USFA FIRE Grants: A New Source of Funding for Fire Departments

Hot Topic #65

Ray Crouch, Fire Management Consultant

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Written by

Ray Crouch Sr., MTAS Fire Management Consultant

A first-ever appropriation by Congress will provide $100 million in grants to directly assist local fire departments across the country — the best news in decades for the fire service. Eligible cities can apply for grants to help fund new programs and purchase much-needed equipment that they couldn't afford otherwise.

The new bill, Assistance to Firefighters of H.R. 5408, Title XVII, is part of the Floyd D. Spence National Defense Authorization Act for fiscal year 2001. It amends the Fire Prevention and Control Act, U.S. Code Annotated Title 15, Chapter 49.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) will administer the grant program. FEMA Director Joe Albaugh and U.S. Fire Administration Chief Operating Officer Ken Burris have directed their staffs to develop the grant guidelines as soon as possible. Officials expect the guidelines for all six eligible categories to be available by the end of April. Fire departments will have 30 days to complete the grant application and return it to the U.S. Fire Administration (USFA) by May 31, 2001.

The USFA will review the applications in June and July, and grants will be distributed in August and September. All funds have to be spent by midnight on Sept. 30 — the end of the federal budget year. Otherwise, the money must be returned to the U.S. Department of the Treasury.

The grant process is expected to be relatively simple and straightforward. The application is a standard four-page document. It includes a section for outlining grant expenditures and explaining the community's fire-related financial needs.

Grant eligibility hinges on meeting some basic minimum requirements. First, a fire department must be fully reporting on its state fire incident reporting system. Tennessee departments have to report to Tennessee Fire Incident Reporting System (TFIRS) at the state Fire Marshal's Office. Those already reporting will be rewarded extra points on the grant application. The longer a department has been reporting, the higher the points.

The first two years are already funded for this five-year grant package. So the sooner fire departments start reporting to their state systems, the better off they'll be. There will be *no exceptions* to this policy. USFA will contact Tennessee. If the state doesn't confirm that a fire department has been making regular system reports, the grant application will be ineligible.

If your department is not currently reporting or is only partially reporting, you need to start immediately. For TFIRS information and assistance, call TFIRS Coordinator Dennis Mulder at 615-741-2981.

Another grant requirement prohibits using the money for replacement appropriations. In other words, a city can't reduce appropriations to its fire department because it received a grant. USFA will require each city to submit certified copies of the past two budget years for the fire department. These two years will be averaged, and expenditures for the next fiscal year cannot drop below the average of the past two years. This is designed so the grants are used for progress, not for maintaining the status quo. Tennessee is in the nation's "Burn Belt," where more lives and property are lost to fire than 42 other states. While sad, this distinction is to your advantage in the grant process. USFA wants the grants to help pull us out of the fire.

The FIRE grants also require matching funds. For populations less than 50,000, the local match is only 10 percent. For areas with populations greater than 50,000, the local match is 30 percent. With this particular grant, "in-kind" services aren't allowed. The local portion must be cash, and the city must specify where the money will come from. For instance, if a department from an area with more than 50,000 population applies for a $300,000 grant, the local portion is $90,000. The department's application will need to specify that there will be a general fund balance of at least $90,000 when the grant is received, and the balance will be used to match the 30 percent local share. If the city plans to borrow its share, the application must state the municipality's commitment to this action. Smaller communities, which have to match 10 percent, may need to hold an event to help raise their portion. The application should include a few details about the fund- raiser and the revenue it's expected to generate.

The federal grant process, even with its simple format, requires some facts that should be gathered now while waiting for the final grant guidelines. Two important items are a "need statement" and the size of the population served. The need statement is critical to the application's success. It must state how the grant will help the people the fire department serves and not just how it will help the fire department. For instance, if a second fire station or newer fire apparatus will cut the department's response time, then the community benefits. If newer fire apparatus will reduce the time firefighters spend maintaining the vehicles, the

fire department benefits — not the citizens. Make sure every statement in the application is aimed at helping citizens.

Another example might be self-contained breathing apparatus (SCBA). If a fire department needs additional SCBAs or better units that are compliant, the need statement should say, "Eight additional SCBAs will allow our department to have four units on each pumper. We could begin search-and-rescue operations when we arrive on a fire scene instead of waiting for vehicles carrying more SCBAs."

Firefighter personal protection equipment is an exception to illustrating that citizen benefits outweigh departmental benefits. This personal protection and safety equipment primarily helps firefighters. However, it doesn't hurt to mention that firefighters need this gear to more effectively save citizens' lives and property.

Population size is also important because it directly impacts the cost/benefit analysis. If a grant application includes buying a fire vehicle for $100,000 but the department only serves a population of 1,000, the cost/benefit ratio is 100-to-1. If a town of 5,000 is spending the same $100,000, the cost/benefit ratio is now 20-to-1. The fire department with the best cost/benefit ratio has a better chance of getting the grant if all other factors are equal. There are other aspects to consider, however, and some favor smaller communities.

Another approach to the application process would be combining efforts with other fire departments. If several go together to apply for a grant for a training center, a specialized vehicle shared by all of the departments, or some other joint project, the chances of receiving a FIRE grant are greatly improved. Start brainstorming now with other fire departments to come up with creative, innovative grant applications.

It's not enough to just list a bunch of needed items. Everyone could say that they need computers, radios, books, large-diameter hoses, foam, distributing nozzles, foam educators, hand lights, gated wyes, or deluge guns. But the fire departments that receive the grants will be those that tell USFA *why* they need these items and *how* these items will help the citizens of their communities.

The economic impact on the citizens is also an important item to include, especially if the grant will complete an ISO-improvement project. Calculate the insurance premium savings for one year and the cumulative savings over five or 10 years if your ISO rating is reduced. Also, if the community has a high unemployment rate, mention that an improved ISO rating will help with industrial recruiting and attracting new jobs to the area.

Any specific information that can show a special need for the grant will receive higher points, such as communities with unusually large populations of senior citizens or children under the age of 10 — two high-risk groups in fire deaths. Or if your community has a population of below-poverty-level citizens that's higher than national or regional averages, make sure you show how the grant will benefit that group.

Finally, there are six categories of funding. Applicants *must* pick two categories and *only* two categories. The grant money must impact two areas within the six categories.

The categories and fund amounts are:

Category	**Funding Available**
1. Firefighter Training	$6.5 million
2. Firefighting Vehicles	$15 million
3. Firefighting Equipment	$15 million
4. Personal Protective Equipment	$35 million
5. Fire Prevention Programs	$12 million
6. Wellness and Fitness for Firefighters	$6.5 million

When USFA or FEMA make the official guidelines available, MTAS will distribute the final version. Until then, use this time and preliminary information to start preparing the grant application.

For additional information, contact MTAS Fire Management Consultant Ray Crouch at (615) 532-6827, or e-mail at crouchr@utk.edu.