

INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF FIRE FIGHTERS

LEGISLATIVE PRIORITIES

118TH CONGRESS, SECOND SESSION





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A Letter from the General President

DEAR MEMBER OF CONGRESS,

On behalf of the more than 344,000 men and women of the International Association of Fire Fighters, I present a copy of our 2024 Legislative Priorities. This book will provide you and your staff with a deeper understanding of the critical policy issues that impact America's professional fire fighters and emergency medical workers and the communities we serve. Improving the fire service requires assistance from elected leaders like you. Decisions made on Capitol Hill directly impact our ability to do our jobs safely and effectively. I say this not only as the General President of the IAFF, but also as a local fire fighter who still relishes the opportunity to make my community better by serving a tour at my firehouse.



IAFF leaders and members from across the country will gather in our nation's capital from March 4-6 to meet with their elected representatives. Please take the time to meet with IAFF members from your district and home state to hear their concerns and understand how the issues outlined in these pages are impacting public safety.

Thank you for your consideration of our issues. Please know that our entire office stands ready to assist you and your staff throughout the year. Do not hesitate to call on us. We look forward to working with you.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Edward A. Kelly". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Edward A. Kelly
General President

SAVE THE AFG/SAFER GRANT PROGRAMS

The AFG and SAFER grant programs provide more than \$700 million per year to ensure local fire departments are staffed and have the equipment needed to respond to emergencies. Unless Congress acts, these programs will be eliminated on October 1. Congress must pass the Fire Grants and Safety Act (H.R. 4090/S. 870) to ensure fire stations are staffed and that 9-1-1 calls are answered.

BACKGROUND

Too many communities risk the lives of their fire fighters and residents by allowing fire departments to operate without full staffing and modern, effective equipment. Studies have shown that the ability to maintain full staffing is one of the biggest predictors of safe and effective emergency responses.

The AFG/SAFER grants were created more than 20 years ago, delivering vital support to the fire service following the September 11th Terrorist Attacks. Each year, these grants provide more than \$700 million to local and state fire departments to recruit and retain fire fighters, provide training, and obtain equipment and apparatus. AFG/SAFER is the largest form of federal assistance that goes directly to fire

departments. These grants ensure America's fire service is prepared to respond to emergencies at home and in mutual aid agreements across the nation.

Since the creation of these programs, AFG/SAFER has awarded more than \$15 billion to fire departments. These grants have directly resulted in fire stations being staffed, fire trucks on the road, and lives being saved.

The authorization for AFG/SAFER lapsed at the end of FY 2023, and these programs now face a statutory sunset at the end of FY 2024. The Senate passed S. 870 in April 2023 by a 95-2 vote; however, the bill has not moved in the House. Congress cannot allow these programs to disappear and leave communities unprepared for emergencies. The IAFF urges Congress to pass H.R. 4090/S. 870.

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REAUTHORIZE THE U.S. FIRE ADMINISTRATION.

The United States Fire Administration (USFA) is the primary representative of the fire service within the federal government and helps fire departments be prepared to respond to emergencies. USFA plays a key role in training fire fighters at the National Fire Academy, leading fire-related data collection and analysis to shape public education efforts, and conducting research into PFAS and other threats to fire fighter health and safety. The U.S. Fire Administration's authorization also expired at the end of FY 2023 and must be reauthorized so that it can continue providing its critical support for the fire service.

ALWAYS READY TO ANSWER THE CALL

- In 2020, our nation's fire fighters and emergency medical workers responded to more than 36 million emergency calls for service.
- Fire departments are all-hazards response agencies that routinely answers calls for fires, medical emergencies, hazardous materials incidents, terrorism, and natural disasters.
- The responsibility to fund fire and EMS agencies largely falls on local governments.
- When tax revenues decline, public safety shouldn't suffer due to failures to maintain staffing levels or provide effective emergency response equipment.
- Since 2000, these grants have provided more than \$15 billion to ensure communities have the resources needed to save lives during emergencies.
- AFG and SAFER face a statutory sunset at the end of FY 2024.
- Congress has reauthorized these grants several times since they were created in 2000 — each time on a strongly bipartisan basis.
- Congress must reauthorize AFG and SAFER by passing the Fire Grants and Safety Act (H.R. 4090/S. 870).

