



How to Become a Professional Fire Fighter

Fire fighting is a challenging career – challenging to the body, mind and spirit. With those challenges come immeasurable rewards. Some are tangible; others are personally fulfilling. Becoming a fire fighter takes more than just an education and a résumé. It takes commitment to proving you have the mental fortitude and the physical stamina to meet the demands of the job.

There are three different types of fire departments: career, combination and volunteer. This guide will focus on becoming a professional fire fighter or paramedic in a career or combination setting.

Section I – How do I become a professional fire fighter?

The first step to being hired as a fire fighter is to learn about the examination and hiring process in the city or community for which you wish to work. Information about the examination and the application process can usually be obtained from your municipal fire department, department of human resources or from your local fire station. Often a city or fire department will post information on its website. Sometimes, employment information can be obtained from your local high school's guidance office or your local newspaper.

Professional fire fighters are certified for fire fighting according to standards established by their municipalities which differ from region to region. Typical requirements include:

- Age – Generally, the age range for becoming a professional fire fighter is 18 to 36.
- Citizenship – Most fire departments will require that you be a citizen (or legal resident) and that you have a valid driver's license in order to be appointed as a professional fire fighter.
- Local Resident – Some fire departments require their professional fire fighter candidates to be residents of the community in which they intend to serve and/or to maintain their residence if appointed as a fire fighter.
- Education – Almost all fire departments require a high school diploma or equivalent. Some require college-level credits while others require the completion of a fire fighting training program from an educational institution that teaches fire protection/fire control and/or paramedic skills. A number of areas award preference points in the hiring process to those who have earned college credits.
- Military Training – Active service members and veterans with fire or paramedic experience may be required to demonstrate the techniques they learned and provide evidence of an honorable discharge. Some areas award preference points to veterans in the hiring process.
- EMS Certificate – Most fire fighters are required to earn emergency medical technician or paramedic certification.

Depending on where the fire department is located, there are generally two methods used to recruit and select professional fire fighters.

Are you interested in working for a smaller community or in a larger, urban setting?



How to Become a Professional Fire Fighter

Small Community Area

Smaller Areas – Population < 1 million

Smaller communities, fire districts and counties often require fire fighter or paramedic certification from an adult vocational or community college before becoming eligible to pursue fire fighter vacancies.

The hiring process typically includes a physical ability test (such as the Candidate Physical Ability Test known as [CPAT](#)), an interview process and a background check with particular reference to integrity, reliability and general suitability. Successful completion of the hiring process will earn you a place in the next rookie class entering the training academy to learn how to become a fire fighter for the municipality.

Visit the websites of the fire departments listed below or download their recruitment brochures to learn about some recruitment processes in different areas:

- [Abbotsford, BC](#) [Career Fire Fighter Recruitment Application Manual](#)
- [Brandon, MB](#) [Become a Manitoba Emergency Services College Graduate](#)
- [Grand Island, NE](#) [Grand Island Fire Department: Join Our Team](#)
- [Winchester, VA](#) [Probationary EMT/Firefighter Recruitment Packet](#)

Click [here](#) to see a sample job posting.

Urban City Area

Large Areas – Population > 1 million

Larger cities and municipalities often use the civil service or a similar aptitude exam (click [here](#) to see sample questions from the Los Angeles City exam) to begin a rank-order list of candidates. If you score high enough, you will be invited to continue through the hiring process which may include a physical ability test (such as the Candidate Physical Ability Test known as [CPAT](#)), an interview process and a background check with particular reference to integrity, reliability and general suitability. Successful completion of the hiring process will earn you a place in the next rookie class entering the training academy to learn how to become a fire fighter for the municipality.

Visit the websites of the fire departments listed below or download their recruitment brochures to learn about some recruitment processes in different areas:

- [Calgary, AB](#) [Selection Process Guide](#) [Firefighter Selection Process Overview](#)
- [Houston, TX](#) [Houston's Hottest Jobs](#)
- [Phoenix, AZ](#) [Fire Fighter: It's Your Dream Job](#)
- [Vancouver, BC](#) [Guide for Applicants](#)

Click [here](#) to see a sample job posting.



How to Become a Professional Fire Fighter

Section II – What are the duties of today’s fire fighter?

Fire fighters are our community’s first responders and our nation’s heroes. Fire fighters respond to structure fires, car accidents, and medical emergencies, as well as to natural and man-made disasters. They work in airports, forests, industrial sites, for cities and counties, and in urban and rural areas. The job is physically demanding as most fire fighters work 24-hour shifts, responding to calls that put them in hazardous environments. Fire fighters and paramedics work together to respond to emergencies. These professions require skill and training. Many fire departments require fire fighters to earn EMS certification. Between calls, fire fighters maintain equipment, receive training and run drills, take time for physical fitness and file reports and paperwork.

More than a job

Becoming a professional fire fighter requires courage, knowledge, cooperation, physical strength, agility, endurance, compassion and adaptability. To become a professional fire fighter, you must have all of these characteristics not only to protect the citizens of your community from fire but also to confront any type of emergency to which you will respond.

