

MUTUAL AID IS KEY TO SUCCESSFUL ASSISTANCE TO FIREFIGHTERS GRANT (AFG)

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For fire and EMS departments grappling with the keys to success in the Assistance to Firefighter Grant (AFG) program the secrets lie in a traditional emergency services premises—mutual aid. By this I don't mean simply listing who your mutual aid partners are in the grant application. What I mean is joining together to get the bigger numbers necessary to improve your chances for a successful grant application.

At the time of this writing we are well into the 2011 AFG award process. Though still too early to draw conclusions, there are trends developing that provide insight into what it takes to optimize chances for success with the new evaluation system implemented in 2011.

The Award Process

To understand how mutual aid can help you get an AFG award; let's examine the review process. There are two parts; the initial computer screening and if you pass that, the peer review. Computer screening is the demise of a majority of AFG applications. This is where all of the data entered into the application like population, operational budget, call volume etc. are fed into a computer that determines whether you go on or you get a thank you for applying but we'll see you next year letter. What the magical numbers are that get you through computer screening is a mystery dictated by some formula of the grant gods. This much has become evident to me over my 11 years of work with this grant, though; the higher your population, the higher your call volume, the larger the size of your district, the lower your budget and the lower the size of your request; the greater your chances of making it through computer screening.

Once you make it past computer screening and on to peer review the narrative statements become the key element. With the new application implemented in 2011, narrative statements are found in two sections of the application: the Applicant Characteristics Section and the Request Details Section. In Applicant Characteristics one part asks you to describe your

organization and another part asks you to describe your financial need. Under request details there are four narratives: Project Description, Cost-Benefit, Statement of Effect and Additional Information. How well your application addresses the requirements of each narrative will determine your peer review score.

In peer review a panel studies your narratives and develops a score based on pre-determined scoring criteria. With the new evaluation system your total application score is then developed by melding the computer screening score and peer review score. If that score is high enough, you're in line to get a grant. What that score needs to be is known only to AFG administrators. Once an AFG application is in peer review success is determined by how well the narratives present a convincing argument that you cannot fund this need and fix the problem without assistance from the federal government. The CRITICAL ELEMENT is there must be a tie between the data you present and your request.

Mutual Aid—Regional Requests

With the first critical milestone of computer screening being a numbers game FEMA is making good its prerogative of driving its support towards higher populated areas with higher incident numbers. What this means is that it is advantageous to have bigger numbers.

Regional applications by virtue of their higher population and call volume have the critical mass to get your application past the computer guillotine and before the eyes of a peer review panel. For small fire department USA this means joining together to get the numbers. What it comes down to is using mutual aid—something we have done for decades at incidents. Now it is time to use it to help you get the purchasing power necessary to bolster chances of getting your departments needs met. The mechanism is already here to do this. In Iowa and the Midwest and West, regional is generally the county. Within a county we have county fire associations, county mutual aid agreements; a few areas that have MABAS (Mutual Aid Box Alarm System) districts and in Iowa we have the capability through 28E agreements to develop any conceivable joint entity to form a region.

Every fire or EMS Department can make three applications to the AFG program: one for Vehicles, one for Operations and Safety, and a Regional application. A regional application needs one department within the region to act as its sponsor. Regional applications have traditionally been used for communications and training needs. In 2011 the door was opened to allow requests for PPE under regional applications also. If a fire or EMS department makes three applications and they all make it through peer review they are all evaluated independently—they do not weigh on one another. Within a region, if three or four departments sponsor regional applications for different items and they all make it past peer review they will all be evaluated independently.

Pre-planning—Start Working on Your Grant Now

Success with the AFG program also requires use of another operational principal we employ in the fire service: pre-planning. The best time to begin working on an AFG application is at least two month before the application period opens. A successful AFG application requires accumulation of a lot of data and keeping good records. If you are generating the appropriate data you will gain immense knowledge of everything that has to do with fire protection in your fire district or city. This data accumulation process often turns into a meaningful learning experience for the developer of the grant and hopefully the entire fire department.

Whether you use a grant consultant to prepare the application or do the application on your own; be prepared to invest considerable time in research. Even in the hands of an experienced grant consultant a successful AFG application requires an investment of a minimum of 10 hours of work. Every detail left unaddressed decreases your margin for success; in fact such an oversight could prove fatal.

Secrets to Success

If you feel you have a grant that fits the mold of a successful AFG application the two most important guiding principles behind a successful AFG award are:

1. You must have a legitimate need, not a want. Separating needs from wants and proving needs vs. wants is the crucial element.
2. You've got to look poor and unable to fund your need. For a majority of fire departments this is not a problem.

Other factors that boost your chance for a successful award are:

1. Running a lot of alarms. What defines high call volume is rather nebulous and appears to be scalable depending on the size of the community.
2. Providing service to a highly populated area (like a region).
3. Having a vulnerable population or area within your fire district that will benefit by your request.
4. The presence of identified critical assets
5. Documented fire losses, deaths or injuries to either civilians or firefighters that have occurred due to the need you are addressing with the application.
6. Compromised firefighter safety due to the need you are addressing.
7. Inadequate fire protection due to the need you are addressing.

Rejection is not a Death Knell

If your AFG application is not funded your efforts have not been in vain. The data accumulated, the narrative developed and the experience gained are invaluable in preparing for the next go around of the AFG or the application process for other grants. There are corporate and foundation grants available to assist a variety of non-profit and emergency service causes. They may not be as lucrative as the AFG, but they do provide a needed shot in the arm. In Iowa, the most notable grants other than the AFG are gaming grants or county community development grants. What is available varies from county to county, even city to city.

Developing an AFG application can be a daunting task. Indeed, it is a challenge. Grant failures most commonly occur because:

1. The application is for a want, not a need.
2. A fatal error was committed in data entry.
3. The item(s) applied for are not top priority with the program.
4. The narratives are incomplete and/or non-convincing.
5. The program ran out of funding.
6. The grant developer lacked experience or expertise.

Final Observations

Over its 11 years the AFG has been instrumental in bolstering the capabilities of fire and EMS departments across the country. Fire departments that once had to flip pancakes to put gas in trucks now have good PPE and trucks that aren't held together with bailing wire and they are getting the training they need to conduct emergency operations safely and professionally. Yet, in spite of all the longevity of the program fire and EMS needs are unarguably still huge. There are still fire departments that have not applied for the AFG and there is a growing legion of departments that have given up on trying for an AFG award due to a lack of success. Every year the Fire Service Training Bureau goes out of its way to present informative programs about the AFG. I am amazed that in these sessions there remain a few departments who have not even heard of the AFG program.

One final observation I make is that in spite of the numbers game even the smallest fire departments are still getting funded from stand alone applications with the AFG. Though it is definitely advantageous to be part of a bigger (regional) entity, this is another reason to follow the sound guidance so often given: 'You can't get funded if you don't apply.' So, my advice: if you can formulate or have a regional entity that has the critical mass for a likely pass through computer screening, do it. If you are a small department and you have a legitimate need that

you can't fund, don't let the numbers game scare you away—apply—Santa Claus may still come.

For those looking for the necessary funds to comply with the FCC 2013 narrow banding mandate, regional communications grants for that purpose appear to be a priority for awards. With the 2012 AFG opening possibly as early as April or May this year there should still be enough time to formulate a regional application for narrowband compliance and potentially get funding and equipment before the switch is thrown on January 1, 2013.

This article reflects the views and experiences of the author in dealing with nearly 500 AFG applications since 2001. The author welcomes questions and comment.

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