

INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF FIRE FIGHTERS

# LEGISLATIVE PRIORITIES

119<sup>TH</sup> CONGRESS, FIRST SESSION





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# A Letter from the General President

**DEAR MEMBER OF CONGRESS,**

On behalf of the more than 354,000 men and women of the International Association of Fire Fighters, I am honored to present a copy of our 2025 Legislative Priorities. This book will help you and your staff gain a deeper understanding of the critical policy issues that impact America's professional fire fighters and emergency medical workers, and the communities we serve.



The decisions you and your colleagues make each day directly impact our ability to protect our communities – and to do so safely. Improving America's fire service can only be accomplished by elected leaders and first responders working together. I say this not only as the General President of the IAFF, but also as a Boston fire fighter who remains committed to upholding the oath I took to serve my community.

IAFF members from across the United States will be in Washington, D.C., from March 3-5. I kindly ask you and your office prioritize meetings with these brave men and women from your district and state, hear their concerns, and understand how the issues outlined in this book impact both their ability to serve and the well-being of your constituents.

Thank you for your continued support of America's fire service. The IAFF stands ready to work with you throughout the 119th Congress to protect our communities and the professional fire fighters and emergency medical workers who keep them safe.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Edward A. Kelly". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right.

**Edward A. Kelly**  
General President

# SUPPORT SURVIVORS OF FALLEN PUBLIC SAFETY OFFICERS

## BACKGROUND

The IAFF urges Congress to pass the Honoring Our Fallen Heroes Act (S. 237/H.R. 1269) to recognize first responders' occupational cancer deaths as occurring in the line of duty and provide death benefits to their survivors. Fire fighters have a significantly greater likelihood of developing cancer due to on-the-job exposures. Congress must stand by their survivors and recognize their sacrifice as a line-of-duty death.

## CANCER RATES IN THE FIRE SERVICE

Due to occupational exposures to carcinogens in smoke, vehicle exhaust, and even their own protective gear, fire fighters are far more likely to develop cancer than the average person. The World Health Organization has even recognized working as a fire fighter to be a Category 1 carcinogenic exposure – the same level as smoking tobacco or unprotected exposure to radiation. Numerous studies have shown that these occupational exposures leave fire fighters nearly 15% more likely to die from cancer than the public.

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In 2022, Congress recognized the clear link between firefighting and cancer when it passed legislation to provide presumptive workers' compensation benefits for fire fighters battling cancer. While this and similar actions by 49 states assist fire fighters who are actively battling cancer, it does not help survivors of fire fighters who have died due to occupational cancer. As a result, survivors of first responders who succumb to cancer often experience significant financial hardships.

## PSOB PROGRAM

The Public Safety Officers Benefits (PSOB) Program, operated by the Department of Justice, provides benefits for fire, EMS, and law enforcement officers killed or permanently injured in the line of duty. PSOB recognizes public safety officers' deaths due to traumatic incidents (like building collapses or vehicle accidents) and medical incidents (heart attacks, COVID, and 9/11-related cancer). PSOB does not currently recognize occupational cancer as an eligible cause of death because it cannot be conclusively linked to a specific fire in the fire fighter's career.

## THE HONOR ACT

The Honor Act would correct this oversight in the PSOB program by recognizing the undeniable connection between cancer and fire fighters' chronic occupational exposures to carcinogens. This bill would ensure fire fighters and other first responders can access death and disability benefits due to occupational cancer.

Last year, the Senate Judiciary Committee unanimously approved the Honor Act. In total, the bill was cosponsored by 173 bipartisan Members of Congress.

The Honor Act is endorsed by the International Association of Fire Fighters, International Association of Fire Chiefs, National Volunteer Fire Council, Fraternal Order of Police, National Association of Police Organizations, and the Federal Law Enforcement Officers Association.

## **FIRE FIGHTERS FACE SIGNIFICANT CANCER RISKS WHILE SERVING THE PUBLIC**

- Studies have shown that smoke from the average house fire contains more than 140 hazardous chemicals due to the prevalence of synthetic materials and plastics. Known carcinogens such as arsenic and benzene are also often present in this smoke.
- Turnout gear is another common carcinogenic exposure for fire fighters since it is made with PFAS. This PFAS was intended to repel water, but has since been proven to be highly carcinogenic and was recently classified by the Environmental Protection Administration as a “hazardous substance.”
- Other common carcinogenic exposures for fire fighters include diesel exhaust, firefighting foams, and motor vehicle fluids.
- Together, these exposures make fire fighters nearly 10% more likely than the average person to develop cancer and nearly 15% more likely to die from cancer. Fire fighters are at a 100% increased risk of developing certain types of cancer, including mesothelioma and testicular cancer.
- In recent years, nearly 75% of fire fighter line-of-duty deaths (LODD) were due to occupational cancer.

