

# ISSUE BRIEF

No. 3788 | NOVEMBER 29, 2012

## Fire Grants: Do Not Reauthorize an Ineffective Program

*David B. Muhlhausen, PhD*

Senator Joseph Lieberman (I-CT) has filed an amendment to the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2013 (S. 3254) that would reauthorize the ineffective fire grant program. 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. 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, 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.<sup>1</sup> 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: firefighter deaths, firefighter injuries, civilian deaths, and 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 and grant-funded fire departments were equally successful at preventing fire casualties.

**Exacerbating Existing Problems.** Senator Lieberman's amendment would encourage local firefighter departments to become increasingly dependent on federal funding. It 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 the authorization of appropriations for the AFG, FP&S, and SAFER programs for fiscal year 2013 at \$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.
- **Elimination of the \$100,000-per-firefighter cap.**

---

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/ib3788>

Produced by the Center for Data Analysis

**The Heritage Foundation**  
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE  
Washington, DC 20002  
(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.

Current law caps SAFER grants at an inflation-adjusted rate of \$100,000 per firefighter over a four-year period. 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 used instead 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 not to 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 who previously were 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 of 20,000 to 50,000; and 5 percent for populations less than 20,000.<sup>2</sup> In general, the amendment would set the matching requirement at 15 percent for jurisdictions with populations of 1,000,000 or more while requiring lower matching percentages for jurisdictions with smaller populations. For jurisdictions with more than 20,000 residents but not more than 1,000,000, the matching requirement is set at a minimum amount of 10 percent. For jurisdictions below 20,000, the minimum matching requirement is 5 percent. These reduced local contribution requirements would make local fire departments serving all population sizes 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 this 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."<sup>3</sup>

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 organization linked to voter fraud and other potentially criminal activities.<sup>4</sup> FEMA officials have

1. David B. Muhlhausen, "Do DHS Fire Grants Reduce Fire Casualties?" *Heritage Foundation Center for Data Analysis Report* No. CDA09-05, September 23, 2009, <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, [http://assets.opencrs.com/rpts/RL32341\\_20080806.pdf](http://assets.opencrs.com/rpts/RL32341_20080806.pdf) (accessed February 15, 2012).

3. James Kunde, Paul D. Brooks, 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, [http://www.napawash.org/pc\\_management\\_studies/Fire\\_Grants\\_Report\\_April2007.pdf](http://www.napawash.org/pc_management_studies/Fire_Grants_Report_April2007.pdf) (accessed February 15, 2012).

4. Audrey Hudson, "Firefighters Stood to Lose Grant to ACORN," *The Washington Times*, October 7, 2009, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2009/oct/07/firefighters-lose-large-grant-to-acorn/> (accessed October 19, 2009).

since withdrawn the grant award to ACORN.<sup>5</sup>

By subsidizing firefighter salaries, the SAFER grants supplant rather than supplement state and local responsibilities.<sup>6</sup> 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 they 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.**

Senator 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 to be focused almost solely on subsidizing the routine operations of basic fire services.

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

---

5. Tony Romm, "FEMA to GOP: We Never Gave Grant to ACORN," *The Hill*, October 7, 2009, <http://thehill.com/blogs/blog-briefing-room/news/62021-fema-halts-acorn-grant-gop-lawmaker-praises-decision> (accessed 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.