

Fire and Emergency Service Terminology



If you have never set foot inside a fire or EMS department before, some of the lingo might be unfamiliar to you. To provide you with a little background, below are some commonly used terms and their definitions. Please note that some terminology may vary depending on the location.

Apparatus – Vehicle used in transporting firefighters to the scene of an incident. Types of apparatus include aerial or ladder trucks, engines or pumpers, and brush trucks, among others. In some areas, it may also be referred to as a “rig.”

Career, call, and volunteer – Career refers to individuals who make fire and emergency service their occupation. They have shifts at a station and are paid. Call refers to individuals who have a different, primary job and are paid only for incidents that they respond to. Volunteer refers to individuals who respond to incidents without pay.

EMS – Emergency medical service.

EMT – Emergency medical technician. Individuals who are specially trained and certified to provide basic emergency care and life support services before and during transport to a hospital or other care facility.

Engine – This is an apparatus designed for fire attack and is equipped with a water tank, water pump, and firefighting hose. Also called pumpers.

First Responders – Individuals who, in the early stages of an incident, are responsible for the protection and preservation of life, property, evidence, and the environment. This general term includes firefighters and EMTs.

Firefighters – Individuals who respond to fire incidents and, frequently, to medical emergencies as well, including most natural and man-made disasters.

Fire Chief – The head of a fire department.

Hazmat – Hazardous materials. Includes chemicals and materials that are explosive, flammable, or otherwise capable of causing death or destruction when improperly handled or released.

ICS – Incident Command System. This is a set structure for command, organization, and coordination of an emergency response effort. The Incident Commander is the person in charge of and responsible for the emergency response to an incident.

Non-operational – This refers to the non-response or non-emergency tasks of the department.

Paramedic – Highest level of EMTs. Trained and certified to provide advanced life support and care in emergency situations, and qualified to administer certain pharmaceutical drugs.

PPE – Personal protective equipment. This includes items such as gloves and eye protection.

Rehab – Service provided to firefighters on the fireground that provides immediate medical attention including rehydration, treatment for smoke inhalation, and prevention of life-threatening conditions such as heatstroke and heart attack. Rehab units may provide items and services such as water, food, chairs, cooling items such as a canopy for shade or misting fans, and medical monitoring.

Turnouts – The fire-retardant clothing that firefighters wear to a fire call. Sometimes called “bunker gear.”

SCBA –Self Contained Breathing Apparatus. This is the device worn by firefighters and rescue workers to provide breathable air during incidents.