



MOTOROLA SOLUTIONS



FY2024 **AFG**

Communications Project Guide



Editor's Note

FEMA's Assistance to Firefighter Grants (AFG) application period is an opportunity for fire departments and EMS agencies to fund new equipment, including radio communications devices. The AFG program, also known as the FIRE Act Grant program, is in its 24th year and is opening on November 12, 2024. From 7,962 applications requesting \$3.7 Billion in funding, the AFG FY23 allocation was \$324 Million with 1,635 awards announced. The time is now to get your application ready for submission.

Priorities include supporting basic radio communications that include portable radios, mobile radios, in-vehicle repeaters, headsets and pagers. These devices help carry information from the street to the dispatcher and out to the first responder to provide them with better situational awareness.

Mission-critical radio communications are essential to firefighters, as they offer reliability even in the most extreme conditions, are interoperable with disparate radio and broadband systems and provide life-saving

applications delivered via LMR, such as personnel accountability and fire station alerting. These are a few reasons why FEMA continues to make funding communications a priority in their grant process.

To help you get ready and apply for an AFG communications grant, we worked with our FireGrantsHelp industry experts to develop the FY2024 AFG Communications Project Guide. This guide will help you understand current AFG communications grant priorities and help you manage your AFG grant application. This guide includes:

- A step-by-step plan to get your application completed in time.
- Sections on collecting and using data to help bolster your narratives.
- Sample narrative sections that provide you with examples to help make your application competitive.

Lexipol Grants Team

Contents

- 5 The importance of integrating data into your application**
- 11 Tell your story**
- 14 A step-by-step plan for completing your AFG application**
- 16 Grant 'get ready' checklist**
- 18 Administrative steps**
- 19 Resources**

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THE IMPORTANCE OF INTEGRATING DATA INTO YOUR APPLICATION

We are bombarded with data on a daily basis. Statistics and information are all around us. From the sports events we watch to decisions on investments, we constantly hear information being generated for our benefit.

Why, then, do we have such a difficult time realizing the importance data can play in developing a competitive grant application? Reviewers will tell you they would have given some applications higher scores if the applicants had only presented a better picture of their situation.

By the time you have completed reading this guide, you will have a better idea of

1. Why data is so important to your AFG application.
2. The types of data you should be collecting.
3. How to present your data.
4. Where to find statistics to support your data.
5. Why it's important to tell your story.

The beginning of your data collection should center around your annual risk assessment.

The reason and need for your department to do an annual risk assessment or analysis

1. The process is a requirement of the AFG program.
2. This assessment will show trends that your department has been experiencing over the past few years. (It is safe to use a three- to five-year term for this purpose.)
3. The assessment will be the foundation of your grant application.

Formal vs. informal assessment

1. A formal assessment is conducted by an outside agency or firm, and usually done in conjunction with your local government.



2. An informal assessment is conducted in house by your department. Usually it is completed by the department's officers using both department and outside data.

The types of data you will need and where you can find it

To initiate this program, you need to develop a demographic profile of your coverage area and your department. Begin with U.S. Census data, which you can access at [Census.gov](https://www.census.gov). Once you reach the site, scroll down and click on [View Quick Facts](#) to query data for your community. Repeat this process for all the municipalities in your primary coverage area. (Visit the "[Explore Census Data](#)" page for more information on how to find relevant information.)

Next, depending on your preference, either download the data or print it and put it into a binder. This is the start of your profile. From this data you should have a snapshot of your population. This can provide you with important information, such as:

1. Is your overall population increasing or decreasing?
2. Are certain segments of your population increasing or decreasing? Why is this important? (Certain segments, such as senior citizens, tend to use emergency services more frequently than other population segments. Seniors also have less income to support fire and EMS service funding.)
3. What are your coverage area's median household income, per capita income and poverty rate? These figures are significant because they help to paint a picture of the area's economy in real terms rather than generalities.
4. If a portion of your annual income is based on property taxes, you should also include data on real estate values for your primary area and how they compare to values nationally.



