

INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF FIRE FIGHTERS



Statement of

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before the

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on

The Role of AFG and SAFER Grants in COVID-19 Response

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Thank you, Chairwoman Johnson, Ranking Member Lucas and distinguished members of the Committee. My name is Sandy McGhee and I am 11th District Vice President for the International Association of Fire Fighters (IAFF), representing fire fighters and emergency medical personnel in Texas, Oklahoma and the Panama Canal. I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today on behalf of General President Harold A. Schaitberger and the more than 320,000 professional fire fighters and emergency medical personnel who serve as frontline workers in our nation's public health response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

I come before you today to offer my testimony on the unique challenges fire fighters face every day as they respond to COVID-19 patients in their local communities, and how the Assistance to Firefighters (AFG) and the Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) Grant programs may serve to support fire departments and fire fighters in carrying out their mission.

The COVID-19 pandemic has challenged fire departments in new ways. Fire fighters and emergency medical personnel are responding to positive or potential COVID-19 patients, treating and transporting such individuals to the hospital. As they do so, personnel must protect themselves from infection and carry out decontamination procedures to ensure they do not further spread the infection in the community. At the same time, fire departments continue to respond to everyday emergencies, including fires, motor vehicle accidents, non-COVID emergency medical calls and hazardous materials incidents. All of this occurs in an environment where many of our members are under-resourced and understaffed.

We expect fire fighters to be there for us in a time of crisis, and the federal government has an important role to play supporting fire fighters so they can serve their communities. Especially now, government at all levels can do much to keep fire fighters safe and healthy, and make sure they have sufficient resources and personnel to do their jobs, including the job of caring for and transporting COVID-19 patients, safely and effectively. By providing funds directly to local fire departments in need of equipment, including personal protective equipment (PPE) and staffing needs, the AFG and SAFER grant programs are one of the most important tools at the federal government's disposal to ensure local fire fighters remain healthy and able to serve their communities.

As pre-hospital health care providers, fire fighters and emergency medical personnel are often the first workers in physical contact with infected persons. The vast majority of pre-hospital 911 emergency medical responses in the United States today are conducted by fire personnel cross-trained in emergency medical response. The nature of their work requires such personnel be in close proximity to patients in uncontrolled environments as they assess a patient's vitals, administer treatment and medications, and sometimes perform invasive procedures such as intubation. Paramedics and EMTs are confined with patients to an enclosed space in the back of an ambulance for significant periods of time, and may be exposed to a patient's bodily fluids, including airborne droplets from coughing.

It is imperative that responders performing this dangerous work are properly protected, both to limit the spread of the virus and to ensure they remain healthy and able to serve their communities. As we do not ask fire fighters to go into a burning building without the proper gear, neither should we ask them to respond to potentially infectious patients without the proper respiratory protection, isolation gowns and other equipment needed to prevent themselves from contracting the disease and transmitting the virus to other citizens. Yet, in far too many communities, we are doing just that - relying on fire fighters, paramedics and EMTs to respond to this public health crisis without the proper protection.

Even today, several months into the pandemic, fire departments across the country are reporting a shortage of all types of personal protective equipment, including N-95 respirators. In many communities, personnel have only enough respirators for a day or two before being forced to reuse them. Some communities lack any disposable PPE.

This situation is unsustainable and unacceptable. Without proper PPE, emergency medical responders will become exposed to COVID-19 and become a vector for disease, compounding the difficulties of containing the virus.

For example, in Texas, PPE shortages can be found in communities of all sizes. According to a survey of 251 emergency service districts conducted by the Texas State Association of Fire and Emergency Districts, two-thirds of respondents were concerned about a lack of PPE, and half said an inability to procure enough PPE has already affected responders.

In Dallas, Texas, fire fighters are reusing N-95 masks many times, a practice which reduces their effectiveness and places fire fighters, and the public they serve, at risk.

Reasons for the lack of personal protective equipment vary by community. Some communities lack sufficient funding to establish stockpiles of such equipment. In no community did any fire department anticipate a pandemic which would require all responders to wear protective gear for any interaction with the public. As we know, many COVID-positive patients are asymptomatic, so fire fighters must assume that any patient is positive and protect themselves accordingly; the burn rate of gear could not have been predicted.

At the same time, fire department budgets have been hit hard by the current economic crisis as local governments are facing decreased tax revenue and other significant fiscal pressures due to shuttered businesses and reduced tourism. This is particularly true in states such as Texas and Oklahoma which rely on sales tax revenue to fund public services. As a result, many fire departments are facing deep budget cuts, including potential fire fighter layoffs and reductions in force. A recent survey by the U.S. Conference of Mayors revealed that 52 percent of cities will incur budget cuts that impact public safety, and communities of all sizes expect to face furloughs and layoffs.

