DEVELOPING COLLABORATIVE CAPACITY TO ENHANCE MUNICIPAL-LEVEL FIRE SERVICES IN ALLEGHENY COUNTY

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Pennsylvania volunteer fire departments face numerous challenges, from declining volunteer rates to revenue shortfalls and increased fundraising demands to maintain costs. Increased pressure has been placed on volunteer fire chiefs, and consequently their elected officials, in response to concerns that volunteer fire departments are not equipped to effectively support their residents, which consequently has created an uneven pressure on combination and paid fire departments.

Many of these challenges are due largely to the municipal fragmentation of Pennsylvania's governmental structure. Allegheny County alone holds 130 municipalities; declining demand for fire services combined with increased competition with other municipalities has left a structural challenge for the future of volunteer fire chiefs in PA.

Using a series of qualitative research analyses, this report concludes that the challenge fire chiefs face in PA lies ultimately in its capacity building with its elected officials and counterparts at the municipal level. Our recommendations conclude that developing collaborative capacity at the municipal level, followed by implementing a pathway towards broader regional efforts, will lay the framework for future success of the current structure of fire departments. While there are multiple challenges, the ability to succeed will largely be determined by the capacity of elected officials and volunteer fire chiefs to organize and develop a dialogue for future communications.
INTRODUCTION

Allegheny County epitomizes fragmented local government in Pennsylvania; with over 130 municipalities, it is home to close to twice as many local governments as the second-most decentralized county.\(^1,2\) While hyperlocal governance has been a trademark of the Northeast and Midwest regions, counties across the United States are trending toward decentralization.\(^3\)

Decentralization can allow governments to be more responsive to their constituents. With a smaller population, elected officials and public administrators can devote more of their efforts toward a greater percentage of residents. However, despite the community-first mindset that laid the foundation for many of the municipalities in the region, fragmented local government has also led to service duplication and gaps in service coverage.

With municipalities ranging in size from 0.01 to 55 square miles, decentralization in Allegheny County has created a complicated web of service provision within its boundaries, particularly for fire services.\(^4\) Figure 1 illustrates the clusters and scattering of departments in the area.

Allegheny County has more than 180 fire departments within its 730 square miles.\(^4,5\) With 175 operating as all-volunteer departments, 96% of fire service providers in Allegheny County are staffed solely by volunteers.\(^2\)

Across the nation, volunteer fire departments have been facing ever-mounting challenges including:

**REDUCED STAFFING CAPACITY**

The number of volunteer firefighters has been shrinking rapidly in the United States. Recent reports have listed the total number in Pennsylvania as 38,000, though practitioners estimate that the actual figure is much lower.\(^6\)

**INSUFFICIENT AND DIVERGENT FUNDING STREAMS**

Many volunteer departments operate as nonprofit organizations, relying on financial support from municipalities or money pooled from fundraising and grants. Not only are these funding streams effort-intensive, but the amount is also inadequate in face of rising operational and capital costs.

**DEMAND FOR DIVERSIFICATION**

Fire rates continue to decrease nationally, leading communities to call on their fire departments to provide a wide range of services outside of fire suppression.\(^7\) Expectations for response range from emergency medical incidents to rescues to hazardous materials spills, all of which require additional training, equipment, and gear.

**REDUCTION IN OVERALL VOLUNTEERISM**

Americans are volunteering less, with the volunteering rate at 15 year low of 24.9% in 2015.\(^8\) Suburban and rural areas have seen the most significant decline in volunteerism in the past.
INTRODUCTION

two decades, a somber finding for volunteer fire departments that operate almost entirely in suburban and rural municipalities.\(^9\)

**SHifting Public Perception**
As scrutiny increases on public service provision, the public value of fire service continues to be called into question. Volunteer firefighters are expending time on fire suppression and ancillary duties in addition to competing for scarce resources.

The threats facing our volunteer fire departments are numerous, but far from insurmountable. Through collective action spurred by building collaborative capacity in the region, Allegheny County can work toward a fire service that is more efficient, equitable, cost-effective, and sustainable.

END NOTES


METHODOLOGY

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS
Snowball sampling was utilized to determine respondents for semi-structured interviews. In sum, six formal interviews were conducted in October and November 2020. Participants included an elected official, two fire chiefs, a volunteer firefighter, a regionalization consultant, and a collaborative governance researcher. Semi-structured interviews provided an opportunity for participants to expound upon their views in a forum advantageous for candid conversations. From semi-structured meetings with individuals and consultations with the Advisory Committee, three overarching themes emerged: relationships with elected officials, the future of volunteer fire service, and regionalization of fire services.

