

**REGIONAL CONSOLIDATION: THE IMPACT ON TRAINING,
COMMUNICATIONS, AND PURCHASING**

EXECUTIVE DEVELOPMENT

BY: Kenneth C. Frankl
Chief
Woodlawn Fire Department
Woodlawn, OH

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Steven B. Ferguson
EMS Officer
Lynchburg Fire Department
Lynchburg, VA

Albert S. Beers
Fire Marshal
Cape May County
Cape May, NJ

Andy McDaniel
Chief
Oviedo Fire/Rescue
Oviedo, FL

Jeffrey L. Johnson
Operations Chief
Fire District Two
Mission, KS

George F. Bentley
Deputy Chief
Olathe Fire Department
Olathe, KS

SF-Consolidation - Regional

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ABSTRACT

Fire services for the past twenty years have been forced to become more resourceful. Now more than ever the fire service must explore the benefits of functional consolidation within regions. Our research team selected the descriptive research method to formulate this paper.

Following a brainstorming meeting, the team agreed on the following research questions:

1. Can training be enhanced with a regional facility?
2. Are communications improved with centralized dispatch?
3. Can capital expenditures be reduced with centralized purchasing?

Our research team reviewed numerous articles, fire service texts, and journals. Also, team members reviewed a videotape containing a success story of consolidation. A personal interview was conducted to determine first-hand experience of a consolidation.

Functional consolidations have been conducted throughout the United States since the 1970s. Our findings show a reduction in costs and an increase in the quality of service for the taxpayer. Functional consolidation has proved to be a feasible approach to the resource problem. It would be advantageous for regional departments to explore the process.

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INTRODUCTION

The problem of diminishing fire/rescue resources is forcing departments to consider regional consolidation of certain departmental functions.

The purpose of this study is to determine if regional consolidation of certain departmental functions can improve service delivery.

This project was based on the descriptive research method, and the questions addressed were:

1. Can training be enhanced with a regional facility?
2. Are communications improved with centralized dispatch?
3. Can capital expenditures be reduced with centralized purchasing?

BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

Fire departments in the United States have seen a dramatic increase in the demand for their services. In contrast to this increased demand, the resources to provide these services have remained fixed or have decreased. The present climate of fiscal restraint and dwindling tax bases are forcing fire service managers to do more with less. As part of the executive development programs section on problem-solving, we researched three areas of the overall fire service to determine if cooperative efforts could result in enhanced service delivery while costs remained constant or diminished.

The areas we reviewed were training, communications, and purchasing. These aspects were viewed as essential to all departments and represented areas where functional consolidation of some services might result in more efficient and cost-effective delivery.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Within the United States there are approximately 3,000 counties, 18,000 municipalities, 17,000 townships, 1,516 paid, and 24,124 combination fire departments. They employ more than ten million persons and spend over \$100 billion annually (Picard, 1975).

Regional consolidation of training, communications, and centralized purchasing may reduce capital expenditures and improve delivery of these services.

Through a joint service agreement two or more governmental agencies arrange for some form of joint service delivery to all their constituents. These agreements allow jurisdictions to pool their resources so they can provide the necessary public services and take advantage of the economics of scale.

The literature review demonstrated the success of such a joint agreement between the city of Littleton, Colorado, the Littleton Fire Protection District, the city of Englewood, Colorado, and two other fire protection districts. These entities became part of the South Metro Fire Training Center, the first cooperative training center in the state of Colorado. The value of this type of agreement is demonstrated by the realization that separately none of these jurisdictions could have supported a major training facility (Hoetmer, 1988, p. 439).

In reviewing the literature on regional training facilities for smaller departments the indication was that training is a necessary function. A regional fire service training organization could purchase a large array of equipment such as tapes, VCRs, and films if costs were shared (Meyer, 1990, p. 29).

Providing a unified training program and receiving better fire insurance ratings are very important to fire departments throughout the United States; both of these concerns are addressed by a regional training facility (Doyle, 1982, p. 38).

According to experts who have experienced consolidation, agencies today are attempting to balance the demand for increasing the service delivery against reducing budgets. Cooperative approaches to functional mergers of capital expense and support services (communications and training) must be considered, regardless of jurisdictional boundaries.

"A tremendous cost savings can be realized by a consortium of public entities combined to purchase equipment and supplies" (Cragan, 1984, p. 52).

Consolidation of jurisdictional entities normally forms a buying power consortium. Costs therefore have been, at a minimum, maintained, not increased following functional consolidation (Cragan, 1984, p. 52). Furthermore, central purchasing has been proved in Washington, D.C., Metropolitan Council of Governments (Fire Almanac, 1984, p. 228).

An additional display of consolidation was experienced in December of 1979 in Pasco County, Florida. There, five separate tax districts in the Metro Tampa Bay Area finalized a functional consolidation. Some major goals included the purchase of capital equipment and purchasing in bulk. Success was achieved by the purchase of four class A pumpers and the refurbishment of other vehicles within the existing fleet. It was recognized that thousands of taxpayer dollars were saved. A report by the County Commission in 1980, stated that a \$500,000 savings was realized (Doyle, 1982, p. 36).

