



# **Frontline Response to Terrorism in America**

## **Statement of Fire Chief Rhoda Mae Kerr President and Chair of the Board**

*presented to the*

## **COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY AND GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS**

**United State Senate**

February 2, 2016

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

Good Morning, Chairman Johnson, Ranking Member Carper and members of the committee. I am Rhoda Mae Kerr, fire chief of the Austin Fire Department, and President and Chair of the International Association of Fire Chiefs' (IAFC) Board of Directors. The IAFC represents more than 11,000 leaders of the nation's fire, rescue and emergency medical services. Thank you for the opportunity to discuss frontline response to terrorism in America.

The fire and emergency service is a key component to the response to a terrorist incident. The revised National Preparedness Goal includes "Fire Management and Suppression" as a core capability. The local fire and emergency medical service (EMS) department will be on-scene early in the incident to provide fire suppression capability; emergency medical response, including victim triage; search and rescue capability; and, in some cases, bomb squad response. The local fire and EMS department expects to be the first on-scene and provide critical emergency response and lifesaving care for up to 72 hours before receiving any federal assistance.

### **The Evolving Terrorist Response**

This year marks the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Al-Qaeda's September 11 attacks. After 9/11, the nation took great steps to improve its preparedness for future terrorist attacks. Our main focus was another attack similar to 9/11, which involved a complicated large-scale effort planned from overseas using airlines, bombs, chemical or biological weapons. The concern was that the terrorists would use a large-scale attack and the resulting media phenomenon to raise the profile of the sponsoring organization and spread fear and insecurity in the nation, as Al-Qaeda had done using the airplane attacks of 9/11.

Over the past years, this threat has evolved. Overseas, in last November's Paris terrorist incidents and the incidents in Mumbai in 2008, the terrorists implemented coordinated attacks using small groups in multiple areas of a city using a variety of tactics including gunfire and small explosives. The 2013 Boston Marathon bombing involved two brothers using primary and secondary explosive devices. Last May's incident at the Curtis Culwell Center in Garland, Texas, involved two individuals inspired by communications with the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). The July incident in Chattanooga involved an active shooter at a U.S. Naval Reserve Center and a military recruitment center. The December incident in San Bernardino involved a husband and wife using active shooter tactics with potential pipe bombs.

These examples demonstrate that terrorists' tactics and techniques have evolved. The actors involved in recent domestic incidents have been small groups or lone wolves. They may be inspired by communications with overseas actors and may be composed of tightly-knit groups (like family members) which are harder to detect.

For the fire and emergency service, we have to prepare for not only large-scale incidents, such as those of 9/11. We also must prepare for active shooter incidents such as occurred in Garland, Chattanooga, and San Bernardino. Meanwhile, we also must be prepared for a coordinated attack using multiple actors and various tactics as occurred in Paris and Mumbai. In addition, the potential remains for a major attack using biological or chemical agents. These incidents may

occur in a major city, a suburb, or even rural America at any time. In addition, there is no federal fire and EMS response capability to provide immediate assistance to a local fire department. The National Guard or U.S. Northern Command may not be able to supply resources until 24 to 72 hours after a terrorist attack occurs.

The local fire and emergency service has actively advocated and engaged in initiatives to prepare for the evolving terrorist threat. Most importantly, we worked with our law enforcement partners and other stakeholders to remove silos that were common prior to 9/11. In addition, the IAFC and other organizations are fully engaged in helping our members prepare for the variety of threats that they face. For example, we have sponsored educational opportunities for our members to learn about the terrorism threat. We also have developed checklists and guides to help fire and EMS departments obtain information about threats to their communities and work with their communities to prepare for them.

### **Fire and EMS Preparedness**

In order to meet this evolving terrorist threat, local fire and EMS departments must take a number of steps to be prepared for potential terrorist attacks in their communities. No fire department has the capability or resources to develop information-sharing, command and coordination, planning and exercise, communications, and specialized response training and equipment capabilities on their own. Local fire and EMS departments must work collaboratively with a variety of stakeholders, including law enforcement, public health, public works, emergency management, state and local elected officials, the private sector and other local stakeholders, as well as other fire and EMS departments in the state and region, and the general public. In addition, the federal government has an important role in supporting local fire and EMS preparedness.

One of the key success elements that local fire and EMS departments need is timely and relevant information about threats to their communities. Because local fire chiefs must balance competing priorities with tightened budgets, they need to have credible information about the tactics, techniques, and procedures that the terrorists are starting to use. The federal government is an important partner in educating local fire chiefs about the threats to their areas. This information should be classified at the For Official Use Only level or even unclassified, if possible. Local fire chiefs do not need to know the sources and methods of how information is obtained; they must however know what tactics the terrorists are planning to use and how to respond to them. Such information is critical not only for the public's safety, but for the safety of the responding fire/EMS personnel as well. Lower levels of classification are important, because many fire chiefs still do not have security clearances and it is difficult to pass on classified information to other stakeholders that do not have clearances.

