
Government of the District of Columbia



Testimony of
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Occupy DC and the District of Columbia

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Honorable Trey Gowdy, Chair

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Good afternoon, Chairman Gowdy and members of the Committee on Oversight and Government Reform. Thank you for the opportunity to present testimony and observations on issues surrounding Occupy DC encampments located at Freedom Plaza and McPherson Square. My name is Paul A. Quander, Jr. I serve as the Deputy Mayor for Public Safety and Justice in the District of Columbia, and I am joined today with Chief Cathy Lanier of the Metropolitan Police Department (MPD), the primary police force in the nation's capital; and Dr. Mohammed Ahkter, Director of the District of Columbia Department of Health (DOH).

On October 6, 2011, the National Park Service granted permission to and allowed two very distinct Occupy DC groups to establish sites upon federal property for the purpose of protesting a variety of issues. These sites and demonstrations were and continue to be located at Freedom Plaza, 14th and Pennsylvania Ave., NW, three blocks southeast of the White House, and McPherson Square, two blocks northwest of the White House at 15th and K Streets N.W. During the first week of the Occupy Movement, there were approximately 150 protestors at Freedom Plaza, and 250 at McPherson Square. Since Thanksgiving the number of occupants has fluctuated with the Freedom Plaza group numbering approximately 30 to 40 participants, and the McPherson contingent numbering about 25 to 50 participants. Initially, a significant number of Metropolitan Police officers were deployed to address Occupy DC, including both MPD's Special Operations Division (SOD) as well as its Civil Disturbance Units, which is staffed by patrol members. After the first week, however, MPD was able to decrease the resources used for Occupy DC, except for major movements or incidents. In the ensuing weeks of the encampments, there were approximately four occasions which required the Metropolitan Police Department to detail more than one or two officers per patrol district per shift from the Civil Disturbance

Units. These events included the Americans for Prosperity meeting at the Convention Center on November 4th, the March on the Key Bridge on November 17th, the K Street Protests on December 7th, and the Occupy Congress March last week on January 17th. The MPD staffing for these incidents has ranged from 80 to 400 officers.

For the most part, protests and the occupants of the encampments have been peaceful. There has been the usual taunting and insulting of police officers which is common. However, on a few occasions, the tactics of the protestors have become very aggressive and dangerous resulting in injuries and situations where law abiding citizens were unable to exit buildings or travel on our public roadways. For instance, blocking entrances and exits to buildings – and using children as tools to do so – as well as physically challenging attendees of events espousing opposing political views are unacceptable tactics, and potentially harmful. Blocking traffic and jumping in front of vehicles is especially dangerous. Furthermore, there have been incidents of destruction of property. But most worrisome has been the incidents of violence at McPherson Square such as the attacks on a Park Police officer and later an occupant of the encampment, both of which resulted in hospitalization. And most recently, we had the neglect of a 13 month old barely clothed infant who was left unattended by her father in a tent in 40 degrees weather. This cannot be tolerated.

As of January 19th, MPD has arrested 68 individuals affiliated with the Occupy protests. An additional 13 protestors were arrested by another District police force on the grounds of Franklin school. There have been other arrests by federal law enforcement officers. While the number of protesters has dwindled this winter, this does not alleviate the potential of escalating protest tactics. The point of any protest is to exercise a constitutional right and at the same time attract

attention to the cause; if the sheer numbers do not demand notice experience has shown that escalated tactics may be used to garner attention.

The District of Columbia has a continuing obligation to provide for the overall health and welfare of its residents and visitors to the City. Several District of Columbia government agencies are working to ensure the wellbeing of the protesters and to assess and mitigate the impact of their presence on the community. Although there have not been any public health emergencies such as outbreaks of communicable disease or reported food borne illnesses, we will remain vigilant in monitoring and protecting the health and safety of the demonstrators, as well as our residents.

District of Columbia government representatives began visiting the Occupy camps in October 2011. Recently, representatives from the U.S. Park Service have accompanied us in order to collectively assess the living conditions and identify health risks factors. During these visits, we became acutely aware that in addition to other risk factors, mental illness, substance abuse, homelessness and rodent infestation all entered into the public health equation. In addition, we are aware that as the weather becomes severe, the environmental conditions at the sites will only worsen.

In January 2012, the Department of Health (DOH) began convening relevant District government agencies to discuss ongoing activities associated with the Occupy sites. The following agencies are represented: the Department of Public Works (DPW), the Department of Human Services (DHS), the Department of Mental Health (DMH), and Fire and Emergency Medical Services (FEMS). Within DOH, staff from the Addiction Prevention and Recovery Administration, Emergency Preparedness Administration, Rodent Control Program and Food Safety Program attend these meetings.

