

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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“FIREFIGHTERS NEED FIREFIGHTERS”

Bipartisan Group Pushes for \$100 million to Hire More Firefighters

WASHINGTON, DC – House Democratic Whip Steny H. Hoyer (MD) led a bipartisan group of 85 lawmakers in urging members of the Fiscal Year 2005 Homeland Security Appropriations conference committee to retain \$100 million in funding for the “Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response Firefighters” (SAFER) Program in a letter sent late Friday. The SAFER Program would provide much-needed funding for career and volunteer fire departments across America to hire new firefighters, recruit and retain volunteer fire fighters, and relieve the thousands of fire stations across the country that are currently operating short of staff.

“A firefighter needs other firefighters to do the job correctly and safely,” said Rep. Steny Hoyer, Co-Chair of the Fire Caucus. “If less than four firefighters per truck answer a call it is harder to save victims, contain the fire and do both safely. September 11th was a wake-up call. All of America is now aware of how important firefighters are to community safety and it is time the federal government acknowledges that role through support of the SAFER program.”

Harold Schaitberger, president of the International Association of Fire Fighters said, “Funding SAFER is our Number One legislative priority. Ensuring adequate staffing is the single most important thing Congress can do to protect the safety of our nation’s fire fighters and the citizens they serve”.

“I’m delighted that both the House and Senate were able to find some startup funds for this important program, particularly given our incredibly tight budget constraints,” said Rep. Sherwood Boehlert, Chairman of the House Science Committee. “Addressing firefighter staffing shortfalls is arguably the greatest challenge facing the fire services today. Accordingly, getting the SAFER program up and running should be a top priority for Congress, and I urge the conferees to adopt the Senate funding level of \$100 million for the program.”

“The firefighters whose bravery and valor protect our nation deserve all that we can give them,” said Rep. Bill Pascrell. “Adequately funding the SAFER program is vital in this regard.”

Two-thirds of all career and volunteer fire departments across the United States, departments that serve large cities, suburbs, small towns and rural areas, do not have sufficient personnel to adequately protect the public. These staffing shortfalls often result in fire departments responding to the scene of a fire with fewer than four firefighters per vehicle.

Responding with fewer than four firefighters per apparatus prevents the first responder unit from complying with OSHA’s “2-in/2-out” standard for safe fireground operation, and adds unnecessary risk to the already dangerous job of fire suppression.

To address this staffing shortfall, Congress last year (as part of the FY2004 Defense Authorization) established the SAFER Program. President Bush did not provide any funding for the SAFER program in his 2005 budget but Congressman Hoyer sponsored an amendment with Representative Curt Weldon (R-PA) to provide \$50 million in the Fiscal Year 2005 Homeland Security Appropriations Bill which passed the House earlier this year.

The text of the letter is below. Please contact Stacey Farnen Bernards at 202-225-3130 for a list of signatories:

September 17, 2004

Dear Conferees:

As you begin work on the conference agreement for the fiscal year 2005 Homeland Security Appropriations bill, we strongly urge you to maintain the \$100 million provided in the Senate bill for the Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response Firefighters (SAFER) Program, which was authorized in the FY2004 National Defense Authorization Act.

This funding would provide much-needed funding for career and volunteer fire departments across America to hire new firefighters, recruit and retain volunteer fire fighters, and will provide relief to the thousands of fire stations across the country that are currently operating short of staff.

Two-thirds of all professional and volunteer fire departments in our nation, located in both large cities and small towns, do not have sufficient personnel to adequately protect the public. The landmark study "A Needs Assessment of the U.S. Fire Service," reveals it is common for fire departments to operate with staffing levels that do not meet the minimum safe staffing levels required by OSHA and the National Fire Protection Association. In addition, many local governments are currently facing budget shortfalls and are unable to hire additional fire fighters even though public safety is clearly at risk.

Although Congress has increased spending on first responder needs in the wake of the September 11th terrorist attacks, no federal funding has been allocated to address the critical staffing shortage in the fire service. Under the SAFER Act, fire departments throughout the country will be able to apply for grants to fill the fire fighter shortage. The grant program, once funded, will enable fire departments to receive federal grants to hire and pay new fire fighters for five years. Under the program, the federal grant decreases annually on a sliding scale in order to promote complete local self-sufficiency after four years. In addition, grants will be awarded to state and local organizations to recruit and retain volunteer fire fighters.

The federal government already provides funds for training and equipment to fire stations throughout the country. However, without adequate fire fighters, training and equipment money will be ineffectual. We saw on September 11th when the country is under attack, or during a natural disaster, fire fighters are the first to respond. Congress spoke when it authorized SAFER.

We urge you to fulfill the promise we made last year to our nation's fire fighters by maintaining the Senate level of funding and providing an initial appropriation of \$100 million for the Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response Firefighters Program.

Sincerely,

Signatories