

PROTECTING OUR NATION: **The American Fire Service Position** **Paper on the Department of** **Homeland Security**



Congressional Fire Services Institute

International Association of Arson Investigators



International Association of Fire Chiefs

International Association of Fire Fighters

International Fire Service Training Association



International Society of Fire Service Instructors

National Fire Protection Association



National Volunteer Fire Council

North American Fire Training Directors

FIRE SERVICE POSITION PAPER ON THE PROPOSED DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY

Overview

The American fire and emergency service was very encouraged when the president proposed the creation of the Department of Homeland Security, especially since it has long advocated the need for a central point-of-contact for terrorism preparedness. Much has changed in the post-September 11th world, but one thing has remained constant: America's fire service must have the adequate personnel, training, and equipment to respond to future emergency incidents, including terrorist attacks, hazardous materials and emergency medical services incidents, technical rescues and fires. These, plus many other challenges, are what makes the fire service America's all-hazards first responders.

In developing a new department, Congress and the administration must consider a number of crucial issues or the department will fall short of meeting its desired intent:

1. The Federal Emergency Management Agency, which is tasked with emergency preparedness and response missions, must be at the core of the Department of Homeland Security. This guiding principle must manifest itself during the planning and development of a new department. To achieve this end, it is imperative that the fire and emergency service has significant representation at the table throughout the entire planning process.
2. The definition of a "first responder" must be clearly articulated from the onset, placing heavy emphasis on response times and exposure to risks. First responders are fire and rescue, emergency medical services and law enforcement personnel. This definition will determine to a large extent the distribution of federal funds to local, state and federal response agencies. To this end, it is imperative that funding for training and equipment reach the local level where it is needed most. Moreover, existing federal programs benefiting local first responders must be preserved. Of particular importance to the fire service is the Assistance to Firefighters grant program, authorized at \$900 million for FY 2003. Congress needs to fully fund this program to bring all fire departments up to a baseline level of readiness and keep them there. Furthermore, fire departments should be able to apply these funds to all uses contained in the enabling legislation, including initiatives to hire career firefighters and to recruit and retain volunteer firefighters. Any new grant programs addressing terrorism must be inclusive of all first responders and authorized to deliver at least 90% of all funds to local public safety agencies.
3. Local first responders are this nation's primary defense against terrorism. Without sufficient staffing and training, the risk of injury or death increases dramatically. This is why fire departments – both volunteer and career – must have adequate staffing levels and continuous training. Training must consist of existing national programs that utilize first responders to train first responders, and take full advantage of state and regional training centers. Moreover, training and equipment must conform to nationally-recognized voluntary consensus standards where such standards exist.
4. The tragic events of September 11th have again demonstrated the importance of communications to public safety. This issue, itself, is not limited to on-scene communications, but encompasses a wide variety of needs including: access to intelligence data on possible terrorist threats/attacks, additional spectrum for interoperability of radio systems, and new technologies that can track the positions of firefighters inside buildings.

These are some important components of the blueprint for a Department of Homeland Security. We ask for both Congress and the administration to give these concerns their every consideration as they lay the groundwork for a new federal agency. Firefighters have long recognized their role in protecting our nation against threats of all magnitude and will continue to serve on the front lines against future attacks. No matter what the final configuration of the complete national response plan to terrorism, the fire service and other first responders will always be first to arrive at the scene. They must be properly staffed, trained, and equipped in order to make a positive difference at the "moment of truth." It is imperative that they be given the recognition and support needed to enhance their level of readiness and decrease their exposure to risks.

Priorities

Assistance to Firefighters Grant Program

The Assistance to Firefighters grant program, commonly referred to as the FIRE Act program, is a model of efficiency. This can be attributed to the fact that it is a competitive grant program that provides direct support to local fire departments for basic fire fighting needs. Another important element of this grant program is that applications are peer-reviewed by fire service experts and grants are made on the basis of needs. Full community participation is assured by the matching grant requirement.

