

LAPLATA - Congressman Steny Hoyer joined Steve Edwards from the Maryland Fire and Rescue Institute, Lynn Gilroy, President of the Southern Maryland Volunteer Fireman's Association, Tom Mattingly, St. Mary's County Commissioner and past president of the Southern Maryland Volunteer Fireman's Association, local elected officials, and Firefighters and EMS Personnel today to announce the introduction of legislation to reauthorize the Assistance to Firefighters Grant Program. As a co-chair of the Congressional Fire Services Caucus, Rep. Hoyer has been very active in helping establish and fund the Assistance to Firefighters Grant Program, which helps local fire departments buy equipment and provide adequate training.

The legislation introduced by Congressman Hoyer and members of the Congressional Fire Services Caucus reauthorizes the Fire Grant program at \$900 million annually, increases the size of the grant awards, adds firefighter safety research and development to the firefighter prevention section which would benefit programs such as the Maryland Fire and Rescue Institute, and expands eligibility to include volunteer EMS squads which would benefit the many EMS squads in Maryland who are struggling to secure the resources they need to do their job.

Following are Congressman Hoyer's remarks, as prepared for delivery, where he addresses the importance of returning the jurisdiction of the program to the US Fire Administrator.

"I am pleased to join Bill Webb, who outlined the major provisions of this bill and highlighted the ways in which this legislation will improve upon this enormously successful Assistance to Firefighters Grant Program.

"Since the program's first year of funding in 2001, the US Fire Administration has been widely praised for the effective and efficient manner in which it has administered the funds and awarded grants to the most deserving applicants.

"During the past three years USFA has made nearly 16,000 grants totaling more than \$1.1 billion. Nearly \$16 million has been provided to fire departments in the State of Maryland since 2001. And, \$750 million has additionally been appropriated by Congress for fiscal year 2004, which has yet to be appropriated.

"But those FY04 dollars will not be administered by the fire administrator, despite its proven record of management over this program. Last year, over the objections of many of us in

Congress, jurisdiction over the Assistance to Firefighters grant program was moved from the US Fire Administrator to the Department of Homeland Security's Office of Domestic Preparedness (ODP).

"ODP is the federal government's lead agency "responsible for enhancing the capacity of state and local jurisdictions to respond to, and mitigate the consequences of, incidents of domestic terrorism." While this is of course one of the most critical challenges our government faces today, and one for which I have consistently sought increased levels of funding, it is not, unfortunately, the intent or objective of the fire grant program.

"This program was created by Congress, and has in fact been administered by USFA, as a source of federal funds designed to bring our nation's career and volunteer firefighters to a baseline of readiness to respond to all hazards. During the past three years we have provided the most basic firefighting and emergency response needs - ranging from turnout gear and breathing apparatus to improved firefighter training and physical fitness programs.

"I am very concerned that under the jurisdiction of the office of domestic preparedness, the fire grant program may lose this focus on preparing departments for all hazards, and instead become focused on meeting the homeland security needs of our first responders. In fact, in his fiscal year 2005 budget proposal, when talking about the Fire Grant program, the President specifically recommends that ODP "place greater emphasis on the unique role of federal funds, particularly for terrorism preparedness."

"In light of these concerns, and taking into account USFA's outstanding record of administering this program, HR 4107 returns jurisdiction over the Assistance to Firefighters Grant Program to the US Fire Administration. This bill also makes funds available to our nation's volunteer EMS squads. I firmly believe that by doing so we will 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."

Also speaking at the event were Bill Webb, Executive Director of the Congressional Fire

Services Institute; Lynn Gilroy, President of the Southern Maryland Volunteer Fireman's Association; Steve Edwards from the Maryland Fire and Rescue Institute and Tom Mattingly, St. Mary's County Commissioner and past president of the Southern Maryland Volunteer Fireman's Association.

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