



FEMA's Preparedness for All Hazards

Statement of Chief Tom Carr

presented to the

**SUBCOMMITTEE ON
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Good morning, Madam Chairman, Ranking Member Graves, and members of the subcommittee. I am Chief Tom Carr, of the Montgomery County, Maryland, Fire Rescue Service, and one of the nearly 13,000 members of the International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFC). The IAFC represents the leadership of America's fire, rescue, and emergency medical services including rural volunteer fire departments, combination departments, and metropolitan career fire departments. I thank the committee for the opportunity to discuss the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) preparedness for all hazards.

THE NEED TO FOCUS ON ALL HAZARDS RESPONSE

The committee has wisely entitled today's hearing, "FEMA's Preparedness for All Hazards." Last year, America's fire service responded to more than 23 million fire and emergency calls covering all hazards, including structural fires, emergency medical services (EMS) incidents, hazmat incidents, technical rescues, and wildland fires. While most of these calls are local, America's fire service has demonstrated its national role in disasters like Hurricane Katrina and the attacks of September 11, 2001.

When fire departments take on such a national role, their lead partner within the federal government is the FEMA. Since 9/11, much of the focus within FEMA's parent organization, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), has been on building terrorism response capabilities. While gaps still exist, these efforts have helped local fire and EMS providers become better prepared than ever before for chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear, and explosive (CBRNE) incidents. The IAFC understands this focus on counter-terrorism as a natural reaction to the September 11th attacks; however, it is important to point out that the response to most incidents -- whether natural or man-made -- is strikingly similar. To a firefighter responding to the scene, a WMD attack is simply a hazmat incident with an attitude, and requires many of the same basic equipment, tactics, and skills.

FEMA REFORM

The backdrop for today's hearing is the so-called "New FEMA," which was brought about by provisions included in the fiscal year 2007 Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Appropriations Act (P.L. 109-295).

The IAFC supports this law and the direction that the FEMA has begun to take in implementing it. In particular, we believe that it is essential that the FEMA's budget and mission be protected from constant DHS reorganizations. Additionally, we approve of the return of the United States Fire Administration (USFA) and the Office of Grants and Training to the FEMA. These transfers create an opportunity to link response planning with training programs and grant distribution in a very effective manner. Administrator Paulison – a former IAFC President and Miami-Dade County Fire Chief – also has made a number of changes to improve the FEMA's logistics, disaster response expertise, and regional offices. For the first time in recent years, the FEMA now has a complete roster of ten full-time administrators in its regional offices. Generally, we urge subcommittee members to support the FEMA's new direction by giving the agency time to complete its transformation plans and by providing full budgetary support for the "New FEMA's" programs through the appropriations process.

Creation of a "New FEMA," however, is far from the final step in making sure that the United States is truly prepared for future disasters. Considerable work remains for the Administration, Congress, states, localities, and the fire service in terms of continuing to ensure that the nation is able to respond effectively when the next major emergency occurs. I would like to take this opportunity to comment on several of the challenges that lie ahead.

GRANT PROGRAMS

As FEMA integrates the Office of Grants and Training into its post-Katrina structure, it must do a better job of understanding that basic fire and EMS are essential not only for response to terrorism incidents, but other types of disasters as well. Creating an emphasis in grant programs on specialized equipment for CBRNE events may steer important resources away from more

fundamental areas of need. Over the long-term, this approach could deprive local responders of the tools necessary for an effective response to the next major hurricane, earthquake, or other natural disaster.

Congress can play a constructive role by ensuring that FEMA-administered programs such as the FIRE Act grants (15 U.S.C. 2229(b)) are well funded and remain focused on the response to all hazards. An October, 2006 joint Needs Assessment by the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) and the Department of Homeland Security drives home the basic, all hazards needs that currently exist within the fire service:

- An estimated 42% of volunteer firefighters serving in communities with less than 2,500 people have not been formally trained in structural firefighting.
- An estimated 36% of fire departments deliver emergency medical response without providing all involved staff with formal EMS training.
- An estimated 60% of fire departments do not have enough self-contained breathing apparatus (SCBA) to equip all firefighters on a shift.
- An estimated 65% of fire departments do not have enough portable radios to equip all emergency responders on a shift.

The FIRE Act grant program currently goes a long way towards helping departments address these shortfalls. Likewise, the related SAFER Act grant program (15 U.S.C. 2229a) aids departments in meeting important staffing standards, such as NFPA 1710. While the president requested a \$247 million cut for the FIRE Act grant program and a total of \$0 for the SAFER Act grant program for FY 2008, we urge Congress to fund these programs above the \$547 million and \$115 million levels appropriated for FY 2007.

