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## Public Safety Consolidation: What Is It? How Does It Work?

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### Preface

The provision of public safety services is among the most challenging tasks a community faces. Among the reasons for this is that expenditures for public safety are among the largest outlay local communities make. Since the economic recession of 2008 and 2009, communities have found it increasingly difficult to maintain proper staffing levels, provide basic police service, and deliver certain functions. Decision-makers in state and local governments have sought to respond to these challenges in several ways, including the consolidation of police and fire services into single, public service agencies. Communities pursuing this option quickly discover that what is known about public safety consolidation is largely anecdotal and based upon scattered and dated case studies. Many questions remain about the options for and feasibility of public safety consolidation and what may contribute to its success or failure.

Researchers at Michigan State University are working with the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS Office) to develop the needed evidence-based lessons. In this report, we present some preliminary results of our work. It features data the research team has been gathering as well as insight derived from practitioners who participated in two focus groups hosted by the team in Dallas, Texas, and Grand Rapids, Michigan.

### About this BOLO

The U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS Office) present the BOLO series, supporting the publication and dissemination of experiences and implications discovered during ongoing research in the field, with the goal of regularly communicating these resources to the law enforcement community at large. “Be on the lookout” for these field-driven, evidence-based resources that will help illuminate the nature, function, context, costs, and benefits of community policing innovations. For questions about this specific report and consolidation research activities underway, contact Dr. Jeremy Wilson, Associate Director for Research and Associate Professor, at [jwilson@msu.edu](mailto:jwilson@msu.edu) or 517.353.9474.



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## **The Increasing Challenge of Providing Public Safety Services**

The provision of public safety services is among the most challenging tasks a community faces. Among the reasons for this is that expenditures for public safety are among the largest outlay local communities make. In 2009, local governments spent more than \$80 billion on police services and more than \$40 billion on fire services (U.S. Census Bureau 2009).

Further adding to this difficulty is that personnel costs are typically about 80 percent of a police or fire budget (Wilson, Rostker, and Fan 2010; Shaitberger 2003). Collective-bargaining agreements can reduce flexibility in managing these workforces, especially if they require minimum staffing levels. Public safety employees have also garnered public support for maintaining current levels of staffing and services.

Yet recent economic changes have greatly affected the ability of communities to maintain public safety services. For many, standard budget-reducing responses, such as marginal cuts, have not been enough to balance local budgets. Traditional reluctance to cut public safety services has given way to dramatic and unprecedented decisions. These have included hiring freezes, layoffs, furloughs, or even disbanding of departments (COPS 2011; Melekian 2012; PERF 2010; Wilson et al. 2011). Many communities have also experimented with alternative modes of public safety service delivery.

One such experiment has been to consolidate police and fire services. This type of consolidation has long existed. Grosse Point Shores, Michigan, created perhaps the first public-safety department in the

early 20th century (Matarese et al. 2007). Sunnyvale, California, created a public-safety department from a small professional police force and a volunteer fire force in 1950. It has grown the department to match its rapid population growth, from less than 10,000 to more than 140,000, since then. Yet such consolidation has been receiving greater attention in recent years as municipalities struggle with fiscal constraints. Public safety service consolidation may be:

- Nominal, with executive functions consolidated under a single chief executive but no integration of police and fire services
- Partial, with partial integration of police and fire services, cross-trained public safety officers working alongside separate functional personnel, and consolidation within administrative ranks
- Full, with full integration of police and fire services, cross-trained public safety officers, and consolidated management and command

Despite the need for creative solutions to the problem of providing public safety services in times of fiscal constraint, practitioners and decision-makers have few systematic, data-driven lessons to which they can turn. What is known about public safety consolidation in particular is largely anecdotal and based upon scattered and dated case studies. Many questions remain about the options for and feasibility of public safety consolidation and what may contribute to its success or failure.

To develop evidence-based lessons, researchers at Michigan State University are working with the Office of Community Oriented

Policing Services (COPS Office). Our assessment includes a literature review, focus group summits, a census and survey of consolidated bodies, multiple case studies, and an opinion survey of residents in Michigan, where public safety consolidation appears to be most prevalent. The goal of this work is to develop concrete, research-based lessons about the nature, structure, function, and implementation of public safety consolidation as well as an understanding of its costs and benefits, including when it will or will not work.

In this report, we present some preliminary results of our work. It features data the research team has been gathering as well as insight derived from practitioners who participated in two focus groups hosted by the team in Dallas, Texas, and Grand Rapids, Michigan. Below, we review some of the perceived benefits and costs of such public safety consolidation, its prevalence, and the state of research on such models. We present three brief case studies from Sunnyvale, California, Highland Park, Texas, and East Grand Rapids, Michigan. These help us illustrate the variation in implementation of the model. The variation of these communities helps us show how consolidation may differ by community attributes, timing, nature, reasons, staffing levels, workloads, and other challenges. We supplement the case studies with insights from two focus-group summits of public safety directors and others involved in the consolidation process and a summary of key issues. We conclude with an overview of pending research on public safety consolidation.

