

CAREER KIT

Firefighter Career Kit: 90-Day Action Plan

How to Become a Firefighter

2026-10 edition

Inside: at-a-glance summary · step-by-step path · costs & requirements · 90-day action plan · documents checklist · exams · interview questions · resume bullets · common mistakes · 13-week tracker · resources

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At a glance

To become a firefighter you usually need to be 18 or older with a high school diploma or GED, a driver's license, EMT certification, and a pass on a written test and a physical ability test such as the CPAT. Getting hired often takes 1–2 years, because you need EMT training (about one semester) and fire departments test on their own schedules. Expect to spend roughly \$1,500–\$10,000 on EMT, testing and, if you self-sponsor, fire academy tuition; many career departments pay for the academy after they hire you.

Timeline	1–2 years (EMT, testing and academy)
Typical cost	\$1,500–\$10,000
Education	High school diploma or GED plus EMT training
License	EMT certification (state or NREMT); Firefighter I/II certification in most states
Median pay	\$59,280 per year
Job outlook	+4% (2025–35), about as fast as average

Step-by-step path

1. Check the basic requirements

Time: 1 week

Most departments require you to be at least 18, hold a high school diploma or GED, and have a valid driver's license. Some departments want you to be 21 by the time you finish the academy. Read the posting for your target department and note any rules on criminal history, tattoos, residency or tobacco use.

2. Earn your EMT certification

Time: 3–6 months · Cost: \$800–\$2,000

A large share of fire calls are medical, so many departments require EMT certification to apply or before you finish probation. Take an EMT-Basic course at a community college or training center, then pass your state's exam or the National Registry (NREMT) cognitive and skills exams. Some departments prefer or pay more for paramedics.

3. Train for the physical ability test

Time: 8–12 weeks · Cost: \$100–\$250 for the CPAT

Many departments use the CPAT, eight timed events done in a 50-pound vest that you must finish in 10 minutes 20 seconds. Others use their own agility test. Build leg endurance with stair climbing, grip strength and carrying work, and take a CPAT orientation or practice session if one is offered.

4. Apply and take the written exam

Time: 1–3 months · Cost: \$0–\$100

Watch department websites and testing services for open hiring periods and apply to several departments. Written exams test reading, math, mechanical reasoning and judgment; many departments use vendor tests such as FireTEAM (offered through the National Testing Network) or their own test. Take practice tests for the specific exam named in the posting.

5. Pass the interview, background and medical checks

Time: 1–3 months

Expect an oral board interview, sometimes a chief's interview, a background investigation, a medical exam and drug testing. Prepare clear answers about teamwork, community service and why you want this department. Get your documents ready early so you do not stall the process.

6. Complete the fire academy

Time: 3–6 months · Cost: \$0–\$6,000 if self-sponsored

Most recruits spend a few months at a fire academy run by the department or the state. You learn fire suppression, ladders, hose, search and rescue, hazardous materials and building codes, and earn Firefighter I and II certification in most states. If you self-sponsor through a college fire academy before you are hired, you pay tuition but become eligible for departments that require certification to apply.

7. Finish probation and keep your certifications current

Time: 6–18 months

New firefighters usually serve a probationary year with regular skills and knowledge tests. Keep your EMT certification current with continuing education. Volunteer or part-time experience and extra certifications such as paramedic or driver/operator help you advance.

Costs & requirements

Estimated costs (USD)

Item	Low	High	Note
EMT-Basic course	\$800	\$2,000	Community colleges are usually cheaper than private schools.
EMT certification exam (NREMT or state)	\$100	\$200	Check your state's current fee; some states use their own exam.
CPAT or physical ability test	\$100	\$250	Fee set by the testing center; some departments charge nothing for their own test.
Written exam and testing service fees	\$0	\$100	Vendor tests often charge per application.
Fire academy tuition (self-sponsored)	\$0	\$6,000	Often \$0 if a career department hires you first.
Gear, uniforms and books for a self-sponsored academy	\$0	\$1,500	Many academies loan turnout gear.
Associate degree in fire science (optional)	\$3,000	\$15,000	Useful for promotion; rarely required to get hired.
Total	\$4,000	\$25,050	

