



Fire Fighters Spell Relief

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First Round of Grants Announced

Fire departments across the country received good news on March 31 when the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) announced the first round of grant awards through the Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) program for Fiscal Year 2009.

The news came as welcome relief for many IAFF affiliates that continue to face layoffs, staffing reductions, station closures and wage and benefit concessions as local governments lose revenue.

But some departments with substantial layoffs weren't part of this initial round of funding.

The IAFF met with FEMA officials April 6 to urge them to give fire departments with layoffs the highest priority and provide funding to those departments before other grants are awarded.

"We understand there is some frustration among departments that weren't included in this long-awaited first round of funding," says IAFF General President Harold Schaitberger. "However, funding is on the way and these initial grant awards are a significant first step to help fire departments that are reeling from layoffs and reductions in force as a result of the economic crisis."

In this first round of funding, which represents \$55 million of the \$210 million available, 49 departments were awarded a grant. Most were for new hires, but some were handed down to departments like Flint, Michigan, that are decimated by massive layoffs.

The new provision allowing departments to apply for the grant to rehire fire fighters laid off as a result of the economic crisis was written and lobbied for by the IAFF. As part of the provision, cities are not required to provide matching dollars.

"We needed to help our locals that have fallen victim to the harsh economy," Schaitberger says. "The IAFF is grateful that help is on the way for so many of our

affiliates in need. But, we anxiously await future rounds of awards so that more of our members can be safe on the job as they protect their communities."

The Flint, Michigan, fire department has been hit with massive layoffs over the past year. FEMA gave the City a \$6.7 million grant to rehire 39 fire fighters.

"We are hopeful that bringing back those fire fighters will help us reopen two of our previously closed fire stations," says Flint Local 352 President Raul Garcia.

"After the layoffs, the City became extremely dangerous for all of us. Truly, this will be a positive step toward making all of us safer," Garcia says.

When 39 fire fighters were laid off last year, the fire department's ability to keep up with emergency calls — an average of 8,000 annually — was greatly hindered by the gross lack of resources.

In April 2010, 23 more fire fighters were laid off and the situation in Flint went from bad to worse. Following those layoffs, more than 50 incidents of suspected arson occurred throughout the City in less than two weeks.

During some shifts, fire fighters were responding to calls nonstop.

"We all began to worry that we might lose one of our own in the line of duty because of low staffing and fire fighter fatigue," says Garcia.

With the announcement of the SAFER grant award, City officials are promising to begin rehires almost immediately.

Other cities that received SAFER grants also were in dire need of funding.

St. Bernard Parish, Louisiana, which is still recovering from the devastation of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, received an \$875,570 SAFER grant. The money will allow the parish to fill 13 vacant positions.

After Hurricane Katrina rolled into the Parish, all 10 of its fire stations were wiped out or rendered unusable. Since the storm, the stations have been slowly renovated. With the new hires, the Parish can open two fire stations that have been shuttered since the storm.

"Even though the population has dwindled in our Parish post-Katrina, we still need all of our fire stations staffed because the population is spread out over a large number of miles," says Local 1468 President Troy Serigne. "Without opened fire stations, we are responding from longer distances, increasing response times to between 15 and 20 minutes in some areas."

With the new hires, Local 1468 fire fighters believe that response times will be significantly reduced and that fire ground operations will be greatly enhanced.



St. Bernard Parish Station 6, which is under post-Katrina reconstruction, will be staffed with fire fighters funded by a \$875,570 SAFER grant.

Springfield, Missouri, will be able to hire 13 new fire fighters thanks to a \$1,306,295 SAFER grant.

Staffing there was depleted by 17 through attrition because the City's economic condition prohibited those positions from being refilled. The economic decline also created a shortfall in available overtime funds; therefore, the City could not keep all of the fire stations staffed and implemented rolling closures of fire stations citywide.

As a result, response times rose dramatically. "We have noticed a significant rise in property loss due to fires, but have been lucky that no deaths or significant injuries have resulted from our shortages," says Local 152 President Shawn Martin.

With the addition of the 13 fire fighters, the rolling fire station closures are expected to stop.

Also in this first round of funding, Kern County in Bakersfield, California, received a grant award that will help fill 27 vacant positions. Because of the lack of staffing, nine of the County's 46 fire stations are woefully understaffed. In fact, most engines run with just two fire fighters per apparatus.

"Without a sufficient number of fire fighters, operations have been affected, not in just the area surrounding those nine fire stations, but throughout the county," says Kern County Local 1301 President Derek Robinson. "It was especially tough during the wild land fire season last summer."

