

How Do I Become a Firefighter in Illinois?

So you've probably gotten this far because you decided you wanted to explore becoming a firefighter in Illinois. You may have researched it a little by calling fire departments, reading things online, or asking people who are already in "the business." And if you've done all that you probably got so much information that it confused the heck out of you. We'll try to make sense of it all here for you which hopefully will set you on a clear path to becoming a firefighter.

So where do I begin?

By now you probably already know the rigors, 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.

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 at one point exactly where you are right now. If we can do it you can too. But 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. That is why the people who end up making it are the ones who worked hard 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 1300 fire departments and not all are alike. The most common types of fire departments are discussed below.

Fire department vs. fire protection districts: 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 town's police department, public works department, etc. They are under the governance of that municipality's mayor or 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 run by those Villages. Most departments and districts hire or recruit firefighters in the same ways. For the purposes of the rest 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, the majority 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, such as 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 a hybrid of a volunteer department. POC’s are generally volunteers when doing most support functions of the department, such as training activities, community events, meetings, etc., but when they actually respond and operate at emergencies they get paid a wage either hourly or on a per call basis. Because 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. This is different from most POC departments in that part-time firefighters may actually work on shift, which is to say they actually are working scheduled hours in the fire stations performing all aspects of the fire service such as training, fire prevention activities, cleaning and maintenance, etc., as well as responding to emergency incidents. They are typically paid hourly for all time that they are working their assigned hours. 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 that department’s testing process, were hired full time, and are actually employees of that department or district. Sometimes they’re also referred to as career firefighters. The testing process for full-time firefighters is a very in-depth process that is beyond the scope of explaining in full here, but a very brief explanation is below. Just know that 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, and during the testing process they have an application period where anyone interested must apply during that time frame. Once that time is up all applicants will go through their 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 who successfully passed all steps will end up on an eligibility list ranked in order of how they scored in all processes. The list will typically be good for two years. Should the department have a firefighter opening in that two years they select a candidate from their eligibility list.

Contract Firefighters or Paramedics: Some departments will employ what are called “contract firefighters” or paramedics, which are commonly referred to as “being contract.” Being contract is typically a full-time job, but you are not an actual employee of the department you are working in. You would get hired by a contract company and you become their employee. Some fire departments will sign a contract with that company for them to provide personnel to work in their department. The department pays the company and your paycheck comes from the contract company. So you will work within the department, wear their uniforms, and ride on their vehicles, but you would not be an employee of that department.

Although there are contract non-paramedic firefighters out there, by and large the most 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 because contract companies typically don't have the stringent testing process that full-time departments do. But the pay and benefits are usually considerably less than being hired full-time. A great many firefighters and paramedics got their start in the contract services before moving on to getting hired on full-time departments.

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 have to be 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, but none will hire someone under the age of 21. The age limits for all other types of departments or contract services will vary from department to department. You will need to contact these departments to know for sure.

What Type of Education or Classes Do I Need to Become a Firefighter?

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 there are 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 in turn will train the personnel in-house to achieve skills & certifications. But most paid departments will not hire someone, or even allow them to test for their department, without certain minimum required certifications or licenses. What these requirements are will vary from department to department.

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 then you need to reconsider. Just about all paid departments in Illinois, especially in the northern Illinois area, require their firefighters to also be paramedics. There are very few career fire departments in the entire state that will hire firefighters only without them being 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's. You cannot become a paramedic until you are first an EMT.

Firefighter II or Basic Operations Firefighter certification: The basic entry-level type of firefighter training in Illinois is called Basic Operations Firefighter (BOF). You may hear many people refer to this certification as "Firefighter II" because that is what it was previously called, and the name changed to BOF very recently. The majority of paid fire departments in the state requires personnel to already be certified as a FFII / BOF before they will even let them test or apply for their department. Most other departments require it as well.

Fire Science Degree: Many people believe that they have the best chance to get hired on a fire department if they get their degree in Fire Science, which is usually an Associates level degree at many community colleges. This in fact is not true. While some departments will give some preference points for applicants who have some college credits, or may even require a small amount of random college credits to even apply, the fact is that an Associates degree will not give you a large advantage when testing for departments. Fire Science degrees are far more beneficial to existing veteran firefighters who are taking promotional exams within their own department because those promotional exams will give preference points for those who have degrees, or may even require the degree to take the exam.

Some community colleges are beneficial, for example, to attend EMT classes if they offer them. Those are usually offered within their Fire Science program. Also, as stated above, you cannot apply for most full-time departments unless you are 21 years old, so if you are under that age attending Fire Science courses at a community college may be beneficial because it will give you some exposure to the educational aspects of the fire service while you are waiting to reach the age of 21.

Candidate Physical Ability Test (CPAT): CPAT is a certification that some full-time departments require the applicant to have before they can test for that department. It is a physical ability test you take through a third party institution that will put the applicant through the test, which is comprised of very physically challenging obstacle course-type

skills for time. 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. As stated above, only a few dozen departments in Illinois require CPAT testing, but more and more departments are beginning to require it. If you plan on testing for full-time departments you should obtain CPAT certification well before a department begins the application process because obtaining CPAT may take a few weeks, and you don't want to miss an application deadline simply because you didn't get CPAT in time. Have it ahead of time. The Romeoville Fire Academy does not offer CPAT certification at this time, but may in the future.

