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**STATEMENT OF SENATOR EDWARD M. KENNEDY ON THE PUBLIC
SAFETY EMPLOYER- EMPLOYEE COOPERATION ACT**

WASHINGTON, DC- Today, Senator Edward M. Kennedy, Chairman of the Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee, released the following statement on the introduction of the Public Safety Employer- Employee Cooperation Act.

This bipartisan legislation will ensure that the men and women on the front lines of our effort to keep America safe -- our firefighters, police officers, and emergency medical personnel -- will have the voice they need to remain safe at work and protect our communities. It's a matter of basic fairness that will ensure that these first responders can continue their essential work and maintain strong working partnerships with the communities they serve.

(As Prepared for Delivery)

It is a privilege to join Senator Gregg today in reintroducing the Public Safety Employer-Employee Cooperation Act, to guarantee that all firefighters, police officers, emergency medical personnel, and other first responders across the country have fundamental collective bargaining rights. The issue is one of basic respect for this valuable workforce, and I urge all of my colleagues to support this bipartisan bill.

The first responders of our state and local governments are on the frontlines of the effort to keep America safe. They perform difficult, exhausting work, day and night, to preserve and protect our communities. In this post-9/11 era, they have an indispensable role in homeland security as well. It is vital to our national interest to ensure that these essential public services are carried out as effectively as possible.

Strong partnerships between first responders and the cities and states they serve are vital to public safety. Studies show that cooperation between public safety employers and employees improves the quality of services communities receive and reduces worker fatalities. These strong, cooperative partnerships are built on bargaining relationships. 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, and those agreements strengthened their ability to respond in that time of crisis.

Unfortunately, many first responders across the country do not have basic workplace protections. 29 states and the District of Columbia guarantee all public safety workers the right to bargain collectively, but 21 states deny some or all of their public safety workers this fundamental right.

Our nation's first responders have earned the right to be treated with respect. The Cooperation Act will ensure that they receive that respect, and will benefit from the same protections enjoyed by many other workers across the country. The bill gives public safety officers the right to bargain over wages, hours, and working conditions, and ensures that these rights are enforceable in state court. It also provides an efficient and effective means to resolve disputes in labor-management conflicts.

The Cooperation Act accomplishes these important goals in reasonable, moderate ways. States that already have collective bargaining in place for public safety workers are not affected by the bill. States that do not currently provide these protections may establish their own collective bargaining systems, or ask the assistance of the Federal Labor Relations Authority in doing so. This approach respects existing state laws, and gives each state full authority to decide how it will comply with the basic standards.

America's public safety workers are prepared to put their lives on the line for their community each and every day. They deserve a voice at the table in the life-and-death decisions about their work. It's essential for their safety, the safety of our communities, and the safety of our entire nation. It's a matter of basic fairness for these courageous men and women to have the same rights that have long benefited so many other Americans. I urge Congress to act quickly to provide these fundamental protections.

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