

Emergency Service Consolidation Principles and Practices



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A rewrite of "Fire Department Consolidation, why and how to do it right...."By VFIS, prepared by Colin A. Campbell Associates Inc. Jan Thomas, researcher and writer © 1994 VFIS. All rights reserved.

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Foreword

It is our sincere pleasure to have been able to commission the initial writing of this publication's predecessor, *Fire Department Consolidation: 'Why and How To Do It... Right'*; and now this document *Fire Department Consolidation Principles and Practices*, which addresses a complex and controversial issue, an issue which, because of present economic and staffing conditions, leads many communities to hire consultants to develop plans for possible consolidation. Many of those communities have chosen not to include the fire department leadership in the discussions. This publication is intended to give emergency service leadership a resource tool to assist in the development of a plan of its own or to provide the communities with alternatives in providing the future level of services.

The views and conclusions in this publication do not reflect the opinions, recommendations or requirements of VFIS. It is intended only to give emergency service leadership a resource to assist those considering some form of consolidation.

Troy Markel,
President VFIS

Management is the astute application of common sense.

Peter Drucker

Acknowledgements

This text is a second edition of the VFIS experiences in assisting emergency service organizations in their efforts to merge, consolidate and acquire agencies to ultimately improve efficiency and effectiveness, in the delivery of service to their customers.

The knowledge, skills, tools and system enhancements we have been introduced to, experimented with and had success with are of benefit to the emergency service community at large, hence, the

It is important to acknowledge those who have been most instrumental in the development of these successful, consolidated systems. Without their expertise, this work could not have been completed. They include:

- Daniel, B.C. Gardiner, M.S., CFPS, Chief (retired) Fairfield (CT) Fire Department
- Past President, International Society of Fire Service Instructors
- Past President, Fire Department Safety Officers Association
- Robert Drennen, M.S., CFPS, CFI, CFO, Fire Official, Upper Moreland Township, PA.
- David A. Love, C.P., Chief (retired) York, (PA) Fire Department
- Greg Jakubowski, M.S., FSFPE, P.E., Chief, Lingohocken, PA Fire Company
- Richard Trexler, Chief (retired) Colfax (NC) Fire Department
- Colin A. Campbell Associates, author, VFIS 1994 text on Fire Department Consolidation
- D. Robert Brady II, Local Government Policy Specialist, Department of Community and Economic Development, Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

As well as the VFIS staff (recognized with their emergency service affiliation)

- David Bradley, Director (retired), LEMSA, Lancaster (PA) Emergency Medical Services
- Ryan Pietzsch, Lieutenant (retired) West DeMoines (IA) Fire Department
- John Sroka, M.S., Chief (retired) Rensselaer (NY) Fire Department
- Michael Young, Assistant Chief (retired) York (PA) Fire Department
- Steve Rabine, Chief United Hook & Ladder Company #33, (PA) Fire

In addition to the printed resources listed in the references section of this book, we at VFIS thank the original contributors to the 1994 edition as well. The following individuals provided valuable information about their consolidation experiences: Chief John Bierling, West Manchester Township, Pennsylvania; Chief Mitch Floyd, Orange County, Florida; Chief Ron Irvin, Downey California, Chief John Mulligan, Poudre Valley Fire Authority, Fort Collins, Colorado, Chief Steve Paulsell, Boone County Fire Protection District, Columbia , Missouri; Chief Charles Rule, Manteca, California; Chief Tom Siegfried, Altamonte Springs, Florida; Chief Jack Snook, Tualatin Valley Fire & Rescue, Aloha, Oregon.

Chapter 1: Fire and EMS Consolidations in Today's World

Facing decreased funding and a lack of volunteers or paid staffing to respond to emergencies, many local fire and emergency medical service (EMS) agencies are considering consolidations and mergers with neighboring agencies. Before entering into an agreement and process, it is important to know the workable approaches, challenges and conflicts that may arise and what to expect once the merger is completed. What the desired final outcome is must be identified from the beginning of the project.

As with any project, there are assumptions and expectations once the project is complete and merging public safety agencies is no different. Unfortunately, the experience of one merger may not be the same as another, therefore, it becomes important to pre-determine expectations and determine if and how they may be achieved or not.

In consolidation projects that VFIS has been involved with, we have seen expectations such as:

- Cost savings.
- Reduction in apparatus.
- Reduction in facilities.
- Resolve political problems.
- Reduce insurance costs.
- Improve response times.
- Expand areas of specialization.
- Reduce bureaucracy.
- Manage financial crises.



Unfortunately, reality demonstrated:

- Higher costs.
- Inheritance of debt and legacy pension programs/expenses.
- New facilities were needed.
- Updated apparatus/new apparatus was required.
- Politics change over time, not immediately.
- Some insurance changed, but property & casualty insurance only changes when exposures change (reduction in apparatus, facilities, risk level, etc.).
- Other various items.

In other words, the expectations may not always be realized.

Emergency service organization (ESO) officials find themselves considering a consolidation or merger for different reasons. In some instances, the action is directed by elected officials for whom consolidation is a hot topic. In others, the ESO managers identify consolidation as an option when they seek better and more efficient ways to provide the services their citizens need and deserve. In many instances, state constitutions and laws may encourage local jurisdictions to consolidate or merge to make the most effective and efficient use of their resources. In other cases, consolidation is a necessity to survive personnel or financial challenges.

In today's world, there are several reasons an ESO sees motivation to merge:

- The fact that there are no artificial boundaries restricting, limiting or driving your options to perform better.
- Changes can be made in the name of the merger.
- They believe less government is better, fewer organizations result in less conflict and greater political impact.
- There is a potential to lower the Insurance Service Office (ISO) rating.
- Economies of scale can be implemented to reduce overhead.
- The process forces an examination of and standardizes programs including training, SOG's, public relations, equipment and response.
- The merger **may** save money and help absorb a financial crisis.
- Consolidations **may** eliminate redundancy and maximize personnel and equipment.
- Consolidations **may** provide the same service for less cost.
- Consolidations **may** provide more service for about the same/more cost.
- Consolidations **may** help comply with mandates and specialty team needs.
- Consolidations helps facilitate coordinated planning which forces strategic planning.

Note there are a number of "may" comments. The opportunities exist through consolidation to accomplish these outcomes, but only with strong leadership and a good plan.

Consider consolidation for the best interest of the people receiving services. To know and understand this means it's important to recognize:

- Where the organization stands today strategically, tactically, financially, politically.
- What is done today (why they exist and what they do).
- What is on the drawing board.
- What obstacles organizations will face.
- Where to find help.

At the end of the day, what makes the difference between success and failure when considering a merger or consolidation follows a four-step approach that includes:

1. Set goals, commit to them and work toward them.
2. Have the guts to work through conflicts.
3. Understand that expectations may not meet reality – there is a cost to this process.
4. Recognize organizations are doing this for the benefit of the people served, not the municipality or the fire department.

This is typically accomplished through a strategic plan and to effectively accomplish a strategic plan, have an understanding of the risks being faced (risk assessment) and how organizations will manage these risks (standard of cover). In addition, the foundation lies in inter-local governmental agreements and local ordinances. These three topics comprise, what we state as “Fire Department Operational Management Concepts.” These are detailed in Chapter 2 of this text.

Why consolidate: Is it right for you?

Consolidation can be a viable option as a beneficial alternative to enable improved use of scarce resources, flexibility of staff, equipment and dollars, stronger internal programs and increased opportunities to expand. It works to overcome political boundary issues, ensuring that the closest unit responds in an emergency and creates more rational protection service areas and faster response times.

Consolidation can provide for an expanded tax base and reduce redundancy in apparatus, personnel and equipment and the planning process itself can identify areas for savings not foreseen at the outset. It eliminates turf and tax conflicts and, by providing more efficient and consistent application of available resources, can enable the closure of stations or other duplicated facilities and services.

Consolidation may lower apparatus replacement requirements, reduce the number of reserve pieces required and eliminate duplication of specialty apparatus. Additional cost reductions can be realized through volume purchasing, as well as through combined equipment planning and maintenance. In Contra Costa County, California, consolidation was said to have resulted in a measurable, almost immediate reduction in the tax burden, including a reported 50 percent decrease in the training budget. With local growth also contributing to the reduction, the tax rate dropped in the first five years and a capital improvement program was instituted. Tualatin Valley, Oregon, saw a reduction in its tax rate in just four years.

Consolidation could result in a new organization that places more resources on the fireground, a vital interest in a fire protection environment. Improvements in the communities' ratings from the ISO can result from consolidation as well. The elements of a plan that might bring such benefits include better use **of resources**, quicker emergency response times, enhanced training schedules, improved joint communications, improved fireground communications, additional reserve apparatus and enhanced water supply (urban and rural). It may also reduce duplicate administrative burdens.

Consolidation could also make fire protection master planning easier during periods of tremendous regional growth. Planning for placement of future facilities, recruiting, hiring and training is supported by the process and possibly eased by the increased resources available. The analysis and revised perspective that grow out of the consolidation planning process may lead to modernized systems. Jurisdictions could become better able to deal with problems that

span political boundaries, for example, a chemical recycling operation located in the county. In addition, where multiple jurisdictions respond as mutual or automatic aid, a common set of fire codes and amendments can make enforcement easier to understand and accomplish both for the department and for developers.

Internally, consolidation may offer more appealing career enhancement possibilities. Although positions at the top are reduced, the organization as a whole is larger, creating more retirements and other turnover and better chances for advancement for bright young officers. In addition, labor contracts can be standardized and areas or periods of volunteer shortages can be compensated for.

Consolidation does not always work the same. It lends itself to individual customized approaches to meet particular local needs. For example, when city and county fire chiefs in Seminole County, Florida, began looking into consolidation in an effort to help their many separate departments serve their citizens more efficiently, they decided to institute a highly individualized approach. The Chief of the Altamonte Springs explained that something beyond a functional consolidation (combining communication or training functions) was called for, but the kind of consolidation most often considered, in which entire departments combine in total, had little appeal to the local agency/local officials.

"There seemed to be a lot of pain that went along with major consolidations," Siegfried said, "and, in some cases, it even worked out that the price tag went up and the level of service went down." In 1975, after a period of intense study and discussion, the fire chiefs of Seminole County entered into a joint venture that is in some ways a partial consolidation and in other ways similar to a broad mutual aid agreement. But it also is more, softening jurisdictional boundaries by instituting automatic first response by the closest company regardless of those boundaries using a countywide dispatch system. This inter-local agreement found the foundation for the cooperation.

Response zones were established to ensure response by the nearest piece of equipment. Fire stations have been located strategically with one city and one county facility moved to provide better coverage. Location of specialized apparatus and equipment, such as aerial trucks and rescue rigs, is thoughtfully planned. "We've become much more efficient, protecting more people with fewer people," Siegfried said. For example, for a multiple company response in the city of Altamonte Springs, the assigned response might consist of an engine from Altamonte Springs, another from the county, an aerial truck from another city and a rescue truck from somewhere else. "That means we don't have to have all of those pieces of equipment available in every jurisdiction," he added.

In one scenario, area departments took the unconventional step of instituting similar cooperative agreements with neighboring Orange County. "Now we're working on linking the two major county communication networks so that a call coming in for part of Orange County that's closer to one of Seminole County's stations automatically will be routed to the Seminole communication center," Siegfried said. Modern 800-MHz computer-aided dispatch systems may enable such flexibility.

The most notable advantage of this approach, he suggested, is that each department maintains its identity and autonomy while becoming more efficient which, in turn, satisfies politicians. "They let the fire chiefs do their jobs, finding the most effective and efficient way to provide fire protection services," he said. "At first, they might check numbers constantly, how many of everything they're contributing and how much of everything else they're getting back. But they

get over that after a while and just let it operate. The reality is that, over time, it tends to even out pretty well."

Considerations, potential pitfalls and keys to success

Give careful consideration to organizational change since it can be a thorny matter and most likely will not be achieved easily. Change can be especially difficult in the tradition-bound fire service. It is particularly challenging to attempt a process that often is perceived as reducing each jurisdiction's autonomy and power. Emotions can become entangled in discussions that progress is stymied before benefits are seen. Further, combining a larger, more sophisticated department with a smaller, less sophisticated one can bring the level of service enjoyed by the larger jurisdiction down and still cost more than the smaller jurisdiction is accustomed to paying.

