



INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF FIRE FIGHTERS®

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**TESTIMONY BEFORE THE
SENATE GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE**

ON

**INVESTING IN HOMELAND SECURITY
CHALLENGES ON THE FRONTLINE**

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BY

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**ON BEHALF OF THE
INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF FIRE FIGHTERS**



INTRODUCTION

Chairman Collins, good morning. My name is Chauncey Bowers and I am a certified fire fighter and EMT-Paramedic with the rank of Captain in the Prince George's County Fire Department. I am here representing the nation's 260,000 professional frontline fire fighters and emergency medical services (EMS) personnel who are members of the International Association of Fire Fighters (IAFF).

Especially to those of us in the fire service, September 11th changed the world. On that day, every fire fighter lost 343 of our brothers. As an organization, the IAFF vowed never to let such a tragedy happen again and to ensure that fire fighters have the resources that we need to protect our communities and our nation.

It is for this reason that I testify before you on the needs of the frontline first responder.

NEEDS OF THE FRONTLINE FIRST RESPONDER

In the current environment, fire departments are facing the dual pressures of homeland security demands and reduced resources caused by local budget deficits and the economic downturn. At a time when even historic levels of funding would have been inadequate to meet the new homeland security demands, we are being asked to do more with far less. This is a recipe for disaster, unnecessarily endangering the safety of my fellow fire fighters and the communities we are sworn to protect.

To address these concerns we need a national commitment to homeland security preparedness. We must work to ensure that every fire department in America has the resources to adequately protect our citizens. While much of this work toward preparedness needs to focus on the unique challenges posed by weapons of mass destruction (WMD), we cannot overlook the imperative to prepare for all hazards. The most horrific terrorist attacks our nation has ever known—including the tragedies of September 11th and the bombing of the Murrah Building in Oklahoma City—were carried out without sophisticated nuclear, chemical or biological weapons. Our fire departments must be prepared to respond however, whenever, and wherever American lives are in danger.

We need more fire fighters, who are trained and competent in basic firefighting and emergency medical services. We need basic firefighting and protective equipment, as well as advanced terrorism specific WMD detection, protection, and mitigation equipment. We need to provide more training in hazardous materials response and EMS, in addition to training in WMD response and mitigation. And, to ensure that we will respond as efficiently and effectively as possible during a terrorist attack, we need regular exercises that test all facets of a response in a realistic manner. Lastly, when available, fire departments need to have access to as much information as possible on the type of threat so that an informed decision can be made as to the nature of our response and pre-deployment.

Personnel

The first and foremost need of the fire service is adequate personnel. The mission to protect Americans against terrorist acts poses a number of unprecedented challenges for the fire service. We now have to rethink how personnel are deployed. Rather than viewing incidents as isolated events, we must be cognizant that each incident could be one part of a coordinated attack. Each time the alarm rings, we must be prepared for the possibility that it is an act of war.

In the vast majority of our communities, fire departments regularly and consistently respond with 2 or 3 fire fighters per apparatus. National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) studies of fire fighter fatalities have consistently identified inadequate staffing as a key factor in line-of-duty deaths. Since 1997, NIOSH has investigated every fire fighter line-of-duty death as part of its Fire Fighter Fatality Investigation and Prevention Program. Far too many of these investigations have found that an inadequate number of personnel contributed to the loss of fire fighters. NIOSH has been especially critical of the failure of fire departments to assure that there are adequate numbers of people stationed outside a dangerous environment during an interior fire suppression attack.

The recently issued FEMA study, *“A Needs Assessment of the U.S. Fire Service,”* revealed that the vast majority of fire departments cannot respond in a timely manner, and when fire fighters do reach the scene of an emergency, there are not enough personnel to do the job safely and effectively. The report found that up to 75% of our nation’s fire departments have too few fire stations to meet response time guidelines. Further, it is common for fire departments that protect communities with a population of less than a million to respond to emergencies with less than 4 fire fighters per apparatus.

The federal government and the fire service industry have formally recognized this level of staffing as inadequate for safe fireground operation. Both OSHA and the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) have promulgated standards designed to achieve safe staffing levels.

OSHA’s 2-in/2-out regulation requires that whenever fire fighters enter a burning structure or other dangerous environment, they must do so in teams of at least two that operate in direct visual or voice contact. Additionally, there must be at least two other fully-equipped and trained fire fighters who remain outside the structure, monitoring those inside, and who are prepared to rescue them, if the need arises.

Unfortunately, most fire departments do not currently have adequate staffing to comply with these safety regulations. The result is that all too often fire fighters are sent into dangerous environments without sufficient personnel standing by to rescue them if they become disoriented, trapped, or injured.

