



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

Statement of

**Fire Lieutenant David Bullard
Georgia Director, National Volunteer Fire Council**

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Good morning, Chair Collins, Ranking Member Stevens, and distinguished members of the subcommittee. My name is David Bullard and I have been a firefighter for 25 years. I am currently a Lieutenant with Georgia's Columbia County Fire Rescue and the Georgia Director for the National Volunteer Fire Council (NVFC). On the behalf of the NVFC I'd like to thank the Subcommittee for holding this important hearing and allowing me to have the opportunity to speak today about the need to reauthorize the Assistance to Firefighters Grant (AFG) program, the Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) grant program, and the United States Fire Administration (USFA).

The National Volunteer Fire Council (NVFC) serves as the national voice for over 670,000 volunteer firefighters comprising 65% of the nation's fire service. Since 1976, the NVFC has been the leading nonprofit membership association representing the interests of the volunteer fire, EMS, and rescue services. The NVFC provides critical resources, programs, education, and advocacy to support the interests of volunteer first responders across the nation.

Need for These Grant Programs

The Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) Assistance to Firefighters Grant (AFG) program and Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) grants are by far the most significant sources of assistance that the federal government provides to local fire departments. The goal of the AFG and SAFER programs is to bring all fire departments in the United States up to a baseline level of readiness. This is particularly important for all- and mostly-volunteer fire departments, which protect 82 percent of the nation's communities and 30 percent of the population.

Fire departments are being asked to do more with less. The volume of calls for service has increased by 23% from 2010 to 2020 to more than 36.4 million calls, while the number of firefighters nationwide has declined. During the same 10-year period, the number of volunteer firefighters has dropped by 12%. Meanwhile, in the last five years the average cost of turnout gear has increased by approximately 35-40%, while the cost of fire self-contained breathing apparatus (SCBA) has increased by 32%. I recently completed an order for turnout gear for my department and the price was 25% more than last year's order.

Rural areas like mine are almost exclusively protected by volunteers. According to the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA), 98% of departments serving populations of less than 2,500 are either all volunteer or mostly volunteer and 96% percent of departments serving populations between 2,500 and 4,999 are either all or mostly volunteer.

National needs assessment studies of the nation's fire service consistently show that volunteer agencies have difficulty affording up-to-date equipment, training, and apparatus. This is primarily for economic reasons. Because fire protection services are funded at the local level, the resources available to each department are dependent on the local tax base. For smaller communities that can mean having to engage in private fundraising and relying on older and sometimes unreliable equipment and vehicles in order to maintain operations. Additionally, during the COVID-19 pandemic smaller departments really suffered due to the inability to hold their fundraising efforts like pancake breakfasts, chicken dinners, and bingo nights.

Some of the specific challenges revealed in the most recent NFPA Needs Assessment of the U.S. Fire Service include major issues providing firefighters with personal protective clothing (PPC) and personal protective equipment (PPE). In fact, more than half of all fire departments cannot equip all personnel with SCBAs. Departments protecting less than 10,000 people have the highest rates of unmet need for SCBA equipment. Among the smallest departments, 75% have at least some PPC that is 10 years of age or older, which does not meet national safety standards for PPC. Additionally, 57% of all fire departments cannot equip all their responders with wildland fire PPC.

AFG

AFG grants help meet the emergency response needs of fire departments and non-affiliated emergency medical service (EMS) organizations across the country. AFG funds are used to obtain critically needed equipment, protective gear, emergency vehicles, training, and other resources necessary for protecting the public and emergency personnel from fire and related hazards. As the Georgia Director for the NVFC, I travel the nation and frequently evaluate the needs of the volunteer fire service with my fellow directors.

I see volunteer fire departments that struggle to get enough firefighters to man the trucks. I see volunteer departments that have to beg for money to sustain the services they provide to their community. I see volunteers step up to the plate and pay for a lot of this out of their own pockets. There are still fire departments that have dirt floors. There are still fire departments that are using turnout gear that is worn out. There are still fire departments that have to work on trucks just to get them out the door or work on them when they return. I have also participated in reviewing applications for NVFC's annual protective clothing giveaway programs and have seen many departments that do not have the budget to replace their gear and comply with the 10-year replacement recommendation.

