

Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2023

Remarks to the United States Fire Administrator's Summit on Fire Prevention and Control

October 10, 2023

[The President addressed the summit, which was held at the National Emergency Training Center in Emmitsburg, MD, via videoconference.]

The President. Hello, hello, hello. Thank you, Dr. Lori, for that introduction. You and your team deserve tremendous credit for what you've accomplished over these last 2 years.

And a special hello to Eddie—Ed Kelly, my good friend. Ed, I can't see you out there, but I'm sure you're around. And also Kevin—and Chief Kevin Quinn as well.

Look, I joined this summit virtually last year, and I wanted to be with you in person this year. But there was a critical issue, and it required me to stay at the White House to respond to the terrorist attacks in Israel.

We've gotten word that several firefighters have already been killed in the assault on Israel, and Dr. Lori and her team are in touch with fire officials on the ground.

You know, you've heard me say before: God made man, then he made a few firefighters. *[Laughter]* And that's pretty close to the—the overwhelming human instinct is to run away from danger, and there's no more frightening danger than a fire. And when that bell rings, you run toward it. You put your gear on, you jump on the truck, and you do what you've got to do.

Because being a firefighter isn't just what you do, it's who you are.

But we also know your bravery comes at a real cost. This year alone, we've had—already had 61 line-of-duty firefighters' deaths in the United States. And I've had far too many firefighter funerals that I've attended in my life, from coast to coast.

This is a dangerous profession, and there's no getting around it. But there are things we can do to make the job a little bit safer. And that's what I want to talk about today.

With the effects of climate change becoming more severe, fire departments that never trained for wildfires—to fight wildfires are facing wildfires head on now.

And Jill and I just visited Maui in the wake of that historic fire there——

[At this point, the President wiped his nose with a handkerchief.]

Excuse me, I have a bit of a cold—and we met firefighters who performed breathtaking acts of heroism while their own homes stood at risk and some burned to the ground.

This is National Fire Prevention Week, and the one thing we can do to make our job—your jobs safer is to prevent the fires in the first place. So we launched a national initiative offering Federal grants to help local governments adopt the most up-to-date building codes to make structures more resilient to extreme weather events and—like wildfires and hurricanes. It makes a difference.

In January of last year, a fire tore through affordable housing units in Philadelphia, killing 12 people—many of whom were children—in large part because the smoke detectors didn't work. In the wake of this tragedy, I signed a bill that requires affordable housing units to have reliable, tamper-resistant smoke alarms.

Just 4 days after that Philadelphia fire I just referenced, another fire took place, costing 17 lives in Bronx—in the Bronx because the building made up of affordable housing units had no firesafe—none—it was not firesafe. Period.

In response, I signed legislation giving the U.S. Fire Administrator authority to conduct onsite fire safety investigations of major fires to determine what happened and prevent the needless heartbreak in the future.

Too many lives have been lost from fires that could have been prevented—the fires. And people of color, people with disabilities, seniors, low-income Americans are too often the victims. You know, my administration is going to combine—continue working to protect all Americans from these tragedies.

But also—we also know that what protects firefighters—the only thing that really protects firefighters is more firefighters. During the pandemic, we invested \$350 billion from the American Rescue Plan that States and cities could use to keep firefighters on the job through premium pay, new fire and rescue vehicles, extra staff during peak times.

I also signed a budget providing \$360 million [\$260 million; White House correction] to both the Assistance to Fire Prevention—Firefighters Grant program and SAFER grant program for hundreds of emergency response vehicles, thousands of sets of turnaround—turnout gear, and critical cancer research and cancer screening. Look—and to put almost 1,200 more firefighters in the field. My budget this year includes another \$370 million for each of these grants.

It's also past time to acknowledge the physical toll of these jobs. Toxic substances you've exposed to are almost certainly why cancer is the leading cause—the leading killer of firefighters is cancer.

You don't have to look any further than 9/11. We stepped up and we did something about that. We would step up now—we should step up now.