FULL STAFFING LEVELS ARE KEY TO SAFE, EFFECTIVE RESPONSES

- Firefighting is an inherently dangerous job.
- Studies have shown that when jurisdictions cut staffing, fire fighters are more likely to be injured and are less effective at emergency response.
- The SAFER grant helps local government recruit and retain fire fighters — as well as protect these jobs during economic downturns.
- SAFER uses a sliding scale over several years to ensure local governments can maintain these new staff positions after the grant ends.
- These fire and EMS professionals are available to also provide interstate mutual aid responses.
- Emergencies happen regardless of local budgets.
- SAFER is a critical form of support to ensure fire houses aren't empty and communities unprepared.

EFFECTIVE EQUIPMENT IS NEEDED

- In addition to proper staffing levels, fire fighters also need to have modern, effective equipment and apparatus.
- Local governments often lack the funding to invest in higher capacity SCBA tanks, modern apparatus with advanced safety features, new extrication equipment, or multiple sets of turnout gear.
- AFG grants allow jurisdictions to obtain the tools and equipment needed to keep fire fighters safe and allow them to work more effectively.
- AFG also helps ensure fire fighters and emergency medical workers can obtain training to address emerging threats such as lithium-ion batteries and terrorism.
- When seconds count in emergency responses, fire fighters should not be forced to rely on outdated and ineffective equipment.

REAUTHORIZE THE U.S. FIRE ADMINISTRATION

- The U.S. Fire Administration (USFA) is housed within FEMA and serves as the primary representative of fire fighters and emergency medical workers within the federal government.
- In addition to training thousands of fire fighters each year at the National Fire Academy, the USFA also conducts in-depth data collection and analysis to identify trends in fire loss.
- This research is also translated into life safety education for both fire fighters and the public.
- Congress also recently tasked the USFA with investigating major fires to identify lessons learned.
- The USFA's authorization lapsed at the end of FY 2023 and must be renewed.
- The IAFF also supports increasing the USFA's authorization level to ensure it can continue leading fire and life safety efforts for the federal government.

SUPPORT SURVIVORS OF FALLEN PUBLIC SAFETY OFFICERS

BACKGROUND

The IAFF urges Congress to pass the Honoring Our Fallen Heroes Act (S. 930/H.R. 1719) to recognize first responders' occupational cancer deaths as line-of-duty deaths 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. Fire fighters are almost 15% more likely to die from cancer and nearly 200% more likely to develop some forms of cancer.

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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 die due 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.

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.

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 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 shown 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 200% 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.

SUPPORT THE DEVELOPMENT OF NEXT-GENERATION TURNOUT GEAR

BACKGROUND

The IAFF urges Congress to pass the PFAS Alternatives Act (H.R. 4769) to drive the development of next-generation protective gear. America's fire fighters are forced to use gear that offers limited protection and contains 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 – indicating a causal association between working as a fire fighter and developing cancer. Fire fighters are almost 15% more likely to die from cancer and nearly 200% more likely to develop some forms of cancer.

PFAS are a hazardous class of chemicals used in fire fighting protective gear. 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 45lbs), 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 protect them from the hazards of their jobs and not expose them to 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 (H.R. 4769) will authorize a \$25 million grant within the U.S. Fire Administration 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, 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 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, the Biden Administration classified PFAS 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.

ANY RESEARCH ON TURNOUT GEAR MUST BE LED BY FIRE FIGHTERS

- Firefighting is a very unique and often 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.
- Solid 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.

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 needs. The IAFF urges Congress to pass the Public Safety Officer Free Speech Act 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.

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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 ensure fire fighters have 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 (H.R. 7398), which would ensure that fire fighters and other first responders keep their rights to speak publicly about job-related issues. H.R. 7398 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.

