



**U.S. Fire Administration
and Fire Grant Programs Reauthorization:
Examining Effectiveness and Priorities**

Statement of

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Good morning, Chairwoman Comstock, Ranking Member Lipinski, and members of the committee. I am Chief John Sinclair, fire chief of the Kittitas Valley Fire and Rescue (KVFR) department in Ellensburg, Washington, and president and chairman of the board of the International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFC). The IAFC represents approximately 12,000 leaders of the nation's fire, rescue and emergency services. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today about the effectiveness and priorities of the U.S. Fire Administration (USFA) and the Assistance to Firefighters Grant (AFG) program, including the Fire Prevention and Safety (FP&S) grant and the Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) grant programs.

Both the AFG program (including the FP&S and SAFER grants) and the USFA help local fire and emergency departments meet the myriad missions that they face every day. Today's local fire department is an all-hazards response force that must provide fire suppression; emergency medical response; hazmat response; multi-casualty/civil unrest/terrorism response; urban search and rescue; train-derailment response; and technical, high-angle, swift-water building-collapse, confined-space and deep-trench rescue. During times of crisis, the local fire department serves as the closest thing to government that provides service to the victims, their communities, their families and their friends.

The Assistance to Firefighters Grant Program

The AFG program (including the FP&S and SAFER grant programs) provides matching grants to local fire and emergency medical service (EMS) departments to assist them in their all-hazards missions. Created by Congress in 2000, the AFG program provides direct support to local fire departments to improve training and equipment capabilities. The FP&S grants, funded by 10% of the funds appropriated to the AFG program, are used to promote local fire prevention activities and research to reduce both firefighter and civilian deaths and property loss due to fires. The SAFER grant program was created by Congress in 2003 to provide matching grants to help local fire departments hire career firefighters. Using at least 10% of appropriated funds, the SAFER program also funds recruitment and retention programs to help volunteer fire departments maintain and enhance their staffing.

These programs are administered by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). They use a merit-based, peer-review process to evaluate applications and make awards to grantees. While there is an economic hardship waiver, most fire departments must meet a scalable match requirement of 5% to 15% for the AFG grant based on the size of the population served by the fire department. For the SAFER hiring grants, a local fire department must provide a 25% local match in the first two years and a 65% match in the third year of the period of performance. The FP&S grants require a 5% match. The national fire service organizations meet annually with FEMA staff to set the criteria for awarding the AFG grants in order to ensure that the programs continue to meet the needs of local fire departments.

Since the AFG program's inception in FY 2001, FEMA has distributed approximately \$6.32 billion to local fire departments through the AFG program. From FY 2005 through the latest awards in FY 2015, the SAFER grant program has awarded approximately \$2.73 billion. In

general, these programs have been recognized as good stewards of taxpayer funds. For example, the Office of Management and Budget found in 2007 that the AFG program was “effective” and assigned a 100% score for Program Management and Program Results/Accountability.

It is important to highlight the qualitative impacts of the AFG, SAFER and FP&S programs on the nation’s fire and emergency service. For example, KVFR received AFG funding in 2006 and 2007 to purchase personal protective equipment and self-contained breathing apparatus (SCBA). We used these grants to replace twenty-year old turnout gear, which had far exceeded its ten-year service life. In addition, the purchase of new SCBAs allowed us to replace an old system with the current contemporary gear that neighboring departments had. This equipment helped us to regionalize our local fire and emergency service and provide more effective emergency response to our communities.

In addition, the IAFC has been engaged in AFG- and SAFER-funded initiatives to support the nation’s fire and emergency service. The IAFC’s Volunteer Workforce Solutions program helps volunteer and combination departments improve their ability to recruit, retain and manage volunteer firefighters. This national recruitment and retention initiative is aimed at improving diversity and inclusion in the fire and emergency service. For example, one department grew from having less than 1% female members to now having 20% of its membership composed of women. Another department that had only eight all-male operational members added nine women, so that 67% of its current operational volunteers are women. A larger county department started the program with 157 total volunteers including 38 women and 34 Hispanic members. With help from the SAFER-funded IAFC program, the department now has 250 total members with 76 women (30% of operational staff) and 100 Hispanic members (40%). Later this year, the IAFC will release three online courses to focus on diversity and inclusion in the fire and emergency service, and a volunteer chiefs’ handbook to help new chiefs learn the business of a fire department. It is important to highlight the importance of diversity in the fire and emergency service to provide superior customer service to a diversifying U.S. population.

