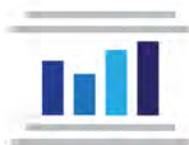




REPORT BRIEF

# FIRST RESPONSE

*Addressing fire and emergency medical  
service challenges in Ozaukee County*



WISCONSIN

**POLICY FORUM**

As part of the metro Milwaukee region and home to several burgeoning suburbs, many might assume that Ozaukee County is served by robust fire and emergency medical services (EMS) that rival those of neighboring Milwaukee or Waukesha counties. A closer look, however, reveals that is not the case. Relying largely on part-time paid and unpaid volunteers, the fire and rescue departments that serve Ozaukee County all take a comparatively bare-boned and inexpensive approach. That approach has been a justifiable source of community pride and has generally served the communities well over time, but it is now showing severe signs of distress.

In this report, at the behest of Ozaukee County’s municipal leaders, the Wisconsin Policy Forum explores options that Ozaukee County’s municipal governments may wish to consider to collaboratively respond to their growing fire and EMS service delivery challenges. The analysis was conducted with the input and cooperation of administrators and fire chiefs from each of the participating departments. Its purpose was not to recommend a specific strategy and implementation plan, but instead to develop a range of potential collaborative approaches.

## Overview of Departments

Ozaukee County is served by nine fire departments that are dispersed geographically throughout the county. As shown in the table below, there are differences among the nine in terms of governance, staffing models, and EMS licenses. Still, all of the Ozaukee County departments provide both fire and EMS and offer ambulance transport (with the exception of Belgium, which contracts with Fredonia and Port Washington for transport).

**Summary of Ozaukee County fire department characteristics**

Name	Type	Staffing Model	ALS License
Mequon Fire Department	Municipal	Paid-on-call	Paramedic
Grafton Fire Department	Municipal	Combination	Paramedic
Port Washington Fire Department	Municipal	Paid-on-call	Paramedic
Cedarburg Fire Department*	Municipal	Volunteer/POC	AEMT
Thiensville Fire Department	Municipal	Paid-on-call	Paramedic
Saukville Fire Department	Municipal	Paid-on-call	AEMT
Fredonia Fire Department	Municipal	Paid-on-call	AEMT
Belgium Fire Department	Independent District	Volunteer	EMR
Waubeka Fire Department	Independent District	Volunteer	AEMT

\* Cedarburg only pays part-time responders for ambulance transports but not for other calls.

There are very few full-time fire/EMS employees in Ozaukee County, with each of the departments instead making extensive use of part-time or volunteer staff. Only one department, the Grafton FD, could be considered a combination department, meaning that it staffs its station with both full-time firefighter/emergency medical technicians (EMTs) and paid-on-call (POC) or hourly employees. The Mequon FD also is moving to that model in 2021 with the addition of three full-time positions. Three of the departments are true volunteer departments in which the chief is generally the only paid employee.

EMS calls account for 80% of total calls in Ozaukee County. As shown in the table, the Mequon, Port Washington, and Grafton departments have the highest activity levels. Call volumes are growing in most jurisdictions, with increases exceeding 30% in Fredonia, Port Washington, Saukville, and Grafton. **This growth in calls for service is an important development that merits consideration by policymakers.**

#### Calls for service trends, 2015 to 2019

	2015	2019	% Change
Mequon Fire Department	1,917	2,323	21.2%
Grafton Fire Department	1,131	1,471	30.1%
Port Washington Fire Department	1,334	1,748	31.0%
Cedarburg Fire Department	1,045	1,162	13.1%
Thiensville Fire Department	677	777	14.8%
Saukville Fire Department	378	506	33.9%
Fredonia Fire Department	284	381	34.2%
Belgium Fire Department	190	229	20.5%
Waubeka Fire Department	103	98	-4.9%
<b>Total</b>	<b>7,059</b>	<b>8,695</b>	<b>23.5%</b>

An important aspect of response is whether and to what extent departments maintain staff who are stationed physically at the fire house and ready to immediately respond to a call. These ready-to-respond staff can be full-time, salaried employees or part-time staff who are paid at an hourly rate to be on site during a specified shift (the latter are known as paid-on premise or POP employees). Shift staffing can be in place 24/7 or only for daytime hours, when call volumes are higher.

