



GREAT LAKES DIVISION

LEGISLATIVE HOT SHEET

MARCH 22, 2008

FIRE/SAFER Act Grant Programs

- Many fire departments across the country cannot afford the equipment, training, and staffing necessary to meet a baseline level of readiness. This situation puts firefighters and their communities in danger.
- The FIRE and SAFER Act grant programs augment local funding and provide much-needed assistance to meet these needs. To date, the programs are working well to improve preparedness and response capabilities, but much more needs to be done.
- FIRE and SAFER grant appropriations should increase annually to approach their full authorization levels of \$1 billion per year, respectively.

Funding for the U.S. Fire Administration (USFA) and National Fire Academy (NFA)

- Many fire service leaders have been concerned about the level of funding that the USFA and NFA receive, and if they will be able to fulfill their missions. Unfortunately, the USFA was flat-funded in FY 2008 at \$43.3 million. President Bush's FY 2009 budget proposes \$40.9 million for the USFA, a 5.5 percent decrease. Legislation has been proposed in the House and Senate to reauthorize the USFA in support of fire service priorities (H.R. 4847 and S. 2606).
- Because America's fire service is critically important to national preparedness and response, the fire service needs to have a strong voice within the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS), and fire programs need a consistent and high level of funding. Legislation reauthorizing the USFA will enhance opportunities for training, modernize the National Fire Incident Reporting System, encourage adoption of national voluntary consensus standards for firefighter health and safety, and enhance coordination regarding fire service-based Emergency Medical Services.

9-1-1 Service for Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) Users

- Millions of people are disconnecting their traditional local telephone service with 9-1-1 and enhanced 9-1-1 (E9-1-1) capability. They are instead signing up for Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) service that may not have adequate 9-1-1 capability.
- Congress needs to pass either the 9-1-1 Modernization and Public Safety Act of 2007 (H.R. 3403) or the IP-Enabled Voice Communications and Public Safety Act of 2007 (S. 428) which will improve access to 9-1-1. Both of these bills have passed their respective houses of Congress.

Job Protection for Volunteer Firefighters and EMS

- Volunteer firefighters can be deployed to the scene of a national emergency, but their employers are not required to retain their employment status. Employers should be required to protect the jobs of volunteer firefighters and EMS personnel who are deployed to emergencies or major disasters.
- Congress needs to pass the Volunteer Firefighter and EMS Personnel Job Protection Act (H.R. 1643 and S. 2240) which will prevent employers from firing or demoting volunteer firefighters formally deployed for a maximum of 14 days to Stafford Act-defined emergencies or major disasters. Additionally, the Senate is encouraged to consider and pass H.R. 1684, the Fiscal Year 2008 Department of Homeland Security Authorization Act, which has already passed the House and includes the volunteer job protection bill as Section 513. The House accepted this language by unanimous vote as an amendment on the House floor.

Tax Incentives for Retrofit of Fire Sprinkler Systems

- Buildings without sprinklers are a life hazard. Retrofitting existing buildings with sprinklers would improve public safety and reduce fire deaths.
- Improving a federal tax incentive would encourage building owners to retrofit by reducing the depreciation period for investments in sprinkler systems.
- Congress needs to co-sponsor the Fire Sprinkler Incentive Act of 2007 (H.R. 1742 and S. 582) which will provide economic incentives to building owners to retrofit their buildings with fire sprinklers.

Federal Taxation of Volunteer Incentives

- In many states, the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) has started to tax, as income, property tax rebates and other benefits provided to volunteer firefighters and emergency medical responders which are commonly utilized to assist departments with recruitment and retention.
- The number of volunteer firefighters has dropped from a high of 880,000 in 1984 to 823,950 in 2007 according to the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA). Incentives are important for recruiting and retaining volunteers who must struggle to balance their career and family obligations.
- Congress needs to pass the Heroes Earnings Assistance and Relief (HEART) Tax Act of 2007 (H.R. 3997) which would extend the volunteer incentive protection until 2015.

Implementation of the Hometown Heroes Survivors Benefits Act of 2003 (P.L. 108-182)

- The IAFC is concerned about the U.S Department of Justice's lack of implementation of the Hometown Heroes Survivors Benefits Act which grants survivor assistance, under the Public Safety Officers' Benefits (PSOB) program, to families of firefighters and police officers who die of a heart attack or stroke within 24 hours of a line-of-duty activity or training event.
- As of February 22, 2008, 111 PSOB claims have been approved; 79 denied; 111 remain active with 8 pending medical review; 34 under appeal; and 5 approved after appeal. These numbers illustrate a continued upward trend of improvement, with approvals rising from 21 in October, 2007, to 74 in January, 2008 and 111 by February's end. Of note, there have only been 8 additional denials since October 25, 2007 and many cases have entered the appeal process.