

Board of Visitors for the National Fire Academy Fiscal Year 2024 Annual Report

Meeting Schedule

Dec. 13, 2023

April 22, 2024

Aug. 5, 2024

Introduction

The Board of Visitors (Board) for the National Fire Academy (NFA) plays an important role in supporting the academic stature of the NFA. From the Federal Register:

The purpose of the Board is to review annually the programs of the National Fire Academy (Academy) and advise the Administrator of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), through the United States Fire Administrator, on the operation of the Academy and any improvements therein that the Board deems appropriate. In carrying out its responsibilities, the Board examines Academy programs to determine whether these programs further the basic missions that are approved by the Administrator of FEMA, examines the physical plant of the Academy to determine the adequacy of the Academy's facilities, and examines the funding levels for Academy programs. The Board submits a written annual report through the United States Fire Administrator to the Administrator of FEMA. The report provides detailed comments and recommendations regarding the operation of the Academy.

Thus, the Board's role is to:

- Review NFA programs to ensure they fulfill the basic mission of the U.S. Fire Administration (USFA).
- Ensure that NFA facilities are adequate for their assigned purposes.
- Advocate for appropriate funding levels for NFA programs.
- Provide advice and recommendations to the USFA via an annual report of its activities.

The Board examined the NFA in the first 3 areas listed above via 2 virtual meetings in December 2023 and April 2024. The NFA Board of Visitors met in person at the National Emergency Training Center (NETC) in Emmitsburg, Maryland, for the August 2024 meeting to further review NFA programs, facilities and funding. After receiving briefings during each meeting from USFA program representatives, the Board offers this report in fulfillment of the fourth responsibility.

The Board would like to emphasize the following:

- NFA continues to have urgent vacancies in essential staff and leadership positions. Currently 19% of positions (27.5 total) at NFA are unfilled, with 1 position being vacant for nearly 3 years. Addressing this requires streamlining of the hiring process. The Board recognizes the hiring process may be beyond the control of USFA/NFA staff. Filling vacancies takes 6 to 12 months to complete, interfering with attracting and retaining desirable candidates.
- Similarly, the Board would like to reiterate the need to further develop the instructor bid process to create a more equitable process for interested instructors from across the country.
- It is imperative that the USFA and NFA obtain the required funding to maintain their mission and the expected role they play within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS)/FEMA.
- The Board emphasizes the need for a modern, on-campus, physical and mental health and wellness center to model the expected behaviors taught to students.
- There are excessive admissions wait times, in some cases several years, in the Leadership, Incident Management and Fire Investigations training programs that require additional funding and resources to meet the market demand.

National Fire Academy programs

The NFA provided training and education to over 72,400 career and volunteer fire and emergency medical services (EMS) personnel in fiscal year (FY) 2024. Classes are delivered in person on NFA's campus, through online synchronous and asynchronous courses, through partnerships with state and metro fire training organizations, and with institutions of higher education.

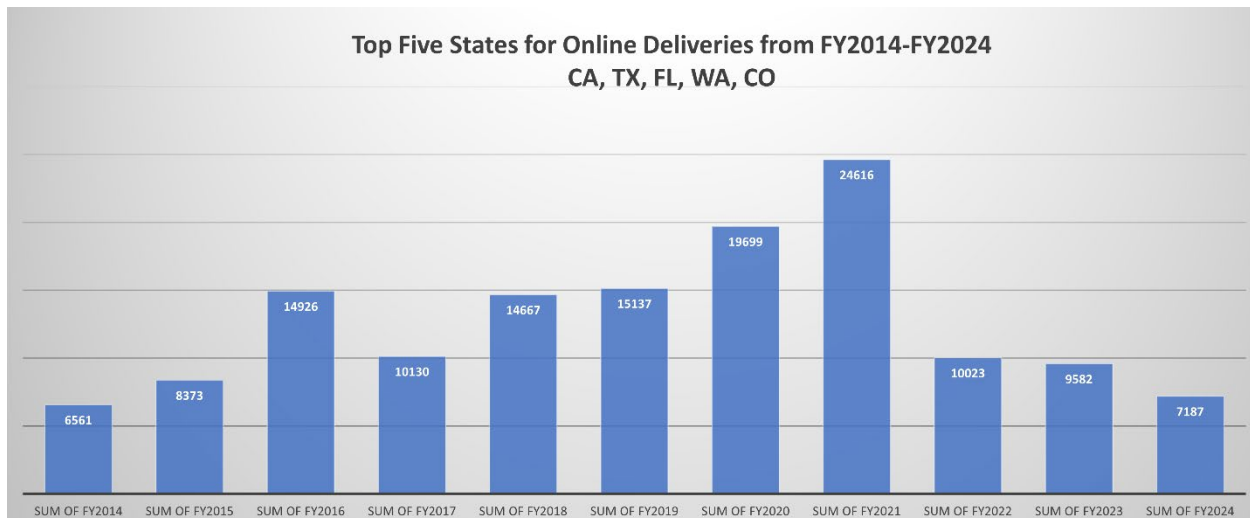
U.S. Fire Administrator Dr. Lori Moore-Merrell continues to invigorate the USFA through enhanced grassroots outreach, affinity group engagement and the Strategic Plan, including:

