

Beyond the Bay Doors: A Fire Department Open House Playbook

A practical guide to planning, promoting and delivering a fire department open house your community will remember.

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IN SHORT

The complete playbook for a fire department open house: timeline, marketing, schools, sponsors, demonstrations, logistics and follow-up, from the first planning meeting to the final debrief.

A successful fire department open house is more than an apparatus display. It should educate residents, build trust, create useful community relationships and give families a reason to come back next year.

This guide covers the complete process, from the first planning meeting through the final follow-up.

It is a companion to [Three Helicopters, a Fire-Safety Clown and a Line Down the Street](#), the personal story of how our department grew its open house from dozens of visitors to more than 1,000.



Define the Mission Before Planning the Attractions

Before booking a DJ or inviting a helicopter, decide what the event should accomplish.

Possible goals include:

- Teaching three or four important fire and life-safety lessons.
- Showing residents the full range of fire, rescue and EMS services.
- Building relationships with local officials, schools and community groups.
- Introducing potential members and their families to the department.
- Promoting smoke-alarm, CPR or other public-safety programs.
- Generating goodwill that supports future fundraising and department needs.

Choose a few priorities and design the event around them. Attendance matters, but it should not be the only measurement. If 500 people walk past a few tables and leave, you attracted a crowd, not necessarily created an effective open house.

The best open house sends people home knowing more about safety, more about the department and more about the people behind it.

2

Use a 3–4 Month Planning Timeline

A successful open house should begin taking shape three to four months before the event. That gives schools, sponsors, specialty units, neighboring agencies, media partners and community organizations enough time to participate, and

gives your department time to build something more memorable than a few apparatus displays and folding tables.

The heaviest public marketing push should begin approximately four weeks before the event, when families are more likely to place it on their calendars and remember the date. However, the campaign itself must be planned much earlier. School distribution, sponsor participation, photography, video, printed materials, media outreach and social content all require advance preparation.

3–4 months before

- Select the date, hours, event leader and core planning team.
- Define the target audience, primary goals and approximate budget.
- Identify the major educational themes and safety messages.
- Reserve the station areas, grounds and nearby space you will need.
- Invite specialty teams, helicopters, mascots and neighboring agencies.
- Contact schools before their Fire Prevention Week calendars fill up.
- Begin approaching businesses about sponsorships, printing, food, supplies or giveaways.
- Identify permits, insurance requirements and any local approvals.
- Select the signature attraction or demonstration that will anchor the event.

8–12 weeks before

- Confirm participating agencies, specialty units and community partners.
- Develop the preliminary schedule for demonstrations and activities.
- Choose hands-on fire and life-safety activities for children and adults.
- Assign leaders for programming, logistics, marketing, sponsors and volunteers.
- Begin planning parking, pedestrian routes, apparatus movement and emergency access.
- Create the event name, basic visual identity and key promotional message.

- Collect strong photos and video from previous events for future promotion.
- Determine what flyers, banners, signs, maps and handouts will be needed.
- Ask schools, sponsors and partners how and when they can distribute event information.

4–8 weeks before

- Finalize demonstrations, attractions, activities and the public schedule.
- Create flyers, posters, social graphics, email copy and the event webpage.
- Prepare a bank of social posts featuring different attractions and safety activities.
- Draft the media advisory and community-calendar submission.
- Provide promotional materials to schools, sponsors and community partners.
- Order helmets, activity books, prizes, safety materials and other supplies.
- Assign members to demonstrations, activity stations and operational roles.
- Develop backup plans for weather or emergency units that may be called away.
- Begin light advance promotion and encourage partners to save the date.

4 weeks before

- Launch the primary public marketing campaign across social media, email and the department website.
- Distribute flyers through schools, libraries, businesses and community centers.
- Submit the event to newspaper, television, radio and online community calendars.
- Ask local government, schools, sponsors and participating agencies to share the event.
- Place approved roadside signs, banners and posters in high-traffic locations.

- Publish the full schedule or begin announcing major demonstration times.
- Feature a different attraction, activity or safety message in each post.
- Encourage members to share event information through their own community networks.

1–2 weeks before

- Increase posting frequency and begin a countdown to the event.
- Share short videos of members preparing or personally inviting the community.
- Confirm every partner, sponsor, vendor and participating unit.
- Send the media advisory and directly invite reporters and photographers.
- Prepare signs, maps, handouts, activity materials and sponsor recognition.
- Conduct a complete site walk-through from a visitor's perspective.
- Confirm parking, traffic, accessibility, restrooms, first aid and lost-child procedures.
- Review the weather plan and decide how postponement or cancellation updates will be communicated.

