Testimony Submitted by the

National Volunteer Fire Council

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Chairman Wu, Ranking Member Smith and distinguished members of the subcommittee, I'd like to thank you for giving me the opportunity to be here today to speak with you about the Assistance to Firefighters Grant (AFG) program and the Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) Grant program as the subcommittee prepares legislation to reauthorize both programs. My name is Jack Carriger and I am the Chief of the Stayton Fire Department in northwest Oregon as well as the First Vice-Chairman of the National Volunteer Fire Council (NVFC).

The NVFC is a nonprofit organization representing the interests of the more than one million volunteer firefighters and EMS personnel in the United States. Volunteer firefighters and EMS personnel serve in more than 20,000 communities across this country. Their services save local taxpayers more than $37.2 billion each year. Without volunteer firefighters and EMS personnel, thousands of communities, particularly in rural areas, simply could not afford to provide effective emergency services to their citizens.

Program Overview

The AFG and SAFER programs provide assistance to local fire and EMS agencies through a competitive grant process that ensures that funding is efficiently directed to the communities that need it most. AFG funds are used primarily to purchase equipment, protective gear, emergency vehicles and training while SAFER funds are used for hiring career firefighters as well as recruitment and retention of volunteer firefighters. By statute, five percent of AFG funds are set aside to support "fire prevention and control activities." These funds have traditionally been administered as a separate program, the Fire Prevention and Safety (FP&S) grants.

With several notable exceptions, AFG, SAFER and FP&S use local matching requirements restrictions on using federal funding to replace local spending to ensure that the programs are building capacity and improving safety rather than simply helping local governments balance their budgets. The size of grant awards is capped based on community size to ensure that there is funding available to help a large number of communities of different sizes.

Over the past few years, I have represented the NVFC at criteria development and strategic planning meetings that the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) holds in order to receive stakeholder input on AFG, SAFER and FP&S. In March, I participated in a conference call with other stakeholders to provide input on criteria for the Fire Station Construction (FSC) grants that were funded through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) of 2009.

Stakeholder input has been solicited though criteria development meetings since the inception of AFG in 2000 – a process that was codified during the last AFG reauthorization. DHS is able to take the input from the criteria development meetings and use it to recalibrate the grant criteria each year to ensure that it is addressing the most pressing needs of the fire service. The meetings also offer DHS an opportunity to share information with the fire service about emerging trends within the grant programs that may necessitate consideration of additional adjustments to the criteria.

In addition to consulting the fire service through the criteria development and strategic planning meetings, DHS convenes panels of firefighters to evaluate and rank grant applications based on merit. Based on the panel rankings, awards are made directly to fire and EMS agencies. This funding delivery method, combined with the outstanding work of Grants Program Directorate (GPD) of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), which administers the various programs, has resulted in more than 95 percent of appropriated funds reaching local first responders.

AFG

When AFG was created in 2000, it was the first federal program designed to assist local fire agencies, with the goal of bringing all fire departments up to a baseline level of readiness. Congress authorized a needs assessment study to identify major areas of need based on national consensus standards in 2000 and again in 2004 when AFG was reauthorized. The second needs assessment study was published in 2006 and found that significant progress had been made in several areas, including:

- A 56 percent increase in the number of departments with enough portable radios to equip everyone on a shift.
- A 33 percent increase in the percentage of departments with enough self-contained breathing apparatus to equip everyone on shift.
- A 129 percent increase in the number of departments with thermal imaging cameras.
- A 21-42 percent increase (depending on the type of incident) in the overall percentage of departments with written agreements to coordinate the use of outside personnel and equipment in a response.

A 2007 DHS Program Assessment Rating Tool (PART) review of AFG determined that the program was 95 percent effective – the second highest rating of any DHS program behind only the Secret Service Domestic Protectees program. The Assessment found that AFG has been particularly successful at reducing on-scene firefighter injuries and reducing the percentage of grant dollars spent per firefighters trained.

