



NATIONAL FIRE AND EMERGENCY SERVICES DINNER

Remarks of

THE HON. JANET RENO, UNITED STATES ATTORNEY GENERAL

Thursday, April 30, 1998

7:33 p.m.

P R O C E E D I N G S

(7:33 p.m.)

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Thank you very much, Congressman Andrews, for those very wonderful words. I have got a lot to live up to.

Congressman Hoyer, Congressman Weldon, and all who are here tonight, it is a real privilege for me to be here.

For the 15 years that I served as State Attorney in Dade County, one of the most effective agencies that I dealt with was the fire department. They taught me so much about public safety, about how you respond, about how you build an agency that is strong and vital and responsive to its people. Little did I think that you would make sure that my favorite fire fighter was here tonight. It is wonderful to see Chief Herman Brice, and a real surprise.

(Applause.)

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: What struck me then and what strikes me now is that fire fighters are ahead of the game. They are always looking to see what could be done to prevent the problem in the first place. They are thinking smart. They are thinking wise. Whether you are dealing with weapons of mass destruction, a terrorist act, or a fire, you represent the best in government and its service to the people.

(Applause.)

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: To think that it is now 350 years of fire services in the United States that we celebrate tonight. It was a little more than a decade ago that Congressman Weldon formed the Congressional Fire Services Caucus. But the impact that it has had so far has been truly magnificent. It is a great privilege to be among so many of the nation's first responders, dedicated public safety officers who have made such an incredible difference in the lives of so many Americans.

I would like especially to pay recognition to the families and the coworkers of fire fighters and fire service personnel who have died in the line of duty. You have sacrificed so very much that this nation could be a safer place. And my prayers are with you always.

I will continue to do all that I can to see that groups dedicated to providing emotional support and encouragement have the funding that they need. And I hope the work of the Fallen Fire Fighters Foundation is a resource to you in all your times of grief.

(Applause.)

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: The public is well aware of the commitment and service that you give to it. I think you are probably the most visible. No matter what time of day or night, no matter where the emergency strikes, fire fighters are on the scene, saving lives and averting disaster.

The image of the fire fighter, working to save property and lives, is so ingrained in our consciousness that it could very easily be taken for granted. This we must never do.

You understand, and I have some understanding gained from you, all the hard work, the training, the preparation and the thought that goes into doing what you make look so easy. Because the service all of you provide is so vital to the public safety of this country, we have got to do all we can to continue to develop the equipment and provide the training that make you more efficient, better equipped to handle the issues that you face, and safer when you face them.

You all do the heavy lifting. I am here to tell you that I am committed to continuing to

strengthen the partnership between the Department of Justice and local fire fighters and emergency service personnel across this country. You know best what you need.

(Applause.)

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: When I was in Miami, the Feds would sometimes come to town and tell me what to do. I always liked it better when they came to town and asked, "How can we work together?" We want to do that in every way we possibly can.

The dangers posed to this nation are real, and the threats current. We in the Department of Justice place training for emergency response and preparedness among our most critical missions. Unfortunately, we all live in an age when terrorists, domestic and foreign, think they can forward their own agendas by wreaking havoc in our cities and laying waste of innocent lives. Only a partnership, a true team effort, between local, state and federal public safety communities can manage this threat.

We have built good foundations, and I want to work to build stronger ones.

I am motivated again by images that I have seen only this past week, as I returned to Oklahoma City to meet with victims, survivors and first responders and law enforcement officers. I am reminded again of how great this nation is when it pulls together, every one of us giving our best to try to see that lives are saved and that justice is done. Your colleagues, and you, from all around this nation, were there.

One of my most touching moments is to go into a city, far removed from Oklahoma City, and meet fire fighters and emergency personnel who were there and who have never forgotten the experience. I can tell you that Oklahoma has never forgotten you.

I am very pleased to see Laurie Robinson here. Laurie is the Assistant Attorney General for the Office of Justice Programs. I have asked Laurie to administer our first responder training initiative, an initiative that recognizes the role of the fire fighter as the likely first responder in any terrorist or emergency incident, and which seeks to provide the training and technical assistance necessary to perform your critical missions more effectively.

Currently, the Office of Justice Programs Fire Fighter Emergency Medical Training Program, a program developed and implemented with FEMA's National Fire Academy and the International Association of Fire Chiefs, is conducting a 16-hour training curriculum which targets fire fighter and emergency medical personnel as first responders to terrorist incidents. Over 68,000 of your fellow fire fighters and emergency personnel will have benefitted from this training by June of 1999.

I would like to ask you, if you were the Attorney General of the United States, how

would you improve our delivery of these services to you? That is a continuing question. And I would love to hear the answers. Because we want to hear from you who are on the front lines as to what is needed on the front lines.