- Establish the USFA as the leader of the nation's fire and EMS.
- Prepare the nation's fire and EMS to prevent, prepare, respond to and mitigate all hazards.
- Inspire fire service research and technology innovation.
- Establish a prepared, resilient and engaged USFA workforce.

Dr. Moore-Merrell also continues to emphasize integrating EMS priorities into all aspects of the USFA including NFA’s offerings, enhancing the capture of data and the capacity to use that data to empower activities. The ongoing enhancement of wildland urban interface (WUI) offerings with special attention to the impact of climate change is also evident under the USFA and NFA leadership. The NFA maintains the goal of a student-centric approach with current and relevant professional development opportunities for career and volunteer fire and EMS personnel.

A robust spectrum of courses and course delivery options demonstrates the evolution of the NFA with the changing fire service and the emergence of new teaching methods and technologies. The NFA embraces facilitated learning in its Emmitsburg classrooms, has digital drafting tables in its fire plans classes, uses hands-on scenario-based training in its fire investigations classes, uses technology such as mannequins in its hazmat EMS class, and uses digital scenarios in its incident management classes.

Online instructor-led courses: During FY 2024, the NFA Online team hosted 30 deliveries utilizing Blackboard. The bulk of these offerings were resident courses using Blackboard to support the prerequisite and/or pre-course assignments and in-class assignments and grading. NFA also successfully delivered a 10-week online instructor-led course in Blackboard and assisted with the review and updates to many others. The Board supports expanding online instructor-led course offerings as an effective training model. It recommends that the NFA investigate online course participation trends and conduct a needs assessment to identify unmet training needs where online learning could be beneficial for the fire service (see the chart below).



Note: This information is provided by the Training, Administration, Planning and Analysis Branch, 2024.

NFA Online: During FY 2024, NFA Online self-study completions totaled 39,095. 3 brand new self-study courses were launched. All 3 are in the Hazardous Materials curriculum and include chemical and physical properties terms, energy storage systems and cost recovery for emergency incidents.

Prevention Branch

The Prevention Branch includes curricula for Fire Inspections, Fire Prevention Program Management, Community Risk Reduction, Hazardous Materials Code Enforcement, Youth Firesetter Intervention and other topics. During FY 2024 this branch began a complete update to 3 2-day WUI community risk reduction classes used by the NFA that will be completed in FY 2025. Work began with the Society of Fire Protection Engineers to create a property fire risk assessment and mitigation course for the NFA that will provide training and engineering-based resources to support firefighters and fire departments operating in the WUI.

Leadership and Partnership Branch

The Leadership and Partnership Branch includes curricula for Executive Fire Officer (EFO), Managing Officer, Leadership and Executive Development, Fire and Emergency Services Higher Education (FESHE), state and national weekends, and off-campus classes. The updated **EFO Program** began accepting applications for its FY 2024 cohort in January and received 500 qualified applications within 2 weeks. The Board looks forward to student feedback on the updated program. Applications will be accepted Nov. 1-30 or when the first 500 applications have been received, whichever comes first, for classes to begin in 2025. The **Managing Officer Program** is currently undergoing a redesign. All students who were in the Managing Officer Program have completed the courses, and the program will close out December 2024. The Board supports the process of pausing the Managing Officer Program during the curriculum refresh and encourages the NFA to actively market the new program at relaunch. The new, 2-day “Fostering Belonging in the Fire and Emergency Services” (F/W0851) course has been greatly anticipated by state, local, tribal and territorial (SLTT) partners and will be ready for national delivery in FY 2025.