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 have experienced 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 respect first responders by providing them safer working conditions. Unfortunately, fire fighters and emergency medical workers often face discipline for requesting this support.

FIRE FIGHTERS AND EMERGENCY MEDICAL WORKERS ARE OFTEN 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 even 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 protect 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 trampled on 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.
- Until fire fighters are guaranteed free speech, then cannot fully advocate for their safety and the safety of those they serve.

SUPPORT COLLECTIVE BARGAINING FOR FIRE FIGHTERS AND EMERGENCY MEDICAL WORKERS

BACKGROUND

The IAFF urges Congress to pass the Public Safety Employer-Employee Cooperation Act (H.R. 3539). 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 and federal employees, fire and emergency medical workers have no federal protections for their rights to collectively work 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 wildland fires, 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.

FAIRNESS FOR RETIRED FIRST RESPONDERS

BACKGROUND

The WEP/GPO provision denies Social Security benefits for retired first responders who paid their fair share simply because they chose a career in public service. Despite paying into Social Security through a second job, thousands of fire fighters and emergency medical workers are denied their full Social Security benefits because they were not eligible for Social Security through their primary job. The IAFF urges Congress to pass the Social Security Fairness Act of 2023 (H.R. 82/S. 597) and end the penalty on public service.

HOW WEP/GPO HURTS FIRE FIGHTERS

Fire fighters and other first responders often work second jobs to provide for their families. In some parts of the country, fire fighters' salaries are so low that these second jobs are needed to keep their families afloat. While most fire fighters do not qualify for Social Security through their primary job, they pay full Social Security withholdings on earnings from their second job.

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Congress created the WEP in 1983 to prevent people who didn't qualify for Social Security, and their survivors in the case of the GPO, from receiving full benefits. However, the WEP/GPO fails to distinguish between people who don't pay into Social Security and people who paid into Social Security through a second job. The WEP/GPO can slash retired fire fighters' Social Security benefit by more than \$500 per month.

Almost all workers must pay into Social Security for 10 years before they qualify for full benefits in their retirement. Unlike the average person, most fire fighters and emergency medical workers are forced to pay into Social Security for three times as long – 30 years – before they can receive their full benefits. The GPO can similarly cut the Social Security survivor benefits.

Like most retirees, fire fighters and other first responders often struggle to make ends meet in retirement. Losing hundreds of dollars per month in fairly earned benefits needlessly penalizes a first responder and their family for their career in public service. Retired fire fighters are not seeking a hand-out – they just want the benefits that they paid for and earned.

REPEAL THE WEP/GPO

The IAFF is proud to support the Social Security Fairness Act of 2023 (H.R. 82/S. 597). This bill would fully repeal the WEP/GPO and end this unfair penalty that hurts thousands of retired first responders every year. Retirees already struggle to maintain a dignified retirement with a limited income. The WEP/GPO makes this challenge even harder by denying them the benefits that they earned. Congress needs to end the WEP/GPO and ensure that retired public servants can have the retirement that they deserve.

FIRE FIGHTERS DESERVE SOCIAL SECURITY BENEFITS

- Fire fighters and other public safety often work second jobs to provide for their families.
- In some parts of the nation, fire fighters earn an average salary of just \$32,000 – forcing them to find other income to keep their families afloat.
- While most fire fighters are ineligible for Social Security, they generally pay full Social Security withholdings on earnings from their second job.
- Most workers only need to pay into Social Security for 10 years in order to receive their full benefits.
- First responders must pay into Social Security for 30 years through their second job to qualify for full benefits.

WHAT IS THE WEP/GPO?

