

INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF FIRE FIGHTERS



STATEMENT OF

JEFFREY A. CAYNON

**PRESIDENT, HOUSTON PROFESSIONAL FIRE FIGHTERS
ASSOCIATION LOCAL 341**

BEFORE THE

HOUSE SUBCOMMITTEE ON

HOMELAND SECURITY

ON

FEDERAL EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT AGENCY BUDGET

MARCH 7, 2012

Good morning Chairman Aderholt, Ranking Member Price, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. My name is Jeffrey Caynon, and I serve as an Engineer Operator in the Houston, Texas Fire Department. I also proudly serve as President of the Houston Professional Fire Fighters Association, Local 341 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 nearly 300,000 professional fire fighters and emergency medical personnel who comprise our organization.

Today's fire service has evolved from a municipal force whose primary duty was to extinguish local fires to an integrated national system that responds to a wide range of local emergencies and national disasters. When the nation faces a terrorist attack, natural disaster, pandemic, hazardous materials spill, or any potential mass-casualty event, it is local fire fighters who respond.

It is through this lens as the nation's primary domestic defenders that we view the Administration's budget proposal for the Department of Homeland Security for Fiscal Year 2013.

The most fundamental purpose of government is to protect the public safety. Despite rising deficits, the federal government cannot afford to cut spending on homeland security funds to state and local governments. As first line of defense in protecting our homeland, the federal government has an inherent responsibility to help ensure that local fire departments can effectively protect the public safety.

Fire Fighter Grants

Among the most effective federal programs to assist local communities in protecting the homeland are the SAFER and FIRE grant programs, which provide funding directly to local fire departments to ensure such departments have sufficient personnel, equipment and training to operate safely and effectively. A study by the National Fire Protection Association recently found that fire department needs have improved in a variety of areas funded by SAFER and FIRE (formally known as Assistance to Firefighter Grants, or AFG), thus improving the capabilities of such departments. Fire Departments have experienced improvements in staffing levels, training, equipment, and health and safety. For example, there has been a forty-nine percent increase in the number of departments that own thermal imaging cameras. These cameras allow fire fighters to see the heat of fire or the heat signature of a person in areas of smoke, darkness, or even through walls. Departments which own thermal imaging cameras are able to conduct swifter and more effective attacks upon a fire, and are more likely to save the lives of individuals incapacitated or otherwise trapped by fire or debris.

There have also been significant increases in the numbers of fire departments that are able to provide their fire fighters with radios, protective clothing and turnout gear. And thanks to FIRE grants, more fire departments today are able to train their fire fighters in basic structural firefighting, hazmat response and emergency medical care. All of this translates into improved public safety.

The Needs Assessment also found similar improvements in staffing, particularly in mid-size communities. Jurisdictions of between 250,000 – 499,999 people have witnessed a fifteen percent

increase in staffing levels. Improved staffing levels have been proven to reduce response time and enhance effectiveness. For example, four fire fighters must be present at a scene of a fire before an interior attack can commence. Waiting for additional engines to arrive because a department lacks sufficient staff to put four fire fighters on an engine clearly endangers lives and property.

SAFER and FIRE are not only among the most effective federal programs – they are also among the most efficient. By utilizing a peer-review process and awarding funds directly to fire departments, grants go to those communities where they are most needed, with a minimum of overhead.

The Houston Fire Department has itself seen significant improvements in its preparedness and capabilities due to investments made through FIRE grants. For example, in 2004, the Department received a two million dollar FIRE grant to fund an innovative fire ground survivability program. The Department had previously lost two of its own, Lewis Evans Mayo III and Kimberly Ann Smith, at a fast food restaurant fire on February 14, 2000. Through the training afforded the department by the FIRE grant, HFD was able to train its personnel in survival skills and mayday prevention. By better assuring the safety of our own, this life-saving training enables the department to conduct its operations more effectively and thus better protect the public.

Although SAFER and FIRE have been traditionally well-funded, efforts to reduce the deficit have caused a reduction in funding for the programs over the last two fiscal years. For Fiscal Years 2010 and 2011, the programs were funded at a total of \$810 million. For Fiscal Year 2012, however, funding was reduced to \$675 million - \$337.5 million each.

The Administration's budget proposal further reduces funding for SAFER and FIRE to \$670 million - \$335 million each.

Unfortunately, such cuts could not come at a worse time. The recent recession and continuing weak economy has led municipalities nationwide to reduce fire department staffing and cut back on training and equipment purchases. Furthermore, although the aforementioned Needs Assessment shows improvement in fire department needs and capabilities, it also demonstrates that critical shortages continue to exist.

Although the Houston Fire Department has been lucky that we have not experienced serious shortfalls, many of my brothers and sisters at other departments around the country have not been as fortunate. In Kansas City, for example, the mayor is proposing to eliminate more than 200 fire fighter positions due to budget shortfalls. This type of cut is particularly worrisome, as substandard staffing has been proven by numerous independent studies to significantly increase response time.

Combined, such cuts at both the local and national level undermine emergency response and pose significant threats to the nation's homeland security.

Reversing recent funding cuts to SAFER and FIRE will help remedy the damage done to local public safety budgets by the recession and ensure that communities have the resources they need to protect the

homeland. We therefore recommend that the Subcommittee reverse funding cuts to the SAFER and FIRE grant programs and provide \$810 million, evenly divided, for the two programs in Fiscal Year 2013.

