



**State of Emergency:  
The Disaster of Cutting  
Preparedness Grants**

**Statement of**

**Chief Rhoda Mae Kerr  
President and Chair of the Board**

*presented to the*

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INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF FIRE CHIEFS  
4025 FAIR RIDGE DRIVE • FAIRFAX, VA 22033-2868

Good morning, Chairman Donovan, Ranking Member Payne and members of the subcommittee. I am Rhoda Mae Kerr, fire chief of the Austin Fire Department, and president and chair of the Board of Directors of the International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFC). The IAFC represents more than 11,000 leaders of the nation's fire, rescue, and emergency medical services. Thank you for the opportunity to discuss the effects of cutting the preparedness grant programs at the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).

It is important to emphasize to the American taxpayers that the more than \$40 billion spent on FEMA grants have been used to develop a strong national preparedness and response system. From the fire and emergency service's perspective, I would like to highlight a few grant programs with the most relevance. The State Homeland Security Grant Program (SHSGP) and the Urban Areas Security Initiative (UASI) help local fire and EMS departments to prepare for potential acts of terrorism by supporting planning, training, and equipment. The Assistance to Firefighters Grant (AFG) grant program<sup>1</sup> (including the SAFER and Fire Prevention and Safety grants) help fire departments improve their baseline emergency response capability.

The IAFC is greatly concerned by the Administration's FY 2017 budget proposal. It would include draconian cuts to the SHSGP and UASI program. Also, it would attempt to re-classify the AFG programs as homeland security grants. Additionally, the new budget would remove many of the separate accounts funding these programs and combine them under a new "Federal Assistance" account. Considering the growing threat of coordinated, complex attacks sponsored by foreign terrorist groups, we ask Congress to reject the Administration's budget proposal. Now is not the time to break a system that works.

It is important to point out that the majority of the investments in preparedness are still made by local communities. As federal grant funding continues to decline, local emergency response agencies will have to focus on sustaining our existing capabilities and using federal funds wisely by learning from other grantees' past experience.

### **Successes of the Current DHS Grant System**

The current suite of FEMA preparedness grants are critical to building a national preparedness system. The great success of the federal homeland security grant programs is that they provide an incentive for federal, state, tribal, territorial, and local jurisdictions to work together. By planning, training, and conducting exercises together, local fire chiefs, police chiefs, sheriffs, public health officials, emergency managers and state and federal officials are able and ready to work together when an incident happens. This pre-planning and coordination prevents confusion during an incident and directly saves lives.

In Austin, UASI-funded training brought together all of the regional stakeholders, including smaller neighboring jurisdictions, surrounding volunteer fire departments, the U.S. Attorney's office, public health officials, and the city manager for annual exercises

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<sup>1</sup> Popularly known as the "FIRE" grant program.

in response to mock chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear or explosive (CBRNE) events. The UASI funds allowed the Austin region to complete training that it would not otherwise have been able to do, and brought all of the stakeholders together to learn how to work together in a catastrophic situation. In addition, Austin was able to purchase props and develop expertise with the initial federal funding, so that the region could continue to host these annual exercises after the UASI funding expired.

The SHSGP and UASI grants also help local jurisdictions develop capabilities for responding to terrorist attacks. In the National Capital Region (NCR), UASI funds have been used to help the area prepare for a future mass casualty incident. The NCR used its funds to develop eight Medical Ambulance Buses and Mass Casualty units, which can each transport 40 patients and treat up to 100 patients. In addition, learning from the lessons of the response to the 9/11 attack on the Pentagon, the NCR also used UASI funds to develop a patient tracking system. This system allows EMS personnel to use handheld devices to scan a victim's triage tag, enter basic information about the patient's identity and pre-hospital care, and transport the patient to the appropriate area hospital.

In Clark County, Nevada, SHSGP and UASI funds are used to support fusion center activities within the Southern Nevada Counterterrorism Center. These activities include suspicious activity analysis and reporting; evaluation and support of special events; multi-agency intelligence and information-sharing; and the hardware and software to support these programs. The federal funding also supports community outreach and education programs like "See Something, Say Something" campaigns; training and exercises; and the development of public/private partnerships to help protect the region.

These preparedness grants also support regional coordination. Jurisdictions that receive FEMA grants must certify that they are compliant with the National Incident Management System (NIMS). NIMS is based on the fire service's incident command system and allows multiple agencies to communicate and function effectively during an incident response. The need for effective NIMS implementation is vital, especially in the case of a complex, coordinated attack like the one in Paris which took place in multiple locations. As Austin's fire chief, I have found the federal grant funds to be an effective catalyst for helping federal, state and local stakeholders to plan, train and conduct threat-based exercises together. During the first hours of a major incident response, it is important that all responding agencies are familiar with each other *and* basic command and control functions to ensure an effective response and prevent confusion.

I also would like to highlight the important role that the AFG program plays in improving the nation's preparedness. The AFG program uses a merit-based, peer review process to provide matching grants to local fire and EMS departments for equipment and training. The SAFER grant program uses a similar process to provide matching grants for hiring career firefighters and helping to recruit and retain volunteer firefighters. Here are some examples from the National Fire Protection Association's (NFPA) *Third Needs Assessment of the U.S. Fire Service* of how the AFG and SAFER grants are helping local fire and EMS departments:

- 51 percent of all fire departments that answered the NFPA survey do not have enough portable radios to equip all emergency responders on a shift. This percentage is down from 77 percent in 2001 and 75 percent in 2005.
- 48 percent of all fire departments that are responsible for EMS have not formally trained all of their personnel involved in EMS. This percentage is down from 54 percent in 2001 and 53 percent in 2005.
- 51 percent of all fire departments cannot equip all firefighters on a shift with self-contained breathing apparatus. This percentage is down from 70 percent in 2001 and 60 percent in 2005.
- 65 percent of all fire departments that are responsible for hazardous materials response have not formally trained all of their personnel involved in hazmat response. This percentage is down from 73 percent in 2001 and 71 percent in 2005.

