

Testimony of Bill Pascrell, Jr.
Science & Technology Committee
Subcommittee on Technology & Innovation
“Reauthorization of the FIRE Grant Programs”
Wednesday, July 08, 2009

I want to thank Full Committee Chairman Bart Gordon, Subcommittee Chairman David Wu and Ranking Member Adrian Smith for holding this important hearing and allowing me to testify before this Subcommittee about the need to reauthorize the fire grants, an issue which has been very near and dear to me.

I am very proud to say that in the 106th Congress I authored the original FIRE Act and helped lead the effort with many of my colleagues in Congress to get this vital grant program started. At that time we in Congress began to realize that our national public security could not be ensured if we simply left it to states and localities to provide the equipment and resources necessary for our firefighters. It was a great sight to behold so many of our nation’s finest and bravest firefighters come to the halls of Congress and lobby their Members on the need to pass the FIRE Act. I think it’s especially noteworthy that all the fire service organizations—volunteers and career—truly joined together and worked hand-in-hand to help get the FIRE Act up and running.

In the end the FIRE Act was passed and the Assistance to Firefighters Grant (AFG) Program was officially established through Title XVII (17) of the FY2001 National Defense Authorization Act. After the terrible attacks we witnessed on 9/11 few could argue against the critical need for these fire grants. On that fateful day 343 firefighters lost their lives while bravely trying to save others. The lesson was clear – we needed to provide those firefighters with the equipment and training necessary to match their bravery and strength. With those men and women as our inspiration, we fought on a bipartisan basis to establish funding for fire grants and protect those grants against repeated annual cuts in the President’s budget.

Since 2001, this program has positively impacted public safety by providing more than \$3 billion for infrared cameras, personal protective gear, hazmat detection devices, improved breathing apparatuses, advanced training and fitness programs, fire engines, prevention and education programs, and interoperable communication systems. A number of independent evaluations of the program have demonstrated its success:

- On May 13, 2003, the U.S. Fire Administration (USFA) released the first independent evaluation of the Assistance to Firefighters Program and concluded overall that the program was “*highly effective in improving the readiness and capabilities of firefighters across the nation.*”
- Another evaluation was released by the DHS Office of Inspector General in September 2003, which concluded that the program “*succeeded in achieving a balanced distribution of funding through a competitive grant process.*”
- Finally, in the FY 2008 DHS Program Assessment Rating Tool report issued in May, the FIRE Act grant program received the second highest rating of any program in DHS scoring only one percentage point lower than the U.S. Secret Service Domestic Protectees program.

After the success of the FIRE Act, we again worked with all the fire services groups in the 108th Congress to address concerns that our nation’s firehouses were not being adequately staffed. In response we passed the Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response Act—the SAFER Act, which authorized grants to career, volunteer and combination local fire departments for the purpose of increasing the number of firefighters to help communities meet industry minimum standards and attain 24-hour staffing to provide sufficient protection from fire and fire-related hazards.

Together FIRE and SAFER make up what we commonly refer to as the fire grant programs and while I could go on for days relating the countless stories of lives that were saved or disasters that were averted throughout our nation due to these grants, the point I want to make here is that the fire grant programs are as vital and necessary today as the day we passed them. Today, in the midst of a terrible economic recession, localities throughout America are being forced to cut budgets and unfortunately public safety funds are too often the target. Sadly while public safety budgets can increase and decrease from year to year, the threat of fire and natural disaster are constant – these threats in no way accommodate for our economic condition.

Furthermore, the need for FIRE grants is made clear by the statistics, according to the 2006 DHS report *Four Years later – A Second Needs Assessment of the U.S. Fire Service:*

- 60 percent of fire departments do not have enough self-contained breathing apparatus to equip all firefighters on a shift;
- 48 percent of fire departments do not have enough personal alert safety system devices to equip all emergency responders on a shift;
- 65 percent of fire departments do not have enough portable radios to equip all emergency responders on shift;
- Less than 20 percent of fire departments in the United States are able to cover the cost of apparatus replacement through their normal budget.

Similarly, the need for the SAFER grants is demonstrated by the large number of firefighters being laid off throughout the nation. I imagine the Members here know of at least one similar situation in their own district. Finally, I want to make the point that in FY 2009, nearly 20,000 fire departments across the country applied for more than \$3.1 billion in FIRE Act grant assistance – so no one should be able to claim that the demand for these grants does not still exist.

Mr. Chairman, I came here today to state what we all should agree upon, that it is essential that we reauthorize both the FIRE and SAFER grants programs in this 111th Congress. Clearly adjustments must be made to both programs based on the lessons we have learned, but that should not and can not hinder us from advancing these fire grant programs which have shown to be effective. I have always said that real homeland security starts on the streets of our local towns and not in the hallways of Washington –I truly believe these fire grants awarded to local municipalities are key to our homeland security infrastructure.

Mr. Chairman I thank you again for this invitation and the chance to speak on this essential issue.