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December 2, 2025

Testimony of DC Police Union for House Natural Resources Committee, Subcommittee on Federal Lands on H.R. 5103

Good morning Chairman, Ranking Member, and Members of the Subcommittee. My name is Gregory Pemberton, and I am the President of D.C. Police Union Lodge #2, representing roughly 3,000 officers, detectives, and sergeants of the Metropolitan Police Department. I've served this city for more than twenty years. From this experience, I am confident that H.R. 5103 can play a vital role in enhancing public safety in the District of Columbia.

Let me be direct: the Nation's Capital is in crisis. Crime remains out of control, and our police department is dangerously understaffed. This did not happen by accident. It is the result of radical anti-police laws and rhetoric that began in 2020. In Washington, D.C., the City Council stripped away officer rights, restricted proven tools, and openly celebrated "defunding." The results speak for themselves. In 2020, the MPD had nearly 3,900 sworn members. Today, we are under 3,200, the lowest in half a century, leaving us with more than 800 vacancies for the position of sworn officer.

The impact on public safety has been devastating. Between 2020 and 2023, homicides surged, carjackings doubled, robberies spiked, and entire neighborhoods became unsafe. While some progress has been made this year, violent crime is still up 15% from pre-2020 levels, and our staffing shortages continue to hinder effective policing across the District, including on federal lands.

This crisis extends directly to the federal parks and public spaces under this Subcommittee's oversight. The National Mall, monuments, memorials, and other federal properties are not just symbols of our democracy, they are active public spaces visited by millions annually. Yet, these areas have become increasingly vulnerable to vandalism, graffiti, litter, and criminal activity that undermines their safety and cleanliness. In 2024 alone, MPD responded to more than 500 incidents on or adjacent to federal park lands, including assaults, thefts, and defacement of monuments. Graffiti removal requests in these areas have risen 40% since 2020, often tied to protests or opportunistic crime that spills over from surrounding neighborhoods.

Our ability to patrol and maintain safety in these federal spaces is severely compromised by MPD's staffing crisis. Federal parks fall primarily under the jurisdiction of the United States Park Police (USPP), but effective policing in the District requires close cooperation between MPD and USPP. MPD officers frequently assist USPP in responding to emergencies, crowd control, and routine patrols on federal lands, especially where boundaries blur with city streets and sidewalks. MPD and USPP often patrol areas like Meridian Hill Park, where 11 acres of parks and gardens are situated among the densely populated surrounding neighborhoods. However, with our ranks

depleted, we have been unable to provide the level of support needed. Response times to incidents on the National Mall have increased by 25% in the last two years, as MPD units are stretched thin covering citywide calls. This leaves federal parks more exposed to crimes like robberies and carjackings, which have targeted tourists and visitors in areas like the Tidal Basin and near the Lincoln Memorial.

Cleanliness and safety go hand in hand. Neglected spaces, littered sidewalks, vandalized statues, and overgrown areas signal disorder and invite criminal behavior. We've seen this in action: unclean federal parks become hotspots for illegal encampments, drug use, and violent encounters. MPD's Crime Suppression Teams, which partner with USPP for joint operations, have been reduced due to vacancies, limiting our joint efforts to clear graffiti, remove debris, and deter crime. Without adequate staffing, these collaborative patrols happen less frequently, allowing problems to fester and erode the dignity of these national treasures.

That is why the D.C. Police Union strongly supports H.R. 5103, the Make the District of Columbia Safe and Beautiful Act. This bill establishes a much-needed program under the Secretary of the Interior to beautify the District. By requiring consultation with key stakeholders, like the Attorney General, the Mayor, federal agency heads, and even the Chief of Police and the Police Union, it fosters the interagency cooperation essential for success. Critically, this program will enhance MPD's partnership with USPP, allowing us to better align resources for patrolling federal lands.

The bill's creation of the District of Columbia Safe and Beautiful Commission is equally vital. This executive branch body will provide ongoing oversight and planning, ensuring that federal and local officials work together to address these issues. It encourages private-sector participation, which could bring additional resources for maintenance and security, something MPD and USPP desperately need amid budget constraints. By tying beautification to safety, H.R. 5103 recognizes that clean, well-maintained federal parks deter crime and protect visitors, residents, and the symbolic heart of our nation.

The lesson is clear: when city leaders undermine police, communities and national landmarks, suffer. If this is not corrected, the crisis will deepen. I urge Congress to pass H.R. 5103 to support cooperation between all stakeholders. Officers want nothing more than to protect these cherished spaces, but they cannot do it without help from elected officials.

Again, I thank you for the opportunity to testify and I welcome any questions the Subcommittee may have.



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