As part of your duties as a professional fire fighter you might be called to emergency medical incidents at homes, businesses and public areas; respond to hazardous material spills at traffic incidents; or present fire prevention education at schools and community outreach events. Generally, fire fighters do not investigate traffic accidents involving fire fighter/EMS response.

Special training for all situations

Most professional fire fighters are required to be trained as emergency medical technicians or paramedics, in addition to fire suppression. Providing emergency medical care to the ill and injured is a major part of the job. Fire fighters carry life support equipment like cardiac defibrillators and life-saving medication. Rapid response from a well-trained professional fire fighter can be the difference between life and death in emergency medical calls.

While fire fighting and emergency response are the most visible aspects of being a professional fire fighter, dealing with incident command, hazardous materials, high angle rescue, water rescue, fighting wildland fires, fire prevention, fire investigations, communications, fire education, and community relations also occupy a major part of a professional fire fighter’s job. As a professional fire fighter, you have the opportunity to educate the community you serve about fire prevention and teach school-aged children the dangers of fire and the correct reactions to emergency situations.

Professional fire fighters are also trained to inspect buildings for hazardous conditions that may result in a fire. Armed with the knowledge of fire hazards and local fire and building codes, these professionals check for appropriate exit routes, safe storage and use of flammable and combustible materials, overcrowding of public places and the improper use of equipment or materials in all kinds of buildings.

Home away from home

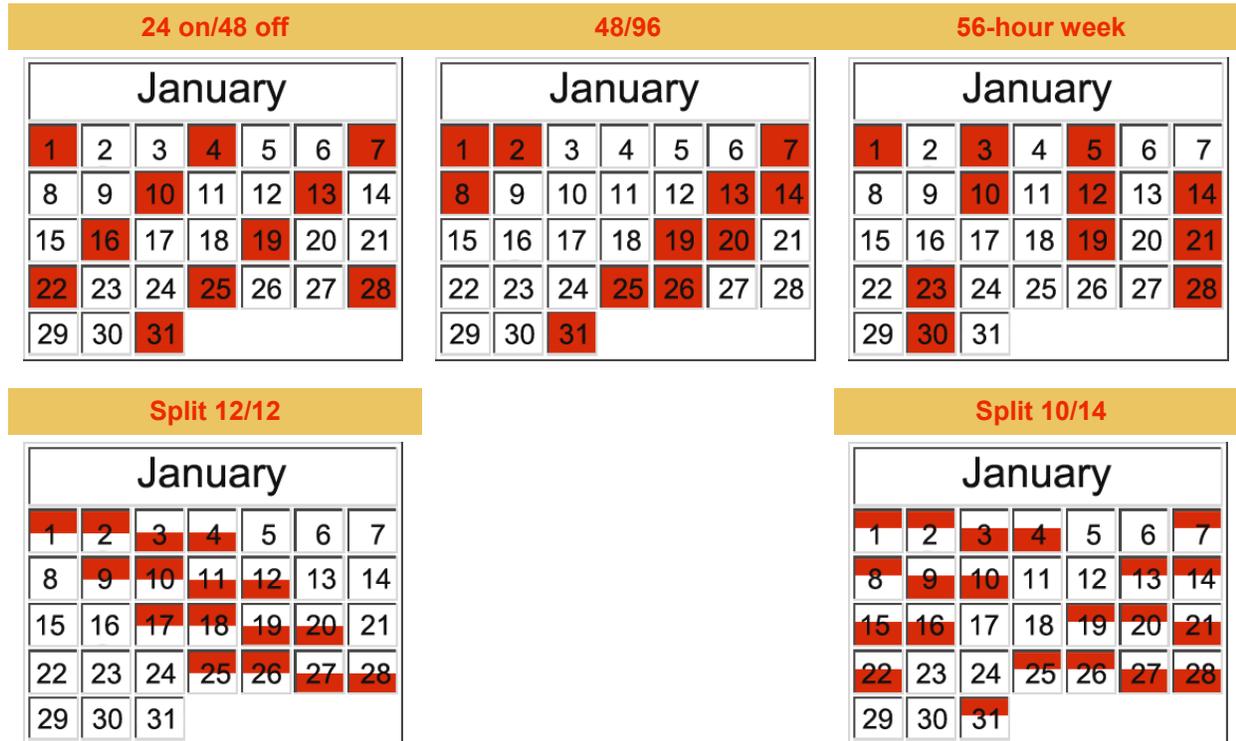
The 24/7 nature of the job requires that fire fighters live together at the station during their shifts. Like a family, fire fighters prepare meals for one another, share living quarters, and sleep in bunk rooms. When not on a call or dealing with the public, fire fighters perform a number of other tasks including conducting practice drills, keeping fire fighting equipment clean and in good operating condition, attending training courses, and taking care of other required station duties.



How to Become a Professional Fire Fighter

Depending on local conditions, professional fire fighters are typically required to work from 40 to 56 hours a week. In order to meet the 24-hour a day demand of fire fighting, professional fire fighters must work in shifts. Each fire department establishes its own shift schedule and staffing requirements. Although there are no absolute rules governing how shifts operate, the two most prevalent shifts are the 24-hour tours and the split shift.

