



Leveraging Mutual Aid For Effective Emergency Response

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President

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Good morning, Chairman Cuellar, Ranking Member Dent, 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) ranging 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 importance of leveraging mutual aid for effective emergency response.

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 – 316,950 career firefighters and 823,950 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 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.

Mutual Aid

The fundamental cornerstone of every emergency event is that the local government and local officials are the responding authority. When there is an emergency incident, a jurisdiction's local fire, EMS, and police resources respond. However, it is understood in the fire service that there will be situations where the emergency's needs exceed the resources of the local departments. In these situations, fire departments call upon their neighbors for help. Mutual aid agreements are based on this principle of neighbor helping neighbor. In many incidents, these local mutual aid agreements will be sufficient to handle an emergency incident.

In some cases, the incident may exceed the capabilities of a local jurisdiction or its neighbors. A robust intrastate mutual aid system is critical to respond to these incidents. The system manages and deploys resources to the incident scene. The key factor for statewide mutual aid systems is the timeliness in which resources can be delivered to save lives. The states with advanced and well-tested intrastate mutual aid systems are California, Illinois, Ohio, and Florida.

Situations, such as Hurricane Katrina, can exceed a state's resources and depend on a national response. The National Response Framework includes 15 Emergency Support Function (ESF) annexes to cover the planning, support, implementation and services that are most likely to be needed during a large-scale event. The ESF-4 is designed to provide resource support to wildland, rural, and urban firefighting operations that require a coordinated federal response. The U.S. Forest Service is designated as the lead agency for ESF-4.

One of the major avenues for the deployment of national assets is the Emergency Management Assistance Compact (EMAC). Originally established in 1993 and ratified by Congress in 1996, the EMAC is composed of all 50 states and administered by the National Emergency Management Association (NEMA). The EMAC serves as a vehicle for a disaster-stricken state to request mutual aid from other states. The EMAC system includes a number of benefits, including liability protections for the out-of-state responders and recognition of their professional licenses and certifications.

State Mutual Aid Programs

In July 2006, the IAFC was contracted by the National Integration Center (NIC) to support the creation of formalized and comprehensive intrastate mutual aid plans. Support for the National Fire Service Intrastate Mutual Aid System (IMAS) increased after it became apparent during Hurricane Katrina that some states need to improve their mutual aid plans to deploy resources to affected areas more effectively. For example, there was a clear need to help disaster-stricken states deploy firefighters and their equipment from unaffected areas within hours of a major disaster before relying on interstate or federal aid that could take days to deploy. The NIC gave \$1 million to the IAFC to fund efforts to improve both statewide and national mutual aid systems.

Using the "anchor states" of California, Illinois, Ohio, and Florida as models, the IAFC is helping all fifty states develop robust mutual aid systems as part of a three-year program by leveraging our relationships with state fire chiefs associations. During the first year, the IAFC focused on assisting states in the Gulf Coast region and Rocky Mountain states based on the threats of hurricanes and wildland fires. For the second year, the IAFC is focusing on states in the Midwest and Mid-Atlantic regions. By the third year of the program, the IAFC intends to assist the remaining states in the West, Midwest, and Northeast regions of the country. The plans in these states can be adopted to suit the needs of other emergency services and disciplines.

Based on its experiences with wildland fires, the state of California has created an effective state mutual aid plan that serves as a model for other states. According to the California Master Mutual Aid Agreement and Part One of the Standardized Emergency Management System (SEMS), California consists of five escalating organizational levels that can be activated as necessary:

- **Field Response:** At this level, emergency response personnel and resources, under the command of an appropriate authority, carry out tactical decisions and activities in direct response to an incident or threat.
- **Local Government:** Local governments manage and coordinate the overall emergency response activities within their jurisdiction. This level includes counties, cities, and special districts.
- **Operational Area:** This is an intermediate level of the state's emergency services organization that encompasses the county and all political subdivisions located within the county. The operational area manages and coordinates information, resources and priorities among local governments within the area, and serves as the coordination link between the local government level and the regional level.
- **Region:** Due to its size and geography, the state of California is divided into six mutual aid regions. The purpose of each region is to provide for the more effective application and coordination of mutual aid and other emergency-related activities. The regional level manages and coordinates information and resources among operational areas within the mutual aid region, and also between the operational areas and the state. The regional level also coordinates overall state agency support for emergency response activities within the region.
- **State:** This level manages state resources in response to the emergency needs of other levels, and coordinates mutual aid among the six mutual aid regions and between them and the state. The state level also serves as the coordination and communication link between the state and the federal disaster response system.

Other factors are also important to a successful state mutual aid system. The implementation of the National Incident Management System (NIMS) and the incident command system allow multi-agency resources to operate together within a common organizational structure with common terminology, span of control, and resource typing. A statewide mutual aid system depends on the establishment and maintenance of a single, statewide recognized list of resources that is categorized by type and kind. A system for ordering resources must be developed to ensure that the closest available and appropriate resources are deployed first, and that the requesting jurisdiction has an expectation of a timely response, mobilization, en route times, and on-scene arrival. When resources are mobilized, including personnel, they must be tracked. The state also must have an interoperable communications system or a plan to ensure interoperable communications, so that the responding units can effectively communicate with each other. A statewide standard for the credentialing of personnel to ensure minimum and consistent standards for performance must exist. The state must develop a compensation/reimbursement plan to identify pay rates for potential responders, handle issues relating to volunteer firefighters, and cover backfill for the responding agency. The state also must develop articles of agreement that address issues relating to liability, workers' compensation, and dispute resolution for financial and other issues. Finally, all state mutual aid plans must

anticipate the increased need to maintain the mechanical functioning of tools and apparatus and provide for the logistical needs of the responders.

