

Congressional Fire Services Institute / International Association of Fire Chiefs
International Association of Fire Fighters / National Fire Protection Association
National Volunteer Fire Council

Outside Witness Testimony: Submitted to the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Homeland Security by Michaela Campbell, Director of Government Affairs for the Congressional Fire Services Institute, on behalf of the undersigned organizations
Regarding: Department of Homeland Security, Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) programs – Firefighter assistance grants

April 30, 2020

The Honorable Shelley Moore Capito
Chair, Subcommittee on Homeland Security
Senate Appropriations Committee
S-128, The Capitol
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Jon Tester
Ranking Member, Subcommittee on Homeland Security
Senate Appropriations Committee
125 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Capito and Ranking Member Tester:

On behalf of the nation's fire and emergency services, we write to update our initial request for fiscal year (FY) 2021 programs that affect our nation's readiness and emergency response capabilities: the Assistance to Firefighters (AFG) and the Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) grant programs. Since the submission of our original letter on March 3, 2020, the ever-evolving COVID-19 pandemic has placed enormous fiscal strains on our nation's fire and emergency services.¹ As such, we respectfully ask you to consider the following requests to help ensure that fire and emergency services personnel can do their jobs safely and effectively:

Request at least \$750 million for the AFG program

While protecting their communities from fire and responding to various medical emergencies, our nation's fire and emergency medical services (EMS) personnel are also working tirelessly on the front lines of the U.S.'s COVID-19 pandemic response. Every day, fire and EMS personnel treat, care for, and transport infected individuals both to and between medical facilities. As the first to interact with these patients, fire and EMS personnel put their health and lives on the line every day. In fact, more than 500 have been diagnosed with COVID-19 and fatalities have begun to mount.

To respond safely to the COVID-19 calls, departments must equip their crews with proper personal protective equipment (PPE) such as gloves, gowns, eye protection, masks, and respirators. It is not always clear when a call might bring fire and EMS personnel into contact with COVID-19, so departments must be prepared every time. These increased costs due to COVID-19 come at a time when costs for other firefighting equipment like turnout gear, self-contained breathing apparatus (SCBA), and trucks are also increasing.

In fact, the most recent analysis from industry experts estimates that since 2011, the cost of protective clothing has increased by around 11%. During the same period, the cost of SCBA

¹ On the date of our original submission, there were fewer than 20 deaths and around 50 known COVID-19 cases reported in the U.S. Now, the U.S. has more than 57,000 deaths and more than a million cases. *See* Cases in U.S. (2020, April 24). Retrieved April 29, 2020, from <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/cases-updates/cases-in-us.html>.

increased by about 15% and the cost of pumper trucks—which make up approximately 60% of the apparatus market—increased by more than 14%. Even today, costs are still rising.

To ensure that our nation’s firefighters and emergency services personnel have the equipment and supplies they need to safely respond to calls, we would request at least \$750 million for the AFG program. This level of funding has been authorized by Congress and would help fire departments and EMS agencies to purchase the equipment and provide the training they need to respond to all hazards, including the COVID-19 pandemic.

Request at least \$750 million for the SAFER program

Funding for SAFER will be particularly critical in the FY2021 cycle due to the negative economic impacts we are already experiencing from the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite ever-increasing demands on fire and EMS personnel, local budgets - on which many departments rely for operational funding - are likely to be hard hit, threatening fire departments’ staffing and readiness. The United States Conference of Mayors has warned that due to the pandemic, “many [cities] will be forced to lay off employees and make cuts that will hurt public safety.”² In fact, in a recent report, 52% of cities responding to a survey said budget cuts will impact public safety.³

Furthermore, a recent report from the National League of Cities and the United States Conference of Mayors showed that almost 100% of municipalities with populations greater than 50,000 anticipate revenue shortfalls in the coming year. In addition, 87%⁴ of municipalities with populations less than 50,000 anticipate a revenue shortfall in the next year. This economic downturn is also likely to continue affecting fire departments and EMS agencies for years to come as municipal budgets tend to lag approximately two years behind more general economic recovery.⁵

To ensure proper staffing capabilities for departments across the country, we request at least \$750 million - the authorized level - for the SAFER program.

Request that waivers be provided for the AFG and SAFER programs

The AFG and SAFER programs provide vital funding to help fire departments with training, equipping, and staffing. In order to ensure that these grant programs can function effectively in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, we would ask you to waive certain statutory requirements.

Given the economic challenges being faced by municipalities across the country, we ask that waivers be provided to help departments with the costs of FY2020, FY2021, and any supplemental AFG and SAFER grant opportunities - including waiving cost-share, maintenance of expenditures, supplanting, and budget level requirements, etc. This will help ensure that fire departments can access these much-needed grant funds.

² Durr, S. (2020, April 18). U.S. Mayors to Congress: This Crisis is Urgent, Cities Need Help Now. Retrieved from <https://www.usmayors.org/2020/04/18/u-s-mayors-to-congress-this-crisis-is-urgent-cities-need-help-now/>

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We also ask you to waive statutory requirements for the FY2020 and FY2021 SAFER program - and any supplemental program funding - to allow fire departments to retain and rehire personnel. As mentioned above, many municipalities are being forced to consider layoffs of public safety employees due to the negative economic impacts of the pandemic. In order to safely and effectively protect their communities, fire departments must be able to attain and maintain appropriate staffing levels.

It is critical that these funds get to grant recipients as quickly as possible. Fire and EMS personnel are working on the front lines *now* to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic and ensuring they have the supplies and personnel they need to respond safely and effectively is paramount. As you look at the AFG and SAFER programs, we further urge you to consider ways to help these funds get to the front lines expeditiously.

Conclusion

The AFG and SAFER grant programs are vital to addressing the needs of more than one million fire and emergency services personnel, while providing an economic stimulus to American businesses. These programs provide the means to enhance preparedness and response capabilities nationwide for all types of hazards.

As our nation confronts the current and future effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is imperative that local fire departments and EMS agencies can meet the increasing costs of equipment, training, and personnel. Given the role that fire and EMS personnel are playing across the country, they must have the support they need to do their jobs. Congress can provide this support by funding AFG and SAFER and waiving certain requirements to help maximize the benefit of the programs.

We remain grateful for your continued leadership in ensuring that America's fire and emergency services are prepared to protect the public from all hazards. As you continue developing legislation to fund the AFG and SAFER programs, we urge you to consider our recommendations to ensure that our nation's first responders can continue to protect and serve their communities as efficiently and safely as possible.

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The Honorable Lucille Roybal-Allard
Chair, Subcommittee on Homeland
Security
House Appropriations Committee
2006 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Chuck Fleischmann
Ranking Member, Subcommittee on Homeland
Security
House Appropriations Committee
1016 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairwoman Roybal-Allard and Ranking Member Fleischmann:

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