

INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF FIRE FIGHTERS



STATEMENT OF

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**BEFORE THE COMMITTEE ON SCIENCE, SPACE, AND
TECHNOLOGY**

OF THE

UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

ON

FIRE GRANTS AND SAFETY ACT (S. 870)

**MAY 11, 2023
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Chairman Lucas, Ranking Member Lofgren, and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today about the importance of the AFG and SAFER grant programs and the role of the United States Fire Administration (USFA). My name is Kevin O'Connor, and I am honored to serve at the International Association of Fire Fighters as the Assistant to the General President for Government Affairs, Political Action, and Strategic Campaigns. I started my fire service career as a fire fighter in Baltimore County, MD and am proud to have served as President of the Baltimore County Professional Fire Fighters Association and the Maryland Professional Fire Fighters Association before joining the IAFF staff. I am also honored to serve as a Baltimore City Board of Fire Commissioner. The fire service has been a passion and driving force throughout my life, and I look forward to talking with you about how Congress can help protect both our fire fighters and our communities.

As you may know, the IAFF represents more than 335,000 professional fire fighters and emergency medical services (EMS) personnel serving at the local, state, and federal levels. Our members serve communities in all 50 states and protect 70% of the United States' population.¹ Professional fire departments protect nearly all communities with populations of more than 50,000.² The IAFF's members are our nation's all-hazards emergency responders and protect their communities from a wide range of emergencies, including structural fires, wildland fires, building collapses, natural disasters, terrorist incidents, and more.

While the IAFF is active in many policy areas related to our members, one of our top priorities is to ensure the continuation of grant programs that assist communities in maintaining full staffing levels of properly trained and equipped fire and EMS professionals. The US Fire Administration and the AFG and SAFER grants programs provide critical assistance to thousands of communities each year by providing federal funds and training opportunities to prepare fire fighters for any emergency they may be called.

Overview of the American Fire Service

Today's fire service provides an all-hazards response role and serves communities of all sizes throughout the nation. The IAFF's 335,000 members represent the 34% of the nearly 1.1 million fire fighters in the United States.³ These men and women stand ready to protect their communities from a wide variety of emergencies, including structure fires, wildfires, medical emergencies, motor vehicle accidents, hazardous materials incidents, technical rescue situations, natural disasters, acts of terrorism, and more. In 2020, American fire departments responded to more than 36.4 million calls for service.⁴ Of these calls, more than 23.8 million, or roughly 65%, were for medical emergencies.⁵ Fire fighters cross-trained as EMS personnel continue to serve as the backbone of America's prehospital EMS system. Fire departments are the largest providers

¹ National Fire Protection Association. *US Fire Department Profile 2020 -Table 12*. <https://www.nfpa.org/-/media/Files/News-and-Research/Fire-statistics-and-reports/Emergency-responders/osFDProfileTables.pdf>

² Ibid. Table 14.

³ U.S. Fire Administration. *National Fire Department Registry Overview*. <https://apps.usfa.fema.gov/registry/summary>

⁴ National Fire Protection Association. *US Fire Department Profile 2020*. P. 5. <https://www.nfpa.org/-/media/Files/News-and-Research/Fire-statistics-and-reports/Emergency-responders/osfdprofile.pdf>

⁵ National Fire Protection Association. *US Fire Department Profile 2020 -Table 12*.

of EMS care and are the providers of EMS care in more than 90% of communities with populations over 50,000. On a national level, 65% of communities receive EMS from their fire department.⁶

Fire fighters not only provide these services in their home communities but also frequently assist neighboring jurisdictions through mutual aid agreements. These pre-existing agreements play a critical role in the continuation of emergency services when one community is overwhelmed by demand or otherwise unable to respond to calls for service. These agreements may be invoked during “routine” emergencies when multiple calls for service are received as well as when major natural disasters or acts of terrorism exceed response capacity.