For example, my hometown of Tulsa, Oklahoma, relies primarily on sales taxes to fund public services. The economic slowdown at the start of the pandemic led, unfortunately, to a drastic revenue reduction for the city. For the month of April, the city was short on revenues from sales taxes by 15 percent, and we are currently expecting a budget shortfall of \$2.7 million. As a

result, the city has been forced to enact pay cuts and furloughs for most public employees. Although fire personnel are currently exempt from these cuts, we fear ongoing revenue shortfalls will lead to potential staff reductions among fire personnel.

We also know that cities of all sizes, all over the country, from New York City to Peoria, Illinois to Maumee, Ohio are facing potential fire fighter layoffs or furloughs in the coming months.

The impact on local communities, particularly in a time of crisis, from fire fighter layoffs cannot be overstated. Staff reductions will result in increased response times, which in turn lead to poorer outcomes for citizens seeking emergency help. Whether a fire or medical emergency, increased response times are associated with higher risk of civilian injury or death.

Layoffs and furloughs are also uniquely challenging as we continue to deal with the COVID-19 virus. As fire fighters experience high risk exposures to infected individuals, they are placed in quarantine for fourteen days, while infected fire fighters are placed in isolation. To date, the IAFF has recorded over 8,000 members having been quarantined and over 4,500 placed in isolation, and obviously unable to work. These absences place further stress on adequate response, making maintaining full staffing levels even more important.

The AFG and SAFER grant programs provide a key lifeline to cash-strapped fire departments facing reductions in force and shortages in PPE and other equipment. We are grateful that Congress provided \$100 million for AFG through the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act. This funding will help local fire departments obtain needed personal protective equipment and related supplies to help protect fire fighters. FEMA moved expeditiously to accept applications for this funding, and we are eager to see it awarded quickly.

Although the \$100 million in supplemental AFG funding is helpful, we know that fire departments will continue to have significant unmet needs, particularly as local governments face the nascent recession. That is why we are pleased that the U.S. House of Representatives included an additional \$1 billion for AFG and SAFER as part of the HEROES Act, H.R. 6800. Specifically, the bill included \$500 million in AFG funds for personal protective equipment and decontamination materials, and \$500 million in SAFER funds to hire, retain and rehire fire fighters. If appropriated, this funding will help ensure fire departments in municipalities large and small have sufficient personnel and equipment to care for all patients in their communities.

Additionally, as funds are appropriated to AFG and SAFER, it is imperative that fire departments be granted waivers from certain statutory requirements to allow departments with budgetary challenges the necessary flexibility to afford necessary equipment and personnel. For SAFER in particular, fire departments should be granted the flexibility to use funds to permit grantees retain or rehire fire fighters. We also believe SAFER grantees should receive waivers from certain budgetary requirements, including period of performance, cost-share, maintenance of expenditures and funding caps.

We also support waivers of budgetary requirements under AFG, particularly waivers of the local cost share and maintenance of expenditure requirements, as well as funding caps.

Together, these waivers will help fire departments save thousands of fire fighter jobs nationwide and ensure fire fighters receive the personal protective and decontamination equipment they need.

Absent these waivers, the restrictions under the programs will likely dissuade fire departments facing fiscal challenges, those departments which arguably need funding most, from applying for grants, potentially allowing desperately needed funds to go to waste. Most communities facing fiscal challenges will be unable to afford the local cost share, for example. And communities facing layoffs would be unable to apply for SAFER grants without waivers which allow for retention. My hometown of Tulsa, Oklahoma, for example, is unable to apply for a SAFER grant despite their dire fiscal situation described earlier in this testimony, as the grant is currently restricted to funding new, additional fire fighters. Although the fire department is fully staffed at present, attrition in future months will result in staffing reductions of 20 percent. By enacting waivers, Tulsa would be eligible for a grant to fill these positions and continue serving the citizens of Tulsa at full capacity.

While the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has chosen to implement a portion of these waivers, including the cost share, position cost limit, supplanting and minimum budget requirements for Fiscal Year 2019 and 2020 SAFER grants, they notably did not waive portions of the statute to permit grants be used to rehire or retain fire fighters. We are pleased the House included the full slate of SAFER waivers allowing funds to be used for such purposes as part of the HEROES Act, and urge they be included for any supplemental funding appropriated as well as FY20 and FY21 grants.

In conclusion, on behalf of the International Association of Fire Fighters, I appreciate the opportunity to testify today. Fire fighters are committed to serving their communities during this pandemic, but we cannot do it alone. Fire departments must be properly staffed and equipped to mitigate and contain the spread of COVID-19. As cash-strapped fire departments struggle in the wake of the economic shutdown, the AFG and SAFER grant programs can provide sorely needed resources to prevent reductions in fire fighter staffing and ensure responders have the necessary protection and equipment to stay healthy and on the job.

To the extent that I or the IAFF can assist the Committee in its efforts to ensure AFG and SAFER continue to provide local fire departments the resources they need to carry on with their missions, I am happy to offer our expertise and pledge to work closely with you and your staffs.

Again, I'd like to thank the Committee for the opportunity to testify today and am happy to answer any questions you may have.