

# Could regionalization solve your problem?

Not to be taken from this room

SF-Consolidation-Regional

In this article, Chief Rule shows how regionalization of some or all fire department functions could provide a more responsive and cost-effective delivery of fire and emergency medical services in some areas of the country.

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Inflation, recession, tax levy ceilings, lack of revenue, layoffs, Fair Labor Standards Act; these are terms heard by many fire administrators who are facing or will face budget discussions in the coming months. We are facing a greater demand for our services at a time when tax monies are becoming less but operating budgets continue to increase. Federal and state funding for local protection is nonexistent, for all practical purposes. Fire protection is looked upon by many



elected officials as a nonrevenue producing drain on the local budget and a necessary evil. The final authority for the level of fire protection must be on the shoulders of elected officials. Too many fire chiefs assume this burden, but the chief is hired to manage the fire department to the best of his ability within the fiscal and physical resources he is provided.

This places the burden on the fire administration to constantly be alert to areas of change and innovation. Custom and tradition will not solve today's problems. Community fire protection master planning will receive a high priority in the near future.

Chief Charles Rule was recently appointed to the position of Fire Chief of the Alexandria Fire Department, Alexandria, Virginia. Before his appointment as chief of Fairborn, Ohio, he was Chief of the Greenfield Fire Department, Greenfield, Wisconsin.

Many elected officials and most city managers no longer accept the provisions of the ISO Grading Schedule as the criteria for their local fire protection services, and simply bypass them as too expensive.

An area that has always interested me to provide more responsive, efficient, and cost-effective delivery of fire and emergency medical services is regionalization. It can be done with two or a number of fire departments, and it can be accomplished completely or through specific function. Many fire departments face the dilemma of being "too large to be small, yet too small to be large." Consolidation or regionalization may provide solutions to some of these problems.

A chief embarking on a regionalization survey as an alternative to his present operation must be objective in gathering the facts. He must lay aside personal prejudices and fears. Suburbs encircling a large central city offer the opportunity for consolidation if they fear take-over by the city and loss of identity. An inventory of population, area, man-made and physical barriers, equalized valuation, personnel, apparatus, value of physical facilities, specific hazard areas need detailed studies. In depth consideration must also be explored in the following areas.

### Emergency alarm response patterns

The combining of several jurisdictions may result in better time/distance responses. The citizen who has an emergency would prefer the closest emergency unit to respond to his emergency. We tend to centralize fire stations within our political boundaries and it is not unusual for fringe area citizens to be closer to another facility in a neighboring jurisdiction. In southern Milwaukee County (Wisconsin) there is an intersection where four communities share a common boundary line (Milwaukee, Greenfield, Oak Creek, and Franklin). The most logical fire department to serve the area would be Greendale but they would never be called unless it was a mutual aid situation.

### Fire station location

Another benefit of regionalization is the possibility of closing fire stations that would duplicate effort. This could allow better manning practice by having fewer companies which were better staffed, more efficient, and safer units.

A practice exercise would be to place the existing fire stations of several contiguous cities in a potential regionalized service area. Compare the existing status of the individual stations with an overall regionalized plan and note the possible efficiencies, if they exist.

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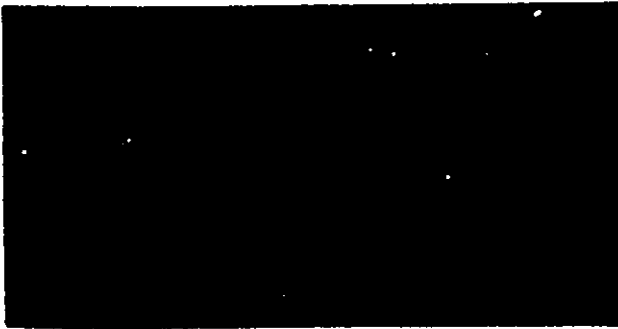
A regionalized department may better qualify for mutual aid with larger cities, again increasing the potential efficiency and effectiveness of the fire protection system. Ask yourself, "Are we the closest emergency unit to all of the properties we are required to protect, or would a neighboring jurisdiction be first due if dispatched simultaneously?"

#### Command and supervision

The majority of fire chiefs are on duty during the normal 40-hour week and on call the remainder of the time, if available. Thus a chief is on duty 25% of the time and on call 75% of the time. If, for example, four cities would consolidate their services one chief could be the administrator and the remaining three could be fire suppression specialists on a 24-hour shift basis.

How many times have you been at a conference more than 50 miles from home and noted all your mutual aid chiefs in attendance and out of service? There are always subordinate officers available, but area command is diluted.

The present fire chief in a middle sized city must be a jack-of-all-trades, devoting small parcels of



time to budgeting, personnel management, planning, emergency medical services, suppression, public relations, putting out political fires, code development, professional self development, etc.

In some instances a small town chief may lose a bugle or two, but his paycheck may increase during

the consolidation process. To some chiefs and their wives, the loss of the prestige of being called "chief" may be surrendered, but government isn't in the business of promoting personal gratification.

#### Emergency medical services

Fire departments which provide emergency medical services realize that the time/distance factor and specialized training are prime considerations. Based on the experience of the Seattle (Washington) and Jacksonville (Florida) paramedic programs, it is felt that the most efficient dispersal of paramedic units is one per 50,000 population. The medical people of these communities feel a population base provides the needed on-the-job frequency of life threatening emergencies to maintain the paramedic skills.

Sharing a paramedic squad between several smaller cities may be the only feasible method of providing this service and yet maintaining the competency of personnel. This, coupled with ambulances and pumpers equipped as life squads, could provide a very efficient system not available to a single unit of government.

A central city of 200,000 population may have 10 ambulances, but 20 cities of 10,000 population might have up to 40, simply to cover their jurisdiction in case of dual alarms or out-of-service downtime. Regionalization would then require less vehicles to provide basically the same service.

The added responsibility of emergency medical services in the fire service is a welcome addition to our job requirements. For the most part, it can function better in the fire department than in any other municipal department. However, the more sophisticated the service is the more it will cost, and whenever possible an attempt should be made to spread the financial burden over a large population base.

#### Personnel

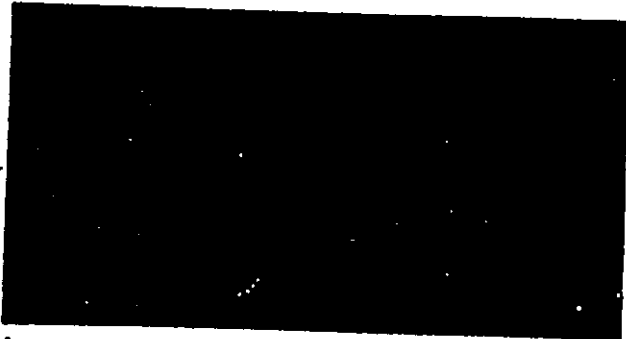
Personnel, whether paid or volunteer, would be absorbed in a merger. If regionalization is the goal, a standard pay and fringe benefit schedule would have to be worked out. In areas that have state retirement systems, a cumbersome hurdle will be conquered. Where political subdivision identity is to be retained, individual community salary and fringe benefits would be retained, but it is obvious that disparity gaps would be narrowed through the bargaining process. In the transition process all positions should be filled by the best qualified through an objective testing method. This should be based on merit and fitness rather

Fire Chief, 8/76, 169

than political muscle or parceling out jobs on an agency quota basis.

When vacancies occur, a larger pool of applicants would be available for promotion if there is a competent personnel system.

The two extremes you may encounter at promotion time are the leaderless and nonmotivated agency who must promote the "best of a sorry lot," or the dynamic, professional agency with minimal promotion potential. The employes of this agency could be highly educated, experienced, and progressive, but locked into



the problem of our pyramid promotion system. All fire administrators who pushed for educational and professional development in the late 60's or early 70's must find areas to implement this educational proficiency or be prepared to deal with extreme frustration of these young Turks. A larger agency could deal more effectively with these two extremes through a properly designed career ladder program.

The career employe with a definite professional development growth goal would welcome a larger agency because of increased opportunity.

#### Communications

Consolidation of communication systems will continue throughout the United States Fire Service. It borders on fiscal irresponsibility to have every fire department in a given area receive and dispatch emergency alarms. The sharing of an emergency fire and emergency medical services dispatch center on a county or regional basis in most areas is the most cost-effective, efficient, and logical method of handling emergencies. A single number, which could be 911, would be less confusing to the general public than many different seven-digit numbers.

The Seattle 911 system has proven that you gain access to the fire dispatcher faster than you can through the seven digit number, even though the seven digit number is known to the caller. How many citizens knows their seven digit fire number? The inside cover of a telephone book illustrates the confusion with its numerous listings of emergency and public service numbers. It is a problem even if the caller knows what jurisdiction to call. The excitement factor only adds to this problem.

The number of dispatchers needed to assure an efficient dispatch center varies, and can be very expensive. A central dispatch center could serve a large population with an awake, 24-hour, professionally trained dispatch crew.

The practice of leaving a \$15,000-a-year salary (and fringe benefits) on the dispatch desk while a two-man company responds is highly questionable. A central dispatch center would allow for another fire-fighter on the apparatus where he belongs. The sharing of frequencies on the day-to-day basis should provide for a more efficient operation at mutual aid fires.

Another practice which is substandard (with exceptions) is the combined police and fire dispatch system. On paper this looks appealing to the city policy makers, but in too many instances the fire service becomes the step-child of the center because of the large volume of nonemergency police calls. About 90% of the calls are law enforcement oriented, but experience has shown that the fire department receives the majority of true emergency calls. This is particularly true if the fire department has an emergency medical service. A police/fire dispatch center may be economical on paper, but is questionable operationally. If the system exists, it becomes a matter of priority, procedures, and accountability.

