

# **INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF FIRE FIGHTERS**



**STATEMENT OF**

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**BEFORE THE**

**HOUSE SUBCOMMITTEE ON**

**TECHNOLOGY AND INNOVATION**

**ON**

**WORKING FOR A FIRE SAFE AMERICA: EXAMINING  
UNITED STATES FIRE ADMINISTRATION PRIORITIES**

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Good morning Chairman Quayle, Ranking Member Edwards and distinguished members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. My name is Kevin O'Connor, and I serve as Assistant to the General President for the International Association of Fire Fighters (IAFF). I offer our testimony on behalf of IAFF General President Harold Schaitberger and the 300,000 professional fire fighters and emergency medical personnel who comprise our organization. On a personal note, as a resident of Crownsville, Maryland, I am a new constituent of Congresswoman Edwards, as well as a former constituent of Congressman Sarbanes, so I am particularly delighted to appear before you today.

Mr. Chairman, I testify today not only as a representative of the IAFF, but as a former fire fighter who fully appreciates the critical role the U.S. Fire Administration serves as the voice of the fire service within the federal government. I spent my entire life in the fire service, starting out as a volunteer fire fighter and serving for over fifteen years as a professional fire fighter and emergency medical technician in the Baltimore County, Maryland Fire Department.

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, a terrorist attack, vehicle crash, hazardous chemical release, or even a residential fire, the men and women of the IAFF are the first to arrive on the scene and the last to leave.

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

### **New Roles, New Responsibilities**

Originally created to ensure a federal focus on the national fire problem described in the original *America Burning* report, Congress tasked 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 21<sup>st</sup> Century fire service.

The days of fire fighters whose primary function was to "put the wet on the red" are long gone. The men and women of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century fire service have evolved into highly-trained, highly skilled all-purpose emergency responders with broad responsibilities. Today's professional fire fighter is trained in such specialized disciplines as hazardous/WMD materials response and high-angle, confined space and water rescue.

Perhaps most significantly, today's fire service has evolved such that today, it has become the nation's primary first medical responder for critical illness and injury. 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. While USFA is beginning to move in this

direction, we are concerned that EMS remains an afterthought within the agency. EMS is an integral function of today's fire service, and should be recognized and treated as such within the agency.

The USFA of the 21<sup>st</sup> century must reflect the all-hazards role and mission of the 21<sup>st</sup> century fire service. While USFA must continue to integrate all-hazards training and preparedness into its programs and policies, it must also work to change the perception that it is solely focused on fire. The unfortunate reality is that USFA's all-hazards role is not widely recognized. For example, organizations and policy-makers have long bemoaned the lack of a "home" in the federal government for EMS, and have advocated the creation of a new entity modeled on USFA but devoted to EMS issues – a proposal which we believe to be duplicative and counterproductive. One way Congress can help rectify USFA's perception problem may be to simply change the Agency's name. The "U.S. Fire, EMS and All-Hazards Administration" or the like would better represent the reality of the modern fire service and the role USFA should undertake today.

## **Disaster Response**

After the botched federal response to Hurricane Katrina, Congress rightly took steps to revamp our nation's approach to emergency response, passing the Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act to ensure a coordinated response to future large-scale disasters. We are therefore pleased that USFA is currently working to develop a better means of coordinating existing state and local response for disaster deployment. To that end, we believe it is imperative to first and foremost amend the National Response Framework to better coordinate the federal response to wildland, rural and urban fires resulting from or occurring coincidentally with a large-scale disaster requiring a federal response. Emergency Support Function (ESF) #4, Firefighting, establishes the U.S. Forest Service as the lead agency in such occurrences. While this makes sense in the case of a wildfire response, the U.S. Forest Service is neither experienced nor equipped to best coordinate the response to structural fires, such as those which occurred on 9/11. Although USFA currently serves as a support agency to the Forest Service, we believe establishing USFA as co-lead to the Forest Service on ESF-4 would ensure a more effective response.

We understand that USFA is also considering organizing structural firefighters and deployable cadres in support of FEMA disaster response and recovery efforts. While we support the goals behind such a proposal, we wish to ensure that professional fire fighters are appropriately utilized and deployed during any disaster.

