

Gulf County Fire Academy

Partnership between Gulf District Schools &
Gulf County Board of Commissioners and Emergency
Management Services

*Train here. Serve here. Build a career here. Our
Fire Academy will develop the skilled workforce
needed to transform volunteer service into
sustainable, paid firefighting careers.*



Presented to: Triumph Gulf Coast Board · August
2026

A National Crisis Hitting Home

30%+

Decline in Volunteer
Firefighters Since 1980

5 Years

Until Gulf County
Transitions to Paid Departments

0

Structured Local
Training Pathways Today

THE NATIONAL PROBLEM

- Volunteer firefighter numbers have declined more than 30% since 1980
- Aging demographics — most volunteers are over 50 years old
- Recruitment has not kept pace with retirements
- Rural communities like Gulf County are hit hardest
- Nationwide public safety emergency

THE LOCAL REALITY

- 11 Volunteer Fire Stations covering more than 559 square miles
- Gulf County's volunteer firefighter workforce is aging out rapidly
- Fewer young residents are joining volunteer departments
- Rural district faces critical gaps in emergency response coverage
- County plans transition to paid departments within 5 years
- Population Influx up to 45,000 due to tourism

Without a local training pipeline, this transition plan will fail.

Gulf County Fire Academy

A local answer to a national crisis — building the pipeline right here in Gulf County

Who It Serves

- Gulf District Schools 11th and 12th grade students
- Adult community members seeking fire careers
- Current volunteer firefighters pursuing certification
- Serves both Port St. Joe & Wewahitchka schools, as well as Franklin County Schools
- **Target:** 25 students enrolled per year increasing to 35 students by year 9

What It Delivers

- Firefighter I
- Firefighter II
- CPR / First Aid/ Basic Life Support
- Emergency Medical Responder (EMR)
- Emergency Medical Technician (EMT)
- National Incident Management System (NIMS) (FEMA) (4)
- Hazardous Material Awareness & Operations (2)
- EV Fire Safety & Suppression Certification
- Alternative Fuel Vehicle Emergency Response Certification
- Wildland Firefighting & Rural Fire Operation
- Work-based learning & professional mentorship

Total Stackable Certifications - 15

The Outcome

- Direct hiring pipeline into Gulf County fire departments
- Supports 5-year transition to paid fire service
- Stackable credentials for postsecondary advancement
- EMT & Paramedic pathway options
- Graduates stay and serve in Gulf County

About the TRIUMPH Grant

TRIUMPH Gulf Coast, Inc. was created to fund projects that promote economic recovery, diversification, and enhancement of Florida's disproportionately affected Gulf Coast counties. Gulf County is a designated beneficiary.

- Gulf County is a designated disproportionately affected county
- TRIUMPH funds workforce development & career pathways
- Priority: K-20 programs with industry certifications
- Workforce programs that create long-term economic resilience
- This Fire Academy application addresses a critical public safety need
- Demonstrated community need + clear implementation plan = strong case

9 Years

Grant-Funded
Program Duration

200+

Students/Community Members Served
Over Program Lifetime

25-35

Students Enrolled
Annually (Target)

Curriculum & Certifications

Gulf Coast State College-aligned coursework embedded within Gulf District Schools

Core Training Program

- Industry-aligned Fire Academy coursework (grades 11 & 12)
- Integrated with Gulf District Schools CTE curriculum
- Hands-on instruction with professional-grade fire equipment
- On-site training rotations at partner fire departments
- Work-based learning and mentorship from professional firefighters
- Partner with Gulf Coast State College
- Open to adult community members and career-changers
- Open to Franklin County students and adults

Certifications Earned

- Firefighter I
- Firefighter II
- CPR / First Aid / Basic Life Support/AED
- Emergency Medical Responder (EMR)
- Emergency Medical Technician (EMT)
- National Incident Management System (NIMS) (FEMA) (4)
- Hazardous Materials Awareness & Operation (2)
- EV Fire Safety & Suppression
- Wildland Firefighting & Rural Fire Operations

