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Federation of Citizens Associations of the District of Columbia

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Testimony of Federation of Citizens Association of the District of Columbia

Before the Task Force on Emergency Medical Services

May 24, 2007

Mayor Fenty, Chairman Gray, Councilmembers Mendelson and Cheh, Chief Rubin and distinguished Task Force Members: My name is George Clark and I am pleased to testify here before you this afternoon as President of the Federation of Citizens Associations of the District of Columbia and its 50 member organizations from across the City. As many of you know, the Federation and its members have taken an intense interest in EMS for many years. Most recently, we were campaigning for a Council investigation into EMS in 2005, before the tragedy that has brought us all together here. Our efforts have only intensified since that incident.

Let me start by saying that DC is blessed with many devoted, hard-working, and often heroic firefighters and emergency medical personnel. One only need look at the recent responses to the simultaneous fires at the Eastern Market and the Georgetown library, with over 400 firefighters present on the sites, to see how well our Fire Department performs that part of its mission. Only Tuesday they performed yet another heavy-duty rescue. Admittedly we take these acts for granted too often. Earlier this year there will has an underground electrical fire in front of my office building two blocks from the White House, and eventually Farragut Square and the surrounding area filled with so much firefighting equipment that someone wondered what was left in the rest of the city. But I knew and said that our firefighting function had not been compromised.

Indeed in this post 9-11 world, having a well-trained and capable fire department is critical in the Nation's Capital. We need to support the department in its core mission, and make sure that it can attend to the increased burdens which it has under the threat of terrorism. We need to update and repair our fire houses and to provide traffic signals at them so that no more firefighters are killed while directing traffic so that an engine can back into the firehouse. We need to make sure that our hydrants are operating properly so that firefighters can do the job when they arrived at the scene. We think that this sharper focus will benefit all of the citizens of DC, as well as the many workers and visitors who come here every day.

One of the Federation's missions in the last year has been the EMS Commission which was formed by Councilmember Mendelson. That Commission has several very capable members and I commend its report on making EMS a medically based service to you. I think Dr. Williams has started some of that work.

But that Commission also brought out one fact at one of its hearings which shocks and surprises me to this very day. During a discussion of certification procedures and practices for EMT training the Fire Department testified that approximately 15-20% of firefighters are not dual role cross trained. This statistic was so shocking that at the conclusion of the meeting when members of the public were afforded the opportunity to speak, I noted the number with the hope that I would be corrected and that I had misheard. But that did not happen.

So here we are, over 20 years after being promised that all firefighters would be trained as EMTs so that they could properly respond to 911 calls and we find out that 15-20% of all firefighters are not properly trained and certified. This statistic alone shows that something needs to change dramatically in the provision of the EMS in this city.

What does this mean? It means that when the truck pulls up in front of your apartment or house you expect the firefighters to know how to evaluate a patient and to get the right help. You've been told for two decades that they've been thoroughly trained for just that. But it just isn't true. As we have testified many times before the Council, every one of us is in grave danger every day if, God forbid, a 911 call for EMS needs to be made.

Unfortunately, this Task Force exists because of just such an incident. Yet the tragic death of David Rosenbaum has been preceded by many other notorious incidents, such as

those involving Monica Yin, and has been followed by others, such as Cassandra Bailey. Unless drastic action is recommended by this Task Force and adopted by the Department and the Mayor, more tragic incidents will certainly follow.

But really should we expect anything else? Our heroic firefighters have not signed up to be the 100th 911 call to transport a particular patient. They did not sign up to be the first responders for medical emergencies. They did not sign up to respond several hundred times a year to nursing homes and shelters that are poorly managed. We know that in 2006 10% of all 911 calls went to just 20 addresses, and that the top 20 individuals were responsible for over 2500 transports. We can understand why firefighters might not accept medical responses as having the same importance as their critical firefighting mission. And the pay structure for civilian EMS personnel only strengthens that image.

There is also unquestionably a problem with drop times at hospitals. While the common wisdom is that lengthy drop time is caused by the inefficiency at the hospitals, the EMS Commission found much anecdotal evidence that delays were caused by EMS personnel taking a break so that they did not have to return to the job immediately. This is part of the culture of indifference found in the IG's dramatic report.

But the Federation is not here to sit in judgment of the personnel involved in the Rosenbaum tragedy. We have read the report of the Inspector General, and we heard the explanations from the previous Chief that everything was okay and that all proper procedures were followed. We have heard the firefighters union claim that despite the IG's report, and despite Mr. Rosenbaum's unnecessary death, that everyone did their job properly that day. But the facts totally belie this assertion. But the assertion points out the critical problem in how EMS is structured in the city. We have too many people trying to protect their own turf instead of worrying about performing the mission. It's time to solve that problem by changing the mission.

Only after the Federation heard at the EMS Commission that so many firefighters were not properly trained as EMTs did the Federation take a formal position on whether or not there should be a third service. After hearing how the dismally the department has failed in implementing dual role cross training, we voted to support the creation of a third service. We did not come to this view because of any political or administrative view of how the fire

department shall be organized. We came to this view because our concern is the public safety first, and it is now painfully evident that public safety has been irreparably harmed by the current regimen for providing EMS.

It has taken the Federation a long time to reach this conclusion. For years we have tried to gather information from the fire department to show what types of calls it has to respond to and where, and how well the Department is performing its mission. To say that this has been like pulling teeth is to give tooth decay a bad name. Perhaps the most dramatic demonstrations of nonresponsiveness that we have seen have been in front of the EMS Commission. Any simple straightforward question asked of the department has been met with assurances that everything is okay, that data will be provided in the future, or that this data which we offer you really answers the question even though it doesn't look like it does. It has been self-evident to any objective observer that the Department's first goal has been to protect itself from criticism, not to uncover and solve problems in the delivery of emergency medical services. Instead we are assured that nothing is wrong that will be solved by moving a few boxes on the organization chart or a reprimand or two.

We trust that this Task Force will see its mission differently and will press for an emergency medical service for DC which we can truly be proud of and that will perform its mission and a first-class fashion. The one we have isn't working.

I am happy to take any questions. Ms. Renshaw will give the rest of our statement.

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