

How to become a
Firefighter

PREPARING FOR A CAREER IN THE FIRE SERVICE



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Welcome!

You've gotten this far because you decided to explore becoming a firefighter. You may have researched it a little by calling fire departments, reading information online or asking people who are already "on the job." If you've done that, you've probably received a ton of information, and in some cases, misinformation, which can be quite confusing. This document will hopefully offer guidance to set you on a clear path to becoming a firefighter.

You probably already know the rigors, sacrifices, and risks associated with being a firefighter, so there's no need discussing that here. Rather, we'll focus on the aspects that encompass the path to becoming a firefighter.

Becoming a firefighter is difficult and it's not a job for everyone. The demand of this vocation takes a toll, both emotionally and physically on the individual, but the job can also be extremely rewarding. It takes quite a bit of time and money, but if you're dedicated, work hard, and follow all the appropriate steps, you can make it a reality. Remember, every firefighter in Illinois was once at the exact same point as you are right now.

All Fire Departments are not the same

Illinois has over 1,300 fire departments and not all are alike. There are predominately two (2) categorizations of agencies: "Fire Departments" and "Fire Protection Districts." They both operate almost identically as far as the emergency services they provide and how they recruit/hire firefighters, but the main difference is the type of governmental agency they are. The key differences are as follows:



A **"Fire Department"** is an actual department of a city, town, or village, no different than a town's police department, public works department, etc. They are under the governance of that municipality's mayor or city board or council. The Palatine Fire Department operates under the Village of Palatine.



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.

Volunteer Fire Departments

The majority of fire departments in the nation are volunteer departments. They're predominately located in rural/lower populated areas. 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, such as:

- 🔗 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.
- 🔗 Responding to emergencies on a regular basis.

If you are interested in becoming a volunteer firefighter, you should contact the ones in your area to learn what their specific requirements are.

Paid-on-Call Fire Departments

Paid-on-call departments, traditionally called "P.O.C.," are a hybrid of the Volunteer Department. POCs are generally volunteers when doing most support functions of the department, such as training activities, community events, meetings, etc., but when they respond and operate at emergencies, they get paid a modest wage either hourly or on a per-call basis. Because volunteer and POC departments are so similar, most POC departments have the same residency and recruitment requirements as volunteer departments.



If you're interested in becoming a POC firefighter, contact the ones in your area to learn what their specific requirements are.

Part-Time Fire Departments

Some fire departments employ part-time firefighters. This is different from most POC departments in that part-time firefighters may actually work on shift, which is to say they're actually working scheduled hours in the fire stations. They perform all aspects of the fire service, such as training, fire prevention activities, cleaning, and maintenance, etc., as well as responding to emergency incidents. They're typically paid hourly for the time they're working their assigned hours. Most part-time firefighters will also have jobs elsewhere, either inside or outside the fire service. If you're interested in becoming a part-time firefighter, contact the ones in your area to learn what their specific requirements are.

Full-Time Fire Departments

Many municipalities in higher populated areas have full-time firefighters. These are career firefighters who have gone through the testing process, met the requirements to make the eligibility list and were hired as a full-time employee of that municipality or fire district. The testing process for full-time firefighters is a very in-depth process. Just know that getting hired on a full-time fire department isn't a matter of simply applying for that department any time of the year. Most complete their testing process every 1-2 years and during this process, they have an application period where anyone interested must apply. Once that time is up, all applicants will participate in a written test and will be scored and ranked based on their test score. This list will typically be good for up to 3 years.

As vacancies develop, the department will then select a candidate off the list to begin a comprehensive evaluation which includes:

- 🕒 Fingerprint and criminal check
- 🕒 Background check / oral evaluation
- 🕒 Physical ability exam (i.e., CPAT)
- 🕒 Medical evaluation
- 🕒 Psychological evaluation
- 🕒 Polygraph exam



These steps may take several months, but candidates who pass the vetting process will generally be offered a job when an opening occurs.

Contract Firefighters or Paramedics

Some fire departments will employ what are called “contract” firefighters or paramedics. Being contract is typically a full-time job, but you're not an actual employee of the department you're working in. You would be hired by a private company that provides fire fighter & EMS services for a municipality or fire district via a “contract” The fire department pays the private company a fee for specific services and the private company pays you. You will work within the department, wear their uniforms and ride on their vehicles, but you would not be an employee of that department. The most common type of contract employees are firefighter/paramedics or paramedic only.

It's far easier to get a contract job, than it is to be hired full-time through a municipality or fire district because private companies typically don't have the stringent testing process that a full-time department does. In most cases, the pay and benefits are considerably less. A great many career firefighters and paramedics got their start in the contract services. It's a great way to work in emergency services while you're still going to school and gaining experience.

