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# Fire Engineering

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## What I Learned from the 2009 AFG Workshop

by [Jonathan Kaye](#)

Over the past couple of months, the [Federal Emergency Management Agency \(FEMA\)](#) has been running its 2009 grant workshops to help departments understand the Assistance to Firefighters Grant (AFG) Program, and to submit timely and relevant proposals. The workshops provide the latest, reliable information about program guidelines and give you the opportunity to discuss the specific issues you need to resolve when you consider applying to this program. I attended a workshop in Chews Landing, New Jersey, in mid-March.

The regional FEMA representative delivered an informative presentation, but the most valuable aspects were the opportunity to ask questions and the tips regarding how to approach the solicitation. If you have questions but couldn't make it to a workshop, find your regional rep via the AFG web site and contact him or her-I believe the reps genuinely want to help you prepare the best proposal possible.

In this article, I summarize the information that caught my attention during the workshop, hopefully to give you some insight if you couldn't make one in your area. However, this article should not replace your thorough understanding of the grant requirements, as articulated in the Program Guidance document or Federal Register Notice. If you have any doubt or question, please consult those documents or FEMA for the definitive answer.

I have also created [an AFG discussion group on the Fire Engineering Training Community site](#) (see Essential Links, below), so please visit and contribute your ideas or ask questions.

If there is one misunderstanding about the AFG Program overall, it is that AFG money is free money. AFG is designed to complement your department's resources, not replace them. It is a cash-matching program that requires you to match a percentage of the award, depending on the size of the population served. A reviewer may deem you have a convincing proposal but your department should have provided for those funds in your operating budget, for example, an adequate supply of replacement parts or equipment. Therefore, your proposal should clearly identify why the need is important and what all the steps are that your department is taking to seek funding outside the AFG program.

Also, grant awards come with restrictions and requirements. For example, if you are the host department applying for a regional grant, you are on the hook for the whole amount to ensure your collaborators put in the money they said they would. Therefore, it is important for you to review the program requirements before submitting a grant proposal.

### ESSENTIAL LINKS

As of March 31, 2009, the Guidance documents for 2009 are not available yet, but should be available through the AFG Web site very soon. Here are some essential links you should check out if you are interested in applying for an AFG grant:

- [www.firegrantsupport.com](http://www.firegrantsupport.com): Home of the AFG program. There are site names that look like this, and some are useful, but this is the official site (notice the official site is ".com", and not ".gov"). I did a quick search on the Internet and found a lot of information about AFG, but as always, let the buyer beware

- [www.firegrantsupport.com/afg/guidance/](http://www.firegrantsupport.com/afg/guidance/): This is the site at which the Guidance documents will be posted, when available. TIP: Rather than diving straight into the full Program Guidance, you should check out the Federal Register Notice. This summarizes critical elements and priorities of the Guidance Document
- [www.firegrantsupport.com/prog/newsletter.aspx](http://www.firegrantsupport.com/prog/newsletter.aspx): Sign up for this newsletter that announces important issues regarding AFG, such as when the Programs open
- [www.firegrantsupport.com/prog/grantsmgt/](http://www.firegrantsupport.com/prog/grantsmgt/): The FEMA rep strongly recommended this tutorial
- AFG Program Grant Discussion Group on *Fire Engineering* (not affiliated with nor endorsed by DHS/FEMA): [http://community.fireengineering.com/group/afg\\_program](http://community.fireengineering.com/group/afg_program)

Also check out [Roger Lunt's excellent "do's and don'ts" advice regarding DHS/FEMA grants](#) on *Fire Engineering*.

## TIMELINE

The likelihood was that the program would open in late March, but apparently that did not happen. Look for it to open shortly. Regarding the much vaunted economic stimulus package-the FEMA rep would confirm there is an additional \$210M in the offering-no one knows exactly what is happening for sure, so do not be misled by rumors. If you sign up for FEMA's newsletter, you will know as soon as information is available.