While most of these mutual aid responses occur between jurisdictions in the same state, fire fighters actively provide interstate mutual aid responses following especially significant emergency events. Professional fire fighters and EMS personnel, many of whom may have been hired, trained, and equipped by the SAFER and AFG programs, serve at the heart of the Urban Search and Rescue (USAR) system. This response system is maintained by the Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA) and enables interstate and international responses to natural disasters and acts of terrorism. For Fiscal Year (FY) 2023, Congress provided \$37.8 million for the USAR program. The IAFF encourages Congress to provide \$75 million for the USAR program in FY 2024 in order to update and replace critical equipment that the USAR teams rely upon during their operational deployments.

At a high level, the AFG grant was first established in 2001, and the SAFER program followed in 2003. These programs have been reauthorized three times over the past twenty years – all of these reauthorizations have been strongly bipartisan and non-controversial. The AFG and SAFER grants are currently authorized at \$750 million each and, for FY 2023, were appropriated at \$360 million. Funding from the SAFER and AFG programs has been used to support fire fighters and EMS personnel in all 50 states.⁷ The IAFF and all other national fire service organizations urge Congress to provide at least \$405 million for each program in FY 2024. The IAFF also joins more than 25 other national fire service organizations in urging Congress to maintain the historical waiver language for SAFER grants and allow municipalities to utilize SAFER funds to retain and rehire fire fighters.

The authorizations for these programs will expire at the end of the current fiscal year. The programs also currently face a mandatory sunset effective at the close of FY 2024. It would be unconscionable for Congress to allow these programs to have a lapse in authorization and approach a mandatory sunset. The Senate has recognized the importance of these grant programs and already passed legislation to reauthorize them. We now ask the House to do the same and ensure the continued vitality of these programs.

Importance of the SAFER Grant Program

While firefighting and emergency response generally occur at the local government level, Congress took important action twenty years ago when it recognized the federal government’s

⁶ Ibid. Table 21.

⁷ Federal Emergency Management Administration. [Assistance to Firefighters Grant Awards](#). Accessed April 2023.

important role in ensuring the availability of these services. When Congress passed its FY 2004 National Defense Authorization Act (P.L. 108-136), it also established the Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) grant program. The creation of the SAFER grant program was a long-overdue recognition that staffing levels and crew sizes have a profound effect on the safety and efficacy of fire fighters responding to fires and other emergencies.

Numerous studies have shown that increasing fire fighters' crew size to at least four, and ideally five, can allow fire fighters to vastly improve the safety and effectiveness of their fire suppression operations and other emergency responses.⁸ Safe staffing levels increase the likelihood of favorable outcomes in the often "life and death" situations confronted by our country's fire fighters. Unfortunately, budget-strapped local governments often struggle to develop the funding necessary to recruit and retain fire fighters – this was especially proven true in 2008 and during other periods of recession when state and local tax revenues decrease. The SAFER grant program provides critical assistance in these cases. It allows local governments to improve their staffing levels and thereby increase their ability to respond to emergencies in their own jurisdiction as well as assist neighboring states and local governments.

An important characteristic of the SAFER program is that it provides funding for these personnel on a decreasing scale so that local jurisdictions can gradually increase their share of the fire fighter's salary and benefits. By the end of year four, a local government will have completely assumed the financial responsibilities for maintaining a fire fighter's employment. The SAFER program received its first appropriation in FY 2005. Since then, Congress has invested more than \$5.6 billion in local communities to ensure fire departments are able to improve their staffing levels.⁹ The funds from the SAFER program constitute one of the most effective and meaningful investments Congress makes into the emergency preparedness and readiness of local and state governments and its citizens. This support has played an integral role in ensuring communities have sufficient levels of fire fighters and EMS personnel to respond to a variety of emergencies.

Congress has also historically maintained a waiver provision in the program that makes it easier for local jurisdictions to utilize SAFER funds to retain and rehire fire fighters and EMS personnel. These flexibilities are critical in maintaining public safety and emergency preparedness, even during times of economic downturn. The SAFER program plays an important role in protecting fire department staffing levels during all economic cycles. Emergencies do not pay attention to the economy -- we must never allow fire stations to sit empty or to be inadequately staffed.

