



**Testimony of Steve Hirsch
First Vice Chair, National Volunteer Fire Council (NVFC)
Submitted to the House Subcommittee on Research and Technology**

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

July 12, 2017

My name is Steve Hirsch and I am the First Vice Chair of the National Volunteer Fire Council (NVFC), the leading national non-profit organization representing the interests of the nation's more than one million volunteer fire, EMS and rescue personnel in the United States. I also serve as the training officer for three all-volunteer fire departments in northwest Kansas, and I am the Secretary of the Kansas State Firefighters Association. I would like to thank Chair Comstock, Ranking Member Lipinski, Vice Chair Abraham, my own Representative, Dr. Marshall, and all of the esteemed members of the Subcommittee for inviting me here to speak today about the need to reauthorize the Assistance to Firefighters Grant (AFG) program, the Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) grant program, and the United States Fire Administration (USFA).

Grant Programs

The NVFC's top priority for the reauthorization of the AFG and SAFER grant programs is simply to extend them beyond January 2, 2018. As the committee is aware, there is a provision in current law that would eliminate these incredibly important grant programs if they are not reauthorized before that date. This would be a severe blow to the nation's fire service and put thousands of communities across the country at risk.

Eliminating the sunset and extending the authorization for AFG and SAFER is absolutely critical. Additionally, the NVFC supports making several other relatively minor changes to the current authorization. I am attaching a document that the NVFC, along with several other national fire service organizations, provided to the committee in March outlining all of the changes that we are requesting in the reauthorization, along with a justification for each.

As the Committee is aware, AFG and SAFER are by far the most significant sources of assistance that the federal government provides to local fire departments. The goal of the AFG and SAFER programs is to bring all fire departments in the United States up to a baseline level of readiness. This is particularly important for all- and mostly-volunteer fire departments, which protect 85 percent of the nation's communities and 37 percent of the population.

Rural areas like mine are almost exclusively protected by volunteers. Unfortunately, national needs assessment studies consistently show that volunteer agencies have difficulty affording up-to-date equipment, training and apparatus (see charts on next page). This is primarily for economic reasons. Because fire protection services are funded at the local level, the resources available to each department are dependent on the local tax base. For smaller communities that can mean having to engage in private fundraising and rely on older and sometimes unreliable equipment and vehicles in order to maintain operations.

Figure 2-5. Percent of Engines and Pumpers That Are At Least 15 Years Old by Size of Community, for Four Studies

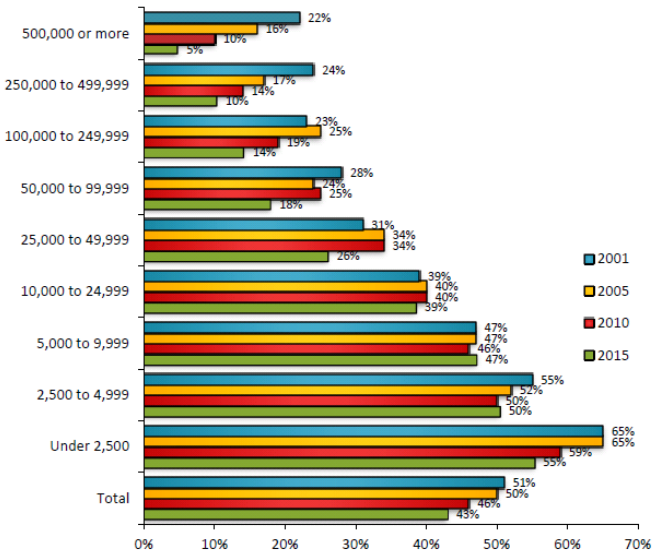


Table 3-D. Firefighters in Departments Where Not All Firefighters Are Equipped With Personal Protective Clothing and Percent of Personal Protective Clothing That Is At Least 10 Years Old by Size of Community (Q. 40a, 40b)