During the final days

- Publish final reminders, the event schedule, parking information and weather updates.
- Highlight any limited-time appearances, demonstrations or special attractions.
- Send final reminders to schools, sponsors, partners, media and participating agencies.
- Brief members on assignments, safety procedures, visitor interaction and key messages.
- Clean and inspect the station, apparatus and all public areas.
- Stage supplies, test sound equipment and verify signs and activity stations.
- Confirm who will capture photos, video and live social updates during the event.
- Be prepared to keep promoting throughout the event with “there is still time to join us” posts.

Starting three to four months out provides the time to build the event properly. Concentrating the public marketing during the final four weeks creates urgency without asking families to remember the date for months. The planning starts early; the promotional intensity builds as the event approaches.

3

Build an Experience, Not a Display

A few trucks and folding tables may fill the firehouse, but they will not necessarily create an event families remember.

Combine education with activity and personality:

- Schedule live fire, rescue and EMS demonstrations.
- Use a narrator to explain what crews are doing and why.
- Let visitors safely handle appropriate tools or try on gear.
- Offer short station tours showing how members live, train and respond.
- Create a well-lit photo area with a fire truck.
- Include a mascot, firehouse pup or fire-safety clown.
- Use a DJ or sound system for music, announcements and demonstrations.
- Repeat major activities so later arrivals do not miss everything.

Avoid spectacle for its own sake. Each part of the event should educate, entertain or help people connect with the department. The strongest activities accomplish all three.

4

Make Fire and Life Safety Hands-On

Brochures are useful as take-home reminders. They should not be the entire educational program.

Create a Kids Fire Safety Adventure Course with stops such as:

- Practice stop, drop and roll.
- Crawl low beneath simulated smoke.
- Identify two ways out of a room.
- Call 911 on a training phone and describe the emergency.
- Select a family meeting place.
- Test a smoke alarm.
- Complete a simple firefighter-style obstacle.

Give each child a card or “passport” to mark at every station. A certificate, plastic helmet or small prize at the end helps keep them engaged and gives parents a reason to visit the entire course.

Adults need useful activities too:

- Quick hands-only CPR instruction.
- Home escape planning.
- Smoke and carbon-monoxide alarm guidance.
- Fire-extinguisher demonstrations where appropriate.
- Seasonal and local hazard information.
- Registration for future CPR classes or smoke-alarm visits.

Keep each lesson focused enough to understand in a few minutes, and useful enough to repeat at home.

People need a reason to put your open house on the family calendar. Offer something they cannot see during an ordinary trip past the station.

Ideas include:

- An air-medical helicopter landing.
- A vehicle-rescue demonstration.
- A ladder truck or specialty apparatus display.
- A canine team or mounted unit.
- A children's character such as Marshall from *PAW Patrol*.
- Pictures with the apparatus, mascot or firehouse dog.
- A firefighter challenge for children.
- A live-burn or sprinkler demonstration where permitted.

Promote exact appearance and demonstration times when possible. Aircraft and working emergency units may be diverted, so make that possibility clear and always have a backup activity.

The attraction gets the family through the door. The rest of the event should turn that attention into something meaningful.

6 Make Schools Part of the Strategy

During Fire Prevention Week, your department is probably already visiting local schools. Use those visits to invite students back to the firehouse, with friends and family.

- Ask schools to send printed or electronic invitations to every family.
- Give students a take-home flyer during fire-prevention visits.

- Invite teachers, administrators and parent organizations to participate.
- Ask school newsletters and social accounts to share the event.
- Create a classroom challenge connected to attendance or the safety course.
- Encourage children to bring a friend and complete the activities together.

Schools provide a trusted connection to exactly the families you want to reach. Coordinate early and make the invitation part of your educational outreach, not a last-minute request.

7 Market Everywhere, and More Than Once

One social media post is not a marketing plan.

Online promotion

- Create a Facebook event with the full schedule and parking information.
- Feature a different attraction or activity in each post.
- Share short videos of members preparing or inviting the community.
- Use countdown posts during the final week.
- Ask members, partners and sponsors to share, not simply like, the event.
- Post live photos and “there is still time to join us” updates during the event.

Community promotion

- Distribute flyers through schools, libraries and community centers.
- Ask local businesses to display signs or bag-stuffers.

- Promote the event during every public appearance leading up to it.
- Place large, readable signs in approved high-traffic locations.
- Include the event in community newsletters and local government communications.

Media outreach

- Submit the event to newspaper, television, radio and online calendars.
- Send a short media advisory with the strongest visual story.
- List exact demonstration times and provide one knowledgeable contact.
- Invite reporters and photographers directly when you have a strong attraction.
- Have a safe location ready for media to photograph demonstrations.

