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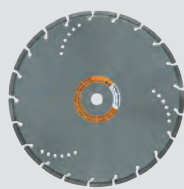
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Expanding Your Horizons

Is Paramedic Certification Right for You?

By Danielle Taylor

Over 723 hours. The bells ring for a motor vehicle accident in your first due. Down in the bay you go to jump on the rig to head to the scene, where you find an unconscious man slumped over his steering wheel after crashing into a yield sign. A medic alert tag shows you he's diabetic. Check the blood sugar—32—and start an IV line of dextrose into his vein to bring him back to consciousness. Halfway to the hospital, he wakes up sobbing, so you comfort him as your partner pulls into the hospital's ambulance bay. You fill out a few papers and chat with the charge nurse, then you're headed back to the station.

One good thing about the fire service is that it's always open to change.

Maybe you're a firefighter, tired of sitting around the station every day, bored between the scarce fire calls. Maybe you're a volunteer, hoping to turn your spare-time gig into a full-time profession. Maybe the answer to your discontent

lies in the other side of the fire service. Adding a paramedic certification to your resume could be just the jump you need.

"I like what I do," says Blake Iselin, firefighter/EMT-Paramedic for the Arlington County (Va.) Fire Department. "Doing both fire and EMS gives you the chance to do a lot more than you could in just one area or the other."

Today's fire service has evolved from men who simply put the wet stuff on the red stuff to a crew of millions that performs emergency services of every kind. Fire academies across the nation boast classes in everything from hazardous materials operations to swiftwater rescue, and modern firefighters face a growing expectation to be well versed in several areas of the emergency service.

With this shift away from simple firefighting applications to the wide range of services the department provides today, it is no wonder that most departments across the nation require their firefighters be cross-trained as EMTs at the basic level, at least. Of the nearly 30,000 or so fire departments in the United States, 56.6 percent provide EMS service as well. Departments responded to more than 22.6



million calls in 2004, and of those, 62 percent, or 14.1 million, were medical aid calls. Less than 1.6 million calls were classified as fires, leaving fire calls at 7 percent. These numbers prove how the historic fire department is expanding its horizons to encompass every emergency a community may experience.

“Our program has sent out firefighter/paramedics since 1974,” says Wayne Zygowicz, EMS chief for Littleton (Colo.) Fire Rescue and a paramedic for more than 20 years. “You can’t even measure the value of it. The fire department is not one-dimensional, and it’s so great to have people bring a lot of different knowledge to the field.”

“Being assigned to the Medic Unit, I’d say 98 percent of the calls I run are medical/trauma calls,” says Iselin. “Being a paramedic allows me to make a difference in a patient’s condition more than an EMT-B can. There’s a big range of calls we run. I’ve had criminals jump out of the third-floor windows, breaking both their legs, all sorts of different medical-related calls, motor vehicle accidents, stabbings and almost anything you can and can’t imagine.”

AREA OF GROWTH

1143 hours. Three bells alert you for an apartment fire. Thirty seconds after the alarm sounds, your crew is going 60 mph with full lights and sirens, weaving through traffic, praying to beat out the next company for the knock. There’s smoke showing from a window on the second floor, so you shoulder an attack line and advance it to the side stairwell. After masking up, you and your backup man take the line to the apartment with smoke curling under the door. Someone breaks the deadbolt and you enter to find a mattress smoldering, the room choked with smoke. As you douse the bed, a firefighter drags an unconscious victim outside. Someone breaks a window, clearing the air. While tearing the place apart, you look out and see your buddies loading the patient up, pumping oxygen into his lungs. You clear the apartment and take all the gear back to the engine.

As one of the fastest-growing jobs in the nation, the government expects a need for more than 50,000 EMTs and

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paramedics by 2014. Firefighting has also been listed as one of the fastest-growing jobs in the near future. As the population continues to shift and people move from cities and rural areas to suburbia, areas previously covered by volunteers are more and more getting career personnel to staff stations. Those highly trained in both fields have a major edge over their competition. While most single-function firefighters may have to apply several times at many different departments to get hired, paramedics have almost a 100 percent hire rate. The additional training as a firefighter suddenly becomes extra incentive for departments to hire specific personnel, many of whom wanted to be firefighters all along.

