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ONE HUNDRED SIXTEENTH CONGRESS

# Congress of the United States

## House of Representatives

### COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND COMMERCE

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WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6115

Majority (202) 225-2927

Minority (202) 225-3641

October 8, 2020

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 write to request a briefing from your office to better understand the failure of the District of Columbia's emergency dispatch system, including whether the 9-1-1 system played a role.

As you know, Congress has authority over District affairs and the House Committee on Energy and Commerce has jurisdiction over emergency communications and the nation's 9-1-1 system. Therefore, we are concerned about recent news reports that the District's Office of Unified Communication (Office) is "daily sending an enormous number of duplicate dispatches," "wast[ing] resources that could be going to real emergencies," and has improperly dispatched emergency first responders to the wrong location or multiple officers to the same location on several occasions, endangering the lives of both critical public safety officials and citizens of the District.<sup>1</sup> These failures have had tragic consequence.

On August 18, 2019, the Kennedy Street fire killed 9 year-old Yafet Solomon and Fitsum Kebede as Fire resources were dispatched to the wrong address.<sup>2</sup> News reports suggest that, "despite a police officer's radio call to dispatch reporting a fire, a dispatcher waited four minutes to send fire crews."<sup>3</sup> On August 25, 2020, news reports stated that the Office dispatched a 9-1-1 call regarding a double shooting, and subsequently changed the location about five minutes later,

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<sup>1</sup> See, "DC Weighs 911 Audit Amid Dispatch Problems," Communications Daily, August 10, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> See, "'A failing of the systems': In rowhouse fire, D.C. missed many chances to save lives," available at: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/dc-politics/a-failing-of-the-systems-in-rowhouse-fire-dc-missed-many-chances-to-save-lives/2019/09/14/78536312-d4bd-11e9-86ac-0f250cc91758\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/dc-politics/a-failing-of-the-systems-in-rowhouse-fire-dc-missed-many-chances-to-save-lives/2019/09/14/78536312-d4bd-11e9-86ac-0f250cc91758_story.html)

<sup>3</sup> *Supra*, at note 4.

with the call finally directed to the proper address *another* five minutes after that.<sup>4</sup> These reports are alarming and unacceptable.

In a recent statement, the Office of Unified Communications stated that “[the Office] receives 1.4 million 911 calls and dispatches first responders to nearly one million emergencies annually. The public’s expectation is that we get every call right and we strive to meet that expectation.”<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, it appears that the District’s results are trending in the wrong direction at the wrong time.

Our law enforcement and emergency responders are facing unprecedented challenges to protect citizens and businesses from violent protests while also responding to the ongoing COVID-19 national public health emergency. Moreover, they are facing these challenges as calls to “defund the police” become mainstream and police are being shot in the streets.<sup>6</sup> While it appears you recognize the importance of standing with law enforcement by pushing back against these radical proposals to defund the police,<sup>7</sup> we remain concerned that there may be technological issues facing the Office resulting in recent, fatal dispatching errors of 9-1-1 calls.

We are pleased to see the District has released a request for proposal to audit the Office and examine these failures in more detail.<sup>8</sup> However, as the Committee on Energy and Commerce continues its work to facilitate a nation-wide transition to Next Generation 9-1-1, it is critical that we understand whether these dispatching failures are a result of technological errors in the 9-1-1 system or rather a result of mismanagement, failures in training, or other procedural problems within the Office.

Thank you for your attention to this important matter. If you have any questions, please contact Kate O’Connor or Evan Viau of the minority Committee Staff at (202) 225-3641.

Sincerely,



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Greg Walden  
Republican Leader  
Committee on Energy and Commerce



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Robert E. Latta  
Republican Leader  
Subcommittee on Communications and  
Technology

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<sup>4</sup> See, “Apparent DC 911 Misdirected Dispatches Observed Amid Heightened Scrutiny,” Communications Daily, September 2, 2020.

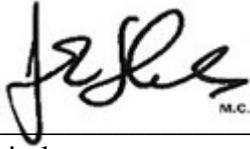
<sup>5</sup> See, “New mistakes at DC’s 911 call center brings call for more oversight,” available at:

<https://www.fox5dc.com/news/new-mistakes-at-dcs-911-call-center-brings-call-for-more-oversight>

<sup>6</sup> See, “Los Angeles police officers shot in ‘ambush,’” available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-54137838>

<sup>7</sup> See, “Bowser Says Proposed Cuts To Her Police Spending Plan Are ‘Not Sound Budgeting,’” available at: <https://www.npr.org/local/305/2020/07/20/893117369/bowser-says-proposed-cuts-to-her-police-spending-plan-are-not-sound-budgeting>

<sup>8</sup> See, “DC auditor to investigate 911 over delays, wrong-address dispatches,” available at: <https://wtop.com/dc/2020/09/dc-auditor-to-investigate-911-over-delays-wrong-address-dispatches/>



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John Shimkus  
Ranking Member  
Subcommittee on Environment and  
Climate Change

cc: The Honorable Frank J. Pallone, Jr., Chairman  
Committee on Energy and Commerce

The Honorable Michael F. Doyle, Jr., Chairman  
Subcommittee on Communications and Technology