

Joining the Fire service

An Education guide to becoming a Fire Fighter in San Diego County



SAN DIEGO MIRAMAR COLLEGE
Fire Technology &
Emergency Medical Technician



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The fire service can be a very rewarding career where an individual will be given many chances to make a real difference in someone's life.

What do I need to do to become a firefighter?

The answer is somewhat complex as different agencies have different priorities with different needs. All types of fire agencies (district, wildland, municipal, private brigade, etc.) are filled with professionals that are good at what they do and, regardless of the variations, there is a fair amount of crossover in skill sets. The key is finding the right "fit". Whichever path you follow, it is required that you obtain an Emergency Medical Certificate (EMT). A Paramedic Certification, while not always required, is generally preferred and will open the most doors.

General items that will help you get hired include:

- EMT (minimum requirement)
- Paramedic certification (National Registry, State Certified, County Accredited)
- Fire Science classes (through selected community colleges)
- Experience (obtained from reserve and volunteer programs)
- Firefighter 1 Academy or Basic Wildland Fire Academy

Fire service training programs provide both education and experience and is not one of the easiest. You will be inundated with information that must be learned to keep you and your co-workers safe, while performing near the peak of your abilities. Once you have completed an entry level program, you will have increased confidence in your abilities, as well as those of your co-workers, that will give you a sense of pride in belonging to the Fire service.

The best candidate for hire has a balanced combination of education and experience. Education provides the introduction to a topic or skill, experience makes the education real, applicable, and a permanent part of your mental "toolbox". Firefighters are expected to continue their education throughout their career to stay current with new trends in training, tactics, and strategy.

Getting hired consists of more than simply passing the required written and manipulative exams. A candidate must also include displaying character traits such as a positive work ethic, pleasant work demeanor, professional conduct and appearance, the lack of a sense of entitlement, and similar attributes which help to gain and keep the public's confidence and trust.

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PROFESSIONAL BEHAVIOR

The fire service is a paramilitary career that requires teamwork, discipline, and the ability to make decisions under pressure.

If you do not have self-discipline, don't like the idea of working under authority, or living with rules and regulations that restrict your personal freedom for the sake of public safety, you are in the wrong place.

As a fire service trainee, you are expected to obey orders, exhibit exceptional personal hygiene, conform to rules and regulations, respect the chain of command, work well with your peers, have integrity and occasionally perform repetitious, menial tasks with excellence. At the same time, you should demonstrate the ability to think on your feet, use sound, independent judgment, be aggressive toward mitigating incidents and display common sense concerning safety for yourself and others. As a trainee, you will take on a tremendous commitment that requires your constant attention. It is essential that you understand your responsibilities so you can work to achieve the highest level of performance possible.

To emphasize the high degree of public trust placed upon you by the citizens of this community, the professional behavior of the trainee will be evaluated throughout their training period. Professional behavior will be evaluated in terms of station duties, emergency work, training, personal traits, along with other characteristics. Any evidence of lying, cheating or any type of dishonesty will result in a lack of ability to get hired in the industry.

The conduct of all Fire service personnel shall be above reproach during all aspects of training and throughout their careers. All members are responsible for regulating their conduct in a positive, respectful manner. Cooperation and teamwork shall be emphasized to provide the community with the highest level of customer service. This applies to your actions on and off duty during your entire fire service career. Compliance to grooming standards is another measure of a firefighter's professional attitude. Trainees may be inspected daily. At morning lineup, all personnel shall be attired in a clean work uniform in conformity with common fire service Standards (these vary slightly between employers).

Once you have joined the fire service, your behavior both On and Off duty will reflect on all fire fighters. Are you ready to take on that responsibility?

PERSONAL BEHAVIOR AND CONDUCT

The fire service is composed of men and women of various ages with different educational backgrounds, work experience and physical abilities. No matter what your background or your previous level of training, you are now in a position to learn. As a fire service student, it is

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important to remember that, while you may have been a decision-maker in your former career, you are now in a position to follow orders and instructions from other people. If you were formally a leader, remember that a good leader is also a good follower and an appropriate attitude and understanding of your position as a new firefighter is essential.

