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**KENNEDY ON PUBLIC SAFETY EMPLOYEE-EMPLOYEE COOPERATION  
AMENDMENT**

*(As Prepared for Delivery)*

Public safety workers are on the front lines of our effort to keep communities in America safe. They're on call 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, doing backbreaking, difficult work. They never blink or falter. They do their duty and they do it well.

- When devastating fires raged through Southern California, they battled the blazes.
- When the I-35 bridge collapsed in Minneapolis, they were first on the scene.
- When massive tragedy hit New York City on 9/11, their heroic work inspired the nation and restored our spirit.

Just last week in Everett, Massachusetts, a tanker truck hauling ten thousand tons of fuel suddenly exploded on the highway. 40 cars caught fire, and it took more than 3 hours to put out the flames. But because the police, firefighters and emergency medical technicians responded so quickly, no one was killed in the accident. Words can't begin to express our gratitude.

These heroic men and women have earned our thanks and our respect. And they have also earned the right to be treated with dignity.

That's why it's such a privilege to join with Senator Harkin and Senator Gregg on this bipartisan Public Safety Cooperation Amendment to the Farm Bill, to guarantee that all firefighters, police officers, emergency medical personnel, and other first responders have a voice at the table in the life-and-death discussions and decisions about their work. It will ensure that they are treated fairly, and it will help them keep our communities safe. It's no wonder that this amendment has received such strong bipartisan support. It passed the House with 314 supporters.

The amendment guarantees that every first responder will have the same basic right that most other workers in the public sector already enjoy – the right to collective bargaining. Many first responders already have this fundamental right.

Every New York City firefighter, emergency medical technician, and police officer who responded to the disaster at the World Trade Center on 9/11 was a union member under a collective bargaining agreement. So were the 7,000 firefighters who responded to the crisis in California.

They were able to respond more efficiently and effectively to the crisis, because they had a voice on the job. Many other first responders, however, are not so fortunate.

29 states and the District of Columbia guarantee all public safety workers the right to collective bargaining - but 21 states still deny some or most or even all such workers this fundamental right. Their first responders don't have a voice in the policies that affect their safety and their livelihoods.

That's both illogical and unfair. We see all too often how dangerous these jobs can be. In 2005, 80,000 firefighters were injured in the line of duty. 76,000 law enforcement officers were assaulted or injured, and almost 300 of these public safety employees paid the ultimate price.

First responders face chronic, long-term health problems as well. The brave men and women who responded at Ground Zero now suffer from crippling health problems such as asthma, chronic bronchitis, back pain, carpal tunnel syndrome, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder.

These men and women are profiles in courage. They walk into fires, wade into floods, and put their lives on the line to protect our homes and families. They know what they need to have to be safe on the job. They deserve the right to have a say in the decisions that affect their lives.

The amendment grants these basic rights in a reasonable way that respects existing state laws. States that already grant collective bargaining to public safety workers are not affected by the bill. States that don't offer this protection can establish their own collective bargaining systems, or ask the Federal Labor Relations Authority for help. What the amendment does do is set a standard -- each state has full authority to decide how it will provide these basic rights.

These rights for first responders aren't just important for the workers -- they're key to the safety of our communities and our nation. In this post-9/11 era, first responders have an indispensable role in homeland security. It's vital to our national interest that the essential services they provide are carried out as effectively as possible. As study after study shows, cooperation between public safety employers and employees improves the quality of services and reduces fatalities.

That's why strong, cooperative partnerships between first responders and the communities they serve are essential to public safety. As Dennis Compton, Fire Chief of the City of Phoenix, has said: "When labor and management leaders work together to build mutual trust, mutual respect, and a strong commitment to service, it helps focus [a] fire department on what is truly most important... providing excellent service to the customers."

Our families and communities deserve the best public safety services we can possibly provide, and it starts with the strong foundation that collective bargaining makes possible.

We cannot call these brave men and women heroes in a time of crisis, but turn our backs on them today. We need to act now to make these basic rights available to all of America's first responders. It's a matter of fundamental fairness, and an urgent matter of public safety. The best way to give our heroes the respect they deserve is by supporting this amendment, and I urge them to do so.

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