



Let's Talk Budget 2023:

Maintaining Affordable Fire and Emergency Services in an Economy that Works for Everyone

From: The Canadian Association of Fire Chiefs

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Recommendations

That the Federal Government:

1. Increase the volunteer firefighter tax credit from \$3,000 to \$10,000 and modernize the CRA definition of volunteer firefighter to help retain firefighters.
2. Create a fund to update fire/emergency training and equipment, with net new monies (a modernized version of the former Joint Emergency Preparedness Program).
3. Integrate FireSmart and Indigenous Wildfire Practices through Fire Departments
4. Support the recommendations of Indigenous Fire Safety and community leaders to ensure that working smoke alarms are in every home in Indigenous communities.
5. As part of the criteria for housing built with and through federal affordable housing incentives require pre-planning with local fire departments.
6. Dedicate resources to complete the design of a governance model for a Public Safety Broadband Network in Canada for public safety communications.
7. Provide interim funding to the Canadian Institute of Public Safety Research and Treatment and strengthen its governance and decision-making structure.
8. Create a Canadian equivalent of the US Federal Emergency Management Agency and the US Fire Administration and invest \$2M in the existing CAFC database to unite all fire departments.

Affordable Fire and Emergency Services for an Economy that Works for Everyone

In the Federal Government's *Let's Talk Budget 2023* consultation, Canadians are asked how to strengthen and grow the economy; help Canadians succeed; support Canadian innovation; and build an economy that works for everyone. These questions assume that Canada can and will prevent, respond, mitigate and recover from emergencies that disrupt life as we know it. Our recommendations help ensure this assumption is met.

Two months ago, the Canadian Association of Fire Chiefs (CAFC), which represents Canada's 3,200 fire departments and their approximately 126,000 career and volunteer firefighters, released the results of the Great Canadian Fire Census. Close to 700 fire departments representing the fire and emergency service areas for 24M Canadians responded to the survey. The data reflected all provinces and territories, and included all major cities as well as rural and remote areas. Estimates were used for those departments that did not respond.

It should be noted that the Census findings were not a surprise within the fire sector. They do however provide an evidence informed snapshot on the state of fire and emergency services in Canada, allowing a greater level of confidence in the recommendations that we would like to make for Budget 2023.

1. Increase the volunteer firefighter tax credit from \$3,000 to \$10,000

Our study showed that we have 126,000 firefighters, of which 90,000 are volunteer. Of the volunteer firefighters, more than 30% are over the age of 50. Close to 70% met attendance expectations, meaning they are active in their duties¹. When these results were released the week of December 5, 2023, the story was picked up by the Hill Times², CTV³, and Global. CBC Syndication ran the story in 19 Canadian cities. This issue is important to Canadians. We need to ensure that we don't lose the volunteer firefighters we have prematurely, and that we can attract new volunteer firefighters as others reach retirement.

What can Canada do now to ensure that we retain our supply of volunteer firefighters? We are asking the Federal Government to send a clear message to the country's volunteer firefighters that their services are recognized, needed and appreciated, by increasing the volunteer firefighter and search and rescue tax credit from \$3,000 to \$10,000 dollars for the 200 hours, as proposed by MP Gord Johns in Bill C-201⁴. The tax credit has not been increased since its inception. During the Fall Economic Statement Implementation MP Gord Johns discussed why this is important to the economy⁵. If we don't have volunteer firefighters to help respond to emergencies, homes, businesses, and communities are at risk.

In February 2022, the Parliamentary Budget Officer costed this request at \$40 to \$41M per year for a total of \$171M over five years⁶. The cost of having to replace even 10% (10,000) volunteer firefighters with full time firefighters over a one-year period, given that firefighter salaries are usually around \$100,000 per career firefighter is billions.

In our discussions during CAFC's Government Relations Week, we understood that MPs from all parties were supportive of an increase to the tax credit. We understand that the Federal Government's initial response to Mr. Gord John's Bill C-201 requesting this tax increase is to

apply \$15,000 in tax free income to all Canadians. We commend and support this because it is good for all Canadians. Many fire and life safety issues happen when individuals can't afford to live in well heated homes. However, this should be separate and distinct from the volunteer firefighter tax credit.

As we are often tragically reminded, firefighting is not like coaching hockey, volunteering at the library, or even being a reservist. It is an ongoing commitment that can be dangerous and disruptive. The risk of post-traumatic stress injury is high and firefighting was recently recategorized into the top most carcinogenic profession.

