

INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF FIRE FIGHTERS



Statement of

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on

BUILDING A 21st CENTURY INFRASTRUCTURE FOR
AMERICA: THE NATIONAL PREPAREDNESS SYSTEM

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Thank you Chairman Barletta, Ranking Member Johnson and distinguished members of the Subcommittee. My name is Art Martynuska and I am the President of the Pennsylvania Professional Fire Fighters Association. I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today on behalf of the International Association of Fire Fighters, General President Schaitberger and the over 300,000 fire fighters and emergency medical personnel who serve as this nation's first line of defense against disasters, natural or man-made.

Whenever and wherever disaster strikes, America's professional fire fighters and emergency medical personnel are on the frontlines working to save lives and protect the public safety. Today's fire service has evolved from a municipal force whose primary duty was to extinguish local fires to an integrated national system that responds to a wide range of local emergencies and national disasters. When the nation faces a terrorist attack, natural disaster, pandemic, hazardous materials spill, or any mass-casualty event, it is local fire fighters who respond. It is from this unique perspective as America's frontline domestic defenders that we view the federal government's preparedness efforts.

The horrific events of September 11, 2001 shook our nation to the core, and Congress responded appropriately by creating the Department of Homeland Security and establishing new programs to protect the nation. But these laws did more than create a new bureaucracy, they fundamentally altered the way our nation views emergency response and preparedness.

Before 9/11, emergency response and preparedness was understood to be almost an exclusively local government function. The federal role in emergency management was largely confined to recovery after a major disaster, with FEMA helping families, communities and businesses rebuild once the life-saving emergency response functions were completed.

The September 11 tragedy forced us to face the deficiencies of this outmoded view and prompted us to create a new paradigm partnering federal, state and local governments to better protect our communities. Under this partnership, local emergency responders came to understand that our responsibilities lie beyond the jurisdictional boundaries of our municipality. Perhaps even more importantly, fire fighters came to understand that his or her job is not merely protecting communities from local incidents, but to play an integral role in protecting all Americans against terrorist attacks and other major disasters.

The federal government's role in this new partnership is two-fold. First, it must be able to marshal all available resources, including the assets offered by the nation's fire services, to respond to these events. And second, in order to fulfill this obligation, the federal government must be willing to ensure that local emergency response agencies have the training, equipment and preparation they need to successfully execute their missions.

SAFER and FIRE Grants

Clearly, in order to successfully mitigate a broad palate of operational responsibilities, the fire service must maintain a continuous state of preparedness. This continues to be a difficult task to achieve as we continue to slowly recover from the recent recession. Unfortunately, while

engaged in their essential duties, fire fighters are too often expected to work with outdated equipment, minimal training and insufficient personnel.

The Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) and Assistance to Firefighters (FIRE) grant programs were created by Congress to help address these needs and keep fire fighters and fire departments in an ever-ready state of preparedness. Providing funds to communities large and small throughout the nation, SAFER and FIRE have proved to be highly effective. A study by the U.S. Fire Administration revealed that the grants have resulted in important enhancements in local preparedness, including increased and improved equipment and training.

For example, the Philadelphia Fire Department has struggled for years with a depleted fire fighting force. Insufficient personnel is equated with increased response times and increased risk to communities and their citizens. In 2015, I am pleased to say that the City of Philadelphia Fire Department received a SAFER grant of \$22.6 million, allowing the department to add 160 fire fighters to their depleted rolls, enhancing safety and significantly reducing risk. Similar examples abound nationwide.

In addition to providing their effectiveness, the grants are highly efficient. By utilizing a peer review process and awarding funds directly to fire departments, SAFER and FIRE grants go to those communities where they are most needed, with a minimum of overhead.

Yet, despite the clear improvements in fire department preparedness produced by these grants, there remains a strong need for additional funding. According to a 2016 Needs Assessment of the Fire Service conducted by the National Fire Protection Association, shortages in personnel, equipment and training persist in many fire departments. Fire departments are continually updating equipment, training is required on a recurring basis, staffing costs continue to rise. Although SAFER and FIRE Grants have allowed departments to make headway against long-standing shortages, many departments are swimming against a rising tide.

In Fiscal Year 2016 Congress appropriated a combined \$690 million for SAFER and FIRE, a reduction from the programs' traditional funding level of \$810 million. In Fiscal Year 2016, nearly 10,000 fire departments applied for more than \$2 billion in FIRE grants, and for Fiscal Year 2015 over 1300 fire departments applied for more than \$1 billion in SAFER grants. By allowing more grantees to earn grants, we believe a small investment to restore funding to the traditional \$810 million level would significantly enhance fire department preparedness.

Homeland Security Grants

In addition to SAFER and FIRE, we believe the Homeland Security grants, particularly the Urban Area Security Initiative (UASI) and the State Homeland Security Grant Program (SHSGP) have been largely beneficial to enhancing the nation's preparedness. UASI, which funds preparedness activities in large urban areas, has been particularly important to improving the overall

preparedness of the nation's fire service. This is particularly true since Congress enacted the 9/11 Commission Act, which expanded the ability of states and localities to use UASI and SHSGP funds for personnel costs, and required states to make SHSGP and UASI funds available to localities within forty-five days of receiving funds, expediting their use by local fire departments.