My budget includes \$1.7 billion for my Cancer Moonshot—to keep part—key parts of my unity agenda in the State of the Union to cut cancer deaths rates in half, to invest in research and development and early detection and screening, and to end cancer, which we could do, as we know it.

We passed the PACT Act as part of my unity agenda to help veterans, like my son, exposed to toxic materials and their families recover and receive compensation. You know, around 20 percent of firefighters are military veterans.

You know, thanks to this law, the Department of Veterans Affairs has already provided free screening for over 4.5 million veterans from toxic exposure from burn pits. These burn pits, as you know, are the size of football fields. They're 8 to 10 feet deep. And they're used to incinerate—they're used to incinerate wastes of war: tires, poisonous chemicals, jet fuel, and so much more.

You know, we also just created the special claims unit at the Department of Labor to process cancer claims and all other claims of Federal firefighters and to process them faster.

You know, and we're tracking PFAS, the so-called forever chemical that for years have been in fire suppression agents and in your gear. I signed legislation to fund research aimed at understanding the risk you face from PFAS, and we banned the Department of Defense from buying gear, by the way, that contains PFAS as soon as an alternative is available.

In April, the CDC launched the National Firefighter Registry to collect details—detailed data to better understand the link between workforce exposure and cancer among firefighters.

I'm also proud to sign the Federal Firefighters Fairness Act, giving more than 10,000 firefighters and their families critical workers' compensation and other benefits by making sure certain kinds of heart problems, lung disease, and cancers are presumed to be caused by the job.

We also know the sacrifices you make are more than physical. According to one study, firefighters develop posttraumatic stress at a similar rate of troops returning from combat. And I don't know why that should surprise anybody. It's estimated that more than 100 firefighters a year die from—by suicide.

That's why I signed legislation extending the Public Safety Officers' Benefit Program not only to firefighters who are permanently disabled, but to their families of firefighters who die after experiencing trauma like PSD [PTSD; White House correction] on duty.

But we also know we need to do more on the front end to help firefighters cope with the mental health challenges that come from the job.

You know, when it finally comes time for you to leave the job, you should be able to retire with dignity. That's why I was proud to sign legislation to make sure disability retirement benefits remain tax free. Let me say it again: Those retirement benefits remain tax free. I'm also going to protect your right to collective bargaining.

Let me close with this. When the worst happens, when those alarms go off, when everything and everyone you love is in danger, there's no better sight in the world than a firefighter ready to go to work. So thank you for being who you are.

I want to thank your families. Every time that alarm goes off and you respond, they wait for that phone call—pray God, they don't get that phone call. You sacrifice every day—they sacrifice every day along with you.

And thank you for all the heroes you represent—on alert, on call—in communities all across America at this very minute.

So God bless you all, and may God protect our firefighters.

You're the best. You've been with me my whole career. You've taught me a lot.

I want to know how many other people go out, risk their lives, and save someone in their home and then, a week later, standing on a corner with a boot, collecting money to help someone rebuild the home they just lost. You're the very best. You really are.

Thank you. Thank you, thank you.

[U.S. Fire Administrator Lori Moore-Merrell spoke from the National Emergency Training Center in Emmitsburg, MD, as follows.]

Administrator Moore-Merrell. —President, thank you. Thank you, Mr. President, for your leadership and your commitment to the Nation's fire service. Thank you, sir.

The President. Thank you.

Administrator Moore-Merrell. Thank you.

[As the President left the podium, several reporters shouted questions.]

Q. [Inaudible]—Gaza?

Q. How far are you willing to go to bring back Americans, Mr. President?

NOTE: The President spoke at 3:48 p.m. from the South Court Auditorium of the Dwight D. Eisenhower Executive Office Building. In his remarks, he referred to Edward A. Kelly, general

president, International Association of Fire Fighters; and Kevin D. Quinn, member of the board of directors and advisory committee, National Fallen Firefighters Foundation.

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