Use real photos and video from previous events whenever possible. A rescue demonstration, helicopter landing or child completing the adventure course will usually attract more attention than a text-heavy graphic.

8

Ask Businesses to Sponsor and Promote

Local businesses can provide more than money. They can also provide supplies, services and access to their customers.

- Ask a print shop to provide flyers, signs or banners.
- Invite restaurants or grocery stores to donate water, snacks or food.
- Seek support for activity books, helmets, course prizes or safety materials.
- Ask sponsors to promote the event to customers and employees.

- Recognize support appropriately on event materials and social media.

Make participation easy. Offer several practical sponsorship levels or let businesses support a specific need. Follow department and local government ethics rules, and do not let commercial displays overwhelm the public-safety mission.

The best sponsor makes the event better and helps you reach people you might otherwise miss.

9 Treat Logistics and Safety as Part of the Program

If the promotion works, you must be ready for the crowd.

- Separate visitor parking and pedestrian paths from moving apparatus.
- Preserve a clear emergency-response route at all times.
- Position popular activities so lines do not block doors or demonstrations.
- Post a simple map and schedule near the entrance.
- Plan for accessibility, restrooms, shade, hydration and first aid.
- Establish a procedure for lost children.
- Assign members to traffic, crowds and safety, not only visible activities.
- Prepare weather, postponement and cancellation plans.
- Ensure cooking, live-fire and demonstration areas have appropriate supervision.

Do a complete walk-through from a visitor's perspective. Where will they park? How will they know what happens next? Can someone using a wheelchair participate? Where will a line form? Can apparatus still respond?

A great program can be undone by unsafe traffic, confusing schedules or unmanaged lines.

10

Make Every Member an Ambassador

For some visitors, the open house will be their first real conversation with a firefighter or EMT.

Brief members before the event and ask them to:

- Welcome visitors rather than wait to be approached.
- Explain equipment and procedures in plain language.
- Engage children without intimidating them.
- Introduce people to fire, rescue, EMS and support roles.
- Know the schedule and direct visitors to upcoming activities.
- Present a clean station and apparatus that reflect pride in the organization.

Invite elected officials and community leaders, but do more than pose for a photograph. Give them a meaningful tour. Explain department activity, community risks and current needs. Let them see the members and capabilities their decisions support.

11

Keep the Relationship Going

The event should be the beginning of a community relationship, not a once-a-year transaction.

- Provide information about smoke-alarm programs and CPR classes.
- Include volunteer, career and auxiliary opportunities without creating a hard sell.
- Offer a simple way to follow the department or receive event notices.
- Capture strong photos and video, with appropriate permission, for future outreach.
- Thank attendees, schools, sponsors, partners and participating agencies.
- Share attendance, highlights and specific outcomes after the event.

Debrief while the details are still fresh. Ask members and partners what worked, what failed and what should change. Document contacts, costs, schedules and lessons in one shared location.

Someone eventually handed you the baton. Build a playbook that makes it easier to hand the event to the next person.

A Simple Event-Day Formula

Before finalizing the program, make sure every visitor has the opportunity to experience four things:

- 1 Something to see:** A memorable fire, rescue or EMS demonstration.
- 2 Something to do:** A safety course, CPR practice or hands-on activity.
- 3 Something to learn:** One clear lesson they can use at home.
- 4 Someone to meet:** A welcoming member who represents the department well.

You do not need three helicopters or 1,000 attendees to hold a successful open house. You need good planning, creative programming, persistent promotion and a clear connection to the mission.

Open the bay doors, but do not stop there. Create an experience your community will remember and a relationship worth continuing.

Frequently asked questions

How far in advance should we begin planning an open house?

Begin planning three to four months before the event. Use that time to establish the budget, invite participating agencies, secure sponsors, coordinate with schools, schedule demonstrations and prepare promotional materials. The heaviest public marketing should begin approximately four weeks before the open house, with promotion becoming more frequent as the date approaches.

How much does a fire department open house cost?

The cost depends heavily on the department's resources, the size of the event and how much can be donated or provided internally. A small open house using department equipment, member volunteers and donated supplies may cost only a few hundred dollars. A larger event with food, entertainment, printed materials, children's activities, rented equipment, specialty attractions and professional services could cost several thousand dollars.

Create a working budget early and include items such as:

- Printing, banners and signs.
- Food, beverages and serving supplies.
- Children's helmets, activity books, prizes and giveaways.
- Entertainment, sound equipment or rentals.

- Tables, tents, portable restrooms and accessibility needs.
- Demonstration supplies and safety equipment.
- Insurance, permits or required public-safety support.
- Cleaning supplies and post-event expenses.

