

APPRENTICESHIP

Training Essential Workers in the Age of COVID-19

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Whether it's a natural disaster or a pandemic, firefighters don't have a "stay at home" option. As essential frontline workers, firefighters must respond to every potential threat, including the invisible threat of COVID-19. That means they not only have to stay at their posts, but they are required to continue mandated training on the job. For the thousands of firefighter apprentices in California, this reality has altered the way they receive their training and the precautions they take on the job.

CAL FIRE implemented a hybrid model for its fire control academy, guided by an online training course conducted under the supervision of a battalion chief in their home fire station. Testing and some training took place for one week at the training center. Sacramento City implemented distance learning at the beginning of the COVID-19 restrictions. LA County Fire continued classroom training but concentrated its academy into eight weeks, sequestered recruits, dramatically reduced class sizes and implemented strict distancing and sanitation standards.

Hands-on training for firefighters isn't just an aspect of the training process, it is a requirement of state and federal standards. CAL FIRE conducted most of its manipulative training and testing at the training center, with strict PPE and smaller groups. Sacramento City cancelled its manipulative training when the quarantine was implemented and has since implemented decentralized training.

Graduating from a training academy is an important moment for firefighters, and ceremonies were held but



A socially distant graduation held for firefighter apprentices.

changed considerably. Families were not allowed to attend, physical distancing was implemented and some of the traditional pomp was missing. In most cases, agencies were able to live-stream their graduations, with CAL FIRE conducting a double ceremony for two company officer academies.

Firefighters in California are also medical responders, putting them at high risk of exposure. For apprentices on the job, the protective standards were largely mandated by the CDC. In virtually every program, full PPE—including face shields, masks, gloves—were mandated on all calls. In addition, daily health monitoring and physical distancing requirements were established. Because online training is already a well-established component of firefighter training, these courses were able to continue.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also forced substantial changes in operations and procedures for California Firefighter Joint Apprenticeship Committee (Cal-JAC) and especially its recruitment and testing functions, including those targeting underrepresented groups.

Cal-JAC's Firefighter Candidate Testing Centers (FCTC) is an essential focus of pre-employment testing for firefighters. The statewide quarantine forced closure of the testing centers, pausing both written and physical ability testing—critical prerequisites for any firefighter recruit or apprentice. “It was a hardship for our candidates to have FCTC close, especially since many departments were still hiring,” said Yvonne de la Peña, Cal-JAC Executive Director.

Cal-JAC kept engaged with FCTC's thousands of firefighter candidates through robust social media programs including [video of stay-at-home test practices](#) and career encouragement. In June, [FCTC reopened](#) its physical ability testing to candidates, with reduced capacity, distancing requirements and rigorous sanitation of test equipment.

Like FCTC, Cal-JAC's overall operations were forced to close and have continued to operate remotely, without measurable impact on service.