In addition to working in Columbia County, I am a training officer for Taliaferro County within Chairman Collin's district. Taliaferro is the poorest county in Georgia and the least populated. I regularly conduct training in the 10th district for departments in our Georgia Pipeline Emergency Response and Georgia Fire Academy Volunteer Initiative Training. Many of the departments I work with in this role lack the ability to outfit personnel with up-to-date protective clothing, pay for fuel, and repair trucks. With the substantial increases in the cost of turnout gear, SCBAs, and other equipment, I see these departments' budgets becoming increasingly squeezed. These departments use fundraisers to supplement budgets in an attempt to alleviate this squeeze, but they often provide little relief.

In a recent national news interview, the NVFC's Chair Steven Hirsch emphasized that many volunteer departments rely on budgets of \$5,000 to \$10,000, which make it nearly impossible to purchase \$3,000 sets of turnout gear. It is the AFG program that gives such departments a fighting chance at equipping their firefighters. Due to the significant resource challenges that fire departments protecting smaller communities face, the AFG program has been a lifeline for thousands of volunteer and small combination agencies across the country. From FY 2015-2020, volunteer fire departments received an average of 879 grants worth a total of \$99 million each year to help them purchase critically needed equipment, training, and vehicles. This funding helped to maintain and improve response capabilities in every state across the nation.

Fire departments use AFG grants for turnout gear to keep firefighters safe, replace equipment and vehicles that are decades old, and purchase necessities like compressors to refill our air tanks and heavy-duty washing machines to keep our gear clean and try and prevent cancer in firefighters. One particular AFG grant success I am aware of is a grant awarded to the Oconee County Fire Department in Georgia. This department protects the largest population of any all-volunteer department in Georgia, and they received \$300,000 to replace 54 outdated SCBA and purchase 9 thermal imagers for each of their stations. Thermal imagers are key to improving firefighters' field of vision especially in heavy smoke.

Another AFG success story is a grant awarded to a volunteer fire department in Lamar County Mississippi. Lamar County is a rural county containing 12 fire departments covering an area of nearly 500 square miles. A \$120,000 AFG grant provided Lamar County the ability to purchase 13 sets of turnout gear, 8 SCBAs, training, and physical exams.

Shortly after this grant was awarded a severe residential trailer fire occurred in Lamar County. George Stevens, the NVFC Mississippi Director and Lamar County Fire Coordinator, said this fire was seconds away from becoming fatal because there was a couple trapped inside. The AFG grant came just in time and the gear purchased with this grant was key to that couple being rescued. Stevens also said that without this AFG grant Lamar County wouldn't have been able to purchase new turnout gear and that their old gear was ill-fitting and ragged because it has seen a lot of action.

Earlier in my career as a volunteer firefighter with Grovetown Fire Rescue, I assisted in writing five successful AFG Grants including two grants for firefighting PPE for approximately \$30,000 each, two grants for SCBAs that were \$31,000 and \$26,000 respectively, and a \$38,000 grant for extrication equipment. When my department received these grants our budget was partially funded by subscription funding, and without these grants we would not have been able to afford to bring our protective gear and SCBA up to current standards. The equipment my department purchased with these grants was crucial to outfitting firefighters with needed protective clothing to keep them safe and to purchasing more effective extrication equipment for removing patients from vehicle crashes.

A major challenge for volunteer fire departments related to the AFG program is access to funding. 879 grants per year represents approximately one award for every 21 volunteer fire departments in the United States. From FY 2015-2020, 13 percent of the funds requested by volunteer fire departments through AFG were awarded. In FY 2022 approximately \$2.4 billion was requested through AFG applications with only \$324 million in available funding. As Congress has reduced funding for AFG – from \$565 million in FY 2009 to \$360 million in FY 2023 – competition for funding has increased substantially. This competition combined with inflation being at a 40-year high and the cost of fire equipment outpacing this rate put tremendous additional pressure on fire departments.

Smaller volunteer fire departments are particularly vulnerable to these pressures because they often struggle with the grant-writing process. This is because volunteer fire chiefs are just that –

volunteers. They have other full-time careers and families they have to juggle. They put those other priorities on hold while they protect and serve their communities.

