

**Congressional Fire Services Institute / International Association of Arson Investigators /
International Association of Fire Chiefs / International Association of Fire Fighters /
International Fire Service Training Association / International Society of Fire Service Instructors /
National Fire Protection Association / National Volunteer Fire Council /
North American Fire Training Directors**

February 23, 2010

The Honorable Robert C. Byrd
Chairman, Subcommittee on Homeland Security
Senate Committee on Appropriations
135 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable George V. Voinovich
Ranking Member, Subcommittee on Homeland Security
Senate Committee on Appropriations
125 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Chairman Byrd & Ranking Member Voinovich;

On behalf of the nation's fire and emergency services, we write to urge your support for two critical programs that provide federal aid to improve the readiness of our nation's fire and emergency services: the Assistance to Firefighters (FIRE) Grant Program and the Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) Grant Program. As you begin work on the Fiscal Year (FY) 2011 Homeland Security Appropriations Act, we encourage you to fund each program at \$420 million apiece. The FIRE and SAFER grant programs are critical to addressing the needs of more than one million fire and emergency services personnel, while providing an economic stimulus to American businesses.

We also urge you to provide additional funding for the Urban Search and Rescue Response (US&R) system. An appropriation of \$50 million for Fiscal Year 2011 is crucial to ensuring search and response teams may continue to respond to emergencies at home and abroad.

In 2006, the United States Fire Administration and the National Fire Protection Association issued a joint report that identified critical capability gaps in training and equipment. According to the report, sixty-five percent of fire departments do not have enough radios and sixty percent do not have enough self-contained breathing apparatus to equip all firefighters on a shift, and aging equipment and vehicles are being utilized beyond their expected useful lives. Thirty-six percent of fire departments that provide emergency medical response do not have enough adequately trained staff designated for that purpose. These types of shortages add to the level of risk firefighters face on a daily basis and hamper their ability to protect the public.

This past year, funding for the Fire Grant Program was reduced by over thirty percent – from \$565 million in FY2009 to \$390 million in FY 2010. The decrease could not have come at a worse time for our nation's fire departments. Facing serious budget crises, they cannot purchase critical equipment, hire and retain staff, offer essential training and maintain their facilities because of funding shortfalls. The problem is endemic in both career and volunteer fire departments in every region of the country.

The economic recession has taken its toll on the fire service industry as well, which provides jobs for over 100,000 Americans. According to industry analysts, approximately ninety percent of all equipment and apparatus purchased by the American fire service is manufactured in the United States. The reduction in federal funds coupled with the anemic economy has placed huge strains on the fire service industry, forcing many companies to lay off personnel.

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We applaud the commitment Congress has shown to the SAFER program by providing \$420 million for the program in FY 2010. While pleased with this figure, it is becoming increasingly apparent that the nation's fire service still struggles with significant staffing shortfalls as a result of the dire economic conditions in so many local communities. Fire departments tend to experience increases in call volumes when the economy is not performing well. Additional funding for SAFER will help alleviate staffing shortages, significantly improving the readiness of firefighters across the country to respond to a variety of emergencies.

While we understand the current economic climate necessitates prudent spending on the part of the federal government, we object to the Administration's proposed cuts to the FIRE and SAFER grant programs. The grants are vital to the ability of the fire and emergency services to protect the public and the national infrastructure. We cannot emphasize enough the importance of these critical public safety programs. As you begin consideration of the FY 2011 spending bill, we respectfully request that you maintain the current funding level for the SAFER program at \$420 million. Furthermore, we would encourage you to provide a modest increase of \$30 million to the FIRE Grant Program, which would bring that program to an equal level of funding as SAFER. Adequate federal funding for the FIRE Act and SAFER grant programs is critical to ensuring the fire service can fulfill its mission. Moreover, it would have a direct and immediate impact on spurring local economic activity.

Additional funding for the Urban Search and Rescue Response System is vital to protecting our homeland security. The unfolding tragedy in Haiti and the subsequent deployment of US&R teams to assist with ongoing search and rescue efforts underscores the importance of the Urban Search and Rescue Response system. Unfortunately, the twenty-eight US&R teams currently lack sufficient resources to adequately fulfill their missions.

The nation's US&R teams received \$32.5 million in federal funding in Fiscal Year 2010. Unfortunately, this amount only covers approximately seventy percent of the costs associated with maintaining the twenty-eight teams, leaving local government sponsors responsible for the remaining expenses at a time they can ill afford to do so. U.S. search and rescue capabilities are far too important to risk. We therefore respectfully request that you provide a modest increase of \$17.5 million for US&R, bringing the FY11 appropriation to \$50 million.

In the United States, firefighters respond to over 25 million emergency calls annually. These emergencies involve a variety of situations, including fires, emergency medical calls, search and rescue operations, wildland/urban interface fires, and hazardous materials response. Regardless of the situation, our nation's fire and emergency services are the first on the scene.

Thank you for your consideration of our request and your continued support of our nation's first responders.

Sincerely,

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