

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

August 3, 2020

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Majority Leader
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Charles E. Schumer
Minority Leader
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Leader McConnell and Leader Schumer:

As the Senate considers a new relief package in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, we urge you to include additional funding and flexibility for the Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) Grants and Assistance to Firefighter Grants (AFG) programs. Our communities count on first responders as the first line of defense in protection and emergency response. These frontline workers are operating in environments that place them at high risk of COVID-19 exposure, and they deserve proper protection and support.

We urge your support for the following:

- Include \$500 million each for Assistance to Firefighter Grants (AFG) and Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) Grants.
- Require that the Secretary of Homeland Security waive the cost share and maintenance of expenditure requirements for Assistance to Firefighter Grants for reimbursement of COVID-19-related expenses through FY21.
- Require that the Secretary of Homeland Security grant waivers to SAFER grant recipients for employee retention to aid staffing shortages through FY21 and retroactively require that the Secretary grant such waivers for FY18, FY19 and FY20 SAFER funds.

State and local governments now responding to the COVID-19 pandemic and consequent economic downturn are faced with historically unprecedented revenue shortfalls. Budgets will undoubtedly come under stress and sacrifices may have to be made. But we cannot afford to cut corners on emergency preparedness to save costs.

Firefighters provide our communities with essential insurance against the damage of fire emergencies. Fire is a risk to lives, property, and infrastructure that is real and deserving of our consideration even as we grasp with a viral outbreak. Substantial portions of the labor involved come from the service of dutiful volunteers.

In Maryland, many local volunteer fire departments expect drastically reduced collections and donations from their respective communities. Already, two Baltimore City fire stations are facing closure because of financial strain caused by the pandemic. County executives from across Maryland have written to us and called for a waiver of the requirements for local matches to existing and future SAFER and AFG grants. The Maryland Emergency Management Agency has

submitted waiver requests to FEMA, but have been unsuccessful. It is clear that statutory relief is needed.

Your support for these requests would provide significant relief to fire departments in both urban and rural jurisdictions. In a public health and now economic crisis unlike any other, Maryland desperately needs federal funding that can help alleviate budget shortfalls while also ensuring that critical services such as fire protection and emergency response are not put in jeopardy.

Communities across the nation are relying on their first responders to weather this national crisis. Your support of these requests is critical to ensuring that the next relief package provides the resources our first responders need to meet that challenge.

Sincerely,

/s/Chris Van Hollen

Chris Van Hollen
United States Senator

/s/Benjamin L. Cardin

Benjamin L. Cardin
United States Senator