



## Reauthorization of the Assistance to Firefighters Grant Program

Each year, the more than 29,000 fire departments across the United States respond to more than 33 million emergency calls, including fires, medical emergencies, hazardous materials incidents, highway accidents and other major and routine incidents. Unfortunately, many fire departments have trouble meeting their basic staffing, training and equipment requirements. Besides making it harder for these fire departments to provide service to their communities, these shortages also weaken the National Preparedness System. During national emergencies and disasters, local fire departments provide the fire apparatus, firefighters, paramedics, and an array of other specialized resources that arrive on scene.

In order to address basic shortfalls in fire department preparedness, Congress created two programs under the aegis of the Assistance to Firefighters Grant (AFG) program:

- **Assistance to Firefighters Grant Program:** The AFG program (popularly known as the “FIRE grant program”) was created by Congress in 2000. It provides direct federal support to local fire departments to improve baseline training and equipment. The AFG program also includes the Fire Prevention and Safety grants, which fund local fire prevention programs and research to reduce both civilian and firefighter casualties.
- **SAFER Grant Program:** The Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) Act was created by Congress in 2003. The program provides matching grants to help local fire departments hire career firefighters. The program also funds recruitment and retention programs to help volunteer fire departments maintain and enhance their staffing capabilities.

Both programs are administered by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security’s Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). The AFG and SAFER grants are awarded directly to local fire departments, which must provide local matching funds. The awards are made through a competitive, peer-reviewed process based on criteria developed by the national fire and emergency service organizations.

Despite the documented effectiveness of these programs, local fire and EMS departments still suffer from shortages in basic requirements. Consider the following examples from the National Fire Protection Association’s (NFPA) *Fourth Needs Assessment of the U.S. Fire Service*:

- Fifty percent of all departments (that answered the NFPA survey) do not have enough portable radios to equip all emergency responders on a shift.
- Fifty-three percent of all departments (that answered the NFPA survey) cannot equip all firefighters on a shift with self-contained breathing apparatus (SCBA).

- An estimated 60% of all departments (that answered the NFPA survey) provide hazmat response but have not formally trained all of their personnel involved in hazmat response.
- Almost three-quarters (72%) of departments (that answered the NFPA survey) reported that some of their personal protective clothing was at least 10 years old, which exceeds the life-cycle of the equipment.

Both the AFG and SAFER grant programs need to be reauthorized. The current authorization expires at the end of FY 2017. In addition, the authorizing statutes contain “sunset” provisions to eliminate both programs on January 2, 2018.

As Congress begins to consider reauthorization of the AFG and SAFER programs, the IAFC recommends making the following changes:

- **Eliminate the sunset provision.** The last reauthorization of the FIRE and SAFER grant programs includes a sunset for the programs on January 2, 2018. We need to remove this sunset to keep the programs from expiring.
- **Extend the authorization of both programs for another five years.** Both programs are authorized through the end of Fiscal Year (FY) 2017. The programs were authorized at \$750 million in FY 2013. Subsequent increases in the authorization are based on annual increases in the Consumer Price Index (all items, United States city average) vis-à-vis the previous year’s Consumer Price Index. We need to extend the authorization into the future.
- **Remove the reference in the SAFER statute in section (b)(3)(B) to subsection (a)(1)(B)(ii).** This is simple clean-up to the statute. Subsection (a)(1)(B)(ii) doesn’t exist.
- **Change the date in the SAFER statute for sustaining funds from “three years prior to November 24, 2003” to “three years prior to the application date.”** The current SAFER statute does not allow FEMA to award a SAFER grant to a jurisdiction that reduced its annual budget for fire-related programs and emergency response “below 80 percent of the average funding level in the 3 years prior to November 24, 2003.” The November 24, 2003 date is an anachronism. The language should be updated to replace “November 24, 2003” with “the application date.”
- **Move the recently added language relating to training for emergency medical personnel to recognize and treat people with mental illness from the SAFER authorizing language to an allowable use of funds under the FIRE Grant program.** The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Cures Act (P.L. 114-255) added language to the SAFER grant program to allow SAFER funding to be used to provide “specialized training to paramedics, emergency medical services workers, and other first responders to recognize individuals who have mental illness and how to properly intervene with individuals with mental illness, including strategies for verbal de-escalation of crisis.” This language is problematic, because the SAFER grants are used for staffing and personnel. This mental health training component should be moved to the Use of Grants section of the FIRE grant authorizing statute (15 USC 2229(c)(3)).
- **Correct anomaly in the hardship waivers for the SAFER grant program.** The SAFER grant statute allows FEMA to waive (for jurisdictions with demonstrated local hardship) the prohibition on using SAFER funds to supplant state and local funds; and the requirement that

applicants have sustained their fire-related programs and emergency response budgets by at least 80% of the three preceding years (see above for the discussion of the anomaly in this provision). However, the statute only waives the reference to the 25%-25%-65% local match requirement in one part of the statute (subsection (a)(1)(e)) and not the other (subsection (c)(4)). The FIRE/SAFER reauthorization bill should update the statute so that it consistently waives the 25%-25%-65% matching requirement.