- Congress created the Windfall Elimination Provision (WEP) and Government Pension Offset (GPO) in 1983 to prevent people from receiving Social Security benefits that they did not earn.
- The WEP/GPO does not distinguish between those who don't qualify for Social Security and those, like fire fighters, who qualify through a second job.
- The WEP can reduce a fire fighter's Social Security payment by more than \$500 per month.
- The GPO is a similar provision which can reduce the Social Security survivor benefit.
- Congress needs to develop a better, more precise tool to address mispayment of Social Security benefits to those who did not earn them.
- Fire fighters and other first responders cannot be penalized because other people are not paying their share into the Social Security program.
- Fire fighters are generally forced to pay into Social Security for 30 years just to receive the same level of benefits as private sector workers.

FIRST RESPONDERS SHOULD RETIRE WITH DIGNITY

- In many states, retired fire fighters and other first responders receive extremely limited pension incomes of just \$25,000 per year.
- When these retirees plan for their retirement, they do so assuming that they will receive the Social Security benefits that have paid for.
- Losing more than \$500 per month in their Social Security benefits can force retirees to make tough decisions about which bills to pay or medications that they can afford.
- It's bad enough that fire fighters are routinely denied fair wages during their working years – penalizing them further in retirement is an added burden that they do not deserve.
- After a career of public service and sacrificing their own well-being, fire fighters and other first responders deserve to know that their hopes for retirement will not be stolen from them.

REPEALING THE WEP/GPO

- More than two-thirds of the House and half of the Senate has cosponsored H.R. 82/S. 597.
- This enormous, bipartisan group of Members of Congress recognize the unfair burden that the WEP/GPO places on retired public servants.
- Congress cannot continue to allow the Social Security program to be balanced at the expense of retired fire fighters.
- The Social Security Fairness Act will ensure that fire fighters across the nation can receive the benefits that they have paid for and earned.
- Fire fighters are not looking for a hand-out, just the benefits that they deserve.

HOW TO LOBBY TIPS & BEST PRACTICES

WHY LOBBY?

Lobbying is vital to making a difference in the lives of fire fighters. Virtually every aspect of a fire fighter's job – from equipment and staffing, to bargaining rights and pensions – is shaped by an elected official. Simply put, lobbying lets you tell your story and fight for what matters to you and your members.

IAFF members can use the online form to contact the Government Affairs Department for assistance in securing meetings with members of Congress, preparing for these meetings, and developing lobbying strategies. All IAFF members are also encouraged to attend the annual Alfred K. Whitehead Legislative Conference in Washington, D.C., where we actively lobby federally elected officials.

MEETING PREPARATION

When meeting with your elected official, it is essential to prepare well in advance to take advantage of this opportunity to make a difference for you and your members.

Make sure your attire is appropriate, regardless of whether you are meeting in-person or online. First impressions matter. Make sure your elected official sees you as the professional and informed fire fighter that you are.

HAVE A CLEAR GOAL

- **What is it that you hope to achieve?** Sometimes you may have a specific “ask” for your elected official, and other times you may just be looking

to build a relationship. Both are good reasons to lobby your elected official, but these two goals have very different preparation needs.

- **What are your asks?** Sometimes you may need your elected official to introduce a bill, cosponsor a bill, vote on a bill, etc. When this is the case, make certain you clearly and directly ask for what you need from your elected official. While you always want to be polite, now is not the time to be timid about what your local needs.

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF TO BETTER PREPARE

- What is the issue that needs to be addressed?
- Why is this issue important?
- How can I demonstrate this issue?

KNOW YOUR ISSUES/ASKS

- Do research ahead of time so that you feel you have a confident grasp on your issues/asks.
- Remember that your elected official will look to you for your expertise and recommendations on the topic.
- Develop a one-page summary of the issue and explanation of your ask. Contact the Government Affairs Department if you need a summary. The IAFF maintains one-page summaries of our top priorities that IAFF members can use when meeting with their members of Congress.

PERSONALIZE YOUR ASK

- Add personal testimony and anecdotes to your presentation to humanize your issues and provide real-world examples of how fire fighters in your local are being affected by this issue. Personal stories make for more compelling arguments.
- Elected officials and their staff look to experts like you to educate them on the issue and explain how it impacts fire fighters in their district. Your one-page summary may be the briefing document that an elected official brings with them to inform their vote on a bill.

