

PUBLIC NEWS

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Fire Sirens: Women Underneath the Fireproofing

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**From
behind
the
frying pan
and into
the fire:
Why would a
woman want
to be a
firefighter?**



firefighter is simple. It is an important job that requires ability and desire, not all who could be firefighters want to, and not all those who want to can. I was both able and willing, and so I did it.

Perhaps it was an instinct to help others. My great-grandfather was a volunteer firefighter all his life, so maybe part of my interest was inherited. Perhaps it's a combination of all those elements and more.

What about other female firefighters? Why and how did they chose this profession? How were they received by their male counterparts? Once out of their bunker gear and fire engines, what kinds of women were they?

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Maureen Crespo, 30, has worked for two years as a firefighter for the City of Houston and eight years as a volunteer in the Klein Fire Department. She graduated from Houston Community College with a degree in Physical Therapy Assistance, and it was during her college years that she began volunteering. As a child, she watched volunteers in her Klein neighborhood, always interested but never thinking she would someday become one herself — because back then, she says, "Only men could be 'real' firefighters."

She found herself fascinated and inspired by the fact that so many of the volunteers were women. "Here were all these women (working fire scenes) in the middle of the day," she said. For good reason — it was mostly women who didn't work outside the home who were able to volunteer their time during the day. Nighttime shifts are from 6:00 p.m. to 6:00 a.m., which is when most of the men were available. Today, more volunteers belong to double-income families, so the ratio of women to men is likely to be about the same during the day as at night.

Because 85 percent of all emergency calls are emergency medical service-related, firefighters that work for the city of Houston are required to become either EMTs or paramedics. As such, Crespo rotates her duties. Paid firefighters work eight 24-hour shifts per month, and of those shifts, she spends one and a half on the ambulance. Still, she is able to use her medical skills a great deal of the time as part of the First Responder Program, which was developed so that a ladder truck or other fire

by **CHRIS PULLEN**

Over the hiss of my own amplified breathing inside my air mask, I heard my lieutenant shout, "Chris, you're the smallest one! Take the red line up into the attic!"

Someone handed me the hose and moved to hold the attic ladder that we had extended through a scuttle hole and leaned against a ceiling joist. The fire had started up there and was burning its way downward into the rest of the house. To prevent it from reigniting, we had to suppress it at the source.

That I was small was essential; the width of the ladder was about 10 inches, and the hole through which I crawled was not much larger. In full bunker gear, I weighed an additional 47 pounds, and if you were to wrap a tape measure around me, my girth would have been increased by at least a foot and a half.

In one thickly gloved hand, I held the red line, and with the other, I pulled myself into the attic. I wedged my body sideways to allow the air tank strapped to my back to pass through the hole, and then, hooking an oversized rubber boot through the ladder rung, I adjusted the hose tip to a narrow-angle fog and opened the nozzle. The pressure from the water blast drove me backward, forcing my air cylinder against the ceiling joist behind me. I had no way of maintaining a secure foothold while the hose was open, so I gave another short blast of water to push back the flames and then closed it so I could crawl

all the way into the attic.

It was hot — almost 1,000 degrees Fahrenheit. The heated gases spread out laterally from the top down, forcing cooler air to seek lower levels. My bunker gear was becoming a sweat box, building up body heat and hindering my movements. The attic was "fully involved," meaning fire was igniting all combustible materials, and the dense smoke and steam made it difficult to see.

My body felt heavy and awkward as I positioned myself on my knees atop a crossbeam whose structural integrity didn't seem immediately threatened. I was as fueled by adrenaline as the fire was by oxygen as I began my attack. I changed the tip to a straight stream, and blasted vent holes in the roof. I watched tar shingles and sheathing fly off rafters, exposing small patches of smoky sky. Water turned to steam which blanketed the large areas of fire, finally leaving only small clusters of flame. I soaked those much longer than I thought necessary, because fire can easily reignite in the dry places inside walls, rafters or beams. I thought over and over of the most basic lesson in my training: Put the wet stuff on the hot stuff.

