

Testimony Submitted by the
National Volunteer Fire Council

Before the

Committee on Science and Technology
Subcommittee on Technology and Innovation

U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

October 2, 2007

Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, the National Volunteer Fire Council (NVFC) appreciates the opportunity to be here today to express our views and experiences regarding the United States Fire Administration (USFA) and the National Fire Academy (NFA).

My name is Gordon Henderson and it is an honor and a pleasure to appear before you today. I have been in the fire service for 32 years. Currently, I am the Deputy Chief of Operations in the Rome-Floyd County Fire Department in the State of Georgia. I serve as the Chairperson of the Georgia Firefighters and Fire Chiefs Joint Legislative Committee. I am a principle member of the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) 1001 National Professional Qualifications for Firefighters Committee and also serve as the secretary. I am a Past President of the Georgia State Firefighters Association (GSFA) and the GSFA is a member of the NVFC, which represents the interests of the nation's approximately 1,000,000 volunteer fire and emergency medical personnel who staff more than 30,000 fire and EMS agencies nationwide.

Over the years, the roles associated with the fire and emergency services have greatly expanded. Gone are the days when our primary responsibilities were "putting the wet stuff on the red stuff to make black stuff" in other words putting out fires or transporting patients to the hospital. Fire and emergency services personnel now routinely deal with hazardous materials spills, provide emergency medical care, and perform search and rescue in a wide range of situations. We are the first responders to dumpster fires, automobile accidents, structure fires, wildland fires, medical emergencies, natural disasters, and yes-even terrorist attacks and much more.

The USFA and NFA play a critical role in educating and training fire, rescue and emergency personnel throughout the United States. As the fire and emergency services have been asked to do more, the USFA has expanded its course offerings. The USFA currently offers courses in arson, communications, critical infrastructure protection, emergency medical services/rescue, fire prevention and planning, fire service administration, firefighter health and safety, hazardous

materials, incident management, operations and tactics, professional development, terrorism, wildfire and youth/juvenile firesetter intervention.

In recognition of the wide range of activities that the fire and emergency services perform, as well as the extensive course offerings that the USFA already provides, the NVFC is pleased to see that the draft reauthorizing language would expand the types of activities that the USFA is explicitly authorized to train fire service personnel in to include dealing with fires occurring in the wildland/urban interface, incidents involving hazardous materials and advanced EMS. These are each core aspects of fire and emergency service provision and deserve to be recognized as such.

With today's requirements for emergency personnel to perform such a wide range of duties, they are also required to spend more time training. For volunteers who work a full-time job and train on nights and weekends, increases in training times are particularly burdensome. The most visible and direct benefit that the USFA provides to the volunteer fire service is the hosting of the Volunteer Incentive Program (VIP) at the NFA, which combines two weeks' worth of course work into an intensive six-day session. The compressed course schedule is essential for many volunteers who cannot take two weeks off to attend classes and the course topics are geared specifically toward addressing challenges faced in many volunteer agencies. Topics of the course include:

- Command and Control of Fire Department Operations at Target Hazards
- Challenges for Local Training Officers
- Command and Control of Incident Operations
- Community Education Leadership
- Fire Cause Determination for Company Officers
- Fire Protection Systems for Incident Commanders
- Leadership and Administration
- Advanced Safety Operations and Management
- Leading Community Fire Prevention
- Management Strategies for Success
- Presenting Effective Public Education Programs
- Command and General Staff Functions in the Incident Command System
- Juvenile Firesetter Intervention Specialist I & II Leadership

In addition to the training provided on-site at NFA, the USFA delivers training directly to local jurisdictions, either through online tutorials or by providing states with NFA-developed training and educational materials to be made available to local emergency responders. This allows USFA to reach a greater number of firefighters at a relatively low cost. The NVFC is pleased to see that the draft authorizing language would specifically allow USFA to implement a "train the trainer" program, which goes beyond simply training first responders but teaches them to deliver that training to others.

The USFA collects, analyzes and disseminates data and information on fires and other emergency incidents to stakeholders and members of the public. Using this information, decision makers can make better-informed decisions on policies and strategies to pursue with the end result being reduced fire-related loss of life and property.

One of the data collection programs maintained by the USFA is the National Fire Incident Reporting System (NFIRS), this is the standard national reporting system used by U.S. fire departments to report information on fires and other incidents to which they respond. NFIRS is supposed to allow the USFA to maintain records of incidents in a uniform manner and develop statistics from that data.