Differences in call volumes help explain the range of different staffing models across jurisdictions. In areas with fewer than two or three calls per day, there may not be a financial justification for having fire or rescue crews available to respond from stations on a 24/7 basis. Consequently, assuming sufficient POC staff can be recruited and retained, a POC model may be appropriate.

The adjacent table breaks down each department's paid staffing (using full-time equivalents, or FTEs) and shows the important variations in use of shift staffing versus POC staff. <sup>1</sup> Four of the departments have regularly scheduled shifts at their

#### Paid staffing breakdown by department

	Chief/Admin	Shift FTE	POC FTE	Total FTE
Mequon Fire Department	3.00	7.29	18.52	28.82
Grafton Fire Department	2.50	4.41	8.14	15.04
Port Washington Fire Department	1.31	6.44	3.40	11.15
Cedarburg Fire Department	1.90	1.50	1.47	4.87
Thiensville Fire Department	2.01	0.00	3.40	5.42
Saukville Fire Department	0.50	0.00	5.52	6.02
Fredonia Fire Department	0.00	1.00	1.39	2.39
Belgium Fire Department	0.00	0.00	0.00	NA
Waubeka Fire Department	0.00	0.00	0.00	NA
<b>Total</b>	<b>11.23</b>	<b>20.64</b>	<b>41.83</b>	<b>73.70</b>

stations, although only Grafton and Mequon have true 24/7 shifts. Port Washington seeks but is not always able to staff a full-time paramedic and supplements that with a POP shift from 6 am to 6 pm. Fredonia has one full-time EMT at its station.

<sup>1</sup> The table reflects 2019 actual staffing and budgets unless significant changes occurred since that time. In those cases, we updated FTE numbers to reflect actions taken in 2020 and 2021 budgets. Grafton and Thiensville calculations reflect 2020 budgets and Mequon and Cedarburg numbers are updated to reflect 2021 budgets. Also, volunteer hours worked in Waubeka, Belgium, Thiensville, and Cedarburg are not reflected as these are not "paid" FTE hours.



Response times are an important measure of service levels and are influenced significantly by staffing models. The table shows EMS average response times as provided by the nine departments. Given that Grafton and Mequon have at least some 24/7 shift staffing, it is not surprising that those two departments have the lowest turnout times<sup>2</sup> for EMS and fire calls. More rural departments, which rely on a general page and serve larger geographic areas, have longer turnout times. Travel time, meanwhile, is a reflection of station location and geographic service area.

EMS average response times

	EMS - Average Response Time in Minutes		
	Turnout time	Travel time	Total Response Time
Mequon Fire Department	4.00	5.50	9.50
Grafton Fire Department	3.00	4.00	7.00
Port Washington Fire Department	5.75	3.75	9.50
Cedarburg Fire Department	7.90	3.60	11.50
Thiensville Fire Department	5.19	3.51	8.70
Saukville Fire Department	7.95	4.80	12.75
Fredonia Fire Department*	6.1/6.3	2.3/5.8	8.4/12.1
Belgium Fire Department	5.87	3.03	8.90
Waubeka Fire Department	10.50	3.90	14.40

\* For Fredonia, we show response times both for calls within the village and town of Fredonia (the first number) and for ambulance calls to which the department responds in Belgium.

While readers may wish to gauge whether the response times for the Ozaukee County departments are satisfactory, it is difficult to opine on that question. Different staffing models, geographies, and service expectations among different fire departments makes it difficult to use response time comparisons or statewide or national standards to measure service quality. Nevertheless, **it is certainly worth noting that with the exception of Grafton, EMS response times for the Ozaukee County departments generally do not measure up well with statewide and national averages and/or standards.**

With regard to fire department budgets, there is wide variation between the Ozaukee County departments in the costs borne by taxpayers (see chart on following page). Some consistency does exist in the north between the departments in Waubeka, Belgium, Saukville, and Fredonia, which is linked to their similar staffing and response models. Similarly, Mequon and Grafton, the two departments that make greatest use of full-time staff, have similar net per capita spending levels. Overall, per capita fire and EMS spending levels in Ozaukee County are considerably lower than those we have seen in other counties where we have conducted fire and EMS service sharing studies, including Milwaukee, Racine, and La Crosse counties.