Experience in fire organizations across the United States has indicated many ways that consolidation efforts can fall short of expectations. Reasons for failure can include less-than-ideal timing; the departments involved being too different or too distant; creating conflict from one another, lack of support among members of the departments; fear of loss of control by local government officials and incomplete or ineffective communication. The list is long. Such issues as the name of the new organization, the color of emergency apparatus and selection of an individual to head the organization, among many others, can derail consolidation discussions.

A consolidation cannot be a reduction-in-force in disguise; the truth may emerge during the planning process, sabotaging the atmosphere of trust and cooperation, which is necessary in the foundation for consolidation. In some states, laws prohibit communities from laying personnel off under such conditions. Further, such expectations likely will not materialize because savings resulting from a consolidation are more likely to come on the capital side, not the personnel side. Such a move eventually might reduce personnel through attrition and reassignment can put personnel to more-efficient use. In fact, the whole area surrounding the issue of personnel can prove difficult when planning and effecting a consolidation. Also, consolidation may result in hiring new career personnel to improve time from new stations that may be further apart.

Many possible pitfalls can derail a consolidation effort

Impact bargaining, differences in compensation and workloads; consolidation of unions and civil service/ personnel systems; selecting key staff for the new department; possible loss of job status for some employees; social, economic, philosophical and cultural differences; and personal problems are factors that, if not afforded adequate attention in the early stages, may sink a consolidation/merger plan. Drawing lines for a new organization, developing universally acceptable rules, policies and procedures and standardizing equipment present challenges of their own. A review of different union, work rules, contracts for each agency and how they integrate is important. One recent merger involved two different unions, firefighters and teamsters and very different work rules and letters of understanding. It's important to research or there may be serious consequences if not fully addressed.

In addition, it is important to remember that consolidation is not always appropriate in every circumstance. Until a thorough study of the potential benefits and pitfalls has been made, the decision to merge or consolidate should not be made. Further, it is possible that the preliminary study will indicate that it is not in the best interests of the parties to do so.

None of these potential problems need destroy a sincere effort at consolidation if those behind the plan approach their work with care and forethought, aware and respectful of the potential

pitfalls, as well as the potential benefits. There may be enough possible reasons to move forward with the idea of consolidation to more than compensate for the complexity of the task. Chief among them is that consolidation can create a more flexible, appropriate and sensible local organization. The known advantages of consolidation may outweigh the disadvantages. Consolidation activities can form the basis for a win-win situation in which all the players can gain something.

Just as experience has pointed to possible challenges in attempting to consolidate or merge, it also has identified a set of factors that will help bring success. Some factors involve the baseline characteristics of the organizations. If the involved organizations have pre-existing cooperative relationships, they are more likely to find the way to consolidation smooth. It is recommended that officials of involved jurisdictions and agencies support the idea and commit their efforts to success and involved parties be open and honest about their interests. Time for planning and communication with top-level government officials, members of the departments and their families and the media and public is critical.

Throughout the years, volunteer firefighters have served to protect their communities. The current estimate of savings to local communities throughout the country has been calculated to

Key Personnel Issues

There are certain factors that, if not given adequate attention in the development stages, may sink a consolidation plan. Those factors include:

- Impact bargaining.
- Differences in compensation and workloads.
- Consolidation of unions and civil service/personnel systems.
- Selection of key staff for the new department.
- Possible loss of job status for some employees.
- Social, economic, philosophical and cultural differences.
- Human resource issues.

be approximately \$32 billion. The demands of firefighters in terms of training, community service and administrative responsibilities have, without a doubt, driven men and women out of the fire service. With declining numbers of responders, progressive firefighters may look at a neighboring fire company and make a proposal that a consolidation may be in the best interest of the members, as well as the residents.

For some members, consolidation can be an emotional experience. The loss of identity for the department may have a negative impact on the morale of the membership. When firefighters realize the newly configured department may attract new members, may motivate the current members and may improve their operational readiness, they typically understand they can continue to serve the public with a first-class approach.

Leadership comes from both local elected and appointed officials and from ESO management. The support of a county or regional fire chiefs' association could be beneficial as well. However, the role of the chiefs of the involved departments is the ultimate keystone. A consolidation effort may be doomed to failure without the full support and genuine and total

commitment of the involved chiefs. It is recommended that the vision for the future be clear and the moral obligation to the community come first. Set self-interests aside.

The question of who will lead the consolidated organization is a vitally important matter and must be considered from the outset. Most likely, the leader of the new department will meet a wide array of challenges and be up to the task. Sometimes, the most effective route may be to bring in someone new from the outside and someone without ties to the preceding organizations, but

may not always be the case. If two (or more) organizations are considering consolidation and one of the involved chiefs is scheduled to retire shortly, this can solve the problem of consolidating multiple chiefs into a single position, but it is no guarantee.

Occasionally, two consolidating chiefs can reach a mutually satisfying arrangement that meets individual interests, perhaps designating one as chief of the department and the other as operational chief.

However, selection of the individual to head selection of the new organization is of immeasurable importance and it is not recommended that anyone assume that the position belongs to him or her. Skills and capabilities may be the determining factor applied to selecting leadership for the new organization.

Consider the public and whether they are sold on the idea of consolidation. Discussions can be both through the media and through appearances by local chiefs before civic and neighborhood groups to explain the reasons for and benefits of consolidation. Develop an informational program for the public that provides basic facts and stress that the department isn't going anywhere, simply improving itself. Verify that involved officials, elected and appointed, are available to the media for interviews and background explanations. Photographs of representatives from the different communities working cooperatively together can be especially effective in bolstering public support.

Selection of the individual who will lead the department is vitally important.

Convincing the public may not be easy and should be recognized as a long-term process but, if the communication process is planned carefully and conducted properly, support may outweigh resistance. If the public information effort is solid, citizens can prove to be the easiest group to convince of the benefits of department consolidation. Keep in mind that while it might not matter to citizens whether their fire protection comes from a local or multijurisdictional organization, "they do want to know where responsibility lies and who to hold responsible."¹

The need for internal communication is equally vital. Involve labor and other employee groups from the start. Address fears about job security and pensions openly and honestly throughout the process. Stress that the resulting organization can be stronger and offer increased promotional opportunities. Be aware of the need for lightning-quick and razor-sharp rumor control because resentments can build rapidly based on a wisp of a rumor.

Inform these groups early in the process and then keep information flowing through regular briefings and/or a series of special newsletters or bulletins. Especially, make any groups affected by the consolidation a part of the process through appropriate participation on a working group designing some element of the new system.

Every type of consolidation carries with it its own individual needs that must be met consistently if the operation is to succeed. For example, the cooperative venture that is in place in Seminole County, FL, requires each participating chief to be continually aware of what the other jurisdictions are doing that might have an impact on what they are trying to do together. It requires planning and open communication and chiefs must ensure that competition doesn't lead to duplication of effort and resources. When department A purchases an aerial truck, department B might think it should have one too, even though it's only necessary to have one to share. It

¹ Williams, *Subregional and Extraregional Cooperation in the State of South Australia*

takes time to keep tabs on everything and to ward off that kind of competitiveness, particularly in the early stages.

Consolidation may provide the best possible level of service with available resources, but it will need the support and leadership of local officials and department members. More than one effort has failed because a key group, for example, firefighters or the political leaders in the community, perceived they would lose something.

Consolidation and the process for achieving it are not difficult to understand or to do, but they do require diligent staff work, careful communication and top-to-bottom commitment. Certainly, the process places demands on local department officials, but it is important that managers be clever enough to handle the complexity and adjust approaches to fit the needs of the organization.

Chapter 2: Emergency Service Operational Management Concepts

In recent years a number of new techniques and processes have been introduced into the emergency service community. While practiced with diligence in larger departments, the value of strategic planning, risk assessment and standard of response cover have now reached the volunteer service as well and serve as new challenges to the officers of these organizations.

Most businesses want to improve their operations and enhance the product or service they provide to the customer. The techniques described herein are no different. They are quality of service enhancement techniques. Techniques that, if applied, will help you better organize your department and serve your “customers”, which is the public. The goal of these techniques is to improve the service delivery system for the future.

Each technique stands alone and also serves as a component of total quality management for organizations.

Strategic planning, risk assessment and standards of response cover are three techniques to use within an ESO to respond to the ever changing environment of the organization. These are explained in this section.

Strategic planning for emergency service organizations

“Strategic planning,” “risk assessment,” and “standards of response cover” are three techniques that can be used within an ESO to respond to the ever-changing environment of the organization.

Strategic planning or strategic focus has been described as a set of concepts, procedures and tools designed to assist leaders and managers in exercising control, coping with change and developing a basis for decision making (J.M. Bryson, Strategic Planning for Public and Nonprofit Organizations).

The strategic focus process can help answer such questions as:

- What are the department’s objectives for the next five years?
- Where will the organization be in seven years?
- What are the department’s capital purchasing plans for the next 10 years?
- What is the department’s standard of response cover?

Obtain direction from key sources of input:

- Organizational members.
- Community leaders.
- Citizens.

- Business community.
- Mutual aid agencies.

Develop an action plan with:

- Immediate action steps to achieve goals and objectives.
- Long-term plan for implementation.

Implement a plan with responsibilities and time frames involving:

- Finance.
- Personnel.
- Apparatus.
- Equipment.
- Facilities.
- Processes and procedures.
- Utilization of a monitoring method to help assure plan's success.

The planning process model is further detailed in Figure 1. The result of many strategic focus initiatives is change. Therefore, it is important for the process to be undertaken by an organization that is ready for the change. If the organization is not ready for the change, then conflict can exist. As a result, identify change management practices and catalogue them for reference as the planning process moves forward.

The strategic planning process serves as a single point of collection to coordinate various data points, administrative processes and planning consideration. This integration of benchmark performance, budgetary commitments, mission statements, assessment of ESO activities, etc., serves the management team with a summary report of the efficiency and effectiveness of the organization.

Identifying and prioritizing the initiatives critical to an organization's performance helps assure long-term ESO health and growth. The output from this process establishes coordinated goals, objectives and in some cases, action steps dealing with the organization aspects (as indicated earlier) of:

- Finance.
- Personnel.
- Facilities.
- Apparatus.
- Equipment.
- Procedural/process.

Be Prepared! If an organization hasn't been asked before, it may only be a matter of time. When the questions are asked, a response will be expected. Develop a strategic plan to be able to provide the answers.

In recent years there have been several approaches to performance enhancement of both profit and non-profit organizations. The terminology may vary, however, it is important that the organization is being driven to future decisions and actions to help assure organizational success.

Creating and implementing a strategic focus helps the organization understand its resources, capabilities and needs. In order to be successful in the development of such a plan, an appropriate planning model is necessary. VFIS has created such a model to assist in this planning process through its education, training and consulting unit.

The VFIS Strategic Focus Model is driven by three components:

- Organization resource assessment.
- Defined service expectation.
- Priority planning.

To enable resources to meet expectations and by incorporating these components, it may create a disciplined process that develops basic decisions and actions that help structure what an ESO is, does and why. In essence, the process creates decisions about the ESO's future.

It is recommended that an ESO strategic focus initiative start with a risk assessment for services to be delivered. Today, this means assessing rescue, hazmat, emergency medical and storm management risks as much as fire and prioritize them against fire and injury prevention, which may be more important to the community.

Once the risk assessment is complete and the delivery and support system is envisioned, an effort can be focused on identifying individualized issues and needs to determine the necessary steps to create a plan that turns vision into reality.

