TESTIMONY

of

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on

Incident Command, Control, and Communications during Catastrophic Events

before the
Subcommittee on Emergency Preparedness, Science, and Technology
House Committee on Homeland Security

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Good morning, Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Pascrell, and distinguished Members of the House Committee on Homeland Security. My name is Chuck Canterbury, National President of the Fraternal Order of Police. I am the elected spokesperson of more than 321,000 rank-and-file police officers—the largest law enforcement labor organization in the United States. I am here this afternoon to share with you the views of the F.O.P. on the challenges faced by law enforcement officers during critical incidents.

Before I begin my testimony, I want to offer my congratulations to Chairman Reichert, a thirty-year law enforcement veteran, for having assumed the chairmanship of this Subcommittee. The F.O.P. often feels that law enforcement's preventive role in homeland security is overlooked in favor of "response and recovery," and we believe that his experience will greatly benefit the work of his Subcommittee and the Committee as a whole.

Command and control during a critical incident, particularly in the first few hours after an event, is the single most important factor in mitigating the loss of life and property.

However, the effectiveness of the Incident Commander, and his ability to maintain oversight of the situation, hinges on his ability to communicate with the myriad of public safety, governmental, and private entities who play a role in the response to a critical incident. In short, without the ability to talk to the various elements which play a role in critical incident response, even the best laid preparations can quickly come undone. My testimony this afternoon will focus on the role of the Incident Commander and the vital communications needs of the command in particular.

In order to establish and maintain command and control, most emergency services, particularly when multiple layers of government or first responder disciplines are involved, utilize an Incident Command Structure or Incident Command System (ICS). An ICS features, or should feature, a common organizational structure and apply key management principles in a standardized way by providing a means to coordinate the efforts of individual agencies to achieve three main priorities: life safety, incident stability, and conservation of property. Generally speaking, an ICS has five major functions: command, planning, operations, logistics, and finance/administration.

These three priorities and five elements are present in every Incident Command System and its use is not limited to large scale incidents. In fact, most communities use some form of ICS to respond to "routine emergencies" or small scale events and, in many cases, all five elements of ICS are relevant to some extent, though one person may be able manage them all.

For example, after receiving reports of a single car accident on a busy highway, a single dispatcher and the appropriate command authority can deploy a variety of emergency service assets—law enforcement officers to secure the scene and divert traffic flow, firefighters to extract individuals from the car or assist with any spills of hazardous materials, and emergency medical technicians to treat any injuries. Under ICS theory, the scale of the response expands to meet the scale of the incident; for emergency response to be effective, it must be complete, whether the situation is as minor as a fender-bender, or a widespread, catastrophic event like a hurricane or terrorist attack.

The highest ranking position within the ICS is the Incident Commander, who is ultimately responsible for all activities that take place during an incident, including the development and implementation of strategic decisions and the ordering and releasing of resources. In order to make these life-and-death decisions, an Incident Commander must be able to receive accurate information from assets in the field and to communicate with those assets during the entirety of the incident. A common operating picture is necessary for consistency at all levels of incident management across jurisdictions, as well as between various governmental jurisdictions and private-sector and nongovernmental entities that may be engaged.

The entire command and control doctrine depends on integrated systems for communication, to allow data to be continuously updated during an incident, providing a common framework that covers the incident's life cycle across jurisdictions and disciplines. With such a communication system in place, the Incident Commander is able to disseminate warnings to civilians caught up in the incident as well as public safety officers involved in the response; to formulate, execute, and communicate operational decisions at the incident site, as well as between incident management entities across jurisdictions and functional agencies; to prepare for potential requirements and requests supporting incident management activities; and develop and maintain overall awareness and understanding of an incident within and across jurisdictions.

Without reliable and effective communications, the effectiveness of ICS is compromised, because it is impossible for the Incident Commander to establish and maintain a common operational picture of the incident, and thus he is unable to make effective, consistent, and timely decisions.

Consider, for example, the failure of the communications system serving the New Orleans Police Department, which was inoperative for three days following the hurricane. At one point, hundreds of New Orleans officers were trying to communicate on two radio channels on a back-up system, forcing them to wait for an opening in radio traffic to transmit or receive critical information.

"Interoperability" is a frequent post-incident buzzword, but little real progress has been made on developing and implementing truly interoperable communications systems. For instance, in 1997, the F.O.P. pushed for legislation that provided 24MHz of spectrum on the 700MHz band for use by public safety agencies.

Yet, in our nation's most populous areas, television broadcasters still occupy this spectrum nearly nine years after it was allocated for the ***exclusive*** use of public safety.

The F.O.P. and other public safety organizations are lobbying Congress to set a hard date for broadcasters to vacate this spectrum in order to increase the capacity of current systems, alleviate dangerous radio communications congestion, and allow implementation of new and expanded multi-agency and wide-area radio systems. This will enable greater communications interoperability among agencies at all levels of government and allow the implementation of newer, more advanced mission critical communications, including high speed data, imaging and video systems. But, I am saddened to say, we are encountering resistance from certain members of Congress who are reluctant to take on the broadcasters and a successful conclusion on this issue is anything but certain.

The effectiveness of any Incident Commander and the entire ICS paradigm is tied to the ability to communicate quickly and reliably. If we are to improve our ability to respond to a catastrophic event, then the first order of business must be to address the communications needs of public safety agencies at every level of government.

I want to thank you, Mr. Chairman, and Ranking Member Pascrell, as well as the other Members of this distinguished Subcommittee, for your continued leadership and for the chance to appear before you today. I will now take any questions you may have.