A visit to your planning commission should be next on your agenda. Most every state requires its transportation and/or public utility agencies to compile 10 and 20-year planning documents, which are available through your planning commission. A section of these plans will discuss anticipated areas of development and their projected rates of growth. If any of these zones are in your first due coverage area, make a note of them for future use.

Your area's employment outlook should be your next concern. Again, your planning commission or the Bureau of Labor Statistics are both good sources for this information. At a minimum, know your community's unemployment rate and check it monthly as new figures are posted. Additionally, either of these sources may also provide you with information on employment sectors that are anticipating imminent growth.

After that, delve into any relevant information that's available at your department, such as, your ISO Public Protection Classification and the date this survey was conducted. Determine what items could help to lower your ISO PPC and what items could hurt your ISO rating. List the SARA facilities and critical infrastructure components in your first due area as well.

Record and report your own data

Also begin compiling as much information as you can on every call you answer. More importantly, remember to count every call. This may be a painstaking task, but you need to document every alarm, not just the "big ones." If you are entering data on your department's responses into the National Fire Incident Reporting System (NFIRS), this information will be at your fingertips.

If you are not reporting to NFIRS, at a minimum, you should document how many members responded, what apparatus was used, the length of the call, the mileage traveled to get to the call and any mutual aid required. If it was a structure fire, what was the cause and origin of the incident? Were there any casualties or injuries? If yes, explain why. Have someone in your department start to record this information so you can pull statistics from it as needed.

Next, examine your apparatus and equipment. Record the date equipment was purchased and placed in service. Keep a record of any maintenance issues. Remember to record any injuries that occur because of deficient equipment. Document your staffing or membership levels. Know how many firefighters

you have responding to alarms. Keep training records of your firefighters, including copies of certificates and any training, even in-house, that they attend.

This may seem like a large and difficult undertaking, but it really isn't. The original assessment may take some time, but after the first one the others should fall in place. Also, once you have used this data profile for your first grant application you will see how much easier it is to develop and assemble an application. No longer will you have to sit in front of your computer and guess or dig through file after file to find information.

Once your data gathering is complete, it's time to meet with your officers or planning committee to assemble all the information into a useable document that adequately portrays the demographics of your coverage area and your department.

From this process you will be able to determine and document your department's needs, and you will have the information available to develop a strong and competitive application.

Use data to improve your financial need narrative

A portion of the data you gathered for your profile will be important in helping to plan and write a strong financial need narrative for your AFG application. The financial need element of the AFG narrative typically receives the lowest score of all elements, most likely for the following three reasons:

1. Applicants fail to remember that the reviewers know nothing about the applicant's department or coverage area.
2. Applicants assume that simply by stating, "We are a poor, rural fire department with a small budget and no help," the AFG reviewers are going to completely understand their plight.
3. Applicants fear, "If we tell them we have money, then we won't get funded."



DID YOU KNOW?

Opportunity Zones receive priority consideration for grants funding

What is an Opportunity Zone?

This designation was created by the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act on December 22, 2017. The IRS describes an Opportunity Zone as "an economically distressed community where new investments, under certain conditions, may be eligible for preferential tax treatment. Localities qualify as opportunity zones if they have been nominated for that designation by the state and that nomination has been certified by the Secretary of the U.S. Treasury via his delegation of authority to the Internal Revenue Service."

What does this mean for grants?

Federal agencies, such as FEMA, give priority consideration for applicants who propose to implement projects that will directly benefit a Qualified Opportunity Zone. The applicant must be sure to include the QOZ in the application and explain how the project will benefit the QOZ.

To find a QOZ, visit the Treasury Department's resource page at <https://www.cdfifund.gov/pages/opportunity-zones>.



Do any of these sound familiar? Here are some options to assist you in making your narrative's financial need element stronger and more competitive.

The best place to begin is to give the reviewer a good look at your current financial situation. What is your annual budget? What are your sources of revenue and what are your expenses?