The IAFC supports state and regional fusion centers, which can serve as a clearinghouse of information between federal, state, and local partners. It is important that these fusion centers have local fire service representation, not only to contribute subject matter expertise beyond typical law enforcement expertise but also so that information can be made actionable for the local fire and EMS departments. For example, I have firefighters assigned to my local fusion center. In addition, the IAFC recommends that fire chiefs develop working relationships with

their local FBI Joint Terrorism Task Force and law enforcement agencies to stay aware of threats to their jurisdictions. The IAFC also has posted a generic set of fire and EMS intelligence requirements that fire chiefs can use when working with fusion centers to explain their needs.

A local fire department also can provide intelligence to the local fusion center and federal, state, and local counter-terrorist efforts. Much as some states require local fire departments to report evidence of domestic abuse, the IAFC urges fire and EMS departments to report suspicious activity, such as if the firefighters witness a heavy presence of chemicals or explosives at a fire scene or civilians asking curiously detailed questions about emergency response operations. The Nationwide Suspicious Activity Reporting Initiative provides training and procedures to local first responders to ensure that they are appropriately trained for suspicious activity reporting. The IAFC also supports efforts like the National Counterterrorism Center's Joint Counterterrorism Assessment Team, which embeds local first responders with federal intelligence analysts to develop specific products aimed at a broader local first responder audience. Fire departments can be of particular value in identifying ways to detect, prepare and mitigate attempts to use fire and hazardous materials as a weapon in a terrorist incident.

One key area of preparedness is the need for local fire and EMS departments to develop mass casualty response capabilities. Local fire and EMS departments must work with local law enforcement, emergency management, and public health agencies to be prepared to respond to an incident involving mass casualties. They must develop capabilities to provide rapid on-scene care; triage patients; and transport patients to the most appropriate hospitals. It also is important for a jurisdiction to develop a patient tracking system, so that authorities can let concerned families and friends know where injured patients have been transported. Federal grants can provide funding for planning and exercises to help communities prepare for mass casualty events.

The events of 9/11 demonstrated the need for a unified command system during the response to a terrorist incident. The IAFC supports the development of the National Incident Management System (NIMS), which is based on the fire service's incident command system. It is important for multiple agencies to plan and exercise together before an incident, so that they can function effectively during the early moments of the incident response. The need for effective NIMS implementation increases if there is a coordinated attack like the one in Paris which took place in multiple locations. Overall, NIMS implementation has been effective, due to the requirement that federal grantees certify that they are NIMS-compliant. However, we have witnessed cases, exemplified by the response to the Ebola outbreak in 2014, where some emergency support functions still were trying to adopt to the NIMS requirements.

It is important to realize that local fire and EMS departments probably will require assistance in responding to a large-scale terrorist incident, especially if the attack occurs outside of a major metropolitan area. Local fire and EMS departments rely on mutual aid agreements with surrounding jurisdictions to provide assistance during large-scale incidents. Mutual aid agreements provide automatic aid during times of need. They also help local fire and EMS departments to plan together ahead of time. Because they may be activated with regularity, mutual aid agreements also ensure that local fire and EMS departments are used to working together during a major terrorist incident. State and local mutual aid agreements also support

regionalization and regional response: not every fire department needs specialized hazardous materials or search and rescue response units if they have an agreement to use its neighbor's capabilities. The Emergency Management Assistance Compact provides a nationwide mutual aid agreement among the states to supply resources during a national emergency.

As the terrorist threat evolves, there also is a need for local first responders to engage in regional planning and exercises. As I discussed, a community can face a wide variety of threats and the local fire, EMS, and law enforcement community must be prepared to respond to major terrorist attacks and ISIS-inspired active shooter incidents. Each type of incident requires a different degree of response. Scenario-based planning and training, along with tabletop and full-scale exercises, help fire, EMS, and law enforcement to become familiar with the tactics needed to respond to the various types of incidents. For example, a mass casualty exercise in Paris on the morning of the November terrorist attack helped to expedite the response later that evening. Federal grant programs, such as the Urban Areas Security Initiative (UASI) and the State Homeland Security Grant Program (SHSGP), provide an important incentive for state and local stakeholders to plan, train, and conduct threat-based exercises together. As fire chief in Austin, I have found large-scale drills to be an effective use of federal funding.

