



Urban Search and Rescue Task Forces: Facts and Issues

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Summary

Since the early 1990s, Urban Search and Rescue (USAR) Task Forces have been certified, trained, and funded by the federal government. Twenty-eight task forces are located in 19 states. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) officials may call out the task force (or forces) in closest proximity to the disaster to help locate and extricate victims from collapsed buildings and structures. The task forces represent a partnership involving federal, local government, and private sector experts. Most recently, USAR teams received considerable publicity, and reportedly achieved life-saving results, in their mission to Haiti after the earthquakes of early 2010.

Legislation pending before Congress would affect the USAR system in two ways. First, H.R. 119 would designate a New Jersey task force to be part of the system. Other legislation (H.R. 706 and H.R. 3377) would establish statutory authority and federal funding for a USAR response system.

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Overview

Urban Search and Rescue (USAR) task forces have been designated by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to provide specialized assistance after buildings or other structures collapse.¹ The task forces work to stabilize damaged structures, locate and extricate victims, identify risks of additional collapses, and meet other needs at disaster sites. Each task force is comprised of at least 70 persons whose skills as unit members include engineering, emergency medicine, canine handling, firefighting, hazardous material handling, communications, logistics, and other areas.

Although the USAR task forces are local government entities, they may be considered part of the federal emergency response network as they receive funding, training, and accreditation from the federal government.² Congress authorized emergency search and rescue response activities in 1990 as part of an earthquake hazards reduction program, and federal involvement in the urban search and rescue field has increased since the establishment of the task forces in the 1990s. The successful deployment of task forces after the terrorist attacks of 2001, the bombing of the Murrah federal building in Oklahoma City in 1995, actions taken after Hurricane Katrina, and other disasters appears to have established general support for the task force concept. Most recently, task forces from New York, Virginia, Utah, California, and other states dedicated weeks to the recovery efforts in Haiti after earthquakes destroyed much of the nation's infrastructure.

Genesis and Growth

The federal role in urban search and rescue efforts has developed slowly over the past decades. Its roots may be traced to congressional enactment of the Earthquake Hazards Reduction Act of 1977 to stimulate research and planning related to preparation for, and response to, the devastation of earthquakes.³ The statute recognized that federal and non-federal entities, both public and private, must exercise responsibilities to reduce losses and disruptions from earthquakes. The primary mandate given to the President in the 1977 statute was to designate responsible agencies to establish and maintain “a coordinated earthquake hazards reduction program,” one primarily oriented toward earthquake prediction and mitigation.⁴ Objectives that were to be incorporated in the program included “organizing emergency services” and educating the public and state and local officials on “ways to reduce the adverse consequences of an earthquake.”⁵

Following establishment of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) in 1979, Congress amended the 1977 statute to require FEMA to serve as lead agency for the program.⁶ More recently, the 108th Congress transferred that authority to the National Institute of Standards and Technology of the Department of Commerce.⁷ The most significant program change relevant to the history of the USAR task forces was the 1980 requirement that the director of FEMA

¹ For background on USAR task forces see <http://www.fema.gov/emergency/usr/index.shtm>.

² Regulations pertinent to the operation of the task forces are found at 44 CFR Part 208.

³ 91 Stat. 1098-1103.

⁴ 91 Stat. 1099. The program was eventually designated the National Earthquake Hazards Reduction Program (NEHRP).

⁵ 91 Stat. 1100.

⁶ 94 Stat. 2257.

⁷ Sec. 103, P.L. 108-360, 42 U.S.C. 7704(b)(1).

submit an “interagency coordination plan for earthquake hazard mitigation *and response*” [emphasis added] to Congress.⁸ This provision indicates that Congress, perhaps for the first time, authorized federal action and responsibility for disaster response efforts traditionally considered the responsibility of state and local governments.

As a consequence of the Loma Prieta earthquake of 1989, Congress and FEMA revisited the scope of NEHRP. FEMA established the National Urban Search and Rescue Response System that same year. Also in the aftermath of that earthquake, Congress enacted the National Earthquake Hazards Reduction Program Reauthorization Act of 1990.⁹ These amendments to the 1977 statute expanded the federal response authority to include the following charge:

develop, and coordinate the execution of, federal interagency plans to respond to an earthquake, with specific plans for each high-risk area which ensure the availability of adequate emergency medical resources, search and rescue personnel and equipment, and emergency broadcast capability.¹⁰

In 2004, the 108th Congress further amended the 1977 earthquake hazards act. The amendment required that the Undersecretary of Homeland Security for Emergency Preparedness and Response, who also served as the director of FEMA, develop and coordinate the National Response Plan and support state and local plans “to ensure the availability of adequate emergency medical resources, search and rescue personnel and equipment, and emergency broadcast capability.”¹¹ The Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act of 2006 authorizes the FEMA Administrator to “lead the nation’s efforts to prepare for, protect against, respond to ... the risk of natural disasters, acts of terrorism, and other man-made disasters, including catastrophic incidents.”¹² In addition, the statute established in FEMA the Urban Search and Rescue Response System.¹³ Under this authority the FEMA Administrator, and his designees, coordinate the activities of USAR task forces when called to service.