The NFA **State Fire Training Systems Grant** program offers \$20,000 to each state fire training system/academy. The complications and costs of administrative overhead and burden of work results in a decision in some states to not accept or use these grant funds. During FY 2024, there are 36 state fire training grant recipients that have applied and will be approved. These funds can be used to hire instructors, pay for training costs, and support a wide variety of local delivery training efforts for all facets of the fire and EMS service nationwide. The Board encourages NFA staff to continue to market the use of these funds by as many states as possible.

The NFA’s **FESHE** program connects the NFA with institutions of higher education engaged in fire and emergency services degree and certificate programs. More than 90 colleges and universities are currently active in the FESHE program from coast to coast. Solid partnerships currently exist with both 2- and 4-year academic institutions around the nation with more interested in participating. Work is underway to create model course outlines for both high school and graduate fire-related and EMS management programs over the upcoming year. There will be a FESHE Conference in June 2025 (June 17-18 FESHE Committee Members Only/June 18-21 FESHE Conference).

The **NFA State/National Weekend** summary statement: Some state weekends have been successfully combined, resulting in full course offerings and excellent attendee interaction. Several national weekends allow individuals from across the country to attend 2-day classes and

experience the NFA campus. The Board strongly supports weekends focused on outreach to affinity groups, such as the partnership with Women in Fire for Women's Weekend, which grew from 186 attendees in 2023 to 234 in 2024. These efforts highlight NFA's commitment to serving the diverse fire service community and helping recruit future attendees and instructors from underrepresented groups. There were 10 state weekends, 1 women's weekend and 1 national weekend offered during FY 2024.

Through the NFA **off-campus delivery** programs, each state receives 9 2-day classes, and each region receives 3 5/6-day classes. Classes not used may be reallocated to other states and regions. This program continues to support strong partnerships with state fire training agencies. The reallocation process implemented by the NFA has enabled states that are ready to host classes with ample student numbers to support them to do so, thus avoiding allocated funds for SLTT fire and EMS members to receive NFA classes as close to home as possible.

Response and Special Operations Branch

The NFA Response and Special Operations Branch includes curricula for Incident Management and Coordination, EMS, Fire and Investigative Sciences, Hazardous Materials and Response to Terrorism, and Responder Health and Safety. The board recognizes and applauds the creative partnership with the U.S. Forest Service and CAL FIRE to deliver 2 offerings of the wildfire investigation course (FI-210) in California to law enforcement and fire service investigators from SLTT agencies. The new 2-day "Fire Investigation: Fire as a Weapon" (F/W0756) class has been well received by participants and is a great addition to the NFA catalog. The board encourages the continued application of new and imaginative ways to deliver course content to students.

Training, Administration, Planning and Analysis Branch

Changes are in progress regarding the recruitment and bid evaluation of **contract instructors**. The NFA is looking at geographic diversity (e.g., cadre from California will be paid equally as cadre from Pennsylvania) when selecting instructors to ensure rich discussions in NFA classrooms that cover the wide variety of fire and EMS issues occurring in the United States. USFA and NFA leadership have been intentionally **reaching out to affinity groups**, such as the International Association of Black Professional Firefighters, Black Chief Officers Committee, Women in Fire, the National Association of Hispanic Firefighters, Native American Fire Chiefs Association, and the International EMS & Firefighters Pride Alliance, to enhance diversity, equity and inclusion and ensure that all members of fire and EMS feel welcomed to attend and instruct at the NFA campus. This outreach has increased the instructor pool, but much more work is needed and underway.

Targeted efforts to recruit, hire and onboard a diverse cadre of instructors have been hampered due to the lack of available staff to evaluate candidates and perform interviews. Additionally, the **hiring process** for contract instructors remains complicated and time intensive, disincentivizing potential instructors from joining the teaching pool. NFA has assigned a staff member to serve as the point of contact to assist interested instructors with navigating the federal contracting system, which has been very helpful. NFA staff is working to implement a quarterly contract instructor

hiring orientation session that will be offered in a virtual format to help alleviate many of the challenges that it has heard from interested applicants.

