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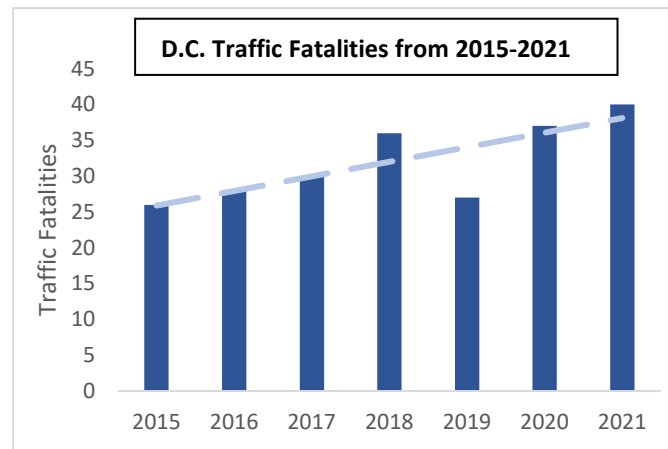
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Vision Zero Goals Hampered by Lack of Full Funding, Data and Outcome Analysis

Report has recommendations for Mayor, D.C. Council and D.C. Department of Transportation

March 16, 2023 (WASHINGTON) D.C.'s Vision Zero Initiative—the multi-agency program announced in 2015 to eliminate traffic fatalities by 2024—lacked the infrastructure, funding, and oversight to ensure that the D.C. Department of Transportation (DDOT) could effectively implement the engineering components of the road safety initiative, according to a new report by the Office of the D.C. Auditor (ODCA).

The audit—requested by some 200 D.C. cyclists, pedestrians, scooter riders, drivers, and taxpayers concerned that traffic fatalities in the District were on the rise—focused on DDOT's engineering strategies, including traffic calming, intersection management, and road surface markings between October 1, 2018, and September 30, 2021. ODCA's review also sought to determine whether DDOT's implementation of traffic safety engineering investments advanced the District's racial equity goals. A second Vision Zero audit is underway to assess the initiative's enforcement strategies of MPD, the Department of Public Works, and DDOT.



One of the audit's significant findings is that while District leaders made a public commitment to Vision Zero, implementation was delayed by a failure to establish the bureaucratic infrastructure within DDOT and a failure to fully fund the Vision Zero Omnibus Amendment Act. The report calls for the Mayor and D.C. Council to fund Vision Zero sufficiently to implement provisions designed to reach zero fatalities.

"The Bowser Administration failed to follow the ambitious announcement in 2015 with appropriate resources in both funding and manpower," said D.C. Auditor Kathy Patterson. "Commitments have improved significantly in the months since our audit scope after a full six years without an updated action plan."

Councilmember Charles Allen, chair of the Council's Committee on Transportation and the Environment and author of the Vision Zero Enhancement Omnibus Act of 2021, said, "The city is trending in the wrong direction. We have solutions sitting on the shelf—either unfunded or unused. I'm committed. But I need to see leadership from or structure within DDOT to reach Vision Zero. That's especially important as billions in federal infrastructure funding comes to the District over the next few years. We need to be guided by high-quality data and best practices. Beyond reckoning with serious crashes and fatalities, we're not taking seriously the pervasive way that speeding and dangerous driving wear on our residents and detract from their quality of life."

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ODCA made 21 recommendations, the majority directed at DDOT, and in its written response DDOT Director Everett Lott said, “We agree with the report recommendations, and we already have processes in place that address each of them.” He said DDOT “has continuously worked to improve our approach to the Vision Zero initiative and remains committed to sustained improvement toward the District’s ambitious goal.”

The administration disagreed with several of the report findings, and ODCA’s final report acknowledged changes based on DDOT comments, including examples where the agency documented having dedicated more staff to the engineering efforts than had been indicated in District budget reports.

“We are pleased with the strong cooperation and collaboration on DDOT’s part throughout this audit,” Patterson said. “It’s clear the agency has made significant strides over the last two years in particular and we are hopeful that our report will help ensure those efforts are sustained.”

Findings include:

Lack of a database. While DDOT conducted safety studies that proactively identified the District’s most dangerous roadways the agency did not incorporate those results into a comprehensive database to target, track, and document traffic safety investments which delayed action to mitigate traffic danger.

Furthermore, in the audit scope DDOT did not build a robust data framework by creating a database that gathered and analyzed all of its traffic safety research and data and did not utilize the database to develop and publish a High Injury Network that geographically identified where locations are most urgent, including factoring in measures of equity.

No monetary targets. The 2015 Vision Zero Action Plan was not clear about the budget implications of each of its strategies. The Plan listed an initial funding amount of \$500,000 for FY 2016, but that amount was not updated for subsequent fiscal years and was not the estimated cost of getting to Vision Zero by 2024 or the estimated annual costs to implement DDOT’s engineering strategies.

DDOT staff indicated that it is difficult to identify the cost of achieving the overall goal of Vision Zero, but without estimating the cost to implement Vision Zero, the audit says, the District cannot measure its impact and gather information key for the budget process to ensure funding is adequate.

Not analyzing outcomes. D.C. did not update its Vision Zero Action Plan until late 2022, missing a key opportunity to assess the performance of its safety investments, integrate equity strategies, and establish funding expectations to achieve its goal of zero traffic fatalities by 2024.

While progress was being made to include equity in the FY 2023 capital project selection, DDOT did not have effective systems in place to provide equity data on completed capital projects, nor were procedures in place to implement the equity goal for medium-size and small traffic safety investigation (TSI) projects.

ODCA reviewed TSIs submitted during the audit scope and found that there was no difference in the number of TSIs accepted and denied based on median household income. DDOT stated that it would like to prioritize TSIs using equity metrics. Without prioritizing safety and equity when conducting TSIs, DDOT cannot ensure it is investing in those TSI requests that need immediate attention and equitable responses, and DDOT cannot track what investments are made by ward or census group.

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Communication with stakeholders. While DDOT closed 98% of Traffic Safety Investigations (TSIs), cleared the backlog, and streamlined the request process, the agency did not consistently communicate its decision and implementation results to residents before closing requests, creating frustration and confusion about DDOT's efforts to address traffic safety at the neighborhood level. Failure to notify residents of the results of the studies left them unaware of whether their TSI requests were accepted, and if not, why they were denied.

Recommendations include:

- DDOT should allocate sufficient resources for continuous before/after evaluations and set targets in its annual performance plan to include how many safety improvements were assessed and whether investments have been worthwhile.
- DDOT should establish agency-wide and division-level Vision Zero policies and procedures that demonstrate how DDOT will achieve its objective and address related risks to the Vision Zero goal.
- The Mayor should hold quarterly Vision Zero CapSTAT or similar accountability meetings to ensure agencies have necessary funding and resources to implement Vision Zero.
- DDOT should allocate sufficient full-time employees (FTEs) to the Traffic Engineering and Safety Division to strengthen program communications, address TSI backlogs and develop policies and procedures detailing how to complete traffic safety studies, document the investigations, and communicate the results of the investigations to residents.

This is the first of two ODCA audits on the implementation of the Vision Zero Initiative; the second will focus on traffic safety enforcement policies and practices.

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