The cost of increasing this tax credit is practical, affordable and provides the boost in morale that is needed for these volunteers. We can't over-state the impact of the Prime Minister's words on April 6, 2020 when volunteer firefighters were mentioned specifically in the revised criteria for the CERB. Circulated across the country, this sent a powerful message that kept many volunteer firefighters going during the pandemic⁷. Finally, while CAFC only speaks for its members, it is our understanding that this proposal would also be welcomed by members of the Search and Rescue community.

2. A fund to modernize emergency preparedness training and equipment

Notwithstanding the potential for the loss of life and limb, the economic costs of fire are not hard to conceptualize. In minutes, a supply of affordable housing can be destroyed, businesses can be shut down; and people can be displaced.

Protecting homes and businesses is essential to improving costs of raising a family and ensuring an economy that works for everyone. Consider that in Sherbrooke, a fire department with operating expenses of \$20M in 2017, responded to 11 commercial fires that year. Those 11 fires were associated with \$400M in revenues and 679 jobs. This is a 20-fold return on investment. However, it relies on the right training and equipment⁸.

What was formerly known as the Joint Emergency Preparedness Program was established in October 1980 to enhance national capacity to respond to all types of emergencies and to enhance the resiliency of critical infrastructure. It was sunset in 2013 because, per a memo

*"The original objectives of this program, namely, to enhance local emergency preparedness and response capacity" had been met. ... These changes are expected to result in a leaner, more efficient and effective federal government engaged in the delivery of its core business areas, which these two programs are outside of Public Safety Canada remains committed to ensuring a safe and resilient Canada and to the security of Canadians and their communities".*⁹

The rationale provided for eliminating the JEPP program is no longer true, neither from a need nor a mandate perspective. Through the Great Canadian Fire Census, we learned that over 40% of fire departments deferred training and equipment purchases for more than 48 months due to fiscal pressures. As examples, eight hundred fire departments need new emergency vehicles and at least 600 need new communications equipment¹⁰.

Not having the right equipment is dangerous for both community members and firefighters. This year the International Association for Research on Cancer reclassified firefighting into the top

tier of carcinogenic professions¹¹. Representatives of Fire Service Women Ontario advised that close to 2/3 of women firefighters report not having appropriately fitting gear¹². For community members, antiquated communications systems and equipment and inappropriate technologies won't help modern day situations. For example, electric vehicles have a host of fire safety related issues that need to be communicated, scaled and spread rapidly to keep up with Canada's goals for 2030.

In the mandate letters for the Minister of Natural Resources, the Minister of Public Safety, and the Minister of Emergency Preparedness there is a mandate "to make our communities safe and increase forest resilience to wildfire, including training 1,000 new community-based firefighters, investing in equipment and other measures to reduce risks from wildfire and supporting fire management by Indigenous communities". This is an important direction, but it must be executed thoughtfully. Communities are not just at risk of wildfire. Training and equipment are needed year-round for all emergencies.

Currently, the US Fire Administration is warning fire departments that they must be ready for the impacts not only of climate change, but of societal adaptation to it. They provide two groups of recommendations. The first is in relation to more frequent responses to weather-related incidents. These include: longer wildfire seasons (potentially year-round); more emergency declarations and longer recovery phases; health, safety and behavioral health concerns for fire and Emergency Management Service personnel; a need for different skills and equipment, such as water rescue or response to green energy-related incidents; and water supply insecurity¹³.

They also note: "People and companies are moving toward green solutions to mitigate climate change. This means there are new hazards for the fire service to be aware of and trained to respond to such as: electric vehicle and charging station fires; solar photovoltaic system fires; structure fire and collapse issues associated with green building exterior and interior materials and finishes; changes to electrical distribution networks and battery storage technologies".

Regarding critical infrastructure, the US Fire Administration notes: *"Climate change can make issues with aging roads, buildings and public infrastructure worse. For example, when an aging storm-water drainage system is overwhelmed, flooding can impact your department's ability to reach people safely in an emergency. It can also impact your personnel's ability to respond and can even compromise the fire station".*

Canada is not immune to the issues experienced south of the border. The Federal Government can plan proactively with Canada's fire departments, cities and towns to make sure that equipment is replenished in an efficient and affordable manner. When we buy equipment at the time of need, problems arise. For example, the absence of generators in Prince Edward Island during Fiona, created rapid purchase, incorrect use, and carbon monoxide poisonings. The absence of communications technologies in Hope BC during the atmospheric floods exacerbated response and recovery.

