



SO, YOU WANT TO BECOME A FIREFIGHTER?

6 Key Points To Assist You In Becoming A Firefighter

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Becoming a firefighter is not easy. It takes a great deal of perseverance, patience, persistence, dedication and good old-fashioned hard work to become a firefighter. Nothing in life comes easy; especially when you want to have one of the best careers a person could ever dream to have!

How long will it take to become a firefighter? That question cannot easily be answered because it really comes down to “what you give is what you get.” Not every person that starts out to become a firefighter ends up becoming a firefighter. For that matter, not every person that ever goes to medical school becomes a doctor; not every person that ever goes to law school ever becomes a lawyer.

I cannot guarantee that you will ever reach your dream of becoming a firefighter. What I can guarantee you is that if you never give up on obtaining your dream of becoming a firefighter, then your odds of succeeding greatly increase. On the average, I would say it takes anywhere from three (3) to seven (7) years to become a full-time paid firefighter. Some do it in less time, some do it in more time, and some never get the chance to do it at all. I have known people to take 10 to 15 years to become a firefighter. I have known people to give up after a year of trying to become a firefighter.

What’s the moral of the story? If you give up, you give up on your dream. If you continue pursuing your dream and continue doing whatever it takes to achieve that dream, continuously working on improving your weaknesses, keeping up your strengths, and preparing yourself to be the best candidate that you can be, then you stand the chance of actually achieving that dream!

Beginning the process:

Once you have determined that it is your dream to become a firefighter, then it is time to put your money where your mouth is and start preparing yourself on a full-time basis.

It’s a full-time job just getting the job!

Six (6) KEY POINTS to assist you in becoming a firefighter:

- #1: Create an action plan and road map for success.
- #2: Start applying for as many firefighter positions as you qualify for.
- #3: Start learning what the hiring process for a fire department looks like.
- #4: Begin preparing now for your background investigation.
- #5: General suggestions to assist you become a firefighter.
- #6: Start your to-do list.

KEY POINT #1:

Create An Action Plan & Road Map For Success

To apply for firefighter positions, you must first meet certain requirements and/or possess certain qualifications. What one fire department requires will differ from the next. However, there are many similarities and I want to provide an overview of the most common requirements and qualifications so that you can be best prepared for the majority of opportunities.

Some of the requirements to be able to file an application at various fire departments across the United States can include, but are not limited to:

1. Minimum age: 18 or 21 years old
2. High School Diploma or G.E.D.
3. Valid Driver's license
4. Current EMT certificate
5. Current Paramedic license
6. Firefighter 1 academy completion certificate
7. Firefighter 1 State certification
8. CPAT certification (less than 6 months old)
9. CPR certification (less than 12 months old)
10. College credits

Other qualifications some fire departments list as "highly desirable" include (some may be 1 of the 10 items above):

- Bilingual ability in any language.
- Volunteer or paid firefighter experience.
- Volunteer / community service experience in areas other than fire or EMS.
- Fire Technology courses completed from a community college.
- Two-year degree in Fire Technology or Fire Science.

NOTE: You can have the best resume in the world (meaning you are very qualified on paper), but it will not guarantee you a career as a firefighter. **YOU STILL HAVE TO SELL YOURSELF AND YOUR QUALIFICATIONS TO THE ORAL BOARD DURING THE ORAL INTERVIEW.** See the oral interview information below for more information.

Some departments require one or more of the above qualifications. It is feasible that you may qualify to take a firefighter entrance exam even before you start taking classes at a community college. Is it realistic to get hired as a firefighter without any training or education? Not really. Regardless, while it is not realistic, it is

possible and does happen. However, your chances for successfully passing the recruit academy (the academy that a department puts you through after they hire you) and the probationary process will be greatly increased if you have been through a firefighter 1 academy at a community college and have received a fire technology two-year degree.

However, remember that having the above qualifications only allow you to participate in the hiring process; they do not guarantee your success! The term “qualified” is very subjective. A fire department is hiring a person, not a resume. Thus, don’t try to be the one with the most education, the most certificates, the most volunteer hours, etc., and assume you’re a sure thing to get hired. While it is important to show your passion or commitment to the fire service by taking fire classes, volunteering your time, and obtaining certificates, those alone will not guarantee you a position as a firefighter since you still have to successfully pass ALL phases of the hiring process. In most fire departments, the oral interview makes up 100% of your final ranking on a hiring list. If you can’t sell yourself to the oral board, and more importantly convince them you are worth taking a chance on and that you will fit into their culture and their family, all the education and certificates don’t mean a thing!

Why should I get some of the above 10 qualifications if the are not required by the department I am testing for? Or, why should I get those qualifications (such as a Firefighter 1 academy or Firefighter 1 State certification, or even a Paramedic license) if the department that hires me will put me through that training anyway? Well, first of all, not every department will put you through that training. Plus, that training will allow you to look more attractive or at least equal when compared to your competition (many of whom will look very attractive, at least on paper).

