

A Statement on
Issues of National Significance to the
American Fire Service

For presentation to
Candidates for
President of the United States of America

By the
Joint Council of National Fire Service Organizations

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The Joint Council is a unique organization of eleven (11) major national fire service organizations whose voice is only expressed on matters to which all organizations have agreed.

The eleven (11) constituent organizations of the Joint Council are:

- Fire Marshal Association of North America
- International Association of Arson Investigators
- International Association of Fire Chiefs
- International Association of Fire Fighters
- International Fire Service Training Association
- International Municipal Signal Association
- International Society of Fire Service Instructors
- Metro Chiefs of the International Association of Fire Chiefs
- International Association of Black Professional Fire Fighters
- National Fire Protection Association
- National Volunteer Fire Council

The Joint Council has a serious concern about the leadership of this country being not only aware of, but supporting in a humanistic way, improved fire prevention and control efforts through a contemporary cultural orientation to fire.

The concerns set forth in this paper are not for the two (2) million members of the fire service but for the two hundred and fifty million citizens, all elected officials are sworn to protect.

Let us therefore begin.

Introduction

“The striking aspect of the Nation’s fire problem is the indifference with which Americans confront the subject. Destructive fire takes a huge toll in lives, injuries and property losses, yet there is no need to accept those losses with resignation.” (America Burning, 1973)

The enactment of PL 93-498 in 1974 was intended to address many of the needs that were identified in the Report of the National Commission on Fire Prevention and Control entitled “America Burning.” The following summarizes briefly some of the aspects of the Nation’s fire problem which the Commission studied:

- There needs to be more emphasis on fire prevention
- The fire service needs better training and education
- Americans must be better educated about fire safety
- In both design and materials, the environment in which Americans live and work presents unnecessary hazards
- The fire protection features of buildings need to be improved
- Important areas of research are being neglected

Recent Federal Efforts Hurt Fire Programs

Unfortunately, several times in recent years, the President, working through the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), has made a concerted effort to eliminate the U.S. Fire Administration and minimize the role of the National Fire Academy. Two times in the past eight years the U.S. Fire Administration has been completely eliminated from the Federal Budget proposal that OMB has prepared for consideration by the Congress.

These actions are in direct opposition to a clear Congressional Intent and concern which was expressed in the passage of the 1974 Fire Legislation. Fortunately, and with the support of the Nation's fire service, Congress has acted decisively to at least maintain the Federal Fire Programs at a marginal funding level.

After the positive Congressional reaction to reinstate the funding for the Federal Fire Programs, the OMB has responded with a far more insidious action...the removal of the primary program funds of the USFA in the area of fire prevention and arson control.

Apparently, the OMB has decided if the USFA cannot be successfully eliminated from the budget with a direct action, then the USFA will be made completely impotent through the elimination of its primary program funds.

Fire Is An Issue Of National Importance

The provision of fire and emergency medical services protection in the United States is an issue of national importance, but has been traditionally looked on as a local responsibility. Officials in each of the hundreds of individual jurisdictions throughout the country have established the form, organization, and level of public fire and emergency medical services protection determined to be adequate.

This local responsibility has resulted in the establishment of approximately 32,000 fire departments, supported by nearly 1.5 million volunteer firefighters and 200,000 paid firefighters.

The 1974 Report "America Burning" recommended that, "The Federal Government can help, however, in being a national advocate of fire protection and in providing better training and financial assistance—so that State and local governments and private enterprise can more effectively reduce deaths, injuries, and property losses from fire." Paramount among the objectives is to assist local fire services to improve their effectiveness and broaden their responsibilities from primarily fire suppression to a "fire loss management" orientation designed to prevent fires from happening and reducing their consequences when they occur.

In late 1987, a conference was held to examine the progress against the goals of the original America Burning report. While the final conference report has not been completed at this time, the conference participants noted that America still faces the same basic problems. While some progress has been made in many areas, not enough progress has been made in all areas.

In fact, in addition to the unsolved problems remaining from 1974, the fire service is now facing a much more complex environment, complicating the existing problems and presenting an entire set of new and different challenges. Many of these new challenges, such as those that are found with hazardous materials, are extremely complex and require an application of resources that currently do not exist in most areas of the Nation.

The Fire Service Serves the Nation

In most American communities, the fire service is proud of the cliché that, “When you don’t know what else to do, call the fire department.” The fire services of the Nation are first on-the-scene of nearly every conceivable type of emergency faced by our citizens:

- Hazardous materials spills and accidents
- Aircraft crashes
- Automobile accidents
- Heart attacks
- Ditch collapses
- Train wrecks
- Barn fires
- Building collapses
- Tornadoes
- Forest fires
- Broken arms
- Childbirth
- Terrorist situations
- Hurricanes
- Children locked in automobiles

The list can go on and on...truly, the fire service is the primary emergency service of our Nation.

The fire and emergency medical services need a Federal Focus, such as that which could be provided by an adequately funded and staffed U.S. Fire Administration, National Fire Academy, and Center for Fire Research.