While the SAFER grant is good news, fire fighters are still concerned about the future. "Even with federal assistance, the County's budget remains tight. Future cuts have not been ruled out."

In Fitchburg, Massachusetts, members of Fitchburg Local 3128 have been responding to calls with just half the number of fire fighters needed to do so safely and effectively. About a decade ago, Fitchburg had approximately 130 fire fighters. Today, there are 65.

With the \$389,516 SAFER grant, eight new fire fighters will fill positions left open through attrition.

"Fire fighters in Fitchburg, with the help of IAFF 3rd District Vice President Mike Mullane and the Professional Fire Fighters of Massachusetts, have been doing what they can through concessions and other strategies to help their City weather its ongoing economic shortfall," says PFFM Bob McCarthy. "Still, that was not enough to maintain adequate staffing levels. This grant really is a godsend for them."

Without the eight new fire fighters, Fitchburg faced a station closure and dramatic increases in response times.

The Commonwealth of Massachusetts has been proactive in applying for SAFER grants to help stem widespread layoffs, and four IAFF affiliates were awarded grants in

excess of \$4 million. The largest of the grants, totaling more than \$760,000, went to Malden Local 902. Other locals receiving grants included Pittsfield Local 2647 and Melrose Local 1617.

In 2009, the IAFF and its local affiliates in Massachusetts successfully lobbied the governor's office to allocate more than \$17 million in Recovery Act funds to a competitive grant program aimed at bringing laid-off fire fighters back to work.

Although a great success for many struggling IAFF locals, the Recovery Act grants had some unintended consequences



Jurisdictions like Flint, Michigan, are seeing response times escalate due to insufficient available fire fighters. Hiring new or re-hiring laid off fire fighters make faster, safer response possible.



with regards to the SAFER grants.

The Recovery Act grants fund fire fighter positions for a full 12 months, keeping IAFF members on the job through fall 2010. With federal laws prohibiting the duplication of grants, the SAFER period of eligibility for layoffs overlaps with many of the Recovery Act awards. This has left many locals, such as Fall River Local 1314 — with more than 40 layoffs — in the uncomfortable position of staring down the fall expiration dates of the Recovery Act grants without the ability to apply for SAFER grants to replace them.

The IAFF is continuing to work with FEMA on this issue.

Despite the fact that Cincinnati, Ohio, was awarded a \$6.9 million SAFER grant — enough for 40 fire fighters — staffing remains a question mark.

"Because our City is in such financial dire straits, the City almost did not to apply for the SAFER grant," says Cincinnati Local 48 President Marc Monahan. "The only way that the City can accept the grant is if FEMA grants us a waiver."

Because economic hardship is so widespread, FEMA agreed to consider petitions from 2009 grantees for waivers for positions lost to attrition after the grant is awarded on a case-by-case basis. In order to qualify for the waiver, the economic hardship must affect the entire public safety sector in their jurisdiction, not just the fire department.

"If we are not granted the waiver, the City will need to figure out how it is going to hire more fire fighters, because a large part of the fire department is close to retirement eligibility," says Monahan.

The Cincinnati Fire Department has 839 fire fighters. By the end of 2011, the department will lose at least 32 in mandatory retirements. Some 566 are over the age of 40 and 290 are over the age of 48. Just 47 are under the age of 30.

Two new ambulances, brought into service in January 2009, were initially funded by overtime, but the City began browning out between one and four fire stations per day beginning in August 2009 when overtime funds ran out. When an emergency call came in for a cardiac arrest, the nearest fire station just blocks away was closed and fire fighters responding from the next closest station arrived too late.

"It's hard to say for sure if this patient would have survived had the closer station been open, but, for sure, the patient's chances of survival would have been greater," says Monahan.

The more than \$55 million awarded during the first round is about one-third of the amount of Fiscal Year 2009 funding that FEMA is expected to award. Other fire departments waiting to hear about the status of their applications include: Muncie, IN Local 1348; Orlando, FL Local 1365; Prince George's County, MD Local 1619; Los Angeles City, CA Local 112; Pensacola, FL Local 707; Nashville, TN Local 140; Green Bay, WI Local 141; San Diego, CA Local 145; and Phoenix, AZ Local 493.

Visit www.firegrantsupport.com for a current list of awards.

During the application period, the IAFF assisted affiliates, fire chiefs and city managers in developing their grant applications. More funding will be distributed by FEMA in subsequent rounds. The IAFF stands ready to help affiliates through the application process. SAFER grants for Fiscal Year 2010 could be made available as soon as this summer.

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