In the face of the mounting evidence of a severe nationwide shortage of fire fighters, NFPA—the consensus, standard making body of the fire service—issued its first standard

on minimum staffing for fire departments in the summer of 2001. NFPA Standard 1710, governing deployment and operations for fire and rescue departments, was the result of years of thoroughly investigating staffing related line-of-duty injuries and deaths, and gathering and analyzing data. Ten years in the making, the standard represents the consensus of the entire fire service industry.

NFPA 1710 established minimum safe staffing levels for the full range of emergencies fire fighters encounter from basic firefighting operations to responding to tactical hazards. If fully implemented, this standard would result in more effective and efficient fire and EMS departments across the United States—and in our business that means lives saved.

Even after September 11th, localities have failed to provide the resources necessary to adequately staff fire departments. Not a week goes by that the IAFF does not receive urgent pleas for help from our locals that are facing fire fighter reductions and station closings. Examples of short staffing are common in every part of the country.

- In Maine, not a single fire department is NFPA 1710-compliant. Portland and Old Orchard Beach are among the communities considering laying off fire fighters.
- In Springfield, Massachusetts, 54 fire fighters have been laid off.
- In Texas, the cities of Dallas and Fort Worth have proposed shutting down companies. And Fort Worth is planning to reduce the number of fire fighters per apparatus from four to three.
- Seattle, Washington has proposed eliminating 31 fire fighters.
- In the Midwest, Dayton, Ohio has closed four engine companies, has refused to fill approximately 50 fire fighter vacancies that occurred through attrition, and plans to reduce the number of fire fighters per apparatus from four to three.
- Statesville, North Carolina has reduced the number of fire fighters per shift while experiencing growth in both population and the size of the jurisdiction. In 1978, Statesville had 19 fire fighters per shift protecting an area of 11.5 square miles. In 2002, Statesville has reduced the number of fire fighters per shift to 13 while the population has increased by 30% and Statesville's size has doubled to 22.6 square miles.
- In Worcester, Massachusetts, the city is honoring the memory of the six fire fighters who died in that horrific warehouse fire three years ago, by entertaining a proposal that would demolish a fire station and potentially lay off a number of fire fighters.

These examples just cited are merely the tip of the iceberg. Below the surface, there is a massive personnel crisis that is the weak link in our homeland defense. Congress would never allow our Army to engage in a war with 2/3 of its divisions understaffed. Incredibly, this is exactly what we are asking our local fire departments to do in this current war on our home soil.

While this staffing crisis must ultimately be addressed at the local level, there is much the federal government can do. And I must take a moment to commend both Chairman Collins and Ranking Member Lieberman for helping to point the way. Your leadership

in working to create a federal grant program in the Department of Homeland Security legislation to provide funds to hire local fire fighters is deeply appreciated by every fire fighter in this nation. On their behalf, I thank you.

This staffing proposal has been introduced in the 108th Congress as S. 544, the Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) Act. Modeled after the highly successful Universal Hiring Program used to implement the COPS program, the SAFER Act provides grants to local fire departments to fund the hiring of 75,000 additional fire fighters over a seven-year period. SAFER would create a four year program under which fire departments would apply for federal grants that would contribute to the costs associated with hiring new fire fighters, not to exceed \$100,000 over four years for each fire fighter hired. Local jurisdictions would then be required to retain the fire fighter position(s) for at least one additional year.

Staffing is currently the missing piece of federal support. In recent years, the federal government has established a number of significant programs that fund fire fighter training and equipment purchases. None of these programs, however, currently provide any federal assistance for the most significant need of the fire service. All the money the federal government plans to spend on training and equipment will do little good unless we have adequate fire fighting personnel to take advantage of it. The SAFER Act creates a comprehensive and more effective federal support network.

Equipment

The second need of the fire service is equipment. Recently, the IAFF, which represents more than 90% of all the professional fire departments in the nation, conducted a survey of our State Associations. Twenty-two states participated in the survey, representing 1364 fire departments.

Among the survey findings were:

- 43% of fire departments are in need of additional personal protective clothing (i.e., coats, gloves, helmets, and boots).
- 50% of fire departments are in need of additional respirators (SCBAs).
- 70% of fire departments do not have adequate maintenance programs for their protective gear.
- 66% of fire departments are in need of better communications equipment.

