

**Testimony before the United States House of Representatives  
Subcommittee on Emergency Communications, Preparedness, and Response  
Committee on Homeland Security**

**regarding**

**Assessing the Capabilities and Coordination of Federal Emergency Response Teams**

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Thank you Chairman Cuellar, Ranking Member Dent, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee on Emergency Communications, Preparedness, and Response for this opportunity to discuss the capabilities of Federal Emergency Response Teams.

By way of introduction, I am Fred Endrikat; I have been a Philadelphia firefighter for 32 years, and I am currently assigned as the Special Operations Chief for the Philadelphia Fire Department's Special Operations Command. I also serve the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Urban Search & Rescue (US&R) National Response System in concurrent duty assignments as the National Task Force Leader's Representative, Incident Support Team Operations Chief, and Task Force Leader for Pennsylvania Task Force 1.

I have served in various capacities at the local, state, and federal levels in disaster response operations, including a 40-day field assignment as the FEMA US&R Incident Support Team Operations Chief at the September 11<sup>th</sup> attack and collapse of the World Trade Center in New York City and a 30-day field assignment as the FEMA US&R Incident Support Team Operations Chief for Hurricane Katrina (Mississippi theater of operations) and Hurricane Rita.

I am speaking today as a first responder, but I also have the responsibility and privilege to speak on behalf of the nearly 6,000 members of the Federal Emergency Management Agency's Urban Search & Rescue National Response System.

**Background**

Similar to the rapid advances and extensive development of emergency medical services and hazardous materials response capabilities during the 1970's and 1980's, the field of technical rescue has seen significant improvement in terms of organization and training during the 1990's through today. New performance standards and accompanying training and legislative initiatives for technical rescue operations have recently been developed and teams have been assembled with all of the capabilities that are needed for the most complex and challenging incidents. The Federal

Emergency Management Agency's Urban Search & Rescue National Response System is the product of these efforts.

In 1990, following the Federal Government's responses to the disasters of Hurricane Hugo and the Loma Prieta earthquake, Congress tasked the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to develop a national civilian urban search & rescue capability. Several advanced Urban Search & Rescue teams had already been developed by individual fire departments and within regions where special risks had been recognized, such as California with its well-known earthquake potential. FEMA, with support from federal, state, and local authorities, fire departments, the nation's top technical rescue specialists, and other interested groups, developed the Urban Search & Rescue (US&R) National Response System.

As you are aware, during a disaster, the Federal Government implements the National Response Plan to provide state and local government with technical expertise, equipment, and other resources. These resources are provided by one or more federal agencies. The primary agency responsible for Urban Search & Rescue is FEMA, under Emergency Support Function #9 (ESF #9) of the National Response Plan.

The primary purpose of this system is to provide a nationwide network of heavy search and rescue teams that can be rapidly deployed to disaster incidents. The individual teams are established at the local-jurisdiction level and can be federalized and deployed by FEMA as needed for nationwide response. The US&R teams provide an organized system of resources to locate, extricate, and provide immediate medical treatment to victims trapped in collapsed structures and to conduct other life-saving operations. The US&R National Response System is responsible for the coordination, development, and maintenance of the Federal effort in providing these resources to augment state and local resources in disaster situations.

The twenty-eight Urban Search & Rescue (US&R) Task Forces are the fundamental units of FEMA's national response system, and are strategically located throughout the country. Each Task Force is sponsored by a State or local government jurisdiction and deploys with technical specialists who are divided into management and operational elements. FEMA has the ability to deploy the Task Forces in one of two operational configurations: as a Type I Task Force with 70 personnel (with a full equipment cache that includes specialized Weapons of Mass Destruction capabilities), or as a Type III Task Force with 28 personnel (with a modified smaller equipment cache) that is primarily designed to operate in weather-driven disasters such as hurricanes.

To ensure the ability to deploy at any time with the required number of personnel, teams are staffed in all positions "three-deep", and carry a total rostered personnel complement of two hundred and ten members. A significant number of the sponsoring agencies are municipal fire departments, and firefighters comprise the largest percentage of the rostered members within the system.

