



Joint Budget Committee Staff

Nonpartisan Budget Analysis for Colorado's Legislature

Memorandum

To: Joint Budget Committee and Wildfire Matters Review Committee
From: Michelle Curry, JBC Staff (303-866-2062)
Date: December 19, 2025
Subject: Report on the Implementation of S.B. 22-002 (Resources for Volunteer Firefighters)

The following report includes JBC staff analysis of the implementation of S.B. 22-002 (Resources for Volunteer Firefighters). The bill expanded the uses of the Local Firefighter Safety and Disease Prevention Fund to include direct distribution of personal protective equipment (PPE) and training to local fire departments and reimbursement to a behavioral health trust that supports firefighter mental health. That trust was then created within the already existing Colorado Firefighters Benefits Trust.

Staff believes that funding firefighter mental health and protective equipment distribution is important to recruit and retain firefighters. The state's role in wildfire management depends on the capacity of local fire departments. Appropriations to the Local Firefighter Safety and Disease Prevention Fund allows the Department to build local fire department capacity through grants and training. This investment can provide long-term General Fund relief by reducing the costs and damage incurred by large fire disasters that exceed the capacity of local departments. However, outside of the provision of peer support groups, staff could not identify any comparable behavioral health programs or studies to support this theory, though peer support programming does show promising evidence.¹

Recommendations

Staff recommends that the Division of Fire Prevention and Control (DFPC) invest in the fund by prioritizing and using existing appropriations to the Department of Public Safety. Although staff agrees that continued funding of both direct distribution of PPE and the behavioral health trust is warranted, DFPC leadership in collaboration with the Fire Service Training, Certification, and Firefighter Safety Advisory Board should decide the amount of that funding.

Staff is unable to make a recommendation regarding appropriations to the program because of inconsistencies in the program's policy limits and utilization. Staff recommends that the Trust and Division collaborate to make the following changes to the behavioral health program as it exists:

¹ Horan, Kristin A., Madeline Marks, Jessica Ruiz, Clint Bowers, and Annelise Cunningham. "Here for my peer: The future of first responder mental health." *International journal of environmental research and public health* 18, no. 21 (2021): 11097

- Prioritize claim eligibility for volunteer firefighters who do not receive health insurance from their department;
- Increase peer support grants and training activities;
- Collaborate with career fire departments to build a list of in-network mental health providers who are equipped to work with firefighters; and
- Identify an annual contribution level to the trust that would provide enough consistency for firefighters to utilize the program without over-investment.

The Local Firefighter Safety and Disease Prevention Fund

The Local Firefighter Safety and Disease Prevention Fund was created by S.B. 14-046 (Local Firefighter Safety Grant Program). The Fund’s purpose is to provide needs-based grants to local departments and governing bodies to:

- Purchase and/or replace equipment; and
- Provide training to increase firefighter safety and prevent occupation-related disease.

The Fund is continuously appropriated to the Department. Initial funding for the program came from a \$3.3 million transfer from Federal Mineral Lease revenue in the Department of Local Affairs. Beginning in FY 2019-20, the General Assembly has annually appropriated \$500,000 to the Fund through the Long Bill.

Legislative Transfers to the Fund

Beginning in FY 2021-22, the General Assembly increased appropriations to the cash fund through a series of transfers shown in the table below.

Historic Transfers to the Local Firefighter Safety and Disease Prevention Fund

	Bill Number	Amount Transferred	Use
FY 22-23			
	HB 22-1194	\$5,000,000	direct distribution of PPE
	HB 22-1132	100,000	direct distribution of PPE
FY 23-24			
	SB 22-002	5,000,000	\$1.0 million to the Behavioral Health Trust \$1.0 million to the Firefighter Safety and Disease Prevention Grant \$3.0 million to direct distribution of PPE
FY 24-25			
	SB 22-002	5,000,000	\$1.0 million to the Behavioral Health Trust \$0.0 million to the Firefighter Safety and Disease Prevention Grant \$4.0 million to direct distribution of PPE
	Total	\$15,100,000	

The Department reports a cash balance at the end of FY 2024-25 of \$1.3 million and anticipates a balance of \$97,956 at the end of FY 2025-26.

S.B. 22-002 (Local Firefighter Safety Grant Program)

The bill includes adjustments to reimbursement levels for volunteer departments and expands authorized uses of the Local Firefighter Safety and Disease Prevention Fund. It also increases appropriations and transfers to the cash fund.

Reimbursements to Volunteer Fire Departments

The bill allows the Department to reimburse fire departments staffed primarily or solely by volunteer firefighters for the costs of fire suppression that occur after the mutual aid period has ended. Mutual aid periods are determined based on the specific event and regional agreements. Reimbursements can be made from the Disaster Emergency Fund and/or the Wildland Fire Cost Recovery Fund.

Changes to the Local Firefighter Safety and Disease Prevention Fund

Senate Bill 22-002 increased revenue and expanded the uses of the cash fund.

Direct Distribution of Equipment

The bill allows the Department to purchase and distribute equipment to fire departments and to pay for training directly without reimbursing local fire department costs. This program is in addition to the Division’s competitive grant awards which include a peer review process. Since FY 2022-23, the Department has provided a total of \$11.9 million worth of directly distributed equipment to 175 different fire departments. Of those departments, 108 are fully volunteer staffed.