This year we will implement a 6-day incident management curriculum for fire commanders. And we will complete development of a 6-day tactical considerations curriculum, targeting hazardous materials teams and emergency personnel responding to a terrorist incident.

In partnership with both the International Association of Fire Chiefs and the Georgia Emergency Management Agency, we have developed a training video which discusses the lessons learned in Atlanta, where secondary devices were encountered at two bombing incidents. This video provides important information to alert you, our nation's first responders, to the potential dangers of secondary explosive devices at the scene of a bombing. We have teamed with FEMA to distribute over 60,000 copies of this video to law enforcement, fire and emergency personnel across the country.

We recently hosted a conference in Virginia, again in partnership with the International Association of Fire Chiefs, entitled "Strengthening the Public Safety Response to Terrorism." At the conference we asked the attendees to identify the various equipment needs of their jurisdictions. It is our hope that this needs assessment will allow those of us at the federal level to best understand what you need to do your jobs and protect the public. We want to do everything we can to develop an appropriate effort that supplies this equipment in an orderly way, avoiding duplication, avoiding almost immediate obsolescence, and making sure that you have the tools to do the job.

In addition, the Department of Justice is supporting the Department of Defense in carrying out its statutory obligation under the Nunn-Lugar-Domenici Amendment to provide weapons of mass destruction training to state and local emergency responders. This initiative will eventually train emergency responders like yourselves in 120 cities throughout the United States.

To date, officials from 19 cities have received training. Thirty-one cities will receive training this year, and 35 more next year.

I can tell you tonight that these partnerships I have described will continue and will grow in the coming years. But they will be stronger if you give us your input as to how they can work better.

As we talk about cities, I want to make sure that we hear from small communities and rural areas across this nation. I do not want to neglect any one part of this nation.

This partnership cannot bear fruit, however, unless state, local and federal public safety agencies have the ability to effectively and efficiently communicate with and between each other. I know I am preaching to the choir in this room. But fire fighters have too often fallen victim to crowded airwaves and garbled communications, and I have heard it.

This past Sunday, we recalled as we talked in Oklahoma City the difficulty that the agencies had, resorting in fact to runners, once they realized that the airwaves were too crowded and that they were unable to communicate with each other.

In New York City, after the World Trade Center was bombed, responders who were merely on separate floors of the building were unable to communicate with each other for similar reasons. I could go on and on, and you could cite me too many examples. One example is one too many.

Why is this happening? Because there simply are not enough frequencies available to public safety agencies. There is not enough spectrum.

Due in large part to the work of the members of the Congressional Fire Services Caucus, the nation's legislators last summer took the first step towards correcting the problem. Congress directed the FCC to allocate more spectrum to the public safety community.

Congressmen Weldon and Andrews were way, way, way out in front on this issue, and they deserve praise. But this was just a first step. We are still unsure whether all of our communities will benefit from this additional space on the radio dial for public safety purposes. And we will need to ensure that local, state and federal agencies can talk to each other.

We are all going to have to come to grips with the cost of doing this, and we need to work together in the coming year to do just that.

So tonight I would ask you to join me in another partnership. We must all speak with one voice, to make sure that the concerns of the public safety community are heard loud and clear.

In your materials you will find a copy of a guide on public safety and radio spectrum. This document represents a small step towards educating those concerned about the communications issues you face. I'll bet you have seen it: You go up to someone and you start talking to them about spectrum and sufficient radio frequency, and they look at you like you are crazy. They think a spectrum is one of those rainbows.

We have got to educate them. And this is an attempt to do just that. The Department of Justice, along with the Department of the Treasury, the National League of Cities, and with input from the Congressional Fire Services Institute, put this document together so that those

who control the scarce natural resource known as spectrum are aware that life and death issues are at stake when it is reallocated.

I encourage all of you to read this guide and to let your members of Congress know if you are having troubles communicating with each other or if your communications technology is outdated. We in the Department of Justice will work with you to address your concerns.

I have been in office a little over 5 years. Sometimes you get fussed at and verbally beat around the ears. But I have had the chance to work with so many people in Congress, with communities across this nation, Republicans and Democrats, with fire fighters and police officers, and with teachers and women and men who care so much for this country.

I came to Washington thinking that public service was one of the great undertakings that anyone could pursue -- public service to this nation. But never, after I have watched you, your colleagues, others in public safety at work across America have I ever, ever believed so strongly in this nation. You do so much for so many. We are in your debt. And we pray for you daily.

(Standing ovation.)

(Whereupon, at 7:48 p.m., the remarks were concluded.)