

“Legislative Hearing: H.R. 5103, Make the District of Columbia Safe and Beautiful Act”

**Statement of Kenneth Spencer, Government Affairs Chief of Staff
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before the
House Committee on Natural Resources, Subcommittee on Federal Lands
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Good morning Chairman Tiffany, Ranking Member Neguse, and Members of the Subcommittee on Federal Lands, my name is Kenneth Spencer and my testimony this afternoon is delivered in my capacity as the Government Affairs Chief of Staff of the United States Park Police Fraternal Order of Police (“USPPFOP”). Simply put, our organization represents the interests of the approximately 350 sworn law enforcement officers of the United States Park Police (“USPP”). I am honored to be here today and very thankful for this opportunity to share the USPPFOP’s views on, and lessons learned from, President Trump’s Executive Order 14252, signed on March 28th of this year and commonly referred to as the Make the District of Columbia Safe and Beautiful Act.

By way of background, in addition to my capacity as the former Chairman of the USPPFOP, I serve as a Master Patrol Officer for the USPP and have served the agency for nearly 16 years. In years long gone by, the US Park Police was rightfully viewed as the world’s foremost law enforcement organization that protected First Amendment rights while, at the same time, ensured the safety of the community and protected national landmarks that adorn much of the federal land under our jurisdiction. Sadly, due to decades of neglect by the National Park Service, Department of the Interior and the United States Congress, our Agency’s ability to effectively manage large scale events and routine patrol duties is significantly diminished, leading to disappointing and dangerous outcomes.

Before my time with the USPP, I proudly served in the United States Air Force as a Law Enforcement Area Supervisor and Nuclear Weapons Security Escort Team Leader with the United States Air Force Security Forces. During these years, I was deployed in support of Operation Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom, completing missions in multiple locations throughout Iraq and Kuwait.

United States Park Police

The United States Park Police was created by President George Washington in 1791. The Force functions as a unit of the National Park Service (“NPS”) with jurisdiction in urban federal parks, including all federal lands throughout the District of Columbia and the Washington Metropolitan Area, San Francisco, and New York City. In Washington, DC, we share the same duties, responsibilities, and arrest authority as our

brothers and sisters in the DC Metropolitan Police Department. Our mission is to provide quality law enforcement to safeguard lives, protect our national treasures and symbols of democracy, and preserve the natural and cultural resources entrusted to us.

On average, USPP officers protect 160,000 daily visitors to our parks, patrol a geographic area of over 30,000 acres across three urban metropolitan regions, and more than 75 miles of highway. Notably, we are, or at least once were, the world's leading law enforcement agency when it comes to supporting large scale special events and other First Amendment activities.

Importantly, we protect our national icons and symbols of democracy in the District of Columbia, New York City, and San Francisco. This includes - but is not limited to - the Statue of Liberty, Washington Monument, Lincoln Memorial, and the Presidio.

United States Park Police Fraternal Order of Police

The United States Park Police Fraternal Order of Police has served as the exclusive representative for bargaining unit employees of the USPP for the last 30 years. We negotiate collective bargaining agreements as necessary and administer the labor-management agreement between the officers and the Department of Interior and the National Park Service. On a day-to-day basis, the USPPFOP communicates the challenges facing USPP officers to our senior management leadership, the public and their elected representatives with the goal of improving the operational readiness of the Force. Membership in the USPPFOP is voluntary and we represent all members of the bargaining unit regardless of membership status. We do not have a political action committee, we do not make political donations, and we do not endorse candidates for public office.

Most recently, the USPPFOP has focused on issues related to officer retention and recruitment as the consequences from decades of NPS neglect (across administrations from both political parties) has come to roost. Law enforcement experts who have studied our agency have suggested that the minimum number of officers needed to accomplish our essential missions is at least 650 and some estimates are as high as 1,400. As of October 2025, we had a total of 496 sworn officers across all three jurisdictions - a smaller force than we had in 1975. With the current administration's hiring efforts, we have hired 77 new recruits to date, and more are filtering in quickly. It is not an overstatement to suggest that, at current staffing levels, our agency would be unsustainable without the intervention of our current hiring surge under Secretary Burgum's leadership.

