



CANADIAN ASSOCIATION OF FIRE CHIEFS
Fire Chiefs on the Hill, November 2021

Written Submission for the Pre-Budget Consultations in Advance of Budget 2021

**From emergency operations to economic recovery:
improving what we have to keep what we need**

By: The Canadian Association of Fire Chiefs

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Recommendations

1. That the Federal Government install a federal fire advisor to increase a whole of government approach to federal issues impacting the fire service.
2. That the Federal Government continue to ensure that public safety services are maintained through adequate emergency operating funds to the municipalities.
3. That the Federal Government expand eligibility to fire and emergency services for programs like Investing in Canada, Gas Tax Fund, Airport Capital Assistance.
4. That the Federal Government reinstate a Joint Emergency Preparedness-type Program, while maintaining funding for Heavy Urban Search and Rescue.
5. That the Federal Government coordinate incentive programs that preserve the supply and savings provided by volunteer, paid on call and part time firefighters.
6. That the Federal Government direct the remaining \$3M in earmarked funds for first responder mental health from Budget 2018 towards crisis prevention
7. That the Federal Government request milestones for the front line from the \$27M invested from Budget 2018 in first responder mental health research.
8. That the Federal Government continue to explore housing conditions for temporary foreign workers to ensure that fire regulations are enforced.
9. That the Federal Government advance the public safety broadband network to facilitate emergency communications, rural coverage and economic opportunity.

From emergency operations to economic recovery: improving what we have to keep what we need

Canada's fire departments respond to all hazards. This includes emergency medical response during the COVID 19 crisis. Chief fire officers are often also the emergency managers for their city or county. The Canadian Association of Fire Chiefs (CAFC), represents these individuals and their organizations. There are over 3,500 fire departments (155,000 firefighters) in our country, including volunteer, career, and composite departments. Our representation is through individual chief fire officers and through our National Advisory Council, which brings together all of the provincial and territorial chief associations as well as the national affiliate organizations.

In our brief, *From Emergency Operations Centres to Economic Recovery*, our recommendations are about 'Improving What We Have to Keep What We Need'. This includes stable municipalities to keep communities clean, safe, and employed; correcting idiosyncrasies in the policy landscape for volunteer firefighting; and leveraging current mental health investments through a results-forward approach. We begin with a reflection on COVID 19 and why a federal fire advisor would be timely.

A Federal Fire Advisor and a National Fire Advisor Secretariat

Throughout the first wave of the COVID 19 pandemic, CAFC participated in Public Safety Canada's Extended Critical Infrastructure Network (ECIN). ECIN provided weekly updates to critical infrastructure associations like the CAFC for dissemination to our membership and they welcomed information on issues which they subsequently channeled as appropriate.

This was an excellent start. It is limited however to the information processing capacity of the issue and the moment. It is not yet generative outside of the pandemic or in terms of the future. Remember, fire does not have the federal linkages of the police to the RCMP nor does it have the provincial linkages of paramedicine to the provincial health systems. This can create a policy generating vacuum federally. Many years ago, there was a Dominion Fire Marshall. The position no longer exists.

Why does this matter? Many federal departments are involved in the fire service. The National Research Council houses the Canadian Commission for Building and Fire Codes. Transport Canada regulates Dangerous Goods and Rail Safety. Health Canada and the Public Health Agency of Canada work on issues like opioids, consumer safety, and oversee CIHR which is managing significant funding for public safety research and treatment. Public Safety Canada is working on a proposal for a Public Safety Broadband Network, the public alerting system, critical infrastructure, the Memorial Grant Program, national search and rescue framework and more. Canada Revenue Agency administers a volunteer firefighter tax credit.

These are all excellent programs that are to be strongly commended. We believe however that if they are coordinated strategically, we can better leverage opportunities, efficiencies and synergies. Most importantly, we can stay ahead of key issues.

An illustration of why a national fire advisor is important came up during the first wave of the COVID 19 pandemic. Housing regulations for temporary foreign workers are a mix of local, provincial and federal regulations. There are significant fire safety hazards in the current mix of housing. These issues were made visible during COVID but were likely present before. A federal fire advisor would have identified these issues earlier. As one fire chief said, “we are small fire away from a national if not an international issue”. We commend the recent action taken in temporary foreign worker housing and recommend continued work to ensure all housing meets safety standards.

In 1974, the US Federal Government established the “US Fire Administration”. The US Fire Administration works intimately with the US based counterpart of the CAFC (the IAFC), providing an official point of contact and resourcing to support the fire sector. It provides intersection between the grassroots chiefs’ association and the federal government to bring a whole of government approach to relevant policy issues. In addition, the functions of this office, which include (1) support for training and professional development; (2) fire prevention and public education; (3) operations management and safety; (4) data publications and library; and (5) grants and funding, are related to ensuing recommendations in this brief.

