



Testimony Submitted by

THE NATIONAL VOLUNTEER FIRE COUNCIL

Before the

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Subcommittee on Homeland Security

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I'd like to thank Chairman Price and Ranking Member Rogers for giving me the opportunity to address this subcommittee today. The National Volunteer Fire Council represents the volunteer fire service of America, which numbers more than 800,000 men and women nationwide. My name is Jeff Cash. I am the NVFC North Carolina State Director as well as a member of the NVFC's Executive and Legislative Committees. I am also the chief of the Cherryville Fire Department in Cherryville, NC.

I am going to limit my spoken remarks to issues that concern the NVFC and volunteer firefighters and EMTs in particular. The NVFC is extremely supportive of the Assistance to Firefighters Grant Program, the SAFER Grant Program and the U.S. Fire Administration. Because President Schaitberger and Chief Harmes have already spoken eloquently about the importance of these programs I will limit my comments in those areas to my written testimony.

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has a variety of programs designed to help communities prepare for a major disaster. DHS' Citizen Corps program was created to coordinate volunteer activities that will make our communities safer, stronger, and better prepared to respond to any emergency situation. The NVFC and the International Association of Fire Chiefs administer the Fire Corps program, the newest of five Citizen Corps programs. Through Fire Corps, fire and emergency service departments are able to utilize community volunteers in non-emergency roles such as public education and

administrative tasks, allowing first responders to focus on training for and responding to emergencies.

Through Citizen Corps and its programs such as Fire Corps, Neighborhood Watch/USAonWatch, Community Emergency Response Teams, Volunteers in Police Service, and Medical Reserve Corps, there are opportunities for community members to support each of the emergency responder disciplines. This invaluable program is greatly increasing the ability of our nations' first responders to provide more programs and services and to focus on critical, life-threatening situations such as hurricanes, terrorist attacks, and other large scale incidents while promoting community involvement in preparedness issues.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the Harris County (TX) Citizen Corps program prepared the Reliant Astrodome in Houston to receive 25,000 evacuees in approximately eight hours. Over the course of the two weeks that the Astrodome housed evacuees, more than 40,000 people volunteered their services in some fashion.

Citizen Corps received \$15 million in FY 2007, a \$5 million cut from FY 2006. One of the great things about Citizen Corps is how cost-effective it is. Think of how much federal time, effort and money were saved because the Harris County Citizen Corps program was prepared to coordinate such a massive volunteer effort. Think of all those people who were spared having to spend even more time in dangerous, unsafe conditions. Citizen Corps is a proven program that gets results and reducing its funding is pennywise and pound foolish. The NVFC supports increasing funding for Citizen Corps in FY 2008 back to \$20 million.

While Citizen Corps programs like Fire Corps encourage people to volunteer in non-emergency roles, the federal government should continue working to credential first responders so that they are able to respond to major disasters more effectively. After Hurricane Katrina, the NVFC sent me to tour impacted areas of Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama. One of the major problems that people in those states reported with regard to the overall response from the outside was the large number of "self-dispatched" first responders who showed up with no plan and no ability to sustain themselves. In many instances, these individuals ended up doing more harm than good. Credentialing allows emergency managers to verify the identities, training and qualifications of emergency responders and deploy (or not deploy) them accordingly.

In Montgomery and Prince George's County, a recent credentialing pilot project initially excluded volunteers because of concerns over differences in background check procedures between volunteer and career personnel. The situation was eventually resolved with both career and volunteer firefighters being issued credentials, but this is just the latest example of volunteers being, at least initially, excluded from participating in non-local response activities. After Hurricane Katrina, for example, similar difficulties played a role in delaying the dispatch of community relations teams made up of volunteer firefighters.

Fire service personnel should be credentialed and dispatched based on their qualifications. With more than 800,000 personnel nationwide, the volunteer fire service has the potential to be an enormous resource for emergency managers handling major incidents. Future credentialing projects must be adequately funded so that willing and able volunteers can be identified and credentialed while minimizing delays and setbacks.

Another DHS program that is crucial in preparing the nation's fire service is the Assistance to Firefighters Grant (AFG) program, which provides funding to fire departments around the country to pay for equipment, apparatus, training, public education, and health and safety programs. Often, local governments are unable to afford the extensive training and equipment that these challenges require. The Assistance to Firefighters Grant program assists local fire departments by providing a percentage of the needed funds to pay for these necessities, while not supplanting local responsibility to provide adequate fire and emergency medical services.

The Assistance to Firefighters Grant program has proven to be the most effective program to date in providing all fire departments - both large and small, volunteer, career and combination - not only with the tools they need to perform their day-to-day duties, but it has also enhanced their ability to respond to large disasters as well. As we move to prepare to respond to major disasters, we must first ensure that local fire departments have the basic tools they need to do their jobs on a daily basis.

The program has been successful because it provides funding directly to fire departments. In addition, the program's success is directly attributed to the fact that members of the fire service have been involved in nearly every aspect of the program to ensure that it addresses our current needs. We have helped to set the criteria for each funding category, and have staffed panels to grade the applications through an excellent peer-review process.

Last year's appropriation of \$547 million for AFG was a \$2 million increase from FY 2006. This is only slightly more than half of the program's authorized level of \$1 billion. Full funding for AFG is the top legislative priority of the NVFC.

The NVFC is also very supportive of the Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) Grant Program, which provides funding to increase staffing levels in America's fire departments, including funding for volunteer and combination departments to implement recruitment and retention programs. As training standards have increased and private citizens increasingly have more demands on their time, recruitment and retention has become more difficult. SAFER grants provide volunteer departments, many of which are cash-strapped already, the resources to implement innovative programs to recruit and retain volunteer first responders.

Like with AFG, SAFER funds go directly to fire departments and the fire service is involved in developing the grant criteria and ranking grant applications. SAFER only received \$115 million in FY 2006, around 10 percent of its authorized level. The NVFC supports full funding for SAFER.

The mission of the U.S. Fire Administration (USFA) is to reduce life and economic losses due to fire and related emergencies by providing training and coordination and performing research.

USFA's National Fire Academy (NFA) conducts specialized training courses and advanced management programs on its campus in Emmitsburg, MD, and around the country through its Regional Delivery Program. NFA also has courses available on-line. It is estimated that since it was created in 1975, NFA has trained more than 1.4 million students, many of whom went back home and passed the lessons learned along to their entire department.

USFA's research is wide ranging, with current projects exploring fire detection, suppression and notification systems, first responder health and safety, home electrical wiring and more. USFA also collects information and data specific to the fire service in this country.

The President's FY 2008 budget request would provide \$43.3 million for USFA. This is far lower than the \$68.8 million that USFA is authorized at. While we have seen enormous increases in overall homeland security spending in recent years, USFA's funding level has actually been slightly reduced over the same period, causing the agency to struggle in executing its core mission. The long-term health of USFA and its National Fire Academy are critical to the fire service. The NVFC would like to see full funding for USFA but is supportive of the IAFC's request of \$50 million for FY 2008.

I'd like to thank the Committee again for giving me the opportunity to speak here today and I look forward to answering any questions that you might have.