

November 15, 2007: Establishing the National Urban Search and Rescue Response System

The Honorable Loretta Sanchez

H.R. 4183, TO ESTABLISH THE NATIONAL URBAN SEARCH AND RESCUE RESPONSE SYSTEM

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Madam Speaker, last night I introduced H.R. 4183, a bill to authorize the National Urban Search and Rescue Response System.

The National Urban Search and Rescue Response System is an important part of our Nation's all-hazards preparedness and response efforts. FEMA established the Urban Search and Rescue Response System in 1989 so that local emergency services personnel could act as integrated disaster response task forces. However, the system has never been fully authorized by Congress. As a result the Taskforces have suffered funding shortfalls, and the Taskforce personnel have been deployed without the appropriate Federal worker's compensation and employment protections.

Currently the Urban Search and Rescue Response System is made up of 28 Taskforces that are sponsored by local or State agencies. Most Taskforces consist of 70 personnel that are ready to deploy within 6 hours of activation, for 10-day deployments with 24-hour operations. The Taskforces deploy with all the equipment they need and they are self-sufficient for 72 hours.

In the event of a terrorist attack, a natural disaster, an accident, or another emergency involving structural collapse, FEMA can deploy any or all of the Taskforces to help with the emergency response. Taskforces have been deployed to respond to a variety of emergencies including earthquakes, hurricanes, and terrorism events like the Oklahoma City bombing. In 2001, 25 out of the 28 Taskforces were deployed to respond to 9/11. In 2005, all 28 Taskforces were deployed to respond to Hurricane Katrina. During that deployment the Taskforces searched thousands of collapsed structures in Mississippi and flooded structures in New Orleans, resulting in the rescue of 6,587 victims in New Orleans alone.

In my district the Orange County Fire Authority sponsors the fifth California Urban Search and Rescue Taskforce. The Orange County Fire Authority and the other sponsoring agencies make significant commitments to their Taskforces by absorbing Federal funding shortfalls, maintaining the necessary equipment, and supporting their personnel's participation in training, exercises, prestaging and deployments.

It is time for Congress to provide greater protections to the agencies that sponsor Urban Search and Rescue Taskforces and the individuals that serve on the Taskforces. H.R. 4183 will authorize \$52 million annually to ensure that sponsoring agencies are not forced to absorb a Federal funding shortfall. This legislation will also provide Taskforce personnel or their families with Federal injury, illness, disability, and death benefits if the Taskforce member is injured during a Federal deployment. In addition, this bill provides employment protections so that Taskforce members will not lose their jobs

because they have been deployed by FEMA.

The National Urban Search and Rescue Taskforces are a valuable resource and an excellent example of how local, State and Federal Governments can cooperate to effectively prepare and respond to all-hazard emergencies. I urge my colleagues to join me in supporting our Nation's Urban Search and Rescue Taskforces, and cosponsoring H.R. 4183.