

HOW DO I FIND OUT WHICH FIRE DEPARTMENTS ARE ACCEPTING APPLICATIONS?

Phase 3: Obtaining the necessary information for your firefighter candidate research binder

By Steve Prziborowski

To actually do some research on when a fire department will be next accepting applications, where do you start? I believe you should do an all encompassing approach that will include using the internet, calling up the fire department headquarters, calling up the city personnel department, stopping by a fire station, and stopping by the City Hall (or other similar administrative offices of the municipality, county, state, or federal agency you are applying for).

In the last article, Phase 2: Organizing your firefighter candidate research binder into chapters, I discussed how to organize your binder into a user-friendly tool that will greatly assist you in finding out which fire departments are accepting applications.

I provided a sample template to use that contained information on a fire department that I felt will be very relevant and useful in performing your research. You probably saw that template and asked yourself, "How am I going to obtain all of the necessary information?" Obtaining that information will be the focus of this article. Think of yourself as a detective trying to piece together a crime. Instead, you will be piecing together the pieces that will complete the puzzle of pursuing your dream of becoming a firefighter!

I. OBTAINING THE NECESSARY INFORMATION FOR YOUR FIREFIGHTER CANDIDATE RESEARCH BINDER.

If you are thinking that you are getting in over your head, then sit down and take a deep breath. Rome wasn't built in a day, and odds are you are not going to become a firefighter in a day either. Patience is a virtue. All of this research you perform now is going to be valuable information that will assist you in some form or fashion. Where do we start? Now that you have this nice binder, what are you going to do with it? Hopefully use it! There are many ways you can obtain information to "fill in the blanks." Here are my top choices to assist you in the process of filling in the blanks for each of the fire departments you are planning to research (remember we are using the template I showed you in the last article, or something similar):

- A. **Firehouse.com website Links page.** If you haven't discovered this valuable tool yet, you are definitely missing out on an incredible resource. On the U.S. Fire Department's section alone, there are thousands of links to both volunteer and paid fire departments. I haven't found too many major departments that are not already listed. This is the first place I would go.

B. **Searching the Internet.** If you can't find what you're looking for on a website links page such as firehouse.com, you can use a search engine such as google, yahoo, alta vista, etc. Those would all be excellent choices. Once there, you would type in such specific words as City of Oakland or Oakland Fire Department. Personally I would start off with the City web site first. Why? Because that is usually the easiest to find, and they also have links to City Departments such as the Fire Department and Personnel / Human Resources. Once at the City web site, I would bookmark the City web site for future access, and additionally bookmark the Fire Department web site. That way I would have both to reference from.

C. **Directly accessing the City website without using a search engine.** I'm not sure if most people realize this about the Internet, but it is actually set up in a user-friendly format. By user-friendly, I mean that you can type in a set order of words to get you where you want to go, and it will usually work. For example, say I want to access the City of Sunnyvale website. Yes, I could use a search engine. Another easy way would be to take a shot at directly accessing it by typing in <http://www.ci.sunnyvale.ca.us> and guess what? It takes me right to the city website!

Take a look at that link I just typed. After the two forward slashes, you see the www, which stands for world-wide-web. Many Internet sites start with www. After the www, you see the .ci - which stands for City (if it was a County, you would use .co). After the .ci, you see the name of the city. If the city had two names (such as Union City), you would try <http://www.ci.union-city.ca.us> (using a dash between the two names). After the name of the city, you see a .ca - which is the two-digit designator for a state (every state has a two-digit designator). After the .ca, you see a .us - which stands for United States.

D. **I'm at the City or County website, what do I now do?** Go directly to the Personnel / Human Resources section. This can be found usually by looking under CITY DEPARTMENTS or JOBS or EMPLOYMENT or CITY HALL or something similar. Once there, this section will allow you to see if there are firefighter vacancies. Chances are, there are not. That's ok, you shouldn't have gotten your hopes up - you are in this for the long haul, and are using this information to better prepare yourself. If you happen to find a fire department is testing by chance, then consider yourself lucky. Besides current job openings, you can see if they take interest cards (which allow you to be notified when they are recruiting for a certain position, such as firefighter). You can also copy down their address, their business phone number, their 24-hour job hotline, and any other information you feel valuable. *DON'T FORGET TO BOOKMARK THIS PAGE FOR FUTURE REFERENCE!*

E. **After visiting the Personnel / Human Resource section, what information should I obtain next?** Now it is time to navigate to the FIRE DEPARTMENT portion of the website. Most fire departments have websites, and they can usually be accessed in the same fashion as the Personnel / Human Resource office. Just go under CITY DEPARTMENTS or PUBLIC SAFETY and click on FIRE DEPARTMENT. Some fire

departments have a wealth of information to offer (such as the one I work for - <http://www.sccfd.org>) and some have a one-page home page that lists virtually no information that it makes you wonder why they even bothered. Some websites will allow you to complete much of your template just by visiting the website. *DON'T FORGET TO BOOKMARK THIS PAGE FOR FUTURE REFERENCE!*

- F. **What happens if I still don't have all of the blanks of my template filled in?** I would suggest stopping by the fire department headquarters, since they will possibly have brochures or other information to provide you with, as well as knowledge of when there might be another firefighter examination. They might even have a person in charge of recruitment you could talk to or a firefighter working at the headquarters who could answer some of your questions.