Reducing health risks and creating and maintaining a healthy environment is a shared priority. I will briefly summarize the current major concerns that the District has and that we have communicated to the Director of the National Park Service.

Hypothermia

Hypothermia is a very serious threat to the Occupy demonstrators and inhabitants of the encampment. In 2010 there were 11 deaths from hypothermia in Washington, D.C. There is concern that as the weather continues to get colder, deaths from hypothermia could occur. Therefore, the Department of Health has issued a Hypothermia Alert to the inhabitants of both sites outlining the signs and symptoms of hypothermia and encouraging them to call 911 in case of an emergency. This health advisory also serves to educate the protestors on safe measures to be taken during extreme weather conditions.

In addition the District of Columbia Department of Human Services has been conducting frequent visits to both sites to assess the hypothermia risk and provide education on hypothermia prevention, including use of the D.C. Hypothermia Hotline. The hotline provides a link to city services and distributes blankets and other comfort items.

Rodent Harborage and Abatement

Rodents spread disease. The infestation of rodents at McPherson Square is clearly visible, even during daylight hours. Rodent burrows have been noted throughout the park and rodents have been observed inside camping tents as well as within the makeshift kitchen tent. Pallets and straw used to elevate tents in an effort to reduce cold further exacerbate the problem by creating prime conditions for rodent harborage.

Effective abatement would necessitate the movement of tents and other supporting material from the encampment while the abatement takes place. Once complete, it is important to educate protestors in order to ensure that an environment conducive to rodent infestation is not re-created. The Department of Health is in discussions with the National Park Service regarding rodent abatement at both sites.

Food Safety

There is an immediate need to implement appropriate environmental safeguards for food preparation and the disposal of waste. DOH has issued a health advisory to educate inhabitants of the camps on proper food handling and preventing food borne illness. Our food inspectors also are working with the food handlers at the camps to educate them about proper food safety.

Of particular concern is the dumping of food and human waste into public storm drains. The storm drains have been properly cleaned by the DC Department of Public Works. The illegal dumping must be immediately halted in order to prevent a negative environmental impact to our waterways and flooding from blocked storm drains.

Prescriptions and Other Medications

Some of the demonstrators who have been on site for several weeks have run out of their prescription medicines. Lack of medications could pose a serious threat to life and health of these individuals. These prescription medications are not available in their makeshift first aid stations. We are working to assess the extent of this situation prior to making an appropriate response.

Physical Health Screenings

Due to several weeks of living in sub-optimal conditions and co-habitation with the homeless population, demonstrators are at increased risk of nutritional deficiencies and infectious diseases. DOH strongly encourages each of the participants in the encampments to receive a physical health screening for communicable disease and other medical conditions so that issues can be identified and treated before becoming a threat to themselves and to the community. Toward this end, DOH is in the process of working with our private healthcare providers to make arrangements for relevant services.

Emergency Evacuation Plan

In case of a serious emergency such as fire or heavy snowstorm, we need to plan for emergency evacuation of the encampments. The DC Department of Human Services has arrangements to take care of the homeless population, but does not have the capacity to accommodate additional people. An alternative indoor site must be identified and an evacuation action plan made ready. We encourage the National Park Service to work with us to accomplish this.

Addressing these concerns and implementing these recommendations will require funding. As an example of costs, the ambulance services associated with Occupy DC have so far cost \$63,000. Expenses associated with Occupy DC will surely rise as the temperature continues to fall.

The District has expended more than its share of resources in ensuring that not only the occupants of the encampments are safe and cared for but that our residents and visitors continue to receive a high level of services. The District has deployed manpower by way of its police force, fire and emergency medical services and human services agencies such as Department of Health, the Department of Human Services, and the Department of Mental Health. The cost to

the District exceeds the previously requested reimbursement of \$1.6 million dollars. And as we continue to handle the ongoing protest and encampments, the culminative impact upon the City is increasing.

We do not want the public to misunderstand our sentiments; we respect and support the constitutional rights of such activities like spontaneous marches and demonstrations in front of or in proximity to government or private buildings. We have longed realized and accept that as the nation's capital, the District of Columbia is the premier venue for demonstrations. Regardless of the content of the demonstrations, the District has an obligation to safeguard and protect not only those who come to demonstrate, but also all the residents, businesses, and visitors of the District of Columbia. We are a city that is fortunate to have not only a well-trained, disciplined and prepared police force who is equipped to handle any situation but a highly professional and caring staff of social service providers.

In closing, Mayor Gray and the District supports the Occupy DC movements' right to peaceably assemble, and we remain committed to safeguarding both the rights of the protestors and the public health and safety of all in the District. However, we must also protect and promote the interests of District residents, including being a watchdog for the limited resources of the government.

We appreciate the opportunity to discuss this issue and I and my team look forward to responding to any questions the Committee may have.