VFIS advocates using a derivative of the standard decision making process, employing five basic activities to evaluate organization resource assessment, defined service expectation and priority planning and create an appropriate plan for future service delivery. The five basic activities include:

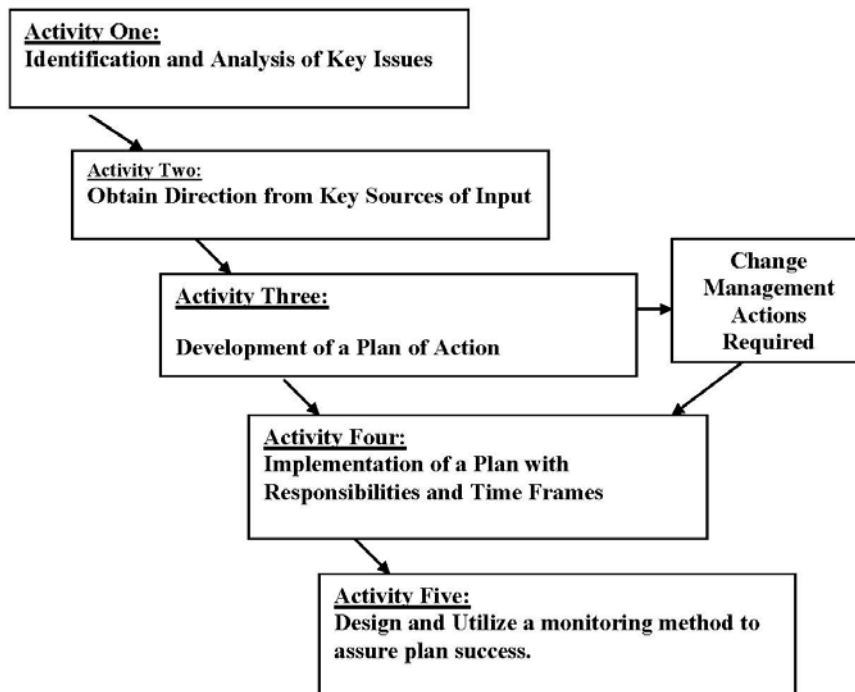
Identification and analysis of key issues (identifying, developing, creating ...)

- Mission and vision.
- Standard of response cover.
- Identification of roles and responsibilities.
- Goals and objectives.
- SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats).
- Strategic alliances.

These are then consolidated into planning documents, including identified costs, time frames to complete and responsibilities for completion. The process then identifies different sets of objectives for organizational action.

While organizations may want it to be “the same old fire service as the glory years of the ‘60s,” it isn’t. Today, ESOs are complex and dynamic and it’s important they identify what they are doing, why they are doing it and change if current initiatives are costly, ineffective or problematic. The strategic focus process helps organizations develop the vision of where it wants or needs to be and how to get there.²

Figure 1. The Planning Process



² **Credits**

The VFIS Strategic Focus Process is a compilation of several strategic planning organizations and documents customized to meet the needs of volunteer fire service (nonprofit) agencies. Among the references are:

- Bryson, John M., *Strategic Planning for Public and Nonprofit Organizations*, Jossey-Bass Publishers, San Francisco, 1988.
- Center for Simplified Strategic Planning, The Support Center, “What are the steps of a strategic planning process?”
- Jenaway, W.F., “Volunteer Fire Service Strategic Focus,” *VFIS News*, Vol. 3, No. 4, pp. 1-2.
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- Myma Associates Inc., “What Strategic Planning Can Do For You”.
- Organized Change Consultancy, “Strategic Planning and Organizational Change”.
- The Support Center, “What are the Key Concepts and Definitions in Strategic Planning”.
- CFAI, “Section 3—Strategic Planning, Risk Assessment and Standards of Response Coverage,” *CFAI Self Assessment Manual*, Chantilly, VA, 2004.

Risk assessment: Fire service planning

According to the Commission on Fire Accreditation, assessment and planning is defined as “the process(es) used to identify a community’s fire protection and other emergency service needs in order to identify potential goals and objectives. All agencies should have a basic source of data information in order to logically and rationally define the organization’s mission. The overall purpose of using these processes is to establish a long-range general strategy for the operation of the system.”³

Many fire chiefs have been performing a component of broad risk assessment and planning, known as “Pre-Planning,” which serves as a decision-making process to understand risks and hazards at a location, analyze resource needs and impacts in the event of an emergency and being ready to respond when necessary. This is a critical component of risk assessment, but only one of several components that are needed.

Are you prepared (excerpted from *VFIS News*)⁴

The World Future Society regularly publishes a report entitled “Trends Shaping the Future.” This report focuses on general economic trends, social and demographic changes and trends in energy and the environment. Each of these trends drives a demand on the world, be it long range or short term.

But we can also utilize forecasts of such trends to better match the needs and resources of the emergency service community. Ask yourself, “Do you monitor trends locally and change your operations accordingly to meet new needs and challenges? Are you shaping the future of your ESO to the needs of your response area? Is the community population in your response zone growing? Is it aging? Are the types and nature of businesses, highways and structures changing? They probably are, and you should be asking yourself if your ESO is currently planning for yesterday or tomorrow.

The World Future Society report identifies trends such as:

- The world’s population will double over the next 40 years.
- The population of the developed world is living longer.
- The growth of the information sectors is creating a knowledge dependent society.
- Societal values are changing rapidly.
- Physical-culture and personal health movements will remain strong.
- Family structures are becoming more diverse.
- Fossil fuel is still rising rapidly and will continue to be a mainstay energy source.
- Water shortages will continue.
- Continuing urbanization will aggravate most environmental and societal problems.

³ Commission on Fire Accreditation International, “Category 2—Assessment and Planning,” Self Assessment Workbook for Fire Service Accreditation, CFAI, Chantilly, VA, 2004, p. 40.

⁴ Jenaway, W.F., “Fire Service Planning = Risk Assessment, the Optimum Management Activity,” VFIS News, Vol. 3 No 4, 2003.

“So what!” you say. “This is big picture stuff and has nothing to do with my town!”

If your approach is to rationalize such changes in attempting to make them seem insignificant, you are either ignoring the duty you have to assess the constantly changing risk patterns in your community or you don’t understand the obligation you have to plan for the demands of your community.

A process that ESOs can expand their use of and in order to assure they can meet future demands is a fundamental assessment and planning effort.

This is defined as the process used to identify the community’s fire protection and other emergency service needs in order to identify potential goals and objectives. Agencies should have a basic source of data and information in order to logically and rationally define the organization’s mission. The end result of the process is to establish a long-range general strategy for the operation of the system. You can achieve this goal by:

- a. Documenting area characteristics by collecting historical data and instituting a process by which risks are defined and potential organizational goals and objectives are established.
- b. The organization then assesses the nature and magnitude of the hazards within its jurisdiction, with each significant event categorized and listed, to permit future analysis and study in determining standards of coverage and related services.
- c. The organization next assesses the nature and magnitude of other hazards and risks within its jurisdiction and identifies appropriate strategies, methods of operation and resource allocation required to mitigate potential emergencies.
- d. Finally, the result is a strategic or other form of long-term (typically three to five years into the future) planning process that, along with a budget, is guiding the activities of the organization.
- e. The plan is then submitted to the appropriate authority having jurisdiction for review and implementation.

The coordination of these actions creates a plan to manage your emergency response district. This plan, based on a factual, technical basis, will help individuals in all walks of life better understand your organization’s goals and help you work toward them.

Standard of Response Cover

Standards of Response Cover (SOC) is a formalization of what most ESOs have been doing for years—determining what is needed to manage emergencies in their community and assuring appropriate deployment.

To many, SOC has become an area of concern. Questions often heard include, “Why do we have to do this?” “Who is requiring this?” “What does this have to do with volunteer fire companies?” Fire chiefs often recognize this is simply a validation of their ESOs being able to perform to the level they suggest they are performing.



The current SOC concepts and methodologies are most notable in the work of the Commission on Fire Accreditation International and new initiatives by the National Fire Protection Association and the Insurance Services Offices.

The Commission on Fire Accreditation International defines “Standard of Response Coverage as being those adopted written policies and procedures that determine the distribution, concentration and reliability of fixed and mobile response forces for fire, emergency medical service, hazardous materials and other forces of technical response.”

This can also be phrased as a decision on the level of service, based on empirical evidence and rational discussion.

Developing a Standard of Response Cover isn’t quick and easy, but it is valuable to the progressive ESO.

Why consider developing a Standard of Response Cover and what is it?

The Standard of Response Cover process includes an evaluation of eight components, all of which are integrated into a final methodology for SOC development. They include:

- a. *Existing Deployment*—requires ESOs to map, measure and understand existing deployment, regardless of its foundation (ISO, community growth, etc.). This will help understand the total reflex and coverage capability.
- b. *Risk Assessment*—requires ESOs to understand fire flow demand and capability, probability of an emergency and the consequences to life safety and economic impact. New products such as RHAVE (Risk Hazard and Value Evaluation) can be used to identify and measure risk to occupancy, a demand zone or the entire community.
- c. *Risk Expectations*—requires ESOs to identify what the community and the ESO want in the form of service, what the outcomes should be and whether the desired outcomes can be justified. These will assist in establishing critical tasking measures, e.g.:
 - Structure fire performance objective
 - To stop the development of a moderate fire risk when encountered, conducting search and rescue as required, confining damage to as close to the room of origin as possible, limiting the expansion of heat and smoke damage.
 - EMS risk objectives
 - To effectively provide a basic level of medical care at the Basic Life Support level to be on-scene in a timely fashion to:
 - Assess and prioritize patient situations.

- Minimize death and disability.
 - Stabilize patients to what level.
 - Training of responders.
 - Intervene successfully in life threatening situations.
5. *Service Level Objectives*—requires ESOs to assemble and evaluate fire growth and flashover, EMS response needs, special service response needs, reflex and response times on-scene operations, problem-solving critical tasks and determining an effective response force. Examples of Service Level Objectives as defined by the Commission on Fire Accreditation International are: “For 90 percent of all incidents, the first-due unit shall arrive within five minutes total reflex time (or travel time). The first-due unit shall be capable of advancing the first line for fire control or starting rescue or providing basic life support for medical incidents.” Or, it can be more specific. This may be too demanding for some ESO systems. The key is to base it on your capability and need to serve.
 6. *Distribution Study*—requires ESOs to geographically analyze first-due resources for initial incident intervention, to assure quick deployment in order to minimize and terminate average, routine emergencies. The distribution measures are up to ESOs, but might include percentage of square miles, percentage of equally sized analysis areas, percentage of total road miles in jurisdiction or some similar measure.
 7. *Concentration Study*—requires ESOs to look at the arrangement of multiple resource spacing (close enough together) so that an initial “effective response force” can be assembled at the scene within the adopted public policy time frames. The initial effective response force is one that should be able to stop the escalation of the emergency for the risk posed. Concentration measures can be similar to distribution measures.
 8. *Reliability Study*—requires ESOs to determine the ability to meet performance expectations even if resources are committed on an existing call. This necessitates a historical measure of performances, resource exhaustion, (relocation practice) and expectations.
 9. *Performance Study*—requires ESOs evaluate information and data available such as:
 - Existing standards of cover documents.
 - Risk assessments.
 - Historical performance.
 - Cost benefit evaluations, etc.
 10. The SOC can be considered a tool to accomplish several objectives including:
 - Evaluating and defining an agency’s baseline of operations.
 - Identifying benchmarks for achieving an agency’s goals and objectives.
 - Determining levels of service for all portions of a community.
 - Measuring an agency’s performance over different budget operational years.

The SOC development process allows each ESO to establish its own SOC, after systematically evaluating all pertinent factors and acknowledging alternatives.⁵

Conclusion

The result of using either the above described process, the Pre-Emergency Planning Process described in Figure 1 or any localized process is to assist in the development of a Standard of Response Coverage, which has taken into consideration the area of responsibility, demographics, economic indicators, fire loss data, water supply and automatic fire protection information.

Finally, remember this: While only a few trends noted in this document, the point is to recognize that change is constant. Change the capabilities, response system, staffing, resources, etc., based on society changes in your area.⁶

⁵ Farnsworth, Dan, Standards of Response Coverage can be part of strategic planning.

Fire Chief, 2/01/01.

Coleman, Ronny J., Fire Department Standards of Response Coverage, PERI, www.peri.org
Commission on Fire Accreditation International, Standard of Response Coverage, CFAI, Chantilly, VA, 2004,
www.cfainet.org

⁶ Commission on Fire Accreditation International, "Category 2—Assessment and Planning," Self
Assessment for Fire Service Accreditation, CFAI, Chantilly, VA, 2004, Pages 40-88.

Jenaway, W.F., "Fire Service Planning – Risk Assessment"

Jenaway, W.F., Pre Emergency Planning, ISFSI, 1996

Chapter 3:

Types of Consolidations, Mergers and Organization Options

There are potentially as many different variations of organizational design as there are number of “joined” organizations. There is no one model that fits all. In fact, there are several different types of organizational designs that are more prevalent than others, but the ultimate inter-local government agreement developed by an ESO also meets the needs of its community that it protects.