If you received a rejection letter for a 2008 proposal and your proposal made it through the electronic scoring phase, there is a small chance that money will be left over or returned, in which case it must be distributed to the next on the list (which may be you). However, if you had a good 2008 application that hits the priorities for 2009 as well, you definitely should also submit a 2009 proposal-if you do end up receiving money from 2008 funds, your 2009 proposal will be for naught.

## YOUR PROPOSAL MUST ADDRESS THESE

The following notes sketch the main sections of your proposal. Frame your answers to be specific, concise, and compelling about how your issues relate to your department's situation. The more specific you are regarding how what you're asking for meets local or regional needs, and those needs fit the highest priorities identified in the Guidance document, the more likely you will be to receive an award.

### 1. Project Description and Budget

a. Who are you, where are you, what is your identified risk/problem, what is your solution, which standards will be met, how much will it cost

**TIP:** *make a compelling story that is about your specific problem*

### 2. Financial Need:

a. Why do you need Federal money, briefly describe your income compared to expenses to illustrate current funding deficiencies

b. Explain other attempts to fund need

c. Explain any relevant community or financial trends

**TIP:** *rejected applications typically are weak here*

### 3. Cost/Benefit

a. Explain benefits you will realize in return for grant funds

i. Frequency of use, increased efficiency of operation, interoperability, consequence of not receiving award

**TIP:** *Show whatever you're asking for is going to be used a lot*

### 4. Effect on Daily Operation

a. How will the grant improve safety and reduce loss of life and property?

b. Discuss frequency of use

c. Describe how you will measure results

## Important:

- Grant proposals should not specify brand names. Rather, you should define the performance standards that you require. If you receive an award, you are expected to promote competition-this means soliciting pricing from multiple manufacturers/producers. You do not have to buy the cheapest, but you must maintain documentation related to the purchase and bid process
- Find someone else to review your grant, someone who hasn't read it yet, before you submit the application. Once you submit it, you can't change it!

**DO A SELF-MINI-REVIEW**

Here are the questions the evaluators are likely to be asked, so put yourself in an evaluator's position and be critical about your proposal. According to the rep, the weakest part of the proposals tend to be the Financial Need section, so argue your case with specific, real numbers about what you need and what your department resources can supply. It would be a good idea for you or your reviewer to ask these questions before you submit your grant:

## 1. Project Description and Budget

- Did applicant provide enough information defining the risk/problem, the solution, and relative cost?
- What information was missing and/or what additional information would have helped?

## 2. Financial Need

- Did applicant make case for why it needs the money?
- What information was missing and/or what additional information would have helped?

## 3. Cost/Benefit

- Did the applicant provide a clear description of how the request would benefit the community, department, and its firefighters?
- What information was missing and/or what additional information would have helped?

## 4. Effect on Daily Operations

- Did the applicant clearly demonstrate that the project will enhance daily operations of its department?

**SHARPENING YOUR STORY**

- Understand current priorities - applications aimed at highest priority has potential to score the highest--know the priorities (in Priorities section of Program Guide)
- Essentially, you need a good story with a visceral tug as to why your specific department (or region) needs the stuff at highest priority - not fiction, just have to paint the picture why it is a critical need not adequately served by your existing budget or means of getting other funding. Your story identifies need(s) and how you plan to address them, not simply a need for tools, instructors, etc.
- The higher the priority addressed, the higher your chance of success. Merging lower priority and higher priority items in a grant may bring down the overall likelihood. Therefore, know the priorities to emphasize them in grant application. Lower priority does not mean you won't get funded, it just means you may have a lesser chance of success
  - Vehicle Acquisition: *Fire*: Pumper is priority 1. Program doesn't care how it is configured, just so that it is compliant with pumper. The overall money going into this category is capped at 25% of the appropriation (25% of the total is about \$132M). Since vehicles cost a lot, it is likely the cap will be reached solely in supplying money for pumpers. *EMS*: Ambulance or transport unit to support EMT-B needs
  - Operations & Safety: 5 categories, Training, Equipment, PPE, Modifications to Facilities, and Wellness/Fitness Services
- In Training, have to indicate percentage of FF trained to NFPA 1001 - any less than 100% the dept. will have to answer what is plan to get to 100% compliance to standard. These questions asked for every activity.
- Training highest priority: instructor-led, measurable event (test), leads to recognized certification at State or Fed level. Money for taking classes is lost wages, not backfill, though backfill can be applied for in a miscellaneous expense category
- Up to 50% of a grant's excess funds may be applied to training or wellness/fitness initiatives