If you’re in California, one of the best things you can do is enroll as a student at a college offering a two-year degree in Fire Technology or Fire Science, that will hopefully also include EMT and Paramedic training, as well as a Firefighter 1 Academy that is approved by the State Fire Marshal’s Office as an Accredited Regional Training Program (ARTP). The reason I mention those above related items (EMT, Paramedic, and Firefighter 1 academy) are because those three items are very commonly asked for as “minimum requirements” just to apply to work as a firefighter at many departments.

Why go through a Firefighter 1 academy at a college before getting hired, since most departments will put you through their own academy? For two primary reasons:

1. Think of going through a college fire technology two-year degree program and firefighter academy as being similar to a baseball player going through the minor league baseball system, preparing themselves to be a professional baseball player. How many professional ball players do you know that go straight from high school to pro baseball? Very few. And of those very few, how many have successful careers lasting more than five or ten years? Even fewer. Most successful professional baseball players have “honed” their skills by playing minor league and college baseball. Think of a two-year fire technology program at a community college like minor league or college baseball. I don’t know about you, but I would rather make my mistakes at the college level, not during my probationary period at the fire department (which can lead to termination).



2. When you get hired, it will make that recruit academy they are paying you to go through easier, since most college firefighter 1 academies are more challenging and demanding than many paid fire department academies. Having been through a college academy and degree program will make your paid academy go much smoother since you're just refreshing or relearning concepts or skills you should have learned at the college level. This is much less stressful than trying to learn something new once you get hired and then have to maintain an 80% average on your daily quizzes during the academy to keep from getting terminated. Additionally, passing a college firefighter 1 academy tells a department that you are trainable and have the basic skills to enter and hopefully pass the academy.

Looking for colleges offering a Firefighter 1 academy that is an ARTP approved by California State Fire Marshal's Office?

Go to the California State Fire Training website:

<https://osfm.fire.ca.gov/divisions/state-fire-training/accruited-academies/> - and you will find over 40 colleges around California offering an approved ARTP Firefighter 1 academy.

Looking for colleges offering a two-year degree in Fire Technology?

For a list of community colleges in California offering Fire Technology degrees, go to the California Fire Technology Directors Association website at: www.cftda.com - other options include stopping by your local fire stations to ask the personnel if there are any schools in the local area offering such training and education.

Looking for schools or companies offering EMT or Paramedic training?

While you are encouraged to search the Internet, and ask the firefighters at your local fire department, the California State EMS Agency also has a list of approved EMT and Paramedic programs for those in California. Go to: <http://www.emsa.ca.gov>

Now it's time to begin taking classes to work towards your Two-Year Degree in Fire Technology!

Assuming you are able to enroll in a college offering a two-year degree program, below is a road map over the next couple of years to increase your odds of success. Some of you may be thinking, "next couple of years, I can't wait that long, I want it now!" Well, good things come to those who wait, and who do not rush to get where they want to be in life. Very few ever get hired at the first department they apply to (and without any fire related training and/or education on their resume), and those that do, have the odds stacked against them for success in the long run. Not saying it can't be done, just saying it's not the best way to go about getting hired.

Trust me, while I wish I would have been hired by the first fire department I applied to, I realize I'm better off it didn't happen that way. It took me about 4 ½ years of applying to fire departments all around the state (and even out-of-state), where I applied at upwards of 50 different fire departments. Some may say, "what a loser, he should have been hired sooner!" Well, easier said than done, especially since about 20 of those 50 departments I applied at used the random lottery process to determine who goes to the oral interview phase of the process.

It was very common in the early 1990's for fire departments to use a random lottery to narrow down the applicants, since they received thousands of applications and could only reasonably take 100 or less to the oral interviews. 0 for 20 on random lotteries, so much for random; I guess that's one reason I don't like to gamble or play the lottery. Seriously, what doesn't kill you makes you stronger, right? As frustrating as the process was, I was fortunate my DNA did not let me quit; each rejection letter I got only made me stronger and made me want this great career even more. Sadly though, there were many casualties amongst my friends who were also testing to become firefighters as most could not handle the ongoing rejection and just wanted to get on with their life. I get it; they had to do what they had to do.

For example, here is a two to three-year sample plan of action for any future firefighter, using the two-year degree program curriculum from Chabot College in Hayward, California. It may not match what is currently on the Chabot College website as the suggested order does change for a number of reasons:

FIRST SEMESTER / MONTHS 1 – 6

CLASSES to take:

- **EMS 1** (EMS First Responder – the prerequisite to get into the EMT program).
- **Fire Technology 1** (Principles of Emergency Services).
- **Fire Technology 2** (Principles of Fire and Emergency Services Safety and Survival).
- **Fire Technology 3** (Fire Behavior and Combustion).
- **Fire Technology 4** (Fire Prevention)
- **Fire Technology 7** (Health and Fitness for the Fire Service)
- **Fire Technology 88A** (Introduction to Fire Fitness Testing).

