

application will include questions that are designed to provide general, generic information about the applicant. The application will also include activity-specific questions for each activity that the department plans to implement with the grant funds. The activity-specific questions will also be used by us to determine if your application addresses the program's priorities and merits further review.

In connection with the activity-specific questions, the applicants will be asked to provide details concerning the various budget items necessary to accomplish their proposed projects. Lastly, the application will include a project narrative in which the applicant provides a detailed description of their planned activity or activities, the applicant's financial need, and the benefits to be derived from the costs of the activity.

In selecting applications for award, we will first evaluate each application independently based on established applicant eligibility criteria and with respect to program priorities. Then we will evaluate the applications of those with the best score for their project descriptions, the financial needs of the applicant and an analysis of the benefits that would result from the grant award. In the first screening, every application will be evaluated based on the answers to the activity-specific questions. The applications that most closely address the Assistance to Firefighters Grant Program's established priorities will be deemed to be in the "competitive range" and subject to a second level of review. This second level of review is conducted using technical review panels (made up of individuals from the fire service and fire service organizations) that assess the application's merits with respect to the detail provided in the narrative about the project, the applicant's financial need, and the project's benefit to be derived from the cost. At least three technical evaluation panelists will independently score each application and then discuss the merits/shortcomings of the application in order to reconcile any major discrepancies. A consensus on the score is not required. The scores of the panelists will be added together, and then divided by the number of panelists to arrive at the final score of the application. The highest scoring applications will then be considered for award.

The law requires a certain distribution of grant funds between career departments and combination/volunteer fire departments. Specifically, we must ensure that fire departments that have either all-volunteer forces of firefighting

personnel or combined forces of volunteer and career firefighting personnel receive a portion of the total grant funding that is not less than the proportion of the United States population that those departments protect. The specific proportions will be gleaned from the most recent survey conducted by the National Fire Protection Association and announced in the NOFA that we will publish pursuant to the program's annual appropriation.

To fulfill our obligations under the law which requires us to make grants to a variety of fire departments, we may deviate from our primary decision factor of rank order and use department type (career, combination, or volunteer) and/or the type of community the fire department serves (urban, suburban, or rural) and/or the geographic location of the department as alternate decision factors when selecting departments for award. In these instances in which we are making decisions based on geographic location, we will use States as the basic geographic unit. We are also required under the law to make grants for fire prevention programs that total no less than five (5) percent of the funds appropriated for the grant program. We are also limited in the amount of funds that may be awarded for firefighting vehicles, specifically, no more than twenty-five (25) percent of the funds appropriated for the grants shall be used to assist grant recipients to purchase firefighting vehicles.

For each year the grant program is appropriated, we will issue a NOFA and announce the application requirements as well as other pertinent information regarding the application. The application will be available on FEMA's e-grant system and accessible from the FEMA and USFA Internet homepages. Although we do not encourage the use of paper applications, paper applications will be available for applicants that do not have access to the Internet.

Complete application packages must be submitted electronically or otherwise received by us on or before the close of business (5 p.m. EST) on the closing date as announced in the Notice of Availability of Funds. We will not accept late or incomplete applications. The automated grant application system has features built into it that will guarantee that the application is complete when submitted.

Eligible applicants can access an electronic version of the application form at the FEMA/USFA Web site (www.usfa.fema.gov). If an applicant does not have access over the Internet to the FEMA/USFA Web sites, the

applicant may contact us directly to request a copy via mail. Those applicants interested in receiving an application in the mail can (1) submit their request to USFA Grant Program Technical Assistance Center, 16825 South Seton Avenue, Emmitsburg, Maryland, 21727-8998, (2) phone 866-274-0960, or (3) e-mail us at USFAGRANTS@fema.gov. Applicants not using the automated e-grant system should complete and submit their signed original application to us at USFA Grant Program Technical Assistance Center, 16825 South Seton Avenue, Emmitsburg, Maryland, 21727-8998. In order for us to receive paper applications by the closing date, paper applications must be postmarked three business days prior to the closing date, or transmitted via next-day courier service one full business day prior to the closing date. Faxed applications will not be considered.

We solicited comments on the proposed rule in our previously published interim final rule. The interim final rule appeared in the **Federal Register** on February 22, 2002. We received thirteen (13) responses that contained seventeen (17) individual comments. Five comments were unrelated to the rule (e.g., dealing with the application deadline or advertising the availability of excess Federal property). Three comments were specific to the eligibility of certain items and five were specific to the eligibility of certain types of applicants. All concerns over expense eligibility have been addressed in this final rule. The five comments regarding applicant eligibility were all focused on the eligibility of non-fire based organizations; four were related to the exclusion of non-fire based EMS providers into the program. We are bound by our statutory authority, which only allows us to make grants to fire departments, and therefore we made no changes to the final rule with respect to applicant eligibility. One comment indicated that the program's emphasis should be based on basic operational needs rather than basing it on the industry's standards that often incorporate a certain amount of "expensive technology." We made no adjustments to our rule as a result of this comment because our program already places a higher priority on basic firefighting needs. We received one comment that concerned the inclusion of combination departments with volunteer departments rather than with career departments. This policy is a direct reflection of the authorizing legislation. Therefore, we did not make