My low-air bell went off, alerting me that I only had a few minutes of air left in my tank. It felt like I'd been up there for hours, and I had nearly forgotten the activity that was occurring just 10 feet below me. Other firefighters were soaking the interior of the house, lieutenants were coordinating efforts and reporting back to the captain, ambulance crews

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department apparatus would be dispatched to a scene if the nearest ambulance were delayed in its response. "I almost feel like we do more as First Responders," she said, "because there's always the hope that there's going to be a 'save.'"

When she talks, Crespo, fair-haired and cheerful, seems to exude competence. Her eyes are bright as she explains her passion for her work, and it is easy to see that she is proud of what she does.

What would she like the public to know about female firefighters? They seem to have a determination to make things work. They are very maternal with respect to patient care, especially in the treatment of children. And they can do the same jobs as men, though from a different approach. "It doesn't take [the ability to do] 200 pushups to pull a body out of a building. Women naturally use body mechanics rather than brute strength. It comes from years of picking up the groceries, picking up the clothes, picking up the kids."

Crespo and her husband, a firefighter for the city of Sugarland, are thinking of trying for a baby this summer. They have discussed the changes their lives would undergo, but she doesn't think she would approach her job differently, even when her maternal instinct kicks in, making risks seem more realistic.

"There's a lot in this field that could wipe you out at any moment," she said. "AIDS, meningitis, explosives (guns) in the house, wiring hooked up wrong because someone was trying to save money. I know what this job entails. Every time I step on that pumper, ambulance or ladder truck, I take a risk. There's always going to be risk involved, but you don't think about it when you're doing it. You just take the action that's needed."

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Kim Herring has known since the age of 10 or 11 that she wanted to become a public servant. "I wanted to do something exciting, and I wanted to help other people," she said. "I thought of becoming something like a cop or a nurse."

It wasn't until she was 20 that she knew she wanted to pursue firefighting. One evening, the porch light at her house shorted out, causing a small electrical fire. She immediately cut off the power and then used an extinguisher on the insulation in the garage attic, where the fire had begun to gain strength.

"I had it out before the fire department got there," she said. When they did arrive, she realized they were volunteers. Not long after, driven by the desire to contribute to the welfare of the community, she went to the nearby station and signed up. That was eight years ago.

Since then, Herring has helped fight some of the biggest fires in the district. She has married another firefighter who now works as District Chief for the

department she volunteers for, the West I-10 Fire Department. She and her husband have a daughter named Ashton.

Herring works as an assistant librarian at an elementary school, and every Tuesday night from 6:00 p.m. to 6:00 a.m., she runs with the West Harris

techniques and equipment make it possible for men and women with different levels of physical prowess to achieve the same goals. It's less about upper body strength than it is about leverage.

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would drag him. There are some things women can't do as fast as men can, but we can drag just like they can drag."

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"It's in my blood," says Kim Hughes, a 21-year-old volunteer firefighter. At age 5, she broke her arm while visiting her uncle, an EMT and firefighter for the city of Friendswood. It so happened that he had the ambulance, also known as "the box," parked in front of his house, and he drove her immediately to the emergency room in it. It was an experience that she remembers as defining her goal to become a firefighter herself.

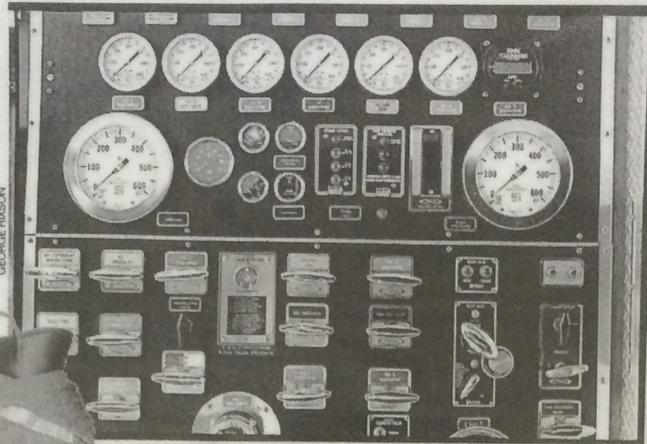
She began her involvement in the fire service six years ago as part of the Juniors, a group affiliated with the Boy Scouts of America. Girls and boys join Juniors at 15 and go through classes and department training. At 18, they are eligible to fight fire.