It is crucial that the Assistance to Firefighters grant program remains separate and distinct from any new funding programs for first responders and that it be fully funded to the amounts authorized by law. This is because local fire and emergency services departments are the only organizations deployed for the purpose of saving lives and mitigating property and environmental damage caused by natural or manmade disasters. They are strategically located throughout America and staffed, trained and equipped to arrive on the scene within four to six minutes of notification of an incident. It is only at the local government level that federal funds intended for first responders can be assured of being utilized for the purposes intended. Furthermore, fire departments should be able to apply these funds to all uses contained in the enabling legislation, including initiatives to hire career firefighters and to recruit and retain volunteer firefighters.

Providing support for the basics of fire fighting enhances all fire department responsibilities, including terrorism response. The history of the program to date:

- Authorized at \$900 million through FY 2004
- Funded at \$100 million for FY 2001 and \$360 million for FY 2002
- Almost 20,000 departments (of a total of 26,350) sought funding in each of the first two years in amounts approaching \$3 billion each year.

First Responder Grant Program

America's fire and emergency service stands strongly in support of the proposed \$3.5 billion first responder grant program. The program is uniquely positioned to promote desperately needed coordination between neighboring jurisdictions and various first response agencies. To ensure that the money is wisely spent, several principles should be included in the program.

First, at least 90% of the money must reach the local level. The funding should go through the states, but it should not stop there. While terrorism is an attack upon our nation, every terrorist attack is first an attack upon a local community. The ability of our nation to effectively combat terrorism is therefore inextricably intertwined with the ability of our local communities to respond to such attacks. Thus, a paramount job of the federal government is to provide adequate resources to local emergency response operations.

Secondly, the state agencies that distribute this funding must include all first responder interests in the decision making process. Too often the fire service is left out of discussions at the state level. This oversight must be corrected.

Thirdly, the states must expedite the funding to local governments. States are already undertaking needs assessments for terrorism preparedness, so within a limited amount of time the funding should be distributed to local governments.

Finally, if a match from state and local governments is part of the requirement for receiving federal funds, then state and local in-kind contributions should meet, in full, that requirement.

Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) Training

The current WMD fire fighter training program operated by the Office for Domestic Preparedness in the U.S. Department of Justice must be retained and strengthened. The organizations that currently provide specialized WMD training under this program possess invaluable expertise and experience, which should be preserved under any plan to reorganize federal training programs. It is important to utilize existing and established programs to ensure the right training reaches the right people.

Standardization of Equipment

The InterAgency Board for Equipment Standardization and InterOperability (IAB) is designed to establish and coordinate local, state, and federal standardization, interoperability, and responder safety to prepare for, respond to, mitigate, and recover from any incident by identifying requirements for chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear or explosives incident response equipment. In addition to radio communication systems, interoperability applies to a firefighter's protective gear and rescue equipment. For instance, air cylinders of one manufacturer of self contained breathing apparatus cannot be interchanged with those from another. The purpose of the IAB is to ensure standardized and compatible equipment for use by emergency response personnel. The First Responder grant program should require that the Standardized Equipment List (SEL) prepared by the IAB be utilized for the purchase of equipment made possible by the federal grant.

SAFECOM

SAFECOM was formed as an e-government initiative with its purpose to improve wireless radio communications among and between federal agencies. Recently, the scope of SAFECOM was expanded to include state and local government and the lead agency was changed to FEMA. Since this is the primary federal initiative to improve wireless radio communications and interoperability for local fire and emergency medical services departments it is essential for the fire service to have representation on advisory committees to SAFECOM. Local public safety first responders must have appropriate input to federal SAFECOM decision makers.

Conclusion

Future events will require continuous review and evaluation of all federal programs designed to mitigate the potential impact of terrorist attacks and other major disasters. In highlighting the primary theme of this report, it is imperative that those agencies at the local level – specifically the fire and emergency services, emergency medical services and law enforcement – serve a primary role in the development of all federal initiatives dealing with national homeland security initiatives.

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