



MUTUAL AID BOX ALARM SYSTEM

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The Honorable Mark Kirk
Member of Congress
1910 Waukegan Road
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Dear Congressman Kirk:

As always, it is a pleasure to work with yourself and your staff on matters of mutual interest. My goal in this memorandum is to advise you of a public safety issue associated with Homeland Defense and Domestic Preparedness regarding field based biological assessment capabilities. I do believe you might be able to assist not only the fire service in Illinois, but throughout the nation.

As you are aware, I'm not only the Fire Chief in Northbrook, but also the President of MABAS (Mutual Aid Box Alarm System) and the States Fire/EMS Operations liaison with Illinois Terrorism Task Force. As such, I'm responsible for the Statewide Plan and coordinating 1,200 fire departments and the thirty-two (32) Hazardous Materials Response Teams, including equipment, protocols and field capabilities.

The thirty-two (32) Hazardous Materials Teams in Illinois are rated Level A, the most capable, and are well equipped in the field detection and analysis of chemical and nuclear releases. Unfortunately, our weakest capability is within the biological, field detection and analysis area.

All thirty-two (32) teams are equipped with a single device, capable of field use for bio detection and analysis. The device is the "Guardian" brand, which was used extensively during threatening events following September 11, 2001. The Guardian is the sole device most team's carry for bio threats and when an experienced, trained operator utilizes the device, their findings and recommendations are extremely beneficial in contributing to the formulation of tactical decisions.

Unfortunately, Health and Human Services Department (HHS) policy makers have been attempting to stop the field use of the Guardian. The action will effectively leave many First Responders and HAZ-MAT teams without a single field biological tool. First Responders and the public will be left at the mercy solely of laboratories and prolonged periods of waiting due to backlogs.

During the Anthrax experience, lab services were backlogged for weeks. The quickest turn around experience was 48 hours for several special cases, where the bio threat surroundings suggested high probability of a genuine threat.

Imagine the loss of public confidence if field First Responders are disallowed from having a technological tool. Imagine the advantage copycats have in eroding confidence in Government when they realize First Responders lack a field analysis capability. We are giving way to chaos and societal disruption. The thought of removing these tools from field First Responders requires reconsideration.

I understand HHS based their findings on Anthrax experiences within the postal system. As you might recall, the postal system experience was different than what we experienced in the field. The postal experience involved aerosolized products, which were not visible to the human eye. Conversely, field First Responders dealt with a visible suspect products, package or letters, which contained powders of various sorts. Quite a different experience than those dealt with at postal facilities.

I believe two considerations for action are worthy of consideration.

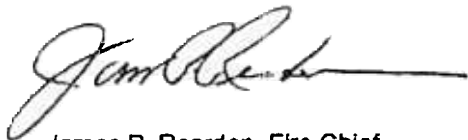
First, have HHS reverse its position in removing the Guardian from First Responders, and consider the mandatory adoption of sample analysis and collection protocols for laboratory analysis in conjunction with the Guardians field use. In Illinois, we have done so in a cooperative manner with the FBI, and continue to use the Guardian as part of our field assessment and tactical decision making process. The Guardian does not drive our tactical decision, but rather assists us in making a more knowledgeable tactical field decision, which always involves follow up laboratory analysis if even a remote probability exists that the product is genuine.

Secondly, the transfer of improved federal technology regarding field bio threat detection and analysis to the First Response and HAZ-MAT Team's within local government. Until new technologies become available that demonstrate more reliable field performance than the Guardian System, we will continue to rely upon the current screening equipment. Such performance issues require that Federal authorities make test results available for evaluation by the First Responder Community. Although such information is typically kept classified for security reasons, some means must be developed for a review of such test data by independent authorities at the local response level. Only then can a proper comparison be made between technologies.

It is my hope you will understand our dilemma in serving our communities, and find purpose and comfort in pursuing the recommendations. Your actions will make a difference not only to Chicago's North Shore, but also throughout the nation.

I can always be available to assist, and can be reached at (847) 498-5545.

Sincerely,



James P. Reardon, Fire Chief
MABAS - President
Illinois Fire Chiefs Association - Vice President