As you can see, FEMA’s homeland security grants are meeting their goal in providing training and building capabilities that local fire and EMS departments could not otherwise develop. It is important to recognize that federal homeland security grant funding has decreased over the years. Currently, preparedness grants like the UASI and SHSGP programs are focused on sustaining existing capabilities. Meanwhile, the AFG and SAFER programs have shown remarkable progress in improving baseline emergency response capabilities, but a lot of work remains.

### **The Administration’s FY 2017 Budget Proposal**

The IAFC has serious concerns about the Administration’s FY 2017 budget proposal. It drastically reduced many of these important grant programs: the SHSGP program would be cut by more than half to \$267 million and the UASI program would be cut by 45% to \$330 million. In addition, the AFG and SAFER grant programs would be cut by \$10 million each and be classified as terrorism preparedness grants with a priority given to applications that “enhance capabilities for terrorism response and other major incidents.”

As my testimony demonstrates, the SHSGP and UASI programs are achieving their missions of building terrorism response capabilities that a jurisdiction would not otherwise be able to afford and serving as an incentive to bring together all stakeholders for major training and exercises. Because of the steady decrease in SHSGP and UASI funding over the years, most of these funds are being used to sustain existing capabilities. It is unwise to cut programs that actually are achieving their objectives.

It also is important to recognize that these cuts are proposed in a more dangerous threat environment. Last May, we witnessed an incident at the Curtis Culwell Center in Garland, Texas, involving two individuals inspired by communications with the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). In July, an active shooter attacked a U.S. Naval Reserve Center and a military recruitment center in Chattanooga, Tennessee. In December, a

husband and wife used active shooter tactics with potential pipe bombs in San Bernardino, California. ISIS continues to threaten the U.S. homeland and we have learned that acts of terror can occur anywhere in the nation. Grants like the SHSGP and UASI program help us to analyze threat information and develop capabilities to prepare for these new threats.

We also have concerns about the Administration's attempts to convert the AFG and SAFER grant programs into terrorism response programs. These programs are meant to improve baseline capabilities for all-hazards response. Many fire departments around the nation still have trouble meeting basic response requirements and the AFG and SAFER grant programs have proven successful at helping these departments. Fire departments depend on each other to provide mutual aid in response to incidents as diverse as high-rise fires, wildland fires, and even acts of terrorism. It is important that fire departments around the nation have basic emergency response capabilities, so that they can effectively aid each other during these incidents. The AFG and SAFER grant programs help support a nationwide response system that can escalate and respond to all hazards, not just acts of terrorism.

Also, we oppose the Administration's attempts to set a priority for AFG and SAFER applications focused on terrorism response. As described in statute,<sup>2</sup> the major national fire service organizations meet annually to discuss the criteria for the upcoming year's AFG and SAFER grants. One complaint with the SHSGP and UASI programs is that FEMA changes funding priorities every year without much explanation. Priorities for the AFG and SAFER grant programs should be based on stakeholder-driven criteria and not bureaucratic whims.

The IAFC also opposes the FY 2017 budget proposal's attempts to consolidate a number of programs, including FEMA's preparedness grants, the U.S. Fire Administration, the AFG and SAFER grant programs, the Emergency Management Performance Grants and other programs into one "Federal Assistance" account. Historically, these programs have been funded under separate accounts to ensure that the appropriations were spent in a transparent and accountable manner. Our concern is that this transparency and accountability will be lost if these programs are merged into a single "Federal Assistance" account.

### **Conclusion**

I thank you today for the opportunity to testify about the importance of FEMA's SHSGP, UASI, AFG and SAFER grant programs. This suite of grants plays an important role in building and sustaining the national preparedness system. The changes proposed in the FY 2017 budget proposal would hurt the ability of the nation's local fire and emergency service to protect their communities.

For FY 2017, the IAFC urges Congress to at least continue to fund the SHSGP program at the FY 2016 level of \$467 million and the UASI grant program at the FY 2016 level of

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<sup>2</sup> 15 U.S.C. §2229(1)(2)

\$600 million. For the AFG and SAFER grant programs, we ask you to fund these programs at the FY 2011 level of \$405 million each. This request is based on the steady increase in the cost of equipment. For example, the cost of personal protective equipment has increased by 11.4% since 2011 and the cost of self-contained breathing apparatus has increased by 15%. In addition, the cost of fire apparatus also has increased: the cost of pumper trucks, which represent 60% of the apparatus market, has increased by 14.6% since 2011 based on increased labor and materials' costs. To ensure continued transparency and accountability, we also recommend that Congress continue to fund these programs using the same appropriations account structure that has been used in the past. In addition, we urge Congress to reauthorize the AFG and SAFER grant programs which otherwise will sunset in January 2018.

I am grateful for the committee's leadership in addressing the needs of first responders as we prepare for an evolving terrorist threat. The IAFC looks forward to working with you during the FY 2017 appropriations process to ensure that local fire and EMS departments are ready to protect their communities.