Departments may be able to offset or recover some of those costs by:

- Promoting voluntary donation opportunities during the event.
- Soliciting sponsorships or in-kind support from local businesses.
- Selling food and beverages where department policies permit.
- Selling appropriate department shirts, challenge coins, patches or other merchandise.
- Asking businesses to sponsor a specific activity, giveaway or printed item.
- Seeking donations of food, water, printing, tents, prizes or safety materials.

Follow all department, municipal and nonprofit rules involving donations, sponsorship recognition, raffles, merchandise and food sales. Fundraising can support the event, but it should not overwhelm its public-safety and community-engagement mission.

Should admission to the open house be free?

In most cases, yes. Free admission removes a barrier for families and reinforces that the event is a community education and outreach program. Departments can still provide clearly marked donation opportunities, sell

food or merchandise, or offer separately priced fundraising activities when appropriate.

How long should an open house last?

Three to five hours is usually enough time to offer several demonstrations and accommodate families with different schedules without exhausting the event team. Publish exact times for major demonstrations and repeat the most important activities when possible so visitors arriving later do not miss everything.

What attractions bring the most people?

The best attraction is something residents cannot experience during an ordinary visit to the firehouse. Examples include:

- A vehicle-rescue or live-fire demonstration.
- A firefighter challenge or hands-on safety course for children.
- An air-medical helicopter landing.
- Pictures inside or beside a fire truck.
- A ladder truck or specialty apparatus display.
- A canine, mounted, bomb-squad or technical-rescue team.
- A firehouse dog, mascot or popular children's character.

Working emergency units may be called away, and aircraft appearances may change because of weather or operational needs. Promote those attractions appropriately and prepare backup activities.

What should visitors learn at the event?

Choose three or four clear fire and life-safety messages rather than trying to teach everything at once. Useful topics include smoke alarms, home escape planning, calling 911, stop-drop-and-roll, carbon-monoxide safety and hands-only CPR. Keep lessons brief, interactive and easy for families to repeat at home.

How can schools help promote the open house?

Contact schools early, especially when the event is held during Fire Prevention Week. Ask them to distribute printed or electronic invitations, include the event in newsletters, share social posts and invite teachers or parent organizations to participate. If department members are already visiting classrooms, give students a flyer and personally invite them to return with their families and friends.

How many members are needed to staff the event?

That depends on the size and layout, but every major activity should have an assigned leader and enough personnel to operate safely. Remember to staff less-visible responsibilities such as parking, pedestrian safety, emergency access, information, photography, cleanup, first aid and member relief. Do not commit every available member to public activities if the department must remain ready to answer calls.

How should we handle emergency responses during the event?

Keep response routes clear and separate visitors from moving apparatus. Brief members on which units and crews remain available, how public activities will pause during a response and who will manage the crowd. Explain to attendees that apparatus or specialty units may leave if an emergency occurs; seeing the department respond can itself become an authentic educational moment when managed safely.

What should we do if bad weather is forecast?

Decide well in advance whether the event will continue indoors, move to a rain date or be canceled. Establish who makes that decision and when it will be announced. Prepare indoor alternatives for outdoor activities and publish updates consistently on the department website, social media pages and event listing.

Can the open house support volunteer recruitment?

Absolutely, but avoid turning the entire event into a hard sell. Offer a welcoming recruitment area, introduce visitors to operational and support roles, and make it easy for interested people to provide their contact information. Current members and their families are often the most effective recruiters because they can explain the experience honestly and personally.

Do we need permits, insurance or special approvals?

Possibly. Requirements may apply to food service, road closures, tents, raffles, live-fire demonstrations, helicopter landings, temporary electrical service, amplified sound or large public gatherings. Confirm requirements with department leadership, the municipality, the insurance provider and the appropriate fire, health or law-enforcement authorities early in the planning process.

How should local businesses be involved?

Ask businesses to contribute in ways that directly improve the event. A print shop might provide flyers, a grocery store could donate water, a restaurant might support food service, or a company could sponsor the children's safety course. Businesses can also promote the event to their customers and employees. Recognize their support appropriately without allowing commercial displays to take over the fire-safety mission.

How do we measure whether the open house was successful?

Attendance is useful, but it should not be the only measurement. Also consider:

- Participation in safety activities and demonstrations.
- Smoke-alarm visits, CPR classes or other services requested.
- Volunteer or career recruitment inquiries.
- Donations, sponsorships and event revenue compared with costs.
- School, business and community-partner participation.
- Media coverage and social engagement.

- Feedback from visitors, members and participating agencies.
- Photos, video and promotional assets captured for future use.

Debrief soon after the event and document what worked, what failed, what the event cost and what should change next year. That record will make the next open house easier to plan and improve.

For the personal story behind this guide, read [Three Helicopters, a Fire-Safety Clown and a Line Down the Street.](#)

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