ACTIONS to take:

- **Sign up for and successfully pass the Candidate Physical Ability Test (CPAT).** To locate where to take the CPAT test in California, and for more information, go to www.cpatonline.org
- **Start learning as much as you can about the process of what it takes to become a Firefighter.** For more information about the firefighter hiring process, go to www.chabotfire.com - I will also give a brief overview in Key Point #3 below.
- **Take general education units towards your degree** (for specific general education units, talk to a counselor or fire technology coordinator at a college). An emphasis should be on classes in English, Math, and Speech since those are key areas a firefighter needs to be proficient at.
- **Start building up volunteer experience** (anything you volunteer your time for is highly looked upon by fire departments, and it doesn't necessarily have to be fire or EMS related). It's also a question many Fire Chiefs will ask you during the Chief's Interview. For various volunteer opportunity suggestions, go to: www.chabotfire.com
- **Start learning as much as you can about the fire service and the career (not job) of a firefighter.** Visit your local fire stations and start talking with the firefighters to make contacts, to start to build a network, and to learn more about firefighting as a career. Also, start visiting fire department websites to see how each fire department is unique and what each has to offer. For an extensive list of fire department websites, go to www.chabotfire.com

- **Start applying for every fire department you qualify for** (see Key Point #2 below for more information). Yes, you may qualify for some that only require you to be 18 years old and have a high school diploma or G.E.D. Start learning about the firefighter hiring process by taking the examinations. Each fire department uses a different method to recruit firefighters. For example, many California fire departments currently use the National Testing Network – www.nationaltestingnetwork.com - a company that currently offers applicants the opportunity to apply for over 300 different fire departments across the United States.

For more information on where to find fire service jobs, go to www.chabotfire.com

- **Purchase firefighter preparation and career development books.** Three of the best fire service bookstores are 1. The Firefighter’s Bookstore – www.firebooks.com 2. FSP Books and Videos – www.fire-police-ems.com and 3. Amazon – www.amazon.com

SECOND SEMESTER / MONTHS 7 - 12

CLASSES to take:

- **EMS 2 and EMS 2W** (Emergency Medical Technician). For more information about the EMT program, as well as paramedic programs, go to: www.chabotfire.com
- **Fire Technology 5** (Fire Protection Systems).
- **Fire Technology 6** (Building Construction for Fire Protection).
- **Fire Technology 88B** (Intermediate Fire Fitness Testing).
- **Fire Technology 10** (Introduction to Firefighter 1 Academy).
- **Take any general education units towards your degree** (for specific general education units, talk to a counselor or the fire technology coordinator at a college).

ACTIONS to take:

- **Continue the items mentioned above under actions taken for your first semester/months 1-6.**



THIRD SEMESTER / MONTHS 13 - 18

CLASS to take:

- **Fire Technology 11** (Firefighter 1 Academy)

ACTIONS to take:

- **Start looking for a job as an EMT with an ambulance company to gain experience and to help you prepare for paramedic school and a career in the fire service** since Emergency Medical Service responses make up 70% or more of our call volume.
- **Continue the items mentioned above under actions taken for your first two semesters/months 1-12.**

FOURTH SEMESTER / MONTHS 19 - 24

CLASSES to take:

- **Fire Technology 88B** (Advanced Fire Fitness Testing).
- **Fire Technology 95 and 96** (Fire Department work experience, which you can enroll in for up to 4 semesters, gaining valuable experience for your resume as a student firefighter). For more information about the Chabot College Fire Department work experience program, go to: www.chabotfire.com
- **Continue to take any general education units towards your degree** (for specific general education units, talk to a counselor or the fire technology coordinator at a college).

ACTIONS to take:

- **Start looking at enrolling in a paramedic program.** For a list of paramedic programs, go to www.chabotfire.com
- **Continue the items mentioned above under actions taken for your three semesters/months 1-18.**

NOTE: The exact order of classes may vary slightly, based on your ability to successfully enroll and pass the classes, and also at the college you choose. Not every class may be offered every semester. Some students are able to handle the above course load per semester, some can handle more classes per semester, and some students can handle fewer classes per semester. Also, the above classes reflect the two-year degree in Fire Technology at Chabot College; some other colleges may have a slightly different program.

Already have a two year or four-year degree in a non-fire discipline?



Many people ask me when they are starting out why they have to get a fire technology two-year degree when they already have a degree in another discipline. Some think it is a waste of time; some think they know what they need to know; some do not have the time to go through more college; some just do not provide a good answer. While the fire service is looking for educated personnel, we are also looking for personnel who have shown a commitment to, and have a passion for, the fire service. One way to show your commitment and passion to the fire service is by obtaining a two-year degree in fire technology, which should include

EMT training, academy training, and education and training in the basics of becoming a firefighter and preparing for future promotional opportunities. Surprisingly the education you receive in a two-year program will be much more than a fire department will be able to provide upon hire.