Urban Search and Rescue Response System

In addition to SAFER and FIRE grants, the Urban Search and Rescue Response (US&R) System serves as a significant program crucial to our nation's homeland security. In recent years we have all witnessed the heroic actions of our nation's Urban Search and Rescue teams. Dispatched to the Joplin tornado in 2011, as well as the recent Haiti and Japanese earthquakes, America's search and rescue teams are unparalleled in their skills and capabilities.

Although originally established to provide adequate search and rescue capacity in the event of an earthquake, the US&R system has evolved into an invaluable resource capable of responding to both natural and manmade disasters, including earthquakes, tornados, hurricanes, acts of terrorism and catastrophic structure collapses. Today, the US&R system comprises twenty-eight national task forces consisting of highly-trained, equipped and exercised emergency response personnel, including many IAFF members. The State of Texas is the proud sponsor of one such task force, Texas Task Force One, which counts among its deployments responses to Hurricane Katrina and the September 11th attacks on the World Trade Center.

Given the significant importance of our nation's US&R system, we are extremely concerned with cuts to the program in the Administration's budget proposal. Congress has, in recent years, provided modest increases to US&R, and funded the program at \$41.25 million in Fiscal Year 2012. Unfortunately, the Administration's budget reverses this trend and cuts funding for the program by \$13.7 million in its budget proposal, providing a scant \$27.513 million.

In 2006, FEMA estimated the average cost to maintain a national US&R team at \$1.7 million. Today, in many jurisdictions the cost exceeds \$2 million. Annual investments through the Department of Homeland Security provide funding for team training, exercises, communications and personal protective equipment, as well as medical monitoring for first responder safety and health. When insufficient federal funding leaves the task forces with budget deficits, it falls to the local governments which sponsor the task forces to fill the gap.

With many localities facing budget shortfalls themselves, sponsoring US&R teams has become a burden they struggle to afford, significantly straining task forces' readiness and capabilities. Furthermore, subsidizing US&R task forces at the local level also results in a negative impact on community preparedness by diverting funds from local emergency services budgets.

For a very minor investment, Congress can significantly enhance the nation's preparedness and response capabilities. We encourage the Subcommittee to reject the Administration's budget proposal for the nation's only self-sufficient, all-hazards, ready-response force, and increase funding for the program over the Fiscal Year 2012 appropriation.

Homeland Security Grants

Lastly, we wish to express our reservations regarding the Administration's proposal to consolidate sixteen homeland security grant programs into a new National Preparedness Grant Program. The Homeland Security Grants administered by FEMA were established after the terrorist attacks of September 11 to enhance state and local government preparedness, and each program was established in order to serve a very specific and important public safety need. The Metropolitan Medical Response System (MMRS) for example, prepares communities to respond to mass casualty events, while the Port Security Grant Program (PSGP) helps protect our nation's ports from terrorism. Given the limited federal funding afforded to homeland security grants, merging these distinct and equally-important homeland security priorities into a single block grant could cause some such priorities to go unserved.

The city of Houston provides a stark example of just this sort of dilemma. As a major metropolitan area in a border state, containing a port, significant rail and road freight and replete with hazardous industry, Houston faces significant risk from terrorist attack or other large-scale disaster. Houston has enhanced its preparedness and capabilities via funding from numerous homeland security grants, including the Urban Area Security Initiative (UASI), Port Security Grant Program, and Metropolitan Medical Response System. Because Houston received funding for various activities under numerous different grant programs, we are able to address numerous homeland security priorities and provide a more complete level of preparedness.

For example, through UASI, the Houston Fire Department has been able to invest in Chem/Bio Kits and radiation detection instruments on all responding units. Given Houston's potential risk as a terrorist target, this equipment has significantly increased our Department's capabilities and preparedness. Had we not received funding through UASI for this equipment, the Department would have been ill-able to afford this vital equipment itself. Under the Administration's proposal, it is unclear whether HFD would have been able to obtain funding for such equipment given the many competing priorities in a large state like Texas.

We are also concerned that the Administration's proposal directs the National Preparedness Grant to be administered solely by the states. As you have no doubt witnessed in your own communities, state agencies are often far removed from the needs of local emergency managers and local first responders. Under the Administration's proposal, such individuals, who often have the best knowledge of homeland security threats and needs, could be left out of the decision making process. While the city of Houston has a good relationship with its state administrative agency, this is not the case nationwide. States may, in some instances, make funding decisions based on arbitrary or political considerations. The nation's fire service has traditionally had minimal presence on the state level, and may lose important resources if funding decisions are left entirely to state officials.

Despite the essential role played by local officials and emergency responders, the Administration's proposal was developed without input from local stakeholders. We are pleased that Secretary Napolitano and others within the Department of Homeland Security have indicated in recent days that

they intend to consult with stakeholders in the continued development of their proposal, and hope to address many of these issues as we work to make improvements to the Homeland Security grants.

We urge the Subcommittee to carefully consider any grant consolidation proposal, and seek the input of all stakeholders, including state and local government representatives and first responders, before making major changes to current Homeland Security Grants. The country's homeland security is too important not to require thoughtful and sober consideration.

Conclusion

On behalf of the International Association of Fire Fighters, I appreciate the opportunity to share with you our views on the Administration's budget proposal for Fiscal Year 2013. We urge the Subcommittee, as they develop appropriations for the Department of Homeland Security, to continue funding critical investments in state and local governments to ensure that local first responders have the personnel, tools, and training they need to effectively protect the public safety.

To the extent the IAFF can assist the Subcommittee in its mission, I am happy to offer our expertise and pledge to work closely with you and your staffs.

Again, I'd like to thank the Subcommittee for the opportunity to testify today and am happy to answer any questions you may have.