

When one plus one makes one

The key element of this equation? Consolidation, a solution that more and more departments are looking at after seeing their budgets fall and workloads rise.

By Jan Thomas
Correspondent

One of the biggest problems faced by the fire service today — shrinking resources versus growing public expectations — might best be solved by putting more than our heads together.

More and more fire departments are turning to a variety of joint ventures to provide the level of service their communities need while conserving scarce resources. Approaches range from the informal sharing of individual personnel or equipment to the formal consolidation of departments across jurisdictional lines.

In response to this trend, Volunteer Firemen's Insurance Services has put together "Fire Department Consolidation — Why and How To Do It Right." This guidebook, which will be available in the coming months, provides an overview of what makes a department a good candidate for consolidation, and how to go about it.

Based on the experiences of a number of fire protection and other officials, the publication is aimed at helping fire service managers understand the benefits and pitfalls of consolidation so they can manage the process, rather than be managed by it. The book also provides a series of case studies illustrating several approaches to a wide range of cooperative ventures, and suggests a model methodology for conducting a consolidation study and developing and implementing a consolidation plan.

This article offers an overview of the different types of consolidation and a skeletal review of the heart of the VFIS publication: the model process for choosing, designing and implementing a consolidation plan.

Why consolidate?

Fire officials find themselves considering consolidation or merger for different reasons. In some instances, the action is directed by elected officials, for whom consolidation has been a hot topic in the 1990s. In

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others, fire service managers themselves bring up consolidation as they seek better ways to provide the services their citizens need and deserve.

Consolidation can allow more efficient use of scarce resources, greater staff flexibility, fewer equipment needs, stronger internal programs and increased opportunities to expand or specialize services. It works to overcome political boundary issues, ensuring that the closest unit responds in an emergency, creating more-rational protection service areas and faster response times.

Consolidation also makes fire protection master planning easier during periods of regional growth. Internally, consolidation can offer more appealing potential career enhancement: Although there are fewer top positions, the organization as a whole is larger, creating more retirements and other turnover and better chances for bright young officers to advance.

Consolidation options

There is a wide range of consolidation possibilities. Whatever approach is taken, the motivation must be the best interest of the public whom you serve.

■ **Functional consolidation.** Separate fire departments are retained but some functions are shared. An example is a joint training or dispatch center.

■ **Partial consolidation.** Separate fire departments are retained, and a special agreement is formed to handle specific challenges. An example is shared staffing of a fire station that effectively serves more than one jurisdiction.

■ **Operational consolidation.** Separate fire departments that have similar staffing levels and run the same kinds of calls combine into one unified department.

■ **Merger.** A larger department absorbs a small department, resulting in a single entity.

■ **Mutual aid.** Departments give reciprocal assistance for emergency management, fire, rescue, emergency medical, hazmat and other disaster response services. Such an agreement may specify joint response to all alarms in a given geographic area or automatic response by the unit closest to the incident, regardless of jurisdiction.

A consolidation model

VFIS has developed a model for guiding a consolidation process, based on the experiences of many different fire organizations and a number of classic planning models. The final consolidation model comprises nine steps:

- determining feasibility;
- forming and activating an advisory group;
- identifying key needs, issues, requirements and constraints;

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- 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; and
- monitoring implementation.

Determine feasibility. At this stage potential avenues, specific benefits and possible challenges of consolidation are explored, and a recommendation is made whether to proceed. Commitments are obtained from all involved jurisdictions and agencies. Decision-making authorities approve resources to develop a consolidation plan.

Keep in mind that consolidation does not always originate within the fire department. Several examples of consolidations started by local government officials are cited in the VFIS guidebook, for instance.

Form and activate an advisory group. Both a central executive committee and a number of working groups will be required. The executive committee will most likely consist of the chief and city or county manager for each participating jurisdiction.

Working groups will be charged to develop specific elements of the plan. Broad representation of all involved agencies and organizations is vital, so including representatives of the local media, business community and the general public is also wise, as long as they are assigned roles in appropriate working groups.

Determine key needs, issues, requirements and constraints. Such issues, needs, requirements and constraints need not be resolved during this phase, but they must be identified so that they are not overlooked as the process continues. For example, if the consolidation involves paid and volunteer or combination departments, this issue should be brought to the table at this time.

Develop goals and objectives. Since these are the guidelines that will shape the ultimate nature of the consolidated organization, they must be developed with care and forethought. Remember that goals and objectives must be measurable and achievable to be effective.

Establish criteria for selecting programs and approaches. A myriad of possible goals and objectives will surface during the planning process, probably more than could

reasonably be achieved. Therefore, a means must be established to determine which you will strive to achieve, and which will be put on the back burner. At the very least, suggested programs and approaches will need to be prioritized according to some rational method.

To ensure the highest possible degree of fairness, you must decide in advance what criteria will be applied in judging recommended goals and objectives. State clearly what standards will be used and

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ensure that they are understood and followed.

Develop and analyze alternative programs and approaches. The working groups draw up a long list of specific ways to enhance the organization; a range of options should be identified so that choices are not limited. Each option should be fully explained, including how it differs from the departments' current arrangements.

Then, each alternative is analyzed according to its projected costs, benefits, political acceptability, legality and other characteristics. Any that do not meet the goals and objectives or the selection criteria identified earlier are rejected. The best programs and approaches will be selected for implementation.

Formulate the action plan. This is the roadmap that will guide your organization to the future you have chosen for it. The plan will outline a strategy for implementing the selected programs and approaches, such as staff cuts or reorganizations, or the use of facilities and equipment.

The plan also must include criteria for evaluating the consolidation after it has been implemented. In short, the plan will outline every detail of the new organization and specify how each of the goals and objectives will be achieved. Nothing, however seemingly minor, should be left to chance or assumption.

The plan should lead you to an organization that is measurably more efficient, effective and reliable than the previous separate ones.

Implement. Implementing the plan must be accomplished in accordance with the approved procedures, budget and schedule. During the implementation phase, all the good ideas that were chosen for the plan will become realities. While setting the big issues in motion will probably be largely taken care of in the consolidation agreement, challenges remain in implementing the details and acclimating staff and the public to the changes. Still, if the planning process worked the way it should have, implementation should be smooth and hold few surprises.

Monitor and evaluate. Monitor programs to determine whether and how closely they match intended results. Consider whether any problems are the result of unrealistic expectations, inadequate planning or shortcomings in implementation. Revise the plan as needed by re-entering the planning process and reworking problem areas from there. If something needs to be changed, do it. Just be certain that any changes are undertaken with as much care as in the original plan.

As with any change in the way services are delivered, caution is prescribed. A consolidation program represents a significant change in the way agencies conduct business and deserves considerable time and thought. It is critically important that the ultimate goal — enhanced fire protection services for our citizens — be recognized by all parties involved and achieved in the planning and implementation processes.

Consolidations of various sorts, whether formal or informal, comprehensive or functional, phased-in or all-at-once, can help progressive fire service managers enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of their agencies. The concept is based on a basic awareness that when we work together and share the resources we each have, we can accomplish more.

Jan Thomas is a freelance writer and communications consultant with nearly 20 years' experience in the fire service. She has served as communications/information director and editor for a state fire training agency and two major fire associations, headed a communications network for the U.S. Fire Administration, and done consulting during the past 10 years. She currently edits the Public Fire Education Digest and is U.S. correspondent for Fire International. She is a member of FIRE CHIEF's editorial advisory board.