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Report explores fire and EMS challenges in Ozaukee County

Potential benefits of collaboration among nine departments highlighted

Fire and Emergency Medical Services (EMS) responders in Ozaukee County would benefit from greater intergovernmental collaboration as they grapple with increasing calls for service, staff recruitment and retention hurdles, and service response times that lag comparable areas, according to a new Wisconsin Policy Forum report.

The Forum, Wisconsin's leading independent, nonpartisan source of public policy research, conducted the study at the behest of Ozaukee County municipal leaders. Included are the fire departments of Belgium, Cedarburg, Fredonia, Grafton, Mequon, Port Washington, Saukville, Thiensville, and Waubeka.

The study's purpose was not to recommend a specific strategy, but instead to develop a range of potential options for new collaborative approaches. It found these nine fire departments rely largely on part-time paid and unpaid volunteers who are not stationed at fire houses but are called in from work or home to respond to fire and EMS calls. Maintaining sufficient rosters of these paid-on-call responders is an increasing challenge, particularly during daytime hours when call volumes are heaviest.

“(The paid-on-call) approach has generally served these communities well over time,” the study finds. “Yet, it is also evident that (it) is now showing severe signs of distress. These signs began to emerge several years ago but have now intensified in light of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.”

A consequence of the existing staffing framework and its intensifying challenges are EMS response times that, for several of the departments, generally do not measure up well with statewide and national averages and/or standards.

The report notes that staffing challenges were on full display during the final two months of 2020, as a surge in COVID-19 cases and the year-end holidays depleted paid-on-call and volunteer rosters and rendered some departments unable to respond to service calls for extended periods.

Other notable findings include:

- Calls for service are increasing for all nine departments, which have added to the pressure to enhance staffing and response levels.
- Each department is struggling to recruit and retain part-time or volunteer staff, and has expressed serious concerns about the sustainability of a model that relies upon such staff going forward.
- 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 role in assisting neighboring jurisdictions.

As part of this study, the Forum considered and 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.

- The first tier of options involves strategies the departments could undertake collaboratively while maintaining their independence. This could mean strategically stationing and jointly paying for full-time paramedic interceptors across the county as a means of boosting paramedic response capacity county-wide; or a collective effort to boost the number of full-time shifts at strategic station locations to ensure sufficient mutual aid capacity when call volumes are high or staff are scarce.
- The next tier of options involves partially consolidating the departments. The first looks at merging pairs of departments, with Grafton and Saukville used as a hypothetical model. The second examines a scenario in which the existing Ozaukee County departments merge into two departments: one for the northern part of the county and another for the southern portion.
- The final tier models a single consolidated fire department to serve all of Ozaukee County. The first option approximates the staffing model used by the North Shore Fire Department, which may best position Ozaukee County citizens and taxpayers to maximize the general benefits of consolidation. The second is a lower-priced approach that may more appropriately reflect Ozaukee County's call volumes and density.

In asking the Forum to analyze these options, Ozaukee County leaders are not alone. Even before the pandemic, efforts to explore enhanced service sharing and cooperation among regional fire and EMS providers were becoming more common in Wisconsin and across the nation.

The report concludes that while the nine fire departments maintain strong working relationships that help plug some service gaps and take justifiable pride in their part-time and volunteer models, those models now require some form of fortification to respond to current conditions.

"The 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 report says.

Go [here](#) to read the Ozaukee County Fire and EMS report.

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