



Staff photo by E.J. Harris

Hermiston firefighter/paramedic Chris Wrathall and firefighter/EMT Jesse Brown take a patient from the back of a Hermiston police cruiser and transfer him to their ambulance Wednesday in Hermiston.



Staff photo by E.J. Harris

Hermiston firefighter/EMT Jesse Brown mops out the back of an ambulance after responding to a motor vehicle accident on Wednesday in Hermiston.

Around the Clock

A day in the life of a Hermiston emergency responder

By JENNIFER COLTON
East Oregonian

For 24 hours at a time, working life is punctuated by adrenaline for the firefighters of Hermiston Fire and Emergency Services. Sleep, meals, exercise and training take a back seat to emergency response from 8 a.m. to 8 a.m. each day.

Administration calls them the “troops,” the firefighters, paramedics and emergency medical technicians who handle the calls, the cleaning and the maintenance on the vehicles and fire stations. Career firefighters will spend one-third of their working lives at the fire station, where downtime is spent waiting for the next call in a job that taxes the body, mind and emotions.

“Most people just know that if they need an ambulance, they call 9-1-1, if they need a fire truck, they call 9-1-1. They don’t always realize it’s the same guys having to swing for one or the other,” Lt. Nate Stephens said. “We take the calls as they come. That’s our job. Our job isn’t to sleep.”

From Jan. 1 through Feb. 29, Hermiston Fire and Emergency Services ran 687 total calls — about 14 a day and on track for more than 4,100 over the year, according to fire chief Scott Stanton. In 2015, Hermiston Fire responded to 3,961 calls — an increase of 7.4 percent since 2014.

The district has 28 career firefighters and 42 volunteers on its roster.

“Our calls have tripled in the past 20 years, yet we haven’t tripled our staff,” Stanton said. “There are times when we get calls and everyone is already out. While overall we average a call every two hours, the calls don’t come like that.”

Between five and seven troops are on duty each day.

“With five guys, you can imagine, on busy days, how quickly we can get stretched,” firefighter/paramedic Jeremy Grazier said.

If the bond is passed in the May election to consolidate the Hermiston and Stanfield fire districts, the new district will add staff.

About 80 percent of Hermiston calls are for medical



Staff photo by Jennifer Colton

Firefighters prepare lunch at Hermiston Fire Station 1. Cheese and crackers left by firefighter Jeff Armstrong remain on the counter, untouched, after he was called out in the middle of a break.

services, and every firefighter is also a paramedic or EMT.

A day in the life

On Wednesday, medical calls came in at 2:29 p.m., 3:11 p.m. and 3:19 p.m., each requiring an ambulance. A fire call for a pump house on fire came in at 3:31 p.m.

“Statistically, we’re the busiest fire department in the state of Oregon right now,” firefighter/paramedic Jeff Armstrong said. “It’s nuts. You just don’t sleep.”

The station’s record is more than 30 calls in one 24-hour shift. Any more than 24 calls means the troops will not be able to complete all documentation within the shift, much less sleep or relax. Although a service call may only take 30 minutes, even a short medical transport call requires documentation, patient charts and paperwork.

“One run can take up to an hour just to get put into the computer,” Jesse Brown said. “Then we’ve got a lot of vehicles to maintain, and we’re constantly out there making sure they’re ready to respond and they have all the tools and equipment. We have to make sure down to the last battery is charged and ready to go, even down to little Duracells.”

The vehicle checks usually begin after an hour of exercise. At 8 a.m. on a Wednesday, firefighters Jeff Armstrong and Trevor Phillips loaded up an ambulance to 24 Hour Fitness for an hour to work out at the start of their shift. In T-shirts and shorts, they carried turnout gear,

the ambulance just outside the gym doors. That Wednesday, the duo planned to exercise for an hour, but when the tone sounded at 8:25 a.m. for a person having difficulty breathing, duty calls.

On a slow call morning, troops will begin vehicle checks around 8:30 a.m. All equipment is inventoried, fluid levels checked and storage secured. On the fire trucks, air and water pressure is monitored and all air tanks verified; on the ambulances, each vial of medication is checked to make sure it is not past its expiration date. Empty or low materials are replaced.