## **PSOB BENEFITS**

- The Public Safety Officers Benefits (PSOB) program is an important way for the federal government to support the survivors of fire fighters, emergency medical workers, and law enforcement officers who are killed in the line of duty.
- PSOB provides surviving family members with a variety of benefits, including a one-time monetary award and Pell Grant for the fallen public safety officer’s children.
- Survivors of fallen public safety officers are only eligible to receive a PSOB award if the public safety officer died due to certain circumstances such as a flashover, building collapse, motor vehicle accident, or a limited number of medical conditions.

## **OCCUPATIONAL CANCER DEATHS MUST BE RECOGNIZED AS LODDs**

- The PSOB program currently recognizes several medical conditions as eligible LODDs including heart attacks and strokes. PSOB has been updated in recent years to cover public safety officers who die from COVID-19 and suicide due to PTSD.
- In 2022, Congress passed the Federal Firefighter Fairness Act which recognized the clear roots of occupational cancer for fire fighters and provides presumptive workers’ compensation benefits for federal fire fighters diagnosed with cancer.
- 49 out of 50 states also provide presumptive workers’ compensation for fire fighters battling cancer due to the countless carcinogenic exposures that fire fighters face throughout their career.
- Despite being eligible for workers’ compensation coverage, fire fighters who die from job-related cancer continue to be denied PSOB.
- When 75% of fire fighter LODDs are due to the same medical condition, we cannot continue to ignore those deaths and abandon those fire fighters’ surviving family members.

## **CONGRESS MUST SUPPORT THE FAMILIES OF ALL LODDs**

- The PSOB program is an important way for our nation to express its appreciation for those who make the ultimate sacrifice in service to others.
- PSOB allows public safety officers to know that their families will be supported if they do not return home from work.
- Fire fighters who die from occupational cancer are no different than those who experience a fatal injury or accident when responding to a call.
- Survivors of fire fighters who die from occupational cancer face the same challenges to pay their mortgage, clothe their children, and afford the necessities of life. It is critical that Congress ensure that they can access the PSOB program.

# PROTECT FIRE FIGHTERS' RIGHTS TO FREE SPEECH

## BACKGROUND

Fire fighters work a dangerous job and deserve the right to speak openly and freely about the challenges they face. However, fire fighters and other public safety officers are routinely fired or suspended for expressing their concerns. The IAFF urges Congress to pass the Public Safety Officer Free Speech Act (H.R. 1443) and ensure our first responders are not unfairly denied the right to discuss job-related issues.

## FIRST AMENDMENT RIGHTS DENIED

Fire fighters serve in one of the most visible, yet misunderstood jobs in our communities. Movies and TV shows routinely share inaccurate information about the type of work fire fighters perform and what they need. These misconceptions about the job commonly lead local governments to deny fire fighters the staffing, tools, training, and apparatus they need to respond to emergency incidents safely and effectively. These challenges

are often compounded by bureaucratic rules that hinder recruitment and retention efforts.

First responders routinely face unfair discipline when expressing their needs, even while off-duty. IAFF members have been fired or suspended for simple acts like making comments at city council meetings, writing letters to the editor in newspapers, or being politically active. These penalties are wholly inconsistent with the First Amendment protections that all Americans enjoy.

Communities have a solemn duty to guarantee fire fighters the safest possible working conditions. Key to this is ensuring that they can express their own needs in their own words. Basic First Amendment protections should not be denied to fire fighters simply because they work for a government agency. Fire fighters must be given the right to speak about their operational needs, salary and benefits issues, and other administrative policies.

## PROTECTING FIRST RESPONDERS' RIGHTS TO FREE SPEECH

The IAFF is proud to endorse the Public Safety Free Speech Act, which would ensure that fire fighters and other first responders keep their rights to speak publicly about job-related issues. This bill would protect fire fighters from retaliation and discipline when they raise public awareness of job-related issues, including delivery of public safety services, compensation and working conditions, PPE and other response resources, administrative procedures, or political opinions. To be eligible for these protections, fire fighters can only share their opinions on these topics while off-duty and in non-official capacities.

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# TALKING POINTS

## FIRST RESPONDERS DESERVE THE RIGHT TO SPEAK FREELY ABOUT THEIR JOBS

- Fire fighters and emergency medical workers have unique jobs that are often misunderstood by the general public. When serving their communities and working on the front lines of emergencies, first responders face occupational dangers that few people ever experience first-hand.
- As experts in emergency response, first responders have the right, and duty, to discuss job-related concerns. Fire fighters and emergency medical workers are uniquely positioned to explain emergency preparedness needs to the public and elected officials.
- Simple investments in replacing protective gear, providing routine medical screenings, and maintaining safe staffing levels are ways that a community can provide first responders safer working conditions. Unfortunately, fire fighters and emergency medical workers often face discipline for requesting this support.

## FIRE FIGHTERS AND EMERGENCY MEDICAL WORKERS SUSPENDED OR FIRED FOR EXERCISING THEIR RIGHTS

- Municipalities often have policies prohibiting fire fighters and emergency medical workers from discussing job-related issues publicly.
- First responders have faced penalties for exercising their free speech rights when off-duty.
- IAFF members have been penalized for advocating for positions on ballot referendums, meeting with elected officials about staffing shortages and insufficient safety equipment, and submitting letters to the editor.
- First responders challenge these penalties in the courts but are denied justice due to confusing laws about when public employees can make comments and what disclosures are protected by whistleblower rules.

