

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

# SOMETHING IN COMMON

*Exploring Fire and EMS Service Sharing Opportunities in the La Crosse County Region*



WISCONSIN

POLICY FORUM

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

It is at times of crisis that citizens recognize more than ever the value of highly-functioning emergency response departments and systems. 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.

La Crosse County and the La Crosse Area Planning Committee jointly commissioned this report to explore options for enhanced service sharing among the various fire departments and emergency medical service (EMS) providers in the La Crosse County region. Their rationale included growing demands for service in parts of the region marked by increased development and population growth; challenges with current staffing models; and a desire to consider cooperative approaches with regard to possible new stations or other service enhancements.

## Overview of Participating Agencies

The eight agencies that participated in the study include five fire departments, two EMS-only nonprofits, and a private ambulance company. As might be expected given the differences in size and density among the communities, there is a variation in staffing models between the agencies.

The La Crosse Fire Department employs 98 full-time equivalent (FTE) employees who typically staff 25 shifts each day at four stations. La Crosse also is the only department licensed to provide paramedic-level EMS. Tri-State Ambulance provides paramedic service to the other communities as well as to La Crosse under a cooperative arrangement. The Onalaska and Holmen Area departments employ some full-time staff but also use part-time staff paid on an hourly basis, while the Shelby and La Crescent departments rely fully on part-time firefighters/EMTs.

### Department and agency characteristics

Department/Agency	Type	Staffing	EMS/Fire
La Crosse City Fire	Municipal Dept.	Career	Fire/First response ALS
Onalaska City Fire	Municipal Dept.	Career and PT	Fire/First response EMT
Shelby Fire	Municipal Dept.	POC	Fire/First response EMR
Holmen Area Fire	Independent District	Career and PT	Fire/First response EMR*
City of La Crescent Fire	Municipal Dept.	POC	Fire/First response EMR
Brice Prairie EMS	Nonprofit	Volunteer	First response EMR
Farmington Emergency Medical Team	Nonprofit	Volunteer	First response EMR*
Tri-State Ambulance	Nonprofit	Career and PT	ALS and transport for entire county

\* Holmen Area and Farmington are transitioning from EMR to EMT

Part-time staff can either serve as paid-on-call (POC), which means they are called in when needed for a response and paid on an hourly basis; or paid-on-premise (POP), which means they are hourly



employees but work out of a station as part of a regular shift. Both Shelby and La Crescent have large part-time rosters, but other departments reported recruitment challenges.

Our analysis also reveals that the Holmen Area Fire Department is facing a sharp increase in call volumes; in fact, it now fields about two thirds as many calls annually as the Onalaska department but has less than half of its FTEs. Growing demand for service is a challenge facing each of the other departments, as well, as call volumes in the study area increased by 15% from 2016-2019.

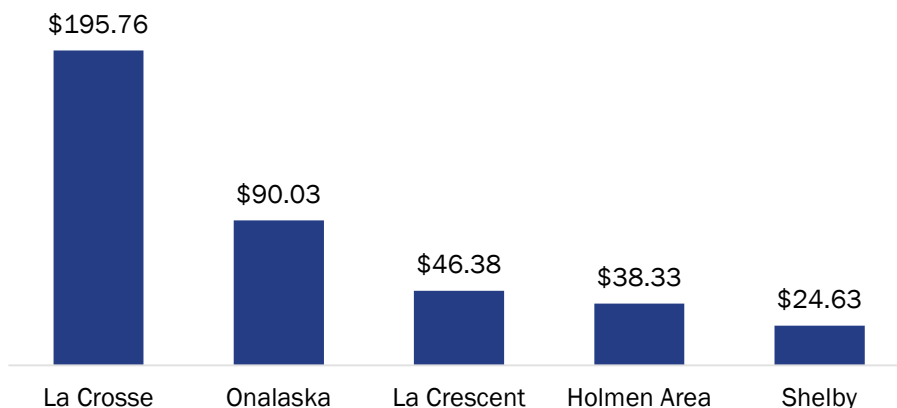
**Calls for service trends, 2016 to 2019**

	2016 CFS	2019 CFS	% Change
Holmen FD	825	1,057	28.1%
Onalaska FD	1,458	1,596	9.5%
La Crosse FD	6,009	6,837	13.8%
Shelby FD	305	330	8.2%
La Crescent FD	310	400	29.0%
Farmington EMS	75	97	29.3%
Brice Prairie EMS	60	71	18.3%
Tri-State EMS	8,520	9,810	15.1%

Differences in call volumes help explain the range of different staffing models across jurisdictions. In areas with less than one call per day, there would not be a financial justification for having fire or rescue crews available 24/7, which means that a POC model may be appropriate. But as call volumes increase, relying solely on POC response may become problematic.

