



High school students and supporters rally near City Hall, calling for 100 percent police-free schools and improve education resources by defunding the NYPD. | AP Photo

School safety agents will stay under NYPD this year, despite city's claims of \$1B cut

By JOE ANUTA, POLITICO, 07/02/2020

School safety agents will not be moved out of the NYPD in this year's budget, documents released Thursday show, despite assurances by the mayor and Council speaker that they would be as part of an historic cut to the police department budget.

Mayor Bill de Blasio has repeatedly said that he cut the NYPD's budget this year by \$1 billion in response to calls for systemic changes in the way the city conducts policing. More than \$300 million of that sum was supposed to come from moving school safety agents out from under the auspices of the police department, according to a breakdown released by City Hall earlier this week.

But budget documents show the 5,511 school safety agents will remain NYPD employees for the upcoming fiscal year. And the program's budget, still within the police department, will actually increase by 2 percent to \$326 million.

That was not the impression city leaders have given this week in announcing the cuts.

"The NYPD's budget has been reduced by \$1 billion while maintaining patrol strength and safety through a combination of savings and shifting responsibilities to other agencies," the mayor's office said in a release announcing the \$88.2 billion budget deal Tuesday.

A separate press release from Council Speaker Corey Johnson cited a similar figure as part of a substantial haircut to the department's budget, which it initially proposed in response to protests against police brutality that rocked the city last month.

"The reduction includes nearly \$484 million in cuts [and] \$354 million in shifts to other agencies best positioned to carry out the duties that have previously been assigned to the NYPD, such as [the education department]," the statement said.

The program is largely funded by the Department of Education already — and many were already accusing city leaders of using the shift as a budget gimmick to mollify activists. The agency transfers the bulk of the money needed from its own balance sheet to the police department's ledger each year, and will do so again this time around.

A spokesperson for the mayor's office said de Blasio has said repeatedly that the transition would be a multiyear process. And an education spokesperson said that while the agents will remain NYPD employees this year, they will undergo additional training from the education department that will change how they do their jobs.

"This transition will involve a paradigm shift that welcomes [safety agents] with newly defined roles and training into school communities, and continues our de-escalation, implicit bias, and restorative justice work," Nathaniel Styer said in a statement. "The transition will be assessed over the course of the first year to ensure the new system keeps students and staff safe. The full transition will take two years."

Johnson's office said the safety agents were supposed to come out of the NYPD this year, and the Council expects the switch to begin when the budget undergoes mid-year adjustments in November.

"We have a commitment from the de Blasio Administration that school safety would be moved out of the NYPD budget this fiscal year, and we will hold the mayor to his word," Council spokesperson Jennifer Fermino said in a statement. "The administration's response raises serious alarm bells about their commitment to this time frame. This is unacceptable."

The Council plans to hold hearings on legislation that would force City Hall to come up with a timetable for when the move would happen.

The mayor has bristled at suggestions that the \$1 billion cut to the police department he touted was achieved through smoke and mirrors — a view held by U.S. Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez.

"Defunding the police means defunding police. It does not mean budget tricks or funny math," she said in a statement earlier this week. "It does not mean moving police officers from the NYPD budget to the Department of Education budget so that the exact same police remain in schools. That is not a victory."

The mayor responded in kind.

"She's just wrong," de Blasio said during an interview with CNN. "The facts are, we took money from the NYPD, put it into youth programs. We are reducing the size of the NYPD but still in a way that can keep us safe."

Not only do the budget documents show the mayor's \$1 billion claim to be at least \$300 million short, but more than a third of the reduction also hinges on a \$350 million overtime decrease that many have said is an unlikely figure.

"That's a really high target to set for a single year," Ana Champeny, director of city studies for the Citizens Budget Commission, said this week in the podcast, What's the Data Point. "So I think that's another reason why there's some skepticism about, in the end, whether this reduction will really hit the target."

The NYPD accounted for 44 percent of all the budgeted overtime last year, according to the budget commission, and routinely exceeds its allotted amount annually.

"There are no safeguards to ensure that the NYPD will actually adhere to the reductions in overtime they have committed to this fiscal year — like they do every year," Council Member Donovan Richards said before voting against the budget earlier this week.