



**pennsylvania**

EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT AGENCY

**Testimony for the House and Senate Veterans Affairs & Emergency  
Preparedness Committees  
August 1, 2023**

Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency  
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Testimony for Public Hearing on Senate Bill 792 & House Bill 843, Urban Search & Rescue Teams  
August 1<sup>st</sup>, 2023

Chairman Mastriano, Chairman Solomon, Chair Muth, Chairman Gillen, and members of the Senate and House Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committees, thank you for the opportunity to come before you today to testify on the bills before your respective committees on Urban Search and Rescue (US&R) teams.

Currently, Pennsylvania has a robust tiered US&R response system that is comprised of various teams across seven of the eight regional counterterrorism task forces that were established by Act 227 of 2002. These teams vary from a US&R Squad, which is the smallest team deploying with six members to a US&R Strike Team which is the largest of configuration deploying with twenty members. The composition and organization of these teams was predicated on the most likely threats, hazards, and types of incidents that could be reasonably anticipated in a given area and was designed to provide US&R response capability across the state. These teams are supported by local first responder agencies and have the capability to conduct technical search, concrete breaching and breaking, metal cutting and burning, building shoring, heavy lifting and rigging, hazardous materials assessment, and provide medical care for team members and entrapped patients.

The system also includes PA Task Force 1, which is one of twenty-eight Federal US&R teams, that is capable of providing additional support that may be needed for larger or more complex incidents such as Canine Search Specialists with trained and certified canines and Structural Specialists who are specially trained structural engineers that can assess building damage and inform strategies for building shoring or stabilization. There is a tri-party agreement/MOU between PEMA, FEMA and PA Task Force 1 that permits PA Task Force 1 to be deployed on in-state missions in support of disasters and other emergencies. PA Task Force 1 is not financially supported by the Commonwealth. The only cost to the Commonwealth occurs when/if we activate the team for state response. Since its inception, the Commonwealth has used elements of PA Task Force 1 to support emergencies in state when they exceed existing capabilities but has never had to deploy the full Type 1 US&R Team on an in-state mission.

In addition, the Pennsylvania National Guard also has a Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and Nuclear (CBRN) Enhanced Response Force Package (CERF-P) that is equipped to provide US&R capability in a contaminated environment with members that are trained to provide search and extraction, medical care and decontamination of survivors.

The Commonwealth's US&R Response System was formed based on recommendations of a Blue-Ribbon Commission after the attacks of September 11, 2001. These recommendations were eventually incorporated into Act 227 of 2002 to increase the level of coordination, preparedness and response capability across the Commonwealth and all levels of government inclusive of public safety, emergency management and private sector partners. The in-state US&R Response System was modeled predominantly after the FEMA US&R Response System, however, it also took into consideration limitations of the federal system and incorporated best practices from other states to provide a distributed network of regional teams that could provide the appropriate level of US&R capability in a timely manner.

The US&R teams have been supported in part by the local first response agencies that comprise the teams along with funding provided through the State Homeland Security and Urban Area Security

Initiative (UASI) Grant Programs. Eighty percent of the grant money the state receives through these two grant programs is required to be passed through to the eight Regional Task Forces. Allocation of grant program money is controlled by the Regional Task Force Executive Committees to close preparedness and response gaps in accordance with a regional Threat and Hazard Identification and Risk Assessment (THIRA) that is completed by each county and at the regional level. In the past, PEMA has also provided supplemental funding to support the regional US&R teams when there was an excess of unspent regional grant funding, however, in recent years the agency has worked with the Regional Task Forces to ensure their funding is being spent in a timely manner. Currently the Commonwealth receives approximately 26.5 million dollars in State Homeland Security and UASI grant money that can be used in part to purchase equipment, conduct training and exercises and support planning efforts to maintain specific capabilities such as US&R.

Much has changed since the system was originally developed and we now have over twenty years of history to help inform decisions on the structure and design of the system going forward. While the significant concern post September 11<sup>th</sup> was believed to be an ongoing foreign kinetic terrorist threat and the ability to conduct mass search and rescue operations, our threats and hazards have continued to evolve. The changing threats the Commonwealth faces require emergency managers and first responders to be prepared to respond to several other types of incidents such as cyber-attacks, mass acts of violence, and domestic violence extremism. While US&R capability is still needed across the Commonwealth, the planning assumptions that were used when the system was first organized need to be revisited and updated for the current threat and hazard profile, while also taking into consideration the historical use of the system.

A synopsis of the history of the use of the current system and changes affecting the system is below:

- Over the last 20+ years the vast majority of incidents across the Commonwealth that require US&R capability have been effectively managed at a regional level and have not risen to the level that requires a state proclamation of disaster emergency and /or activation of a larger response.
- Regional Task Forces have adopted different US&R response models over the past 20+ years to meet specific needs and response plans within their respective regions. While some regions deploy teams in the state outlined configurations, many regions deploy resources in support of incidents through their organic first responder organizations that support the in-state teams.
- In-state system response doctrine was predicated on the fact that first responder organizations in an impacted area would respond as part of the regional mutual aid plans and would not be able to organize into the state defined team configuration. Resources would only organize into state defined team configurations to respond outside of their Regional Task Force in support of incidents requiring a larger response that exceeds the capability of a region. All response operations leveraging regional mutual aid plans would be under the policies and procedures developed by the respective Regional Task Force.
- Flooding and flash flooding still remain the most predominant hazards that impact the state on a regular and repeated basis. Early after the development of the in-state US&R system, teams were used to respond to these types of situations, however, the configurations did not require the teams to have water rescue equipment or training. In 2009, state guidelines were developed for qualification of swiftwater rescue and flood evacuation teams. Today, the system has grown

to the point that there are approximately 40 qualified teams across the Commonwealth that are leveraged to respond to flooding incidents.