There is also a wide divergence among the departments with regard to budgets. La Crosse spends nearly \$10.5 million annually to support its large full-time department, while the part-time departments in Shelby and La Crescent spend only \$170,000 to \$250,000 per year. Meanwhile, both the Holmen Area and Onalaska departments have seen substantial growth in operating costs over the past four years as call volumes have increased and service models have been adjusted.

**Chart 1: 2020 per capita expenditures by department**



Despite these differences in service models, staffing, and service expansion needs, we identified a handful of key issues that affect each of the participants. Those issues – summarized below – may benefit from collective planning and coordination as departments seek to resolve them.

- The **Holmen Area FD is in a period of transition because of growing call volumes and development**, which are certain to require continued increases in spending and staffing and which may lead to more reliance on assistance from neighboring departments.
- We observe **lower levels of mutual aid** in the La Crosse region than we have seen elsewhere, including possible under-utilization of the well-staffed La Crosse FD. Enhancements to the mutual aid framework used by the departments could address some service challenges.
- Shelby and La Crescent have healthy rosters of POC employees, but we also heard that **recruitment is growing more difficult for all departments**.
- Several departments face operating budget challenges but **there appears to be an overabundance of apparatus** for the region as a whole, which suggests opportunities for collaboration that may free up capital resources for operating needs.
- Each of the three large departments has cited the **potential need for a new station or stations to meet increasing service demands** and Shelby has cited the need for significant repairs or replacement of its western station. This suggests an opportunity to join forces to plan for new station development.

## Summary of options for change

We considered a spectrum of service sharing and consolidation options that may allow the study participants to grapple with their challenges in a manner that would be less expensive and more effective than if they attempted to do so individually. None of these options are mutually exclusive, and they could be pursued progressively over time.

The first tier of options, and the easiest to implement, involve support functions that are common to all fire/EMS agencies, such as training, recruitment, and fire prevention (see adjacent table).

### Tier 1: Enhanced Functional Service Sharing Options

Option	Description
Joint Training	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. La Crosse coordinates training for region</li> <li>2. Tri-State enhances &amp; coordinates EMS training</li> <li>3. Create joint training bureau</li> </ol>
Joint Recruitment & Retention	Departments with part-time staff recruit jointly & standardize pay and advancement opportunities.
EMS Case Management	Departments jointly pay for EMS case managers to proactively serve frequent 911 callers and reduce call volume.
Other	Build on La Crosse-Holmen Area vehicle maintenance arrangement and explore applying to prevention, inspections, investigations.



A more ambitious level of cooperation involves options relating to collaborative fire or EMS response. Those options can range from formalizing arrangements for mutual aid to more advanced forms of cooperative response that could include automatic aid agreements or a “closest unit response” framework. While these options offer potential benefits in terms of response, they also may entail extra financial cost to implement and an investment of time in planning and preparation.

### Tier 2: Enhanced Coordination of Operations Options

Option	Description
Improved Mutual Aid	Formalize mutual aid agreements and practices to enhance cohesion and effectiveness; consider automatic aid, change of quarters, closest unit response as part of such agreements.
Work with Tri-State to Improve EMS Response	Departments outside of La Crosse work jointly with Tri-State to improve first response times and paramedic response in their communities.
Share Apparatus	Develop service sharing agreements to share ladder trucks, tenders/tankers, back-up equipment.

Finally, a third tier of options relates to sharing stations or staff or contracting or consolidation between two or more departments. While we do not detect strong interest by some of the participating agencies in consolidation options at this time, we felt it was important to include them given the growing challenges in the region and the possibility that local officials might be more open to them in the future.

### Tier 3: Advanced Options

Option	Description
Station Sharing	Existing and potential new stations are shared by one or more communities to reduce staffing and/or construction costs and encourage new contracting arrangements.
Consolidation Through Contracting	The heavily-resourced La Crosse FD would provide fire and first response service under contract to Shelby, Greenfield, and La Crescent, thus reducing the number of departments from five to three.
Consolidated Department	A single consolidated department would replace the five departments, which would function under the governance of a board of directors formed by the participating municipalities.