This year, the **American Council on Education (ACE)** reviewed 20 courses (7 are new or being updated). The ACE credentialing program provides third-party, unbiased assessment of course content and rigor. Many colleges and universities accept ACE-approved NFA courses for academic credit transfer at both the undergraduate and graduate (EFO) levels.

Table 1 offers an overview of course deliveries and attendees.

Table 1: Course delivery student completions

| | FY 2022 Final | | FY 2023 Final | | FY 2024 Preliminary | | Difference | |
|------------------------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------------|---------------|-------------|---------------|
| | Offerings | Attendees | Offerings | Attendees | Offerings | Attendees | Offerings | Attendees |
| NFA Sponsored | | | | | | | | |
| Resident | | | | | | | | |
| 2-day | 45 | 780 | 75 | 1,414 | 78 | 1,609 | 3 | 195 |
| 6-day | 142 | 2,434 | 181 | 3,554 | 152 | 3,651 | -29 | 97 |
| 10-day | 45 | 844 | 30 | 607 | 32 | 751 | 2 | 144 |
| Subtotal resident | 232 | 4,058 | 286 | 5,575 | 262 | 6,011 | -24 | 436 |
| Nonresident | | | | | | | | |
| 2-day | 224 | 3,557 | 255 | 4,109 | 282 | 4,604 | 27 | 495 |
| 6/10-day | 34 | 618 | 46 | 788 | 54 | 1,304 | 8 | 516 |
| Mediated | 1 | 29 | 2 | 86 | 3 | 129 | 1 | 43 |
| Virtual | 65 | 1,403 | 12 | 268 | 10 | 269 | -2 | 1 |
| LMS | | 40,090 | | 37,554 | | 39,095 | | 1,541 |
| Subtotal nonresident | 324 | 45,697 | 315 | 42,805 | 349 | 45,401 | 34 | 2,596 |
| Total NFA Sponsored | 556 | 49,755 | 601 | 48,380 | 611 | 51,412 | 10 | 3,032 |
| State Sponsored | | | | | | | | |
| Enfranchised | 1,055 | 15,744 | 1,053 | 14,661 | 996 | 14,062 | -57 | -599 |
| Approved | 360 | 5,880 | 339 | 5,052 | 169 | 2,452 | -170 | -2,600 |
| Total state sponsored | 1,415 | 21,624 | 1,392 | 19,713 | 1,165 | 16,514 | -227 | -3,199 |
| College | 513 | 3,230 | 460 | 2,418 | 393 | 4,559 | -67 | 2,141 |
| Total NFA | 2,484 | 74,609 | 2,453 | 70,511 | 2,169 | 72,485 | -284 | 1,974 |

Note: The information provided in this chart was from Sept. 30.

The NFA evaluates long-term training effectiveness of resident courses through surveys of students and their supervisors. During FY 2024 (Oct. 1, 2023, to Sept. 30), 565 students and 492 supervisors responded to the long-term evaluation. As with previous years' responses, students indicated that they were able to transfer the training skills and learning to their jobs, and supervisors reported improved performance. The previous 5 years of response data are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Long-term evaluation results

| Long-term evaluation reporting elements | 2020 | 2021 | 2022 | 2023 | 2024 |
|---|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Students reporting they were able to apply NFA training at home | 93.9% | 88.1% | 93.8% | 94.9% | 94.8% |
| Students reporting NFA training improved their job performance | 96.4% | 91.8% | 97.4% | 94.9% | 95.4% |
| Students reporting they shared NFA training with their peers | 97.2% | 91.7% | 96.2% | 96.7% | 97.2% |
| Students reporting they conducted formal courses with NFA material | 24.2% | 17.0% | 22.9% | 21.4% | 21.5% |
| Students reporting they established new policies and procedures based on NFA training | 70.8% | 63.2% | 59.7% | 68.9% | 66.9% |
| Supervisors reporting improved performance from NFA training | 92.3% | 92.5% | 93.6% | 91.6% | 92.5% |
| Supervisors reporting improved departmental performance | 91.4% | 91.7% | 93.6% | 92.0% | 92.4% |
| Supervisors who say they will recommend NFA training to others | 96.9% | 96.2% | 97.6% | 97.5% | 94.8% |
| Supervisors reporting NFA benefits outweigh costs | 95.2% | 93.9% | 95.2% | 95.1% | 94.8% |

Note: Data reported was derived from NFA Long-Term Evaluation Forms sent to both students and their supervisors 4 to 6 months after the NFA training class ended.