However, as everyone knows, being a firefighter/paramedic is not without its stigma. Many firefighters feel that EMS service of any kind is a drain on the fire service, a waste of resources and a task thrown to professionals who want to have nothing to do with patient care. While some are merely complaining about having to ride the ambulance when they only want to be on fire trucks, others have legitimate concerns about the future of the fire department.

At many stations, chiefs delegate rookie or insubordinate firefighters to ride the

ambulance as a punishment, leaving no wonder as to why EMS has a bad reputation from the inside. With this stigma permanently etched in the minds of many firefighters early in their careers, why would anyone want to become a paramedic?

"It's destroying the fire service," says one volunteer officer in Maryland. "What happens is a lot of guys get hired as firefighter/paramedics at a higher pay rate, and they go through the fire academy and paramedic school, and then they get placed on a medic unit and never really get off. After a few years in the field, many of them want to spend more time on the fire side, but if they just drop back to being a firefighter, they have to take a pay cut. So the only way for them to advance is to become a fire lieutenant, but they may not have been in a burning structure since the academy, and they lack the field experience to lead others as a fire officer."

Many paramedics disagree, saying their cross-training only opens them up to more opportunities instead of hindering them in the field they eventually want to specialize in anyway.

"We encourage our personnel to keep their paramedicine certification throughout their career, and most do," says Zygowicz.

"There is no 'going to the fire side,' because we are the fire side. If you look at our lieutenants and captains, you'll see most of them were paramedics at one point in their careers or still have their certification active."

"I wouldn't have gotten hired by Arlington if I hadn't signed a contract saying I'd become a paramedic," says Iselin. "When I was an EMT-B, I wasn't a big fan of the ambulance, but I grew to enjoy it as a medic. Now I actually have more opportunities to advance if I want to, on either the fire side or EMS." Iselin also keeps his fire knowledge fresh by volunteering at a nearby firehouse in Maryland, where he sees more fire than he does in his paying job.

"I was a volunteer firefighter for 23 years and a professional paramedic for 15," says Doug Beatty of Brookville, Pa. "My medical training helped me a lot in the fire service, because people got injured on fire calls, too. Also, my medical background helped when I changed professions and became a nurse."

THE SEEDS OF WAR

1447 hours. Dispatch alerts your unit for a patient with altered mental status. They advise you to stage for police, so you wait until the cops come and knock on

the door. After a moment, one of the officers waves you in, so you grab your bags. There's glass and blood everywhere and a man handcuffed in the kitchen. A woman's arm is bleeding, and the left leg of her jeans is soaked red. After a few minutes you find out the woman had been out drinking and her husband locked her out. She punched her fist through the window and cut her arm up in the process. The police have dealt with these folks before.

Like many major technological advancements, paramedic history is rooted in war. Rapid gunfire changed the injury pattern of those hurt in the American Civil War, and as warfare technology evolved from bayonets to machine guns, ambulatory medical service improved as well. Field hospitals focused mainly on amputations and stopping blood flow, waiting to transport patients to established hospitals once the gunfire ceased and resources became available. Once "ambulances" marked with red crosses arrived, they were understood to be off-limits for gunfire, and patients on both sides got their chance at survival. Many patients who would have died with the primitive field hospital care were saved due to the efforts of off-site medical providers the ambulances took them to.

Many of the first public ambulances were run by funeral directors with no medical training, hoping simply for easy access to new business, but as the need for emergent medical care and evacuation to hospitals increased, so did the roles of those who provided this service.

EMS as we now know it wasn't formalized until the late 1960s, and for the first time, patients found the service that transported them to the hospital was being staffed by trained medical professionals. In 1969, the Miami Fire Department began the nation's first paramedic program, soon followed by the Los Angeles County Fire Department and the rest of the country.

Interestingly enough, a TV show brought EMS to the public mindset. "Emergency!," which debuted on NBC in 1972, showed the daily grind of paramedics Johnny Gage and Roy DeSoto as they served Los Angeles County. At the show's onset, there were only 12 medic units in the entire country; when the series ended in 1977, 50 percent of the nation was within 10 minutes of a medic unit. The population began to expect emergency medical service to be available to them just like it was shown on TV, and fire departments responded in kind. Later shows such as "Rescue 911," "ER" and "Saved" continued this trend of giving the public insight into EMS through television.

Today, there are 142,000 paramedics in the country, an increase that has heightened the need for emergency medical technicians of all levels over the past three decades. Helicopters entered the service as alternate emergency vehicles for massive trauma, cardiac emergencies and long-distance transports to specialty medical centers. EMS is a four-tiered system, ranging from First Responders (40-60 hours of training), EMT-Basics (120 hours of training), EMT-Intermediates (200-400 hours of training) to EMT-Paramedics (1,000 hours or more of

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training).

