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STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD

ON BEHALF OF
THE STATE OF ALASKA

BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY AND
GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE OF EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT,
INTERGOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS. AND THE DISTRICT OF
COLUMBIA
U.S. SENATE

April 4, 2014

**“The Role of First Responders in Catastrophic Disaster
Planning”**

Introduction

Chairman Begich, Ranking Member Paul and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for this opportunity to address a topic of continuing and critical value for my state of Alaska. This nation has a proud history and heritage of our citizens organizing for swift response to the hazards we face. In 1733 Benjamin Franklin described the Philadelphia volunteer firefighters. "Soon after it [a fire] is seen and cry'd out, the Place is crowded by active Men of different Ages, Professions and Titles who, as of one Mind and Rank, apply themselves with all Vigilance and Resolution according to their Abilities, to the hard Work of conquering the increasing fire."

But through the years we have learned hard lessons. If all we do is wait to respond, our people suffer and our property is laid waste. It is a distressing truth for pilots that the Federal Aviation Regulations are written in blood. Sadly we have too often waited for a disaster to spur us to develop better plans, procedures, and processes.

But this approach is fading away and new approaches are emerging to better prepare for the inevitable and the unpredictable events that nature, technology, and humans can throw at us.

Changing Roles of First Responders

The traditional perceptions of first responders begin with the police officer, the firefighter, and the emergency medical provider. In our increasingly complex society and economy, other professions now join that distinguished group. Electrical linemen, transportation providers, logisticians, volunteers, communications providers, those working in convention centers or other public buildings are now part of the broader definition of first responder. Also, it is often true that the first person on scene is a neighbor or passerby.

Support Systems for First Responders

The effectiveness of the first responder begins with the commitment and skills of the individual. But we cannot meet the extreme needs of the public just by the acts of heroic individuals acting on their own. Neither will random acts of response serve the greater needs of a catastrophic disaster.

For years, we have studied the disasters within our nation and in others. We found many similarities in the actions of the opening hours and days to bring together people with the skills and authorities to solve problems and to take coordinated action.

Here in Alaska, we formed several task forces in peacetime that we anticipate needing and using in the disaster: housing and sheltering, medical care and health needs, energy, transportation, disaster search and rescue, public safety. Rather than waiting to form these groups in the chaos and confusion of the early hours and days, these standing task forces study the likely consequences and work to solve the likely problems. They also work to understand and address the interdependencies between these mission areas. In the disaster, they then can focus on any issues that could not have been anticipated.

Investing in These Systems

Our federal partners in the Department of Homeland Security and the Federal Emergency Management Agency have made good progress in improving how we define risk and how we invest

in reducing that risk. Several states, including Alaska, are working to add more relevance to measuring risk and better integration of our investments to draw those risks. We seek to make investments that address the complexity of the disaster rather than the components. We believe that an investment in law enforcement should complement other investments in citizen preparedness. Investments in medical preparedness should align with those in search and rescue.

First responders do not stand alone and neither should our efforts to support them.

Alaska Shield

To commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the Good Friday earthquake of 1964, the State of Alaska recently completed the Alaska Shield exercise. In this very complex exercise we recreated the geology of the 1964 earthquake but in today's built environment and our reliance on technology. We tested our plans, our partnerships, and our assumptions. It will be many weeks before we will complete our analysis but I believe we validated our new concepts on problem solving, on decision making, and measuring the effectiveness of our actions

Defense Support of Civil Authorities (DSCA)

In the Alaska Shield exercise, we rigorously tested the concept of the dual status commander where a general officer of the Alaska National Guard is empowered by both the governor and the president to command Guard and active duty troops.

In our exercise, our uniformed troops worked alongside civilians from local, state, and federal agencies, as well as private sector and non-governmental organizations. They performed missions of great import and complexity with great success. These missions far exceeded the capabilities of any single entity and demanded the unity of effort and command that only the coordination through the dual status command could achieve.

When facing the complexities of a catastrophe, we need not make matters worse by rigidly adhering to organizational structures designed for purposes other than swift, coordinated action within our borders to alleviate the suffering of our own people. The Alaska Shield demonstrated the means and methods to advance the dual status commander concept to a highly effective enterprise to augment the civilian first responders.

Conclusion

The role and responsibility of the first responder is vital to the safety of our community and the wellbeing of our citizens. I have related how the definition has expanded to include others who provide the essential services we depend upon.

There is a story of a janitor at Cape Canaveral during the Apollo. When asked about his job he replied that he worked to put a man on the moon and his contribution was keeping clean the buildings and offices of the engineers.

We strive towards the time when every Alaskan and every American will answer that their role in an emergency is, "I am a first responder." And they contribute through training in CPR, building an emergency kit, commitment to help neighbors when they cannot help themselves, their ability to

care for the family so the husband, the wife, the son or daughter can perform the vital duty of the firefighter, the lineman, the nurse or the volunteer.

In January 2012, the states, through their partnership of the National Emergency Management Association, proposed a new approach to prepare for the needs of the nation during any disaster. We are very pleased that the administration has embraced many of the precepts of that proposal. The states put forward a fundamental value that bears on the purpose of this hearing. We stated that we as a nation must: “Build and sustain a skilled cadre across the nation that is well organized, rigorously trained, vigorously exercised, properly equipped, prepared for all hazards, focused on core capabilities, and resourced for both the most serious and most likely threats and hazards.”

In this complex world we face extreme risks from endless and evolving hazards. The first responder – in the biggest of cities, the most remote of our wilderness, and all the variations in between – must be ready to respond with the needed swiftness and effectiveness to make the difference in life and death. We, the leaders of our nation, our states, and our local governments, must work together to ensure our efforts to prepare and our actions to alleviate suffering are second to none.