



39th PARLIAMENT, 1st SESSION

Standing Committee on Finance

EVIDENCE

CONTENTS

Monday, September 25, 2006

The Chair:

I invite our committee members to resume their positions and I will welcome our second panel.

I'd also encourage those who are not participating to take their conversations to another part of the building, and we'll move on with our meeting.

Thank you, panellists, for being here. We very much appreciate your taking the time, and we look forward to your presentations.

Five minutes is what you're limited to. I'll give you an indication when one minute remains. We'll try to keep it on track so that we leave time for the exchanges that are so important in this process, which you just witnessed taking place in the previous panel.

To start us off, we have the International Association of Fire Fighters. The representative is Mr. Lee. Would you like to commence, sir?



Mr. Jim Lee (Assistant to the General President, Canadian Operations, International Association of Fire Fighters):

Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

Once again, I appreciate the opportunity to be here today on behalf of the 20,000 professional firefighters we represent across Canada.

The national compensation benefit for the families of fallen firefighters and other public safety officers such as police is long overdue in Canada. It's a matter of equity. It's a matter of dignity for the family and it's a matter of ensuring that never again does the family of a fallen firefighter have to face financial hardship. Yes, it has happened, and it

will happen again unless there is a national standard in place, a minimum amount of compensation covering all Canadian firefighters.

What currently exists is a patchwork of provisions. A small handful of these provide a meaningful benefit but the vast majority do not. What the family will receive depends upon where they live. It depends upon what province they're from or what city they live in. Should the dignity of a fallen firefighter's family depend upon which city or province they live in? I believe that an overwhelming majority of Canadians would want the federal government to establish a national benefit, and I urge you to recommend that the next budget include the funding necessary for the federal government to establish a national public safety officer compensation benefit here in Canada.

We propose that this benefit would be in the form of a one-time payment to the surviving family in the amount of \$300,000. I ask you in your deliberations to recognize the essence of motion number 153, which stated that the federal government should establish a national compensation benefit for fallen firefighters. Motion 153 was adopted in the House of Commons in October 2005 by a vote of 161 to 112. We believe that was a clear indication that the majority of MPs, representing the view of the majority of Canadian citizens, believe that the government should establish this benefit.

With regard to funding for national hazardous materials and chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear response training, five years have now passed since 9/11 and billions of dollars have been allocated toward national security here in Canada, but still not enough front-line first responders have received the training they need to respond safely and effectively to these kinds of emergencies.

In 2005 the Auditor General identified problems in design aspects and in the pace of delivery of the federal government's CBRN training initiatives for the first responders. We note there have been improvements since then, but we assert that more needs to be done, and it has to be done immediately. Last year we surveyed 170 of our local affiliates to find out how many felt they had the training to respond safely and effectively to CBRN incidents. To our alarm, we found that only 19% of our local affiliates had any members trained to respond to a CBRN incident in their city. A full 75% had little or in fact no training at all.

A shocking number of Canada's first responders don't even have basic hazardous materials training. Just four days ago, fire chiefs in northern British Columbia told the meeting that fire departments throughout their region, and I quote, "were under-equipped and not prepared" and have "no protection of any kind" against hazardous materials emergencies. We propose that for \$500,000 annually the federal government could solve this problem in all parts of Canada by funding the IAFF hazardous materials training for first responders program and our emergency response to terrorism operation programs.

Our programs could train 1,600 first responders every year to a recognized level of CBRN response. Our programs are not just for firefighters. They're also for police officers, paramedics, utility workers, and part-time firefighters, for example.

We can arrange a demonstration of our program for the federal government for something in the range of \$8,000, but this should not be about money. It's about ensuring that all Canadians are protected against the aftermath of a CBRN incident.

I note that the public safety minister in a recent letter copied to our affiliate in Victoria, B.C., has indicated he wants to meet with the IAFF to discuss our programs, and we look forward to those discussions. In the meantime, I would urge this committee to recommend that this important national security item be reflected in the next budget.

Thank you.

 [\(1705\)](#)



The Chair:

Thank you, sir.

[...]

We go next to Mr. Carrier.



Mr. Robert Carrier (*Alfred-Pellan, BQ*):

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. My first question is for Mr. Lee.

I have a great deal of sympathy for firefighters across this country, given the nature of their work and their dedication. However, my sympathy is smaller for the budget allowance that you are recommending that the government should give to firefighters, and I know from my research and my own experience that every association of firefighters negotiates with its respective municipality to come up with collective agreements, and many of them often provide very good benefits. Municipalities, of course, come under provincial jurisdiction. So it is not clear to me what role the federal government could play here.