The FEMA study, "*A Needs Assessment of the U.S. Fire Service*," had similar findings. Among the key findings of the report were:

- Approximately 57,000 fire fighters lack personal protective clothing.
- Approximately 1/3 of the fire fighters per shift are not equipped with respirators and nearly all the SCBA units are at least 10 years old.
- Nearly half of the fire fighters per shift are not equipped with personal alert systems (PASS) devices.
- Overall, fire departments do not have enough portable radios to equip more than half of the fire fighters on shift and the majority of portable radios are not water-

- resistant.
- Approximately 75% of fire departments cannot communicate with other response agency partners whether the agencies are at the federal, state, or local level.

And beyond the need for basic equipment, there is a tremendous need for advanced hazmat equipment, in particular hazmat detecting equipment. As the nation's fire departments have become increasingly involved in WMD emergency response, the IAFF has grown concerned that the greatest threat to our safety comes not from sophisticated nuclear devices launched by foreign nations, but from so-called "dirty bombs" that utilize a conventional explosion to release radioactive material. With minimal technical expertise, anyone with access to agricultural fertilizer and low level radioactive medical waste could unleash an atomic nightmare on our soil.

In the event of such a dirty bomb detonation, calls to 9-1-1 will only report an explosion and fire. Fire fighters responding to the scene will be completely unaware of the radiological contamination dispersed miles beyond ground zero. For years we have been told that it is the job of the military, with their specialized training and sophisticated monitoring devices, to respond to such incidents. But the reality is that these military teams, as capable as they are, could be hours away. Meanwhile, the fire fighters are on the scene within minutes. It is vital that all first responders have the monitoring devices and training to use them. When fire fighters are made aware of the radiological dangers, we can take the appropriate precautions to limit our exposure so that we can begin to conduct rescue and decontamination missions.

Interoperable communications equipment is another area of great need. Far too often, emergency response operations are hindered because various responding agencies have little means to communicate and coordinate their efforts. Rather than resulting in enhanced public safety, the convergence of numerous emergency response agencies often results in chaos.

After the 1993 attack on the World Trade Center, evaluations conducted by emergency planning organizations identified lack of communication between police helicopters and the incident commander as a significant impediment to effective response. Tragically, this exact same lack of communication hindered our response on September 11th.

To address these concerns, the IAFF endorses full funding of both the FIRE Act and the First Responder program. The FIRE Act provides grants directly to local fire departments for basic needs, including personal protective gear and equipment. The First Responder program—which builds on the successful work of the Office of Domestic Preparedness—provides grants to states and localities for the purchase of specialized terrorism equipment.

Training

Lack of training continues to plague too many fire departments. Throughout the nation, there are fire fighters who essentially receive on-the-job training.

Fire fighters need training in fire suppression, EMS, rescue, hazmat and WMD response.

While not every fire fighter needs to be fully trained in every discipline, every fire fighter needs exposure to each type of training, and every fire department needs specialists in each field. We are a long way off from that simple goal.

The recent FEMA study, “*A Needs Assessment of the U.S. Fire Service,*” found:

- An estimated 27% of fire department personnel who are involved in delivering emergency medical services (EMS) lack any formal training in those duties.
- Approximately 73% of fire departments fail to meet EPA and OSHA regulations for hazardous materials response training for fire fighters.
- An estimated 40% of fire department personnel involved in hazmat response, most of them serving in smaller communities, have not received hazmat training.

One of the obstacles to training that has arisen over the past year is that many jurisdictions lack the funds to backfill positions of those fire fighters who are assigned to training. Even in places where funds are available to hire training instructors, purchase training equipment, or send fire fighters to remote training facilities, many fire departments do not take advantage of these opportunities because they can not afford the overtime pay for the fire fighter who is filling in for their colleague who is being trained.

To address the need for training, we urge Congress to fully fund both the FIRE Act and the programs run by the Office of Domestic Preparedness. The FIRE Act can be used for most basic training, including EMS. And the ODP program provides some of the world’s best WMD response training.

The IAFF is a proud partner in the ODP program, and we provide a unique WMD training program that uses a cadre of certified fire service instructors who are also front line fire fighters with hazardous material expertise. Rather than having students come to a central location, we provide this training on-site, and tailor the course to address the unique threats in each local community.

In addition to providing additional resources for these exceptional programs, we urge Congress to ensure that communities are able to utilize funding to backfill the positions of fire fighters who are pulled off the line to attend training.

EMS NEEDS

Fire departments provide as much as 95% of emergency medical services in the United States, and we are the largest provider of pre-hospital emergency care. Based on years of experience, the IAFF has come to the conclusion that fire-based EMS, featuring EMS-trained, multi-role fire fighters, is the most effective and efficient delivery system for emergency medical services. Many departments have heeded this call, as evidenced by the rapidly expanding role fire departments play in pre-hospital medical care. When you talk about the fire service, you are also talking about emergency medical services.