15 Stackable Certifications

Career Outcomes & Employer Pipeline



Immediate Employment Pipeline

- Direct hiring relationships with Gulf County Fire Departments
- Students graduate with certifications employers require
- Reduced training costs for fire agencies
- Local graduates who know and serve their community

5-Year Department Transition Goal

- Gulf County is transitioning to paid fire departments
- Fire Academy creates the pipeline needed for this shift
- Graduates ready to step into paid positions as they open
- Reduces reliance on out-of-county recruitment

Long-Term Career Pathways

- Stackable credentials for continued advancement
- Pathway to EMT, Paramedic & Emergency Management
- State & regional fire service employment options
- Postsecondary alignment with Gulf Coast State College

Training Location — White City, FL

County-Provided Facility — Strategically Located for Gulf District Students

- Facility provided by the Gulf County Board of Commissioners
- Located in White City, Florida — Behind active volunteer FD
- Minimal facility upgrades required to begin operations
- Close proximity to Gulf County fire stations — supports on-site department training partnerships
- Partner with Gulf Coast State College Emergency Programs
- Accessible to adult community members from across the county
- Accessible to Franklin County students and citizens



UNITED for the Future of Public Safety

Gulf District Schools

Lead Applicant

- 1,800 students across 4 public schools
- Over 60% economically disadvantaged
- Port St. Joe Jr/Sr High & Wewahitchka Jr/Sr High
- Lead program administrator
- CTE integration & curriculum alignment

Gulf County Board of Commissioners & Gulf County Emergency Management

Facility Partner

- Donating training facility in White City, FL
- Donating Fire Truck
- Local government endorsement & match
- Long-term land-use collaboration
- On-site Training & Mentorship rotations
- Industry Guidance
- Direct Employers for graduates

Gulf County Coast State College

Training Partners

- Live Burn Training
- Industry guidance & equipment access
- Continuing Education until the Fire Academy is fully developed

Timeline Overview

Planning & Facility Preparation Spring of 2027

- Complete facility upgrades at White City
- Purchase fire training equipment
- Execute Partnerships with GCSC, local fire departments, emergency management agencies, & workforce partners
- Recruit & enroll first cohort

Years 1 - 2 Fall 2027 - 2028

- Launch inaugural Fire Academy Cohort
- Firefighter I, CPR, BLS, AED, National Incident Management System
- Recruit second cohort
- Begin EMR training opportunities
- Firefighter II training

Years 2-4 2028 - 2030

- Begin EMT program
- Increase Employer partnerships and work-based learning opportunities
- Year 4 - increase to 30 participates

Years 5-9 2030 - 2035

- Program sustainability & growth
- Maintain full implementation & regional training capacity
- Evaluate long-term impact on workforce development & public safety
- Paid fire service transition underway
- Ongoing community impact

More Than a Fire Academy: Community Impact

200+

Students Served
Over 8 Years

\$60,000

Average Florida Firefighter Salary

5 Years

Timeline to Paid
Fire Departments

Strengthens Public Safety

- Significantly improves emergency response capacity
- Locally trained firefighters serving their own community
- Reduces reliance on aging volunteer workforce
- A pipeline toward paid, professional fire service
- Long-term resilience for rural Gulf County

Economic Opportunity

- Stable, well-paying fire service careers in Gulf County
- Students don't have to leave the region for successful careers
- Reduced recruitment costs for fire agencies
- Contribution to the local tax base

Student & Community Equity

- Industry credentials before high school graduation
- Equitable access to high-wage career pathways
- 60%+ of students are economically disadvantaged
- Adults re-entering the workforce gain real credentials
- Serves both district high schools equally

Invest in Gulf County's Public Safety Future

TRIUMPH Gulf Coast funding will build a Fire Academy that prepares Gulf County students and adults to serve their community — creating a sustainable pipeline into professional fire service for generations to come.

**Fund the
Fire Academy**

**Support White City
Training Site**

**Protect Gulf
County's
Public Safety**

Contact: Melissa Hancock, Assistant Superintendent for Instruction
mhancock@gulf.k12.fl.us · 850.229.6940 x23126 · gulfcoschools.com



Gulf County Fire Academy