



# WISCONSIN POLICY FORUM

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## **Crisis Point: Wisconsin Fire and EMS Agencies Face Looming Challenges**

*Growing call load from aging population, volunteer recruiting hurdles may demand state response*

Growing numbers of fire and emergency medical services (EMS) agencies in Wisconsin are struggling to maintain appropriate service levels in the face of numerous challenges, including increasing service calls from an aging population and staff recruitment and retention difficulties, [according to a new Wisconsin Policy Forum report](#).

Given the implications for public safety and local government finances, the situation may demand greater consideration of consolidating local agencies to improve service levels while holding down added costs. A response from state policymakers may also be warranted, the report finds.

The report pulls together insights and possible solutions gleaned from the Forum's extensive fire and EMS research portfolio. In the past eight years, the Forum has studied 30 fire and EMS providers throughout Wisconsin as part of a dozen service-sharing studies.

This report finds that while volunteer-reliant staffing models have served many smaller communities well in the past, rising EMS call volumes and staffing challenges are causing many to move toward a model that makes greater use of full-time staff. This can often improve operational efficiency and reduce response times, but it also requires additional funding that can be difficult to obtain due to competing local priorities or state limits on local property taxes.

"Perhaps our most important finding – and one that state and local policymakers cannot afford to overlook – is that unless they are appropriately addressed, fire and EMS financial and staffing challenges may soon have a real impact on public safety," the report finds.

Additional takeaways are:

1. **Recruitment is a major issue for all types of departments, but is reaching a crisis point for many volunteer-reliant departments.** For small communities with departments getting a call or two per day, a volunteer or part-time staffing model makes sense. Unfortunately, this model is becoming difficult for many departments to sustain. EMS personnel have licensing and training requirements that can be a significant burden; combined with today's busy lifestyles, the result for many departments has been shrunken volunteer rosters.
2. **In many cases, consolidation does not produce immediate financial savings, but offers advantages for future fiscal challenges.** This is particularly true when consolidation offers opportunities to reduce apparatus and/or stations. Those departments that need to transition to a greater reliance on full-time staffing models may also find that consolidation with nearby departments offers a more cost effective way to manage that change. Consolidation also improves service levels in many cases.

3. **While consolidation may be beneficial, the odds are against it in most cases.** Reasons include geography, conflicts between municipalities rooted in other issues, and perceptions that some municipalities will be “winners” or “losers” if consolidation occurs. Many fire chiefs acknowledge this reality and seek other ways to collaborate with neighboring departments. Options may include formal mutual aid agreements, automatic aid agreements, or “closest unit responds” frameworks; joint trainings; and equipment sharing.

State government provides little direct financial support to local fire and EMS agencies in Wisconsin and limits the ability of municipalities to increase local tax resources to address their growing challenges. Meanwhile, the most important form of state aid to municipalities – shared revenue – has been stagnant for years.

Examining how fire and EMS are organized in other states, we found possible food for thought for Wisconsin policymakers. For example, in Ohio, a single division of the Department of Public Safety covers both fire and EMS regulations and oversight. Many states have created regional agencies to address issues of planning and service design and provide state resources to support such activities.

Our work with fire and EMS agencies in Wisconsin and our overview of other states suggest that increased attention by state leaders here is warranted and likely required to address the growing challenges faced by many fire and EMS agencies. Options that might be considered include:

1. Establishing direct state aid (either grants or loans) to help prospective fire and EMS professionals pay for education and licensing costs.
2. Creating opportunities for part-time fire and EMS responders to enroll in health care and retirement plans or other benefits offered to state employees.
3. Increasing Medicaid reimbursement for ambulance transports to 100% of the Medicare rate.
4. Allowing localities more flexibility in terms of revenue and expenditure restraint limits (other than referenda) when addressing documented fire and EMS service challenges that need to be addressed with greater financial resources. State law does currently allow some exemptions for joint fire districts and joint or countywide EMS districts. While these provisions may offer relief for those that elect to form joint districts or have their counties administer EMS, that may not be a feasible approach for many jurisdictions.
5. Establishing a formal role for counties or regional entities in governing and setting standards for fire protection services and EMS throughout the state and providing state financial assistance to ensure standards can be appropriately monitored and met.

Finally, given that moving to a larger mix of full-time staff appears to be a must for many small departments, efforts to encourage consolidation among such departments appear to be in order. Proportional spending on fire and EMS by municipal governments is already trending downward, suggesting little capacity for local governments to increase spending to pay for full-time staff. That is why – barring new forms of state aid or relaxation of levy limits – teaming up with neighboring departments may be the best solution.

Ultimately, we hope state and local elected officials will heed the overriding message of our recent reports: the ability of many communities to provide an appropriate level of fire and emergency medical services is in jeopardy and may soon necessitate an emergency response of its own.

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