KNOW YOUR ELECTED OFFICIAL

- Do you have a prior relationship with your elected official? If so, is it positive or negative?
- Have you worked with this elected official or their staff before?
- Has this official supported or opposed this issue in the past?
- What committees does this official serve on? Is this official in a leadership position on the committee?
- Is the official a freshman member or do they have a long legislative history?
- Is the official fire fighter friendly?
- Do you have relationships with any of their staff?
- What is your elected official's background? Are they familiar with firefighting and unions or will they need help to understand what a career in firefighting looks like and why unions are a good thing?

DURING THE MEETING

- Meetings are often very brief, so make the most of your time. You may also meet with staff rather than the elected official. This isn't a bad thing, as elected officials rely very heavily on their staff for advice and information on how to vote. Winning over their staff will ensure you have an advocate inside their office.
- If multiple people attend, figure out who will say what in advance and plan how to transition from person to person.
- Know the current status of the bills you are advocating for. Be able to articulate arguments in favor of your issues and stay consistent and clear with your "asks" and messaging.
- Start with a brief description of the issue and its impact on your local's members.
- Explain the issue's impact with a personal story. Elected officials always want to know the specific impact of an issue in their district or state.
- Give arguments in favor – make sure to also know the opposition's arguments and prepare for any pushback you may receive.
- Listen and respond to their questions or thoughts. You may want to take notes for future conversations.
- Try to get a firm commitment on the next steps. Elected officials, and especially their staff, may not be able to give an immediate answer to your "ask." However, try to understand how their decision process works and how you can best influence it.

- Write down any questions or concerns for follow-up conversations.
- If you do not know the answer to a question, it is completely fine to respond later via email or phone call. You can simply say, "I am not sure, but I would be happy to find out and get back to you." Under no circumstances should you make up an answer or lie. You want to establish yourself as a trusted source of information. Being authentic and doing follow-up research is a great way to build your position as a trusted advisor.
- Reiterate the official's commitment or next steps and any ways you can help in their research and decision-making.

AFTER THE MEETING

DEBRIEF WITH THOSE WHO ATTENDED THE MEETING

- Did you deliver your message?
- Did you present a clear "ask"?
- What feedback did you receive?
- Were there questions that you need to follow up with an answer?

SEND A WRITTEN THANK YOU

- Email is acceptable.
- Thank the elected official on social media for meeting and/or commitments.

TAKE NOTES FROM THE MEETING

- Write down as much as you can remember from the meeting.
- Did they request any additional information?
- Is a follow-up necessary?

THINGS TO CONSIDER

- The best way to achieve lobbying success is to develop productive, long-term relationships with elected officials (and staff).
- Officials want and need knowledgeable people they can trust on selected issues.
- Relationship building takes time, effort and repeated interactions.
- Accept that you may not always agree with your official, but it pays to have a positive relationship.

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

Continue to engage and build relationships with your elected officials outside of meetings. Don't wait until you have an ask to engage. There are several things you can do to build relationships with your elected officials and their staff:

- Invite your officials to station visits.
- Invite your officials to do a ride-along.
- Invite your officials to a FIREOPS 101 event.
- Attend fundraisers and community events for your officials.
- Attend town halls for your officials.
- Tag officials on social media when applicable.

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:

ESTABLISHING FAIR PAY AND HOURS FOR FEDERAL FIRE FIGHTERS

Federal fire fighters at the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) work a regularly scheduled 72 hours per week, and receive wages of just \$12 per hour in some places. These grueling schedules and low wages deny fire fighters opportunities to recover after demanding shifts. The IAFF urges Congress to pass the Federal Firefighter Pay Equity Act (H.R. 1235), which will require the DOD to reduce its fire fighters' schedules to a 56-hour week and increase their wages to a meaningful level.

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 Biden 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 (H.R. 5212) 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; H.R. 3671/S. 1925), 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. 2555), which would repeal the cap on SALT deductions and help fire fighters keep more of their hard-earned wages.

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