Of the different types of organizational designs, VFIS believes there are some that are more frequently implemented than others. Before focusing on organizational design, consider what and why consolidation is being evaluated. There are six general types of consolidations found in public safety agencies today.

Types of consolidations/mergers

An **Administrative Consolidation/Merger** may be advantageous for two or more emergency service organizations who wish to maintain separate operational aspects but find value in consolidating administrative or staff functions such as human resource, finance, information technology, clerical or other tasks. A fire administrator or fire/EMS coordinator is one such role that may fulfill administrative consolidation needs.

In a **Functional Consolidation/Merger** each emergency service organization remains legally separate but performs special function(s) as if they were one department. Typical functional consolidations include a combined training facility, dispatch center, apparatus maintenance, code enforcement or fire investigation.

Functional consolidation/merger

Consider a communications center that employs a single person at any one time. During a large-scale incident, after the initial station notifications are transmitted, the dispatcher might be confronted simultaneously with multiple citizen reports of the incident, handling responding unit transmissions and other notifications such as ambulance responses and additional alarm assignments for the incident and reports of other non-related emergencies.

This situation and common logic suggests that multiple personnel are needed to handle communication requirements effectively. Because smaller jurisdictions often cannot afford to have multiple personnel on duty at one time, consolidating resources with neighboring departments may offer an effective solution. In most such instances the jurisdiction benefits by receiving communications center backup at all times, without the expense each jurisdiction would face if each expanded its own communications capabilities.

A consolidated central dispatch center may make coordination of a major emergency easier, more efficient, more effective and more reliable. Additionally, in order to qualify for 800-MHz frequency assignments under Federal Communications Commission rules, a department must

commit to use a minimum number of radio units. Without multi-jurisdictional consolidation, many small departments cannot meet this requirement.

Combined communications also can prove highly efficient in terms of resources. The City of Manteca, California, was looking at a \$50,000 annual bill for fire dispatch with only one dispatcher on duty at a time. Since forming a joint communication center with surrounding departments, the city spends just \$25,000 a year, but receives the benefits from having three dispatchers on duty simultaneously. The regional center, located in nearby Stockton, dispatches for two other municipal fire departments, two fire districts, four contract fire districts and five private ambulance companies. Similarly, the Net Four Consolidated Communication Center in Anaheim, California, organized to serve the cities of Anaheim, Garden Grove, Orange and Stanton, resulted in a 50 percent reduction in total dispatching staff.



Stockton's emergency communications center dispatches more than 55,000 fire and emergency medical incidents each year for the city, two other municipal fire departments, two fire districts, four contract fire districts and five private ambulance companies. Contracting agencies pay the city of Stockton just a fraction of what they would *have* to pay to establish their own service and they still would have only a single dispatcher on duty at a time.

Chief Ronald Irwin of Downey, California, views communication consolidation as an effective precursor to a broader consolidation. Joint dispatch, he explains, brings about a need for the involved departments to train together (to reduce conflicting approaches or even terminology). Before long, the departments find themselves operating as one.

Consolidation may produce a leaner, stronger organization.

Regionalized training also makes sense, enabling more efficient use of facilities and specialized personnel, with several departments using a joint training program. Colorado's South Metro Fire Training Center, a joint effort among the cities of Littleton and Englewood and three fire protection districts, combines resources and shares costs for training facilities to purchase a wide range of training equipment and materials and to provide an enhanced combined instructor cadre. Many believe the resulting training program is substantially more extensive and effective than the departments could have managed alone.

Another popular form of functional consolidation is formation of a buying-power consortium. The benefits of cooperative purchasing have been proven by the Metropolitan Washington (D.C.) Council of Governments and in Pasco County /Metropolitan Tampa Bay (Florida). In one report to its county commission, the Tampa Bay consortium's five jurisdictions reported that a single purchase agreement for four Class-A pumpers saved a half million dollars. A similar agreement among six communities in Hudson County, New Jersey, resulted in a five percent overall budget reduction.

Communities are growing larger and closer together and, in some cases, nearly overlapping their service areas. Consolidation may provide an answer for some as modern society's emergency response demands expand and the demands for other government services and as available resources become more difficult to allocate across all needs. The organization that results from a

consolidation effort is commonly a leaner, stronger organization, providing higher levels of service at lower cost. Participation by involved agencies also can have benefits beyond the project itself, as they experience working cooperatively toward the common goal of optimum citizen service.

In larger areas, **Geographical Consolidation** may be advantageous in low demand incident/service areas where selected/separate operations are performed in higher service demand areas, such as a county, regional or large city environment.

Mergers and Consolidations occur where one organization absorbs another agency resulting in a single emergency service agency. The reasons for this may be political, funding, staffing, performance or some other challenge that makes a merger or consolidation beneficial.

In an **Operational Consolidation**, multiple ESOs are involved but remain independent legally, and then join administrative and operational functions, delivering services as if they were one. This occurs most frequently when one municipality or group of elected officials is unwilling to “give up” their named agency but recognizes they are unable to provide the required resources, resulting in an automatic mutual response or management of an incident or organization.

A **Full Consolidation** occurs when two agencies merge completely into a single new organization. Political boundaries become invisible and functions occur as if there is only one organization. The typically requires implementation of an oversight board.

Methods of a consolidation

It is important to establish an understanding of the definitions of various concepts of joining two or more organizations to become one organization. This is generally characterized as methods by which organizations/corporations legally unify ownership of assets formerly subject to separate controls.⁷ These include the following:

Acquisition – A general term used to refer to the consolidation of two companies to form a new company, while an acquisition is the purchase of one company by another in which no new company is formed.⁸

Mergers – A merger occurs when one firm assumes all the assets and all the liabilities of another. The acquiring firm retains its identify, while the acquired firm ceases to exist. Stockholder (or member) votes are typically required to approve a merger.⁹

Consolidation – In a consolidation, two or more entities come together to form an entirely new organization with the previous organizations ceasing to exist. Assets (and liabilities) are typically joined within the new organization, however, some variations to asset and liability ownership can be created.¹⁰ It could mean a new fire department with several differently named component companies.

⁷ www.answers.com

⁸ www.answers.com

⁹ www.answers.com

¹⁰ www.answers.com

Despite the method used to create the new organization, establishing several key legal documents in order to assure successfulness of the organization is important.

- a. If the organizations are corporations, the appropriate organization by-laws, articles of incorporation/constitution and/or local municipal ordinance are created and adopted.
- b. Whether or not the new organization is a municipal owned and operated organization, if more than one municipality (or district) is served, then an inter-local government agreement between/among the affected municipalities/districts is necessary, establishing expectations and obligations.

Motives behind corporate mergers and acquisitions

To better understand the basic business concept of mergers and acquisitions it is worth looking at the rationale behind related corporate actions. Typically, motives are financial performance improvement driven, but provide a unique insight into how public safety agencies can potentially provide a better service for a better managed cost.

Economy of Scale – Fixed costs may decrease by reducing the number of facilities, equipment, etc. by eliminating un-necessary duplication. Thus, the revenue streams stay the same but the costs are reduced.

Economy of Scope – Efficiencies can be gained from increasing or decreasing scope of distribution of services. This can also describe the concept of **resource transfer**.

Increased Revenue/Market Share – This would be similar to increasing service area due to elimination of a neighboring provider. This is also an example of **geographical distribution**.

Cross-Selling – Providing complimentary services (e.g. fire suppression, haz-mat, EMS) by one agency not three or more.

Synergy – Using purchasing economics or management specialization are two examples.

Taxation – Expanding taxing potential is one example.

Vertical Integration – This is done when two groups have some monopoly power but it does not always guarantee more efficiency.

Absorption of smaller organizations – Assumes the larger group is more effective, but not necessarily.

Merging or consolidating for financial purposes is not always a positive impact or result so understanding value growth for diversification, growth or income/revenue growth may be the ultimate reason or goal.

Management and leadership will often change, which results in challenges that are addressed later in this book.

Chapter 4: Creating a New Cooperative Partnership

***THIS PROCESS IS WORK!
BE PREPARED TO DO THE WORK OR THE PROCESS WILL FAIL.***

Partnerships Have Power

In those early days of Ben Franklin, the volunteer fire companies were called to assist neighbors when they needed a helping hand. There have been those who believe that consolidation or sharing services is the next generation of that concept but the reality is that shared services arrangements have existed for years. The result of this process has repeatedly found that participants receive the benefits of lower cost and expanded expertise while providing more efficient services. The communities who have focused on service, solutions and cost savings have demonstrated success over and over.¹¹

Partnerships, shared service, mergers, consolidation, etc. are not just for fire departments. The concepts work for public works, law enforcement, parks and recreation, emergency medical services, administrative services and even for municipalities. The process occurs within municipal boundaries and across municipal boundaries.

Some examples outside ESOs include:

- Multiple communities with similar equipment and lighting needs joined forces to reduce the cost of new equipment and repair costs for the equipment by consolidating purchasing power and consolidating methods of obtaining funding. (The same concept has been used to purchase firefighting and EMS equipment).
- Joint bidding on health care insurance has been another success story. Risk levels that are reduced through reduction of exposures or shared costs or self-insuring can exist. (Workers' Compensation insurance has been the classic opportunity however other opportunities may exist, depending on the ultimately organizational structure and change in risk and exposure).
- Multiple communities have joined forces to buy open-space land that abutted their municipalities, reducing the cost of purchase while expanding its open-space to communities. (One fire department "swapped" open space for land it owned to construct a new fire station and in another case convinced a developer to build a joint station for communities on a border of two areas where he was creating a sprawling town center complex, saving the taxpayer dollars while enhancing service capability.)
- Similarly, multiple communities have joined together to build joint use for:
 - Swimming pools.
 - Ball fields.

¹¹"The Power of Partnerships", PA Townships, April 2011, Pages 8-14.

- Auditoriums.
- Community centers.
- Libraries.
- Schools.
- Dispatch facilities.

(The fire service has done this with fire training sites, apparatus repair facilities and equipment testing sites, to name a few.)

- Yet other communities have joined together for joint code inspection with successful funding models. (This has been popular in public safety consolidation projects.)
- Shared equipment purchases have also been found to be of value, including such items as:
 - Pipeline camera vehicles.
 - Remote/satellite television trucks.
 - Road graders.
 - Wood-chipping equipment.

(Regionalized service/equipment for technical rescue, hazardous materials, decontamination, tanker task forces, aerial devices, rehabilitation teams, SWAT teams, etc. are common forms of shared service in the public safety community)

Every day, communities find ways to coordinate, consolidate and better provide service delivery thus improving service and reducing cost. The reality is in some cases, consolidation just makes sense.

The most critical scenario in the development of a merger, consolidation or multi-municipal regional effort is the willingness of the various agencies and their organizational cultures to work together, in harmony, to build a new organization. Too many good opportunities to build a new consolidated system have been undermined or unable to even get started because of cultural issues, pre-conceived perceptions, lack of trust, political challenges and more.

In recent years, Pennsylvania, the state with the most independent fire departments in the country, experienced extensive interest in consolidation of public safety agencies and had one individual whose role was to help facilitate such new partnerships. D. Robert Brady II, local government policy specialist of the Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development, worked with numerous agencies to develop a series of 21 steps that must occur in order to create a new cooperative partnership. It is only once this cooperative agreement has occurred that the real work can begin to build a consolidated organization (Chapter 5 of this text).

“The 21 Steps to Create a New Cooperative Partnership” are reprinted here by permission. Each step is provided a box to be checked off as a project tracking tool.

Step 1

Members of the interested organizations begin tailboard discussions regarding a possible new partnership to deal with dwindling members, increasing costs, higher community expectations or some other defined issue.

Step 2

After reaching positive feedback from these informal talks, a fact-finding committee is established to gather additional information on the available options.

Step 3

The fact-finding committee reports back with this finding to the respective organizations. If the committee recommends pursuing a partnership and the membership agrees, the companies should take a VOTE OF CONFIDENCE to begin formal discussions.

Step 4

The companies then need to establish a steering committee. The committee should consist of a maximum of three (3) members from each company. Along with the members, each company should appoint a citizen and business person from the community. Also, a representative of municipal government should be appointed.

NOTE: Based on the state, form of government, oversight and regulatory system for the provision of fire protection, the terms may be different, however, the communication process is what is critical to determine approvals, cooperation and direction occur in the interest of providing public safety services to the general public.