Funding for Municipalities

CAFC commends recent announcements in support of municipalities. On April 3, 2020, the Federation of the Council of Municipalities (FCM) asked for \$10-\$15B in emergency operating funds from the federal government. Their ask is outlined in a report entitled “Protecting Vital Municipal Services”. The first example they give in a long list of vital services is police, fire and ambulance.

FCM noted that the largest Canadian cities required property tax increases between 17% and 56% to bridge 2020 fiscal shortfalls without cutting funds. To address this, FCM asked for targeted emergency operating funding and additional emergency operating funds for those municipalities that run transit systems.

The FCM’s ask comes at a time when many CAFC members are concerned about how fire departments and public safety budgets will be impacted. We commend the initial investments through the Safe Restart Program and the Building Canada Resilience Fund. It would be essential for the federal government, recognizing pressures on provincial health systems, to continue to ensure and require that municipalities and public safety organizations are not overlooked in the flow of funds.

Other strategies can also support this effort. For example, expanding eligibility for access to the Airport Capital Assistance Program for mid-size communities that fall just short of the current threshold or expanding eligibility for the Gas Tax Fund to fire and

emergency services. Similarly, the former Joint Emergency Preparedness Program (JEPP) was intended to enhance capacity to respond to all types of emergencies and to enhance the resiliency of critical infrastructure. This program offered matched funding for equipment, training, and other infrastructure needed by the country's fire departments. It was an especially important program for volunteer departments. While the program was underutilized due to the complexity of application, we believe a modified version will provide important support to public safety.

Finally, in the US, under the auspices of the US Fire Administration, the Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) Grants, provide federal funding directly to fire departments and volunteer firefighter interest organizations to help them increase the number of trained, "front line" firefighters available in their communities. The Assistance to Firefighters Grants (AFG) also provide direct financial assistance to fire departments and related organizations to equip and train personnel; enhance operation efficiencies, foster interoperability, and support community resilience.

Preserving the Supply and Cost Savings Offered by Volunteer Firefighters

Without the country's volunteer fire departments, Canada would have severe vulnerabilities in its social, safety and security fabric. Eighty-five (85%) of Canada's fire service consists of trained volunteer firefighters. These are individuals whose primary employment is not firefighting, but who do so for the benefit of their communities.

While volunteer firefighting is what it says, there are three important differences from most volunteer jobs. (1) volunteer firefighters are people who have invested in and in whom society has invested in training; (2) firefighting involves a high level of mental, physical and emotional risk and stamina; and (3) financial recognition, through honoraria, pay on call, or part time pay, is often mandated by the province and recognizes the immense personal and familial contributions these individuals often provide. This however, is not to be confused with a liveable wage.

During the COVID 19 crisis, issues in the policy landscape impacting volunteer firefighters were highlighted because of the initial eligibility requirements for the Canadian Emergency Response Benefits (CERB) programs. With thanks to the federal government, this issue was rectified in most parts of the country, but because of regional variations, some concern remained that volunteer firefighter duty could eliminate access to important social safety programs. Some suggested no limits on volunteer firefighting; others described the possibility of reassessing CERB eligibility at tax return time; a third option stems from language in the CERB extension which is to exempt income from non-employment sources.

However, the CERB was just one example of the precarious policy landscape for volunteer firefighters. In some parts of the country, because of mismatched provincial and federal regulations, volunteer firefighter pay-on-call or part time pay disqualifies them from the volunteer firefighter tax credit. Others are required to pay EI premiums. Another problem occurs when employers become concerned that employees who serve

as volunteer firefighters become ill or infected or may lose work time. Employers need incentives to support volunteer firefighters.

These are all unintended consequences of a complex system and unique situation. However, if we don't find ways to correct them, we may have attrition rates that leave communities vulnerable. Remember, over 100,000 volunteer firefighters are contributing billions of dollars of service and cost savings to municipalities and to our country.

Mental Health in First Responders

In 2018 the federal government dedicated a total of \$30M over five years to the Canadian Institutes for Health Research and the Canadian Institute for Public Safety Research and Treatment (CIPSRT) to advance research, treatment and knowledge mobilization in the area of first responder mental health. Since then, \$27M has been spoken for and \$3M remains. Our first recommendation is to incent the delivery of returns from the \$27 M spent to date. There are opportunities and milestones in this spending that need to be unpacked so that the front line is aware of them and can benefit. For example, in one study funded for \$150,000, there is opportunity for 25 individuals to receive access to care. There are no doubt others of which we are not aware. The second recommendation is to direct CIHR to use the remaining \$3M in earmarked funds for a crisis prevention line for first responders. We believe this can be developed using the levers of applied and clinical research through a grant competition hosted by CIHR. This would bring the best minds to bare on a rapid evidence informed approach to leveraging technologies in order to stand the line-up, provide care to an initial cohort of individuals and provide a proof of concept system solution for suicide prevention among first responders.

Concluding Remarks

Our submission speaks to value and economic recovery that can be stimulated if we are prudent and coordinated with what we have. Thank you for the opportunity to present our recommendations. We look forward to the possibility of appearing before the Committee.