

**U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
COMMITTEE ON SCIENCE, SPACE, AND TECHNOLOGY  
HEARING CHARTER**

*The Role of AFG and SAFER Grants in COVID-19 Response*

Friday, June 12, 2020  
12:30 p.m. EDT – 2:30 p.m. EDT  
Cisco WebEx

**PURPOSE**

The purpose of the hearing is to discuss the impact of COVID-19 on the fire service community, to examine implementation of supplemental funding for the Assistance to Firefighters Grant (AFG) program provided under the *CARES Act*, and to explore the need for additional funding and temporary administrative changes to the AFG and Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) grant program in order to expedite assistance to fire departments for personal protective equipment, staffing, and other needs.

**WITNESSES**

- **Chief Gary Ludwig**, President and Chairman of the Board, International Association of Fire Chiefs
- **Mr. Roy L. “Sandy” McGhee, III**, District 11 Vice President, International Association of Fire Fighters
- **Mr. Steve Hirsch**, Chair, National Volunteer Fire Council

**OVERARCHING QUESTIONS**

- How have the U.S. Fire Administration and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) assisted fire departments in accessing resources to help them respond to the COVID-19 crisis?
- What is the current status of *CARES Act* funding distribution to fire departments? How can Congress help expedite funding to fire departments? What additional resources are needed?
- What are the challenges for firefighters in procuring personal protective equipment? How do these challenges vary across different types of fire departments, including career fire departments more often in urban areas and volunteer fire departments more often in rural areas? What steps are departments taking to manage these challenges?
- How are departments meeting staffing challenges during the crisis?
- What are the longer term challenges and needs for fire departments given the dual health/economic crisis?

## **The Role of Fire Grants in Local, State, and Federal Fire Protection and Emergency Response**

Local, state, and federal governments each have a role in protecting people and property from fire and being first responders in emergencies. In general, fire departments are organized under a local government (municipal or county) and are responsible for carrying out firefighting duties within that jurisdictional boundary. There are 30,000 local fire departments and 1 million firefighters, of whom 70% are volunteers. At the state level, state fire marshals are responsible for fire investigations, fire code enforcement, fire prevention, and collection of fire incident data.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) administers the Assistance to Firefighters Grant Program (AFG) and the Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response Grant Program (SAFER). The U.S. Fire Administration<sup>1</sup>, which operates within FEMA, publicizes federal funding opportunities, including AFG and SAFER, and is the federal agency responsible for providing national leadership and training on prevention, preparedness and response for fire and emergency services. A different agency, the U.S. Forest Service<sup>2</sup> of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, manages wildland fires on National Forests and Grasslands, together with federal, tribal, state, and local partners.

The AFG program was established in 2001 to provide federal assistance directly to local fire fighting and emergency response efforts.<sup>3</sup> Since 2001, \$8.3 billion in federal funding has been competitively awarded to local fire departments to purchase firefighting and emergency response training and equipment.

AFG grants are awarded for three years, and career fire departments, volunteer fire departments, and combination fire departments are each to receive 25% of total grant funding. Another 10% of funding is required to go to open competition among these three types of fire departments. The remaining 15% is carved up among various fire and EMS activities, including 10% for fire prevention programs and to support firefighter health and safety R&D.

AFG grant recipients are required to make a 15% match of the grant with non-Federal funds. This percentage is reduced for entities serving small communities; however, economic hardship waivers are available and relied upon by small fire departments.

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<sup>1</sup> Originally named the National Fire Prevention and Control Administration

<sup>2</sup> Thirteen thousand federal firefighters were available from the U.S. Forest Service and the Department of Interior during the 2013 wildfire season.

<sup>3</sup> AFG and SAFER are codified in sections 33 and 34, respectively, of the *National Fire Prevention and Control Act of 1974*. The *United States Fire Administration, AFG, and SAFER Program Reauthorization Act of 2017* [P.L. 115-98] reauthorized these programs through FY 2023. Each program is authorized to receive \$750 million per year. In FY 2020, AFG and SAFER were each funded at \$355 million.

The amount of the AFG funding awarded to a fire department is based on the population of the jurisdiction that the recipient serves with award amounts ranging from up to \$1 million for departments serving 100,000 or fewer and up to \$9 million for departments serving the largest populations (more than 2.5 million).

FEMA also administers SAFER, which was established in 2004. Over the past 15 years, the SAFER program has competitively awarded over \$4.2 billion to local fire departments for the hiring, recruitment, and retention of firefighters. This funding has helped fire departments bring their organizations in line with national voluntary consensus standards for safe staffing levels.

SAFER awards also provide three years of funding with a matching requirement. The law further specifies that such funds cannot be used to supplant State or local funding and includes a number of specific requirements intended to prevent local jurisdictions from using the Federal funding as a reason to reduce local budgets for fire and emergency response.

Even prior to the COVID-19 crisis, AFG and SAFER became increasingly important to fire departments as many departments saw their local budgets cut at the same time that their mission was expanded to include medical emergency response, requiring additional equipment, training, and staffing. According to the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA), in 2018, fires accounted for only 4% of fire department calls. Sixty-four percent of fire department responses in 2018 were medical aid calls, including ambulance, EMS, and rescue. The National Fire Protection Association (NFPA)'s "Fourth Needs Assessment of the U.S. Fire Service" estimated that 69% of fire departments in the U.S. do not have enough self-contained breathing apparatus to equip all firefighters on shift and 34% of fire departments that provide emergency medical response do not have enough adequately trained personnel to perform those duties.<sup>4</sup> The dual health and economic COVID-19 crisis has magnified these challenges, especially as many firefighters and emergency responders themselves are quarantined due to illness or exposure.

### ***CARES Act and Heroes Act***

The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act ("*CARES Act*") [P.L. 116-136] provided \$100 million in supplemental funding to AFG. Under H.R. 6800, *The Heroes Act*, \$500 million in additional supplemental funding would be provided to the AFG program to make grants for the purchase of personal protective equipment and related supplies, mental health evaluations, training, and temporary infectious disease de-contamination or sanitizing facilities and equipment. *The Heroes Act* also proposes \$500 million in additional supplemental funding for SAFER to address staffing shortages.

In the 2012 reauthorization of the programs, Congress gave FEMA permanent authority to waive some of the grant requirements in cases of economic hardship, including the matching

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.nfpa.org/-/media/Files/News-and-Research/Fire-statistics-and-reports/Emergency-responders/Needs-Assessment/OSFourthNeedsAssessment.aspx>

requirement. *The Heroes Act* proposes temporarily waiving the majority of grant requirements under both AFG and SAFER, including matching requirements, peer review requirements, grant apportionment requirements, and the requirements under SAFER with respect to local funding, for the purposes of expediting distribution of funding to fire departments in need. Past appropriations laws have also waived some of the SAFER grant requirements, including most recently the *Consolidated Appropriation Act for FY2020*. While the AFG and SAFER programs were not designed or intended to provide emergency funding, the fire organizations are advocating for the use of these programs to quickly meet the needs of fire departments during the current crisis.