



CANADIAN ASSOCIATION
OF FIRE CHIEFS

ASSOCIATION CANADIENNE
DES CHEFS DE POMPIERS

Safe and Sound: Productivity and Competitiveness through Collaboration with Canada's Fire Service

Submission to the Standing Committee on Finance's
consultations in advance of Federal Budget 2018

August 4, 2017



Executive Summary

Founded in 1909, the Canadian Association of Fire Chiefs (CAFC) is an independent, non-profit organization representing approximately 3,500 fire departments across Canada. The primary mission of CAFC is to promote the highest standard of public safety in an ever changing and increasingly complex world to ensure the protection of the public through leadership, advocacy and active collaboration with key stakeholders. For contact and other information please visit www.cafc.ca.

The Canadian Association of Fire Chiefs (CAFC) is pleased to partake in the Federal Government's consultation process in advance of Budget 2018. We commend the evident commitment to: public safety, the health and well-being of all Canadians including first responders, and the swift action in recent emergencies. We thank the Government for helping communities in need and for using the lessons learned to improve fire-related policy and practice in Canada. We commend the Minister of Public Safety and Transport and their colleagues and staff for commitment to key files affecting the fire service and first responders; for the upcoming National Fire Incidence Database (NFID); and the reinvestment in Heavy Urban Search and Rescue (HUSAR). We also share in the Government's valuation on diversity and equality. We strive for this as well.

Unfortunately, however, Canada is seeing fires of massive proportions including the wildfire in British Columbia and Alberta and fires in Lac Megantic, Kingston, Ile Verte, and others, reminding us that continuous action is needed. These undermine our productivity and competitiveness through their destruction, economic impact, and through the physical and mental health toll they take on communities and first responders. Our recommendations, substantiated in this brief, to improve productivity and competitiveness, through measures in Canada's Budget 2018 include:

- (1) **Interim access programs for first responder mental health needs:** Recognizing that: longer term action is being taken on post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD); mental health issues are broader than PTSD, prevalent, and urgent; and innovations currently exist that can be helpful in prevention: (1) that the Government commit \$2.5M for spreading and scaling the Mental Health Commission of Canada's R2MR and Mental Health First Aid programs to every Canadian Fire Department; and (2) that the Government launch the Mental Health Innovation Fund of \$100M recommended by the Canadian Alliance for Mental Illness and Mental Health (CAMIMH) funding innovations expediting care and coverage for more Canadians, sooner.
- (2) **A Fire Rescue Research Fund and Building Code Modernization:** Recognizing that the fire service has the experience but not the resources needed to generate comparable research quality evidence to industry and academia; and the valuation on evidence informed policy and practice, that \$50M/year be earmarked to enable the fire service to generate research evidence for its Building Code modification proposals and other policy and resourcing discussions. Over time, Canada may need to have a Chief (National) Fire Advisor.
- (3) **Maintain the Volunteer Tax Credit and prevent penalties for volunteers:** Recognizing that the fire service relies on over 140,000 volunteer firefighters, that the Federal Government maintain the volunteer firefighter tax credit and ensure that volunteers are not penalized by employment or insurance acts for volunteering in their communities.



Introduction

Currently, over 36,000 British Columbians have been evacuated from their homes due to wildfires¹. Close to 300 firefighters from across the country have been brought in to British Columbia to assist². The province has dedicated \$100M to help in this disaster³. The Federal Government has received and responded to state of emergency requests⁴. To date, gratefully, not one life was lost in these fires. However, productivity and competitiveness are impossible if communities are burning. The Federal Government plays a crucial role in the fire service.

In May 2016, when the Alberta Wildfires marked the worst natural disaster in Canadian history, fire displaced 88,000 Canadians and destroyed 2,500 homes⁵. The province paid \$743 M to help but the total cost of the Alberta Wildfires exceeded \$5B⁶. Insurance companies will pay out \$3.6B in insurance claims and the economy suffers \$1.4B in lost oil revenues⁷. The fire shut down small businesses. Studies clearly quantify the benefits that minor investments in prevention programs have in significantly reducing such losses⁸. We need these to be economically competitive.

In July 2013, Canada experienced the worst train disaster since 1867 resulting in a fire that claimed 47 lives, orphaned 27 children, destroyed 160 homes, and left 46 buildings beyond repair⁹. Over 1000 firefighters from Ontario, Quebec, and the United States, came to Lac Megantic to help combat the fire. Among them were Lac Megantic's 47 volunteer firefighters¹⁰. One of those volunteers committed suicide at the end of the mission. Two of three residents in Lac Megantic are known to experience PTSD symptoms. Productivity and competitiveness needs safety measures for the transportation of dangerous goods¹¹.

In December 2013, a six-story wood frame building still in construction caught fire in Kingston. Firefighters strived to keep the fire away from an exposed gas station. This would have turned a disaster into a catastrophe. That year, annual dollar losses for the city went from an average of \$3M to \$40M¹². This speaks to building code issues. Similarly, in 2014, a coroner's report on the nursing home fire at Ile Verte Quebec recommended sprinklers in all nursing homes¹³. Tragically, on July 10, 2017 we saw another nursing home fire. This one affects 35 residents and requiring 70 firefighters to control. One person died¹⁴. We cannot have a competitive and productive economy if fire safety is not adequately reflected in building codes.

