

# Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20510

March 17, 2025

Terrence Emmert  
Acting Secretary of the Navy  
1 000 Navy Pentagon  
Washington DC, 20350—1000

Dear Mr. Emmert:

We are writing to express deep concern regarding manning challenges faced by Department of Defense firefighters, particularly those responsible for protecting critical naval installations at Portsmouth Naval Shipyard (PNSY). Recent administration actions create a significant degree of uncertainty and operational risk, which demand urgent attention. We urge you to bring clarity to your most valuable asset—the people who serve the Department of the Navy.

One of the most pressing concerns is the uncertain job environment for these essential personnel. Probationary firefighters face an alarming risk of termination due to haphazard workforce reductions and unclear guidance on exceptions. While federal police personnel appear to be granted certain protections, there is no specific indication that firefighters are similarly excepted. This lack of clarity has led to unnecessary distress and instability within the workforce.

The potential loss of probationary employees at PNSY would be particularly devastating. If these individuals are terminated, the shipyard would lose an entire shift—amounting to a 22% reduction in its firefighting workforce. This level of loss in staffing would severely compromise emergency response capabilities and overall operational safety.

Compounding this issue is the seemingly arbitrary hiring freeze, which has abruptly halted employment commitments. Some prospective hires, who had already made significant life changes, including relocating hundreds of miles to accept these positions, were suddenly told to stop and that their hiring would not proceed. This approach not only disrupts lives but also undermines the Department's ability to attract and retain top-tier firefighting talent in an already competitive job market.

Firefighting is an arduous profession requiring specialized training and expertise. At Naval Computer and Telecommunications Station Cutler, it took two years to reach full manning levels, underscoring the challenge of adequately staffing these critical roles. The firefighters at such remote bases are indispensable, as they provide emergency response capabilities in areas without local fire department support. Their work directly supports sensitive national security missions, making their continued employment a matter of national security, not just workforce planning.

Furthermore, the national shortage of firefighters extends beyond the Department, which means that arbitrarily cutting positions and telling personnel to reapply later is not a viable option. Unlike other fields outside of the Department of the Navy, where hiring and layoffs can be more flexible,

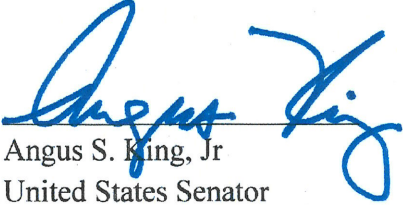
firefighting requires continuous training and preparedness. A break in service could result in skill degradation and loss of qualified personnel to other sectors that provide greater stability.


The importance of base fire departments cannot be overstated. Fires do not stop at the gates of a base, and present hazards to the surrounding population. Shipyards are especially vulnerable due to the inherently hazardous nature of their operations. History has demonstrated the catastrophic consequences of shipyard fires, making it imperative that we maintain adequate firefighting staffing levels. Without sufficient personnel, shipyard operations may come to a halt, delaying essential maintenance and production work vital to fleet readiness.

Ultimately, this is not just a matter of workforce numbers—it is a matter of safety for our military personnel, our local communities, and the security of our nation. The firefighters protecting our bases and shipyards are essential to ensuring operational continuity and emergency preparedness. We urge you to address these concerns and provide clear, consistent guidance to stabilize this critical workforce.

We appreciate your time and consideration in addressing these urgent matters and look forward to your timely response.

Sincerely,

  
Angus S. King, Jr  
United States Senator

  
Jeanne Shaheen  
United States Senator