

TIMES INVESTIGATION

FAMILY MEMBERS BEAT THE ODDS IN WINNING PRIZED FIREFIGHTING JOBS

By **PAUL PRINGLE** *contact the reporter*

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Sons of department veterans represent nearly 7% of L.A. County's 2,750 firefighters
The Times found evidence that insiders at the L.A. County Fire Department have tried to manipulate hiring

Offering six-figure pay and generous benefits, jobs at the Los Angeles County Fire Department are among the most sought-after in the field. Nearly 95% of applicants are turned away.

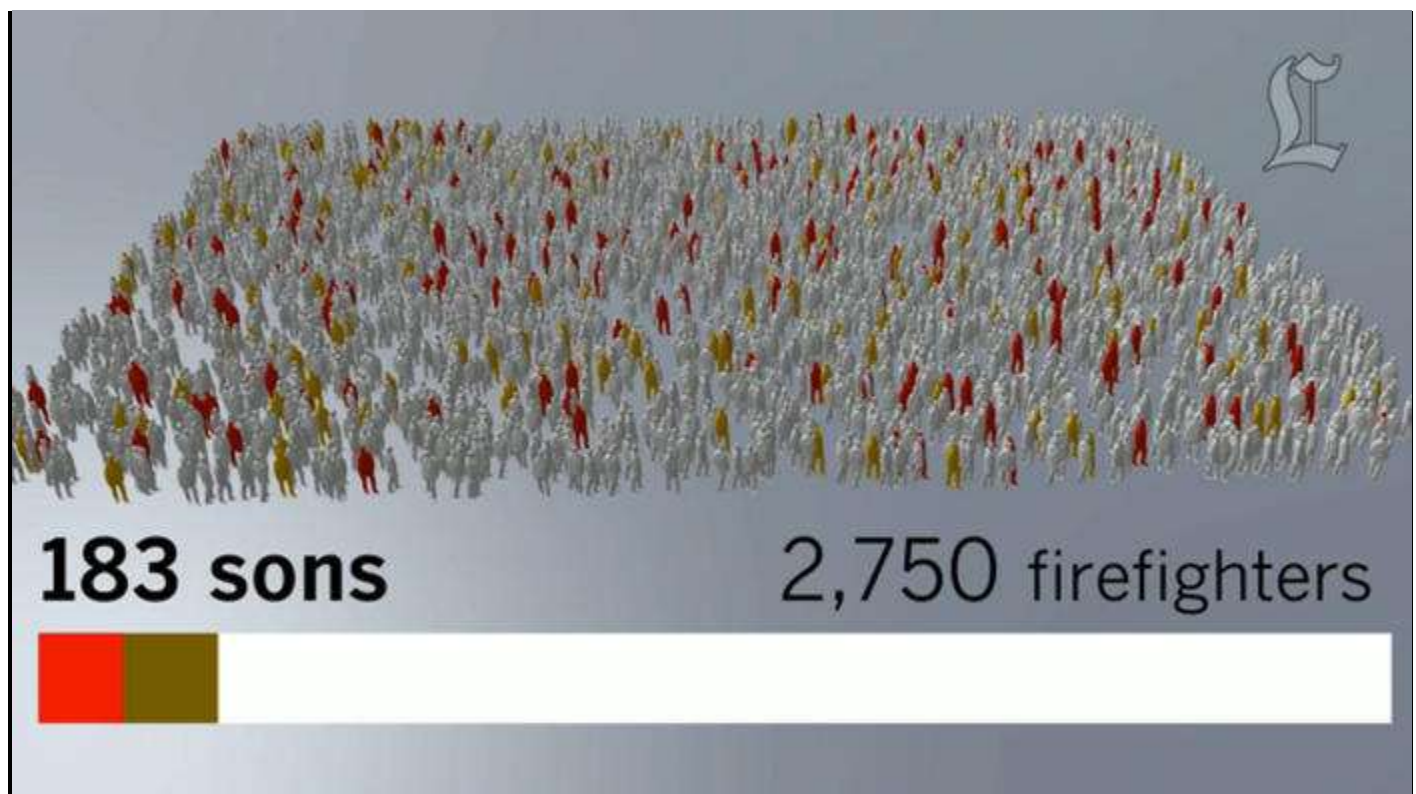
Department officials say the hiring of firefighters is based purely on merit, with the best candidates selected through an exacting regimen of testing and interviews.

But a Times investigation has found that the process favors one particular type of applicant: sons of L.A. County firefighters.

