



***International Association of Fire Fighters
AFL-CIO, CLC***

*Testimony before
the Standing Committee on Finance*

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Good morning,

My name is Sean McManus, and I am Assistant to the General President for Canadian Operations with the International Association of Fire Fighters. On behalf of General President Harold Schaitberger and the 17,000 professional fire fighters and emergency response personnel we represent in Canada, we appreciate the opportunity to participate once again in this important prebudget consultation exercise.

As all of you are aware, from the submission we filed in August, and from our previous appearances before this committee, the IAFF has long advocated pension reform for Canada's professional fire fighters, most recently in the form of an increased annual pension accrual rate of 2.33 per cent for years of credited service. While this issue has not yet been achieved, the issue has continued to advance, thanks in no small part to a recommendation of this committee in 1999. We are confident that we will resolve this issue shortly as we continue our dialogue with Finance Ministry officials.

As a result of these advances, the issue of pension reform for professional fire fighters does not require reiteration before this committee today. Instead, allow me to first take a moment to express, on behalf of Canada's professional fire fighters, our gratitude for your recognition of the problem with fire fighter's pensions under the current system and your recommendation that the Finance Minister take the necessary action to remedy the issue.

I would also like to thank each of you personally, on behalf of our 245,000 members across North America, for the many kind words of condolence and support that have come from Parliament Hill in response to the loss of more than 340 members of our association in the World Trade Centre attacks on September 11. These brave professionals showed us the finest examples of selflessness and public service when they gave their lives on that day so that others might live, and we, too, mourn their loss.

Given these circumstances, I will focus today on a budgetary issue that affects Canada's fire fighters, an issue we have also advocated for some time but which has taken on a new sense of urgency in recent weeks.

As we all know, the world was forever changed on September 11. A new and frightening reality was born in the wake of the despicable attacks that resulted in the loss of some five thousand innocent lives. The loss and devastation we face is enormous, but so too is the challenge that lies ahead – preparing the nation for the potential of terrorist attacks.

In this new kind of war, the battle lines are the communities and workplaces of our cities, and civilians are the explicit targets.

In recent weeks, the federal government has introduced a number of measures designed to prevent acts of terrorism on Canadian soil, and to respond to those incidents after they have occurred. The recent incidents of bioterrorism that have claimed multiple lives in the U.S., and which have gripped all of North America, have underscored the urgent need for these measures.

In terms of major disaster response, or what is being called “disaster mitigation,” the federal government has focused its approach on the use of Canadian Armed Forces personnel, particularly through the funding of specialized and centrally-located teams such as the Joint Task Force 2 and other units designed to handle biological or chemical incidents. While the IAFF does not disagree that our armed forces have a role to play in national security, we have to question the practicality and effectiveness of this approach for addressing a domestic terrorist threat. A military team based in southern or eastern Ontario would be hours or days away from providing emergency assistance to an attack on Canadian soil.

As seen in the attacks in New York and Washington, it is fire fighters who are a nation’s first responders, who are the first ones on the scene. They are our domestic defenders. When the alarms sounds, fire fighters are on scene in four minutes – long before any military-based team can be assembled and deployed. Yet as it stands, the majority of professional fire fighters are not adequately trained and equipped to respond properly to these incidents, and as a result, the fire fighters, and the citizens who they are duty-bound to protect, are in fact unprotected from this threat.

While some cities, like Ottawa, do have first-responder-based hazardous materials teams in place, the majority do not. And frankly, it is just as easy to mail or otherwise deliver a biological agent such as anthrax to Ottawa as Saint John, or Winnipeg, or Surrey. With all due respect, the measures recently announced by the federal government would not add any protection in this case.

Training and equipping first responders for disaster mitigation, specifically in response to terrorist attacks, is not new. Nor is it one advocated solely by the first responder community. In 1998, a Special Senate Committee on Security and Intelligence was struck to assess Canada’s risk from nuclear, biological and chemical attack. The report of that committee, released in January 1999, contained the following recommendation:

Although much has been accomplished at the federal level, the role that first responders play in an incident is critical. First responders will (by definition) be first on scene and have to manage a nuclear, biological or chemical incident until help ... arrives. Depending on the circumstances, help may be some time coming. Most municipal police forces and other first responders make no claim to having an effective response capability against a nuclear, biological or chemical attack.

Further, the Committee recommended

... We need to ensure first responders receive the protective and diagnostic equipment they require in order to be able to perform mass decontamination, have available approved drugs for first responders and casualties and sufficient quantities of ventilators and hospital beds for mass casualties and to treat people with injuries who may also be chemically contaminated. We need regular joint training exercises among

first responders, the Department of National Defence and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police.

To the extent reasonably possible, the federal government should support the training of first responders across Canada. First responders must be trained to identify a nuclear, biological or chemical incident and to respond appropriately.

First responders must be adequately trained and equipped to respond to these incidents, if the nation is to be properly prepared, and the federal government must play a role in providing the appropriate funding. A matter of national security should not be left for cities to fund. This need for training and equipment is tremendous and can no longer be borne solely by local jurisdictions. This government must recognize that terrorist attacks are not local incidents, but national tragedies that require a national response.

We have come here today not only to identify this problem for the committee but to also present a clear and attainable solution, one that is proven to be effective, takes advantage of an existing infrastructure and one that can be implemented on an extremely cost-effective basis with annual funding from the Canadian government in the amount of \$500,000.

Each of you has been presented with a report about the IAFF Hazardous Materials Training for First Responders Program, which includes a proposal for federal funding. We would ask you to review this material carefully. Through 2001, the IAFF has trained close to 30,000 emergency responders in the United States with the IAFF's haz-mat curriculum.

More than 5,000 of these students were instructor trainees, who are then able to return to their communities and deliver training to their fellow emergency response workers, thus multiplying the effectiveness of the program. As a result of this effect, more than 500,000 first responders in the U.S. have been educated with the IAFF curriculum.

As this program is funded by the U.S. government, Canada's first responders are not eligible to participate. If the federal government was to provide annual funding, the training of Canadian emergency workers through this program could begin immediately. The curriculum already exists. The administration is already in place. The instructors are already lined up. Funding from the Canadian government would go strictly toward training Canadian emergency workers. The IAFF Hazardous Materials Training for First Responders Program is just waiting to be taken advantage of. All that is required is the funding.

Annual funding of \$500,000 from this government would enable a significant number of Canada's first responders to be trained to a recognized standard for hazardous materials response. It would fully fund one hundred 24-hour courses in communities across Canada, providing 40,000 contact hours. It would train 1,600 students, including fire fighters but also other emergency workers. At this funding level, the nation's first response community could have the appropriate training in just five to ten years.

In conclusion, we urge the committee to recommend to the Finance Minister that federal funding be made available to the appropriate ministry or ministries to give fire fighters and other first responders the training and the tools they need to respond to a biological or chemical incident safely and effectively permitting them in turn to protect the public.

Again, on behalf of the International Association of Fire Fighters, thank you for this opportunity to participate in the prebudget process. I would be more than pleased to answer any questions you may have.