

# What Does a Firefighter Actually Do?

**The job is more than battling blazes today**

By **Steve Prziborowski**, Editorial Staff - Firehouse.Com Contributor



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Before you make the commitment to put countless hours of preparation, energy, and effort into becoming a firefighter, I sure hope you realize what you are getting yourself into. Well, if you are this far along in the process (which I assume you are since you are reading this), you may still learn a few things you did not previous know were things a firefighter actually does in the course of a day.

What a firefighter does in one fire department may slightly (or drastically) differ from what a firefighter does in another fire department in the nearby vicinity or across the country. Watch television shows and it is not uncommon to see firefighters sitting around the kitchen table, joking and having fun, and maybe even watching television or sleeping, during the day time. Rarely do you see firefighters portrayed as doing "busy work," or actually doing productive work such as actual pre-fire planning (and that does not mean going shopping; it means actually walking through existing occupancies or buildings under construction to learn how they are constructed and analyze how they would mitigate an emergency), doing company fire prevention inspections, creating and updating pre-fire plans, training, performing physical fitness, or just maintaining their fire station, apparatus and/or tools and equipment.

So, if you watch a television show, news story, or even a movie relating or depicting firefighters, how do you usually see us portrayed? In my experience, one of two ways: we are either on the job at a working incident of some form or fashion, or we are back at the station either preparing a meal or killing time waiting to get toned out for the next run. I'm not saying this is bad, as much as I'm saying it is an unrealistic portrayal of what a firefighter does in many (not all) departments. In some departments, that is the routine; go on a call or wait for the next call to come. Yes, there may be a little housework completed, and a rig check out here or there, but is the crew spending a couple of hours a day training, and doing what it takes to be the best they can be? I'll let you make that call.

However, getting back to what a firefighter really does, I think it would open a lot of people's eyes - including the eyes of future firefighters, if they realized that a firefighter may do more things than just run calls and sit around the kitchen table waiting for the next run. I find it amazing when fire departments hire firefighters, who suddenly hate running medical calls, or hate going out on Band-Aid calls, or hate doing public

education details or company inspections, or whatever. We have all heard some form of complaint (after someone got off probation of course), where a firefighter is not fond of doing a certain task, or even worse, pleads ignorant or states "I didn't sign up to \_\_\_\_\_," or "that is not in my job description." As great of a career we have, I still hear things like that (luckily rarely in my department), but more commonly when I talk to others around the country or read about the actions or statements a certain firefighter may provide.

Before any future firefighter determines this is the career for them, I hope they realize they may be called upon on any given shift, to do a number of different things, and even possess the necessary knowledge, skills, and abilities to accomplish the following things at some point during their fire department career, depending on the department they end up working for. Note: some of these things the department will formally teach you how to accomplish. However, many of these things the department will expect you to bring with you in the form of life experience or learn on-the-job from other firefighters. I once heard from someone that a firefighter needs to know about 26 different trades and careers, to be a good firefighter. At first, that sounded unrealistic, but when you think about it, it is highly possible a firefighter can be called upon at a moment's notice to do any of the following trades, professions, jobs, or careers as part of their daily routine on duty (and I don't mean as part of a side job off-duty):

1. Plumber
2. Electrician
3. Carpenter
4. Social worker
5. Psychologist
6. Psychiatrist
7. Auto detailer
8. Auto repair person
9. Maid
10. Mechanic
11. Teacher
12. Chef/Cook
13. Administrative Assistant (Secretary)
14. Dishwasher
15. Janitor/Custodian
16. Landscaper
17. Painter
18. Police officer
19. Service station attendant
20. Accountant

21. Financial advisor
22. Truck driver
23. Facilities manager
24. Food server
25. Waiter/waitress
26. Recreational coordinator
27. Career planner/advisor
28. Maintenance person (handyman)
29. Dietician
30. Appliance repairperson
31. Heating, Ventilation, Air Conditioning (HVAC) repairperson
32. Tow truck driver
33. Customer service representative
34. Public educator
35. Public information provider
36. Computer technician
37. Television repair person / troubleshooter
38. Fire prevention inspector
39. Fire investigator
40. Medical professional (first responder, EMT, paramedic)
41. Hazardous materials first responder
42. Rescue technician (basic or advanced)
43. Firefighter (oh, yes, on occasion, we are still asked to put out fires!)

I have probably missed a few professions or trades, so feel free to add your own to the list to educate others about what a firefighter really does. Take a deep look at what a firefighter does from the time they arrive at the firehouse to the time they leave the firehouse. Whether or not they respond to a single call, they may still do many of the above items while on duty at the firehouse. Talk to most senior firefighters, and I bet they can provide examples of having to do a good majority (of not more) of those abovementioned items at some point in their career, obviously some more than others. Some people forget that we are the folks people call when they cannot figure out what to do, or more commonly, cannot afford to call a repair person for, especially at three o'clock in the morning, on a holiday. While they may not want to pay triple time for a plumber to come to their house to stop the water flowing from a burst pipe, they have no problem calling 9-1-1 knowing we will come and at least stop the problem, with some thinking we may solve the problem. If nothing else, we will probably stop the immediate problem, and then direct them with who they need to contact to fully solve the problem. If you haven't figured it out by now, I hope you do very quickly realize we don't just "save lives and property anymore," and that we are really jacks of all trades. I won't go

as far as adding "but masters of none," because I hope if nothing else, we are masters at our profession and the core expectations of what we are here for: serving our community and making a positive difference every day we are on duty.

If you do not embrace the challenges a firefighter faces every day (and I don't mean life-threatening or life-saving challenges, those are usually far and few), you will be frustrated and unhappy. Instead of getting angry with the folks who call 9-1-1 for our assistance, do your best to have patience, tolerance, and most of all compassion for their current situation. To you, it may be a B.S. call; to them, it may be the emergency of a lifetime. More importantly though, we need to educate our future firefighters and let them know we don't just save lives and property (less than 5% of our job) and that instead, we are here to help the people who pay our salaries, solve the problems they are faced with in a courteous and professional way, to ensure we leave the impression that they cannot live without us!