Population Protected	Estimated Firefighters in Departments That Do Not Have Personal Protective Clothing for All Firefighters	Estimated Percent of Departments With At Least Some Personal Protective Clothing That Is At Least 10 Years Old
500,000 or more	3,000	37.0%
250,000 to 499,999	0	41.5%
100,000 to 249,999	0	34.2%
50,000 to 99,999	0	38.9%
25,000 to 49,999	2,000	42.1%
10,000 to 24,999	5,000	56.7%
5,000 to 9,999	7,000	69.9%
2,500 to 4,999	30,000	77.1%
Under 2,500	75,000	78.4%
Total	122,000	71.7%

Source: "Fourth Needs Assessment of the U.S. Fire Service", NFPA, November 2016

I get around a fair bit across Kansas. I teach fire classes in a volunteer fire department at least one weekend a month. I see volunteer fire departments that struggle to get enough firefighters to man the trucks. I see volunteer departments that have to beg for money to sustain the services they provide to their community. Recently a fire department in a little city in Northwest Kansas had a need for a fire truck to maintain the fire insurance ratings in their community. I was able to find a small rural volunteer department in Nebraska that had a fire truck to give them – one that had been given to them by a volunteer department in Delaware.

I see volunteers step up to the plate and pay for a lot of this out of their own pockets. There are still fire departments that have dirt floors. There are still fire departments that are using turnout gear that is worn out. There are still fire departments that have to work on trucks just to get them out the door or work on them when they return. I know of one department in Kansas that has a budget of under ten thousand dollars. It's a small town with a very small tax base. How can they ever hope to replace their bunker gear at \$3000 per person? How can they ever hope to buy a newer brush rig to fight wildfires that used might still cost tens of thousands of dollars? They have that hope because of the AFG program.

Due to the significant resource challenges that fire departments protecting smaller communities face, the AFG program has been a lifeline for thousands of volunteer and small combination agencies across the country. From FY 2010-2015, volunteer fire departments received an average of 993 grants worth a total of \$95 million each year to help them purchase critically needed equipment, training and vehicles. This funding helped to maintain and improve response capabilities in every state across the nation.

My own home department has been fortunate to receive grants under AFG for turnout gear to keep our firefighters safe, to replace hose that was 40 years old, to finally be able to buy a compressor to refill our air tanks without making a 60 mile round trip, for heavy duty washing machines to keep our gear clean and try and prevent cancer in our firefighters, and to purchase a fire truck to replace one that was 50 years old. Neighboring departments in my area have received grants for similar equipment, and we work together and do not duplicate equipment that can easily be shared. Our washing machine is used to wash the neighbors gear. Our compressor is used to fill other departments' air bottles. That's what makes this program so necessary.

Recently in my community I called a widow of a firefighter who had died in the line of duty in 1967. She is my hero. She had three small children. There was no life insurance. There was no gear. There was no training. And yet Carol Ferguson left his job at the meat counter of the local grocery store to help out his neighbors. He was killed when a

chimney fell on him. Firefighters place their lives at risk every time they respond to a call. The AFG program helps to minimize that danger by providing funding to purchase needed equipment and training that simply could not otherwise be afforded in my own community and thousands like it across the country.

A major challenge for volunteer fire departments related to the AFG program is access to funding. 993 grants per year represents approximately one award for every 20 volunteer fire departments in the United States. From FY 2010-2015, less than ten percent of the funds requested by volunteer fire departments through AFG were awarded. As Congress has reduced funding for AFG – from \$565 million in FY 2009 to \$405 million in FY 2011 to \$345 million in FY 2016 and FY 2017 – competition for funding has increased substantially. This puts particular pressure on smaller fire departments, which often struggle with the grant-writing process.

Volunteer fire chiefs are just that – volunteers. They have lives and they have families. They put those lives and those families on hold while they protect their communities. They have to make a living. Some fire chiefs, after being denied grants – sometimes just because they aren't very good grant writers– decide to simply not take the time to fill out the grant application. This happens more and more as funding becomes more limited.

FEMA is working to try to address funding access issues. They put on grant-writing workshops across the country, including in rural areas, and there is a helpline that people can use to call for assistance. Working with FEMA and other national organizations through the criteria development process, we were able to establish “micro grants” – grant applications where fire departments voluntarily limit their request to \$25,000 or less in order to have a better chance of getting funded. Micro grants allow FEMA to give out more awards, even as available grant dollars have dwindled.

