



Addressing the Threat of Worsening Natural Disasters

Statement of

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Good morning, Chairman Peters and Ranking Member Portman. I am John S. Butler, Fire Chief of the Fairfax County (Virginia) Fire and Rescue Department and Second Vice President of the International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFC). I appreciate the opportunity today to discuss how the nation can address the threat of worsening natural disasters.

The IAFC represents the leadership of over 1.1 million firefighters and emergency responders. IAFC members are the world's leading experts in firefighting, emergency medical services, terrorism response, hazardous materials (hazmat) incidents, wildland fire suppression, natural disasters, search and rescue, and public-safety policy. Since 1873, the IAFC has provided a forum for its members to exchange ideas, develop best practices, participate in executive training, and discover diverse products and services available to first responders.

America's fire and emergency service is an all-hazards response force that is locally situated, staffed, trained, and equipped to respond to all types of emergencies. There are approximately 1.1 million men and women in the fire and emergency service – consisting of approximately 300,000 career firefighters and 800,000 volunteer firefighters – serving in over 30,000 fire departments around the nation. They are trained to respond to all hazards ranging from earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes, and floods to acts of terrorism, hazardous materials incidents, technical rescues, fires, and medical emergencies. We usually are the first on the scene of a disaster and the last to leave.

National Preparedness in a Time of Greater Disasters

Today the nation faces a larger variety of threats than it has in the past. The nation must deal with the COVID-19 pandemic, an ever longer and more severe wildland fire season, and an increasing frequency in hurricanes and other major storms. Even a national pandemic ultimately affects citizens at the local level, which means the fire and emergency service is on the front lines of all of these threats. America's fire and rescue departments answer to fire and EMS calls; treat and transport COVID-19 patients; staff vaccination centers and administer COVID-19 testing campaigns; provide lifesaving aid to victims of mass shooting incidents; respond to incidents involving new and evolving hazardous materials, including lithium batteries; and rescue the survivors of catastrophic building collapses. In addition, fire and EMS departments can become vulnerable to cybersecurity attacks, including attempts to take down 9-1-1 centers or ransomware attacks.

The past 18 months have provided a real-life stress test for the nation's preparedness system. The nation's public safety and medical staff have performed heroically in the face of these various threats. However, we also have been able to identify unforeseen areas of improvement or new challenges. In many cases, lessons learned from one challenge like the pandemic can be applied to other challenges like wildland fires. As the nation responds to greater risks, we also can address opportunities to improve the nation's preparedness system.

Lessons from the COVID-19 Pandemic

Fire and EMS departments have been on the front line of the COVID-19 response. The nation's fire and EMS personnel respond to 9-1-1 calls from COVID-19 patients; host testing sites and participate in testing campaigns for at-risk communities; and staff and manage COVID-19 vaccination campaigns both through vaccination centers and campaigns to reach seniors in their homes. From this experience, we have some recommendations that can help improve the national preparedness system for future pandemics and other disasters:

- 1) The Biden Administration should review the National Incident Management System (NIMS) to address long-term events.** The NIMS was designed to address acts of terrorism and

short-term incidents with a duration of a few days to a couple of weeks. The COVID-19 pandemic has lasted since January 2020. The response effort to a major wildland fire, hurricane, flood, or tornado can take weeks and recovery operations can take years. The NIMS must be revised to include these long-term events and how to manage supplies and personnel and rotate command resources, like incident management teams, for these types of events.

- 2) **There is a need to include new partners in incident planning, such as public health authorities.** At the local level, fire, law enforcement, EMS and local emergency management have done a better job since 9/11 at planning and training for acts of terrorism and other large-scale events. In many cases, local hospitals have been brought in for planning for events like active shooter incidents.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the need to bring in other stakeholders like public health officials to respond to incidents like pandemics. To prepare for major hurricanes, tornadoes, and wildland fires, other critical infrastructure partners, such as utilities, public works, communications companies, and transportation officials should be invited to participate for planning and exercises. These disciplines also need to be trained in NIMS and the principles of the incident command system, so that they can integrate into the incident management team during a disaster. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) can set conditions on grants, training, and exercises to make sure that these stakeholders are included in planning. In addition, FEMA may want to work with the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS); the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services; the Federal Communications Commission; and other federal regulatory and grant-making agencies in a federal government-wide effort to ensure education and adoption of NIMS.

- 3) **There is a need to review mutual aid agreements and understand the expectations of the parties to these agreements.** During the COVID-19 pandemic, many fire and EMS departments had to quarantine large numbers of their members who were exposed to or infected with COVID-19. Fire departments routinely rely on mutual aid agreements at the local, state, and national level to provide resources as incidents escalate. With the COVID-19 pandemic, fire departments found that not only were they suffering from COVID-19-related staffing shortages; their mutual aid partners were in the same situation. In other cases, there was a struggle for resources as fire departments could not rely on interstate help to fight wildland fires, because fire departments in other parts of the country were responding to hurricanes or floods. In addition, there were concerns that jurisdictions might not provide aid, especially across state borders, because they wanted to retain resources in case of a surge in COVID-19 cases at home. This concern became greatest in fighting wildland fires, where firefighters come from across the nation to live and eat in close quarters in camp facilities for weeks at a time and then return home.

