



STATEMENT OF

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BEFORE THE EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT AND
TECHNOLOGY SUBCOMMITTEE

OF THE

COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

OF THE

UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

ON

OSHA PROPOSED EMERGENCY RESPONSE STANDARD

JUNE 4, 2024
WASHINGTON, DC

Good morning Chairman D'Esposito, Ranking Member Carter, and members of the Subcommittee. My name is Grant Walker, I am the President of the Prince George's County Professional Fire Fighters and Paramedics Association IAFF Local 1619 representing the 1,800 active and retired members of IAFF Local 1619. Additionally, I currently serve as the legislative policy chair for the Professional Fire Fighters of Maryland, which represents 10,000 active and retired IAFF Members of the IAFF that reside in Maryland. I want to thank you for the opportunity to testify today on this critically important rule making. I started my fire service career shortly after graduating high school in 2004, where I would move into the College Park Volunteer Fire Department as part of the Prince George's County Fire and EMS system. While attending college, I worked full time and had a regular assigned schedule at the volunteer firehouse. I was not unique as this program had been in place for many years prior to my arrival. I completed my undergraduate degree in fire science from the University of Maryland in 2009 and began employment as a firefighter at the National Institute of Standards and Technology in Gaithersburg, Maryland. In 2012 I left NIST and began my employment with the Prince George's County Fire/EMS department where I currently hold the rank of Lieutenant. I am a recent graduate of the Executive Fire Officer Program from the National Fire Academy located in Emmitsburg, Maryland.

Our nation's firefighters are facing a crisis of massive proportions. Not a day goes by where a firefighter doesn't experience a lack of staffing, aging apparatus, substandard working conditions with no discernable standard to turn to. This OSHA standard aims to make significant improvements to that problem. No firefighter should be concerned about whether the working conditions they're subjected to will lead to their injury, illness or even worse, their death.

Too often our Firefighters are reliant on the goodwill of the community or elected officials to maintain or update facilities, apparatus, or personal protective equipment. Our Nation's fire fighters need a standard to point to, a place to go when status quo is just not safe. While school systems point to test scores, and police forces point to crime statistics, our metrics are more nuanced and are not normally as easily converted to the direct impact on a person's everyday life. We measure our successes by our failures in property loss and loss of life. Response times and personnel on a unit are rarely reported or compared from department to department, region to region.

In September of 2023, Station 820, upper Marlboro, had an ambulance catch fire in its apparatus bay. Had it not been for the ambulance siren shorting out causing a loud noise and the station doorbell going off due to the electrical system going haywire Lt. Michael Carey may not be with us today. Fortunately, Lt. Carey was able to self-extricate out a window and is currently serving alongside my Brothers and Sisters just up the road. Many fire stations across the country are historic or significant in age, and not required to meet the applicable modern fire safety codes. It seems monthly that a piece of apparatus causes a fire in a station apparatus bay.

We have fire fighters from all walks of life who answer the call to serve. Not all of these personnel are medically fit to serve. For many annual medical physicals are the only way they discovered life threatening diseases and illnesses.

Lieutenant Jeff Chandler went in for his annual medical physical and ended up having two stints placed the next morning. On the operating table he would go into cardiac arrest. Three weeks later he would have three more cardiac stints put in place. Fortunately, Lieutenant Chandler survived and has been able to see his son become a firefighter and watch his grandchildren grown. Unfortunately, too many firefighters discover their medical illnesses when it is too late. In 2023 72% of all IAFF member Line of Duty Deaths were caused by occupational cancer. In 2022 33 firefighters died of a heart attack. In Prince George's County, annual medical physicals are a benefit as part of our collective bargaining agreement. While our members are fortunate to be in a state with a collective bargaining agreement, safety shouldn't be reliant on whether or not firefighters have a contract or if appropriate safety standards are mandated as part of negotiations. Safety should not need to be negotiated, it should be required.

Even with the protections of a collective bargaining agreement, aging apparatus and fire houses, and substandard working conditions plague most fire departments across the nation. When money is involved, this committee will understand that there is never enough to go around. Too often fire departments across this nation are vying for public grants, community funding like the UASI, SAFER, and AFG Grants programs. Not getting one of those grants can mean the difference between safe responders and not. We've watched as the prices of fire apparatus has ballooned. Sometimes costing nearly 2 million dollars, not to mention the 3 to 4 years it will take for delivery of said apparatus. We've watched a manufacturers push back on the idea that PFAS in

firefighter gear is safe, even though the science disagrees. We've watched as the IAFF took the lead on developing Peer Support Resources so that when our members were in their darkest hour they would be able to seek treatment without the fear of stigma or reprisal. Many of these issues would be corrected by putting in place a standard, one that has been needed for many years. A standard that moves us past the status quo and to an realm where every firefighter in a America is ready to respond with the appropriate apparatus, facilities and health that is needed to do this dangerous profession.

I look forward to talking with you more and answering any questions you may have.