Finally, fire apparatus and equipment manufacturers and distributors in Canada are warning fire departments about the increasing costs that they are facing. They recommend that departments and municipalities consider this in their planning. Now is the time to use what we have learned to be more prepared for the future. We may not be able to cover everything, but beginning to close the gap would be money well spent.

3. Integrate FireSmart and Indigenous Wildfire Practices through Fire Departments

The Liberal Party Platform included a pledge to allocate \$500M to train community-based firefighters for future wildfire seasons, working with provinces and territories to provide firefighters with equipment and training, and build capacity for Indigenous-led fire crews. We strongly commend this. The challenge is to ensure the specifications are correct.

Fire departments need to be involved in the Canadian context to ensure interoperability of equipment and communication, consistent practices, and command structures. Wildfire firefighters need to maintain their training throughout the year. They should be situated in local career, volunteer or composite fire departments, where they can be deployed rapidly and for short periods when needed on season. They need to contribute actively off season to keep their skills sharp. Provinces and Territories have excellent resources, however, firefighters don't train or practice independently, whether unionized or volunteer. They rely on the infrastructure and equipment of a department year-round.

In addition, as it pertains to wildfire, the success and effectiveness of the FireSmart program has been correctly recognized in the National Adaptation Strategy. As new communities are built closer to the wildland urban interface (WUI), there is a need to implement FireSmart principles considered best practice in the protection of homes and property from wildfire. This was appropriately identified in the First Ministers Forest Fire Roundtable "What We Heard" reports. The fire department has three roles in this:

1. Executing the seven FireSmart "disciplines": education, emergency planning, vegetation management, legislation, development, interagency coordination, and cross training.
2. Providing human resources for FireSmart Implementation and training including training trainers, and linking FireSmart with other types of building code considerations.
3. Liaising between municipalities/First Nations, neighbourhoods and residents on FireSmart programs and activities at landscape, community, and WUI scales.

On the flip side, relying solely on FireSmart principles can create a "preparedness paradox" where FireSmart principles are applied to the exclusion of other considerations. This is where collaboration with Indigenous communities on forestry management practices is also important.

4. Fire Protection in Indigenous Communities

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 /Indigenous Fire Marshall's office, a member of CAFC's National Advisory Council, we support their call to make fire protection available in every community and require the installation of smoke alarms in houses.

5. Build fire, life safety and climate expectations in a Housing Accelerator Fund

CAFC commends the Federal Government for committing to the rapid development of affordable housing. Fire departments respond daily to fires and other emergencies which can have roots in the lack of safe and affordable accommodations for Canadians.

Homeless encampments have seen an uptick in fires and resulting injuries. Individuals unable to pay rent or cope with inflation, find themselves in the cold with a sleeping bag, resorting to propane tanks and fire to keep warm. Since bylaws often prohibit open flames in public spaces, homeless individuals try to hide these taking a dangerous practice into a “tinderbox” situation.

The Federal Government with the support of municipalities are taking the right steps. However, we need to ensure that we don’t kick the fire and life safety problem down the road. Now is the time for the Federal Government to require that any and all housing built with or through direct or indirect federal support engage the local fire departments prior to construction planning, so that appropriate fire and life safety considerations, from smoke alarms to sprinklers can be made in a manner that is most appropriate to each community, and without slowing the process.

International studies have consistently shown that vulnerable populations around the world are disproportionately subject to, and impacted by, fires in residential settings and are the least able to recover from these events. As such, it is our recommendation that the Federal Government require any affordable housing that it is incentivizing through funding or other policies, bear requirements for the involvement of the local municipal fire department during the planning, design and construction phases of the housing units developed under these programs. While this regularly occurs in Canada’s major cities, it is not a prescribed step.

In our experience municipal fire departments often only become aware of these developments after construction commences; therefore, cost effective decisions that could enhance fire and life safety and increase fire department efficacy are not identified on time to be practically implemented. The rapid expansion of housing in suburban areas exacerbates this concern as most of these areas are served by volunteer fire services.

6. Complete the governance and implementation of Public Safety Broadband Network

Climate emergencies from floods in British Columbia to hurricanes in Nova Scotia, Newfoundland and Prince Edward Island remind us that first responders can’t be competing with civil society for bandwidth during an emergency. This will become even more important as 911 calls move to phone, text, and video through “Next Generation 911” expectations. We strongly commend the work that Public Safety Canada has done on the Temporary National Coordination Office for the Public Safety Broadband Network. We ask that the Federal Government dedicate resources to complete the design and implementation of a governance model for a Public Safety Broadband Network in Canada for public safety communications.

