

# Resilient DC

A Strategy to Thrive in  
the Face of Change

PIONEERED BY THE  
ROCKEFELLER FOUNDATION

100



CITIES



GOVERNMENT OF THE  
DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA  
MURIEL BOWSER, MAYOR





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**Muriel Bowser**  
Mayor

Fellow Washingtonians:

Washington, DC is one of the strongest, most diverse, and most vibrant cities in the United States – our city’s growth and our thriving local economy make me the envy of mayors around the globe. For our growth and prosperity to continue, we must make sure that we are prepared for the unexpected and are resilient in the face of change and challenges.

Cities across the country increasingly look to Washington, DC – our city, not the federal government – for leadership. Through Resilient DC, we have the opportunity to work together across disciplines to tackle 21st century challenges and create models for other cities to follow. We must vigorously address all of the challenges that we have identified – and those that may appear in the future – to ensure that DC not only survives but thrives in the face of change.

The Resilient DC strategy is the result of a nearly two-year process that developed a deeper understanding of some of DC’s most important challenges and vulnerabilities. It brings together and aligns the District’s major planning efforts into a coordinated strategy to accelerate action, streamline implementation, and embed equity and resilience.

A robust resilience strategy is not limited to emergency management. It must address all areas where the District faces challenges, including affordable housing, economic and social equity, environmental health, and urban mobility. These areas all play roles in strengthening our city, reducing risks, mitigating harm, and improving our ability to recover when we experience disruptions.

The District’s strategy must also account for the unique challenges we face as our nation’s capital, from potential acts of terrorism to government shutdowns. We recognize the federal government’s outsized presence in our city, but we continue to make tremendous strides to grow and promote DC’s private sector economy.

To develop Resilient DC, we took a hard look at both potential sudden shocks – like severe weather, flooding, and infrastructure failure – and chronic stresses, such as the high cost of housing, that challenge our city on a daily basis. Building a Resilient DC is about addressing both everyday issues – such as poverty and inequality – and also the infrequent, unexpected, and potentially catastrophic events that our city could face. This comprehensive approach ensures that we are not only stronger and better prepared to overcome disruptions, but also to provide benefits to our residents in the absence of disruptions.

We have a responsibility to think ahead and plan for the future. The Resilient DC strategy outlines goals with generational ambition. By examining our challenges and vulnerabilities, we will not only build a more resilient DC, but also create new opportunities for residents and ensure that every Washingtonian – whether their family has been here for five minutes or five generations – gets a fair shot.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Muriel Bowser". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Muriel" and last name "Bowser" clearly legible.

Muriel Bowser, Mayor

**Michael Berkowitz**  
100RC President

On behalf of the entire 100 Resilient Cities team, congratulations to Mayor Bowser and to the District of Columbia on the release of *Resilient DC*, a major milestone for the District and for our partnership. Through this ambitious Resilience Strategy, the District is poised to embark on a set of initiatives that will help all Washingtonians thrive in the face of change – positioning DC as a leader for the nation and for other global cities around the world.

*Resilient DC* stands out in the 100RC Network as a strategy that is both comprehensive in its scope and innovative in its approach. This is a forward-thinking roadmap that addresses longstanding and persistent challenges, such as flooding, crime, and inequality, while simultaneously preparing the District for emerging and future challenges, such as the impacts of technology and growth on DC's economy and neighborhoods.

For example, we see in the Resilient Rivers Focus Area a bold and integrated approach to building resilience at the community level, setting the stage for critical investments that will yield environmental, economic, and social benefits for Washingtonians along one of the District's great treasures, the Anacostia River. In addition, the District is advancing a suite of comprehensive initiatives to preserve and increase the supply of affordable housing for residents, as well as setting forth groundbreaking support to prepare DC's workforce for the impacts of automation, expanding training opportunities while nurturing growth in promising sectors. Finally, this strategy builds upon the District's leadership in climate action, embedding and accelerating mitigation and adaptation efforts across District Agencies, partners, and communities.

This innovative strategy would not be possible without the tireless efforts of Chief Resilience Officer Kevin Bush and his team. Kevin led an inclusive engagement effort across DC's eight wards, District Agencies, and multi-sector partners. His vision and leadership, in combination with trailblazing commitment from Mayor Bowser, leave the District equipped to confront some of its most intractable resilience challenges.

As DC shifts from strategy development to implementation, we are confident that the ambitious initiatives outlined in *Resilient DC* will prepare the District to thrive no matter what shocks and stresses it may face – ensuring a more secure and vibrant future for all Washingtonians, while leading the way in the global urban resilience movement.

Sincerely,

A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a series of loops and a long horizontal stroke.