## **Benefits of Public Safety Models**

Among the perceived benefits consolidation may offer is increased efficiency in provision of public safety services. Public safety consolidation can reduce the total need for line staff. It can also reduce duplication in administration, communication services, and physical infrastructure. Those participating in Michigan State University's focus groups also pointed out the key advantage of having a broadly trained officer who can arrive on the scene of an incident and immediately assess the equipment and resources required, along with their most effective positioning. This can frequently prevent the needless dispatch of large equipment (and certain personnel) that is not only expensive to operate, but can place the community at risk (when driving quickly from location to location).

Public safety consolidation can also help communities meet evolving needs. Changes in the fire industry help illustrate this. The fire industry has evolved from fire suppression to greater provision of emergency medical services. From 1983 to 2010, the number of fires to which fire departments responded decreased by 43 percent (this number is 59 percent down from 1977) (NFPA 2011a). At the same time, the number of career firefighters increased 48 percent, and the number of fire departments increased 7 percent (NFPA 2011b). While there are more firefighters to fight fewer fires, medical-aid calls increased 260 percent from 1980 to 2010 (NFPA 2011c). Providing more broadly trained personnel can help public safety agencies address such evolving needs. It can also make more staff continuously available to respond to a broader range of calls.

More broadly trained personnel can also help communities reduce the total number of personnel they require. For example, Traverse City, Michigan, employs 56 fire and police personnel in its police and fire departments. This is 43 percent more than the number employed by the average public safety department in similar Michigan communities.

Public safety consolidation may also promote community policing. Cross-training officers can increase access to staff for any given assignment and flexibility in their deployment. This, in turn, can free time for officers to work in the community. Consolidation can also expand the role of police officers to include activities more favored by the public. (Public satisfaction with fire services is often greater than that for police services. The firefighting profession is also one of the most respected professions.) The expanded role that officers fulfill in a public safety department may attract officers with broader skills useful for community policing. Finally, by making public safety services more efficient, consolidation may prevent the elimination or reduction of community policing activities.

Public safety consolidation may also increase comprehensive community safety and homeland security. It can do so by enhancing communication between police and fire personnel, including through a unified command structure. It can also provide all-inclusive emergency response and planning, including through comprehensive training. Given their new and evolving roles as first responders to terrorist attacks and similar emergencies, as well as responsibilities to prevent such attacks from occurring, local police and fire agencies have a heavier workload than years past—a workload that consolidation may help lighten (Matarese et al. 2007).

## Costs to Consolidation

While public safety consolidation may promote long-term efficiency, its upfront costs can be prohibitive. Among such costs are those for increased training and backfilling of staff during training. Agencies may also struggle with issues of branding, uniforms, and proper equipment and vehicles. As a result, assumptions that consolidation will bring immediate cost savings are often incorrect. Upfront costs can steer some away from considering public safety consolidation.

There may be still further obstacles to consolidation in labor or facilities contracts preventing differing uses of workforce, buildings, or equipment. Planning for structure, positions, and personnel can also result in reorganization costs. Reorganization may, in some cases, exacerbate existing management problems.

Because of these and other costs and obstacles, citizens, workers, or administrators may oppose public safety consolidation. Citizens may perceive or see an actual decline

in the quality of public safety services following consolidation. In select areas, organized labor has succeeded in blocking public safety consolidation by seeking changes in local or state statutes, charters, or pension regulations. Finally, administrators may oppose consolidation because of the cultural and organizational changes it may require, as well as confusion and ambiguity about administrative roles.

## Current Extent of Public Safety Models

To document the prevalence of public safety consolidation, researchers at the School of Criminal Justice at Michigan State University have been gathering data on consolidated public safety agencies. As of May 2012, they had confirmed 130 agencies with at least nominal consolidation of public safety services.

The 130 agencies for which the researchers had documented or were documenting consolidation are spread across at least 25 States, but Michigan, with at least 54, has more such agencies than any other state. The model is most prevalent among small- and medium-size agencies. It is used in both rural and urban communities. Its form of implementation varies, as noted earlier. It is also expanding into new regions, including New Jersey, New York, and Nevada.

Some agencies have actually abandoned consolidation. The researchers have learned about many agencies that adopted but later abandoned consolidation, and they

are working to verify these. Reasons for consolidation failure include the value citizen's place on local control, the personal stake administrators and staff have in separate police and fire services, the emphasis organizations—even small ones—place on unique identity, opposition from employee groups, failure to realize expected cost savings, and decline in perceived or actual quality of service delivery.

