

Pittsburgh Fire Fighters, IAFF Local No. 1

Next Generation of Firefighters

Recruitment

Good morning Chairman Stefano and Chairwoman Muth, and members of the committee. Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to speak to all of you today on this important subject matter.

My name is Ralph Sicuro and I am the President of Pittsburgh Fire Fighters IAFF Local No.1 and I am also an active firefighter with the Pittsburgh Bureau of Fire where I have served for the past 24 years.

Today I offer a perspective on the challenges a career fire department has recruiting and hiring firefighters, specifically the city of Pittsburgh Bureau of Fire. We currently have 670 firefighters and provide services to the city of Pittsburgh, Borough of Wilkinsburg, and the Borough of Ingram.

Recruitment for career firefighters in the city of Pittsburgh is handled solely by the city of Pittsburgh Department of Human Resources and Civil Service, with some assistance from the Pittsburgh Bureau of Fire. Recruitment efforts are challenged by other industries in our region such as healthcare, technology, and building trade which all have a need to fill their growing workforce.

Recruitment

There were times when the city of Pittsburgh announced it was seeking applicants for the position of firefighter and they would receive thousands of applications. Now we only see a few hundred, our current application period for 2021 received 492 applicants. Looking back to 2008 when we received just over 1,500 applicants to today's 492 that's a 67% loss in applicants.

The city of Pittsburgh spends approximately \$50,000 on a recruitment budget, with advertisements through their website, social media and marketing material. The city has representatives attend job fairs and other community events in an attempt to recruit potential firefighters.

Firefighters themselves are probably one of the most effective recruiters, both active and retired, spreading the word when the city prepares to start the application process. But we too have seen a decline in interest from friends and family members.

The city has partnered with our public school system to develop an Emergency Response Technology (ERT) program where students learn the technical knowledge and skills required to perform entry level duties in fire fighting, emergency medical services, and law enforcement.

The students are offered certifications in the following:

- Emergency Medical Technician (EMT)
- Hazardous Materials First Responder Awareness
- Essentials of Firefighting
- National Incident Management Systems (NIMS)

- Basic Life Support for Healthcare Providers (BLS)

Application

Everyone interested in applying for the position of firefighter for the city of Pittsburgh Bureau of Fire must meet the minimum requirements. The requirements are as follows:

- Must be at least 18 years of age at time of application
- Must be a city resident 1 year prior to application
- Must have a current, valid PA driver's license
- Never been convicted of a felony or serious misdemeanor

Testing process

Applicants meeting the minimum requirements will receive an invitation to take the written exam. Each applicant receives preparation guide material and must achieve a minimum of 75% to pass the exam and they are given 2.5 hour to take the test.

On top of the 67% decline in applicants, we also lose an average of 54% of those who apply through our testing process. For example, out of the 492 applicants this year 45 chose not to schedule an exam, 40 scheduled but did not show up, 66 failed the written exam and 5 did not test due to military waivers. Thus far we have lost 156 applicants out of 492 that is nearly 32% of our applicants to this point leaving 336 eligible for the physical exam.

Those receiving a passing score on the written exam will be scheduled for a physical exam. The physical exam consists of an initial flexibility event followed by a sequence of timed and scored activities while wearing a weighted vest. The activities include rescue, forcible entry, brisk walk, stair climb, and hose hoist.

By my estimates based on an average over the past decade we will lose, either through applicants not showing up or failure, another 110 applicants during the physical exam leaving us with around 226 applicants for the final eligibility list. Applicants who successfully passed the physical exam and are entitled to military veteran preference points, will have them added to their final total score at this time. From this eligibility list the city will start at number 1 and pull names in numerical order for the hiring process.

The testing process costs are approximately \$40,000 for the written exam and \$53,000 (\$18,821) for the physical exam for a grand total of \$93,000.

Hiring Process

Once an applicant makes the final eligibility list they will become a candidate for full time employment. All candidates offered conditional employment must submit to background checks, a polygraph, medical evaluations including stress testing, and hair follicle drug testing.

This process usually yields one firefighter recruit for every two candidates on the final eligibility list, meaning the city will select the first 64 candidates in an attempt to get 32 firefighter recruits in a class. The reason for a 2:1 ratio is candidates will fail portions of the background check, medical evaluation or drug testing and others will have moved, taken other employment, or simply declined the job opportunity.

An eligibility list consisting of 226 candidates could yield upto three recruit classes before the list expires. Three recruit classes using an average of two candidates to get one firefighter recruit draws down approximately 192 candidates leaving a buffer of 34 remaining on the eligibility list. At this point the process starts all over again.

I was not able to gather costs on background checks, polygraphs, medical evaluations and drug testing.

Conclusion

The fire service in Pennsylvania, both career and volunteer, struggle to recruit and on the career side hire firefighters. I hope today I was able to demonstrate the difficulties a career department faces in attracting and hiring the Next Generation of Firefighters.

Ralph Sicuro
President, Pittsburgh Fire Fighters
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