

What to Expect:

A Guide for New Members and Your Families



From Your Local Fire Company

CAPITALREGIONFIREFIGHTER.org

INTRODUCTION

Becoming a volunteer firefighter is a life-altering decision. Whether it's you or your family member entering the fire service, the impact of that decision will be felt by the entire family, in both predictable and unexpected ways. Volunteer firefighting differs in comparison to other volunteer roles, as it becomes a part of your lifestyle.

Being a volunteer firefighter means:

- You can be called to serve at any given moment
- Dedicating extra hours towards training each week
- Putting yourself in high-risk situations help those in need
- Making a vital contribution to the safety of the community

“A volunteer firefighter is a special kind of person. There are not many people that will invest their time and energy to commit the selfless act of risking their life for others, who in most cases are strangers.”

– Chief Brian Hamilton, Union Fire Company

The Basics of Being a Volunteer Firefighter

When you decide to join the volunteer fire service, you agree to dedicate your free time to filling a vital role, in the community, protecting the lives and property of those in need. As a volunteer firefighter, you can expect to:

- Be called to respond to an emergency at any moment
- Attend regular meetings and training sessions
- Perform physically demanding work
- Spend extended periods of time outdoors in inclement weather

Emergency Response

You may carry a radio, pager or alerts via a smartphone paging app to notify you when there is an emergency. This can occur at any time of the day or night.

Gear

Special gear is issued to all volunteers to protect them while in a fire or on the scene of an accident. Gear should be cleaned after every harmful exposure, and it is highly-encouraged that you keep your cleaned gear in either your vehicle or at the station to ensure it can be easily accessed for an emergency call.

The Time Commitment

The calendar of a volunteer firefighter contains periodic meetings and training drills, ranging from a weekly basis to a monthly basis. At the very minimum, you can expect a few hours each month will be dedicated to the fire service, but oftentimes, that number is far greater.

The time devoted to the fire department isn't always spent preparing to fight fires; you may stop by the fire department just to visit and spend time with fellow firefighters, as camaraderie and companionship with fellow volunteers is such a crucial component of the volunteer experience. Eventually, you may take on additional roles, such as an officer or lieutenant with the department, which requires heightened responsibilities.

Physical Demands

It is physically taxing to fight fires and respond to emergencies. Wearing heavy gear and dragging water lines while working in “emergency mode” requires a heightened level of physical exertion and mental stamina. Training drills will prepare and teach you the correct practices when responding to emergencies to prevent injuries, but it is crucial to take time to recover both physically and mentally.

The Benefits

Even though there is no salary or paycheck associated with being a volunteer, there are plenty of benefits that make the experience valuable. Some volunteer fire companies offer a live-in program, providing volunteers with a free place to live and direct access to multiple amenities in exchange for their volunteer services.

However, one of the most amazing benefits of the volunteer fire service is helping those in their time of need and playing a part in making your community safe. Another benefit is gaining an extended family that will always have your back. Being surrounded by people who can relate can be very helpful, and in many instances, can create a strong foundation for lifelong friendships.

The “New Normal” of a Volunteer Fire Family

Interruptions by Fire Calls

The predominant method of notifying a volunteer firefighter of an emergency call is inheriting a pager or a smartphone paging app.

When your family member receives a call, they must move immediately. There is only a short window of time allowing for a momentary exchange before they jump into their vehicle and head to the firehouse. It is important to not take this personally, as they are responding to someone or something that is in urgent need.

Communicating With Your Volunteer When They're Responding to a Call

When your relative arrives at the scene of an emergency, they will not be able to communicate with you. While you may be worried or concerned about them, their focus must be on the safety of those at the emergency call.

It is important to remember that your family is not being forgotten about and your relative isn't choosing firefighting over you. Oftentimes, the love your relative has for your family is their catalyst for volunteering.

There may be occurrences where your relative receives a call and is unable to communicate with you before heading

to the scene. If they are able, many volunteers will text their family and inform them that they are responding to an emergency.

Some volunteer families will also obtain a scanner as a reassuring indicator that their volunteer is safe and well. It can also shed light on the severity of the call in question and when the volunteer will likely be returning home. Some families, however, do not like to listen to the scanner, as it may increase worry and fear.

Managing Your Worry and Fear

It is completely understandable and normal that you may experience worry because your loved one has elected to perform life-saving tasks, many risky, in your community. There are ways to mitigate these concerns and ease your anxieties. Here are simple techniques to help manage your worry and fear:

- Communicate your concerns to your volunteer
- Have confidence in your volunteer's training and abilities
- Develop a network of friends or family members who you can speak to if you get anxious
- Visit the station and meet the other firefighters who have your relative's back

“It is okay to worry, but don't stress about the unknowns or what ifs. It took a while for my wife to be okay with what we do in the fire service. She still worries about me, but she understands that my training and fire service family will look out for me and keep me safe.”

– Pierce Trujillo, Firefighter and Fire Police Officer at Upper Allen Fire Department

Agreeing on Scheduling and Planning

Similar to most members, your relative likely chose to volunteer because of a passion for helping those in need. Due to the energy and time that your relative is devoting to the fire department, this passion will spill over into other aspects of your family life. Discussing balancing your schedules and factoring in time for the family can go a long way. Don't expect to get it right immediately, as it will take some time to adjust to your new life as a volunteer family. It is important to openly communicate with your relative and work through scheduling snafus as a team.

Understanding the Importance of Training

It can be really difficult to sacrifice another day of family time because your relative has to train, but training is exactly what you want them to do so they can keep themselves, their fellow responders and the community safe during an emergency. There are many scenarios that can happen in an emergency, and each of these scenarios requires special knowledge and training.

Easing the Impact on Children

Firefighting is such an exciting concept for children, and when it is their own parent, it's that much better. There's nothing your child will find more amazing than seeing their own parent in their firefighting gear, in their big truck with the sirens and lights flashing, ready to put out fires.

“I don't think I have ever seen my children with smiles as big as they did when they saw me driving the fire engine for the first time.”

– Ryan Flynn, Firefighter and Secretary at Annville Cleona Fire Department

Unfortunately, there will be occasions when your children will have to miss their parent being at a big game, birthday party or other event as a result of their volunteer duties. This can be difficult for them, but here are some ways you can ease the impact on your children by involving them in the volunteer life:



- Take them on a tour of the station and fire trucks, and explain to them what their parent does as a firefighter
- Bring them to family-friendly events hosted by the fire department
- Assure them that their parent is safe while serving, thanks to their training, gear and other volunteers having their back
- Have a routine “goodbye” for when there is an emergency call and your relative must respond.

“Family always needs to come first. Training is scheduled months in advance. Plan your time and don't miss family events for the fire company. When a volunteer starts to miss family activities, stress will occur.”

– Jerry Ozog, Deputy Chief at Hampden Township Volunteer Fire Company

CONCLUSION: Joining Your New Fire Department Family As a Volunteer or Family Member

While there are many challenges in the volunteer firefighting world, there are also many rewards, like being a part of a new community that feels like family. By embracing this new life, you too can learn to break down barriers, overcome obstacles, forge unbreakable bonds and experience all of the amazing things that the fire service has to offer.

Some spouses or family members may be encouraged to help out at the firehouse as a result after watching their relative devote time and energy towards making the community a safer place for all. There are plenty of volunteer opportunities available!



Do you know a potential volunteer? Tell them to visit
CAPITALREGIONFIREFIGHTER.org
for more information.