

**International Association of Fire Chiefs  
International Association of Fire Fighters  
Congressional Fire Services Institute**

December 22, 2008

The Honorable Barack Obama  
President-Elect  
Presidential Transition Team  
Washington, D.C.

Dear Mr. President-Elect:

Over the past month, there has been some discussion in the press about removing the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS). America's fire service believes that emergency preparedness and response to all hazards is integral to our nation's homeland security, and we urge you to keep FEMA in its current role as an autonomous component within DHS.

After the bungled federal response to Hurricane Katrina, the national fire and emergency service organizations worked with Congress to restructure and strengthen FEMA and improve its emergency response capabilities. The result was the Post-Katrina Emergency Reform Act (P.L. 109-295). This law established requirements that the FEMA Administrator has a "demonstrated ability in and knowledge of emergency management and homeland security" and at least five years of executive leadership or management experience in the private or public sector. The law also designated the FEMA Administrator as the principal advisor to the President on emergency response matters, and the Administrator can be given Cabinet-status by the President in the event of natural or man-made disasters, or acts of terrorism. Additionally, this law protected FEMA's budget from arbitrary reprogramming and the agency from arbitrary reorganization by DHS. To strengthen FEMA, the law rolled most of DHS' preparedness activities into FEMA, including management of all of the major grant programs, including the Homeland Security Grant Program (HSGP); the Urban Areas' Security Initiative (UASI) grants; the Assistance to Firefighters Grant (AFG) program; and other related programs. Both these legislative changes and the experienced leadership of Chief R. David Paulison and his staff have created a strong, autonomous FEMA within DHS.

The success of the new, strengthened FEMA is clear. By being more proactive in meeting the needs of state and local officials, FEMA successfully responded to flooding in the Midwest and hurricanes along the Gulf Coast in 2008. In describing FEMA's response to the Midwest flooding, the chairman of the House Homeland Security Committee, Representative Bennie Thompson (D-MS), stated that "FEMA's success demonstrated a continuing integration within DHS to implement the mandates of the Post-Katrina Emergency Reform Act (P.L. 109-295). Simply put, this FEMA is better

prepared, as a critical component of the Department of Homeland Security, to prepare for and respond to acts of terror, natural disasters, and other man-made emergencies.”

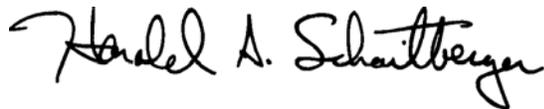
We are concerned that any attempt to remove FEMA from DHS would actually endanger America’s emergency response capabilities. By separating FEMA from DHS, the new Administration would create a bureaucratic barrier between FEMA and the other DHS preparedness and response components, such as the Office of Intelligence and Analysis, the Office of Health Affairs, the Office of Infrastructure Protection, and the U.S. Coast Guard. In addition, if FEMA were removed from DHS, it would separate the agency’s work with local first responders from the department’s communications interoperability programs at the Offices of Emergency Communications and Interoperability and Compatibility. We also are concerned that the months of Congressional deliberation required to enact this change would create bureaucratic instability within DHS and FEMA, which would prevent FEMA’s ability to perform its core preparedness and response mission.

The federal response to Hurricane Katrina demonstrated the problems that can occur when a federal agency is trapped in a period of continued transition. In 2006, Congress wisely acted to strengthen FEMA’s autonomy; adequately fund its programs; and ensure experienced leadership for the agency. As a result of this legislation and Congressional appropriations, the new FEMA is better managed, staffed, and prepared to respond proactively to all hazards. Considering FEMA’s recent accomplishments, we urge you to keep the agency within DHS, and make whatever managerial decisions are necessary to ensure that FEMA is adequately staffed and funded to meet its statutory preparedness and response mission. If FEMA were removed from DHS, we have serious concerns that the agency’s core missions would be critically compromised, which would have a deleterious effect on the safety of the American public.

Sincerely,



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President  
International Association of Fire Chiefs



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