

INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF FIRE FIGHTERS



Statement of

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Before the

**HOUSE COMMITTEE ON SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY
SUBCOMMITTEE ON TECHNOLOGY AND INNOVATION**

on

**THE UNITED STATES FIRE ADMINISTRATION
REAUTHORIZATION: ADDRESSING THE PRIORITIES OF
THE NATION'S FIRE SERVICE**

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Thank you Chairman Wu, Ranking Member Gingrey, and distinguished members of the Committee for the opportunity to testify before you today. My name is Bob Livingston. I serve as a Captain in the Salem, Oregon Fire Department, and I am also a proud member of the International Association of Fire Fighters (IAFF). I am pleased to appear before you today on behalf of IAFF General President Harold Schaitberger and the more than quarter million full-time emergency response personnel who comprise our organization.

Protecting over 85% of the nation's population, America's professional fire fighters and emergency medical personnel are on the front lines every day working tirelessly to save lives and protect the public safety. Whether responding to everyday emergencies or large-scale disasters, be it massive flooding in the Gulf Coast, a terrorist attack in New York, a vehicle crash in Cleveland, a hazardous chemical release in North Carolina, or a residential fire in Salem, the men and women of the IAFF are first to arrive on the scene and the last to leave.

Our members' dedication is matched only by the technical expertise they bring to their mission. Today's professional fire fighter is an all-purpose emergency responder trained in such specialized disciplines as emergency medical care, hazardous/WMD materials response and high-angle, confined space and water rescue.

The days of fire fighters whose primary function was to "put the wet stuff on the red stuff" are long gone. The men and women of the 21st Century fire service have evolved into highly-trained, highly skilled all-purpose emergency responders with broad responsibilities.

It is from this unique perspective as America's frontline domestic defenders that we view the mission, activities and services of the United States Fire Administration (USFA).

Originally created to ensure a federal focus on the national fire problem described in the original *America Burning* report, Congress tasked the USFA with reducing the incidence of death, injury and property loss from fire through public education, data collection, research and training. But as fire fighters have expanded their duties, responsibilities, and capabilities to meet the needs of their communities and their citizens, so too must USFA evolve to meet the needs of the 21st Century fire service.

New Roles, New Responsibilities

Traditionally focused on the fire control and fire prevention duties inherent to fire fighting, the USFA of the 21st Century must evolve to embrace and support the fire service's role in EMS and hazmat response.

Pre-hospital 9-1-1 emergency response has, in recent years, become a principal duty of the fire service such that today, the fire service has become the first medical responder for critical illness and injury in virtually every community in America. According to a recent

survey of the 200 largest cities in the United States, 97 percent of such cities deliver pre-hospital 9-1-1 emergency medical response through the fire service. Additionally, the fire service provides advanced life support response and care in 90 percent of the thirty most populous U.S. jurisdictions.

The prevalence of fire-based EMS throughout the United States requires that the Fire Administration fully integrate EMS training and preparedness into its mission. USFA must continue to offer advanced EMS training to emergency responders as well as working to assist responders in preparing for a mass casualty event, such as pandemics and other disasters.

While we are confident that USFA appreciates the importance of expanding its work in the EMS arena, we remain concerned that these efforts are not widely recognized. Organizations and policy makers concerned about EMS issues have long bemoaned the absence of a “home” in the federal government for EMS, and they have advocated creation of a new entity modeled on the USFA but devoted to EMS issues. While we believe any such entity would be duplicative and counterproductive, we nevertheless acknowledge that there is a perception that USFA is not adequately focused on EMS. We therefore recommend that USFA increase its efforts to educate the EMS community about its work in this important area. And we further call on USFA to educate others in the federal government of the critical importance and merit of fire-based EMS.

Similarly, while America’s fire fighters had always been the de-facto first responders to hazardous materials incidents, the skyrocketing number and increasingly dangerous nature of such incidents in recent years has elevated the importance of hazmat training and preparedness within the fire service. According to the National Fire Protection Association, each year, fire departments receive 354,000 calls related to hazardous materials emergency response. Furthermore, as more and more chemicals become part of our daily lives and as the transport of hazardous materials continues to grow, the complexity and dangers of hazmat emergency response have multiplied.

Not only has the presence of hazardous materials in our communities increased dramatically, but the current and ominous threat of terrorism looms large for our nation’s fire fighters. The possibility that terrorists will target shipments of hazardous materials or seek to use other weapons of mass destruction on U.S. soil, such as biological or chemical weapons, is very real. Faced with this reality, it is more important than ever that USFA work to ensure that our nation’s emergency responders are properly trained and fully prepared to respond to incidents involving hazardous materials, including weapons of mass destruction.

Enhanced Education Delivery

The United States Fire Administration and the U.S. Fire Academy have successfully and effectively helped to further the professional development of the fire service through current training and educational programs. As many fire fighters and emergency medical

personnel are unable to attend on-campus programs, the Academy has rightly moved to offer distance learning and locally sponsored delivery through the various state fire training programs.

To expand the Academy's reach and help achieve the goal of professional development among America's fire fighters, the USFA should expand their remote training and education programs. The federally-funded training programs currently offered by the IAFF provide an excellent model for the sort of delivery system USFA could utilize towards this end. Using a cadre of instructors who are both certified fire service instructors and certified hazmat responders, the IAFF offers real-world training in hazardous materials response that few institutions can match. We are able to take the training into communities and tailor the presentations to address the unique concerns of each fire department. Furthermore, a recent analysis by the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences found that the IAFF program was the most cost-effective method of live training.

