

Modern firefighters tackle more than flames

By NPR

Fires are on the decline nationwide, but that doesn't make a firefighters job any easier. In fact, it may be harder now. Not only are fires more complicated these days, but the scope of firefighting has changed drastically and now includes fire prevention, public education, safety inspections and more than anything, emergency medical assistance.

"Seventy percent of our calls are medical calls," probational firefighter Jeff Taylor tells weekends on All Things Considered guest host Laura Sullivan.

Taylor works at Station 4 in Alexandria, Va. The last time he saw a structural fire – one that affects a building or structure – was four months ago. That's thanks to better building materials and codes, as well as public awareness. According to the National Fire Protection Association, there are half as many fires as there were 30 years ago.

But Taylor and the two dozen other firefighters at Station 4 are still saving lives. They're just doing it on a gurney. Every one of them is an emergency medical technician.

In the early '70s, the Alexandria Fire Department incorporated the rescue squad as part of the fire department medical services. It was the first paramedic program in the country.

Capt. Tony Washington, an 18-year firefighter, has seen the profession change and evolve. He acknowledges he may have missed fighting fires five or 10 years ago, but things have changed.

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