

November 16, 2017

David Lochbaum, Director  
Nuclear Safety Project  
Union of Concerned Scientists  
PO Box 15316  
Chattanooga, TN 37415

SUBJECT: HEADQUARTERS OPERATIONS CENTER STAFFING

Dear Mr. Lochbaum:

This letter is in response to your October 3, 2017, letter to Mr. Bernard Stapleton, Chief, Operations Branch, Division of Preparedness and Response, in the Office of Nuclear Security and Incident Response (NSIR). In your letter, you expressed concern that the staffing of the Headquarters Operations Center (HOC) had become degraded. As the Acting Director of NSIR, I am replying to your letter with responses to your concerns. These responses are consistent with information provided during our telephone discussion on October 12, 2017. A separate response to your Freedom of Information Act request is currently in process.

We appreciate the concerns that you brought to our attention and agree that staffing of the HOC is a high priority in ensuring an effective and timely response to nuclear and radiological events. I want to assure you that the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) believes an adequate response capability has been and remains in place to handle such events. You are correct in stating that the Handbook attached to the NRC Management Directive (MD) 8.2, "NRC Incident Response Program" (IRP) states that the HOC is staffed with a Headquarters Operations Officer (HOO) and a Headquarters Emergency Response Officer (HERO). Section V. of Handbook 8.2, describes the major components of the IRP, outlines the NRC incident response at headquarters and the regional offices, and provides general guidance. The NRC continues to believe that the current workload in the HOC requires one HOO and one HERO. The HOO is the principal individual responsible for handling emergency calls, and the HERO is primarily responsible for providing administrative support and handling interagency communications. In practice, the HERO is generally a qualified HOO. The HERO position has also historically been used for on-the-job training of new HOO candidates.

As we discussed during our teleconference, during late summer and continuing into the fall of 2017, we experienced a shortfall in staffing our HERO watch standers. The staffing shortfall was the result of a number of individuals receiving promotions to other NRC offices, a retirement, and illnesses of staff/family; aggravated by hiring freezes and other challenges in hiring replacement staff. This resulted in the HOC occasionally being staffed on a short-term basis with a fully qualified HOO accompanied by other NRC professionals who were part of the agency's IRP and members of the Operations Branch (the same branch to which the HOOs belong). Management ensured that an adequate response to an event could be provided by the fully qualified HOO and the individual assigned to provide communications assistance. This contingency was only intended to be an interim measure until the staffing shortfall could be remediated.

In response to the shortfall, we have restored the staffing to the levels described in Handbook 8.2 by hiring nuclear engineering professionals who are currently in training for positions as HOOs. We are also exploring options and taking actions to expedite the hiring for future vacancies, and for qualifying a reserve group of volunteers who could fill in to alleviate staffing shortfalls, if necessary.

I trust that this letter addresses your concerns. Again, thank you for your interest and perspectives. If you have any further questions, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

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K. Steven West, Acting Director  
Office of Nuclear Security and Incident Response

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DATED: November 17, 2017

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