I recognize that this committee does not control appropriations, but I think it is important to raise the issue of funding to illustrate the vital importance of maintaining the current allocations in the statute that govern how AFG is apportioned. The last time that these programs were reauthorized there were changes made that opened AFG up to applicants other than fire departments, including non-fire-based EMS organizations and state fire training academies. Additionally, the percentage of funding that was set aside for the Fire Prevention and Safety (FP&S) grant program, which is a component of AFG, was doubled. Today, with less funding available and greater competition for grants, the NVFC strongly opposes any further changes to the grant programs that would shift dollars away from AFG and local fire departments.

To be clear, the NVFC supports the FP&S program, which funds projects that enhance the safety of the public and firefighters from fire and related hazards. The NVFC was in favor of doubling the allocation for FP&S from five percent to ten percent of the AFG appropriation, as was written into law in the last reauthorization. We felt that this was justified because FP&S applications typically account for 6-8 percent of the combined AFG/FP&S applications and funds requested, as well as the fact that effective fire prevention programs can have a profound, far-reaching impact.

My own Sheridan County Volunteer Fire Department covers all 900 plus square miles of Sheridan County. Thanks to FP&S we were able to put a smoke detector in every home in the county. This is something that we could never have done with local resources, but it is a project that is keeping families alive by having early detection and warning systems in place. One would think that a smoke detector would be affordable by most people but there are folks that struggle with monthly bills and having smoke detectors versus feeding their family limits their choices.

Finally, the Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) grant program helps to increase or maintain the number of trained, “front line” firefighters in the United States. While SAFER funds are primarily used to pay salary and benefits for career firefighters, ten percent of the funding is set aside to recruit and retain volunteers. Through SAFER, departments can create marketing plans to recruit new volunteers and establish benefit programs and implement other retention strategies to encourage personnel to remain active participants in the department.

I could spend all day talking about the significant staffing challenges facing volunteer fire departments. They are closely related to the transformation taking place across rural America. As jobs leave small towns and young people move to the cities and suburbs in search of work, there are fewer people available to volunteer as emergency responders. Additionally, as call volumes have risen and the amount of training required to serve as a firefighter has increased, it is

harder and harder to convince people to become volunteers. Since 2000, the proportion of firefighters over the age of 50 serving in communities with populations of 2,500 or fewer residents has surged from 18.9 percent to 31 percent.

As I said I get around Kansas a lot and see communities where the entire volunteer fire department is over 50 years old. Now there's nothing wrong with older firefighters – they pass along a world of experience to the next generation – but you don't want to have an entire fire department that doesn't have any young, energetic, vigorous firefighters in their ranks. To do so puts the entire community's population at risk. The SAFER program gives fire departments the tools that they need to recruit and retain the next generation of volunteers.

The Stayton Fire Department in Oregon used two SAFER grants over a seven year period to recruit 80 new firefighters. Stayton's marketing efforts also directly led to the recruitment of 29 firefighters total spread across 15 different neighboring fire departments. The volunteer coordinator that Stayton hired with their initial grant went on to help found the Oregon Firefighter Recruitment Network, which now helps fire departments across the state implement R&R best practices.

One of the ancillary benefits of establishing a R&R program is that it helps departments not only increase the number of firefighters that they have, but also increase the level of activity of their firefighters. This is a trend that the NVFC has heard from a number of our members that have received SAFER grants. Stayton reports that a side-effect of recruiting new, active volunteers and establishing a formal R&R program was that many of the existing volunteers who had become less active ramped up their engagement with the department. Meanwhile, volunteers who were ready to retire but had continued serving because there was no one to replace them were able to transition out of active duty without damaging the department's response capabilities.

State and national organizations are also able to use SAFER funds to create programs that help local fire departments recruit and retain firefighters. State and national programs are critical because they reach a much larger group of fire departments, including agencies that desperately need assistance but may not have the time or wherewithal to successfully implement R&R strategies. Many, many volunteer fire departments fall into this category, as evidenced by the fact that less than 2 percent of agencies apply for SAFER each year.