On a broader scale, Congress should carefully balance the portfolio of federal grant programs to address requirements associated with both terrorism and natural disasters. When authorizing programs for the risk-based distribution of funds, Congress should carefully consider how it wishes to define risk and how those definitions affect all-hazards preparedness goals.

FUNDING FOR THE U.S. FIRE ADMINISTRATION

Though the U.S. Fire Administration has remained in Emmitsburg, Maryland the entire time, the agency has moved around quite a bit in departmental organization charts over the past several years. Most recently, the USFA was transferred back into the FEMA after being removed just one year ago.

As I indicated earlier, the IAFC strongly believes that the USFA belongs within the FEMA. This arrangement offers opportunities for synergies between the USFA and other FEMA programs in areas such as training and grant funding, while also ensuring that federal emergency officials have immediate access to expertise regarding local emergency responders. As the FEMA re-integrates the USFA into its operations, there are a number of areas where improvements can be made to help make the federal government more effective and better prepared for future disasters.

The USFA recently has begun to staff a desk at the DHS' National Operations Center (NOC). This development is important because it increases the ability of local fire chiefs to receive threat information at the same time as local law enforcement officers. In order for law enforcement, fire, and emergency services to plan and train for a coordinated response to an incident, they need to have timely and accurate information.

The USFA also needs to update the National Fire Incident Reporting System (NFIRS) and make it web-based. The NFIRS helps the USFA to identify and assess trends in fire activity. By making the NFIRS timely and easier to use, the USFA will begin to identify the changes necessary to reduce America's fire loss statistics, which are some of the worst in the developed world.

The USFA also needs to be able to increase its policy staff in Washington, D.C. As the DHS begins to review and examine new policies, such as the National Response Plan, the National Incident Management System, a new credentialing system, and new training models, the USFA must have the resources and personnel to represent and inform the fire service.

Furthermore, the USFA needs strong leadership at the top. Though the United States Fire Administrator position remains an Assistant Secretary equivalent, it has not been filled with a permanent occupant for an extended period of time. Presently, the nomination of Chief Gregory B. Cade, of Virginia Beach, Virginia, to serve as the U.S. Fire Administrator awaits final action in the Senate. The IAFC strongly supports Chief Cade's nomination and urges Senate confirmation, so that he will be able to begin contributing to the USFA's progress in the near future.

Congress can aid in these efforts by continuing to provide a robust budget for the USFA in fiscal year 2008. Though the USFA received nearly \$47 million in FY 2007, the president's budget requests only \$43.3 million for the USFA in FY 2008. To address the needs I have just identified and ensure that the USFA operates as effectively as possible within the "New FEMA," we urge Congress to appropriate \$50 million for the USFA in FY 2008.

NIMS AND NRP REVISION PROCESSES

Two major tools that play a vital role in the nation's disaster planning and response regime are the National Response Plan (NRP) and the National Incident Management System (NIMS). Currently, both of these initiatives are in the midst of a revision process involving a wide array of stakeholders. The IAFC has participated in this comment process on several occasions thus far, and stands ready to do so when future opportunities arise.

Regarding the NIMS, the IAFC is focused on establishing a clear understanding of which entities and individuals are required to be compliant. At the state and local levels, training efforts are underway to meet existing NIMS requirements; however, FEMA's Preparedness, Training and Exercises Directorate must play a role in ensuring that these efforts are completed. Additionally, IAFC members have filed a number of more technical recommendations through the recent public comment periods.

With respect to the NRP, the central challenge is timing. As subcommittee members are aware, there have been several delays in releasing an updated version of the NRP for stakeholder

review. These delays are cause for concern in light of the previously announced June 1, 2007, target date for rollout of the updated NIMS and NRP initiatives. The amount of time remaining prior to June 1, 2007 leaves no room for affected organizations to offer meaningful input on broad elements of the NRP or more specific issues such as the need for standardization of state and federal Emergency Support Function (ESF) designations. Additionally, the FEMA must make sure that any changes to the NRP are communicated at the local level through the USFA, the Office of Grants and Training, and other appropriate channels. In doing so, it is essential that the FEMA utilize clear and concise terminology when interfacing with first responders.

We urge subcommittee members, leaders within the FEMA, and the DHS at large to identify ways to ensure that the NIMS and the NRP are adequately reviewed and strengthened prior to concluding the revision process.

CONCLUSION

Thank you again for the opportunity to address this subcommittee. On behalf of America's chief fire and emergency medical officers, I thank the Congress, and especially the members of the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, for its continued support of America's fire service. I look forward to working with you throughout the 110th Congress and in the future.