At least 183 sons of current or former firefighters have served on the force since the start of 2012, according to an analysis of payroll, pension, birth, marriage and other records.

All told, sons represent nearly 7% of the county's 2,750 firefighters.

When brothers, nephews and other relatives are included, at least 370 firefighters — 13% of the department ranks — are related to someone now or previously on the force, The Times found.



At least 183 sons of current or former firefighters have served on the force since the start of 2012, according to an analysis of payroll, pension, birth, marriage and other records.

"The evidence clearly suggests there is a problem with nepotism," said Christopher Hoffman, a mathematics professor at the University of Washington who reviewed the Times analysis.

Fire officials said they could not explain how so many family members were able to land jobs in the department.

The Times, however, found evidence that insiders have tried to manipulate hiring.

Lists of questions and suggested answers for the formal interviews of applicants have circulated freely through the department's station houses, even though they are supposed to be kept under lock and key. The interviews determine whether and when applicants win a spot in the fire academy.

The Times obtained an eight-page list of questions and answers from two firefighters who were not authorized to have them. One of the firefighters said he hunted down the questions and answers because a co-worker wanted them for a relative.

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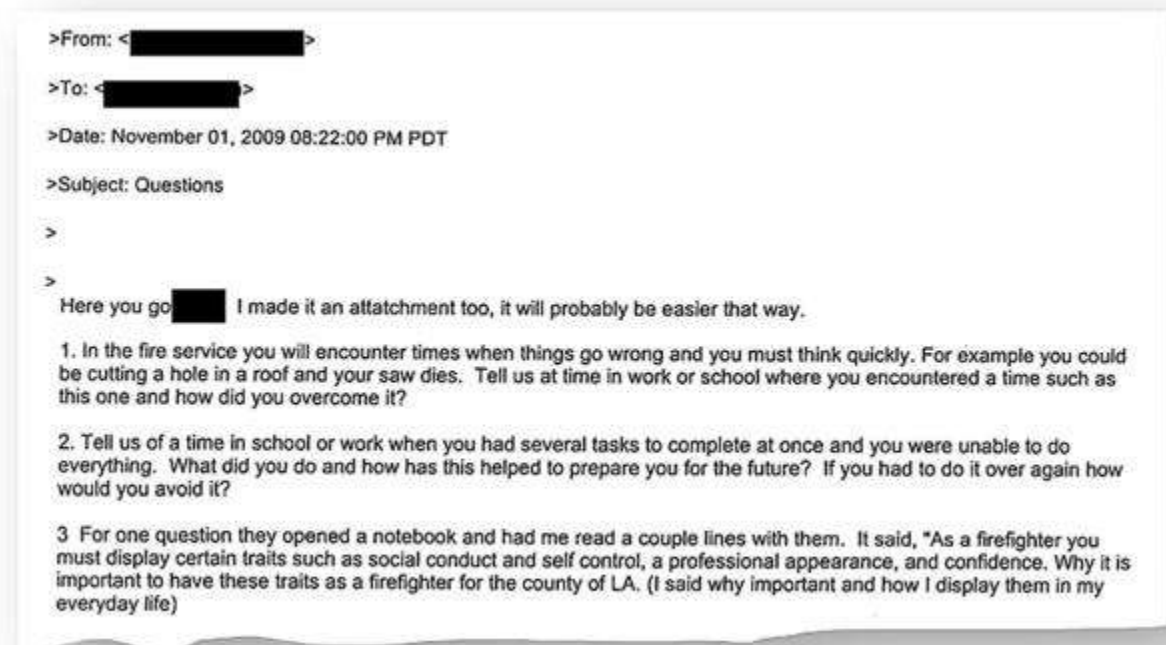
"If you know the right people, it's not a problem getting them," he said. "I couldn't believe how prevalent they were."

The two firefighters — who spoke on condition of anonymity, saying they feared retribution — also provided an email string in which department employees exchanged detailed descriptions of interview questions.

Told by The Times that the confidential interview material was readily available, Fire Chief Daryl Osby asked the county auditor-controller to investigate. A preliminary review, he said, has determined that employees were "sharing" at least the questions.

"That's not appropriate," Osby said, adding that those questions would no longer be used. He said his goal "is to make sure we have transparent and objective processes."

Osby said the sons of firefighters might have a strong motivation to follow in their fathers' footsteps. But he and other officials said that should not give them any practical advantage over other applicants.



The Times found that interview questions and desired answers, which are supposed to be kept secret, circulate freely in the department. Above is part of an email exchange between firefighters that includes detailed descriptions of the questions.