If you already have a degree, here is my suggestion: take your transcripts down to a counselor to see which general education units will transfer over to the college you are applying to be a fire technology student at. Most of your general education should transfer in; I did this when I started out at Chabot College in the early 1990's, after having received my four-year degree. I went to a counselor, and they accepted all but six

units of my general education. So, to get a two-year degree in fire technology at Chabot College (as opposed to just a Certificate of Achievement, or no piece of paper whatsoever), all I needed to do was take two, three-unit general education classes. That was a no-brainer, and it showed my commitment to and passion for the fire service.



Also, imagine not having a fire technology degree when you are in the oral interview, and the oral board asks: “you have a four-year degree in Sociology, great. Now, tell us how that applies to the fire service?” While I think you can relate a degree in any discipline to the fire service, I think it is tough to really convince the oral board that the fire service is your career choice when you have no formal education in fire technology and you are expecting us to take a chance on someone who has not shown a commitment to or does not have passion for the fire service. I would rather take a chance on hiring someone who has completed a two-year degree fire

technology program at a community college, which included a firefighter 1 academy. I want a proven commodity, so to speak. More importantly, if you can pass a firefighter 1 academy at a two-year college, you have a greater chance of passing the recruit academy a fire department puts you through upon hiring you.

Should I get four-year degree in fire technology, fire science, fire administration?

I would only recommend the four-year degree in a fire specific field if you are already working as a Firefighter? Why? Because a four-year degree in fire can be a waste of time if you never become a career firefighter. Also, what happens if you get injured as a firefighter, get retired out in your 30s or 40s and still need to find gainful employment? That four-year degree in fire will be very limiting. Plus, most of the curriculum in those four-year degree programs are targeted at fire service personnel already working in the fire officer ranks (captains, chiefs, etc.), meaning the information covered would not be fully comprehended as it would be if you were already working in the fire service.

I recommend a two-year degree in fire technology (because it usually contains EMT and a Firefighter 1 academy as well as the core classes and a great deal of information you will never receive on the job), and then a four-year degree in another field. Find a four-year degree that you enjoy, but that is also marketable to not only the fire service but also a field you wouldn't mind working in if you were no longer a firefighter. Intelligent applicants can tie in any degree to the fire service, not just one that has fire in the name.

Should I consider an online degree program before I am employed as a firefighter?

I would only recommend an online degree program if you are currently employed as a firefighter. Why? First, certain classes need to be taken in person, like EMT, Paramedic and your Firefighter 1 academy. While it's true some colleges offer some of the fire technology classes like fire behavior or building construction online, the benefit of going in person is that you get to meet others who you will be forming a bond with, as you start applying for different fire departments. Maybe I'm old school being a brick and mortar school person, but for me, I find I learn better when I'm in a classroom with other students and an instructor in front of me.

Closing thought on education.

Just remember that having a degree (or even your EMT, Paramedic or Firefighter 1 academy) does not guarantee you a job; I don't know of any fire department that requires a college degree for the main reason that it limits their applicant pool. Some departments may list a college degree as a desirable qualification, but it doesn't mean you can't get hired without one.

KEY POINT #2: **Start Applying For Firefighter Positions**

Start applying for as many firefighter positions as you qualify for. Every fire department usually has their own testing / hiring process (which they may coordinate, or which may be coordinated by their city, county, state, etc.) that occurs anywhere from once a year to once every few years or more. For example, if you want to work for the Oakland Fire Department, you will have to participate in their firefighter hiring process. If you want to work for the Alameda County Fire Department, you will have to participate in their process. On occasion, you may find some fire departments that participate in a joint testing process where your one application may be considered by multiple fire departments. Take advantage of those opportunities because it is more bang for your buck. Timing is everything because if you miss the deadline to apply for a department you want to work for, it may take a number of years to get that opportunity to apply again.

How do I find out which fire departments are accepting applications and what are the requirements to become a firefighter with that department?

- Subscribe to firefighter examination notification services such as www.firecareers.com – a service that is well worth every penny of the price. It will save you the time and effort of calling each fire department and asking when they are next hiring. This type of service provides notifications of when departments nationwide are accepting applications.
- Go to websites such as **National Testing Network (NTN)** – www.nationaltestingnetwork.com that offer a candidate the opportunity to take one test and apply for over 300 different fire departments. For example, if you want to become a Firefighter in many departments, you have to take the NTN test because that is the only application process mechanism some departments use..
- Go to websites such as the **Fire Candidate Testing Center** – www.fctonline.org and sign up to be on their list so that you're notified of upcoming testing opportunities.
- Contact individual fire departments and their respective city (or county or state) personnel (or human resource) offices. To find out how to contact them do a search on the Internet. Typically, the personnel department (or human resource department) for a jurisdiction handles the testing process for positions within the fire department. If you can't find the information on their website, ask them when they will next be testing for the position of firefighter, what their qualifications are to become



a firefighter, do they accept interest cards (if so, can you leave your name with them so you can be notified of their next exam?), and any other relevant questions you may come up with.