Hudson County, New Jersey, experienced functional consolidation of six communities in 1973. It was apparent that positive results were achieved. A firm five percent (5%) reduction of the budget was achieved. Along with the savings, a 40% increase in efficiency was measured (Jurkat, 1976, p. 12).

In October of 1981 Orange County, Florida's, sixteen fire districts finalized a regional merger. In the following ten years of operations, substantial savings were displayed with a resulting reduction of the mil levy. Even with this reduction, overall service delivery has been enhanced (D.G. McAvoy, 1991).

Functional consolidation of fire/rescue communications services, on a regional basis, also has been proved to increase the level of service (Stauffer, 1991, pp. 4-8).

PROCEDURES

The study was limited in the number of sample subjects due to the limitations of time. Orange County, Florida, Pasco County, Florida, and Jacksonville, Florida, were sampled. Lt. Dan McAvoy was interviewed by members of the survey team. Lt. McAvoy was instrumental in the consolidation of Orange County. A videotape was viewed with an explanation by Lt. McAvoy. This tape extensively reviewed training, communications, and capital expenditures.

Literary searches from the Learning Resource Center computer file revealed numerous articles. The literature was researched by members of the team and documented. Journals, periodicals, and NFPA publications were reviewed.

The volumes of information provided by the various reviews were sufficient to document our study.

RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to see if regionalization of training, communications, and capital expenditures was feasible and what implications it may have on the quality of service. Articles in the literature review were all positive. Training should be regionalized with several companies or departments using the same facilities. Communications should be in one central location. This not only allows for a more effort on the fire scene, but eliminates the need for each agency to support its own dispatch center.

Centralized purchasing is also more cost effective. It allows agencies to take advantage of "high volume buying" and by utilizing state contracts, etc. Additional savings can be realized when combining the capital purchases of several agencies (e.g., fire engines). Most manufacturers will give a price break if the same specifications are used on multiple apparatus purchases.

DISCUSSION

Past literature reviews reveal that setting up a regional training facility can save time and tax dollars. Without an effective, consistent training program, a fire department severely compromises its ability to protect life and property. Training would be enhanced by a unified training program by permitting departments within an established mutual aid district or other geographic area to train together. When training is left up to individual departments it can become difficult to monitor. One station or department may get better training if it has a strong training officer or superior resources, whereas another

department may get little or no training due to an inverse lack of resources. This can create a problem when the lesser trained department is a mutual aid responder. This type of training concept could be accomplished through some form of shared budget concept which would purchase items such as VCRs, videotapes, films, and other equipment necessary to conduct professional fire service training. Facilities such as drill towers, classrooms, and smoke buildings are expensive to build and in many cases are not affordable for most small and medium size departments.

A strong training facility in the form of a regional training system can standardize various training programs. It can offer special training in hazardous materials, which is becoming more important to all emergency services. The facility can avoid duplicating efforts, which would save time, money, and make the training process far more meaningful. It would eliminate deficiency points levied against departments by ISO and other grading agencies.

OSHA has become more involved nationwide by investigating firefighter deaths and injuries, and at times in the past has cited departments which are unable to produce sufficient evidence of adequate training.

NFPA has written several standards on training needs and requirements. Live burn simulations and NFPA 1500 safety standards will drive fire service costs up for smaller departments, taking monies away that might be used for training facilities. By the 21st century regional facilities not only will enhance the training, but will become necessary if future lives and property are going to be saved.

Communication sections consist primarily of a dispatch section and a call taker section (Mulham, 1979, p. 435). Many smaller jurisdictions utilize a single person who performs both functions. Logic dictates that these smaller dispatch centers are the most likely to benefit from consolidation.

For example: The communications center, which only employs a single on-duty dispatcher, receives a report of a large scale incident. After the initial station notifications are transmitted, the dispatcher is confronted with multiple citizen reports of the incident, responding unit transmissions, additional notifications such as ambulance responses, and any additional alarm assignments for the incident, in addition to any subsequent reports of other emergencies which may occur.

Logic dictates that several on-duty communications personnel are required to handle alarms of this magnitude efficiently. Smaller jurisdictions simply cannot afford the number of personnel required to staff and operate a communications center of sufficient capability to handle these types of large scale incidents adequately. By consolidating resources, two or more separate jurisdictions, which maintain their own communications sections, can increase the amount of resources allocated to a single dispatch section (Stauffer, 1991, pp. 4-8).

The authors intent was not to comment on the cost savings of consolidation of communications since the cost effectiveness of consolidation is dependent on external factors such as demographics and the number of employees involved.

RECOMMENDATIONS

There are numerous examples of functional consolidation for the three aspects (training, communications, and centralized purchasing) that our group researched. Our findings conclude that consolidation is a very positive step. By consolidating these functions, departments can enhance their service delivery with improved training, improved dispatch and reduced costs for capital expenditures.

Departments from the same area that are experiencing reduced resources can improve service delivery by consolidating those necessary functions.

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