

THE FIREFIGHTERS

It had been raining that night in Eastern Kentucky when a woman lost control of the van she was driving and the car flipped over. Though injured, she managed to get out of the vehicle, and crawled all the way to a nearby house to call for help and then made her way back to her car.

Barboursville, KY Branch 2856 member **Jason Grubb** heard the call and drove there. “I was first on scene,” he said. He located the woman and what she said next surprised him.

“Go help my baby,” she said.

Grubb didn’t know what she meant, but he rushed to the wrecked van. There, he heard the giggling of an infant. The carrier gently pulled the unharmed baby from the vehicle and handed him back to his grateful mother.

“That was my first save,” said Grubb.

He is a letter carrier—but also a volunteer firefighter.

Since letter carriers know the neighborhoods and customers they serve better than anyone, it’s no surprise that a good number decide to put that knowledge to positive use by pulling double-duty as volunteer firefighters in communities across the United States.

While there are no hard-and-fast figures about how many letter carriers also serve as volunteer firefighters, we have identified several throughout the country.

Becoming a firefighter is no small feat. Though requirements for training vary from state to state and department to department, it takes many hours of work and/or training to become certified.

“It can be grueling,” said Grubb, who has volunteered for the East Knox Volunteer Fire Department for the past six years. In Grubb’s home state of Kentucky, there are two tiers of certification: volunteer and career. For his volunteer training, he completed 150-plus hours of training, both classroom and hands-on.

And even after all the training to become certified, most volunteer firefighters continue learning as they go.

“My training never really stops,” said Scranton, PA Branch 17 member **Dale McConnell**, who is in his first year as a letter carrier and has been a firefighter for the past decade. Previously, the carrier was an emergency medical technician (EMT) in Louisiana, and he currently works as a firefighter for the Athens Borough Fire Department in Pennsylvania.

Michael Couture of Worcester, MA Branch 12 said that he and his team at the Millbury Fire Department trained every Monday night, and had specialty training one weekend a month. He has been carrying mail for 29 years and spent 17 years as a volunteer firefighter before retiring last year as a fire lieutenant.

All of the carriers said they had a lot to learn in the hundreds of hours of training they have each undertaken, such as how to handle hazardous material incidents, flashovers (the sudden spread of flames over an area when it becomes heated to the flash point), and how to use fire hoses and pumps. Each class has different requirements and time frames. Many firefighters also have EMT certification. The top thing they learn, though, is safety. Grubb

Paul Glavin DJs his weekly radio show, “Eargasm!” on Nashville’s WXNA-FM.



Photo by Edd Cote

said that a major takeaway is that “you are the No. 1 priority.”

The carriers have varying schedules for their volunteer firefighting roles. While Grubb has a regular once-a-week 24-hour Monday shift, Couture and McConnell are “on call,” and will receive notification via pager or text when there is a local emergency for which they are requested to respond. If they are available outside of their postal schedule, they take the call.

Who is at the fire station on any given night just depends on whichever volunteer firefighters can show up, Grubb said.

And getting a call “depends on what’s actually going on in our area,” McConnell said. “Our area is pretty rural—it’s hard for [our department] to do full shifts.”

Couture said he carried a pager 24/7 and took all the calls he could. “If we can respond, we go right to our station and then [to] the incident,” he said. “There’s such a variety [of calls]—car fires, entrapment in cars, house fires. It’s all local emergencies and tragic situations.”

The carrier described winter as the most hectic time of the year. His department would get calls during the cold-weather months for faulty wiring and wood stoves causing blazes. Cou-

ture estimated that he responded to up to 30 fires in his career.

Sometimes the carriers on call get a notification immediately after clocking out at the post office, which doesn’t leave a lot of transition time or opportunity to change clothes. “Under my fire gear, I’d have my postal gear,” Couture said.

It’s happened to McConnell, too. “In September, as soon as I was leaving the post office, there was a car fire,” he said. He headed straight to the scene.

And there is no such thing as a typical shift in firefighting, the carriers say. “It’s different from call to call or day to day,” McConnell said.

Grubb concurred. “You could work 24 hours a day, seven days a week and not repeat the same thing twice,” he said.

He added that “it’s either feast or famine.” They could have no calls for weeks, or have four to five calls in a single day.

“The only thing normal was our Monday night training,” Couture said.

Even if they don’t have an incident to respond to, that doesn’t mean they aren’t busy, Grubb added. There always is a list of actions for firefighters to do while on shift. “We might inspect the truck and make sure the equipment functions,” he said, as an example. Those on duty also would have

Michael Couture, a letter carrier from Worcester, MA Branch 12 and a retired firefighter for the Millbury Fire Department



Jason Grubb in his two uniforms

a short checklist to follow immediately after a call, which includes replacing used oxygen tanks with fresh ones.