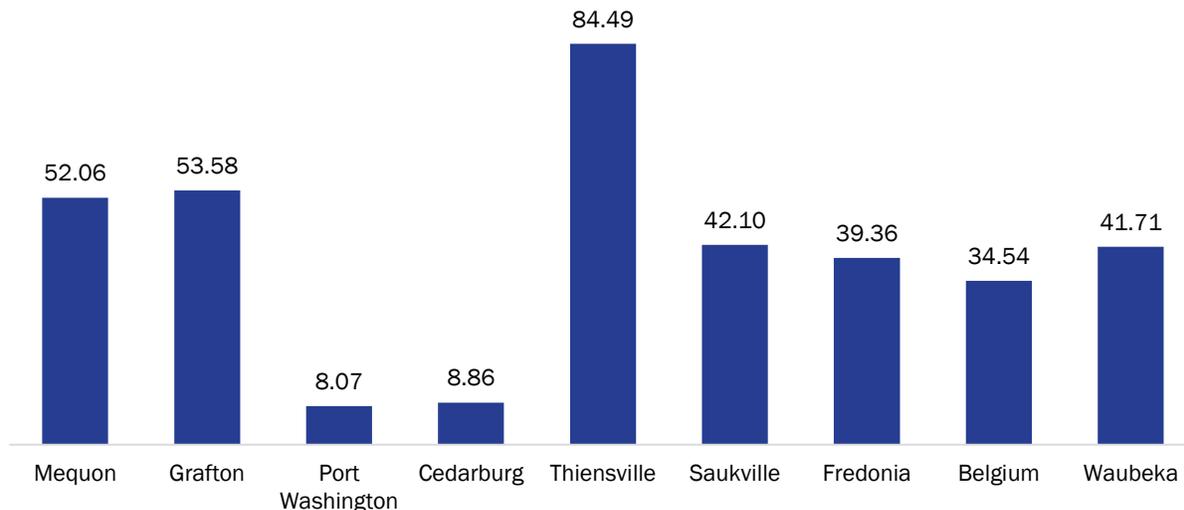
## Key Challenges and Observations

There is no “right” or “wrong” fire department staffing and operational framework, and each of the models employed in Ozaukee County may be perfectly suited to a particular community based on the needs and expectations of its residents. In fact, the dedication of part-time and volunteer staff and the ability of several departments to sustain their operations through fundraising and other creative means is impressive.

<sup>2</sup> Turnout times represent the time between the receipt of a call and when a response is on the road.



### 2019 net department operating expenditures per capita



Nevertheless, we identified some pressing issues that affect each of the participants and that may benefit from collective planning and coordination as departments seek to resolve them:

- **Calls for service are increasing** for all nine departments, which have added to the pressure on all departments to enhance staffing and response levels.
- At the same time that call volumes are growing, each department is **struggling to recruit and retain part-time or volunteer staff** and each has expressed serious concerns about the sustainability of a model that relies upon such staff going forward.
- While there is no precise standard for EMS response times to equally apply to each of the nine departments, it is clear to us that **EMS response times in Ozaukee County merit improvement.**
- **Paramedic and overall staffing levels in Port Washington are particularly stretched thin**, which has negative ramifications for other departments given Port Washington's central location and its role in providing either primary or back-up advanced life support services to neighboring jurisdictions.

Most notably, **the departments' challenges during the final weeks of 2020 should serve as an urgent call to action for greater investment in full-time staff.** Paid-on-call staffing challenges were on full display as a surge in COVID-19 cases and the year-end holidays depleted rosters and rendered several departments unable to respond to service calls for extended periods of time.

When one department is unable to field a response, response times suffer as neighboring departments must pick up the slack. Meanwhile, those neighboring departments – which have invested sufficiently to ensure service interruptions do not occur in *their* communities – experience severe stress, with command and line staff often forced to work extended hours and juggle multiple calls from multiple jurisdictions. Overall, **this is an unsustainable situation that merits immediate consideration and action.**



## Summary of options for change

We considered and broadly modeled a spectrum of service sharing and consolidation options that may allow the study participants to grapple with their challenges in a manner that would be less expensive and more effective than if they attempted to do so individually. None of these options are mutually exclusive, and they could be pursued progressively over time.

