



Coronavirus Legislative Agenda

The nation's fire and emergency service are on the front lines of the response to the 2019 novel Coronavirus (COVID-19). Fire and EMS departments are struggling to provide service to their communities and are experiencing shortages of personal protective equipment (PPE), masks and other supplies. These departments are also seeing reduced numbers of staff due to the transmission of COVID-19 and associated quarantines. The IAFC recommends that Congress take the following actions:

COVID-19 Response Issues:

- **Special funding of \$2 billion for the Assistance to Firefighters (AFG) and SAFER grant programs to support fire and EMS response to COVID-19:** Firefighters and EMS personnel place themselves at risk of exposure when caring for and transporting COVID-19 patients. Fire departments are facing challenges in obtaining PPE and sanitizing solutions for ambulances and personal use. The spread of the virus has presented an overwhelming need for new PPE in fire departments nationwide. Equipment and ambulances must be fully disinfected after each use. In addition, fire and EMS personnel are being exposed to the coronavirus, which has already led to department-wide quarantines and high backfill expenses. *The IAFC recommends \$1 billion for the AFG program and \$1 billion for the SAFER program to fund equipment and staffing shortages associated with the COVID-19 response.*
- **Prioritize the provision of supplies to local fire and EMS departments:** As the nation faces a shortage of sanitizers and N95 masks, fire departments are forced to adapt protocols to conserve these resources. Fire and EMS personnel are some of the first health care providers to encounter COVID-19 patients and may not even be aware that a patient has COVID-19 until after being exposed. *Fire and EMS departments should receive the same priority as hospitals and other health-care providers when it comes to receiving supplies from the Strategic National Stockpile and other federal supply-chain initiatives.*
- **Prioritize testing of fire/EMS personnel for COVID-19:** Due to delays in testing, firefighters and EMS personnel undergo a 14-day quarantine, which results in understaffed emergency response departments and potentially unnecessary stress for the individual and their family. Without enough staff, some departments may be unable to

provide timely and effective emergency medical services. This situation will only worsen as the virus spreads. *Fire and EMS personnel should receive priority testing for COVID-19, so that they can be diagnosed and treated in an efficient manner.*

- **Protect jobs of volunteer fire and EMS personnel responding to, or quarantined by, COVID-19:** During the COVID-19 outbreak, many communities, especially in rural America, are served by volunteer firefighters and EMS personnel, who are providing aid to COVID-19 patients with little or no remuneration. These volunteer responders may be exposed to COVID-19 during their duties and would be forced into quarantine. It is important that they not lose their paid jobs, while either deployed responding to COVID-19 or in quarantine. *Congress should pass legislation granting job protection to volunteer fire and EMS personnel similar to the employment protection granted to National Guard personnel.*
- **Notification of drug shortages:** Fire departments often encounter shortages of basic emergency medications such as saline, epinephrine, and glucose. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) announced that shortages are possible for many medications, including those used to treat COVID-19. However, the FDA did not identify at-risk medications. Fire departments are especially hard hit by shortages since the medications permitted for EMS use often are limited by state regulations and local policies. Without advance identification of at-risk drugs, fire departments will face difficulties caring for patients with COVID-19 or other critical illnesses and injuries. *Congress should direct the FDA to provide advance warning of all drugs at-risk for shortage and to assist state and local governments in developing guidance on the use of alternate medications when a primary medication is in shortage.*
- **Support mutual aid to reinforce departments facing equipment and personnel shortages, include temporarily waiving state EMS licensure laws:** As fire department personnel are quarantined or become ill due to exposure to COVID-19, they will need additional personnel and resources to supplement their shortages. Fire departments have local, regional, inter-state and intra-state agreements in place that enable them to help each other during major disasters and national emergencies. These agreements can be utilized to assist fire departments as they protect their communities from COVID-19. However, one obstacle to interstate mutual aid for EMS response is that EMS licenses are granted at the state level and EMS personnel may not be able to practice EMS outside of their home state. *Congress should fund efforts like the National Mutual Aid System that will allow fire departments to effectively share resources both within a state and between states. Additionally, Congress should support measures to provide temporary, emergency portability to EMS licensure.*
- **Protect the public safety spectrum in the T-Band (470 MHz – 512 MHz):** Congress has mandated that Federal Communications Commission (FCC) auction the public safety spectrum in the T-Band (470-512 MHz) by February 2021. All public safety operations must vacate the band within two years of the auction's close. The T-Band is a key spectrum resource allocated for radio communications in 11 major U.S. urban areas and the surrounding 50 to 80-mile radii of these cities. These cities and their suburbs

