

Washington DC faces shortage of emergency response vehicles

Trent Novak
21 June 2013

A recent audit of D.C.'s Fire and Emergency Medical Services Department (FEMS) has revealed that many of the agency's vehicles are inoperable or unfit for service. The audit found that only 56 out of 96 ambulances, 37 out of 53 engine pumpers, and 18 out of 26 ladder trucks are actually functioning and available.

The shortage also extends to EMS personnel. FEMS has only 245 paramedics, far short of its stated goal of 300. Paramedics on staff are working overtime shifts nearly every day, and only a third of operating ambulances have a paramedic on board. Fire Chief Kenneth Ellerbe has done little to correct this situation, claiming that understaffing is a result of paramedic shortages across the nation and that he is specifically trying to fill the positions with former military personnel trained in emergency care.

Over the past several months, a number of events have drawn the attention of District residents, news agencies, and local politicians to these shortages, including, delayed ambulance response times and a mechanical failure suffered by an ambulance that had been transporting a man shot by police during an attempted carjacking. In March, local news channels covered the story of a police officer who had been wounded in a hit-and-run attack and had to wait half an hour before an ambulance could arrive. The most recent incident occurred on June 10, when D.C. councilmember and mayoral candidate Tommy Wells paid a personal visit to the city's 911 call center to find that there were only three ambulances that were not busy responding to calls or otherwise occupied.

Wells's discovery quickly developed into a media dispute between the councilmember and the office of Mayor Vincent Gray. Wells claimed that the small supply of reserve vehicles was "unacceptable," causing

a spokesman for the mayor to fire back and accuse him of "fear mongering."

Wells has made the startling shortages a key component of his mayoral bid, calling for an audit of the department after Ellerbe and FEMS staff misreported not only the total number of vehicles available, but also failed to disclose that a significant percentage of those vehicles were not actually in use. Lack of transparency as well as repeated discrepancies in estimates since an initial report was delivered last February have given Wells an opportunity to go on the offensive, declaring: "I will stay on this like a laser beam. They must be accountable to the public for the vehicles they have and the vehicles they have been budgeted for."

According to Wells, the city council has provided the fire department with an extra \$18 million in order to purchase new equipment, and yet the department has been slow to actually utilize the money. Union leaders from the International Association of Firefighters (IAFF), locked in their own political battles with Ellerbe, have also criticized him for maintaining staff vacancies that the department has more than enough funding to fill.

Rather than purchasing new equipment and hiring more staff, Ellerbe and Gray have consistently called for the implementation of a "redeployment plan" that they say would allow the city to have more resources at its disposal during peak call times. The redeployment plan focuses work schedules around "power shifts" geared toward addressing periods of high call volume while drastically scaling back on available personnel between the hours of 1 a.m. to 7 a.m., when FEMS services would be in "low demand." The end result of such a policy is to have FEMS staff work shorter but more frequent shifts.

Last year, Ellerbe proposed downsizing the department by 20 percent and eliminated all Advanced Life Support (ALS) services during early morning hours. It is possible that this decision contributed to the death of a 53-year-old asthmatic man in December, when the first ambulance to arrive on the scene had to request assistance from a second unit because it lacked full life-support capabilities.

While the IAFF union has voted no confidence in Ellerbe's oversight of the department and is opposed to his formulation of the redeployment plan, it has signaled that it is prepared to accept slight alterations in the demand for cuts and concessions. The union has proposed retaining a small number of ALS vehicles for the early morning hours and incorporating a degree of flexibility into the assignment of daytime power shifts. It is primarily concerned that the severity and rapidity of Ellerbe's agenda will lead to increased burnout and lead to further shortages of emergency workers/paramedics in the department.

Similarly, Wells has voiced "grave concern" over the state of FEMS supply and staffing, but has not put forth any detailed and principled proposals to solve the crisis. Jumping on the opportunity to advance his own political career by denouncing such "mismanagement," Wells has avoided commenting on the systematic assault being carried out against D.C.'s working class residents. In January, he notably criticized D.C. firefighters for independently staging a sick-out to protest their stressful working conditions. Like politicians around the globe, Wells only objects to budget cuts and austerity on the basis of asserting that he can distribute them in a more adequate fashion.

The political row surrounding FEMS occurs alongside of a budget surplus in the District that stands at about \$400 million. This surplus is officially attributed almost solely to increased tax revenue as highly paid government and private-sector employees continue to move into the capital, but attacks on social services and public agencies throughout the city have undoubtedly contributed to its growth as well.

The proposed changes within the agency are a manifestation and reflection of this process. Ellerbe is not only turning down funds but imposing cuts, in order to make his own contribution to the current administration's surplus.

In a survey of EMS leaders in the 200 largest

American cities, the *Journal of Emergency Medical Services* found that 44 percent of the areas surveyed had made budget cuts to emergency response services in 2012. Hiring freezes or employee vacancies were present in 28 percent of agencies and, in some cases, had existed for three years. An absence of cost-of-living or pay-performance increases were found in 21 percent of cases, with some cities having kept wages stagnant for up to four years.

These findings demonstrate that the existence of funding gaps and overworked personnel in emergency response teams extends beyond the borders of D.C. alone. In fact, it is a key component in the austerity agenda being advanced by the ruling class through its Democratic and Republican political forms in response to the global economic crisis.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact