

Medical mission



YALONDA M. JAMES/THE COMMERCIAL APPEAL

Firefighter-paramedic Kendrick Johnson, 31, listens to a resident as Johnson checks his blood pressure at Station 42 in Whitehaven. One in four paramedics in the Memphis Fire Department is African-American, a proportion that is much higher than the national average.

Mandatory training boosts number of black paramedics

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A few years ago, Kendrick Johnson had a conversation with his girlfriend: If he wanted to keep his job with the Memphis Fire Department, he had to enter an intense training program to become a paramedic.

He recalls telling her that if they were going to stay together, she would have to understand. "I put my life on hold for about 16 months," the 31-year-old said.

Johnson graduated from the program in 2011. Now, he can find himself treating a headache — or a cardiac arrest. "You're in these people's houses. You're in their elements so you have to adapt and deal with the situation put in front of you."

Nationally, it's a job that few African-Americans currently hold. Only 7.7 percent of paramedics in the country are black, according to the National Registry of Emergency Medical Technicians. But in Memphis, the proportion has risen from 8 percent to 25 percent in recent years, due in part to an enhanced system of in-house training.

Segregation kept black people out of the Memphis Fire Department for decades. The department first hired 12 black firefighters in 1955, but kept them

separate from their white counterparts. A 1980 court consent decree forced the department to promote and adequately compensate black workers.

"There wasn't a legacy in the fire service. You didn't know people who looked like you in the fire service," said Fire Director Alvin Benson, who is African-American and joined in 1987 when a friend suggested it.

During a time when the Fire Department was making a transition away from simply putting out blazes and toward emergency medicine, Benson said a concerted effort was made to bring more African-Americans into the role of paramedic.

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