

**Testimony of Steve Hirsch, Chair of the National Volunteer Fire Council
House Committee on Science, Space, and Technology
Hearing on The Role of AFG and SAFER Grants in COVID-19 Response
June 12, 2020**

Chairwoman Johnson, Ranking Member Lucas, and members of the House Committee on Science, Space, and Technology, my name is Steve Hirsch and I am the Chairman of the National Volunteer Fire Council (NVFC), which represents the interests of the nation's volunteer fire, EMS, and rescue services. On behalf of the NVFC I'd like to thank the Committee for this opportunity to speak to you about the role of the Assistance to Firefighters Grant (AFG) and the Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) grant programs in helping the nation's fire and emergency services deal with the significant challenges that they face related to COVID-19.

Overview of Volunteer Fire Service

According to data from the National Fire Protection Association, there are 745,000 volunteer firefighters in the United States. Approximately 67 percent of the nation's firefighters are volunteers. There are 24,328 fire departments across the nation staffed by all- or mostly-volunteer personnel, representing 82 percent of the nation's fire departments and protecting 32 percent of the nation's population.

Volunteer firefighters serve in urban, suburban, and rural communities, but communities with 10,000 or fewer residents are the most likely to depend on volunteer staffing. 87 percent of volunteer firefighters serve in a community with 10,000 or fewer residents, and volunteers make up 91 percent of firefighters serving in communities of this size.

In my remarks today I will focus on the challenges facing volunteer fire, EMS, and rescue organizations around the country, particularly in the smaller communities where volunteers are most common, and how the AFG and SAFER grant programs can help volunteer-staffed organizations in this difficult time.

COVID-19 Challenges

Volunteer and career fire and EMS department face challenges today that are as significant and widespread as anything I can recall. Respondents to the NVFC's COVID-19 Impact on Volunteer Fire and EMS survey, which we created on March 20 and encourage volunteer fire and EMS personnel to take as frequently as once per week, have reported experiencing a number of significant impacts related to COVID-19, social distancing, and the economic downturn, including:

- 75 percent of respondents report that they haven't been able to train. This is the most commonly-cited challenge reported by survey respondents, although we are hearing anecdotally that this is starting to change as states open back up and as departments find creative ways to train using online platforms.

- Lack of PPE is also a significant challenge. 62 percent of respondents reported that they are running low on personal protective equipment (PPE), while about 20 percent report that they are completely out.
- Staffing shortages are also a problem. 46 percent of respondents reported that staff unwilling or unable to respond was a challenge, while 50 percent reported that inability to recruit new volunteers was an issue. For staff who are unwilling or unable to respond, numerous respondents have submitted comments indicating that volunteers are concerned about exposure for themselves or someone they live with. Inability to recruit and inability to train are overlapping issues, according to survey comments, since both activities generally involve face-to-face interactions that are curtailed due to social distancing guidelines and restrictions on gatherings.
- Lack of funding is another problem for many volunteer fire and EMS departments. 46 percent of respondents reported that inability to fundraise was a challenge for their department. Many volunteer fire departments host community events, including meals, bingo, raffles, and auctions of donated items, to support operations. These events have had to be cancelled or postponed across the country since mid-March. Additionally, many departments report that they are seeing or anticipating significant reductions in local tax support.

The most immediate and pressing problem facing the nation's fire and EMS departments is keeping personnel safe. According to data from the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation, between March 26 and May 21 there were 54 documented fire and EMS COVID-19 related fatalities, including 18 individuals who have so far been identified as volunteers and 21 identified as career personnel. To put that in context, in 2018, the latest year for which complete data is available, there were a total of 82 line of duty firefighter deaths.

Fire and EMS personnel are at a heightened risk of exposure, assisting patients suffering from or showing signs of COVID-19, and responding to calls for service where they may come into contact with people who are infected but don't know it. The personal risk to fire and EMS personnel is made worse by a lack of PPE, including N95 masks, gloves, gowns, and face shields. The private distributors that volunteer fire and EMS agencies typically purchase PPE through have been out of stock for months. Resupply through local public health or emergency management offices has been insufficient to meet demand overall, although experiences differ depending on location and need. For the most part, volunteer fire and EMS organizations have had to make the best of a bad situation, reusing PPE per Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidance and repurposing readily available items to serve as makeshift PPE. This situation is suboptimal, to say the least, and exacerbates the staffing challenges that volunteer fire and EMS agencies are experiencing.

CARES Act

Recognizing the fire service's struggles getting adequate PPE, Congress provided \$100 million in AFG funding as part of the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, "...for the purchase of personal protective equipment and related supplies, including reimbursements." The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) held a meeting to

discuss criteria for the special AFG (AFG-S) funding approximately two weeks after the CARES Act passed. The AFG-S application period opened in late April, closed on May 15, and a virtual peer review panel was conducted the week of May 18. As of this date, FEMA has yet to announce any AFG-S grants, but my understanding is that they anticipate making approximately 1,000 awards.

The CARES Act funding will help address PPE shortages for the hardest-hit fire departments across the country. While fire and EMS agencies can be reimbursed for 75 percent of the cost of purchasing PPE through the FEMA Disaster Relief Fund, many can't afford to make purchases and wait for reimbursement. Because of the high cost of PPE right now, having access to grant money is critical. While many fire departments will be helped by the funding provided in the CARES Act, it should be noted that based on the number of anticipated awards that less than five percent of fire departments nationwide are likely to receive an AFG-S grant.

HEROES Act

The reality is that more funding is desperately needed. On May 15, Congress passed the Health and Economic Recovery Omnibus Emergency Solutions (HEROES) Act, which provides an additional \$500 million through AFG, "...for the purchase of personal protective equipment and related supplies, mental health evaluations, training, and temporary infectious disease decontamination or sanitizing facilities and equipment." The HEROES Act also provides \$500 million in SAFER funding to help fire departments hire, recruit, and retain volunteer and career firefighters.