Yet new consolidations continue to occur as well. Researchers have identified more than two dozen communities throughout the United States that are considering the model, and there are still likely more that may adopt it. Understanding the context of both success and failure is critical to understanding how consolidations may, or may not, help improve delivery of public safety services.

To better understand the context of public safety consolidation, we turn next to case studies of its implementation in three communities: Sunnyvale, California; Highland Park, Texas; and East Grand Rapids, Michigan.

### Sunnyvale, California: One of the Oldest, and Largest, Public Safety Departments

Sunnyvale, California, is a city of approximately 140,000 residents in Santa Clara County, California, comprising 24 square miles at the south end of San Francisco Bay. It is one of the major cities that comprise the Silicon Valley area, the second-largest city in Santa Clara County, and the fifth-largest city in the San Francisco Bay area. Its daytime population is 230,000, including employees of Advanced Micro Devices, Inc. (AMD), NetApp, Inc. (formerly Network Appliance), and Yahoo! Inc., all with headquarters in Sunnyvale (City of Sunnyvale 2012).

The first major settlement of the area occurred in the 1860s, as canneries to process fruit from surrounding orchards were built near newly open rail lines (City of Sunnyvale 2012). The area grew further with the movement of an iron works from San Francisco to what is now Sunnyvale in 1906.

Sunnyvale incorporated as a city in 1912 and soon organized a volunteer fire department (City of Sunnyvale 2005). In 1914, Sunnyvale voters established five city departments, including a Department of Public

Health and Safety with both police and fire services.

Sunnyvale continued its combination of paid police officers and volunteer firefighters through the 1940s (City of Sunnyvale 2005). In the 1940s, Sunnyvale had a paid police force of about a dozen employees in addition to a volunteer police auxiliary and nearly 30 volunteer firefighters.

Adoption of a new city charter in 1949 and the subsequent hiring of a city manager led to discussion of how to improve public safety in the city, particularly its fire safety (City of Sunnyvale 2005). The city council considered creating a separate fire department or combining police and fire functions in a unified Department of Public Safety. For fiscal reasons, the city manager favored a Department of Public Safety. The volunteer firefighters strongly resisted this because of their opposition to both the new public-safety concept and to paying firefighters rather than investing in equipment. Nevertheless, the city council created a unified Department of Public Safety in June 1950.

The newly created Department of Public Safety had leadership from

the police and the fire departments as well as several police officers who became public-safety officers (PSOs) and several newly hired PSOs (City of Sunnyvale 2005). Altogether, a public safety department of about two dozen employees served a city that had grown to a population of nearly 10,000 in six square miles.

Though airing controversy over the department for years, by 1956 the *Sunnyvale Examiner* was praising the department for having achieved “a 20 to 25 percent cost saving in personnel and equipment cost [including] shorter hours and better pay for trained men; a saving in having one headquarters building instead of two; greater efficiency through single administration; elimination of wasteful competition and jealousy between two departments and a greater pool of trained man power for any emergency” (City of Sunnyvale 2005). The city maintained low crime rates and improved its fire ratings.

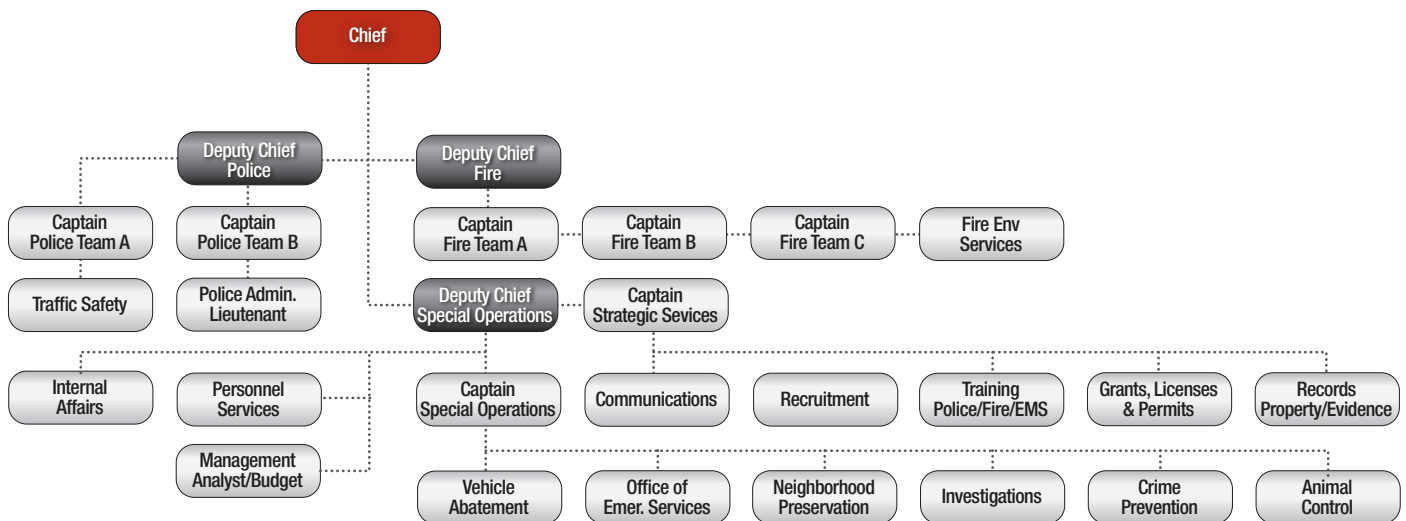
The department grew as the city did. By 1965, a staff of 171, including 143 sworn officers, was serving a city of 85,000 residents in more than 20 square miles. The department continued to require both police and