Our first tier of options involves strategies the Ozaukee County departments could undertake collaboratively while **maintaining the independence of each department**. The first would strategically station four full-time paramedic interceptors across the county as a means of boosting paramedic response capacity county-wide; while the second envisions a collective effort to boost the number of full-time shifts at strategic station

### Tier 1: Near-Term Options

Option	Description
Paramedic Supplement	Four 24/7 paramedics stationed strategically across Ozaukee County to provide 24/7 response as a supplement to EMS response capability of existing departments; paramedics could be employed by health systems, the county, or a private contractor with the cost allocated to municipalities.
Add FT staff countywide	Provide a minimum of two full-time firefighter/EMS responders at several stations throughout the county to improve EMS response times, enhance mutual aid capacity, and decrease reliance on POC staff. This option would rely on a far more extensive and formalized approach to mutual aid that could include additional automatic aid agreements or “closest unit response.”

locations to ensure sufficient capacity when call volumes are high or POC staff are scarce. This option also anticipates a higher and more formalized level of mutual aid. Cost sharing negotiations would be required to implement these options, but implementation from a programmatic perspective could occur relatively quickly.

Our next tier of options involves two approaches to **partially consolidate the Ozaukee County fire departments**. These options would move the departments further in the direction of a full-time staffing model, while allowing costs to be shared among multiple communities. The first looks at the prospect of merging pairs of departments in Ozaukee County. We use Grafton and Saukville as a model since those two departments are

### Tier 2: Partial Consolidation Options

Option	Description
Two-Way Consolidation	Two departments consolidate their operations as a means of sharing the cost of enhanced full-time staffing while also seeking administrative and apparatus efficiencies; a Grafton-Saukville hypothetical consolidation plan is presented for illustrative purposes.
Two Ozaukee County Departments	The nine departments consolidate into Northern Ozaukee County and Southern Ozaukee County departments as a means of moving toward full-time staffing while also securing the service-level benefits and efficiencies associated with large departments.

currently sharing a chief. Our second partial consolidation option examines a hypothetical scenario in which the existing Ozaukee County departments merge into two departments – one that would cover the northern part of the county and the other the southern portion.



Our final tier of options presents two different models for a **single consolidated fire department to serve all of Ozaukee County**. The two models differ both in their ratio of full-time to part-time staff and the number of 24/7 shifts maintained at each station. The first model is designed to approximate the staffing model used by the North Shore Fire Department, while the second is a lower-priced approach that may more appropriately reflect Ozaukee County’s call volumes and density.

A single consolidated department would perhaps best position Ozaukee County citizens and taxpayers to maximize the general benefits of consolidation. For example, the department’s larger size might make it better able to recruit and retain high-quality staff; create a more efficient command and operational structure; and house a leaner fleet of vehicles. Conversely, because of the differences in demographics and service demands that exist in different parts of Ozaukee County’s large geography, a “one size fits all” approach may not be optimal.

### Tier 3: Full Consolidation Options

Option	Description
Higher-Price Staffing Model	Ozaukee County is served by a single consolidated department that uses mostly full-time firefighter/EMS responders to staff a combined 38 shifts on a 24/7 basis across eight of the county’s 11 stations. The remaining three stations would be staffed with POC personnel.
Lower-Price Staffing Model	Ozaukee County is served by a single consolidated department that uses a combination of full-time and part-time firefighter/EMS responders to staff a combined 25 shifts on a 24/7 basis across seven of the county’s 11 stations. The remaining four stations would be staffed with POC personnel.

## Options Comparison

As summarized in the table below, each option would necessitate substantial additional taxpayer investment, which is not surprising given the relatively low level of investment that is currently occurring. However, while the price tags may be difficult for policymakers and citizens to swallow, they cannot be considered in a vacuum.

It is clear that *some* sizable increased investment is warranted to move toward full-time fire department staffing. This will be important not only to ensure that the service-level issues cited above are addressed, but also as a means of ensuring equity. Indeed, the current situation – in which certain departments that have invested more heavily are being asked to pick up slack for others – would appear to be unsustainable.

