

July 9, 2009

The Honorable Bernie Sanders  
Casey  
United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Robert  
United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Sanders:

I am writing to express the full support of the National Volunteer Fire Council (NVFC) for your amendment to increase funding for the Assistance to Firefighters Grant (AFG) program and the Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) grant program by \$50 million each in the FY 2010 Department of Homeland Security Appropriations Act. The NVFC represents the interests of the more than one million volunteer firefighters and EMS personnel in the United States.

AFG helps fire departments and EMS agencies purchase desperately needed equipment, apparatus and training. Nearly 20,000 fire departments applied for more than \$3.1 billion in funding through AFG in FY 2009 – more than five times the \$565 million appropriated for this year. The \$380 million allocation in the Committee-passed version of the FY 2010 DHS Appropriations Act represents a reduction of 33 percent from last year and is \$10 million below the House-passed companion bill.

AFG is a highly successful program that relies on input from the fire service and a direct grant process to ensure that funding quickly reaches the agencies that need it most. An FY 2007 review of AFG by DHS found the program to be 95 percent effective, the second highest rating of any program at DHS.

A needs assessment survey conducted by the Fireman's Fund Insurance Company recently found that 60 percent of respondents report that their fire department has delayed equipment replacement purchases due to the economic downturn. Fifty percent of respondents reported that if economic conditions do not improve within the next 12 months that it could affect their ability to provide service to their communities. Local fire and EMS agencies need AFG funding now more than ever.

SAFER funds assist fire departments to build staffing capacity through hiring of career firefighters and recruitment and retention of volunteers. There is no single

more significant challenge facing the volunteer fire service than recruitment and retention. Since 1987, the percentage of volunteer firefighters under the age of 40 has shrunk from 65 percent to approximately 50 percent today. As this trend suggests, fire departments are increasingly having difficulty recruiting and retaining the next generation of volunteer firefighters. Volunteer fire departments can use recruitment and retention funds for a variety of activities from marketing campaigns to establishing modest incentive programs.

Your amendment would provide critical additional funding to assist first responders and signal to local fire and EMS agencies that they remain an important national priority even in these difficult budgetary times. Thank you again for offering this amendment.

Sincerely,

Heather Schafer  
Executive Director