

INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF FIRE FIGHTERS



Statement of
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FIRE FIGHTERS
before the
SUBCOMMITTEE ON CONSUMER PROTECTION
AND COMMERCE
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
on
KEEPING KIDS AND CONSUMERS SAFE
FROM DEFECTIVE PRODUCTS

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Thank you Chairwoman Schakowsky, Ranking Member McMorris Rodgers, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee. My name is Christopher Parsons, and I am the President of the Minnesota Professional Fire Fighters. I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today on behalf of the International Association of Fire Fighters, General President Harold A. Schaitberger and over 316,000 fire fighters and emergency medical personnel who serve in every congressional district in this nation.

For over eighteen years, I have served with the Saint Paul (Minnesota) Fire Department, where I currently hold the rank of Captain, assigned as a crew supervisor on a ladder company. As an active-duty fire fighter as well as an elected leader within the IAFF, I have seen firsthand the unfortunate results of lax consumer safety laws and enforcement in my community. Inaction on these issues impacts not only the public at large, in the instances of carbon monoxide poisoning or flame-jetting injuries from portable gas cans, but also injures fire fighters sworn to protect the public, from exposure to toxic, cancer-causing flame retardants.

The federal government can and should do more to help prevent such tragedies, the resultant suffering, and loss of health and life. Today's hearing will examine several legislative proposals to do just that and I come before you today to offer my full support for your efforts. ***The Safer Occupancy Furniture Flammability Act (SOFFA), the Portable Fuel Container Safety Act, and the Nicholas and Zachary Burt Carbon Monoxide Poison Prevention Act*** will each address noteworthy gaps in federal consumer safety law and help keep fire fighters and the general public safe in their communities and at work.

Safer Occupancy Furniture Flammability Act

In 2018, fire fighters and paramedics were dispatched to over thirty-two million emergency incidents, including nearly 1.5 million fires. With each response to a residential, office, or commercial building fire, fire fighters are exposed to large amounts of now-ubiquitous flame retardants. These chemicals, once thought to provide a measure of fire protection, were placed in furniture in to meet an outdated 44 year-old standard and have, unfortunately, proved toxic when on fire.

According to numerous scientific studies, fire fighters are contracting and dying from cancer at an alarming rate. A 2013 study by the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health analyzed cancers and cancer deaths of nearly 30,000 professional fire fighters from 1950 to 2009 and found that fire fighters have a statistically significant increased risk of dying from seven different cancers, including esophageal and kidney cancer, as compared to the general population.

Further, a 2006 meta-analysis conducted by LeMasters at the University of Cincinnati examined data from thirty-two smaller studies of fire fighters for twenty different cancer types. Their research identified ten cancers for which fire fighters were at an increased risk as compared to

the general population, including testicular cancer, Non-Hodgkin's lymphoma and multiple myelomas. Studies also show that fire fighters contract cancers at a younger age than the general public, and that such cancers are more aggressive.

We know that, when burned, flame retardants emit cancer-causing furans and dioxins into the ambient air. Fire fighters operating in the environment are acutely exposed to these toxins via inhalation, ingestion, and absorption through the skin. They are exposed hundreds of times over a decades long career to such carcinogens. Despite modern advances in personal protective equipment, and clothing worn by fire fighters, such ensembles are often inadequate or only partially effective at providing physical protection for a fire fighter. A 2009 California study measuring fire fighters' blood after working fires found that the level of furans and dioxins was more than 100 times higher than the average level found in the general public.

We also now know that chemical flame retardants are not only toxic, but totally ineffective. A peer-reviewed study published in 2000 in the journal *Fire Science* concluded that fires involving furniture treated with chemical flame retardants only provided three extra seconds of escape time while producing twice the amount of smoke, seven times the amount of carbon monoxide, and 80 times the amount of soot compared to non-treated furniture. This toxic soup inhibits occupants' escape from a burning building adding further risk of injury and death.

Given their toxicity and suspect value, we see no reason to continue use of toxic flame retardants. In Minnesota, I have worked with state lawmakers to prohibit the sale and distribution of childrens' products, mattresses, residential upholstered furniture and textiles that contains certain toxic flame retardants. While the Minnesota law protects fire fighters and the public from many flame retardants, residents of many states have no similar protections.

The IAFF is therefore pleased to endorse, and urges the committee pass the Safer Occupancy Furniture Flammability Act (SOFFA). SOFFA would make California's Technical Bulletin 117-2013 a national standard, replacing an outdated open flame test, which led to the use of toxic flame retardants in furniture, with a more modern and realistic smolder test. California adopted this standard in 2013, and since then they have demonstrated that while the new standard poses no new fire safety risks, it does reduce the presence of flame retardants in home products and furniture, thereby protecting the citizens of the state while lessening the harmful health impacts suffered by fire fighters exposed to flame retardants. By passing SOFFA, Congress will extend these protections to citizens nationwide and reduce the risks fire fighters face from cancer-causing flame retardants.

