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An Open Investigation: Exploring Police Consolidation in Milwaukee County's North Shore

Consolidation could bring savings but also a partial loss of local control

Seven municipalities on Milwaukee County's North Shore could realize savings and potentially improve the quality of law enforcement services by consolidating their police departments into a single one to serve the region, according to a Wisconsin Policy Forum analysis.

But the amount saved from consolidation, as well as the extent of potential service improvements, may vary considerably depending on several factors, the report finds. These include whether these communities would opt to maintain existing police patrol levels, or reallocate patrol capacity while using some share of the savings to fortify specialized areas of police operations.

During the past decade, the Wisconsin Policy Forum has conducted more than a dozen service sharing and consolidation studies for local governments seeking to explore the benefits of collaboration with neighboring jurisdictions.

Perhaps no area in the state has been more successful in recognizing the benefits of service sharing and consolidation than Milwaukee County's North Shore. Its seven municipalities – Bayside, Brown Deer, Fox Point, Glendale, River Hills, Shorewood, and Whitefish Bay – previously consolidated their fire, public health, and dispatch services. Policing, however, is one of the few large functional areas that has not been consolidated.

Seeking context

In late 2021, the city of Glendale's mayor approached WPF to examine this issue. After consulting with top elected officials and managers at the six other North Shore municipalities, WPF and city officials agreed on a plan to model options for a consolidated North Shore Police Department (NSPD) and broadly assess financial and service-level impacts.

In this high-level analysis, we lay out factors that should be considered – but we do not endorse any plan or model. Instead, we hope this report will be instructive to leaders in these communities as they consider how best to provide their residents with high-quality, cost-effective law enforcement.

We gleaned helpful context for our modeling from a review of six Wisconsin police departments that serve communities similar in population and other characteristics to the North Shore: those serving Appleton, Eau Claire, Janesville, Oshkosh, Waukesha, and West Allis.

Those departments have an average of 112 sworn officers each – 50 fewer than the collective number in the North Shore. That is explained partly by the fact that the North Shore's seven individual departments are unable to achieve economies of scale realized by larger departments.

Modeling options

A leading concern we heard from North Shore police chiefs was that efforts to take advantage of economies of scale under a single consolidated department would conflict with expectations of North Shore officials and citizens regarding police presence in their communities. With this in mind, in our research process, we built two models for consideration.

Model 1 maintains the status quo in terms of patrol staffing, but adjusts command staff, sergeants, and non-sworn staff to reflect economies of scale from consolidation. This model reflects the input we received from chiefs and municipal officials regarding minimum staffing and their perceptions of citizen expectations. Consolidation still presents some efficiencies since a larger department would be able to reduce the number of command staff, patrol supervisors, and non-sworn staff.

This model yields an annual estimated personnel cost of just under \$22 million, for an estimated annual savings of \$677,000. While our models provide details on personnel-related fiscal impacts, we do not provide cost estimates and comparisons for other elements of the hypothetical consolidation because of the highly speculative nature of such estimates. However, some of those – like savings on police stations, vehicles, and administrative staff within existing governments who would no longer have to tend to police services – could be substantial.

Model 2 imagines a consolidated NSPD that takes advantage of the elimination of municipal boundaries to reallocate patrol capacity while also fortifying specialized areas of police operations. This approach reduces by 20 the number of patrol officers (from the current collective total of 95 to 75) but adds a handful of other positions that may offer new capabilities to improve police response and services (like crime analysts, additional community liaison and community service officers, and behavioral health specialists). Also, the total of 93 patrol officers, sergeants, and lieutenants in this model still exceeds by a wide margin the average of 77 among the six comparison departments.

Again, additional efficiencies are achieved through reductions in command staff, shift supervisors, and non-sworn staff. This model yields an annual estimated personnel cost of \$18.6 million, which represents an estimated annual collective savings of \$3.75 million.

Community impacts; local control

By presenting two models, we aim to provide North Shore leaders with distinct approaches that hopefully will assist them in framing a decision on whether to pursue a consolidated department.

Ultimately, the report finds no clear-cut answer as to whether consolidation should occur. For local officials and residents, the answer may come down to questions including how consolidation may affect one's community. A concern for the smaller communities in this study is that the much higher volume of calls in the larger communities would leave them with a reduced patrol presence. The question is whether those concerns could be sufficiently addressed via the patrolling framework established by a consolidated department and alleviated by the potential cost savings and other service-level benefits of police consolidation.

Another question is the importance for each community of retaining highly localized control of policing capacity as well as departmental policies and procedures. Each of these municipalities is accustomed to deciding the level of policing that its citizens desire and wish to pay for, and that would be diminished under a consolidated department. On the other hand, by all accounts, the consolidated North Shore Fire Department has served these communities well.

[Click here to read the full report: “An Open Investigation: Exploring Police Consolidation in Milwaukee County’s North Shore.”](#)

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