Let me be perfectly clear – currently, on any given day, we are extremely short of our required minimum levels. Our capacity to serve and protect the public today is literally bursting at the seams.

Fortunately, a bipartisan group in Congress, led by Representatives Nicole Malliotakis, Pete Stauber, and Josh Gottheimer, introduced H.R. 1260, the United States Park Police Modernization Act, legislation that balances the recruitment and retention resources among similarly situated federal law enforcement organizations.

From the National Mall to the Neighborhoods: US Park Police and MPD Working Together

For more than two hundred years, United States Park Police officers have worked side by side with the Metropolitan Police Department of the District of Columbia to keep the Nation's Capital safe for residents, businesses, and visitors. From the National Mall and the memorials to busy commercial corridors and neighborhood streets, our officers and MPD officers respond together, plan together, and stand together in defense of this city.

By act of Congress in the late nineteenth century, United States Park Police officers were granted the same powers and duties as the Metropolitan Police, with authority that extends across the entire District of Columbia, not only within the boundaries of parkland. That framework remains in place today, which means our officers share law enforcement jurisdiction across the city and can act wherever they are needed to protect the public. Unfortunately, many people still assume that the United States Park Police is confined to the monuments or the Mall, when in fact our officers have full police authority throughout the District – and are required to take action as law enforcement officers throughout the city and its environs.

In practical terms, that shared jurisdiction translates into a daily partnership. Our agencies use coordinated communications, shared radio channels, and established cooperative agreements that allow officers to work together seamlessly, from initial response to arrest processing. During large scale demonstrations, major special events, or unexpected emergencies, it is routine for United States Park Police and MPD officers to operate in mixed teams, under unified operational plans, with a common goal of protecting constitutional rights while preventing violence, property damage, and threats to public safety.

At the street level, the relationship between our officers and MPD officers is extremely strong, professional, and grounded in mutual respect. We train together, back each other up on calls, and rely on one another in the same way officers do within a single department. When an MPD patrol unit calls for assistance, Park Police officers respond. When a United States Park Police officer encounters a situation that calls for MPD resources or specialized units, MPD responds. That kind of cooperation is not the exception; it is the norm.

This partnership matters for everyone who lives, works, or visits here. The District is home to some of our Nation's most important symbols and institutions, but it is also a community of more than seven hundred thousand residents and thousands of

small and large businesses. A strong, collaborative relationship between the United States Park Police and the Metropolitan Police Department helps ensure that federal lands and city neighborhoods are both protected. As staffing levels for both agencies are strained by increasing demands, it is essential that Congress understand that supporting the United States Park Police is not just about protecting statues or parkland. It is about upholding a proven citywide partnership that keeps the National Mall, the memorials, the parks, and the surrounding communities safer together.

The USPPFOP Urges Passage of H.R. 5103

I want to begin by stating clearly and at the outset that the officers of the United States Park Police Fraternal Order of Police strongly support H.R. 5103, the Make the District of Columbia Safe and Beautiful Act. We urge Congress to enact this bill as soon as possible.

Our support for H.R. 5103 is not about politics. The officers I represent have served under Democratic and Republican administrations alike. We have enforced the law and protected the public through changes in party control, changes in policy, and changes in public opinion. What has not changed is our responsibility to keep people safe on federal lands and throughout the Nation's Capital, and our daily experience of the crime realities that this bill seeks to address.

In recent years, violent and property crime in Washington have reached levels that are simply not acceptable for the capital of the United States. Residents, workers, and visitors deserve better. The city's monuments, memorials, parks, highways, and transit systems deserve better. H.R. 5103 recognizes that reality and provides important tools and direction for cleaning up and protecting the spaces that define this city and our country.

We are asking both parties to recognize the gravity of the public safety situation in Washington and to come together around this practical, targeted piece of legislation. H.R. 5103 will not solve every problem on its own. But it is a critical step toward restoring order, improving coordination, and showing the American people that Congress understands its responsibility to safeguard the Nation's Capital.

