

Hi Gail,

Thanks for the opportunity to join today's meeting. As the Committee requested, I'm sending information on Senator Sanders' recent bill for fire departments and fire-based EMS (non-affiliated EMS also is eligible for 2% of this funding) – a link to the bill is at the bottom of the press release, below.

If you or the Committee members have any questions, please let me know.

Once the EMS bill is officially introduced, I'll send it to you.

All the best,
Haley

NEWS: Sanders Introduces Legislation to Address Major Crisis in Fire Departments Across Rural America

February 8, 2022

Over the last 30 years, emergency call volume has tripled, yet firefighter recruitment and retention has become increasingly more difficult, severely affecting the safety of communities

WASHINGTON, Feb. 8 – Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.) on Monday introduced legislation to address the major staffing crisis affecting both career and volunteer fire departments.

Recruiting and retaining both volunteer and career firefighters has become increasingly difficult, even as emergency call volume has **tripled** over the last 30 years. The strain of the COVID-19 pandemic has only deepened the crisis. To begin to address the many crises facing fire departments and the communities they serve, Sanders' legislation, the Firefighter Staffing and Support Act, would more than triple the federal support for fire departments over the next five years.

“Career and volunteer fire departments in Vermont and across America are facing unprecedented challenges,” said Sanders. “The difficulty in recruiting and retaining personnel is an absolute crisis that has left fire departments and the communities they protect dangerously short-staffed. There are a lot of reasons why we are where we are. But in my view, one thing is entirely clear: Our firefighters, both volunteer and paid, put their lives on the line to protect our communities, but they are not getting the proper support and resources they need and deserve. It's time for that to change.”

A major factor in this staffing crisis, particularly for smaller rural communities, is the overwhelming dependence on volunteers. Nationally, **86 percent** of all departments are categorized as all or mostly volunteer. In

Vermont, that number is 96 percent. Across the country, the time donated by volunteer firefighters saves localities an estimated \$46.9 billion per year, however the number of volunteer firefighters in the U.S. reached a **40-year low** in 2017. At the same time, call volume has tripled in the last 30 years, due in large part to the increase in emergency medical calls, according to the National Volunteer Fire Council.

While some additional funding was included in the American Rescue Plan, federal programs to support fire departments have been historically underfunded despite high demand. Currently, two major programs exist to support these departments: the Assistance to Firefighters Grants (AFG), which can fund vehicles and equipment; and the Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) grants, which funds hiring, recruitment, and retention. Despite Congressional authorization to fund both programs at nearly \$1 billion, they each received only \$360 million this past year. As a result, these grant programs turn down hundreds of millions of dollars in requests for funding each year. Additionally, many local fire departments, particularly volunteer departments who are already short staffed, lack the resources necessary to prepare grants with complicated application requirements and as a result are often unable to access existing grant funding.

Sanders' Firefighter Staffing and Support Act would more than triple the funds currently available to fire departments to \$12 billion over five years through Assistance to Firefighters Grants (AFG), and Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) Grants through 2028. The legislation would also:

- Allocate funding for technical assistance to support departments in applying for these funds;
- require that FEMA and the Fire Administration develop an action plan to improve and streamline the application process;
- require that FEMA and the Fire Administration provide a report detailing the challenges rural and volunteer fire departments face with staffing, and develop a plan to use Federal resources to address the crisis; and
- protect volunteers from being fired, demoted, or discriminated against by their employer if they respond to a federal emergency or major disaster.

Joined by U.S. Fire Administrator Dr. Lori Moore-Merrell, Sanders recently held a virtual **town meeting** with Vermont firefighters and EMS providers to discuss the serious staffing crisis facing fire and EMS departments in Vermont and in other rural communities across the country, and how the federal, state, and local government can support their invaluable service. In November of 2021, firefighters in Williston, Vermont were reportedly forced to leave their station unstaffed for up to an hour in order to properly respond

to an emergency. During the town hall, the Vermont first responders spoke of similar challenges facing their own and neighboring departments. This legislation would be an important first step in beginning to address this dangerous crisis that is threatening the safety of our rural communities.

Read the bill, [here](#).