

BECOMING A FIREFIGHTER

Have you done your research? Called fire districts/departments? Searched the internet... only to end up even more confused? This will show you a breakdown of where to begin, answer some questions, describe key components and hopefully set you up on an easy route to success.

Becoming a firefighter is hard, it's supposed to be. This is a vocation that demands only the best of the best. It is not for everyone. People succeed in the fire service, because they worked for it. Those are the ones the fire service wants.

Where do you begin? You probably already know the sacrifices and risks associated with becoming a firefighter, so there is no need discussing that here. Rather, we'll focus on the aspects that encompass the path to becoming a firefighter.

Gain Experience: Depending on your age, there are districts/departments that have cadet/explorer programs for students between the ages of 16 – 21. This will help you become familiar with the training and ride time.

Plainfield Fire Protection District has a Cadet Program –email Brett at bkrasuski@plainfieldfpd.com



High School Students: Create an educational and career plan with your college advisor while you are working on graduating. (high school diploma or GED are needed)

What type of education or classes do you need? Do you want to be a career firefighter? A paramedic? Work part-time for a combined department?



EMT-B – enroll in an EMT-B Program (1 college semester)

We recommend that you first go to EMT-B school and obtain that license. The length of the typical EMT class depends on where you take it. We encourage you to research area EMT programs before committing to one over another. EMS incidents outnumber fire incidents by far. This is why districts in this part of the state have their firefighters also work on the ambulance. It allows personnel to be the most versatile to serve their communities.



Basic Operations Fire Academy (BOF) – enroll in a fire academy (1 college semester)

The BOF Academy is a paramilitary style entry-level course for firefighters. It gives students the necessary basic skills and education needed to begin their fire service career. By no means is it an all-encompassing course that teaches you everything you need to know to be a firefighter. It only scratches the surface. You will be required and expected to continue your education as you make your way through the fire service.



Paramedic School – 12 months of schooling

You may also hear paramedic referred to as "EMT-P." Most full-time/career fire districts/depts in the area will require you to be a firefighter AND paramedic. Of course, there are exceptions. Always look at the hiring fire districts application or testing process posting. Many volunteer, part-time, and POC districts/depts may not require you to be a paramedic to join their district. Always call around or look at the fire district's website.



CPAT & ladder climb – complete and become certified

CPAT is a certification that many full-time districts/depts require as a pre-requisite to test. It is a physical ability test you take through a third-party institution. CPAT is essentially a timed obstacle course.



FIRE SERVICE

There are predominately two categorizations of agencies in Illinois: **“fire departments”** and **“fire protection districts.”** They both operate almost identically as far as the services they provide, but the main difference is the type of governmental agency they are. Generally, the public uses the generic term “fire department” when they refer to their local agency, regardless of if they are a “department” or a “district.” A **“fire department”** is typically an actual department of a city, town, or village, no different than a police department, public works department, etc. They are under the governance of that municipality’s mayor, city board or council. A **“fire protection district”** is an entirely separate unit of government from the towns they serve, and they are their own tax collecting body rather than relying on getting their funds from a municipality’s budget. They usually have their own independent governing body of trustees. While they work closely with the towns they serve, they are not under the direction or management of those towns. Most departments and districts hire or recruit firefighters in the same ways. In these definitions, we will use the word “department” universally to encompass both.

Volunteer Departments: Many fire departments in Illinois, like most of the nation, are volunteer departments, or some aspect of it. While it may be easier to join a volunteer department than a paid one, most volunteer departments have specific rules and requirements to be a member.

Paid-on-call Departments: Paid-on-call departments, traditionally called POC, are similar to a volunteer department. POC’s are generally volunteers when doing most support functions of the department, such as training activities, community events, meetings, etc. The difference is: when they respond and operate at emergencies, they get paid a wage either hourly or on a “per call” basis.

Part-Time Departments: Some departments employ part-time firefighters. Part-time is different than many POC departments. Part-time firefighters may work on shift, which means they usually work scheduled hours in the fire stations. They perform all aspects of the fire service such as training, fire prevention activities, cleaning and maintenance, as well as responding to emergency incidents. They are typically paid hourly for all they are working their assigned shift.

If you are interested in becoming a volunteer, POC or part-time firefighter, you should contact the ones in your area to see what their specific requirements are. Examples may include living in the district they protect, attending department training sessions and meetings on a regular basis, helping with department events such as community services and fundraising, and of course, responding to emergencies on a regular basis.

Full-time Departments: Many departments in Illinois have full-time firefighters. These are firefighters who have gone through the department’s testing process, were hired full time, and are employees of that department or district. On many occasions, they are also referred to as career firefighters. A very brief explanation, getting hired on a full-time department isn’t a matter of simply applying for that department any time of the year. Most do a testing process every two years. During the testing process, they have an application period where anyone interested must apply within the time frame listed on the application. Once time is up, all applicants will go through a series of testing steps which can encompass written exams, physical ability exams, psychological exams, etc. These steps may take several months to complete. After all testing is completed, everyone that successfully passed all steps will end up on an eligibility list. The eligibility list combines all scores throughout the process and ranks the candidates in order of scoring. The list will typically be good for two years. If the department has a firefighter opening during the two-year list, they select a candidate from their eligibility list.

Contract Firefighters or Paramedics: Some departments will employ “contract firefighters or paramedics”. Working for a contract is typically a full-time job, but you are not an actual employee of the department you are working in. You would be hired by a contract company and become their employee. Some fire departments will sign a contract with that company to provide personnel to work in their department. The department pays the company, and your paycheck comes from the contract company. You will work within the department, wear their uniforms, and ride on their vehicles, but you would not be an employee of that department. Contract companies generally have a less stringent testing process than career fire agencies. Pay and benefits vary based on the contract or the agency. Many firefighters and paramedics began their careers working for a “private” or “contract” organization before being hired full-time by a fire department.

Combination Departments: Some departments are considered combination, which means they are made up of any combination of the above types of departments.