



**TESTIMONY OF MURIEL BOWSER,  
MAYOR OF WASHINGTON, DC**

**Before the Committee on Oversight and  
Accountability  
U.S. House of Representatives**

**James Comer, Chairman  
Jamie Raskin, Ranking Member**

**May 16, 2023**

Good morning, Chairman Comer, Ranking Member Raskin, and members of the Committee.

I am Muriel Bowser, Mayor of Washington, DC. I am joined today by Robert Contee, Chief of the Metropolitan Police Department, and Kevin Donahue, City Administrator for the District of Columbia.

A lot has been said about Washington, DC over the past few weeks and months. As someone who was born and raised here, and who has served in elected office since 2005, I dare say I know Washington, DC more than most. So, I would like to start by both sharing my story of DC, and also setting the record straight about my hometown and the best city in the world.

So, I'm older than DC Home Rule by one year. The DC I was born into didn't have an elected Mayor or an elected Council. The residents of DC had no elected representation except for a school board. In fact, my parents were born into a DC where they could not even vote for the President of the United States. Prior to Home Rule, DC residents suffered many indignities under the control of a Congress that was, at best, indifferent to local needs. These indignities ranged from poor funding for our schools and programs, to describing the "negro problem" and the "color problem" within DC as a justification to withhold Congressional representation. You may have even heard the story of a Representative who responded to Mayor Washington sending his proposed budget to Congress in 1967 by sending a truckload of watermelons back to the Mayor.

When I was one year old, in 1973 – Congress passed the District of Columbia Home Rule Act, effectively creating a local government while retaining Congress's power to overrule local legislation. Today, of course, we now have an elected mayor and an elected 13-member council, but we still lack any voting representation in Congress, and we still do not have final say over our own laws or full autonomy.

Since achieving Home Rule, we have made significant strides in moving DC forward:

I am proud to be able to say with confidence that **the state of our finances and the state of the District is strong**. We are currently in the process of passing our 28th consecutive balanced budget. I sent the DC Council a balanced budget with no new taxes or fees, and one that reflects the sober reality of our time: declining revenues due to increases in remote work and increased costs due to inflation. Still, we are a

donor state and give more to the federal government than we get back, and our finances continue to be the envy of jurisdictions across the country.

We got here through a long history of balanced budgets and clean audits. By fully funding our pensions and retirement plans. In January 2020, for the first time in District history, we achieved 60 days of cash on hand. Three years and one global pandemic later, we still have a 60-day operating reserve.

In 2018, Moody's upgraded our general obligation bonds to the highest possible rating. In just over 20 years, DC went from junk-bond status to a triple-A rating. A strong bond rating means we can borrow more cost effectively and make bigger capital investments.

In addition to responsible budgeting, growing our tax base, and prioritizing our infrastructure, the renaissance of our city can be directly tied to two commitments we made to DC residents in the early 2000s: a commitment to transform our public school system and a commitment to invest more in public safety.

In recent years, we've built on the tremendous progress in our public schools by expanding access to early learning opportunities and reimagining the high school experience. We continue to attract and retain world-class educators. Today, our public school enrollment is the highest since the 2007 reform era began. We were also the only public school district in the region to grow our enrollment from pre-pandemic levels this school year.

We did all this with one arm tied behind our back. Our Congresswoman with no vote in the House, and with no representation at all in the Senate. In fact, as states jockeyed for funding to get their residents and businesses through the pandemic, we had to fight just for what we were owed. And that was because we were wrongly classified as a territory for CARES Act funding.

Indeed, we are not a territory nor a colony, we are not actually a city and not quite a state. But I want to call attention to what it means for our country to have 700,000 disenfranchised Americans living in the shadow of this Capitol – who pay federal taxes, in fact we pay more per capita than any state, who go to war to defend our democracy, and who have all the responsibilities of citizenship. It was our local police department that went in to support the Capitol Police on January 6<sup>th</sup>; they put their lives on the line and cleared out and secured the Capitol. We are the only major democracy in the world that has a system of disenfranchising citizens who live in the capital. Of course, we can fix it through statehood, and I

implore all members not to think of statehood as political but fundamental to building a better democracy.

Maybe because of our history, we are a resilient city – known for our comebacks, and our tenacious spirit:

When the riots of 1968 destroyed corridors like U Street and 14<sup>th</sup> Street, it was our community who came together in the 70s and 80s to bring them back.

When our downtown was languishing in the mid-90s, it was our local government that helped launch a downtown arena and bring the Washington Wizards to DC, a new Convention Center only a few blocks away, and executed a Downtown Action Agenda; and today we have a Comeback Plan.

After a tragedy in our homeless services system, we rebuilt the system – both the facilities and our programs – and drove down family homelessness by 74% over seven years, providing us a blueprint for a post-COVID transformation of the singles system too.

I've already mentioned our school reform. In 2007, when too many of our students were struggling, we began the transformation of our public schools. We created a system of mayoral accountability and council oversight, where the proverbial education buck stops with the Mayor.

And like every big city mayor in America, I tackle big city challenges all day, every day. And we are using every tool in our toolbox to address the most vexing of social problems troubling American cities and towns alike – gun violence being top among them.