Direct Distribution Request Funding

Fiscal Year	Total Funding Allocated to Direct Distribution of PPE [1]	Total Amount of Grant Requests [2]	Total Amount Funded [2]	Total Amount Unfunded [2]
FY 22-23	\$5,000,000	\$17,154,024	\$4,724,836	\$9,186,548
FY 23-24	3,000,000	8,357,560	3,293,462	5,064,097
FY 24-25	4,000,000	9,926,918	3,918,759	5,448,120
TOTALS	\$12,000,000	\$35,438,502	\$11,937,057	\$19,698,765

[1] does not include funds rolled from previous years.

[2] The total of Columns 4 and 5 do not always equal column 3. Column 3 shows the total equipment costs documented in the applications. However, the Steering Committee reviewed requests and, in order to maximize the funding, modified the requests so they were in line with the number of firefighters in the department. The Steering Committee did not allow departments to receive gear that was in excess of current staffing.

The Department reports spending a total of \$67,040 on administrative costs associated with equipment distribution.

Allocations to the Colorado Firefighter Benefits Trust Behavioral Health Program

Senate Bill 22-002 allows the Department to support the establishment of a behavioral health program. The program offers reimbursements to all Colorado firefighters for behavioral and mental health treatment that is not already covered by employer-offered programs including deductibles, co-pays, and out-of-pocket expenses. The program is located within the Colorado Firefighter Benefits Trust, which also manages programs related to cancer and heart disease that are administered by the Department of Local Affairs (DOLA). Those programs are funded through annual per-person premiums paid by individuals and departments. Those premiums can be reimbursed by DOLA when funding is available.

Behavioral Health Trust program overview

The Behavioral Health Trust is intended to encourage volunteer and career firefighters to seek out mental health care. A claim is opened the first time a firefighter contacts the Trust with a need. They are then connected to services and can submit reimbursement requests ongoing. Initially, claimants could be reimbursed for up to \$10,000 in a single policy period. After funding changes to the program, reimbursements now have a lifetime cap of \$2,000. Firefighters can be reimbursed for a wide variety of services, some of which may be covered by health insurance. The most utilized treatment type is Neurofeedback Brain Therapy for sleep support with psychotherapy and ketamine therapy following. The trust reports that insurance coverage varies widely for neurofeedback therapy, which is a proven method to improve sleep without the use of medication or traditional talk therapy methods.

In addition to providing funding for all out-of-pocket costs, the Trust connects firefighters with providers who meet cultural competence standards. The Department and local firefighting organizations describe the need to identify and build a network of providers who are familiar with the demands and unique challenges faced by first responders. These challenges include complex and acute trauma, inconsistent sleep schedules, and job-related stress. Currently, the program builds this network through word of mouth from colleagues who have found supportive care. The group notes ongoing need to encourage providers to become certified in first responder cultural competence.

Funding and utilization trends of the program

The Behavioral Health Program launched in February 2023 with funding granted to the program from the Local Firefighter Safety and Disease Prevention Fund. In its first year, the state contribution to the Fund was limited to \$1.0 million. In subsequent years, the amount granted to the Fund is determined by the Fire Service Training, Certification, and Firefighter Safety Advisory Board.²

Initially, the program included a policy period cap of \$10,000 per person. In calendar year 2023, the Trust received 96 claims totaling \$509,021 in program costs. In 2024, that increased to 275 claims totaling \$1.1 million. Each of these claims represents an individual firefighter. Once a claim is opened, additional funding requests are added to the original case.

² § 24-33.5-1231 (II), C.R.S.

During the 2025 budget cycle, the appropriation to the Local Firefighter Safety and Disease Prevention Fund annualized back to \$500,000, which was the level of appropriation prior to S.B. 22-002. As a result, the Trust reduced eligibility to a lifetime cap of \$1,000 effective July 2025. This increased to a lifetime cap of \$2,000 effective November 2025 after the Department granted the Trust with \$250,000 in FY 2024-25. Through September 2025, the program had received 304 claims costing \$846,467. In 2025, these claims represented 53 different agencies.

Behavioral Health Program Claims

Calendar year	Funding to the Trust	Number of Claims granted	Total program costs
2023	\$1,000,000	96	\$509,021
2024	1,000,000	275	1,138,844
2025	250,000	304	846,467
Total	\$2,250,000	675	\$2,494,332

Trust leadership and firefighter representatives point to funding changes impacting the level of uptake. In addition to the total of 675 individual firefighter claims, the Trust has contributed to the development of peer support programs at 13 fire departments and districts.

Local Firefighter Needs Assessment 2024

The Division of Fire Prevention and Control is required to conduct a needs assessment for fire departments across Colorado. The survey occurs every two years and includes information related to resource capacity and training. The 2024 survey received 194 responses which is equal to 57.0 percent of Colorado fire departments.

The top three highest priority needs across departments include:

1. **Personnel.** The report indicates a need for a median of 2 paid firefighters and 3 volunteer firefighters per department.
2. **Safety equipment.** Local fire departments report needing 753 new and replacement apparatuses over the next two years totaling an estimated \$25.3 million.
3. **Training.** A majority of departments indicated needing support with training firefighters including access to classes, props, and facilities.

According to the Department, one of the greatest needs in recruiting and maintaining firefighters is their ability to cope with the physical and emotional demands of the job. This includes the need to support their mental health and ensure that their training is adequate.