- PPE: SCBA that are old is high priority; SCBA compliant with more current editions of NFPA 1997 are a low priority. Age of existing equipment considered, and you'll have to provide significant detail regarding existing equipment inventory
- Modification to Facilities: Structures built before 2003; Stations with 24/7 occupancy; Exhaust extraction systems (source capture: from inside to outside building)
- Wellness/Fitness: 3 highest: entry level physicals; physical assessment; Immunization. Costs for trainers, nutritionists, gym memberships, not eligible
- Department can put in up to 5 grants per year. An applicant can submit three separate applications for AFG areas: vehicle acquisition, operations and safety, and regional project
- While population and call volume critical factors for each, it really comes down to how the specific need addresses the population and volume. Your area may not have a high residential population, but may have other critical vulnerabilities and transient population, for example, critical infrastructure, hospital, roads, railways, tunnels, high volume pass through, corporate parks, etc.
- New for 2009: EMS level of response focus is now ALS (from BLS)
- If doubt about putting application in, put it in, but recognize best chance is with application geared to highest priority.

## REGIONAL GRANTS

A host department can submit a grant application for the benefit of an entire region. The host department has to be a Fire Suppression organization covering multiple geopolitical areas, for example, across county boundaries, not simply multiple fire districts under one geopolitical organization.

- Host does all the work and is on the hook for everything, so get agreements (MOU's) with participants in writing
- Regional grants look at total population served over all participating organizations
- Designed to facilitate interoperability
- Not necessarily complete buy-in of region, for example, 3 in one county, 3 in another; regions do not have to be contiguous
- Communications and training good for regional grants
- What you buy for your region may be supplied to organizations that are not eligible to participate in AFG. For example, if you buy communication
- AP-25 (or P-25) not necessarily requirement-you simply must comply with Statewide Communications Interoperability Plan (SCIP) that has been approved by DHS

## TEMPLATES/GRANT WRITING ASSISTANCE

- If you hire a grant writer, understand what you're contracting for: just writing grant, administering it, etc. Get the specific things that the grant writer or company is responsible for, written on paper. You don't want to discover mismatched expectations after you receive an award-you ultimately are responsible to meet the reporting and fulfillment requirements of the award
- Be very wary about templates, either from web or vendor-supplied. If language doesn't fit the story your presenting, your proposal could get dinged
- If DHS sees similar-looking copy from different places, it could spell trouble for your application

## PITFALLS

- Be specific about your situation and what you need, and how it will impact you. A good story is about how it fits you, not the Fire Service in general
- Work carefully on Financial Need - remember, AFG should complement what you do in your budget, not replace it
- *No brand names* - should describe what you need in terms of performance standards/requirements
- DHS will not tell you which brand of equipment you need to buy, nor will it require you to buy the cheapest, but if you are

granted an award, *you must document your procurement process* because DHS may audit this process. If it turns out you did not do a proper bid, or any monkey business, you could get into trouble. You can't control how many actually submit bids, but you can ensure that relevant competitors have been made aware of the solicitation

- Getting through electronic scoring: answers to many of the questions in the application have values assigned. The answers most closely aligned with program priorities will score the highest
- Don't cite a standard without a specific purpose--you don't get extra points for citing more standards, and it can actually dilute the story
- Get a third-party reviewer or at least second set of eyes on your document. Big screw-ups can happen with misplaced characters
- DHS looks at total inventory, not just request. If you ask for a few when you have many, your success is not likely--the proposal will be deemed replacements that should be budgeted for out of your available resources.

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