



## **Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) Grant Program Appropriations**

**Request: Restore SAFER funding in FY 2027 to \$405 million**

### **What is SAFER?**

SAFER is a competitive grant program that provides funds in the form of direct grants to fire departments to help them reach a baseline level of preparedness. SAFER grant funds can be used to pay for hiring career firefighters or for recruiting and retaining volunteer firefighters.

### **How does SAFER work?**

SAFER allocates funding based on grant criteria that the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) establishes and updates each year after convening a group of stakeholders from national fire service organizations like the NVFC to provide formal input. According to statute, at least 10 percent of SAFER funding must be designated for recruitment and retention of volunteers. FEMA convenes peer review panels comprised of firefighters from across the country who volunteer their time to rank grant applications. This collaborative process ensures that SAFER funds are spent effectively.

### **Why is SAFER important?**

Fire departments are being asked to do more with less. The annual volume of calls for service has increased by 23% from 2010 to 2020 to more than 36.4 million calls a year, while the number of firefighters nationwide has declined. During the same 10-year period, the number of volunteer firefighters has dropped by 12%.

Volunteer fire departments face significant staffing challenges that are closely related to the transformation taking place across rural America. As jobs leave small towns and young people move to the cities and suburbs in search of work, there are fewer people available to volunteer as emergency responders. Since 2000, the proportion of firefighters over the age of 50 serving in communities with populations of 2,500 or fewer residents has surged from 18.9 percent to 34 percent.

Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic, increased hazardous incidents caused by lithium-ion batteries, increasing wildland fires, and other factors have all made being a firefighter more taxing and the need for additional firefighters more pressing. Through SAFER, departments can create marketing plans to recruit new volunteers and establish benefit programs and implement other retention strategies to encourage personnel to remain active participants in the department.

### **Why is restoring SAFER funding critical?**

Since FY 2011, funding for SAFER has been cut by \$63 million, from \$405 million to \$342 million. For the past few years FEMA has only been able to fund less than 15% of funding requests received for these grants. This has reduced the pool of recruitment and retention funding available for fire departments to compete over. Providing \$405 million for SAFER in FY 2027 would allow FEMA to fund more high-quality grant applications from volunteer fire departments.

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