FOCUS GROUP SESSIONS
While the semi-structured interviews provided insights on individuals’ personal attitudes and beliefs regarding fire service in Allegheny County, focus groups were conducted to explore perspectives on the themes gathered from individual interviews.

DESIGN AND RECRUITMENT
Potential participants were recruited via email. CONNECT and the Advisory Committee assisted in promoting the sessions among their contacts. Interested parties were directed to complete a survey to gather demographic information, including years of service, affiliated municipalities, and volunteer status.

The focus groups were conducted on Thursday, November 5, at 6:00 PM and Friday, November 6, at 12:00 PM via the Zoom video conferencing platform. The sessions were limited to 45 minutes each, with facilitators introducing the subject, reviewing expectations, and offering prompts for discussion. Table 1 outlines the three prompts developed around the primary themes identified through the preliminary interviews and meetings.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>THEME</th>
<th>PROMPT</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relationships with Elected Officials</td>
<td>Describe your relationship with your municipality.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Future of Volunteer Fire Service</td>
<td>What role do you see volunteer fire departments playing in the future of municipal fire service?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regionalization of Fire Services</td>
<td>If tomorrow you discover that your fire department will be combined with another, how would you feel?</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
The Zoom sessions were not recorded per the recommendation of the Advisory Committee, who emphasized the sensitivity of these issues and the benefit of providing a space for participants to speak freely. Notetakers were provided by CONNECT.

**PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS**

Five participants attended the November 5th session and 13 attended the November 6th session. Three participants from the November 5th session also joined the second session (total n=15). While the targeted demographic was volunteer fire chiefs, the sample was expanded to include both career fire chiefs, career firefighters, and volunteer firefighters. One elected official also attended on behalf of their volunteer department. Participants ranged in affiliation, representing 13 municipalities and one organization in Allegheny County. Tenure as a firefighter ranged from 1-5 years to 20+ years, with the majority of participants reporting at least 10 years of experience.

**FOCUS GROUP ANALYSIS**

**RELATIONSHIPS WITH ELECTED OFFICIALS**

Participants affiliated with career departments noted solid relations with their municipalities, while the majority of participants affiliated with volunteer departments described their relationships as “contentious” and “poor.” Those with positive relationships attributed their success to weekly meetings, periodical reports, and educational outreach. The high turnover of elected officials was underscored as a barrier to relationship-building, but many participants suggested that fire departments be proactive in contacting elected officials and providing an overview of their services and needs. The volunteer department with a favorable relationship suggested the presence of a firefighter on their council was key, a sentiment echoed by participants who had served as both a firefighter and an elected official. One participant also stressed the importance of both the relationship with elected officials and the relationship with the community.

**THE FUTURE OF THE VOLUNTEER FIRE SERVICE**

One participant began the discussion by reiterating the role municipalities should play in providing fire service. The consensus among participants was that the volunteers would play a role in combination departments, with regionalization an inevitable outcome. Volunteers were noted as essential to providing fire service, but their current model has not adapted to address the needs of modern society. Several participants mentioned that there is no sole solution that will be able to address the issues in Allegheny County due to the geographic configuration of its municipalities.

**FIRE SERVICE REGIONALIZATION**

Both participants from volunteer fire companies and career fire companies expressed support for regionalization. Several participants emphasized the need for a strong communications plan outlining the regionalization effort to garner stakeholder support. Regionalization was noted as a long term process that has obstacles in the political, financial, and personal realms. Participants acknowledged the time, effort, and connections that volunteers have to their fire companies, but stressed the importance of prioritizing community needs over personal wants. Department culture was also
discussed among participants, who mentioned the traditions unique to each department that could impede regionalization.

