

Public Safety Committee (PSC) meeting Transcript – 4/22/2024

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It's 2:00, in the afternoon on April 22nd, 2024, and I will call to order the public safety committee, of the Austin city council. We are meeting at city hall and the city council chambers at 301 west second street. And we have

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west second street. And we have a quorum of the committee available, they're here with us members. The first item on our agenda is an approval of the minutes of the special call public safety committee meeting of March 25th, 2024. Council member qadri moves approval at his second by council member Kelly. Is there any discussion? Without objection, the item is approved with council member Vila, off the dais. He is on his way. Coming from a capital metro board meeting. I want to verify what I think I know, but I didn't say it out loud. We don't have anyone signed up for public communication. Is that correct? That is correct. Great. Thank you very much. That will take us to our discussion item, which is a briefing and discussion on operational improvements. Since fy 2023 2024 budget process and an update on the staffing structure, developments from our homeland security and emergency management department. And the director of that department is here with us, Mr. Snipes, welcome, sir. And we look forward to your presentation.

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forward to your presentation. >> Good afternoon, mayor Watson, committee, it is a pleasure to be here to present to you all council member Kelly and council member qadri. Good to see you all as well. My

name is director Ken Snipes of homeland security and emergency management, and I am here today to provide you with an update on the improvements at homeland security and emergency management. Next slide please. Our agenda for this afternoon will include a brief overview of our operating environment, challenges and accomplishments as well as future areas of focus for the workgroup. Next slide. Due to a multitude of threats and threat types, Austin's homeland security and emergency management team is shifting to an all hazards approach to managing incidents and events. The change will improve the team's ability to meet demands and our growing and increasingly complex city by leveraging the capabilities of the entire city, enterprise and my short term a short time here in Austin, we've

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short time here in Austin, we've had three ice storms, two of them pretty severe. We've also had an increasing wildfire threat, as well as our other issues that we typically see and have seen in the form of thunderstorms and hailstorms. So we know that we're starting to see these things more often and more frequently. >> For the record, for the record members, the way you said that is in the short time he's been here, we've had all those things. I don't think any of us blame you specifically for it. I just want the record to be clear on that. >> Thank you. Mayor, I appreciate that, next slide please. All right. So, what that means is that there are impacts, that we want to talk about, and we're going to show you how some of our, some of these impacts are, are affecting our region. Each icon on the slide that you see here before you represents a disaster from 2023 that caused \$1 billion or more in damage.

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\$1 billion or more in damage. There were 28 of them in 2023. This easily surpasses 2022 with 20, which was formerly the year with the most, events of this type. The average annual annual temperature across the contiguous United States was 2.4 degrees higher than in the total of the 20th century. That is important to note, because the most expensive disaster of 2023 was the southern and midwestern drought at \$17 billion. And on the map shown by the brown icon, on over the eastern part of Texas, you will see that most of those impacts, were here as well, so, as you have heard, the weather is becoming more volatile and it is becoming more unpredictable. And it's not just in your mind. It is getting hotter. Next slide please. So many of the challenges that we

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many of the challenges that we are seeing have been long standing. They've been identified by staff. They've been identified by the audit findings after action reports as well as our more recent reaccreditation, excuse me, process. Some of the challenges that we have worked to address over the

past ten months include staffing, which is a contributing factor in many of the challenges that have been noted during previous events and presentations. We have made significant progress in those areas. Taking a closer look at a couple of them, I want to start by just talking about addressing the confusion around communications. Communications was a huge issue and huge concern both for our elected officials as well as those in the community. And also from quite a few of our city departments. One of the most significant changes was decoupling the activation of the joint information center and the joint information system from

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joint information system from the activation of the eoc that allows the city to get information out sooner and quicker to the public, as well as to elected officials and across the enterprise as incident. Staffing was also another area that we're going to talk about on one of our subsequent slides. Next slide please. Homeland security and its complexities, involve a number of areas to include many legislative items and legislative concerns, you see just a snippet of those on the screen here that we are legislated by. They include federal, state and local ordinances as homeland security is charged with creating and managing a framework that reduces the vulnerability to threats and threat hazards in our communities. Doing so requires adherence to requirements from all of the agencies that we've mentioned to achieve compliance with these requirements, homeland security