The Nevada Fire Chiefs Association received SAFER R&R grants in 2007 and 2011 and used the funding to recruit nearly 1,000 new volunteers spread across 82 different fire departments in the state. NFCA, in partnership with the Nevada State Firefighters Association, developed marketing materials and established a website for referring prospective volunteers to local fire departments. These tools are still in use today, although the grant expired in 2015.

NFCA also used grant funds to pay for entry physicals for the new recruits. The State of Nevada requires all firefighters to have an entry physical, which can be prohibitively expensive for many smaller agencies that lack resources. The NFCA grant allowed agencies to not only add new, healthy staff but at no cost to the local taxpayers. I am including as supporting documents an overview of the Stayton grants, as well as grants that the Nevada Fire Chiefs Association received to implement a statewide R&R program.

The NVFC received a SAFER grant in 2014 and used the funding to establish our national Make Me a Firefighter (MMAF) campaign to help local fire and EMS agencies recruit volunteer personnel. The MMAF campaign is a web-based tool that provides departments with information about how to establish a recruitment program, gives them pre-packaged and customizable marketing materials, messaging and outreach strategies, and offers them free access to post volunteer position listings on our online portal. To date there are more than 7,600 users signed up with the campaign, representing more than 5,200 fire departments. More than 2,200 volunteer opportunities are listed and nearly 2,000 applications have been submitted through the portal.

One of the supporting documents that I am submitting along with my written testimony is an article that appeared in a recent issue of Emergency Management magazine about the R&R challenges that volunteer fire departments face. Included in the article was the experience of the West Barnstable (MA) Fire Department, which used MMAF to recruit new volunteers through Facebook. West Barnstable Fire Chief Joe Maruca, who is also a member of the NVFC Board, reported that he received so much volunteer interest because of the MMAF campaign that he was able to completely fill

his recruit class for this year and has prospective volunteers waiting for next year. He also indicated in the article that because the MMAF campaign lets him target the entire community that the new recruits are from more diverse backgrounds.

U.S. Fire Administration

The United States Fire Administration (USFA) provides training to more than 100,000 fire and emergency services personnel each year. USFA also performs research and collects data specific to the fire service, and educates the public on the importance of fire safety. The long-term health of USFA and its National Fire Academy are critical to the fire service, particularly volunteers.

Access to training is a significant challenge for many volunteer fire departments. Trainers are in short supply in rural areas, and smaller fire departments often aren't able to do a lot of specialized training in-house. USFA delivers training directly to individuals on campus and remotely through online course offerings. It also hands courses off to state fire training academies, many of which are able to deliver services in rural areas.

When USFA was reauthorized last there were a number of new focus areas added to its mission, including hazardous materials, emergency medical services, and wildland fire. This reflected the fact that today's fire department is a multi-hazard response agency and that a narrow focus on structural firefighting alone was no longer appropriate. I would say that the changes made in the last authorization have been a qualified success. USFA has developed some training in the new focus areas, and has begun partnering on cross-cutting federal projects dealing with EMS and wildland fire.

Unfortunately, USFA is limited in the new activities that it can engage in due to funding constraints. Again, I recognize that appropriations are outside of this committee's jurisdiction but it is important to note that with USFA's budget having remained at \$44 million in recent years after several years in which it sustained cuts, the focus has been mostly on how to maintain current functions. Developing new courses, updating existing curriculum, and modernizing the National Fire Incident Reporting System (NFIRS) have all suffered due to lack of funding.

With that in mind, the NVFC supports extending the current authorization for the USFA for five years without major changes.

Conclusion

The volunteer fire service depends on the AFG, FP&S and SAFER grant programs, as well as the U.S. Fire Administration, as a lifeline that gives us access to training, education, equipment, vehicles and staffing that we desperately need but simply do not have the ability to afford using local resources alone. On behalf of the NVFC I can say that these programs are effective and that they need to be extended beyond January of next year. I commend the subcommittee for holding this hearing, I thank you for inviting me to speak, and I would be happy to answer any questions that you have.

