Police and Fire Consolidation

Never Say “Never”

by

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The Command College Futures Study Project is a FUTURES study of a particular emerging issue of relevance to law enforcement. Its purpose is NOT to predict the future; rather, to project a variety of possible scenarios useful for strategic planning in anticipation of the emerging landscape facing policing organizations.

This journal article was created using the futures forecasting process of Command College and its outcomes. Defining the future differs from analyzing the past, because it has not yet happened. In this article, methodologies have been used to discern useful alternatives to enhance the success of planners and leaders in their response to a range of possible future environments.

Managing the future means influencing it—creating, constraining and adapting to emerging trends and events in a way that optimizes the opportunities and minimizes the threats of relevance to the profession.

The views and conclusions expressed in the Command College Futures Project and journal article are those of the author, and are not necessarily those of the CA Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST).
Police and Fire Consolidation
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You are on patrol in your marked police car when you receive a radio dispatch to respond to a structure fire in a residential neighborhood. You arrive on scene, park and quickly walk to the back of your car and open the trunk. You calmly remove your gunbelt and other police safety equipment and place them in the trunk of your car. You then remove your fire safety equipment (boots, helmet, and turnout gear) from the trunk and quickly dress as you wait for the fire trucks to respond. “Never going to happen” you say? “Never” is a long way off; perhaps this scenario will come sooner than you think.

The driving force toward consolidation is often the opportunity to save money in the provision of police, fire, and EMS services. There are many different ways for cities to reduce costs; downsizing, contract employees, and civilianization are only some of the tactics being explored today. Consolidating police and fire services, as applied to the future of policing, could provide the beginning of a new era in public safety and changing the way local governments safeguard their communities. This article seeks to discuss the renewed viability of this concept in today’s economic climate. On the pages that follow, we will explore the cost savings, manpower efficiencies, and effects on policing safety if a city combined its police and fire resources and personnel into a single Department of Public Safety.

A Historical Perspective

“Doing more with less” has virtually replaced “To protect and to serve” as the modern day public safety motto. Federal Grants for law enforcement beyond homeland security needs have all but been eliminated. Byrne/Justice Assistance Grants (JAG) block grants to the states
have been cut from $725 million in 2004 and $625 in 2005 to $416 million in 2006.¹ This number trickled down to $374 million in 2008.² With the dramatic decline in fiscal resources, cities suddenly came face-to-face with a harsh financial reality. The issues resulting from increasing demands for service from a larger population are compounded by economic pressures resulting in reduced revenues being generated. Businesses are closing down or curtailing activities. People are losing jobs and spending less.³ According to the CA League of Cities, restaurant and hotel reservations are down, retail sales are down, home prices are falling and new home construction is down⁴. All of these are the revenue sources that municipalities traditionally rely upon for financial stability and continued operation. This fiscal problem, of course, is further exacerbated by the higher costs associated with conducting municipal business operations.⁵ One example of this fiscal impact occurred in February 2010, when the City of San Diego placed all seven of its police horses for sale via an online auction as a way to help balance


⁵ Delicate Balance-The balance between resources and needs that keeps Lakewood functioning is in trouble. www.lakewoodcity.org/emag/budget/2008
its budget. The horse unit which began in 1983 was disbanded and the officers were assigned to other units; at the same time, the City “laid off” approximately one-third of its police dogs.⁶

Across the country, this new fiscal reality resulted in police departments, and even entire cities and counties, being asked to make unprecedented reductions in their budgets to stave off the possibility of layoffs and/or furloughs.⁷ According to a February 2010 article in the Sacramento Bee “Some experts fear that the situation will continue to deteriorate. The source of the added concern is Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's state employee furlough plan. It went into effect in February (2009), calling for most state employees, including dispatchers, to take two days off without pay each month through June 2010.”⁸

But the reality facing these local municipalities goes beyond this immediate fiscal crisis. The long term survival of the independent and incorporated city is in jeopardy and these local governments need to find a significant change in the way they conduct their daily operations. One change to be considered involves the delivery of two of the most costly services these cities provide, namely the police and fire services; and what can be accomplished by consolidating these two public safety disciplines. Consolidation offers an opportunity to reduce or avoid costs, which makes the concept an attractive alternative for local government managers and elected officials who face demands for more services from an electorate that resists paying higher taxes.

