

WASHINGTON, DC - The House leadership of the Congressional Fire Services Caucus, led by House Democratic Whip Steny H. Hoyer (MD), sent a letter yesterday to President Bush urging him to reconsider his decision to significantly reduce funding for the Assistance to Firefighters Grant Program. In his fiscal year 2005 budget, the Bush Administration proposes reducing the \$750 million grant program by one-third, for a cut of \$250 million dollars. The House leaders of the Congressional Fire Services Caucus who signed onto the letter were: Democratic Whip Hoyer and Representatives Curt Weldon (R-PA), Sherwood Boehlert (R-NY), Rob Andrews (D-NJ), Bill Pascrell (D-NJ), and Nick Smith (R-MI).

Since 2001, Maryland has received over \$12 million in grant funding from the Assistance to Firefighters Grant Program. Fire departments that have received grants in Maryland's Fifth District include La Plata, Hughesville, Mechanicsville, Solomons, Laurel, Prince George's County, Seventh District, Leonardtown, College Park, Cobb Island, and Second District.

The lawmakers stated in the letter, "Considering that nearly \$3 billion in applications were submitted for the current program year, and also taking into account the recent Council on Foreign Relations report which highlighted the underfunding of our fire departments, a \$250 million reduction in funding is unacceptable."

Following is the text of the letter:

Dear Mr. President:

We write to express our deep concern over the treatment of the Assistance to Firefighters Grant Program in your fiscal year 2005 budget submission. As co-chairs of the Congressional Fire Services Caucus, we have resisted repeated attempts to reduce or eliminate funding for this vital program, whose purpose is to bring fire departments to a base line of readiness.

We are particularly troubled by the decision to reduce by one third the \$750 million appropriated by Congress during each of the past two years - a funding level by which Congress has demonstrated both its strong bipartisan support for the Fire Grant program, as well as its understanding of the contributions this program has made to our firefighters and the communities they serve. Considering that nearly \$3 billion in applications were submitted for the current program year, and also taking into account the recent Council on Foreign Relations

report which highlighted the underfunding of our fire departments, a \$250 million reduction in funding is unacceptable.

Further, we do not accept the assertion, based upon the findings of a Program Assessment Rating Tool, that the Fire Grant program “is unfocused and has not been able to demonstrate its impact on public safety.” The fact is that this program has positively impacted public safety by providing nearly \$2 billion for infrared cameras, hazmat detection devices, improved breathing apparatuses, advanced training and fitness programs, fire engines, and interoperable communication systems. This is the basic equipment our fire departments need to effectively respond to all hazards.

We call upon you to release the complete results of this Program Assessment Rating Tool, so that Congress may take into account these findings when making important decisions about the fiscal year 2005 funding level, as well as during consideration of legislation to reauthorize the grant program.

Additionally, we ask for clarification on the categories eligible for funding. It appears as though the budget would eliminate the noncompetitive grants, which focus on prevention initiatives, as well as a number of other programs. Saving lives starts with prevention. Just as the budget proposes millions in funding to prevent potential terrorist attacks, it should not overlook the importance of prevention as it relates to fires and other dangers that claim the lives of thousands of Americans every year.

Finally, we are concerned about the recommendation that the Office of Domestic Preparedness “place greater emphasis on the unique role of Federal funds, particularly for terrorism preparedness.” As you know, many in Congress did not support the decision last year to transfer the Fire Grant program to the jurisdiction of ODP, and many of us publicly committed to ensuring that the program continue to meet the basic firefighting and emergency response needs of our career and volunteer fire departments, rather than becoming an additional anti-terrorism grant program. This recommendation seems to justify our concerns.

Mr. President, we urge you to reconsider your budget recommendation for the Assistance to Firefighters Grant Program, and to work with Congress to fully fund the program and guarantee that it remains designed to meet the every day needs of the men and women serving our nation in the fire service. We ask far too many of them to risk their lives in our defense everyday with insufficient training and inadequate equipment, and we have an obligation to provide them the

necessary resources to perform their jobs as safely and effectively as possible.

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