The recent wildland fires in California demonstrated the advantages of having a strong state mutual aid system. At the height of the fire siege, over 13,000 firefighters and about 1,500 engines were deployed to combat the fires in southern California. A majority of these resources came from within the state of California with additional firefighting resources provided by other western states.

National Mutual Aid System

In conjunction with the IAFC's efforts to improve statewide mutual aid plans, the IAFC also is working on developing a plan for a national mutual aid system. This national system would serve as an annex to the EMAC, and strengthen the foundation for effective interstate mutual aid by assuring the existence of a system of states experienced with the provision of mutual aid. The national mutual aid system should be based on the FEMA regions. By drawing resources from other states within a FEMA region, the disaster-stricken state should be able to receive interstate assistance within 12 hours of an emergency. It is important to recognize that a successful interstate mutual aid program also would depend on continued stakeholder and financial support.

To develop a well-coordinated national fire service mutual aid system, the IAFC is working with the NEMA, the U.S. Fire Administration, and the U.S. Forest Service. The IAFC also is working with other stakeholder organizations to develop education programs to prepare the fire service for the implementation of the national mutual aid system.

Credentialing

One important issue for an interstate and intrastate mutual aid program is credentialing. The IAFC supports the development of a credentialing system that includes both career and volunteer firefighters, and provides sufficient evidence of training and agency affiliation, while not placing an excessive burden on the participants. A successful credentialing and resource typing system would focus on the ability to deploy units within and between states that are composed of both apparatus and personnel.

It is vital that any national credentialing and resource typing system be simple to understand and manage. Prior attempts at developing these systems have been bogged down by a need to be all things to all people. As a practical matter, a credentialing and resource typing system that is composed of lengthy lists of personnel and resources can create a process that is too cumbersome for the vast majority of local fire departments to adopt. The IAFC recommends that a national credentialing and resource typing system be based on a core set of capabilities that will be easy for agencies from all levels of government to adopt.

Role of Congress

While Congress has taken the most important step in supporting mutual aid by ratifying the EMAC in 1996, there are still steps that it can take to support mutual aid.

For example, it is important that the fire departments that provide mutual aid are reimbursed in a timely manner. Under the current system, the local fire departments that send resources to help must bear all of the initial costs incurred in sending the engines and personnel. Reimbursement can take months or years through the EMAC or federal reimbursement systems, causing significant financial distress on these local fire departments who were simply trying to help their neighbors. This issue came up during the recent California wildland fires when some fire departments from outside the state expressed concern about the delay in being reimbursed. Small fire departments can face severe hardship if they are forced to wait months for reimbursement. We urge Congress to examine how responding mutual aid units are reimbursed, whether they are dispatched through the EMAC system, through the U.S. Forest Service or U.S. Department of Interior, or through a direct request from FEMA.

Also, as an illustration of the need for a credentialing system that provides for standardized minimum levels of training, some of the firefighters that were deployed from other states to California through the EMAC system were not trained to respond to wildland fires. Although these firefighters were supposed to backfill for the fire departments deployed to respond to the wildland fires, the reality is that any firefighter in any station in the West could be dispatched to fight a wildland fire. In some cases, that is exactly what happened and these firefighters were used to fight wildland fires. There needs to be a greater effort to make sure that all firefighters, especially those in the West, are trained to respond to fires in the wildland urban interface.

In addition, Congress can fund a number of important programs that support mutual aid activities. Specifically, Congress should pass H.R. 2638, the Fiscal Year (FY) 2008 DHS Appropriations bills to fund the following programs:

- **The National Integration Center:** The NIC plays an important role in overseeing the development and implementation of the NIMS. The NIMS is important in ensuring an organized, unified incident command system during a national disaster. In addition, the NIC is engaged in important initiatives to improve national and statewide mutual aid and develop credentialing and resource typing programs.
- **The Assistance to Firefighters Grant (AFG) program:** The AFG's FIRE and SAFER components grant matching funds to local fire departments for staffing, equipment, training, and prevention programs. Unlike the State Homeland Security Grant and the Urban Areas Security Initiative programs, the AFG programs fund fire departments' capabilities to respond to all hazards, including hurricanes and wildland fires. Since the resources deployed in national disasters are locally-owned, it is important to bolster local response capabilities. The IAFC

supports the House-passed funding levels of \$805 million for the AFG program, including \$570 million for the FIRE grants and \$235 million for the SAFER grants.

- **The Interoperable Emergency Communications Grant Program:** The Interoperable Emergency Communications Grant Program was created by the “Implementing Recommendations of the 9/11 Commission Act of 2007 (P.L.110-53).” This grant program sets out federal funding to ensure both communications operability and interoperability by funding equipment, training, planning, and governance activities as outlined in the SAFECOM interoperability continuum. The need for interoperable communications still remains an obstacle to national mutual aid, even six years after the terrorist attacks of 9/11. The IAFC supports the Senate-passed amount of \$100,000 in H.R. 2638.
- **The U.S. Fire Administration:** The USFA plays an important role in promoting mutual aid for the fire service. By working with the U.S. Forest Service, it is helping to support operations under ESF-4. In addition, the USFA has been deeply involved in the development of a national credentialing system, including a study in 2005. The House and Senate have both passed appropriations of \$43.3 million for this program.

Conclusion

Thank you again for the opportunity to address this committee. On behalf of America’s fire and EMS chiefs, I would like to thank you for holding this hearing on the important topic of mutual aid and look forward to answering any questions that the committee members may have.