

How Do I Become a Firefighter in Illinois?

So...you're looking to be a firefighter in Illinois? You may have even researched a little by calling fire departments, google searching, or asking people who are already in "the business." If you've done all that, you're probably even more confused! We'll try to make sense of and hopefully set you on a clear path to becoming a firefighter.

Where do I begin?

You probably already know the sacrifices and risks associated with being 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.

Frequently asked questions:

Is becoming a firefighter tough?

- Yes.

Can it take quite a bit of time and money?

- Yes.

Can it, at times, be frustrating?

- Yes.

But is it impossible? Not at all.

- After all, every single firefighter in Illinois was exactly where you are right now.

If we can do it, so can you. The key is to stay diligent and follow all the appropriate steps required.

Becoming a firefighter is hard, but 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.

The first thing you'll need to understand is what types of fire departments there are in Illinois. Illinois has over 1,000 fire departments and not all are alike. In fact, the word "fire department" is rather generic and encompasses a large range of agencies that provide fire or ambulance services. The most common types of fire departments are discussed below.

Fire Department vs. Fire Protection District:

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 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. For example, the Romeoville Fire Department is an agency of the Village of Romeoville. The Village operates the Department.

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. For example, the Darien-Woodridge Fire Protection District serves parts of the Villages of Darien and Woodridge, but they are not actually operated by those Villages. Most departments and districts hire or recruit firefighters in the same ways. For the remainder of this document, we will use the word “department” universally to encompass both.

Volunteer Departments: The majority of fire departments in Illinois, like most of the nation, are volunteer departments, or some aspect of it. While there are numerous departments in the Chicagoland area that are volunteer, most of them are outside the Chicagoland area in most rural parts of the state.

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

Paid-on-call Departments: Paid-on-call departments, traditionally called P.O.C., 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. Since volunteer and POC departments are so similar, most POC departments have the same residency and recruitment requirements as volunteer departments. If you are interested in becoming a POC firefighter, you should contact the ones in your area to see what their specific requirements are.

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 the they are working their assigned shift. Most part-time firefighters will also have jobs elsewhere, either inside or outside the fire service and work as a part-time firefighter as a second job. If you are interested in becoming a part-time firefighter, you should contact the ones in your area to see what their specific requirements are.

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 actually employees of that department or district. On many occasions, they are also referred to as career firefighters. The testing process for full-time firefighters is a very in-depth process and is beyond the scope of explaining in full here. Below is 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 generally 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 are you 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.

It is possible to find a contracted non-paramedic firefighter position. However, the most common type of contract employees are firefighter/paramedics, or paramedic only. It is far easier to get a full-time contract job, than it is to be hired full-time through a fire 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. For example, there are departments that have a mixture of full-time and part-time personnel, departments that have some contract personnel and volunteers, etc.

Age limits: In Illinois, most full-time departments require that you are between the ages of 21 to 35 to get hired. Some departments will allow someone over the age of 35 to get hired if they have credible full-time service on another Illinois department. The minimum age to be hired full-time is age 21. The age limits for all other types of departments (part-time, POC, volunteer or contract services) will vary from department to department. You will need to contact these departments to know for sure. It is best to consult the current version of the state law to explore age requirements, as we know the law can change.

What type of education or classes do I need?

There is a lot of confusing information, or misinformation about what classes a person should take to work toward becoming a firefighter. The real answer is: it really depends on what area in the state you live in. In more rural areas of the state where you may find 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 may train personnel in-house or cover expenses with training. Most paid departments generally require a minimum of a paramedic license. The largest exception to this rule is the City of Chicago.

Emergency Medical Services (EMS) training: EMS is a large part of the Illinois fire service. If you have ambition to become a career firefighter, but have no interest in becoming an emergency medical technician (EMT-B) or paramedic; you may need to reconsider. Nearly all paid 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-Basics. You cannot become a paramedic until you are first an EMT-Basic.

Basic Operations Firefighter Certification: The basic entry-level type of firefighter training in Illinois is called Basic Operations Firefighter (BOF). If you ever hear the name “Firefighter II”, that is the old name of the certification within the state. It means the same level of training as BOF. Many career agencies may require BOF to take their test, but this continually changes based on recruitment in the IL fire service. It is encouraged to closely read the requirements for testing or the information listed on the application.

Fire Science Degree: Many people believe they have the best chance to get hired on a fire department if they get a degree in Fire Science or EMS. This in fact is not true. While many departments will give small amounts of preference points for applicants who have college credits, it may not offer much of an advantage. Fire Science degrees are far more beneficial to existing veteran firefighters who are taking promotional exams within their own department. Generally, promotional processes will give preference points for those who have degrees or may even require the degree to take the exam.

