

ISSUE BRIEF

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Fire Grants: Do Not Reauthorize an Ineffective Program

David B. Muhlhausen, Ph.D.

Senator Joseph Lieberman (I-CT) filed an amendment to reauthorize the ineffective fire grant program to the federal transportation bill, aptly named the Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century Act (S. 1813). The amendment is a revised version of the Fire Grants Reauthorization Act of 2011 (S. 550), and it reauthorizes a grant program that has significant shortcomings.

Ineffective Fire Grants. Fire grants, administered by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), encompass a number of grant programs. The Assistance to Firefighters Grant (AFG) program subsidizes the routine activities of local fire departments and emergency management 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 late 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 Using panel data from 1999 to 2006 for more than 10,000 fire departments, the evaluation assessed the impact of fire grants on four different measures of fire casualties: (1) firefighter deaths, (2) firefighter injuries, (3) civilian deaths, and (4) civilian injuries.

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 firefighter deaths, firefighter injuries, civilian deaths, or civilian injuries. Without receiving fire grants, comparison fire departments were just as successful at preventing fire casualties as grant-funded fire departments.

Exacerbating Existing Problems. Lieberman's amendment would encourage local firefighter departments to become increasingly dependent on federal funding. The amendment 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. The amendment's provisions include these specific shortcomings:

- **Increased spending.** The amendment sets each of the authorization of appropriations for the AFG, FP&S, and SAFER programs for fiscal year 2013 to \$750 million. Afterwards, the authorization levels are increased by the percentage growth in the Consumer Price Index. This change sets the authorization levels on an annual growth path that the nation cannot afford.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/ib3505>

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The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002-4999
(202) 546-4400 | heritage.org

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- **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, the amendment would eliminate this cap, leaving the federal contribution per firefighter unlimited. Eliminating the salary cap for SAFER-funded positions invites escalating salaries and other abuses at the federal taxpayer's expense.
- **Supplanting waivers.** The amendment 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.
- **Retention waivers.** The amendment allows firefighter positions funded by SAFER grants to be retained one year after the grant expires. When used, the retention waiver encourages fire departments to not make adequate budgetary plans to self-finance

positions after the federal funding runs dry. Without adequate plans to assume local responsibility, grantees will be more likely to lay off firefighters previously subsidized through SAFER grants. Grantees will then be encouraged to apply for new SAFER grants to rehire the laid-off firefighters. This practice makes fire departments even more dependent on the federal government.

- **Reducing local matching requirements.** The current AFG program requires the following local contributions: 20 percent for populations over 50,000; 10 percent for populations 20,000 to 50,000; and 5 percent for populations less than 20,000.² The amendment would reduce the matching requirements from 20 percent to 15 percent for populations more than 50,000 while keeping the matching requirements for the other population groups the same. This reduced local contribution requirements would make local fire departments serving populations more than 50,000 even more dependent on the federal government.
- **Extending the life of a failed program.** Lieberman's amendment extends the life of the fire

grant program until 2022, six years beyond the original sunset provision included in S. 550. Given the federal government's current financial crisis, the fire grant program is an ideal candidate for elimination. Prolonging the life of the failed program is not justified.

An Absent Federal Homeland Security Function. As currently written, the amendment continues the fire grant program's lack of focus on fulfilling a federal homeland security function. It 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 the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN), a scandal-plagued

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/reports/2009/09/do-dhs-fire-grants-reduce-fire-casualties>.

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 (February 15, 2012).

3. James Kunde, Paul D. Brookes, Glenn Corbett, Harry Hatry, Bruce D. McDowell, and Darrel W. Stephens, "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 (February 15, 2012).

organization linked to voter fraud and other potentially criminal activities.⁴ FEMA officials have since withdrawn the grant award to ACORN.⁵

By subsidizing firefighter salaries, the SAFER grants supplant rather than supplement state and local responsibilities.⁶ In addition, the AFG grants are routinely used to purchase vehicles and equipment used for routine activities, such 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 merely replaces local responsibilities. 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.

Significant Shortcomings.

Lieberman's amendment 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 would continue being almost solely focused on subsidizing the routine operations of basic fire services.

—*David B. Muhlhausen, Ph.D., is Research Fellow in Empirical Policy Analysis in the Center for Data Analysis at The Heritage Foundation.*

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).

6. While financial supplanting of federal funds for local funds is supposedly not allowed for fire grants, the federal funding of these grants is also another form of supplanting because the federal government is taking over the traditional responsibility of local government for funding the routine operations of local fire departments.