By partnering with organizations and institutions that have established effective local delivery systems, such as the IAFF, to offer National Fire Academy courses to those fire fighters for whom traveling to Emmitsburg is impractical or impossible, USFA could easily and efficiently increase the number of fire fighters to benefit from its training programs.

An Advocate for the Fire Services

In addition to strengthening its own work in support of the fire service, we believe USFA has a role to play in promoting the fire service throughout the federal government. There are literally dozens of federally agencies that administer programs and provide funding that impact the fire service, but too often these agencies have little background or knowledge about who we are and what we do. We therefore urge USFA to enhance its role as an advocate for the fire service with its sister federal agencies, especially within DHS.

USFA already has an excellent relationship with the Office of Grants and Training. The two agencies work cooperatively administering FIRE and SAFER grants to local fire departments. USFA should build upon these kinds of established relationships and establish new relationships to continue acting as an advocate for the fire service and the expertise we can bring to bear within DHS and throughout the federal government.

Protecting Fire Fighter Safety and Health

In addition to enhancing its many ongoing worthwhile projects, we believe there is one significant new initiative that USFA should undertake. Since its inception in 1974, the U.S. Fire Administration has helped reduce both the number of fires as well as the number of civilian deaths and injuries from fire. Unfortunately, far less progress has

been made reducing the number of line-of-duty deaths and injuries among fire fighters. The annual number of deaths has hovered between 100 and 120 for many years. Given the advances in fire fighting science and technology, including advances in personal protective equipment as well as a better understanding of the importance of safe fire fighting operations and fire fighter fitness, these numbers remain far too high and are completely unacceptable.

The problem of avoidable fire fighter fatalities has been recognized for over thirty years, yet we as a nation continue struggling to keep the men and women who put their lives on the line every day safe. While it will never be possible to eliminate all line-of-duty deaths, we must, both as first responders and policymakers, commit to significantly reducing the number of fire fighter fatalities each year.

We understand much of what must be done to prevent many fire fighter deaths. Providing adequate training and proper equipment, establishing safe staffing levels, following safe operating procedures, ensuring the physical and mental health of fire fighters – all of these can help reduce avoidable fatalities. Unfortunately, and despite the advocacy of USFA and government-funded nonprofit organizations, the fire service has been slow to adopt the many practices that would save lives and prevent injury. Although some fire fighters and some fire departments have fully embraced many changes to ensure fire fighter safety, the traditional approach to institute change within the fire service from the “bottom-up” has, to a large degree, failed.

In my home town of Salem Oregon, for example, we experience the same problems with communications interoperability as do many communities across America. Simply put, radios belonging to the Salem Fire Department are incompatible with those belonging to the Salem Police Department. It is currently impossible for a police officer and a fire fighter to communicate via portable radio. Obviously, this disconnect can create a very dangerous scenario for both first responders and the public when timely communications is of the essence. Fortunately, Salem has a plan to overcome its communications challenges, which it is working expeditiously to implement, but for many communities, the significant challenge of public safety communications remains.

It doesn't have to be this way. The time has come for the federal government to take a bold and proactive role in reducing the number of fire fighter fatalities and injuries. The number one recommendation I can make to achieve this goal is the adoption of national standards for safe fire fighter operations, training, staffing and fitness.

The good news is we needn't recreate the wheel to accomplish this goal. The National Fire Protection Association, represented here today by Doctor Hall, has developed over three hundred consensus codes and standards relating to fire safety, including but not limited to standards for safe fire fighter staffing, training, and operations. Using an open, consensus-based development process, the NFPA and NFPA standards are widely respected throughout the fire service, as well as the federal government and private sector. Similarly, via Project 25, organizations representing public safety and the communications industry have established common system standards for public safety

radio communications, compliance with which would go a long way towards addressing many of our nation's interoperability problems.

USFA should make it part of its core mission to ensure every fire department in America complies with fire safety standards. We call on USFA to examine how the federal government can use its programs and resources to promote adherence to such standards throughout the nation. Some of the ways this might be accomplished include requiring fire departments to commit to national consensus standards in order to participate in federal programs or receive federal assistance. The federal government has vast resources at its disposal to encourage change, and we believe the full force of these resources must be brought to bear on the goal of reducing fire fighter deaths and injuries.

In addition to promoting compliance with national fire safety standards, more dollars must be invested in fire research and technology. The advances achieved from federal research sponsored by USFA, NIOSH, and other agencies have resulted in dramatically improved equipment and technology that no doubt will have a positive impact on fire fighter safety.

And, current efforts within USFA and the Congress to improve the accuracy of data collected by the National Fire Information Recording System (NFIRS) will help assure a more complete picture of equipment and technology needs. The IAFF strongly supports full funding of the NFIRS enhancement project. By providing more accurate, real-time information, the improved data collected as a result of the NFIRS reform project will better inform USFA-sponsored research efforts as well as identify additional fire and fire safety trends.

Conclusion

On behalf of the IAFF, I appreciate the opportunity to offer our perspective on the future of the U.S. Fire Administration. As you continue working to reauthorize the U.S. Fire Administration, we urge you to consider enhancing the Administration's programs and services to meet the 21st Century needs of the modern fire service, including an increased emphasis on EMS and hazmat / WMD response. Furthermore, we hope the Committee will give serious consideration to novel ways by which the Administration may help reduce the number of fire fighter deaths and injuries, including advocating for the adoption of and compliance with national standards for safe fire fighting at all levels of government. I welcome the opportunity to work with the Committee to this end.

Again, I would like to thank the Committee for its attention and I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.