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Consolidated Public Safety Departments

Strictly speaking, the idea of combined police and fire services is not a new concept. By the 1960’s, more than 73 cities in the United States and Canada were operating under a police-fire consolidation system of one form or another. By the mid-1970’s, though, sixteen had already abandoned the consolidation concept. Many of these cities were in California, including Buena Park, Chico, Fremont, Hawthorne, San Marino, and Monterey Park. It appears that for those that tried and failed, or simply gave up on the concept, it was often a result of poor planning, poor implementation, or insufficient cause / motivation for the merger in the first place. Public opinion resulting from citizens fearing a reduction in services and safety, and more frequently pressure from organized police and fire unions often led to their downfall.

Today, examples of consolidated (joint) public safety departments are difficult to come by. There are agencies such as Santa Monica and Burbank CA, which share police headquarters facilities with their fire departments. Others, like Beverly Hills CA, police and fire departments share a joint radio dispatch center. Examples though, of a truly (fully) combined police and fire public safety department are in short supply.

Rohnert Park, California, Kalamazoo, Michigan, Naples, Florida and Grosse Pointe, Michigan have all formed public safety departments in varying forms. The Sunnyvale Public Safety Department in Northern California, though, is the premier national example of a department with truly blended police and fire services. In a recent interview, Deputy Chief Mark

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10 Ibid, p18-19
Stivers of the Sunnyvale Public Safety Department related one of the secrets to Sunnyvale’s success. Deputy Chief Stivers credits Sunnyvale’s success with the fact that the Public Safety Department was created as a combined service when the City was first incorporated as a charter city in the early 1950’s (M. Stivers, personal communication, March 9, 2009).

Sunnyvale’s newly elected city government made the historic decision to combine the police department and volunteer fire department into a single public safety department. Ever since that day, nearly 60 years ago, all of Sunnyvale’s public safety employees are fully trained as police officers and fire fighters. Deputy Chief Stivers estimates his City saves about $15 million dollars each year utilizing the combined public safety concept compared to similar sized cities providing a traditional approach to police and fire services. Cost savings are realized because fewer personnel are required to remain in fire stations and staff the trucks/engines. Traditionally, four to five firefighters are assigned to each truck/engine. In a combined public safety department, staffing in the fire stations could be cut as much as half, with two or three firefighters assigned per truck/engine supported by responding police officers who transition to their fire fighting role. Further savings could be realized by training all personnel as EMT’s, eliminating the firefighter/paramedic position and contract out the paramedic and ambulance (transport) functions to a private agency. Through consolidation, dispatch centers can more easily be combined to accommodate joint operations. Headquarter buildings and field stations could be modified for joint operations as well; which may ultimately result in the closure or reallocation of some facilities. Overall, consolidation can be expected to result in a reduction in personnel and fixed overhead costs of operation.

When discussing the concept of “combined” or “consolidated” services, it is important to note there are varying degrees of consolidation. Some agencies, such as Sunnyvale and Rohnert
Park, have fully consolidated their police and fire resources into a single unified Department of Public Safety. In this form of public safety agency, all sworn personnel are fully trained as both police officers and firefighters, and will work both functions throughout their careers.

Other cities have tried various other forms of consolidation which fall short of the fully consolidated approach. In these cases, police and fire often maintain their separate identities, but have some cross-over in training and/or responsibility in an effort to maximize available resources. Often, this cross-over training is limited to specialized functions such as Search and Rescue or Arson Investigation, or only a small portion of the personnel are fully cross-trained as public safety officers to supplement the full-time police or fire personnel. Another approach is to maintain completely separate department identities, but report to a single executive commonly referred to as the Public Safety Director. This is often simply a strategy used by city administrators to eliminate one key executive position.

**Timing is Everything**

As with so many things in life, it has been said that “timing is everything.” The fact the concept of consolidation has been visited and revisited many times before does not mean it should not continue to be discussed. Because some cities have been successful while others have abandoned their attempts at consolidation does not mean the concept is flawed or without merit. Matarese and Chelst ask the question, “As this ‘age of terrorism’ forces local governments to assess issues of interoperability and emergency management, while still competing for scarce resources, should emergency response organizations become combined under one public safety
umbrella?”11 “Because of terrorism, police and fire departments today see their roles differently than they did 15 or 20 years ago. As the first responders to potential terrorist attacks with significant responsibility to prevent such attacks from occurring, local police and fire agencies now have a much heavier workload.”12 “In light of these changing conditions and increased demands, the public safety concept may be more attractive to localities than ever before, offering not only potential financial savings but also the ability to extend the capabilities of the emergency services system while improving relationships with the citizens.”13 Officers who are cross-trained and authorized to address law enforcement, fire, emergency medical, and other public safety responses are needed to ensure appropriate first response to crimes, medical emergencies, and natural and man-made disasters. The public safety concept also offers continuity of command and true interoperability that traditional police and fire agencies lack.14 In addition, a recent study at Indiana University of Pennsylvania indicated that cross-training increases job satisfaction among cross-trained public safety personnel. The findings support the conclusion that cross-training of public safety personnel can reduce burnout and improve job satisfaction.15