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requirements, homeland security and emergency management belongs to over 50 teams and committees. We also coordinate and exercise up to 75 plans. Managing those plans can be really complicated and confusing, especially when we have storms and other events to deal with another issue that comes up from time to time is the fact that homeland security and emergency management supports over 260 special events for the city of Boston. So think in terms of, south by southwest, UT football games, f1, NASCAR, all those types of events are events that homeland security and emergency management sets up minimally calm plans for or works with other city departments to coordinate on just how we might respond. If there was an incident, we also secure and manage multiple grants, both federal and state, for several departments across the city. Core state disaster recovery from FEMA and also, again, as I mentioned, we

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again, as I mentioned, we coordinate we activate the event operations center, to make sure that we have the ability to quickly respond to events like south by southwest. When that happens, we actually have two eocs activated at that time, one for the special event. And then our regular eoc, which is still

fully functional just in case there's an incident outside of what might be taking place at the special event itself. Next slide please. Another major area of improvement is how staffing is provided in support of incidents. Going forward. We will use, we have decided that all employees are either essential or critical. Departments will provide 1% of their employees to staff emergency shelters. So, for example, that means that a department will provide one person per 100 members of their department, to staff the events. And also another area that was a sticking point for staff was that early notice was not always

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that early notice was not always given to let them know ahead of time so that they can make arrangements within their own homes before responding to the emergency. So we really wanted to focus on that, to make sure we give people advance notice to make preparations at their home so that when they, respond to the incident, it was at least disruptive as possible. Next slide. Recently, we also went through the reaccreditation process, we're currently working through that process. And we were recently we recently received a, conditional, accreditation. The program is a national program. And its standards exceed those of FEMA. It is a grueling process. And through this and to this point, Austin has been granted, as I said, the conditional, process, which means that we have some things to improve on and we're going to continue to work on those. And we have until the end of the year to resolve those

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of the year to resolve those issues. And at that point, we would receive our full accreditation. One of the things I want to point out here that you'll see on the on the slide is that we have 40 plus departmental plans, that we manage to make sure that departments are ready to respond to incidents and issues. And one of the things that come out of the accreditation was that they, in particular, really liked the fact that we had all of our emergency messaging translated into 14 different languages. They noted that as a best practice nationally, and asked our permission to take that forward with them, to share with other cities. Next slide please. Training was another area of focus for us. We really wanted to hone in on making sure that we have regular training so that people get a chance to practice the skills needed to respond appropriately and quickly, we had several tabletop exercises to include south by southwest and our acl, event as well. We had, training for our elected

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had, training for our elected officials and we also had a winter weather tabletop exercise . Next slide. As I said, communications is and will continue to be a huge area of focus for us. The reason that this is important is because, one of the things that we heard from the community, is that they didn't know how in some cases, to prepare, we wanted to make sure that they understood what they needed to do and

to share that information as much as possible. We did that. We are doing that through a number of venues, through pop up events in our communities, you see some of the things that we're putting out right now, the neighborhood preparedness guide is very popular, we share that on a regular basis with the community, and they find it as a valuable, resource. We host ten pop up events a year, one in each council district, and with our public safety and utility partners as well, we have a fair with dozens of partners, an

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with dozens of partners, an annual fair, and then also, we invite our ngos to participate in those as well. Next slide please. One of the things in this space that I want to share with you, you may remember during several of our winter events, we heard people say that they couldn't cook during, periods of time when they had no power. So we wanted to address that in both a fun and somewhat, serious way, I should say, somewhat fun and serious way. And what we did was with our public safety partners, we put together a video. The total video is about 17 minutes long, but we have just an excerpt to share with you here today. >> Rey. We're going to show you several options that will allow you to feed yourself and your family when there's no power. >> This is officially complete. Butts knell and delicious. All right. >> And we're going to place this directly onto the heat source, military style. It's not truelove, but it'll get the job

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truelove, but it'll get the job done. And remember, when the power goes out with a little preparation, you can prepare a nice meal for yourself and your family. >> Bam! Could I ask you a question? >> Yes. Councilmember qadri has a question. >> I'm just so intrigued. How was the food? >> The food was fantastic, and again, all of that food was prepared without power. So we want to make sure that we're not only talking the talk, but we're actually walking the walk in the community to share information on how people can prepare for themselves and be able to take advantage of whatever information we have to offer that will help them provide information and support for their families as well as themselves. And the full version of that video will be available soon. Very fun. Next slide. All right. As I mentioned earlier, ageism has about homeland security and emergency management has about 70 plans that we manage, one of the main