Step 5

After the steering committee is created, the first meeting should be held and officers selected. A chairperson, vice chairperson and secretary are needed. The chairperson should not be an active member of any of the emergency service organizations involved in the consolidation.

Step 6

At the first meeting, establish a few rules for conducting the meeting. This will help you stay focused.

Step 7

The FIRST GOAL of the committee is to review the available partnership options and select a model to use. Merged organizations, consolidated organizations, alliances and regional fire districts are all used extensively. You can also create something for your specific needs.

Step 8

The SECOND GOAL is to decide on the administrative structure for running the new partnership. Do you want to stay with the traditional President, Vice President and Trustee model? Do you want to create a Board of Directors type of structure? Do you want to create a hybrid model?

Step 9

Along with the structure, the committee will need to decide on the following organizational items at a minimum:

- ___ Administrative Officers (elected, appointed or both)
- ___ Operational Officers (elected, appointed or both)
- ___ Organizational Chain of Command (both administrative and operational)
- ___ Membership Categories
- ___ Draft By-Laws
- ___ Financial Requirements
- ___ Funding Model

Step 10

Once you've decided on the model and structure, then the committee should make a preliminary presentation to the members to gain feedback. The feedback can then be used to improve the model and structure. You can also take a simple hand vote to see if members are supportive at this point.

Step 11

The committee takes any feedback and improves the model and structure (including public input).

Step 12

Once the model and structure are finalized, the committee makes its formal recommendation to the membership of the companies.

Step 13

The companies then notify the members in accordance with the law to formally vote on the partnership plan.

Step 14

Assuming the majority companies approve the plan, the next step is to expand the steering committee.

Step 15

Add additional members to the committee as needed and create sub-committees to finalize several parts of the plan. They include the following:

- a. By-Law sub-committee
- b. Financial and Funding sub-committee

c. Rebranding sub-committee

Step 16

Retain an attorney and an accountant. These two professionals will be needed to assist with preparing and filing the necessary legal and financial documents.

Step 17

Establish a start date for the new partnership.

Step 18

Submit the required documents to the applicable county/state agency, etc. for approval.

Step 19

Upon the new organizations being created, the company will begin conducting business.

Step 20

The legacy organizations will conduct their final meetings to complete any necessary business.

Step 21

The new partnership should adopt a five-year strategic plan to set benchmarks and to establish tangible goals.

Cooperative Steering Committee Actions

As noted in these 21 steps, there are several committees that are best served to support the process. One of the key groups, early in the process is to establish a Cooperative Partnership Steering Committee. A successful approach in the past has involved:

- One (1) to three (3) members from each fire company/rescue squad/ambulance corps and an alternate member.
- One (1) elected official from each municipality/district and an alternate member.
- One (1) citizen at large from each municipality/district and an alternate member.
- One (1) business person from each municipality/district and an alternate member.



This basic committee structure may be changed if there is valid reason.

At the first meeting of this steering committee group, there are several tasks that must be accomplished. They include:

- Setting a regular meeting date for the steering committee meetings.
- Setting a regular starting time for the steering committee meeting.
- Create a mission statement or list the goals/objectives of the committee
- At the first meeting, elect a Chairperson, Vice Chairperson, Secretary and Spokesperson
- At the first meeting, select an official spokesperson for the committee that will manage all communications and press releases so that the correct information is being shared with all stakeholders.
- The task of the Secretary is to keep meeting minutes. Make sure the group approves any minutes before posting.
- Set a time limit for the steering committee meetings.
- Set a quorum for the steering committee to conduct official business. This assures any business conducted is binding.
- Set an ending date for the committee to make a report to all the involved parties.
- Make sure everyone keeps an open mind. This may be hard but the Chairperson will need good leadership skills who can accomplish this task and keep everyone focused.

Considerations for the steering committee include:

1. The citizen and business person should have no previous affiliation with an agency in the merger/consolidation/reorganization process.
2. The citizen and business person should not be a previously elected official with any of the municipalities or districts that are in the merger/consolidation/regionalization talks.
3. The steering committee can take on several looks by having multiple sub-committees, etc.
4. A decision needs to be made how the committee is going to accomplish its goals.
5. Creating the mission statement or establishing the goals and objectives sets the tone for everything else you do.
6. The alternate members DO NOT VOTE, unless the primary representative is absent.
7. Rumor control is a very important part of the process. The steering committee should select one person to function as the official spokesperson for the committee. If any individual or entity wants an official statement from the committee, this is the person who is responsible for releasing the correct information.

This is a time-proven process. It can be modified to meet local needs, but do not modify it greatly.

Getting Started

Consolidation should be in the best interest of the people receiving services:

- Where do you stand today?
- What is done?
- What's on the drawing board?
- What obstacles do you face?
- Where do you need help?

Re-consider why you have determined you should consolidate or merge:

- Less government is better.
- Potential to lower ISO rating.
- Economies of scale.
- Forces an examination of the program.
- Saves money.
- Eliminates redundancy.
- Decreases capital expenditures.
- Maximizes personnel and equipment.
- Provides same service for less money.

- Provides more service for about the same money.
- Provides more service for more money.
- Facilitates coordinated planning and strategic planning.
- Avoids future costs.
- Balances and assures response to demands while reducing costs.
- Standardizes service delivery.

Redefine the potential benefits and expectations:

- Helps comply with mandates and specialty team needs.
- Strategic location for infrastructure.
- No artificial boundaries.
- Changes can be made in the name of the merger.
- Reduces overhead.
- Standardizes services and programs:
 - Training.
 - Public relations.
 - Equipment.
 - Response.
- Political clout.
- Ability to absorb financial crisis.
- Forces strategic planning.

Once you have this basic road map, you can begin the true process.

A Consolidation Model

Based on the experiences of the organizations referenced in this book, as well as the many others indicated by the list of references, VFIS has developed what is believed to be a useful model for guiding a consolidation process. The reason for providing such a model is twofold: First, it appeared from research and discussion that some kind of skeletal framework would be useful for those entering into a consolidation review. Second, the majority of the most successful consolidations appeared to have followed similar processes.

The same cautions apply to learning from process models as apply to learning from case studies. Do not follow the prescribed steps rigidly; it is best to modify the steps slightly where appropriate to local differences. However, while the model can be modified to fit local circumstances and needs, be careful not to eliminate details which, if ignored, could create havoc later. Remember the advice of Tualatin Valley fire officials to take all the time the process needs; don't rush it. The result of this effort presumably will be the structure within which the fire protection organization for a community will operate for a long time; it deserves time and

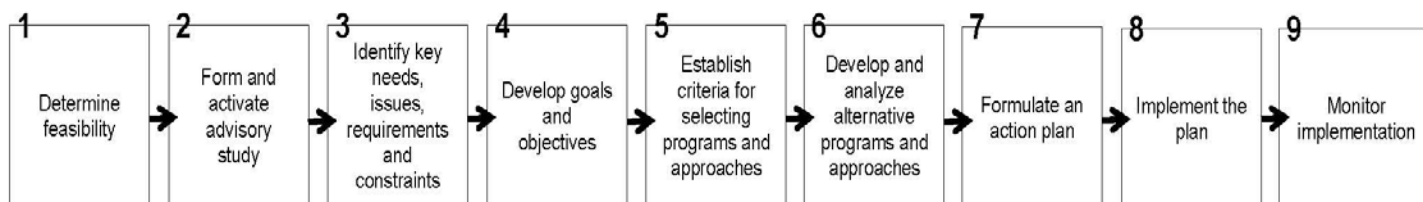
consideration now. And, because state law may apply to the process of consolidation, advice of qualified legal counsel is strongly recommended.

The model process described here is based on a number of classic planning models, some of which have been used widely in fire protection master planning and other fire service initiatives.

This particular model, adapted from these previous versions in response to lessons learned throughout this study, consists of nine steps:

- Determining feasibility.
- Forming and activating an advisory group.
- Identifying key needs, issues, requirements and constraints.
- Developing goals and objectives.
- Establishing criteria for selecting programs and approaches.
- Developing and analyzing alternative programs and approaches.
- Formulating an action plan.
- Implementing the plan.
- Monitoring implementation.

Throughout the following narrative, it will be explained in further detail what kind of activities take place at each step and examples are provided from real-life consolidation experiences.



1. Determine feasibility

An individual and/or a small group become interested in exploring consolidation possibilities. After some research and consideration, they determine that benefits can result. They approach and obtain the commitments of others within and outside their organizations, still within their own jurisdictions. Next, they approach leaders in other jurisdictions that might be involved. Potential participating organizations mutually learn about possible benefits and commit their staffs to further study.

They prepare a feasibility study and planning proposal and present it to decision makers. A general statement of purpose for the consolidation effort was developed at this time.

Now, the current situation is defined specifically and clearly. Potential avenues for consolidation, specific benefits and possible challenges are explored and a recommendation is made whether to proceed with developing an actual consolidation plan. Commitments to proceed are obtained from all involved jurisdictions and agencies and decision making authorities approve and authorize resources for development of a plan.

Keep in mind that consolidation actions do not originate always within the fire department. Two such instances are cited as examples in this publication: Orange County, Florida and Downey/Santa Fe Springs, California. In each of these situations, local government officials directed either the initial consolidation study or the consolidation action itself. In the Tualatin Valley area property taxes were widely considered too high and a city manager told his fire department, "You cost too much and we need that money for other things; if you can't cut your costs, we'll do it for you." In Orange County, the consolidation was thrust upon the fire departments from the county commission. If these actions would happen, it may be far better to be part of deciding what changes will be made than to permit them to be made for an organization.

Initial meetings might not prove encouraging, but participants should not lose faith or lose sight of the goal (a more efficient, effective fire protection organization). Early meetings in Tualatin Valley reportedly degenerated into squabbles over what color the fire trucks should be and whose fire chief was better. Nonetheless, once these personal objectives had been acted out, a consensus was reached to begin development of a plan.

Early meetings can have surprising benefits in their own right. In Monroe County, New York, the initial feasibility meeting among agency representatives was the first time some of the involved officials had realized their existing communications and dispatch center was dangerously overburdened.

Consider researching and articulating specific potential savings during this time. In Tualatin Valley, approximately 25 redundant positions were identified that could be reduced through attrition over the following five years at a savings of \$1.2 million. It also was learned that consolidation would eliminate the need for three separate departments to purchase two aerial ladder trucks and the consolidated department could build and staff an 18th fire station without hiring additional personnel. A study completed in North Hudson County, New Jersey, showed that consolidation would enable a reduction in companies from 34 to 23, with five percent cost savings overall and no reduction in the level of service (number of firefighter on the scene).

Most often, the purpose of consolidation is to define and recommend the most efficient, effective and reliable balance for optimum fire service to the organization's customers, the taxpaying public.

2. Form and activate an advisory group

Set up a central executive committee and a number of other working groups. The executive committee may consist of the fire chief and city/county manager for each participating jurisdiction; working groups will be charged to develop elements of the plan focusing on specific functional areas. Typically, the most workable arrangement is for an overall advisory group to be composed of the executive committee, plus the chairs of all working groups. It might be desirable, for political reasons, to include members of all working groups on the advisory body, but this can make for a quite large and rather unwieldy group depending on the number and size of the working groups.

