

**The Bill Blackwood
Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas**

Value of Cross-Training Police and Fire Personnel

**A Leadership White Paper
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
Required for Graduation from the
Leadership Command College**

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September 2011**

ABSTRACT

The value of cross-training police and fire personnel is relevant to contemporary law enforcement in a small community because it allows for better utilization of personnel and equipment, which could, in the case of a large scale incident, quickly tax a community's resources. There are five types of consolidation to be considered, which are full consolidation, partial consolidation, selected area, functional consolidation, and administrative consolidation. A description of these examples will be given; however, the main focus will be on functional consolidation as this seems to be geared more towards smaller communities. Functional consolidation is also more cost effective than the other forms of consolidation, which is of utmost importance in a smaller community.

The position of the researcher is that cross-trained personnel can greatly affect the outcome in an emergency, and depending on the support structure and level of training, the effect can be either positive or negative. Information used to support this position is from the internet, periodicals, and books. The recommendation is that in a small community, having cross-trained police and fire personnel can be a considerable asset in the event of a crisis or disaster.

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INTRODUCTION

Cross-training employees to work in various capacities are a common practice by most private employers. When it comes to public sector jobs, especially emergency services, it would appear to most that they are single function jobs. Consolidation of both the police and fire services may seem to be a relatively new idea to some; however, the first account of men being tasked with keeping order and fighting fires was a group called the Vigiles. The Roman Emperor Augustus saw a need to arm men with swords and batons and made them responsible for the safety of the others in the community (Sobba, 1989).

More relevant to modern times were the “special constables” who kept the peace in Great Britain in the 1800s. They were sworn citizens who performed both police and fire services (IAFF & IAFC, n.d.). Germany and Japan also had some type of consolidated police and fire services up until the end of World War II (IAFF & IAFC, n.d.). More recently, in the United States, Grosse Point, Michigan, was the first to try integrating both police and fire services in 1911. Yet, even though there is a historical base for consolidation, the concept has not been overwhelmingly accepted by both police and firefighters alike (Sobba, 1989).

One of the earliest publications available that has been used for research for this paper is “Police and Fire Integration in the Small City” (James, 1955). In this article, it is evident that community leaders have looked at ways to provide an acceptable level of services without having to hire additional personnel. Though it may seem dated, the ideas expressed are still in line with today’s problems.

Some 54 years after the James (1955) article, the idea seems to be picking up popularity given the bleak economic outlook in some areas of the country. Small cities, meaning those with 10,000 to 12,000 in their population, are looking for ways to cut costs. These cities are expected to maintain and, in some cases, increase levels of emergency services without increasing taxes or reducing positions.

Sikeston, Missouri in 1976 passed a city ordinance establishing the Sikeston Department of Public Safety (Juden, 2008). The article, by Juden (2008), who is the Chief of the Sikeston Department of Public Safety, drew a picture of how one community joined two forces. The purpose was to combine the police and fire departments in order to better service the community.

The population in Sikeston at the time of the article was 18,000. Although there would not be a population that would be considered a cutoff, a city that has a population less than 10,000 or 12,000 would probably benefit more from the integration the two services. A sizeable fraction of this population lives works and dies in small towns. Small town people drink water, pay taxes, commit crimes, and burn down their buildings (James, 1955).

One of several issues to be considered in combining agencies would be who is going to be in charge. A sure way to fail would be a lack of clearly defined leadership. A city would need to look deeply into how a two chief system, such as in a partial consolidation instance, may or may not benefit the community compared to full consolidation effort.

Other issues to be considered would be the cost of training, any continuing education requirements, and equipment. How employees are selected and any issues

dealing with additional pay would also have to be addressed. The pay issue plays a major part in the consolidation efforts. Obviously, the salaries must be equitable (Sobba 1989).

Authors Margeson and Hall (1988) stated that one way that managers can promote a challenging and rewarding workplace is to provide cross-training. Most people in the workplace have sought out additional duties for a variety of reasons, including boredom as well as a desire to promote. This could be considered cross-training, although, it is at a lower level than what is being considered in this article. Consideration of cross-training police and fire services could be a worthwhile approach for a smaller city in respect to providing emergency services in a time when budgets are being closely monitored.