On that Wednesday, the last of the daily checks at Station 1 finished at 9:44 a.m., the truck bay swept and the trucks parked back in their spaces. The firefighters moved on to the next task on the to-do list. On a quiet day, the “patient lead” — Armstrong in the case of the gym-interrupting call — fills out the report while his partner for the day continues to tackle the to-do list, which can include a monthly check on a vehicle — washing inside and out, topping off fluids and checking oil — or cleaning a different part of the station.

Time for a break

With a long list of projects each day, the firefighters treat down-time with superstition. The morning reports completed and the morning cleaning list checked off, Armstrong and Phillips headed up to the second floor to relax. Armstrong pulled a block of cheese from the refrig-

2015 by the numbers

3,961 - Total calls
563 - Fire/Rescue calls
3,398 - EMS calls
622 - Transports from Good Shepherd to other hospitals
7,622 - hours of training
5.65 - average daily staffing

erator and a sleeve of saltine crackers from the cabinet.

“Just watch, this is what it will take to get another call,” he joked while slicing through the block.

His prediction wasn’t wrong. Less than 10 minutes later, the tone sounded, and he popped a third slice of cheese into his mouth as he and Phillips raced down the stairs for a medical call to perform CPR. On the scene, they talk to the family and the patient, they load the patient onto the stretcher and connect oxygen and IVs. One paramedic drives the ambulance; one stays with the patient. En route, Armstrong called Good Shepherd Medical Center, letting them know the patient’s name and what to expect. Armstrong is on a first-name basis with the emergency room staff.

At noon, the firefighters take their first break of the day, traveling upstairs in the station for lunch. Armstrong’s cheese was still on the counter.

While Grazier worked through lunch on a medical transport to Kadlec, the other troops made sandwiches and frozen pizzas and relaxed in the semicircle of recliners around the television and an episode of “Last Man Standing.” The lunch break is scheduled for an hour, but it rarely lasts that long.

At 12:55, less than an hour after returning from the CPR patient, the tone rings over the sound of the television.

“That’s us,” Armstrong says, and he and Phillips head down the stairs again. Another patient, another triage and transport to Good Shepherd.

Continued education

At 1:49 p.m., they stop at a gas station, and at 2:16 p.m. they settle into chairs at the station in front of computer monitors. Armstrong began paperwork; Phillips reviewed materials for his paramedic exam. With a goal of becoming a career firefighter,

Phillips has completed his firefighter and EMT schooling, then paramedic school, paramedic “ride time” with Hermiston Fire and testing. He fills in for Hermiston Fire as needed and is waiting on the state to find out if he passed all his exams to become a paramedic.

“People don’t know the education and training it takes to do this job,” Armstrong said. “It’s a professional career. There’s rarely a day we’re not in classes.”

Becoming a paramedic requires a minimum of an associate’s degree. For both medical and firefighting licenses, firefighters must pass written exams, physical exams, and practical exams. They must keep up to date with techniques and laws and renew certifications on regular periods, some annually. The field is also competitive, with many firefighters waiting five years before landing a “career” job like those at Hermiston Fire and Emergency Services.

While the troops work, the energy fluctuates. Sometimes the space is eerily silent, everyone typing and filling out reports. At other times, it’s loud and boisterous, filled with a camaraderie honed over many, many hours together.

In the evenings, Hermiston Fire receives fewer calls, but the types of calls — including fires and motor vehicle accidents — take longer. Some nights, they sleep. Other nights, they don’t.

“There’s a perception that we sit in recliners all day,” Lt. Ed Clark, working overtime on a Wednesday afternoon, said. “We have a work schedule. We work 56 hours a week. We have downtime, but a lot of evenings, I’m working on things for the next shift, I’m working on a class, I’m getting ready to teach a class. It’s your time to do what you want, but there’s always something to do.”

Despite the strain, the long hours and the emotional toll, every firefighter interviewed said he couldn’t imagine doing anything else.

“It’s the greatest job ever,” Wrathall said. “We create great friendships and relationships, and we have the opportunity to help people and to do that for a living. It’s a great job. It doesn’t get much better than this.”