Suggested Planning Groups¹²
Executive Committee
 (mayors, councils, fire boards)

<p>Implementation Group (administrative, finance officials) <i>Issues:</i> structure, funding mechanisms, taxpayer impact, jurisdictional impact, public relations, transition, indebtedness</p>	<p>Technical Study Group (fire officers) <i>Issues:</i> administration, operations, training, maintenance, communications, support services, fire prevention</p>								
<p>Working Groups</p> <table border="0" style="width: 100%;"> <tr> <td data-bbox="300 657 787 867"> <p>Administration <i>Issues:</i> staffing, structure, policy, organization, budget, employee relations, public relations</p> </td> <td data-bbox="787 657 1308 867"> <p>Operations <i>Issues:</i> suppression, procedures, policies, medical, hazardous materials</p> </td> </tr> <tr> <td data-bbox="300 894 787 1104"> <p>Fire Prevention <i>Issues:</i> code implementation, building inspections, plan reviews, prevention programs, investigation</p> </td> <td data-bbox="787 894 1308 1104"> <p>Training <i>Issues:</i> standards, facilities, equipment, funding, instruction</p> </td> </tr> <tr> <td data-bbox="300 1131 787 1299"> <p>Communications <i>Issues:</i> dispatch, E-911, protocols, frequencies, telephone, radio</p> </td> <td data-bbox="787 1131 1308 1299"> <p>Support Services <i>Issues:</i> purchasing, finance, risk management, human resources</p> </td> </tr> <tr> <td data-bbox="300 1327 787 1457"> <p>Maintenance <i>Issues:</i> fleet, equipment, facilities</p> </td> <td data-bbox="787 1327 1308 1457"> <p>Fixed Assets <i>Issues:</i> inventory, reimbursement, ownership</p> </td> </tr> </table>		<p>Administration <i>Issues:</i> staffing, structure, policy, organization, budget, employee relations, public relations</p>	<p>Operations <i>Issues:</i> suppression, procedures, policies, medical, hazardous materials</p>	<p>Fire Prevention <i>Issues:</i> code implementation, building inspections, plan reviews, prevention programs, investigation</p>	<p>Training <i>Issues:</i> standards, facilities, equipment, funding, instruction</p>	<p>Communications <i>Issues:</i> dispatch, E-911, protocols, frequencies, telephone, radio</p>	<p>Support Services <i>Issues:</i> purchasing, finance, risk management, human resources</p>	<p>Maintenance <i>Issues:</i> fleet, equipment, facilities</p>	<p>Fixed Assets <i>Issues:</i> inventory, reimbursement, ownership</p>
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Keep in mind that planning teams may work best when they consist of three to eight individuals with each one having a strong commitment to the result, are experienced in planning and have the ability to devote time and energy to the process. A chart illustrating how the groups relate to one another and to the ultimate decision makers may be useful both to participants and others outside the process.

Broad representation from all involved agencies and organizations is vital. Including representatives of the local media, business community and general public may also prove beneficial as long as they are assigned appropriate roles as members of working groups. Apply

¹² From a set of informal notes on consolidation, Tualatin Valley Fire and Rescue.

logistical/technical and political considerations in selecting members and seek the involvement of technical experts in various areas and representatives of allied agencies and groups. Communicate roles clearly too all participants. In some situations, these group assignments might require approval of political bodies.

In formulating both the composition and working guidelines for these groups, the goal is an open, vigorous discussion of proposed changes involving all the key actors (mayors, other elected officials, staffs, unions, governments and citizens) in order to create the environment out of which will emerge a new organization incorporating mutually acceptable trade-offs based on the legitimate concerns of all.

Needs, issues, requirements and constraints: Colorado example

In an ISO study conducted by three Colorado fire chiefs and their staffs for a possible consolidation among Thornton, West Adams and Westminster, Colorado, the following findings were made:

- The action was legally viable in light of state and local law and ordinance.
- Communication/dispatch was a necessary and key component to consolidation.
- One department was fully career, while the other two used a combination of career and volunteer personnel.
- Some overlapping of stations was found. Special regionalized teams, e.g., hazardous materials and dive and water rescue, were already in place, using cooperative staffing and intergovernmental agreements.
- Two of the communities contracted for ambulance service. A consolidated organization could provide consolidated advanced life support service with engine companies and create a revenue-generating ambulance service.
- The three agencies, for some time, had been conducting certain training activities jointly, including testing, video and reference library purchases and combined training academies. More savings could be accomplished with total departmental consolidation.
- A goal for fire prevention (public education, inspection, investigation, plans review, fire code adoption and enforcement) was to bring the programs up to the level currently provided by the jurisdiction offering the most. This meant a need to adopt common fire codes with few potentially confusing local amendments and the need to develop a single inspection information tracking system.
- Existing resources, both plant/equipment and personnel, could effectively protect the consolidated service area without major additions; some stations even could be closed or combined with others and relocated.
- Two of the departments used computer-aided dispatch with automated fire reporting; the other was in the process of evaluating bids for such a system. All had remote communications established at each fire station. Decisions would be needed on the location of a consolidated dispatch center.
- Locations needed to be determined for fire administration headquarters, a computer mainframe site, a single recordkeeping system and other administrative offices including payroll, accounts payable/ receivable, personnel, legal issues, purchasing, building and fleet maintenance, health insurance and workers' compensation. Pensions and

information systems would need to be consolidated, each bringing legal issues of their own. The consolidated department would need to decide whether to incorporate stand-alone support services within the consolidated entity or to contract for services with one of the existing municipalities or with a private vendor.

3. Determine key needs, issues, requirements and constraints

This stage involves identifying the needs, issues that underlie possible changes, requirements that guide future plans and constraints that might influence the outcome. This, in turn, involves identifying data collection needs and a process for finding requested data.

Among such considerations might be whether the new organization risks being burdened by too many employees (proportionally) from one jurisdiction. This may drain personnel resources from the beginning. Watch for seniority conflicts, promotional restrictions, changes in proportions of minority employees and effects of blending career and volunteer firefighters. A group also might seek to ensure benefits and obligations that existed prior to consolidation remain the responsibility of the original jurisdiction.

Carefully and clearly identifying needs, issues, requirements and constraints during the planning process helps ensure they are not overlooked

Planning for the assignment of existing individual personnel within the new organizational structure requires careful consideration. State guidelines for those decisions up front. While in the private sector, the best people may be placed in the most appropriate jobs and the rest could be let go; but public-sector constraints often prohibit that approach. This might require compromise, but the goal is to place the best possible people into the most appropriate positions for their skills and experience.

Leftover management staff (excess to the needs of the new organization) may be assigned to staff functions for which there had never been enough money before; for example, managing public fire safety education, coordinating volunteer/career relations, personnel director, strategic planning, research and development and others. When forced to choose among several existing personnel for a consolidated position, consider a specific process for selection of the best person. Clearly state in the process that constraints during decisions will not be political and that, once the decision is made, the specified person is in charge.

For a smoother transition, develop a plan for labor contracts already in place. When the long-term, gradual consolidation in Sarasota County, Florida, first got underway in the 1980s, the organization was constrained to spend the first year working with separate collective bargaining units and different labor groups. The county needed a process to ultimately combine employees into a single group, which meant the unions' members had to decide who would represent them. It also meant the consolidated organization had to live out the existing contracts before being able to achieve true parity. It took approximately three years to combine these elements across the board and to tie up loose ends.

In addition to personnel issues, consider operational issues, needs, requirements and constraints. These can range from communications matters such as resolving different frequencies and different dispatch systems, to the transition of rules and regulations. Sarasota County worked from three separate sets of rules through the months of committee work required to arrive at an agreeable single set of rules. It is recommended to plan the standardization of equipment as well.

Consider geographic constraints, for example, natural barriers that could inhibit response, including mountains, rivers, floodplains and other features. The same is true of major highways subject to serious rush-hour congestion. Neglecting to consider these factors could mean that projected improvements in response times would prove inaccurate and misleading.

Financial and legal issues also exist, including the need to establish a workable, mutually agreeable funding formula, which presumably will require a great deal of negotiation. Develop a policy on ownership and use of existing and new assets as well as one regarding the current debts of the existing organizations. Determine the means for the provision of general support services, such as legal assistance, finance, payroll, purchasing and personnel services. Another question to ask: Will the organizational change have any impact on state or federal funding?

When some participating departments provide emergency medical transport and others depend on private ambulance services, it's important to make a decision concerning how the consolidated department will function in this regard. Expansion of ambulance service into the areas served by private organizations may create sensitive issues that will have to be confronted and resolved.

These issues, needs, requirements and constraints need not be resolved during this phase of the planning process, but are important to be identified so they are not overlooked as the process continues.

4. Develop goals and objectives

Goals and objectives for the consolidated organization are developed during this stage and then submitted for approval to whatever decision making bodies are in place. These are the guidelines that shape the ultimate nature of the consolidated organization. It is recommended that goals and objectives are measurable and achievable in order to be effective.

Goals for a consolidation effort might include:¹³

- Providing cost-effective and efficient delivery of services on an expanded basis.
- Providing a strong system for performing initial fire attack and an improved organization for effectively managing larger-scale emergencies.
- Providing the capability to deliver additional special resources or services that are not cost-effective at the current level.
- Reducing redundant programs and overhead costs.
- Streamlining and integrating systems.
- Expanding the database to evaluate service levels throughout the new organization.
- Reducing overhead positions (duplicated administrative positions) and increasing the number of line personnel to enhance labor-intensive operations.
- Attaining reductions through attrition and reassignment.
- Minimizing emotional reaction to change by verifying the planning process is driven by facts and involves all parties.

¹³ From a seminar by Chief Charles Rule (retired), Manteca, California.

Establish deadlines and milestones at this stage in order so the process is completed in a timely and efficient manner.

5. Establish criteria for selecting programs and approaches

A myriad of possible ideas will arise during the planning process, probably more than could be reasonably achieved. Therefore, establish a means for prioritizing and determining which will be enacted and which will not.

Make advance decisions regarding what criteria will be applied in judging recommendations to help keep things as fair as possible. Cost/benefit, political, legal and other analytical factors might be considered. State clearly what criteria will be used so the criteria are understood and followed. The importance that recommendations and assumptions are evaluated before being adopted can be seen by reviewing one element of the consolidation experience. In Salt Lake County, Utah, the planning group made the seemingly reasonable assumption that the consolidation would expand the tax base available to the new organization. Unfortunately, it did not.

Don't assume future savings. Find a way to project accurately.

Administrative costs, expected to be reduced, actually rose after the Salt Lake County consolidation because, while some of the involved departments had not had active programs in training, prevention and fiscal administration, the new organization had to provide sufficient levels of these services to cover the entire consolidated department. Expected favorable economies of scale for purchasing in bulk did not materialize because each jurisdiction had in place a system of municipal purchasing offices that were part of the inherited organizational structure. In this case, the message is, "Find a way to judge projected savings."

6. Develop and analyze alternative programs and approaches

By brainstorming and other methods, the working groups now develop a long list of ideas for specific programs or approaches that might be undertaken to enhance the new organization. Identify a wide range of options so that eventual choices are not limited, each option is described fully and its differences from the current situation explored. Then, each alternative is analyzed according to its projected costs, benefits, political acceptability, legality and other characteristics. Those that do not meet the goals and objectives or the selection criteria identified earlier may then be rejected. The best programs and approaches ultimately will be selected for implementation.

For example, Monroe County conducted studies on air-time demand and staffing before undertaking its "simple" communications/dispatch center consolidation. Communications issues were to be examined, whether for a functional (communications only) consolidation or for a broad one. Those identified included determining what is being paid for dispatch services (including costs, obvious as well as hidden), long-term benefits such as hardware and personnel, efficiency, effectiveness and reliability.

Possible areas of general study for a consolidation might include duplicate positions, purchasing, supply and warehousing, training, communications, operational overlap, fire stations (number, location), apparatus (number, type reserves) and organizational structure. When Orange County, California's 14 previously separate departments consolidated in 1981, they formed a central vehicle maintenance and repair facility to operate 24 hours a day. The facility provides

computerized recordkeeping and has enabled cost-effective programs of refurbishment, repowering and preventive maintenance.

In the area of fire investigation, options such as combining investigation activities, minimizing fragmented information ownership and standardizing training and procedures may be studied. In fire prevention (including codes and public fire safety education), consider studying what it would take to replace multiple codes with a single code, how to achieve consistent enforcement and how to provide one-stop permit processing and plans review as well as the benefits of volume purchasing.

In the area of training, studies might encompass potential savings to be gained by combining physical facilities (burn building, drill tower, flammable liquid pits, specialized training props), standardizing training (all levels and specialties), consolidating instructor positions and time, eliminating training redundancies and purchasing training materials and aids in greater volume.

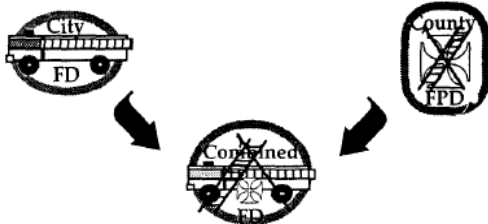
These suggestions are by no means all-inclusive. Consider whatever areas of interest are expressed by members of the working groups, local leadership or the public during the planning process. By considering the full range of possibilities, creative solutions may be found. According to the group's pre-established criteria for implementation, it may be beneficial for the suggestions to be (at a minimum) cost-effective, operationally desirable and politically acceptable.