## CONGRESS MUST PROTECT FIRST RESPONDERS' BASIC RIGHTS

- The Public Safety Free Speech Act would establish clear protections that ensure all first responders retain the right to discuss job-related issues such as safety protections, staffing levels, wages and benefits, and administrative requirements.
- This legislation would allow first responders to seek compensation from their employers if they are unfairly disciplined for speaking on job-related issues while off-duty.
- This legislation would provide protections to ensure that fire fighters and emergency medical workers can leverage their experience to educate community members and policymakers on issues, such as how staffing levels allow for more effective responses and how improved safety protections help personnel stay on the job longer and avoid occupational injuries and illnesses.

## BASIC PROTECTIONS ARE NEEDED IN ALL 50 STATES

- The COVID pandemic was another instance where first responders faced penalties for speaking out on issues like the need for personal protective equipment or unfairly imposing administrative regulations without consulting employees.
- Municipalities in both labor-focused states and right-to-work states disregarded fire fighters' rights to free and public speech.
- Passing the Public Safety Free Speech Act sends a clear message that Congress values our nation's first responders and that all municipalities must honor the constitutional rights of dedicated public servants.
- Recently, President Donald Trump signed an Executive Order recognizing the fundamental First Amendment rights of all Americans and the need to respect that right.
- Until fire fighters are guaranteed free speech, then cannot fully advocate for their safety and the safety of those they serve.

# SUPPORT THE DEVELOPMENT OF NEXT-GENERATION TURNOUT GEAR

## BACKGROUND

The IAFF urges Congress to pass the PFAS Alternatives Act (pending reintroduction) to drive the development of next-generation protective gear. America's fire fighters are forced to use gear that offers limited protection and contains carcinogenic PFAS chemicals. The PFAS Alternatives Act will help develop gear that is safer and free of carcinogens.

Due to occupational exposure to carcinogens, including PFAS chemicals in their protective gear, fire fighters are far more likely to develop cancer than the average person. The World Health Organization's International Agency for Research on Cancer classifies firefighting as a Group 1 carcinogen – meaning there is sufficient evidence to conclude that it causes cancer. Numerous studies have shown that these occupational exposures leave fire fighters nearly 15% more likely to die from cancer than the public.

Studies have found an association between PFAS exposure and negative health outcomes like cancer, kidney disease, and reproductive harm. Textiles in protective gear also absorb carcinogens from fires and other incidents which are not fully removed through laundering.

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## NEED FOR RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

Despite advances in materials science, protective gear remains a source of carcinogenic exposure for fire fighters. In addition to exposing fire fighters to PFAS, this gear is heavy (nearly 45 pounds), hinders fire fighters' mobility, adds to retained metabolic heat buildup, captures carcinogens from emergency incidents, and provides no indication when washing or maintenance is needed.

Fire fighters need protective gear that will shield them from the hazards of their jobs and not expose them to even more carcinogens. The research and development of existing protective gear has historically been funded by the corporate interests that secure patents for, manufacture, and sell the gear. This has resulted in gear that causes cancer. The development of next-generation protective gear must be led by fire fighters who will prioritize health and safety – not corporate profits.

## THE PFAS ALTERNATIVES ACT

The PFAS Alternatives Act will authorize a \$25 million grant within the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health to drive the development of next-generation protective gear. This research will be conducted in partnership between fire fighters and scientists and focus on key goals like:

- The elimination of all PFAS chemicals
- Improved resistance to carcinogens and chemicals from fires and other emergencies
- Visual alerting for the need to clean the gear and perform other maintenance
- Better accounting for varied individual fire fighters' body types and composition
- More comprehensive protection from the dangers that fire fighters face



## CANCER CONTINUES TO BE THE BIGGEST THREAT FACING FIRE FIGHTERS

- In recent years, nearly 75% of fire fighter line-of-duty deaths were due to occupational cancer.
- When compared to the general public, fire fighters are nearly 10% more likely to develop cancer and almost 15% more likely to die from cancer.
- The epidemic of cancer in the fire service is driven by fire fighters' exposure to a wide range of carcinogens. PFAS chemicals continue to be one of the most frequent sources of carcinogenic exposure for fire fighters.
- These exposures leave fire fighters up to 100% more likely to develop some forms of cancer such as mesothelioma.

## TURNOUT GEAR CONTAINS PFAS CHEMICALS AND FAILS TO PROTECT FIRE FIGHTERS FROM CARCINOGENS

- Despite advances in materials science, fire fighters' turnout gear has largely failed to evolve.
- Turnout gear is made of three layers and is designed to protect fire fighters from heat, liquids, and cuts.
- PFAS is used in the manufacturing of turnout gear to repel water and other liquids.
- PFAS is a highly carcinogenic chemical which has been linked to many forms of cancer.
- In 2022, PFAS was formally classified as a "hazardous chemical" and may subject it to rigorous clean-up requirements.
- Despite this knowledge, PFAS has not been removed from turnout gear and continues to be intentionally added.
- Turnout gear can also absorb chemicals and carcinogens from emergency calls like fires, vehicle accidents, and hazardous materials incidents.
- Regular washing of turnout gear can help reduce some of these carcinogens; however, PFAS is a "forever" chemical and cannot be removed.

