*Fiscal Facts by Wisconsin Policy Forum*

**Exploring fire, EMS service sharing in the La Crosse region**

With fire and emergency medical services (EMS) departments in the La Crosse region facing a host of challenges, collaborative action by local providers could improve service levels at a lower cost than acting independently.

A recent Forum study, commissioned by La Crosse County and the La Crosse Area Planning Committee, explores emerging issues for providers of these critical services. It is the latest in a series of Forum reports that have found communities throughout the state could benefit from greater local service sharing.

Included in this study are the La Crosse, La Crescent, Onalaska, Holmen Area, and Shelby fire departments; Brice Prairie EMS and Farmington Emergency Medical Team; and Tri-State Ambulance, a nonprofit paramedic service provider to the region.

While partnership among these departments has already resulted in some shared efforts, emerging challenges point to a need for enhanced collaboration. These include growing demand for service in some parts of the region, concern that some departments are stretched too thin during times of high call volumes; difficulties with retaining and recruiting staff; and the potential need for new or replaced fire stations.

The study presents three tiers of cooperative-action options for these communities to consider. The first includes steps such as joint training and/or recruitment of staff, joint case management, or joint conduct of other non-response functions like fire prevention, inspections, and investigations. The next tier could include formalizing and expanding current mutual aid protocols, including a possible move to “closest unit response” or automatic aid.

The most advanced options could require some departments to relinquish some or all of their existing autonomy but hold the greatest potential for improving services and efficiency. These could involve sharing new or existing stations between multiple communities, making greater use of the La Crosse FD’s capacity by having it provide contracted service to neighboring communities, or creating a single consolidated regional department.

“It is at times of crisis that citizens recognize more than ever the value of highly-functioning emergency response departments and systems,” the report finds. “During such times, exemplified by the current COVID-19 pandemic, not only is it critical to have sufficient numbers of well-trained personnel and appropriate equipment, but the value of cooperation and coordination among neighboring public safety and health agencies also becomes more pronounced.”

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