



## INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF FIRE CHIEFS LEGISLATIVE HOT SHEET

*A Guide for Talking with Members of Congress*

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April 2019

### The 116<sup>th</sup> Congress

#### Protect the FIRE/SAFER Grant Programs

- **The Problem:** Many fire departments across the country cannot afford the equipment, training, and staffing necessary to meet a baseline level of readiness. This situation puts firefighters and their communities in danger.
- **The Solution:** The FIRE and SAFER grant programs augment local funding and provide much needed assistance to meet these needs. To date, the programs are working well to improve preparedness and response capabilities, but much more needs to be done. The Fiscal Year (FY) 2019 Consolidated Appropriations Act (P.L. 116-6) appropriated \$350 million each for the FIRE and SAFER grant programs. For FY 2020, President Trump requested \$344.344 million for each program, a 1% cut.
- **The Explanation:** *If you have received a grant under the FIRE or SAFER grant programs, explain how you used the money and how it has improved your ability to serve your community in response to all hazards. If you have not received a grant under these programs, explain how you could use that grant money. Give a specific example of how a FIRE or SAFER grant has helped or could help you serve your community.*
- **The “Ask:”** Ask your representatives and senators to support at least \$405 million each for the FIRE and SAFER grant programs in FY 2020.

#### Funding for the U.S. Fire Administration (USFA) and National Fire Academy (NFA)

- **The Problem:** Many fire service leaders have been concerned about the level of funding that the USFA and NFA receive, and whether they will be able to fulfill their missions and respond to emerging challenges. The Fiscal Year (FY) 2019 Consolidated Appropriations Act (P.L. 116-6) appropriated \$45.679 million for USFA. Of that amount, \$1.5 million is allocated for infrastructure improvements at the National Fire Academy. For FY 2020, President Trump requested \$46.605 million for USFA, a 2% increase.
- **The Solution:** Because America’s fire and emergency service is critically important to national preparedness and response, it needs to have a strong voice within DHS. Also, fire programs need a consistent and high level of funding.
- **The Explanation:** Explain the importance of receiving training through the NFA. *If you have taken NFA courses on campus or online, explain what you learned and how it has helped you to do your job better. Also, discuss why your community needs up-to-date information from the National Fire Incident Reporting System.*
- **The “Ask:”** Ask your representatives and senators to support \$50 million for the USFA and NFA in FY 2020.

## **Requirement to Give Back Public Safety Communications Spectrum in the T-Band**

- **The Problem:** The law that created the FirstNet Authority also mandated that the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) auction the public safety T-Band spectrum (470-512 MHz) by February 2021. All public safety operations must vacate the band within two years of auction close. The T-Band is a key spectrum resource allocated for radio communications in 11 major urban areas and the surrounding 50-mile radius of these cities of the United States. It is unclear where these public safety users would relocate. The National Public Safety Telecommunications Council (NPSTC) estimates that it will cost at least \$5.9 billion to migrate these users and this migration will affect other users in the band, including broadcasters and industry. Soon, the FCC will begin preparing for the pending auction.
- **The Solution:** Support the repeal of the T-Band auction provision. In January, Representative Eliot Engel (D-NY) introduced the Don't Break Up the T-Band Act (H.R. 451) to repeal the statutory requirement to auction the T-Band.
- **The Explanation:** *If your department's land-mobile radio communications are on the T-Band*, explain how this requirement to migrate from the T-Band will hurt your communications. Explain why it is important for your agency to have adequate spectrum for voice communications and how this affects interoperability in your area. *If you do not rely on the T-Band*, explain why it is critical for public safety to have access to reliable radio communications and how transitioning a radio system would impact critical time and resources.
- **The "Ask:"** Ask your representatives to cosponsor H.R. 451 to protect public safety communications on the T-Band.

## **EMS Grants for Rural Fire/EMS Agencies**

- **The Problem:** Rural fire and EMS agencies often face uniquely difficult budgetary challenges as they may lack the tax base to provide strong funding and often receive incomplete reimbursements for the cost of providing emergency medical care. As a result, these agencies struggle to afford basic EMS equipment and medications. Additionally, increasing drug shortages have significantly increased the costs of medications that are commonly provided to critically ill and injured patients.
- **The Solution:** The Supporting and Improving Rural EMS Needs (SIREN) Grant was established in 2018 to provide funding for procuring EMS supplies, recruiting personnel, and running EMS licensure classes. Only public and non-profit fire/EMS agencies are eligible to receive funding. The IAFC urges Congress to provide \$30 million for the SIREN grant in FY 2020.
- **The Explanation:** The SIREN grant assists budget-challenged rural fire and EMS agencies in providing life-saving services in their communities. These grants are for public and non-profit agencies located in rural areas. This eligibility requirement ensures that these funds are provided to fire and EMS agencies in need.
- **The "Ask:"** Ask your representatives and senators to support funding the SIREN Act at \$30 million for FY 2020.

## **Federal Taxation of Volunteer Incentives**

- **The Problem:** State and local governments use property tax rebates and other incentives to recruit and retain volunteer firefighters. The Internal Revenue Service views these incentives as income. A

previous federal law excluded any property tax benefit and up to \$360 per year of all other state and local benefits to volunteer firefighters and EMS personnel from taxable income. *This law expired at the end of 2010.*

- **The Solution:** Representative John Larson (D-CT) introduced the Volunteer Responder Incentive Protection Act (VRIPA; H.R. 1241/S. 1210), which would permanently reinstate the tax benefit and raise the \$360 cap to \$600. Representatives Richard Neal (D-MA) and Kevin Brady (R-TX) and Senators Chuck Grassley (R-IA) and Ron Wyden (D-OR) also introduced a large retirement-related legislative package (H.R. 1994/S. 972), which contains a one-year reauthorization of the VRIPA.
- **The Explanation:** Explain that taxing such incentives makes them ineffective and may hinder recruitment and retention of volunteer emergency responders. Further, point out that the number of volunteer firefighters nationwide has decreased from 880,000 in 1984 to 814,850 in 2015 according to the NFPA's *U.S. Fire Department Profile*. State and local incentives are important when recruiting and retaining volunteers who must struggle to balance their careers and the obligations of today's two-income families.  
**The "Ask:"** Ask your representatives to cosponsor the Volunteer Responder Incentive Protection Act (H.R. 1241/S. 1210) and the House and Senate's bipartisan retirement package (H.R. 1994/S. 972).