I. Federal Parks and Monuments in DC Are Bearing the Brunt of Disorder and Inadequate Staffing

It is impossible to talk honestly about the President's Executive Order on Making the District of Columbia Safe and Beautiful in March 2025 without first acknowledging what had been happening on the streets of this city since 2020. Washington remains a wonderful place to live, work, and visit, but in recent years we have experienced a very real crime crisis that my officers have felt every single shift.

City homicide numbers tell the story. After 166 homicides in 2019, the District recorded 198 in 2020 and 226 in 2021, followed by 203 in 2022. In 2023, the situation worsened sharply. There were 274 homicides that year, a 36 percent increase over 2022 and the highest number of lives lost in roughly twenty years. Those are not talking points. They are the official figures that officers from the Metropolitan Police Department and federal agencies like the United States Park Police live with as we respond to calls, notify families, and try to prevent the next tragedy.

Homicides were not the only concern. The District also faced an extraordinary spike in carjackings and other violent offenses. In 2023 alone, the city recorded about 957 carjackings, roughly three quarters of them involving a gun, according to the District's own carjacking dashboard and independent analyses. Many of those incidents involved young offenders and unfolded on or near federal property, parkways, and commuter routes that my officers patrol. When residents are afraid to pump gas or pull up to a crosswalk after dark, they do not experience this city as safe and open, no matter how beautiful our monuments are.

Homicide totals remain higher than they were in the middle of the last decade, and the lived experience for residents and visitors in the years leading up to the March 2025 Executive Order was one of anxiety about carjackings, robberies, and random violence. Saying that crime was a serious problem in Washington is not a partisan statement. It is a straightforward description of what the official data showed and what officers in the field were dealing with.

For the men and women of the United States Park Police, this surge in violent crime collided with a long running staffing crisis. Over the past decade, our sworn ranks have withered. In August 2025, I publicly reported that we had only about 496 sworn officers nationwide, and just 289 to cover the entire National Capital Region. Our minimum DC-area staffing requirement (according to the NPS) is 432 sworn officers. That is an extraordinarily small force when you consider that we police national memorials, the National Mall, parkways, parklands, and other federal sites in and around a major American city that has been struggling with serious violent crime.

Independent organizations have confirmed that law enforcement staffing across the National Park System is at its lowest level in a generation, even as demands for service continue to grow. For the United States Park Police in particular, recruitment and retention have been undermined by an outdated pay and benefits structure that has not kept pace with comparable federal law enforcement agencies such as the United States Capitol Police and the United States Secret Service Uniformed Division. The National Police Association recently described our pay system as antiquated and cited it as a core reason for our staffing crisis while urging passage of the U.S. Park Police Modernization Act to address those disparities.

The officers I represent are doing their jobs. They are making arrests, supporting the Metropolitan Police Department, and protecting millions of visitors each year. What we are not able to do, under current staffing levels and conditions, is put enough officers on patrol to meet the rising demand for service in and around federal lands and facilities. When a city experiences the kind of homicide and carjacking numbers that Washington recorded between 2020 and 2023, and the federal agency responsible for key parts of that city has seen its sworn force shrink and fall behind its peers, the result is a gap in capacity that no amount of individual effort can completely bridge.

By the time the President issued Executive Order 14252 on March 27, 2025, on Making the District of Columbia Safe and Beautiful, it was evident from both the crime statistics and the day-to-day realities on the street that something more had to be done. My message to this Subcommittee is simple. Acknowledging that crime in Washington reached crisis levels in recent years is not about scoring political points. It is about recognizing the factual record and then giving agencies like the United States Park Police and the DC Police the staffing, pay parity, and tools they need to help ensure that the recent improvements in public safety are not a temporary pause but the beginning of a sustained return to a safer, more secure capital city.

II. The Growing Threat of Defacement to America's Federal Monuments and Memorials

Section 2(b)(1) of H.R. 5103 speaks directly to what my officers and I see every day on the street. It would require the Secretary of the Interior to work with District and federal partners to coordinate and maintain the cleanliness of federal and District facilities, monuments, land, public spaces, sidewalks, parks, highways, roads and transit systems, including removal of graffiti.