Another memory that contributed to Hughes' motivation for volunteer firefighting is of a friend who was killed in an automobile accident three years ago. It made her want to "go out and help people even more."

Living in a small town, too, has been an incentive. "I know just about everybody," she said. "I'd like to help them any way I can, save property if I can. A lot of people are in it for the hero part, which is true, but there's also a drawback. One day you can be a hero, but the next you might lose somebody to a fire or a car accident, and you go through that stage of depression for a while. What keeps me going are the people at the station. It has gotten me closer to the good Lord above, because I know He's watching over us. Him, the guys, my family—they all motivate me."

Hughes' family is a supportive one. Her sister also worked as an EMT for a while, and her mother takes photos for the department at scenes. Her father and other people around her are proud of her contribution.

"When I was in high school, all my teachers told me that they thought I was older than I was because of my attitude and responsibility. Being in the Juniors make me grow up faster and kept my grades up. I wouldn't change anything about it."



County EMS as a volunteer.

She is not able to perform as many duties in fire protection as she was before she had Ashton; now she does more administration and public service. It doesn't bother her that her focus has shifted. "There are other aspects of the fire department besides the glamour of fighting fire. There are other things that need to be done," she explains.

Herring doesn't consider her motherhood as a factor in how much risk she would take on when fighting fire. "We train so much that I feel that my skills would be there to back me up on an attack line, for example. As would the other firefighters. I wouldn't go into an especially dangerous situation, not because I'm a mother, but because none of us would."

Safety for all department members is the highest priority. Firefighters are taught to look out for themselves and the other crew members, and then the victims—whether human, animal or structural. If something happens to the firefighters, there isn't anyone to properly handle the dangers of rescue, fire suppression, salvage and overhaul.

Overhaul is what happens after the fire has been extinguished. Once a fire department takes over a scene, it "owns" the property. As such, the department is responsible for clearing the area of dangerous debris and helping the owners remove what belongings were salvaged from the fire. "Women," Herring says, "can do the job."

She is proud of the women who go in and do a job that they believe they can do. "I don't think they should get preferential treatment because they are women, but if they can do the job, they should. If they can't, they shouldn't."

Her male counterparts would agree. While physical fitness is important, there is a certain macho mystique that even most guys don't like. Most firefighters aren't bodybuilders, because that level of physical strength is not required. New

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GEORGE HIXSON

Hughes had a boyfriend whom she met at the fire station, a paramedic and a firefighter. They are still best friends after their recent breakup. When asked whether or not she would still want to fight fire if she marries and has children, she said, "Oh, of course I'll still do it. I'd be bored out of my mind [if I didn't]. I'll never give it up."

Along with the common desire to provide help to the community, a thrill factor accompanies the rush to don bunker gear while running to the fire engine, the deafening wail of the siren on the way to a scene, and then entering a burning building or approaching a burning car.

Hughes says the most exciting scene is an automobile accident. "I'm hoping the whole time that we'll be able to save somebody's life. When that tone's dropped [when the firefighters are called to a scene], I think my heart's going to race out of my body. It's sad to see an accident, but that's where the action is."

There is a selflessness about Hughes. She doesn't speak solely in terms of herself; she relies upon the teamwork of her department and gives them credit for their endorsement of her. "We can do a man's job. There are some things we can't do, and we'll admit it, but most things we can. That's when the guys are most supportive."

"We [women] get a lot of respect, and it feels great. It feels really good. The chief might tell a captain at a scene to keep an eye on us because we're smaller and everything, but we can do a good job."

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Four years ago, there were only 17 paid female firefighters for the city of Houston. Today, out of a total of 3115, there are 81, and the number is increasing. Of those 81, one woman holds the rank of Engineer/Operator or Chauffeur, and one is the first to have obtained the equivalent of the rank of Captain. Chief E.A. "Eddie" Corral encourages the participation and advancement of females within the department because, he says he wants everyone who has "a sincere desire to serve the public" to have the opportunity to do so.

Firefighting isn't a matter of being male or female; it is about hard work and commitment. More and more women are realizing they have both the skills

and the desire to make a difference in their communities, and they're doing it not to prove they can, but simply because they love the work.

...

If I call for an ambulance, why does a ladder truck arrive?