## Departmental Consolidation

The most “advanced” option we considered was a single consolidated department to serve the entire region. We modeled such a department using hypothetical assumptions on where stations would be located, how they would be staffed and equipped, how command and administration would be structured, and other factors based on our own knowledge and input from the five chiefs. This is just one scenario for a consolidated department and there are many other possibilities.

Our model is shown on the map on the following page. Instead of having municipal boundaries determine station coverage areas, we divide the region into northern and southern divisions, each with a 24/7 battalion chief. We assume a new station near the Valley View Mall (both La Crosse and Onalaska have already discussed individual stations in that area) and another to serve southern La Crosse and Shelby (such a station already has been proposed for La Crosse). The existing Shelby station would be eliminated. In addition, we assume a new station in the northern part of the Holmen

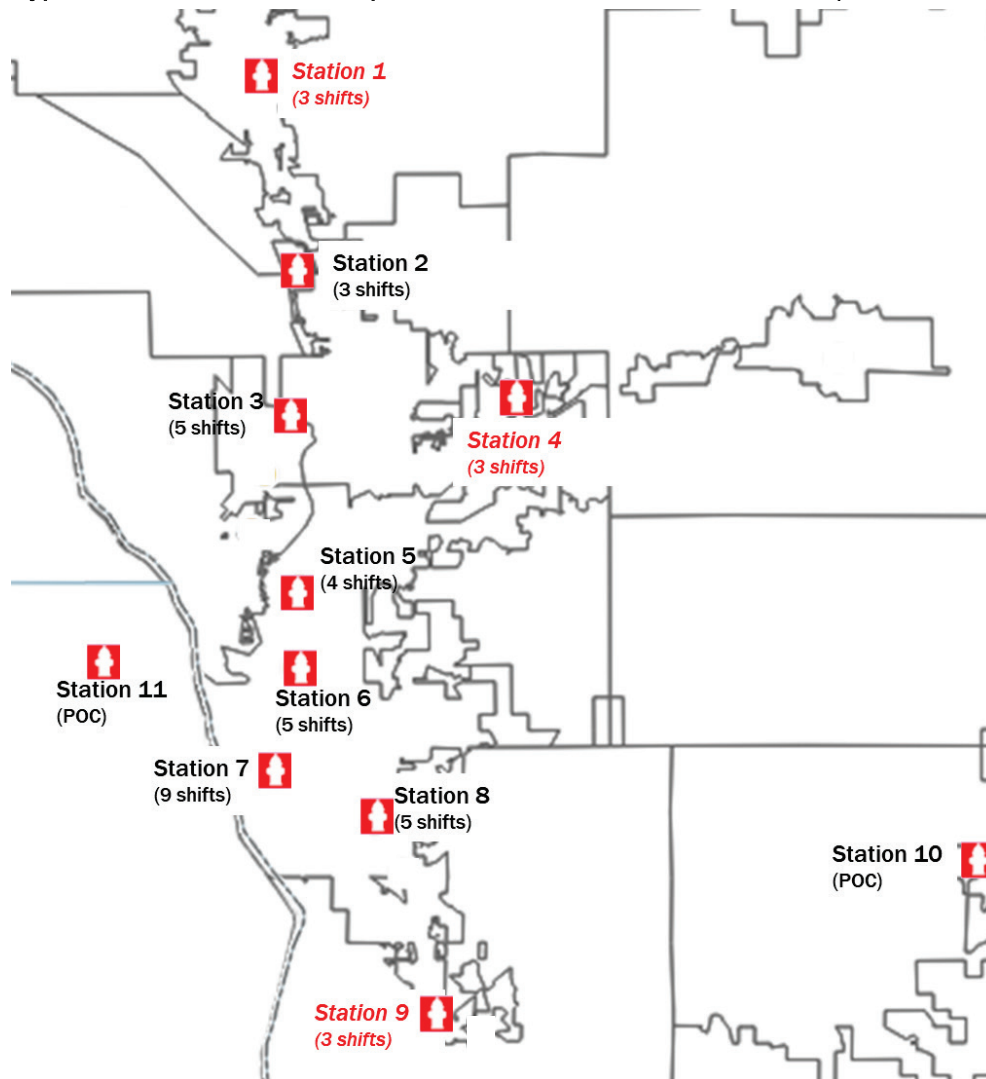


area to address growing call volumes. Consequently, there would be 11 stations instead of the current nine.

