

Partnering to Advance Priorities of Pennsylvania Fire & Emergency Services



A Guide for Members of the 118th Congress

“Breakfast on the Hill”

Congressional Fire Services Institute

“Collaborating with the other Pennsylvania fire service organizations and together walking the halls of the U.S. Capital makes our common issues known to our federal elected officials. We must continue to advocate for what we need and believe in as Fire Chiefs to protect the health and safety of our staff and community alike. If we don’t make our voices heard, our elected officials assume we don’t need anything, and everyone is good.”

Thomas O’Donnell, President of Pennsylvania Career Fire Chiefs Association.

“We stand together as firefighters and fire service industry professionals to ensure our common voice is heard loud and clear in these halls of Congress. We are stronger together- it’s not about who’s a Republican or who’s a Democrat- it’s all about who supports our firefighters, period.”

Stephen Flegal, Southeast Director, Firefighters Association of the state Pennsylvania.

Talking Points – Federally Focused

1. All members of Congress are encouraged to join the Congressional Fire Services Caucus. Today, it is one of the largest caucuses in Congress!

- The Caucus's mission is to educate all members of Congress on the role and needs of the fire and emergency services. The caucus aims to bring together Republicans and Democrats in support of initiatives that benefit all first responders. Becoming a member does not require taking positions on legislation; rather Caucus members are asked to pledge support in a way that best benefits fire departments in their respective Congressional Districts.

2. Protect the FIRE/SAFER Grant Programs

- **The Problem:** As fire departments continue to respond to a variety of increased threats, the strain on fire department equipment and personnel remains high. As equipment and overtime/backfill costs escalate, 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 Solution:** The FIRE and SAFER grant programs augment local funding and provide much needed assistance to meet these needs. The programs help fire departments meet their basic needs as the economy slows down. However, they are scheduled to be terminated on September 30, 2024. The U.S. Senate passed the Fire Grants and Safety Act (S. 870) on April 20, 2023, which would reauthorize the FIRE and SAFER grant programs through Fiscal Year (FY) 2030. S. 870 also would delay the FIRE and SAFER grants' termination until September 30, 2032. The House Committee on Science, Space, and Technology marked up a companion bill (H.R. 4090) on June 21, 2023. It would authorize the programs through FY 2028 and protect the programs through September 30, 2030. Congress approved \$324 million each for the FIRE and SAFER grant programs in FY 2024. This is a 10% cut to both programs. For FY 2025, President Biden is requesting \$385 million for each program.
- **The Explanation:** If you have received a grant under the FIRE or SAFER grant programs, explain how you used the money and how it has improved your ability to serve your community in response to all hazards. If you have not received a grant under these programs, explain how you could use that grant money. Give a specific example of how a FIRE or SAFER grant has helped or could help you serve your community.

- **The Ask:** Ask your representatives to pass the Fire Grants and Safety Act (H.R. 4090/S. 870) to protect the FIRE and SAFER grant programs. Also, please ask Congress to fund the AFG and SAFER programs at President Biden’s request of \$385 million each.

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

- **The Problem:** The U.S. Fire Administration (USFA) provides necessary training and policy resources to local fire departments. During the COVID-19 pandemic, USFA provided guidance and educational materials to help fire departments protect their personnel and the public and be reimbursed by the Federal Emergency Management Agency. It is important that USFA be funded to continue its critical mission.
- **The Solution:** The Fire Grants and Safety Act (S. 870) would reauthorize the USFA through FY 2030 at \$95 million for each year. The House companion bill (H.R. 4090) would authorize \$95 million for USFA through FY 2028. Congress appropriated more than \$71 million for USFA in FY 2024. For FY 2025, President Biden is proposing \$78.6 million for USFA, which includes funding for upgrades at the National Fire Academy (NFA).
- **The Explanation:** Explain the importance of increasing USFA’s budget. This increase will allow USFA to develop the National Emergency Response Information System (NERIS), a new data system to replace the National Fire Incident Reporting System.
- **The Ask:** Ask your representatives and senators to pass the Fire Grants and Safety Act (H.R. 4090/S. 870) to reauthorize USFA. Also, please ask Congress to fund the USFA at President Biden’s requested \$78.6 million in FY 2024 to fund the NERIS program, maintain the NFA’s buildings, and upgrade its information technology infrastructure.

4. **EMS Grants for Rural Fire/EMS Agencies**

- **The Problem:** Rural fire and EMS agencies often face uniquely difficult budgetary challenges as they may lack the tax base to provide strong funding and often receive incomplete reimbursements for the cost of providing emergency medical care. As a result, these agencies are struggling even more to afford basic EMS equipment and medication due to increased inflation. Additionally, shortages impacting medications and personal protective equipment have exacerbated these financial challenges by making these essential EMS tools more expensive.