The Connecticut Fire Chiefs Association, the Virginia Fire Chiefs Association, and the Tennessee Fire Chiefs Association also have received SAFER grants and chosen to partner with the IAFC on volunteer recruitment and retention programs. These programs have focused on statewide media campaigns, leadership workshops, and specialized physicals for prospective volunteers, as described by the National Fire Protection Association’s (NFPA) Standard on Comprehensive Occupational Medical Program for Fire Departments (NFPA 1582), to ensure that they are fit for duty. During the most recent program in Connecticut, 600 new applications were received in the 15 participating departments and 400 new members joined. Considering that each volunteer is estimated to save a community approximately \$45,000 per year, this effort produced a cost savings of \$18 million to those communities.

In Virginia, more than 1,100 applications were received in the 15 participating departments with 565 new members joining these departments. This effort resulted in approximately \$25 million in cost savings to communities. In addition, more than 30,000 training hours were delivered statewide including leadership, recruitment and retention training. Also, the program held more than 1,700 recruitment and retention events, and distributed 78,000 campaign marketing materials. The Tennessee effort is just getting under way.

The IAFC also has received FP&S grants to apply FP&S-funded scientific research to the fire ground. The Firefighter Safety Through Advanced Research (FSTAR) and Researchers Creating Useable Emergency Solutions (RESCUES) programs have been focused on applying research to reduce the severity of home fires and improve firefighter health and safety. To inform the fire and emergency service about new scientific developments, the program has developed easy-to-use fact sheets. These fact sheets cover topics such as structural collapse tests of single-story wood frame structures; understanding fire performance and tactical decision-making for engineered floor systems; post-traumatic stress for career firefighters; and sudden cardiac death among firefighters less than 45 years of age in the U.S. The FSTAR program also included online training courses in fire ground tactics and fire dynamics, such as the thermal hazards of wind-driven fires.

Currently, the FSTAR program is focused on firefighter health and safety issues. Research shows that firefighters are at increased risk for cardiovascular events, respiratory illnesses, cancer, musculoskeletal injuries and behavioral health issues because of their jobs. The FSTAR program is focused on improving the awareness of firefighters and health care providers to these increased occupational risks through training. For example, the FSTAR program has developed and updated a health care providers' guide to the NFPA 1582 physical and distributed more than 1,000 copies of the guide at conferences and meetings since the guide's November 2016 launch. FSTAR also has developed fact sheets on firefighter fitness and wellness programs and candidate physical ability tests for firefighters. In addition, the FSTAR program hosted a webinar which included a comprehensive study of mayday situations in which firefighters were at risk on the fire ground.

The Need to Reauthorize the AFG Program

Despite the effectiveness of the AFG and SAFER program, local fire and EMS departments still suffer from shortages in basic requirements. Consider the following examples from the NFPA's *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 cannot equip all firefighters on a shift with SCBA.
- An estimated 60% of all departments provide hazardous materials response but have not formally trained all of their personnel involved in this response activity.
- Almost three-quarters (72%) of departments reported that some of their personal protective clothing was at least 10 years old, which exceeds the life-cycle of the equipment.

There still is a definite need in the fire and emergency service for the AFG and SAFER grant programs. The current authorization of funding expires at the end of FY 2017. In addition, the authorizing statutes for the AFG and SAFER grant programs have "sunset" provisions to eliminate both programs on January 2, 2018. In order to ensure that these programs can continue to serve the nation's fire and emergency service, the IAFC asks the subcommittee to report a bill to reauthorize funding for these programs.

The IAFC supports the AFG and SAFER Program Reauthorization Act (S. 829), which was introduced by Senators John McCain and Jon Tester on April 5. This bipartisan legislation was reported out of the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee on May 17, and we are awaiting its passage in the full Senate.

The legislation would:

- **Eliminate the sunset provision.** The last reauthorization of the FIRE and SAFER grant programs includes a sunset for the programs on January 2, 2018. This legislation would remove this sunset to keep the programs from expiring.
- **Extend the authorization of both programs through FY 2023.** 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. This legislation simply would extend the current authorizing language through FY 2023.
- **Clean up typos in the SAFER statute.** The legislation would clean up anachronistic dates and remove references to previously-removed sections of the code. It also would correct an 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. However, the statute currently 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)). S. 829 would update the statute so that it consistently authorizes a hardship waiver of the 25%-25%-65% matching requirement.
- **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 AFG program.** The 21st 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. S. 829 would designate this mental health training component as an allowable use of the AFG program.
- **Allow SAFER grant funds to upgrade paid-per-call or part-time firefighters to full-time career firefighters.** The NFPA's Standard for the Organization and Deployment of Fire Suppression Operations, Emergency Medical Operations, and Special Operations to the Public by Career Fire Departments (NFPA 1710) requires a minimum of four on-duty firefighters on a fire engine or pumper. Due to the lingering effects of the Great Recession, many jurisdictions still cannot meet that standard. For example, 51% of fire departments protecting populations of 250,000 to 499,999 assign less than four firefighters to an apparatus, as well as 80% of fire departments protecting populations of

50,000 to 99,000. Currently, the underlying statute does not allow local fire departments to use SAFER funds to promote part-time firefighters to full-time status. S. 829 would fix this problem and allow local fire departments to promote their experienced part-time firefighters to full-time positions.