## RESEARCH IS NEEDED TO DEVELOP NEXT-GENERATION TURNOUT GEAR

- Fire fighters need next-generation turnout gear.
- First and foremost, fire fighters need turnout gear that is PFAS-free. Fire fighters take their gear on and off countless times per shift. It is unacceptable that fire fighters are exposed to carcinogens every time they wear their gear.
- Materials science has advanced in recent years. Next-generation turnout gear should embrace new materials that are more resistant to absorbing chemicals from smoke and other toxins that fire fighters encounter when working.
- Next-generation turnout gear should also leverage technology to be lighter weight, account for body composition differences in fire fighters, and include indicators to alert fire fighters when their gear needs to be cleaned or otherwise fixed.
- Fire fighters work a dangerous job and deserve to have turnout gear that actually protects them rather than repeatedly exposes them to toxins.

## RESEARCH ON TURNOUT GEAR MUST BE LED BY FIRE FIGHTERS

- Firefighting is a unique and misunderstood profession. Researchers who are knowledgeable about materials science may not understand the unique demands that fire fighters face.
- The chemical industry has consistently prioritized profits over fire fighter safety.
- Trustworthy research requires partnerships – however, fire fighters must be in a leadership position in developing next-generation turnout gear to ensure the final product is both affordable and practical.
- To be effective and embraced by fire fighters, next-generation turnout gear must be developed by fire fighters and for fire fighters. This bill takes meaningful steps to ensure fire fighters oversee this critical research and development process.

# STAND WITH SEPT. 11 FIRST RESPONDERS AND SURVIVORS

## BACKGROUND

The IAFF urges Congress to pass the 9/11 Responder and Survivor Health Funding Correction Act (H.R. 1410) to fulfill our nation's commitment to protecting and honoring those who responded to the Sept. 11 terror attacks. The World Trade Center Health Program (WTCHP) provides critical healthcare services for 9/11 responders and survivors, but faces a looming funding shortfall. Congress must pass this critical legislation to keep this program open.

## NEED FOR CONTINUED HEALTHCARE SERVICES FOR 9/11 RESPONDERS AND SURVIVORS

On Sept. 11, 2001, tens of thousands of fire fighters rushed to the World Trade Center, Pentagon, and Shanksville, Pennsylvania to rescue their neighbors and colleagues on one of our nation's darkest days. Their time spent sifting through asbestos and carcinogen-laden debris predisposed them to cancer at levels exponentially higher than the general public. Our nation pledged to "never forget"

their service, and that includes doing everything possible to protect their health.

In 2010, Congress established the WTCHP to provide key medical monitoring and healthcare services for these 9/11 responders and survivors. Today, this program provides care for more than 135,000 enrollees who live in all 50 states and 434 of the 435 House Congressional districts. Due to the rising cost of healthcare, this program faces a looming budget shortfall, which will bar new enrollees by 2028 and curtail services for current enrollees by 2029. If left unaddressed, this shortfall will violate the commitment Congress made to honor 9/11 first responders and survivors.

## ENSURING LONG-TERM SOLVENCY FOR THE WORLD TRADE CENTER HEALTH PROGRAM

This legislation makes essential budgetary changes for the WTCHP to ensure it has a funding formula that keeps the program doors open through 2090. These changes are critical to ensure the program's funding remains strong, even if healthcare costs rise and inflation increases. Congress must future-proof the WTCHP's funding to ensure no 9/11 first responder or survivor is ever turned away or denied care. Our nation owes it to these brave men and women.

## SUPPORT FOR RESEARCH AND ENHANCED SERVICES

Once passed, this bill would increase funding for research on 9/11-related healthcare conditions—advancing care in other areas as well. It would also provide greater flexibility in adding conditions recognized by the WTCHP and allow mental health practitioners to evaluate and certify individuals for 9/11-related mental health care.

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## NEED FOR CONTINUED HEALTHCARE

- On 9/11, tens of thousands of fire fighters rushed to rescue victims of the terror attacks at Ground Zero, the Pentagon, and Shanksville, Pennsylvania
- While conducting rescue and recovery missions, these fire and emergency medical workers spent months sifting through debris coated with asbestos and other carcinogens.
- These exposures have resulted in startlingly high rates of cancer and other diseases among 9/11 responders and survivors.
- Studies show 9/11 fire fighters and rescue workers are up to 200% more likely than the general public to develop some forms of cancer.
- More than 100 health conditions, including forms of cancer and respiratory disease, have been linked to 9/11-related exposures.
- As of 2024, nearly 400 fire fighters who responded to the 9/11 terror attacks have since succumbed to 9/11-related cancer.

