

WebMemo



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Fire Grants: Reauthorization of an Ineffective Program

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The U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Science and Technology is planning to markup the Fire Grants Reauthorization Act of 2009 (H.R. 3791) on October 21. The fire grant program, administered by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), subsidizes the routine fire-fighting and emergency medical services (EMS) responsibilities of local governments. Fire grants fund the purchase of equipment and technology and subsidize the salaries of local firefighters.

H.R. 3791 reauthorizes a grant program that has significant shortcomings:

- It continues a grant program that has failed to reduce fire-related deaths and injuries of firefighters and civilians.
- It is specifically designed to encourage local fire departments to become increasingly dependent on federal funding.
- As currently drafted, the legislation fails to reorient the fire grants toward fulfilling a federal homeland security function. Instead, fire grants will continue being almost solely focused on subsidizing the routine operations of basic fire services.

Ineffective Fire Grants. Fire grants encompass a number of grant programs. The Assistance to Firefighters Grant (AFG) program subsidizes the routine activities of local fire departments and EMS organizations. The Fire Prevention and Safety (FP&S) grants fund projects to improve the safety of firefighters and the public from fire and related hazards. Created in 2003, the Staffing for Adequate

Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) grants are intended to increase staffing levels by funding the salaries of career firefighters and paying for recruitment activities for volunteer fire departments.

The Heritage Foundation's Center for Data Analysis evaluated the effectiveness of fire grants by matching fire grant award data to the National Fire Incident Reporting System, an incident-based database of fire-related emergencies reported by fire departments.¹

The Heritage evaluation compared fire departments that received grants to fire departments that did not receive grants. In addition, the evaluation compared the impact of the grants before and after grant-funded fire departments received federal assistance.

Fire grants appear to be ineffective at reducing fire casualties. AFG, SAFER, and FP&S grants failed to reduce deaths and injuries for either firefighters or civilians. Without receiving fire grants, comparison fire departments were just as successful at preventing fire casualties as grant-funded fire departments.

Exacerbating Existing Problems. The intent of H.R. 3791 appears to be to encourage local fire-

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fighter departments to become increasingly dependent on federal funding. The bill would also bolster the false public perception that basic fire services are a federal responsibility. This would prompt local officials who fail to devote adequate resources to fire services to shift accountability for firefighting to the federal government.

No Requirement to Retain SAFER Grant-Funded Firefighter Positions. While SAFER grants are set to fund firefighter salaries for three years, H.R. 3791 does not require grantees to retain funded positions after the original grants expire. This discourages fire departments from making adequate budgetary plans to self-finance positions after the federal funding runs dry. As a result, grantees would be more likely to apply for new SAFER grants to avoid laying off those personnel.

Elimination of the \$100,000-per-Firefighter Cap. Current law caps SAFER grants at an inflation-adjusted rate of \$100,000 per firefighter over a four-year period. However, H.R. 3791 would eliminate this cap: The federal contribution per firefighter would be unlimited. Eliminating the salary cap for SAFER-funded positions invites escalating salaries and other abuses at the federal taxpayer's expense.

Supplanting Waiver. H.R. 3791 would allow the federal government to abandon the requirement that fire departments use SAFER grants to supplement—not supplant—local resources. Supplanting occurs when federal funds are used to replace local funds, such as when federal funds intended for hiring additional firefighters are instead used to pay for currently employed firefighters.

Reducing Local Matching Requirements. The current AFG program requires the following contri-

butions from local governments: 20 percent for cities with populations over 50,000, 10 percent for populations 20,000–50,000, and 5 percent for populations less than 20,000.² H.R. 3791 would reduce the matching requirements to 10 percent for populations 20,000 or more and 5 percent for populations less than 20,000. These reduced local contribution requirements would only make local fire departments more dependent on the federal government.

An Absent Federal Homeland Security Function. As currently written, H.R. 3791 continues the fire grant program's lack of focus on fulfilling a federal homeland security function. H.R. 3791 continues to focus fire grants on subsidizing the routine operations of basic fire services.

A 2007 report by the National Academy of Public Administration acknowledged that “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.” However, the fire grant program “mainly funds local entities and isolated projects not tied to improving regional capabilities.”³

In addition, fire grants have been awarded for highly questionable purposes. In September 2009, FEMA awarded a fire grant worth nearly \$1 million to Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN), a scandal-plagued organization linked to voter fraud and other potentially criminal activities.⁴ Since the news was made public, FEMA officials have withdrawn the grant award to ACORN.⁵

AFG grants are routinely used to purchase vehicles and equipment used for routine activities, such

1. David B. Muhlhausen, “Do DHS Fire Grants Reduce Fire Casualties?,” Heritage Foundation *Center for Data Analysis Report* No. 09-05, September 23, 2009, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/HomelandSecurity/cda0905.cfm>.
2. Lennard G. Kruger, “Assistance to Firefighters Program: Distribution of Fire Grant Funding,” Congressional Research Service *Report for Congress*, May 8, 2009, p. 2, table 1, at http://assets.opencrs.com/rpts/RL32341_20080806.pdf (October 19, 2009).
3. James Kunde *et al.*, *Assistance to Firefighters Grant Program: Assessing Performance*, National Academy of Public Administration, April 2007, p. 92, at http://www.napawash.org/pc_management_studies/Fire_Grants_Report_April2007.pdf (October 19, 2009).
4. Audrey Hudson, “Firefighters Stood to Lose Grant to ACORN,” *The Washington Times*, October 7, 2009, at <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2009/oct/07/firefighters-lose-large-grant-to-acorn> (October 19, 2009).
5. Tony Romm, “FEMA to GOP: We Never Gave Grant to Award,” *The Hill*, October 7, 2007, at <http://thehill.com/blogs/blog-briefing-room/news/62021-fema-halts-acorn-grant-gop-lawmaker-praises-decision> (October 19, 2009).

as pumpers, tankers, self-contained breathing apparatuses, and Personal Alert Safety Systems. While these items are important to providing basic fire services, federal funding of these items does not supplement or add to the capabilities of local fire departments to perform homeland security tasks.

The federal funding does not perform a value-added function because it replaces local responsibilities. Yet federal assistance for the purchase of interoperable communication equipment and training to help local fire departments from different jurisdictions to coordinate responses to large-scale catastrophic incidents, such as natural disasters and acts of terrorism, is a more appropriate use of federal resources.

Encouraging Dependency. H.R. 3791 continues a grant program that has failed to reduce fire-related deaths and injuries of firefighters and civilians. It is specifically designed to encourage local fire departments to become increasingly dependent on federal funding. As currently drafted, the legislation fails to reorient the fire grants toward fulfilling a federal homeland security function; instead fire grants will continue being almost solely focused on subsidizing the routine operations of basic fire services.

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