Task Force Operations and Capabilities

DHS generally activates up to three task forces located closest to a disaster in the United States, if it requires the assistance of USAR task forces. Task forces must be able to deploy all personnel and equipment within six hours of activation, and must be able to sustain themselves for the first 72 hours of operations.

Each task force must include a wide range of emergency response capabilities, a requirement that calls upon each task force member to complete a significant amount of training, and must consist of a deployable roster of at least 70 fully trained individuals. DHS has established a goal for each position on the task force to be staffed to ensure that each position has at least two alternates in reserve. Task force members must hold the following specialist skills: technical search, rescue, emergency medicine, structural engineering, logistics, communications, canine search, and

⁸ 94 Stat. 2258.

⁹ 104 Stat. 3231-3243.

¹⁰ 104 Stat. 3234, 42 U.S.C. 7704(b)(2)(A)(iv).

¹¹ Section 103, P.L. 108-360, 42 U.S.C. 7704(b)(2).

¹² P.L. 109-295, 120 Stat. 1396, 6 U.S.C. 313(b)(2).

¹³ Section 634, P.L. 109-295, 120 Stat. 1421, 6 U.S.C. 722.

hazardous materials handling. A task force must continue training and evaluation to maintain the accreditation status received from DHS.

Members commonly work in 12-hour shifts. Task forces are supported by Incident Support Teams (ISTs), which provide technical assistance to state and local emergency managers, coordinate the activities of multiple task forces, and provide logistical support. Task forces remain on-site until the Incident Commander determines that no victims could possibly remain alive.

Funding

Comprehensive information on USAR funding is not readily available, although some data have been published. Federal funding for the activities of the task forces in responding to catastrophes is provided through the Disaster Relief Fund administered by FEMA. In general, host employers of task force members (generally units of local government) serve as the primary source of funds for the task forces. The federal government provides funding for costs incurred when they are activated by FEMA.

Some historical information is available on funds Congress appropriates to ensure that the supplies and capabilities of the task forces are maintained. In FY1998 and FY1999 roughly \$4 million in federal funding was provided to the teams.¹⁴ FY2001, FEMA allocated approximately \$6.4 million to the USAR program for training and equipment, which was distributed to the task forces based on need. According to program officials, state and local governments expected to pay 80% of the long-term costs associated with sponsoring a USAR task force. In FY2001, FEMA also allocated \$3 million for upgrading six task forces to weapons of mass destruction capability (WMD). This new capability was meant to enable the task forces to search collapsed structures in an environment with chemical, biological, or radiological contamination.

Following the terrorist attacks of September 2001, USAR task forces received federal funds to cover costs associated with responding to the World Trade Center and Pentagon sites. Out of its discretionary funds in the emergency supplemental appropriation (P.L. 107-38), the Administration allocated funds to the task forces. Congress also allocated roughly \$32.4 million to the USAR program in FY2002 supplemental appropriations (P.L. 107-206). For FY2003, Congress provided \$60 million for the 28 existing task forces. The conference report accompanying the appropriation bill (P.L. 108-7) stated that the funds could be used for operational costs, equipment, and, training. The report also emphasized readiness for operating in an environment contaminated by a weapon of mass destruction.¹⁵ In similar fashion, Congress appropriated another \$60 million for the task forces in FY2004.¹⁶ President Bush did not request funding in FY2005 for the task forces, but Congress appropriated \$30 million for the teams in the FY2005 appropriations legislation for homeland security.¹⁷ In recent years (FY2009 and FY2010) Congress has appropriated roughly \$32 million for the USAR task forces and administration of the system.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 48.

¹⁵ U.S. Congress, Conference Committees, 2003, *Making Further Continuing Appropriations for the Fiscal Year 2003, and for Other Purposes*, report to accompany H.J.Res. 2, H.Rept. 108-10, 108th Cong., 1st sess. (Washington: GPO, 2003), 1474.