[*English*]



Mr. Jim Lee:

Well, you're quite right, the firefighters' associations do negotiate their own collective agreements and try to negotiate benefits for firefighters who pass away in the line of duty, but as I said in my presentation, it's a very patchwork benefit across Canada. Some have been able to negotiate two times their salary, which is normal and which isn't all that much money.

We think it's time that the federal government did something very similar to what's been going on in the U.S. since 1976--that the federal government recognize first responders when they pay the ultimate sacrifice and die in the line of duty. And they can't hide behind jurisdiction every time we come forward on this. It's time that they moved

forward and recognized those who pay the ultimate sacrifice and leave behind a widow and children.

[*Translation*]

[...]

Mr. Rick Dykstra (St. Catharines, CPC):

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to begin by asking Mr. Lee a couple of questions with respect to the whole aspect of emergency response training and the relatively low cost that you've indicated, \$500,000 to implement a nation-wide program. I wouldn't mind you expanding on that a little bit as to how we'd be able to do that.



Mr. Jim Lee:

The cost is a question that has been raised time and time again. The reason we can do it as cheaply as we can is that there is a program there ready to go that is fully funded by the federal government in the U.S. Our problem is that we can't bring it to Canada without having to fund it. We don't have to reinvent the wheel here. That's why we can keep the cost down: we can bring it in, get it in place, and start training first responders right away. And we do it in a way that our trainers go out to the municipalities, so there is no cost to the municipality other than supplying a classroom. That's the reason.

We've been told time and time again that we're flying under the radar at \$500,000. We should have added a zero to that and said it was \$5 million and the government probably would have jumped on it, but we can't honestly do that. We think for \$500,000 we can start training.



Mr. Rick Dykstra:

You pointed out about \$8,000 for a pilot project. I'm assuming that would just mean in one community you would implement the program once to show the benefit.



Mr. Jim Lee:

Yes. We've done that in the past. We've done it in border communities. Actually, in Niagara Falls, Ontario, we did a pilot program with regard to train incidents, and that's why we thought maybe it would work there, so let's try it with our hazardous materials and our CBRN training. We're proposing that.



Mr. Rick Dykstra:

Thank you.

[...]

The Chair:

Thank you.

Mr. Weiner, I think it would be fair to observe that you made the comment about politicians in reference to children not voting. But I think it would be fair to say there

might not be \$600 billion of debt in the country if children could vote too. We could look at spending in a couple of different ways in that respect.

My questions are for you, Jim. You have a very interesting brief here. I want to address, just more for information, your proposal on the compensation benefit. To be clear, it's an at-work-only benefit you're asking for. Is that correct?



Mr. Jim Lee:

That's correct.



The Chair:

Hazard benefit for death or disability occurring in the line of duty.



Mr. Jim Lee:

That's correct.



The Chair:

And \$6 million all in is what you're....



Mr. Jim Lee:

What we're saying is for every line-of-duty death, there would be a cash payment of--



The Chair:

\$300,000?



Mr. Jim Lee:

Yes, \$300,000.



The Chair:

And your estimated cost is \$6 million?



Mr. Jim Lee:

We lose about ten firefighters a year in the line of duty and the police lose about seven, so that's in around just over \$5 million.



The Chair:

Just for my personal interest, although it may interest the committee, I'm always concerned with benefits, as a former chartered financial consultant who's now actively involved in another world. I still carry some residual interest in this. I'm always concerned when there are sometimes benefits brought into play. In other words, whether a firefighter dies at work or not makes no difference to the hardship on a family. The hardship is the same financially, and this is why I ask this question.

Firefighters can get their own personal life insurance. They negotiate life insurance benefits through their collective bargaining process, and so on. That's a fact.



Mr. Jim Lee:

If they're able to, yes.



The Chair:

Yes, and it varies. You're saying there's a hodgepodge. I believe that was the word you used. The benefits vary, depending on the bargaining unit and what have you.



Mr. Jim Lee:

That's correct.



The Chair:

I'm soliciting your organization's assistance here. I know that a number of associations across the country make association life insurance available to their members and encourage that. Has your organization done something like that? Do you do that?



Mr. Jim Lee:

Yes, we do. The International Association of Fire Fighters has a financial corporation.



