



# Can You Handle the Heat? Oregon's Firefighters Can

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by *Kale Donnelly*

## First Ones In, Last Ones Out

As Oregonians, we've all probably pulled off to the side of the road to make way for the whirring sirens of firetrucks passing by. Those brave enough to take on the responsibility of going into the danger rather than running away from it have earned a specific title all their own – Firefighter. With more than 12,000 firefighters in Oregon, both volunteer and career, these men and women who serve their communities do so without question. At the same time, it's a job that they are more than willing to perform. With a state average wage of \$64,273, favorable benefits, and an unrivaled camaraderie amongst coworkers, this can be a very desirable career and lifestyle. Let's take a look at what it takes to become a firefighter, how they operate from day to day, and how their demand varies between counties.

## Do You Have What It Takes?

In order to become a firefighter candidate, one must undergo extensive physical and mental conditioning to train for the job's stringent requirements. Candidates must pass exams that test spatial awareness, reading comprehension, mechanical reasoning, logic, observation, and memory. Applicants must also pass a physical fitness test – the Candidate Physical Ability Test (CPAT). This test has eight separate events that must be completed in less than 10 minutes and 20 seconds. The events include a weighted-vest stair climb, 50 foot hose drag, weighted equipment carry, and a wall-breaching hammer swing to name a few – all to ensure a candidate is minimally fit to complete basic firefighter duties.

The amount of training to become a firefighter is extensive – it takes more than 400 hours to earn your Firefighter II Certification. The lion's share of this training is time spent at Fire Academy, a boot camp of sorts intended to turn individuals into sharp, calculated, and efficient firefighting team members. On top of that are specialized elective trainings that trainees can undergo in order to specialize in many different areas. According to the Department of Public Safety Standards and Training's (DPSST's) Fire Division, firefighters along the coast will receive more extensive training in maritime firefighting; those east of the Cascades typically have more of an emphasis on wildland firefighting; and those in larger urban areas will train more comprehensively in urban navigation and structural firefighting. Most firefighters will specialize in something, but all of them are trained to adequately respond to any distress calls they may receive.

A candidate must also obtain the required Emergency Medical Technician certification, given that these

men and women must be able to perform various medical procedures when they arrive on scene. Not all responses to a call are for fire-related incidences. It's not uncommon to see a fire truck at the same scene as an ambulance. Why? Both professionals can provide many of the same medical services, and firefighters aim to cut down the response time by possibly arriving sooner than their ambulance counterparts.

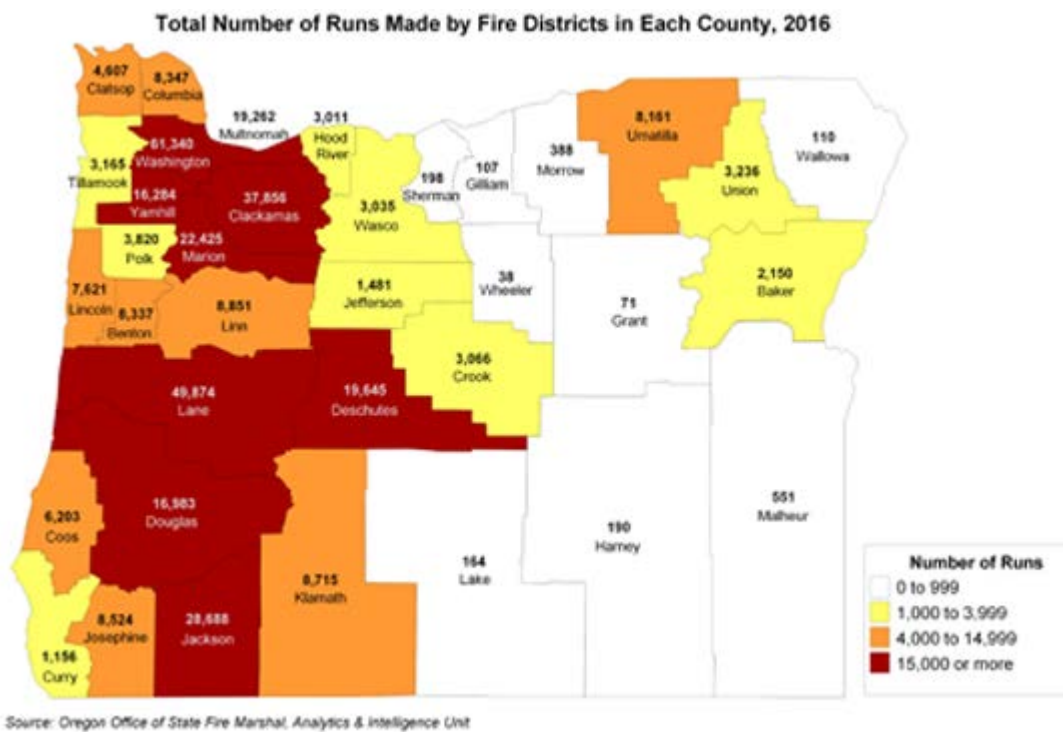
One key component that's commonly glossed over is that those considering a career in this field must be able to handle the pressures of the job. In other words, critical incident stress management is a tool that all firefighters must possess, as the harsh conditions and the toll they may take on human life at any scene are very much a reality that can't be avoided. These men and women are truly strong, both physically *and* mentally.