One important area for improvement is communicating to the public about what can be done during a terrorist attack. Terrorists obviously are attempting to create fear and confusion. However, as the incident at the Boston Marathon proved, skilled bystanders are willing to assist during a major terrorist attack. Organizations, such as the Stop the Bleed campaign, support efforts to educate the public about how to provide vital first aid, such as hemorrhage control with the use of tourniquets, during a terrorist attack or active shooter event. Local fire and EMS departments can provide this training in their communities just as they provide CPR training. For example, we have a "Do Your Part" public education program in Austin that we can expand upon to promote public preparedness.

It is important to provide clear guidance on evacuation routes and whether or not to shelter in place during a terrorist incident. Clear and concise information from a trusted source, like the local fire chief, can prevent confusion. As local fire, EMS, law enforcement, and emergency management agencies are planning and conducting terrorism response exercises, they should develop pre-scripted directions and messages for the public.

An interoperable communications system is another vital component for an effective response to a terrorist incident. The Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States identified the need for improved interoperable communications between first responders. This problem also was identified in the after-action reports of the Hurricane Katrina response and other incidents. Congress and the Administration have worked over the years to address this need.

The Middle Class Tax Relief and Job Creation Act of 2012 (P.L. 112-96) provided the necessary 20 MHz of spectrum in the 700 MHz band and \$7 billion to build a nationwide broadband network dedicated to the mission requirements of public safety. This legislation also created the First Responder Network Authority (FirstNet), an independent authority within the National Telecommunications and Information Administration. FirstNet will develop and operate the new

broadband network, which is to be based on a single nationwide network architecture, thus enabling first responders to communicate with one another within and across jurisdictions. The FirstNet network will allow multiple agencies to be interoperable on-scene at an incident. It also should be more resilient than commercial networks and prevent the network being jammed by users during an emergency. In January, FirstNet achieved a major milestone by releasing a request for proposals to select a commercial nationwide partner to help it build and manage the network.

Currently, FirstNet is focused on building a network for data communications, such as streaming video of the incident to the incident commander. Public safety agencies still must depend on land mobile radio (LMR) in the short term. One of the provisions of P.L. 112-96 will create problems for public safety voice communications at the beginning of the next decade. The law requires first responder agencies to vacate their LMR systems in the T Band (470-512 MHz) by early 2023 with the Federal Communications Commission directed to auction this spectrum in 2021. Eleven major urban areas currently use this T Band spectrum, including Boston which used T Band systems for its interoperable communications during the response to the Boston Marathon bombing. It may cost \$5.9 billion to migrate these jurisdictions' communications systems to another band, and at least five jurisdictions do not have excess spectrum to which to migrate. The IAFC urges Congress to address this issue before the end of the decade.

It is important that local fire and EMS departments have the training and specialized equipment they need to respond to the variety of terrorist threats facing their communities. Programs such as the SHSGP and UASI play an important role in helping communities pay for assets to be used in mass casualty or mass decontamination response. These grant programs also can be used to purchase advanced chemical detectors and equipment needed to respond to a bioterrorism attack. In many cases, state and local grantees have used the approximately \$40 billion in federal grants to purchase the capabilities that they need, and these funds are now being used to sustain these capabilities. Federal grant funds also are used to staff and maintain local fusion centers. It also is important to recognize that federal funding acts as an important incentive in regional planning, training and exercises by bringing together all of the federal, state and local stakeholders together. The IAFC supports the concept of developing a database of state and local projects funded by SHSGP and UASI grants, so that other jurisdictions can learn how federal funds have been used. This database could allow for the better use of taxpayer funds by preventing grantees from "re-inventing the wheel" when developing capabilities.

The IAFC also supports current efforts in Congress to improve the preparedness for potential acts of bioterrorism. In December, this committee marked up the First Responder Anthrax Preparedness Act (S. 1915), which would set up a voluntary anthrax vaccine program at the Department of Homeland Security. On February 2, 2015, the House passed the Medical Preparedness Allowable Use Act, which would allow grantees to use SHSGP and UASI funding to establish programs that place kits of medical countermeasures with first responders and their families. The IAFC supports both of these bills as necessary to improving local first responder preparedness for bioterrorism attacks. We urge the Senate to pass this legislation this year.

## **Conclusion**

I thank the committee for the opportunity to represent the fire and emergency service at today's hearing. The terrorist threat has evolved since 9/11 and local first responders now must be prepared for a variety of incidents. It will take a whole community effort to be prepared for these threats, which requires the active participation of all federal, state, local, and private sector stakeholders, including the American public. The federal government provides a number of opportunities for local first responders to receive the information, training, communications, planning, equipment and coordination that are required for an effective emergency response. It is important to recognize the essential role that this committee has played in improving our nation's preparedness. I look forward to working with you to ensure that local fire and EMS departments are ready to protect their communities.