

**Testimony before the United States House of Representatives
Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure
Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings and Emergency Management**

Regarding

FEMA Reauthorization: Ensuring the Nation is Prepared

**Bob Khan
Fire Chief, City of Phoenix Fire Department
and
Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Urban Search & Rescue (US&R)
Program
Central Region Sponsoring Agency Chief**

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Introduction:

Thank you, Chairman Barletta, Vice-Chair Farenthold, Ranking-member Carson and distinguished committee members for the opportunity to appear today before the U.S. House of Representatives Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings and Emergency Management.

My name is Bob Khan. I am a 31-year member of the City of Phoenix, Arizona Fire Department, currently serving the residents, business owners and visitors of the greater Phoenix area as their Fire Chief. As such, I am the Sponsoring Agency Chief for *Arizona Task Force 1*, one of the 28 Urban Search and Rescue (US&R) Teams in the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Urban Search and Rescue National Response System. I have been asked to serve the FEMA Urban Search and Rescue Program as one of three Sponsoring Agency Chief Representatives, representing the ten Central Region teams.

US&R

I appear before you today as a Sponsoring Agency Chief. I want you to know how proud I am of this program. The men and women that serve our nation through the US&R program are competent and committed professionals that care deeply for the program and for the citizens that we serve. Each and every team member is a professional provider in his or her locale. Whether a firefighter or a medical doctor or a trained search-dog handler, these personnel respond to national disasters with the same skill sets that they apply every day in their hometowns. The concept is fairly simple: utilization of an all-hazards approach to incident mitigation utilizing special training, special equipment and special people.

The US&R system is part of a tiered approach to disaster management. The system has the capability to augment local and state resources with federally sponsored teams that can readily plug into operations at the local level following the National Incident Management System. These US&R teams, made up of local providers that are on their local payrolls until activated, are far less expensive to maintain than a resource that may otherwise be fully funded by the federal government. The 28 US&R teams and their localities benefit from the training, equipment and experience that come from being part of the program. Just as the system members apply the skills learned at home to national disasters, they apply the lessons learned while on federal missions to the emergency or planning needs of their local jurisdictions. The same search and rescue methods that were utilized and refined during the responses to the September 11th attacks, Hurricanes Katrina and Sandy, and the tornado response in Oklahoma are performed daily throughout your hometowns in America by our members. Many of the planning methods learned by the team members in this system were applied just two weeks ago while responding to the Colorado floods.

All five of the task forces deployed to the recent flooding in Colorado were from the Central Region. Our training, equipment and processes worked and lives were certainly saved as a result. These deployed teams knew each other and operated from a common operating platform grounded in training, similar equipment and common policies. Many of the areas in Colorado, because of the flooding, were only accessible by aircraft or boats. Fortunately for the victims in

Colorado, all 28 task forces were able to increase their water operations capabilities by adding needed watercraft to their equipment cache during this past fiscal year, which allowed us to more effectively respond to the vast and complex needs that resulted from this catastrophic flooding. Several of the remaining 28 US&R teams were on standby at their points of departure, waiting to deploy as either augmentation or in relief of the first teams that had been deployed. The US&R Program Office also worked diligently to coordinate the deployment of the teams and to ensure the practices applied to any domestic response would also be consistently applied here. As the Central Region Sponsoring Agency Chief representative of the deployed teams, it was gratifying to know that federal support was there and that the activation orders were spelled out.

In the aftermath of the tornado-caused destruction in Oklahoma, capabilities brought to the theater of operation included structural evaluation of buildings by structural engineers including stabilization of damaged structures, i.e., shoring and cribbing of walls, roofs, and flooring, along with the critical expertise needed to determine the structural integrity of a building prior to inserting teams to assist with search and rescue efforts of any possible victims. In comparison to a typical local first responder, a US&R task force is able to conduct physical search and heavy rescue operations in collapsed, re-enforced concrete buildings with all the equipment and supplies necessary for the task force to be self sufficient for up to 72 hours without impacting the strained local resources needed by local authorities.

A prime example of how FEMA US&R task forces bring the ability to be a “force multiplier” was demonstrated by the eight US&R task forces that arrived in New York following the landfall of Hurricane Sandy. After search and rescue efforts were completed, all eight task forces were held in theater to assist local authorities with recovery efforts. Because of the support of all the sponsoring agency chiefs of each of the task forces, a multi-agency team took part in the humanity efforts needed in the heavily populated areas of New York City and on Long Island. Because they were also trained firefighters and paramedics, the task forces went door to door in high-rise buildings. Others went into the neighborhoods at the request of the New York City Office of Emergency Management. The task forces provided welfare checks and delivered desperately needed supplies to residents who were without both running water and electricity. Using their expertise in logistics, the task forces provided additional assistance in the following three days by setting up supply stations for those New York residents in need of food, water, toiletries and diapers.

Within 12 hours of tornados touching down in Oklahoma this past spring, FEMA US&R task forces were on the ground and in theater providing search and rescue efforts. An additional capability that each task force brought included human remains canine assets, along with civilian structural engineers that deployed with each task force. This asset assisted local authorities with the ability to quickly clear affected structures and neighborhoods.

With every deployment, we discover opportunities for improvement and we feel confident that after-action issues will be addressed by the US&R teams as well as the program office. I would like to thank Mr. Nimmich, Mr. Fenton, Mr. Framer and the entire US&R program staff for their efforts and support. Mr. Nimmich has clearly made every effort to make himself and his staff available to the Sponsoring Agency Chief’s representatives and the Task Force Leaders’ representatives. This increased spirit of cooperation will go a long way toward making the

program even better. This will ensure our teams are mobilized and transported to the disaster site within the window of opportunity necessary for successful search and rescue operations, whether in a domestic or foreign theater.

US&R Needs

From a Sponsoring Agency Chief's perspective, there are legal and financial liabilities that are of concern. We want to send the best trained teams to assist others while assuring our localities are not left vulnerable and exposed. In this economic climate, expenses that have been borne by sponsoring agencies in the past are being more closely scrutinized by our localities. Many of the sponsoring agencies are facing staffing cuts that have not been seen in thirty years. We are continually being asked to do more with less in our municipalities. It is increasingly difficult to place a fire company out of service for mandatory US&R training or equipment maintenance when we do not have enough resources to protect our community at the levels we have in the past.

We feel it important for this program to have consistent funding in order to support training and exercises, acquisition and maintenance of equipment and medical monitoring for the responders.

Workers compensation and liability protection for our civilian personnel are also of critical importance. There is a very real risk of injury and death to our task force members when they are deployed. God forbid anything awful were to happen to them in an already dire situation, but these are things that we have to think about and we want to ensure the proper liability protections, coverage and compensation are in place for that member and their family.

Additionally, we want to ensure our deployed members' jobs remain secure until they safely return home. These assurances protect civilian members of the US&R system (non-uniformed personnel such as physicians, structural engineers and canine handlers) from employment discrimination and retaliation as a result of engaging in federal US&R activities. For example, we faced this situation when one of our heavy riggers, Don Childress, faced termination from his civilian employer if he chose to respond with us to New Orleans. Fortunately for us and for the residents of New Orleans, Don came, but sadly, he did lose his job.

Conclusion

I am thankful to the Committee for this opportunity to discuss the US&R program and how it benefits our communities. We look forward to working with the Committee on the FEMA reauthorization and stand ready to assist in making this proven system better today and into the future.