

**STATEMENT OF CHARLES CUVELIER, ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR, VISITOR AND RESOURCE PROTECTION, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE THE HOUSE NATURAL RESOURCES SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND INVESTIGATIONS REGARDING RECENT PROTESTS ON FEDERAL LANDS IN WASHINGTON, DC.**

**December 10, 2024**

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Chairman Gosar, Ranking Member Stansbury, and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today regarding recent protests on federal lands in Washington, DC.

Across the Nation, the Department of the Interior employs nearly 3,000 law enforcement officers to protect visitors, critical national infrastructure, and natural and cultural resources on federal and Tribal lands. Within the National Park Service (NPS), both law enforcement rangers and United States Park Police (USPP) carry out this vital role.

The USPP, established by President George Washington in 1791, is a premier law enforcement organization, dedicated to providing quality law enforcement to safeguard lives, protect national treasures and symbols of democracy, and preserve natural and cultural resources. The USPP primarily oversees law enforcement on national park lands in Washington, DC, New York City, and San Francisco, but also provides critical support to federal, Tribal, state and local partners around the country.

With specialized training in handling events that involve civil disobedience, the USPP works closely with these interagency partners during every large-scale demonstration or event in the Washington, DC area. This year there have been several of these events. The Department is committed to ensuring that citizens can safely exercise their rights of free speech and assembly in accordance with the Constitution and the law. There were no unanswered requests for additional resources and support for these demonstrations from the USPP. However, at public protests in June and July, certain demonstrators did violate the law by committing vandalism, theft, and assault on USPP officers. These acts and violence in all forms, particularly against law enforcement officers, are abhorrent. The Department has condemned and continues to fully condemn this behavior. At the same time, we recognize free speech is a fundamental constitutional right, ensuring all Americans can express their beliefs, question authority, and participate in public discourse without fear of government retaliation. The National Park Service is charged with facilitating First Amendment activities to ensure that Americans have the ability to exercise their First Amendment rights while providing for public safety and protection of resources.

The USPP is actively collaborating with several state, local, and Federal law enforcement agencies as well as the United States Attorney's Office for the District of Columbia, in an effort to investigate, identify, and prosecute those involved in the unlawful events at Columbus Circle. In coordination with the Federal Bureau Investigation, a public bulletin has been issued seeking assistance in identifying several individuals. To date, four arrests have been made. Charges include assault on a police officer, damage to government property, and second-degree theft of

government property. Three other individuals are under various stages of investigation, court review, or prosecution.

The NPS has been working with the USPP to continue evaluating the specific circumstances and to implement strategies and safeguards to minimize future incidents. For example, we are exploring ways to modify permit conditions to provide that permittees – and applicants who have previously held permits – ensure their participants behave lawfully and inform participants of prohibited activity. Also, conversations are ongoing regarding the appropriate use and deployment of additional equipment, including anti-scale fencing and other icon-hardening barriers. The NPS has previously provided technical assistance to Congress regarding potential supplemental appropriations to cover this type of protective and icon-hardening equipment. We would be more than happy to work with Congress to continue this dialogue.

The Department strongly supports our law enforcement personnel. At the direction of Secretary Haaland, and after a rigorous research and outreach process, the Department’s Law Enforcement Task Force issued twelve recommendations in its 2023 Report (2023 DOI-LETF Report) with a focus on ways to enhance the trust afforded to our law enforcement workforce, support the safety, health and wellness of officers, and ensure that law enforcement programs effectively continue to provide for safe and equitable access to public lands and the free exercise of fundamental rights in public spaces. Important among these is the commitment to enhance training opportunities for USPP personnel and other DOI law enforcement and permit-monitoring personnel in the Washington, DC, area on issues such as civil disobedience.

The 2023 DOI-LETF Report identified a number of issues related to the recruitment and retention of law enforcement workforce that the Department is currently pursuing, including ensuring that the Department has adequate staffing to respond to, and discourage, incidents and enhance the resiliency of the workforce. Often underlying these efforts is the need for greater funding.

As with other DOI law enforcement programs, staffing levels within the USPP have declined over 15% over the last decade, as funding provided through the annual appropriations process has not been sufficient to meet the program’s capacity and fixed cost needs. The 2023 DOI-LETF Report identified that when annual hiring does not keep pace with attrition, and staffing levels fall, the impacts on the remaining workforce increase the challenges of officer retention, leading to a self-reinforcing cycle. The 2023 DOI-LETF Report additionally found that inadequate staffing is the “largest single factor contributing to stress, mental health concerns, feeling unsafe on the job, and a lack of work-life balance for DOI law enforcement officers.”

