



The U.S. Fire Administration Reauthorization: Addressing the Priorities of the Nation's Fire Service

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President

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Good morning, Chairman Wu, Ranking Member Gingrey, and members of the committee. I am Chief Steven P. Westermann, CFO, of the Central Jackson County, Missouri, Fire Protection District and President of the nearly 13,000 members of the International Association of Fire Chiefs. The IAFC represents the leadership of America's fire, rescue, and emergency medical services (EMS) from large, metropolitan, career fire departments to small, rural, volunteer fire departments. Today, I would like to thank the committee for the opportunity to discuss the U.S. Fire Administration (USFA) and the priorities of the nation's fire service.

The Fire and Emergency Service Community

America's fire and emergency services are the only organized group of American citizens that is locally situated, staffed, trained, and equipped to respond to all types of emergencies. There are approximately 1.1 million men and women in the fire and emergency services – 305,150 career firefighters and 795,600 volunteer firefighters – serving in 30,400 fire departments around the country. They are trained to respond to all risks and hazards ranging from earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes and floods, to acts of terrorism, hazardous materials incidents, technical rescues, fires, and medical emergencies.

The fire service protects America's critical infrastructure – the electrical grid, interstate highways, railroads, pipelines, petroleum and chemical facilities – and is, in fact, even considered part of the critical infrastructure. The fire service protects most federal buildings, provides mutual aid to most military bases, and protects interstate commerce. No passenger airliner takes off from a runway that is not protected by a fire department. The transport of hazardous materials is an integral part of the U.S. economy, and when they spill or ignite, the fire service responds to protect lives and clean up the mess.

The U.S. Fire Administration

The U.S. Fire Administration plays a major role in preparing the fire service for all hazards. The mission of the USFA is “to reduce life and economic loss to fire and related emergencies through leadership, coordination, and support.” In Fiscal Year (FY) 2007, the USFA's National Fire Academy trained over 8,000 fire and emergency service officers on campus and over 76,000 through off-campus and distance-learning to respond to regional and national incidents involving all hazards. The USFA also helps educate the public about fire safety and prevention through partnerships with the fire service, the media, other government agencies, and safety interest groups. Data collection is also a vital function of the USFA, including the collection, analysis, and dissemination of information on fires and other emergency incidents. Finally, the USFA also works with federal agencies, such as the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS)'s Science and Technology directorate and the National Institute of Standards and Technology, and other public and private entities to conduct research into new technologies to improve firefighter and public safety, and fire prevention, detection, and suppression.

For FY 2007, Congress appropriated \$46.8 million for the USFA, an increase of \$2.3 million above the FY 2006 level. Both the House and Senate have passed appropriations bills containing \$43.3 million for the USFA for FY 2008. Congress authorized \$68.8 million for the USFA in

FY 2008. We urge the committee to re-authorize the USFA in FY 2009 at \$70 million with a five-year authorization to ensure long-term funding stability for the agency.

Modernizing the National Fire Incident Reporting System

The National Fire Incident Reporting System (NFIRS) is an important tool for America's fire service. The NFIRS is the world's largest, national, annual database of fire and emergency incident information. Nationally, over 21,000 fire departments report to the NFIRS each year. These departments report an average of 14 million incidents and 1 million fires each year. The NFIRS is designed to receive data pertaining to all incidents in order to cover the full-range of fire department activity.

To participate in the NFIRS, local fire departments fill out reports for fires and other incidents using paper forms or computer files. These reports are sent to a state office where the data are validated and consolidated into a single computerized database. The participating fire departments receive feedback reports from the state office. Periodically, the aggregated statewide data is sent to the National Fire Data Center at the USFA to be included in the national database.

While the NFIRS system is a helpful tool for the fire service, it is not being utilized to its potential. The current format requires fire departments to submit data on paper or as computer files to the states, which then periodically upload the data to the USFA. Under the current system, there can be a delay of between 12 and 18 months in compiling national data. In addition, the NFIRS only includes about half of the reported fires that occur annually. Without accurate and timely information, the NFIRS system cannot correctly produce a timely analysis of fire damage in the U.S., and can only produce historical information based on half of the actual fire incidents.

