

How it works: funding New Mexico's fire departments

Local governments provide the vast majority of funding for local fire departments, both within New Mexico and across the country. But thanks to recent legislation at the state level, the New Mexico government has made substantial progress in securing new funds for firefighters. Still, the process of turning insurance premiums into firefighter funding is somewhat complicated and is accomplished as follows:

First, the Fire Protection Fund (FPF) receives funding through a 3% premium included on home, vehicle, and other insurance policies. A portion of the FPF is used to finance the State Fire Marshal's Office's (SFMO) operations, and the remainder is distributed to New Mexico's fire departments through two distinct channels.

The first round of FPF distributions is based on ratings from the Insurance Services Office (ISO), a private data-collecting firm that analyzes each department's ability to protect its community. These ratings are based on factors such as the number of stations in a region, apparatus and equipment, the number of personnel able to respond within each district, and access to water resources, among other factors. The SFMO's Fire Support Bureau is available to assist departments with ISO inspection preparation. Distributions for each eligible department is based on a formula that is prescribed by state law: NMSA 59A-53 Fire Protection Fund.

Beyond that, the state realizes that rigid frameworks can't capture the unique needs of New Mexico's 700+ fire departments. For that reason, FPF funds that aren't used for ISO distributions are transferred to the Fire Protection Grant Fund, which enables departments to advocate for specific projects and critical needs through a competitive grant process.

The Fire Grant Council, established under NMSA 59A-53-18 and outlined under 59A-53-19, oversees the grant fund and is made up of experienced firefighters from across New Mexico. The Council takes incredible care to evaluate applications based on the needs of each department and the state's overall needs. This complex mission means that Fire Grant funding decisions can shift from one year to the next.

To begin, applications for the grant are submitted through a web-based portal. The applications are then vetted by the Fire Support Bureau for completeness and to ensure that appropriate scope of project and acceptable project specifications are

included in the application. Valid applications then are forwarded to the Council to be reviewed and scored using the following methodology:

- The state is split into north and south regions.
- Three councilors from the north review and score applications from the southern region, while three councilors from the south review and score applications for the northern region – with any conflict of interest resolved by the council chair.
- The scores are then merged and averaged for a raw score, to which the individual entity's ISO rating is added for a final ranking score.
- The Council reviews the final scores and validates outliers.
- The Council then reviews the individual applications for award from the highest scores to lower scores.

Criteria for eligibility can be found at: <https://www.nmdhsem.org/state-firemarshal/fire-grant-council/#grant> within the “Eligibility Requirements” link.

In addition to this state funding, New Mexico's fire departments also have access to federal funds through Assistance for Firefighters Grants ([AFG](#)), Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response Grants ([SAFER](#)), and Fire Prevention and Safety Grants ([FP&S](#)). In 2020 alone, these grants distributed nearly \$1.8 million to New Mexico fire departments, reaching San Juan and Valencia counties, the cities of Hobbs and Carlsbad, and several other regions.