

# WebMemo



Published by The Heritage Foundation

No. 2499  
June 22, 2009

## Do DHS Fire Grants Reduce Fire Casualties?

*David B. Muhlhausen, Ph.D.*

This Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* summarizes the findings of a forthcoming Center for Data Analysis (CDA) report that evaluates the effectiveness of the Assistance for Firefighter Grant (AFG) Program, Fire Prevention and Safety (FP&S) grants, and the Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) grants. Collectively, these grants are commonly referred to as “fire grants.”

In the near future, Congress will consider the fiscal year (FY) 2010 appropriation bills for the Department of Homeland Security (H.R. 2892 and S. 1298). Both appropriation bills call for \$800 million for the fire grant program—\$380 million for the AFG program and \$420 million for the SAFER program. Before committing additional funding to the fire grants, Congress should first consider whether the programs are an effective use of taxpayer dollars.

Overall, the CDA report finds that fire grants, including grants that subsidize the salaries of firefighters, had no impact on fire casualties. Specifically the report finds that:

- AFGs used to purchase firefighting equipment, vehicles, and fitness equipment failed to reduce firefighter deaths, firefighter injuries, civilian deaths, and civilian injuries;
- FP&S grants that funded fire prevention and safety projects failed to reduce firefighter deaths, firefighter injuries, civilian deaths, and civilian injuries; and
- SAFER grants that subsidized firefighter salaries failed to reduce firefighter deaths, firefighter injuries, civilian deaths, and civilian injuries.

**Fire Grants.** In 2000, the FY 2001 National Defense Authorization Act established the AFG Program to subsidize the routine activities of local fire departments and emergency medical service (EMS) organizations.<sup>1</sup> Administered by the Federal Emergency Management Agency’s U.S. Fire Administration within the Department of Homeland Security, fire grants consist of several types:

- AFGs provide funding for the purchase of firefighting equipment, vehicles, and fitness equipment;
- FP&S grants target high-risk populations and are intended to improve the safety of firefighters and the public from fire and related hazards;
- SAFER grants, created in 2003, are intended to increase staffing levels by funding the salaries of career firefighters and paying for recruitment activities for volunteer fire departments; and
- Fire Station Construction (FSC) grants, created by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, fund the renovation and building of fire stations.<sup>2</sup>

From FY 2001 to FY 2009, Congress appropriated over \$5.7 billion in funding for fire grants.<sup>3</sup>

**Are Fire Grants Effective?** The forthcoming CDA report concentrates on finding evidence of

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:  
[www.heritage.org/Research/Economy/wm2499.cfm](http://www.heritage.org/Research/Economy/wm2499.cfm)

Produced by the Center for Data Analysis

Published by The Heritage Foundation  
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE  
Washington, DC 20002-4999  
(202) 546-4400 • [heritage.org](http://heritage.org)

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

whether fire grants affect fire casualties. Fire casualties are defined as firefighter deaths, firefighter injuries, civilian deaths, and civilian injuries.

Do fire grants reduce or prevent injuries and deaths to firefighters and civilians? This is a reasonable research question to ask, because the fire grant program has concentrated mainly on developing the capabilities of fire departments to react to fire emergencies.<sup>4</sup> By subsidizing routine operations, fire grants are thought to assist fire departments in becoming more proficient at fighting fires and providing emergency services. Thus, the improved operational proficiency of grant-funded fire departments should reduce fire casualties.

Using panel data from 1999 to 2006 for 10,033 fire departments, the CDA report used panel regression analysis to estimate the impact of fire grants on fire casualties. Of these fire departments, 5,859 (58.4 percent) received fire grant awards while 4,174 (41.6 percent) did not. The panel regression analysis used in the report controls for the level of risk fire departments face each year; the percentage of fire department responses to fires, hazardous conditions, service calls, and good intent calls; and county-level socioeconomic factors, such as age and race demographics, income per capita, and unemployment rates.

**The Findings.** Overall, the CDA report finds that fire grants, including grants that subsidize the salaries of firefighters, had no impact on fire casualties. Indeed:

- AFG grants used to purchase firefighting equipment, vehicles, and fitness equipment failed to reduce firefighter deaths, firefighter injuries, civilian deaths, and civilian injuries;

- FP&S grants that funded fire prevention and safety projects failed to reduce firefighter deaths, firefighter injuries, civilian deaths, and civilian injuries; and
- SAFER grants that subsidized firefighter salaries failed to reduce firefighter deaths, firefighter injuries, civilian deaths, and civilian injuries.

The findings of this evaluation were foreshadowed when a 2007 report by the National Academy of Public Administration (NAPA) concluded that the “program’s strategy of improving firefighting response capabilities, however effective it is at doing this, may not represent the most cost-effective way to reduce either public or firefighter deaths and injuries.”<sup>5</sup> In addition, the NAPA report noted, “One argument that has been made forcefully by experts on the fire problem over the last four decades is that dollars used to reduce the number of fire incidents are likely to have greater impact on fire safety relative to their cost than dollars used to improve response to fires when they break out.”<sup>6</sup>

Nor do fire grants appear to fulfill a homeland security function. The NAPA report acknowledges, “Basic fire incidents are usually well-handled in the U.S. and have been for some time, whereas large-scale, complex incidents are less well addressed and usually require cooperation of organizations and across jurisdictions.”<sup>7</sup> However, the fire grant program “mainly funds local entities and isolated projects not tied to improving regional capabilities.”<sup>8</sup>

**An Ineffective Program.** The strength of the CDA report’s methodology resides in its use of panel data that compares fire departments that received grants to fire departments that did not receive grants. In addition, the evaluation compares the

1. FY 2001 National Defense Authorization Act, Public Law 108-398.
2. The CDA report does not evaluate the impact of the FCS grants, which have only recently been created.
3. Lennard G. Kruger, “Assistance to Firefighters Program: Distribution of Fire Grant Funding,” *CRS Report for Congress*, RL32341, Congressional Research Service, March 31, 2009, Tables 2 and 4, pp. 3 and 6.
4. James Kunde et al., *Assistance to Firefighters Grant Program: Assessing Performance* (Washington, D.C.: National Academy of Public Administrators, 2007), p. 62.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 70.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*, p. 92.
8. *Ibid.*

impact of the grants before and after grant-funded fire departments received federal assistance. After analyzing over 10,000 fire departments from across the nation from 1999 to 2006, the CDA report reaches a clear conclusion: Fire grants are an ineffective way of reducing fire casualties. Conse-

quently, Congress should eliminate funding for the fire grant program.

—David B. Muhlhausen, Ph.D., is Senior Policy Analyst in the Center for Data Analysis at The Heritage Foundation.