### Fiscal impacts of six options

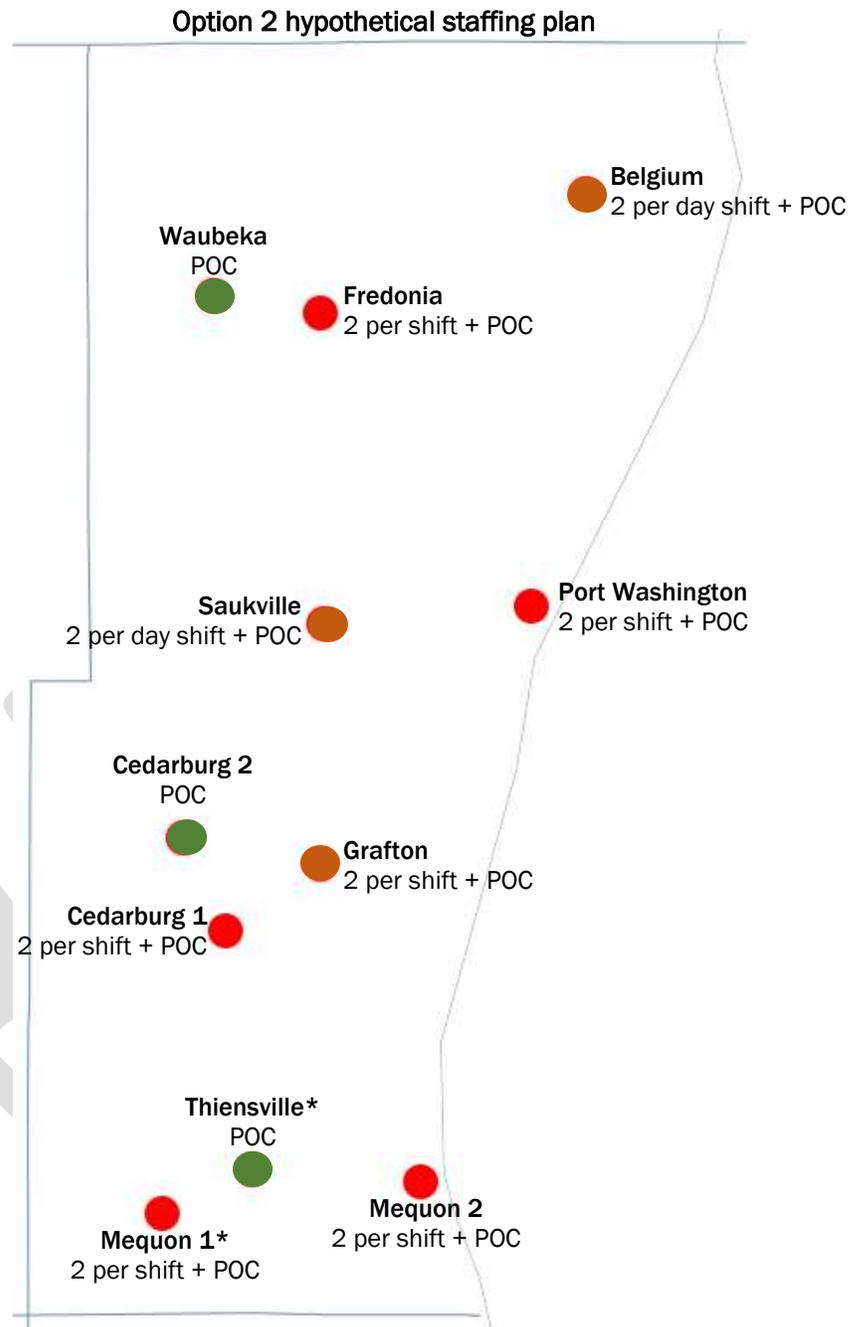
Consolidation Option	Total Expenditures	Addl. Net Expenditures	Per Capita Addl. Net Expenditures
Option 1 – Paramedic Supplement	\$5,820,903	\$1,449,307	\$16.02
Option 2 – Enhanced FT Staffing	\$7,083,146	\$2,711,550	\$29.98
Option 3 – Grafton-Saukville	\$1,765,611	\$741,718	\$33.99
Option 4 – Northern & Southern Depts.	\$9,321,404	\$4,949,808	\$54.73
Option 5 - Higher-Cost Consolidated	\$12,227,538	\$7,855,941	\$86.86
Option 6 - Lower-Cost Consolidated	\$8,192,202	\$3,820,605	\$42.24



The cost differential among the various options is largely attributed to the extent to which they would allow Ozaukee County to move toward 24/7 station staffing and reduce reliance on POC staff. For example, as shown on the adjacent map, the premise of Option 2 is to ensure a 24/7 onsite presence of at least two firefighter/paramedics or firefighter/EMTs at several stations throughout the county while maintaining the nine independent departments. This would ensure that a two-person crew would be available to immediately respond to an EMS call at multiple, geographically dispersed locations at any given time. Each department would continue to rely on POC staff to supplement the two individuals working on station shifts for fire response, as well as for some instances in which there are multiple EMS calls.