ILLUSTRATIVE CASE STUDIES
To highlight current models of fire service delivery in Allegheny County, three case studies were conducted. Data were collected through document review and semi-structured interviews. An overview of the case studies models is presented in Table 2. In line with the theme of fire service regionalization, the first case study examines Rivers Edge. Presented in Box A, Rivers Edge was formed as part of a regionalization effort known as consolidation. Ingram Borough, presented in Box B, highlights a municipality that opted to dismantle their volunteer department and enter into an intergovernmental cooperation agreement with the City of Pittsburgh. As participants from the focus group sessions indicated that combination departments would play a role in the future of the industry, Mt. Lebanon was selected as the combination model discussed in Box C. The case studies provide an overview of the historical basis for the model, discuss key takeaways, and analyze their applicability within Allegheny County.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>CASE STUDY</th>
<th>MODEL</th>
<th>DESCRIPTION</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rankin-Braddock Boroughs</td>
<td>Consolidation</td>
<td>Two or more companies are dissolved and a new organization with a new name is formed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ingram Borough</td>
<td>Intergovernmental Cooperation Agreement</td>
<td>Arrangement between two or more local governments to provide services or initiate collective action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mt. Lebanon Township</td>
<td>Combination Department</td>
<td>Career fire departments that are supplemented with volunteer firefighters</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CASE STUDY A: CONSOLIDATION

In early 2019, Braddock and Rankin, adjacent municipalities located in Allegheny County, consolidated their volunteer fire departments to create a new company with a fitting name for two municipalities that border the Monongahela River: Rivers Edge Volunteer Fire Department.¹ The Rivers Edge Fire Department also serves East Pittsburgh. Per Osdol, East Pittsburgh’s fire service had been provided by the Braddock Borough since 2015, when East Pittsburgh’s council voted to disband the department following a months-long impasse wherein the council declined to pay for reinspection of the department’s lone pumper.²

The PA DCED offered financial support through their Municipal Assistance Program, providing approximately $55,000 for professional legal services and rebranding of equipment and uniforms.³ The financial support covered over 50% of the overall project cost of $93,000.⁴

For over three decades, per the PA DCED, Braddock and Rankin have been Act 47 municipalities, indicating financial distress levels that require the assistance of the Commonwealth.⁵ While many of the successful regionalizations and combination departments operate in municipalities with considerably greater financial assets, the three municipalities involved in the Rivers Edge consolidation provide a model for the numerous municipalities in the Allegheny County region with similar financial means.

The success of the consolidation was attributed to strong leadership, the steering committee, and perseverance. The internal meetings of both departments were emotionally-charged, but the leadership and the steering committee were vital to continuing the conversation and moving forward with the consolidation. Perseverance was also noted as crucial to the process. A number of departments were originally interested in joining the regionalization effort but did not ultimately join Braddock and Rankin. Undeterred, the two municipalities continued to pursue the consolidation while still leaving the door open for collaboration in the future.

END NOTES


DISCUSSION

FINDINGS
Improving fire services in Allegheny County has been structured around the concept of recognizing the threat of municipal fragmentation. Allegheny County alone holds 130 different municipalities, with 183 fire companies. Pennsylvania’s history of decentralization has contributed to the massive proliferation of fire departments, and indeed holds 12 percent of the nation’s 20,000 all-volunteer fire companies, more than any other state. While fire departments face greater scrutiny due to declining demand and increased costs, municipal officials must also remain accountable, due in part to the challenges stipulated by the high concentration of local governments.

Since 2018, the Congress of Neighboring Communities (CONNECT) has focused on the increasingly difficult challenges faced by municipal volunteer fire departments (VFDs) in Allegheny County. In 2020, these challenges continue to surface for VFDs in numerous components; from revenue shortfalls, rising operating costs and fundraising demands, to declining volunteerism and poor retention rates. In 2018, the Pennsylvania Senate reported an 87% decrease in volunteer firefighters, from 300,000 in the 1970s to 38,000 in 2018. Noting this, 96 percent of all fire companies are fully staffed by volunteers, suggesting the growing importance of this problem.

Pennsylvania’s increasing reliance on VFDs to support residents has trickled into a lack of administrative accountability and poor governance. The Pennsylvania Fire and Services Institute estimates that VFDs save Pennsylvania taxpayers roughly $6 billion annually. However, mounting service demands—such as an expansion of duties into weather service emergencies, vehicle cleanup, and chemical threats—combined with the decline of human capital due to aging and lack of training, and the erosion of physical capital has created an amalgamation of problems for VFDs. This decline has crippled VFDs financially and in its administrative capacity, resulting in a belief among combination and paid fire departments that VFDs are not equipped to handle the evolving responsibilities of managing a fire department.

