

INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF FIRE FIGHTERS



Statement of
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FIRE FIGHTERS AND PARAMEDICS
before the
SUBCOMMITTEE ON RESEARCH AND TECHNOLOGY
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
on
U.S. FIRE ADMINISTRATION AND FIRE GRANT PROGRAMS
REAUTHORIZATION: EXAMINING EFFECTIVENESS AND
PRIORITIES

JULY 12, 2017

Thank you, Chairwoman Comstock, Ranking Member Lipinski and distinguished members of the Subcommittee. My name is John Niemiec, and I am the President of the Fairfax County Professional Fire Fighters and Paramedics. I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today on behalf of the International Association of Fire Fighters, General President Harold A. Schaitberger and over 305,000 fire fighters and emergency medical personnel who serve in every congressional district in this nation as the first line of defense against disasters, natural or man-made.

Madam Chairwoman, I come before you today to offer my full support of the Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) and the Assistance to Firefighters (FIRE) Grant programs and urge the Subcommittee to reauthorize these programs swiftly. For over thirty years I have served with the Fairfax County Fire and Rescue Department where I currently hold the rank of Captain, assigned to serve in the 2nd Battalion as an Emergency Medical Services - Paramedic Supervisor. As an active-duty fire fighter as well as an elected leader within the IAFF, I have seen firsthand the remarkable service delivery improvements my department has been able to achieve through the resources the SAFER and FIRE grants provide; improvements that would not have been possible absent these critical grant programs. It is clear to me that the SAFER and FIRE grant programs are crucial to the ability of local fire fighters and fire departments to serve their communities safely and effectively.

SAFER & FIRE Grants are Crucial to Public Safety and Proven Effective

The demands on the fire service to deliver critical life-saving services have never been greater than they are right now. In 2015, fire fighters and paramedics were dispatched to just under thirty-two million emergency incidents. Of course, these demands will only continue to grow in the years to come, undoubtedly translating to a need for additional trained and equipped emergency responders to effectively provide those critical response services.

Furthermore, the modern fire service is no longer simply responsible for fire fighting. In almost every community in America, our duties encompass a broad range of emergency services including structural fire fighting, airport fire and rescue services, wildland fire fighting, basic and advanced levels of emergency medical services, rescue operation in high-angle, swift water, and technical environments, terrorism and hazardous materials response. Additionally, today more than ever our nation's fire fighters are on the front lines working to protect our homeland while responding to natural disasters such as hurricanes, floods, wildland fires or acts of terrorism.

We are truly all-hazard responders. I am proud to say that my fire department boasts one of the nation's 28 Urban Search and Rescue (USAR) teams that respond to every conceivable disaster at home and abroad. Fire fighters are expected to risk and give our lives to safeguard our fellow countrymen. We do this willingly and without hesitation despite knowing that we are often forced to carry out our duties with minimal training, outdated equipment, and insufficient personnel. This begs for correction.

The 106th Congress created the Assistance to Firefighters Grant program and gave it a unique mission: to help local fire departments meet minimum standards for equipment, apparatus, and training, as well as, health and wellness and fire safety activities. AFG, generally known as the FIRE Grant program, was expanded in the 108th Congress to include the Staffing for

Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) Grant program to provide a mechanism to ensure fire departments also met minimum staffing standards to operate efficiently and safely.

In the years since their inception, the SAFER and FIRE Grant programs have proven themselves to be highly effective – allowing local fire departments to make significant progress in their baseline capabilities.

According to a series of studies by the National Fire Protection Association, SAFER and FIRE have helped local fire departments improve staffing, equipment and training levels. As an example, consider that from 2010 to 2015, fire departments serving a population of 250,000 to 499,999 have improved the percentage of engine or pumpers meeting the national standard of 4 fire fighter staffing from 26% in 2010 to 51% in 2015. Similarly, fire departments serving a population of 50,000 to 99,999 have increased the percentage of engine or pumpers staffed by the national standard of 4 fire fighters by 11% over the same period.

Meanwhile, such studies also show significant improvements in certain categories of personal protective equipment and training. For example, departments of all sizes have improved the percentage of personnel with personal alert safety system (PASS) devices. In 2001, 62% of fire departments failed to equip all responders on a shift with their own PASS device – a necessity to find injured or lost fire fighters in an emergency. This figure plummeted to 28% in 2015, a result NFPA speculates may be attributable to FIRE Grant funding. Similarly, the NFPA reports that training in hazardous materials response has improved, with the rate of departments training all responders in hazmat improving by 6%.

