Reauthorization of the FIRE Grant Programs

Written Statement of

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Good morning, Chairman Wu, Ranking Member Smith, and distinguished members of the subcommittee. I am Jeff Johnson, First Vice President of the International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFC), and fire chief of Tualatin Valley Fire and Rescue, which is located in Beaverton, Oregon. I appreciate the opportunity to testify this morning on the importance of reauthorizing the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) Assistance to Firefighters Grant (AFG) program, which strengthens the baseline operational capabilities of America's fire and emergency services.

The IAFC represents the leadership of over 1.1 million firefighters and emergency responders. IAFC members are the world's leading experts in firefighting, emergency medical services, terrorism response, hazardous materials spills, natural disasters, search and rescue, and public safety policy. Since 1873, the IAFC has provided a forum for its members to exchange ideas and uncover the latest products and services available to first responders.

The Fire and Emergency Service Community

America's fire and emergency services are the only organized group of American citizens that is locally situated, staffed, trained, and equipped to respond to all types of emergencies. There are approximately 1.1 million men and women in the fire and emergency services – approximately 300,000 career firefighters and 800,000 volunteer firefighters – serving in over 30,000 fire departments around the country. They are trained to respond to all hazards ranging from earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes and floods, to acts of terrorism, hazardous materials incidents, technical rescues, and fires. America's fire and emergency services also provide 68 percent of the nation's pre-hospital 9-1-1 emergency medical response.

The fire service protects America's critical infrastructure – the electrical grid, interstate highways, railroads, pipelines, petroleum and chemical facilities – and is, in fact, even considered part of the critical infrastructure. The fire service protects federal buildings, including military installations, and interstate commerce. No passenger airliner takes off from a runway that is not protected by a fire department.

The Success of the Assistance to Firefighters Grant Program

The AFG program is one of the few grant programs dedicated to all-hazards preparedness and response. The FIRE grant program was created in 2000 as part of the Fiscal Year (FY) 2001 National Defense Authorization Act (P.L. 106-398) to improve the baseline operational capability of America's fire service through improved equipment, training, and staffing. The program also includes the Fire Prevention and Safety (FP&S) grants, which are designed to enhance fire prevention programs and fire safety research. In 2004, Congress reauthorized the program. The SAFER grant program was created in 2003 as part of the FY 2004 National Defense Authorization Act (P.L. 108-136) to specifically address the staffing shortages in career, volunteer and combination fire departments. Between FY 2001 and FY 2009, Congress appropriated $4.815 billion for

the FIRE grant program. Also, Congress appropriated $689 million for the SAFER grant program between FY 2005 and FY 2009.

From the IAFC's perspective, the AFG program has been very successful. The programs distribute federal funding directly to local fire departments, which reduces the amount of overhead and processing costs that are found in other DHS grant programs. Every year, DHS convenes annual meetings of the major fire service organizations to develop the criteria for awarding the FIRE and SAFER grants, which ensures that the award process is attuned to the needs of the end users. The AFG grant funds are awarded through a peer-review process to ensure that applications are judged on merit and demonstrated need. The programs also are designed to ensure that federal funds are used to supplement, and not supplant, local budgets. These factors ensure that the federal funds are used judiciously to meet the program's goal of improving public safety.

There is clear evidence of the AFG program's success based on external federal studies. In 2003, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) surveyed over 1,500 AFG recipients to assess the effectiveness of the program. The USDA found that "more than 97 percent of the respondents reported that the AFG program had a positive impact on their department's ability to handle fire or fire-related incidents." More than 75 percent of the respondents said that the grants had a "significant" impact on their operational capabilities. In addition, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) reviewed the program in 2007, and rated it "Effective." Notably, the OMB also gave the program a 100 percent score for "Program Management" and "Program Results/Accountability."