EXAMPLE: The United Fire Department provides fire and rescue services to the community of Uniontown. Our department has an annual operating budget of \$131,000. 40% of this amount is derived from the community's fire tax. 25% comes from donations and 35% from fundraising activities. Our expenses are: Insurance \$32,000, Utilities \$27,000, Fuel \$12,000, Vehicle repairs and maintenance \$15,000, Training \$18,000, Equipment purchases \$10,000, Building maintenance \$12,000, and Consumable Supplies \$5,000.

Next, describe the root cause of your need for financial assistance. This is where a quick reference to your service area profile is extremely beneficial. The census data profile that you should have for each community in your first due coverage area is critical in painting a picture of the local economic and social landscape for the reviewers.

At a minimum, examine such data as the per capita income for the community, the poverty rate and the median household income. If you feel that any of this information is helpful to your

cause, then extract it both in whole numbers and percentages. Include with this local data, the national data and how your area compares.

EXAMPLE: The community has continued to suffer chronic unemployment since the closing of the town's major employer, Turn Signal Fluid Inc. This is evident by the community's per capita income of \$19,060, compared to the national average of \$28,000. This is almost a 43% difference. In addition, the median household income for Uniontown is \$36,250 a drastic drop from the national figure of \$53,842.

At the same time our unemployment rate has risen to 7%, which is 3% higher than the national rate. This has pushed our local poverty rate to 5.7% higher than the nationwide figure. But one of the most compelling statistics that accurately depicts the disinvestment in this community is the median value of a single-family owner-occupied home in Uniontown, which is \$65,000 which is 42% below the national average. This is significant because 40% of our budget is derived from property taxes. All the data used in this section is from the U.S. Census Bureau.

This gives the reviewers factual statistics to illustrate the local economic landscape in which you must try to secure your operating funds. Next, explain other items that impact your annual revenue. For example, have you eliminated any

fundraising activity because it was losing money or because of a lack of volunteers? Have you experienced a major unexpected expenditure? Have you had to take out a loan to cover a purchase? Describe why and how this has affected your operations.

EXAMPLE: Due to our region's depressed economy, contributions to our annual fund drive have dropped 30% from their total of five years ago. In addition, last year we had to cancel our largest annual fundraiser "The Road Runner 5k Walk," which annually raised \$13,000, because of a lack of financial support. The past two years the event actually lost money. Losing this event caused a 10% drop in our budget. Because of this, we have postponed the replacement of our station's 35-year-old roof and patched it instead. We also placed a freeze on all non-emergency expenditures, and we have fallen two years behind on our vehicle replacement program.

Your grant reviewers now have a better idea of your department's financial situation. Be sure to explain what steps you are taking to address the situation and what are the short- and long-term outlooks for improvement. Tie all this information into your justification for federal assistance.

EXAMPLE: For almost 115 years, the United Fire Department has been able to sustain its operations without outside assistance. In recent years, the community's economy has been devastated by the loss of its major employer. This has translated into less expendable income for the area's residents, and in turn less revenue for the fire department. The UFD perceives this to be a short-term situation with plans to attract other employers into the community. Until this happens, the department must turn to outside

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT LOGIN.GOV

FEMA GO now utilizes Login.gov as the new way to access FEMA GO accounts. Departments will need to make sure they follow this process:

- If you're already on Login.gov, ensure your FEMA GO email is linked to avoid issues.
- Need a Login.gov account? Visit their site and add your FEMA GO email.
- If you're an Authorized Organization Representative, link your [SAM.gov](#) email to Login.gov.
- Avoid using your work email on Login.gov.

sources for assistance to fund the replacement of our portable radios and 15 sets of turnout gear. At the present time, it would take us 10 years to raise the funds to purchase these two critically needed items.

Three things to keep in mind

1. Be clear with the description of your financial situation. If you are not sure how your narrative sounds, have someone else read it and make comments. It never hurts to have a second set of eyes go over your application.
2. Be concise. Remember, your application will probably be in front of the reviewers for about 20 minutes.
3. Be open about your department's financial outlook and the reasons for it. Explain with examples why this situation has occurred and how you are trying to address it. 🔥

TELL YOUR STORY

Ultimately, your grant application is your chance to explain what your department is doing and why you need financial assistance. Take this opportunity to tell your story.

