

Statement of Mr. Ed Carlin
Training Officer of the Spalding Rural Volunteer Fire Department
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Chairman Wu, Ranking Member Smith, and Members of the Committee, thank you for giving me the opportunity to appear before you today to provide testimony in regards to the AFG program. My name is Ed Carlin. I live in the small town of Spalding located 60 miles away and belong to the Spalding volunteer fire department, a department made up of 35 volunteers. I also help serve my community as an elected official on the city council. In addition, I am also a career FF currently serving as Captain on the Grand Island Fire Department. Our fire department functions with 68 members operating out of 4 stations. We provide emergency services such as fire, EMS, rescue, hazardous material response, airport response and technical rescue such as trench and high angle rescue.

While off duty, I teach both fire and EMS education to departments in Nebraska. As a career firefighter, a volunteer firefighter and a fire & EMS instructor I have been able to see the benefits of the AFG and some of the short falls of the grant as I traveled throughout the state. I was asked to come before you and give an oral testimony to what I have seen and experienced on a local and community level, where I am involved.

Funding for career and volunteer departments was almost impossible to obtain until the AFG was established. A lot of the departments are in areas classified as low income areas. Although these designations offered relief to citizens in the area, it did nothing to help the fire departments. With poor economies not just locally but across the nation – along with many areas being classified as low income – funding for equipment and staffing was becoming impossible to secure.

The community where I reside – Spalding, Nebraska – had this problem until awarded an AFG grant in 2008. The community had only one fire apparatus, a 1948 pumper that could not hold water due to a rusted tank. This tank could not be fixed or relined due to the structural integrity of the tank. When a structure fire broke out they

would have to park this pumper next to a hydrant and deploy a portable tank so they could pump out of it until mutual aid arrived from the Rural Fire District. Valuable time was lost setting up this tank, allowing a fire to further destroy the property and eliminating the window of opportunity for a rescue.

Our ability to protect the two things a firefighter is sworn to protect, life and property, was jeopardized in our community. When Spalding applied for a grant they opted for the Mini pumper for several reasons. The smaller size allowed it to fit in the current building our pumper was housed in and allowed for a quicker response. Once the 5% in matching funds was obtained, the grant was submitted and as stated earlier we received the grant. This new mini-pumper now allows the village to respond with a reliable pumper to help mitigate emergencies in our area.

Obtaining equipment to protect our fire fighters and allow them to conduct their missions in a safe, efficient manner would be next to impossible without AFG program. I believe this program is on the right track of fulfilling its objective of protecting the public and firefighters from the hazards of fire. I do know that we have a long way to go to meet these objectives. It is still hard for some departments to come up with their matching portion of the grant, which ultimately keeps them from applying. I know of a few departments who are not applying this year because they will not be able to meet the required match for the grant. As easy as it sounds to obtain 5 to 10% in matching funds, it is still very hard to do for some departments that have small budgets with no leeway.

Grant Review Criteria

In the profession of fire fighting it is often said that all firefighters are professionals and are held liable for their duties whether they are from a career or volunteer department. In the 2009 AFG grant, new priorities were outlined giving higher level of consideration to departments that protect a larger population and have a higher call volume. This is a highly competitive grant and this provision alone could possibly eliminate several rural area grants from advancing to the next round of "peer review", where the grants are actually read and discussed. I understand the higher call volume will show a

greater benefit of the award, but the grant should not discriminate on the basis of the population served by a certain fire department. A life is a life and death does not discriminate by population. Possibly, DHS should give higher consideration to departments by the square miles they protect as well since most rural areas have huge coverage areas.

I recently instructed a rural department which I could not allow to participate in any live fire exercises because their bunker gear did not meet the required standards. They were not able to complete some of the realistic training that I feel is critical for fire fighters to experience and learn from. If this department was dispatched to a fire call today and had a rescue situation in front of them I can almost guarantee that not one firefighter would hesitate to attempt the rescue. Not one would say "I can not go in because Instructor Carlin told me my gear is not compliant with NFPA standards." It is what they are trained to do and whether we like it or not they are going to do their job and attempt to save a life. Fortunately, an AFG grant was awarded to them and the department is in the process of acquiring new gear to protect their fire fighters. This is just another example of why we need to make sure this grant remains a grant to help fire fighters and fire departments equally across the nation based on their needs.

It is stated in the Program Guidance for the 2009 AFG that "*Our primary goal is to help fire departments and nonaffiliated EMS organizations meet their firefighting and emergency response needs. AFG seeks to support organizations that lack the tools and resources necessary to more effectively protect the health and safety of the public and their emergency response personnel with respect to fire and all other hazards*". Based off this I do not believe the intent of the grant program was for it to become biased toward the population of a given area.

I feel the AFG is not a complex grant to apply for but, due to the urgent need and competitiveness, many departments use grant writers to write their grants. There is nothing wrong with using a grant writer. It can provide an edge by using experience and expertise in the field to demonstrate needs, further increasing the chance of an award. There are still thousands of departments that could not afford a grant

writer to and will continue to submit their own grants due to the lack of funding

Funding from the AFG is right on track. The money goes straight to the fire department and 100% of it can be used for their request.

Whether they are a small or large fire department, this grant is needed by all departments across the nation to upgrade their equipment so we can continue to provide our services to the public.

SAFER

The SAFER program has also been a huge benefit to fire departments across the nation in this time of economic crises. Fire departments nationwide are being forced to freeze hiring and lay off firefighters. Unlike factories, manufacturing plants and other businesses that can slow production or reduce their production to coincide with their layoffs, we can not. There is no control over fires, accidents, injuries and other emergency calls and our call volumes will not decline. Departments nationwide will continue to respond to their call volume understaffed and it will be the public who will suffer by waiting longer for a rescue unit or engine company to arrive.

Fire scenes are demanding and often require continuous aggressive actions to stop the fire. Waging this war in dangerous environments close to a point of exhaustion, firefighters work as they await other units to arrive and relieve them so they can rehabilitate and return to the battle. At these scenes manpower is often the primary resource and without it firefighters will be forced to operate in multiple roles, putting them in dangerous situations without the help they need.

As these cuts to fire departments are made I would not expect the number of injuries and fatalities to firefighters on fire and emergency scenes to decline, but possibly increase instead. It was evident early on the SAFER grant was needed to adequately staff the fire departments manning to a level where they could safely respond. SAFER funding needs to remain at the \$420 million, but taking money from the AFG program and adding it to the SAFER program is not the solution. With 21,000 departments applying for \$3.2 billion dollars in the AFG it is evident that there is still a need for the AFG to be fully funded

Thank you and I will be happy to answer any questions you may have.