



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

Statement of

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Good afternoon, Chairman Collins, Ranking Member Stevens, and members of the subcommittee. I am Chief Donna Black, fire chief of the Duck Fire Department in Duck, North Carolina, and president and board chair of the International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFC). The IAFC represents more than 11,000 leaders of the nation's fire, rescue, and emergency services. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today about the effectiveness of the Assistance to Firefighters Grant (AFG) program; the Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) grant program; and the U.S. Fire Administration (USFA). These programs serve as critical resources for the nation's fire departments as they face an increasing and varied number of threats.

Today's local fire department is an all-hazard response force that must provide fire suppression; wildland fire response; emergency medical response; hazmat response; multi-casualty/civil unrest/terrorism response; urban search and rescue; train derailment response; and technical, high-angle, swift-water, building-collapse, confined-space, and deep-trench rescue. During the COVID-19 pandemic, fire departments were on the front lines – treating patients; administering tests to the public; and managing and staffing vaccine clinics. As of March 28, 2023, the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation has identified 302 fire and 87 EMS personnel that died from the virus.

The AFG and SAFER Grant Programs

The AFG and SAFER programs provide significant assistance to local fire departments through matching grants as they face these myriad challenges. Created by Congress in 2000, the AFG program provides direct support to local fire departments to improve training and equipment capabilities. The Fire Prevention and Safety (FP&S) grants, funded by 10% of the funds appropriated to the AFG program, are used to promote local fire prevention activities and conduct research to reduce firefighter and civilian deaths and property loss due to fires. The SAFER grant program was created by Congress in 2003 to provide matching grants to help local fire departments hire career firefighters. At least 10% of appropriated funds for the SAFER grant program are used to fund recruitment and retention programs for volunteer fire departments.

These programs are administered by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). They use a merit-based, peer-review process to evaluate applications and make awards to grantees. While there is an economic hardship waiver, most fire departments must meet a scalable matching requirement of 5% to 15% for the AFG grant based on the size of the population served by the fire department. For the SAFER hiring grants, a local fire department must provide a 25% local match in the first two years and a 65% match in the third year of the period of performance.¹ The FP&S grants require a 5% match. In accordance with statutory requirements, the national fire service organizations meet annually with FEMA staff to set the criteria for awarding these grants to ensure that these programs continue to meet the current needs of local fire departments.

The programs are designed to help the nation's fire and emergency service meet emerging challenges. For example, as the threat of wildland fires becomes more prevalent, the IAFC received FP&S grants to help communities address wildland fire risk. Under the FP&S grant, the IAFC will help communities in high-risk wildland areas by providing wildfire subject matter experts to assess needs and develop, evaluate, and update Community Wildfire Protection Plans. The grant also will help local fire departments host events to engage communities in fuels reduction efforts and educate individual homeowners about how to create defensible space. In addition, the IAFC will be able to translate its Ready, Set, Go! Program resources into other languages to reach at-risk populations. Finally, the grant funds a Fire Department Exchange, which allows fire departments from across the nation to share their wildfire challenges and collaborate to

¹ Congress has authorized FEMA to waive matching requirements and other requirements of the AFG and SAFER programs in past annual appropriations bills.

mitigate them. These programs have helped more than 250 at-risk communities with their wildfire risk-reduction efforts.

After the COVID-19 pandemic, fire and EMS departments are facing challenges in recruiting new candidates. This challenge is especially fierce for the volunteer fire service, where training requirements and overnight and weekend hours are competing with greater family and paid full-time work requirements.

To address this concern, the IAFC received a SAFER grant to fund a national recruitment and retention initiative. The program trained over 600 members of the volunteer and combination fire service to effectively recruit and retain volunteers and build effective teams in a combination fire department. The program also created a Guide for Creating a Diverse and Inclusive Department and free online training courses that have been taken by more than 1,000 members of the nation's fire service. The IAFC will be launching a mobile app to help fire departments develop volunteer recruitment plans and a mentoring certification class. The IAFC also used the SAFER grant to award \$100,000 to volunteer and combination fire departments to develop fire camps to recruit women and members of other underrepresented communities.

Fire chiefs' organizations in Indiana, Tennessee, and North Carolina chose the IAFC as a partner for their SAFER-funded recruitment and retention campaigns. These programs developed research-based strategies for enhancing their volunteer recruitment efforts. The effort in Indiana held more than 2,500 recruitment and retention events and distributed more than 28,000 campaign marketing materials. The effort resulted in 1,059 applications for 11 participating departments and resulted in 514 new members. The effort in Tennessee held more than 16,000 recruitment and retention events resulting in 240 applications and 194 more volunteer firefighters. The North Carolina effort is getting underway.

