*Fiscal Facts by Wisconsin Policy Forum*

**Wisconsin fire and EMS agencies face looming challenges**

Growing numbers of fire and emergency medical services (EMS) agencies in Wisconsin are struggling to maintain appropriate service levels in the face of numerous challenges, including increasing service calls from an aging population and staff recruitment and retention difficulties.

Given the implications for public safety and local government finances, the situation may demand greater consideration of consolidating local agencies to improve service levels while holding down added costs. A response from state policymakers may also be warranted.

In the past eight years, the Wisconsin Policy Forum has studied 30 fire and EMS providers throughout the state as part of a dozen service-sharing studies. Our research finds that while volunteer-reliant staffing models have served many smaller communities well for many years, rising EMS call volumes and staffing challenges are causing many to move toward a model that makes greater use of full-time staff.

This can often improve operational efficiency and reduce response times, but it also requires additional funding that can be difficult to obtain due to competing local priorities or state limits on local property taxes. Unless they are appropriately addressed, the consequence may be that fire and EMS financial and staffing challenges may soon have a real impact on public safety.

Possible measures that could be undertaken by state leaders include providing state aid to fire and EMS professionals to offset education and licensing costs; allowing part-time fire and EMS responders to enroll in health care, retirement or other benefits offered to state employees; increasing Medicaid reimbursement for ambulance transports; or allowing localities more flexibility in revenue and expenditure limits to address fire and EMS service challenges. A final possibility would be establishing a formal role for counties or regional entities in governing and setting standards for fire and EMS services statewide, and providing funds to ensure standards can be monitored and met.

Since moving to a larger mix of full-time staff appears to be a must for many small departments, efforts to encourage consolidation among such departments also appear to be in order.

Ultimately, we hope state and local elected officials will heed the overriding message that the ability of many communities to provide an appropriate level of fire and emergency medical services is in jeopardy — and may soon necessitate an emergency response of its own.

*This information is provided to Wisconsin Newspaper Association members as a service of the Wisconsin Policy Forum, the state’s leading resource for nonpartisan state and local government research and civic education. Learn more at wispolicyforum.org.*