Attachment 1 – AFG Applications and Awards Data: FY 2009-FY 2015

Appropriations		Requested	Applications	Awarded	Grants	Funding Share	Success Rate
FY 2009 - \$565 million	Department Type						
	Volunteer	\$1,540m	11,204	\$217m	2,829	42.70%	25.20%
	Combination	\$831m	4,473	\$128.5m	1,137	25.30%	25.40%
	Paid On Call	\$193m	1,375	\$26.6m	361	5.20%	26.30%
	Career	\$601m	2,739	\$135.8m	884	26.70%	32.30%
FY 2010 - 390 million	Department Type						
	Volunteer	\$1,200m	8,828	\$111m	1,217	32.80%	13.80%
	Combination	\$690m	3,896	\$114.6m	966	33.90%	24.80%
	Paid On Call	\$167m	1,144	\$20.7m	178	6.10%	15.60%
	Career	\$497m	2,363	\$92.1m	572	27.20%	24.20%
FY 2011 - \$405 million	Department Type						
	Volunteer	\$1,240.8m	8,442	\$84.4m	549	24.30%	6.50%
	Combination	\$806.7m	4,220	\$117.0m	583	33.70%	13.80%
	Paid On Call	\$192.0m	1,246	\$11.9m	76	3.40%	6.10%
	Career	\$607.7m	2,588	\$134.2m	521	38.60%	20.10%
FY 2012 - \$337.5 million	Department Type						
	Volunteer	\$867.3m	5,680	\$89.3m	1,079	31.20%	19.00%
	Combination	\$618.7m	3,136	\$86.1m	696	30.10%	22.20%
	Paid On Call	\$119.8m	821	\$11.2m	169	3.90%	20.60%
	Career	\$467.0m	2,053	\$99.6m	546	34.80%	26.60%
FY 2013 - \$337.5 million	Department Type						
	Volunteer	\$750.7m	4,986	\$90.9m	1,061	31.50%	21.30%
	Combination	\$660.1m	2,950	\$90m	560	31.20%	19.00%
	Paid On Call	\$126.1m	762	\$10.2m	91	4.20%	12.70%
	Career	\$558.2m	2,000	\$97.4m	439	33.80%	22.00%
FY 2014 - \$340 million	Department Type						
	Volunteer	\$731.6m	4,609	\$94.4m	1,089	31.00%	23.60%
	Combination	\$721.2m	2,907	\$94.4m	595	31.00%	20.50%
	Paid On Call	\$122.9m	692	\$10.1m	100	3.30%	14.50%
	Career	\$549.9m	1,791	\$105.9m	462	34.70%	25.80%
FY 2015 - \$340 million	Department Type						
	Volunteer	\$849.7m	4,860	\$102.5m	963	32.10%	19.80%
	Combination	\$761.7m	3,008	\$93.1m	547	29.10%	18.20%
	Paid On Call	\$125.4m	726	\$12.7m	108	4.00%	14.90%
	Career	\$550.8m	1,860	\$111.4m	401	34.80%	21.60%