Our fears are predicated by our experience. During the delayed response to Hurricane Katrina, as New Orleans fire fighters worked around the clock, exhausted and in desperate need of relief, FEMA called up 1000 fire fighters to serve as "community relations officers," tasking them with the distribution of flyers. Ostensibly, FEMA utilized fire fighters for this task because they believed fire fighters would be trusted by members of the community, but it was nevertheless a tragic waste of talents and resources during a critical time.

We hope that USFA and FEMA are not pursuing this route again. Unfortunately, neither USFA nor FEMA has, to date, consulted with the IAFF regarding their proposal. As the representative organization of the nation's professional fire fighters, we hope to work in conjunction with USFA to coordinate the deployment of professional fire fighters during a disaster. We simply ask that such personnel be used effectively, recognizing their unique skills and training.

One way to help ensure that fire fighters are used effectively during the federal response to a disaster would be to establish a fire fighter credentialing system. Under such a system, the qualifications, experience, and training of fire fighters would be used to establish a pool of personnel who are credentialed to respond to various incidents. Incident commanders could better identify fire fighters who possess the skills and training needed for a particular scenario. Establishing such a system is imperative – in the past, too many well-meaning fire fighters have self-dispatched to the scene of an emergency, and too many such fire fighters have lacked the requisite training and experience to be of the most use. A national credentialing system will alleviate this uncertainty and allow incident commanders to make the most appropriate use of their most valuable resource.

The establishment of just such a system has been in development at FEMA since 2006. Given the threat of a natural or man-made disaster, there is simply no excuse for this long delay. USFA can do much to advance the institution of a national credentialing system for fire fighters, and we pledge to work closely with them to this end.

### **Voice of the Fire Service**

In addition to its work in support of the fire service, USFA has an important role to play in representing and promoting the fire service throughout the federal government. There are literally dozens of federal agencies that administer programs and provide funding that impact the fire service. USFA serves as an effective advocate for the fire service and resource for its sister federal agencies, especially within the Department of Homeland Security. Further, USFA provides a direct link to the federal government for local fire fighters through activities such as providing technical assistance and information related to federal grants.

Unfortunately, USFA's ability to well-represent the fire service at the federal level is compromised by a lack of adequate funding. The disparity between the agency's authorization and appropriation is wide and growing. For Fiscal Year 2012, USFA was authorized to receive approximately \$76.5 million, but received only slightly more than \$44 million. Further, USFA's budget has been reduced by twenty-five percent over the past decade. This trend must stop. As the voice of the fire service within the federal government, and with the myriad duties that befall the agency as a result, we must ensure that USFA is properly resourced. We believe that USFA is extremely underfunded, and believe the current authorization level of \$76.5 million is more appropriate to enable USFA to carry out its mission. We therefore urge the Subcommittee to retain or increase the current authorization level for the coming years.

### **Enhanced Education Delivery**

Lastly, we'd like to comment on a Congressional recommendation from the last reauthorization that USFA has been slow to implement. As the Subcommittee is aware, USFA and the U.S. Fire Academy have successfully and effectively helped to further the professional development of the fire service through training and education programs. As many fire fighters and emergency medical personnel are unable to attend on-campus programs in Emmitsburg, the Academy has rightly moved to offer distance learning and locally-sponsored delivery through various state fire training programs.

To expand the Academy's reach and help achieve the goal of professional development among America's fire fighters, Congress authorized USFA to partner with nationally-recognized organizations that have established fire service training programs to deliver a portion of the agency's training. Organizations such as the IAFF provide an excellent example for the sort of training USFA could deliver through this model. 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 few institutions can match. We are able to take training into communities and tailor 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 is 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 Fire Academy courses to those fire fighters for whom traveling to Emmitsburg is impractical or impossible, USFA could easily and cost-effectively increase the number of fire fighters to benefit from its training programs. Unfortunately, USFA has yet to take advantage of such training opportunities. We hope that under the new leadership of Chief Mitchell, the agency will move swiftly to implement Congress's recommendations to enhance its training delivery.

## **Conclusion**

On behalf of the IAFF, I appreciate the opportunity to offer you our perspective on the U.S. Fire Administration. As you begin work on the agency's reauthorization, we urge you to consider the expanded role of the modern fire service and how USFA can best serve and represent local fire fighters. To the extent the IAFF can assist the Subcommittee in its efforts I am happy to offer our expertise and pledge to work closely with you and your staff.

This concludes my testimony. Again, I thank the Subcommittee for its attention and am happy to answer any questions you may have.