Sample shift schedules appear below:



The risks

Professional fire fighters are at great risk of becoming injured while on duty. Even though fire fighting can be rewarding, it is one of the most dangerous professions.

Almost 40 percent of all professional fire fighters are injured every year due to the variety of dangers they face on any given day. Injuries may be minor – requiring first aid only – to moderate and severe resulting in loss of time on the job and recovery from a potentially life-threatening condition.

The most common injuries include sprains or strains, thermal burns, lacerations, exhaustion, smoke inhalation, contusions, cardiac symptoms and difficulty breathing.

Besides the perils of fire, professional fire fighters must confront the risks associated with the transport and use of toxic and hazardous materials, as well as the possibility of being exposed to numerous contagious diseases such as tuberculosis, hepatitis and HIV.

Click [here](#) to see fire fighter and injury reports.



How to Become a Professional Fire Fighter

The rewards

The starting salary for fire fighter recruits depends upon their geographic location and shift schedule. With an hourly rate of \$20.00 per hour, the annual salary would equal:

- \$49,920 (48-hour average work week)
- \$55,120 (53-hour average work week)
- \$58,240 (56-hour average work week)

Depending on the geographic location and average hours of work per week, the starting salary for a fire fighter recruit can range from the mid-high teens in nonmetropolitan, rural areas to low \$70,000 in larger, urban areas*. Fire fighters who work under a collective bargaining agreement tend to earn more than those who are not represented by a union.

Some locations offer incentive pay supplementing eligible fire fighters' annual salaries. Examples of incentive pay include:

- Various EMT certifications
- Hazardous Materials Certification
- Bilingual ability
- Longevity – based on years of service.

* Salary data taken from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics for Firefighters (Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) code 332011) Hourly 10th percentile wage.

Career Advancement

Fire fighting is a rewarding career that offers numerous promotional opportunities both as members of the rank-and-file, support personnel and administration positions.

Rank-and-File:

- Suppression personnel including fire fighters, drivers, lieutenants, and captains
- Paramedics

Support Personnel:

- Arson investigators
- Fire prevention specialists
- Dispatchers
- Mechanical services technicians
- Building/Zoning inspectors
- Fire marshals

Administration*:

- Battalion/Platoon chiefs
- District chief
- Assistant chief
- Deputy chief

* Some administration positions exist only in larger departments.



How to Become a Professional Fire Fighter

Section III – What is the IAFF and how do I join?

The International Association of Fire Fighters, headquartered in Washington, DC, represents more than 300,000 full-time professional fire fighters and paramedics who protect 85 percent of the nation's population. More than 3,100 affiliates and their members protect communities in every state in the United States and in Canada. In addition to city and county fire fighters and emergency medical personnel, IAFF members include state employees, federal workers and fire and emergency medical personnel employed at certain industrial facilities.

The IAFF is the driving force behind nearly every advance in the fire and emergency services in the 21st century—from the introduction of shift schedules early in the last century to the enactment of Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) in 2003. With extremely active political and legislative programs, and with recognized experts in the fields of occupational health and safety, fire-based emergency medical services and hazardous materials training, the IAFF has established professional standards for the North American fire service. A detailed account of IAFF accomplishments is available at www.iaff.org/history.

Today, the IAFF is the primary advocate for providing fire fighters and paramedics with the tools they need to perform their jobs safely. The IAFF provides a strong voice in the development and implementation of new training and equipment, and has worked hard to ensure the proper staffing of fire and EMS departments. It is a member-driven organization—for fire fighters, by fire fighters.

Once you become a fire fighter or paramedic, you can join the IAFF. Your IAFF local will contact you about your membership. [Click here to learn more about organizing an IAFF local](#).

Section IV – Where can I find more information?

Visit the following links to learn more about fire fighting and the fire service:

- [IAFF Department of Education](#)
- [IAFF Job Center](#)
- [IAFF CPAT Manual](#)
- [IAFF CPAT Video](#)
- [Fire Fighter National Fire Protection Association \(NFPA\)](#)
- [Fire Fighter Fatality Program - NIOSH](#)
- [Fire Fighter Injuries in the United States - NFPA](#)
- [Homeland Security Grant Program \(HSGP\) Training Information System](#)
- [United States Fire Administration](#)
- Camp Experiences:
 - [Camp Ignite](#)
 - [Camp Houston Fire](#)



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A Day in the Life... Real people comment on what it takes to be a fire fighter

Fire Ops 101 is a program that invites local politicians and reporters to experience a taste of what it's like to be a fire fighter or EMT. Civilians participate in a series of supervised, controlled exercises and come out with a new perspective on what fire fighters do.

Watch [this video](#) to hear what non-fire fighters think about the job.

Summary

Fire fighting is a challenging career – challenging to the body, mind and spirit. With those challenges come immeasurable rewards. Fire fighters are our community's first responders and our nation's heroes.

Fire fighters put their lives at risk in order to protect their communities each day. Fire fighting is a challenging career - but the rewards are immeasurable for those who join our ranks.

For any questions, contact the IAFF Department of Education at (202) 824-1533 or email at education@iaff.org.