The consolidation models are more complicated because they would merge existing departments into larger departments that would require new governance and cost allocation structures. They assume a much higher level of full-time staffing similar to other large departments throughout Wisconsin.

As shown on the map on the following page, our model in which the nine departments merge into two would have five individuals stationed on a 24/7 basis in Port Washington and two in Fredonia to anchor response in the northern part of the county. In the south, four or five firefighter/EMS responders would be at stations at all times in Grafton, Cedarburg 1, and both Mequon stations. An advantage of the two-department approach is the opportunity to design a service model for each half of the county that is more appropriately suited to their respective call volumes, demographics, and financial capacities.



\* Either Mequon 1 or Thiensville could house FT shifts while the other would use POC for fire response.

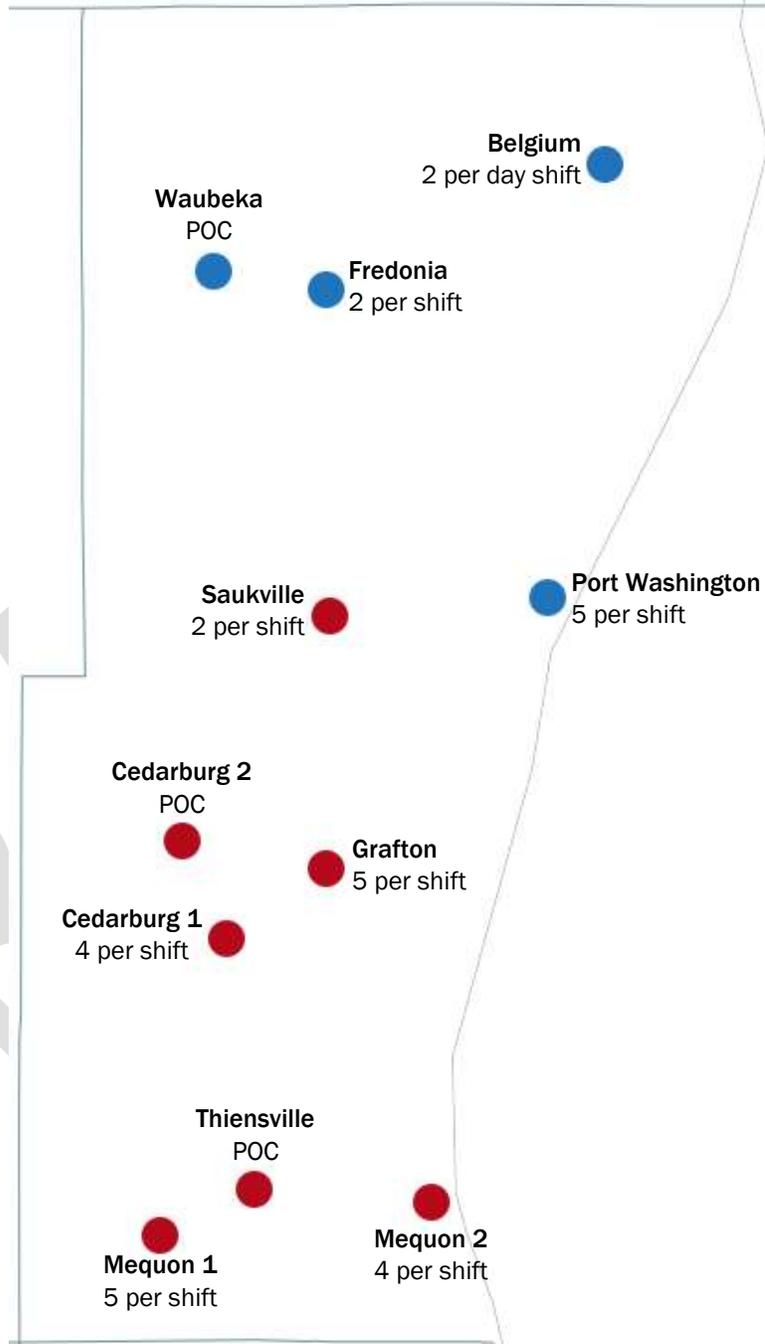


Finally, our full consolidation models would provide the opportunity for even better coordination of staff resources and apparatus while providing a vastly enhanced level of service compared to the current state. Our lower-price full consolidation model would call for four or five individuals on shifts on a 24/7 basis at 5 of the 11 station locations and two on shifts during the daytime at two additional stations. This may represent a reasonable middle ground for policymakers who wish to explore the benefits of a single department consolidation option but also wish to maintain a balanced combination of full-time and part-time staff that is consistent with Ozaukee County's call volumes.

It is important to note that the substantial additional cost of the consolidation options is *not linked to the act of consolidating*. Instead, it reflects our premise that if consolidation is to occur, then that reflects (at least in part) a sentiment by elected leaders that they need to substantially enhance staffing and service quality. While that entails extra cost, the cost likely would be lower than if the same pursuit occurs by each department independently.

For example, our lower-price full consolidation model would reduce the number of apparatus housed throughout the county from 82 to 56. Also, the larger departments under either our two-department or single department consolidation models would enhance staff recruitment and retention by establishing expanded pay scales and career ladders; reduce the need for overtime to cover for vacation and sick leave by allowing commanders to easily shift staff among multiple stations; and enhance service effectiveness by allowing leaders to strategically deploy staff and apparatus on a regional level. A larger department also could produce greater capacity to engage in proactive efforts to reduce call volumes, such as use of community paramedicine and enhanced fire/EMS education and prevention.