As members of the fire service we expect our personnel to treat others with dignity and respect. Courtesy shall be accorded all officers, co-workers and citizens. Chief Officers, Captains and staff are to be addressed by rank and last name or by rank only if last name is unknown. Civilians are to be addressed professionally, either using a proper title and their last name (e.g. "Ms.", "Mr.", "Ma'am, "Sir", etc.).

Discipline and accountability are key parts of training. Due to the hazardous nature of the profession, lives may depend on the ability to respond immediately. All trainees shall respond to supervisors' orders. Disrespect, insubordination or any conduct unbecoming a member of the fire service will make it very difficult to get hired.

SAFETY

The firefighter's job is one of the most hazardous of any occupations. Trainee firefighters are trained to function in a safe and proficient manner that is consistent with the aggressive firefighting nature of the fire service. Carelessness in any work routine, drill or simulated emergency can result in serious injury or death. Therefore, safety violations will not be tolerated. Repeated failure to comply with safety policies, practices and procedures and / or negligent acts will result in difficulty in getting hired.

Although outlined in safety manuals, a particular program or a specific procedure does not solely represent safe practices. Safety is integrated within our organizational culture. You must be assertive and advocate for safe practices. If you believe something is wrong or you are uncomfortable, be prepared to speak up. Overconfidence, resignation and impulsive behaviors can cause task failure or harm.

TEAMWORK

Safety means working together as a team. Teamwork creates synergy where a company of firefighters working together can accomplish the tasks needed to mitigate an emergency in a safe manner. Safe fire ground operations demand company integrity and teamwork at all times. While training, you will be evaluated as an individual and on your ability to operate effectively within a team. You must develop the ability to monitor the progress of your assigned task within the context of the overall objectives of a particular mission. Although many firefighting tasks are completed by an individual (i.e., operating the chainsaw) they are usually done within a team assignment (i.e., ventilation group). The work of one team may affect the work of another team. For example, the interior fire attack team may need to delay their operation

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based on the expediency of vertical ventilation. Teamwork and cooperation determine the success or failure of any operation. As a means to develop this skill, fire trainees should work together at all times.

ABILITY TO COMMUNICATE

The ability to communicate is a key element of an effective team member, as well as popular employment criteria. This can take many forms, including verbal and non-verbal means. Good communication is best represented as a loop in which the sender transfers information, the receiver acknowledges receipt and the sender then assures that the proper transfer has occurred. Be prepared to process complex situations and relay information as a clear, concise package. As the receiver, be an active listener. Your understanding is often represented by your ability to paraphrase or add to the initial communication. The sender completes the process by confirming that the exchange is accurate and/or corrects any misunderstandings. Remember to listen and think before you speak.

Each member also has an obligation to the team to stay both mentally and physically prepared for maximum job performance. Mentally, the success of any operation is predicated on each member's understanding of the assigned task. Physically, the company is only as fast as the slowest member and one unprepared person can slow down the production of an entire fire company.

DISTRACTIONS

As a firefighter, you are a problem solver. In the fire service, much of the work is done in situations that are out-of-control. Therefore, firefighters must learn to control the things that they can, both professionally and personally. Make sure you have handled your personal dilemmas and distractions as it is hard to be functional at work when you have a personal crisis hanging over your head.

If you are experiencing difficulties, consider approaching an officer for assistance or guidance before the difficulty becomes more serious. In many cases, the officers can assist you. If they cannot, there are tools available to assist you. Addressing a potential problem early is always the best approach. If you provide details about an underlying issue as an excuse for poor performance after the fact, it gives the appearance of avoiding responsibility, which is not acceptable.

ADAPTABILITY / FLEXIBILITY

Emergency operations are dynamic. Although the initial plan of action must be produced quickly, you will also be evaluated for your ongoing situational awareness and adaptability. Standard operating procedures serve as an operational foundation; however, you may need to

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alter them based on changing conditions. Observe the situation, orientate yourself within the environment, and consider your decision as the best option for a plan of action and then act. These actions will be evaluated by their impact. You may find the need to alter tactics or procedures. This process continues until the problem is fixed. Each event is a learning experience, no matter how simple or mundane. Afterwards, take the time to conduct an honest assessment of your actions and learn from what has transpired.