The department does not test candidates for firefighting skills they could have learned from relatives, such as deploying hoses and ladders, the officials said. Those are taught during 21 weeks of training at the academy in Pomona.

Deputy Chief Anthony Marrone, the department's spokesman, said the agency would begin tracking the hiring of relatives in light of The Times' findings. He said the department would also draft an anti-nepotism policy.

"Our awareness has been raised about nepotism and cronyism," Marrone said. "That's a positive thing."

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The department, one of the largest local fire agencies in the country, attracts applicants from across Southern California and beyond.

In the last seven years, more than 12,600 people have applied, according to the department. About 740 were hired. That's 1 in 17.

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If firefighters' sons faced the same slim chances, more than 3,000 of them — an improbably high number — would have had to apply to account for the 183 sons in uniform.

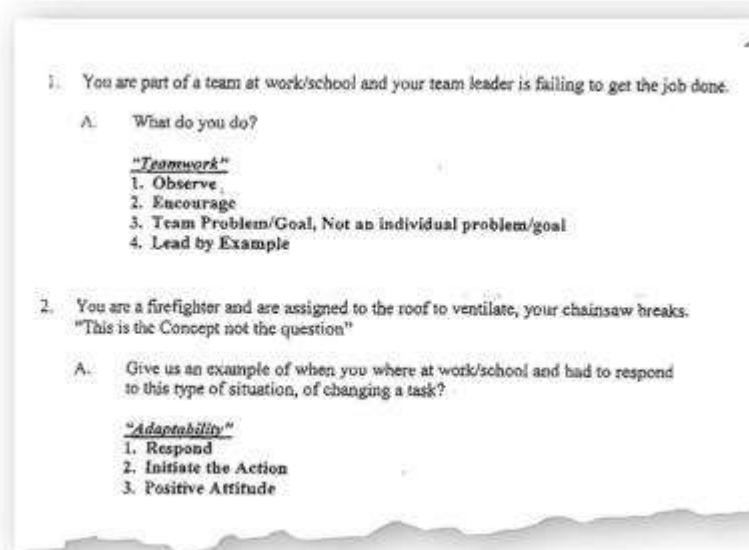
Susan Holmes, a Stanford University statistics professor, said it was "practically impossible" that the sons had been hired at the same rate as other applicants.

Department officials initially said they did not know the number of family members on the force. Later, they acknowledged that, in fact, they ask new recruits to list the names of relatives in the agency.

In response to a request filed by The Times under the California Public Records Act, the department provided a list of recruits' family members dating

to 2007. It shows percentages of sons and other relatives closely comparable to what The Times' analysis found.

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A page from a list of interview questions and desired answers. This document and the one above were provided to The Times by two firefighters.

Family ties pervade the department. At least 59 pairs of brothers have served since 2012, including two who were in the same 2010 academy class, The Times found. There have been at least two sets of three brothers on the job in that time.

Twenty-two of the known brothers are sons of county firefighters. Three of the firefighters with sons in the department also have a brother on the payroll. And three sons represent the third generation of county firefighters in their families.

Derek Mushinskie, who was hired in 2010, followed his father and grandfather into the department. Growing up in a firefighter household, he said, inspired him to work hard to compete against other applicants, including by taking a workshop on how to prepare for the interview.

"You apply yourself," he said.

Mushinskie said his father, now retired, gave him pointers on how to conduct himself during the interview, but that was about it. "He was of no help with any of the testing or interview questions," he said.

Mushinskie's academy class included at least three other sons of L.A. County firefighters.

Last June's class had 37 recruits. Eight were firefighters' relatives, six of them sons.

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Many of the sons on the force have fathers in the executive and supervisory ranks.

Michael T. Metro, the department's second in command for emergency operations, has two sons on the force. Deputy Chief John Tripp, who preceded Metro in that position, also has a son in the department.

Both men said they had no influence over the hiring of their sons. Metro said one of his sons had to wait eight years after he applied before getting tapped for the academy.

Since 2012, at least five battalion chiefs have had sons in the agency. The fathers of all six sons in last June's academy class held ranks of captain or higher.

Many of the sons joined the department on the watch of former Chief P. Michael Freeman, who led the agency for 22 years before retiring in 2011.

Two of Freeman's sons were hired during his last four years as chief.

After receiving an anonymous complaint in 2008 that the younger Freemans had benefited from their family connection, the county auditor-controller investigated and found no wrongdoing, Marrone said.

Freeman said in an interview that he was not involved in entry-level hiring but did "as much as humanly possible to prevent nepotism."

