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# United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE, SCIENCE,  
AND TRANSPORTATION

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6125

WEBSITE: <https://commerce.senate.gov>

LILA HARPER HELMS, MAJORITY STAFF DIRECTOR  
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August 9, 2024

The Honorable Charles F. “Chuck” Sams III  
Director  
National Park Service  
1849 C Street NW  
Washington, D.C. 20240

Dear Mr. Sams:

On July 24th, pro-Hamas rioters effectively took control over parts of Columbus Circle outside Washington D.C. Union Station. Despite extensively damaging property, assaulting U.S. Park Police (USPP) officers, and blocking a major throughfare and access to a critical transit hub, their appalling and criminal actions went largely unchecked. This should never have been allowed to happen. The National Park Service (NPS) had advance notice of the large anti-Israel protests, timed to coincide with Israel Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s address to Congress, and ample time to prepare. As the Ranking Member of the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, which has jurisdiction over Union Station and Amtrak, I write to solicit answers to important questions about how this failure occurred and NPS’s plan to prevent similar failures in the future.

As the date for Prime Minister Netanyahu’s address approached, Washington, D.C. braced for planned protests and potential riots. According to Amtrak Police, U.S. Capitol Police provided briefings for other agencies in the area, including Amtrak (responsible for Union Station) and NPS (responsible for Columbus Circle).<sup>1</sup> NPS had advance notice, too, since it issued a “First Amendment Demonstration” permit for Columbus Circle to the radical ANSWER Coalition. ANSWER Coalition has condemned Israel’s self-defense in response to the horrific massacre of October 7, 2023. That permit anticipated fully 5,000 participants with the intent of issuing a “notice of citizen’s arrest” to Netanyahu.<sup>2</sup> When the U.S. Capitol Police successfully repelled these rioters from accessing Capitol grounds, many of these anti-American extremists congregated in Columbus Circle.

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<sup>1</sup> Call between Committee staff and Amtrak Police Chief Dotson (July 30, 2024).

<sup>2</sup> Public Gathering Permit NCA-NAMA-EVNT24-1278 (July 23, 2024), <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/ANSWER—COALITION—PROTEST—PERMIT—NPS—2024.pdf>; “Arrest Netanyahu! Surround Congress July 24 with the People’s Red Line for Palestine,” ANSWER Coalition (June 24, 2024), [https://www.answercoalition.org/arrest\\_netanyahu](https://www.answercoalition.org/arrest_netanyahu).

According to the USPP union, only 29 NPS officers were present to respond to the massive protest even as the situation rapidly and foreseeably deteriorated into a riot.<sup>3</sup> This contrasts with the preparations undertaken by another entity whose resources foreseeably would be strained: Amtrak. Amtrak Police made arrangements to quintuple its police presence at Union Station and get additional resources to provide roughly 100 officers at the location. This force successfully kept Union Station open to ticketed passengers and safe from property damage, but Amtrak Police were not prepared, and apparently lacked the resources, to undertake enforcement outside the Union Station barricades. Notably, NPS had not coordinated with Amtrak Police, other than providing notice of the demonstration permit.<sup>4</sup>

The insufficient resources deployed by NPS, despite advance notice of the massive protest and the propensity of pro-Hamas demonstrations to turn violent, was negligent. Even with every USPP officer in the D.C. area deployed, the many other demands on that force left far too few USPP officers available for a major protest that could turn violent, and the Park Police union is not aware of any effort to get additional officers.<sup>5</sup> Instead, NPS left its USPP officers hopelessly outnumbered (based on the approved ANSWER Coalition permit for 5,000 protestors and the deployment of just 29 officers) by a ratio of nearly 200 to 1. With USPP resources stretched thin, NPS and the Department of the Interior should have requested additional support from other law enforcement agencies in the region, as U.S. Capitol Police and Amtrak had done. Moreover, while the USPP union is concerned about budgetary constraints, it seems that NPS could have paid for more officers in anticipation of this event. When the foreseeable lawlessness occurred, USPP officers found themselves in an impossible situation with no good options.<sup>6</sup>

The USPP officers on the ground valiantly played the hand they were dealt, making at least 10 arrests, and at least some MPD officers eventually joined the response. But the organization and planning for the response at higher levels in the agency left much to be desired, ultimately endangering USPP officers and nearby passengers at Union Station. Additionally, the USPP officers are not sure that the limited arrests they were able to make during the riot are leading to prosecutions.<sup>7</sup>

The Standing Rules of the Senate provide the Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation with jurisdiction to review and study transportation matters.<sup>8</sup> As the Ranking

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<sup>3</sup> Press Release, Statement of Kenneth Spencer, Chairman US Park Police Fraternal Order of Police Regarding Columbus Circle Protests (July 25, 2024), <https://usppfop.org/2024/07/25/press-release-statement-regarding-the-violent-protests-at-columbus-circle-in-washington-dc-that-occurred-on-july-24-2024/>.

<sup>4</sup> Call with Amtrak Police Chief, *supra* note 1.

<sup>5</sup> Call between Committee staff and U.S. Park Police Fraternal Order of Police Chairman Spencer (Aug. 2, 2024).

<sup>6</sup> *Id.*; Statement of Chairman US Park Police Fraternal Order of Police, *supra* note 3.

<sup>7</sup> Call with USPP FOP Chairman, *supra* note 5; *see also* Domingo, Rogers, and Lockman, “At Least 23 Arrested in DC as Thousands Protest Israeli PM Netanyahu’s Speech to Congress,” WJLA.com (July 25, 2024), <https://wjla.com/news/local/netanyahu-address-congress-speech-israel-hamas-gaza-palestine-washington-dc-thousands-rally-protesters-biden-kamala-harris-trump-politics-security-police-violence-arrests-cannon-rotunda-families-hostages-president-ceasefire>.

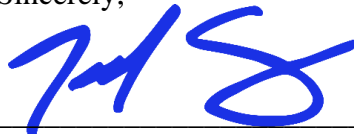
<sup>8</sup> S. Rules XXV(1)(f), XXVI(8)(a)(2).

Member of the Committee, I request you provide written answers and requested records in response to the following questions no later than August 23, 2024, in accordance with the attached instructions.

1. What intelligence surrounding this event did NPS have in advance, including the likely activity of ANSWER Coalition?
2. What specific precautions and steps (including the number of officers) were undertaken to prepare for protests and rioting at Columbus Circle?
3. What steps did you take to coordinate with other law enforcement agencies in the area, including to share intelligence or resources? Please list all such agencies and specify the exact coordination activities and dates and times thereof.
4. What after action reviews has NPS conducted following the events of July 24, 2024? What changes or plans has NPS put in place or begun developing to reduce the likelihood of a similar failure the future?
5. Will you commit to working with the U.S. Department of Justice to encourage prosecutions for the rioters arrested at Columbus Circle?
6. Please provide copies of any body-camera footage from USPP officers who responded to the rioting at Columbus Circle, along with any NPS after action reports or similar documents.

Thank you for your prompt attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



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Ted Cruz

Ranking Member