It is important that the nation's mutual aid system be strengthened. One major issue that needs to be addressed is reimbursement. When a fire department sends resources through the Emergency Management Assistance Compact (EMAC), it may take years to be reimbursed due to the bureaucratic processes of the federal and state agencies. The process must be standardized and streamlined so that fire departments can easily file their reimbursement request and track it in a transparent system. In addition, FEMA and the states should look at auxiliary systems like the IAFC's National Mutual Aid System (NMAS), which can complement systems like EMAC. The NMAS allows fire chiefs to request specific assets both within and between states and track them in real-time as they are dispatched to provide assistance.

- 4) **The need to prioritize supplies, tests, and vaccines for first responders.** During the outbreak of the pandemic, fire and EMS agencies quickly used their stocks of masks and protective

equipment. In the beginning, fire and EMS personnel also were not considered priorities for testing. It is important to recognize that fire and EMS personnel are aiding the public in the field, which is an uncontrolled environment. The risk for exposure and infection was extremely high. The IAFC was grateful to see that fire and EMS personnel were listed as high priorities as the federal and state governments rolled out vaccine prioritizations. However, we must remember in the future that public safety organizations are both critical infrastructure and the agencies that protect all other critical infrastructure sectors.

Issues Facing Local Fire Departments

The COVID-19 pandemic and other major disasters have placed an incredible strain on the workforce of the nation's fire and emergency response agencies. Across the EMS field, there are concerns about EMS personnel quitting due to burnout and better job opportunities, while EMS agencies cope with the difficulties in recruiting replacement personnel. In addition, volunteer fire departments are seeing volunteers leave the service, because of fears of infecting families with COVID-19 or losing their jobs if they become infected with COVID-19 during their volunteer work. Restrictions caused by COVID-19 also make it harder for volunteer fire departments to hold recruitment drives or fundraising dinners. Career fire departments also are facing delays in fire academy classes and funding shortages, which are reducing their abilities to replace retiring or departing personnel. In addition, the strain on Western fire departments in responding to major wildland fires restricts their ability to prepare for other threats, like acts of terrorism or pandemic planning.

Fire and EMS departments' expenses have increased. They must buy protective equipment for their personnel; pay overtime for staffing shortages caused by quarantines and infections; and answer increased 9-1-1 calls from COVID-19 patients. In addition, fire and EMS departments are having trouble accessing the equipment they need. During the outbreak of the pandemic in 2020, fire and EMS departments were forced to bid against states and the federal government to buy supplies like personal protective equipment, masks, and gloves. Now the global semiconductor shortage has caused delays in the delivery of ambulances and fire apparatus.

Fire and EMS departments require funding to pivot to address daily changes in threats from active shooter incidents to wildland fires to flooding, while still responding to 9-1-1 calls asking for help fighting fires, responding to traffic accidents, and providing aid to COVID-19 patients and other EMS calls. The American Rescue Plan Act (P.L. 117-2); the Stafford Act declaration concerning the COVID-19 pandemic; and other programs like HHS's Provider Relief Fund have helped replace some of these funding shortfalls. However, the Assistance to Firefighters Grant (AFG) program and the Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) grant program are important for helping fire departments purchase equipment for responding to all hazards and recruit and retain career and volunteer firefighters. We are grateful for the extra \$200 million provided to each the AFG and SAFER programs during the COVID-19 pandemic and ask that Congress fully fund these programs.

The Importance of Mitigation and Community Preparedness

The increase in the scope and severity of natural disasters demonstrate the importance of mitigation. For the wildland-urban interface, it is important that communities take steps to be fire-safe, including removing hazardous fuels, clearing defensible space around structures, and adopting and enforcing building codes. The adoption of strong building codes can prevent windborne damage from hurricanes and tornadoes, and the use of cedar roofs and other flammable materials in the wildland urban interface. We support FEMA's focus on mitigation both with the Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities program and the focus on allowing the use of the Hazard Mitigation Assistance to prevent flooding in areas affected by wildland fires. The IAFC recommends that the states adopt the most up-to-date building

codes. We also ask FEMA to hold states accountable for adopting model building codes and to support the education and training of code officials to ensure enforcement of these codes.

In addition, communities should take action to prepare for major disasters. For example, the IAFC manages the Ready, Set, Go! (RSG) Program in partnership with the U.S. Forest Service. RSG helps communities in the wildland-urban interface through local emergency response agencies to become involved in preparation, mitigation, and being ready to evacuate early and safely when a wildland fire strikes. By taking the steps to mitigate and pre-plan for disasters, communities can save lives and prevent economic damage when a natural disaster strikes.