- **The Solution:** The Supporting and Improving Rural EMS Needs (SIREN) grant program was established in 2018 to provide funding for procuring EMS supplies, recruiting personnel, and running EMS licensure classes. Only public and non-profit fire/EMS agencies are eligible to receive funding. Congress appropriated \$11.5 million for the SIREN grant program in FY 2024, but the program needs to be reauthorized. On December 13, the Senate passed the SIREN Reauthorization Act (S. 265), introduced by Senators Richard Durbin (D-IL) and Susan Collins (R-ME), which would extend the authorization of the SIREN grant program through FY 2028. Representative David Joyce (R-OH) introduced a bipartisan House companion bill (H.R. 4646), which was passed by the House Energy and Commerce Committee on March 20.
- **The Explanation:** The SIREN grant assists budget-challenged rural fire and EMS agencies in providing life-saving services in their communities. These grants are for public and non-profit agencies located in rural areas. This eligibility requirement ensures that these funds are provided to fire and EMS agencies in need.
- **The Ask:** Ask your representatives and senators to fund the SIREN grants at \$15 million for FY 2025. Also, please ask your representatives to co-sponsor H.R. 4646.

5. **Develop Federal Standards for Lithium-Ion Batteries & Micromobility Devices**

- **The Problem:** The nation has witnessed an increase in deadly fires caused by lithium-ion batteries in micromobility devices. The lithium-ion batteries can become overcharged or damaged and create explosive deadly fires that put both firefighters and the public at risk.
- **The Solution:** Representative Ritchie Torres (D-NY) and Senator Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY) introduced the Setting Consumer Standards for Lithium-Ion Batteries Act (H.R. 1797/S. 1009). This bill would require the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) to issue safety standards on lithium-ion batteries in mobility devices.
- **The Explanation:** By directing the CPSC to develop safety standards for lithium-ion batteries and micromobility devices, Congress can ensure that these devices are fire-safe. In addition, local jurisdictions can remove from use older devices that do not meet the standards.
- **The Ask:** Ask your representatives and senators to cosponsor the Setting Consumer Standards for Lithium-Ion Batteries Act (H.R. 1797/S. 1008).

6. Support Housing Benefits for Volunteer Fire Responders

- **The Problem:** Eighty-five percent of the nation's fire departments are staffed by all- or mostly volunteer personnel. However, the number of volunteer firefighters across the nation has declined from approximately 898,000 volunteers in 1984 to 676,900 volunteers in 2023. Potential volunteers say that the work and family commitments present obstacles to volunteering with their local fire department.
- **The Solution:** Senator Tammy Baldwin (D-WI) and Representative Andrew Garbarino (R-NY) introduced the Volunteer First Responder Housing Act (H.R. 4787/S. 1988) to create a new recruitment and retention incentive for volunteer firefighters. The bill would assist volunteer firefighters that have served for two years in their community and have met the minimum requirements for active membership or provided at least 200 hours of service per year.
- **The Explanation:** The bill would allow qualified volunteer first responders to participate in the Good Neighbor Next Door Program to receive a 50% discount on the list price of their home in designated areas. Also, qualified volunteers in rural areas would be allowed to deduct \$18,000 from their income to qualify for the Single-Family Housing Guaranteed Loan Program, which provides a 90% loan guarantee for homes in rural areas. These programs are designed to provide recruitment and retention incentives for volunteer firefighters by helping them become single family homeowners.
- **The Ask:** Ask your representatives and senators to cosponsor the Volunteer First Responder Housing Act (H.R. 4787/S. 1988).

7. Eligibility in the Federal PSOB Programs for the Families of Fallen Public Safety Officers Due to Cancer

- **The Problem:** The U.S. Department of Justice's Public Safety Officers' Benefits (PSOB) program is designed to help the families of fallen public safety officers that died in the line of duty. Unfortunately, the program does not recognize deaths and disabilities of public safety officers from job-related cancer-causing exposures. However, studies by the National Institute for Occupational Health and Safety found that firefighters face a 9% increase in cancer diagnoses and a 14% increase in cancer-related deaths, when compared to the general U.S. population.
- **The Solution:** Representative Bill Pascrell, Jr. (D-NJ) and Senator Amy Klobuchar (D-MN) introduced bipartisan legislation, the Honoring Our Fallen Heroes Act (H.R. 1719/S. 930), to grant eligibility for the PSOB program to the families of public safety officers that die or are disabled from cancer due to job-related exposures.