This begins in the project description, where you'll describe what equipment your department needs, and how much funding is needed to purchase it. Make sure you describe what it is you're requesting, and show the project budget. Talk about the equipment you have now, and why it needs to be replaced. Are your radios analog, and your dispatch is changing over to digital? Are your portables lacking because they are not P-25 compliant? Include these details in the project description. Remember to include associated costs, such as shipping, and sales tax.

EXAMPLE: The United Fire Department is requesting \$91,737.75 in Assistance to Firefighters Grant funding to purchase new portable radios for our department. This Communications Project budget is as follows:

Portable radios, P-25 Compliant, 15 at \$5,500 ea	\$82,500.00
Shipping	370.00
Sales Tax 7.5%	8,868.75
Total	\$91,737.75

We are asking for this funding to replace our 5 current portable radios, and increase our cache of portables so that each riding position will have a radio. We need to upgrade our radios because

our County Dispatch Center is changing from an analog to a digital platform in the next year. Without this funding our firefighters will lose vital communication with our dispatch.

The cost/benefit and effect on daily operations elements of the AFG narrative section give you the opportunity to tell your story and explain what benefits your department and community will realize in return for the grant funds you receive. These elements, like other parts of the AFG application, can be augmented with data to help make your case for funding, but at the same time you need to tell reviewers what will change if you are approved for funding.

As in the financial need element, you need to directly address your department and your community. The reviewers are not interested in national trends or statistics. They want to know what has been happening in your coverage area that has caused you to apply for this project. They want to know what will change if you are funded and how this will positively affect the health and safety of your firefighters and your community.

Make your case: How will new equipment improve operations?

For example, let's say your department needs to replace its radio equipment. The cost/benefit and effect on daily operations elements of your AFG narrative should discuss how often the radios that you are requesting will be used. Reviewers have a tendency to give low scores to items that will be used infrequently. The exception to this rule is if you can justify the substantial benefit that will be received by the department or the

community. This is an extremely difficult task but one that can be accomplished with the proper amount of information and explanation.

Next, explain how the purchase of this communications equipment will increase the efficiency of your department's operations. Basically, describe what will change if your request is approved.

EXAMPLE: The United Fire Department is requesting funds to purchase 15 new portable radios for our firefighters. This will allow us to have one portable radio for each riding position on our two engines and brush truck. The purchase of these radios will have a 100% benefit to the department, the community and our firefighters. The new portables will be used at all calls. Currently we have 15 seats, and only five of our seats have portable radios. These five radios are from 2004 and no longer manufactured. In fact, last November we received word from our vendor that they would no longer be able to support our portables because they couldn't find parts for them. Funding our request will allow our department to respond to all alarms with a greater number of properly equipped firefighters.

The next point you should attempt to make is how this equipment will increase interoperability. One point to remember: Do not confuse interoperability with standardization. Standardization would be stating that we want to purchase new radios to be the same brand as all other departments in our area, whereas interoperability is purchasing radios so we can communicate with other departments who may or may not have the same brand. You must describe how the new equipment will help you communicate better with neighboring departments.

Also discuss how the impact of the grant will be increased or leveraged in your area.

EXAMPLE: By funding the UFD request for P25-compliant portable radios, we will be able to respond with additional

Prepare, Write, Review

Remember, writing a successful narrative involves several activities, including planning, searching for data, developing a budget, making an outline, writing your draft, proofreading, making revisions and submission of the application.

Some points to keep in mind:

1. Write clearly and concisely.
2. Read the Program and Application Guidance before you start. Then read it again and highlight or make notes of important information.
3. Make sure your organization is eligible to apply.
4. Check the guidelines to see if you have an eligible project.
5. Ask yourself: Is your budget reasonable?
6. If in doubt, seek advice.
7. Find someone outside your group to read your narrative and give you feedback.
8. Make sure you have enough time to produce a competitive narrative. If you don't, wait until the next grant cycle.
9. Remember, a grant reviewer's job is stressful, repetitive work. Put yourself in the reader's place and write a complete and detailed narrative.



firefighters that will have compatible portable radios with them upon request by other departments under mutual aid. This is especially important during the daylight hours of 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. when our neighboring departments of Lincoln and Washington only have four firefighters available.

