

## Audit finds D.C. fire officials failed to implement overhauls after 2006 death

By **Peter Hermann** June 18, 2015

The D.C. fire department has failed to implement more than a dozen revisions recommended after a mugging victim died nearly 10 years ago because emergency crews dismissed him as drunk and treated the call as a low priority, the city's auditor concluded Thursday.

Among the most significant unaddressed issues is cross training firefighters and paramedics, creating so-called dual-role providers. It was a pivotal recommendation after the death in 2006 of retired New York Times reporter and editor David E. Rosenbaum.

The auditor noted that since the task force issued the list of overhauls in 2007, "the District has seen a significant increase in its population along with a decrease in the number of [emergency responders] to serve them" and that the changes needed to be implemented quickly.

The District's acting fire chief, Gregory Dean, who was [named in March](#) and started last month, issued a statement saying that he plans to address all the recommendations stemming from the Rosenbaum incident.

Dean said he has re-created the position of assistant chief of emergency medical services, to be filled by Edward R. Mills III, who had briefly served as interim chief. That position had been created under the task force recommendations but was rescinded by former fire chief Kenneth B. Ellerbe. Dean also said Friday that he named Juliette M. Saussy as medical director. She held a similar position in New Orleans during the time of Hurricane Katrina. She left that department in 2010.

Dean said in the statement that filling these positions demonstrates "a stronger departmental commitment to patient care." The chief said "there are challenges before us, but it is our responsibility to rise above them" and provide residents and visitors "the highest quality of professional and compassionate pre-hospital care to people who need it."

The audit began in February and came after a long series of problems that repeatedly raised [issues of public accountability and safety](#) with the D.C. Fire and Emergency Medical Services Department. Issues included slow response times, broken equipment and failure to render basic care. The auditor, Kathleen Patterson, noted in her conclusion that "a new administration and new leadership" gives the fire chief "a new opportunity to address the

commitments made in 2007.”

Patterson’s audit concluded that of the 36 recommendations made in the Rosenbaum case, just 11 had been implemented. Another six had been “partially implemented” and four had been implemented but later rescinded.

The issue over cross-training has been a sticking point for years, bogged down in differences between unions for firefighters and paramedics, and in some cases difficulties in hiring people willing to be both firefighters and paramedics.

By now, the audit report says, all new hires should be cross-trained. But in 2013, the fire department under [Ellerbe](#) hired 23 paramedics as single-role providers. Ellerbe argued it was a one-time exception to the department’s policy because a paramedic shortfall of 150 vacancies had reached dangerous levels.

But the Office of the D.C. Auditor said the Ellerbe administration rewrote the Rosenbaum task force recommendations on its public Web site to mask the fact that it was departing from protocol. Those actions “mislead the public,” the auditor concluded.

The issues raised by the Rosenbaum report were revived when in January 2014, Medric “Cecil” Mills Jr. suffered a fatal heart attack down the street from a fire station in Northeast Washington but was [refused help from the firefighters inside](#). His family [sued the District](#) for \$7.7 million in June and said they had waited to see if the fire department would make changes that had been recommended under Rosenbaum and which they felt would also address some of the issues in their case.

Rosenbaum’s brother, Marcus, who lives in Northwest Washington, has noted the similarities between what happened to David Rosenbaum in 2006 and to Mills eight years later. But he has been careful in his comments, saying the culture of the department has changed for the better since his brother’s death.

Marcus Rosenbaum said he has read the audit and has met with the new fire chief, and he is hopeful that Dean, who had led the fire department in Seattle, can make the necessary changes in Washington.

He said members need to understand that medical emergencies make up the bulk of calls. “The thing is that people in the department have a job to do,” Marcus Rosenbaum said. “Their job includes fire suppression and it includes medical services. That’s their job, to do it all. And they have to do it all with enthusiasm. That’s the task for the new chief.”

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