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Assessing Central Indiana's Preparedness for a Mass Casualty Event

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Chairman Brooks, Ranking Member Payne, Senator Donnelly, Representatives Walorski and Young, and Members of the Subcommittee: Good morning, I am Steven Orusa, Fire Chief for the Town of Fishers Department of Fire and Emergency Services. On behalf of Town Council President John Weingardt and Town Manager Scott Fadness, thank you for the opportunity to discuss Central Indiana's Preparedness for a Mass Casualty Event.

From the 2011 State Fair Stage Collapse to the 2012 Richmond Hills Explosion to the Colonial Hills Baptist Church bus crash last month, our firefighters, paramedics, and EMTs are the tip of the spear during these tragic events, but they weren't the only first responders. Bystanders, neighbors, and people given the chance to go about their business decided to stay and help our personnel serve professionally and heroically. Mass Casualty Events are an amazing example of humanity, service, and teamwork.

Both the work leading up to these events, as well as quick action following the events, highlight the significant progress that we, as a region, have made over the past years responding to Mass Casualty Incidents. But there is still more work to do, and we are continuing to learn from these events and others to strengthen our preparedness and training and exercise programs as they relate to mass casualty and hostile situations.

Marion and Hamilton Counties have worked with FEMA to assess gaps and prioritize grant investments. In 2012, we completed a Threat and Hazard Identification and Risk Assessment (THIRA), a process for assessing regional capability gaps required by each state and urban area designed to prioritize investments in key deployable capabilities.

Many of the capabilities demonstrated in the aforementioned events and aftermath were built or enhanced and have been sustained through the preparedness suite of Homeland Security Grant Programs (HSGP), including the Urban Area Security Initiative (UASI) Grant Program and the State Homeland Security Program (SHSP).

As a former paramedic, US&R Task Force member, and chief, I can attest to the importance of preparing our public safety men and women for whatever may come. Grant funds provided commodities and training that were essential in response to incidents. In part, because of the

investment made in the system, and in no small part of the outstanding work of our first responders, patients were triaged, treated, and transported in an orderly manner to the appropriate hospitals based on needs.

Mass Casualty Incidents are high risk/low frequency events. This means we cannot rely on our call volume alone to be safe and effective. In order to assess capabilities, identify gaps, and create improvement plans, we must use table-top, functional, and full-scale exercises to improve and sustain our capacity to safely and effectively rise to the occasion of a Mass Casualty Incident.

Individual agencies can practice “blocking and tackling,” but until we scrimmage together and rehearse under “game-like” conditions we cannot identify and analyze the gaps critical to improve capability. These operational readiness exercises provide an environment where mistakes can be made and lessons learned when they are affordable: in a controlled training environment. The alternative is too costly.

Quite simply, our preparedness system works like it should, but we need your help. The challenge is providing the backfill and overtime required to engage our people in realistic, high quality, scenario-based exercises and at the same time keep our communities protected. Historically we have depended on UASI funding and SHSP funding. Central Indiana did not qualify for UASI funding in 2013 and it is unknown for 2014. As a consequence SHSP funding may be reduced.

In closing, our public safety men and women pride themselves on doing whatever it takes, no matter what the conditions, to serve those in need, but I believe we owe them more than that. We owe them a system which plans, organizes, exercises, and evaluates their capabilities; we owe them a system that prepares them to be successful. Our covenant with them is to do everything in our power to keep them safe and effective. When we commit them to harm’s way we commit their families to harm’s way. We have no greater responsibility. We need your support to return UASI funding to central Indiana.