What you want to communicate to the reviewers is the money spent in purchasing this equipment will be used 100% of the time by your department. You have made an additional case for your request by showing that not only will your department benefit, you are benefiting the entire area by increasing the number of equipped firefighters that can respond upon request. Your application has now made an impact not only on your community, it has made an impact on the entire region.

Describe the consequences of not receiving financial support

Next, briefly explain how the cost of the grant will be controlled. Discuss why this is the most economical or innovative solution to your identified risk. Describe the process you will use to procure the radios if you are funded and how it will ensure the best possible price.

To conclude this element of your narrative, describe the consequences of not receiving financial support through AFG. Again, the best possible technique is to simply tell your story by giving real examples of incidents that have caused negative impacts in recent months because you didn't have the proper equipment.



A step-by-step plan for completing your AFG application

To help you complete your grant application in record time, FireGrantsHelp has developed a step-by-step plan for developing your AFG proposal for 2024. There is a short window of opportunity to complete the application, so plan accordingly!

Here is our suggested plan:

- 1** Determine who will be part of the grant writing team.
- 2** Assemble your demographic profile.
- 3** Collect the necessary data.
- 4** Make sure your FEMA GO account is linked with Login.gov.
- 5** Perform an inventory of your equipment.
- 6** Decide what equipment/amount you will apply for this year.
- 7** Get cost estimates for all items for which you are applying.
- 8** Obtain signed MOUs if needed for regional projects.
- 9** Complete the AFG Checklist available from the FEMA website.
- 10** Have your team go over the completed checklist.
- 11** Read the grant guidelines/NOFO.
- 12** Complete rough drafts of your narratives and have them reviewed by the team.
- 13** Finalize narratives.
- 14** Complete your application.
- 15** Have another person review before submission.
- 16** Submit application.



MOTOROLA SOLUTIONS

When every second counts, your department needs to be able to share information seamlessly across your organization and multiple response teams, regardless of the device or network. [Motorola Solutions](#) empowers the fire service to better serve and protect lives through reliable communications and by turning data into actionable intelligence. We help departments like you with smart fire and first response tools so that you can be your best in the moments that matter.

Motorola Solutions partners with FireGrantsHelp to assist you with winning communications-based grants. [Click here](#) to fill out the form for customized grant help for radio projects, including grant research, grant alert notices and grant application reviews, from our team of grant experts.

EXAMPLE: In December 2020, our department was dispatched to smoke in a structure. When our first engine arrived on scene, they laid a supply line from the hydrant, and established operations at the A side of the building. A crew advanced a line into the structure and radioed to the IC that they had encountered heavy fire in the interior. Our first engine only has three portables on it, and these were all utilized by the three firefighters on the attack crew. The hydrant firefighter did not have a portable. When this firefighter attempted to turn on the hydrant, he found that the stem of the hydrant was broken, and the hydrant was useless. Because he did not have a portable available to him, he had to run five blocks to let the operator and IC know that the hydrant was non-operable. The IC radioed Dispatch to upgrade the call to a working fire and to dispatch a second alarm. Because of the time of day, it was 12 minutes before a second engine from our

mutual aid company arrived to lay additional line to the next hydrant. By this time, the IC had made the decision to pull the interior crew because of safety reasons. As a result, we moved to a defensive operation and the building suffered \$250,000 in damages. If our request for assistance to purchase new portable radios for our members is not approved, it will continue to have a negative impact on our ability to provide our community with the best possible protection, and it will continue to jeopardize the safety of our firefighters.

