



Combating Terrorism: Preparing and Funding First Responders

Statement by
Chief Edward Plaughter

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International Association of Fire Chiefs
4025 Fair Ridge Drive • Fairfax, VA 22033
Tel: 703.273.0911 • Fax: 703.273.9363

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Kucinich and members of the subcommittee, I am Edward Plaughter, chief of the Arlington County (VA) Fire and Rescue Department. I appear today on behalf of the International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFC) which represents the leadership and management of America's fire and emergency service. I am a member of the IAFC's Terrorism Committee and chairman of its legislative subcommittee.

The stated purpose of this hearing is to review the recent Council on Foreign Relations Report entitled: *Emergency Responders: Drastically Underfunded, Dangerously Unprepared*. The IAFC participated in the development of that independent task force report and agrees with many of its recommendations. Central to the findings of funding shortfalls for the fire and emergency service was a needs assessment prepared by the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA). This needs assessment was a requirement from Congress when the Assistance to Firefighters grant program was enacted in 2000.

I begin my testimony with a quotation taken directly from the Council on Foreign Relations task force report found on page eleven.

“Enhancing responder capabilities will require inputs on multiple levels. Providing response equipment is only one aspect of improving overall preparedness. Without appropriate staffing, training of personnel, and sustaining equipment and capabilities over time, new equipment may contribute only marginally to greater preparedness. Wherever possible, an all-hazards approach should be followed to ensure that, to the maximum extent possible, resources devoted to responding to a terrorist attack can enhance underlying emergency preparedness capabilities for addressing natural disasters.

“With whatever capabilities they have, however, America's local emergency responders will always be the first to confront a terrorist incident and will play the central role in managing its immediate consequences. Their efforts in the first minutes and hours following an attack will be critical to saving lives, reestablishing order, and preventing mass panic....

“The United States has a responsibility to provide them with the equipment, training, and other necessary resources to do their jobs safely and effectively.”

Mr. Chairman, America’s fire and emergency service reaches every community across the nation, covering urban, suburban and rural neighborhoods. Nearly 1.1 million men and women make up the fire service – 293,600 career firefighters and 784,700 volunteer firefighters serve in 30,000 career, volunteer and combination fire departments across the United States.

The fire service is the only entity that is locally situated, staffed, trained and equipped to respond to all types of emergencies. The fire department responds to natural disasters such as earthquakes, floods, tornadoes and hurricanes as well as to manmade catastrophes both accidental and deliberate. As such, America’s fire service is an all-hazard, all-risk response entity.

The fire service responds to 17 million calls each year that include fire suppression, emergency medical services, hazardous materials, wildland fires and technical rescues such as high angle, swift water, building collapse, trench rescue, auto extrication and others. The fire service is also heavily involved in fire prevention and education, fire code enforcement and arson investigation. America’s fire service protects the critical infrastructure of the United States and is part of that critical infrastructure – the continuance of government. Mr. Chairman, I would like to submit for the record a monograph prepared by the IAFC titled: *America’s Fire Service* which gives a brief description of the numerous activities that define this emergency first responder community.

Mr. Chairman, in your invitation you asked witnesses to address the problem of matching appropriate funding amounts to an evolving and uncertain set of emergency responder requirements and to address the role of federal agencies in supporting local first responders and emergency management officials in the event of a terrorist incident.

I can appreciate the federal government's focus on terrorism—both preventing terrorist acts from occurring and enhancing the ability of emergency responders to mitigate an attack when it occurs. That is why maintaining and enhancing the current Assistance to Firefighters grant program – now in its third year – is so critically important to terrorism preparedness and response. Preparing a fire department to deal with specific acts of terrorism requires a department that is adequately staffed, equipped and trained to deal with the normal hazards and risks found in a community. Only when baseline needs are met can departments enhance their capabilities. The Assistance to Firefighters grant program – we call it the FIRE Act – is specifically tailored to accomplish this goal.

The language that established the FIRE Act grant program states that the purpose of the program is for “protecting the health and safety of the public and firefighter personnel against fire and fire-related hazards.” Although funds can be used to purchase specialized counterterrorism-related equipment, the program is directed at addressing basic needs. And according to the NFPA's Needs Assessment that I referred to earlier, many departments remain in need of basic equipment such as turnout gear, radio communications, and breathing apparatus that only the FIRE Act can address. In fact, the NFPA found that overall, fire departments can only equip about half of each shift with portable radios. They also found that approximately 1/3 of firefighters on a shift do not have Self-Contained Breathing Apparatus and that 57,000 firefighters across this country lack turnout gear. It is important to note that all of these items are so basic to emergency response that in addition to enhancing a department's basic readiness, they will certainly be used in the event of a terrorist attack.

The IAFC strongly supports the FIRE Act and urgently recommends that it be kept as a separate and distinct program, under the U.S. Fire Administration. Under management by USFA, a part of FEMA, the program has been an unqualified success. The reasons for that are: (1) FIRE Act grants are made directly to local jurisdictions after undergoing a competitive, peer-reviewed process which ensures that the money is being spent in a productive, responsible manner, (2) grants are needs-based, whereby the local fire departments must demonstrate an actual need for the proposed equipment or training, (3) the grant program requires a co-payment for the need from the local community by ensuring “buy-in” from local officials for the specific programs and

equipment purchased through the funding, and (4) the law has a “maintenance of expenditures” provision which means the federal grant can only supplement, not supplant, local firefighting funds. The important point to be noted is that the federal funds are channeled directly to fire departments for the purposes intended.

In addition, there is 100% accountability. We know exactly where every dollar of FIRE Act grant funding has been spent. Mr. Chairman, I would like to submit for the record the three-year history of FIRE Act grants delivered in the state of Connecticut as an example of this exemplary accountability.

The IAFC also supports the terrorism preparedness block grants administered by the Office for Domestic Preparedness. This is a formula grant program that is specifically directed to provide terrorism preparedness funding through the states. While this program plays an important role in enhancing the response capabilities of certain elements of the first responder community, it has not proven effective for the fire service since we lack centralized representation at the state level. We have neither state fire chiefs nor Secretaries of Fire Safety within any of the 50 states. Instead, the command structure originates from within local jurisdictions. That is why the FIRE Act remains the only effective federal program for assisting the fire service.

Mr. Chairman, in closing, I would like to quote my friend, the late Chief Jack Fanning of the Fire Department, City of New York, who died in the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. In testifying before a Senate committee earlier that year on terrorism preparedness, Chief Fanning said: *“the emphasis must be placed upon the most important aspect of the equation – the first responder and first responder teams... If lives are to be saved and suffering reduced it will be up to them to do it. At an incident, whatever the scale, firefighters and other responders will be there within minutes, some quite possibly becoming victims themselves.”* Chief Fanning’s testimony ended with these words: *“They (the first responders) will do what they have always done – act to protect the public they serve. Knowing this, let us provide them with the tools they need to perform their duties safely and effectively.”*

Mr. Chairman, the subject of your hearing is of great importance to America's fire and emergency service. There is no question that federal support is required. The key issue is the effectiveness of that support. That is why we are solidly behind keeping and enhancing the current Assistance to Firefighters grant program as a separate and distinct program. The current program administrator – FEMA – has done an outstanding job which we fully support.

I appreciate the opportunity to appear before this subcommittee. I will be pleased to respond to any questions.