Effective Leadership at FEMA

As the nation continues to face an ever-increasing number of disasters, it is important that FEMA be adequately led and staffed by emergency response experts. On behalf of the IAFC, I thank the committee for acting expeditiously on the nomination of FEMA Administrator Criswell. We also would like to see the committee consider the nomination of Mr. Erik Hooks to be the Deputy FEMA Administrator. It is important that President Biden appoint experienced personnel for the other open positions in the FEMA leadership. For example, the IAFC asks the committee to make sure that President Biden appoints an experienced fire service leader to the position of U.S. Fire Administrator soon.

The Urban Search and Rescue System

One particularly important resource for the national preparedness system is the National Urban Search and Rescue (US&R) system. The US&R system is a unique partnership between the federal government and state and local agencies to provide lifesaving assistance during major disasters. The 28 US&R teams have been especially active in 2021. The Fairfax County Fire and Rescue Department hosts Virginia Task Force 1, which has deployed personnel to the presidential inauguration; the building collapse in Surfside, Florida; Hurricane Ida in both New Jersey and Baton Rouge; the earthquake in Haiti; and a volcano in Saint Vincent and the Grenadines.

The US&R system is the “Swiss Army knife” for many national disasters and teams’ resources are deployed to meet a variety of missions. However, the system requires some specific actions, so that it can continue to operate in an effective manner. For example, funding for the US&R system has remained funded at approximately \$38 million since Fiscal Year 2020. Sponsoring agencies can spend between \$800,000 and \$1.5 million in additional “soft costs” to maintain the teams. States are having trouble providing support for US&R teams. Most of the state funding for the US&R system is sustained from the State Homeland Security Grant Program (SHSGP) and the Urban Areas Security Initiative (UASI). However, without the clear nexus between the US&R system and terrorism and the focus on other priorities for SHSGP and UASI funds, this source of funding is drying up.

We urge increased funding for the US&R program to address these shortfalls and build new capabilities. This funding also would allow the US&R teams to replace current transportation assets, which are nearing the end of their lives. Increased funding also would allow FEMA to conduct three or four full-scale exercises each year to provide training along with operation readiness evaluations. In addition, the US&R teams would be able to improve their capabilities for responding to subterranean incidents like trench or tunnel collapses. Also, the US&R teams would be able to validate and use new technology, such as unmanned aircraft systems or robots to help with search operations and GIS platforms to improve mapping. The IAFC also recommends increasing funds for the US&R system to adequately catalog and validate federal, state, tribal and territorial, and local search-and-rescue teams to better understand the national search-and-rescue capability in the case of the major incident like an earthquake along the New Madrid fault.

Infrastructure Needs

With the focus on improving the nation's infrastructure, I would like to highlight infrastructure needs for the nation's fire and emergency service. In 2019, the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) released a report describing the *Renovation Needs of the U.S. Fire Service*. This report showed that 43% of stations at the surveyed fire departments are more than 40 years old. It also found that 59% of the surveyed fire departments' stations are not equipped with cancer-preventing exhaust emission control systems. Approximately, a third of the surveyed fire departments' stations did not have access to backup power. In addition, these stations may be affected by mold, asbestos, old ventilation systems and other environmental problems, and they may not have crew quarters for the female fire and EMS personnel that serve in the modern fire and emergency service. Facing constrained budgets, fire departments are unable to upgrade or replace their fire stations to meet modern codes and standards. The NFPA estimates that it would cost between \$70 and \$100 billion to replace these stations. The House Science, Space, and Technology Committee recommended that Congress allocate \$718 million to renovate, reconstruct and construct new fire and EMS facilities in the reconciliation bill. The IAFC asks that the committee support this proposal.

Conclusion

I thank you for the opportunity to address the threat of worsening disasters. Currently, the nation faces variety of threats, including longer wildland fire seasons, a greater number of severe hurricanes and storms, and the continued COVID-19 pandemic. Local fire and EMS departments are at the front line of these disasters. In responding to COVID-19 in the past 18 months, we have learned important lessons that can be applied to improving the national response system overall. The Biden Administration should use this opportunity to review NIMS and make changes to include a wider variety of stakeholders who will be responding to long-term incidents. In addition, FEMA should examine how to bolster the nation's mutual aid systems. We also must look at addressing shortages in the fire and EMS workforce and helping fire and EMS departments to regain strength after the financial, logistical, and personal stress of responding to an historic pandemic, while also responding to other natural disasters. Finally, we must ensure that federal resources like FEMA and the US&R system are staffed with experienced leaders and personnel and fully resourced to meet the large varieties of threats facing America. The IAFC looks forward to working the committee to address these needs.