- Since most Human Resources/Personnel Services departments (like virtually every other department within a city, county, state or federal government agency) are understaffed and overworked, try not to bother them when possible by calling or stopping by in person. Try to get your necessary information from their website.

KEY POINT #3: **Start Learning What The Hiring Process Looks Like**

Start learning what the hiring process for a fire department looks like.

It is up to you to score highly in all phases of the hiring process, which can include (but are not limited to) the following events:

- **Application filing** (submitting your completed application and resume by the filing deadline).
- **Application Screening** (to ensure candidates meet the minimum qualifications and to sometimes select only the most qualified candidates).
- **Written Examination** (usually a 100-question multiple choice test of various subject areas such as math, English, problem solving ability, mechanical aptitude, reading comprehension, ability to follow directions, etc.).
- **Physical Ability Test** (consisting of various events to ensure you meet the minimum physical performance requirements). This may be in lieu of or in addition to the CPAT. For example, many fire departments in Southern California use the Biddle Test as their physical ability test.
- **Oral Interview** (usually making up 100% of your overall ranking on the hiring list. Used to evaluate such areas as oral communications, ethics, problem solving ability, decision making skills, maturity, and ability to get along well with others).
- **Chief's Interview** (a second level interview for those candidates selected to continue in the process. Usually with the fire chief or some other high-ranking chief officers. This interview is usually designed to get to know you better and find out more regarding your suitability to work for that department).
- **Background Investigation** (designed to do a full investigation on areas such as your educational history, work experience history, credit history, driving record, personal characteristics and attributes, etc.).
- **Psychological Examination** (designed to determine your suitability as a firefighter based on psychological questions).
- **Medical Examination** (usually based on NFPA 1582 and designed to determine your fitness for duty through the means of a full body examination and medical screening).
- **Recruit Academy** (if you're lucky enough to successfully pass all of the above phases, then you are usually eligible to receive a job offer and appointment to a recruit academy lasting anywhere from 8 weeks to 24 weeks. This recruit academy sponsored by the hiring department will provide you with firefighting knowledge, skills, and abilities. However, as mentioned above, you will

receive more training and education in a two-year fire technology degree program that has a firefighter 1 academy than you ever will at most fire departments. Thus, if you truly want to be the best you can be for yourself, your crew and the public, it's best to have that two-year degree in fire as well as whatever training your new fire department puts you through. During the recruit academy, you can be released (terminated) for any legal reason. Most common reasons recruits get terminated are for not keeping an 80% average on their written or skills tests every week, not being as physically fit as they should be, bad attitudes, inappropriate behavior, or just not being able to get along with their fellow recruits or the department staff.

- **Probationary Period** (successfully completing the academy allows you to start working as a probationary firefighter). Probation periods last anywhere from one year to three years. This period is designed to determine if you are suitable for permanent employment and you can be released (terminated) for any legal reason.

What does the hiring process for one fire department look like?

The following was taken from a fire department in the San Francisco (CA) Bay Area and gives you an idea of what to expect if you want to work there. They typically open up the application filling period for firefighter positions between once a year to once every two years, depending on department need. The process listed below takes about nine months from the time the announcement is published stating they are accepting applications, to the day they actually hire someone and have them enter their recruit academy.

- **Application filing period opens up for 8 weeks:**
 - During this time frame, the candidate must successfully complete the FireTEAM test and apply through National Testing Network (NTN): www.nationaltestingnetwork.com
 - The FireTEAM test is good for one year, and candidates have to wait at least six months to retake the test to attempt.
 - Candidates must obtain a passing score on the FireTEAM test to be eligible to continue to the oral interview phase.
 - Because of the large number of applicants, they will usually do a random lottery to obtain the names of the individuals (usually less than 100 EMTs and less than 100 Paramedics) that will continue to the oral interview.
 - NTN offers multiple locations, dates and times around the area and the U.S. on a regular basis to take the FireTEAM test.
- **Oral board interviews:** (100% of final eligibility list ranking)
 - They typically interview approximately 90 EMT & paramedic candidates (two separate oral boards, one for EMT, one for Paramedic)
 - Paramedic applicants also have to successfully pass a Paramedic skills examination, something that is very common for many to fail. This is based on National Registry Paramedic skills.
 - CPAT card required at time of oral interview and again at the start date of academy (no older than 6 months).
 - Separate eligibility lists are then created for EMT and Paramedic candidates based on the top scores within each list.
- **Fitness test:**
 - The top-ranking candidates within the respective EMT and Paramedic lists are then asked to participate in the Fitness Test, which each of our personnel are required to complete once a year.
 - Run - 1.5 mile in 12 minutes or less.
 - Pull-ups (palms in or out) - 3, or flexed arm hang - 45 seconds