Freeman said he could not recall taking any specific actions but said he set the right tone. "The staff understood that everyone had to be given the same fairness and equity in the hiring process," he said.

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The L.A. County Fire Department serves 4 million people in a 2,300-square-mile area. The starting salary for academy graduates is about \$61,000 a year, with the opportunity to earn thousands more in overtime. Firefighters can make more than \$100,000 annually within a few years, payroll records show.

When they retire, often when they are in their 50s, they receive pension and health benefits that average more than \$130,000 a year, according to county records.



Many of the sons at the L.A. County Fire Department have fathers in the executive and supervisory ranks. Deputy Chief John Tripp has a son in the department. (Francine Orr / Los Angeles Times)

Money isn't the only lure. Many applicants are attracted by the county's broad range of station assignments, from beach towns to the inner city to the high desert, said Marrone, the department spokesman.

The department operates a network of camps in the foothills and mountains, fields urban search-and-rescue teams and has a fleet of nine helicopters.

County firefighters work 10 days a month in 24-hour rotations, instead of daily shifts throughout the week. That affords them ample days off for other pursuits.

The department hires 80 to 120 recruits a year to fill vacancies. Candidates for entry-level firefighting positions are required to have a high school education and a certificate of physical agility.

After filing an application, they wait to be selected randomly by computer for an opportunity to take the written test — a process known as "the lottery." The department said it did not know what percentage of applicants win the lottery.

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The written test is a pass-fail exam on subjects such as reading comprehension, Marrone said. Applicants who pass go on to the interview stage.

Interviews are conducted by panels usually made up of two captains and a personnel officer. The questions focus on general concepts of teamwork, following orders and completing assignments. They are designed to take the measure of an applicant's character and attitude, rather than test for a body of specific knowledge.

During the interview, candidates are allowed to make a personal statement, which can include naming relatives in the department. "You could say your dad's on the force," Marrone said.

Afterward, panel members give each applicant a score. Based on their performance in the interviews, applicants are placed in five ranked groups, or bands. Those in the first band are given the first available openings in the academy.

Our awareness has been raised about nepotism and cronyism. That's a positive thing. - Deputy Chief Anthony Marrone

Department officials who conduct interviews sign statements promising to keep the questions and answers confidential, Marrone said. Between interviews, the material is locked in a cabinet inside a cage in a county

personnel office, said Roxanne Benavides-Ortega, the fire department's human resources manager.

"They are double-locked," she said.

But two firefighters told The Times that employees could get their hands on the questions and answers with little difficulty.

To illustrate the point, they provided an email string on condition that the sender and recipients not be identified.

One of the emails described nine interview questions.

It began: "Here you go ... I made it an attachment too, it will probably be easier that way."

The author then recounted the questions, listing them by number.

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L.A. County firefighter Ryan Tripp is the son of Deputy Chief John Tripp. He was one of 10 firefighters' relatives in a 2010 academy class -- seven of them sons. The relatives made up 25% of the class. (L.A. County Fire Department)

The first reads: "In the fire service you will encounter times when things go wrong and you must think quickly. For example you could be cutting a hole in a roof and your saw dies. Tell us a time in work or school where you encountered a time such as this one and how did you overcome it?"

In an apparent reference to whoever sought the questions, the author of the email closes by saying: "If they want to talk to me to get some ideas for what I used in my interview I would be more than happy to help. Good luck."

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Ryan Tripp almost didn't make it as a recruit.

He was one of 10 firefighters' relatives in 2010's academy Class 131— seven of them sons. The relatives made up 25% of the class.

None of the sons' fathers held a position lower than captain. The most prominent was Tripp's father, John Tripp, then the department's head of emergency operations.

In the academy, Ryan Tripp labored to grasp a basic part of his training: emergency medical treatment, according to department emails and exam scores that The Times obtained under the state's Public Records Act.

He failed 13 of 14 quizzes on the subject, the records show.

His average quiz score was the worst in his class, according to the records. Toward the end of the EMT instruction, he and another recruit — the son of a captain — were in danger of being kicked out of the academy because of their performance, the emails show.

In the emails, Assistant Chief Anthony Whittle, who oversaw recruit training, alerted John Tripp, his boss, to his son's problems. "Don't forget to call me," Whittle said in one message.

About two weeks later, Whittle forwarded another email to John Tripp. For Ryan to graduate, the email said, he had to achieve a minimum score of 83 on a cumulative exam, or "block test."

The younger Tripp scored 83 on the exam, records show.

He did not respond to requests for an interview.

