

A photograph of a Black woman, an EMT, smiling warmly. She is wearing a light blue short-sleeved uniform shirt with a stethoscope around her neck. On her left chest, there is a circular patch with a blue Star of Life and the text 'EMERGENCY MEDICAL TECHNICIAN'. The background is the interior of an ambulance, with various medical equipment and a glowing orange light fixture visible.

Empowering Women in Public Safety Careers

Recruiting, retaining and promoting women in public safety careers is essential to address workforce shortages, enhance diversity of problem-solving skills and improve community relations. However, women in law enforcement, firefighting and emergency medical services (EMS) are vastly underrepresented.

Only 12% of law enforcement officers are women, with only 3% in leadership positions.¹ Only 5% of career firefighters² and about 27% of emergency medical technicians (EMTs) are women.³

As part of its commitment to public safety personnel, Verizon Frontline leads a Women in Public Safety initiative.

“Our goals are to empower women in public safety to make a difference, build confidence and competence, and support diversification to represent our communities through inclusion,” says Kim Mirabella, vice president of business development and strategic sales with Verizon.

Career barriers

The following barriers keep women from embracing public safety careers.

Workplace culture. Many public safety leaders don’t fully understand what inclusion means and how to foster it. Leadership opportunities for women have traditionally been limited, so inclusion must be intentional.

Struggles with work-life balance. When women go home, their job isn’t done. “We lose a lot of women to being caretakers,” says Sarah Krebs, the chief diversity, equity and inclusion officer for the Michigan State Police.

Lack of visibility and clarity. Some people may not be accustomed to seeing female firefighters, EMTs or law enforcement officers. In addition, the general public often doesn’t understand what these jobs entail. “Running into buildings is only part of the job. Ninety percent of our calls are EMS responding to a medical emergency,” says Kara Kalkbrenner, former fire chief of the Phoenix Fire Department.



Agencies should highlight women in public safety and diversity in ranks.

Developing the pipeline

The following steps can inspire girls from an early age to dream of, prepare for and pursue a career in public safety.

Start early. Build relationships with K-12 schools and extracurricular organizations, such as Girl Scout groups. Participate in career days. Develop books and materials specifically for lower-grade students.

Normalize women in public safety. Agencies should highlight women in public safety and diversity in ranks.

“Let’s showcase diversity and put articulate and passionate individuals in the spotlight,” says Mirabella. “Let them be the shining example young girls can look up to and say, ‘I want to be her when I grow up.’ If they can see it, they can be it.”

Increase media representation. Use photos of women in promotional and recruiting materials. Include women at news conferences and public events.

Improving recruitment

These best practices make public safety jobs more welcoming, inclusive and accessible to women.

Target recruiting. Use diverse and inclusive descriptions in recruiting materials. Recruit at events that potential candidates are likely to attend (e.g., athletic competitions, first aid trainings or healthcare career days).

Offer internships. Internship programs introduce young women to various jobs and create a pool of potential job candidates.

Start mentoring from Day 1. “Mentorship during training is absolutely critical,” says Sandy Jo MacArthur, former assistant chief of the Los Angeles Police Department. “You decide to take the test to be a firefighter, and you get in there and you’re thinking, ‘I don’t belong; there’s no one else like me,’ then there’s that one mentor who says, ‘Keep going — you’re going to be good.’”

Allow job sharing and part-time shifts. For example, let two people at the same work site share a shift.

Update grooming standards. Ensure standards are professional and inclusive so that the policy is equitable and respectful.

Revamp policies. Create policies that support family leave, breast pumping and childcare. Make sure requirements like years of experience, specific types of experience or full-time employment history don’t rule out qualified individuals.

Create a safe and welcoming environment for all. Promote diversity. Encourage open dialogue. Appoint leaders who proactively address problems and hold people accountable for their actions.

Creating women leaders

The following tactics support women leaders in their growth and success.

Be deliberate about promoting women to leadership roles. Make them visible in the organization. Avoid making token appointments so you can check the “women in leadership” box.

Make career development a high priority. Establish clear goals and paths to promotion. Identify education and skill requirements early on.



Verizon Frontline — the advanced network and technology for first responders — is the #1 network choice in public safety.⁴ “We’re committed to advocating for and making a difference in the lives of our first responders and the public safety community,” says Kim Mirabella, vice president of business development and strategic sales with Verizon. “We care deeply about the men and women we serve.”

Start a mentorship program. Encourage informal mentoring, too. Supervisors can help perform this function, and men also play an important role. “They don’t have to look like me or act like me, but they have to be dynamic, and they have to support the organization and provide that positive reinforcement,” says Kalkbrenner.

Encourage peer networking within and outside the agency. “Building peer networks outside your direct organization can be part of your success story and expose you to broader industry best practices,” says Karen Tandy, consultant and former administrator of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration. “It can also help you get through the tough times and points of failure.”

Help women develop external skills required for effective leadership. These skills include communications and media, collaboration and conflict management.

Conclusion

Above all, agencies looking to expand women’s roles in public safety should invest in education — early and often. “Let’s make sure the industry knows what is and isn’t appropriate by setting clear guidelines and then following and enforcing them,” says Mirabella. “We can also establish and foster a culture built on respect and ensure complaint procedures are in place and working as designed.”

1. <https://30x30initiative.org/>
2. U.S. Fire Administration. <https://www.usfa.fema.gov/a-z/supporting-women-in-fire-and-ems/>
3. https://nasemso.org/wp-content/uploads/2020-National-EMS-Assessment_Reduced-File-Size.pdf
4. Quarterly third-party wireless voice market share data, Q1 2024

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