

Fourteen-year-old Trever O'Donnell was glad for his refresher course on fire behavior.

The study on how fires burn was just one part his week at the 9th annual Junior Firefighter Academy held this week near Chambersburg.

"I've been doing firefighting stuff pretty much for most of my life. My dad's a chief and firefighting is just something I've always wanted to do, and this was a perfect place to get started and refresh myself," O'Donnell said.

Like O'Donnell, some of the cadets have already been through some sort of training, but for others, this is their first real taste of firefighting, academy administrator Jason Strite said.

"The reason for this academy is we've never known of any academy out there like this. We want to get them to know and understand the basics. It's not a certified class, but it gives them a hands on experience and background. For ones that don't have training, it gives them something to look forward to and think about: 'Is this something I really want to do?'" Strite said. "Some don't want to be a career fireman. They want to do something else but maybe want to volunteer. Some don't know what they want to do."

The week-long academy, sponsored by the Franklin County Fire Chief's Association, is open to boys and girls age 14 to 17 who are members of a fire company's junior firefighter program.

This year, the program drew 37 youth from Franklin, Adams, Cumberland and Carbon counties, and well as Carroll County, Maryland.

The week includes an exercise on vehicle extrications, a study on fire behavior, and lessons on how to throw ground ladders or pull a hose from a truck and repack it.

Cadets will also take trips to the National Fire Academy in Emmittsburg and the National Fallen Firefighters and 9/11 Memorials.

While some of the time is spent in the classroom, for a lot of cadets, it's the training exercises that they enjoy the most.

Lida Fitz, 14, a member of the Fountaindale junior firefighter program in Adams County, said her favorite part of the week has been working with the self-contained breathing apparatus gear.

This is her first year at the academy, but she hopes to come back next year.

"I have two close friends who are like family who do it (firefighting) and I've been around it ever since I was little," she said. "I figured this would be a good place to learn stuff and have it fresh in my mind."

Each year, administrators try to gauge what the participants like or don't like about the week.

Strite said a lot of the cadets enjoy the training while also making new friends.

What don't they like?

Pushups.

By Wednesday, instructors had divvied out about 300 pushups.

"When they get here, they're all one," Strite said. "It's like the military. If one person messes up, the whole department messes up. The record is 892. We're hoping not to reach that."

Instructors push the cadets but also ensure they have a fun week. The schedule included bowling and kickball, and the water battle is one of the more popular events.

Cadets are divided into teams, structured much like a fire company with a chain of command.

Through the academy, instructors hope to instill leadership and other skills in the cadets that they can take back to their respective junior firefighter programs.

"We have two cadets that this is their fourth year in a row coming here," Strite said. "This is their last year. We looked to them for leadership to lead the rest of the cadets."

The academy would not be possible without the help of the 19 staff members and 25 to 30 sponsors, Strite said. Local fire companies also host the cadets for dinner each evening and give them station tours.

The class graduates on Saturday with a formal ceremony. A challenge course set up Wednesday evening was postponed to Saturday after fire companies had to respond to an actual fire just down the lane from the Franklin County Public Safety Training Center where the academy is held.