### A Day in the Life

After visiting with Gregg Timm, Fire Chief for the City of Roseburg, it was all too easy to gain a sense of his drive for the firefighting lifestyle, as well as his commitment to setting his crew up for success. With 29 years of service under his belt, he's climbed up the ladder (no pun intended) from the ranks of Firefighter to Engineer, Lieutenant, Battalion Chief, Division Chief, and finally to Fire Chief.

Chief Timm comes from three generations of police officers, but he stated that he wanted to switch up the family legacy and carve a new path for himself. When asked why he does what he does, he said, "We have the ability to take someone's worst day and make it better," and adds that "it's a job, it's a drive, it's a passion." A passion shared amongst all firefighters, and one that has brought Timm's unit together as a family. Camaraderie is just as much a vital component to a well-oiled unit as adequate training and preparedness. Given that firefighters live, eat, and sleep in the firehouse during their shift, their cohesiveness as a unit is of utmost importance.

After



conversing with Chief Timm about how a typical day in the firehouse goes, he stated the personnel in the firehouse maintain a "constant state of readiness" by performing equipment checks and engaging in various training exercises during their shifts. With the changing of technology, more advanced equipment takes know-how and maintenance in order to preserve that constant state of readiness – thermal imaging cameras, air monitoring equipment, and multiple computer based programs.

Additionally, Timm likes to keep his men sharp and maximize training by trying to do something in-house every week and by organizing multi-company evolutions with other units on the weekends. Essentially, “The days of sitting around and playing cribbage are over,” says Timm.

## More than Just Fires

Just how often are firefighters responding to calls that require their attention? This varies greatly by county, and at first glance seems to coincide with county population. Tualatin Valley Fire and Rescue in Washington County, the second most populated county in Oregon, reported the greatest number of “runs” in the state in 2016 – a term used for any time the fire engine’s tires hit the pavement. Worth noting, runs made specifically for a fire, or a fire-related incident, only comprise 5 percent of all runs on a statewide basis. The other 95 percent are contributed to a multitude of reasons, with the largest contributor of those runs being medical-related services.

Our employment numbers at the Employment Department show that counties with a higher number of responses to calls have a higher proportion of people employed within the fire protective service. However, a caveat to this data is that volunteer firefighters (which significantly dominate a greater share of firefighter employment in rural counties) fall under the All Other Support Services industry, and separating volunteer firefighter employment from this industry is nearly impossible. According to the DPSST, roughly 70 percent of firefighters throughout the state come from a volunteer or combination department (career and volunteer). However, the overall trend with the employment-to-runs ratio would more than likely remain the same.

## Overview

Firefighters are not only physically and mentally fit individuals, but they are also service-oriented professionals who willingly risk their lives to keep their communities safe. While they are away from their families, they’re with their firehouse family ensuring that they and their equipment are prepared for any call at a moment’s notice. If you would like to pursue a career in firefighting, Chief Timm says, “Just ask. Reach out. Talk to firefighters, because they’re more than willing to answer your questions.” There are various programs throughout the state, and many of them can be found through our website’s [Occupation Profiles](#), as well as current job openings, wage levels, skills, and career pathways. Those who are “the first ones in and the last ones out” are the best of the best, and welcome more to join their ranks.

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