Several years ago, the city of Houston established the First Responder Program, which is designed to provide the fastest possible response to an emergency call. In the event that one of the 28 advanced life support ambulances is delayed, and the next closest one is out of the area, the Fire Department will dispatch either an engine, a "pumper" or a ladder truck.

A fire department apparatus will generally be able to reach a scene before an ambulance because ambulances are busier. It is estimated that 85 percent of all 911 calls are EMS-related, so ambulances are dispatched more frequently than fire engines. The fire department crews, which are all required to have certification as either EMTs or paramedics, provide an organized medical incident command system while the ambulance is en route. Crew members are able to administer CPR, set up IVs and provide other initial medical care. They are also there to secure an area for Life Flight if it is necessary to fly a patient to the hospital.

In a life-threatening situation, the first few minutes can be the most critical. The First Responder Program is responsible for a faster response time and, in some cases, a saved life.

The First Responder Program is a free community service. Patients are not billed for the Fire Department's response, only for transportation via ambulance.

Chris Pullen is a former volunteer firefighter, current marketing data analyst and contributing writer to PN.

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UNDERNEATH THE BUNKER GEAR

By Chris Pullen

Over the hiss of my own amplified breathing inside my air mask, I heard my lieutenant shout, "Chris, you're the smallest one! Take the red line up into the attic!" Someone handed me the hose and moved to hold the attic ladder that we had extended through a scuttle hole and leaned against a ceiling joist. The fire had started up there, and was burning its way downward into the rest of the house. In order to prevent it from reigniting, it had to be suppressed at the source.

That I was small was essential; the width of the unfolded ladder was about 10", and the hole through which I crawled was not much larger. In full bunker gear, I weighed an additional 47 lbs., and if you were to wrap a tape measure around me, my girth would have been increased by at least a foot and a half. In one thick, gloved hand, I held the red line, and with the other, I pulled myself into the attic. I wedged my body sideways to allow the S.C.B.A. air tank strapped to my back to pass partially through the hole, and then, hooking an oversized rubber boot through the ladder rung, I adjusted the hose tip to a narrow-angle fog, and opened the nozzle. The pressure from the water blast drove me backward, forcing my air cylinder against the ceiling joist behind me. I had no way of maintaining a secure foothold while the hose was open, so I gave another short blast of water to push back the flames, and then closed it so that I could crawl all the way into the attic.

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My low-air bell went off, alerting me that I only had a few minutes of air left in my tank. It felt like I'd been up there for hours, and had nearly forgotten the activity that was occurring just ten feet below me. Other firefighters were soaking the interior of the house, lieutenants were coordinating efforts and reporting back to the captain, ambulance crews were supplying exhausted firefighters with drinking water, neighbors stood behind the yellow tape, wide eyes reflecting the red and blue flashes from the apparatus lights.

When the fire was out, and the drama over, we stood around in the adrenaline afterglow slapping each other on the back. "Great job, Chris," someone said. "Yeah, Chris," said one of my buddies, "Not bad for a girl."

"Why would a woman want to be a firefighter?" is a question that I am frequently asked. Reaction by men and women who learn of my volunteerism is similar: curiosity. The reason I was, until recently after moving out of the district, a volunteer fire fighter is simple. It is an important job that requires ability and desire; not all who could be firefighters want to, and not all those who want to can. I was both able and willing, and so I did it. Perhaps it was an instinct to help others, or the adrenaline rush that accompanies attacking a blaze that made me want to fight fire. My great-grandfather was a volunteer firefighter all his life, so maybe part of my interest was inherited. Perhaps it's a combination of all those elements and more.

The question, though, set me on a search to learn about other female firefighters, and why and how they have chosen this profession. I wanted to find out how they were received by their male counterparts, who are generally less likely to consider this a "man's job" than the public might think. I wanted to know what kinds of women they were outside of their bunker gear and fire engines. The answers are compelling, and the women I talked with are as varied as the fires they fight. I, for example, am also a freelance writer, and a marketing data analyst for a software company. One is a young woman working on her G.E.D., with aspirations to work in television broadcasting. Another is an assistant librarian, mother of a little girl, and wife of another fire fighter. Still another is a full-time firefighter, an Emergency Medical Technician, or E.M.T., and a part-time physical therapist who is thinking about starting a family.