Cutting a ventilation hole on a roof with a chainsaw is a simple example of this process. There are a number of variations in roofing materials and construction. Using one technique or cutting speed on all roofs will not work. You must learn what an effective cut feels, sounds and looks like. You must learn to adjust your cutting methods for each type of roof. You may be able to do a cut quickly in one situation but are obligated to do it slower and more deliberately in another. The outcome is the same for both, but the techniques are altered based on the situation.

RESPONSE TO INSTRUCTION

You are in this training program to learn. Ask questions. There is a lot to learn and asking questions is one of the best tools for learning. Volunteer to try new things. Take initiative when you see things that need to be done. As a trainee, it is understood that mistakes will be made while you are learning new skills. This is part of the learning process. If you make a mistake, admit it, take responsibility for it, correct it and move on to the next challenge.

You are evaluated not only by your initial abilities, but also by your capacity to respond to correction and redirection appropriately.

LEADERSHIP

During the training program you will be expected to take a leadership role. Even as a trainee, you should be able to demonstrate skills in coordinating resources and personnel. All firefighters are expected to be able to use logical and sound judgment to make decisions based on available information.

VARIANCES IN EXPERIENCE AND TRAINING

As you proceed through any training program you will be exposed to different methods of accomplishing tasks or doing skills. These variations become “tools in your mental tool box”. In the fire service there isn’t necessarily one way to do things. Learn each of the variations you are exposed to as it will make a stronger, better skilled firefighter.

ATTITUDE

It all comes down to a proper Attitude. A proper attitude is **EVERYTHING**. Agencies look for

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individuals with a good attitude toward learning in addition to a great work ethic.

CAREER PATH

There are a few variations regarding career path that should be considered. A person considering a career in the fire service should perform ride-a-longs in different types of agencies to get a feel for the differences. This will aid in determining your educational path to success as each has a different approach.

San Diego County Fire Reserve, CAL FIRE

These agencies now require a basic wildland academy or equivalent. This curriculum includes approximately 180 hours of instruction and includes wildland fire fighter training along with structure fire basics. Current choices for training include:

- Southwestern College. The Basic Wildland Academy is 10 weeks and provides all of the minimum training required to meet the basic minimum for CAL FIRE and San Diego County Fire.
- Miramar College. An equivalent amount of training may be obtained through Miramar by taking several classes (see charts).

Cities and Districts

Most municipal fire departments require or prefer the completion of an accredited fire academy and a paramedic certification. In the City of San Diego Fire-Rescue Department, you can be hired with a minimum of an EMT certificate and then assigned to their own fire academy. Most other agencies hire from a pool of people who have been through an accredited academy. There are currently 3 in San Diego County and Include:

- Heartland Fire Training (associated with Miramar College)
- City of San Diego Fire-Rescue Department (associated with Miramar College)
- Palomar College
- San Pasqual Reservation Fire Academy (not associated with a local college)

In most cases, you are either an open enrollee (a college student not sponsored by an agency) or sponsored. Each has a unique vetting process to gain entry into the respective programs. Palomar and San Pasqual are largely open enrollee programs. Heartland and San Diego have both sponsored students and open enrollees.

All academy students will also need to pass a comprehensive written exam and be tested on a number of skills to be able to move forward in the program. Once testing is successful, an

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experience component is required. Most academies fulfill the TRAINING requirements for Fire Fighter 1 but a person must also have 6 months as a paid employee or 1 year as a reserve/volunteer and a completed state task book to be eligible for the actual certification.

Please note that equivalent certificates from other institutions may be used to satisfy some pre-requisite items in lieu of the specific college classes. Check with the program you are entering to obtain more information.

This guide is the result of a joint effort by Miramar College, Southwestern College, Palomar College, San Diego County Fire, CAL-FIRE, City of San Diego Fire-Rescue and the Heartland Fire Training Authority. These agencies are working in collaboration to create a multi-agency approach to training, with more agencies joining on a consistent basis. As such, this is a living document which will be updated on a regular basis.

If you desire more information on the fire service as a career, please contact these agencies or your local fire department for more information.

Local Community Colleges with Fire Technology Programs

Palomar College Fire Technology

<https://www2.palomar.edu/pages/fire/>

Miramar College Fire Technology

<http://www.miramarfiretechnology.com/>

Southwestern College Fire Technology

<http://www.swccd.edu/index.aspx?page=103>