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that we manage, one of the main issues that we had in managing those plans is whenever there is a storm or an event, it consumes so much time, that we would get off track in terms of keeping the plans, up to date. So we've come up with a structure that allows us to break the plan management down into,

the various years that we're going to update those plans. This gives us an opportunity to keep track. It also allows our partner agencies each one of these plans impacts multiple departments, but allows them to see as well, when the impact is going to take place for their respective work groups and so that they can set aside, time in their calendar to support those programs. Next slide. All right. So future areas of focus, these are a couple of the areas that we really want to continue to push, we to standardize the are the after action report process is huge. One of the issues that we have run into is that the different departments across the

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different departments across the city, have different ways of, providing information associated with after action report, and that in itself means that the report takes a lot of time just to compile and synthesize all the information and to gather the materials. So we're working on standardizing that process. We will continue to enhance training and drills. The training that we have done so far has been well received. The training that we did recently at College Station was especially well received, and we want to continue to push that. One of the main drivers for the work that we're doing right now is to increase the level of predictability for what we do and what we provide. We want the community to understand Eid what they can expect when there's an incident from our team, and this is going to continue to be an area of focus for us because we want people to understand that they can expect regular and reliable service from us. Next slide. And that concludes the update, are there any questions.

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update, are there any questions. >> Appreciate that. Any questions members ask member Kelly. >> Yes. Thank you so much for this presentation. I always appreciate the updates, I would like to request that the presentation be added to backup. We did not get this in advance. And so I just want to make sure in full transparency that our constituents and the community as a whole can review it as part of this as well. It should be it should be in the backup this afternoon, that is what I was told just before the meeting began. So thank you for calling that up. And we'll make sure that happens. >> Thank you. And then I say this often, but I was reminded today because I met my FEMA emergency management advanced academy class, and according to FEMA, for every \$1 spent on mitigation, we saved \$6 in future losses. And so I guess my question is, how are you all really moving forward with mitigation in a way that ensures that we are saving as much as possible to mitigate those natural disasters? >> Tirz great question, council

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>> Tirz great question, council member. So what we're doing right now is taking inventory of the types of incidents that we've seen most commonly here, and working to address those. And then we're also spending quite a bit of time understanding what we can expect to see in the future. We're doing work to understand how climate change is going to impact our region, for example, we know that we're starting to see hotter and warmer temperatures, which may drive wildfire conditions or the intensity of those conditions. And so we're working to understand how we work together better, to address those across the enterprise so that we can minimize cost associated with those. But the main thing that we're doing right now is taking an inventory of the issues that we're seeing and understanding what is the most efficient and effective way to address those. >> Thank you. That's wonderful to hear, could you provide us with more details on the staffing model changes and how you're ensuring that those positions are adequately filled? >> I can so one of the things

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>> I can so one of the things that we're doing is we're looking at our leadership structure, the way the team has been structured thus far, is very vertical, and that made it really difficult for the director or the leadership in general to focus on a lot of the areas. And so we're looking at adding a couple of leadership positions and we'll be bringing that to the new city manager to share with him as well, and I think go ahead. My apologies. >> Oh, I just said thank you. >> You're welcome, and then I just have a couple more questions. I'm sorry. This is something of big interest to me, what? How will essential and critical staff be notified in advance of potential incidents to allow time for them to prepare? >> So typically, what we're doing now is we're trying to get that information out early. As early as possible, the plan is to create training sessions for people outside of the incident, what we've done in the past is oftentimes we'll have just in

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oftentimes we'll have just in time training or training just before the event or the onset of the event. We want to get away from that. We'll not get away from it totally. But we want to add to that process by having training throughout the year so that people have a chance to be more comfortable and learn what their roles are when they show up for certain duties, it can sometimes be a bit overwhelming and daunting for people to say, for example, show up at a shelter, to work a shelter for the first time. And not having had training, before, you know, maybe a day or two ahead of time. So we want to make sure that we give people plenty of time to have that training. >> Fantastic. And then how will the effectiveness of improvements be measured and reported back to the committee moving forward, it depends. Some of them are easy to measure. We can measure, for example, the time that it takes to turn an air around. Right. That's pretty pretty quick. Right. We can look at the time that we've taken in the past to do it, after action

