



April 29, 2020

President Donald Trump  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Ave., N.W.  
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

On behalf of the National Volunteer Fire Council (NVFC), the leading national organization representing the interests of the nation's volunteer fire, EMS, and rescue services, I would like to thank you for your leadership in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic emergency. I am also writing to ask for your assistance in addressing the unprecedented challenges that volunteer emergency services personnel and organizations currently face related to this emergency.

Volunteer fire and EMS organizations in many parts of the country are struggling to access resupply of personal protective equipment (PPE). Last week, 65 percent of respondents to a weekly survey that the NVFC started to better understand the impact that the pandemic is having on our members indicated that they are running low or have completely run out of PPE. Without adequate PPE responders have a heightened risk of exposure, which is leading to some personnel being hesitant or unwilling to continue responding.

I want to thank you for your leadership in overseeing the Defense Logistics Agency awarding a contract to Battelle Critical Care Decontamination Systems for 60 N95 decontamination units for the sanitation and reuse of N95 respirators. This, along with your actions to exercise your authority under the Defense Production Act (DPA) to reduce the time that it takes to ship imported PPE into this country, to eliminate exports of PPE to other countries, and to limit hoarding of PPE supplies, are helping to improve access to PPE throughout the nation.

I understand that there has been a nearly 50 percent increase in the supply of available PPE in the United States since December 2019. This is an impressive achievement, but the fact remains that current demand for PPE continues to exceed supply. To address this problem I ask that you use your authority under the DPA to encourage manufacturers to produce more PPE, similar to how you exercised that power to increase production of ventilators.

Volunteer fire and EMS organizations are struggling financially, and many will soon be unable to sustain themselves without assistance. The challenges that we are hearing about from our members include that they are unable to fundraise because of social distancing, local tax dollars are starting to dry up due to the economy slowing, reimbursements from ambulance transports are down because patients are avoiding hospitals, and operational costs are higher due to increased usage of PPE and having to disinfect vehicles and equipment.

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Fire and EMS organizations are able to be reimbursed for 75 percent of the higher costs associated with responding to the pandemic through the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) Disaster Relief Fund (DRF). Unfortunately, many of our members cannot afford even the 25 percent local match now, and that number is likely to increase over time. I urge you to exercise your authority under the Stafford Act to waive the local cost share requirement. If the cost share is not waived, many volunteer fire and EMS organizations will not be able to afford to access disaster assistance and may instead be forced to curtail or even cease operations altogether. Losing access to emergency services would be challenging in normal times, but the impact will be devastating when that occurs in the middle of a pandemic.

The NVFC has heard from members that they are considering temporarily hiring volunteer personnel to ensure that they have adequate staffing capacity. Because of social distancing, recruitment, training, and education of new volunteer firefighters and EMS personnel is difficult or even impossible in many areas at the moment. At the same time, attrition rates have increased in many departments due to concern about contracting COVID-19. Many departments will struggle to afford to hire temporary personnel due to funding shortfalls at the local level, even though personnel costs associated with the pandemic are reimbursable through the DRF. I urge you to direct FEMA to develop clear guidance for volunteer emergency services organizations that outlines exactly what they need to do to be reimbursed for the full cost of hiring temporary employees to deal with staffing shortfalls caused by the current pandemic.

Finally, we have heard from a number of non-profit fire and EMS organizations that are having difficulty accessing assistance through the U.S. Small Business Administration's (SBA) Economic Injury Disaster Loan (EIDL) program. As you know, EIDL provides aid to small businesses and non-profit organizations that have suffered a financial loss as a result of the pandemic. Non-profit emergency services organizations are heavily dependent on private fundraising to pay for operations as well as vehicle and equipment replacement. Much of this fundraising is done by hosting events, including community meals, carnivals, bingo, raffles, and/or hall rentals. Unfortunately, due to social distancing most of these events have had to be cancelled since mid-March, resulting in significant revenue losses for hundreds if not thousands of emergency services organizations.

One of the main problems our members face in trying to apply for EIDL funding is the requirement for applicants to verify that no more than 33 percent of their organization's gross revenue comes from legal gambling activities. Many non-profit emergency services organizations rely on raffles and/or bingo to raise money. These activities often account a high percentage of gross revenue even though most the funds raised are returned to participants in the form of prizes. I ask you to direct the SBA to exempt emergency services organizations from 13 CFR 123.301(e), which limits eligibility to apply for an economic injury disaster loan to organizations that derive no more than one-third of their gross revenue from legal gambling activities.

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Given the scope of the challenges facing our nation, unprecedented in modern times, it is more important than ever that we work together. The NVFC stands ready and willing to do what we can to support you and the entire federal government as you work to help the nation respond to the pandemic. I am copying and will be following up directly with the FEMA Administrator Gaynor and SBA Administrator Carranza to provide additional details about the challenges that volunteer emergency responders face and talk about ways that we can work together to address them.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Steven W. Hirsch". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'S'.

Steven W. Hirsch, Chair

CC: Ms. Jovita Carranza, SBA

Mr. Peter Gaynor, FEMA

Chief Keith Bryant, USFA

Dr. John Krohmer, NHTSA Office of EMS