Attachment 2 – SAFER Applications and Awards Data: FY 2009-FY 2015

Appropriations		Requested	Applications	Awarded	Grants	Funding Share	Success Rate
FY 2009 - \$210m	R&R	\$199.9m	730	\$21.6m	52	11.40%	7.10%
	Hiring	\$1.047b	1,369	\$166.5m	131	88.60%	10.50%
	Department						
	Volunteer	\$116.6m	535	\$5.2m	20	2.60%	3.70%
	Career	\$682.4m	560	\$148.9m	81	75.00%	14.50%
	Combination	\$420.3m	960	\$32.4m	70	16.30%	7.50%
	Interest Org	\$30.3m	38	\$12.0m	11	6.00%	28.90%
FY 2010 - \$420m	R&R	\$173.8m	643	63.1m	204	16.20%	31.70%
	Hiring	\$1.021b	1179	326.0m	237	83.80%	20.10%
	Department						
	Volunteer	\$97.5m	444	\$19.2m	92	4.70%	26.10%
	Career	\$688.9m	502	\$280.6m	137	69.10%	27.30%
	Combination	\$377.4m	761	\$87.8m	188	21.60%	24.70%
	Interest Org	\$30.5m	33	\$18.7m	22	4.60%	66.70%
FY 2011 - \$380.7m	R&R	\$262.7m	765	\$38.4m	114	10.30%	14.90%
	Hiring	\$1.4425b	1,209	\$335.5m	203	89.70%	16.80%
	Department						
	Volunteer	\$141.7m	515	\$11.0m	58	2.70%	11.30%
	Career	\$883.7m	513	\$264.9m	113	65.40%	22.00%
	Combination	\$619.8m	906	\$103.6m	150	25.60%	16.60%
	Interest Org	\$59.3m	40	\$12.7m	10	3.10%	25%
FY 2012 - \$320.6m	R&R	\$245.7m	575	\$32.2m	91	9.90%	15.80%
	Hiring	\$952.3m	977	\$292.2m	194	90.10%	19.90%
	Department						
	Volunteer	\$95.3m	359	\$12.3m	43	3.60%	12.00%
	Career	\$601.9m	393	\$219.6m	93	65.10%	23.70%
	Combination	\$390.3m	750	\$88.2m	147	26.10%	19.60%
	Interest Org	\$106.6m	50	\$11.7m	11	3.50%	22.00%
FY 2013 - \$320.9m	R&R	\$796.2m	602	\$32.1m	79	10.30%	13.10%
	Hiring	\$884.7m	910	\$280.3m	168	89.70%	18.50%
	Department						
	Volunteer	\$512.8m	348	\$9.3m	27	2.80%	7.80%
	Career	\$567.0m	358	\$216.3m	90	64.10%	25.10%
	Combination	\$545.9m	761	\$76.3m	124	22.60%	16.30%
	Interest Org	\$55.2m	45	\$10.5m	6	3.10%	13.30%
FY 2014 - \$340m	R&R	\$183.5m	471	\$34.7m	89	10.20%	18.90%
	Hiring	\$995.0m	864	\$305.3m	247	89.80%	28.60%
	Department						
	Volunteer	\$75.0m	264	13.5m	43	4%	16.20%
	Career	\$641.3m	358	226.6m	82	66.70%	22.90%
	Combination	\$407.8m	680	91.4m	120	26.90%	17.60%

	Interest Org	\$53.4m	33	8.3m	9	2.50%	27.30%
FY 2015 - \$340m	R&R	\$180.0m	474	\$34.4m	87	10.10%	18.40%
	Hiring	\$856.0m	844	\$302.4m	192	88.90%	22.70%
	Department						
	Volunteer	\$83.2m	290	\$10.1m	36	3%	12.40%
	Career	\$502.9m	305	\$240.2m	113	70.60%	37.00%
	Combination	\$412.5m	693	\$75.7m	122	22.30%	17.60%
	Interest Org	\$37.5m	30	\$10.8m	8	3.20%	26.70%

Stayton (OR) Fire Department SAFER Recruitment and Retention Success Snapshot

Grant Highlights

- Created a marketing program that was designed to be updated regularly. The marketing program helped Stayton FD to establish a brand in the community that continues to be recognized even after the grant expired.
- Partially funded a recruitment and retention (R&R) coordinator position. The R&R coordinator works full-time and responds to day-time, weekday calls while many volunteers are unavailable.
- The “join rate” for Stayton FD increased by more than 400% during the early years of the grant and today it remains more than double what it was prior to the grant being awarded.
- Developed a retention plan that is continually updated based on feedback from members that is solicited on a regular basis.

By the Numbers

Years:	2008-2010; 2010-2014
Grant size:	\$455,600 *
Firefighters recruited:	80
Estimated annual value of services:	\$1.44 million