In addition to the statistical documentation of the program's success, there is substantial anecdotal evidence available on various websites including www.firegrantsupport.com, which is maintained by FEMA, and www.firegrantdata.com, which is maintained by several national fire service organizations. My own fire department has received three AFG three AFG grants have been for firefighter safety and wellness. The first grant we received replaced Self Contained Breathing Apparatus that was for the most part over twenty years old and no longer compatible with or neighboring departments we know can work with all of our surrounding departments. The second grant assisted us in providing our firefighters with new Personal Protective Equipment which included turnout gear, helmets, gloves and boots that meet current NFPA standards that our old equipment, in most cases over fifteen years old, did not meet and left our firefighters exposed to much higher risk. Our third grant provided a firefighter rehabilitation unit designed to provide monitoring, care and treatment to firefighters and other emergency service agencies on scene. These grants have allowed us to provide a much higher level of protection to our volunteers then we have ever been able to provide before.

One of the challenges in tracking the impact of AFG in statistical terms is a lack of comprehensive data on fire incidents nationally. The National Fire Incident Reporting System (NFIRS) is in the process of being updated using funds authorized last year in the United States Fire Administration Reauthorization Act of 2008, which was written by this Committee. More consistent and comprehensive reporting of fire incidents will allow us to examine with far greater accuracy the true impact of AFG. Additionally, Congress should authorize another needs assessment of the fire service in order to examine progress that has been made since the last assessment was performed.

In each of the past three years, an average of nearly 20,000 fire departments and EMS agencies have submitted requests for an average of more than $3 billion through AFG. The largest percentage of these requests – both in the number of applications and funds requested – have come from volunteer departments, which are first-due responders to approximately 70 percent of communities nationwide.

Volunteer departments serve urban and suburban areas but are most highly concentrated in rural communities that have small tax bases and higher rates of poverty on average than larger jurisdictions. DHS needs assessments have consistently shown that equipment, training and apparatus needs are most acute in volunteer departments. Many volunteer departments rely on used equipment and apparatus, either purchased from or donated by other departments. According to a 2005 survey by the U.S. Fire Administration, in communities of 2,500 or less, only 43.5 percent of fire departments purchase new apparatus. According to the same survey, 71 percent of those communities are served by fire departments that are involved in structural firefighting without all personnel having formal training.

Over the years, the roles and responsibilities the fire service has been asked to take on have been gradually expanding – a process that accelerated after the terrorist attacks on our country in September, 2001. Since that time, a number of grant programs have been established through DHS to improve preparedness, including providing assistance to first responders. Funding through these programs is made available primarily in densely populated communities, which are

perceived to have a higher risk of terrorist attack. Since Hurricane Katrina, the priorities of these programs have been altered to recognize the importance of preparing for a wider range of disasters. Still, the bulk of funding is still being directed to urban areas – both directly and by providing larger allocations of block-grant funding to states with major population centers.

Of all DHS programs, the various firefighter assistance grants stand alone in serving communities of all sizes and distributing funding based on need rather than population (although population protected is one component taken into account in ranking AFG applications). AFG is particularly important to volunteer departments because it addresses the pressing needs that represent the largest proportion of their budgets – equipment, training and apparatus expenditures.

Even with little-to-no costs in the form of personnel compensation, most volunteer departments still rely on private fundraising to balance their operating budgets. Volunteer firefighting and EMS professionals respond to emergency calls with or without the type of equipment, training and apparatus that their counterparts in many larger communities take for granted. For many volunteer departments, AFG represents their only option for purchasing up-to-date firefighting tools.

AFG is also an invaluable tool in encouraging training within the volunteer fire service. Earlier I cited the percentage of fire departments serving small communities that have not trained all of their personnel for structural firefighting, and similarly dismaying statistics exist for training levels of personnel responding to other types of incidents, including EMS, wildland fires and hazardous materials incidents, among others.

One of the things that is consistently stressed at stakeholder criteria development meetings is that departments receiving grants for equipment and apparatus must have their personnel trained to use it. As a result, departments must certify that their personnel are trained to a level consistent with minimum national consensus standards for the use of a piece of equipment or apparatus that they are applying for. Departments that do not already meet this minimum standard are still eligible to receive AFG funds if they adopt a plan to train their personnel and their applications will actually score higher if they include funds to pay for necessary training.

Last year, the NVFC adopted a position that all volunteer fire departments should at least be working towards training all personnel to a level consistent with NFPA 1001: Standard for Fire Fighter Professional Qualifications. This is not a unique position within the fire service, but it was a major step for the NVFC because there are a number of volunteer departments in the country that do not believe training their personnel to that level is possible, desirable or some combination of the two.

