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Testimony Submitted by  
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Subcommittee on Emergency Communications, Preparedness, and Response

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Chairman Cuellar, Ranking Member Dent and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today to discuss the extremely important issue of Citizen Preparedness. My name is Philip C. Stittleburg and I am the Chief of the La Farge Fire Department in Wisconsin as well as the Chairman of the National Volunteer Fire Council (NVFC). My testimony today will focus on the Fire Corps program, which is administered by the NVFC and is a component of Citizen Corps.

In the wake of the tragic events of September 11, 2001, the nation came together in a rare show of unified support and human compassion. Capitalizing on our need to support each other and our nation in these trying times, President Bush called upon every American to dedicate two years or 4,000 hours over the course of their lives to serving others. This call to action launched USA Freedom Corps, an effort to foster a culture of service, citizenship, and responsibility, building on the generous nature of the American people. As a component of USA Freedom Corps, Citizen Corps was also created as a national grassroots effort to involve citizens in helping their communities prevent, prepare for, and respond to natural and man-made disasters and other emergencies.

Citizens have become increasingly important in making our nation and communities safer, stronger, and better prepared to respond to emergencies of all kinds. As a result, state and local government officials have increased opportunities for citizens to become an integral part of protecting the homeland and supporting emergency responders. Today, many of these opportunities are coordinated through Citizen Corps Councils and the five partner programs: USAon-Watch/Neighborhood Watch, Volunteers in Police Service (VIPS), Medical Reserve Corps (MRC), Community Emergency Response Teams (CERT), and Fire Corps. Together, these programs provide volunteer opportunities for citizens and community members to support all aspects of emergency response.

Fire and other emergency service departments across the nation are struggling with increasing demands for service coupled with inadequate funding. In addition to responding to fires and medical emergencies, firefighters and EMS personnel are called upon to respond to major disasters, both natural and manmade. In an effort to help departments face these increasing demands, Fire Corps was launched in December 2004, making it the newest of the five partner programs under Citizen Corps.

Administered by the National Volunteer Fire Council (NVFC) in partnership with the International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFC), Fire Corps' mission is to increase the capacity of volunteer, career, and combination fire and EMS departments through the use of community volunteers. These volunteers help resource-constrained departments by performing non-operational or non-emergency roles, making departments better able to develop, implement, expand, and sustain programs and services that meet the needs of their communities. In fulfilling these roles, citizens allow their local firefighters and emergency medical personnel to focus their efforts on training for and responding to critical, life-threatening situations while also increasing the ability of the department to provide additional programs and services for the community it serves.

Through Fire Corps, individuals across the country assist their local departments in a myriad of roles, including conducting fire prevention activities at the state and local levels, fundraising, providing canteen services (drinks and food) for emergency responders during lengthy incidents, maintaining emergency apparatus, performing administrative duties, and much more. The range of tasks citizens can perform is limited only by the needs of the department. In return, citizens gain an intimate understanding of the fire and emergency services and become better prepared to handle their own emergencies as well as those of their neighbors.

In its short two and half year history, Fire Corps has grown to include hundreds of programs representing more than 10,000 engaged community volunteers across America, and the U.S. Territories. Together, these programs are greatly increasing the ability of our nation's fire service to provide, maintain, and increase services to those they serve. The successes of these programs are abundant and I'd like to share just a few of these success stories with you.

In 2005, the Johnson County Rural Fire District #1 in Clarksville, Arkansas implemented a Fire Corps program by partnering with students from the local University of the Ozarks' Phi Beta Lambda organization. Today over 100 students assist this small rural department with their fire safety programming. With the help of the department's firefighters and Fire Corps members, the Johnson County RFD #1 increased the hours of its fire safety programming and 100 hours per year pre-Fire Corps to 8,600 hours a year in 2006. Since the inception of its Fire Corps program, the group's efforts have reached nearly 1 million people on the local, state, and national levels with their important fire safety messages. Through these efforts, this small department has effected a dramatic 34% decrease in fire-related property loss...all at little to no cost to the department. This was made possible by Fire Corps.

Fire Corps is helping fire/EMS departments and communities of all sizes. The Mesa Fire Department in Mesa, Arizona has also increased its ability to respond to emergencies of all kinds while providing more services to their community. Serving a population of over 455,151, the Mesa Fire Department launched their Fire Corps program in 2005. Today, 148 community volunteers, ranging in age from 18 to 89 assist the department in conducting home safety checks for senior citizens, provide translation services so the department can reach out to its non-English speaking residents, and assist family members after the death of a loved one by providing emotional support and assisting them through the necessary processes. This valuable team also assists the department by responding to non-emergency incidents, such as providing individuals with disabled cars with transportation, resourcing, and other services. Such services are vital for the safety and well-being of a community, but can also take first responders away from their primary duties of fighting fires and responding to life-threatening emergencies. Through the more than 29,040 volunteer hours donated through Fire Corps each year, the Mesa Fire Department is able to accomplish all of its programming goals, keep its community safe, and still focus on life-threatening emergency situations. Again, this was made possible through Fire Corps.

The Stayton Fire District located outside of Salem, Oregon launched its Fire Corps program in 2005 in an effort to carry on its commitment to providing outstanding service while saving lives and property. Today, the department's Fire Corps volunteers assist the department in fundraising, canteen and chaplain services, fire prevention and life safety education, and provide support for the department's Juvenile Firesetter Intervention program. The department's Fire Corps team also installed reflective address signs in rural areas of the 104-square-mile district. These signs were needed to locate homes that were not well marked or addresses that were not visible at night. Through the efforts of the departments Fire Corps team, the department has been able improve their response time to these residents, increasing their ability to save lives and property.

A program like Fire Corps that stresses volunteerism and teamwork is a perfect fit in the fire service where those values are prevalent. Prior to the creation of Fire Corps, Citizen Corps programs did not address the needs of the fire service, leaving out this crucial component of our nation's emergency services. In addition to addressing this critical need, one of the reasons that Fire Corps has been so successful is due to the guidance of the National Advisory Committee (NAC), which I sit on, which includes members of all the major national fire service organizations. The NAC's involvement ensures that Fire Corps meets the unique needs of the fire service.

Citizen Corps was created by the administration and has been funded through appropriations, but has never been authorized. Last year, the Medical Reserve Corps, a Citizen Corps program, received a separate authorization. The NVFC believes that Congress should pass a Citizen Corps authorization that includes a sub-authorization for Fire Corps. The NVFC feels that a Congressional authorization would give this valuable program increased stature. Furthermore, the NVFC believes that a sub-authorization for Fire Corps is necessary to ensure that it retains its unique characteristics linking Citizen Corps efforts to the fire service.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify. I look forward to answering any questions that you might have.