- **The Explanation:** Under H.R. 1719/S. 930, a public safety officer would have to have been exposed to “heat, radiation, or a carcinogen that is linked to an exposure-related cancer while in the course of the line of duty.” The public safety officer also would have to have served for five years as a public safety officer before the cancer diagnosis, and the diagnosis would have to occur not later than 15 years after than the last day of active service for the public safety officer.
- **The Ask:** Ask your representatives and senators to cosponsor and support passage of the Honoring Our Fallen Heroes Act (H.R. 1719/S. 930)

8. **Reauthorize the FirstNet Authority**

- **The Problem:** Congress created the First Responder Network Authority (FirstNet) to establish a nationwide public safety broadband network. The network gives public safety both preemption and priority on their own spectrum. FirstNet has been used in numerous major disasters by public safety agencies, including active shooter incidents, wildland fires, and hurricanes. More than 27,000 public safety agencies and organizations are subscribers to FirstNet. Currently, FirstNet is scheduled to be sunset and end operations on February 22, 2027.
- **The Solution:** Representative Lizzie Fletcher (D-TX) introduced legislation, H.R. 3366, to authorize FirstNet permanently and remove its sunset date.
- **The Explanation:** If you are a subscriber to FirstNet, explain how it helps your operations during daily incidents and major disasters. Explain why it is important to have reliable communications during incidents and why it is important to have a network dedicated to public safety.
- **The Ask:** Ask your representatives to cosponsor and pass H.R. 3366.

9. **Reauthorize the National Firefighter Cancer Registry**

- **The Problem:** Cancer is a major cause of death for firefighters. According to a study by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) firefighters have a 9% increase in cancer diagnoses and a 14% increase in cancer-related deaths than the public. The International Agency for Research on Cancer has classified the occupational exposure of firefighters as “carcinogenic to humans.”

- **The Solution:** The nation's fire and emergency service require cancer researchers and medical professionals to identify the causes of cancer in firefighters and develop ways to prevent cancer. The National Firefighter Registry for Cancer is a repository designed to collect anonymous information from firefighters. Researchers will be able to use this information to identify ways to prevent cancer in the fire and emergency services.
- **The Explanation:** Congress appropriated \$5.5 million for the national registry in FY 2023, and the Senate proposed the same amount in FY 2024. However, the authorization for the program expired in FY 2022. Congress needs to reauthorize funding for this program. The Firefighter Cancer Registry Reauthorization Act (H.R. 3821/S. 2119), by Representative Bill Pascrell, Jr. (D-NJ) and Senator Robert Menendez (D-NJ), would authorize \$5.5 million for the National Firefighter Registry for Cancer from FY 2024 through FY 2028. The House passed H.R. 3821 on March 6.
- **The Ask:** Please ask your senators to pass the Firefighter Cancer Registry Reauthorization Act (H.R. 3821).

10. **Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) Program**

- **The Problem:** President Biden has requested \$3.4 billion for the Community Development fund, which is \$3 billion less than the 2023 enacted level.
- **The Solution:** Increase funding to ensure many Pennsylvania communities have the opportunity to use this funding to purchase critical equipment like fire apparatus.
- **The Explanation:** The cities of McKeesport and Wilkes-Barre count on CDBG to ensure they can have up to date fire apparatus to serve their communities. Without it they wouldn't survive on property taxes alone to fund these expensive capital purchases.
- **The Ask:** Ask your representatives and senators to increase funding to \$6 billion.

For further information about federal legislative issues, please visit the IAFC's Government Relations and Policy Department at (703) 273-0911 or go to www.iafc.org/gr. In addition, you can follow @IAFC on X (formerly known as Twitter) for real-time updates and information.

We Are Stronger Together



Firefighters Association of the State of Pennsylvania
President Deanna Force
241 Center Street
Danville, PA 17821
(570) 847-0953
Dee_L_Force@hotmail.com



Fire Chiefs Association

Pennsylvania Career Fire Chiefs Association
President Thomas O'Donnell
235 East Airy Street
Norristown, PA 19401
(610) 292-8281
todonnell@norristown.org



Pennsylvania Professional Fire Fighters Association
President Robert Brooks
301 Chestnut Street, Suite 101
Harrisburg, PA 17101
(717) 221-8800
rbrooks@ppffa.org



Pennsylvania Fire & Emergency Services Institute
President William Rigby
27 North Pennell Road
Media, PA 19063
(610) 565-2700
wrigby@middletowndelcopa.gov