



WISCONSIN POLICY FORUM

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Preparing for the Future of Fire and Emergency Medical Services in Walworth County

Analysis offers options to improve service and enhance collaboration among county's 15 departments

Fire and emergency medical services (EMS) responders in Walworth County face challenges with staffing their agencies and funding their capital needs, and some of the county's smaller departments still rely on a volunteer model that has become increasingly difficult to sustain.

Heightened collaboration or consolidation among the 15 departments that currently serve the county might help alleviate these issues, and might also improve service quality, a new [Wisconsin Policy Forum report](#) finds.

"If starting from scratch to plan fire and EMS service delivery in Walworth County, it would be impossible to justify 15 departments and 17 stations in the context of the county's population and call volumes," the report finds.

Several fire and EMS departments in Walworth County already have taken proactive steps to address their operational challenges, such as collaborating with neighboring departments or adding full-time staff. Yet some difficulties remain, which prompted Walworth County to commission the Forum to conduct this analysis of fire and EMS service provision in the county.

This is the Forum's latest report that looks at local fire and EMS service provision and opportunities for such agencies to collaborate across municipal boundaries. We [previously conducted](#) nearly two dozen similar analyses for counties and municipalities across Wisconsin.

In Walworth County, while each communities' needs may differ, the common nature of many of the issues confronting fire and EMS agencies may lend themselves to shared solutions. Our research does not endorse any particular course of action, but lays out options for local leaders to consider.

The broader trends

Walworth County is projected to see a small decline in overall population over the next 15 years. However, its senior population is growing, and based on this and other factors – including the large numbers of visitors who frequent parts of the county during the summer months – we suggest that most of its agencies should be preparing for steady or modestly higher call volumes.

A number of the county's smaller departments use a paid on call (POC) or volunteer staffing model which department officials generally acknowledge may become unsustainable over the long term. Staff recruitment and retention also are challenges for larger departments, though smaller departments that use POC and volunteer personnel typically see greater challenges. Departments compete with other agencies across southeast Wisconsin for paramedics in particular.

Capital needs are another major challenge. Not only are most departments facing steep vehicle replacement costs in the near future, but many may lack the financial capacity to undertake these

replacements. Also, some departments are planning station renovations or replacements and are exploring financing options.

We find that fire and EMS stations are reasonably positioned across the county given its population distribution, with most existing in the southern half of the county. That said, it may be superfluous for 15 departments to serve a county with a population of only a little more than 100,000 residents. The report concludes that the benefits of having fewer departments could be financial – particularly for those with low call volumes and who otherwise would be moving to full or part-time staffing on their own - but could extend further.

“Under a scenario in which the county had five or fewer regional departments, the ability to staff those departments on a mostly full-time basis would undoubtedly improve service for most jurisdictions,” the report finds, “while also easing responder recruitment and retention challenges and making it easier to implement service upgrades.”

The report also acknowledges, however, that such a comprehensive consolidation scenario would require much more detailed analysis and take years to implement. Consequently, it identifies a range of collaborative options for these departments to consider.

Small-scale collaboration strategies could include new cooperative agreements between departments. These might allow the closest available provider to respond to a call, sharing of ambulances and fire apparatus, joint vehicle maintenance and supply purchasing, collective fire prevention and education activities, or cross-credentialing of staff.

A greater role for Walworth County government in supporting EMS would be another option. This could come through initiatives like county-coordinated data collection and dissemination, a county-financed paramedic “fly vehicle” to provide extra assistance as needed, and a county-employed EMS coordinator to establish countywide standards and protocols and engage in planning activities.

Departmental sharing or consolidation approaches could include shared stations or two- or three-department consolidations or contracting opportunities. One strength of Walworth County fire and EMS agencies is that several departments have taken the initiative to address their operational challenges in recent years, in some cases by pursuing the types of collaboration we would have recommended. This includes departments that have shifted from a POC staffing model to a full-time or hybrid model, contracted with neighboring communities to provide fire or EMS services, or reached agreement to share personnel with other departments.

A more ambitious approach could take the form of a **regional consolidation model**. We show how a hypothetical regional consolidated department might function in the southwest part of the county – in areas currently covered by the Darien, city of Delavan, town of Delavan, Sharon, Fontana, Walworth, and Williams Bay departments. Our purpose in creating a hypothetical regional model is to give a high-level overview of the implications of a more sweeping proposal, enabling decision makers to consider the opportunities, benefits, and challenges associated with regional consolidations.

[Click here](#) to read the full report.

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