fire training of its recruits. A new PSO had to attend basic training on his own time. This included 4 hours of police training per week for 18 months, or a total of 240 hours, to get the mandatory Peace Officer Standards and Training certificate. It also included 12 days, or 96 hours, of fire training during the first year.

In subsequent decades, Sunnyvale adopted many innovations in police and fire services evolving elsewhere (City of Sunnyvale 2005). It created a Special Tactics and Rescue team, later renamed a Special Weapons and Tactics team, in 1974. It developed a Crisis Negotiation Team in 1975. Its Mobile Field Force has managed events ranging from riots in the 1960s to environmental and anti-abortion protests in the 1980s to anti-war demonstrations in the 2000s. It developed a Hazardous Materials (or HazMat) response team in 1985. Its canine and emergency medical dispatch units have won statewide recognition. It also has a Type II HazMat Team and its SWAT Operators are trained and operationally ready to be deployed in level A PPE.

Figure 1 presents the current organizational chart for the

**Figure 1:** Sunnyvale Department of Public Safety Organization Chart



department. The department currently has 195 sworn personnel, 80 support personnel, and more than 50 volunteers donating more than 4,000 hours annually. Its budget of \$73 million includes \$25 million for police field operations, \$27 million for fire field operations, and \$21 million for special operations.

Recently, Frank Grgurina, the chief of the department, told a focus-group summit convened by Michigan State University researchers that the department remains fully integrated. A new hire gets police, fire, and medical training. PSOs annually bid on shifts they want to work in the police or fire bureaus. The police-based personnel work a 4/11 shift schedule with rotating days off based on an 8-day calendar, whereas fire-

based personnel work a traditional 24-hour shift schedule. Those working firefighting duties need not wear firearms, but they must have police equipment with them.

The cross-training has enabled PSOs to work together “seamlessly,” including in crisis situations, Grgurina said. In October 2011, Grgurina said, the department was able to deploy 24 fire-team personnel coming off a shift to the police bureau in response to a workplace shooting, with an off-shift patrol team deployed to cover calls for service. Police and firefighting PSOs also worked together to resolve a situation in which a woman had killed her infant child and was threatening to kill herself. All PSOs are trained as EMT-Basics

and equipped with AED’s and first aid kits. The combination of EMT training and provided equipment allow for immediate response by patrol-based personnel to incidents with a high probability of cardiac arrest, which in the past has resulted in a significant number of life saving events.

Grgurina says initial and ongoing training remains an enormous challenge. In addition, PSOs are compensated above police officer and firefighters from nearby agencies. Nevertheless, he contends, Sunnyvale residents pay several hundred dollars less per capita for total public safety services in comparison with the same nearby cities.

### **Highland Park, Texas: Using the Public Safety Model to Provide More Services**

Highland Park, Texas, is a town of nearly 9,000 residents in Dallas County, Texas (Town of Highland Park 2009). The town is approximately 3 miles north of the center of the city of Dallas, and is surrounded by the cities of Dallas and University Park. The town is a little more than 2 square miles in size and is one of the wealthiest in the nation. Its per capita income is more than \$130,000—nearly five times the national level (U.S. Census Bureau 2012).

Incorporated in 1913, the town initially sought to implement a public safety model combining police and fire services, Chris Vinson, the chief of the town’s Department of Public Safety, told a focus-group summit convened by Michigan State University researchers. The town placed its marshal in charge of fire services as well, but when it hired a police chief from Dallas in the 1920s

the town developed separate fire and police departments.

The police and fire departments remained separate until 1977 when the town council voted to consolidate police, fire, and emergency medical services in a Department of Public Safety (Fant 1990). Before the consolidation, a single director administered the department, but the department maintained separate functions for responding to police and fire emergencies, each with its own personnel and rank structure. The department contracted for emergency ambulance services from funeral homes until 1972, when it trained fire personnel as Emergency Medical Technicians and acquired its own patient transport vehicle. It also equipped a squad car with first-aid supplies, and, in 1976, trained paramedics.

Although the town created a public safety department in 1977, and had a manager advocating the model, the transition, Vinson said, took 15 years to fully implement, until the last “single-discipline” person

retired. One particular challenge the department has faced, Vinson said, was integrating police and fire policies.

