Government of the District of Columbia
Fire and EMS Department

Acting Assistant Fire and Emergency Medical Services

Chief-Operations Edward R. Mills III Testimony

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Subcommittee on Government Operations

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Good afternoon members of the Transportation/Public Assets and Government Operations Sub-Committees, and other members on the dais. My name is Edward R. Mills, and I serve as the Assistant Fire/EMS Chief for the District of Columbia. As this is my first time before Congress, let me take a moment to introduce myself and the position for which I am serving. My role is to oversee emerging operations for the District's Fire and Emergency Medical Department and coordinate with other public safety agencies and federal partners, including WMATA (Metro) to prevent/protect, mitigate, respond to and recover from disasters and emergencies. I have spent 36 years of dedicated service to the Fire service, 18 years in Prince William County, and 18 years in the District of Columbia Fire/EMS Department. Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to discuss the response of District's Fire/EMS Department, along with WMATA (Metro) to the January 12, 2015 incident at the L'Enfant Plaza Metro Station. I will provide a brief summary of the incident, our response to it, and corrective steps that we are already undertaking.

I want to state from the outset that the suffering that occurred during and as a result of the January 12 incident is a tragedy. Again, I extend my sympathies to the family of Carol Glover and everyone else who was injured or went through a terrifying experience that day.

I want to assure the Committees and the public that on January 12, my Department responded quickly, acted bravely, and conducted rescue efforts that led to a positive outcome of the incident. I am grateful that the Bowser Administration has taken immediate steps to address issues identified by our preliminary reviews which we believe will improve safety precautions. The Administration has also taken the unprecedented steps of releasing 911 call transcripts and providing a thorough chronology of events. In doing so, our goal is not to assign blame, but to be open and transparent with our residents, visitors and Metro riders. We want to assure the residents and visitors to the District of Columbia that our Department is prepared to handle any type of emergency at any time.

The Incident Inside the L'Enfant Plaza Metro Station

According to the publicly released NTSB preliminary report, on January 12, 2015, at approximately 3:06 p.m., an electrical breaker at one end of a section of third rail tripped (or opened). At approximately 3:15 p.m., moments after it departed southbound from the L'Enfant Plaza Metro Station toward the Potomac River Bridge, a six-car Yellow Line train encountered heavy smoke and came to a stop in the tunnel. After stopping, the rear car of the Metro train was about 386 feet from the south end of the L'Enfant Plaza Metro Station platform. A second six-car Metro train arrived at the L'Enfant Plaza platform around 3:25 p.m. and was also affected by heavy smoke. This second train stopped, allowing its passengers to exit the train and evacuate from the station. These facts are available at –

1) NTSB Preliminary Report: WMATA Smoke and Electrical Arcing Accident in Washington, DC, are available at:
http://www.ntsb.gov/investigations/AccidentReports/Pages/DCA15FR004_preliminary.aspx.

2) A more detailed timeline of events is contained in the Initial Report by FEMS on the L'Enfant Plaza Metro Station Incident of January 12, 2015, available at: http://mayor.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/mayormb/release_content/attachments/Initial_Report_on_the_LEnfant_Plaza_Metro_Incident_January-12-2015.pdf.

The District's Responses

At 3:18 p.m., OUC received a 911 call from a construction worker reporting smoke coming out of a Metro ventilation shaft at 9th Street and Maine Avenue/Water Street, SW. OUC dispatched two FEMS units at 3:22 p.m. and they arrived on the scene at 3:25 p.m. The two responding units reported the smell of smoke emanating from the ventilation shaft. Approximately five minutes after arriving on scene, the FEMS responders observed two individuals in the ventilation shaft who had apparently self-evacuated from a Metro train. The FEMS responders notified their Battalion Fire Chief, opened the ventilation shaft doors, and descended approximately 50-75 feet to assist and evacuate the two individuals.

The second emergency call from a WMATA supervisor was received by OUC at 3:22 p.m. The WMATA supervisor reported heavy smoke in the upper level of the L'Enfant Plaza Metro Station. A subsequent call from a different WMATA employee was received by OUC at 3:24 p.m.; the caller requested medics and fire units to the L'Enfant Plaza Metro Station due to smoke in the station and individuals having difficulty breathing.

At 3:28 pm, OUC dispatched a Metro Station Box Alarm to L'Enfant Plaza Metro Station. The first FEMS unit, Rescue Squad 1, arrived on scene at 3:31 p.m.; the first MPD unit, Unit 1011 from the First District, arrived on scene one minute later. At 3:33 p.m., FEMS unit engine 4, 18, and EMS Captain 6 arrived on scene. At 3:34 p.m., FEMS Engine 23 arrived on scene. At 3:36 p.m. FEMS Engine 10 and Engine 1 arrived on scene. Within eight minutes of dispatch, seven FEMS units and one MPD unit were at L'Enfant Plaza Metro Station providing assistance. I also want to emphasize that at this point, FEMS responders did not know there was a Metro train filled with about 200 passengers stopped in the tunnel. The only information they had received at this point was there was heavy smoke in the Metro Station.

