

July 20, 2020

# MORE THAN A PLAZA

## DC JUSTICE LAB

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Honorable Phil Mendelson  
Chairman, Committee of the Whole  
Council of the District of Columbia  
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW, Suite 504  
Washington, DC 20004  
*via email:* [pmendelson@dccouncil.us](mailto:pmendelson@dccouncil.us)

Re: FY 2021 Budget

Dear Committee of the Whole,

On behalf of DC Justice Lab, we join the voices of others in our community calling for the District to prioritize community-focused public safety measures over continuing to fund MPD. We need a clear commitment to non-law enforcement community-based policing alternatives that will make the community safer. We are asking that the Council do more to reallocate funds from MPD to respond to residents' needs, including developing and implementing strong community-based crisis response and robust violence interruption resources to reduce the potential for harmful interactions between law enforcement and the public and to reduce violence in the District generally. We implore the Council to look beyond existing measures to ensure meaningful change.

DC Justice Lab seeks to transform policing, courts, and corrections to make the District a national leader in supporting dignity, fairness, and freedom for all. We are a public policy organization that combines community organizing and empirical research to deliver imaginative, carefully-calibrated public safety solutions by and for people who are most directly impacted. Our current project, "[Prioritize Prevention](#)" emphasizes that community-led public safety initiatives, including, [violence interrupters](#), [credible messengers](#), mental health services, social work, and food access programs are more effective at preventing violence in communities than traditional policing.

The MPD budget has [grown by 12 percent since 2015](#). The budget for policing dwarfs the budgets for affordable housing, employment services, physical and behavioral health, and human

services. It is clear that by increasing the MPD budget to around \$568 million, the Council is ignoring D.C. residents' demands for justice, and community-focused outcomes that will make *all* of our residents safer. We need bold measures to truly change our community for the better. We call on the Council to consider new alternatives such as the ones discussed below, to respond to the needs of our community.

Traditional policing perpetuates systemic racism and makes our community less safe. For example, between 2013 and 2017, Black residents in D.C. were arrested at [10 times the rate](#) of white residents. This trend is [not changing](#) despite previous calls for reform. The [MPD refused to keep and report extensive records](#) on police stops required by the Neighborhood Engagement Achieves Results (NEAR) Act until a court ordered compliance. Once collected, the data revealed that [Black people composed 72% of the individuals stopped in D.C. despite making up just 46.5% of the District's population](#). These racially-driven practices increase distrust in the MPD and in traditional policing; polling data suggests roughly [36% of Black Americans trust police](#). [Distrust between police and residents](#) has very clear negative outcomes for public safety. These cycles of racism, police brutality, and distrust increase violence in communities where residents [are already disproportionately affected by poverty](#). This reality is compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic: The [racial disparity of COVID-19's impact in the District](#) has led the nation.

## Non-Law Enforcement Community-Based Crisis Response

Throughout the United States, cities are reexamining how systems have grown to expect police as the default first response for societal issues which they are neither equipped nor best suited to handle, such as mental illness and homelessness. For example, jurisdictions across the country are considering measures to reduce police violence through providing alternatives to police crisis response. Far too often, law enforcement are the default first response for issues of mental health crisis, poverty, and homelessness, or even schoolyard discipline issues. However, it is clear that police officers are not the most adept in handling many of these calls; these calls could better be responded to by those who are trained to address those issues, such as social workers, mental health experts, and those trained in conflict resolution and crisis deescalation. This assertion is underscored by [a recent study](#) indicating that 20%-50% of fatal encounters with law enforcement have involved individuals with mental health issues. It is abundantly clear that the District must reconsider its current approach to policing.

We urge the Council to consider adopting community-based alternatives to police 911 responses, such as one modeled off of the Crisis Prevention Helping Out on the Streets (CAHOOTS) in Eugene, Oregon. Thirty one years ago, CAHOOTS, a community-based mental health response team, was founded in Eugene to [respond to crises involving mental health, addiction, and homelessness](#). The program functions by sending [a two-person unit](#) consisting of a social worker and a medical professional to scenes that ["don't involve a legal issue or some kind of extreme threat of violence or risk to the person, the individual or others."](#) To determine this, CAHOOTS works in unison with Eugene Emergency Response Services to assess whether a 911 call warrants the services of the police or the community-based model.

To operate in Eugene, a locality much smaller than the District, CAHOOTS requires [a \\$2.1 million budget](#) annually. However, the program saved the city approximately [\\$8.5 million in public safety spending annually](#), while answering [17%](#) of the police department's call volume. Additionally, while the program works with the police department and emergency response services to determine whom it will respond to, CAHOOTS is largely independent during the execution of its services. For example, of the [24,000 calls it responded to last year](#), police backup was requested [only 150 times](#), often [only to apprehend callers on the brink of suicide](#).

Undoubtedly, CAHOOTS would operate differently in a larger city such as Washington D.C. However, the model has spread throughout the nation in recent years; the District could benefit immensely from a program like this.

## Violence Interruption

Public safety funds should be shifted from traditional police forces to community-based safety initiatives, including violence interruption programs, which are better able to break cycles on violence. Unlike police officers who escalate situations with force and violence, violence interrupters build relationships with communities to gain trust, improve opportunities, mediate conflicts, and reduce violence. There is national, bipartisan support for funding violence interrupters rather than expanding traditional policing methods: [71% of likely voters](#), including 62% of Republicans, believe that programs designed to interrupt and prevent gun violence have been shown to be more cost effective than increasing the number of police in a community.

While the Council just voted to reallocate \$9.67 million and 50 FTEs from MPD to agencies and programs supporting restorative justice, violence interruption, and victim service work, this accounts for about .1% of the total budget. It does not go far enough. To truly respond to the community's need for a just public safety system that makes us all safer, much more must be done. To put this into perspective, Richmond, California, [whose citizens saw some of the highest rates of gun violence for years](#), invests [.4% of their budget](#) into [just one violence interruption program](#); since the program was initiated, [gunshot wounds and deaths have fallen 55%](#). Other cities have seen similar reductions when they have made significant investments in these kinds of programs. The organization Cure the Streets has [tracked](#) similar reductions in gun violence and homicides in cities across America when violence interruption programs are adequately funded. The solution to violence in the District is not investing more in a system that is not working.

Although MPD's budget keeps growing, [homicide rates in the District have increased in recent years](#). Increased funding for the MPD does not lead to decreasing rates of homicide. Instead of increasing the budget *again*, the Council must invest in violence prevention and community programs which are proven to reduce violence and restore public trust. We call upon the D.C. Council to reallocate at least 20% of MPD funds to community-driven public safety alternatives and commit to increasing the allocated funds for these programs in the future.

## Conclusion

We urge you to show your commitment to all members of our community by rejecting the status quo and investing in alternatives that will help, heal, and protect our community. It is the ultimate goal of any city to create the safest environment for *all* its inhabitants; this proposal will support that objective.

Sincerely,

Brandon Spreckels, Legal Intern  
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Lauren Johnson, Ward 4 Resident  
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