We strongly encourage professional development through college education. Just understand, starting with a college degree is most likely not getting you hired on a career department with the degree by itself. In addition, many junior colleges will offer some version of college credit once you are already through fire academy or licensed as a paramedic.

Candidate Physical Ability Test (CPAT): CPAT is a certification that many full-time departments require as a pre-requisite to test for that department. It is a physical ability test you take through a third party institution. CPAT is essentially a timed obstacle course. When the applicant successfully completes the testing, they will be issued a certification card that has an expiration date. The 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 usually 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. Obtaining CPAT certification may take several weeks, and you do not want to miss an application deadline as a result of not having the pre-requisite. Have it ahead of time.

So... where do I begin again?

As stated above different departments have different requirements to get on their department. When you decide that you want to start getting the required education, you should focus on EMT-Basic, Basic Operations Fire Academy and Paramedic School. These are generally the three main programs needed to be hired by a career department in Northern Illinois. We are often asked, which should I take first?

That depends. It is likely you can work as an EMT-Basic for a contract ambulance company, but you generally cannot work only as a Firefighter or BOF. As mentioned before, you must go through EMT-Basic before paramedic school. You will not be accepted into a paramedic program if you are not first licensed as an EMT-Basic through Illinois Department of Public Health. Many volunteer or POC departments may not require one or more of these three programs. If you obtain them ahead of time, it makes you that much more of a desirable hire.

As mentioned, we generally 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. As an example, the Romeoville Fire Academy EMT program meets two nights a week. We encourage you to research area EMT programs before committing to one over another.

EMS incidents outnumber fire incidents by far. This is why departments 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.

After you obtain your EMT license the next program you should take ultimately depends on your age, location and many other factors. It truly varies based on the person. To answer the question simply, the next step is either BOF or paramedic school. You generally need both for most career departments in the Chicagoland area as mentioned previously.

If you choose to attend a BOF Academy first, there are two ways you can do so – either as a member of a fire department or as a non-affiliated “civilian” student. If you are affiliated with a fire department, they generally provide all means to accomplish the program and achieve certification. If you attend non-affiliated, we have several partnerships that provide gear rental and the necessary steps to be successful. The largest difference: a department affiliated student can achieve full BOF certification at the end of the program and after successful passing of the Office of the IL State Fire Marshal certification exams.

A Non-Affiliated student will complete all practical requirements and may challenge two of the state certification exams, but they will receive a “recognition of completion” document. The recognition document is not the same as a certification, but it shows a department you have completed all the necessary steps. The only thing missing, is to be hired by a department. Once you are hired, you can then achieve full certification as a BOF. It is important to note, practicals are good for five years. If you attend non-affiliated, you must be hired by a fire department within five years to still achieve certification.

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.

The Romeoville Fire Academy offers numerous BOF academies annually. It is best to visit our fire academy website and look at the various course offerings.

Lastly, we discussed the potential need to become a paramedic. You may also hear paramedic referred to as “EMT-P.” As stated above, most full-time/career fire department in the Chicagoland area will require you to be a firefighter AND paramedic. Of course, there are exceptions. Always look at the hiring fire department’s application or testing process posting. Many volunteer, part-time, and POC departments may not require you to be a paramedic to join their department. As we mentioned previously, always call around or look at the fire department’s website.

Paramedic school varies, but may take as long as one to two years. It is an incredibly busy and intense year. During that time, not only do you have to attend regular classroom sessions and numerous hours studying; but you will also have to do hundreds of hours riding on ambulances for field time. You will also complete shifts scheduled in numerous departments of a hospital such: the emergency room, ICU, labor & delivery, pediatrics, cardiac care units, etc.

Most paramedic schools are run through certain hospitals around the Chicago area and the state. They are not commonly held through outside schools or fire academies like the RFA. Some community colleges hold paramedic schools as a partnership with hospital programs offered in the traditional college semester format.

We hope the above information gives you a little better idea of what is expected for you to launch your fire service career in Illinois. The steps on becoming a firefighter can be difficult and frustrating at times, but it is necessary and in no way impossible. The key is to stay diligent and accomplish the steps that need to be done. We encourage you to call fire departments and inquire about hiring, visit their websites or google search. Another helpful website that shows many job postings is <https://www.theblueline.com>.

The Romeoville Fire Academy can help you with your educational needs. Feel free to contact us anytime at 815-372-4042 or online at <http://www.romeoville.org/153/Fire-Academy>

For a complete list of all fire departments in the state go to:
<http://webapps.sfm.illinois.gov/FireDeptSearch/Search.aspx>
Just enter the search criteria and click “search”.