On paper, that may sound like a landscaping or janitorial program. From the perspective of a front-line law enforcement officer, it is much more than that. The physical condition of our monuments, memorials and public spaces is inseparable from our ability to keep the peace, protect First Amendment activity and deter crime. A city that looks abandoned or defaced sends a message that no one is in charge. That message is heard loudly by those who want to commit crimes under the cover of large, emotional demonstrations.

To be clear, U.S. Park Police officers are not assigned to power wash stone or apply solvents to marble. That is the job of highly skilled National Park Service preservation crews. But when those crews are constantly chasing new layers of graffiti or repairing broken fixtures, it is a sign that the enforcement side is under resourced. On the rare occasion when we caught these individuals, they were almost never prosecuted in D.C. due to charging practices that do not reflect the seriousness of the crimes. Fortunately, it appears that these prosecutorial policies are beginning to change.

Last year's pro-Palestinian demonstrations around Union Station are a vivid example. On July 24, 2024, during protests tied to Prime Minister Netanyahu's address to Congress, demonstrators in Columbus Circle pulled down American flags, burned flags and other objects, and sprayed graffiti on the Columbus Fountain and surrounding statues and walkways. One individual later pleaded guilty in federal court for spray painting "HAMAS IS COMIN" and an inverted red triangle on the Columbus statue, and was sentenced to jail time and restitution.

In the weeks that followed, Park Police investigators, including our Intelligence and Counterterrorism Unit, worked with federal partners to identify suspects using open source video, and the National Park Service preservation staff labored to remove the paint from historic stone. The Park Service ultimately estimated that it cost more than eleven thousand dollars just to clean and repair the damage at Columbus Circle from that single event.

Unfortunately, this is not an isolated incident. Over the past decade, the Lincoln Memorial, the Washington Monument, the World War II Memorial and other iconic sites on the National Mall have all been defaced with spray paint or marker, sometimes requiring multiple rounds of chemical treatment and careful washing over weeks to avoid permanent damage to the stone. After the riots in 2020, National Park Service crews spent days cleaning fresh graffiti from monuments and memorials across Washington, and the District has reported that graffiti removal associated with major protest activity can cost tens of thousands of dollars at a time.

These are not victimless "property crimes." Every time a monument is defaced, public resources are diverted away from other priorities, visitors confront scenes of damage at the very places that are supposed to symbolize our shared history, and officers are pulled into extended security and crime scene details. Repeated vandalism also emboldens those who want to escalate from graffiti and flag burning to assaults and more serious offenses, especially when they believe they can blend into a large crowd.

At the same time, I want to be absolutely clear that U.S. Park Police officers have no interest in suppressing peaceful expression. We guard the steps where Dr. King spoke at the Lincoln Memorial. We routinely police large, passionate demonstrations from all points on the political spectrum. The officers I represent are proud to protect the right of Americans to assemble and speak, whether we personally agree with their message or not. But no one has a constitutional right to destroy federal property, to deface monuments, or to turn our most visible public spaces into canvases for criminal vandalism.

For that reason, the program envisioned in section 2(b)(1) is not cosmetic in our eyes. If it is properly resourced, and if law enforcement agencies like the U.S. Park

Police and the Metropolitan Police Department are included as full partners, it can help restore a sense of order, reinforce clear expectations for lawful conduct during protests, and ensure that when incidents do occur, we have the staffing and coordination to respond quickly. Clean, well-maintained, well-lit spaces with working cameras and intact barriers make it easier for us to facilitate marches, protect bystanders and distinguish between peaceful demonstrators and those who are intent on breaking the law.

I would urge the Subcommittee to view this provision as part of a broader commitment to public safety. Investing in the cleanliness and restoration of our shared civic spaces, while at the same time investing in the officers who protect them, will make the District of Columbia safer and more beautiful for residents, businesses and the millions of visitors who come here every year.

