



# BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS

By Courtney Accurti,  
PSAB Director of Communications

*The changing face of fire and emergency services in Pennsylvania*

# A

cross the country fire companies are engaged in conversations much like those in

Pennsylvania. Firefighters are looking to the future and trying to identify the best way to deliver service to the community. Many companies have found a solution within themselves to address challenges - working together. From California to Florida, fire companies are finding intergovernmental cooperation helps to maintain quality community service.

Pennsylvania has a rich heritage of providing fire services that dates back to 1736 when a group of Philadelphia residents stepped forward to create the nation's first fire brigade. The volunteer spirit can still be seen today. Nationally, 70 percent of firefighters are volunteers, and in Pennsylvania, approximately 90 percent of the more than 2,000 fire companies are manned by volunteers. Since the inception of the first fire company, significant technological advancements have been made, service delivery costs have increased, safety concerns have become more significant, and recruitment and retention challenges have altered the reality for volunteer fire companies. But these volunteers are again answering the call, and a variety of partnerships are emerging as a result.

There are a number of issues that are common throughout the volunteer fire and emergency services sector that establish the framework for a discussion about cooperation. In a survey of fire chiefs by the Center for Rural Pennsylvania, 53 percent of the chiefs reported an increase in calls over a two year span. In addition to the increase in calls, the types of responses required have diversified over time. As areas have grown and been developed and with the enhanced availability of amenities, the potential for needed

response has increased placing further expectations upon the fire service.

Two key challenges referenced by chiefs most frequently are funding and retention. There are distinct costs associated with maintaining and operating infrastructure, equipment and apparatus, and community fundraisers like bake sales and car washes are no longer bringing in the revenue necessary to support operations. Concurrently, the issue of member retention continues affecting fire company operations. A 2005 Legislative Budget and Finance Committee report provides some perspective on the issue of retention. The House Resolution 148 report, which focused on volunteer fire service regional and cooperative efforts, indicated that the Commonwealth loses approximately 8,000 volunteers annually, and the Center for Rural Pennsylvania's survey identified that moving, job and family commitments, and loss of interest are among the top reasons given for discontinuing service.

A formal partnership may be the solution for many fire companies dealing with challenges such as volunteer retention and responding to calls. There are a number of models from which companies could select to modify their operations; it is a matter of weighing the options and assessing what is in the best interests of the participating companies.

From a technical standpoint, the options available include mergers, consolidations, partial consolidations, functional consolidations and multi-municipal commissions. From a practical perspective, the issue is identifying the approach to cooperation and partnership what will work best for the service and volunteers.

Cory Simo, a firefighter and emergency medical technician of the Garden Spot Fire Rescue in Lancaster County, which serves New Holland Borough, Earl and East Earl

townships, offered insight into his company's process.

"When we called our initiative a consolidation, people thought we were involved in a takeover," Simo said. "When we called it a cooperative partnership, people were okay with the initiative."

With the variety of options available to companies, there is the opportunity to make the partnership work for the communities involved. Don Konkle from the Pennsylvania Fire and Emergency Services Institute said that cooperative efforts can be tailor made. In creating a partnership Konkle noted that there is not a one size fits all solution.

A factor that companies need to consider when establishing a partnership is the relationship with local government. Professionals in the fire and emergency services arena recognize that local governments have to be engaged in the process.

"Having local officials involved is important to the long-term health and survival of the volunteer fire service," Konkle said.

State Fire Commissioner Ed Mann said that fire companies need to initiate the process and lead the way in establishing a formal partnership, but he also reiterated the importance of engaging the local government and building a rapport with local officials.

"These initiatives can't be forced," Mann said. "The efforts that have been successful have worked because the fire company initiates the process and the local government supported it."

Since 2000 there have been 150 new cooperative service ventures and there are active fact finding or steering committees in 32 counties.

Rob Brady, a local government policy specialist with the Department of Community and Economic Development's (DCEd) Governor's Center for Local Government Services, an agency which coordinates activities at the state



**FIRE APPARATUS** Serving Springettsbury and Spring Garden townships, these twin pumper fire engines are part of York Area United Fire & Rescue's fire apparatus

level, said that he receives an average of three requests for assistance per week from rank and file company members. For companies considering cooperation formally, Brady recommends reviewing current activities to see if the two (or more) companies are currently responding to calls, training and fundraising together. If so, then the administrative function is the main component missing from a formal partnership. The reality is that many of these companies are already working together, just not from an administrative perspective.

