



WISCONSIN POLICY FORUM

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Contact: Mark Sommerhauser, Communications Director & Researcher
(608) 982-0324 or msommerhauser@wispolicyforum.org

Greater Collaboration May Help Fox Valley Fire, EMS Agencies Address Common Challenges *Existing culture of cooperation provides foundation for a range of potential further partnerships*

Amid mounting service demands and an already strong cooperative spirit, fire and emergency medical service (EMS) agencies in Wisconsin's Fox Valley could benefit further from enhanced collaboration in areas including training, special operations, community risk reduction, fleet maintenance, and EMS quality control and oversight.

A new Wisconsin Policy Forum report finds fire departments in Wisconsin's Fox Valley have a history and a culture of working together to improve response. Several Fox Valley fire chiefs approached the Forum to help them consider options to further enhance this collaboration as a means of promoting greater efficiency and teamwork.

The new report responds to that request, covering a range of service sharing options for fire departments serving Appleton, Grand Chute, Kaukauna, Neenah-Menasha, and Oshkosh.

The departments already support each other through mutual aid arrangements and some have extended those arrangements in various ways, such as an automatic aid agreement for fire response between the Appleton and Grand Chute departments. Extensive cooperation is also in place for various training efforts.

In consultation with the chiefs, our analysis focused on five specific areas of fire department operations that may hold potential to pursue even greater levels of collaboration in the future:

- **Training:** Each of the five departments has a designated training officer, all of whom currently collaborate. Our analysis finds an opportunity to formalize that collaboration through a cooperative agreement that might, for example, divide responsibility for types of training on specific areas between these officers, who would then coordinate it on a regional basis. We also modeled options for a more comprehensive merger of training functions: a Regional Training Bureau, which would employ a small staff to address regional issues such as standardizing protocols and procedures (SOPs; or a Regional Training Office – a more comprehensive model that would assume much responsibility for training functions for participating departments.
- **Special operations:** All five departments have special operations capabilities in areas like hazardous materials response, water rescues, confined space and trench rescues, or structural collapses. We explored a cooperative model of special operations rather than more formal consolidation in which each department would maintain some of its own special operations responsibilities, but one might be tapped to be the designated response team for one or two types of special operations while receiving service from other departments for the remainder.

- **Community risk reduction:** These activities, conducted by all five departments, include fire code inspections, fire investigations, and public education on fire safety and general health and safety issues. Fire investigations could be considered for regional collaboration given that investigations are relatively infrequent and require specialized staff. A regional approach involving a new bureau to conduct repeat or complex inspections and investigations might be considered. Community risk reduction activities also could be incorporated into the new bureau, including development of common education curricula and materials, shared instructors and equipment for community programs, or a shared public information officer.
- **Fleet maintenance:** Fleet maintenance activities include regular or scheduled maintenance, emergency repairs, and testing of pumps, hoses, and other equipment. Our discussions with the chiefs and fleet personnel found that a stand-alone garage serving the five fire departments could yield benefits but may be overly expensive. Other potential collaboration options include the possibility of expanding the capacity of the Neenah-Menasha department to handle fleet maintenance for some of the other departments. A shared reserve fleet also could be a first step towards greater collaboration in this area.
- **Quality control and oversight:** While differences between these five departments in EMS service levels and models make collaboration less practical here than for other functions, there are some potential steps that could be taken. Those include the sharing of data collection and analysis; consolidating medical direction; and agreeing to a common set of EMS protocols that could help to lay the foundation for a regional EMS system. We suggest a possible next step would be a formal intergovernmental agreement that would guide the creation and activities of a regional EMS committee to oversee quality and coordination.

Our analysis found several potential opportunities to build on the strong framework of collaboration and cooperation that currently exists between these five departments. However, as was the case with many of the previous fire and EMS service sharing studies we have conducted, these opportunities are geared more toward enhancing the quality of service than reducing fire department expenditures.

Within each functional area we considered, we present options that would allow the departments to “start small” and build over time toward more comprehensive collaborations. On the other end of the spectrum, should the five departments and their respective municipalities ultimately wish to “go big,” then they might consider a single Fox Valley Fire Resources Bureau to regionalize the large array of support or specialized services addressed in this report.

Intergovernmental cooperation can be time consuming and resource-intensive. Yet, our previous work on service sharing has demonstrated it is worth the investment, particularly in regions like the Fox Valley where trust and positive working relationships already provide a foundation.

[Click here to read the full report: “Better Together: Options for Enhanced Fire Department Collaboration in the Fox Valley.”](#)

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