Portable Fuel Container Safety Act

The IAFF also supports the Committee's efforts to update fuel container standards. Each year nearly 4,000 Americans are critically injured with burns, and approximately 450 of those burn victims will succumb to injuries sustained by a preventable phenomenon known as flame

jetting. Flame jetting occurs when flammable vapors escape from an open nozzle fuel can and are ignited when exposed to an open flame, creating an explosive “flame thrower” type blaze. The rapid and unexpected nature of flame jetting occurs with such speed and power that reflexive human action unfortunately often spreads the lethal stream of flaming vapors.

I have been witness to flame jetting at the scene of a structural fire. When it happened, there was no doubt as to the destructive force I was witnessing. The initial fire was located on the exterior deck of a house, but the jetting flame caused an immediate increase in the fire’s intensity. I saw a jetting flame from a portable fuel container on the deck shoot through a doorway to the interior of the house and turn a relatively uneventful fire into a prolonged and sustained attack, requiring fire fighters to use multiple attack lines to extinguish the blaze, and causing significantly more damage than would have been expected from the original fire.

The explosive force of flames exiting from flammable liquid containers ignites everything within its path; many times, this results in innocent victims suffering severe burns. Survivors of flame jetting burns require medical care in a hospital specializing in burn injuries, often necessitating survivors to travel hundreds of miles by ground or air ambulance. Once in the burn center, victims will undergo intensive care to stabilize and treat these wounds. Unlike most hospital stays, care in a burn center usually occurs over weeks or months, frequently at the cost of \$25,000 to \$35,000 a day for intensive care, with a hospital stay’s total cost averaging as much \$20,000 a day or more. Furthermore, survivors require a lifetime of follow-up care, including potential additional surgeries and psychological counseling.

Financial cost aside, the pain and suffering of survivors, victims, and their families of flame jetting incidents cannot be overestimated. Yet, there is a simple and effective solution for many such incidents. For as little as twenty-five cents, manufactures of portable flammable liquid containers can add a simple plastic or metal screen, often referred to as a flame arrestor, to preventing the rapid release of vapors that causes flame jetting.

While workplace safety regulations mandate the use of approved flame arresters in flammable liquid containers for industrial use, there is no such requirement for consumer containers used in homes across the country. The Portable Fuel Container Safety Act fixes this deficiency by directing the installation of flame arresters in all containers manufactured to hold flammable liquids. This common sense measure will prevent tragic disfiguring burns from occurring and doubtlessly save lives.

Nicholas and Zachary Burt Memorial Carbon Monoxide Poisoning Prevention Act

Finally, the IAFF is pleased to support the Nicholas and Zachary Burt Memorial Carbon Monoxide Poisoning Prevention Act. Carbon Monoxide (CO) gas is odorless, tasteless, and invisible to its victims. CO is the byproduct of burning fuels and is frequently emitted from improperly used or malfunctioning home appliances such as furnaces, water heaters, stoves, clothes dryers, or portable power equipment. Carbon monoxide gas becomes trapped inside of

homes with toxic concentrations building as long as the faulty appliance remains in use and ventilation is lacking. Low levels of CO poisons its victims, creating symptoms like headaches, nausea, and weakness, which becomes easily confused with common illness while high levels of CO is lethal.

Each year more 20,000 victims of carbon monoxide poisoning visit hospital emergency rooms and 400 deaths nationwide are directly attributable to this poisonous gas. In 1995, a few years before I joined the Saint Paul Fire Department, Minnesotans Nicholas and Zachary Burt, for whom this bill is named, tragically died in their beds as a result of CO poisoning from a malfunctioning furnace. Like the Rochester, MN fire fighters that responded to the Burts' tragic incident, I too have witnessed the deadly effects of CO firsthand.

Years ago, I responded to a call for emergency medical assistance at the home of a senior citizen. This senior citizen appears to have been out of the home grocery shopping, and upon returning home, she parked her car in the garage. She unloaded the groceries from the car and closed the garage door. Later that evening, family members were unable to contact her. Growing concerned, a family member went to the senior citizen's home where she was found unconscious on the floor. The fire department was summoned to help, and I was on the unit dispatched to assist. Upon our arrival, fire fighters determined the senior citizen had passed away from CO poisoning caused by a car left running in the garage. The home had lacked a CO detector.

Fatalities like the Burt children or this Saint Paul senior citizen are often preventable with the installation of an inexpensive working CO detector in the home. Despite the clear dangers of carbon monoxide, many people remain unaware of the need for carbon monoxide detectors. This bill aims to change that - it will assist states in delivering public education on the dangers of carbon monoxide poisoning while simultaneously providing grants to purchase and install CO detectors in the homes of elderly and low-income citizens and schools.

Conclusion

On behalf of the International Association of Fire Fighters, I appreciate the opportunity to share our views on **SOFFA**, the **Portable Fuel Container Safety Act**, and the **Zachary and Nicholas Burt Carbon Monoxide Poisoning Prevention Act**. As a nation, we continue to make significant positive progress towards improving the safety of our citizens, but much more must be done. It is crucial that these common sense safety measures be adopted to better protect the health, safety, and well-being of fire fighters along with the public we serve. To the extent that I or the IAFF can assist the Subcommittee in these efforts, I am happy to offer our expertise and pledge to work closely with you and your staffs.

Again, I'd like to thank the Subcommittee for the opportunity to testify today and am happy to answer any questions you may have.