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the past to do it, after action report. My apologies, and how long it takes us to do it. Now, some of them may be more difficult to manage, or provide feedback on, for example, in some of our engagements with the community, we're really trying to understand how they want to receive messages. Messages and information so that we're reaching them in a manner that makes sense to them and not in a way that is easy for us to present, and that might be hard to manage. Right. So that will happen just through continuous engagement and feedback from the community. Thank you so much for answering my questions. >> I do want to say that I am over at the Texas division of emergency management and management right now, and I'm working with my cohort and I have nothing but good things to say about the city of Austin and all the good things that have happened in the last several months. And to get to your conditional accreditation and I just want to say, I know that was no small lift and congratulate to you and your team for getting that. And thank

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team for getting that. And thank you so much again for being here today and for being that strong example to the rest of the state in the work that you all do. >> Thank you. Council member. >> Thanks. Councilmember. Councilmember alter, did you have your hand up? >> Yes. Thank you. Mayor. So first of all, Mr. Snipes, I just want to thank you again for putting together the training in College Station at the tech center. That was extremely valuable on, on many levels, learned a lot from it. And I think, certainly the staff who were there, thought it was valuable both for what we learned on the ground as well as the relationships that are needed in a time of crisis. I think that kind of opportunity for that training is valuable, in that regard, particularly when they're cross-departmental connections. So I appreciate you leaning in and making that happen. And I was very pleased that we could do that in February without a storm happening at the same time, I know that, you know, for instance, tomorrow I'm going to be joining you for a case study looking at the Boulder, wildfire

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looking at the Boulder, wildfire and that, your department has, has stepped up its approach to wildfire prevention and planning, you know, we saw last year, for instance, with the amplification that he summoned, Pio were able to do in conjunction with our wildfire division. But though we had a higher risk, hotter season Ann, we actually had fewer human starts than we had, in the prior year. So the messaging is working and it's very important, for the safety of our community. I did want to just ask you about what you see as the biggest challenges from your department's perspective in preparing for a potential wildfire. Situation. >> I think probably the biggest challenge and one that we're working on is the evacuation process. And we're working with fire on that, we want everyone to understand that it's a true enterprise wide approach, right? So it's not just fire or just

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So it's not just fire or just law enforcement or ems. It's going to take an entire department or, excuse me, an entire city to manage something like that in terms of, you know, what is transportation doing, what is public works doing, and how can we all play a role in making sure that in those communities in particular, where we know they may have difficulties leaving due to the road networks there, what can we do to help that process, and so that is probably the biggest issue that I see and that we're working on, one of the reasons that we're bringing the team in from Boulder is to share their experiences, it is a cross-functional look, not just about fire. Obviously. Fire was the catalyst for that event, but as I mentioned earlier in this presentation, Ann, we're taking an all hazards approach, meaning that the same methodologies that we're using to evacuate people for a fire would be used to evacuate people for a flood or for a hazmat spill scenario. So, and making sure that we have

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and making sure that we have time to develop the plan, thoroughly and then socialize those plans to ensure that everyone understands what they're supposed to do, because we have lots of plans. And if they're not socialized, if people don't understand the plans and know what they're supposed to do, then the plans aren't as impactful as they as they would be otherwise. So those are the areas that I think we have, the biggest opportunity to learn and to grow in and, and by and large, I want to say and commend all of our public safety partners who have all stepped in and stepped up to say, hey, what do you need? How can we help, and that has made things much, much easier in the transition here at homeland security and emergency management. >> Thank you, one of the things we did a couple of years ago is fund, a situational awareness tool for evacuation. Is that now up and running? >> Well, yes and no, but we're working to expand that. In fact, we're actually starting the process for that. I think, we have a meeting next week to start, really working on that, and another thing that we're

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and another thing that we're doing for, with the meeting tomorrow is inviting members from across the region to participate so that we start the processes of collaborating, not just with city departments, but with our regional partners as well. And that will be really important in the case of wildfire. >> Thank you. And then, after Yuri and after the water boil, etc, we had funded a large increase to staffing in ageism, and for a long time those positions were unfilled. Where are we in terms of vacancies at the sum right now? >> All of those positions are either filled now or they're in the process of being filled. A couple of things that we've run into a couple times where, as you all know, the to work at ageism, you have an additional level of background clearance. And we've had a couple of instances where, employees cannot

meet the criminal background check for working at ageism. They go all the way through the hiring process.