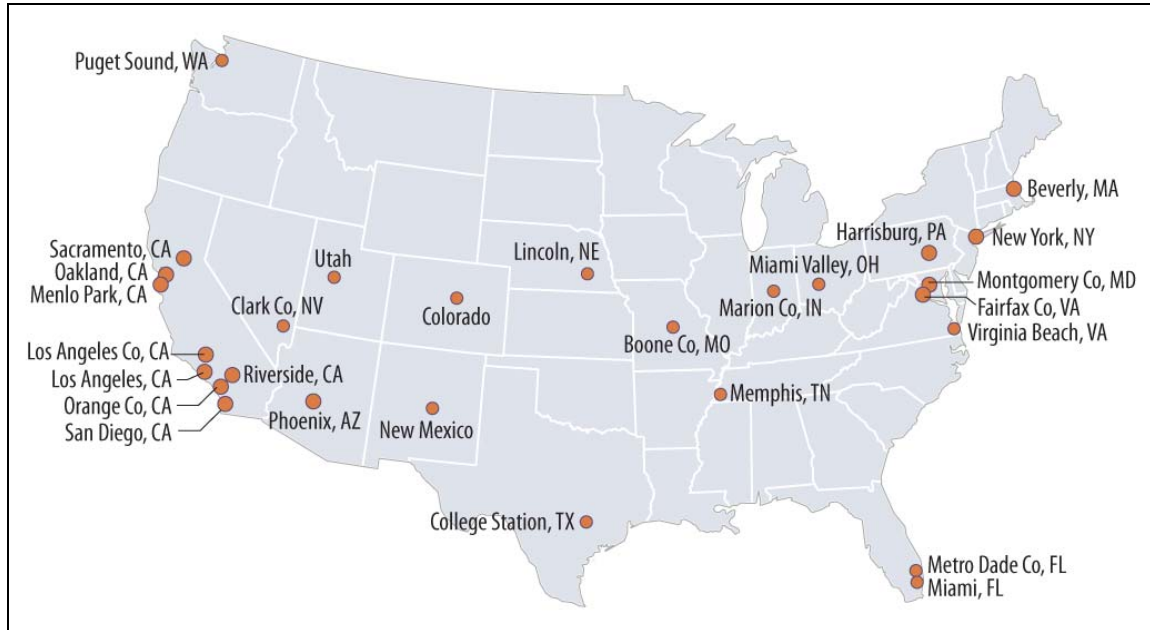
¹⁶ P.L. 108-90, 117 Stat. 1147.

¹⁷ P.L. 108-334, 118 Stat. 1311.

Locations

Twenty-eight task forces have been established throughout the United States, as shown in the following map.

Figure I. USAR Response System Task Forces



Source: Map taken from U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency, <http://www.fema.gov/usr/usrtask.shtm>, visited Apr. 21, 2004. (No longer available online as of Apr. 24, 2006.) Adapted by CRS.

Selected Issues

Members of Congress might elect to consider the following issues as they consider the emergency response needs of communities. The response of USAR teams to Haiti in response to the earthquake of 2010 may also present opportunities for modifying existing USAR practices or reconsidering priorities.

- *Additional task forces.* Some Members of Congress, along with state and local officials, contend that more task forces should be certified throughout the nation. DHS officials, however, have expressed concern that the establishment of more task forces would dilute the available funding to train, equip, and manage the task force network. Members of Congress may consider several options with regard to this issue: (1) adopt language in the appropriations legislation for DHS that directs the department to establish additional task forces, whether in specified states or at the discretion of DHS officials; (2) consider legislation that statutorily establishes USAR task forces, such as H.R. 119 pending in the 111th Congress.
- *Authorization.* The USAR task forces have developed over time through administrative actions taken by FEMA (now DHS) in response to the general authority provided by Congress in the earthquake statute discussed above. Since the role of the task forces has evolved, Members of Congress might elect to

consider legislation that specifies attributes of the task forces, identifies requirements, and establishes permanent funding accounts. Two bills before Congress, H.R. 706 and Section 105 of H.R. 3377, would authorize establishment of a USAR response system.

- *Funding.* Funding for USAR task forces, like other aspects of homeland security, could be increased to ensure that sufficient equipment (and reserves) are available to task forces. Congress might consider legislation (such as S. 930, considered in the 108th Congress but not acted upon) that would require the Secretary of DHS to provide grants to task forces to ensure that operational, administrative, and training costs continue to be met. Others may argue, however, that federal support and involvement in task forces should be minimized, as the federal need for USAR task forces occurs relatively infrequently, and task forces primarily serve local government purposes.
- *Redundancy.* Congress may wish to debate how USAR task forces fit into the broader scope of federal disaster response efforts. A report issued by the General Accounting Office prior to the terrorist attacks of 2001 identified 24 types of teams, administered by eight federal agencies, capable of responding to terrorist incidents involving weapons of mass destruction.¹⁸ The extent to which USAR task forces duplicate the capabilities and authorities of other federal response teams might be considered.
- *Involvement in non-domestic catastrophes.* The allocation of USAR resources to Haiti after the earthquakes destroyed much of the capital city and other parts of the nation arguably demonstrated the best use of the USAR capabilities. Lives were saved and local and international burdens were shared. Some may question whether domestic USAR forces should be dedicated to work in foreign countries if catastrophes occur in the United States and the USAR forces are already committed overseas.

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¹⁸ U.S. General Accounting Office, *Combating Terrorism: Federal Response Teams Provide Varied Capabilities; Opportunities Remain to Improve Coordination*, GAO Report GAO-01-14 (Washington: Nov. 30, 2000).