

Firefighting Goes Beyond Extinguishing Flames: Inside The Admirable Vocation



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Los Angeles County Fire Department apprentices and experienced firefighters working together [+]

Firefighters. They are different than the rest of us. While others run away from a burning building, they race toward it. They hold the line against raging wild fires, pull people from burning buildings, and deal with all types of disasters, including floods, traffic accidents, and chemical spills. When someone has a medical emergency, firefighters are often the first to respond.

It's easy to forget about these public servants and what they do every day to protect our lives and property. Easy, that is, until we need them. That was my experience recently when James, my six year-old, took a nosedive, badly gashing his chin. Blood, wailing, and pandemonium followed. Within minutes of dialing 911, a local fire crew and EMTs arrived and took control of the situation. Once the dust had settled James had seven stitches in his chin, a kid's fireman's helmet on his head, and a "bravery" award on his shirt. And my family had a new respect for fire fighters and other first responders.

My passion involves helping young people find pathways to satisfying, skilled-based careers. So I naturally found myself thinking about those two firefighters and about other men and women who devote their working lives to helping others in stressful situations. What are their jobs like? How do they learn to do their work with such cool heads and professionalism? What I learned was that fire fighters are among the best-trained and most respected public servants. They are also well paid, with compensation in some communities ranging from \$40,000 for newcomers to over \$120,000 for experienced people--not bad for a vocation that does not require a four-year college degree. But for most firefighters it's not so much a good job but a calling they wouldn't trade for any other.

This isn't nine-to-five work.

In California, for example, most firefighters work 24-hour shifts, with 48 or 72 hours off. When wildland blazes are on the move, companies of men and woman are on the fire lines most of the day and night, sometimes for a week or more, until the fire is under control. Coping with the rigors of this type of work requires technical know-how, physical strength, and the ability to stay level-headed in dangerous situations.

Firefighting today goes beyond the traditional business of "putting wet stuff on the red stuff." Today's fire professionals deal with hazard waste spills, traffic accidents, natural catastrophes, "active shooter" events, and medical emergencies of many types. In fact, over the past year California's firefighters responded to some 300,000 events that had nothing to do with fire.


As fire departments around the country have learned, continual training is the best way to prepare people for such varied responsibilities. Maintaining uniformly high quality training, however, is a challenge. That is especially true in a big state like California, which has over 200 professional municipal fire departments, as well as volunteer departments in rural communities. The larger municipal departments operate their own training “academies.” Others look to fire academies in local community colleges for basic training. In fact, most departments now expect job candidates to have completed firefighting coursework--and to have earned EMT certification--*prior* to applying.

But training doesn’t stop there.

More than half of California’s professional fire departments provide on-going training through a state registered apprenticeship program that currently involves over 7,000 men and women. That program offers apprenticeships in occupational fields that include paramedic, hazardous materials, fire officer, fire inspector, and 14 others. Each combines classroom and on-the-job training under the watchful eye of the California Firefighter Joint Apprenticeship Committee (Cal-JAC)—a decades old collaboration of the Office of the State Fire Marshal and California Professional Firefighters, the state firefighters union. This management/labor collaboration ensures that training is of consistent high quality and that it addresses the challenges that fire fighters experience in their work today. It also provides some training cost reimbursement to cash-strapped local fire departments.

That incident with my son, and what I’ve since learned about the firefighters has changed the way I think about the men and women who follow that calling. They are among the most well trained public servants in our communities.

And though they may never receive the social prestige or earn the princely sums paid to doctors and surgeons, they get the satisfaction of saving lives helping people in difficult situations—something that few of us will ever experience. Theirs is one of those admirable vocations that, for too many of us, is hidden in plain sight.

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