

Fast Growing Employment Opportunities Favor Experienced Fire Fighters

(This article taken from US Bureau of Labor Statistics web site, <http://www.bls.gov>.)

Every year, fires and other emergencies take thousands of lives and destroy property worth billions of dollars. Fire fighters help protect the public against these dangers by responding to fires and a variety of other emergencies. In addition to putting out fires, they are frequently the first emergency personnel at the scene of a traffic accident or medical emergency and may be called upon to treat injuries or perform other vital functions.

Employment of workers in fire fighting occupations is expected to grow by 12 percent over the 2006-2016 decade, which is as fast as the average for all occupations. Most job growth will stem from volunteer fire fighting positions being converted to paid positions. In recent years, it has become more difficult for volunteer fire departments to recruit and retain volunteers. This may be the result of the considerable amount of training and time commitment required. Furthermore, a trend towards more people living in and around cities has increased the demand for fire fighters. When areas develop and become more densely populated, emergencies and fires affect more buildings and more people and therefore require more fire fighters.

According to the U.S. Fire Administration, about 71 percent of fire companies were staffed entirely by volunteer fire fighters in 2005. Prior experience and training as a fire fighter is a real bonus for applicants to paid fire fighting positions. Considerable and significant experience can be gained through membership and participation in your local volunteer fire department.

During duty hours, fire fighters must be prepared to respond immediately to a fire or other emergency. Fighting fires is dangerous and complex, therefore requires organization and teamwork. At every emergency scene, fire fighters perform specific duties assigned by a superior officer. At fires, they connect hose lines to hydrants and operate a pump to send water to high-pressure hoses. Some carry hoses, climb ladders, and enter burning buildings—using systematic and careful procedures—to put out fires. At times, they may need to use tools, like an ax, to make their way through doors, walls, and debris sometimes with the aid of information about a building's floor plan. Some find and rescue occupants who are unable to safely leave the building without assistance. They also provide emergency medical attention, ventilate smoke-filled areas, and attempt to salvage the contents of buildings. Fire fighters' duties may change several times while the company is in action. Sometimes they remain at the site of a disaster for days at a time, rescuing trapped survivors, and assisting with medical treatment.

Fire fighters work in a variety of settings, including metropolitan areas, rural areas with grasslands and forests, airports, chemical plants and other industrial sites. They have also assumed a range of responsibilities, including emergency medical

services. In fact, most calls to which fire fighters respond involve medical emergencies. In addition, some fire fighters work in hazardous materials units that are specially trained for the control, prevention, and cleanup of hazardous materials, such as oil spills or accidents involving the transport of chemicals.

Workers specializing in forest fires utilize different methods and equipment than other fire fighters. In national forests and parks, forest fire inspectors and prevention specialists spot fires from watchtowers and report the fires to headquarters by telephone or radio. Forest rangers and prevention officers also patrol to ensure that travelers and campers comply with fire regulations. When fires break out, crews of fire fighters are brought in to suppress the blaze with heavy equipment and water hoses. Fighting forest fires, like fighting urban fires, is rigorous work. One of the most effective means of fighting a forest fire is creating fire lines—cutting down trees and digging out grass and all other combustible vegetation in the path of the fire—to deprive it of fuel. Elite fire fighters called smoke jumpers parachute from airplanes to reach otherwise inaccessible areas. This tactic, however, can be extremely hazardous. When they aren't responding to fires and other emergencies, fire fighters clean and maintain equipment, study fire science and fire fighting techniques, conduct practice drills and fire inspections, and participate in physical fitness activities. They also prepare written reports on fire incidents and review fire science literature to stay informed about technological developments and changing administrative practices and policies.

Most fire departments have a fire prevention division, usually headed by a fire marshal and staffed by fire inspectors. Workers in this division conduct inspections of structures to prevent fires by ensuring compliance with fire codes. These inspectors also work with developers and planners to check and approve plans for new buildings and inspect buildings under construction.

Some fire fighters become fire investigators, who determine the causes of fires. They collect evidence, interview witnesses, and prepare reports on fires in cases where the cause may be arson or criminal negligence. They often are asked to testify in court. In some cities, these investigators work in police departments, and some are employed by insurance companies.

Fire fighters spend much of their time at fire stations or fire offices, which are often similar to dormitories. When an alarm sounds, fire fighters respond, regardless of the weather or hour. Fire fighting involves the risk of death or injury from floors caving in, walls toppling, traffic accidents, and exposure to flames and smoke. Fire fighters also may come into contact with poisonous, flammable, or explosive gases and chemicals and radioactive materials, which may have immediate or long-term effects on their health. For these reasons, they must wear protective gear that can be very heavy and hot.

