

# Newfound respect for firefighters after 9-11 yields monetary rewards around state

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For years, firefighters in Mount Pleasant had searched for a way to buy exercise equipment so they could stay in shape on the job.

They applied for a federal grant in 2001, but the grant program was in trouble because the Bush administration was questioning whether the federal government had any business equipping local fire departments.

Then the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, killed more than 300 firefighters in New York City. The hazards of their job tragically evident for all to see, firefighters enjoyed newfound respect and reverence.

Within two weeks, the Mount Pleasant Fire Department had its \$50,000 grant.

Funding for the Assistance to Firefighters grant program has jumped from \$100 million in 2001 to \$750 million in 2003, enriching departments

throughout Wisconsin and the rest of the nation.

Even in the new age of terrorism, some critics question whether the federal government should be doling out money for something that local taxpayers already fund.

But fire officials applaud the grant initiative, saying they cannot recall another time when opportunities to improve emergency readiness were more plentiful.

"September 11 raised the

consciousness of the nation," said Mount Pleasant Assistant Fire Chief Jon Keiser.

The North Shore Fire Department in Brown Deer used a \$41,000 grant last year to purchase an inflatable boat for water rescues.

West Allis firefighters were outfitted with new two-way radios after getting a \$38,000 grant.

Brookfield bought new meters for measuring carbon

monoxide and other hazardous substances with a \$51,000 award.

And Mount Pleasant got another \$159,000 to buy new air masks and oxygen tanks for firefighters.

In all, fire departments throughout Wisconsin last year shared \$7.5 million out of the more than \$300 million awarded nationally.

That figure could be much higher this year, when the amount allocated nationally

more than doubles.

But as firefighters reap the rewards of their post-Sept. 11 visibility, the grant initiative could be losing some momentum.

## Criticisms leveled

The National Taxpayers Union, a Washington, D.C.-based watchdog group, questions whether fire departments really are so short of

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