## WORLD TRADE CENTER HEALTH PROGRAM (WTCHP)

- In 2010, Congress created the World Trade Center Health Program (WTCHP) to recognize the long-term health conditions that 9/11 responders and survivors face.
- This program is housed within the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and provides medical monitoring and healthcare for 9/11-related conditions.
- More than 1350,000 individuals are enrolled in the WTCHP and rely on this program for essential healthcare services.
- These enrollees live in all 50 states and 434 out of 435 House Congressional districts.
- More than 36,000 enrollees live outside of New York and New Jersey.
- The WTCHP gains new enrollees each year, showing that new 9/11-connected health conditions are continuing to arise for 9/11 responders and survivors.

## LOOMING SHORTFALL THREATENS WORLD TRADE CENTER HEALTH PROGRAM

- Despite being created with strong bipartisan support, rising costs of healthcare have created a looming budget shortfall that threatens the WTCHP's solvency.
- If Congress does not act, the WTCHP may need to deny new enrollees beginning in 2028.
- By 2029, this shortfall would not only prevent perspective enrollees from accessing the care they need, but it would force the WTCHP to curtail services for current enrollees.
- The 9/11 Responder and Survivor Health Funding Correction Act of 2025 would create a more robust funding formula to keep pace with inflation and ensure the WTCHP can continue caring for 9/11 responders and survivors into the future.
- The legislation also would require a report to Congress on the WTCHP's budgetary needs to ensure the program is on track to maintain its funding.

## ENHANCED SERVICES FOR ENROLLEES

- This legislation would also increase funding for data collection and research on 9/11-related health conditions.
- This research can yield important findings that improve the detection and treatment of these conditions in other populations.
- The bill also allows qualified mental health providers to evaluate and certify 9/11-related mental health conditions for program members.
- The WTCHP already recognizes some 9/11-related mental health conditions, but more flexibility is needed to ensure enrollees can access appropriate care.
- The proposed bill also would expand the period for evaluating and adding health conditions connected to 9/11 exposures.

# PREPARE FIRE FIGHTERS TO RESPOND TO WILDFIRES IN ALL COMMUNITIES

## BACKGROUND

The IAFF urges Congress to pass the Wildfire Preparedness and Response Act (pending introduction) to ensure our nation's fire fighters are properly trained and ready to protect their communities from wildfires. In recent years, wildfires have intensified significantly, endangering urban and rural communities alike. Fire fighters need the tools, training, and organizational structures to efficiently and safely respond to these dangerous fires.

## MASSIVE GROWTH IN WILDFIRE DANGERS

The threat of wildfires has grown dramatically, impacting communities of all sizes. We've seen wildfires devastate cities like Los Angeles and Maui, and spread across heavily populated areas in New Jersey, Massachusetts, and Delaware. Once considered a regional and rural issue, wildfires now pose a significant risk to communities nationwide, and the danger is only increasing. We must ensure fire fighters are better prepared for this challenge.

Nearly 400,000 professional fire fighters stand ready to respond to these fires, but almost all are forced to do so without the formal training needed

to keep them safe on the job. A lack of effective coordination between local and state fire fighters and the federal government further impedes fire fighters' ability to safely and effectively combat wildfires. As the wildfire problem worsens, it is increasingly important that Congress address these challenges and build an effective nationwide wildfire response mechanism.

## PREPARING FIRE FIGHTERS FOR SAFE, EFFECTIVE RESPONSES

WPRA addresses these challenges by authorizing the federal government to work with industry stakeholders to develop a program that trains structural and urban fire fighters on how to safely respond to wildfires. WPRA also makes other important reforms, such as expanding fire fighters' access to mental and behavioral health care, advancing research on safer protective equipment and fire retardants, and ensuring more fire departments can secure the tools and gear needed for proper wildfire responses.

## COORDINATING RESPONSES ACROSS ALL LEVELS OF GOVERNMENT

Dedicated fire fighters work at all levels of government. However, the lack of a coordinated, whole-of-government approach to combating wildfires makes their job significantly more difficult. The WPRA would ensure coordination between federal, state, and local governments, eliminate the red tape that bars federal fire fighters from assisting in wildfire response, and give fire fighters a voice in shaping federal wildfire policy.

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## ALARMING SPREAD OF WILDFIRES

- In recent years, wildfires have not only become larger and more severe, but they are frequently impacting densely populated areas.
- Since 2019, wildfires have cost nearly \$3 billion to suppress – an almost 20% increase from the 10-year average of costs.
- Heavily populated areas – such as Los Angeles and Maui – are increasingly being impacted by wildfires.
- All 50 states are at risk for catastrophic wildfires. Even suburban areas of New York, New Jersey, Delaware, and Pennsylvania have experienced damaging wildfires in recent years.
- The ever-expanding wildland-urban interface (WUI) is driving the wildfire problem, as more than 60,000 communities across the nation are at-risk for a wildfire.
- Wildfire smoke also poses a lethal threat to communities, as it spreads carcinogens and other toxins throughout the impacted areas.
- All fire fighters, including structural and municipal fire fighters, are being called on to fight these fires – even though they may not have the necessary training or tools to operate safely and effectively.