Most fire fighters have a high school diploma. The completion of community college

courses, or in some cases, an associate degree, in fire science may also improve an applicant's chances for a job. A number of colleges and universities offer courses leading to 2- or 4-year degrees in fire engineering or fire science.

Many fire departments have accredited apprenticeship programs lasting up to 4 years. These programs combine formal instruction with on-the-job training under the supervision of experienced fire fighters.

Almost all departments require fire fighters to be certified as emergency medical technicians. (For more information, see the article herein on page _____ on emergency medical technicians and paramedics.) Although most fire departments require the lowest level of certification, Emergency Medical Technician-Basic (EMT-Basic), larger departments in major metropolitan areas increasingly require paramedic certification. Some departments include this training in the fire academy, whereas others prefer that recruits earn EMT certification on their own but will give them up to 1 year to do it.

In addition to participating in training programs conducted by local fire departments, some fire fighters attend training sessions sponsored by the U.S. National Fire Academy. These training sessions cover topics such as executive development, anti-arson techniques, disaster preparedness, hazardous materials control, and public fire safety and education. Some States also have either voluntary or mandatory fire fighter training and certification programs. Many fire departments offer fire fighters incentives such as tuition reimbursement or higher pay for completing advanced training.

Applicants for municipal fire fighting jobs usually must pass a written exam; tests of strength, physical stamina, coordination, and agility; and a medical examination that includes a drug screening. Workers may be monitored on a random basis for drug use after accepting employment. Examinations are generally open to people who are at least 18 years of age and have a high school education or its equivalent. Those who receive the highest scores in all phases of testing have the best chances of being hired.

Among the personal qualities fire fighters need are mental alertness, self-discipline, courage, mechanical aptitude, endurance, strength, and a sense of public service. Initiative and good judgment also are extremely important because fire fighters make quick decisions in emergencies. Members of a crew live and work closely together under conditions of stress and danger for extended periods, so they must be dependable and able to get along well with others. Leadership qualities are necessary for officers, who must establish and maintain discipline and efficiency, as well as direct the activities of the fire fighters in their companies.

To progress to higher level positions, fire fighters continue studying to improve their job performance and prepare for promotion examinations. They acquire expertise in advanced fire fighting equipment and

techniques, building construction, emergency medical technology, writing, public speaking, management and budgeting procedures, and public relations. Usually, structural or municipal fire fighters are first promoted to engineer, then lieutenant, captain, battalion chief, assistant chief, deputy chief, and, finally, chief. For promotion to positions higher than battalion chief, many fire departments now require a bachelor's degree, preferably in fire science, public administration, or a related field. An associate degree is required for executive fire officer certification from the National Fire Academy.

In response to the expanding role of fire fighters, some municipalities have combined fire prevention, public fire education, safety, and emergency medical services into a single organization commonly referred to as a public safety organization. Some local and regional fire departments are being consolidated into countywide establishments to reduce administrative staffs, cut costs, and establish consistent training standards and work procedures.

Median annual earnings of fire fighters were \$41,190 in May 2006. The middle 50 percent earned between \$29,550 and \$54,120. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$20,660, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$66,140. Median annual earnings were \$41,600 in local government, \$41,070 in the Federal Government, and \$37,000 in State governments.

Median annual earnings of first-line supervisors/managers of fire fighting and prevention workers were \$62,900 in May 2006. The middle 50 percent earned between \$50,180 and \$79,060. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$36,820, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$97,820. First-line supervisors/managers of fire fighting and prevention workers employed in local government earned a median of about \$64,070 a year.

Median annual earnings of fire inspectors and investigators were \$48,050 in May 2006. The middle 50 percent earned between \$36,960 and \$61,160 a year. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$29,840, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$74,930. Fire inspectors and investigators employed in local government earned a median of about \$49,690 a year.

Fire fighters receive benefits that usually include medical and liability insurance, vacation and sick leave, and some paid holidays.

Information about a career as a fire fighter may be obtained from local fire departments and from the following organizations:

International Association of Fire Fighters, 1750 New York Ave. NW., Washington, DC 20006.
Internet: <http://www.iaff.org>

U.S. Fire Administration, 16825 South Seton Ave.,
Emmitsburg, MD 21727.
Internet: <http://www.usfa.dhs.gov>

Information about professional qualifications and a list of
colleges and universities offering 2- or 4-year degree programs
in fire science or fire prevention may be obtained from:

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National Fire Academy, 16825 South Seton Ave.,
Emmitsburg, MD 21727.
Internet: <http://www.usfa.dhs.gov/nfa/index.htm>