Although each of these programs serves an important public safety need, shrinking budgets are limiting their effectiveness. In Fiscal Year 2016, Congress allocated \$580 million for UASI and \$402 million for SHSGP. We are concerned with this trend and warn that, if continued, it would have a significant negative impact on our nation's preparedness.

Additionally, in recent years, the previous Administration proposed consolidating the Homeland Security grants, including SHSGP and UASI. We rejected this proposal, as did Congress. The Homeland Security grants were each established in order to serve a very specific and important public safety need. Given the limited federal funding afforded to the grants, merging distinct and equally-important homeland security priorities into a single block grant could cause some such priorities to go unserved. We hope this proposal is not resurrected under the current Administration, and urge it be rejected again if it is.

Urban Search and Rescue

As you know, the National Urban Search and Rescue (US&R) Response System provides a significant national resource for search and rescue assistance in the wake of a major disaster or structural collapse. A typical US&R task force will conduct physical search and rescue operations, provide emergency medical care to trapped victims, assess and control hazards such as ruptured gas and electric lines, and evaluate and stabilize damaged structures. Due to the critical, life-saving nature of their mission, US&R task forces must be prepared to deploy within six hours of notification, and must be self-sufficient for the first seventy-two hours. US&R teams have been deployed to numerous disasters in the United States, including Superstorm Sandy, Hurricane Katrina, and of course, the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon. They are a phenomenal resource and highly successful.

I know this Subcommittee values the significant work of our nation's US&R teams, and I would be remiss if I did not thank you for your work last year to pass the National Urban Search and Rescue Response System Act of 2016. This legislation, which has been a priority for our members for nearly a decade, not only provides US&R with the protections of law, it better protects US&R team members by clarifying members' workers compensation, liability protections and jobs, and specifies that local sponsoring agencies may receive federal reimbursement for back-filled positions. It is a significant achievement by this Subcommittee and we appreciate your tireless efforts that resulted in this bill becoming law.

Unfortunately, and despite the importance of the program, the Urban Search and Rescue Response System is desperately underfunded, and becomes more so each year. In 2006, the Federal Emergency Management Agency estimated the annual and recurring cost for each task force to be approximately \$1.7 million. Today, in many jurisdictions, the cost exceeds \$2 million. In addition to program management costs, this estimate includes expenses for training, exercises, medical monitoring of personnel, and equipment maintenance and storage. For Fiscal Year 2016, Congress only appropriated

\$35.18 million for all twenty-eight teams, leaving local sponsoring agencies and local taxpayers to pick up the remainder of the tab.

Unfortunately, tight local budgets have left many local sponsoring agencies unable to subsidize critical US&R functions such as training, significantly straining task forces' readiness and capabilities. In fact, some teams have been so underfunded that they have been unable to respond to emergencies when called upon.

Additionally, when local communities are forced to assume an ever-increasing share of such costs, funds are inevitably diverted from local emergency services budgets. Thus, a failure to fund an inherently federal function actually detracts from local emergency preparedness.

Adequately funding the Urban Search and Rescue Response System would significantly improve our nation's readiness. For the past several years, the IAFF has recommended funding US&R at a minimum of \$50 million. This small investment would yield significant returns in ensuring teams are prepared to conduct critical, life-saving search and rescue operations in the wake of a disaster.

Potential Funding Challenges

These and other programs allow the federal government to enhance preparedness at both the local and national level, assisting fire fighters and others so that they can adequately provide the first line of defense protecting our local communities and their citizens.

We are concerned with reports that funding for homeland security grants and other priorities within the Department of Homeland Security may be cut under the new Administration's budget. We recognize that hard choices must be made when deciding how to allocate taxpayer dollars. However, despite the many challenges facing the federal budget, it is fundamentally unwise to cut spending on homeland security funds to state and local governments. As the first line of defense in protecting our homeland, the federal government has an inherent responsibility to help ensure local fire departments can effectively protect the public safety. We caution Congress against any attempts to cut funding for these essential programs. Such cuts would surely result in critical gaps in fire fighters ability to quickly and effectively respond to emergencies, significantly undermining our nation's preparedness.

Conclusion

On behalf of the International Association of Fire Fighters, I appreciate the opportunity to share with you our views on the national preparedness system. As a nation, we have made significant positive progress since 9/11 to enhance readiness and capabilities. We must continue to build upon this framework and resist suggestions to cut or underfund programs that are essential to our national security and well-being. To the extent that the IAFF can assist the Subcommittee in these efforts, I am happy to offer our expertise and pledge to work closely with you and your staffs.

Again, I'd like to thank the Subcommittee for the opportunity to testify today and am happy to answer any questions you may have.