The prospect of getting cross-trained as a firefighter/paramedic makes the childhood dream of riding on the big red truck much more economically feasible. With higher pay rates for responders trained in several areas of emergency services, firefighter/paramedics beat out their single-function coworkers in salary and benefits. The average salary for a firefighter in 2004 was \$39,980, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor statistics. According to the *Journal of Emergency Medical Services*, paramedics average \$40,318. However, the firefighter/paramedic averages a \$10,000 higher base wage than an emergency service provider who serves in only one area of concentration, with the potential for a higher income coming from bonuses, stipends, overtime, teaching and increased education—not bad for an extra few semesters of education. Gaining certifications in other areas of rescue also raises salaries, making the profession that much more practical.

The community benefits from cross-trained personnel as well. The fire service is becoming better trained and equipped to deal with all sorts of emergencies as the population requires more and more assistance. As those of the baby boomer generation move into their 50s and 60s, health concerns become paramount, and the need for paramedics to deal with all sorts of medical emergencies is becoming greater.

Since the government is expecting a need for all these EMTs and paramedics in the next eight years, and with fire stations moving away from all-volunteer units to encompass more and more career personnel, the opportunity to advance is there. Individuals who make themselves indispensable by having a variety of useful skills will find themselves ahead of the crowd in promotional opportunities and salary raises.

THE BOTTOM LINE

1952 hours. Asthma attack. You recognize the address—the woman there has emphysema and a pack-a-day smoking habit. She lives alone without a car, so you're old friends. Once on-scene, you see her standing in her doorway with her bag already packed, and the BLS ambulance is parked at the curb. They're checking her vitals and waiting for your go-ahead, so you put her on oxygen and tell them they're fine to take her. The EMTs load her up and go, and you're cleared from the call after just a few minutes.

Adding a paramedic certification to your resume could cost anywhere from \$1,500 to \$6,000, but most departments will reimburse their employees or pay up front for the training. The program could take a year or more, with most students completing their degrees within two or three years. Generally, programs are conducted with the student in

mind, with nighttime sessions and classes that won't conflict with the odd schedules of many EMTs and firefighters. Programs run approximately 1,200 hours and include components such as labs, lecture, EMS clinicals and hospital clinicals. Aside from straight paramedic courses, students are commonly recommended, if not required, to take courses in anatomy and physiology, psychology, composition, speech and math in order to complete the paramedic certification.

"After the fire academy, our personnel go for one year of probation, after which we send them through a battery of tests to see if we think they'd qualify to be a paramedic," says Zygowicz. "If we send them to medic school, they go offline for six months and take classes. They're still on salary, and after they get their paramedic certification, they go for another year of probation under the supervision of a paramedic/lieutenant before we allow them to do patient care unsupervised."

"I was hired as a firefighter/EMT-B [in October 2001], but part of my contract was to get my paramedic certification," says Iselin. "I spent 25 weeks in the academy and two years in the field after getting hired before starting paramedic school. The department made it easy for us; on days that we were on shift but had to attend class, we were detailed to class and did not have to use our leave." Iselin says all of his expenses for the program, including tuition, books and



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even parking passes, were paid for by his department. Also, when classes were held on days he wasn't scheduled to work, he got paid overtime. "Basically, I got paid to go to college," says Iselin.

"You never stop learning in this field," adds Beatty.

Do some research. What programs does your department offer? What are the benefits to you? How will it shape your job in five, 10, 20 years? If you haven't already, take an EMT-B course and get your feet wet with EMS. While many people are better suited to one job or the other, you may find yourself comfortable in both branches of emergency services.

"We've never had retention problems; in fact, there's a waiting list of personnel trying to get into paramedic school," says Zygowicz. "Training our people in both fire and EMS has worked out very well for our area."

0713 hours. After a long day at work, you walk in from the driveway and kiss your kids at the breakfast table. They ask how your shift went. "Oh," you say, "it was fine. Nothing out of the ordinary." NF&R

Danielle Taylor is a rising junior at the University of Maryland and a volunteer firefighter/EMT in Prince George's County in Maryland. She is majoring in journalism, English and human geography, and is spending her "spare" time interning for National Fire & Rescue.

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