

Five days after Dr. Juliette Saussy resigned from her position as medical director for D.C. Fire and EMS (FEMS), she appeared before a D.C. City Council committee on Wednesday to discuss the “highly toxic culture” of FEMS.

Her concerns, which were directed toward Fire and EMS Chief Gregory Dean, included the department’s lack of accountability and leadership, insufficiently trained EMS personnel and unmeasured EMS performance, particularly in regard to ambulance dispatch times.

“Their sense of urgency and mine are totally different,” Saussy said. “People are dying needlessly because we are moving too slow.”

D.C.’s emergency services dispatch time is 144 seconds compared to the national standard of 90 seconds, according to Saussy’s records from her time in office.

“Clearly there is a problem,” said Councilmember Kenyan McDuffie (D–Ward 5) who is also Chairman of the Committee on Government Operations. “The EMS system in the District of Columbia is in serious need of reform.”

The District has long suffered from faulty emergency services. Nearly a year after Mayor Muriel Bowser (D) hired Dean to resolve some of the department’s issues, city council members said that they have seen “very little improvement.”

“I am losing faith,” Councilmember Mary Cheh (D—Ward 3) said.

Saussy reported to Dean during her seven months in office. She said that she was met with “a very high level of resistance” from him and was given little power to implement change.

Saussy’s resignation letter dated Jan. 29 called for a division of FEMS that would create a separate unit for the “provision of advanced life support care.” In her testimony, she said that with this structural reorganization and simple, measurable fixes to the department, a higher-functioning FEMS would occur.

“When I see something that can make a difference between life and death, and yet it is ignored, I must distance myself from that system,” Saussy said in her resignation letter.

Despite that 80 percent of calls that FEMS receives are for emergency medical services, Saussy claimed the department put more emphasis on fire services. She added that the department appeared to have “an immunity to grief.”

Dean acknowledged the department’s need for improvement, but firmly rejected Saussy’s statement.

"I don't know how you could say that we're immune to grief," he said. "These men and women put their heart and soul into this."

Under Dean’s plans to fix the department, FEMS would sign a \$12 million contract with a third-party medical response team to supplement current ambulance services. City

council members met this proposal with reluctance.

“Does a third-party contract work if we can’t routinely make these kinds of assessments that are critical?” McDuffie asked.