In June 2012, The Algoma Centre Mall in Elliott Lake, Ontario collapsed. While not a fire, the Elliott Lake Fire Department, a volunteer department was on scene. Heavy Urban Search and Rescue was called in from Toronto. The plan to rescue individuals trapped in the debris was working, until an elevator began to show signs of collapse. The Heavy Urban Search And Rescue (HUSAR) team and first responders had to decide, do they risk everything and bring out two people or do they call it off¹⁵. A high-tech crane was finally called in. It still resulted in fatalities and had a significant impact on the community and on the mental health of first responders.



What do these stories tell us? They tell us that it only takes one fire or structural disaster to wipe out an economy, a community, a history, a life. They tell us that our building codes and fire departments matter; that citizens and firefighters can become exposed to life threatening physical and mental health issues; and that while fires may be local and provincial matters, it often takes a nation to help save a community. Canada needs a robust national fire system.

In this submission, we discuss three federal budget measures. However, we also believe Canada needs to modernize its conceptualization of the fire service. Just as the Federal Government has introduced a Chief Science Advisor, a Chief (National) Fire Advisor and Secretariat could help achieve this, linking all fire-related federal departments, provinces, and national issues from emergency response; to transport, mental and physical health, to science, technology, research, innovation and infrastructure, among others. We would be pleased to discuss this further and will now discuss the budget measures.

1. Expediting access to mental health services for first responders

We appreciate the work of the Standing Committee on Public Safety and National Security and Bill C-211 in addressing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) through federal frameworks, guidelines, research and information¹⁶. We also commend stigma reduction around mental illness. With these in hand, a few things must be considered in the near term.

First, PTSD is not the only mental health issue first responders face. Suicide, depression, alcohol abuse, and post-traumatic stress symptoms are also prevalent. We must prevent and reduce these. Next, the impact of reducing stigma and promoting understanding of mental health and illness is that people try to get help. What happens when they try to get help? They may run into one of two issues (a) wait times and (b) cost coverage. Now we have a situation where individuals (a) know they have an illness; (b) try to get help, but (c) have to wait until it may be too late.

What can be done in the short term? On the prevention side, our proposal to the federal government is to commit \$2.5 M to the scale and spread of the Mental Health Commission of Canada's (MHCC) Road to Mental Readiness (R2MR) and Mental Health First Aid Programs to every fire department in the country¹⁷. These programs are currently recognized as a beneficial; however, they do require departments to purchase training on a per firefighter basis which is costly to departments. The course could assist departments in ensuring that staff and volunteers have health promoting practices for resiliency. The Mental Health First Aid course helps firefighters and their families recognize the signs of mental illness and hopefully address them.

On the short-term access side, we ask the Federal Government to implement a Mental Health Innovation fund, an idea proposed by the Canadian Alliance for Mental Health and Mental Illness (CAMHMI) and use this to identify and fund innovations that expedite access and coverage to care for more Canadians sooner¹⁸.



2. A Fire Rescue Research Fund and Building Code Modernization

From the transportation of dangerous goods, to rail safety, to building codes, to funds for first responders responding to highway traffic accidents, making appropriate resource allocation decisions requires an understanding of the current context and of emerging national and international trends. It also requires evidence and argumentation to push policy and practice into the best safest possible future for Canadians.

Consider that Canada has an extraordinary system for developing and modernizing its model Building Code. The application process is rigorous, evidence informed, and based on high standards. When a change is needed to them, the National Research Council accepts applications. These applications involve a rigorous description of the size, prevalence and impact of the problem and the proposed solution¹⁹. This is a commendable evidence informed approach.

However, as we examine the specifics of the building code and how to affect change, it becomes evident that organizations that have strong and timely access to research and data capacity have the ability to propose and substantiate changes much more effectively and efficiently to the Building Code. For example, commercial companies with large R&D budgets or academics with access to grant funding can make excellent arguments.

By contrast, fire departments, have first-hand observational and experiential knowledge of issues, but not the mandates, capacity or resources to generate, collect or present research level data as the evidence needed for their policy proposals or their building code modification applications. As such, many requests for changes to the Building Code do not withstand the rigorous assessment expected. We therefore ask for funding of \$50M per year dedicated to fire related policy and research, directed in collaboration with the sector, and allowing for the resources needed to complete modifications to Building Code applications and informing key research and policy issues. We are not looking for less rigorous standards; but the resources to meet them. This funding could also maintain the National Fire Incidence Database (NFID).

3. Volunteer Firefighter Tax Credit

Finally, Canadians rely on over 140,000 volunteer firefighters. We thank the Government for the volunteer firefighter tax credit, ask that it be maintained, and ask that employment and insurance requirements be reviewed to ensure that they do not inadvertently penalize willing volunteer fire-fighters who assist their communities. We would be pleased to provide further details.

Thank you for considering our views. We look forward to the possibility of meeting with you.



Links referenced

- ¹ <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/bc-wildfire-williams-lake-1.4207548>
- ² <http://peacefm.ca/peace-firefighters-assisting-in-state-of-emergency/>
- ³ <http://www.caledoniacourier.com/news/bc-wildfires-costs-over-172-million-so-far/>
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- ⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2016_Fort_McMurray_Wildfire
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- ⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lac-Mégantic_rail_disaster
- ¹⁰ <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/okay-were-in-hell-lac-megantic-fire-chief-recounts-night-of-train-explosion/article21137065/>
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- ¹³ <http://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/coroners-report-set-to-be-released-in-lisle-verte-seniors-home-fire-that-killed-32>
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- ¹⁸ http://www.camimh.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/CAMIMH_MHN_EN_Final_small.pdf
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