National Fire and Emergency Medical Services Division and National Fire Data and Research Center

While the National Fire and Emergency Medical Services Division (NFEMSD) and the National Fire Data and Research Center (NFDRC) are not officially within the charge of the Board of Visitors, the close work between NFA and the NFEMSD and NFDRC requires consideration of the efforts of these divisions of the USFA to provide context to the NFA assessment.

The Board recognizes the importance of data and data analysis to address the issues facing the fire service and believes a current information system that provides near real-time data analysis is an important advance in realizing the mission of the NFA. The Board is concerned with the increasing fire death rate nationally and supports NFA's continued efforts to develop outreach materials and training curricula to reverse the emerging trend.

National Emergency Training Center, Physical Plant

The size, age and scope of the NETC campus facility continue to present both challenges and advantages. The historic nature of many NFA buildings adds complexity to ongoing maintenance and repairs. On behalf of students and other stakeholders, the Board appreciates the tremendous support FEMA has provided to address capital improvement and maintenance issues on campus. We applaud the dedication and exceptional work of the NETC Management, Operations and Support Services (MOSS) Division in managing the physical plant and the numerous activities held on campus each year.

The Board of Visitors expressed gratitude to Mr. James “Vince” Hodge Jr. and the staff for their extensive efforts. It is commendable that the unscheduled repairs did not adversely affect the budget allocated for scheduled repairs. The maintenance staff is organized in prioritizing the facility’s needs and keeping everything within the budget.

Deferred maintenance remains a concern for the Board. Capital improvement and deferred maintenance projects completed during FY 2024 included: Visitor Center heating, ventilating and air conditioning repairs; campus-wide plumbing updates; the completion of Building B pavilion; Walk of Honor bricks; helipad upgrades; Wi-Fi project update; Building K exterior update; and roof updates for buildings D, E and F; among others. The Board is especially pleased that both the fire alarm system with a public address component and the campus-wide Wi-Fi upgrade have been successfully completed as these have been high-priority concerns in previous Board reports. As of June (FY 2024), MOSS has extended the campus Wi-Fi service and improved signal strength to cover the Visitor Center and the burn range. They are now exploring opportunities to enhance signal strength in the dormitory of Building C.

Ongoing projects include the enhancements to multiple buildings, the Walk of Honor (funded by the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation), parking lot maintenance, picnic area, bus repair and potential replacement, and additional solar installation.

The NFA should lead in promoting physical and mental resilience within the fire service. The NETC campus requires a well-equipped, safe and welcoming physical fitness, health and wellness center for use by students, instructors and staff. This has been proposed as a program decision option to FEMA but has not yet been selected for funding. The Board strongly advocates for the establishment of this resource.

Funding

The USFA and the NFA continue to exemplify commendable stewardship regarding fiscal responsibility. While the operational budget has remained relatively stable, inflation has led to increased operational costs. It is crucial for the USFA and NFA to receive an increase in funding to sustain their mission and the expected role they play within DHS/FEMA, as well as to recruit and retain valuable staff. However, the USFA bears the full cost of NETC maintenance. The Board encourages FEMA to assess appropriate cost-sharing measures between the National Disaster Emergency Management University and NFA for ongoing NETC maintenance and improvements.

The NFA is unique in the federal government because its specific mission is to train SLTT first responders and their leaders, rather than primarily federal employees. Any reduction in resident classes at the NFA would compromise incident management capabilities, community risk reduction, hazardous materials response, and arson detection and prosecution at the local level, where these services are most needed.