- **Make administrative changes to improve the administration and oversight of the grant programs.** In order to assist fire and EMS departments with the complicated process of administering an AFG or SAFER grant, S. 829 would authorize the FEMA Administrator and U.S. Fire Administrator to develop an online training course to educate grantees. In addition, the legislation would establish a framework for the oversight and monitoring of the grant programs to mitigate waste, fraud and abuse. These provisions are meant to answer concerns raised by 2016 reports issued by the DHS Office of Inspector General.

As the subcommittee considers legislation to reauthorize the AFG and SAFER grant programs, the IAFC recommends that the committee use the reported version of S. 829 as a starting point. This bipartisan legislation was reported unanimously from the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee. From the IAFC's perspective, S. 829 addresses the issues necessary to ensure that the AFG and SAFER grant programs remain adequately funded and continue to meet the needs of the fire and emergency service.

In addition, we are concerned by proposed cuts to the AFG and SAFER grant programs. For FY 2017, Congress agreed to appropriate \$345 million for each program. For FY 2018, the Administration proposed reducing each program to \$344.344 million for each program. In light of the programs' effectiveness and the still-prevalent need for the programs, the IAFC requests that Congress appropriate the FY 2011 level of \$405 million for each program.

The U.S. Fire Administration

Congress created the USFA and its educational arm, the National Fire Academy (NFA), in 1974, in response to the landmark document, *America Burning: The Report of the National Commission on Fire Prevention and Control*. The mission of the USFA is to reduce life and economic losses due to fire and related emergencies through leadership, advocacy, coordination and support. The USFA also provides important policies and guidance documents to local fire departments on emerging issues relating to active shooter response, EMS system management, and fire safety and fire prevention policies. The IAFC welcomes President Trump's appointment of Chief G. Keith Bryant, IAFC president (2014-2015), as U.S. Fire Administrator.

The NFA is the nation's premier fire service training institution and uses off-campus and resident courses, and training sponsored through the state fire academies to provide leadership and specialized training to the fire and emergency service. The USFA estimates that it has trained more than 1.4 million students since 1975, including more than 86,00 students in 2015.

The authorization of funding for the USFA expires at the end of FY 2017. The IAFC asks the subcommittee to consider legislation that will reauthorize funding for the program for another five years. It is important that USFA have adequate funding to provide the highly-valued

education at the NFA in the face of rising transportation costs. Steady funding also will allow the NFA to continue to provide online learning opportunities, which are especially important to volunteer and paid-per-call firefighters that must balance firefighting and training duties with paid employment and family obligations. Continued funding for USFA also will allow the NFA to develop new courses in topics related to information sharing, fusion center participation, and incorporating threat information into fire department budgeting and planning. In addition, continued USFA funding will allow it to address important infrastructure maintenance at NFA.

The IAFC believes that USFA also could play a greater role in helping fire departments deal with the emerging issues of behavioral health and wellness. According to FSTAR research, 46.8% of firefighters have considered suicide and 15.5% have had an attempt during their careers. The USFA can help local fire departments address this issue by working with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs to disseminate lessons learned from veterans' behavioral health and wellness programs to help firefighters and EMS personnel deal with the traumatic situations that they face. Also, USFA could help provide information about firefighter behavioral health and wellness issues to the medical providers of first responders. The USFA also could review firefighter health and wellness resources to provide guidance to firefighters about how to get help if they need it.

Conclusion

On behalf of the approximately 12,000 members of the IAFC, I thank you for the opportunity to testify at today's hearing. As a grantee, I would like to ensure you that the taxpayers' funds are being well-spent on the AFG and SAFER grant programs as well as the USFA. These programs provide valued assistance to local fire departments and help them protect their communities.

Nevertheless, there is still much work to be done. The U.S. still has one of the worst civilian death and property loss records due to fires in the industrialized world. For example, more than 1.3 million fires were reported in the U.S. in 2015, which resulted in more than 3,200 civilian fire deaths and \$14.3 billion in property damage. If our nation is going to continue to expect adequate response to fires and medical emergencies, and other threats, like active shooter incidents, hazardous materials incidents, flooding and wildland fires, it is important for Congress to continue to support programs such as the AFG and SAFER grant programs and the USFA. On behalf of the members of the IAFC, I look forward to working with the subcommittee to draft and pass legislation to reauthorize these critical programs.