



WISCONSIN POLICY FORUM

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

For release:
June 24, 2026

Fire, EMS Providers in Wisconsin Adapt to Fewer Volunteers, More 911 Calls

Scan of Forum research on Wisconsin agencies finds common challenges, barriers, recommendations

With fewer volunteers and increasing calls for service, fire departments in Wisconsin have opted to increase their ranks of paid staff positions, a new [Wisconsin Policy Forum report](#) finds.

The report finds that volunteer fire departments in Wisconsin have lost over 930 positions since 2020, a 5.5% decline. The declining volunteer levels are straining the emergency response capabilities of many agencies, with many struggling – or unable – to maintain the staffing needed to respond to calls twenty-four hours a day. Many agencies have responded by hiring more paid staff, as 488 full- and part-time paid fire department positions were added across the state since 2020 – a 10.4% increase.

“These data bear out the message that fire chiefs and medical directors have been sharing for years – namely, that the volunteer service model that largely defined emergency responses for over a century is failing,” the report finds.

The report summarizes and expands upon the Forum’s body of [fire and EMS service-sharing research](#). Since 2012, we have studied 84 fire and emergency medical services (EMS) providers across Wisconsin. This came as part of 18 distinct service sharing studies, most of which examined whether greater collaboration or consolidation across neighboring departments would help them address their service challenges. While cost controls often are an outcome of measures taken in accordance with the findings of these studies, maintaining or improving service levels is always the primary goal.

Relying on volunteers

Fire departments in Wisconsin, most of which also provide some level of EMS care, operate under one of three models: career departments, staffed by full-time staff at all hours; volunteer departments; or combination departments, with a mix of full- and part-time staff, sometimes supplemented by volunteers. Wisconsin relies more on volunteers than most states. As of this June, 92.5% of the 762 Wisconsin fire departments registered with the U.S. Fire Administration are volunteer or mostly volunteer – the 14th highest rate in the country. The vast majority (63%) of fire personnel in Wisconsin also served in volunteer departments.

The emergency response capabilities of departments vary across Wisconsin and are unevenly distributed. A critical support for local agencies is mutual aid, through which nearby agencies can be asked for assistance. In interviews, however, department heads increasingly cite mutual aid as a crutch that props up a neighboring department’s operating model instead of acting as an occasional support.

Statewide, fire and ambulance services accounted for 12.8% to 15.1% of total municipal operating and capital spending each year from 1997 to 2023. This relatively steady share of overall municipal spending over time suggests that structural changes in fire and EMS service delivery have been gradual, and is consistent with limited local revenue growth options that constrain staffing hires.

Common recommendations, barriers to change

In our growing body of service sharing research, common challenges have emerged that affect agencies across the state. These include difficulties with staff recruitment and retention, financing capital costs such as vehicle purchases, or financing a shift to paid staffing models; varying rural response times that can range from less than 10 minutes to more than 30 minutes; or increased costs due to rising call volumes and inflation.

To address local challenges, Forum studies typically conclude with a range of options for departments and local governments to consider. Common recommendations include sharing response vehicles or stations; consolidating or collaborating on dispatch facilities or operations; reducing calls from frequent EMS users via paramedicine or other approaches; or full-scale consolidation of departments.

Our research has also flagged barriers that often impede departments or community leaders' efforts to pursue service sharing with their neighbors. They include a lack of good data across jurisdictions; having multiple dispatch centers run by different governments in a region, which can hinder cross-departmental coordination; political or personal tension between localities; or an unwillingness by local agency heads or elected officials to relinquish control. Additional barriers include a lack of a single coordinator charged with stewarding forward movement, which can cause efforts to lose momentum, or conflicts over appropriate cost-sharing formulas.

Despite these significant hurdles, through the Forum's research on fire and EMS service provision, we have witnessed numerous successful changes occur. In many cases, communities ultimately chose to pursue incremental steps toward regionalization, or successfully led mergers. Examples include:

- Our 2015 study [“Come Together”](#) looked at whether a 1995 consolidation of emergency services across seven **North Shore municipalities in Milwaukee County** had unfolded as intended. Our analysis found a reduction in fire stations and vehicles, reduced levels of personnel that were more highly trained, and substantially higher capability ratings than prior to consolidation. Each of the North Shore municipalities also experienced operating savings.
- Following our 2021 report [“First Response.”](#) which covered nine departments in **Ozaukee County**, the Mequon and Thiensville departments **merged into the Southern Ozaukee Fire and EMS Department** in 2023. Then in 2025, the Grafton and Saukville fire departments merged into the Ozaukee Central Fire Department.
- Departments in other regions covered by our reports, such as those in Southern Milwaukee County and **La Crosse County**, have stopped short of full mergers **but implemented improvements** such as shared trainings or formalizing automatic aid and mutual aid agreements.
- After publishing our review of the 15 departments in **Walworth County**, [“One Step Ahead.”](#) local leaders used the report as a focal point to launch conversations about how communities in northeast Walworth County might **move toward a regional emergency response system**.

“These successes illustrate what is possible when communities confront their challenges, set service priorities, and pursue new ways of doing business,” the report concludes.

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

The Wisconsin Policy Forum is the state's leading source of nonpartisan, independent research on state and local public policy. As a nonprofit, our research is supported by members including hundreds of corporations, nonprofits, local governments, school districts, and individuals. Visit wispolicyforum.org to learn more.