From its inception, the department provided incentive pay for cross-trained personnel (Fant 1990). Since 1979, it has assigned personnel to 24-hour shifts followed by 48 hours off duty, regardless of whether working police or fire duties. Personnel working police duties rotate among three subshifts, spending 8 hours on patrol and 16 hours at a station.

In 1983, the two assistant director positions over the segregated rank structures were deleted, replaced with one assistant who had some consolidated oversight. It reformatted its Fire Marshal position to make it third in command of its department, and further increased incentive pay for cross-trained personnel (Fant 1990). Today its pay scale is set at 20 percent above that for four target communities, Vinson said.

In the mid-1980s, the department moved to consolidate rank structures (Fant 1990). In 1984, it placed Shift Commanders (Captain rank) over consolidated services, having one work each shift. In 1985, it placed Assistant Shift Commanders (Lieutenant rank) over consolidated services, having one work each shift, and in 1986 added one Public Safety Supervisor (Sergeant) per shift. Supervisory personnel were also fully trained in both police and fire duties.

Today, Vinson told a focus-group summit convened by Michigan State University researchers, the town has 54 total sworn personnel and 69 total personnel. Of the 54 sworn personnel, 38 are paramedics. The town also maintains two mobile intensive-care units, and had been “very aggressive” in maintaining its emergency medical services.

For each shift, Vinson said, the town has a minimum of 11 public-safety personnel on duty, including four on patrol (one of whom is a supervisor), and, among the seven in station, two on an engine, two on a truck, and two on a mobile intensive-care unit. In other words, all personnel have police, fire, and emergency medical services duties daily. The department participates in mutual aid agreements with other Dallas County agencies, including those in the cities of Dallas and University Park.

A continuing challenge for the department, Vinson said, is training, particularly maintaining certification and having personnel participate in regional SWAT team training. The department has a sergeant whose only duties are to manage training. Vinson said new personnel have a 2-year training curve before they are fully qualified for police, fire, and emergency medical services duties. The department also integrates training into each shift.

Nevertheless, the department has not pursued full accreditation for both fire and police services. In particular, Vinson said, the department offers few opportunities for specialization. “At what we do, we’re as proficient as anybody,” he said, “but we don’t do as many things. That breadth of specialty is too difficult to maintain.”

Public safety officers in Highland Park, Vinson said, must display both individual and team skills. Noting a “cultural difference” between police and fire work, Vinson said that traditional firefighters can step right into a situation requiring team work because they have lived together in the station, while traditional police officers may not know how to handle such situations well. Vinson said his department has had particular difficulties in taking officers from large urban or small rural agencies.

As a result, finding qualified well-rounded candidates for public-safety duties remains a challenge, Vinson said. The department requires a four-year degree for applicants because previous applicants without such a degree had difficulty completing training. In addition to administering other standard fitness tests, the department has worked with a consultant to identify 18 different characteristics candidates should have and to rank them by these, including how well a candidate will fit in the department and assist with both police and fire duties.

One reason the department has been able to meet its challenges and maintain its levels of service, Vinson said, is its affluence. The population remains stable and very affluent. As a result, Vinson said, Highland Park has not faced budget crises that other communities have.

Overall, Vinson said, the model works for Highland Park because citizens are willing to pay for it in a small jurisdiction with about 12,000 calls for service per year. The model gives Highland Park a higher number of police, fire, and emergency medical services personnel per shift than other communities, but also at an annual per capita cost of about \$1,000. “What sells it,” Vinson said, “is that somebody who arrives at [a resident’s] door within two minutes knows what to do regardless of the situation.”

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### **East Grand Rapids, Michigan: Using the Public Safety Model to Realize Efficiencies and Economies**

East Grand Rapids, Michigan, is a city of nearly 11,000 residents covering about 4.5 square miles in Kent County, Michigan (City of East Grand Rapids 2012a). A suburb of

Grand Rapids, the city developed around Reeds Lake and the parks surrounding it, was established as a village in 1891 and incorporated as a home-rule city in 1926. Its per capita income of nearly \$45,000 is about \$20,000 higher than that elsewhere in Michigan and the United States. (U.S. Census Bureau 2012).

East Grand Rapids established its public safety department in 1985 by combining its police and fire departments into one organization (City of East Grand Rapids 2012b). Each of the 29 sworn personnel in the Department of Public Safety is trained in law enforcement, firefighting, and medical first response. At the same time, Mark

**Table 1:** East Grand Rapids Public Service Officer by Training in 2010

Police	Fire	Medical
Weapons Qualification	Fires: Strategies and Tactics	CPR/AED Certification
Rapid Deployment Training	Airboat Ops	Medical First Aid
Precision Driving	Haz-Mat	Blood Borne Pathogens
Defensive Tactics	Ice Rescue	Patient Assessment
Simunitions	Aerial Operations	Pediatric Treatment
Legal Updates	Confined Spaces	Airway/Ventilation
Cultural Diversity	Extrication	
Felony Car Stops	Apparatus Driving	

Herald, the director of public safety for the city, told a focus-group summit convened by Michigan State University researchers, the city does not qualify all its public safety officers as emergency medical technicians, because the vast majority of medical service calls the department receives do not require such expertise.