The current NFIRS process creates long delays in getting fire data into the national reporting system, and creates the potential for decisionmakers to make policy using old or incomplete information. For example, there were a number of fires in early 2007 that caused multiple fatalities in New York and the Midwest. Without timely data from the NFIRS, it was difficult to ascertain if these deaths were a record number, a growing trend, or an anomaly receiving heightened media attention.

The IAFC urges Congress to authorize \$3 million over three years to enhance the NFIRS data collection system and transform it into a real-time web reporting tool. While we understand that it is not possible to analyze fire data overnight, we believe that it is possible to close the 12 to 18 month delay by making the system easier and more user-friendly for inputting data. The Senate appropriated \$1 million to modernize the NFIRS in H.R. 2638, the FY 2008 Department of Homeland Security Appropriations bill and we hope that the USFA reauthorization bill will include language authorizing this project.

The Role of the USFA in the U.S. Department of Homeland Security

Considering its unique relationship, the USFA can play an important role in influencing DHS' preparedness and response policies. In the post-9/11 world, a number of federal policies affect the local fire department, including the National Preparedness Guidelines, the National Infrastructure Preparedness Plan, the National Incident Management System and the new National Response Framework. It is important to ensure that these federal policies are practicable for the local first responder during an emergency, terrorist attack or disaster. The USFA brings the perspective of the front-line firefighter to policy discussions.

Currently, the USFA staffs a seat at the National Operations Center (NOC). The NOC serves as the nation's nerve center for information sharing and domestic incident management. Operating 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, the NOC collects and fuses information from a wide variety of sources to help deter, detect, and aid in the response to terrorist attacks and natural disasters. The USFA can play an important role in the NOC by obtaining information from different fire departments around the country and making sure that it is fused with other information regarding a possible threat. In addition, the USFA can relay information on a possible threat to a local fire department. For example, if there was a threat of a chlorine bomb in Kansas City, the NOC could inform me of that threat so that the hazmat teams in the Kansas City area would be ready to respond.

It is important to ensure that the USFA is adequately funded to perform its DHS role. By having more policy staff, the agency can play a stronger role in policy discussions here in Washington. The NOC position also is a vital resource for the fire service that needs funding.

Residential Sprinkler Campaign

The USFA is engaged in an aggressive plan to advocate the increased use of residential fire sprinklers. Currently, only about two percent of American homes have fire sprinklers. However, fire sprinklers can play a major role in saving lives and preventing property damage. According to the National Fire Protection Association, "when sprinklers are present in structures..., the fire death rate per 1,000 reported structure fires is lower by at least 57 percent and the rate of property damage per reported structure fire is lower by one-third to two-thirds (34-68 percent)." The USFA's public education program can inform the public about the advantages of installing fire sprinklers in homes, which should reduce both civilian and firefighter deaths and property damage resulting from fires.

Wildland Fires

A growing challenge for the fire service is the growth of the wildland-urban interface (WUI). As residential growth expands into traditionally rural areas, there is an increase in the amount of property damage that has occurred from fires. The annual estimated costs for combating wildland fires exceed \$500 million for local governments and \$2 billion for state and federal agencies, a large portion of which is in the WUI. In addition, insurance companies spend over \$250 million per year in covering the damage caused by WUI fires.

Many fire departments, especially those not in the West, are just beginning to recognize the challenges of fighting fires in the WUI. There are many tactical differences between fighting a structural fire and a wildland fire. The USFA has traditionally developed strong relationships with the structural departments around the country. By working more closely with the U.S. Department of Agriculture and U.S. Department of Interior, the USFA can become the leading agency in educating the traditionally structural fire departments about how to safely and effectively respond to fire in the interface and help educate the public about fire prevention and mitigation in the WUI.

Emergency Medical Services

It is important to recognize that EMS is an important part of the U.S. fire service. According to the USFA's "Four Years Later – A Second Needs Assessment," 67 percent of the responding fire departments provide emergency medical service. In communities with populations over one million people (major metropolitan areas), 100 percent of the departments provide EMS. As the nation develops policies to deal with threats such as large-scale terrorist attacks and pandemic influenza, the USFA can play a role in helping the fire service and fire-based EMS prepare for these threats. In addition, the USFA can help to educate the DHS leadership, other federal agencies, and the public about the role of fire-based EMS in their areas.

Conclusion

Thank you again for the opportunity to address this committee. On behalf of America's fire-EMS chiefs, I would like to thank you for your continued support. I look forward to working with you as the committee takes action to reauthorize the USFA.