



Federal Actions Requested to Address the Impact of COVID-19 on the Volunteer Emergency Services

Updated May 5, 2020

Volunteer fire, EMS, and rescue departments face unprecedented challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic and associated social distancing guidelines. This document identifies policies that the federal government should pursue to help support volunteer fire and EMS organizations.

- **Waive all federal cost-share for assistance under the emergency declaration**
- **Make emergency services organizations and personnel the highest priority for testing and PPE**
- **Invoke Defense Production Act to encourage manufacturers to produce more PPE**
- **Increase AFG and SAFER funding to help fire and EMS departments that are struggling financially**
- **Expand access for non-profit emergency services orgs to SBA's economic relief program**
- **Make the Volunteer Responder Incentive Protection Act (VRIPA) permanent**
- **Make AFG and SAFER grant awards as quickly as possible**
- **Make pay for temporary employees eligible for emergency funding to bolster fire and EMS staffing**
- **Include volunteer emergency responders in proposals providing hazard pay to frontline workers**
- **Allow EMS organizations to be reimbursed for services other than transport to a hospital**
- **Job protection for volunteer emergency responders who are deployed or in isolation/quarantine**
- **Establish COVID-19 occupational presumption for Public Safety Officers' Benefits**

Waive all federal cost-share for assistance under the emergency declaration

On April 9 [the NVFC asked President Trump](#) to waive all federal cost-share requirements for assistance under the current emergency declaration and any superseding major disaster declarations in response to the novel coronavirus. Many volunteer emergency services organizations would struggle to pay the required 25 percent local cost share for Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) disaster assistance. Under 44 CFR 206.47(d) FEMA has the ability to increase the federal cost share for emergency response to 100 percent at the direction of the president.

Make emergency services organizations and personnel the highest priority for testing and PPE

Shortages of personal protective equipment (PPE), including respirators, gowns, gloves, and face shields, increase the risk of exposure that fire, EMS, and rescue services personnel face in responding to emergencies. At the same time, a lack of access to testing, and delays in getting the results from tests back, have led to personnel who have the virus but are asymptomatic continuing to respond even as others who are not infected remain in isolation due to an exposure. On March 20 [the NVFC asked President Trump](#) to ensure that emergency services organizations are in the highest priority group for access to testing and PPE.

Invoke Defense Production Act to encourage manufacturers to produce more PPE

On April 29 [the NVFC asked President Trump](#) to use his authority under the Defense Production Act (DPA) to encourage manufacturers to produce more Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) like respirators, gowns,

gloves, and face shields. The President has previously invoked the DPA to increase the supply of ventilators. According to FEMA the supply of PPE in the United States has increased by roughly 50 percent since December of 2019, but unfortunately demand has risen even more steeply leading to shortfalls across the country.

Increase AFG and SAFER funding to help fire and EMS departments that are struggling financially

On April 30 [the NVFC asked congressional appropriators](#) to fully fund the Assistance to Firefighters Grant (AFG) and Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) grant programs at \$750 million each in FY 2021 to help fire and EMS departments that are experiencing fiscal challenges related to COVID-19 and social distancing restrictions. The [NVFC is also asking](#) that local cost share requirements be waived in FY 2020 and FY 2021 for AFG and SAFER.

Expand access for non-profit emergency services orgs to SBA's Economic Injury Disaster Loan program

On April 29 [the NVFC asked the U.S. Small Business Administration \(SBA\)](#) to 1) eliminate restrictions on accessing Economic Injury Disaster Loan (EIDL) for emergency services organizations whose gross revenue from legal gambling (bingo, raffles, etc.) exceeds program limits, 2) create an "emergency services" business activity category in the application, and 3) develop a FAQ document for emergency services organizations, similar to a document that exists for faith-based organizations. Congress has provided funding through the EIDL program to allow small businesses and 501(c)(3) organizations that have suffered economic injury as a result of the pandemic to apply for forgivable loans to help them continue to pay their bills. Many non-profit fire and EMS organizations have struggled to access EIDL assistance due to the limitation on legal gambling as a revenue source and how the application is structured.

