

WASHINGTON – Congressman Steny Hoyer (D-MD) today announced that \$65 million for the Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response Firefighters (SAFER) Program and \$650 million for the Assistance to Firefighter Grant Program was included in the fiscal year 2005 Homeland Security Appropriations Conference Report. As a co-chair of the Congressional Fire Services Caucus, Hoyer helped establish and fund both of these federal grant programs to assist fire departments across the country.

In June, the House of Representatives approved Congressman Hoyer's amendment to provide funding to initiate the SAFER Program and he worked to ensure that the funding remained in the final version of the bill. The Senate is expected to pass the legislation this weekend, sending the bill to the President to be signed into law.

Funding for the historic new SAFER grant program will help career and volunteer fire departments hire new firefighters, recruit and retain volunteer fire fighters, and provide relief to the thousands of local fire stations across the country that are currently operating short of staff. Two-thirds of all professional and volunteer fire departments do not have sufficient personnel to adequately protect the public.

"I am particularly pleased that \$65 million was included in today's Conference Report, and I was proud to have worked to pass an amendment this summer to provide initial SAFER funding," said Hoyer. "This conference agreement's \$65 million in new hiring grants will help bring fire departments to adequate staffing levels and improve the safety of our firefighters and the communities they serve.

"The agreement also contains \$650 million for the Fire Grant Program, a \$150 million increase over the President's request that is vital to our firefighters, too many of whom risk their lives on a daily basis to protect our homes and our families without the modern equipment and advanced training they deserve. Thanks to the equipment, vehicles and improved training provided by Fire Grants, fire departments in Maryland and across the country are now better trained and equipped to respond to fires, automobile accidents, natural disasters, or acts of terrorism.

"During the last four years, Congress has provided nearly \$20 million to fire departments in the state of Maryland in Assistance to Firefighters Grants." Hoyer continued. "These funds have been used by large and small departments in our state to purchase basic firefighting equipment ranging from infrared cameras and defibrillators to HAZmat detection devices, new vehicles and

to implement improved training and fitness programs.

“But inadequate training and outdated equipment are not the only challenges facing our fire departments today. Insufficient staffing is a very real problem for far too many of the nation’s career and volunteer fire departments. In fact, the National Fire Protection Association estimates that between 75,000 and 85,000 new firefighters are needed in order to bring all fire departments to this minimum staffing requirement.

“To address this problem, Congress last year approved the creation of the SAFER program to help fire departments hire new firefighters and recruit and retain volunteers. Modeled after the highly successful Assistance to Firefighters Program, the SAFER grants will be awarded directly to career and volunteer fire departments.

“I am pleased that the Congress recognized the importance of supporting our first responders by including funds to maintain the Fire Grant Program and begin implementation of the SAFER program. We have an obligation to provide our firefighters with the necessary resources to improve their safety as they risk their lives in our defense every day, and funding for the SAFER and Fire grant Programs helps us make good on that obligation,” Hoyer concluded.

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