In 2006, the U.S. Fire Administration (USFA) and the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) completed a statutorily-mandated analysis of the AFG program entitled "Matching Assistance to Firefighters Grants to the Reported Needs of the U.S. Fire Service." The report compared data received from fire service needs assessments in 2001 and 2005. This report demonstrated that the AFG program had begun to make progress in meeting the needs of the fire service. The following examples show some of the progress made by the program nationwide:

- The percentage of departments where there were not enough portable radios to equip everyone on a shift declined by 13 percentage points (from 77 percent to 64 percent).
- The usage of thermal imaging cameras increased (and the need therefore decreased) by 31 percentage points (from 24 percent to 55 percent).
- The percentage of departments without enough SCBA to equip all emergency responders on a shift declined by 10 percentage points (from 70 percent to 60 percent).
- The percentage of departments without enough PASS devices to equip all emergency responders on a shift declined by 14 percentage points (from 62 percent to 48 percent).

The report also found improvements in the size of the population covered by fire prevention programs. The programs include plans review; permit approval; routine

testing of active alarm systems; the distribution of free smoke alarms; and programs that work with at-risk youth to reduce arson.

One problem in measuring the effectiveness of these programs is that the most recent data that we have is from 2006. The data shows that the AFG program was beginning to show progress. However, we would encourage the committee to support an updated needs assessment and further analysis of the AFG program's effectiveness as part of a FIRE-SAFER reauthorization bill.

The Continued Demonstrated Need for the AFG Program

While the studies listed above have documented the success of the AFG program, there is still a demonstrated need for its reauthorization. In 2006, the USFA and NFPA also released a report entitled "Four Years Later - A Second Needs Assessment of the U.S. Fire Service." This document updated an earlier 2002 needs assessment. The 2006 report still found a number of equipment and training shortages that can be addressed by the AFG program:

- An estimated two-thirds (66%) of departments have at least some personal protective clothing that is at least 10 years old. This includes basic equipment, such as helmets, bunker gear, coats and boots.
- An estimated 63 percent of fire departments involved in wildland firefighting have not provided formal training in those duties to all involved personnel.
- An estimated 36 percent of fire departments involved in emergency medical services or hazardous materials response have not provided training to all involved personnel.
- In communities with a population of less then 2,500, 21 percent of fire departments, nearly all- or mostly-volunteer departments, deliver an average of four or fewer volunteer firefighters to a mid-day house fire.

In light of the recent economic downturn, many fire departments across the country have seen their budgets cut. To respond to these budget cuts, fire stations have been shut down, firefighters have been laid off, and training, equipment, and fire prevention budgets have been cut. Meanwhile, fire departments face increased risks, including the widespread transportation of ethanol-blended fuels (which requires new training and equipment) and the outbreak of pandemic influenza, along with the continued risks presented by natural disasters and man-made incidents. Over the next two years, the IAFC believes that the FIRE and SAFER grants will be critical for helping local fire departments prepare for and respond to these risks.

Proposed Changes to the FIRE Program

While the IAFC believes that the AFG program runs well, we would recommend the following legislative changes to the FIRE grant program:

- **Waiver to the local match for economically-challenged jurisdictions:** According to the current statute, most fire departments have to meet a 20 percent match. A jurisdiction with 50,000 or fewer residents has to meet a 10 percent match, and a jurisdiction with 20,000 or fewer residents only has to meet a 5 percent match. There are some jurisdictions that cannot meet these local match requirements due to the economic downturn, but still need to replace antiquated equipment or need new training. Since the FIRE grant program is designed to improve the operational baseline capability of fire departments, we ask that the committee create the authority for the DHS to grant a waiver for the local match for these needy departments. We would be willing to work with the committee to develop a fair, credible and transparent process for granting waivers for needy departments.

- **Establish Centers of Excellence in Fire Safety Research:** Every year, over 100 firefighters die in the line of duty and over 3,000 members of the public die in fire-related deaths every year. The FP&S grants fund a number of research projects to study issues such as how to improve firefighter cardiovascular health, reduce community fire risk, and the IAFC's National Fire Fighter Near-Miss Reporting System, which is designed to reduce firefighter deaths and injuries. However, many of these projects are single projects that are not part of a comprehensive research program. Also, there needs to be greater success at transferring new technology and important information developed by the FP&S grants to the mainstream fire service.

