

Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2023

Remarks Announcing a Federal Emergency Management Agency Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) Grant in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

December 11, 2023

The President. Chief, thank you. And hello to everyone.

Look, before I begin, I have to make an admission and full disclosure: I would not be here were it not for my local fire company in Wilmington, Delaware. They saved my life. I had a cranial aneurysm. I wasn't expected—it was the middle of a snowstorm. Not a joke.

I couldn't figure out how they were going to—President Reagan was nice enough to send Air Force—Helicopter One to take me down, but it couldn't fly. And so my fire department—my fire department—came up, put me in the back, and took me on—in heavy snow on the day I went down to Walter Reed, because that's where I had to get for this operation.

I got there for a 9-hour operation that saved my life. I—not a joke. My firefighters—the guys I grew up with—they saved my life.

They also saved my home and my wife's life when I was away. It was the last day that—the most famous guy doing "Meet the Press" in Washington, DC, and I was doing the program. And what happened was there was a—lightning struck a little pond behind my house, hit a wire, came up through the basement of my home and three stories. And the smoke literally ended up being that thick——

[At this point, the President held up his hands to indicate the thickness of the smoke.]

——literally that thick. You've seen it—you guys have seen it.

I wasn't there. And my wife was there and my—my dog and my cat—*[laughter]*—and my '67 Corvette.

But all kidding aside, they saved my wife. They got her out. Saved my home. And I can think of many occasions where there are—so it's—that it's personal not just to me, but thousands of people.

Unfortunately, I've presided over too many mass funerals of firefighters out West and throughout the country. Because I have an expression I always use, an old one: God made man, and then he made a few firefighters. You're all crazy. *[Laughter]* You're all crazy, and I love you for it.

I grew up in Claymont, Delaware, after we moved down from Scranton, Pennsylvania, across from a fire hall. And I—all my buddies either became—I went to a little Catholic school across the street, Holy Rosary. *[Laughter]* All my friends either became cops, firefighters, or priests—and here I am. *[Laughter]*

So Governor Shapiro—*[laughter]*—Josh, thanks. You've been a great friend.

And, Jim, I'm going to miss you, pal. You've been not only a great mayor, but a great personal friend to me. Thank you. Thank you very much.

And Ed Kelly—Ed only—Ed every—every time there was a real issue, Ed is there standing next to me. I've been supported by the firefighters and supported them my entire career.

And, Fire Commissioner Adam Theil, I want to thank you, pal.

And, Dr. Lori, thank you for everything you're doing in the U.S. Fire service.

This January is going to be 2 years since the fire ripped through a three-story rowhouse in the Fairmount neighborhood, as was mentioned already. Engine 13 got the call that day. They raced to the firehouse—from the firehouse, arrived at the scene, along with engines from other parts of the city.

It was clear—later determined that the blaze started when a Christmas tree in the home caught fire. Ultimately, it killed 12 people, mostly children. I think it was 12 children as young as 2 and 3 years old.

But you know what? In the wake of that tragedy, Local 22 President Mike came along and said, "Look"—Mike told me that during the 2008 recession a number of fire companies across the city had to be decommissioned. One of those companies was right here, Ladder 1, from this station that we're standing in today.

On the day of the Fairmount fire, if the company hadn't been decommissioned, Ladder 1 would have been the closest truck to the fire. God only knows whether it would have been able to get there that much earlier to save lives—would have responded, but maybe saved some lives.

When I spoke to the city officials here, I told them everything I could—I'd do everything I could to bring back Ladder 1 back into service, as well as others.

During the pandemic, we invested \$350 billion in [from; White House correction] the American Rescue Plan and—and my administration. States and cities could use it to keep firefighters on the job, including here in Philly.

I also signed a budget providing \$360 million each for both the Assistance to Fire Fighters Grant Program and the SAFER Grant Program for hundreds of emergency response vehicles and thousands of protective equipment called "turnout gear."

It conclude—I included money for critical cancer research [and; White House correction] screening, because that's the cause of death for most firefighters because of exposure to toxic—toxic exposure on the job. And helped put almost 1,200 more local firefighters in the field and across the country.

Using previous SAFER Grant awards, Philadelphia had already been able to bring back several fire—several line companies back online that had been decommissioned during the Great Recession.

In the wake of the Fairmount—tragic Fairmount fire, my team worked with city officials and the mayor to help get them to apply for a new SAFER Grant to bring the rest of the decommissioned companies back into service, including Ladder 1.

As a result, the city just got an additional \$22 million to fund salaries and benefits for 72 firefighters. On January 8, a new firefighter cadet class is entering the academy supported by this grant. And starting today, for the first time in nearly 15 years, this neighborhood once again has a ladder company on call 24 hours a day, 365 days a year ready to keep them safe.

Mike, I kept my promise and got the job done.

Now, you've all heard me say before that God made man, but he also made a few firefighters. The overwhelming human instinct is to run away from danger. I think the most frightening thing anybody could do is run into a fire. Almost anything else is less consequential. But when the bell rings, you all just run toward it, and you put your gear on, you jump in the truck, and you do what you've got to do.

Because being a firefighter isn't just what you do, it's who you are. It's who the hell you are. And we know that's what produces firefighters. And the only thing that protects firefighters is more firefighters. Let me say it again: The only thing that protects firefighters is more firefighters. Good equipment, obviously—but more firefighters.

For my entire career, I've been committed to doing everything I can to put more firefighters in the field and to give you the training and equipment you need to do your jobs. That's what today is all about, in my view.

So let me close with this. You know, when the worst happens, when those alarms go off, when everything and everyone you love is in danger, there's no better sight in the world than a firefighter ready to go to work.

So thank you for being who you are. And thank your families, by the way. Thank your families. That alarm goes off, man, and their hearts go up in their throats. And they wait for that phone call wondering what happened, because so damn many of you have given your lives across the country—so many of you.

So I can't thank you enough. I think you're the—[inaudible]—you and the medics that you travel—are the most consequential people in the community. So thank you, thank you, thank you.

And I promise you: We're not stopping here. We're going to keep going.

Thank you, thank you, thank you.

[The President was presented with the Certificate of Grant Award for the Philadelphia Fire Department and read from the certificate as follows.]

"[Inaudible]—million dollars." You can cash it at a local bank. [Laughter]

Philadelphia Fire Department Commissioner Adam K. Thiel. Yes, sir.

The President. "The Philadelphia Fire Department has been awarded staffing and adequate fire and emergency response staffer grant." And here you go, pal. [Inaudible] Use it well, use it well.

[The President presented the certificate to Commissioner Thiel.]

NOTE: The President spoke at 12:38 p.m. at the Engine 13 Firehouse. In his remarks, he referred to Derek Bowmer, executive chief, Philadelphia Fire Department; Mayor James F. Kenney of Philadelphia; Edward A. Kelly, general president, and Michael Bresnan, Local 22 president, International Association of Fire Fighters; and U.S. Fire Administrator Lori Moore-Merrell.

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