**Option 4 hypothetical shift staffing plan (North department stations in blue and South department stations in red)**



## Conclusion

Our analysis of fire and EMS service sharing and consolidation opportunities in Ozaukee County finds that while the nine fire departments maintain strong working relationships that help plug some service gaps, they also face severe challenges that promise to intensify over time. In fact, **those challenges are now sufficiently acute to justify immediate investment in service and staffing enhancements**, which would be most effective and efficient if made as part of broad-based, systemic collaboration.

The crux of the problem is as follows:

- At a time when EMS calls for service are increasing, **most departments have limited rosters of paid-on-call and volunteer responders and are having great difficulty recruiting new part-time firefighters and EMTs**. In addition, while Ozaukee County departments have a high ratio of paramedics to other licensed EMS responders, the available capacity of paramedics is limited. These staffing challenges pose a particular problem during daytime hours, at times when there are multiple EMS calls within the same or neighboring jurisdictions, and in the case of multi-alarm fires or other major incidents.
- **EMS response times are below the standards one might expect in a largely suburban service area, which similarly stems from the departments' heavy reliance on POC responders**. Perhaps most alarming – given the impact on response times – is the frequency with which some departments must rely on mutual aid for EMS response because staffing challenges preclude them from assembling sufficient staff to respond on their own. This challenge became particularly acute in the final weeks of 2020, when a surge of COVID-19 cases combined with typical holiday shortages to put several departments out of service for extended periods.

To address these challenges, we present three tiers of increasingly comprehensive options that policymakers could pursue to improve service levels and response times. The less advanced options would maintain the independence of the nine existing departments as well as existing response patterns, which may be preferable to some given the different needs and service expectations of smaller and larger communities within the county. Yet, while maintaining local control, these options would not provide the same level of service improvement and would fail to take advantage of some of the natural efficiencies that flow from consolidation.

We acknowledge that the price tags associated with our broad options may be difficult for policymakers and citizens to swallow. However, if advanced options are deemed too expensive for now, then the less advanced options – perhaps phased in over several budgets – would allow the communities to start slowly and build toward more comprehensive collaborative approaches. A slower approach may also be necessary given the possible restrictions to enhanced fire and EMS spending that may be posed by state property tax levy limits and expenditure restraints, which may require legislative action to address.

Overall, we hope this analysis sheds light on Ozaukee County's fire and EMS challenges and the need to respond both swiftly and thoughtfully. Going forward, we would be pleased to support any efforts to implement the policy options cited in this report or otherwise assist the region in pursuing greater intergovernmental cooperation.