The FEMA US&R National Response System also provides an overhead management capability for field operations known as the Incident Support Team (IST). The IST provides Federal, state, and local officials with technical assistance in the acquisition and utilization of Federal US&R resources through advice, incident command assistance, management, and coordination of US&R Task Forces, and obtaining logistical support. The FEMA US&R Program rosters three 21-member

Incident Support Teams (the Red, White, and Blue teams). Each IST is on call one out of every three months, and members must be able to deploy within two hours of receiving their activation orders.

Each Task Force maintains extensive capabilities within seven major functional elements.

- Search Specialists utilize canines and technical electronic search equipment to locate trapped victims.
- Rescue Specialists are skilled in shoring operations, lifting, and cutting and breaching all types of building materials including structural steel and reinforced concrete to extricate trapped victims.
- Physicians and Medical Specialists (at the paramedic or equivalent level) provide advanced life support capability and pre-hospital and emergency care for Task Force members and crush syndrome medicine and confined space medicine for rescued victims. Cross-trained personnel
- Rigging Specialists work in conjunction with heavy equipment, such as large hydraulic cranes, to remove heavy debris and expose collapse voids where victims are buried.
- Structural Engineers (some of them firefighters also licensed as professional engineers) perform structural integrity assessments of structures in rescue operations.
- Hazardous Materials Specialists and Technical Information Specialists provide support to the overall search and rescue mission including planning, hazards evaluation, hazardous materials assessments in rescue operations, and technical documentation.
- Logistics Specialists support the overall search and rescue mission by providing supplies, equipment, communications, and transportation for the Task Force and managing the mobilization and demobilization processes.

In addition to having the above listed capabilities, Task Forces are structured to be able to operate under the following guidelines:

- 24-hour around-the clock operations
- Self-sufficiency for 72 hours
- Report to the Point Of Departure within 4-6 hours of activation, and to be able to deploy all personnel and the entire equipment cache by ground or air (as required)
- Cross-trained personnel
- Standardized equipment and training
- Standardized operating procedures
- Operate under the Incident Command System (ICS)

### **Current Overview**

The US&R System has played an essential role in the federal response to terrorist attacks. Eleven of the then 25 Task Forces and one management team took part in the federal response to the bombing of the Alfred R. Murrah Building in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, on April 19, 1995, and 25 of the current 28 Task Forces and two of the current three standing management teams took part in the response to the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001.

During the response to Hurricane Katrina in 2005, all 28 of the Task Forces were activated, with ten being activated a second time for the extended operations encountered. These US&R Task Forces were credited with the search of thousands of homes and buildings and the rescue of 6,587 victims. As evidenced by the FEMA US&R Program's response to Hurricanes Katrina and Rita and as highlighted by Secretary Chertoff in his Report to Congress last year, the FEMA US&R Program was one of the federal response entities, along with the United States Coast Guard, that was acknowledged for successful response operations.

Regardless of the triggering mechanism that causes a disaster, the FEMA US&R System has been built with a foundation in the concept of "All-Hazard" preparedness. This program has also been at the forefront of the implementation and field-use of Incident Command structures at incidents of national significance (which was referenced in last year's FEMA Post-Katrina reform legislation).

One of the demonstrated strengths of the National US&R System has been the ability to coordinate state and local US&R assets and quickly fold them into field operations at disaster sites (at the request of the local Authorities Having Jurisdiction). New Jersey TF1 deployed to New York City to the attack and collapse of the World Trade Center on September 11, and Puerto Rico TF-1 deployed on September 13. Both Task Forces staged alongside FEMA Task Forces at the Javits Center Base of Operations. Neither team was, or is, part of the FEMA US&R National Response System, but both are modeled in a similar fashion to Federal Task Forces in the areas of personnel rostering and equipment, and training. They technically did not come under the command and control of the FEMA US&R Incident Support Team, but at the request of the Fire Department of New York, the IST effectively coordinated their operations.

This positive interaction between the FEMA US&R Program and various levels of government is demonstrated not only during disaster operations, but also in the preparedness phase of emergency management. The benefit of the FEMA National US&R System to the first responder can be demonstrated by the fact that state, regional, and local first responders utilize the FEMA US&R National Response System's training curriculum, equipment standards, and policies as benchmarks in preparation for response to local emergencies. These rescue teams have realized that FEMA has developed a best-practices model that they have incorporated into their training and operations, and the National Program has willingly shared policies, procedures, training curricula and technical expertise in an outreach effort to first, second, and third tier emergency management response elements.

