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Spending Agreement Hurts Police and Fire Agencies

By MICHAEL COOPER

It may have kept the federal government from shutting down, but the budget agreement that **President Obama** struck with Congress will make it harder for some struggling cities to keep their police stations and firehouses staffed.

A **program** that helps cash-starved cities hire police officers — which has become highly sought-after in recent years as the economic downturn has forced cities from Camden, N.J., to Oakland, Calif., to take the rare step of laying off police officers — was cut by \$52 million.

The reduction means that the program, under which the Justice Department awards cities grants that pay the full salary and benefits of new officers for three years, will be able to pay for roughly 200 fewer officers this year than it did last year, when it paid for 1,388 officers.

The budget deal also changed the rules governing a similar program that helps struggling cities hire firefighters — reducing the grants so much, union and city officials said, that many cities may find themselves unable to take advantage of the program.

Many cities have eagerly sought the grants to pay for firefighters as the budget crunch has forced fire departments in Philadelphia, San Diego and Baltimore to institute what they call “rolling brownouts,”

in which they shut down different firehouses each day because they cannot afford to staff them.

The **firefighter grants**, administered by the **Federal Emergency Management Agency**, have been used in the past year to rehire 252 previously laid off firefighters, retain 161 firefighters in danger of losing their jobs and hire 1,253 new firefighters.

But Harold A. Schaitberger, the general president of the **International Association of Fire Fighters**, said changes made to the law during the conference committee process would probably render the program useless to many cities.

Under the old law, the grants could pay the full salaries and benefits of firefighters for two years. But the new budget agreement caps the amount of money that can be awarded at levels well below the true cost of a firefighter's salary and fringe benefits, Mr. Schaitberger said.

Other provisions would make it hard for the most truly distressed cities — which have drastically cut their fire budgets, and which may not be able to promise to retain the new firefighters after the grants run out — to qualify for the program.

The result, Mr. Schaitberger said, is that many cities will not be able to afford the program.

“It is money appropriated in a bill that municipalities will not be able to access,” he said, warning that departments would find themselves stretched when responding to their communities. “They’re going to be doing it shorthanded, short-staffed.”

While police and fire protection are paid for mostly by local communities, the federal help has allowed some cities to maintain services they would have otherwise lost.

Lawrence, Mass., a city 25 miles north of Boston that laid off 23 firefighters and shut down half of its six firehouses last summer, is a perfect example. The city is in the process of rehiring the 23 firefighters, along with 15 new firefighters, with the help of federal grants. And it will soon reopen one of its closed firehouses.

Officials there doubt that they could have done so if the grants had not covered the full cost of the firefighters. “We don’t have the resources to cover the rest of it,” said Leonard Degnan, the chief of staff to Lawrence’s mayor, William Lantigua. “Without that grant, you would have an absolute public safety fiasco in the city of Lawrence.”

The budget agreement also cut millions from programs that allow local law enforcement agencies to upgrade technology, including for crime analysis and DNA processing, and millions more from a program designed to help police and fire departments streamline radio systems so they can communicate with each other in emergencies.

Chuck Wexler, executive director of the [Police Executive Research Forum](#), said that while the federal government could not, and should not, supplant what state and local governments did, it had provided vital resources to departments. These cuts come, he said, “at a particularly daunting time for state and local agencies.”



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