

Mr. HARKIN. I am pleased that this bill provides significant support to continue outreach and default aversion activities through the College Access Challenge Grant Program funded at \$750 million, more than double the amount we have provided for these grants in years past. However, I agree that these activities are very important and we could do more to assist students.

Mr. SCHUMER. Mr. President, as Senator GILLIBRAND and I have expressed to Senator HARKIN, we share Senator SPECTER's concerns. The citizens of our State rely upon the New York State Higher Education Services Corporation, HESC, to provide similar services, which have also been funded with the earnings HESC has retained from their role as a State guaranty agency.

Mrs. GILLIBRAND. Mr. President, I ask does Senator HARKIN agree that the Secretary of Education has the authority to contract for these types of services?

Mr. HARKIN. I do.

Mrs. GILLIBRAND. And, Mr. President, I ask if Senator SCHUMER would also agree that in our State and many other States these agencies provide valuable services to students and families?

Mr. SCHUMER. Yes, I do. That is why Senator GILLIBRAND, Senator SPECTER, and I believe it would be beneficial for the Secretary of Education to use this authority for State guaranty agencies that provide valuable services.

FIRE GRANTS REAUTHORIZATION ACT OF 2010

Mr. LIEBERMAN. Mr. President, yesterday Senators DODD, COLLINS, CARPER, MCCAIN, and I introduced the Fire Grants Reauthorization Act of 2010.

The bill we presented to the Senate is a bipartisan piece of legislation that provides support to our Nation's firefighters and emergency medical service responders. It reauthorizes the Assistance to Firefighters, AFG, program and the Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response program, SAFER—two highly successful programs I worked to establish in 2000 and 2003, respectively.

I think we are all aware of the great sacrifices first responders make for us. Since September 11 and the Hurricane Katrina catastrophe, firefighters in communities large and small have assumed a greater role in overall national emergency preparedness. They are now the frontline of defense in most communities for disasters of all types. More than ever, firefighters need the training and equipment to deal not only with fires but also with hazardous materials, nuclear, radioactive and explosive devices, and other potential threats.

The demands on firefighters have increased in other ways as well. As the New York Times reported last year, firefighters are responding more and more to medical emergencies—15.8 million in 2008, a 213 percent increase from 1980. Right here in Washington, DC, at Fire Engine Company 10—known as the “House of Pain” for its grueling schedule—80 percent of the calls are for medical emergencies. Our Nation's firefighters—like other first responders are the first to arrive and the last to leave whenever trouble hits. They deserve all the support we can give them.

Regrettably, they do not always get it. Firefighters often lack the equipment and vehicles they need to do their jobs safely and effectively. The U.S. Fire Administration reported in 2006 that 60 percent of fire departments did not have enough breathing apparatuses to equip all firefighters on a shift, 65 percent did not have enough portable radios, and 49 percent of all fire engines were at least 15 years old.

We can and should do more so that these brave men and women have what they need to protect their communities and themselves as they perform a very dangerous job. Our bill takes much-needed steps to ensure that they do.

To start with, because career, volunteer, and combination fire departments all suffer from shortages in equipment, vehicles, and training, our bill requires that each type receives at least 25 percent of the available AFG grant funding. The remaining funds will be allocated based on factors such as risk and the needs of individual communities and the country as a whole. This creates an appropriate balance, ensuring that funds are directed at departments facing the most significant risks while guaranteeing that no department is left out.

We have also taken a number of steps in our bill to help fire departments recover from the recession. Faced with economic difficulties, local governments have reduced spending on vital services, including fire departments. Among other things, these cuts have prevented many departments from replacing old equipment and forced them to lay off needed firefighters. To help departments rebuild, we have lowered the matching requirements for AFG and SAFER. Departments are still required to match some of their grant awards with funds of their own—ensuring they have some skin in the game—but the reduced amount will make it easier for them to accept awards.

We have also created an economic hardship waiver for both grant programs that will allow FEMA to waive certain requirements, such as requiring that grantees provide matching funds, for departments in communities that have been especially hard hit by tough economic times.

Our bill contains a number of other important provisions. It raises the

maximum grant amounts available under AFG. As common sense would suggest, large communities often require a substantial amount of equipment, and they will now be able to apply for funding in amounts more in line with what they need.

We also would provide funding for national fire safety organizations and institutions of higher education that wish to create joint programs establishing fire safety research centers. There is a great need for research devoted to fire safety and prevention and improved technology. The work these centers do will help us reduce fire casualties among firefighters and civilians and make communities safer.

As important as it is to help our firefighters, we must also demand accountability when we spend taxpayer dollars. For this reason, we require that FEMA create performance management systems for these programs, complete with quantifiable metrics that will allow us to see how well they perform. Going forward, this will allow us to see what works in these programs and what does not so that we can make needed improvements when required.

We have also included provisions to prevent earmarks from being attached to these programs. AFG and SAFER have never been earmarked—an impressive accomplishment—and we want to keep it that way. The funding for these programs needs to go to firefighters, not pet projects.

Finally, this legislation authorizes \$950 million each for these vital programs. This is actually less than what was authorized in the past. We believe that supporting our nation's firefighters and emergency medical service responders ought to be a priority, but we recognize that these tough fiscal times require some belt-tightening. Authorizing funding for AFG and SAFER at these amounts sends the message that Congress can direct funding where it is needed while also showing discipline.

These programs address a vital national need. Our legislation ensures that fire departments get the support they need to protect their communities while also protecting taxpayer dollars. I urge my colleagues to join me in supporting the reauthorization of these important programs.

IMPORTANCE OF FUNDING NICS

Mr. LEVIN. Mr. President, April 16 marked the 3-year anniversary of the deadliest shooting rampage in our Nation's history, a tragedy that took the lives of 32 Virginia Tech students and faculty members and wounded 17 more. In the aftermath of the shooting, investigations uncovered that the gunman, Seung-Hui Cho, was able to purchase two guns in violation of Federal law. Due to his history of mental illness, Mr. Cho was legally prohibited from