Incorporating national consensus standards into the AFG criteria is having a ripple effect on the way that some states approach training. The Mississippi Fire Academy recently changed its field-delivered training and now offers classes that lead to certification based on NFPA 1001 requirements. The NVFC's Mississippi Alternate Director George Stevens is the Lamar County (MS) Fire Coordinator and reports that this change was in part the result of a lobbying effort by the state's County Fire Coordinators, who were motivated by the requirements in AFG.

Some of the major challenges facing volunteer departments in training their personnel include a lack of resources, time constraints on the individual volunteers and a lack of locally-available training opportunities. AFG is a vital part of the solution to dealing with all of these issues, first and foremost by providing departments with resources to pursue additional training.

State training agencies also play a critical role in training volunteer firefighters, but are not currently eligible for funding through AFG. These agencies deliver training to fire departments in remote areas by producing and disseminating training materials, funding training offerings at local colleges and other institutions and through regional training facilities. State training agencies should be made eligible to apply for funds through AFG to supplement ongoing efforts and encourage expanded training offerings.

SAFER

Staffing was originally a component of AFG, but based on input from the fire service through the criteria development process, AFG has never funded staffing grants. Instead, Congress created the SAFER program in 2003 to address the significant personnel needs that exist throughout the fire service.

SAFER's primary function is to assist career, combination and volunteer departments with hiring personnel. There is also a minimum 10 percent set-aside required by statute to assist combination and volunteer departments with recruitment and retention (R&R) of volunteers.

In each of the past three years, 1,300-1,700 fire departments have applied for $750-$593 million in funding through SAFER. One of the reasons for the low level of requests through SAFER (relative to AFG) has been high local matching requirements for hiring grants. Many departments have been forced to return hiring grants because they are unable to meet the local match. This was addressed, at least in the short-term, in ARRA, which eliminated local matching requirements for SAFER for FY 2009 and 2010. There has never been a local matching requirement for the R&R portion of SAFER, which have represented 30-40 percent of total requests over the past three years.

There is no single more significant challenge facing the volunteer fire service than recruitment and retention. While the total number of people who are members of volunteer fire departments has remained relatively constant over the past 25 years, the average age of those individuals has been increasing to the point where today, approximately half of all volunteer firefighters are over the age of 40. In 1987, roughly 65 percent of volunteer firefighters were 39 years of age or less.

As this trend suggests, fire departments are increasingly having difficulty recruiting and retaining the next generation of volunteer firefighters. There are a variety of reasons for this: increased training requirements mean that individuals have to commit more time than ever to volunteering; people today are commuting longer distances to work, leaving less time for training and putting particular strain on departments ability to have adequate staffing during working hours; an increase in the number of one- and two-parent households in which all the parents are working;

and pressure from career fire departments/union locals to prevent career firefighters from volunteering during off-duty hours (also known as “two-hatters”).

This last issue is already being addressed to some degree through SAFER. Fire departments that receive a SAFER hiring grant are prohibited by statute from discriminating against two-hatters. Two-hatters tend to be individuals who got their initial firefighter training and experience through their hometown volunteer fire department. In a 2005 study, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) estimated that 27,000 (close to 10 percent of) career firefighters volunteer during off-duty hours. The volunteer protections in SAFER ensure that hiring grants aren’t increasing capacity in career departments by subtracting from the ranks of volunteers.

Volunteer fire departments can use R&R funds for a variety of activities from marketing campaigns to establishing modest financial or other incentives to their personnel. In addition to fire departments, local and state interest organizations are eligible to apply for R&R funding. My department received a SAFER grant in FY 2008 that is currently in the process of being implemented. The grant includes matching funds to assist the District with hiring a full time volunteer recruitment and retention office for the District, this person will also assist the nine surrounding Fire Districts with their R & R challenges in meeting the need for increased volunteer firefighting.

The Oregon Volunteer Firefighters Association received a SAFER grant in 2006 to establish a state-wide marketing program to assist local fire departments in recruiting volunteers in their areas. The Oregon Fire Chief’s Association also received a SAFER Grant in 2007 that was incorporated with the Volunteers grant to enhance recruitment and retention across the state. A number of departments have reported an increase in interest and in volunteers since the programs were implemented.

One of the major benefits to allowing interest organizations to compete for SAFER funds is that they can implement programs with the potential to reach volunteer fire departments that are not applying for R&R grants. Many of these departments desperately need additional personnel but are unsure about how to go about implementing a recruitment and retention program. Through the grant that OVFA received in 2006, we have directly assisted more than 200 and indirectly assisted all 340 volunteer and combination departments – many times more than the 32 fire departments in the State of Oregon that applied for SAFER funding in FY 2006.