Make the Volunteer Responder Incentive Protection Act (VRIPA) permanent

VRIPA, which is currently set to expire at the end of this year, makes nominal incentives that volunteer emergency responders receive as a reward for their service exempt from federal income tax and reporting. The NVFC estimates that more than 400,000 volunteer firefighters in the United States receive some type of taxable incentive. Communities use benefits like per-call payments, monthly or annual stipends, or property tax deductions to demonstrate that volunteers are valued in order to bolster staffing. Many volunteer emergency services organizations will be ramping up recruitment and retention once social distancing restrictions are lifted. Making VRIPA permanent will make it easier for those organizations to establish or expand benefits to entice volunteers.

Make AFG and SAFER grant awards as quickly as possible

Currently, there is approximately \$1.5 billion in grant funding that has been appropriated by Congress for the purpose of making direct grants to fire and EMS departments to help pay for equipment, training, and staffing that has yet to be allocated. Specifically \$700 million in FY 2019 Assistance to Firefighters Grant (AFG) and Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) grant funding, \$710 million in FY 2020 AFG and SAFER grant funding, and \$100 million in emergency supplemental AFG funding (specifically to purchase PPE to protect personnel from coronavirus exposures) has yet to hit the streets. The reason for the backlog is mostly related to past government shutdowns and delays in passing final appropriations bills impeding the ability of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), which administers AFG and SAFER, to conduct peer review and criteria development panels that are required under law. The NVFC is [urging the FEMA to move expeditiously](#) to get this grant money to the fire departments that need it.

Make pay for temporary employees eligible for emergency funding to bolster fire and EMS staffing

Many fire and EMS organizations are in a staffing crunch. Hiring and recruitment of new responders is on hold in most places due to the inability to recruit, educate, and train new staff due to social distancing restrictions. At the same time, attrition rates have increased in many agencies due to health and safety concerns. As the number of available personnel drops, many departments that that rely on all- or mostly-volunteer staffing are

considering temporarily hiring some of their volunteer personnel. On April 29 [the NVFC asked the FEMA Administrator](#) to provide guidance to volunteer fire and EMS organizations about how to take advantage of Public Assistance disaster grant funding to cover costs associated with paying temporary employees hired to deal with staffing shortages caused by the pandemic.

Include volunteer emergency responders in proposals to provide federal hazard pay to frontline workers

Volunteer emergency responders who receive no compensation or nominal compensation under normal circumstances should be included in any federal scheme to compensate essential personnel who are unable to practice social distancing due to the nature of their work. Making volunteer emergency responders eligible to receive “hazard pay” would bolster staffing at fire and EMS agencies that are currently unable, due to social distancing, to recruit and train new volunteers to make up for higher-than-normal rates of attrition.

Allow EMS organizations to be reimbursed for services other than transport to a hospital

A major source of funding for EMS – in some agencies the only source of funding – is reimbursement for transporting patients to a hospital’s emergency department. So far during the pandemic, regular calls for hospital transport are down and public health guidelines discourage people from going to the hospital, including if they are exhibiting signs of having contracted COVID-19, unless it is absolutely necessary. Many EMS organizations are treating patients without transporting them, including administering tests for COVID-19. Provision of non-transport services contribute greatly to public health and reduce burdens on hospitals, but they have also resulted in lower revenues for EMS organizations, even as many are also experiencing financial difficulties due to inability to fundraise and lower local tax revenues. The range of out-of-hospital medical services provided by emergency services organizations that are eligible for reimbursement should be expanded.

Establish job protection for volunteer emergency responders who are deployed or in isolation/quarantine

The NVFC is asking Congress to pass legislation that would establish federal job protection of up to 16 days per year (14 days per deployment and one day on either end for travel) for volunteer emergency responders who are formally deployed to respond to a presidentially declared disaster or national health emergency. The bill language contains a separate prohibition against terminating a volunteer who is ordered or recommended into isolation or quarantine due to infection or exposure to an infectious disease. Volunteers would have to notify employers of any absence and employers would not be required to pay volunteers during any absence.

Establish COVID-19 occupational presumption for Public Safety Officers’ Benefits

The Public Safety Officers’ Benefits (PSOB) program provides death and education benefits to the families of public safety officers who die in the line of duty, and disability benefits to public safety officers who suffer a permanently disabling injury in the line of duty. The NVFC believes that if a public safety officer contracts COVID-19 that, for the purposes of making a determination on a PSOB application, there should be a presumption that the exposure was the result of line of duty activity. [The PSOB office has issued guidance](#) on how it plans to treat applications resulting from public safety officers who contract COVID-19.