

Public Policy Forum: Report explores greater cooperation among Milwaukee's three largest local governments

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A report released today by the Public Policy Forum suggests that opportunities exist for greater service sharing among the Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS), City of Milwaukee, and Milwaukee County. The parties should start smart small, however, and recognize that higher- quality and more efficient services – as opposed to substantial cost savings – should be the primary objective.

“Our research found several examples where service sharing between MPS and the City has been successful, and other instances where joint approaches did not work very well,” says Forum Senior Researcher Anne Chapman, the report’s lead author. “Historically, there have not been as many examples of service sharing between MPS and the County, but our research shows there is room for growth in MPS’ service sharing relationships with both entities.”

Recognizing the similar financial challenges facing Milwaukee’s three largest governmental entities – and MPS’ particular challenge to secure resources to invest in strategies that will enhance educational outcomes – the report explores the potential for service sharing to serve as one possible solution. It analyzes past and

existing service sharing arrangements between MPS, the County, and the City; assesses the potential for expanded service sharing;

and outlines specific opportunities to improve, enhance, or initiate new service sharing arrangements.

After sorting out various functional areas where service sharing between one or more of the parties has been attempted before or could be considered, the report hones in on possibilities in six areas: procurement; human resources; information technology; nursing; mental health; and parks and recreation.

“We find that while there are opportunities for new or expanded service sharing in each of the six areas, there are several barriers to overcome,” says Chapman. “An important one is that achieving additional efficiencies through service sharing typically requires considerable start-up investment of dollars or staff resources, and each of the three local governments has limited capacity to make such investments.”

Other barriers cited by the report include the lack of quantifiable benefits that typically are produced by service sharing (i.e. those benefits often are intangible); the absence of service-level cost data that is conducive to analyzing potential sharing-related cost savings; and the difficulty local governments and school districts can have in recognizing service sharing opportunities because of a lack of joint planning and regular communication.

Despite those barriers, the report finds that the parks and recreation area lends itself particularly well to service sharing, particularly with regard to facility maintenance. It presents a case study that examines collaboration on mowing services in the Humboldt Park area, which includes three County parks (Humboldt, Cupertino, and South Shore); two MPS-operated recreation sites (Sijan Playfield and Lewis Playfield); and five MPS schools (Humboldt Park School, Milwaukee Parkside School for the Arts, Bay View High School, Dover Street School and Trowbridge Street School).

“Here we have a County park that represents a hub around which several other recreational properties are situated,” says Chapman. “It was logical to ask whether one entity could

perform mowing services on behalf of the others as a means of enhancing efficiency and saving taxpayer dollars.”

Because County Parks properties make up the majority of the mowing acreage in the area, the report models a joint mowing agreement that assumes Milwaukee County Parks crews will provide mowing services for all sites in the cluster. The modeling suggests that both MPS and the County could achieve modest savings from the arrangement, and that more substantial savings could be realized if similar arrangements were undertaken in other parts of the city where Parks and MPS recreational facilities and schools are contiguous.

The report concludes with a series of recommendations, including the following:

- ☐ Align internal and cross-jurisdictional practices in data collection, storage, and sharing. To the extent that the three governments wish to pursue greater service sharing, they should improve their ability to break down operational costs in a manner that lends itself to financial analysis of alternative service models.
- ☐ Align the timing of major initiatives, investments, and planning processes. The report reveals a number of resource-intensive projects initiated by the three governments that could have benefited from coordinated data sharing and planning; formal intergovernmental communication processes should be put in place to avoid such instances in the future.
- ☐ Start with small-scale, low-risk, and low-cost service sharing arrangements. Local government leaders could build toward high-yield service consolidations by starting with small projects that can be accomplished in the short term with clear benefits, such as joint purchasing or in-kind exchange of goods, services, and facilities.
- ☐ Include service sharing as part of a joint legislative agenda. The three governments could coordinate their government relations resources to advocate for State actions that

fund, reward, and induce local governments to establish new or expanded service sharing arrangements.

☐ Establish a formal joint advisory body devoted to shared services between MPS, the City , and the County. Such a body could structurally integrate intergovernmental cooperation and service sharing as a standard approach to

policy and practice.

“Milwaukee’s three largest local governments face tight constraints on their revenue streams and have limited options to reduce costs,” says Chapman.

“Intergovernmental service sharing is not a panacea to that problem, but there are opportunities to use it as a means of fostering greater efficiency and building a climate in which these governments view themselves as jointly accountable to the same constituency.”

The full report – which was made possible by funding from the Argosy Foundation, Herzfeld Foundation, and Bader Philanthropies – can be downloaded at the Forum’s web site, www.publicpolicyforum.org.

Milwaukee-based Public Policy Forum, established in 1913 as a local government watchdog, is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to enhancing the effectiveness of government and the development of southeastern Wisconsin through objective research of public policy issues.