- Push-ups (to metronome of 80 bpm) - 20 in 30 seconds
- Curl ups (crunches to metronome of 60 bpm) - 30 in 60 seconds
- **Background Investigation / Live Scan / Credit Report** (see Key Point #4 below for more information).
- **Interview with the Fire Chief**
- **Conditional job offer**
- **Polygraph Evaluation**
- **Psychological Evaluation**
- **Medical Evaluation**
- **Recruit Academy:**
 - Typically 12 to 18 weeks depending on department need.
- **Probationary Period:**
 - 18 months

For more specific information about the above phases of the hiring process (including resources to assist you with each of the phases), go to www.chabotfire.com

KEY POINT #4: **Begin Preparing Now For Your Background Investigation**

Those candidates that usually score at the top of the eligibility list (usually because of their oral interview score), are usually then sent to participate in a background investigation, where they are given a document about 20 to 30 pages in length, that asks for full details of pretty much everything you have done in your life related to your education, training, employment, credit history, driving record, arrest record, alcohol and drug usage history, personal relationships, and other items that could make you suitable (or unsuitable) for a career in the fire service.

It is not uncommon for candidates who do really well at the oral interview (or other phases of the hiring process), to get disqualified by a certain fire department during the background investigation, not to mention the psychological evaluation. Candidates usually don't get disqualified for one specific reason. It is usually for a number of reasons that show a pattern inconsistent with the character traits or qualities a specific Fire Chief and fire department is looking for. Just because one is disqualified during a background investigation, doesn't mean they can't and shouldn't apply for that same department (and other departments) in the future. I've known some to get disqualified during one hiring process, then come back in a year or two to the same department and actually get hired, because they were able to show that they have since matured and not allowed the history of inappropriate behavior continue. Time can and does heal many things.

Some (not all) departments have automatic disqualifiers such as:

- A failure to keep any scheduled appointments with the department or related to the hiring process.
- Any falsifications (false statements) or intentional omission of any information requested of you during the process (such as on your application or background packet or during your oral interview).
- A failure to submit all of the required documentation on time or in the format requested.
- Any history of driver license suspensions or revocations.
- Any history of automobile insurance cancellations or lack of.

- Any history of injected steroids.
- Any history of selling or manufacturing of drugs or narcotics.
- Any illegal drug use in the last two (2) years.
- A history of greater than three (3) moving violations in the past three (3) years.
- Being at fault in three (3) or more traffic violations in the past three (3) years.
- Any history of convictions (felonies and even some misdemeanors).
- Any military discipline such as a court martial or dishonorable discharge.
- A history of inappropriate, illegal, or unethical behavior and/or activity.
- Theft, dishonesty, and any other character issues that may bring discredit to you and/or your employment with the department, in the event you were given an offer of employment.

Notice the key word “history” above. Individuals are usually not disqualified during the background process for one specific thing. Instead, it is usually for a history or track record of doing the same things that are illegal, immature, inappropriate, unethical, or just plain stupid. The key is to be honest, and be as complete as you can, providing as much detail to the questions you are asked. Also, be prepared to take responsibility for your actions or non-actions, hold yourself accountable for those actions or non-actions, and have to answer questions from a Fire Chief or background investigator when the subject of the issues you have had comes up. It’s not what you’ve done most of the time as how much you take responsibility and are able to demonstrate that you have learned from the mistake, that you won’t make the same mistake twice, and that you are someone we can trust won’t do the same again in the future.

Begin preparing NOW for your background investigation. This means the following:

- Maintain a clean credit and financial history.** Take the time to obtain a credit report on yourself from one of the three major companies. Doing this will allow you to see (in advance) what your credit history looks like, prior to the background investigator seeing it. If you have outstanding debt, start composing a plan to eliminate that debt. Close any credit cards you are not utilizing. Pay your bills on time! By Federal law, each person is entitled to a free credit report from each of the three credit reporting agencies: Experian, Equifax and TransUnion once every 12 months. I encourage you to take advantage of that service and review what each has to say about you every 12 months. Each have their own website and you should not have to pay for each, so do not scammed by websites who appear to offer their services and will charge you. There is one approved website where you can access all 3 annual free credit reports at no charge: www.AnnualCreditReport.com



- Maintain a clean driving record.** Many candidates have been eliminated during the background investigation for excessive accidents (regardless of who was at fault), and excessive traffic related citations (speeding tickets, moving violations, etc.). The best advice is to go down to your local DMV office to request a printout that shows the longest date range you can obtain so you can accurately document on your background investigation paperwork what your records indicate related to accidents, tickets, etc.