Requirements

Age	Usually at least 18 to apply; some departments require 21 by hire or academy graduation. A few have maximum entry ages; federal wildland firefighter positions generally have a maximum entry age of 37.
Education	High school diploma or GED. Some departments give preference or extra points for fire science credits or a degree.
EMT certification	Required by many departments to apply or before probation ends; rules vary by state and locality. Some require paramedic.
Driver's license	A valid license and clean driving record. Some states or localities require a commercial license or a firefighter endorsement.
Physical ability	Pass a physical test such as the CPAT or the department's own agility course.
Medical and drug screening	Pass a medical exam (many departments follow NFPA 1582 medical standards) and a drug test. Random drug tests and fitness checks may continue after hire.
Background	Pass a background check. Felony convictions and some misdemeanors can disqualify you; departments judge them case by case.
Firefighter I/II	State firefighter certification, usually earned in the academy. Some departments require it before you apply.

90-Day Action Plan

Tick each box as you finish the task. Do the phases in order; it is fine if a phase takes a little longer.

Phase 1: Qualify and enroll

Days 1–30

Goal: Confirm eligibility, start EMT training and begin physical prep.

- ☐ List 5–10 fire departments you would work for and save their hiring requirements.
- ☐ Note which require EMT, paramedic, Firefighter I/II or a CPAT card to apply.
- ☐ Enroll in the next EMT-Basic course at a community college or training center.
- ☐ Take a baseline fitness test: stair climb with weight, push-ups, grip and a 1.5-mile run.
- ☐ Start a 4–5 day weekly training plan built around CPAT-style events.
- ☐ Contact your local volunteer fire department about joining or riding along.
- ☐ Sign up for job alerts on department websites and testing services.

Phase 2: Certify and test

Days 31–60

Goal: Progress through EMT and get your physical test result.

- ☐ Study EMT material daily and practice skill sheets with classmates.
- ☐ Book a CPAT orientation and test date, or your department's physical test.
- ☐ Run a full mock CPAT every two weeks and track your time.
- ☐ Buy a study guide for the written exam your top department uses.
- ☐ Take two timed practice written exams and review mistakes.
- ☐ Gather the documents on the checklist below.
- ☐ Visit a station on an open house day and talk to firefighters about hiring.

Phase 3: Apply and interview

Days 61–90

Goal: Submit applications and prepare for oral boards.

- ☐ Apply to every department on your list that has an open hiring period.
- ☐ Sit for your EMT exams as soon as your course allows.
- ☐ Practice the 12 interview questions below out loud with a mock panel.
- ☐ Research each department: call volume, stations, community, recent news.
- ☐ Clean up your social media and driving record issues.
- ☐ Get a routine physical so the department medical exam has no surprises.
- ☐ Keep training; academies retest fitness early.

Documents checklist

Gather these early. Keep originals in one folder and scans in the cloud.

- ☐ Birth certificate or passport
- ☐ Social Security card
- ☐ Driver's license and driving record
- ☐ High school diploma or GED certificate
- ☐ EMT certification card (state or NREMT)
- ☐ CPAT or physical ability test card
- ☐ College transcripts or fire science certificates, if any
- ☐ CPR/BLS card
- ☐ DD-214 if you served in the military
- ☐ Employment history with supervisor contacts
- ☐ Personal references with contact details
- ☐ Records for any arrests or citations, with dispositions

Exams & how to prepare

CPAT (Candidate Physical Ability Test)

What it is: Eight timed events in a 50-pound vest: stair climb, hose drag, equipment carry, ladder raise and extension, forcible entry, search, rescue drag and ceiling breach and pull. Total limit is 10 minutes 20 seconds.

How to prepare: Train stair climbing with weight, grip and carry work for 8–12 weeks and attend an official orientation or practice session.

Firefighter written entrance exam

What it is: Multiple-choice test of reading, math, mechanical aptitude, spatial reasoning and situational judgment. A common version is FireTEAM, offered through the National Testing Network; some departments write their own.

How to prepare: Use a study guide for the exact test in the posting and take timed practice tests.