The result, Herald said, is a department of “generalist specialists.” Table 1 shows some examples of police, fire, and medical training provided in 2010 (City of East Grand Rapids 2011).

Figure 2 shows the organizational structure for the department (City of East Grand Rapids 2011). Its two main divisions are police services and support services, with fire and medical services being among support services. Each division has a captain in charge; these captains also handle internal affairs for the department.

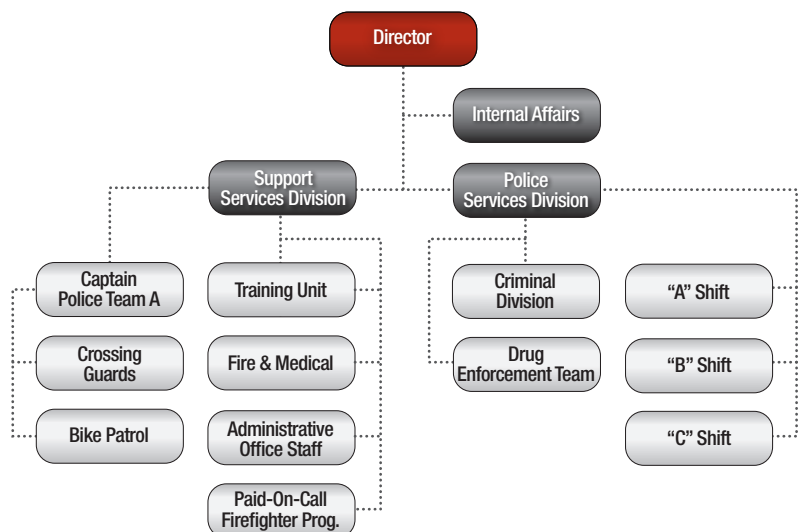
Like the similarly sized jurisdiction of Highland Park, Texas, East Grand Rapids has its public safety officers work 24-hour shifts, albeit with about half as many personnel (City of East Grand Rapids 2011). Each shift has one staff sergeant, one sergeant, and five public safety officers.

The fire division also provides services through inter-department agreements and a paid on-call firefighter program (City of East Grand Rapids 2011). The city has relatively few calls for fire service in a given year. It averaged fewer than 175 such calls per year between 2006 and 2010, with only about 10 percent of these being for fires, and fewer than three per year being for fires in residential dwellings or other buildings. Most fire service runs are for activities such as false or unfounded alarms, downed utility

wires, carbon monoxide alarms, or smoke investigation. The lack of fire calls, and ability to prove firefighting skills, can lead to lesser acceptance of East Grand Rapids personnel by local fire departments, Herald said. At the same time, Herald said, the argument for separate professional fire departments “hasn’t changed in 200 years. I love fighting fires, but we need to look at initial aid agreements” to manage a diminishing number of structure fires across communities.

East Grand Rapids initially began considering consolidation in the 1950s, Herald said. Part of the reason for consolidation, he said, was to improve public safety services. As in Highland Park, the ultimate transition took time, even after the council approved it in the 1980s. Yet once older personnel had retired, Herald said, the department, and its employees, succeeded in developing a “public safety culture.” Each day, he said, public safety officers realize they are “going to get a police assignment, a fire assignment, and a medic assignment.”

**Figure 2:** East Grand Rapids Department of Public Safety Organization Chart





The consolidation also realized some efficiencies. Where once 40 police and fire personnel provided services, 29 public-safety officers now suffice. Herald also contends the public safety consolidation realized both improved services and lower costs, with about 40 percent of the city's general fund now supporting public safety services, rather than the 60 percent he contends is common elsewhere. Herald also speaks of how this model enhances efficiency by having a single organization respond to complex incidents. He illustrates with an incident to which his agency responded where a person was pinned under a vehicle. He explained this would typically require three agencies to respond (police to maintain traffic, fire to remove the

vehicle, and emergency medical services to provide medical response to the victim) whereas his public safety officers arrived on scene and each immediately assumed the necessary positions and saved the victim.

The economies and the efficiencies of the model have appealed to other Michigan jurisdictions. Doreen Olko, the director of emergency services for the city of Auburn Hills, Michigan, told a focus-group summit convened by Michigan State University researchers that a decline in the property tax base led the city to seek consolidated administration of public safety departments. Public perception, she said, is that savings will be realized because of

better management, and that fire department expenses could "break us all." At the same time, Olko said, the city would not launch a "public safety" department because of the negative image such departments have in the city.