- c. **Maintain a clean law enforcement record.** What this means is don't get arrested, don't fight with law enforcement, don't drive or operate vehicles under the influence of alcohol or illegal drugs (even Marijuana if it's legal where you are at or if you're using it "medicinal purposes"), or do something otherwise stupid you're going to regret for the rest of your life. Back to the medicinal purposes statement – if you're using Marijuana for medicinal purposes, you probably should not think about being a firefighter. Think twice before getting into a fight (even if you're not the instigator) or driving home after having alcoholic beverages. Performing (and getting caught) any of the above items can virtually eliminate your chances of getting hired as a firefighter, or get you terminated from the recruit academy or probationary period should you make it that far. Sadly, it is common to see newly hired firefighters in the recruit academy get arrest for driving under the influence, and then find out they are out of a job because the department can release you for any reason during the academy or probation period.
- d. **Maintain an up-to-date list of relatives and friends.** During a background investigation, you are going to be asked to provide names, addresses and phone numbers of your relatives and close friends so that they can be contacted to vouch for your character and background information you have documented.
- e. **Maintain an up-to-date list of your employment history.** Typically, you are going to be asked to provide information from each employer you have worked for over the past 10 years. Some departments require you to provide information from EVERY job you have ever held! Some of the information to obtain now includes name, address and phone number of employers, exact dates employed, exact title(s) you held, exact salaries you were paid, duties and responsibilities, and name of your supervisor. If you don't know the information, contact those former employers ASAP!
- f. **Maintain an up-to-date list of your educational history.** Typically, you are going to be asked to provide information from every educational institution you have attended (after and including high school). Information requested can include name and address of the school, number of units completed, degrees obtained, etc.
- g. **Ensure your Internet and social media footprint is something your parents or future Fire Chief will be proud of.** Social media and the Internet are valuable resources and tools for a number of reasons. Unfortunately, poor decisions or inappropriate postings have wrecked many a career and have kept many from getting hired. Remember that nothing ever gets truly removed from the Internet or social media; it's never too late to ensure your postings are professional, respectable, and something you would be proud to have the whole world see.

One thing to remember is that many departments are willing to "hire for fit, attitude, and character" and "train for skills." Meaning they can train many (not everyone) to throw a ladder or pull some hose, but they can't teach everyone how to be a nice person, or an excellent human being with outstanding character traits and a very positive outlook and attitude. If you've got a positive, can-do attitude, you never complain, you're not bitter, you're willing to be a part of the solution (not the problem), you are a genuinely great human being that people enjoy being around (just not the class clown), you have high ethical standards, you know right from wrong, and you live a productive life, then you're the type of person most departments want to hire. Most fire departments will do their best to try and train you on the skills needed to be a firefighter. However, if you're a jerk, have a bad attitude, have a track record of inappropriate, illegal or immature behavior (alcohol abuse, drug abuse, poor driving habits, inability to play nicely with others in

the sandbox, inability to be a solid employee, etc.), who cares if you can throw a ladder or pull some hose. You're going to be more of a liability and headache for the fire department if they hire you. There is a saying to remember: "the best predictor of future behavior is past behavior..." That doesn't mean you can't or won't be able to change, but it is sure tough to change behavior, especially as we get older.

KEY POINT #5:
General Information To Assist You Become A Firefighter

Other relevant information to assist you in becoming a firefighter:

- a. **Think twice about getting that visible tattoo or getting your body pierced in visible areas** (area of the arm exposed when in a t-shirt, or the area of your legs when in shorts and socks). Some fire departments have rules that prohibit visible tattoos or body piercings.
- b. **If you presently smoke or use tobacco products, attempt to quit.** Many fire departments require you to sign a document stating you have not smoked or used tobacco products for the past year, and that you will not smoke or use tobacco products at any point while their department employs you.
- c. **Buy yourself one nice outfit to wear to the oral interview, the chief's interview, the background investigation interview, the psychological interview, the recruit academy orientation, etc.** This includes a nice suit (pants and coat, you don't need the vest), dress shirt, tie, polished dress shoes, non-white socks, etc. Basically, a conservative look, not something you would wear out on a date or to a cocktail party. Keep the jewelry to a minimum, no Mr. T starter kits (if you have no clue who Mr. T was, do an Internet search and you'll see what I mean). For females, a nice pantsuit or dress that makes you look professional (not something you would wear out on a date or to a cocktail party). Besides firefighter oral interviews, you can use that outfit for weddings, funerals, and other important events. Invest in your wardrobe and it will pay dividends.
- d. **Keep yourself appropriately groomed.** Many fire departments have rules prohibiting facial hair (except for a moustache, which still needs to be clean and maintained). While some of you might enjoy wearing that goatee, soul patch, beard, or long hair, realize you'll probably have to shave it once you get hired. Get used to not having it now. Wearing a goatee, soul patch, beard, or long hair to an interview or during any phase of the hiring process, can severely reduce your chances for getting hired with that department. Don't expect to get the job offer and then be asked to shave it off. You may not even get that far.