Under FEMS protocol, a Metro Station Box Alarm consist of the following FEMS units: five engine companies, two ladder trucks, two battalion fire chiefs, one battalion fire chief dispatched to the WMATA Operations Command Center in Landover, MD, one heavy rescue squad, one basic life support ambulance, one advanced life support ambulance, and one EMS supervisor. The first FEMS unit, Rescue Squad 1, arrived on scene at 3:31 p.m.; the first MPD unit, Unit 1011 from the First District, arrived on scene one minute later. At 3:33 p.m., FEMS units Engine 4, Engine 18, and EMS Captain 6 arrived on scene. At 3:34 p.m., FEMS Engine 23 arrived on scene. At 3:36 p.m., FEMS Engine 10 and Engine 1 arrived on scene. Within eight minutes of dispatch, seven FEMS units and one MPD unit were at the L'Enfant Plaza Metro Station providing assistance. I also want to emphasize that at this point, FEMS responders did not know there was a Metro train filled with about 200 passengers stopped in the tunnel. The only information they had received at this point was there was heavy smoke in the Metro Station.

L'Enfant Plaza Metro Station

I arrived on scene at approximately 3:35 p.m. and immediately assessed the ongoing operations and communicated with the on scene Deputy Fire Chief. First responders had encountered a smoke-filled Metro station with numerous individuals evacuating the station or having just evacuated and at street level. FEMS responders began assisting these individuals as the people had soot around their mouths and noses which could indicate respiratory burns.
As first responders moved to the lower level platform, they found an empty Metro train on the tracks and received reports of a Metro train stuck in the tunnel.

One group of first responders, Recon 1, entered the Metro tunnel by following the catwalk that runs alongside the train tracks. After travelling along the catwalk until it ended, the tunnel split into separate tunnels for the Green Line and the Yellow Line. The Recon Group went into the left-side tunnel (Green Line tunnel) and disabled the power on the track using the blue light power cutoff stations located approximately every 800 feet.

A second group of first responders, the team from Rescue Squad 1, went to the Green/Yellow Line platform and encountered Metro personnel who informed them of a train stuck in the right-side tunnel (Yellow Line tunnel). Rescue Squad 1 then entered the tunnel by following the catwalk that runs alongside the train tracks.

I want to pause for a moment to highlight the actions of these two groups of FEMS responders. Their actions violated the Department's written protocols which require confirmation from WMATA that power to the third rail has been shut off before the firefighters are to go onto the tracks. Yet, once these first responders realized they were dealing with an incredibly serious situation of a train full of passengers stopped in a tunnel, they did not wait for confirmation. Instead, they acted. They went into a tunnel that was filled with heavy smoke and had near zero visibility. And because they heard and felt Orange and Blue Line trains entering and leaving the station on the level below them, they weren't always sure whether the third rail was still powered. Yet, they ignored these significant risks to themselves and made their way forward to help the stranded passengers.

Once Rescue Squad 1 reached the train, they attempted to open the emergency exit door located at the back of the rear car of the train, but could not gain access. Instead, Rescue Squad 1 opened a passenger door on that car to gain entry and begin assisting passengers. Rescue Squad 1 immediately began removing passengers from the train, including one individual that was unconscious. Shortly thereafter, Recon 1 arrived at the train to assist with the evacuation and treatment of passengers.

In total, FEMS responders treated several hundred individuals (200 in testimony) who were on the train or in the station. Eighty-four individuals were transported to area hospitals and one individual tragically died.

Communications Issue

During the incident, FEMS personnel encountered difficulty communicating with each other inside the Metro station using traditional radio communication channels.
Let me provide some context.

DCFEMS operates using 16 radio channels and has used these same channels since 2000. The technology used to operate this radio system was installed in 2004, and is maintained by the Office of Unified Communications (OUC). However, in the WMATA system, all below ground communication equipment is maintained by WMATA, including the bi- directional amplifiers in the tunnels. These amplifiers, including those in the tunnel at L'Enfant Plaza station, are designed to boost radio transmissions to allow radio transmissions to work underground. If the bi-directional amplifiers in an underground WMATA tunnel are not working, radio communication will be interrupted.