As a fire fighter and paramedic, I can tell you first hand that virtually all the needs of the

fire department I spoke of earlier apply with no less urgency to the EMS arena. Fire-based EMS providers need additional personnel, equipment, and training. As stated previously, FEMA reports that an estimated 27% of fire department personnel who are involved in delivering EMS lack formal training in those duties. This is a troubling statistic and it needs to be remedied quickly.

And just like the rest of the fire service, terrorism poses new challenges for EMS. Fire-based EMS providers need training in detecting telltale signs of biological and chemical exposure and identifying the symptoms of specific pathogens or agents while protecting themselves from these hazards.

COOPERATIVE PROGRAMS: THE F.I.R.E. ACT AND FIRST RESPONDER

As noted above, the IAFF does not see a conflict between the existing programs, including the FIRE Act and the First Responder program. The FIRE Act and First Responder serve different purposes and both have an important role in assisting fire fighters to meet the demands of public safety and homeland security. The FIRE Act funds the basic needs of fire departments, including basic personal protective gear, firefighting equipment, training, and apparatus. The First Responder program is for terrorism response, which is a specialized and advanced mission of the fire service. Thus, it is imperative that both the FIRE Act and the First Responder program are fully funded and remain separate and distinct programs.

As Congress evaluates these programs, the IAFF offers the following recommendations:

The FIRE Act

In the first two years of existence, the FIRE Act has awarded over 7,000 grants totaling \$460 million for basic firefighting equipment and training. For this fiscal year, FEMA is currently accepting applications to award \$750 million. While the fire service appreciates the assistance provided by the federal government thus far, the need still remains great. In the first two years of the FIRE Act, the grant requests totaled approximately \$5 billion.

FEMA has done an extraordinary job of administering the program, and under its leadership the FIRE Act has become a model of efficiency. We are aware that many of our colleagues in the fire service feel very strongly that FEMA must retain operational control of the FIRE Act, and they oppose the Administration's proposal to move the program to ODP. We share many of their concerns, and concur that leaving the program at FEMA may be the best course.

However, if the decision is made to move the program to ODP, we would strongly urge Congress to require ODP to continue operating the program in the same manner as FEMA. There are three key elements to the program that should guide whichever agency administers it.

First, the FIRE Act was never intended as a terrorism-specific program. It enhances homeland security by addressing basic fire department needs. Second, the program provides grants directly to local fire departments to fulfill specific requests. Finally, the decision about which grants to award is made through a peer-review process utilizing fire fighters. Whether the FIRE Act is to be administered by FEMA or ODP, these three basic principles must be retained if the FIRE Act is to continue as a successful program.

First Responder

We also urge adequate funding for the First Responder program. There is tremendous need for a program to provide terrorism-specific training and equipment to local emergency response agencies. Specifically, we fully endorse the program's emphasis on mutual aid response, and inter-jurisdictional, inter-discipline training and exercises.

While we find much to laud in the First Responder program, we also have some concerns about the initiative. Filtering funds through the states and allowing broad state discretion has slowed getting funding to local fire fighters. Far too many states simply have no mechanism to spend this funding quickly.

We urge that the funding either be provided in grants directly to local communities or that the funding contains specific pass-thru language, requiring that at least 90% of the money be sent to the local level within 30 days.

We are also concerned that the definition of first responders is overly broad. Under the Administration's guidelines, veterinarians and utility workers would qualify as first responders. While we concur that there are many groups that must be factored into a community's emergency response plan, we believe that funding to train and equip first responders must be targeted at the recognized first responder community: police, fire and EMS.

Finally, the First Responder program must be a supplement to, not a replacement for, the successful program operated by the Office of Domestic Preparedness. ODP has been working on first responder terrorism preparedness longer than any other federal agency, and has unmatched real world experience. The federal government should tap this expertise, and allow ODP to continue to operate the successful aspects of its current programs.

CONCLUSION

For too long, the fire service has been neglected when it comes to allocating resources to protect our Homeland. Yet, we are the ones who too often make the ultimate sacrifice in defense of our nation. Only recently has the federal government begun to recognize that fire fighters are the lynchpin to an effective and strong homeland security. The fire fighters of the IAFF will be ready when the next alarm rings or when terrorists strike again. But our ranks are thin and reinforcements are needed quickly.

Congress must provide adequate resources to ensure that fire departments have the sufficient staffing, right equipment, and proper training to do the job. Our organization will never forget the sacrifice of 343 members on September 11th. Hopefully their sacrifice and heroism will be the catalyst for the federal government to embrace its responsibility and provide the resources to allow our members to do their job safely and effectively.

Thank you for this time to present the view of the IAFF. I will be available for questions by the committee.