In FY 2024, the President’s Budget requested an increase of \$5.365 million for USPP capacity needs and to support additional recruit classes, and \$6.106 million more to cover the increased costs of pay and benefits – in total, a 9.3% increase from FY 2023 enacted appropriations. Congress, kept overall funding flat for the USPP in its FY 2024 appropriations further exacerbating USPP’s ability to maintain staffing levels. In order to operate within these budgetary constraints, the USPP needed to hold vacant previously funded positions. The only source of these positions is new recruit classes to fill behind officers that have separated or retired. A recruit class costs more than \$2.5 million, including costs for background

investigations, medical exams, field training, and other support requirements. Lapsing two recruit classes in FY 2024 allowed the USPP to save roughly \$5 million in discretionary appropriations costs in order to meet their budget. In addition, other non-salary components of the USPP's budget are also increasing year-over-year.

This funding uncertainty is continuing in FY 2025. The FY 2025 President's Budget Request proposes a combined net increase of \$10.16 million for the USPP to cover the re-baselined FY 2024 and FY 2025 pay and benefit cost increases, restore lost capacity, and provide for increased funding for the upcoming Presidential inauguration. H.R. 8998, the Department of the Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies Appropriations Act, 2025, which passed the House on July 24, 2024, does not provide additional funding for any of these USPP needs, though the Department welcomes the \$5 million in funding for the inauguration included in the current continuing resolution, a portion of which will fund law enforcement activities. In contrast, S. 4802, reported out by the Senate Committee on Appropriations on July 25, 2024, provides the full \$2.9 million requested for FY 2025 pay and benefit cost increases, as well as the full \$2.4 million requested for the law enforcement requirements needed for the upcoming Presidential inauguration. The Senate bill also provides an increase of \$25.6 million across parks and programs to partially restore the operational capacity lost in FY 2024 due to absorption of the more than \$100 million in additional pay, benefits, and other fixed costs across the NPS, including the USPP.

While Congress has not provided the requested increases in discretionary appropriations for the USPP, the NPS has utilized other sources of funding to increase USPP staffing capacity. The NPS allocated \$29 million of Inflation Reduction Act (Section 50223) funding to the USPP to support the initial hiring and equipping of a recruit class in FY 2023, and another recruit class in FY 2024, and will cover the salary of these sworn officers for the next several years. Without these Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) funds, the USPP would have experienced a further decrease in staffing. With the addition of the 2 recruit classes supported by IRA funds, there have been 7.5 recruit classes in this Administration compared with 5 during the previous Administration. The capacity provided by the IRA will be temporary unless Congress appropriates an increase to their base funding.

The USPP also faces challenges with pay disparity in relation to other federal or state law enforcement entities. The 2023 DOI-LETF Report found that DOI's compensation packages for law enforcement officers "make it difficult to compete with other law enforcement organizations when recruiting new officers" and also "accounts for some loss of personnel, particularly in urban areas and Tribal communities." Competitive compensation is foundational to the retention of an effective law enforcement workforce. At the same time, as discussed above, if the pay scale is increased without additional funding, law enforcement will face additional limits to its financial ability to recruit new employees and function operationally.

The USPP pay scale is set by statute, and it is lower than the pay scale for certain other Federal police officers, such as Secret Service Uniformed Division officers. When competing for the same applicant recruits, this pay disparity has a negative impact on USPP recruitment and hiring. Similarly, the USPP lacks pay parity with its local law enforcement partners. For example, the starting annual salary for USPP officers in the San Francisco Field Office is \$75,253, while the

San Francisco Police make \$103,116 and the Oakland Police make \$102,000, challenging our ability to recruit and retain officers.

Within this challenging financial environment, the NPS has taken a number of actions with the funding that is available to improve USPP morale. The NPS Office of Workforce Development has focused on USPP officer recruitment by attending over 20 events to promote the USPP to seek quality candidates. The USPP promotes career development within the organization. In 2023, 24 officers were transferred to specialized positions and the Master Patrol Officer (MPO) program was reestablished with nine MPO positions created. These 33 positions include technician pay. The USPP has used monetary and non-monetary awards to recognize employees for their exceptional work. Also, the Department has supported the use of student loan forgiveness and student loan repayment programs, using performance and achievement-based cash or time off awards, offering advanced training opportunities, and offering on-the-job training through detail assignments and temporary promotions.

The NPS protects some of the most significant and meaningful icons and symbols of the United States, and we continue to fulfill this critical mission on behalf of the American public. Thank you for your interest in and support of the National Park Service and the United States Park Police.

Chairman Gosar, this concludes my testimony. I would be happy to answer any questions you or other members of the subcommittee may have.