Further, research conducted by the GSPIA Capstone team of 2019 discovered capital mismanagement through inefficiencies of current fire apparatuses, calling into question the level of duplicativeness and inefficiencies for VFDs, suggesting:

“While the volunteer fire department crisis continues and affects our CONNECT communities, the cost of duplicative equipment could mitigate issues of staffing within the CONNECT fire stations. Additionally there are forty pieces of CONNECT equipment considered obsolete (at 25 years or older). Therefore, there is a combination of duplicative equipment in addition to a fleet of obsolete pieces within the CONNECT communities.”
DISCUSSION

The report’s conclusions were stark, and offered fact-based approaches towards the declining volunteerism challenge through staffing models and the pooling of shared resources. However, they acknowledged that measures to address these problems will start through conversations between municipal officials and fire chiefs. Unfortunately, we also discover that there has been no increased capacity to collaborate between fire chiefs and elected officials, whether due to lack of oversight, lack of pedagogical training for volunteer fire chiefs to reach out to elected officials, or the continuous succession of elected officials by elections.

RELATED LEGISLATION

Improving the capacity of fire departments will also largely be dependent on legislative forces, primarily from the state government of Pennsylvania. While the federal government has offered financial support in the form of grants, through vehicles such as the Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) Act, the Pennsylvania state government would be a more effective tool towards improving the quality of fire services in Allegheny County. There has been some progress—most notably with the passage of Acts 7, 8, 9, and 31 in 2007/2008—which amended the Second Class Township Code of 1933 to give greater jurisdictional flexibility to municipal decisions on fire services. Additionally, the new laws required fire departments that receive municipal funding to speak before the municipality annually, should they wish to seek additional funding.

In the latest legislature session of 2020, an omnibus package under House Bill 1673 combined a series of bills that increased the capacity for loan programs for volunteer fire companies (under control by an application review committee), and transferred broader authorities to the State Fire Commissioner, including direct review of relief funds, and expanded duties such as data collection, training development, and grant administration. The legislation provides greater financial assistance to recruit and retain volunteer firefighters while also empowering the State Fire Commissioner in

MUNICIPAL RESPONSIBILITY FOR EMERGENCY SERVICES IN PENNSYLVANIA

Acts 7, 8, 9, and 31 of 2007/2008 codified the duty to provide emergency services for boroughs, first and second class townships, and third class cities.

“(a) The [municipality] shall be responsible for ensuring that fire and emergency medical services are provided within the [municipality] by the means and to the extent determined by the [municipality], including the appropriate financial and administrative assistance for these services.

(b) The [municipality] shall consult with fire and emergency medical services providers to discuss the emergency services needs of the township.

(c) The [municipality] shall require any emergency services organizations receiving [municipality] funds to provide to the township an annual itemized listing of all expenditures of these funds before the [municipality] may consider budgeting additional funding to the organization.”
the consideration of declining volunteers.\(^7\)

Each of these bills represent a positive first step towards improving the collaborative capacity between fire chiefs and municipal leaders. While the state government can be an effective instrument to improve fire department administration, there are also legislative tools to expand the coordination through regional approaches. Currently in the House Veteran Affairs Committee as of 2020, Senate Bill 1274 would establish the creation of public safety municipal authorities, which could be utilized as regional coordinating units to better organize the proliferation of fire companies, increase efficiency and potentially reduce costs.\(^8\) While there is currently no progress on this bill, efforts to regionalize municipal services have the potential to reduce costs and inefficiencies while generating more innovative public services to the constituents.

**END NOTES**

Municipal governments may take on drastic approaches by entering into intergovernmental cooperation agreements to continue services in the face of financial distress. On April 11, 2016, the Ingram Volunteer Fire Company was dismissed by the Borough Council by a vote of 6 to 1. This ruling included a new fire protection agreement with the City of Pittsburgh. The Chairman of Ingram’s council, Sam Nucci, told reporters that the City of Pittsburgh’s paid firefighters would be answering calls in the Ingram Borough. The term of the intergovernmental cooperation agreement between Ingram Borough Council and Pittsburgh was set at five years, starting on April 11, 2016, with an option to renew for an additional five years. The fire station in the Sheradan neighborhood in the City of Pittsburgh is the primary station that responds to calls from Ingram.

Ingram’s acceptance of fire services from Pittsburgh helped solve their long-standing problem—the city’s insufficient staffing levels. Prior to this merger, Ingram Volunteer Fire Company had 30 volunteer members in three stations spread out through the small community. Maintaining the stations, apparatus, and equipment was expensive for the financially struggling suburb with about 15,000 residents and an average of 65 fire calls a year.