The HEROES Act waives various statutory requirements associated with both the AFG and SAFER grant programs. The NVFC supports waiving local matching and maintenance of expenditure requirements for the AFG and SAFER grant programs. Without these waivers many of the fire departments that desperately need assistance would not be able to afford to accept a grant award.

The NVFC opposes language in Section 10402(a) of the HEROES Act that waives statutory protections ensuring that volunteer and smaller fire departments receive an equitable share of \$500 million in Assistance to Firefighters Grant (AFG) funding appropriated in the bill. I am concerned, specifically, that Section 10402(a) allows for unlimited award amounts, eliminates the statutory requirement that FEMA conduct peer review and rely on input from peer reviewers in making award decisions, and eliminates the requirement that at least 25 percent of appropriated funds be awarded to volunteer fire departments. Waiving these protections would result in the transfer of tens of millions of dollars in grant funding from volunteer fire departments to fire departments with paid staff that already receive the lion's share of assistance through the AFG and SAFER grant programs.

I am particularly concerned about the HEROES Act waiving 15 U.S.C. 2229(h)(2), the requirement that volunteer fire departments receive at least 25 percent of appropriated AFG funding. The AFG criteria prioritizes applications from fire and EMS departments that protect larger populations and have a higher call volume. This disadvantages volunteer fire

departments, which tend to protect smaller communities with lower population densities. However, by dictating that volunteer, combination, and career fire departments each receive 25 percent of funds appropriated to AFG, the law ensures that volunteer fire departments are mostly competing for funding against other volunteer fire departments. That limits the impact of the disparity created by prioritizing population protected and call volume.

My understanding is that the Section 10402(a) waivers in the HEROES Act were requested by FEMA to give them more flexibility to make awards where they are most needed. The problem with that rationale is that AFG is a competitive grant program. Waiving the 25 percent set aside for volunteer fire departments would force small, rural departments to compete directly with large, urban departments under grant criteria that provides a significant advantage to the latter. Without peer review, FEMA would be forced to rely solely on computer scoring to allocate funding. Changing these rules without changing the competitive aspect of the programs does not provide increased flexibility, it simply changes the formula that FEMA would use to allocate funding.

AFG and SAFER Funding Backlog

One of the major challenges that FEMA faced in administering the AFG-S funding was the fact that they are still in the midst of the FY 2019 grant cycle for regular AFG, SAFER, and the Fire Prevention and Safety (FP&S) program. Between the regular FY 2019 and FY 2020, and the AFG-S money appropriated through the CARES Act, FEMA has approximately \$1.5 billion in unobligated funds waiting to be turned into grants for fire departments.

The good news is that several of the issues that led to the backlog in making grant awards appear to have been fixed fairly recently. One of the main reasons that the grants have fallen so far behind is because FEMA historically held in-person peer review panels, which on several occasions had to be cancelled or postponed due to government shutdowns and/or Congress delaying passing a final year-long appropriation until months into a fiscal year. Three days after the CARES Act was signed into law, FEMA had planned to hold the in-person peer review panel for the regular FY 2019 AFG applications. That panel was cancelled due to COVID-19, but rather than waiting to schedule another in-person panel FEMA was able to conduct FY 2019 AFG peer review remotely over the month of April. The AFG-S peer review was conducted remotely the week of May 18, followed by FY 2019 SAFER remote peer review the week of June 1, and FY 2019 FP&S remote peer review this week.

FEMA also now has the ability to run application periods for multiple grant programs concurrently, which it put to use last month as the AFG-S, FY 2019 SAFER, and FY 2019 FP&S application periods overlapped. In general, running concurrent application periods is suboptimal for applicants who are interested in applying for multiple grants and may only have one person in the department responsible for developing applications. With that said, under the circumstances I believe that FEMA's decision to have these application periods overlap was appropriate.

Now that FEMA is able to hold peer review panels remotely and can have application periods overlap if necessary, it should be possible to “catch up” and get back to a more normal grants schedule. This process will not happen overnight, however. Historically the AFG, SAFER, and FP&S application periods have been open for approximately one month each, which gives departments time to collect required data, develop narratives, and put together a competitive application that has a decent chance of being funded. While it is tempting to say that FEMA should speed things up to get the money out the door faster, moving too quickly will result in fewer quality applications being submitted, particularly from smaller fire departments that often struggle to navigate the System for Award Management, or SAM.gov, the federal grants management website.

More Assistance is Needed

AFG and SAFER are an effective way to help fire departments meet immediate PPE and staffing shortfalls, but the \$100 million in the CARES Act and even the \$1 billion in the HEROES Act is not enough to make fire departments whole. Fire and EMS departments across the nation are suffering from a huge revenue shortfall, a combination of increased costs from responding to COVID-19, reduced financial support from local governments, and an inability to fundraise. Many fire departments have also seen revenue from providing ambulance transport services decline, as non-COVID-19 patients are diverted from hospitals.

I think it is important to consider this broader context as we evaluate how effective the AFG and SAFER programs can be in helping fire departments. The emergency grant funding in CARES, and proposed in HEROES, will be extraordinarily helpful in meeting short-term needs. Fully funding and waiving local cost share and maintenance of expenditure requirements for the AFG and SAFER grant programs in FY 2021 would help departments start to recover, replacing lost staff and addressing equipment- and vehicle-replacement needs that there is no local funding available to meet. Ultimately, more assistance to state and local governments will be needed to ensure continuity of operations for a wide range of services, including fire, EMS, and rescue.

I’d like to thank the committee again for the opportunity to testify before you today and I look forward to answering any questions that you might have.