So Where Should I Begin?

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 so you can start applying for fire departments, your best bet is that if you strive to eventually become a career firefighter you should obtain the certifications and education that most paid departments in the state requires, which is Firefighter II / Basic Operations Firefighter, EMT-B, and then paramedic. We call these programs "The Big Three" because they are an absolute must for most paid departments in the state, especially in the northern part of Illinois. Some volunteer or POC departments may not require one or more of these three programs, but if you do obtain them that would just make you all that much more desirable to them.

We get calls almost every day from people who want to become firefighters asking which program they should take first. We always 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, but on the average is about 4 – 4 ½ months. For example, the Romeoville Fire Academy's EMT program is about 4 ½ months and meets every Monday and Thursday evenings from 6 pm – 10 pm. We also offer one class per year during the day every Tuesday and Friday mornings from 8 am – noon.

The reason why EMT should be the first step is because some departments may take you on without having the FFII/BOF certification, but just about no paid department in the Chicagoland area will take you on without being at least an EMT. This is because 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 makes more sense to them to have one employee able to do both jobs instead of hiring two people to do two separate jobs.

Another reason to obtain EMT first is because there are certain jobs to be had as an EMT once you graduate, such as with a private ambulance company, in an emergency room, at a doctor's office, etc. They aren't very high paying jobs but they do allow you work in an environment where you can utilize your new medical skills.

EMT programs are typically offered by many community colleges and some fire academies and fire departments. As mentioned above, the Romeoville Fire Academy offers EMT programs year-round. Our programs are more beneficial to attend vs. a community college because it is usually less expensive because you do not have to pay a per-credit hour fee, book fee, and lab fee as you would at community colleges. It is also beneficial to attend through the RFA because the required ambulance ride time you must do in the program is automatically done on the Romeoville Fire Dept. ambulances, whereas most community colleges require you to find a department willing to allow you to do the ride time on your own. Our EMT program qualifies for payments from the GI Bill. Please call the Romeoville Fire Academy at 815-372-4042 or go to our website at <http://www.romeoville.org/Fire/fireAcademy/pdf/EMT.pdf> for more information.

After you obtain your EMT license the next program you should take is really a toss-up between a BOF Academy and paramedic school. You will eventually have to have both to get on most career departments in the Chicagoland area so it is up to you which to attend first.

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. There is key differences between the two, and most of those differences can be answered by reading our “BOF Frequently Asked Questions” document on our website at <http://www.romeoville.org/Fire/fireAcademy/pdf/BOF-FAQ.pdf>

The BOF Academy is a pseudo-boot camp style entry-level course for firefighters. It gives the students the necessary basic skills and education needed to begin their fire service career. It by no means is 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 usually offers four BOF Academies each year. Three are Mon – Fri 8 am – 5 pm each day for 8 weeks. We also offer one Academy to help accommodate students who might have jobs during the day and cannot attend a M – F daytime class. This class is offered every Tues & Wed nights from 6 pm – 10 pm AND every Saturday 8 am – 5 pm. This class runs considerably longer than 8 weeks because of the less days and hours per week. At this time our Academy is the only one in the area that accepts civilian BOF students putting us at the forefront of entry-level firefighter education. Our BOF Academy qualifies for payments from the GI Bill. For more information on our BOF Academy you can go to our website at <http://www.romeoville.org/Fire/fireAcademy/pdf/BOF.pdf>

Lastly, the third thing you’ll need for your fire service career is to become a licensed paramedic. You may also see paramedic referred to as “EMT-P.” As stated above, just about every full-time fire department in the Chicagoland area will require you to be a firefighter AND paramedic. Of course there are exceptions, so your best bet would be for you to call around to the departments you’re interested in to find out for sure. Likewise, many contract companies will only hire paramedics, as this is the most desired type of

employee fire departments request of these companies. Many volunteer, part-time, and POC departments may not require you to be a paramedic to join their department, so again, calling around is your best bet.

Paramedic school usually lasts about a year straight through – and 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 and shifts in numerous departments of a hospital, such as 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 will hold paramedic schools as a partnership with hospital programs offered in the traditional college semester format.

Paramedic licensure is very important not just to your potential fire service career, but there are many other jobs that can be had as a paramedic such as in an emergency room, doctor's offices, private ambulance services, insurance companies, security field, etc.

So 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. After all, we've all done it. The key is to stay diligent and accomplish the steps that need to be done. Hit the phones to call and visit any and all fire departments out there to see if there is any way they can help you, or you can help them. Find out their requirements to apply and/or test for jobs or to volunteer. Then go out and get the education and certifications to meet their requirements, which will typically be "The Big Three": EMT-B, BOF, and paramedic.

The Romeoville Fire Academy can help you with your educational needs. Feel free to contact us anytime at 815-372-4042 or online at www.romeoville.org/fireacademy.aspx. For specific questions you can contact Academy Director of Operations Jon Ibrahim at jibrahim@romeoville.org. 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".

GOOD LUCK!!!!