A radio system, P25, went into effect in December 2014. While some of the 16 radio channels used by FEMS, became encrypted for us in incidents requiring sensitive communications (i.e. terrorist type incidents, administrative communication, joint criminal matters with law enforcement) all the radio channels used by FEMS, both encrypted and unencrypted, failed to work because the bi-directional amplifiers in the L'Enfant Plaza tunnel were not working on January 12th, 2015. As a result, all below ground radio communication was interrupted on January 12th during the response.

I hasten to add that when we established an above ground medical branch for onsite treatment of victims, all FEMS radio channels –encrypted and unencrypted—worked as expected to allow full communication.

Finally, we have learned that on January 8th, during an FEMS response to an incident at the WMATA L'Enfant Plaza underground station, FEMS experienced radio failures and reported this to WMATA. WMATA responded to FEMS that the problem appeared to be the equipment issues within the station.

FEMS responders had to use a variety of alternate means of communication, including cell phones and the walkie-talkie function of their radios.

Mayor Bowser has instructed OUC, in conjunction with WMATA, to conduct weekly testing of radios at all Metro stations in the District. We are aware that some of the surrounding jurisdictions are also conducting their own radio communications testing at Metro facilities. The results of the weekly OUC testing are shared with WMATA, which is responsible for taking corrective action. During radio testing conducted the week of January 19th; OUC identified nine Metro facilities on the Red, Green, Orange, and Blue Lines that failed inspection. During OUC's re-inspection of all Metro facilities additional failures had been found and all under repair. These tests will continue on a weekly basis for the foreseeable future.

In addition to the FEMS Initial Report, HSEMA also produced an Initial District of Columbia Report on the L'Enfant Plaza Metro Station Incident on January 12, 2015, available at: http://hsema.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/mayormb/publication/attachments/HSEMAInitialReportonWMATAIncident.pdf.

"Montgomery firefighters find radio-signal blind spots near 2 Metro stations," The Washington Post, February 1, 2015, available at: http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/trafficandcommuting/in-montgomery-fire-officials-tests-radio-signals-from-metro-tunnels-dont-reach-the-road/2015/02/01/8312ac5c-aa3f-11e4-abe8-e1ef60ca26de_story.html.

OUC testing included the Metro station entrance, both ends and the middle of the train platform, and the tunnels between Metro stations; the specific area of the failure was noted in the OUC notifications to WMATA.

Additionally, FEMS has re-issued a protocol to its members on the proper alternative means of communication when radio coverage is suboptimal or down. FEMS and OUC are working collaboratively with WMATA to identify and immediately address any communications or safety issues.

Currently, NTSB is conducting an investigation into the incident. Mayor Bowser has ordered all District agencies to cooperate fully with the NTSB investigation. FEMS has worked with NTSB to interview the responders who were first on scene, as well as to provide access to any documentation NTSB has requested. In addition, the Administration shared the FEMS and HSEMA initial reports with NTSB before they were publicly released in order to avoid disclosing anything that could impede the NTSB investigation. We will continue to provide NTSB with full access to any documentation and any individuals they request.
HSEMA is also working on a final After Action Report that I expect will contain a thorough, comprehensive review of the incident and provide recommendations and corrective actions. The HSEMA report will be issued after the NTSB concludes its investigation.

As a final, and important, point in my prepared testimony, let me emphasize that the Mayor is committed to being transparent about information related to the incident. We have worked diligently to release as many details as we can to help the public make sense of the tragic events of that day. The Mayor is committed to using all of the information related to the event, including that which will be in the NTSB report, to help improve how the District responds to and recovers from public safety and homeland security incidents. Our emergency response agencies are working with both their regional counterparts and WMATA to improve our collective response to emergencies of this kind. I'd like to note that as part of my submitted written testimony, I have included the FEMS and HSEMA initial reports on the District's response to the January 12 incident.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today and am available to answer your questions.

We have worked with METRO Police Chief Ron Pavlik and COG staff to establish a very short timeline for implementation of improvements in our communication system testing and reporting capacities.

Additionally we have discussed limited operational efficiencies to standardize incident command post operations, while future discussions will be had about broader training and operational concerns.

There are several upcoming meetings where I will report out on our progress to date and on how the "COG Fire Chiefs" have worked with WMATA to come to consensus on radio testing and reporting procedures.

The protocols however, are still being drafted. In addition to the testing we are doing in the District, we have agreed to bi-weekly radio system testing, system wide. Additionally WMATA has drafted a reporting mechanism, which we have tweaked to address various Chiefs concerns. The web-based reporting mechanism will auto-notify WMATA and jurisdictions of outage concerns.

WMATA has agreed to have "boots on the ground" within 24 hours to investigate radio deficiencies, with projections to affect repairs within 2 to 3 days. WMATA has committed to provide repair feedback to the affected jurisdictions.

A lot of progress has been made in the past week and additional meetings will be held.