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through the hiring process. They're the top candidate. And once we hit the background check, they fall out because they can't make it. We've also had a couple of instances where the candidates don't accept the pay that we're offering, and so we have to restart the process, but none of them are sitting idle at this time. They're all either in process or hired recently, and we've actually made quite a bit of progress in that space. So we're happy about that, and, continuing to work towards getting them fully staffed. >> And how many of those are still in process, there are six total in process. I think there were two offers this week. There's three interviews, I believe next week, or in a couple of those are re interviews, and then a couple of them are recently, created through internal promotions. So we're working on those as well. >> Okay. I would love to see those, those filled, since it's now been years since we, authorized those positions would

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authorized those positions would be great for them to be in there and working and helping you at that, one of the things that you and I talked about with several others when we were at teaks was the need for adopting the virtual the voc platform that Austin water has, and just upgrading, some of some of the, the technology that we have, what is where those conversations at right now for, for the voc adoption, where we're evaluating the different options that are available right now, we are still under contract with our current vendor for that same service, so we don't want to speak about that. You know, I guess, too far in advance, but I will say that we're evaluating the options there. >> Okay. >> Thank you. And then finally, from your perspective, what additional resources does he some need to do, the kind of job that you think we need to be

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that you think we need to be done in our community for us to be prepared and safe, I think just the main thing for us right now is continuing to train, continuing to engage the community, to continue to push our message, to make sure, as I said earlier, that everyone understands what they're supposed to do and what they need to do when we ask them to take cover or to evacuate or to go to a shelter to make sure that information is clear and that it's, you know, something that people have been familiarized with so that there's no confusion in that moment of asking them to take action, thank you. And I will just say, definitely seen a lot of progress. And I know that the Pio staff working together with you, and, and other departments have have really improved those communications. And I think people

are listening to them in a way, now that we've gone through several of these disasters, in a way, maybe they weren't before. So I think

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weren't before. So I think that's good progress. Thank you very much. >> Thank you. >> Thank you. Council member. Council member. Kelly, do you have a follow up question? >> I did I had two things, one, I wanted to thank council member Alison alter for raising a couple of points. The first one was about the evacuations for wildfires. My my district six community emergency response team was asked by AFD to learn how to help people evacuate in wildfires. And so I'll have more information about that training coming up the first Wednesday of next month in my newsletter and on my social media. Anybody from the community is invited to join that to help in that effort, my follow up question was about the virtual eoc platform that council member alter was asking about. And director snipes, I just would like to know if that proposed change would cause interoperability problems between capcom and tdm. If we were to go down that route, if that would be something we'd need to be aware of. I don't think so. >> That's one of the topics that we're discussing right now and

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we're discussing right now and evaluating. We have several people that are looking at the various systems that are available right now to determine which ones work best and align with the city structure, as well as those used by the state. >> Okay, great. Thank you so much. That's all I had. >> Thank you. >> Councilmember. Any other questions or discussion? Mr. Snipes, I want to say on behalf of the committee and the whole council, I think I think, everybody was kind of baptized. I want to say by fire, but it was by frost, early on in, early 23. And I think it was clear that that in a lot of ways, this department and the work that needed to be done, we weren't taking care of some of the basics, some of the basic services that our citizens expect. And we needed some stabilization there, and we needed to be organized in a way that would get us success. Now, granted, it's hard to call almost anything successful when you're dealing with, by definition of a disaster or an

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definition of a disaster or an emergency. But I, I think you hear that in the questions that are being asked. And, and the way the council is reacting that we really appreciate the taking care of the basic services and our success. And we, we're supportive of what you're doing and hope you'll, you know, report back to us things that you might need. A lot of the questions that you've been asked here today. But thank you for that report, we're very appreciative. >> Thank you. Mayor. Thank you. >> Thank you, members of the committee, council member vela, was present almost immediately after, Mr. Snipes

started his presentation, he has requested that he be shown voting in favor of item number one, which was the approval of the minutes of the special called public safety committee meeting of March 25th, 2024, I move that he be shown voting in favor and seconded by council member qadri, without objection, councilmember vela will be shown voting in favor of those minutes so that we will

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those minutes so that we will have a unanimous vote on those minutes. Members. There's no other business to come before the public safety committee, so without objection, we will be adjourned at 2:32 P.M. Thanks, everybody.