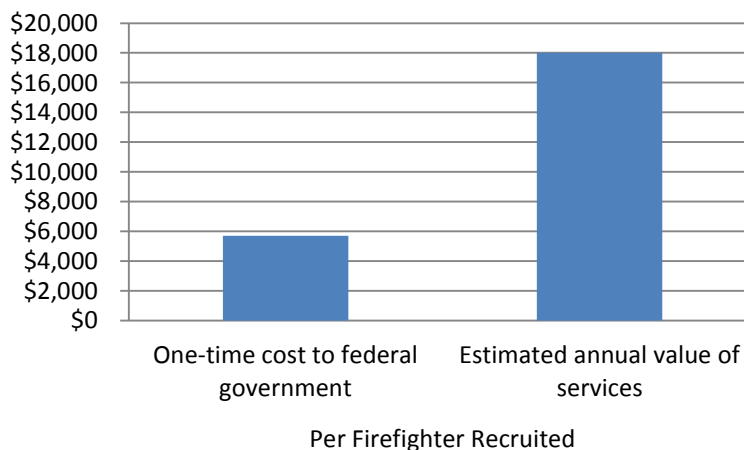
*Total for both grants combined

“Our average volunteer turnout per incident has increased substantially since we received the SAFER grant. This is critical because Stayton has a small population base to draw from for prospective volunteers. Having an R&R coordinator to manage our outreach efforts to the public, work with new recruits and take charge of our retention program has been the key.”

**Chief Jack Carriger
Stayton Fire Department
NVFC Oregon Director**

Statewide Impact

Stayton’s marketing efforts led to the recruitment of 29 volunteer firefighters in 15 neighboring departments. Stayton’s R&R coordinator also helped to start the Oregon Firefighter Recruitment Network, which benefits volunteer firefighter recruitment efforts across the state.



Nevada Fire Chiefs Association SAFER Recruitment and Retention Success Snapshot

Grant Highlights

- Received two grants: for \$400,000 in 2006 and \$499,000 in 2010. Recruited 400 firefighters between 2007 and 2010 and 557 firefighters since 2011.
- Developed marketing materials with the 2006 grant funds; those materials were updated with the 2010 grant funds and are still being used today.
- Directed recruits to nearest volunteer fire department using 1-800 number or website. Created a standard application process for people who apply online.
- Used 2010 grant funding to provide firefighter physicals to new recruits. Firefighter physicals are required under national consensus standards but most fire departments, especially volunteer agencies, can't afford them for all new recruits.
- NFCA partnered with the Nevada State Firefighters Association, which represents the volunteer fire service in the state of Nevada.

By the Numbers

Years:	2007-2010; 2011-2015*
Grant size:	\$899,000**
Firefighters recruited:	957**
Departments impacted:	82
Estimated annual value of services:	\$17.2 million

*Period of performance was extended

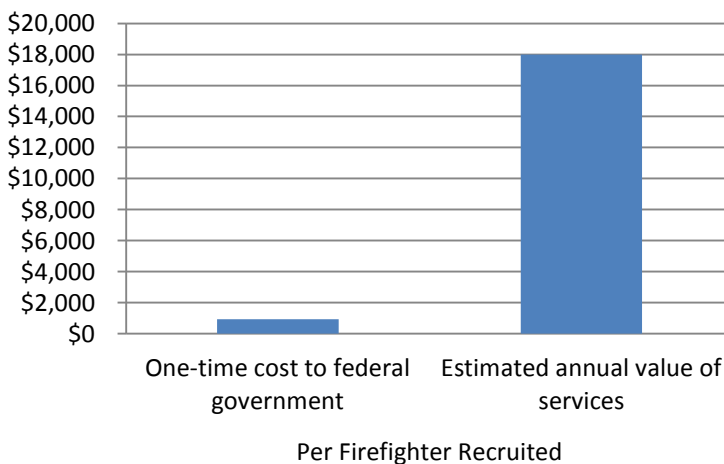
**Total for both grants combined

“Recruitment and retention is about taking care of your personnel. Making sure they are trained, equipped and healthy enough to do the job. This grant gave us the resources to bring in a large number of new recruits and provide them with everything that they needed to be safe and effective firefighters.”

Steve McClintock
Past President
Nevada State Firefighters Association

Healthy Firefighters

National standards require firefighter recruits to receive a rigorous physical examination to ensure that they are healthy. This is extremely important because firefighting is a dangerous occupation and because heart attack, stroke and cancer are leading causes of duty-related firefighter deaths. Unfortunately, due to budget constraints, most volunteer fire departments are unable to provide physical exams for all new recruits. Through the 2010 grant, NFCA was able to provide 367 firefighter physicals to new volunteer recruits.



Make a difference.

Become a volunteer firefighter.

WILL YOU ANSWER THE CALL?

Join the men and women who protect your community and serve as the first line of defense for ensuring homeland security. Answer the call and make a difference today.

