

Firefighter Assistance Grants: Homeland Security Issues in the 116th Congress

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Background

Structural firefighting—which typically refers to fighting fires in residential, commercial, and other types of buildings—is primarily the responsibility of local governments. During the 1990s, shortfalls in state and local budgets, coupled with increased responsibilities of local fire departments, led many in the fire service community to call for additional financial support from the federal government.

In response, Congress established firefighter assistance grant programs within the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to provide additional support for local fire departments. In 2000, the 106th Congress [established](#) the [Assistance to Firefighters Grant Program \(AFG\)](#), which provides grants directly to local fire departments and unaffiliated Emergency Medical Services (EMS) organizations to help address a variety of equipment, vehicle, training, and other firefighter-related and EMS needs. AFG also supports fire prevention projects and firefighter health and safety research and development through the [Firefighter Prevention and Safety \(FP&S\)](#) grant program.

Subsequently, in 2003, the 108th Congress [established](#) the [Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response \(SAFER\) Program](#), which provides grants to fund firefighter hiring by career and combination fire departments, and recruitment and retention by volunteer and combination fire departments.

Funding

Firefighter assistance grants are distributed [nationwide](#) to career, volunteer, combination, and paid-on-call fire departments serving urban, suburban, and rural areas. There is no set geographical formula for the distribution of AFG or SAFER grants. Award decisions are made by a peer panel based on the merits of the application and the needs of the community. The [majority of AFG funding](#) goes to rural (mostly volunteer) fire departments, while the [majority of SAFER funding](#) goes to urban (mostly career) fire departments. The Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2019 ([P.L. 116-6](#)) appropriated \$700 million for firefighter assistance grants, consisting of \$350 million for AFG and \$350 million for SAFER, with funds to remain available through September 30, 2020. Dating back to the programs' establishment, Congress has [appropriated](#) a [total](#) of \$8.325 billion to AFG (since FY2001), and \$4.235 billion to SAFER (since FY2005).

The Administration's FY2020 budget proposal requests \$688.688 million for firefighter assistance, consisting of

\$344.344 million for AFG and \$344.344 for SAFER. This is a 1.6% decrease from the FY2019 level.

Reauthorization

On January 3, 2018, the President signed the United States Fire Administration, AFG, and SAFER Program Reauthorization Act of 2017 ([P.L. 115-98](#)). [P.L. 115-98](#) extended the AFG and SAFER authorization through FY2023 at a level of \$750 million for each program (plus additional annual increases based on the Consumer Price Index); extended sunset provisions for AFG and SAFER through September 30, 2024; provided that the U.S. Fire Administration (USFA) may develop and make widely available an online training course on AFG and SAFER grant administration; expanded SAFER hiring grant eligibility to cover the conversion of part-time or paid-on-call firefighters to full-time firefighters; directed FEMA, acting through the Administrator of USFA, to develop and implement a grant monitoring and oversight framework to mitigate and minimize risks of fraud, waste, abuse, and mismanagement related to the AFG and SAFER grant programs; and made various technical corrections to the AFG and SAFER statute.

Issues

An issue for the 116th Congress is how equitably and effectively grants are being distributed and used to protect the health and safety of the public and firefighting personnel against fire and fire-related hazards. Another issue is [annual appropriations](#) for AFG and SAFER. As is the case with many federal programs, concerns over the federal budget deficit could impact funding levels for AFG and SAFER. At the same time, firefighter assistance budgets will likely receive heightened scrutiny from the fire service community, given the local budgetary shortfalls that many fire departments may face.

Additionally, a continuing issue related to SAFER hiring grants has been whether SAFER [statutory restrictions](#) should be [waived](#) to permit grantees to use SAFER funds for retention and rehiring. Division F, Title III, Section 307 of the [Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2018](#) states that FEMA "may" grant SAFER waiver authority. However, for the 2018 round of SAFER awards, FEMA has chosen not to exercise that authority, and thus will not provide SAFER hiring grants for retaining or rehiring firefighters. The Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2019 ([P.L. 116-6](#)) (Division A, Title III, §307) also includes SAFER waiver authority for the FY2019 round of SAFER awards. The Administration's FY2020 budget proposal does not request SAFER waiver authority.