



May 6, 2009

The Honorable Robert C. Byrd
Chairman
Subcommittee on Homeland Security
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable George Voinovich
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Homeland Security
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Byrd and Ranking Member Voinovich:

On behalf of the International Association of Fire Fighters, representing the nation's nearly 300,000 professional fire fighters and emergency medical personnel, and the International Association of Fire Chiefs, representing nearly 13,000 chief fire and emergency officers, we applaud your efforts to address a potential H1N1 pandemic and providing significant resources to mitigate such a crisis through the Fiscal Year 2009 Supplemental. As you move forward with this important endeavor, we wish to alert you to the needs and concerns of the nation's fire service.

Many fire departments throughout the nation lack sufficient resources to adequately safeguard first responders and the public at large during a pandemic. Although some departments may have sufficient protective equipment and clothing to withstand everyday emergencies, the vast majority lack the quantity and type of resources necessary during a pandemic. In fact, many jurisdictions lack even the most basic products to sanitize equipment and apparatus. This shortage has been exacerbated by the current economic crisis, as state and local governments face increased fiscal demands and tighter budgets.

Distancing measures will do little good if our nation's first responders lack the means to protect themselves and others from the virus. To remedy this dangerous situation, we respectfully request that **\$260 million be immediately made available to fire departments to purchase and stockpile personal protective equipment for a pandemic event such as disposable respirators, gowns and face and eye protection, as well as appropriate medical countermeasures such as antivirals and, when available, vaccine. These funds should also be made available to ensure the fire service receives needed training** regarding the H1N1 virus, patient care and personal protective measures.

We are also concerned that fire fighters may not be afforded the same priority as other public health professionals when considering the use of medical countermeasures. The fire service

serves as the primary first medical responder for critical illness and injury in America; over 85% of pre-hospital patient care and transport is provided by community fire departments.

As the nation's primary providers of emergency medical care, cross-trained, dual-role fire fighters/EMS personnel are now the norm throughout the nation. Even in communities that officially designate some entity other than the fire service as the primary EMS provider, under most true emergency conditions, fire fighters still deliver on-scene health care. Furthermore, the high potential for absenteeism and the need for surge capacity during a pandemic will place all fire fighters at increased risk of exposure.

Despite these facts, the November 2005 *HHS Pandemic Influenza Plan* distinguishes between fire fighters and emergency medical personnel in its vaccine and antiviral distribution recommendations, placing fire fighters lower on the priority list, even behind healthy members of the general population. Given the important role fire fighters will play in the response to a pandemic, and the likelihood that a pandemic will require fire fighters to carry out responsibilities beyond their normal duties, **we believe fire fighters should be afforded the same priority status for medical countermeasures as other public health workers with direct patient contact.**

Lastly, we are concerned that pandemic planning and coordination on the local level has, in large part, occurred without the full participation of the fire service. While some communities have fully embraced and involved the fire service in their planning, many more have failed to do so, potentially jeopardizing their citizens' health and safety. **We therefore urge you to take steps to ensure that local public health agencies coordinate with local fire departments to ensure that the response to a potential pandemic be as efficient and effective as possible.**

Thank you for considering our views. We are committed to working with you to protect the public health and safety during this crisis, and appreciate your continued strong support of the nation's first responders.

Sincerely,



Chief Larry J. Groun, CFO, MIFireE
President
International Association of Fire Chiefs



Harold A. Schaitberger
General President
International Association of Fire Fighters