Combination Fire Departments

Some fire departments are considered “combination,” which means they’re made up of any combination of the above types of firefighter/paramedics. For example, there are departments that have a mixture of full-time and part-time personnel, departments that have contract personnel and volunteers, or a combination of full-time, part-time, and volunteers.

Age Limits

In Illinois most, full-time departments require you to be at least 21 years old but not over 35 to get hired. Some departments will allow someone over the age of 35 to get hired if they have credible full-time service in another Illinois department, but none will hire someone under the age of 21. The age limits for all other types of departments or contract services will vary from department to department. You will need to contact these departments to know for sure.



What Education or Training Do I Need to Become A Firefighter?

There’s a lot of confusing information, or misinformation about what classes a person should take to work toward becoming a firefighter. The answer depends on what area of the state you live in. In more rural areas of the state where there are predominately volunteer departments, you may have a better chance of getting on that department without any classes or certifications. They do this to help recruitment, and in turn will train the personnel to achieve basic skills & entry-level certifications. But most paid departments will not hire someone, or even allow them to test for their department, without certain minimum required certifications or licenses. What these requirements are will vary from department to department, but could include:

- ① Basic Operations Firefighter (BOF) certification through the Office of the Illinois State Fire Marshal (OSFM)
- ① Emergency Medical Technician – Basic (EMT-B) licensure through the Illinois Department of Public Health (IDPH)
- ① Emergency Medical Technician – Paramedic (EMT-P) licensure through IDPH

Emergency Medical Services (EMS) Training

EMS is a large part of the Illinois fire service. Just about all paid fire departments in Illinois, especially in the Northern Illinois area, require their firefighters to also be paramedics. In fact, most part-time departments, contract services, and even some POC and volunteer departments require their members to be paramedics, or at a minimum, EMT-Bs.



Firefighter II or Basic Operations Firefighter Certification

The basic entry-level type of firefighter training in Illinois is called Basic Operations Firefighter (BOF). You may hear many people refer to this certification as “Firefighter II,” because that’s what it was previously called. Some paid fire departments require personnel to be certified as a FFII or BOF before they allow them to test or apply for their fire department, Palatine FD does not.

Fire Science Degree

Many people believe that they have a better chance to get hired on a fire department if they get their degree in Fire Science, which is usually an associate’s level degree at many community colleges including Harper College. This in fact is not true. While some departments will give some preference points for applicants who have college credits, the fact is that an associate’s degree will not give you a large advantage when testing for career departments. But keep in mind that some departments, including Palatine FD, require applicants to have some college experience.



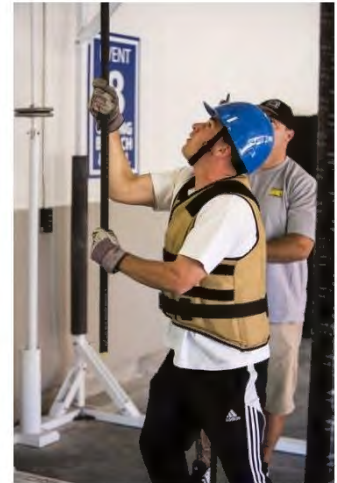
Fire Science degrees are far more beneficial to existing veteran firefighters who are taking promotional exams within their own department because those promotional exams will give preference points for those who have degrees or may even require the degree to take the exam.

With that being said, if you’re just getting out of high school, you won’t be able to take a test for a career department until you are at least 21 years old. Going to community college to take Fire Science classes is not a bad idea as it will give you some exposure to the educational aspects of the fire service and earn you valuable higher education credits while you’re waiting to reach the age of 21. Some community colleges, including Harper, offer EMT-B classes which you will need to test and are usually offered within their Fire Science Program.

Candidate Physical Ability Test (CPAT)

CPAT is a certification that most full-time departments in Illinois require, including Palatine FD, before someone can apply for that fire department. It is a physical ability test you take through a third-party institution that will put the applicant through the test, which is comprised of physically challenging obstacle course-type skills for time.

When the applicant successfully completes the testing, they will be issued a certification card that has an expiration date. The fire departments that require the applicants to have CPAT will require proof when applying. When the card expires, the applicant can go through the testing again to recertify as needed. The cost of CPAT is the responsibility of the individual. If you plan on testing for full-time departments, you should obtain CPAT certification well before a department begins the application process because obtaining CPAT may take a few weeks, and you don't want to miss an application deadline simply because you didn't get CPAT in time. Plan well in advance so you don't miss an opportunity.



CPAT Details

Participants in the CPAT must navigate 8 separate events on a closed course within a span of 10 minutes and 20 seconds. Each event simulates a physical skill or function that firefighters experience on the job.