This service transfer was contentious among both Ingram Borough residents and the volunteer firefighters at the Ingram Volunteer Fire Company. The news of the dissolution of Ingram’s volunteer fire company was not well-received; residents expressed concern about Pittsburgh’s “narrower” fire services and the loss of several community events hosted by the Ingram Volunteer Fire Company. However, the intergovernmental cooperation agreement provides Ingram with the same level of fire services as the City of Pittsburgh, allowing them to benefit from Pittsburgh’s much larger pool of resources and their consistent staffing levels while significantly lowering their costs. Intergovernmental cooperation agreements may be an option for municipalities unable to sustain their volunteer departments, though the loss of the community element can still be a source of apprehension among residents.

END NOTES

1 Fuoco, Linda Wilson. “Ingram volunteer fire company disbanded as borough opts for Pittsburgh services.” April 12, 2016.
4 Silver, Jonathan D. “Ingram residents show outrage over discussions to phase out fire department”. Dec 15, 2015.
Informed by our data collection and analysis, our recommendations are intended to guide the region forward to an improved fire service delivery model through building collaborative capacity. Austin suggests that collaboration exists on a continuum. Collaborative efforts range from information sharing to regionalization, with each type varying in objective, necessary resources, and risk. Engaging in collaborative actions such as information or resource sharing can develop information networks that serve as the foundation for more intensive collaborations in the future.

For municipalities and fire service providers in Allegheny County, actions would begin within the transactional stage, wherein parties engage in a mutually beneficial partnership. Table 3 provides more information on the stages within Austin’s continuum.

The first recommendation is built around mitigating the transaction costs associated with intergovernmental arrangements in the transactional stage of collaboration, while the second recommendation addresses the integrative stage wherein parties engage in collective action and begin integration. Recommendations were assessed along following criteria: cost, efficiency, effectiveness, equity, stakeholder acceptability, and sustainability. See Appendix B for the evaluation matrices.

**RECOMMENDATION I: BUILD PARTNERSHIPS BETWEEN STAKEHOLDERS TO DEVELOP COLLABORATIVE CAPACITY**

**Goal:** Strengthen relationships between and among fire service providers, elected officials and the community to establish mutual trust and credibility that mitigates transaction costs

**A. ENGAGE IN RESOURCE SHARING TO DEVELOP MUTUALLY BENEFICIAL COLLABORATIONS**

With 130 municipalities in 730 square miles, jurisdictions range in area from 0.1 square miles to 58.3 square miles. In population, the differences are even starker: the smallest municipality has a population of 70, in contrast to the over 300,000 people who reside in the largest municipality in Allegheny County. Per the findings of the Bacha et al., Allegheny County fire companies have an overabundance of apparatus.

Fire companies in the region should explore areas for sharing resources. Resource sharing falls within the transactional stage of the collaboration continuum. Parties can save money by sharing costs for existing resources or by opting to jointly purchase a resource. This effort involves minimal oversight, commitment, and risk, but can serve as the basis for more involved positions in the future. Resource sharing is not limited to apparatus and equipment, but can also include assets such as human capital, infrastructure, and technology.
B. PROVIDE REGIONAL TRAINING TO CREATE LOW-STAKES ENVIRONMENTS FOR FOSTERING CONCERTED OPERATIONAL CAPACITY

Rather than addressing operational disagreements while responding to an emergency, joint training can give firefighters an opportunity to establish operational procedures when incidents require a cross-agency response. Coordinating response in advance of a high-pressure situation can improve the capacity of fire companies to provide efficient services in an emergency.

Shared training also offers an opportunity to establish professional capital that lays the foundation for future collaboration. As noted by Wukich, public safety service providers were more agreeable to inter-agency cooperation when they had trained with the partner agency on a regular basis. The volunteer companies in Braddock and Rankin conducted joint training prior to their consolidation, which was credited with minimizing operational disputes.

C. ADOPT PROACTIVE EDUCATIONAL OUTREACH PRACTICES TO INFORM ELECTED OFFICIALS AND THE PUBLIC ABOUT THE VALUE OF FIRE SERVICES

Pennsylvania Burning, a seminal report on the volunteer fire crisis published in 1970, described fire service as an “intangible commodity.” As a public service, the value of fire protection is difficult to quantify. With many municipalities in Allegheny County dealing with declining revenues and increased competition for scarce resources, firefighters have been tasked with justifying their public value to elected officials and the public.