Assistance to Firefighters Grant Program

The Assistance to Firefighters Grant (AFG) program was initially created in 2001 as a means of ensuring fire departments have the proper levels of equipment and training to respond to any emergency to which they may be called. Since its inception more than 20 years ago, the AFG program has provided more than \$9.7 billion to local communities to bolster their efforts to obtain various training opportunities and equipment for fire fighters and EMS personnel.¹⁰ Under

⁸ NIST. [Report on Residential Fireground Field Experiments](#). April 27, 2010

⁹ Congressional Research Service. [The SAFER Grant Program](#). April 25, 2019. Page 5.

¹⁰ Ibid.

the current program guidelines, local jurisdictions may use AFG funds for purchasing equipment, including personal protective equipment and turnout gear, hand and power tools, fire apparatus, and training equipment.

The use of AFG funds to procure updated protective equipment and apparatus is a critical component of improving fire fighter safety. Over time, technological advancements have improved fire fighter safety, such as higher capacity air tanks to allow fire fighters to work longer in imminently hazardous conditions, expanded thermal protection of turnout gear that better protects fire fighters engaged in active fire suppression operations, and modern apparatus that increases the efficiency of fire operations and better protect fire fighters.. Firefighting is a uniquely dangerous occupation that necessitates fire fighters to have the strongest possible protections. The AFG program helps ensure that fire fighters can routinely take advantage of advancements in safety by replacing aging and outdated tools and vehicles.

In addition to helping fire fighters obtain safer and more modern equipment, the AFG program also supports key safety initiatives through its Fire Prevention and Safety (FP&S) grants. These grants within the AFG program are designated to support critical initiatives that produce findings to make firefighting safer and support the advancement of fire and life safety for the public. A recent FP&S grant for which the IAFF is especially excited about is the gathering of fire service stakeholders to conceptualize next-generation turnout gear. Modern turnout gear has largely failed to evolve over the past few decades. This gear is bulky, cumbersome, manufactured with PFAS chemicals, and absorbs carcinogens from smoke and other hazards. The IAFF looks forward to supporting the development of next-generation turnout gear which will be free of PFAS chemicals,

Role of the U.S. Fire Administration

The U.S. Fire Administration (USFA) was established in 1974 to help provide a voice for the fire service at the highest levels of government. The USFA is currently led by Dr. Lori Moore-Merrell, an experienced fire department paramedic herself, and she has embraced this solemn mission wholeheartedly. This agency sits within the Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA) and is tasked with four important missions: data, research, prevention, and education. USFA is currently funded at \$58.2 million, and the IAFF strongly supports the President's proposal to increase the USFA's funding level to \$60.331 million in FY 2024. The IAFF also supports providing the USFA with an additional \$12.5 million, which is needed to complete data management and IT upgrades. The authorization of the USFA is also set to expire at the close of this fiscal year. We urge Congress also to reauthorize the USFA as soon as possible to ensure it can continue performing its critical mission in service to our communities.

One of the hallmark programs operated by the USFA is its National Fire Academy (NFA) which is located in Emmitsburg, MD. While state and local governments provide most initial and some additional training for fire fighters, the NFA provides in-person and online training to tens of thousands of fire fighters. This advanced training in leadership, professional development, and other hard skills enable fire fighters of all ranks to increase their knowledge and better serve their communities. Similarly, the USFA's management of State Fire Training Grants allows fire

fighters to have access to other advanced training opportunities that would ordinarily be out of reach for many local governments.

The USFA also fills a critical need in the fire service by maintaining national data collection and analysis efforts. These initiatives allow us to better understand the fire service as a whole and assess the amount fire loss and the extent of the fire problem in the United States. The USFA's data is regularly shared with the public and is used to inform public education efforts and guide additional research on improving fire fighter safety.

In particular, Administrator Moore-Merrell is working with all fire service stakeholders to ensure the focus of the USFA's data collection is in line with, and meets the needs of, those fire fighters who are providing critical services to their communities on a daily basis. Like most programs, the USFA's data collection efforts have aged and need updating to stay consistent with modern technology and best practices in data management. For this reason, the national fire service organizations are also in support of providing supplemental funding of \$12.5 million to the USFA in FY 2024 to facilitate these updates.

