

FEMA's Firefighter Assistance Grants: Reauthorization or Sunset?

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Under current law (15 U.S.C. 2229(r) and 15 U.S.C. 2229a(k)), sunset provisions for the Assistance to Firefighters Grant (AFG) and the Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) programs will go into effect on January 2, 2018, unless the 115th Congress enacts AFG and SAFER reauthorization legislation. On August 2, 2017, the Senate passed the AFG and SAFER Program Reauthorization Act of 2017 (S. 829) by unanimous consent. S. 829 would repeal the sunset provisions for AFG and SAFER, as well as reauthorize appropriations for both programs through FY2023. The House has not passed AFG and SAFER reauthorization legislation. On September 28, 2017, H.R. 3881, the AFG and SAFER Program Reauthorization Act of 2017, was introduced and referred to the House Committee on Science, Space, and Technology. H.R. 3881 is identical to the Senate-passed S. 829.

AFG and SAFER Basics

The AFG and SAFER grant programs are structural firefighter assistance grant programs housed in the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) in the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). Both competitive grant programs provide direct funding primarily to local fire departments. AFG includes funding for firefighting equipment, protective gear, emergency vehicles, and training. Additionally, AFG grants support Emergency Medical Services (EMS) training, equipment, and vehicles in fire departments and EMS organizations not affiliated with hospitals. AFG also supports fire prevention projects and firefighter health and safety research and development through the Firefighter Prevention and Safety (FP&S) grant program. SAFER grants fund firefighter hiring by career and combination fire departments and recruitment and retention by volunteer and combination fire departments.

The majority of AFG funding goes to rural fire departments, while the majority of SAFER funding goes to fire departments in urban areas. Dating back to the programs' establishment, Congress has appropriated

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a total of \$7.625 billion to AFG (since FY2001), and \$3.5 billion to SAFER (since FY2005). The FY2017 appropriation was \$345 million to AFG and \$345 million to SAFER.

Structural Firefighting in the United States

Structural firefighting—which typically refers to fighting fires in residential, commercial, and other types of buildings—is primarily the responsibility of local governments. According to the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA), 1,160,450 firefighters protected the United States in 2015, consisting of 30% career firefighters and 70% volunteer firefighters. According to the U.S. Fire Administration, there are nearly 30,000 fire departments throughout the nation.

Although improving over the past 25 years, the United States has one of the higher fire death rates in the industrialized world. According to the NFPA, in 2016 there were 1,342,000 total fires reported, 2,950 civilian fire deaths, 14,650 civilian fire injuries, an estimated \$10.6 billion in direct property loss, 69 on-duty firefighter deaths, and 62,085 firefighter injuries.

Origin of AFG and SAFER

During the 1990s, while structural firefighting activities were (and continue to be) the responsibility of states and local communities, shortfalls in state and local budgets coupled with increased responsibilities of local fire departments led many in the fire community to call for additional financial support from the federal government. At that time, there did not exist a dedicated federal program, exclusively for firefighters, which would provide funding directly to local fire departments to help address a wide variety of equipment, training, staffing, and other firefighter-related needs. Accordingly, AFG was established and first authorized in 2000 and SAFER in 2003.

The most recent AFG and SAFER reauthorization—the Fire Grants Reauthorization Act of 2012 (Title XVIII, Subtitle A of the FY2013 National Defense Authorization Act, P.L. 112-239)—reauthorized AFG and SAFER through September 30, 2017, and included sunset provisions for both programs that go into effect on January 2, 2018.

Reauthorization or Sunset?

An issue for Congress is whether to enact the AFG and SAFER reauthorization, thereby repealing the sunset of these programs—which otherwise will go into effect on January 2, 2018. Proponents of these programs argue that AFG and SAFER grants are vital for local fire departments and cite studies finding that responsibilities of fire departments are expanding as local resources are being cut, that more fire departments are turning to AFG and SAFER grants for support, and that the smaller the community protected, the greater the need.

Opponents of AFG and SAFER cite the need to cut federal spending, argue that structural fire protection is more appropriately funded solely by state and local governments, and point to research questioning the efficacy of these programs in reducing the nation's fire loss.

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