

Firefighter

Run toward the thing everyone else runs from, and spend most shifts on medical calls instead.

TYPICAL PAY

\$59,280

a year, full time

PAY RANGE

\$35k to \$101k

starting to experienced

TIME TO QUALIFY

1 to 3 years

after high school

DEMAND

Moderate

job outlook

LICENCE NEEDED

Yes

regulated job

WHERE YOU WORK

Fire stations, houses and apartment buildings, highways, wi...

How you get there

- 1 High school diploma** Grade 12
 You need to be 18, hold a valid driver's license, have a clean record and pass a drug screen. Many departments want a clean driving record too.
- 2 Get your emergency medical certification** 3 to 12 months
 Almost every department requires EMT (emergency medical technician) certification, and a growing number want full paramedic. This is a community college course plus a national exam.
- 3 Pass the hiring process** 3 to 12 months of waiting
 A written test, a timed physical ability test in a weighted vest, an oral board interview, a background check and a medical exam. Hundreds of people apply for a handful of spots.
- 4 Fire academy** 12 to 24 weeks
 A live-in or daily recruit academy covering fire behavior, hose and ladder work, search and rescue, hazardous materials and vehicle extrication. You are paid if the department hired you first.
- 5 Probation at a station** About 1 year
 Riding with a crew, learning the district, constant testing. You are not fully in until probation ends.

Pros and cons

- + No degree or tuition debt needed to start
- + A pension and retirement in your fifties
- + Long stretches of days off between shifts
- Hiring is brutally competitive and can take years
- You will see people die, including children
- Broken sleep and known long-term health risks

Good to know

Most calls are not fires

The large majority of what a modern fire department runs to is medical: chest pain, falls, overdoses, car crashes. That is why the emergency medical certification is the real entry ticket, not the fire p...

Most American firefighters are volunteers

Small towns and rural counties are covered almost entirely by volunteer departments. Career, paid firefighters are the minority of the total force, concentrated in cities and large suburbs.

Optional boosts

Paramedic. Hazardous materials technician. Technical rescue. Fire investigator and fire inspector.

Where these numbers come from

My Next Move: Firefighters (33-2011.00)
 National Registry of Emergency Medical Technicians
 The Pro Board, National Board on Fire Service Professional Qualifications
 United States Fire Administration, National Fire Academy

Numbers checked September 2026. Pay figures are typical full-time annual amounts in United States dollars, based on Bureau of Labor Statistics wage data and published pay scales. They vary by state, employer and experience. Tuition is for in-state students at public schools unless the card says otherwise. Sources, links and the click-through version: <https://career.help/us/careers/firefighter>



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