The FEMA US&R National Response System is a proven response entity of the Federal government, and is available to provide immediate response to a terrorist attack or natural disasters. Since 1991, this system has responded to 28 major disasters, and has also been deployed to support 12 National Security Special events (to include Presidential Nominating Conventions, the 2002 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City, the G-8 Summit, etc.).

## **Challenges**

FEMA currently operates the US&R System under authority drawn from different sections of the Stafford Act, and System response elements (Task Forces and Incident Support Teams) can only be activated during a Presidential emergency declaration.

Annual funding amounts to build and sustain the program have varied widely since the program's inception. The current annual cost to maintain a Task Force in a state of readiness has been estimated by FEMA to be approximately \$1.7 million. At the current level of funding, each Task Force is faced with an approximate \$1 million deficit. A significant portion of this deficit is usually made up by Sponsoring Agencies and Participating Agencies who absorb both "hard" costs (such as the payment of vehicle insurance, maintenance, and operating costs), and "soft" costs (such as the payment of salaries for members to maintain specialized rescue skills during training exercises) related to Task Force expenses.

The System has been functioning for many years without an Advisory Committee (historically comprised of members representing FEMA, Sponsoring Agency Chiefs, technical experts, labor officials, and emergency response professionals). In the past, the Advisory Committee has brought the diverse views of all stakeholders together and provided important guidance and a balanced viewpoint to FEMA with regard to the operation and administration of the US&R National Response System. The rechartering / reseating and active participation of the Advisory Committee is extremely important to the Sponsoring Agency Chiefs and US&R System participants.

Time and funding must be dedicated to continue the development of working relationships with other agencies (such as the National Geo-Spatial Intelligence Agency) and private partners in the science and technology research fields that will significantly advance our operational capabilities with the introduction of new technology.

The maintenance and new technology upgrades of the original Weapons of Mass Destruction equipment cache that was issued to each Task Force after the September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 attacks requires significant and stable funding that is currently not identified.

National US&R Task Forces are evaluated by several methods in relation to operational readiness parameters. Annually, each Task Force must submit a Self-Evaluation to the Program Office. Selected Task Forces are then identified for a Phase II Evaluation. These Operational Readiness Evaluations (where an Evaluation Team of Program Office staff and Peer Evaluators conduct a comprehensive on-site inspection and review of administrative policies, procedures and documentation, logistical readiness, training programs, financial record-keeping, and personnel files) are currently being conducted for six Task Forces each year. The System also undergoes periodic extensive audits by the Office of Inspector General. These various evaluation mechanisms have raised the bar of preparedness and readiness to the highest levels, but have also illustrated the fact that it is impossible for Task Forces to attain the highest levels this program requires without proper Program Office staffing, adequate sustained funding, and an increased focused emphasis on training initiatives.

## **Summary**

Despite the lessons we have learned from our nation's response to the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, and despite our lessons learned from responses to events similar to the devastating hurricane season of 2004 and the response in 2005 to Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, the Federal Urban Search & Rescue System has not reached its full potential.

These responses have increased the urgency for us to continue to improve our skills and develop new technologies to mitigate complicated large-scale technical rescue / collapse situations. Specific legislative authorization and sustained adequate and recurring funding for the Federal Urban Search and Rescue System remains one of the larger missing pieces of the puzzle of homeland security.

In effect, the nation has a proven “ready reserve” force of nearly 6,000 highly-trained specialists capable of immediate response to any type of incident, with an annual current cost to the federal government of approximately \$4,000 per member. This program is an outstanding example of cost-effective cooperation between all levels of government. Legislation that is currently being introduced by Congresswoman Sanchez would consolidate the statutory authority for the System under the Stafford Act and would, among other things, for the first time, explicitly authorize the US&R System and address the funding uncertainties that this program faces every Fiscal Year. This legislation will ensure a strong federal Urban Search & Rescue response capability, with measurable benefits through all tiers of emergency response.

Again I would like to thank Chairman Cuellar, Ranking Member Dent, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee for the privilege of appearing before you today.