How do you find out where each headquarters is located? Remember back in phase 1, I discussed that in the front of most phone books, there is a blue section that is reserved for governmental agencies, such as fire departments. Most libraries have phone books from around the United States for you to view.

When you first sat down to begin developing your binder at the library researching information out of the "blue pages," hopefully you took note of the fire department headquarters address and phone number. That will save you time. Once at fire headquarters, I would ask them if they could give you a list of addresses for each of their fire stations (many times you can download this information from the fire department website). I would also ask them for the business phone numbers of the fire stations so you could call the station Captain to set up an appointment. I would also ask them such information as:

- Do you know when you are going to test for firefighter again?
- When did you last test for firefighter?
- How many firefighters did you hire off the last list?
- What are your qualifications to take the firefighter test?
- Do you take interest cards?
- When should I contact you to find out more information?

- G. **Headquarters was helpful, but I still haven't obtained all of the necessary information.** Now it is time to start visiting fire stations. Hopefully you have called to make an appointment, and are not just dropping by. Most firefighters are usually eager to talk to future firefighters, but not necessarily at a moment's notice. Most firefighters usually have busy schedules during the day in between running calls, and you stopping by might not always be at the best time. Even if you weren't able to make an appointment (because you didn't know the phone number), I would suggest stopping by a local pie shop and bringing a nice pie (homemade works too). This is to thank them for taking valuable time away from their duties, and ask them if you can talk now, or if it would better, could you set up an appointment for another time or day. That would usually work. Bring your binder with your template and be ready to fill in the blanks. Don't overstay your welcome and thank them on the way out.

H. **Keeping track of information and your progress.** – Many times, you will need to use multiple ways to fill in the information for each fire department. It might require you to visit city hall, visit a fire station, view their website, and maybe phone the fire department headquarters. Just like you want to back up any important computer files, or leave copies of valuable documents in a safety deposit box, I would think you would want to keep track of your progress.

A good way to track your progress is by using the fire department information templates you have already produced for each fire department. Since the backs of those pages are probably blank, here is a good location to list such information as:

- Date you visited or phoned
- Method of contact (phone, in-person, website, etc.)
- Information you obtained
- Person(s) you spoke with (you never know when you might need to talk to that person again)
- When to call back or stop by again (this information would then be transferred to Chapter 3, which consists of a month-by-month calendar to list your action plan / to-do items)

II. **CHAPTER 3 – ACTION PLAN / TO-DO LIST**

Don't think you're done now! Just because you have filled in the blanks doesn't mean you can stop! Consider this a work-in-progress! Now that you have obtained some valuable information to assist you in the process of becoming a firefighter, it is time to put that information to work. In the previous two articles, we discussed the first two chapters of your binder:

1. Fire Departments: County-by-County
2. Fire Departments: City-by-City

We will now discuss Chapter 3, which is probably the most important chapter of your binder! Why? Because this is where you are going to set yourself up for success by planning out a course of action to find out when those fire departments you spent time researching, are going to accept applications again!

Here is where I would put 12 blank pieces of paper – one for each month of the year. On the top of each page, I would write out each of the 12 months in order, starting with January. If you have a calendar program on your computer, or have enough computer skills to get you in trouble, feel free to make a calendar that way. Otherwise plain paper will work.

Here is where you will make any notes to you of importance. Items I would include here would be tentative or actual dates of any phases of the testing process I might be involved in (written exam, physical ability exam, oral interview, etc.) and any information that I think would be important to act on either within that month or on a specific date. You will find that when you call a personnel office to ask them when they will be testing next

for firefighter, a lot of times they will tell you “not now, however, why don’t you call us back in March.” That would be something important to list on the March page, to insure you don’t miss out on a valuable opportunity.

This section can also be used for tracking any goals or objectives you might have, whether it is recertifying your EMT, renewing your CPR, applying for paramedic school, completing your two-year degree, etc.

CONCLUSION:

If you think this is a waste of time, then so be it. This method worked for me, and I truly believe in being proactive in life, especially when it comes to controlling your own destiny and plotting out your course of action to get you through life. Nobody is going to lead you by the hand when it comes to getting that firefighter badge. It is a very competitive process, and many candidates get discouraged and never achieve that dream. Don't let your self become one of those. A little research now will go along way in the future.

An important thing to remember is that researching fire departments is not just to let you know when they will be accepting applications. It is to better prepare yourself for oral interview questions such as how have you prepared yourself, why do you want to work for our fire department, what do you know about our fire department, etc. If you have done your homework, then you are going to have more ammunition to better answer the question.

I hope you found the concept of developing your firefighter candidate research binder to be of benefit. Until next month, keep plugging away. Remember that there is a badge out there just for you!