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August 24, 2020

The Honorable Kenneth J. Braithwaite
Secretary of the Navy
1000 Navy Pentagon
Washington, D.C. 20350

Admiral Michael Gilday
Chief of Naval Operations
2000 Navy Pentagon
Washington, D.C. 20350

Dear Secretary Braithwaite and Admiral Gilday:

I write to express my concern regarding current manning of federal firefighters at Navy installations in light of the recent fire aboard the USS *Bonhomme Richard*, which now appears to be the worst in-port disaster since the USS *Miami* fire at Portsmouth Naval Shipyard (PNSY) just eight years ago.

Earlier this year, commanding officers and Navy Region Fire chiefs were directed to take actions to reduce labor costs of the fire and emergency services program, to include reduced staffing of fire departments based on assessments of risk. For PNSY in Maine, this has meant that the fire department has operated with 13 personnel during “off-peak” times, rather than the typical 15 firefighters on-duty. My understanding is that other fire departments in the Navy have experienced similar reduced staffing, including in San Diego where the *Bonhomme Richard* had been docked.

As the Navy investigates the *Bonhomme Richard* incident, I ask that you carefully review the risks and impacts of reduced staffing at federal fire departments. In the case of the USS *Miami*, the 2012 fire caused \$700 million in damage and ultimately resulted in the Navy scrapping the entire *Los-Angeles*-class submarine rather than attempting to repair it. At this time, the likely repair costs for the *Bonhomme Richard* appear to be similarly dramatic. Certainly, in many cases minimal costs of risk reduction or full staffing can help to prevent and contain potentially catastrophic fires. Of note, following the USS *Miami* fire at PNSY, minimum fire department staffing at the shipyard was increased from 13 to 15 on-duty personnel.

I also am concerned that reduced firefighter staffing risks the safety of our firefighters as well as families and businesses near Navy installations. As is the case with many federal fire departments, the department at PNSY often serves as first responders within the local area, protecting both the Navy’s submarines and property but also supporting Kittery and other nearby towns. As a co-chair of the Congressional Fire Services Caucus, I know the importance of firefighters in Maine and have worked to ensure they have all of the support they need to protect

our communities. This has become all the more important as Maine and the rest of the country continues to battle the COVID-19 pandemic

Thank you for your attention to this pressing issue, and please let me know what actions the Navy will take to ensure adequate staffing of fire departments at our public shipyards. As a senior member of the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Defense, I stand ready to assist if the Navy is in need of additional resources to keep our shipyards and communities safe.

Sincerely,



Susan M. Collins
United States Senator