7. Formulate an action plan

This is it, the action plan that will describe and guide the future of an organization. It will serve as the manual for implementing the selected programs and the approaches to those programs. Include in it the criteria and a plan for evaluating the consolidation after it has been implemented. Once it has been prepared, this plan will be submitted to the decision making body(ies) that have oversight for implementing the plan along with the continued authorization of resources.

One way to help members of incoming organizations feel at-home in the new organization is to incorporate elements of previous departmental symbols into the logo of the new one.

Fire Department #1 Logo Fire Department #2 Logo



Consolidated Department Logo

The action plan defines whether the consolidation takes place through a step-by-step series of incremental actions (as in Sarasota County, FL) or an immediate merger (as in Tualatin Valley). It identifies the name of the new organization and illustrates its new graphic symbols (logos). In most cases, the organization's name will be one that all parties can identify with and not favoring one of the entering organizations over another. Individual stations within the combined organization might retain some identity with the local area through special station and apparatus markings.

The action plan also helps describe the structure of the new organization, whether it be a consolidation responsible to the county executive or board of supervisors, independent fire district (with a separate elected board), consolidation of several cities and districts forming a new organization, merger of several districts, intergovernmental contract for all fire protection and related services, intergovernmental contract for functional services (dispatch, codes enforcement, EMS) or even private-sector contract for services.

The action plan explains how the agreement relates to existing local charters and ordinances, how budgets are formulated and revenues obtained along with any revenue restrictions, liability, overhead and asset issues, as well as accountability specifics for maintaining and monitoring the agreement. It defines how specific elements are to be achieved and paid for; for example, in Sarasota County, a bond issue was undertaken to raise funds for a central communications center for all county agencies, plus the city of Sarasota. Officials had a plan in place and now simply are waiting for the money.

It describes the procedures for implementing personnel changes such as staff cuts and reorganization of personnel, including how to help them adjust to any shifts in responsibilities or status that might accompany the changes. It describes the fully consolidated organization as well as any transitional steps that might be required because of existing conditions such as labor contracts. It explains the training, performance and fitness requirements for employees and their effective dates for existing employees. For consolidation to work, it's important that employees become interchangeable where procedures and knowledge match. If new job responsibilities come with consolidation (through a need for services not previously provided), new position descriptions and appropriate training programs may be necessary.

The action plan defines how and when the organization comes into being, in addition to how and for what reasons it can be changed or terminated. It delineates the administrative and operational rules and procedures that steer the organization and the status of existing and future facilities and equipment. It prescribes the process for bringing apparatus and equipment into uniformity, including the locations of tools on apparatus, as well as changing departmental logos on vehicles. Those participating in the Monroe County communications consolidation found that in preparing their standardized procedures manual, 34 of 38 fire chiefs were able to agree on four out of five procedures. In short, the plan describes details of the new organization and how each one is accomplished. Nothing, however seemingly minor, is left to chance or assumption.

Still, simplicity is the guiding principle. As observed by retired Chief Charles Rule of Manteca, California, "Bigger isn't necessarily better; better is better." But, above all, develop a plan that creates a new organization that is measurably more efficient, more effective and more reliable than the previous separate organizations. If these elements cannot be achieved, then the process has not met its principal purpose.

8. Implement the action plan

"Implementation is the key to a successful action plan. Without action, the plan is not really a plan; it becomes just another study."¹⁴ Accomplish implementation of the plan in accordance with the approved procedures, budget and schedule contained in the plan. During this phase, the good ideas that arose during the planning process, that met the criteria for selection and were included in the plan will be applied and become realities. Necessary new facilities and equipment will be designed, procured and installed and personnel will be trained on new equipment and procedures.

Without implementation, a plan is not a plan, but just another study

In Tualatin Valley, a series of intergovernmental agreements on the sharing of personnel, apparatus and equipment had been envisioned and planned to guide implementation of the plan. As they went into effect, the three departments began to function as one. Ultimately, and on

¹⁴ Montgomery and Shepherd, *A Regional Cooperative Model: Regional Vision '95*.

schedule, the required legal actions were taken to formally create a new department. This included a new name, logo, official stationery and other items. All department managers were moved to a central location; both career and volunteer department members and two Explorer Posts were integrated fully, including 342 career personnel, 110 volunteers, 25 Explorers, 17 stations, 25 engines, five trucks, eight rescues, three brush rigs, three tankers, a hazardous materials squad, heavy rescue vehicle and assorted reserve engines and trucks.

In Sarasota County, a step-by-step consolidation took place. First, three of the several fire districts in the county were combined. The following year, two more fire districts formed their own consolidation and, shortly thereafter, an additional district joined the earlier consolidation. A year later, the two previously formed consolidated districts combined, including both ambulance and fire districts. Agreements with the area's major airport fire department and another fire district are under consideration by the parties. The new department covers approximately 365 square miles and employs roughly 260 career and 90 volunteer personnel.

The officials who participated in the Tualatin Valley consolidation recommend that the intended leadership structure be in place when the consolidation takes effect and that line employees be transferred to new locations right away. Consolidation may be traumatic for employees and moving them around may help them become accustomed to working together in the newly merged organization.

The basic intergovernmental agreement that governs the consolidation covers the big issues, but challenges remain in the details and the re-education required by change. If the planning process took the necessary steps, the implementation process may be smooth and hold few surprises.

9. Monitor and evaluate

Evaluate programs by monitoring their effects to determine whether and how closely they match the intended results. This can be accomplished by performing cost/benefit analyses, watching for changes in response times, losses per incident, overall fire data and seeking input and appraisal from participants and users, including fire department officials and members, other local officials (elected and appointed) and citizens.

Keep an eye on reports from division and department heads; if goals or objectives are not being met fully and then institute the changes that might be necessary. Consider whether any perceived problems are the result of unrealistic expectations, inadequate planning or shortcomings in implementation. Revise the plan as needed in accordance with evaluation information by re-entering the planning process at the appropriate point and reworking that element from there.

Officials in Sarasota County suggest that, if they were starting over, they would eliminate the individual taxing districts and form an independent consolidated taxing district. This would have meant having their own purchasing and other support functions rather than working under the county political system and bureaucracy. "We were zooming down the road at 60 miles per hour and ran into the county government system moving at about 20 miles per hour," one official remarked. It would have taken longer to establish an independent taxing district because it would require action by the state legislature, but they believe it might have worked better day-to-day. However, such factors cannot be known until the organization is in the midst of their effects and this experience may

Ensuring long-term success demands keeping a watchful eye on the effects of the consolidation... and making changes as needed.

not translate to each organization considering consolidation. Remember to consider each individual circumstance to learn what will work best.

Be aware of the possible impact on the organization of future changes and growth in the community. Orange County's service area grew substantially after the consolidation took effect, necessitating a sharp increase in the number of career firefighters, while mid-to upper-management personnel of battalion chief rank or above decreased by nearly half in the same period.

Accept that issues will continue to arise from time to time. The fact that the initial planning process is complete doesn't mean that the organization's details have been engraved in granite. If something needs to be changed, do it. Just verify that changes are undertaken as cautiously as the original plan.

Guidelines for mutual aid agreements

Mutual aid agreements can provide for cooperative functions among adjoining departments in a simpler way, but also with fewer far-reaching benefits than is involved in consolidation. Such agreements may present similar challenges, especially politically. In addition, local financial officials may have some trouble with the inherent flexibility of such plans.

Still, mutual aid agreements may offer the opportunity for cooperative ventures with achievable economies of scale without loss of political accountability or additional bureaucracy. Jurisdictions simply contract with one another for the joint or separate provision of services.

Conduct planning for mutual aid agreements. Take equal consideration for broad representation, political and public concerns, legitimate needs, issues, requirements and constraints and equal consideration for the need to create an organization that is effective, efficient, reliable and serves the best interests of the citizenry. Identify a clear, long-term commitment among the jurisdictions. Establish mechanisms for resolving disputes and for rationally dissolving the arrangement if it truly is not working out..

Typically, a mutual aid agreement for emergency services will (at a minimum):

- Define terms.
- Establish criteria and procedures for requesting assistance.
- Explain how aid will be carried out.
- Prescribe the use and deployment of personnel.
- Describe command and control responsibility and interactions.
- Establish communication principles and procedures, including appropriate use of radio frequencies.
- Describe the identification system for functional areas and personnel.
- Delineate how costs will be distributed.
- Contain a blanket waiver of liability, one agency against the other.
- Include an effective date.

- Establish criteria and procedures for withdrawal of assistance.
- Prescribe procedures for changes to the plan.
- Outline termination procedures and guidelines.

Arrange that the governing bodies of participating agencies are signatories to any mutual agreement. This is the way to verify that the document is legal and binding and will not be overruled by officials higher in the local leadership structure than the fire chiefs.

Chapter 5: Financing Considerations

In mergers/consolidations/acquisitions/regional plans, the need to finance the system properly will most likely exist. At this point, assess these three aspects:

1. What is the current level of assets and liability (including debt)? If there is debt, how will this be handled?
2. What financial commitments exist that are non-debt, e.g. workers' compensation, disability, pension reserves, payments, borrowing against pension funds, etc.? If this exists, how will this be handled?
3. How will the new system be supported for both operational and capital expenses?



Give substantial investigation and thought to aspect 1 and 2 require if they are present and need to be dealt with. In both those aspects, accounting expertise and legal support are recommended.

Several approaches can be taken with aspect 3. Deferring to the state's experience in the consolidation of municipal functions regarding municipal funding choices, the following information is provided with their permission.

In cases where some or all of the costs of a municipal service cannot be supported by user fees, the use of municipal general funds is needed. This is true whether the activity is local or a joint one. Once the decision has been made to provide the service, it usually costs less to do it jointly rather than separately. When a program is to be jointly funded, the municipalities decide which of the following choices is the fairest. Often a combination is selected to balance between differing opinions on what is fair.

Equal shares

A joint program can be established where each municipality pays an equal share. This approach may be best suited in situations where the participating municipalities are approximately the same size and receive approximately equal benefits from the joint program. Equal shares are often used as the way of allocating overhead costs of a program, such as advertising costs for joint purchasing or administrative costs for a council of governments.

Population

Each municipality's cost share for a joint activity can be based upon population. The municipality's share is equal to its percentage of the total population of the participating

municipalities. This approach is most appropriate when the general population of each municipality is served evenly by the program. In other words, do all citizens benefit?

Assessed valuation

The total assessed valuation of each municipality participating in a joint program can be used as the basis for allocating shares. Each municipality's percentage of the total assessed valuation for all participating municipalities is their percentage of the joint program costs. Total assessed valuation is a frequently used basis for allocation shares of joint programs because it is a measure of each municipality's tax base or the ability to pay. Shares are deemed to be fairly allocated if they approximate the relative fiscal resources of each municipality. As with population, shares on this basis will tend to be large for the more developed municipalities and small for the rural ones. If the participating municipalities are in more than one county, the assessment ratios and base years are likely to be different. In these cases, participating municipalities equalize the assessment ratios using information from the State Tax Equalization Board.

Use

In programs where the residency of users (the direct beneficiaries of a joint program) can be identified, municipal shares can be allocated in proportion to the number of these users residing in each participating jurisdiction. Users of a joint recreation program where registration is required can include their municipality or residence on the registration form. Borrowers of library books can be identified by municipality if their library card includes a municipal residence code. Numbers of riders on a transit system can be counted at each stop in each municipality. In each of these cases, the number of users of the service can be identified from each participating municipality and municipal shares of the program costs allocated on the same basis. Paying on the basis of use is a popular approach. "We don't pay for it unless we use it," is a well understood and generally accepted approach. However, it is limited to those programs where direct users can be identified by municipality of residence. **The same claim can be made for the number of emergency responses.**

Direct Taxes

In a few special cases discussed in the preceding chapter, direct taxation of property for a regional service is written into the state enabling legislation. This is the case for environmental improvement compacts and transportation development districts. These taxes are separate from regular municipal property taxes and the limits imposed by the respective municipal codes. Most intergovernmental cooperation programs, however, do not have direct taxation as a revenue choice.

Chapter 6: Managing Change Resulting from a Consolidation

Consolidations can create change from a variety of sources and purposes. These changes may create conflict in personal, organizational and community initiatives; where leadership in managing and minimizing that change is important.