A study of Montgomery County (Maryland) and Hamilton County (Ohio) will relate a joint law enforcement/fire/emergency medical services communications center combining these functions under one roof. But each has prime separate fire or police responsibilities.

Continual monitoring by the fire official of a combination police/fire dispatch system is necessary to assure that there are no delays in fire and ambulance responses because of record checks and tie-ups of non-emergency routine police work.

Opponents of a central dispatch, and there are many, must be reminded that many large cities are dispatching more apparatus at a high rate more efficiently with 20% of the personnel needed in a similar population base with multi-jurisdictions. Loss of identity, duplicate street names, and "it won't work" are excuses you hear. Personalities also enter into the picture. The opposition may even fight centralization for financial reasons because the wives of fire department members may dispatch from their homes for an annual fee. This would be terminated with a central system.

Central purchase and capital outlay  
Savings could be realized through volume purchasing. A personal experience when I was Chief of Greenfield, Wisconsin, illustrates this. Fire hose purchased through the Milwaukee County Association of Fire Chiefs in 1972 was nearly a dollar less per foot than

Fire Chief, 8/76

when it was purchased by individual departments in 1961. This was accomplished with inflation and the higher cost of doing business.

The cost of fire apparatus is skyrocketing with no end in sight. The sharing of specialized apparatus between several jurisdictions may be the answer for some. Two cities might share one aerial ladder, for example.

Each city must have reserve apparatus to compensate for apparatus breakdowns, maintenance downtime, and other reasons. A pooling or regionalization of fire services would require less apparatus because reserve units could be shared. A comparison of apparatus per capita in a large city with an equal population base in a multi-jurisdiction may provide some startling figures.

Purchasing through volume would also reduce the cost of tools, brass goods, and household supplies.

Another cost-saving practice would be state-wide purchase of fire apparatus such as practiced by the California Division of Forestry. A state fire chiefs association could develop a master specification and the state government could serve as the purchasing agent with purchase intentions of local jurisdictions determining the number of vehicles to be bid. It is obvious that 30 pumpers could be purchased at less cost through volume purchase. Lettering, striping, and the frills, if desired, could be added locally.

#### Training

Training is one of the most important functions of the fire department; efficiency can be traced directly to the quality of the training program. Many small and medium sized cities can't support an employee whose prime responsibility is training. Training, then, becomes a secondary or part-time function of a line officer who works one of the suppression shifts. If training is divided among shifts and not constantly monitored, different shifts function only under the guise of a unified program even though the same training manuals and lesson plans are used.

Larger departments can justify a full-time training staff by spreading the unit cost of instruction over a larger population base.

Physical facilities — drill towers, smoke buildings, special mock-ups — are expensive to build and are economically impossible for many departments. A regional or county approach could solve this problem for many. It would require detailed study on location, financial arrangements for construction and continual use, and a determination of its intended use.

Other benefits would be a closer working relationship between participating agencies and the scheduling of combined drills which will pay dividends on mutual aid fires. The Environmental Protection Agency would look more favorably to one central unit instead

of numerous sites through an area. The joint powers of the Huntington Beach, Orange County (California) area is an example of how the system can work.

#### Fire loss management

Another important area that could provide efficiencies is fire prevention, code enforcement, and public education. A larger population base could support specialists in these fields to cope with this recognized, but past due, fire department function. Uniformity in metropolitan areas is a utopian goal that would reduce the fragmentation of various standards. But this uniformity would be an asset only if the codes are "people protection" oriented (civilian and fire personnel) rather than oriented to the architect, developer, or building owner codes.

With the National Fire Prevention and Control Administration in its formative stage, our priorities will be directed to the fire loss management field. There won't be an LEAA type mass funding from this agency. Emphasis will be on loss prevention and associated programs. Fire suppression personnel will be taking a more active role in the future to accomplish this objective. With more citizens being reached through a larger jurisdiction an expanded fire prevention program could be more efficient.

#### Fire apparatus maintenance

The same theory could apply in the mechanical repair services function as in the other facets of the larger organization theory. Sharing of mechanics and spreading the cost of the service may produce economies, and would no doubt provide efficiencies.

This article is not intended to be a vehicle to solve the economic ills of local government. Hopefully it will generate a second glance at existing operations. Consolidation or regionalization will not work in all areas, but to say, "it won't work, we're different" without a systematic and objective analysis is a cop-out. It must be recognized that bigness doesn't automatically breed efficiency and responsiveness to the citizen/taxpayer. It also must be realized that numerous small jurisdictions with duplication of effort are not the most cost-effective use of tax monies. Would it work for you?

City leaders will be looking further for cost savings and cost sharing in the future, and they will be looking at different methods and alternatives. We in the fire service can be the cause of it, be a part of it, manage it, or fight it, but it is upon us. Your position may be lonely and unpopular, but who should know the fire protection needs and alternate methods of delivery better than the local fire chief? The program that may solve your problem is regionalization or merger through the community master fire protection planning process. ■