NREMT EMT exam (or state EMT exam)

What it is: A computer-based cognitive exam plus a hands-on skills exam after your EMT course.

How to prepare: Use your course materials and practice question banks; practice the skill sheets until you can do them without thinking.

Firefighter I and II certification exams

What it is: State written and practical tests based on NFPA firefighter professional standards, usually given at the end of the academy.

How to prepare: Keep up with academy reading and practice every skill station until it is routine.

Interview questions

1. Why do you want to be a firefighter?

Tip: Give a specific, personal reason tied to service and teamwork, not just excitement.

2. Why this department?

Tip: Mention something real: its community, programs or call types you researched.

3. What have you done to prepare for this job?

Tip: List concrete steps: EMT, CPAT, volunteering, classes, fitness.

4. Tell us about a time you worked on a team.

Tip: Use a specific story and focus on your role and the result.

5. What would you do if you saw a crew member drinking on duty?

Tip: Safety and integrity come first: you address it and report it through the chain of command.

6. How do you handle conflict with a coworker?

Tip: Show you talk directly and respectfully, and escalate only if needed.

7. Describe a stressful situation and how you handled it.

Tip: Stay specific and show calm action, not drama.

8. How would you handle a patient who refuses care?

Tip: Show respect for patient rights, clear explanation of risks, and following protocol.

9. What does customer service mean in the fire service?

Tip: Talk about treating every resident with respect, even on minor calls.

10. What are your weaknesses?

Tip: Name a real one that is not disqualifying and how you are fixing it.

11. How do you stay physically fit?

Tip: Describe a real routine you follow, not a plan you intend to start.

12. Why should we hire you?

Tip: Summarize two or three strengths with proof: certifications, reliability, teamwork.

Resume bullet examples

Adapt these to what you actually did. Use numbers wherever you can.

- Earned National Registry EMT certification and completed 24 hours of ambulance clinical rotations.
- Passed the CPAT physical ability test with time to spare.
- Volunteered 300+ hours with a local fire department, responding to medical and fire calls under supervision.
- Worked in construction for 2 years using ladders, power tools and safety equipment daily.
- Trained 6 new employees on workplace safety and emergency procedures.
- Maintained CPR/BLS certification and assisted with first aid at community events.
- Served 4 years in the US Navy, including damage control and shipboard firefighting training.
- Worked rotating 12-hour shifts with perfect attendance for 18 months.

Common mistakes to avoid

1. Waiting to start EMT training until a department opens hiring; the course takes months.
2. Showing up to the CPAT without training the stair climb with extra weight.
3. Applying to just one department and waiting for a single test date.
4. Paying for a self-sponsored academy before checking whether target departments require it.
5. Letting EMT or CPR certifications lapse during a long job search.
6. Giving generic oral board answers with no examples from your own life.
7. Ignoring driving record problems that come up in the background check.

13-week progress tracker

Fill this in by hand each week.

Week	Focus	Done?	Notes
1			
2			
3			
4			
5			
6			
7			
8			
9			
10			
11			
12			
13			

Resources, salary & disclaimer

Resources

- **BLS: Firefighters**

<https://www.bls.gov/ooh/protective-service/firefighters.htm>

- **National Registry of EMTs: EMT certification**

<https://www.nremt.org/emt/certification>

- **U.S. Fire Administration**

<https://www.usfa.fema.gov/>

- **National Volunteer Fire Council: Make Me a Firefighter**

<https://www.makemeafirefighter.org/>

- **USAJOBS: federal firefighter positions**

<https://www.usajobs.gov/>

Salary

Bottom 10%	Median	Top 10%
\$34,910	\$59,280 per year	\$101,040

Outlook: Employment of firefighters is projected to grow 4% from 2025 to 2035, about as fast as average, with about 26,800 openings a year, mostly to replace people who retire or change jobs. Competition for career jobs is strong in many cities, so EMT or paramedic certification and good physical test scores help.

Source: BLS Occupational Outlook Handbook, May 2025 data — <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/protective-service/firefighters.htm>

Disclaimer. Requirements vary by state and change over time. Verify with the official sources listed. This guide is not legal or career advice.