



CANADIAN ASSOCIATION OF FIRE CHIEFS
Fire Chiefs on the Hill, November 2023

Federal Pre Budget 2024 Consultations

The Unfortunate Clarity of Crises: A Fire and Emergency Perspective

From: The Canadian Association of Fire Chiefs

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Recommendations

That the Federal Government:

1. Create a Canadian equivalent of the US Federal Emergency Management Agency and the equivalent of a US Fire Administration.
2. Reinstate a modernized version of the former Joint Emergency Preparedness Program (JEPP) for fire/emergency training and equipment, with net new monies.
3. Increase the volunteer firefighter tax credit from \$3,000 to \$10,000 and modernize the CRA definition of volunteer firefighter to help retain firefighters.
4. Fund fire departments to spread and scale the FireSmart, Community Resilience Plans and Risk Assessments; and ensure strategic wildfire training and resource allocation.
5. Ensure that the current review of the explosive regulations (Chapter 16 fireworks) reverses proposals that compromise wildfire management efforts and public safety.
6. Make fire protection a protected service in every community and address Indigenous fire chiefs' recommendations to improve fire and life safety.
7. Fund a national multi-media smoke alarm awareness campaign in collaboration with the CAFC and industry partners in Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities.
8. Invest \$2M in the existing CAFC database to unite fire/emergency services as national advisors.

Federal Budget 2024: A Fire and Emergency Perspective

The Canadian Association of Fire Chiefs (CAFC), represents Canada's 3,200 fire departments and their 126,000 career and volunteer firefighters. Over 1,000 individual fire chiefs are members in good standing of CAFC, many of whom are also regional emergency management leaders. When we reference fire departments, we are referencing fire/emergency services and all hazard response.

CAFC also has a National Advisory Council (NAC) of the provincial and territorial fire chief associations and the relevant national affiliate organizations including the National Indigenous Fire Safety Council; the Fallen Firefighters Foundation; Volunteer Firefighters of Canada; the Department of National Defense, the Canadian Metro Chiefs and Canada's Fire Marshals and Fire Commissioners.

This year's prebudget submission is unlike any we have ever submitted. It echoes not only the recommendations we made last year, but also those that the Standing Committee on Finance itself included in its 2023 report. It is also further supported with a second year of data, lending further evidence to observation; and in the context of the worst fire season on record. The new data comes from a sample of over 530 fire departments serving 22 million Canadians. We hope you will continue to take their testimony seriously.

1. Implement a National Fire Administration

How are Canada's policy objectives in zero emissions technologies, affordable housing, climate change, wildfire, mental health, dangerous goods, and tax policy related to each other? Any policy maker not entirely sure has just confirmed "why Canada needs a national fire advisor".

For many years now, the CAFC has been on the record with a call for a US Fire Administration-type office in Canada. In the US this office sits with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and has existed since 1978. Recently, media has reported the federal government's intention to explore a FEMA type agency. It will be essential that as part of this agency, like in the US, there be an administration specific to the Canadian Fire Service.

Fire and emergency response is usually required on the "worst day" of a policy or practice decision. Whether it's not recognizing lithium-ion battery fires create thermal runways; how a new building code change affects radio signals between first responders; that the proposed explosive regulations are at cross purposes to wildfire precautions; that some environmental efforts are wild fire hazards; or that new affordable housing is going up at rates faster than fire services can keep up, accidents can happen because of what was in a blind spot.

On a systematic and national basis, we need to recognize and coordinate fire and emergency management considerations across all federal policy. New Zealand, Australia, Japan, Ireland, England, Scotland, and the United States have this type of capacity.

Currently CAFC provides this advice when asked. Through CAFC, each of the provincial and territorial associations, as well as the relevant national affiliate organizations, and more than 150 fire chiefs on 21 different committees also meet monthly to come to consensus on key issues. While we do not typically make financial asks for the national association itself, we'd like to ask

for 2 million dollars per year to fund, strengthen and expand the CAFC infrastructure currently bringing together fire departments nationally.

On the Government's side, receptor capacity will be required to receive and coordinate issues and advice. It will need understanding of how to connect the policy files across different departments and minimize blind spots. It can then proactively advise federal departments, fund key initiatives and generate operational advice and planning capacity nationally.

2. Modernize Fire Equipment and Training

The CAFC has asked the federal government to reinstate a modernized version of the Joint Emergency Preparedness Program (JEPP) for some time. Last year, we noted that 40% of fire departments had deferred equipment purchases due to fiscal pressures. This year, 56% have.

Last year 800 fire departments had deferred the purchase of a fire truck or emergency vehicle for over 48 months due to fiscal pressures, this number is now 1300. Last year, 500 fire departments deferred the purchase of communications equipment, this year 900 departments are using radio networks over 15 years old; 400 continue to defer the purchase of hoses, nozzles and pumping equipment, and 1,000 departments are using equipment that over 15 years old. The longer these purchases are deferred, the higher the risk and purchase price.