The Chair:

I really commend you on that. Because you yourself say in the brief that even with this benefit in place, it may still be inadequate for the families of younger firefighters in the event of their death or disability, I offer this entreaty: it's critical that we understand the need for planning and personal preparedness. Of all the people in this country, you should understand that. Your members, I'm sure, understand that, so--



Mr. Jim Lee:

I couldn't agree with you more. What we've looked at is the average age of a firefighter who dies in the line of duty, which is 43. If he had been able to work until age 60, 17 years of lost income works out to about \$1.1 million. We think that if the federal government stepped into the breach and offered \$300,000, actually, that it and life insurance and what they may be able to negotiate at the bargaining table would allow the family to stay in the family home that much longer.

What I find interesting is that the entire Conservative caucus endorsed motion 153, so I feel the Conservatives have got it. They know what needs to be there.



The Chair:

Well, of course, as a non-partisan chair I couldn't respond to that, but I appreciate your response and all your responses.

We'll continue now with Mr. Pacetti. You have five minutes, sir.



Mr. Massimo Pacetti:

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Lee, I had this same question for the person prior. Even if we recommend the \$500,000--because we're not the ones giving it--on your second recommendation

regarding the retraining for Canada's first responders, how do we do it? How do we recommend, and through what organization? How would it be done on a national level? Do we have that kind of organization in place?



Mr. Jim Lee:

I think that through the public safety ministry, we have the Canadian Emergency Preparedness College and we could work in conjunction with the Emergency Preparedness College here in Canada to enhance what they currently have in place.

We get this all the time. Everybody's saying that the clock is ticking here. It's not whether something is going to happen, it's when. Five years after the fact, we're still no further ahead, or we're very little ahead of the curve on training. It's going to be a huge problem with the next event.

We know the military has been in training, but it won't be the military that will be there. They are days and days away from deployment. We're there in four minutes.



Mr. Massimo Pacetti:

The question was basically to see if additional costs would have to be incurred to implement this type of national program.



Mr. Jim Lee:

No.



Mr. Massimo Pacetti:

Okay, thank you, Mr. Lee.

The Chair:

Sorry, Madam Ablonczy, but your time has elapsed.

We have two minutes available for Madam Wasylycia-Leis before we wind it up. My advice would be don't waste it on a preamble.



Ms. Judy Wasylycia-Leis:

I'll try not to.

I want to go to Jim Lee, further to your question, Mr. Chairperson, about training for first responders in the event of a chemical or hazardous materials problem with terrorism involved, etc.

You've been at this for five years. I've written to three different ministers--John McCallum, Jim Manley, Anne McLellan. Each time, they said, "Don't worry. It's all being looked after." Five years later it looks like we've spent \$7 billion in this whole area, but nobody's really been trained in terms of what you think is needed.

You've come forward with a cost-effective proposal, \$500,000 a year. Am I missing something? It just seems so logical that this should be immediately acted upon. What do we do?



Mr. Jim Lee:

Every time I either come to the finance committee or meet with the ministers, I think it seems very positive. I come out of the meeting thinking, "This thing is moving forward; I can just feel it." Then it seems to get caught up somewhere in the bureaucracy and it just doesn't happen. As early as three months ago I had a meeting with the Emergency Preparedness College, and I figured, "Well, that was positive." But here it's three months later, and I hear nothing. The clock is ticking on this one, and it's going to be a sad state of affairs when we have an incident and our firefighters, our first responders, aren't trained. And we agree that with \$500,000--let's not reinvent the wheel here, let's move this process forward--we can start training.

And it wasn't just us saying nothing's happening here. The auditor said it too, and she made it very clear in her report that nothing is happening in this area. So it's not good.



The Chair:

Just 30 seconds, Madam.



Ms. Judy Wasylycia-Leis:

Thank you.

I would assume, then, that if this committee does anything, we need to reiterate this recommendation that you've been making for five years, and perhaps even try to preempt the budget process and get the minister responsible, Stockwell Day, moving on this immediately.



Mr. Jim Lee:

I would agree 100%. And I think the Prime Minister is onside now, because we actually dressed him up like a firefighter and took him into the smokehouse and put him under those circumstances. So the Prime Minister of Canada actually knows what firefighters do for a living now.



Ms. Judy Wasylycia-Leis:

Hear, hear.



The Chair:

Thank you very much to our panel. It was a most stimulating discussion. I appreciate your time here today and the time you put into your presentations and briefs.

To our committee members, we will see you tomorrow morning at 10 o'clock.

We are adjourned.