

NUMBER OF FEMALE FIREFIGHTERS STILL LOW



Firefighters are predominately male, in large part due to the physical demands of the job, but there are some female firefighters out there. The Cedar Rapids Fire Department employs six female firefighters, the most in the history of the department, and they account for 4.17 percent of the entire staff. A test that is gaining steam across the country is the Candidate Physically Ability Test, the CPAT, which is licensed and sanctioned by hundreds of fire departments across the United States. There are some firefighters who believe this test will be too difficult for women to pass but Amy Kunkel, a female firefighter, believes that if you prepare and practice then you will be able to pass the test whether you are male or female. "If you want this job, whether you're male or female, you're going to prepare yourself," says Kunkel, 34. "You're going to do whatever you have to do to complete (the test), if the job is important enough to you." There were 119 applications for firefighters in Cedar Rapids, with only three of them being female, which is a growing problem across the country. After the written test, only two of those women made it into the top 50 candidates. Those two women did not pass the physical abilities test, removing them from job consideration. Karen Jennings, the human resource director for Iowa City, reports that two women out of 70 applicants for a firefighter position applied. They passed the written test and one woman passed the physical abilities test. That woman, Sadie McDowell, was hired in June as just the fourth female firefighter in the city. Female firefighters continue to increase their presence in fire departments across the country by advancing up the ranks. Lt. Tina McDermott, of the Iowa City fire department, joined the staff in 2000 and now holds a position of authority. Captain Emma Pulver, who joined the Cedar Rapids department in 1988, also holds a position of authority. "In many cases, women still don't understand that firefighting is an opportunity for them," says Lynn Washburn-Livingston, the Davenport fire chief. "There are still thoughts in a lot of people's heads that women can't do it. (And women) do have to understand when they are coming into a service like this, it is male-dominated, and there are just some women who aren't willing to work in that kind of atmosphere. It does take a very strong personal character in an atmosphere where it is (mostly) men." Kunkel had the following to say about the job: "In our job, we are sent into dangerous, hazardous environments, we are subjected to physically taxing things every day," explains Kunkel. "And I want to be part of and know that men and women beside me going into a house fire are going to be able to do the job they need to do. I'm invested in this. It's important to me. It's my life. It's my crew's life."

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