

Wednesday April 28, 2021



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**Before, The Committee on Homeland Security's Subcommittee on Emergency
Preparedness, Response, and Recovery.**

"State and Local Perspectives on DHS Preparedness Grant Programs".

Wednesday, March 28, 2021

Good Afternoon Congresswoman Demings and the members of the subcommittee. I am Robert Altman a current Battalion Chief with Ocala Fire Rescue in Ocala Florida, located in North Central Florida. I am pleased to testify before your subcommittee today to discuss the importance of the Assistance to Firefighters Grant program known as AFG. I was recently asked by Congresswoman Cammack from Florida's 3rd Congressional District to give some testimony on the Assistance to Firefighter Grants program from my own firsthand knowledge. I also have been selected to review AFG grants by The International Association of Firefighters for FEMA.

Ocala Fire Rescue operates out of seven fire stations providing emergency services to estimated 61,000 full time residents and approximately 156,000 people on an average weekday. The Department covers just over 47 square miles and has an automatic aid agreement with Marion County Fire Rescue to assist with emergency coverage for 1663 square miles and over 365,000 residents.

Ocala Fire Rescue has been the beneficiary of several AFG awards in the past including one this previous year. The department was awarded a grant for hearing protection in our Fire Apparatus previously, two grants roughly 10 years apart for Self-contained breathing apparatus known as SCBA's. We are awaiting the arrival of our newly awarded SCBA's currently. Fire Departments like Ocala depend on the federal funds to make major purchases that either were not budgeted for or the current financial climate could not cover the expense. Ocala Fire

Rescue like many other departments across our nation has been struggling to recover from the financial downturn our nation previously went through. The current Covid 19 Pandemic has put new strains on departments that have not fully recovered. Bills like the current SB 426; Firefighter Cancer bill have also put a financial strain on Fire departments across Florida. While joining 44 other states in our Country to improve Firefighter safety it has a cost to the city's, Counties and Departments. Departments are trying to improve the Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) of their Firefighters. The new gear that is recommended to protect Firefighters is costly, some departments just do not have the resources to budget for these items. That is where the AFG program helps these departments not only cover the recommendations and meet the current National Fire Protection standards but also the mission of the departments, to protect those that protect us, The firefighters.

Florida Firefighters are asked to perform in all types of emergencies, we cover all types of economic development, from rural to urban terrain and everything in between. We respond to natural disasters, hurricanes, hazardous materials incidents, technical rescues, fires, and medical emergencies and any other situation that the public cannot handle. A perfect example of the need for AFG is the current Covid 19 pandemic we are working through, without the Federal aid that was offered last year by AFG many departments just could not meet the communities needs, services would have been cut short to the people that needed it the most.

Departments across the nation like my own Department are currently being asked to submit flat budgets or decrease their current budget proposals due to the cost the pandemic has put on departments and communities. Funding that was budgeted for other critical equipment was spent on Covid 19 response. With this unexpected pandemic and its costs, departments still need to respond to every other emergency that is out there. They still need to keep on schedule with PPE purchases and other essential equipment that fire departments need to operate and serve their citizens. I have read numerous applications from departments all across our nation, large and small all with the same missions and goals. The AFG grants not only help the departments protect the lives and safety of citizens it also helps them meet their goals of Firefighter safety. Without the AFG many departments would not be able to provide adequate PPE to its Firefighters to do the basic fundamentals of the fire service, fight fire. I have read too many applications where departments do not have enough bunker gear to outfit their firefighters so that each firefighter has his own individual turnout gear. Fire Departments that are driving 30-year-old emergency vehicles as front-line apparatus. Departments asking for exhaust scavenging systems for their apparatus, so Firefighters and the public do not have to breathe cancer causing fumes from emergency vehicles.

The other side to the AFG is that departments that are able to maintain and secure awards can then use other funds to advance life safety projects that the Fire Service offers to its communities. Departments like mine can offer smoke detector programs, hands only CPR to schools and businesses, water safety, and Community Paramedic Programs to name a few.

Ocala Fire Rescue is also part of USAR task force 8 which combines three local departments, Ocala, Gainesville, and Marion County. We have 28 members from our department on the regional team. We have been able to train and receive the most advanced technical equipment through the AFG awards. We have responded to many emergencies throughout Florida and the southeast region of the USA. When a Department receives a grant from AFG not only does the award help their Department, but it also helps the neighboring departments, by adding more resources and/or more up to date resources.

In closing, being a recipient of AFG grants and as a reviewer I can attest that the need to continue and when possible, increase the allotted budget for AFG is greatly needed. Without these funds many departments would be cutting services, laying off Firefighters and asking Firefighters to put their lives at greater risk by performing their job without adequate personal protective equipment or inadequate firefighting equipment. When a disaster strikes, local fire departments will be the first to arrive, they need the equipment to safely do their job, I am glad that the Federal government recognizes the need to assist in funding these grants. Grants help local fire departments meet their basic needs and improve their capabilities to respond to all hazards. I thank you for the opportunity today to testify about my experience with the Assistance to Firefighters Grant program. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.