POSITION

Of the five levels of consolidation, one of those is full consolidation, which means that police and firefighting are combined under a single agency. These officers are commonly referred to as Public Safety Officers (PSO's). Selected consolidation is when a small portion of a community is serviced by PSO's. Functional consolidation is one in which separate departments are maintained except that in an emergency, some duties performed by one department may be assigned to another department. This is usually a simple task, such as traffic direction or hooking up hoses. Partial consolidation is described in detail in the next paragraph. Nominal consolidation is where both departments are headed by one chief or director, but both departments remain completely separate. A small community can greatly benefit from partial or functional consolidation

Partial consolidation can best be described as both police and fire remaining intact and operating as separate divisions. This should not be confused with functional consolidation. Although they sound familiar as far as function, partial consolidation requires more training. On each side of the divisions, there are a small number of personnel who can be cross-trained to perform different duties. When they are engaged in law enforcement activities, they are under the direction of the chief of police. When performing firefighting functions, they will fall under the command of the fire chief.

The pros and cons of police and fire integration will probably be debated for years to come. Not only are technical questions involved, but also the traditions of a century of municipal organization and the prestige of two old and honorable professions (James, 1955). The classic operational argument against consolidation is regarding the chance that bad guys start a fire on one side of town and rob a bank on the other (Saly, 1988). In either capacity, the number of trained personnel can be almost doubled simply by the responders arriving at a scene. Most major incidents involve a multi-agency response to begin with. If both police and fire are already on the scene, having them cross-trained to perform several functions can only be a benefit for the community.

In the event of a major fire or major response by the fire department, the police are most likely to be on the scene also. Often times, police are not needed in an enforcement capacity; however, all of the fire personnel are being used and the addition of more trained personnel on the scene will be an asset. Even if it is only to stand by at hydrant, it would free up a firefighter to assist in the actual suppression efforts.

In 2005, 12 Woodbury, Vermont police officers attained firefighter certification. Woodbury Public Safety Director Lee Vague said officers are generally there anyway.

For this city, “The theory was we already had police officers out there on the streets, why not put fire gear on them” said John Wallgren, a Woodbury Fire Co. Commander (Garrett, 2008).

In the event of a major police response, it is sometimes questionable whether or not fire services will be needed. In the event that they are not needed in a fire suppression or related capacity, cross-trained fire personnel can be utilized for traffic control or perimeter security until additional support arrives. In the case of police services, this is often within minutes, as most jurisdictions have more than one law enforcement agency close by. These can include sheriffs, constables, highway patrol, and game wardens.

Miller (2004) pointed out that the federal government, after all, seems to have led the way, having combined 22 agencies into the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). This multi-faceted agency has been charged with being ready to deal with all hazards, from hurricanes to floods to a Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) event in any town. This concept can go back even farther. Take for instance the United States military. All military personnel are cross-trained in one way or another. One skill they all share is weapons proficiency. No matter what their job title is, they all learn basic weapons skills. Military personnel are also all trained to recognize certain types of biological threats and are trained in basic first aid and survival skills. This is a form of cross-training.

Partial consolidation is the system that would use police who are concerned only with police matters and firefighters who only provide fire suppression skills. In between the two would fall those that are cross-trained to perform either function. This

arrangement could provide balance among the needs of the different services and may well be more cost-effective. It could also help to alleviate some of the challenges associated with training, manpower, and scheduling noted in a completely integrated system (Miller, 2004).

Candidates for this position would have to be voluntary. Most police officers are police officers because that is what they want to do. The same goes for firefighters. Forcing cross-training onto either of these groups is a sure way to doom the idea to failure.

Once the right candidates have been selected, appropriate training can begin. It would not be necessary for the police training to become firefighters to have more than a basic Structural Firefighter designation. Many of these courses are available online, with the required skills testing at various locations. Mike Simmons, director of the North Texas Fire Academy in Rockwall offered a basic structural firefighter course online for \$2,500, and this amount includes the use of bunker gear (M. Simmons, personal communication, January 3, 2010). For firefighters training to become police officers, many academies offer modified classes that include nights and weekends. The cost would be comparable to that of the fire academy. It could also be looked at as adding and additional employee for the cost of training.

Taken as a whole, cross-training police and fire is a design for the future. It is a future that holds much promise, both in theory and application, as shown by past pioneering cities. It is also a future that will never become the present until people realize that the promise it holds is for better public safety services (James, 1955).

The purpose of this idea is not to downsize any particular department, or to save money for other city projects, it is just simply an idea to utilize on-duty workers more efficiently and to provide a higher level of service to the taxpayers. This, in turn, could ultimately result in a lower property loss in the event of a fire, or possibly a lower crime rate in the community.

COUNTER POSITION

On the other side of the coin is the argument that cross-training is a waste of resources and time. The International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFC) and the International Association of Fire Fighters (IAFF) both claim that consolidation is neither cost effective nor provides a higher level of service. In an article titled “Police and Fire Consolidation, An Ineffective Use of Resources” (IAFF & IAFC, n.d.), it highlighted several opinions and instances in which cross-training is neither cost-effective nor an asset to the community. The association also stated that combining roles of firefighters and police officers is a concept that challenges and undermines the career firefighter’s role as a guardian of public safety (IAFF & IAFC, n.d.).