Michael Berkowitz, President  
100 Resilient Cities



# Executive summary

Population growth, climate change, and digitization combined with inequality and persistent social challenges threaten the success of any city. If we become more resilient then we can strengthen our collective capacity to thrive in the face of change. Building our city's resilience is about addressing everyday disasters, like poverty and inequality, so that we can bounce back quicker from catastrophic events, like floods and infrastructure failure. This approach ensures that we're stronger and better prepared for a disaster. It also provides benefits on an everyday basis. This strategy provides a roadmap for building greater resilience in Washington, DC. It is the result of a nearly two-year process of shared

discovery that resulted in a deeper, cross-sector understanding of some of DC's most important challenges. In total, more than 100 community leaders and subject matter experts contributed, in addition to the 1,100 residents, from all eight wards, who shared their ideas for building resilience.

The Strategy is organized around three main drivers of change: economic and population growth; climate change; and technological transformation. It also includes a chapter focused on individual resilience, acknowledging that we can only become a more resilient city by addressing longstanding challenges related to health and safety.





**Goal 1, Inclusive Growth,** envisions a DC where all residents benefit from our continued economic and population growth, whether they have been here for five minutes or five generations. This section outlines initiatives that will show the world how to leverage growth and counter growing inequality.



**Goal 3, Smarter DC,** envisions a DC that embraces advancements in technology, while minimizing the negative consequences of change. This section outlines initiatives that will make DC a technology-enabled city with strong support and safeguards for its residents.



**Goal 2, Climate Action,** envisions a DC that is prepared for the impacts of climate change and where residents and businesses take bold action to combat its causes. This section outlines initiatives that will uphold the commitments of the Paris climate agreement and lead the country in the response to climate change.



**Goal 4, Safe and Healthy Washingtonians,** envisions a DC where every neighborhood is safe, our residents are strong and healthy, and all Washingtonians can thrive. This section outlines initiatives that build individual resilience for all residents by addressing disparities in health and reducing crime in all neighborhoods.



In addition, the Strategy places special emphasis on the fundamental role of equity and governance, and outlines two signature, place-based resilience building efforts that unite activities described across all four goals.



This is a tactical implementation strategy that seeks to bring together and align other major planning efforts into one coordinated strategy to accelerate action, streamline implementation, and embed equity and resilience.

## Shocks and Stresses

Throughout all four goals in this strategy, we used a framework of shocks and stresses to understand DC's vulnerabilities and to prioritize initiatives.

Shocks are sudden, acute disasters, like storms, floods, heatwaves, or cyberattacks. These also include economic crises, like a government shutdown or relocation of a major employer. Stresses, on the other hand, are the slow-burning disasters that weaken our city every day, and also magnify the impact of shocks. These include the everyday impacts of poverty, trauma, and stressed transportation systems. Most of the initiatives in this strategy build resilience to numerous shocks and stresses. Some of the priority shocks and stresses addressed in Resilient DC include the following:

### Government Shutdown

Washington, DC occupies a unique position as the seat of the federal government, which accounts for roughly a third of DC's workforce and owns a quarter of the land within its borders. The 35-day federal government shutdown in early 2019 negatively impacted workers across the region and illustrated the importance of continuing to diversify the economy. This strategy outlines efforts to grow the innovation economy, make DC a prime location for workers of the future, and further buttress DC from the disruptive actions of the federal government.

### Strained Transportation Systems

The Washington, DC region is one of the most congested in the country. Recently, transportation systems have been strained by population growth, weather events, and aging infrastructure. This stress can sometimes result in a shock (Metro's months-long SafeTrack initiative, for example, caused disruption throughout the region). Improving transportation systems will increase our ability to respond to and recover from major disasters, while addressing everyday issues like traffic safety, economic inequality, and lengthy commutes. Therefore, this strategy outlines initiatives to make getting around DC cheaper, faster, and more convenient and people-centered.

### Shortage of Affordable Housing

The District's population, at roughly 700,000 today, is expected to increase to nearly a million people by 2045. The cost of housing is projected to increase as the gap between housing supply and demand widens, and as housing prices continue to grow at a faster rate than incomes. A lack of housing can exasperate efforts to recover from a disaster if residents have nowhere to go. This strategy focuses extensively on efforts to decrease the housing cost burden and limit displacement. Doing so will increase our resilience to major disasters and help us absorb our population growth while preserving affordability for longtime residents.

### Flooding

Formed along the banks of two tidal rivers, Washington, DC is a delta city. Sea level rise increases our risk of flooding along the Potomac and Anacostia rivers. Heavy rains, made more frequent and intense by climate change, can quickly overwhelm our stormwater infrastructure and cause inland flooding. With more than 66 inches of total annual rainfall, 2018 was a record-breaking year. Addressing this increased risk requires a comprehensive and holistic approach that relies on built and nature-based approaches. This strategy contains initiatives that focus on increasing our understanding of flood risk and building defenses, many of which (like green space) deliver multiple benefits.