Similarly, Jeff Lewis, the director of public safety for the city of Muskegon, Michigan, said fire departments require capital investments that are likely to drive some consolidation of services across jurisdictions. "We need [to go] regional for some equipment," he noted. "We can't have five departments have five ladder trucks that get only 20 calls per year."

## Other Issues in Public Safety Consolidation

Sunnyvale, Highland Park, and East Grand Rapids provide several perspectives on differing issues regarding public safety consolidation and use of public safety officers. Sunnyvale has grown its public safety department as its population has grown, realizing economies and efficiencies in the process. Highland Park has used its public safety officers to provide full services to its residents at a higher cost. East Grand Rapids developed a public safety department to improve its public safety services, realizing some economies and efficiencies in the process.

Other communities will confront still other issues. Participants at focus-group summits convened by Michigan State University researchers broached many of these, which we discuss below.

## Reasons for Adopting a Public Safety Model

Though many public safety directors caution that the model cannot achieve immediate savings or efficiencies, such reasons are among the most commonly cited for the change.

"The city manager was the impetus behind it," said Brian Uridge, the assistant chief of the Kalamazoo (Michigan) Department of Public Safety. "He pushed the idea because we were in very extreme financial straits. We had seven or eight police officers on a shift, but more firefighters, even though crime was very high. Now we staff ten in the fire stations and, depending on the time of day, we'll have 18 public safety officers on the road. . . . The biggest benefit was getting more people on the streets. The first studies said we'd need 356 public safety officers, but it was never close to that level. The highest was perhaps 270, [or] 280."

Others cited improving services as a reason for change as well. "We sought

to increase the level of service," said Lee Vague, director of public safety for the city of Woodbury, Minnesota. "The city didn't want to contract services; it wanted to maintain control. The cross-training of police officers seems to have worked well. So when it came time to increase fire services, it seemed to make sense to cross-train more, given we have 30 times as many police calls as we have fire calls."

Support of local leaders can be vital. "The city manager must support the concept and buy into it 100 percent," said Pete Frommer, the former director of public safety for the city of Aiken, South Carolina. "When you first do this, there's going to be stuff on the news and in the newspaper. Everybody needs to know upfront this isn't going to be easy, but you need to stay with the plan, support the plan. It took us about 6 years to complete the switch. Staff knew what the program was; they could accept the change or seek employment elsewhere."

## Enhancing Community Policing

Focus-group participants agreed that the public safety model can improve community policing. In Sunnyvale, Grgurina said, the public safety model “enhances [community policing]. All elements of the organization now look at community policing, and look at it together. They’re more aware when they see things. Everything is our responsibility in this model. There’s no passing the buck.”

Similarly, Vague said that in Woodbury, community policing is well “integrated” with public safety services. “Everybody’s involved. The public safety model enhances community building, trust building, and relationship building. Every time we go into your house we build support for everything we do, including community policing.”

Community policing is also “integral” to the “level of service” that Highland Park public safety officers provide to residents, Vinson said. “I have a person dedicated to community relationships and a very strong citizens’ crime-watch program. We’re driven by it. . . . If we didn’t have that, we would be missing a component with citizens. Even if we’re interacting with them in different roles, I still think you need to make a special effort to integrate with the community, to leverage the business community, to turn them into eyes and ears for the department. Somebody needs to be pushing that all the time.”

## Scale and Specialization Issues

Focus-group participants were split on what levels of scale and specialization the public-safety model could support.

“If it’s staffed and managed appropriately, theoretically you can have a public-safety model anywhere,” said Uridge of the Kalamazoo department. “The problem I’ve seen in Michigan is they want to cut back on police and fire so much that they expose themselves to the point that they can’t do either well.”

Vague of the Woodbury department agreed, noting, “Logistically, absolutely you can do it if you staff it. But in the larger cities you have cultural issues.” Similarly, Herald of the East Grand Rapids department said, “Theoretically, it could work anywhere with appropriate political backing. But do I realistically think it would work in New York City? Absolutely not.” Beyond cultural issues, others pointed to the possible need for specialization (e.g., to handle aircraft fire, hazardous material situations) in larger communities.

Vinson of Highland Park also cautioned against expecting greater efficiencies from public safety models of larger scales. “It may have started with the idea of saving money, but with how it’s evolved and the services it’s delivered in my community, it isn’t more cost efficient than separate departments,” he said. “That’s not where the advantage is. The benefit is that we can have somebody there no matter what the situation is. But if you want efficiency, go to a more regional model rather than duplicating services from city to city. If efficiency is truly your goal, you’re not going to get it out of public safety.”

## Where the Model Does Not Work: Returning to Separate Services

While the number of public safety departments combining police and fire services into one agency has grown over time, several communities have abandoned the model and returned to separate police and fire agencies. Some have done so in order to improve specialized services.