There are several issues of importance to the Nation’s fire problem that need attention. Solutions to many of these problems could provide measurable reductions to our losses from fire. These issues include:

Fire Prevention, Education and Arson Control Issues are Key to Future

Our citizens should be entitled to live and work in an environment as fire safe as possible. With system of continued research, improved engineering and design, public education, smoke detectors (early detection), and quick response residential fire sprinklers (early suppression), large reductions are thought to be possible in fire deaths and injuries.

Progress has been made in the last decade in the areas of data collection, research, new product development, and public education. With more effective application of fire investigative techniques, and increased arson prevention and prosecution, the true scope of the Nation's fire problem can be defined. These efforts must be continued and expanded for this is the area of greatest potential impact on the fire problem. In economic terms, this is the area of greatest return-on-investment (ROI) for the Federal Government.

Protecting the Rescuer: Firefighter Health and Safety Issues

There is no pride in the fact that firefighting remains of the most dangerous occupations in the Nation. The recent efforts of the Federal Fire Programs have fallen short of past needs, much less addressing the emerging issues.

AIDS and other communicable diseases, long-term cancer risks, hazardous materials, physical fitness, diet and exercise, increased toxicity levels in today's living environment, all present monumental challenges to today's fire and emergency medical service providers.

The revision of existing programs and the development of new programs to meet contemporary needs in health and safety must be a priority of the next President.

Human Issues Challenge the Best Managers

For many fire departments, the challenges that remain unanswered are human or people problems and include such things as drug testing, employee assistance programs, racial issues, EEO, hiring procedures, and promotional plans.

For the Nation's 25,000 plus volunteer fire departments, the key problems revolve around the funding of the VFD's yearly budget, and the recruiting, training and maintaining of their volunteer firefighters.

Emergency Medical Services: The Sustaining Force for the Fire Service

Sixty percent of all of the pre-hospital emergency medical services in the Nation are provided by the fire service. Levels of care provided by the fire service range from first response firefighters on fire engines through emergency medical technician-firefighters on basic life support ambulances to paramedic-firefighters on advanced life support fire engines or ambulances.

Hazardous Materials Are An Unresolved Problem

There are over 500,000 different products that can be classified as being a hazardous material. When one of these chemicals or products is spilled or is involved in an accident, the fire service is one of the first to arrive on the scene. The new Federal SARA Title III legislation, coupled with the OSHA Title I regulations, place the fire service in a primary position for handling many different levels of hazardous materials information and response.

This was done over the objection of the fire service and without any significant funding that will assist the local fire department's preparations or response. These hazardous materials raise many unanswered questions to the fire service. No one know the long-term cancer risk after exposure to hazardous materials and little work is being done to identify the risks or to develop products to protect the rescuers from the products in the first place.

Education and Officer Development Open the Door to Tomorrow

The challenge for the 1990's will be the retraining of the fire services' current managers.

And, the primary function of the National Fire Academy should be to develop and deliver advanced level education programs for these current and future fire service leaders. In addition to the resident programs at the Academy, the Academy should expand its programs dealing with fire prevention and control for delivery to existing state and local fire training agencies.

"America Burning" states, "Federal support of the National Fire Academy is a worthwhile endeavor. Through the Academy, the management capabilities of the fire services can be improved. Priorities of fire departments can be effectively shifted, through Academy training, in the direction of more fire prevention efforts...And, most important, the National Fire Academy can help to reduce life and property losses and injuries from fire."

The OMB has also tried to eliminate the student stipends for travel and lodging for the National Fire Academy. Again, "America Burning" speaks to this key issue... "Volunteer firefighters and officers should not be expected to pay for their specialized training and would probably be unable to take advantage of the Academy's offerings in great numbers if they were required to do so. Paid firemen in many communities are in no better position to get local funds to subsidize their special training...." The Commission recommends that the full cost of operating the National Fire Academy and subsidizing the attendance of fire service members be borne by the Federal Government.

Summary

The Federal Government has a key role in assisting the state and local fire agencies. The Nation must recognize that the fire service holds a key emergency and safety position in our Nation's daily struggle with our environment. The President and Congress must re-state their commitment to PL 93-498 and to the importance of maintaining a clear Federal Focus on Fire. This cannot be accomplished when you have more fire department personnel responding to a simple false alarm in the Nation's capital than you have assigned full time to provide a federal fire focus for the entire Nation.

Therefore we ask of the Presidential Candidates:

- What action will you take to strengthen and improve the United States Fire Administration?

- Under what agency of the Federal Government would you place the United States Fire Administration, National Fire Academy and Center for Fire Research?
- Will you assure the Nation's fire service that you will provide a Presidential Appointee with fire service experience as the Under Secretary or Deputy Director of the Agency which houses United States Fire Administration and National Fire Academy in addition to the current positions of Administrator and Superintendent?
- Will you from the White House lead the Nation in a National Exit Drill from the home?
- Will you restore to and for the Nation's fire service its National Fire Academy as intended by PL 93-498?
- Will you assure that your transition team will work with the Joint Council of National Fire Service Organizations in finalizing your Nation's Fire Defense Program and provide an ongoing White House lesson to the Joint Council?

Conclusion

“America Burning” in addressing Federal involvement states “Time and again this report has made evident the need for Federal initiatives to help combat the Nation's fire problems, and also for coordination to strengthen programs now scattered among Federal agencies. These considerations point to an overriding need: A permanent agency specifically concerned with fire.”

That need still exists today.