These examples should give you a reasonably good idea of the essential information that makes a grant narrative more viable. Your narrative doesn't have to be a masterpiece of literature. AFG wants you to tell them what you will do with their funds, how an award will benefit your department and the community, how often it will be used and what will happen if you are not funded. FEMA wants to hear your story. 🔥

GRANT 'GET READY' CHECKLIST



The AFG application period is only open for a few weeks. Get started early to improve the quality of your grant application. Follow the tips below to improve your chances:

- ✓ Access your department's NFIRS data for the past three years if possible.
- ✓ Analyze this data to determine if there are trends emerging.
- ✓ Know your SAM.gov registration information, including your Unique Entity Identifier (UEI), as well as your FEMA GO login. If you have trouble with any of these, seek help right away. Make sure the information contained in SAM is the same as the information contained in your FEMA profile.
- ✓ Identify staffing challenges in your department and surrounding departments to whom you provide mutual aid.
- ✓ Compile a demographic profile of your service area, including income and population statistics.
- ✓ Determine your department's needs and whether these needs are eligible for AFG funding. Secure a good cost estimate and make sure your department has sufficient funds to cover the AFG match.
- ✓ Review your department's budget, identify all sources of income and detail expenses.
- ✓ Save all of this information in one place so you can access it and update it easily. Back up this information on a thumb drive in case you work on the grant application on different computers or the original computer malfunctions.



THE SYSTEM FOR AWARD MANAGEMENT

SAM is an official website of the U.S. government. There is no cost to use SAM. You can use this site for FREE to:

- **Register to do business with the U.S. government.**
- **Update or renew your entity registration.**
- **Check status of an entity registration.**
- **Search for entity registration and exclusion records.**

All SAM.gov users must create a login.gov account in order to sign into SAM.gov. If you don't already have one, use your existing SAM email address to create a login.gov account. For assistance, call the SAM.gov help desk at 866-606-8220.

Entities registering in SAM also must submit a notarized letter appointing their authorized Entity Administrator.

All non-federal entities who create or update their registration in SAM.gov will no longer need to have an approved Entity Administrator

notarized letter on file before their registration is activated. This applies to you if your SAM.gov Purpose of Registration is either Federal Assistance or All Awards. Check SAM.gov to find your Purpose of Registration.

All non-federal entities still must mail the original, signed copy of the notarized letter to the Federal Service Desk.

Notarized letter templates are available online from the [Federal Service Desk](#) website. You must mail the original, notarized letter to:

**FEDERAL SERVICE DESK
ATTN: SAM.GOV REGISTRATION PROCESSING
460 INDUSTRIAL BLVD
LONDON, KY 40741-7285**

ASSISTANCE TO FIREFIGHTERS GRANTS ADMINISTRATIVE STEPS

Registration can take three to four weeks to complete, so start early. Here are the steps you need to take to get your grant application ready:

- 1** Identify the Legal Applicant.
- 2** Apply for, update or verify the Legal Applicant's Employee Identification Number.
- 3** FEMA GO now utilizes Login.gov as the new way to access FEMA GO accounts. Departments will need to make sure they follow this process:
 - If you're already on Login.gov, ensure your FEMA GO email is linked to avoid issues.
 - Need a Login.gov account? Visit their site and add your FEMA GO email.
 - If you're an Authorized Organization Representative, link your SAM.gov email to Login.gov.
 - Avoid using your work email on Login.gov.
- 4** Determine your department's needs and whether these needs are eligible for AFG funding.
- 5** Secure a good cost estimate and make sure your department has sufficient funds to cover the AFG match.
- 6** Review your department's budget, identify all sources of income and detail expenses.
- 7** Save all of this information in one place so you can access it and update it easily.
- 8** Save this information on a thumb drive as a backup.

If you have additional questions or need help with your AFG application, contact a [FireGrantsHelp](#) expert.8

RESOURCES

The following are key resources that can assist you in your AFG communications-based application:

Grants Resources



Motorola Solutions Grant Assistance

FEMA Resources



AFG Guidance Materials



Search for grants with [FireGrantsHelp.com](https://www.firegrantshelp.com)