NOTE: You might be wondering why I included the above information regarding grooming and personal attributes. While it is a true a fire department is not legally allowed to discriminate based on appearance (among other things), realize that perception is reality. That means that you can be the best firefighter or EMT or paramedic in the world, but if you have tattoos and body piercings all over your body, you're potentially going to be perceived negatively. I'm not saying that's right or wrong; I'm just saying it is human nature and reality. Avoid the whole situation entirely and just be conservative in your approach. Remember that it is important to stick out in the hiring process; and that means to stick out in a positive way, not a negative way! Stick out in a positive way such as having a unique background of experience or other qualifications to bring to the table such as being bilingual or having your paramedic license, or having a very interesting life experience story to tell, or more importantly stick out because of your positive, can-do personality and your outstanding character traits.

e. **Start educating yourself on the career of a firefighter** and the operations of a fire department so that when you are talking to firefighters, visiting fire stations, and participating in the various events of the hiring process (such as the oral interview), you can talk in an educated way and actually sound like you know what you're talking about. Knowing the difference between an Engine and a Truck is important PRIOR to the oral interview. Also, some fire departments (such as the Phoenix Fire Department) call their Truck companies Ladder companies. Saying the wrong terminology in your interview will demonstrate you haven't taken the time to properly do your homework and research. One way to learn as much as you can about the job of a firefighter and how the operations of fire departments can be similar yet different, is to start visiting websites of fire departments. For a list of fire department websites throughout California and the United States, go to: www.chabotfire.com

f. **Start staying up-to-date on what is going on in the fire service.** Have your fingers on the pulse of the fire service by subscribing to the numerous free email mailing lists that provide valuable information such as fire service news stories, employment opportunities, volunteer opportunities, training opportunities and other relevant fire service information to help best prepare you to become a firefighter.

Some of the best FREE email lists are:

- FirefighterCloseCalls.com – www.firefighterclosecalls.com
- Fire Engineering Magazine – www.fireengineering.com
- Firehouse Magazine – www.firehouse.com
- Fire Rescue Magazine – www.firefighternation.com
- FireNuggets – www.firenuggets.com
- Daily Dispatch – www.dailydispatch.com
- STATter911 – www.statter911.com



For a list of other FREE email mailing lists, go to www.chabotfire.com

KEY POINT #6: **Start Your To-Do List**

Now that you've taken the time to read the above items to help get you pointed in the right direction as you being your pursuit of becoming a firefighter, it's time to actually do something, by walking the walk, not just talking the talk. To assist you with establishing some goals and with focusing on the most important things to become a firefighter, I have put together the following checklist to use, to point you in the right direction and keep you on track:

Summary of to-do items:

- _____ Enroll at a college offering a 2-year degree program in Fire Technology.
- _____ Obtain your EMT certification.
- _____ Obtain your Firefighter 1 Academy certification.
- _____ Obtain your two-year degree in Fire Technology.
- _____ Obtain your CPAT card: www.fctconline.org
- _____ Sign up for a testing notification service such as www.firecareers.com
- _____ Subscribe to the FREE email list: www.firefighterclosecalls.com
- _____ Subscribe to the FREE email list: www.firehouse.com
- _____ Subscribe to the FREE email list: www.dailydispatch.com
- _____ Subscribe to the FREE email list: www.fireengineering.com
- _____ Subscribe to the FREE magazine: www.firenuggets.com
- _____ Sign up to take the FCTC written exam: www.fctconline.org
- _____ Sign up to be on the CA statewide Firefighter hiring list: www.fctconline.org
- _____ Apply for a firefighter position at any department you qualify for.
- _____ Sign up for the FireTEAM test: www.nationaltestingnetwork.com
- _____ Apply for participating fire departments through NTN: www.nationaltestingnetwork.com
- _____ Establish a physical fitness program and healthy lifestyle.
- _____ Obtain at least one nice (conservative but professional) outfit to wear.
- _____ Start volunteering your time at something (keep track of your hours!).
- _____ Create your resume (keep it to one page!).
- _____ Start visiting websites of fire departments to see how they differ from one another.
- _____ Learn the locations of the fire stations in the community you live.
- _____ Visit a fire station in the community you live.
- _____ Learn the locations of the fire stations in neighboring communities.
- _____ Visit fire stations in other communities so you can start to see how one department differs from another.
- _____ Learn as much as you can about your local fire department(s).
- _____ If on Twitter, keep it professional; if not on Twitter, consider joining to stay informed.
- _____ If on Facebook (FB), keep it professional; if not on FB, consider joining to stay informed.
- _____ Think twice before getting a visible tattoo (visible in a t-shirt and shorts).
- _____ Keep yourself appropriately groomed (no beard, excessive facial hair, hair above your collar, etc.).
- _____ Download the free smartphone APP “PulsePoint” to see current fire department response activity in your community.

IN SUM:

Remember that nothing worth having in life is going to come easily. It is up to you to remain positive, remain focused, and remain motivated to continue doing what it takes to become a firefighter. There are going to be many frustrating and disappointing moments while testing to become a firefighter; the key point is that you recognize your weaknesses, be open to constructive criticism, and continue to pursue that dream of becoming a firefighter. Once you give up, you give up and let someone else take your spot riding on that fire engine you dreamed of riding on!

I thank you for your time you spent reviewing this information, and I hope you found it beneficial. If you have other suggestions for items that could be added to this informational sheet in the future, please email me with your suggestions for improvement. Good luck in your pursuit of becoming a firefighter!