Fire Prevention and Safety (FP&S) grants funded through AFG also help to mitigate community risk and support resilience, ensuring the protection of both lives and property. In Sheridan County, Kansas, a FP&S grant was able to put a smoke alarm in every home. One would think that a smoke alarm would be affordable for most people, but many folks struggle with monthly bills and having smoke alarms versus feeding their family limits their choices. Providing these smoke alarms is something that Sheridan County could never have done with local resources; this grant is keeping families alive by having early detection and warning systems in place.

SAFER

The Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) grant program helps to increase or maintain the number of trained firefighters in the United States. While SAFER funds are primarily used to pay salary and benefits for career firefighters, 10 percent of the funding is set aside to recruit and retain volunteers. 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. Similar to AFG, the demand for SAFER funding is strong. In FY 2022 approximately \$2.8 billion in SAFER funding applications were received for only \$360 million in available funding.

I could spend all day talking about the significant staffing challenges facing volunteer fire departments. Some of the largest factors impacting recruitment and retention (R&R) of firefighters are the transformation taking place across rural America, along with increased mental and physical fatigue. 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.

As call volumes have risen and the amount of training required to serve as a firefighter has increased, it is more difficult to convince people to become volunteers. 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.

Since 2000, the percentage 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. In some areas around the country there are communities where the entire volunteer fire department is over 50 years old. Now there's nothing wrong with older firefighters – they pass along a world of experience to the next generation – but you don't want to have an entire fire department that doesn't have any young, energetic, vigorous firefighters in their ranks. To do so puts the entire community's population at risk and begs the question what will happen when these older firefighters retire from the fire service. The SAFER program gives fire departments the tools that they need to recruit and retain the next generation of volunteers.

Through my work as the NVFC's Georgia Director I am aware of a number of SAFER grant program success stories throughout the state, including Crawford and Glynn counties. SAFER is also needed to enable departments in many high growth areas to adequately provide for the

emergency needs of significantly growing populations. Many areas throughout Georgia are experiencing significant population growth and public services in these areas are struggling to keep pace. These areas include Statesboro and Bulloch Counties, which recently received SAFER grants to recruit more firefighters to meet these needs.

Outside of Georgia, one of the poorest counties in the nation Sumter County, Alabama. Sumter County received a SAFER grant that allowed departments within the county to offer some significant incentives to volunteers encouraging them to sign up and stay involved. These incentives included cancer insurance, payment for participation fees in Alabama's state fire service annuity, physicals, and college scholarships. This grant resulted in 19 new firefighters in Sumter County.

Another success story involving a SAFER grant is Stayton Fire Department in Oregon. This fire department used two SAFER grants over a seven-year period to recruit 80 new firefighters. Stayton's marketing efforts also directly led to the recruitment of 29 firefighters spread across 15 different neighboring fire departments. The volunteer coordinator that Stayton hired with their initial grant went on to help found the Oregon Firefighter Recruitment Network, which now helps fire departments across the state implement R&R best practices.

One of the ancillary benefits of establishing an R&R program is that it not only helps departments increase the number of firefighters that they have, but also increases the level of activity of their existing firefighters. This is a trend that the NVFC has heard from a number of our members that have received SAFER grants. Recruiting new, active volunteers and establishing a formal R&R program reinvigorates the interest of existing volunteers who have become less active with the department. Meanwhile, volunteers who were ready to retire but had continued serving because there was no one to replace them were able to transition out of active duty without damaging the department's response capabilities.

State and national organizations are also able to use SAFER funds to create programs that help local fire departments recruit and retain firefighters. State and national programs are critical because they reach a much larger group of fire departments, including agencies that desperately need assistance but may not have the time, resources, or wherewithal to successfully implement R&R strategies.

The Nevada Fire Chiefs Association (NFCA) received SAFER R&R grants in 2007 and 2011 and used the funding to recruit nearly 1,000 new volunteers spread across 82 different fire departments in the state. NFCA, in partnership with the Nevada State Firefighters Association, developed marketing materials and established a website for referring prospective volunteers to local fire departments. These tools remained in use long after this grant expired in 2015.

NFCA also used grant funds to pay for entry physicals for the new recruits. The State of Nevada requires all firefighters to have an entry physical, which can be prohibitively expensive for many smaller agencies that lack resources. The NFCA grant allowed agencies to not only add new, healthy staff but at no additional cost to the local taxpayers.

