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## Exploring Fire, EMS Service Sharing in the La Crosse County Region

*Enhanced collaboration among providers could enhance operations at reduced cost*

With fire and emergency medical services (EMS) departments in the La Crosse region facing a host of challenges, collaborative action could improve service levels at a lower cost than acting independently, according to an analysis by the Wisconsin Policy Forum, the state's leading nonpartisan, independent public policy research group.

The study, commissioned by La Crosse County and the La Crosse Area Planning Committee, explores emerging issues for providers of these critical services and offers options to enhance service sharing.

Included in the study are the La Crosse, La Crescent, Onalaska, Holmen Area, and Shelby fire departments; Brice Prairie EMS and Farmington Emergency Medical Team; and Tri-State Ambulance, a nonprofit paramedic service provider to the region.

Forum researchers note that a spirit of partnership among these departments has already resulted in some shared efforts. Yet challenges are emerging that suggest a need for enhanced collaboration, including:

- Growing demand for service in the northern and southern parts of the area, particularly in the jurisdiction served by the Holmen Area department;
- Concern that some departments have sufficient capacity in normal conditions, but are stretched too thin during times of high call volumes;
- Difficulties associated with retention and recruitment of paid-on-call staff;
- The potential need for new or replaced stations among four of the five departments to meet increasing service demands or address aging facilities.

"Our analysis suggests that each of the departments likely will need to increase spending in the not-too-distant future," the report says. "Collaborative action could achieve at least some desired improvements at a lower cost and a higher level of service than could be achieved by acting alone."

The study presents three tiers of cooperative-action options for the communities to consider:

- **Enhanced service sharing options** include joint training and/or recruitment of part-time staff, joint case management of high-volume EMS users, or joint conduct of other non-response functions like fire prevention, inspections, and investigations. These options could be pursued via contractual agreements between individual departments or the possible creation of a regional bureau under a cost-sharing agreement. Benefits could include cost efficiencies through

economies of scale; improved service for smaller departments (in particular); and, in the case of training, better cohesion during mutual aid incidents.

- **Enhanced coordination of operations options** would include formalization and expansion of current mutual aid protocols, including a possible move to “closest unit response” or automatic aid; working with Tri-State on strategies to improve EMS response times outside of the city of La Crosse (where they are already strong); and greater sharing of apparatus. The enhanced mutual aid and EMS options hold promise to improve service levels and response times while the shared apparatus option could lower costs.
- **Advanced options** could require some departments to relinquish some or all of their existing autonomy but hold the greatest potential for regional service improvement and enhanced efficiency. One would involve sharing new or existing stations between multiple communities as a means of cutting costs, while another would make greater use of the La Crosse FD’s capacity by having it provide contracted service to Shelby/Greenfield and La Crescent, potentially providing better service at a similar cost for the smaller communities while establishing new revenue streams for La Crosse. We also model a single consolidated department to serve the entire region, which we believe would be the most efficient and effective solution if policymakers are willing to spend more to pursue enhanced service levels.

Each of these tiers of options would involve cost sharing agreements and/or a willingness by larger departments to shoulder greater responsibility for the benefit of the entire region.

We also see potential – if advanced options are deemed too expensive for now – for the communities to start slowly with some of the less comprehensive service sharing options and then build toward consideration and implementation of more advanced options.

“It is at times of crisis that citizens recognize more than ever the value of highly-functioning emergency response departments and systems, the report says. “During such times, exemplified by the current COVID-19 pandemic, not only is it critical to have sufficient numbers of well-trained personnel and appropriate equipment, but the value of cooperation and coordination among neighboring public safety and health agencies also becomes more pronounced.”

Go [here](#) to read “Something in Common,” the La Crosse County region fire and EMS report.