

**Opening Statement**  
**The Honorable Adrian Smith, Ranking Member**  
Subcommittee on Technology and Innovation  
Committee on Science and Technology  
U.S. House of Representatives

***Reauthorization of the FIRE Grant Programs***

July 8, 2009

Mr. Chairman, thank you for holding this hearing today to discuss reauthorization of the Department of Homeland Security's Firefighters grants programs.

I want to welcome our all of our witnesses and thank you for coming here today to testify on these essential programs. I especially want to offer a warm welcome to Mr. Ed Carlin from Spalding Rural Volunteer Fire Department, which is located in the Third District of Nebraska. I sincerely appreciate your willingness to appear before the subcommittee today to discuss these important issues and am grateful for your service to your community and nation.

The Assistance to Firefighters Grant (AFG) program and the Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) program both provide much-needed assistance to fire departments across our nation. In rural areas, many communities rely upon all-volunteer departments to respond to fires and other emergencies. The equipment needed to fight fires and save lives and property is costly, and requires departments to have certain minimum response capabilities regardless of whether they are protecting a community of a few thousand people or a large city of a few *hundred* thousand people. Acquiring these capabilities are particularly difficult in many small communities that do not possess the financial resources necessary to provide adequate support to these departments. As such, Firefighter grants have proven absolutely vital for rural and volunteer fire departments that have small tax bases and the least ability to acquire such equipment.

In numerous discussions with fire chiefs and firefighters in my District, the AFG program is frequently cited as a "lifesaver", and the only means by which their department can attempt to purchase up-to-date equipment – which requires a significant portion of their budget – for their volunteers. Because of volunteer departments' reliance upon the AFG program, and because of the AFG programs' proven track record of successfully awarding grants through a fully competitive process, I am concerned about the Unified Fire Service's proposal to replace the program's current need-based focus with one where statutory set-asides limit program flexibility based on department type. I fear this redistribution of AFG funds will put many rural and all-volunteer departments at a severe disadvantage when it comes to obtaining the necessary equipment.

Similarly, also worrisome to me is a proposal to provide priority to applicants with higher call volume and population. Volunteer departments serving predominantly rural areas

benefit tremendously from firefighter assistance programs because – unlike many other agency programs – the grants are distributed on need rather than population. Population and call volume isn't the only determinant of need, and we must be cognizant of the unique role our volunteer firefighters play in serving their communities and not limit an extremely critical source of funding for their departments.

I am extremely appreciative of the services all brave fire fighters provide on behalf of our nation's citizens and I look forward to hearing from the witnesses today on this essential program.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.