### **DC's Public Safety Ecosystem**

No one can be satisfied with increasing crime in any category—I certainly am not.

In DC, like what is happening across our country, we've experienced some concerning COVID and post-COVID crime trends.

We see more illegal guns on our streets. Our community is saturated with guns. And more repeat violent offenders using them. Those guns are being used in violent crimes like homicides and carjackings. Car theft is up dramatically.

For me, these trends are unacceptable, and we don't accept this as our new normal.

To understand our response, you also have to understand our criminal justice system. It is unique.

More than 20 years ago, we began the transformation of the Metropolitan Police Department to ensure that we have a professional department that is committed to constitutional, community policing and is a department that represents and reflects the community it serves. I have great confidence in the men and women of MPD.

But MPD is one piece of a complex criminal justice system: one that is a mix of local, federal, and independent agencies. The direct line of accountability that I just spoke about in education doesn't exist in our public safety ecosystem.

MPD makes arrests. Most adult cases are then prosecuted by the U.S. Attorney for DC, whose office is part of the Department of Justice. Our youth offenders are prosecuted by our locally-elected Attorney General and our Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services is a local agency; but our youth and adult offenders are supervised by the federal agencies. DC Jail is local, but a majority of our residents who are serving time are at federal facilities across the country.

Our judges are also appointed by the President and confirmed by the Senate. Right now, we have eight vacancies on the DC Superior Court and one on the Court of Appeals.

**But I don't say this to make excuses. Regardless of this ecosystem "word salad" I just described, as Mayor, I am responsible for making it work.**

### **Local Actions**

And I've told DC residents: We are putting every necessary resource towards public safety and turning these trends around.

That's why I've authorized the Chief to use any overtime they need at MPD, while also making it a top priority to recruit and retain more officers so that we can get back on a path to 4,000 officers.

It's why over the past two years we've launched new regional and federal partnerships to tackle carjackings and homicides with the support of the USAO, FBI, ATF, and DEA.

It's why we created a new Office of Neighborhood Safety and Engagement so that we can disrupt cycles of violence with programs like Pathways, which provides intensive job training and subsidized employment.

It's why just yesterday, following my citywide public safety summit, I announced a package of legislation that will enhance penalties for violent crime and modify recently enacted early release legislation to ensure the voices of victims and the judgement of the Courts are not thrown by the wayside.

The legislation will also provide greater discretion for the Courts to determine who should be held pre-trial, including defendants previously convicted of a violent crime while they await trial for a new violent crime.

The legislation is coupled with my FY 2024 budget investments, which include more than \$8 million for staffing and recruitment enhancements at MPD, more than \$18 million to increase access to mental health care, and more than \$100 million to build and preserve affordable housing, as well as a new Mayor's Order to identify ways to administratively fill gaps in our whole-of-government approach.

These latest efforts are responsive to the gaps we're seeing in our system and the feedback we're getting from community members and public safety partners. These changes are also very focused on ensuring we have a public safety ecosystem that will allow me to recruit great police officers and the next great Chief of Police of the Metropolitan Police Department.

But MPD and our public safety agencies, here in DC and across the country, also need the support of our Congress.

### **What We Need from Congress**

Access to firearms is both a regional and federal problem. We have illegal guns flowing into DC from states with more relaxed gun laws.

And despite the narrative we hear about cities, especially cities run by Democrats, guns are not a city problem or a red state problem or a blue state problem. Americans across the political spectrum, including gun owners, want commonsense reform.

Until we become a state, we need Congress to fully fund YOUR parts of the DC criminal justice system. Right now, there are bills in the House to cut funding to agencies and would defund our court system by over \$50 million. Those cuts are the last thing our system – which is already strained by vacancies and backlogs – needs right now.

I also welcome your partnership on issues not directly related to public safety.

Help our young people get a college degree by increasing the DC TAG scholarship from \$10,000 to \$20,000.

Address the needs of travelers coming to our nation's capital by investing in the more than \$8 billion it will cost to redevelop Washington Union Station—a gateway to the DMV region.

Help the national capital region avoid the \$1 billion transit cliff that Metro expects next year; a situation the system is facing, in part, because of federal remote work.

And to that end, help us get federal workers back downtown and deliver a plan for repurposing unused or underutilized federal spaces.

Also, we can work together to reimagine the RFK campus and help shape its future as both a campus for sport and a mix of uses, including housing, an indoor DC sports complex, jobs and opportunity, and more beautiful connections to parks and the Anacostia River. Look no further than the Wharf, St. Elizabeths, Franklin Park, and Walter Reed to see what we've done locally with federally underused and under resourced land in DC.

I'll just end by saying this: I know that all of us here today won't see eye to eye on every issue. But we do all agree in the promise of America, and that our government should be for the people and by the people. And President Lincoln's reminder is most true of our local democracy.

I can assure you there is no one here that cares more about public safety in DC than we do.

My family is five generations in DC and the next one is growing. Today is my daughter's birthday and I'm raising her to be a life-long Washingtonian too.

It is my number one priority to ensure Washington, DC is a place where our children – all of our children – can grow up safely, where they have their full rights as American citizens, and where they can live up to their God given potential.

I hope that any actions taken by this committee will advance that vision.