These USFA's data analysis, education, and thought leadership roles were on full display last year when the USFA held a milestone symposium to highlight and discuss the fire problem in the United States and other threats facing the day-to-day work of fire fighters. This was the first such gathering convened by the federal government in decades. The USFA's leadership in convening this gathering and discussion was critical in building the support and momentum to tackle pressing issues that threaten the lives and safety of fire fighters and the public. The IAFF was pleased to participate in this event in collaboration with our colleagues from dozens of other national and state fire service organizations.

Lastly, the IAFF appreciates Congress' work last year in passing the Empowering the US Fire Administration Act (P.L. 117-246). This Committee played a key role in developing and approving this legislation which expanded the USFA's authorized mission to include investigations of major fires. While the USFA will not be assuming a law enforcement function, these investigations will help identify important lessons learned from major fires that could be used to prevent future tragedies. Since this work is in addition to the USFA's already full agenda, the agency will need additional appropriations. This expansion of mission is another critical reason why the IAFF and other national fire organizations recommend increasing the USFA's authorized funding level from \$76.49 million to \$95 million.

Fire Safety and Grants Act of 2023 (S. 870)

As mentioned above, both the AFG/SAFER programs and the USFA fill a critical need in the fire service. While firefighting is largely a function of local government, the needs of the fire service necessitate, and our neighborhoods, require federal support. Additionally, with the growing severity of weather events, terrorism, and other large-scale emergencies, fire departments are being increasingly called to respond across state lines to provide interstate mutual aid. The fact that local assets are routinely crossing state lines to respond to federally-declared disasters further underscores the need for Congress to ensure fire fighters are prepared to respond to any and all emergencies.

The IAFF is profoundly concerned with the rapidly approaching expiration of authorization for the AFG/SAFER grants and the US Fire Administration. We are even further troubled by the statutory sunset of the SAFER and AFG programs which is currently set to take effect at the end of the next fiscal year. Congress has never allowed these programs to fall inactive since they were established more than 20 years ago. The reason that has never occurred is simple- it makes good sense to continue the investment. Life depends on it.

The modern-day fire fighter serves in an all-hazards response role and is called to mitigate a wider array of emergency incidents than ever before. The growth of domestic and international terrorism, significant expansion of wildfires, and worsening weather-related emergencies are forcing fire fighters to maintain a constantly growing list of professional competencies. These grants, and the leadership of the USFA, provide critical support to ensure fire fighters are always ready to respond to their communities' needs. Emergencies never take a day off, and neither do our nation's fire fighters.

The reauthorization of the SAFER/AFG program and the US Fire Administration has always been a staunchly bipartisan and noncontroversial subject. As you know, just last month, the Senate passed S. 870 by a resounding vote of 95-2. This vote clearly indicated the importance of these programs, as was evidenced by the affirmative votes of senators from all sides of the political spectrum. The fire service needs, and the public deserves, swift consideration and passage of S. 870. The IAFF urges the House to pass this critical legislation as quickly as possible – either as a standalone bill or as part of a large legislative package.

Conclusion

On behalf of IAFF General President Kelly and all of our members across North America, I thank you, Chairman Lucas, Ranking Member Lofgren, and the Committee's members for convening today's hearing to discuss the history, growth, and future of these critical grant programs and the US Fire Administration. Today's fire service looks very different from the fire service that existed decades ago, and these programs have allowed America's fire and emergency service to evolve as threats to our communities have also grown. No one could have predicted the once-in-a-lifetime pandemic that impacted our nation over the past few years, and no one can predict what threats tomorrow will bring. However, through the thoughtful leadership of the USFA and your support of the SAFER and AFG programs, our fire fighters can be as prepared as possible to do their jobs.

When the public calls on fire fighters to respond to emergencies, we answer. We serve all members of the public – regardless of politics – and knowingly place ourselves in harm's way so that we can help. Every fire fighter takes an oath to protect their communities to the best of their abilities, and we hold that oath sacred. We ask the United States Congress to have our backs and not make our jobs even more dangerous by failing to invest in the staffing, training, and equipment we need. Our safety rests in your hands. For 20 years, Congress has placed the fire service above politics and preserved these programs. We're calling for help. Will you answer?

I am more than happy to answer any questions that you may have or provide additional information to demonstrate the importance of maintaining these critical programs.