7. Mental Health of First Responders

During Government Relations Week, we asked that the Federal Government provide interim funding to the Canadian Institute of Public Safety Research and Treatment *and* strengthen its governance and decision-making structure. We understand that this is the intention. This transitional funding is necessary to harvest earlier development investments. We thank the Federal Government not only for supporting this, but also for doing so while carefully re-examining the decision-making and governance structure. Many first responder associations have made this funding request. That being said, many of the same organizations that have advocated for funds in light of the need and potential for their use, are only advisory to the recipients. Stronger governance models could help strengthen accountability.

8. Federal Emergency Management Agency and National Fire Administration

In this submission, we've offered several recommendations from fire chiefs across the country tying different areas of thought and concern together. Our final recommendation is to develop coordinating capacity for fire and life safety issues nationally and across Canada. In the US, these would be coordinated through the US Fire Administration, whose role includes: (1) support for fire department training; (2) fire prevention and public education; (3) operations management and safety; (4) data publications and a library; and (5) grant funding¹⁴.

A similar office in Canada, would address these and other issues; coordinate fire related policy currently occurring across fourteen federal different departments; work with fire departments/emergency services to streamline and standardize public safety messaging in a manner consistent with jurisdictional variation, and facilitate the deployment and sharing of resources across provincial boundaries, helping to keep morale and skills up in areas like Canada's Heavy Urban Search and Rescue teams.

The new office of the Minister of Emergency Preparedness in the Privy Council has been an excellent start. We recommend the continued growth of this office. We recommend the installation of a National Fire Administration there. The CAFC membership would help support this. To do so in a fulsome and deliberate manner, we would ask the Government to consider expanding the CAFC platform uniting all fire departments at a cost of \$2M/year.

Concluding Remarks

The past three years have been difficult, but they've provided clarity about what is needed and how to ensure resilience. We hope we have been able to convey this to you in a clear and compelling manner. We appreciate your consideration and the opportunity to partake in the dialogue. We look forward to Budget 2023.

¹ Canadian Association of Fire Chiefs, 2022. Great Canadian Fire Census 2022. Available:

<https://cafc.ca/page/2022Censusresults>

² McMullen, K & Saryeddine, T. 2022. The Hill Times: *Powerful but Precarious: cracks in the foundation of fire and emergency services in Canada*. December 5, 2022. Available: <https://cafc.ca/page/2022Censusresults>

³ CTV News, December 5, 2022. *Canadian Firefighters call for Support Amid Shortages* <https://www.ctvnews.ca/canada/canadian-firefighters-call-for-more-support-amid-shortage-1.6183070>

⁴ Bill C-201 <https://www.pbo-dpb.ca/en/publications/LEG-2122-033-S--volunteer-firefighters-search-rescue-volunteers-tax-credit-enhancement--bonification-credit-impot-pompiers-volontaires-volontaires-participants-activites-recherche-sauvetag>

⁵ House of Commons Fall Economic Statement implementation debate:

<https://cafc.ca/page/2022Censusresults#media>

⁶ Parliamentary Budget Officer, 2022. Volunteer Firefighter and Search and Rescue Tax Credit Enhancement: <https://www.pbo-dpb.ca/en/publications/LEG-2122-033-S--volunteer-firefighters-search-rescue-volunteers-tax-credit-enhancement--bonification-credit-impot-pompiers-volontaires-volontaires-participants-activites-recherche-sauvetag>

⁷ Prime Minister's remarks on the Canada Emergency Response Benefit and additional measures to fight economic impacts of COVID-19 <https://pm.gc.ca/en/news/speeches/2020/04/06/prime-ministers-remarks-canada-emergency-response-benefit-and-additional>

⁸ Waterhouse, D. 2021. *Economic Impact of Firefighting*. Fire Engineering March 2021

⁹ Executive Memo Economic Statement 2012 Available: <https://www.oafc.on.ca/federal-budget-cuts---jepp-program-and-emergency-management-college>

¹⁰ Great Canadian Fire Census 2022 (see endnote 1)

¹¹ <https://www.naaccr.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/IARC-PR-317-Volume132-Final-1.pdf>

¹² Vandeschoot L. & Vaughan, N. 2022. Rapid Response in Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Session 7, confirmation of learning. Canadian Association of Fire Chiefs.

¹³ US Fire Administration, *Is Your Fire and EMS Department Ready for Climate Change?*

Posted: June 30, 2021 <https://www.usfa.fema.gov/blog/ci-063021.html>

¹⁴ USFA, 2023 <https://www.usfa.fema.gov>