Fire services aren’t limited to fire protection; firefighters now also respond to a wide variety of emergencies, along with providing fire prevention education and community outreach. Volunteer fire companies should proactively engage with their elected officials and the community they serve to reinforce their value and open up lines of communication that can pave the way for a symbiotic relationship. Located in Appendix A, the Take Action Toolkit provides a guide to communicating with elected officials and the public; talking points; and templates for email, PowerPoint, and social media.

### TABLE 3: AUSTIN’S COLLABORATION CONTINUUM

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>STAGE</th>
<th>ACTIVITIES</th>
<th>RELATIONSHIP</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Transactional</td>
<td>Parties engage in resource exchange that provides two-way value</td>
<td>Moderate engagement, medium resource-commitment, and interaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrative</td>
<td>Organizations’ mission, people, and values become integrated and work in tandem</td>
<td>High engagement, large resource commitment, intensive interaction</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Goal: Improve equity, efficiency, sustainability, and cost-effectiveness of fire service delivery within Allegheny County

A. CREATE A REGIONAL OFFICE TO PROVIDE ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT FOR VOLUNTEER COMPANIES

In order to provide fire services, volunteer fire companies take on a large number of administrative tasks, including record management, bookkeeping, and grant writing. While these duties are not directly related to fire suppression, they are essential to the operations of the organization.

A regional administrative office could manage day-to-day administrative responsibilities for volunteer companies, allowing volunteers to focus on the inputs that are directly related to fire services. Another form of resource sharing, a regional administrative office can provide support for future regionalization efforts. Cross-agency events like large-scale fundraising and joint training could be coordinated by the administrative office, further establishing trust and serving as a stepping stone to regionalization of operations.

B. CODIFY STANDARDS FOR LEVELS OF SERVICE ACROSS ALLEGHENY COUNTY TO PROVIDE INTERNETWORK ACCOUNTABILITY AND INCREASE JURISDICTIONAL EQUITY

By discussing service expectations and training requirements, municipalities and their fire service providers can start a dialogue on the essential resources and support that underpin fire protection. Standardizing minimum service and training levels can increase jurisdictional equity in the region, where fire protection is determined by the wealth of a community. The standards can give elected officials and fire companies a frame of reference and reduce concerns related to turnover, while providing a mode of accountability to the community they serve. In addition, reduced response times and adequate staffing can grow professional capital, building support for future cooperative efforts.  

As proposed by the SR 60 Commission, the Standard of Service Matrix and Training Requirements provides a framework for determining service and training levels, including required personnel, necessary equipment and apparatus, and capacity.

C. UNDERTAKE A REGIONAL STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESS TO BEGIN SHARED SERVICE PROVISION

Fire service delivery in Allegheny County has continued to operate based on a model that is no longer effective at addressing the shifting needs of our communities. Municipal fragmentation has created fire service that is inequitable, inefficient, unsustainable, and
cost-prohibitive. While fire service providers and elected officials acknowledge the gravity of the issue, maintaining the status quo is often the most politically acceptable course of action.

Initiating a strategic planning process will allow the region to contend with its fire service delivery issues in a collaborative, coordinated forum. The overarching goal of strategic planning is to increase public value through clarifying the vision, mission, and goals of involved organizations; forming strategies to meet the goals; and implementing the strategies. Strategic planning can build coalitions, improve stakeholder engagement, and refocus conversations around the common good. A steering committee should be created to provide support and establish legitimacy, composed of members with the authority and skills necessary for strategy implementation.

**END NOTES**


The Mt. Lebanon fire department exemplifies how a successful fire company can effectively govern itself despite the municipal fragmentation of a region. Currently operating under a Home Rule Charter, the Mt. Lebanon fire department is a combination department with 17 professional officers and 45 volunteers, serving 33,137 residents within a 6.6 square mile radius.¹ The department holds an ISO Class 1 rating, the highest of the PPO ISO classification system, which was upgraded from a class 3 rating in 2013. It is one of three internationally accredited fire departments in Pennsylvania under the Commission on Fire Appreciation International (CFAI) standards, and one of eighty-four accredited departments in the nation that does not operate under a career-based model. Finally, they have won numerous awards, including the Governor's Award for Local Government Excellence for their work on expanding its information technology to improve fire series throughout Mt. Lebanon.²

These successes are largely attributed to the effective administrative model that has trickled throughout its leadership to its recruitment. Quick response time and a modernized approach to recruitment has been developed and standardized on its website to allow for a quick application process for potential volunteers. This model is complemented through the work of its outreach and training divisions. By utilizing resources on a robust community outreach model, Mt. Lebanon offers a programmatic approach to encourage volunteerism and training through programs—such as the Citizen Fire Academy—they have managed to effectively train and recruit volunteers in the face of negative demographic trends.