As I just alluded to, one of the major benefits of allowing interest organizations to compete for SAFER funds is that they can implement programs with the potential to reach the vast majority of volunteer fire departments that are not applying for R&R grants. Many of these departments desperately need additional personnel but are unsure about how to go about implementing a recruitment and retention program. Through the grant that OSFA received in 2006, we have assisted more than… departments in the state of Oregon, three times the number of departments in the state that applied for SAFER funds.

Unfortunately, national organizations are not currently eligible for R&R funding. The NVFC is already active in promoting recruitment and retention on a number of fronts, operating a national 1-800-FIRELINE phone number where individuals interested in learning about volunteering can

be connected with a department in their area and last year developing, in partnership with USFA, an extensive Recruitment and Retention manual. National organizations should be made eligible to compete for R&R grants so that they have access to additional resources to leverage ongoing efforts and establish new initiatives for departments nationwide.

FP&S

As mentioned earlier, FP&S grants are a component of AFG. By statute, FP&S must comprise at least five percent of funds appropriated to AFG, although in recent years the actual awards have been in excess of that figure.

While AFG and SAFER focus on building response capacity, FP&S focuses on reducing the national fire problem through prevention activities, with a primary goal to target high-risk populations and mitigate high incidences of death and injury. Over the past three years, approximately 2,700-3,330 fire departments and interest organizations have applied for $270-$448 million through FP&S.

The NVFC has received FP&S funds to operate our Heart-Healthy Firefighter program, the only national program dedicated to saving America's firefighters and EMS personnel from heart disease, the leading cause of line-of-duty death. Through the Heart-Healthy Firefighter program, the NVFC disseminates information, materials and programs to implement locally that emphasize heart health through fitness, proper nutrition and lifestyle choices to firefighters and EMS personnel. The program has also provided more than 15,000 health screenings at no cost to firefighters.

In the 2004 AFG reauthorization, the matching requirement for interest organizations was eliminated in an attempt to encourage additional applications. Since the reauthorization we have seen a substantial increase in applications from interest organizations. Unfortunately, since that time we have also seen a major decrease in funding requests from fire departments. In FY 2007, the last fiscal year for which application statistics have been made available on www.firegrantsupport.com, applications from non-fire departments made up nearly 43 percent of total funds requested. Between 2005 and 2007, fire departments have gone from requests through FP&S have fallen from $394 million to $191 million.

The NVFC would like to see the FP&S local matching requirement eliminated altogether in order to level the playing field between fire departments and interest organizations and encourage more applications generally.

NVFC Priorities for Reauthorization

The NVFC's main priority for reauthorization of AFG/FP&S and SAFER is to extend the programs without substantial changes. We believe that the programs are well-run, distributing funding in an efficient manner to the most deserving awardees. Through the criteria development and strategic planning meetings, DHS is already able to make adjustments to the programs on a yearly basis to ensure that the program is responsive to the shifting needs of the fire service.

There are a few changes that we would like to see made, that I alluded to earlier and will summarize again:

> Congress should authorize additional tools for assessing AFG/FP&S and SAFER. This would include another fire service needs assessment to measure the progress that has been made in bringing fire departments up to a baseline level of readiness based on national consensus standards. It would also include developing tools to analyze the impact that grants are having in communities and incorporate data from NFIRS.
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> State fire training academies should be made eligible grantees through AFG, including grants to purchase vehicles and equipment. Grants for state training academies should be capped at $1 million, the same as all but the largest fire department jurisdictions. State training academies are a critical component of creating and delivering training throughout the country and especially in rural areas.
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> National organizations should be made eligible to apply for SAFER R&R grants. Recruitment and retention is one of the most significant challenges facing the volunteer fire service today. State and local interest organizations are already eligible to apply for these grants and have been able to use funds to assist hundreds of fire departments. National organizations could use the same approach to benefit an even larger group of departments.
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> The local matching requirement for fire departments through FP&S should be eliminated. This would hopefully re-invigorate participation by fire departments in the FP&S program as well as create equity between fire departments and interest organizations, which currently have no matching requirement.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify here today. I look forward to answering any questions you might have.