Additionally, the FIRE Grant program has proven itself to be highly efficient, having been scored as “effective” by an Office of Management and Budget.

SAFER and FIRE’s Role Protecting Fairfax County

There are thousands of communities, large and small, all across this nation that have been aided by the SAFER and FIRE grant programs. Just across the Potomac River is the home of my Department, the Fairfax County Fire and Rescue Department. Serving a population of more than one million residents and daily visitors, Fairfax County Fire and Rescue has benefited from both the SAFER and FIRE Grant programs.

For example, Fairfax County received FIRE Grants in 2015 and 2016 to provide training to fifty-four Advanced Life Support providers, upgrading their emergency medical skills and certification. These awards exclusively allowed our department to upgrade all frontline responding units to the Paramedic level, allowing the County to deliver high-quality EMS care in a timelier manner.

An additional FIRE Grant permitted our County to establish a program to continuously raise the awareness of the importance of working smoke detectors. Through this FIRE Grant funded program, we have made thousands of direct personal contacts to various segments of our population that were determined to be most at risk, such as those within our lower income levels and the “English as a Second Language” community. We have also focused our campaign to deliver and install visual smoke alarms for our hearing impaired citizens. All of this is undertaken in an effort to reduce or eliminate the preventable loss of life to fire.

Fairfax County has also benefitted from SAFER grants which have allowed the County to add forty-nine fire fighters to the rolls of the department, further increasing response capabilities by staffing all engines with four personnel and ladder trucks with five personnel. This staffing level has allowed the County to reduce risk for the citizens, minimize property loss, and increase fire fighter safety through the full implementation of the NFPA 1710 Standard and full compliance with the Occupational Safety and Health Administration's two in/two out regulation.

The Need Persists

I am proud of the progress Fairfax County has made with the help of SAFER and FIRE, and many communities across America can say the same. Yet, despite the progress made in communities large and small, the need for funding through the SAFER and FIRE Grant programs persists. Unfortunately, many fire departments continue struggling to meet appropriate staffing, training and equipment standards. The aforementioned 2015 *Needs Assessment* identified many of these weaknesses. For example, 49% of all departments have failed to formally train all of their personnel involved in structural firefighting. Fifty percent of departments operate without having enough portable radios to equip all emergency responders on a shift. And 53% of departments could not equip all fire fighters with self-contained breathing apparatus, particularly in communities of under 10,000.

Reauthorizing SAFER and FIRE

As you likely know, work has begun in the Senate to reauthorize these critical grant programs. On April 5, 2017 Senators John McCain (R-AZ) and Jon Tester (D-MT), introduced Senate bill S.829, the AFG and SAFER Program Reauthorization Act of 2017. The IAFF and all other major national fire service organizations, including the IAFC, NVFC, and NFPA, have worked collaboratively with the Senators for many months to help craft the bill and have offered it our enthusiastic endorsement.

The Senate bill is a simple reauthorization of SAFER and FIRE. SAFER and FIRE has been well honed over the many years the programs have been in place, and we believe the grants are working effectively and efficiently; we therefore do not recommend making major changes to the programs. The bill does make several minor but necessary technical corrections, such as updating dates and eliminating outdated references. The bill also eliminates a sunset provision on the programs and directs the Administrator of FEMA to carry out grant monitoring activities to prevent and identify waste, fraud, abuse, and mismanagement of the program. A 2016 GAO Inspector General audit of the program identified the need for these corrections.

I am pleased to report that on May 17, 2017, the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee unanimously approved S.829 reporting the bill to the full Senate.

Time is of the Essence

I would like to again thank the Subcommittee for holding this important hearing. As you well know, SAFER and FIRE's current authorization expires on September 30th of this year, and the programs are due to sunset on January 1, 2018. I therefore encourage the Subcommittee to

move swiftly to reauthorize SAFER and FIRE to ensure their continuance without interruption. While significant progress has been made to improve the baseline capabilities of the fire service, much work remains. Reauthorizing SAFER and FIRE will ensure that fire departments nationwide will be able to better protect their communities and their citizens.

Conclusion

On behalf of the International Association of Fire Fighters, I appreciate the opportunity to share our views on reauthorizing the SAFER and FIRE Grant Programs. As a nation, we have made significant positive progress in enhancing the readiness and capabilities of our nation's fire services. It is crucial that these vital programs, essential to our national security and well-being, continue. To the extent that I or the IAFF can assist the Subcommittee in these efforts, I am happy to offer our expertise and pledge to work closely with you and your staffs.

Again, I'd like to thank the Subcommittee for the opportunity to testify today and am happy to answer any questions you may have.