

Opening Statement
Ernest Mitchell, Jr., Nominee
Fire Administrator, United States Fire Administration
United States Senate
Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs

Good morning, Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Collins, and Members of the Committee. It is indeed an honor to sit before you today, as the President's nominee to serve as the next U.S. Fire Administrator; and as a leader at the Federal level in response to challenges facing the nation's fire services.

As I reflected on how I got here today, I recalled that my passion to become a firefighter developed when I was working for the Los Angeles County Engineers mapping large wildland fires from Fire Department helicopters in the early 1970's. My desire to follow that calling has led me to serve in many capacities, but this opportunity is the fire chief's career topper – the chance to serve my country and the fire service at the highest level.

During my thirty-three year fire service career, I served at the local, state and national level of fire service organizations. I have had the honor of leading and serving as Fire Chief of the City of Monrovia and City of Pasadena Fire Departments, both in California. At the regional level, I served as President of the Foothill Fire Chiefs in Los Angeles County and the Los Angeles Area Fire Chiefs Association. At the state level I served as President of the League of California Cities Fire Chiefs Department; and nationally I have served as the President of the International Association of Fire Chiefs. Since retiring, I have remained active by serving on boards of directors and advisory committees with various national organizations, such as: the Department of Homeland Security Science and Technology Advisory Committee, the International Association of Firefighters Hazardous Materials Advisory Committee and the International Fire Service Training Association Executive Board.

These experiences have provided me with a diverse breadth of knowledge and experience with local and national emergency service related issues while also allowing me to develop and maintain excellent working relationships with fire service organizations across the country and the individuals that serve within them.

In addition to my fire service background, I have administered citywide emergency management programs in both Monrovia and Pasadena. I have also served on the boards of directors of several not for profit community organizations. These experiences have expanded and strengthened my ability to work as a leader and as a community partner. I have worked effectively within local non-profit organizations to enhance the overall quality of life in the communities in which I have served. I have been an active and visible member of numerous task forces, boards and

committees. I value the opportunity to participate in and make positive contributions to civic and professional groups.

If confirmed as U.S. Fire Administrator, I will have the opportunity to expand upon my body of work and enjoy the added honor of working to enhance our nation's fire service for the American people. I believe my background and experience are ideally suited for the position. And, I believe I will bring a skill set to the USFA that will add value to the organization and allow me to work effectively in advancing the achievement of its mission, goals and objectives.

Since its beginning, the USFA has played a significant role in ensuring public safety through better fire prevention and control; fire safety research and education; and by elevating and enhancing America's fire service response capabilities. Recent catastrophic events have led to a more dynamic USFA with a revised role and responsibility. The USFA and the fire service community are essential to preparing for and responding to all hazards and have a prominent place within FEMA and DHS.

The principal mission of the USFA is to provide support to America's fire departments and fire service organizations to prevent fires, to eliminate or minimize the loss of civilian and firefighter lives when fires occur, to eliminate or minimize injuries to civilians and firefighters related to fires, and to bolster fire service preparedness for and response to disasters of all kinds. The mission of the USFA also includes providing for the professional development of America's fire service, particularly its leaders. These are huge and important endeavors that I believe are best achieved through meaningful collaboration. If confirmed as U.S. Fire Administrator, I will work to engage all agencies and organizations that may assist in achieving the USFA mission. That may include other federal stakeholders, local, tribal, regional and state governments; fire service organizations and other organizations whose missions are complementary to the USFA or whose interests are germane to a particular activity or consideration. If confirmed, I will work to improve all programs and services that enhance the fire service role of preparing for, responding to, and mitigating incidents which have the potential of causing harm to life, property and the environment of the United States of America.

Efforts to reduce property loss and loss of lives continue to improve, but further work is needed. This may be achieved by focusing on reducing civilian deaths in highly impacted groups within the United States population and by maintaining the recent emphasis upon mitigating line of duty deaths and injuries to firefighters. If confirmed, exploring methods of increasing the impact of fire prevention and public safety education within the civilian population suffering the highest losses will be a high priority. Another priority would be reemphasizing the need to evaluate, target and reduce line of duty deaths and injuries through the programs currently in place, while also seeking ways to improve upon those initiatives.

One of the primary responsibilities of the USFA is to serve as the nation's leader in fire prevention initiatives. The USFA must continue in its tireless efforts toward

public awareness and education. Given the dynamics of change in these times, we cannot become satisfied with our efforts to reduce the loss of life and property. Efforts should focus on where the losses are greatest and where trends indicate the losses may develop and grow. The aging baby boomer generation's changing lifestyle, physical realities and medical needs will likely have a significant impact upon the delivery of fire and emergency services. Fire safety education in multifamily and senior citizen complexes must be reevaluated, especially in low to moderate income minority communities, where loss levels remain highest, to continue to minimize fire fatalities. The USFA should use data from the National Fire Data Center, and any other reliable sources, to identify and target populations that meet the criteria for being the highest fire death and injury risks. Based upon that data, partnerships with local fire agencies and other organizations with complementary interests should be sought to initiate and provide aggressive fire prevention, safety and awareness education programs where needed.

In addition to the USFA's reputation for excellent fire service management and leadership training, its most highly valued and notable strength is the agency's strong ties with and support from local fire departments, fire service associations, and state fire service training institutions. It has a rich history of collaboration with all fire service stakeholders in the planning and decision making process which directly impacts fire service programs and operations across the nation. These strengths have positioned the USFA to maximize its resources in delivering products that meet the needs of its stakeholders. If confirmed as Fire Administrator, I will use my past experiences to continue to build upon these strengths to enhance the future of the USFA and the American fire service.

I thank the Committee for considering my nomination as U.S. Fire Administrator. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for the opportunity to appear before you today. I am happy to answer any questions the Committee may have.