While training incurs cost, the absence of training is even more costly in terms of lives lost (both civilian and firefighter), property damage, litigation, economic impact and societal effects. According to USFA data, in calendar year 2023 there were 93 on-duty firefighter fatalities (<https://apps.usfa.fema.gov/firefighter-fatalities/>). In calendar year 2022, there were 4,446 civilian fire fatalities (2022 National Center for Health Statistics Mortality Data File, as compiled from data provided by the 57 vital statistics jurisdictions through the Vital Statistics Cooperative Program: [NVSS - Datasets and Related Documentation for Mortality Data](#)).

Observations

Student feedback

Members of the Board of Visitors visit classes and meet with NFA students during the Board's annual campus meeting. While the sample size is limited to the classes meeting on campus and the Board's available time, the information is still instructive. Some interactions were with a full class and others were during small groups of breakout sessions. It was also a good experience to observe and interact with students in the Simulation Lab in Building S.

Everyone enjoyed the interaction with the students and observing how they are doing in the classes. All the students seemed very appreciative of the upgrades to the facilities. The students complimented their knowledgeable instructors and had positive comments regarding the campus. There were representatives of a wide range of ranks attending courses. Some students suggested having more course offerings for the courses that are more popular, citing long waiting periods for some classes. Students were also appreciative of the admissions process having a fast turnaround for letting students know that they were eligible to take the courses, especially the revised application timelines. Through interactions with the students, the Board learned of concerns with the reimbursement process and that the upfront cost to the students may be a barrier to participation.

Board celebrations and concerns

The Board recognizes several **successes** that deserve recognition.

USFA staff continues to demonstrate competence, professionalism and dedication throughout the many challenges of running such a complicated institution. The Board is intensely grateful for everything these individuals do on behalf of the NFA campus and the nation's fire and EMS service. The Board recognizes and thanks Superintendent Eriks Gabliks for his visionary leadership and his support to advocate for the NFA.

The Board would like to congratulate U.S. Deputy Fire Administrator Chief Tonya Hoover on her retirement and thank her for her years of service.

The Board thanks Dr. Michael Macey for his 4 years of dedicated service to the NFA and Board of Visitors.

Efforts to incorporate **diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging** throughout the curriculum and within the staffing, contract instructors and admission process are recognized and appreciated. All facets of the fire service should feel welcome at the NFA.

Multiple programs are realizing success through creative partnerships with external agencies. These include, but are not limited to, the training delivery with CAL FIRE, Women's Weekend with Women in Fire, and an improved EFO capstone course with the external higher education partner. The Board commends these innovative approaches and encourages future collaborations, including collaboration with the International Association of Fire Chiefs EFO section in the EFO program.

The Board also wishes to call attention to these specific **concerns**:

- Multiple **vacancies** in key leadership and critical support positions are impacting program delivery, including processing applications of students, interviewing and onboarding new instructors, reviewing and refining existing courses and programs, and developing new offerings. Existing staff has undertaken added duties to compensate for the lack of staff. This could result in overworked, overstressed staff and ultimately in additional vacancies and a reduction in quality of service. The Board acknowledges that hiring is a challenge in almost all sectors, including throughout the emergency services. We urge the USFA and FEMA to provide any resources available to expedite the hiring process.
- Continued support for a health, wellness and resilience center.

In conclusion

The Board would like to thank the dedicated and passionate staff, faculty, students and administrators, who all contribute to the success of the NFA and USFA. The Board applauds the USFA for 50 years of dedicated service in support of the nation's fire, EMS and emergency services in the unwavering pursuit of a safer nation.

Fiscal Year 2024 Board of Visitors

John S. Butler (Chair)

Fire Chief
Fairfax County Fire and Rescue Department
Fairfax, Virginia

W. Nelson Bauer, Ph.D.

Deputy Fire Chief
Orange Beach Fire and Rescue Department
Orange Beach, Alabama

Steven Dubay (Vice Chair)

Deputy Chief, retired
Colorado Springs Fire Department
Woodland Park, Colorado

Megan Schuth, Ph.D.

Battalion Chief/Fire Marshal
Denton Fire Department
Denton, Texas

Dr. Michael Macey

Director of Public Safety
St. John's College
Santa Fe, New Mexico

Scott Somers, Ph.D.

Professor
Arizona State University
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Tiffany S. Wesley

Deputy Fire Chief
Arlington County Fire Department
Arlington, Virginia

Edward Davis

Executive Director
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Garland, Texas