While NFIRS is useful in its current capacity, it needs to be updated so that reporting can be done online as well as in written form. Currently, data that is reported using NFIRS software can take more than a year to reach the USFA if it reaches at all. Some fire departments purchase their own software to keep track of and report incident data to USFA rather than using NFIRS. USFA should develop a web-based reporting system that would allow information to flow more quickly – to states and the USFA. The NVFC is pleased that the authorizing bill addresses this issue.

The NVFC would also like to see the authorizing bill establish some type of link between NFIRS and the National Emergency Medical Services Information System (NEMSIS). NEMSIS, which is maintained by the National Highway Transportation Safety Administration (NHTSA), collects data about incidents that occur during EMS responses. Because the fire service handles so many EMS calls, the NVFC believes that the USFA and NHTSA should cooperate to make sure that their respective systems are capturing data that is as accurate and useful as possible.

A major area of concern for the NVFC is that the number of volunteer firefighters in the U.S. is decreasing. According to a National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) study, between 1983 and 1988, the number of volunteer firefighters in the country has gone from close to 900,000 to approximately 800,000. Since 1988, the number of volunteers has fluctuated up and down but remained close to 800,000. Over that same period of time, the number of volunteer firefighters per person in this country has declined by 26.7 percent.

In addition to the declining numbers, the average age of volunteer firefighters is increasing. In 1987, 63.2 percent of the firefighters serving in communities of less than 2,500 – almost all volunteers – were under the age of 39. In 2005, the percentage was down to 51.7 percent under the age of 39. The ages of firefighters serving communities with populations of 24,999 or less, which are also mostly volunteers, have shifted in a similar fashion.

To improve staffing at volunteer public safety agencies, the USFA recently partnered with the NVFC to develop “Recruitment and Retention for the Volunteer Emergency Services,” a 237 page guide that identifies more than 30 specific challenges to recruiting and retaining volunteers

and offers multiple suggestions on how to overcome each of them. The USFA has sponsored recruitment and retention workshops around the country based on the information contained in the guide. The NVFC and the USFA recently agreed to work together to create a video companion to the guide that will be made available to the public.

Mr. Chairman, in my invitation to testify here today you specifically requested information about the challenges facing rural volunteer fire departments in reaching out to their communities to teach fire prevention and fire safety education. Teaching fire prevention and fire safety education is one of many nonemergency functions that volunteer fire departments perform. Each of these functions requires additional volunteer hours, which places stress on the membership of a volunteer fire department. One strategy for combating this is using retired volunteer firefighters who no longer respond to emergencies, or community members who are not trained as firefighters, to perform these tasks.

A great example of this is the Johnson County Rural Fire District #1 in Clarksville, Arkansas, partnering with students from the local University of the Ozarks' Phi Beta Lambda organization. The partnership was established in 2005 and today over 100 students assist this small rural department with their fire safety education programs. With the help of the department's firefighters and nonoperational volunteers, the Johnson County RFD #1 increased the hours of its fire safety education programs from approximately 100 hours per year before 2005 to 8,600 hours in 2006. Since the inception of its Fire Corps program, the group's efforts have reached nearly 1 million people on the local, state, and national levels with their important fire safety messages. Through these efforts, this small department has affected a dramatic 34% decrease in fire-related property loss...all at little to no cost to the department.

The Johnson County RFD #1 program was actually established through a program called Fire Corps, which is part of the Department of Homeland Security's Citizen Corps program and is administered jointly by the NVFC and the International Association of Fire Chiefs. Fire Corps provides career, combination and volunteer fire departments with resources to help attract community members to serve the fire department in nonoperational roles. The USFA participates in meetings of the Fire Corps National Advisory Committee, made up of 15 nongovernmental organizations representing different constituencies within the fire service. The USFA also helps promote Fire Corps at fire service trade shows and at NFA.

In closing, the NVFC respectfully requests that USFA be reauthorized and that funding be placed at a level that will allow the USFA to continue, improve, and increase the programs offered to the fire service and other emergency services. We support the funding levels specified in the draft authorizing language and hopes that they will not only be passed into law but fully funded in future appropriations legislation.

Once again, thank you again for the opportunity to speak to you today. If there are questions from the Committee, I will be glad to respond to them at this time.