Recently, the International Association of Firefighters (IAFF), Canada's largest firefighter union, expressed concern that turn out gear exposes firefighters to carcinogens through flame-retardant chemicals in fabric. Older gear has more carcinogens. More than 700 fire departments are using gear purchased over 10 years ago, contrary to the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) standards. A revised JEPP would allow for the replacement of turn-out gear *and* the flexibility to meet other equipment requirements. For example, more than 600 fire departments are using self-contained breathing apparatus (SCBA) over 15 years old.

In the US, the Assistance to Firefighters Grants (AFG) program provides direct financial assistance to fire departments to equip and train personnel; enhance operational efficiencies, foster interoperability, and support community resilience. The former Joint Emergency Preparedness Program (JEPP) used to do this here. It was cut in 2013.

We recommend bringing JEPP back with net new monies. Substantial monies were invested in equipment for wildfire. This is commendable, but most fire departments haven't had access to it. A modernized JEPP should be limited to use by fire departments; the current funding for the Heavy Urban Search and Rescue teams should remain separate and intact, and the application process should be straightforward. Failing this will create a national safety and security issue that will become increasingly difficult to address over time.

3. Increasing the Volunteer Firefighter Tax Credit

In 2022, CTV's W5 began its 57th Investigative reporting season with "Under Fire: Fewer firefighters mean slower response times, jeopardizing lives". The story was heartbreaking, and to some shocking. However, the shortage of volunteer firefighters is not news to us.

Our data show a drop from 126,000 in 2016 to 89,000 in 2023. Both 2022 and 2023 data show that about 32% of volunteer firefighters are over the age of 50 and over 15,000 vacancies.

Departments also reported that 9,000 volunteer firefighters retired or left this year taking with them 100,000 years of experience. New individuals entering but do not yet have the same experience.

We strongly recommend increasing the volunteer firefighter tax credit from \$3,000 to \$10,000 as was previously included in the Standing Committee on Finance's report and per NDP MP Gord John's Bill. This tax credit would represent the return of money volunteer firefighters earned in exchange for the potentially dangerous and disruptive service they are providing. This is impossible to fund on a permanent full-time basis. The Parliamentary Budget Officer's costing of this measure at \$171M over 5 years is 10% of what it would cost to replace 10% of volunteer firefighters with full time paid firefighters. Let's send a clear message to volunteer firefighters that we need and value them. Let's take this ask across the finish line in Budget 2024.

4. Strategic Wildfire Planning and Spreading "FireSmart" in Communities

Through its climate committee and the provincial, territorial and national affiliate fire chief related organizations, CAFC has prepared a 13-point plan for wildfires which has been used as the basis of the recommendations we have been providing to Government.

This plan includes ensuring that equipment, resources and training are interoperable; federal and provincial resources are embedded into local fire departments to optimize deployments; that the current Canadian Interagency Forest Fire Centre (CIFFC) table be expanded to include fire departments and others; that Indigenous wildfire practices be integrated into western practices; and that fire departments be resourced to implement FireSmart, Community Resilience Assessment Plans, and critical infrastructure risk assessments.

Fire Departments can conduct the seven "FireSmart" disciplines, namely education, emergency planning, vegetation management, cross training, development, legislation that helps protect communities, however, initial training is expensive. We recommend funding Fire Departments for this important work.

The CAFC's recommendations are also consistent with the Liberal Party Platform pledge to allocate \$500M for 1,000 new community-based firefighters. The challenge in this endeavour will be ensuring that the specifications are correct. This is where a national fire advisor is essential. While many of the wildfire announcements made were commendable, some of the well intended proposals risk unexpected costs and inequities in the way we treat firefighters in this country.

5. Fire Protection in Indigenous Communities and National Smoke Alarm Campaign

No words are strong enough to express our concern about fire protection in Indigenous Communities. The death toll from residential fire is ten times that anywhere else in the country. In consultation with the National Indigenous Fire Safety Council, a member of CAFC's National Advisory Council, we ask for legislation to make fire protection a protected service and require the installation of smoke alarms in all houses. Funding is also needed for sprinkler retrofits. All other recommendations made in this brief are needed in Indigenous communities.

The Fire Service in general has also seen a stark increase in fires and fire fatalities. Ontario saw the most deaths in over 2 decades (133) and British Columbia saw a 207% increase in fire fatalities (86); 91% of fire fatalities are in residential homes (Stats Canada). The NFPA reports

that 60% of home fire deaths were caused by fires in properties with no smoke alarms (41%); smoke alarms that failed (16%); and that the death rate per 1,000 home structure fires is 55% with working smoke alarms than in homes with no alarms or alarms that fail. The effectiveness of smoke alarm campaigns has been proven. We recommend that the Federal Government work with the CAFC and Industry Partners to develop and fund these.

Concluding Remarks

In closing, we thank the Standing Committee on Finance for hosting this consultation and for supporting our recommendations last year. We hope you will continue to see merit in what we are proposing in service of safety and that the extreme difficulties of this summer are not forgotten this fall and winter. We hope that in our next prebudget submission we will celebrate having achieved what's needed for fire and emergency. We would be honoured to appear before the committee during your consultations wherever and whenever those take place. We will also be in Ottawa, December 4-6, 2023 for our annual Fire Chiefs on the Hill Event and hope to see you then. Thank you for considering our submission.