



**Assessing the Nation's State of Preparedness
A Federal, State, and Local Perspective**

Statement of

Chief James H. Schwartz

Arlington County Fire Department

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INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF FIRE CHIEFS
4025 FAIR RIDGE DRIVE • FAIRFAX, VA 22033-2868

Good morning, Chairman Brooks, Ranking Member Payne, and members of the subcommittee. My name is James Schwartz, Chief of the Arlington County (Virginia) Fire Department and chairman of the Terrorism and Homeland Security Committee of the International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFC). The IAFC represents the leadership of the nation's fire, rescue, and emergency medical services (EMS), including rural volunteer fire departments, metropolitan career departments, and suburban combination departments. I would like to thank the subcommittee for this opportunity to share with you some thoughts about the nation's preparedness.

America's fire and emergency services play a critical role in our national preparedness system. There are approximately 1.1 million men and women in the fire and emergency services – approximately 344,000 career firefighter and 756,000 volunteer firefighters – serving in over 30,000 fire departments around the nation. These firefighters are the only organized group of American citizens that is neighborhood-based, staffed, trained and equipped to respond to all types of emergencies. They respond to all hazards ranging from earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes and floods, to acts of terrorism, hazardous material incidents, technical rescues, and fires. Local fire departments also provide a diversity of non-traditional services to their communities including emergency management; community education about family and personal preparedness; building code enforcement; protection of critical infrastructure; and information sharing about threats and risks to their jurisdictions. America's fire and emergency services also provide a majority of the nation's pre-hospital 9-1-1 emergency medical response.

Are We Better Prepared to Respond to a Major Incident in the Homeland?

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and the catastrophic nature of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005 demonstrated major weaknesses in the nation's ability to prevent, protect, mitigate, respond to, and recover from major all-hazards events. In the aftermath of these events, the federal government, states, counties, localities, and communities all have taken steps to improve the nation's preparedness. The federal government created the Department of Homeland Security (DHS); strengthened the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA); developed the National Incident Management System (NIMS); and distributed over \$38 billion in grants to states and localities to improve the nation's preparedness. On March 30, 2011, President Obama released Presidential Policy Directive/PPD-8, National Preparedness, as a further refinement to the nation's preparedness system.

As events across the nation have demonstrated, the nation is better prepared today than it was in the 1990s and early 2000s. While major incidents, both natural and human-made, will always cause loss to life and property, events such as the response to the 2011 tornado in Joplin, Missouri; the response to Superstorm Sandy last year; and the response to the Patriot's Day bombing in Boston all demonstrate the strength of the nation's emergency preparedness system. Jurisdictions across the nation are developing capabilities to fill gaps in their preparedness systems, and studying these events to learn lessons that can be applied in their communities.

Consider these examples from the National Capital Region (NCR):

- One of the lessons of September 11 was the importance of patient tracking. In the aftermath of 9/11, it took several days to locate all of the victims that had been transported from the Pentagon to area hospitals. In response to this problem, the NCR developed a patient tracking system. Now EMS personnel are deployed with handheld devices that allow them to scan a victim's triage tag and enter basic information about the victim's identity and pre-hospital care. This information is transmitted to a regional hospital coordinating center. The center coordinates the distribution of patients to area hospitals, so that no patients are lost in the system and no hospitals are overloaded.
- The response to 9/11 also identified the need for greater emergency response capacity. This capacity needed to be standardized to ensure true interoperability for an effective response to any crisis. In order to address this challenge, the NCR developed standardized regional capabilities like mass casualty units and ambulance buses; bomb teams that coordinate through a regional organization called Metrotech; and air units to refill firefighters' self-contained breathing apparatus during an incident. On 9/11, there were only two mass casualty units in the NCR, and they were stationed at the airports. Now there are 23 mass casualty units situated around the region.
- To improve greater coordination, the NCR jurisdictions used funds from the Urban Areas Security Initiative (UASI) to interconnect the fiber optic networks built and funded by local jurisdictions to form the "NCR Net." This system enables the seamless transition of critical data, including information from computer-aided dispatch systems, throughout the region to improve situational awareness and reduce emergency call processing time.

Many similar examples exist across the nation. For example, in analyzing the response to Hurricane Katrina, many states found that they did not have intrastate mutual aid systems that would allow them to deploy fire and EMS resources in a timely manner within the state. With the support of FEMA, the IAFC developed the Intrastate Mutual Aid System (IMAS) program to help states build these mutual aid systems. During the time of Hurricane Katrina, only four states had statewide mutual aid systems for fire and EMS. Now, because of the IAFC's work, there are 34 states with robust mutual aid systems and 12 states that have completed exercises to their programs and are in the process of being deployable with assistance.