Fitting in firefighting along with their postal career takes some work, but these carriers make it a priority.

McConnell's work schedule at the post office and fire station generally don't overlap, as was the case for Couture when he volunteered as a firefighter, though McConnell occasionally will use

annual leave to complete annual fire training and continuing education courses to keep up his skills for certification.

"I responded all the time except when I was working at the P.O.," Couture said.

Grubb is a part-time flexible (PTF), so his schedule varies, but he says, "I don't let the two interfere with each other."

Even when their fire calls and shifts don't take away from their already hectic jobs as letter carriers, it can affect the balance of work and home life. "It takes time away from being able to spend time

with family," McConnell said.

Couture echoed that sentiment. "My poor wife," he said, remembering the middle-of-the-night pages he would get. "I would have to leave my family in the house [to go respond]."

Sometimes the calls the carriers respond to stay with them.

One save in particular really stuck

out to Grubb. He was at a Halloween gathering at his fire station, and kids were trick-or-treating there. They had a big candy bucket that they were all enjoying treats from, too. A fellow firefighter "just started smacking me," Grubb said. The carrier was at first unsure what was going on, but then asked, "Are you choking?"

After the firefighter nodded, Grubb quickly positioned himself behind him and performed the Heimlich maneuver on the man. The piece of candy came flying out. "He cried, 'You saved my life!'" Grubb said.

The carrier said that occasion gave him a sense of accomplishment. "I used my training to save a life," he said.

Though Couture worked for an on-call department, he said that because they are so well trained and have modern technology such as thermal imaging, he and his fellow firefighters frequently provided backup and station coverage for full-time departments in Massachusetts on calls outside of their town. They were called to help out when a tornado hit Springfield, as well as with a seven-alarm warehouse blaze in nearby Webster. "We went out of our town quite a bit," he said.

Couture also served on a Rapid Intervention Team (RIT), which means that he and other specially trained members would stand by at other fire departments' calls in case a firefighter was in distress and called "mayday." The team would then go in to help get them out.

Letter carriers are visible faces in their communities, so it's no surprise that each of the carriers *The Postal Record* spoke with said they sometimes are recognized while responding to emergencies.

Couture's house is on his route, and if he was working a fire call there, he would often hear, "Aren't you my mailman?"

Grubb said that it's usually children who spot him. One time while directing traffic, he heard a kid say, "Mommy, Daddy, is that the mailman?"

McConnell said it happens no matter whether he's fulfilling his role as a letter carrier or as a firefighter. "I have several customers who come outside their house and recognize me," he said.

There's also more common ground between the two professions than you might think. Grubb said that being a letter carrier and a firefighter give him "the ability to help the public from both sides." Carriers and firefighters know the layout of towns and streets as well as anyone.

McConnell said there's a difference only in the type of help the two professions provide to residents. Acting as both in the community, "you get acquainted with your customers at a faster rate and establish rapport with them," he said. "I love my job as a letter carrier. I love getting to meet people in the area. As a firefighter, I've gotten to know the people I've helped." The elderly, in particular, are important. In both roles, you may be the only person they see for a while, he added.

Couture said that several times when he responded to residents' needs, the customers said they felt good knowing that he was keeping an eye on them. Because he delivered there as a carrier, he was familiar with their houses, families and pets. "People told me they felt more comfortable," he said.

Sometimes duties even overlap. As reported in a "Proud to Serve" story in this magazine in 2013, Grubb was delivering on his route when he came across a tree-trimming company's bucket truck on fire—with a man trapped inside the bucket. The carrier quickly called 911 to inform the local fire department, which arrived very quickly and discovered that the blaze had started with a gas leak. He was able to keep the man calm and get him help fast. "He later found me, shook my hand and thanked me," Grubb said.

So why do these carriers fill both roles?

"I just enjoy helping people," Grubb explained.



McConnell, who describes himself as a "fourth- or fifth-generation firefighter" who also has many relatives serving as firefighters in states along the Eastern seaboard, said, "I want to make sure that a community doesn't lose a trained fireman."

Beyond feeling a duty to his community to serve, Couture, who also has been his branch's Letter Carrier Food Drive coordinator for the past 17 years, said that "you know these people and you're responding. It's pretty emotional. Adrenaline kicks in. It's our craziness. We're all a little afraid. We're all willing to enter a burning building to save a life."

"It was very rewarding, very dangerous. I'm very tired," the retired firefighter and Air Force veteran added, "but I enjoyed serving my town in both aspects."

Feeling inspired? "If letter carriers have the time to volunteer, there's always something to do at the fire department," McConnell said. **PR**

Equipment for Dale McConnell's two jobs