



Opening Statement of Research and Technology Subcommittee Chairman Mike Collins

Research and Technology Subcommittee Hearing
*Reauthorizing the U.S. Fire Administration and Fire Grant Programs: Evaluating
Effectiveness and Preparedness for Modern Challenges*

May 11, 2023

Good afternoon, and welcome to our witnesses who have joined us here today.

Before I begin my remarks, I want to take a moment to thank our witnesses and those in the room who have served as firefighters or in other first responder roles.

Firefighting is dangerous, and too many firefighters lose their lives each year.

My home state of Georgia lost one of its own in March when firefighter Matthew Brian Smith of the Bartow County Fire and Emergency Service passed away due to complications from a medical incident during a search and rescue training exercise.

This tragedy is a somber reminder of the dangers firefighters face, even when not responding to an active call.

It is my hope that the work we do here in Congress and the things we discuss today will lead to fewer deaths in the future.

We have convened this hearing to discuss the United States Fire Administration, the research it conducts, and the programs it administers.

Originally part of the Department of Commerce, the U.S. Fire Administration was founded through the Federal Fire Prevention and Control Act of 1974.

Now housed within the Federal Emergency Management Agency at the Department of Homeland Security, the Fire Administration plays an essential role in our nation's fire prevention efforts.

For example, the Fire Administration collects, organizes, and publishes statistics on fire incidents nationwide through the National Fire Incident Reporting System at the National Fire Data Center.

The Administration promotes awareness of fire prevention through partnerships and special initiatives.

It maintains and operates the National Emergency Training Center in Maryland, where thousands of firefighters and first responders have trained over the last fifty years.

The Fire Administration also runs two popular grant programs, The Assistance to Firefighters – or AFG – program and the Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response – or SAFER – program.

The Assistance to Firefighters Program supports local emergency responders by providing direct assistance for training, equipment, facilities upgrades, vehicle acquisition, and other critical needs.

The SAFER Program helps fire departments and firefighter support organizations hire and retain capable firefighters.

Together, these programs have led to billions of dollars of investments in local fire readiness by increasing the number of service-ready firefighters and providing equipment to urban, suburban, and rural fire departments across America.

The Fire Administration doesn't just invest in local departments, though. It also funds and conducts critical research on fire prevention.

Improving the fire-safety of the things we use, the buildings we enter, and the vehicles we drive means fewer fire-related deaths and less property damage every year.

This critical function of the Fire Administration means there are fewer fire incidents, and they are more manageable when they do happen.

Minimizing the size and frequency of fire incidents is the most cost-effective way to protect firefighters and reduce the costs of operating fire departments.

Supporting our firefighters and first responders has never been more essential than it is today.

During COVID lockdowns, firefighters and other front-line workers carried the weight of a nation in crisis.

Emergency services never stopped during lockdowns thanks to the brave men and women who showed up every day to put their lives on the line.

Unfortunately, the effects of the pandemic have led thousands of firefighters, both career and volunteer, to exit the service.

This has left many departments understaffed, and new recruits are not signing up fast enough to replace those exiting the service.

The witnesses with us today will be the first to tell you that firefighting is more than a profession – it's a passion that has often passed from parent to child through the generations.

The U.S. Fire Administration has a role in restoring that passion and prestige to the service.

The U.S. Fire Administration is a trusted institution of the fire community, and its leadership will be needed to identify and address modern challenges facing America's firefighters.

However, with more than 29,000 fire departments across the United States, the Federal Government, which is already trillions of dollars in debt, does not have the resources to fund every aspect of fire prevention.

The Fire Administration has, and should continue to, act as a force multiplier for fire departments by providing high quality and accessible training services through the Fire Academy.

The AFG and SAFER programs should be thoroughly examined to identify where these limited Federal resources can have the biggest impact.

And Congress must think critically about how to best support the fire prevention community long into the future.

I look forward to working with my colleagues and the witnesses here today to identify the most pressing issues facing the fire services and supporting the men and women who keep this essential service operating across America.