While the majority of investments in preparedness are made by local communities, it is important to emphasize the role that the federal government has played in enhancing the nation's preparedness. The NIMS and its resource-typing help local authorities from around the nation identify capabilities and share resources with each other. The preparedness grant programs, administered by FEMA, help states and localities purchase necessary equipment and training to fill gaps in their homeland security preparedness. In addition, the federal grants help to bring homeland security partners (fire, EMS, law enforcement, private sector, public health, etc.) together to plan, train and exercise together. For example, the years of planning, equipment and training purchased by Tucson, Arizona, through the Metropolitan Medical Response System (MMRS) played a major role in the effective interdisciplinary response to the January 8, 2011, incident involving Representative Gabrielle Giffords and 19 others.

The federal government also is playing a significant role in resolving the problem of communications interoperability. The Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States highlighted the tragic consequences of the communications interoperability problems that occurred during the 9/11 response. The DHS has been focused on resolving this issue since 9/11. Through more than \$13 billion in grants, including the Interoperable Emergency Communications Grant Program, and the work of the DHS' Office of Emergency Communications and the Office for Interoperability and Compatibility, the federal government is helping first responders around the nation to begin to talk to each other at the state and regional levels. Last year, Congress passed the Middle Class Tax Relief and Job Creation Act (P.L. 112-96), which allocated 20 MHz of spectrum and \$7 billion to establish a nationwide, public safety broadband network. This legislation also created the First Responder Network Authority, which is doing the preliminary planning that will allow first responders from different states to respond to a national disaster and be able to seamlessly communicate with each other.

Areas for Improvement

While the nation is more prepared for a major all-hazards incident, there is still a lot of work to do. The Great Recession cut property values and local government tax receipts, which reduced the amount of funds that state and local governments could spend on emergency preparedness. A long period of spending cuts and the sequester have reduced federal funds and programs to improve preparedness. The National Fire Protection Association's (NFPA) 2011 Needs Assessment provides some information about how the fire and emergency services have both improved and still have lots of work to do to become truly prepared.

For example:

- 51 percent of all fire departments that answered the NFPA's survey do not have enough portable radios to equip all emergency responders on a shift. This percentage is down from 77 percent in 2001 and 75 percent in 2005.
- 51 percent of all fire departments cannot equip all firefighters on a shift with self-contained breathing apparatus. This percentage is down from 70 percent in 2001 and 60 percent in 2005.
- 48 percent of all fire departments that are responsible for EMS have not formally trained all of their personnel involved in EMS. This percentage is down from 54 percent in 2001 and 53 percent in 2005.
- 65 percent of all fire departments that are responsible for hazardous materials response have not formally trained all of their personnel involved in hazmat response. This percentage is down from 73 percent in 2001 and 71 percent in 2005.

The national preparedness system depends on local fire and EMS resources to be adequately staffed, equipped and trained. FEMA grant programs, such as the Assistance to Firefighters Grant program, help to bolster the emergency response capabilities in jurisdictions that still cannot meet basic needs. However, it is clear that more work needs to be done.

The IAFC believes that taxpayer funds can – and should – be used effectively to improve national emergency preparedness. In order to help grantees better use federal grant funds, the IAFC recommends that FEMA develop a system for grant recipients to share information about the successful uses of grant funds to develop capabilities. For example, as part of the Public Health and Medical Services core capability defined by PPD-8, FEMA could post information about the NCR’s patient tracking system. If a jurisdiction was interested in developing this capability using federal funds, it could adopt the NCR system for its use and avoid costly mistakes already experienced elsewhere. In addition, as more jurisdictions adopt each other’s plans for developing core capabilities, the system will create greater interoperability of these capabilities across the nation.

Along with building and sustaining basic emergency response capabilities, the nation also needs to move forward more aggressively on developing and dispensing medical countermeasures. As the nation debates military action over the use of chemical weapons in Syria, it is important to recognize the need for the nation to be prepared for this threat at home. First responders will be on the front lines of any biological or chemical attack or the outbreak of pandemic influenza. The IAFC supports H.R. 1791, the Medical Preparedness Allowable Use Act, which would allow jurisdictions to use homeland security grants to fund the distribution of medical countermeasures to both first responders and their families. The legislation proposes a good use of federal funds to ensure the health of critical staffing needed during a catastrophic incident.

The nation’s information-sharing efforts are another area in which national preparedness can be improved. After being identified as a weakness by the Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, the nation has developed an information-sharing regime with 78 fusion centers around the nation. Many of these fusion centers lack standardization and are in various stages of implementation. It is important that these fusion centers continue to focus on collaborating with all stakeholders, including fire and EMS departments. In addition, it is important to make sure that the fusion centers are providing information to the end-users in local fire response agencies that is clear, helpful, and actionable. As the committee determines the next steps in fusion center development, any performance metrics must measure not only the quantity of information passed on to local stakeholders, but also the information’s quality and if it meets the needs of the end users.