Call **1-800-FIRE-LINE** to find out more about volunteer opportunities in your area.

To learn about federal and state benefits for volunteers go to www.nvfc.org and click on State Benefits Guide.

Volunteer Fire Departments Are Struggling to Retain Firefighters, While 911 Calls Are Surging

The search for solutions as volunteer firefighter recruitment sputters and 911 calls soar.

by Madeline Bodin / June 29, 2017

Every year an average of 10 volunteer firefighters quit the West Barnstable, Mass., Fire Department, about 27 percent of the department's total. Fire Chief Joseph Maruca never finds out why half of those department members leave, but does know that about one-third of his crew leaves for career firefighting positions at larger, nearby fire departments, typically after serving in West Barnstable fewer than four years.

West Barnstable, with its white clapboard church and saltbox houses on the shores of Cape Cod Bay, is a classic New England village with a population of 3,500, popular with retirees.

Constantly recruiting new firefighters is a strain on the department, and on Maruca. The situation got bad enough that officials looked into staffing the department only with career firefighters. Maruca found that not only would that cost taxpayers more, it would also reduce the number of firefighters responding to each call.

Nationwide, volunteer fire departments save municipalities, and taxpayers, \$139.8 billion per year in firefighting costs, according to a 2014 report from the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA). About 70 percent of America's firefighters are volunteers, and 85 percent of the nation's fire departments are all or mostly volunteer, according to NFPA. The smallest communities — those with fewer than 10,000 residents — are almost always served by volunteer departments, also, according to NFPA.

Across the country, small, rural fire departments like West Barnstable's are struggling to recruit and retain volunteer firefighters. But even where the number of volunteer firefighters is holding steady, the number of calls is exploding. The nationwide tally of the calls departments respond to each year has tripled in the last 30 years, according to NFPA. These numbers influence a community's ability to deal with emergencies, both large and small...

(A portion of this article was deleted to save space. The full article can be viewed at: <http://www.govtech.com/em/disaster/EM-Summer-2017-Dwindling-Force.html>)

...For Maruca, the solution to his recruiting problem is an NVFC program called Make Me a Firefighter and a lot of effort. Make Me a Firefighter provides marketing materials that Maruca can adapt to his own needs. His first effort was advertisements on Facebook that targeted users in his region by age. (Because of state law, firefighters in Massachusetts need to be between 18 and 65 years old.)

The ad provided a link to the Make Me a Firefighter national website, where potential recruits can search for fire departments in their area. (Kimberly) Quiros (NVFC Chief of Communications) said that more than 25 percent of departments nationwide have signed up to be in the program's database.

When Maruca received emails generated by the national database, he replied immediately, asking the potential recruits to stop by and learn more about the department. Then, once a week, simply because the response was so overwhelming, he sent out a welcome email to all the new contacts that included an application. If he didn't hear back, he would email again a month later, with another invitation and application.

One of the things he most appreciates about the program is that the people who responded were a more diverse group than he sees through traditional word-of-mouth recruiting. "If your fire service is made up of community members, it reflects the community," Maruca said. That can mean increasing a department's racial or ethnic

diversity, but it also means loosening the grip of the clique of families that seem to fill every small-town fire department. And that may be more difficult.

In his town, Maruca sees women as his biggest untapped pool of recruits. Women make up half of almost every community, he says, yet they are only 10 percent of his recruits. Departments across the country have similar numbers. "No matter where you are in the country, this is your biggest area for growth," he said.

Through the program and the Facebook ads, the department received 62 inquiries. Ten of those people applied, Maruca said. That was more recruits than he had spaces to fill in the next training class, so some recruits are waiting to attend the next.

It's a hopeful sign, Maruca said, but the new normal is constant attention to recruiting and more flexibility in assigning deployments. "It's a very dynamic process to keep us functioning."

All of these challenges don't mean that emergency managers should give up on using their traditional infantry of volunteer firefighters, Quiros said. A stronger volunteer fire department means a stronger community response to just about any emergency. Instead, she suggests, emergency managers should advocate for their fire department as they would for any true partner in their mission. When volunteer firefighters have the resources they need, she said, the whole community benefits.