- Around 2009, State Homeland Security and UASI grant program funding plateaued which impacted the available money to support Regional Task Forces and the first responder organizations that supported in-State US&R teams. This resulted in more of a focus on maintaining current capabilities needed to respond to incidents as opposed to developing new capabilities.
- State Homeland Security and UASI grant funds in recent years have incorporated targeted spend categories to focus on evolving and emerging threats which has decreased the availability of funding to support US&R capabilities.

Recognizing the need to revisit the structure, function, and concept of operations of the in-state US&R system because of changes and impacts listed above, in 2017 PEMA solicited input from Regional Task Force Executive Committees, applicable subcommittees, and existing in-state US&R team leadership regarding a number of subjects. The result of this engagement was the development of a white paper that provided an overview of current system status and contained a number of considerations for right sizing, aligning the system with current practice, and supporting the system going forward.

In 2018, PEMA developed a draft transition document that would align existing teams with resource typing guidelines published by the National Integration Center (NIC) in accordance with the National Incident Management System (NIMS). Input on the draft transition document was solicited from Regional Task Force Executive Committees, applicable regional subcommittees, and existing in-state US&R leadership. Suggested changes were incorporated into the draft document pending the release of final standards for US&R resource typing from the NIC and a final update to the document.

In September of 2021 the NIC published the final updated US&R resource typing guidelines which contained some changes from the original draft guidance that was the basis for the 2018 alignment. In 2022 PEMA updated the draft transition document that incorporated the updated changes and developed a revised draft concept of operations for the in-state US&R response system.

In early 2023, PEMA hired a highly qualified vendor with many years of US&R experience to continue the work of updating and finalizing the draft documents. This included assisting with the roll out of the federal Search and Rescue Common Operating Platform (SARCOP) to in-state US&R teams which is a federal system for documentation of search information for larger incidents.

As part of the overall initiative to reimagine the in-state US&R response system, PEMA has also looked to other states that have a similar hazard profile to help inform our decisions and path forward. While many states have developed in-state US&R capability since the early 2000's, the organization, structure and capacity of those capabilities vary. As an example, many states that have a significant threat of direct impact from hurricanes with resultant widespread structural damage from tidal surge and hurricane force winds or states with high seismic potential or history of significant long track EF 3-5 tornados, have developed in-state US&R capability to deal with those threats. In the Commonwealth, we have significantly less potential for those threats, however, that does not mean that we do not need US&R capability. The capability we require, however, should be commensurate with our threat profile and our anticipated needs in the future. It should also be predicated on a tiered delivery model that

places an appropriate level of capability throughout the state in first responder's hands but allows for a scalable response for times when it is needed.

While PEMA supports the overall concept of aligning the Western PA US&R Team and the in-state US&R system in general with NIMS resource typing guidelines that is contained in the current proposed legislation, much of this work has already been started and can be easily accomplished under the current law. The agency, however, does not support several other prescriptive requirements that are contained in the draft legislation such as designating state naming conventions for teams when historically, over the past 20+ years, the vast majority of incidents requiring US&R capability have been handled very effectively at the local and regional level without the need to deploy US&R teams under the provisions of Act 227 of 2002.

As an example, the proposed legislation requires the establishment of a NIMS Type 1 US&R Task Force in Philadelphia and prescribes that it be specifically named PA Task Force 1. While Philadelphia Fire Department is currently the sponsoring agency for PA Task Force 1 that has not been the case during the entire existence of the team. PA Task Force 1 has actually changed sponsoring agencies a total of three times since the team was initially formed in the early 1990's so prescribing a name in legislation would prove problematic if the sponsoring agency changes or FEMA decides to no longer sponsor a team in the Commonwealth.

As another example, PEMA has responsibility for certifying Hazardous Materials Response Teams in accordance with the requirements under Act 165 of 1990. As part of that process, teams that are certified are not provided state naming conventions nor are they permitted to display state seals or other insignias that identify them as being a state resource. This doctrine has been in place for significantly longer than the existence of the in-state US&R system and PEMA looks to align these policies across all resource domains.

Additionally, PEMA does not support a unilateral investment in a portion of what should be an organized tiered response system that provides the needed US&R capabilities across the Commonwealth. PEMA, however, would support working with our regional task force leaders and the Emergency Management Council to review our current capabilities as a Commonwealth and look at what it would cost for a statewide refresh of the in-state US&R system that aligns with the threats our regions face.

We sincerely appreciate the opportunity to participate in this public hearing and are willing to take any questions from the committees.