We also assume an increase of 10 shifts – these are required both to staff the new stations and to otherwise address service challenges discussed in the report. These shifts are assumed to consist of both full-time and part-time positions; in fact, the hypothetical department as a whole would have a mix of full-time and part-time staff with a ratio similar to that currently used in Onalaska.

There are several advantages to a combination model. One is that having a variety of part-time and full-time options would offer greater opportunities to recruit, train, and promote employees. Also, the flexibility of a combination department would offer the chief much greater flexibility in scheduling staff and controlling overtime costs by using part-time staff to cover time off.

### Hypothetical consolidated department station locations and shifts (new stations in red)



Below we summarize our rough fiscal projection for the hypothetical consolidated department relative to current combined expenditures among the five fire departments. The table shows both added staffing costs associated with the expansion of service capacity plus some offsetting savings that reflect a streamlined command and administrative structure, a smaller fleet of vehicles made possible by a unified approach, and other equipment and supply savings. Overall, we calculate a **net additional annual cost of about \$2 million**.

**Cost summary for hypothetical consolidated department**

Expenditure	Cost/Saving
Shift staffing	\$2,362,882
Battalion chiefs	\$264,091
Non shift staffing	(\$158,304)
Apparatus	(\$386,486)
Non personnel costs	(\$90,460)
<b>Total Cost/(Savings)</b>	<b>\$1,991,723</b>

Policymakers should weigh the added cost of a consolidated department against costs that may need to be incurred by the five departments individually as they seek to respond to increased call volumes and service demands, new development, and other factors. We developed an estimate of the “future state” shift staffing cost if the five departments individually add and staff stations currently under discussion and address POC staffing concerns. That estimate is based on the following assumptions:

- The La Crosse FD adds one shift at a new station in the Valley View area (we assume that station would be jointly staffed with Onalaska). The La Crosse chief has committed to staff a new southern station by shifting existing staff with no net increase in staffing.
- The Onalaska FD adds two shifts: one at Valley View and one at its current station to address increasing call volumes.
- The Holmen Area FD adds four shifts, one at its current station and three at a new northern station to meet growing call volumes.
- Shelby and La Crescent fund two POP shifts at \$17/hour to meet growing call volumes.

Based on current shift staffing costs at each department, **we assume that the additional annual cost of the above would be about \$2.8 million, or about \$800,000 million more than the jurisdictions would need to incur collectively under our hypothetical consolidated department scenario.**



## Conclusion

The question that prompted this study was whether, by working more collaboratively, the individual departments could address their mutual challenges in a more effective fashion than if they did so independently. We present a series of options that could be considered to answer that question affirmatively, including the following:

- **Enhanced service sharing options** include joint training, joint recruitment of part-time staff, joint case management of high-volume EMS users, and joint conduct of other non-response functions like fire prevention, inspections, and investigations. Benefits could include cost efficiencies through economies of scale; improved service for smaller departments (in particular); and, in the case of training, better cohesion during mutual aid incidents.
- **Enhanced coordination of operations options** would directly address fire and EMS response and capacity. They include formalization and expansion of current mutual aid protocols, including a possible move to “closest unit response” or automatic aid; working with Tri-State on strategies to improve EMS response times outside of the city of La Crosse; and greater sharing of apparatus. The enhanced mutual aid and EMS options hold promise to improve service levels and response times while the shared apparatus option could lower costs.
- **Advanced options** could require some departments to relinquish existing autonomy but hold the greatest potential for regional service improvement and enhanced efficiency. One would involve sharing new or existing stations between multiple communities as a means of cutting costs, while another would make greater use of the La Crosse FD’s capacity by having it provide contracted service to Shelby/Greenfield and La Crescent. We also model a single consolidated department to serve the entire region, which we believe would be the most efficient and effective solution if policymakers are willing to spend more to pursue enhanced service levels.

**Our analysis suggests that each of the departments likely will need to increase spending in the not-too-distant future, and that collaborative action could achieve at least some desired improvements at a lower cost than could be achieved by acting alone.** We also see potential – if advanced options are deemed too expensive for now – for the communities to start slowly with some of the less comprehensive service sharing options and then build toward consideration and implementation of more advanced options.

Overall, we hope this analysis sheds further light on the current and future challenges associated with fire response and EMS in the La Crosse area. Going forward, we would be pleased to support any efforts to implement the policy options cited in this report or otherwise assist the region in pursuing greater intergovernmental cooperation.

