



Legislation Text

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City of Alexandria, Virginia

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MEMORANDUM

**DATE:** JANUARY 18, 2022

**TO:** THE HONORABLE MAYOR AND MEMBERS OF CITY COUNCIL

**FROM:** JAMES F. PARAJON, CITY MANAGER /s/

**DOCKET TITLE:**

Consideration of a Grant Application to the 2021 Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) Grant Program from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Federal Emergency Management Agency.

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**ISSUE:** Consideration of a grant application to the 2021 Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) program of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), and its subsequent local funding impact.

**RECOMMENDATION:** That City Council:

- (1) Approve the submission of a grant application for \$6 million over a three-year period to partially fund the addition of 20 additional firefighters for relief staffing for the Alexandria Fire Department (AFD) over a three-year period; and
- (2) Authorize the City Manager to execute the necessary documents that may be required.

**BACKGROUND:** On January 3, 2022, FEMA opened the competitive grant application period for the 2021 SAFER grant program. SAFER grants provide financial assistance to help fire departments increase the number of frontline firefighters. The goal of SAFER is to help communities better meet industry minimum standards and obtain 24-hour staffing to provide adequate fire protection.

AFD will seek to hire an additional 20 firefighters for relief staffing through the grant program following on the Office of Performance Analytics (OPA) Report from November 2019 which recommended the Fire Department needed an additional 26 positions in order to meet relief staffing level requirements. In that report, AFD and the Office of Performance and Analytics (OPA) calculated a staffing relief factor for minimum required posts. A staffing factor is a calculation that establishes how many employees are needed to supply the total number of hours each post requires per year, after accounting for non-post time. There are many sources of non-post time, including sick leave, annual leave, training, and restricted duty after an injury. A staffing factor accounts for non-post time and estimates how many full-time equivalents (FTEs) are needed to cover all posts with uninterrupted coverage without the use of overtime.

OPA calculated the staffing factor for two groups of AFD employees who are responsible for minimum required posts: firefighters and officers. The staffing factor for dual-role firefighters was calculated at 1.24 positions. This means 1.24 firefighters are required to

ensure continuous annual coverage of each shift (with three shifts per post). The staffing factor for officers was calculated at 1.30 positions. 6 of the 26 positions recommended in the OPA report were already added in the FY 2021 Operating Budget, this SAFER grant would help to fund the remaining 20 positions. It should be noted that with fewer than the optimal number of relief positions, AFD would use overtime to meet its minimum staffing requirement on each shift. While overtime can solve an immediate staffing problem, its use if frequent places can undue work and family life burden on AFD employees.

Previously, the Department has successfully used SAFER grant funding in 2017 and 2018 to achieve a four-person staffing level on our engines and ladder trucks, working to industry standards. The addition of four-person staffing is one of the causal factors contributing to excess overtime use. This SAFER application would be to assist with staffing relief for proper staffing of units.

**DISCUSSION:** The 20 positions will provide staffing relief and reduce the need for overtime. Currently the Department is averaging 18 hours every day of mandatory overtime where employees are forced to work overtime. This is on top of averaging 10 people every day working 24 hours of overtime. All of this is after putting one unit out of service (the heavy rescue squad) which will need to be restaffed for the AlexRenew project. AFD currently has 27 recruits in training and has been previously authorized to initiate a new recruit school in early 2022 with up to 30 recruits.

The SAFER grant historically pays for the full salary & benefits of the positions for the first two years, then reduces the federal share of these positions to 35% in the third year, and then requires the locality to fully fund the positions for a 4<sup>th</sup> year. This year, the SAFER grant will fund salary and benefits of the 20 positions for three years, and then require the City to fully fund the positions in the 4<sup>th</sup> year.

The SAFER grant opened for applications on January 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2022 and will close on February 4<sup>th</sup>, 2022. AFD will be working with the contracted grants vendor (the Ferguson Group) for assistance with its application as this will be a competitive application process open nationwide to fire departments.

**FISCAL IMPACT:** The SAFER grant currently pays for 100% of the personnel costs positions throughout the three year period, though the locality is still required to fund all gear, uniform and training costs. This equates to a \$6 million three-year grant for all 20 positions. Localities are responsible for all costs of the positions in the fourth year and thereafter. The City would need to pay for the 20 positions at least in year 4 (estimated \$2.3M) if awarded.

The grants costs for the 20 positions equate to just over \$2 million for the first year with \$1.8M of that \$2M covered by federal revenue from the grant. The only costs associated with the additional 20 positions is the gear and uniform costs of \$0.25M.

There will be overtime savings from these positions once they are fully trained and onboarded. Based on the time until they are trained, these 20 positions will reduce overtime on a daily basis by approximately 6 positions per day. This overtime savings equates to approximately \$1.3M in overtime savings per year once the employees are fully trained and released to the field.

The City has applied for and received SAFER grants in 2012, 2017 and 2018.

**STAFF:**

Debra Collins, Deputy City Manager

Corey Smedley, Fire Chief