## INCREASING HEALTH RESEARCH

- Fire fighters face a wide range of carcinogens when responding to wildfires. Studies show that wildfires in urban areas are especially concerning as cars, homes, and plastics burn and release a toxic mixture of toxins into the air.
- Structural firefighting gear is exclusively made with carcinogenic PFAS, and fire fighters worry that similar toxins are added into wildfire gear.
- Additional concerns have been raised about the presence of other chemicals in the fire retardants that are used in aerial firefighting operations.
- Additional research is needed to fully understand whether fire fighters are subjected to carcinogens, beyond the fires' smoke, when responding to wildfires.
- Congress should take a comprehensive approach to ensuring fire fighters are protected from all carcinogenic exposures while they are fighting fires.

## FIRE FIGHTERS NEED TRAINING

- As the threat of wildfires grows, structural fire fighters are fighting these fires in their communities and neighboring jurisdictions.
- While these fire fighters are trained for structure and vehicle fires, they are often forced to fight wildfires without adequate training.
- The lack of wildfire training increases the chances these fire fighters are injured or killed in the line of duty.
- It is unreasonable to expect the 400,000 professional local and state fire fighters in the U.S. to respond to emergencies for which they have no training.
- The federal government must work with firefighting stakeholders to design and deliver a training program to teach municipal fire fighters how to safely and effectively fight wildfires.
- This training should cover critical topics like wildfire behavior and tactical considerations.
- Some of this training is already available, but many local and state firefighting agencies have been unable to access it.

## IMPROVING EFFICIENCY IN WILDFIRE RESPONSE

- The U.S. Forest Service (USFS) fails to consistently coordinate with state and local fire fighters.
- Given local fire departments' roles in extinguishing more than 80% of wildfires on initial attack, this coordination is critical.
- Congress should create a new office within the U.S. Department of Agriculture to ensure this coordination happens.
- Urban fire fighters and USFS fire fighters could share critical information and resources if given the opportunity to train together regularly.
- The USFS also should utilize local fire fighters to backfill their stations rather than bringing in personnel from across the country.
- Local fire fighters also deserve a seat on the National Wildfire Coordinating Group and Wildfire Leadership Council given their extensive involvement in wildfire response.

# SUPPORT COLLECTIVE BARGAINING FOR FIRE FIGHTERS AND EMERGENCY MEDICAL WORKERS

## BACKGROUND

The IAFF urges Congress to pass the Public Safety Employer-Employee Cooperation Act (pending reintroduction). This legislation ensures fire fighters and emergency medical workers have the right to work with their employers to address concerns related to working conditions.

## BENEFITS OF FIRE SERVICES COLLABORATION

Fire fighters and emergency medical workers face dangerous conditions while fighting fires, responding to vehicle accidents, and caring for critically ill and injured patients. Unlike private sector employees, fire and emergency medical workers have no federal protections for their rights to collectively bargain with their employers to improve working conditions and operational readiness. Recently, this cooperation enabled fire fighters, paramedics, and their communities to confront tough budgetary constraints, staffing challenges, and shortages of personal protective equipment amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

Studies show that when fire fighters and emergency medical workers collaborate with their employers, their communities have lower death rates per fire and more effective emergency responses. Fire

fighters and emergency medical workers also enjoy safer working conditions, improved wages, and more secure retirements. As personnel increasingly respond across state lines for wildfires, terrorist acts, and natural disasters, it is more important than ever to ensure they have the staffing, resources, and open dialogue needed to succeed.

Congress has recognized the need to support our nation's fire fighters and emergency medical workers. The Cooperation Act has enjoyed longstanding bipartisan support and, in 2007, was passed in the House with a majority of both parties voting in support. That vote, 314-97, sent a clear message that Congress intends to protect our frontline emergency responders.

## ESTABLISHING A FRAMEWORK FOR COOPERATION

The Cooperation Act recognizes the value of partnerships between fire fighters and emergency medical workers and their employers by protecting the rights to form a union, bargain over working conditions, develop a written agreement, and establish a dispute resolution mechanism. The Cooperation Act does not permit fire fighters and emergency medical workers to engage in strikes or lockouts.

Many states already recognize these rights and would see no impact from the Cooperation Act. States which do not protect these rights would have two years to draft laws consistent with this framework; however, states retain full independence in drafting the exact details of their laws.

## PROTECTIONS FOR STATES' RIGHTS AND EXISTING AGREEMENTS

The Cooperation Act includes protections for existing state laws, including right-to-work laws, and labor agreements. The legislation also exempts jurisdictions with less than 25 full-time employees or populations under 5,000.

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## **THE COOPERATION ACT ENJOYS BROAD BIPARTISAN SUPPORT WHILE PROTECTING STATES' RIGHTS**

- Legislation providing collective bargaining rights for fire fighters and emergency medical workers has received broad, bipartisan support in Congress.
- In 2007, the U.S. House of Representatives passed such legislation by a vote of 314 to 97 with a majority of both parties voting in favor.
- The bill gives maximum flexibility for states to craft their own laws and enables fire fighters and emergency medical workers to sit down and talk with their employers.
- The Cooperation Act respects the uniqueness of each state's employment needs by prohibiting fire fighters or emergency medical workers from striking, maintaining states' right-to-work laws, and enabling local jurisdictions to make public safety decisions.