The U.S. Fire Administration

The U.S. Fire Administration (USFA) serves as the main federal focal point for policy and training. The USFA and its educational arm, the National Fire Academy (NFA), was created in 1974 in response to the landmark report, *America Burning: The Report of the National Commission on Fire Prevention and Control*. The mission of the USFA is to reduce life and economic losses due to fire and related emergencies through leadership, advocacy, coordination, and support. The USFA also provides important policies and guidance documents to local fire departments on emerging issues relating to active shooter response, EMS system management, and fire safety and prevention policies. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the USFA provided valuable information about federal reimbursement for COVID-19 response activities and advocated for policies to protect fire and EMS personnel in the field.

The NFA is the nation's premier fire service training institution and trains the future leaders of America's fire and emergency service. Its campus in Emmitsburg, Maryland, hosts approximately 15,000 students per year. Including its online courses and training network through the state fire academies, the NFA provides training to more than 100,000 students each year in fields such as executive development; hazardous materials response; community risk reduction; EMS; and emerging topics. I am a graduate of the NFA's Executive Fire Officer (EFO) program, which is designed to help fire service leaders learn to develop thoughtful, bold, and innovative solutions to create healthy, prepared, safe, and resilient communities.

The USFA is engaged in new initiatives that require Congressional support through this year's reauthorization. Last year, Congress passed the *Empowering the U.S. Fire Administration Act* (P.L. 117-246), which allows the USFA to examine major fire incidents, report on the cause of fires, and make

recommendations to prevent future such fires. An increase to USFA's authorization and funding will allow the agency to begin to dispatch teams to review future fires.

Under the U.S. Fire Administrator, Dr. Lori Moore-Merrell, the agency also is engaged in a replacement of the National Fire Incident Reporting System. The current system hosts data about fires and other incidents in the United States. Unfortunately, the system is more than 20 years old and lacks many of the data requirements of the modern fire service. For example, fire departments cannot obtain even their own real-time data from the system, and the data historically has been up to 18 months old. Dr. Moore-Merrell is designing a new National Emergency Response Information System (NERIS), which is aimed at providing real-time data and a nationwide analysis of the national fire problem. This information will help set priorities in addressing major problem areas and make progress in reducing fire loss. The IAFC also asks the committee to increase USFA's authorization to account for the costs of developing the NERIS system and making it operational.

The Need to Reauthorize the AFG and SAFER Grant Programs and the USFA

Coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic, America's fire and emergency service still faces many challenges. According to the National Fire Protection Association's (NFPA) report of *Fire Loss in the United States During 2021*, America's fire and emergency service responded to an estimated 1.3 million fires, which resulted in an estimated 3,800 civilian fire deaths; 14,700 civilian injuries; and \$15.9 billion in direct property damage.² While property loss continues to decrease, the civilian death trend is increasing. Between 2020 and 2021, the civilian deaths rose by 8.5%.³ In fact, for home fires, the 2021 rate of 7.9 deaths per 1,000 reported home fires was higher than 1980's rate of 7.1.⁴ The rate for one- or two-family homes was 35% higher than in 1980, even though the rate for apartment fires was 31% lower.⁵

Meanwhile, fire departments continue to face shortages of basic requirements to serve the public. The nation's wildland fire problem is growing, and 87% of fire departments are responsible for wildland firefighting or firefighting in the wildland-urban interface (WUI).⁶ However, many of these departments have personnel, who are not formally trained for wildland/WUI operations. In fact, 41% of fire departments do not have access to wildland fire training.⁷ Furthermore, 57% of all fire departments cannot equip their firefighters with the personal protective equipment required for wildland/WUI firefighting.⁸

Fire departments continue to face basic shortages in equipment. According to the NFPA, 53% of all fire departments could not equip all of their firefighters with self-contained breathing apparatus (SCBA).⁹ In

² P. 2, Shelby Hall and Ben Evarts, *Fire Loss in the United States During 2021*, National Fire Protection Association, September 2022.

³ Ibid.

⁴ P. 1, Shelby Hall and Ben Evarts, *Fire Loss in the United States During 2021*, National Fire Protection Association, September 2022.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ P. EX-9, *Needs Assessment of the United States Fire Service*, National Fire Protection Association, December 2021.