Maureen Crespo, aged 30, has worked for two years as a firefighter for the City of Houston, and eight years as a volunteer in the Klein Fire Department. She graduated from Houston Community College with a degree in Physical Therapy Assistance, and it was during her college years that she began volunteering. As a child, she watched volunteers in her Klein neighborhood, always interested, but never thinking that she would someday become a firefighter herself, because back then, she says, "Only men could be 'real' firefighters."

She found herself fascinated and inspired by the fact that so many of the volunteers were women. "Here were all these women [working fire scenes] in the middle of the day," she said. For good reason: it was mostly the women who didn't work outside the home who were able to volunteer their time during the day. Nighttime shifts are from 6:00 p.m. to 6:00 a.m., which is when most of the men were available. Today, more volunteers are parts of double-income families, so the ratio of women to men is likely to be about the same during the day as at night.

Because 85% of all emergency calls are Emergency Medical Service (or E.M.S.)-related, firefighters that work for the City of Houston are required to become either E.M.T.s or paramedics. As such, Maureen rotates her duties. Paid firefighters work eight 24-hour shifts per month, and of those, she spends one and a half shifts on the ambulance. Still, she is able to use her medical skills a great deal of the time as part of the First Responder Program, which was developed so that a ladder truck or other fire department apparatus would be dispatched to a scene in the event that the nearest ambulance were to be delayed in its response. "I almost feel like we do more as First Responders," she said, "because [of the fact that we get there first] there's always the hope that there's going to be a save."

When she talks, Maureen, fair-haired and cheerful, seems to exude competence. Her eyes are bright as she explains her passion for her work, and it is easy to see that she is proud of what she does. What would she like the public to know about female firefighters? They seem to have a determination to make things work. They are very maternal as far as patient care, especially in the treatment of a child. And they can do the same job as a man, though from a different approach. "It doesn't take [the ability to do] 200 pushups to pull a body out of a building. Women naturally use body mechanics rather than brute strength. It comes from years of picking up the groceries, picking up the clothes, picking up the kids."

She and her husband, a firefighter for the City of Sugarland, are thinking of trying for a baby this summer. They have discussed the changes that their lives would undergo, but she doesn't think that she would approach her job differently even when her maternal instinct "kicks in" and the risks might seem more realistic.

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Kim Herring has known since the age of ten or eleven that she wanted to become a public servant. "I wanted to do something exciting, and I wanted to help other people," she said. "I thought of becoming something like a cop or a nurse." It wasn't until age twenty that she knew she wanted to pursue firefighting.

One evening, the porch light at her house shorted out, causing a small electrical fire. She immediately cut off the power, and then used an extinguisher on the insulation in the garage attic, which is where the fire began to gain strength. "I had it out before the fire department got there," she said. When they did arrive, she realized that they were volunteers. Not long after, driven by the desire to contribute to the welfare of the community, she went to the nearby station and signed up. That was eight years ago.

Since then, she has helped fight some of the biggest fires in her district. She has married another firefighter who now works as District Chief for the department that Kim volunteers for, West I-10 Fire Department. They have a daughter named Ashton. Kim works as an assistant librarian at an elementary school, and every Tuesday night from 6:00 p.m. to 6:00 a.m. she runs with the West Harris County E.M.S. as a volunteer.

She is not able to perform as many duties in fire protection as before having Ashton, but now she does more administration and public service. It doesn't bother her that her focus has shifted, she says, "because there are other aspects of the fire department besides the glamour of fighting fire. There are other things that need to be done."

Kim doesn't consider her motherhood as a factor in terms of how much risk she would take when fighting fire. "We train so much that I feel that my skills would be there to back me up on an attack line, for example. As would the other firefighters. I wouldn't go into an especially dangerous situation, not because I'm a mother, but because none of us would."

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human, animal or structural. If something happens to the firefighters, then there isn't anyone to properly handle the dangers of rescue, fire suppression, salvage and overhaul. Overhaul is what happens after the fire has been extinguished. Once a fire department takes over a scene, it "owns" the property. As such, the department is responsible for clearing the area of dangerous debris, and for helping the owners remove what belongings were salvaged from the fire. "Women," Kim said, "can do the job."