The research for this text identified three actions to understand in order to help manage three recurring scenarios, including:

- The impact of the changes and effectively communicating ways to manage the change.
- The impact of culture and related resistance to change.
- How people impact change management.

It's important to have LEADERSHIP to effectively manage these scenarios because leadership has an impact on the culture of the organization. In many consolidations one common situation often surfaces.

IF THE ORGANIZATION IS NOT
CULTURALLY READY TO CONSOLIDATE,
CONFLICT IS IMMINENT AND IT WILL
THREATEN THE SUCCESS OF THE
PROJECT

Communicate

Author and leadership consultant Ken Blanchard identified five key success factors for cultural transformation. These suggested that leaders:

- Show they are committed to the project.
- Show values in behavioral terms.
- Define accountability and deliverables for success.
- Verify that staff is committed to change the culture.
- Establish key interim milestones to demonstrate success.

These five steps demand effective communication and may direct positive performance resulting in cultural change in a new organization.

Resistance to change

Many times, if someone proposes a change, someone will resist. If not handled properly, the resistance could cause the active project to fail. The resistance can be operational or personal-based.

The impact of resistance to change may take one or more of several aspects, such as:

- An overemphasis on process rather than people.
- A lack of process to address human impacts of change.
- A lack of clarity and a lack of communication.
- A lack of ability to articulate the change process.
- Failing to deal with the issues associated with change.

The changes deal with people and process and resistance can occur with both.

People

People may pose a unique roadblock and present challenges as individuals and groups or subcultures. What becomes important is identifying the individuals or groups and assessing whether or not they can be managed and integrated.

People typically resist change from either a financial or emotional base. It is important to determine the foundation of that resistance, how (if possible) to deal with it and what, if any, changes are necessary.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

There has been a great deal of discussion about "reinventing" government and there is no reason why public fire protection cannot be a part of this positive trend. Consolidations, whether formal or informal, wide-ranging or functional, phased in or at once, may help progressive fire service managers enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of their agencies. The concept is based on awareness that when working together cooperatively and sharing resources, more can be accomplished.

Learning from the experiences of others, while not copying their actions entirely, is a valid way to approach change. Organizations can enjoy the benefits of progress without the need to invent each step anew as they proceed. This publication presents some reasons for consolidation, some caveats and cautions and a method for analyzing and planning a consolidation. We have used examples from the actual experiences of other fire service managers in illustrating issues, concerns, actions and experiences.



As with any change in the way services are delivered, caution is recommended. A consolidation program represents a significant change in the way agencies conduct business and thus deserves considerable time and thought. It is important that the ultimate goal of enhanced fire protection services for citizens be recognized by the parties involved and acknowledged by the planning and implementation process.

Chapter 8: Case Studies

CASE STUDY #1

“The Case of the Biased Mayor”

Quincy County had a number of emergency service agencies that protected their own municipalities but for years had acted as single response team. Such was the case for Stations 15A, 15B, 15C, 18, 20 and 22. The services were provided across four municipalities from six stations. The consolidation plan was set to accomplish:

- Assurance of adequate response.
- Eliminating redundancy of stations and apparatus.
- Operating more uniformly for enhanced efficiency.
- Long-term cost savings.

Admirable goals were established by the agencies as they went to the municipal officials to gain support. The four fire service agencies and the four municipal leadership groups were all in favor of the merger and moved forward to hire a consultant to help facilitate the merger.

Upon learning that his fire company (one station, three pieces of apparatus and less than 10 volunteers) would be closed and moved to a neighboring community station less than one mile away, the mayor of the community declared the consolidation would not include his community and fire company. His station was not going to close. In further dialogue, the purpose was clearly political to favor the mayor's position, not the community fire protection.

Moral of the story ...

Even though there is initial agreement to move forward in a consolidation, when reality is ultimately seen and it adversely affects one of the partners more than was originally expected, the partnership can crumble. Experience has illustrated that even in the best consolidation processes, conflict could exist within one to five years. It is recommended that organizations are ready for this possible issue and are able to work to resolve it.

CASE STUDY #2

“The Case of the Old World Mentality”

Centertown had two independent fire companies within the municipality. There was a belief that if the organizations merged, there would be a reduction in costs and improved operations. Over several years, Company 1 became stronger operationally, politically and with staffing; yet Company 2 would not change its ways to become more effective, yet had significant financial resources that they would not invest in either facilities or equipment.

Reality was they were already operating as one organization from an operations standpoint and had hired a day-time firefighter to assure response. It took a “generational change” to eliminate personal bias and conflict, which resulted in Company 2 merging with Company 1. Upon the retirement of the chief of Company 2, the merger occurred with the larger, more powerful agency (Company 1), taking control and the organization now thrives.

As it's been said many times, the fire service is mired in 200 years of tradition, unimpeded by progress.

Moral of the story ...

Culture often plays more of a factor in consolidation actions than individuals realize. Many times the success or failure of the consolidation depends upon what the organizational culture is and its leadership's ability to allow things to happen. Similar to research and findings in the safety industry, if the people in the organization are not ready for the consolidation to occur, conflict may result and consolidation can be hindered or will not achieve anticipated objectives.

CASE STUDY #3

“The Case of the Moving Targets for Success”

Plum County has 24 fire departments protecting 18 municipalities and unincorporated areas. County executives and elected officials were convinced that a merger would improve operations and reduce costs.

Upon analyzing the operations and physical assets of the 24 agencies it was found that indeed six could be eliminated and that operation could be enhanced by modified response procedures and standardized operating guidelines and training. However, an analysis of inherited debt and the need for at least 11 new pieces of fire apparatus and replacement of five of the remaining stations (due to age and future suitability) resulted in the establishment of short- and long-range goals to be implemented.

In this case the elected officials were committed to system enhancement and made the short-term commitment to consolidate and the long-term plan to raise taxes to provide the needed equipment, facilities and staffing to serve the public properly.

Moral of the story ...

Be prepared to change.

- Keep eyes wide open to issues and possibilities.
- Be flexible.
- Long-term goals are the objective.

CASE STUDY #4

“The Case of Teamwork”

Community comments indicated a concern regarding the emergency services resulting in a community group to look into the situation. Leaders of the four fire departments in the area, along with a non-emergency service participant met to gather input and ultimately discuss the issue of consolidation.

The belief was that by combining resources, manpower, ideas, leadership and the elimination of duplication of services that enhancements in the delivery of service would occur. The municipalities were all requested to be involved. As meetings and issues evolved, a consultant was hired to assess the situation and an independent mediator was hired to facilitate the process of consolidation. The result was a decision to form a “cooperative group” as the organizational design of choice. During the process of consolidating, one agency actually dissolved.

Key to the process was agreement on co-op membership, by-laws, standard operating guidelines, municipal financial responsibilities, training guidelines and organizational design. Once defined, six entities signed on to the co-op.

Moral of the story ...

- Organization agreement is key to a successful process.
- This specific process required extensive activity and detail for a higher rate of success.
- Assign and monitor responsibilities.
- Teamwork and a unified single vision were central to the success of this consolidation.

CASE STUDY #5

“The Case of the Bullheaded Chief”

A person characterized as “bullheaded,” typically sees no other position but their own and that position is usually biased - for some personal reason. Such is the case in this situation. Two fire departments in the same municipality were recommended for merger by the municipal officials. One station had few members and they either lived distant from the fire station or outside of the municipality. In either case, long response times were prevalent and social functions took precedence over fire department aspects.

A consulting study confirmed the position of the elected officials and the two companies were directed to merge.

During those next months, one fire chief “stuck his heels in the sand” and resisted almost every attempt to move to the next step of consolidation. Merged organizational documents, standard operating guidelines, dispatch procedures and similar initiatives were resisted by the chief, while the other fire department in the municipality moved forward on each aspect seeing the value of more staffing, less duplication, improved efficiency and so on. The failure of the chief to work the process effectively resulted in negative, unnecessary, adverse recognition and, in the eyes of the elected officials, the entire organization brought minimal value to the community.

Moral of the story ...

Despite the constant push-back from the dismayed fire chief, the elected officials were committed to the merger for the long-term benefit of the community and the merger moved forward. Despite the protests of the fire company members and officers at public meetings and in the media, the best interest of the public was served.

CASE STUDY #6

“The Case of Building Partnerships”

Four fire departments had a long history of tradition and service to their region, sharing much in common including automatic aid on responses, members maintaining membership in more than one of the departments, conducting joint training sessions and fundraising.

With an existing strong relationship, a consolidation was a logical long-term consideration. Ultimately, a Resource Allocation Study was conducted to evaluate the positive and negative aspects of consolidation. The study reviewed financial data, incident statistics, personnel, training, organizational designed and governing documents. The intent was to determine the potential efficient and enhancement of services and potential for success. Multiple consolidation options were offered, but the optimal suggestion was to consolidate into one agency.

For two years, activities occurred including a series of stakeholder meetings which were key to providing information to members, elected officials and the community. A conceptual (shell) organization was authorized to function for a period of time to validate the viability of the concept and a target date for inception and name were defined.

Within the first six months, a strategic plan was developed, approved by the membership and implemented. The plan included clear goals, objectives and action steps. A physical consolidation also occurred, appropriate fleet sizing and long-term planning for growth were implemented as well.

Moral of the story ...

With each activity, goal and objective completion the vision became clearer.

As is the case in so many successes of consolidation, key aspects that were completed included:

- Willing participants ready for merger.
- A clear plan to accomplish consolidation.
- Gaining outside expertise when necessary to move the process along.
- Having a team working together on one vision, set of goals and objectives, dedication and commitment to make the process work.

CASE STUDY #7

“The Case of the Long Term Plan”

Manpower and funding were the reasons two municipalities involving four independent fire companies investigated the opportunity for a merger or consolidation. Not only were manpower and funding concerns but community growth brought worries to chief officers about changing risk and changing demand of the fire service.

Over a decade, leaders of the companies periodically gathered to discuss common issues regarding consolidation actions. Finally, the four agencies committed to funding a process for furthering the course of action. As multiple municipalities were involved, state agencies were contacted and integrated into the process. A local emergency services task force involving emergency service personnel, elected officials and community representatives was established and took the lead. An extensive education effort was needed for the organizations involved, the elected officials and the general public. An attorney was hired and a consulting group contracted to complete an assessment and develop a strategic planning process to work toward consolidation. Following the assessment, an implementation task force was established, roles, responsibilities and timetables were assigned and the process began. An inter-local government agreement was required as multiple municipalities were involved. The first employee of the new organization was an administrator to oversee the new, larger and more defined – yet, demanding organization.

Moral of the story ...

Be patient, constructive change takes time and requires planning and expectation.

CASE STUDY #8

“The Case of Willing Partners”

Three communities from three different municipalities had decided to train together and respond together. This resulted in an interest to merge operations for more efficiency. A task force was created with a joint resolution to study this opportunity. The task force was composed of an elected official from each community, citizen from each community, a fire department representative from each department and a citizen appointed by each fire department.

Monthly meetings resulted in a feasibility assessment with potential impacts identified and resultant committees to analyze and act on:

- Legal issues.
- Operational challenges (financial and political).
- Equipment and resources.
- Personnel impacts.
- Response changes.

Moral of the story ...

Once the partnership is agreed to, the development of a plan and related actions can be quick to implement.

CASE STUDY #9

“The Case of Five Different Systems”

West County pursued consolidation to reduce costs without sacrificing services.

Five different existing systems were phased into consolidation. Fixed and variable costs, legislative impacts and personnel costs figured heavily in the analysis and implementation.

Moral of the story ...

Working toward a defined goal can be a model for consolidation success. It is not recommended to try to accomplish all goals at one time. It is actually possible to implement components of a merger prior to agreeing on each and every detail.

Analysis of the situation is as important as the inclusion of a dispute resolution process.

CASE STUDY #10

“The Case of Pre-emption”

Multiple agencies were approached to consider an attempt at regionalization. The direction to consider this came from local governments of each of the agencies.

The direction was essentially, “figure out how you can be more effective or we will do it for you.”

Moral of the story ...

Using a process very similar to that outlined in this text, the different fire/EMS agencies involved developed their own approach to regionalization, cost reduction and source service improvement, which was approved by the various government agencies. This “pre-empted” local government directed the consolidation and results.

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