- Stair Climb
- Hose Drag
- Equipment Carry
- Ladder Raise and Extension
- Forcible Entry
- Search
- Rescue Drag
- Ceiling Breach and Pull
- 24-foot Ladder Climb



During the test, candidates wear a helmet, gloves and 50-lb weighted vests, designed to simulate the weight of firefighter personal protective equipment. For the stair climb – the first event – candidates will don an additional 25-lb weight, to simulate the carrying of a hose pack into a high-rise fire.

You must be physically fit to pass this evaluation and for your long term success as a firefighter. If your physical fitness level is below par, start working out now. A healthy life starts before you apply.

Where Should I Begin?

A good place to start once you've made the decision to become a firefighter is to obtain the certifications and education that most paid fire departments in the state require. These are:

🔗 Step 1; **EMT-Basic**

🔗 Step 2; **EMT-Paramedic**

🔗 Step 3: **Firefighter II / Basic Operations Firefighter**

We call these programs “The Big Three,” because they’re an absolute must for most paid departments in the state. Some volunteer or POC departments may not require one or more of these three programs, but if you do obtain them, it would make you a much more desirable candidate.

Most career fire departments require the CPAT to test for their department. If you’re planning to become a career firefighter then you should obtain CPAT certification after your education, but just before you start the testing process. With the addition of CPAT, the required programs now become “The Big Four.” If your goal is to work as a volunteer, part-time, or contract department then chances are a CPAT will not be needed.

We get many calls from people who want to become firefighters, asking which program they should take first. We always recommend that they first go to EMT-B school and obtain that license. The length of the typical EMT class depends on where you take it, but on average it is about 4 – 6 months or 2 college semesters. The reason being is because some departments may accept you without having the FFII/BOF certification, but just very few will take you on without being at least an EMT. EMS incidents outnumber fire incidents by about 5 to 1, so fire departments cross-train their firefighters to also work on the ambulance. It's more cost-effective to have one employee qualified to do both jobs. This has become the overwhelming trend in the fire service.

Another reason to obtain your EMT license first, is because you can work as an EMT on a private ambulance company or in an emergency room. They're not very high paying jobs but they do allow you to work in an environment where you can utilize your new medical skills. If you choose to continue to Paramedic School, your employment opportunities and pay will increase.



Paramedic school usually lasts from 9 months to 1 year. During that time, you'll have to attend regular classroom sessions and will also have to complete hundreds of hours riding on ambulances for field time as well as completing shifts in numerous departments within a hospital, such as the emergency room, Intensive Care Unit (ICU), operating room, labor & delivery, pediatrics, cardiac care units, etc.



Most paramedic schools are run through certain EMS resource hospitals, including Northwest Community Hospital. Community colleges, including Harper, may also hold paramedic schools as a partnership with hospital programs offered in a traditional college semester format. Paramedic licensure is especially important not just to your potential fire service career, but there are other jobs that can be had as a paramedic such as in an emergency room, doctor's offices, private ambulance services, event security, etc.



Lastly, you'll need to obtain your BOF certification. You can do so in one of two ways; either as a member of a fire department or as a non-affiliated "civilian" student. The time required may vary depending on if it's a part-time or full-time academy. A BOF fire academy is a pseudo-boot camp style entry-level course for new firefighters. It gives the students

the necessary basic skills and education needed to begin their fire service career. It by no means is an all-encompassing course that teaches you everything you need to know to be a firefighter, but provides basic training. You will be required and expected to continue your education as you make your way through the fire service.



Palatine Fire Department

The Palatine Fire Department was established on June 13, 1887, and was originally operated by 45 Palatine residents serving as volunteer firefighters. Since that time, our fire department has grown to operate from 5 fire stations staffed by 91 career firefighters supported by 5 administrative civilians. While our staffing, equipment, and challenges have evolved over time, we have remained resolute in our commitment and mission to provide the finest all-hazard emergency response possible.



Palatine Fire Department “Fast Facts”

- We respond to over 9,000 Fire and EMS calls annually.
- Our fire department protects approximately 70,000 residents within the 13.5 square miles of the Village of Palatine.
- We have pre-established working relationships (i.e., Automatic Aid Agreements) with all of our neighboring municipalities including Lake Zurich, Long Grove, Arlington Heights, Rolling Meadows, and Inverness.
- The Palatine Fire Department is an active member of MABAS (Mutual Aid Box Alarm System) Division-1.
- Our fire department is a collaborative partner within the “RPM” (Inverness-Palatine-Rolling Meadows) program guiding the 3 individual fire departments to train and operate under a common tactical curriculum.
- Beyond the traditional Fire and EMS services, we also provide “Special Team” responses to; hazardous material releases, underwater rescue and recoveries, swift water rescues, urban search and rescue, confined space rescues, building collapses, above and below grade rescues, and fire investigations.
- The Palatine Fire Department also participates in numerous non-emergency activities such as fire prevention and building inspection services, Community Risk Reduction (CRR) programs, public education events, and grade school fire safety programs.