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"It's in my blood," says Kim Hughes, a 21-year-old volunteer firefighter in Katy. At age five, she broke her arm while visiting her uncle, an E.M.T. and firefighter for the City of Friendswood. It so happened that he had the ambulance, also known as "the box," parked in front of his house, and was able to drive her to the emergency room in it directly. It was an experience that she remembers as defining her goal to become a firefighter herself.

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Another memory she has that contributed to her motivation for volunteer firefighting is of her friend who was killed in an automobile accident three years ago. She says it made her want to "go out and help people even more."

Living in a small town, too, has been an incentive for her participation. "I know just about everybody," she said. "I'd like to help them any way I can, save property if I can. A lot of people are in it for the hero part, which is true, but there's also a drawback. One day you can be a hero, but the next you might lose somebody to a fire or a car accident, and you go through that stage of depression for a while. What keeps me going are the people at the station. It has gotten me closer to the good Lord above, because I know He's watching over us. Him, the guys, my family—they all motivate me."

Hers is a supportive family. In addition to her uncle, her sister also worked as an E.M.T. for a while, and her mother takes photos for the department at scenes. Her father, and other people around her are proud of her contribution. "When I was in high school, all my teachers told me that they thought I was older than I was because of my attitude and responsibility. Being in the Juniors make me grow up faster, and kept my grades up. I wouldn't change anything about it."

Kim had a boyfriend whom she met at the fire station, a paramedic and a firefighter. They are still best friends even after their recent break-up. When asked about

whether or not she would like to fight fire after she married and had children, she said, "Oh of course I'll still do it. I'd be bored out of my mind. I'll never give it up." Then, thoughtful, she added, "I don't like to see kids hurt. It would make me think of my own kids, and make me more determined to help others because of them."

Along with the common desire to provide help to the community, there is a thrill factor that accompanies the rush to don bunker gear while running to the fire engine, and the deafening wail of the siren on the way to a scene, and then entering a burning building or approaching a burning car. Kim says that the most exciting scene is an automobile accident. "I'm hoping the whole time that we'll be able to save somebody's life. When that tone's dropped (when the firefighters are called to a scene), I think my heart's going to race out of my body. It's sad to see an accident but that's where the action is. Or a good fire. 'Good fire' is good for us, but sad for the family. But that's when we can help."

There is a selflessness to Kim. She doesn't speak solely in terms of herself; she relies upon the teamwork of her department, and she gives them credit for their endorsement of her. "We can do a man's job. There are some things we can't do, and we'll admit it, but most things we can. That's when the guys are most supportive; they'll say 'You can do it, you can do it, and if you can't then just holler.' We [the women] get a lot of respect, and it feels great. It feels really good. The chief might tell a captain at a scene to keep an eye on us, because we're smaller and everything, but we can do a good job."

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If I call for an ambulance, why does a fire engine arrive?

Several years ago, the City of Houston established the First Responder Program, which is designed to provide the fastest possible response to an emergency call. In the event that one of the 28 advanced life support ambulances is delayed, and the next closest one is out of the area, the Fire Department will dispatch either an engine, or "pumper" or a ladder truck.

A fire department apparatus will generally be able to reach a scene before an ambulance because of the fact that ambulances are busier. It is estimated that 85% of all 911 calls are E.M.S.-related, and so ambulances are dispatched more frequently than fire engines. The fire department crews, which are all required to have certification as either E.M.T.s or paramedics, provide an organized medical incident command system while the ambulance is en route. Crew members are able to administer CPR, set up IVs and provide other initial medical care. They are also there to secure an area for Life Flight, if

it is necessary to fly a patient to the hospital, as well as to offer manpower to the ambulance crews if a patient is especially heavy, for example, or on an upper level in an apartment or office building.

In a life-threatening situation, the first few minutes can be the most critical. The First Responder Program is responsible for a faster response time, and in some cases, a saved life. City of Houston Captain Jimmy Hunter said, "We've actually been there and initiated CPR, and that's why some people are alive today. Those first minutes are real important."

The First Responder Program is a free service provided to the community. The patient is not billed for the response from the Fire Department, only for the transportation via ambulance.