing-data/>;

²⁰ *Id.*

²¹ *Id.*

²² Adam Bender and Jonathan Make, *Audit Finds DC 911 Center Failed US Standards*, Communications Daily (Oct. 20, 2021), <https://communicationsdaily.com/article/2021/10/20/audit-finds-dc-911-center-failed-us-standards-2110190048>.

²³ Emily Davies and Olivia Diaz, *D.C. has long struggled with 911 calls. Then 10 dogs died in a flood., the Washington Post* (Aug. 25, 2023), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2023/08/25/district-dogs-daycare-flood-dc-911/>. (The 2021 audit was not released to the public).

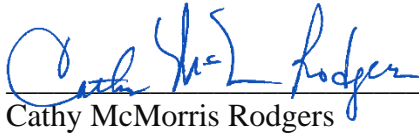
²⁴ Margaret Barthel, *D.C. 911 Agency Reports Another Issue Locating Calls, Audit Finds Other Problems Still Aren’t Fixed*, DCist (Mar. 23, 2023), <https://dcist.com/story/23/03/23/dc-911-call-locating-landlines-audit-report-response-times/>.

²⁵ Letter from the Honorable Greg Walden, the Honorable Robert E. Latta, and the Honorable John Shimkus to the Honorable Muriel Bowser (Oct. 8, 2020), available at <https://d1dth6e84htgma.cloudfront.net/legacy/uploads/2020/10/10.08.20-Letter-to-Mayor-Bowser-on-9-1-1-Dispatching-1.pdf>


The Honorable Muriel Bowser

October 30, 2023

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Cathy McMorris Rodgers
Chair
Committee on Energy and Commerce



Robert E. Latta
Chair
Subcommittee on Communications
and Technology