## **COLLECTIVE BARGAINING HELPS PROTECT PUBLIC SAFETY**

- The federal government has a vested interest in improving local emergency response capabilities by supporting adequate staffing, training, and equipment.
- Beyond "routine" emergencies, preparedness for major interstate incidents, such as natural disasters and terrorist acts, relies on effective local fire and EMS agencies.
- This readiness is best supported when first responders can work directly with their local government leadership to ensure their needs are met.
- Fire fighters' ability to talk about their job with employers protects public safety and promotes preparedness.
- Collective bargaining has produced measurable improvements to staffing, training, equipment, and health and safety throughout the nation's fire departments.
- The benefits from this improved coordination are illustrated by the fact that civilian fire fatality rates are, on average, lower in states that provide these basic rights to fire fighters and emergency medical workers.

## **THE COOPERATION ACT IS A MATTER OF FAIRNESS FOR PUBLIC SAFETY**

- Fire fighters and emergency medical workers risk their lives every day to protect the public. They deserve the same rights to discuss workplace issues with their employer that the federal government grants most other workers.
- The United States has a long history of providing collective bargaining rights to workers.
- The freedom to assemble is established by the First Amendment to the Constitution and is key to our democracy.
- These labor rights for private sector workers were further codified over 80 years ago when Congress passed the National Labor Relations Act.
- First responders must be treated the same.

## **THE COOPERATION ACT STRENGTHENS PUBLIC SAFETY RETIREMENT AND WAGES**

- Due to the dangerous nature of the profession, fire fighters often are forced to retire early, putting an emphasis on smart retirement planning.
- Studies show that employers and employees who engage in collective bargaining achieve fairer pension contributions and improved retirement security.
- Collective bargaining also strengthens earnings for those still on the job and ensures they receive a fair wage for their work.
- Eight of the top 10 states, in terms of disposable income, recognize public employees' rights to collectively bargain.
- Conversely, nine of the bottom 10 states in terms of per capita income do not allow collective bargaining for all public sector workers.

# GIVE FEDERAL FIRE FIGHTERS A FAIR WORK-LIFE BALANCE

## BACKGROUND

The IAFF urges Congress to pass the Federal Firefighters Families First Act (H.R. 759) to help fire fighters employed by the U.S. government maintain a healthy work-life balance. More than 10,000 civilian fire fighters protect Department of Defense (DOD) installations and other federal facilities worldwide, playing a critical role in safeguarding national security. Despite the demands of their job, federal fire fighters must work a 72-hour schedule – nearly twice the average American workweek. These hours deny fire fighters sufficient time to rest and recover between shifts, and forces them to spend even more time away from their families.

## UNSUSTAINABLE WORKING CONDITIONS FOR FIRE FIGHTERS

Federal fire fighters have incredibly dangerous jobs. While protecting military bases, federal research labs, and veterans' medical centers, these fire fighters work nearly twice as many hours as the average person. In addition to responding to fires, medical emergencies, and other incidents on base, they also respond to 9-1-1 calls off base through mutual aid agreements with neighboring cities. Federal fire fighters often work 48- and 72-hour shifts to maintain this schedule.

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These fire fighters respond to emergency calls at all hours of the day and night and must maintain readiness without predictable or sufficient rest. This grueling schedule also prevents fire fighters from spending quality time with their families or tending to personal business. In practice, this arduous schedule forces fire fighters to either come to or return from work every 24 hours.

This demanding schedule can mean fire fighters receive an effective hourly wage of less than \$15/hour. And on top of that, federal pension rules devalue these pre-scheduled overtime hours, denying fire fighters' full pension value for 26% (or 19 hours) of their scheduled working time. Collectively, these factors increase the risk of injury and death on the job for federal fire fighters, and lead to significant mental health challenges.

## RELIEF FOR FIRE FIGHTERS

H.R. 759 helps federal fire fighters by capping their work weeks at a pre-scheduled 60 hours. This does not block them from working overtime hours when additional staffing is needed to protect DOD bases and other federal facilities. However, reducing their mandatory workweek hours will help these men and women gain the rest they need to perform at their best. Studies have shown that this time off is key to preventing physical injury, mental health concerns like PTSD, and ensuring fire fighters can be present in the lives of their family.

## PROVIDING FAIR WAGES FOR HARD WORK

H.R. 759 also makes meaningful changes to federal fire fighters' pensions by including the full value of their overtime hours when calculating their pensions. Current policy denies fire fighters the full value of their pre-scheduled overtime hours. H.R. 759 will recognize the full value of these hours and ensure fire fighters are fairly compensated for their service to our nation when they retire.



