

Bowie Volunteer Fire Department SAFER Grant Awarded 8/28/2015 for \$1,877,900 Volunteer Benefits as an Incentive

Why DHS/FEMA Awards this SAFER Grant Model:

Fire service leaders attribute the lower response in volunteer recruitment efforts to a lack of communication between the fire service and the public, along with overcoming the “What’s in it for me?” from people wanting benefits for serving their communities.

Enhancing the retention and recruitment of Volunteer Emergency Responders using benefits as an incentive increases responses to department calls and department training and will help overcome these R&R challenges. Federal funds provided through the FEMA SAFER grant program are designed to address the challenges that fire departments face with recruitment and retention.

1. The Benefit Plan for Bowie VFD (Stipend):

- This individual incentive will be paid to each Volunteer who qualifies on a quarterly basis through the grantee’s new payroll system. The intent is to offer a benefit to Volunteer Emergency Responders who excel beyond our department’s current standards. The department will report on a quarterly basis a list of the Volunteers who are in good standing and have met the requirements per the grant standards of performance.
 - *A point system is in development to provide tracking for qualification for this program.*
- Once the grant award is accepted by Bowie VFD, all funding of this program will be covered through the SAFER grant. There is no financial obligation on behalf of the fire department to participate in this program. Any expense that Bowie VFD incurs will be reimbursed from the grant budget.
- Social Security contributions are required on this quarterly benefit by the IRS. The department’s contribution is budgeted into the grant application.
- Each Volunteer will be responsible to choose their own eligible benefit and fill out the necessary individual enrollment forms. Volunteers will not receive this quarterly benefit until all of their enrollment forms are completed and processed by the grantee’s administrator.
- Eligible benefits include:
 - Stipend (current tax rate). In this case each member that qualifies and selects this option will receive a monthly check for the achieved level of service.
 - 401 K Contributions (tax deferred). In this case, each member that qualifies will have their benefit deposited directly to a 401K. This option is preferred as it is tax deferred and begins a retirement savings for the member.

2. Tuition Reimbursement as Incentive for Volunteer Emergency Responders

- This program will offer tuition reimbursement for current and new Volunteer Emergency Responders over the 4 year grant time period.
- Eligible participants will receive tuition reimbursement for every 2 years that they commit to active membership in Bowie VFD. The amount of reimbursement per year or semester will be determined by the SAFER committee.
- A county wide marketing campaign will promote the program and encourage residents to stay in their communities for higher education. Guidelines provide a strategic plan to increase commitment levels to the department while maintaining standards in education curriculum.
- On-going minimum requirements must be met for program eligibility:
 - Active volunteer in good standing with department and respond to calls.
 - Meet academic requirements with at least 2.5 GPA. (Specific requirements and GPA are proposed and will be finalized by the SAFER committee.)
 - Agree to the Administration Guide for program with stipulations if the individual fails to fulfill his or her obligation.
 - Field of curriculum to be chosen by participant, and may include Fire Science or other emergency service related program.
 - 20% will be awarded to women and minorities first.(This is a stipulation required in the use of the grant funds.)
- BVFD's goal is to begin the first round of reimbursements in spring semester of 2016, for participants selected during the application period in winter of 2015.

3. Who Qualifies for these Benefits?

Any Volunteer who *responds* to emergency calls is eligible to earn these benefits. The primary objective of these benefits is to recruit and retain trained frontline Volunteer Emergency Responders; therefore, positions such as admin roles in the department are not eligible. Definitions related to this qualification system are being clarified by the SAFER committee. Additional information will follow as it is available.

4. FAQ's?

Who decides which members are eligible for the benefits?

The grant specifies that those receiving benefits must be emergency responders. The BVFD SAFER committee will define a program that establishes qualification levels within the emergency responder group.

What can the grant money NOT be used for?

The grant money can't be used to hire career firefighters or EMTs. Also, the money can't be

used to make capital improvements. Capital improvements would include station renovations, apparatus, etc. There is a small exception which allows up \$10,000 per award to be used for capital improvements; however, there are so many requirements associated with this that it is impractical.

Other than direct benefits to operational members, what can the money be used for?

Any recruiting or retention activity that contributes to increasing membership that provides emergency responses in the community. A great example of a proper use of this funding occurred this week. Prior to sending out the annual fundraising letter to the community, we included recruiting material in the mailer. By conducting a recruitment campaign as part of the fundraiser, grant funds were able to pay a portion of the Departments costs to send the mailer out. This directly frees up money that can now be used for other purposes, such as capital improvements to the facility.

Please Note:

THIS GRANT IS SPECIFICALLY AWARDED TO RETAIN CURRENT MEMBERS AND RECRUIT ADDITIONAL MEMBERS TO PROVIDE DIRECT OPERATIONAL SERVICE TO THE COMMUNITY. WHILE WE ALL APPRECIATE THE YEARS OF SERVICE PROVIDED AT MANY LEVELS BY ALL MEMBERS OF THE DEPARTMENT, IF YOU ARE NOT PROVIDING SERVICE BY RIDING THE ENGINE, TOWER, AMBULANCE, BRUSH TRUCK, OR TANKER, YOU WILL LIKELY NOT QUALIFY FOR THIS BENEFIT PROGRAM.