The city of Eugene, Oregon, is among those which have deconsolidated its public safety department. Ruth Obadal, former planning chief for the Eugene Fire and Emergency Medical Services Department, told focus-group participants that the original consolidation occurred as part of a streamlining process which consolidated several departments. This resulted in police services, fire services, and municipal courts being consolidated into one department, the public library and parks being consolidated into another, and human resources and finance into another.

While the intent of the 1985 consolidation was to streamline, the effect, Obadal said, was to add another layer of administration. There was no integration beyond the administrative consolidation, and police and fire personnel continued to refer to themselves as belonging to the “police department” or the “fire department,” even those entities no longer existed in name.

“My department didn’t have a fully integrated model,” Obadal said. “I don’t know if it didn’t work. I do know it didn’t work as well as it could. What wasn’t working about it is there were a lot of convoluted management lines. Many police and firefighters never saw it as a consolidated department at all. They had integrated administrative functions but no overlap in

training. The consolidation created more layers of bureaucracy. The budget process probably was more efficient, but the city was dealing with two different unions and sets of grievances, and the additional administrative layers were not more efficient.”

In 1997, the city manager chose to deconsolidate the police and fire agencies into separate departments, citing both the need to have closer interaction with police and fire personnel as well as to better support community services. She wrote to city employees, “Creating separate departments will give me the chance to have closer interaction with staff on the policy and operational questions facing these two vital public services. As we move toward community-based government, it will be important to have both Police and

Fire as part of the City’s management team. Another benefit of this move is that it will also increase the stature of these operations in the community” (Obadal 1998).

It was changing responsibilities and the need for specialization, especially as public safety came to encompass more homeland security duties, which prompted deconsolidation of what was a public safety department at Dallas/Fort Worth (DFW) International Airport, reported Tyler Bond, assistant police chief for the DFW Airport, to focus-group participants. From its opening in the early 1970s, the department had used a public safety department to provide police and fire services over the 30 square miles of property comprising the airport grounds. The model worked well for years, Bond said, successfully responding

to events ranging from presidential visits to aircraft crashes.

Yet as the department, like other local agencies, had to assume more homeland security duties in recent years, it felt the need for more specialization. “[Homeland security] was one drive for specialization. So was the desire for SWAT and other teams,” Bond said. “The focus was more on security of the airport and the airlines. Resources were more focused on that and less on fire service. The firefighters felt like they were the stepchildren of the department.” Though the police and fire services have deconsolidated, Bond said, and have only a modest degree of integration now, the departments do work well together under a single director.

## Pending Issues Regarding Public Safety Consolidation

There are many questions about public safety consolidation. In the preliminary examples above we have attempted to illustrate how public safety consolidation originates and how consolidated departments function. Yet, several questions about the public-safety model require more systematic research. Among others, these include:

- How are public safety departments organized? Preliminary evidence, as noted, indicates their organization may range from nominal to full integration.
- What are the short- and long-term costs and benefits? Focus-group participants were divided on this issue, with many also noting difficulties in attaining short-term efficiencies.
- What contributes to success or failure of the model? Cultural and specialization issues appear to pose among some of the more significant obstacles.
- How does consolidation affect service delivery and personnel management? Some agencies report extended periods of time, particularly those related to retirement of old personnel and hiring of new personnel, before consolidation is achieved.
- In what ways does consolidation facilitate or impede community policing? Focus-group participants report it can enhance community policing, but caution against cutting public safety resources so deeply that neither police nor fire services function well.
- How do agencies begin the discussion and implementation process? Financial and service concerns appear to prompt it, but top-level support is necessary.
- How do employees respond when the nature of their job changes so radically? As noted, public safety departments may take years to fully complete their conversion because of such issues.
- What happens to law enforcement activities when large fires occur? Interdepartmental agreements can help, though cultural issues may arise here as well.
- Are community members satisfied with public safety services? In the case of Highland Park, Texas, residents apparently are willing to pay a premium for full public safety services, but more systematic research is needed on how well the model is accepted elsewhere.

To research and provide resources on these and related issues, Michigan State University researchers are developing several projects to create and disseminate evidence-

based resources about the nature, implementation, costs, and benefits of consolidation, contracting, regionalization, and shared services. Their current research on public safety consolidation will:

- Create a national census and administer a survey of public safety agencies
- Conduct in-depth case studies of agencies and communities that have consolidated public safety as well as those that have deconsolidated
- Survey residents to assess their perception and assessment of public safety consolidation.

Consolidation is likely to be a divisive issue in many communities, with residents and officials being supportive of its realities, unaware of the issues that may lead to it, or opposed for a variety of reasons or possible misunderstandings. The skeptics and champions are vocal, but there exists a tremendous need for objective resources to inform decisions on public safety consolidation.

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