

TESTIMONY OF

**Kelvin J. Cochran
United States Fire Administrator
United States Fire Administration
Federal Emergency Management Agency
Department of Homeland Security**

BEFORE THE

**COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE, SCIENCE AND TRANSPORTATION
SUB-COMMITTEE ON CONSUMER PROTECTION, PRODUCT SAFETY
AND INSURANCE**

UNITED STATES SENATE

Thursday, December 17, 2009

Good afternoon, Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Wicker, and Members of the Committee. My name is Kelvin J. Cochran and I am an Associate Administrator at the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) in charge of the United States Fire Administration (USFA) at the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the dangers of carbon monoxide poisoning.

Each year carbon monoxide poisoning kills or sickens thousands of Americans. This colorless, odorless gas adheres to red blood cells considerably faster than oxygen, which interrupts oxygen exchange. The loss of oxygen in the body leads to tissue damage and, in some cases, death. Each year from 1999 to 2004, approximately 450 Americans died from unintentional carbon monoxide poisoning. Annually more than 20,000 people visit emergency rooms and more than 4,000 are hospitalized due to carbon monoxide. Approximately 73% of these exposures occur in homes, and 41% occurred during winter months (December to February). Carbon monoxide poisoning is most fatal to those 65 or older.

Sources of carbon monoxide include house fires, faulty furnaces, heaters, wood-burning stoves, internal combustion vehicle exhaust, electrical generators, propane-fueled equipment such as portable stoves, and gasoline-powered tools such as lawn mowers. The fire and emergency services in the United States have been aware of this silent killer for many years and have been trained on how to respond to suspected cases of carbon monoxide poisoning. Municipal fire departments respond to an estimated 60,000 non-fire carbon monoxide incidents annually.

Individuals and families can take proactive steps to reduce the risk of carbon monoxide poisoning by installing home carbon monoxide detectors. Carbon monoxide detectors provide a crucial early warning of elevated levels of carbon monoxide.

The USFA believes citizens will be best prepared for an emergency in their homes if they install both smoke and carbon monoxide detectors. We have produced a fact sheet in conjunction with the Department of Housing and Urban Development and the National Institute of Standards and Technology entitled, "Smoke and Carbon Monoxide Alarms for Manufactured Homes." This fact sheet and other materials referenced here today can be accessed via the USFA website at www.usfa.dhs.gov.

Americans can also do more to reduce the risk of carbon monoxide poisoning. Homeowners should regularly check and vent their home heating systems, regularly clean their chimneys, and never leave vehicles running in a closed garage. These and other simple steps can ensure that carbon monoxide levels do not rise to dangerous levels within their homes.

In recent years the emergency management community has expressed concerns regarding post disaster deaths from carbon monoxide poisoning. Data has shown that on average 170 people die every year as a result of carbon monoxide poisoning associated with portable gas generators. Such post-disaster deaths are also caused by charcoal grills used inside the home or enclosed garages after power outages. Research by the Center for Hyperbaric Medicine at the Virginia Mason Medical Center in Seattle, Washington, shows the number of carbon monoxide poisoning deaths or emergency room admissions 2-3 days following a power outage spike as survivors begin to recover.

The USFA has developed brochures with guidance on the proper use of generators following disasters so survivors who operate these machines do so safely. The FEMA Administrator has asked USFA to look at how we can better prepare and respond to power outages in order to educate disaster survivors and prevent these tragedies from occurring. USFA will be working closely with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to distribute multi-language brochures and to develop public service announcements to better prepare citizens prior to a disaster.

We are also highlighting carbon monoxide poisoning in our January 2010 “Focus of the Month” on alternative heating. Educating the public on the dangers of carbon monoxide poisoning has been a part of our “Winter Fire Safety” focus for many years and we will continue to warn the public of its danger.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the Committee on this important issue, and I would be happy to answer any questions at this time.