John Tripp said that because he had oversight responsibility for firefighter training, it was appropriate for subordinates to keep him informed of his son's troubles. He said he never intervened and was prepared to see his son fired if he did not improve.

"As a father, I was stressed a bit that I would have to recommend to the fire chief to discharge my son," he said.

Whittle, whose father was a county firefighter, said he felt no pressure from his superiors to help Ryan get through the academy.

Marrone, the department spokesman, said other recruits have knuckled down and stayed on the job after failing numerous quizzes.

To support his case, Marrone gave The Times a list of recruits from the last 10 academy classes — their names had been redacted — who failed at least seven quizzes before passing the block tests. None of the recruits failed as many quizzes as Tripp. The classes had about 400 recruits combined, Marrone said.

The only woman in Tripp's class got booted from the academy. She was let go because of low scores on the physical portion of her training, Marrone said.

The department says it has been stepping up efforts to hire women. There are 38 women firefighters, 1.4% of the force. Nearly five times as many sons have worked for the department since 2012.

Marrone said Tripp was the subject of the same anonymous nepotism complaint that was filed against former Chief Freeman's sons. The resulting investigation cleared Tripp, he said.

Within two years of graduating, Ryan Tripp was earning \$111,137 in salary, overtime and other compensation, payroll records show. Four of the other sons in his class were also making six figures.

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L.A. County Fire Chief Daryl Osby said sons might be motivated to follow in their fathers' footsteps. But he said that should not give them an advantage over other applicants. (Anne Cusack / Los Angeles Times)

Many sons have been hired as firefighters after working, for much lower pay, as fire-suppression aides in the department's hillside camps, where they cut firebreaks, fill sandbags and do other manual labor.

Depending on their length of service and qualifications, aides who want to move up and become firefighters can bypass the lottery for applicants and proceed directly to the written exam.

On occasion, family relationships have put Assistant Chief Vince Pena, a veteran leader of the camps, in a delicate position.

In 2006, the son of Pena's supervisor, then-Assistant Chief Ernie Golphenee, applied for a camp job. Emails show that Pena updated Golphenee on the son's application status, a courtesy not extended to parents outside the department.

The son was hired as a fire-suppression aide and later as a full-fledged firefighter.

Pena said that, because Golphenee had oversight duties for the camps, there was nothing improper about keeping him "in the loop" about his son.

The now-retired Golphenee, whose father was a county firefighter, has a second son on the force. He said he played no role in the hiring of either son.

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Another firefighter's son who worked under Pena, Chad Flath, got into the academy despite finishing near the bottom in a ranking of candidates for a camp promotion. Pena and the father, Battalion Chief Troy Flath, said that the younger man's ranking reflected lack of experience and that he worked hard to improve. Chad Flath did not respond to requests for comment.

Pena noted that three of the other five camp workers who ranked low for the promotion also went on to become firefighters.

Two are the sons of retired captains, a fact Pena said had no bearing on their hiring.

"Nobody gets a break because of who they're related to," he said.

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Contact the reporter

Times researcher Scott Wilson contributed to this report.

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How we reported the story

Reporter **Paul Pringle** began researching this story after receiving a tip from two members of the Los Angeles County Fire Department about the hiring of firefighters' sons.

Pringle used a 1975 department yearbook as a starting point for identifying fathers of current firefighters. He collected additional names from later yearbooks, county pension records, obituaries, marriage announcements and social media posts.

He compared the names with those of firefighters on the county payroll as of the start of 2012.

Pringle verified family ties primarily through California birth and marriage records. He examined records for some other states through databases such as Archives.com.

He found that 183 firefighters on the payroll at some point since 2012 — nearly 7% of those on the force — are the sons of current or former L.A. County firefighters, and that 187 others are brothers, nephews or other relations.

Together, sons and other family members make up 13% of the ranks, the analysis found. A few have retired or otherwise left the agency since 2012. The exact number could not be determined.

The tally of firefighters with family links is a conservative number, because it excludes many firefighters who have common surnames or were born or married out of state, factors that made it difficult to confirm family relationships through public records.

Department officials initially told Pringle that they had no information on firefighters' family ties. Later, in response to the reporter's California Public Records Act request, they provided material collected from recruits about family members serving in the department.

That list of names dates to 2007. It matched Pringle's list for the same period, and it confirmed his broader findings. The department list shows that of about 740 firefighters hired since 2007, nearly 100 (13%) had a relative serving on the force. Fifty-five — 7% of those hired in that period — are sons of L.A. County firefighters.