

Sen. Susan M. Collins
Maine Firefighters Memorial
Oct. 5, 2019

Thank you, Ken. Distinguished guests, friends, and, most of all, the men and women of our fire services who have dedicated their lives to protecting us, I am honored to join you on this day of solemn remembrance.

In a few minutes, the names of the 22 Maine firefighters we lost during the past year will be read and for each, the bell will be rung. Whether they were on duty or retired, every name belongs to a hero who will always be remembered. Every ring of the bell is an echo, not just of who they were, but of the dedication that all firefighters share and of the gratitude that unites all whom they serve.

This annual memorial service is always powerful and inspiring. It has a special significance this year. Just two weeks ago, Farmington Fire Captain Michael Bell gave his life responding to a terrible tragedy in the town he loved so dearly and defended with such courage and devotion. Our thoughts are with the other firefighters, including Michael's brother the Fire Chief, and the maintenance manager critically injured in the massive explosion in Farmington. We pray for their recovery.

When I visited Farmington, there was Acting Fire Chief Tim Hardy already on the job, despite his own injuries and those of his son who is still hospitalized.

Firefighters are a family, both literally and figuratively. Fire Departments from Gardiner, Fairfield, Freeport, and Salem were among those who have helped provide coverage and support.

This spring, Berwick Fire Captain Joel Barnes made the ultimate sacrifice battling a fire in his community. Chief Gary Sacco of Oxford passed away at Joel's funeral. We offer our deepest condolences to the families of these heroes – both their families at home and their brothers and sisters at the firehouse.

It is significant that here, in the shadow of our State House, stand monuments to our fallen first responders: the firefighters, law-enforcement officers, and emergency medical personnel who gave their all to protect people throughout Maine.

That gratitude unites our nation. From rescuing victims in the Twin Towers to fighting massive wildfires out West to helping our Canadian neighbors, Americans have seen firefighters and other first responders confront danger while others flee to safety. We have seen valiant and skilled men and women place their lives in peril to save the lives of others.

Those qualities of character and commitment are found throughout Maine. Whether you are a full-time firefighter or an on-call volunteer, you are a critical first line of defense. Whether you serve in a large city or a small town, whether you are called to a major catastrophe or a local emergency, you respond when the alarm sounds – whenever that may be.

This Sunday marks the beginning of National Fire Prevention Week, which was established more than 90 years ago by presidential proclamation. Our nation's longest-running public health and safety observance is a powerful reminder of another crucial role firefighters play. In addition to responding to emergencies, you work to educate and inform the people you serve to prevent disasters from occurring. As the theme of National Fire Prevention Week 2019 states, not all heroes wear capes.

As co-chair of the Congressional Fire Services Caucus, I recognize that our gratitude must be matched by the resources you need to meet all challenges. I have worked to boost funding for the FIRE and SAFER grants programs because I have seen first-hand in visits across Maine how these programs build the capabilities of our local fire departments and safeguard our firefighters.

It takes but four words to sum up the courage of a firefighter. These words were revealed to us by the recordings of emergency calls made on the morning of September 11, 2001. They were spoken by Fire Captain Paddy Brown amid the suffocating smoke, searing flames, and falling debris of the South Tower's 35th floor. They were Paddy Brown's last words to the outside world: "We're still heading up."

Most of us will never know where such bravery comes from. We can't begin to imagine the courage and dedication it takes to enter a burning building or approach a blazing truck or railroad car that may be about to explode – especially when others are running in the opposite direction. We can only dimly grasp the skill and discipline it takes to rescue and tend to a victim of a fire or accident in the midst of confusion and danger.

But we are deeply grateful to you who take this courage and dedication, this skill and discipline, with you to work every day. Thank you, and may God bless you all.

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