One important tool in the nation’s information-sharing system is the Joint Counterterrorism Assessment Team (JCAT). This organization is located in the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC). It is composed of local firefighters, EMS personnel, and law enforcement officers, who are allowed to work with intelligence analysts to develop information for local first responders. The JCAT develops specific products that are distributed to first responders to warn them of new threats and the tactics and techniques they may face in the field. One issue that may arise with the JCAT is that local agencies must cover the salary and backfill expenses for the JCAT detailee. In this budget environment, many jurisdictions are unable to cover these expenses, which mean that only a few large departments will be able to participate in this program.

Presidential Policy Directive/PPD-8

PPD-8 is the latest revision of the nation's preparedness system. It sets the National Preparedness Goal, solidifies federal roles and responsibilities, and describes the National Preparedness System. The IAFC was consulted by the National Security Council staff as it developed PPD-8. Many of our suggestions were included in the final document.

One highlight of PPD-8 and the National Preparedness Goal is the focus on mutual aid. Mutual aid is a key to an effective emergency response system. Based on the principle of "neighbor-helping-neighbor," an effective mutual aid system allows fire and EMS departments to use a scalable system to call upon resources as an incident escalates. As local budgets are cut around the nation, local fire departments rely upon each other to protect their communities.

Mutual aid is also a major component of an effective national preparedness system. Many jurisdictions will not be able to meet all of the core capabilities defined by PPD-8 on their own. However, by working together, they will be able to complement each other's strengths and weaknesses and protect their citizens. The IAFC has worked with the states to develop intrastate mutual aid systems through its IMAS program. As FEMA implements PPD-8 and the National Preparedness Goal, the IAFC also urges the agency to recognize the importance of developing mutual aid through regionalism. In jurisdictions, like the NCR, the communities clustered around a border may have more in common than with the rest of the state. Programs like UASI and MMRS help to foster this type of regionalism for major metropolitan areas that cross state lines.

One concern about PPD-8 is the National Preparedness System's focus on states. For example, the Threat and Hazard Identification and Risk Assessment (THIRA) should be completed by states and the FEMA regions. The proposed National Preparedness Grant Program proposal would give states a larger say in how FEMA grant funding is allocated.

It is important that local stakeholders also have a role in the process. From a fire and emergency services perspective, all of the resources -- both equipment and personnel -- are owned by local jurisdictions. Any estimation of resources to meet the core capabilities must include the input of local fire and EMS departments. In addition, local jurisdictions best know their threats, risks and level of preparedness to meet them. The IAFC welcomes language in the latest THIRA Guide (Comprehensive Preparedness Guide (CPG) 201), which urges state emergency managers to use a whole-communities approach in filling out their THIRAs by consulting local fire, EMS, law enforcement, and public health departments. However, the record on the THIRAs has been mixed so far, with some states working with their local jurisdictions to complete their THIRAs and other states not doing so. As the committee continues its oversight of the PPD-8 process, one question should be "are local stakeholders being included as equal partners in the process?"

The IAFC also is concerned that firefighting is not listed as a core capability under PPD-8. Other missions of the fire service are covered, including building code enforcement, hazmat response, and emergency medical response. However, as recent events in California have shown, fires remain a major threat to the nation. Overseas, terrorists deliberately used fire as a weapon during the 2008 attacks in Mumbai and at the U.S. consulate in Benghazi in 2012 to cut access and draw media attention. The Al-Qaeda magazine, *Inspire*, has urged its followers to use fire as a

weapon here in the United States to cause damage and fear. As 9/11 demonstrated, firefighting will remain a core capability in an effective national preparedness system. We urge the committee to consider this oversight by FEMA as it reviews the PPD-8 process.

Conclusion

On behalf of the leadership of the nation's fire and EMS departments, I thank you for the opportunity to discuss the state of the nation's preparedness. It is important to remember that any national disaster begins locally and ends locally. However, one of the greatest lessons that the nation has learned in the past 12 years is that it requires the development of a comprehensive national system to improve preparedness. This National Preparedness System must incorporate all stakeholders at the federal, state, tribal, local, and individual levels. Through its various missions, the fire and emergency services are prepared to perform their role in the mission areas of prevention, protection, mitigation, response and recovery. It is important to recognize the amount of progress that the nation has made since 9/11, and that there is more work that needs to be done. The IAFC looks forward to working with the committee and the Administration to continue to improve our nation's preparedness system.