currently are using the T-Band radio spectrum to coordinate their response to the COVID-19 virus. The U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) estimates that it will cost local governments approximately \$6 billion to migrate these public safety users off the T-Band; many of whom do not have access to alternate spectrum. Both the GAO and the FCC Chairman Ajit Pai have recommended that Congress pass legislation, such as the Don't Break Up the T-Band Act (S. 2748/H.R. 451), to repeal the T-Band auction mandate. *Congress should repeal the T-Band mandate and preserve public safety access to this critical piece of the emergency communications infrastructure.*

- **Allow transportation of fire and EMS personnel and vehicles into quarantined areas to reinforce affected fire departments:** If a region faces a mandatory lock-down or nationwide travel is restricted, fire departments will still need to travel across city, county, state, federal and tribal borders to provide emergency response to the public. *If Congress authorizes a travel ban across the nation's interstates, it should include an exception to allow first responders commuting to or from their workplace and emergency response vehicles to use these roads in COVID-19-afflicted areas.*

Economic Stimulus

- **Prevent the taxation of state and local incentives for volunteer firefighters and EMS personnel:** The strain of responding to COVID-19 can be especially difficult for volunteer firefighters and EMS personnel, who have to balance emergency response duties with career and family responsibilities. State and local governments use property tax rebates and other incentives to recruit and retain volunteer firefighters. The Internal Revenue Service views these incentives as income. However, taxing such incentives makes them ineffective and may hinder recruitment and retention of volunteer emergency responders. Recently, Congress passed the Volunteer Responder Incentive Act (VRIPA) as part of broader legislation (P.L. 116-94), which protects all property tax-based incentives and up to \$600 in other incentives from being considered taxable income. This tax relief expires at the end of 2020. *Congress should make the VRIPA permanent by including S. 1210/H.R. 1241 in any COVID-19-related stimulus bill.*
- **Incentivize safety improvements in restaurants and other commercial buildings, including the retrofit installation of automatic fire sprinklers:** There is interest in passing legislation to help small business and commercial property owners during the COVID-19-induced economic downturn. When Congress passed the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act (P.L. 115-97) in 2017, it meant to allow fire sprinkler systems and other qualified building improvements to qualify for bonus depreciation for business owners until 2027 and then also qualify for a 15-year depreciation period after 2027. However, an unintentional drafting error prevented this tax reform from taking effect. Automatic fire sprinkler systems are a proven way to limit the loss of life and protect a building owner's investment in the event of a fire. During this time when fewer firefighters are available to respond due to COVID-19 infections and quarantines, fire sprinkler systems become even more important. *Congress should pass legislation, such as the Restoring Investment in*

Improvements Act (S. 803/H.R. 1869), to fix this problem and allow bonus depreciation for fire sprinkler systems and other qualified improvements.

- **Support professional associations in providing educational resources while mitigating losses due to event cancellations and reduced meeting attendance.** Like most nonprofit professional associations, the IAFC provides crucial education to more than 13,000 fire and EMS chiefs around the world. These educational offerings address topics such responding to emerging diseases (like COVID-19), mitigating hazardous materials releases, responding to acts of terrorism, and best practices for suppressing structural and wildland fires. However, the IAFC has been forced to postpone multiple conferences following the spread of COVID-19. The cancellation of these events creates economic hardship, which challenge the ability of the IAFC to continue educating fire chiefs. Other nonprofit professional associations are experiencing similar operational challenges. *When developing legislation to mitigate the economic impacts of COVID-19, Congress should support tax-exempt professional associations so that they may continue to educate their members and assist in their professional development.*