



# INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF FIRE FIGHTERS®

HAROLD A. SCHAITBERGER  
General President

EDWARD A. KELLY  
General Secretary-Treasurer

June 30, 2020

The Honorable Frank Pallone  
Chairman  
Committee on Energy and Commerce  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Greg Walden  
Ranking Member  
Committee on Energy and Commerce  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairman Pallone and Ranking Member Walden,

On behalf of the 320,000 fire fighters and emergency medical responders of the International Association of Fire Fighters I thank you for holding this timely hearing on Legislation to Improve Mental Health During Crisis. The Helping Emergency Responders Overcome (HERO) Act, H.R. 1646, is ripe for consideration today as fire fighters and emergency medical responders continue to fight the COVID-19 pandemic crisis touching all corners of our nation.

Fire fighters and emergency medical responders are increasingly vulnerable to mental illness and suicide because of the highly stressful and dangerous work they perform. As you know, fire fighters and paramedics rush to all manner of emergency, including fires, accidents and medical emergencies where they encounter stressful and life-threatening situations.

The recent COVID-19 pandemic has only added to this burden. As the nation's primary pre-hospital 911 responders, fire fighters and paramedics currently face an increased call volume, as they respond to COVID-19 patients as well as general emergencies. Many such patients are desperately ill and require immediate emergency care. Many will not recover. Fire fighters perform this dangerous work without sufficient personnel protective equipment, and many times without sufficient personnel. Fire fighters are not only putting their personal safety and health on the line, they fear exposing their loved ones to the virus as well.

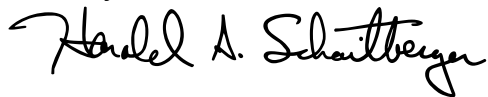
Since the initial outbreak in February, more than 11,000 professional fire fighters have spent time in quarantine, and over 50 fire fighters and emergency medical personnel have died of the disease. These accumulating stressors, combined with feelings of inadequacy and failure when patients die, are having a direct impact on fire fighter mental health. We know of at least one fire fighter who has committed suicide after shouldering the weight of treating and caring for hundreds of seriously ill patients in the hot spots of New York and New Jersey.

H.R. 1646, the HERO Act would provide fire departments the resources necessary to support fire fighters in crisis. Most significantly, the Act would provide resources for fire fighters and emergency medical service personnel to serve as peer counselors to colleagues in crisis. These peer counselors would serve within local fire and EMS departments and assist their fire fighter and EMS coworkers with behavioral health issues including post-traumatic stress and substance abuse. Trained fire fighter peer counselors are able to bring field experience and a unique understanding of the situations causing stress and anxiety to fire and emergency personnel demonstrating signs of crisis and secure help for their peer. Through peer counseling and referrals to mental health care providers trained to treat fire fighters, steps can be taken to return fire fighters and emergency medical technicians to improved mental health.

The HERO Act would also collect data on the scope of post-traumatic stress and co-occurring disorders within the fire service, direct HHS to develop and share resources to educate mental health professionals about the culture of local, state, and federal fire and EMS departments, and develop and distribute best practices on the identification, prevention, and treatment of posttraumatic stress among first responders. Bringing trained peer professionals and proven prevention and treatment modalities to the field will help reduce fire fighters receive the treatment they need and reduce suicide among frontline emergency response personnel.

Again, we appreciate the Committee shining a light on these important issues. The HERO Act will set the stage for better mental health and enhance resiliency among our nation's first responders, as they respond to everyday emergencies or in the wake of another national emergency.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Harold A. Schaitberger". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping initial "H".

Harold A. Schaitberger  
General President