As Fire Chief, I am proud of the knowledge, skills, abilities, and professionalism our members exhibit every day. Thank you for your interest and support.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "P. Gratziana".

Patrick Gratziana
Fire Chief

Palatine Fire Department Testing Requirements

The minimum qualifications to apply to the Palatine FD includes:

- Eligible to work in the United States
- High school diploma or GED
- Valid driver's license at time of application; valid Illinois driver's license due at time of hire
- Be at least 21 years of age, but not older than 35 years of age by the date of the written exam except as otherwise provided by statute
- Attend and pass the written exam, orientation, and all phases of testing which can include polygraph test, background investigation/oral evaluation, psychological assessment, and functional physical evaluation
- Must hold EMT-B, EMT-I or EMT-P license (nationally or IDPH licensed) at the time of application. Must also be valid at the time of hire
- Must have successfully completed the Candidate Physical Ability Test (CPAT) and Ladder Climb Exercise within 1 year period to the date of the written exam
- Completion of at least 60 semester hours of college credit and/or evidence of OSFM equivalent training or experience, acceptable to the Palatine Fire and Police Commission
- Must have primary residence in Illinois prior to appointment as a probationary firefighter
- Applicant must have 20-40 vision



Resources

Local Community Colleges with Fire Science Programs	<p>Harper Community College: https://www.harpercollege.edu/</p> <p>College of Lake County https://www.clcillinois.edu/</p> <p>McHenry Community College https://www.mchenry.edu/</p> <p>College of DuPage: https://www.cod.edu/</p> <p>Elgin Community College: https://elgin.edu/</p>																		
CPAT Testing Facilities	<p>Huntley: https://www.huntleyfpd.org/cpat-testing</p> <p>Naperville: https://www.naperville.il.us/</p> <p>NIPSTA: https://www.nipsta.org/</p>																		
EMT-B & EMT-P Programs	<p>Most community colleges include EMT-B as part of their fire science curriculum. At Harper College, this offered in partnership with Northwest Community Hospital and provides 9 credit hours towards your Fire Science degree.</p> <p>EMT-P can be completed at some community colleges and the following hospitals...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Northwest Community Hospital (Arlington Heights) - Condell Hospital (Libertyville) - McHenry Hospital (McHenry) - St. Francis Hospital (Evanston) - Lutheran General Hospital (Park Ridge) - Good Samaritan Hospital (Downers Grove) - Loyola Hospital (Maywood) 																		
Basic Operations Firefighter (BOF) Fire Academies In many cases, community colleges that offer BOF may apply 12 credit hours towards your Fire Science degree.	<p>Romeoville Fire Academy: www.romeoville.org/153/Fire-Academy</p> <p>NIPSTA: https://www.nipsta.org/</p> <p>College of Lake County: https://www.clcillinois.edu/</p> <p>McHenry Community College: https://www.mchenry.edu/firefighter/</p>																		
Local Part-Time Fire Departments	<table border="0"> <tr> <td>Prospect Heights Fire Department</td> <td>McHenry Township Fire Protection District</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Cary Fire Protection District</td> <td>Huntley Fire Protection District</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Woodstock Fire/Rescue District</td> <td>Lake Forest Fire Department</td> </tr> <tr> <td>East Dundee Fire Protection District</td> <td>Antioch Fire Department</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Clarendon Hills Fire Department</td> <td>Berkeley Fire Department</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Greater Round Lake Fire Protection District</td> <td>Batavia Fire Department</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Wauconda Fire Protection District</td> <td>Long Grove Fire Protection District</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Hanover Park Fire Department</td> <td>Warrenville Fire Department</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Countryside Fire Protection District (Vernon Hills)</td> <td></td> </tr> </table>	Prospect Heights Fire Department	McHenry Township Fire Protection District	Cary Fire Protection District	Huntley Fire Protection District	Woodstock Fire/Rescue District	Lake Forest Fire Department	East Dundee Fire Protection District	Antioch Fire Department	Clarendon Hills Fire Department	Berkeley Fire Department	Greater Round Lake Fire Protection District	Batavia Fire Department	Wauconda Fire Protection District	Long Grove Fire Protection District	Hanover Park Fire Department	Warrenville Fire Department	Countryside Fire Protection District (Vernon Hills)	
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Firefighter Test / Job Posting Sources	<p>IOS: https://iosolutions.com/</p> <p>National Testing Network: https://nationaltestingnetwork.com</p> <p>The Blue Line: https://www.theblueline.com/</p>																		