Implementation


12 Ibid

13 Ibid, p. 14-15

14 Ibid, p. 16

Whether or not police and fire personnel should be integrated into a single public safety department is a complicated question. “Buy-in” from personnel and their unions appear to be an absolute necessity. There are those that would argue that the time has come for city leaders have to put the interests of unions on the back burner. This is not offered as a point of capitulation, but rather from the standpoint of cooperation. Clearly, an operational change of this scale will be accomplished more effectively as a cooperative effort between labor and management. Fear of the unknown and concern over lost jobs will be two of the largest labor hurdles to overcome. Including the primary stakeholders in the planning and implementation process, combined with complete transparency will go far to ensure the success of the change and overcome major resistance to the change. In the face of furloughs or layoffs, concessions to change may be the key to the long-term survival of the labor unions and the continued employment of their members.

Proper training and professional expertise are additional hurdles which need to be overcome. Personnel will ultimately need to be trained and qualified as police officers and firefighters. Finding personnel capable and willing to do both jobs is a task in itself. Sunnyvale recruits and trains its personnel as police officers first. After successfully completing the police academy and the field training program, the Sunnyvale officer is then sent to a fire academy. The probationary employee must successfully complete both the police and fire portion of their training to pass probation. Throughout the remainder of their careers, the Sunnyvale Public Safety officers rotate between assignments in the fire or police services, all the while maintaining proficiency in both disciplines.

It is important to differentiate between a Public Safety Department which is created “from scratch” as when a new city is formed versus trying to combine two existing agencies into
When two existing departments merge into a single agency, it will likely be necessary for
the short run to have a three tier employee program consisting of: 1) Current employees who
desire to cross-train, and are successful in the transition; 2) current employees who do not desire
to cross-train and remain in their current assignment as a police officer or fireman for the
remainder of their career; and 3) new employees who are hired as combined public safety
officers.

In 1989, Dane Nolan conducted futures research on the subject of police-fire
consolidation. In his conclusion, he wrote “While successful implementation of the public safety
officer concept is not seen as impossible over the next decade, it is seen as unlikely. The future
identified by this study simply does not appear traumatic enough to result in the wide acceptance
of the public safety officer concept.”16 In 1989, though, Mr. Nolan’s future forecast did not
envision our current state of affairs. Today’s economic environment is more than “traumatic
enough” to finally seriously consider and accept the public safety concept.

Conclusion

Combining police and fire resources will not be an easy decision to make or an easy task
to accomplish. However, cities and states are facing unprecedented challenges. Personnel issues
associated with an aging workforce and a new generation less likely to embrace a long-term
career in public service is adding another dimension to this workplace crisis. With city revenues
going down and the cost of providing public safety services going up, local governments and the

public safety employees they employ are going to have to recognize that a new era has arrived. Our public is not likely to accept a reduction in the quality of public safety services that they receive, nor should they.

   The days of conducting “business as usual” or relying on “we’ve always done it that way” are rapidly coming to an end. We can fight the changes that are inevitable, or we can embrace the fact that change is upon us. If we choose the former, we will undoubtedly find ourselves in an unpleasant and reactive future simply trying to survive and catch-up. If we recognize the need for change, we can be the catalyst of that change, and create our own future.

   It may very well be that the time has arrived for cities to at least consider the concept. It won’t work everywhere, and it won’t be the right fit for many cities. But the concept is worthy of consideration. It would behoove a progressive City Manager or City Council to at least take the time to consider combining their existing police and fire services into a combined public safety workforce. However, keep in mind, as Chief Stivers pointed out “it is much easier to create a public safety department from scratch when a city is being developed rather than trying to combine two existing organizations into one.

   For the city that does its homework, invests the time and resources into a proper study, plan development, stakeholder buy-in and implementation the reward may very well be an increase in the level of public safety and a reduction in the cost of providing it. The sequel to this article may very well be a case study of the success of your new agency.