Consolidation is generally considered by cash strapped cities as a quick fix to lower municipal budgets, while addressing the public’s misconception of excess firefighter downtime through the consolidation of two jobs into one. Some city leaders may argue that the combining of police and fire services is more efficient. They believe that there will be an improvement in the overall way public safety is delivered.

It should be highly noted, however, that this article does not look into the opinions of the police side of cross-training, and it only offers the opinions of fire personnel and managers. The difference in personalities of police and fire personnel are wide. Both

are geared toward serving mankind; however, the capacities in which they serve are greatly different. Everyone loves a fireman at a fire, but not everyone loves a policeman at a fight. Both are in life-saving positions except that firemen remove victims from the threat and policemen remove the threat from the victims.

It can be argued that the cost of the additional training and the required equipment can be cost prohibitive. The IAFF noted the act of consolidation is very costly. The process of cross-training city employees to fulfill both police and firefighter duties is costly and time consuming (Korcok, 2010). However, the general rule of thumb is that a group of cross-trained personnel can perform the same tasks that would require 60% to 80% more personnel to perform as single-disciplined personnel. This could equate into a substantial savings (Miller, 2004).

Cost of equipment would be another issue. Since both are being looked at to work in a “support” capacity, it should not be an issue if the police are issued bunker gear that has been replaced as long as it is still within the guidelines set by the National Fire Protection Agency (NFPA). Current NFPA guidelines require that bunker, or turnout gear, be replaced every three years. The cost of equipping the firefighters would largely depend on the level of support they would provide. This could range anywhere from a badge, gun, and handcuffs to a full duty uniform to include body armor.

More firefighters than police resist consolidation. This is due largely in part to how it affects their work schedules. Both police officers and firefighters have argued that there is a certain degree of specialization needed in both modern police and firefighting that makes the merger of the two unfeasible (Rubin, 1984).

An example of this can be found in an article printed by Harper Woods Michigan IAFF Local 1188 and distributed to residents of the city. The firefighters claimed that the consolidation of the two departments is of no advantage in either economy or efficiency. The article stated that the city needs both good fire and police services, and if the consolidation were to go through, it would result in poorer services to include inadequate training, insufficient on the job experience, reductions in fire department staffing, increased response times, and ineffective firefighting capabilities. It was the intent of the message to let the voters decide on whether or not consolidate (Harper Woods Fire Fighters/IAFF Local 1188, n.d.). A 1976 study, however, showed that consolidation could increase manpower on initial response, as well as faster response times and the ability to recall more personnel for severe emergencies (Citizens Research Council of Michigan, 1976).

Another issue to consider is how this change is going to affect morale. The IAFF noted that cities attempting to consolidate the two departments report low morale. Turnover rate increases and is a factor that adds to the overall costs because turnover forces the city to have to hire and train new employees (Korcok, 2010). However, based on the Michigan Study, it is believed that morale is improved in the long run. Individual capabilities are utilized more fully, minimizing boredom and resulting in a greater feeling of achievement. It was also noted that cross training usually resulted in higher pay for the individual (Citizens Research Council of Michigan, 1976).

There is no doubt that there are more opponents than proponents for consolidation. Some may feel that it is a strike at the core of these two very old, very honorable positions. Consolidation efforts have failed in many of the cities it has been

proposed in. Support does exist; however, in some communities and as cities look for ways to do more with less, this concept may gain momentum in the future.

CONCLUSION

Smaller communities with decreasing budgets can benefit by providing cross-training to both police and fire personnel. In an era of budget cuts and a faltering economy, doing more with less is becoming a way of life. This is true in both the public and private sectors. Finding ways to provide the same or better level of services to a city, while also cutting the budget, is forcing many city governments to become more creative in the utilization of those services.

The main focus of this position is to explore the possibility of offering cross-training to city departments, namely police and fire. Many calls for service in a community involve a response by both departments. This is mostly true of fire response. If a large fire were to be called in, the police will also be in the area for traffic/crowd control, etc. If one or more of the officers on scene are trained to at least run the pump panel on a fire apparatus, this could free up a firefighter to assist with the suppression of the fire until more fire personnel arrive on scene.

In the event of a police response, fire personnel already on shift can be used for traffic control, perimeter security, or other minor police functions. Usually more police can arrive on scene to relieve the firefighters much more quickly than additional firefighters can arrive on scene from neighboring communities to relieve police. No amount of cross training of police officers and firefighters will result in a community that is completely free from crime or fire. However, it can be better suited and prepared to

handle these inevitable emergencies by providing its citizens with personnel who are trained to respond in different situations.

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