# TALKING POINTS

## UNSUSTAINABLE WORKLOAD

- Most workers across the nation maintain a 40-hour work week and are generally eligible for overtime wages after that point.
- Section 7(k) of the Fair Labor Standards Act establishes a 53-hour work week for fire fighters before they can earn overtime wages.
- More than 10,000 federal civilian fire fighters protect military installations, national laboratories, and veterans' medical centers around the world.
- These men and women work a pre-scheduled 72-hour week – nearly twice as many hours as the average American works in the same amount of time.
- Due to staffing shortages, federal fire fighters are often forced to work additional overtime shifts on top of this grueling work schedule.
- Federal fire fighters can expect to either go to, or return from, work every day.
- In some instances, federal fire fighters are forced to stay on duty for 48- and 72-hour shifts.

## DANGERS COME FROM OVERWORK

- When on duty, federal fire fighters respond to a wide range of 9-1-1 calls, including fires, medical emergencies, car accidents, and hazardous materials releases.
- Federal fire fighters also frequently respond to emergencies off-base as part of mutual aid agreements with neighboring jurisdictions.
- This demanding pace means fire fighters are often denied critical rest periods while on-duty.
- These fire fighters' prolonged periods of sleep deprivation have been found to contribute to already increased chances of developing mental health concerns like post-traumatic stress injury.
- This sleep deprivation also correlates with increased risks for cancer and heart attacks.
- Federal fire fighters already make significant sacrifices – forcing them to work these unsustainable schedules puts them at further risk for serious physical and mental health conditions.

## DENIED A WORK-LIFE BALANCE

- When fire fighters are forced to work these painfully long periods, their families suffer too.
- Fire fighters have commitments in their personal lives to raising their children, supporting their families, and maintaining friendships.
- 72-hour work weeks rob fire fighters of their abilities to fulfill personal obligations and be active, present members of their families.
- Forced and unscheduled overtime is especially painful for fire fighters, as it denies them the personal time that they and their loved ones desperately crave.
- Limiting federal fire fighters' scheduled work weeks to 60 hours will strike a fair balance between time spent at work and fire fighters' personal and recuperation times.

## FIRE FIGHTERS DENIED FAIR PENSION CALCULATIONS

- The promise of a fair pension and dignified retirement is a significant reason fire fighters stay on the job for as long as they do.
- Sadly, federal fire fighters are burdened with a pension that inaccurately reflects their service.
- While fire fighters earn overtime for their working hours in excess of 53 hours per week (i.e. 19 hours of weekly scheduled overtime), their pensions only value this scheduled overtime at their normal hourly rate.
- Over the course of their careers, federal fire fighters are denied the true value of thousands of hours of work.
- After spending their careers in federal service, fire fighters deserve to have a pension which accurately reflects the value of their labor.
- This legislation would ensure federal fire fighters receive full value for their scheduled overtime hours when calculating their pension earnings.

# ADDITIONAL ISSUES

In addition to the priorities highlighted in this book, the IAFF is actively working on a wide range of other legislative and regulatory initiatives to ensure fire fighters and emergency medical workers have safe working conditions, fair wages, and secure retirements. A brief description of some of these issues is below:

## REDUCING THE FLSA WORK PERIOD

Federal regulations currently force fire fighters to work a 53-hour week before they can be eligible to earn overtime. Fire fighters respond to far more calls for service and emergencies today than when this number was initially created decades ago. This grueling tempo leads to mental and behavioral health issues for fire fighters. The IAFF is working with the Trump Administration and members of Congress to lower the FLSA threshold and improve fire fighters' work-life balance.

## EXPANDING ACCESS TO CANCER SCREENINGS

Countless medical studies have proven that cancer is the number one enemy of fire fighters. Whether from emergency responses or even handling their own PFAS-laden turnout gear, occupational exposures lead fire fighters to develop cancer at rates far higher than the average person. Sadly, fire fighters often face financial barriers in accessing the cancer screenings that could save their lives. The FIRE Cancer Act (pending reintroduction) would establish a new funding source within the AFG program to assist localities in providing cancer screenings to their fire fighters. This grant program would ensure fire fighters have every opportunity to detect, and treat, cancer at its earliest stages.

## SUPPORTING MENTAL HEALTH

Maintaining strong mental and behavioral health is among fire fighters' most critical challenges. The IAFF's Peer Support program has shown the value of helping fire fighters look out for each other and serve as our own advocates. The IAFF strongly supports the Helping Emergency Responders Overcome Act (HERO Act; pending reintroduction), which would provide federal funding for fire fighter peer support programs, such as the IAFF's, and educate mental health professionals on the unique needs of fire fighters.

## SALT DEDUCTIBILITY ACT

For more than 100 years, federal law allowed taxpayers to deduct their state and local income taxes from their federal taxes. This principle ensured fairness and prevented fire fighters from paying exorbitant taxes when their employers often compel them to live in a certain jurisdiction. These taxes are also key to ensuring fire departments have the budgets needed to ensure full staffing levels and modern tools and apparatus. In 2017, Congress capped these deductions at \$10,000 per year – effectively double-taxing taxpayers. The IAFF urges Congress to pass the SALT Deductibility Act (H.R. 430), which would repeal the cap on SALT deductions and help fire fighters keep more of their hard-earned wages.

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