⁷ P. EX-11, *Needs Assessment of the United States Fire Service*, National Fire Protection Association, December 2021.

⁸ P. EX-15, *Needs Assessment of the United States Fire Service*, National Fire Protection Association, December 2021.

⁹ Ibid.

addition, 49% of reported fire apparatus or pumpers have exceeded their service life and are 15 years or more old.¹⁰ For the smallest communities, 64% of the engines were at least 15 years old.¹¹

In addition, fire departments are facing greater emphasis on other challenges. Firefighters were on the frontlines of the COVID-19 pandemic. They must respond to provide aid and comfort to the victims of the large number of active shooter events that the nation is facing. These situations have placed a greater emphasis on the need for programs that provide assistance for firefighters' behavioral and mental wellness. Also, there is a need to focus on the prevalence of cancer in firefighters. According to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, firefighters face a 9% increase in cancer diagnoses and a 14% increase in cancer-related deaths, when compared to the general U.S. population.¹²

In the face of these needs, the AFG and SAFER grant programs both face a sunset date of September 30, 2024. In addition, the programs are only authorized through the end of this fiscal year. The IAFC thanks the Senate for taking action to protect these programs by passing the Fire Grants and Safety Act. (S. 870).

As the committee considers legislation to reauthorize the AFG and SAFER programs and the USFA, the IAFC asks that you consider the following recommendations:

1) The AFG and SAFER programs should be authorized through FY 2030.

The AFG and SAFER grant programs are successful at providing matching grants to local fire departments to meet their basic needs. However, many fire departments still struggle to provide basic personal protective equipment and SCBA to their members. In addition, training is required to address new or increasing threats like wildland fires or the increasing number of incidents involving lithium-ion batteries. The AFG and SAFER programs can provide funding for these equipment and training shortages. Meanwhile, the FP&S grants can fund research to identify the causes of increased prevalence of cancer in the fire service and mitigate them. The FP&S grants also fund local fire prevention programs that can reduce the fire death rate. It is important that these programs continue to have authorized funding into the future.

2) The USFA also should be authorized through FY 2030, and its authorization should be increased to \$95 million for each year.

The USFA plays a significant role in educating the fire service leadership through the NFA. In addition, it conducts fire prevention programs to protect the public from the risk of fire and conducts outreach to the fire service about new and emerging threats. For FY 2024, the USFA is requesting an additional \$10 million for the development of its new NERIS data system and an extra \$2.5 million to fund infrastructure upgrades at NFA's Emmitsburg campus. These requests bring USFA's appropriations to \$72.8 million, which is close to the authorized level of \$76.49 million. If USFA is to conduct the examinations of major fire incidents as authorized under P.L. 117-246 and complete the development of the NERIS system, the IAFC recommends that the authorization be increased to \$95 million per year to cover these costs.

3) The sunset date for the AFG and SAFER programs should be extended to September 30, 2032.

The AFG and SAFER programs play a significant role in supporting the nation's emergency response system. They should not be allowed to expire. Realizing that Congress has important priorities and reauthorization bills can lag, the IAFC recommends including a buffer between the

¹⁰ P. EX-14, *Needs Assessment of the United States Fire Service*, National Fire Protection Association, December 2021.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² [Firefighter Cancer Rates: The Facts from NIOSH Research | Blogs | CDC.](#)

end of the authorization period for the AFG and SAFER programs and their actual termination date. We think that a sunset date of September 30, 2032, will give Congress enough time to review the AFG and SAFER programs and make any necessary revisions before the programs face a termination date.

Conclusion

On behalf of the more than 11,000 members of the IAFC, I thank you for the opportunity to testify at today's hearing. The AFG and SAFER programs are examples of well-spent taxpayer funds. They require matching grants and are allocated based on a merit-based, peer review process. Each year, the national fire service organizations meet and set the criteria for the programs based on the needs of their members. In addition, the USFA and NFA serve as the nation's leading agencies in identifying emerging issues and educating the incoming leadership of America's fire and emergency service.

I thank the subcommittee for focusing on reauthorizing these programs. They provide important resources, but there still remains work to be done. Under Dr. Moore-Merrell, USFA is undergoing important reforms, including the development of the NERIS data system, which will require a larger authorization of funding. In addition, the AFG program, its FP&S grant program, and the SAFER grant program provide funding for training, equipment, staffing, and research to help fire departments address an ever-evolving list of challenges. These programs should not be allowed to expire. On behalf of the IAFC and its members, I look forward to working with the subcommittee to draft and pass legislation to reauthorize these critical programs.