For Southeastern Adams Volunteer Emergency Services, or SAVES, there was a natural progression to consolidating the emergency services activities of four companies. The departments first worked together in 1996 when they did a joint fundraiser. The Adams County departments that serve McSherrystown Borough and Conewago Township in addition to parts of Union and Mt. Pleasant townships began training together after the inception of the annual fundraiser, which was followed by the sharing of resources. In 2002, the

group created a steering committee to explore further options, and by January 1, 2005, the four departments had consolidated, becoming SAVES.

While making an inquiry may be the beginning of the process, formalizing a partnership is a process that takes time. For example, the Garden Spot Fire Rescue consolidation took approximately two years to complete while the merger of one fire company into Back Mountain Regional Fire & EMS occurred over the course of six months to one year. However, the results of successfully pursuing a cooperative agreement includes benefits such as the effective use of resources, improved level of service, better use of existing personnel, and eliminating the duplication of service.

"These issues aren't about how we fight fires," Brady said. "The process is about improving the organizational structure under which fire and emergency services operate."

Since these efforts are locally driven, a key step in the process is creating an inclusive steering committee that identifies representatives from the

communities' emergency services groups, local governments and other community leaders. In one past effort, the two companies decided to identify potential members based on skills and background so that the committee was comprised of individuals with the skills needed to make effective decisions in the interests of the companies and communities.

The steering committee bears the responsibility of discussing current issues, examining options and evaluating the current organizational model. Factor into this discussion the consideration of organizational items such as administrative officers, operational officers, chain of command, membership, bylaws, finances and a funding model. The committee's ultimate goal is to present a new organizational model on which the participating companies will vote, so soliciting feedback on the proposed structure and operations prior to a vote may help flesh out the details and curtail problems.

During the period of time when SAVES decided to formally pursue a consolidation, the members spent

time visiting other departments and gathering sample documents. In addition, meetings were held with the department members, local government officials and the public to help garner broad-based support. Six months prior to the transition, a shell company was created that allowed the existing companies to meet and conduct official business.

Even when a vote is taken, the work is not yet done. Working with an attorney and accountant is vital for preparing and filing the necessary legal and financial documents. As the newly identified group establishes itself, an operational start date must be selected and the existing organizations must hold final meetings to complete any business. DCED also recommends that any new organization should adopt a five-year strategic plan to set benchmarks and goals. SAVES Fire Chief Andy Weaver believes that goal setting is important and said that SAVES is getting ready to close out its initial ten-year long range strategic plan and begin implementing a five-year strategic plan.

Those who have been involved in establishing a formal partnership will say that hard work and a number of meetings were involved in the process, but there are positive results from those companies that have taken the initiative to spark

change. Garden Spot Fire Rescue is completing its first year of service and is working on an annual report to highlight activities. Additionally, the company was recently recognized with an Award for Local Government Excellence for its improved service as a result of the consolidation.

In 2006, SAVES demonstrated the value of strength in numbers when the company received the certified agency status from the Office of the State Fire Commissioner (OSFC) for having at least 50 percent of responders being trained to National Fire Protection Agency Standards – a designation that Weaver believes was successful because of the intergovernmental cooperation efforts.

Back Mountain Regional Fire & EMS, which has more than 50 percent of its active firemen trained to OSFC Level 1 status, has adopted a mentality of encouraging partnerships to work in the communities' interests and is being recognized by the Pennsylvania Department of Health's Bureau of Emergency Medical Services at the Pennsylvania Fire and Emergency Services Institute's conference as an EMS agency of the year in 2013.

The emergency services field is changing, and it is going to take different groups of stakeholders working together to make the system

work. There are great examples from around the Commonwealth that companies can look to for advice and guidance during the process of establishing a formal connection, but it all starts with having the initial discussion. Brady pointed out the value of being proactive.

"It's an opportunity to take control of the future. Many companies take pride in the history of the company and length of service, but for many that don't address current challenges, there won't be a long-term future to be had," Brady said. **(B)**

### **Cooperative Solutions MERGER**

The combination of two or more existing corporations that legally resolve to become one entirely new entity. Typically, the larger party becomes the surviving entity. A name change may or may not occur.

### **CONSOLIDATION**

The combination of two or more existing corporations which results in the creation of a new organization with a new name.

### **PARTIAL CONSOLIDATION**

Separate fire and emergency service organizations are retained but a special arrangement is developed to handle specific functions.

### **FUNCTIONAL CONSOLIDATION**

An agreement of two or more organizations to combine and administer similar activities through an umbrella organization. Also known as an association.

### **MULTI-MUNICIPAL COMMISSION**

A formal multi-municipal partnership with two or more municipalities along with local emergency service providers created to accomplish specific goals, objectives and/or tasks.



**LOCAL SERVICE** West Shore Bureau of Fire, which serves Lemoyne and Wormleysburg boroughs, was formed in 1998 when the fire companies from the two communities consolidated