  To address these concerns, the IAFC supports the use of the FP&S funds to develop two or three centers of excellence in fire safety research that would establish long-term, comprehensive applied research programs to improve firefighter health and public fire safety. We envision these research centers as being joint partnerships between major fire service organizations and regionally-accredited, major academic research institutions aimed at reducing firefighter and public mortality and improving firefighter and public safety. These centers would be overseen by the AFG office and funded at up to $2 million in the first year and no more than $5 million annually thereafter from the FP&S grants.

- **Reward Improved Regionalism:** The FIRE grant program is designed to support regionalism and even allows a separate category of applications for regional projects. According to the FIRE grant guidance, the DHS has the ability to waive the legislatively established funding limits under the AFG to fund larger projects that support training and equipment acquisition that "positively affect interoperability between jurisdictions." The IAFC supports these incentives to promote greater regional cooperation between jurisdictions. Mutual aid between jurisdictions is the backbone of our national emergency response system.

  However, we are seeing an increasing trend, especially in the West Coast states, to take regionalism "to the next level." To improve operational capabilities and derive economies of scale, many departments are combining into larger,

amalgamated fire departments. For example, my fire department, Tualatin Valley Fire and Rescue, is composed of what were historically 12 departments. Today, my fire department has 500 members and protects more than 432,500 people in nine cities and portions of three counties in the Portland, Oregon metropolitan area. My fire department is limited to a $1 million grant, but if the12 departments had applied separately for AFG funding, they would be able to apply for a much larger amount. In order to promote greater regional integration and support greater equality for fire departments that are composed of historically smaller entities, the IAFC recommends that the funding cap be raised for larger fire departments.

Proposed Changes to the SAFER Program

The IAFC also would recommend some major revisions to the SAFER grant program. The current program requires a five-year commitment with an escalating local match of 10-20-50-70-100 percent. The current economic downturn has demonstrated some weaknesses in this formula. Many jurisdictions can no longer make a five-year commitment to the program, because they do not know what their budget situation will look like in the fifth year when they have to cover 100 percent of the firefighter's salary. In 2008, the DHS reported a greater than 12 percent drop in SAFER grant applications from 2007, including a 20 percent drop in applications from all-career and combination departments with a majority of career firefighters. In addition, there is an increasing number of jurisdictions that have had to decline SAFER grants or give back federal funding, because they can no longer meet the local match requirements in the second, third, or fourth year. Congress attempted to address this issue temporarily earlier this year in both the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (P.L. 111-5) and the Supplemental Appropriations Act (P.L. 111-32) by waiving the local match and other SAFER Act requirements. The IAFC supported these temporary relief measures, and believes that the situation can be simplified with a straight three-year local commitment for the SAFER grant program with a 20 percent match.

The IAFC also would recommend that Congress remove the SAFER program's $100,000 statutory cap per firefighter (which was increased with inflation to $108,380 in 2008). This cap does not take into account the costs of hiring even a rookie firefighter in some parts of the country. For example, my fire department budgets $76,070 for a rookie firefighter for one year. Even under a three-year commitment with a 20 percent match, the $108,380 from the federal government would run out in the second year. Regardless of the federal match required by law, the statutory cap per firefighter would require me to pay 100 percent of the "subsidized" firefighter by the third year. To prevent this contradiction, the IAFC would urge the committee to remove this cap.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to thank the subcommittee for its continued dedication to helping America's fire service. Last year, this subcommittee passed the United States Fire Administration (USFA) Reauthorization Act of 2008 (P.L. 110-376), which

strengthened the USFA and the National Fire Academy. The IAFC is grateful that the subcommittee is now focused on reauthorizing the FIRE and SAFER grant programs. As my testimony demonstrates, these programs play a vital role in making sure that local fire departments are prepared to respond to all-hazards and they have a proven record of effectiveness. We hope that the subcommittee will consider the recommendations that we have outlined here today, and look forward to working with you to pass an AFG reauthorization bill this year.