The Minnesota State Fire Department Association (MSFDA) received a SAFER grant that allowed them to take a modern approach to marketing to newer generations and retaining their

current members. It also allowed them to access web data on how many individuals may be interested in joining the fire service. The grant also gave fire departments an incentive to recruit new members by providing them funding for personal protective equipment and health screenings. This reduced the financial burden of the hiring costs per firefighter, which are \$3000 to \$4000 in PPE alone. Over this grant's four-year cycle, it will provide funding for 600 sets of gear; statewide marketing for firefighter recruitment via ads on social media, websites, radio, and television; and full-time staff to manage recruitment outreach and communications.

The NVFC received SAFER grants in FY 2014, FY 2017 and FY 2021 to establish and build upon our national Make Me A Firefighter (MMAF) campaign to help local fire and EMS agencies recruit volunteer personnel. These grants also funded national level R&R conferences to train small, rural departments on best practices for volunteer R&R, and other outreach efforts.

The MMAF campaign is a web-based tool that provides departments with information about how to establish a recruitment program, gives them pre-packaged and customizable marketing materials, messaging and outreach strategies, and offers them free access to post volunteer position listings on our online portal. National outreach is also conducted to raise awareness and interest among the public in volunteering in the fire service. To date there are more than 16,250 users signed up with the campaign, representing more than 9,000 fire departments. More than 5,350 volunteer opportunities are listed and nearly 34,000 applications have been submitted through the portal. MMAF has also allowed departments to target their entire communities, including currently underrepresented audiences, which has yielded new recruits from more diverse backgrounds.

U.S. Fire Administration

The U.S. Fire Administration (USFA) is the primary representative of fire and EMS agencies in the federal government and ensures that the fire service is prepared to respond to all hazards. The USFA also leads the federal government's work on fire data collection, public safety education, fire research, and fire service training. The long-term health of USFA and its National Fire Academy are critical to the fire service, particularly volunteers.

Each year, the USFA provides training to approximately 100,000 fire and emergency service personnel through the National Fire Academy (NFA). Access to training is a significant challenge for many volunteer fire departments. Trainers are in short supply in rural areas, and smaller fire departments often are not able to do a lot of specialized training in-house. USFA makes their training accessible by delivering training directly to individuals on campus and remotely through online course offerings.

USFA also hands courses off to state fire training academies, many of which are able to deliver services in rural areas. I am a staunch advocate for attending National Fire Academy classes. In Georgia, the number of in-state delivery courses of National Fire Academy classes is remarkable and meets a critical need. In addition to this, the availability of online training courses provides great training and development opportunities.

Additionally, USFA collects important data and conducts research to reduce the threat of fire and other dangers in local communities. The outreach and educational materials USFA produces help ensure the safety of first responders and community members. To continue in its important work, the USFA requires an increase to its authorization level to support reforms such as upgrading the

National Fire Incident Reporting System (NFIRS), implementing the P.L.117-246 by investigating major fires to identify lessons learned, and updating the NFA's curricula to prepare for new and emerging threats. These reforms will more than pay for themselves with the efficiencies they will yield.

Conclusion

The time donated by volunteer firefighters saves localities across the country \$46.9 billion annually. The volunteer fire service depends on the AFG, FP&S, and SAFER grant programs, as well as the U.S. Fire Administration, as a lifeline that gives us access to training, education, equipment, vehicles, and staffing that we desperately need but simply do not have the ability to afford using local resources alone. As seen in the information I have provided, the demand for these programs is strong and their return on investment is significant.

On behalf of the NVFC, I request that the House of Representative pass an AFG, SAFER, and USFA reauthorization bill like the one that passed in the Senate by a vote of 95 to 2 last month, before these programs' authorization lapses at the end of the fiscal year. At a time of historic inflation, that more significantly impacts essential firefighter equipment, it is crucial that AFG and SAFER's current authorization language remains the same and their current authorization level and annual adjustment for CPI are retained. Additionally, we request that the AFG, SAFER, and USFA reauthorization bill increase USFA's authorization from approximately \$76 million to \$95 million, to enable needed data collection, curricula updates, and facilitate the investigation of major fires.

Passage of these critical reauthorizations is the top legislative priority for the NVFC. Thank you again for holding this important hearing and for the opportunity to be a witness today. The NVFC looks forward to working with the Subcommittee on advancing this important legislation.