III. A Stronger Federal Law Enforcement Team Will Make DC Safer for Everyone

Section 3(d)(1)(H) of H.R. 5103 goes to the heart of what it will take to make the District of Columbia truly safe and beautiful again. It instructs the Commission created under this bill to “facilitate the deployment of a more robust Federal law enforcement presence” within the District, specifically naming the National Mall and Memorial Parks, museums, monuments, Lafayette Park, Union Station, Rock Creek Park, Anacostia Park, the George Washington Memorial Parkway, the Suitland Parkway, and the Baltimore–Washington Parkway. For the officers I represent, that is not just a line of text. It is the centerpiece of any serious solution.

We cannot wish away violent crime, carjackings, open air drug dealing, and the kind of vandalism and defacement that have become all too common at our national monuments and public spaces. Those problems will not be solved by rhetoric or short-term task forces. They will only be solved by putting enough well trained, fully empowered federal law enforcement officers back on the ground, day in and day out, to deter crime, respond quickly, and work in partnership with the Metropolitan Police Department and other agencies.

That is why our union has been sounding the alarm about United States Park Police staffing for years, and why we have been pushing so hard for H.R. 1260, the U.S. Park Police Modernization Act. That bill would finally modernize our pay, benefits, and retirement structure so that we are on par with comparable federal law enforcement agencies such as the U.S. Capitol Police and the U.S. Secret Service Uniformed Division. Without those reforms, we simply cannot recruit and retain the number of officers needed to provide the “more robust Federal law enforcement presence” that H.R. 5103 rightly calls for.

Restoring the United States Park Police to safe minimum staffing levels is, in our view, the smartest, most effective, and most efficient way to achieve the goals of this

bill. Our officers are already responsible for policing many of the very locations that Section 3(d)(1)(H) lists by name. We know the National Mall, the memorials, Lafayette Park, our parkways and riverfronts, and the neighborhoods that surround them. When our ranks are full and our officers are properly supported, we can do more proactive patrol, more community engagement, more focused enforcement against the relatively small number of offenders who cause a disproportionate amount of harm.

H.R. 5103 recognizes that reality. By directing the Commission to facilitate a more robust federal law enforcement presence across these critical areas, it acknowledges that long term public safety in Washington depends on sustained investments in agencies like the United States Park Police, not on episodic surges. For that commitment to be meaningful, Congress will need to back it up each appropriations cycle by ensuring that the resources are there to hire, train, equip, and retain the officers required to carry out this mission.

For the USPPFOP, this is where H.R. 5103 and H.R. 1260 come together. The Make the District of Columbia Safe and Beautiful Act sets the strategic direction: a stronger, more visible federal law enforcement presence to protect the spaces that define our capital. The U.S. Park Police Modernization Act provides the structural reforms that will allow us to build and sustain the workforce capable of delivering on that vision. Together, they offer a realistic, long-term pathway to restoring peace and safety for residents, workers, and the millions of tourists who come here each year.

Conclusion

Let me close where I began. The officers of the United States Park Police Fraternal Order of Police strongly support H.R. 5103 and we believe its success is directly tied to the enactment of H.R. 1260, the U.S. Park Police Modernization Act. H.R. 5103 sets the strategy, a cleaner, safer, better protected capital with a more robust federal law enforcement presence. H.R. 1260 provides the tools, the pay, benefits, and staffing structure that will allow us to recruit and retain the officers needed to carry out that mission year after year.

We also want to recognize the leadership of the Department of the Interior, especially Secretary Burgum and Acting Assistant Secretary for Fish and Wildlife and Parks Kevin Lilly. They have listened to our concerns, acknowledged the staffing crisis, and expressed a genuine interest in restoring the strength of the United States Park Police. We are grateful for that engagement.

However, the time for discussion is over. Crime, vandalism, and public disorder do not wait for policy debates to run their course. Residents, workers, and visitors in the Nation's Capital need action. That means Congress must pass both H.R. 5103 and H.R. 1260, and support them through the appropriations process, so that we can rebuild this agency and protect the places that belong to all Americans.

Thank you again for the opportunity to present this testimony on behalf of the members of US Park Police Fraternal Order of Police. I welcome any questions you have.