### **Strengthen Federal Incentives for Fire Sprinkler Retrofit Installations**

- **The Problem:** Automatic fire sprinkler systems are a proven way to reduce the chances of being killed or injured in a fire as well as significantly limit damage to a building. Congress recently allowed fire sprinkler systems to qualify for deduction under Section 179 of the tax code. However, when Congress passed the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act (P.L. 115-97) in 2017, it contained an unintentional drafting error which prevented fire sprinkler systems from qualifying for bonus depreciation until 2027 and then qualifying for a 15-year depreciation period after 2027.
- **The Solution:** Senators Pat Toomey (R-PA) and Doug Jones (D-AL) and Representatives Jimmy Panetta (D-CA) and Jackie Walorski (R-IN) introduced the Restoring Investment in Improvement Act (S.803/H.R. 1869) which fixes this error and allows fire sprinkler systems, in addition to other "qualified improvement properties" (QIPs) recognized under Section 168 of the tax code, to qualify for these accelerated depreciation rates.
- **The Explanation:** When Congress passed their tax reform bill in 2017, they wanted to incentivize property owners to make their buildings safer through the installation of fire sprinkler systems and other fire alerting and suppression systems. However, the drafting error in P.L. 115-97 limits the ability of property owners to take full advantage of these incentives. S. 803/H.R. 1869 is a bipartisan and cost-neutral bill to correct this drafting error and strengthen tax incentives for fire sprinkler retrofit installations.
- **The "Ask:"** Ask your senators and representatives to cosponsor S. 803/H.R. 1869 and correct the QIP drafting error.

### **Improve Hazardous Materials Response Training for First Responders**

- **The Problem:** The national energy boom has focused attention on the importance of safely transporting crude oil and other hazardous materials across the country. According to the U.S. Department of Transportation's Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration (PHMSA), the overall volume of crude oil moving by rail has quadrupled in less than a decade. Recent incidents in the transport of crude oil have demonstrated the need for local fire and emergency services to be prepared for hazmat incidents.

- **The Solution:** In FY 2015, Congress created the ALERT grants to provide hazardous materials training for volunteer or remote emergency responders. The IAFC was awarded \$2.6 million in ALERT grant funds to develop a training program in coordination with the IAFF, NVFC and the other major fire service organizations. The grant program is focused on providing training for incidents involving rail shipments of crude oil, ethanol, and other flammable liquids. The training will consist of both in-person and web-based components. The FY 2019 Consolidated Appropriations Act (P.L. 116-6) would allow funding for the ALERT grants.
- **The Explanation:** *If you have crude oil or other hazmat rail shipments in your jurisdiction*, explain how you plan and train for possible incidents. Also, explain the time commitments and expenses of planning and training for rail and hazmat incidents. Explain how federally-funded, web-based and in-person training can help your department prepare for a potential incident involving the transportation of crude oil or other hazardous materials.
- **The “Ask:”** Ask your representatives and senators to reauthorize PHMSA to use unspent funds under the Hazardous Materials Emergency Preparedness Grants program to continue funding the ALERT grants.

### **Supporting First Responder Mental Health Needs**

- **The Problem:** Firefighters and EMS personnel provide vital services to their communities and, in doing so, regularly experience significant mental stressors. The cumulative effect of these exposures can lead to significant mental health concerns for first responders. Sadly, many first responders struggle with post-traumatic stress disorder and other mental health challenges. Very few resources are currently available to pre-emptively identify and treat first responders struggling with these challenges. Additional resources also are needed to educate mental health professionals on the mental health needs that are unique to firefighters and EMS personnel.
- **The Solution:** Representative Ami Bera (D-CA) introduced the Helping Emergency Responders Overcome Act (HERO Act; H.R. 1646) which takes several important steps to assist first responders in addressing mental health needs. The HERO Act would create a peer counseling program to teach firefighters and EMS personnel to identify mental health concerns in their colleagues and refer them to treatment. The HERO Act also will facilitate the creation of educational materials to inform mental health professionals of the mental stressors which are unique to firefighters, EMS personnel, and chief officers. Lastly, H.R. 1646 would create a registry to track suicides among first responders in order to identifying important trends.
- **The Explanation:** The HERO Act takes an important step to establish pre-emptive solutions to prevent future suicides and mental health emergencies. The peer counseling program will be an important way to educate firefighters and EMS personnel about warning signs to look for in their colleagues as well as identifying treatment options for those in need. While many mental health professionals are superbly qualified, they may be unaware of the unique stressors experiences by firefighters and EMS personnel. The HERO Act’s educational resources will be key in helping these professionals understand their patients’ experiences and identify how to best treat them.
- **The “Ask:”** Ask your representative to cosponsor the HERO Act (H.R. 1646).

For further information about federal legislative issues, please feel free to contact the IAFC’s Government Relations and Policy Department at (703) 273-0911 or go to [www.iafc.org/gr](http://www.iafc.org/gr). In addition, you can [Follow @IAFC on Twitter](#) for real-time updates and information!