Finally, the success of the department stems from a concentrated effort to build partnerships between municipal elected officials and the Mt. Lebanon fire department leadership. The most significant positive trait that may corroborate with the department’s success lies in the open lines of communication between the municipal manager, the fire chief, and elected officials. An interview conducted with the current MLFD Chief attributes the success of his department to regularly scheduled meetings with his elected officials. Effective education of elected officials from the fire chief may offer a positive step forward for other departments to replicate.

END NOTES

Pennsylvania’s VFDs are increasingly under financial and administrative threat from external and internal trends. While municipal fragmentation is largely to blame for the declining capacity-building of VFDs, internal struggles of declining volunteerism rates followed with increased service demands and expanded responsibilities has left VFDs struggling to compete—especially against paid and combination departments, who offer higher quality services for their residents.

While there has been a great deal of evidence on the subject of improving the structure and capacity of VFDs (and as of October 2020, there have been improvements from the Pennsylvania General Assembly), our findings conclude that a lack of concentrated relationship-building is not being encouraged at the municipal level. Volunteer fire chiefs, and their relative elected officials, must take meaningful steps to build ongoing partnerships, and develop a collaborative capacity to succeed despite the negative trends VFDs face. There are some immediate options interested stakeholders could utilize, such as coordinating a regional-unit office to provide administrative support, a standardization model-based approach, or a collaborative regional strategic planning process as pathways towards greater collaboration and more efficient uses of resources. While there is no guarantee VFDs can survive without making difficult decisions—such as the option to close or merge with another community—to effectively move forward, collaborative capacity-building must occur by all interested stakeholders.
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Building relationships is the first step to developing collaborative capacity and establishing public value. These relationships are essential in continuing to provide fire services to their communities as Allegheny County and the rest of the United States continues to face complications in sustaining volunteer departments. Establishing public value will ensure that stakeholders, including elected officials and the public, understand the benefit of supporting volunteer departments.

As a supplement to Recommendation I.C., the Take Action Toolkit provides tips and templates for volunteer firefighters looking to start discussions, strengthen connections, and highlight their public value.

Whether you are a Fire Chief facing severe challenges, or a concerned firefighter representing your community, this toolkit can be used as a practical first step towards building a partnership between you, your local elected officials, and your community to develop collaborative capacity.
TAKE ACTION TOOLKIT

Public Outreach Tools for Volunteer Fire Service Providers in Allegheny County

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INTRODUCTION

Despite the ever-changing nature of the industry, one thing has remained the same: the tradition, pride, and public value our volunteer firefighters provide. In contrast to the historical functions of volunteer fire service, increased demand for diversification has led to volunteers providing more than fire suppression. Our volunteers now offer services such as response to an expansive range of emergencies, fire prevention education, and community outreach.

This toolkit was developed for Allegheny County fire service providers to assist them in showcasing their value and building relationship with elected officials and the community. Intended to be adaptable to the distinctive attributes of each fire department while remaining targeted toward the region, three templates have been developed to simplify the outreach process.

Three templates are included in this toolkit:

• Introductory email to elected officials
• PowerPoint slide deck for presentations to elected officials
• Flyer for open house
Historically, volunteer fire departments have operated independently of municipal government, in spite of the municipality’s duty (See Municipal Responsibility for Emergency Services). With an increased emphasis on accountability and a more engaged electorate, elected officials have often opted to abdicate their responsibility for fire service provision.

Unlike many of the other services provided to the community at the municipal level, volunteer fire departments have served as an alternative provider of this essential service. Volunteers donate their time to not only provide fire protection to their community, but also to raise funds to support their operations. Thanks to the service of volunteers in the region, elected officials have been able to devote their time, effort, and funds to different priorities.

However, the volunteer fire service has changed along with society. Volunteerism is decreasing across America and the rise of dual incomes has limited the volunteer pool. The demand for diversification has expanded training requirements, growing the time commitment for volunteers. Equipment and apparatus needs have shifted to accommodate the new services areas and costs continue to increase.

Proactive engagement with elected officials accomplishes three goals: education, support, and relationship-building.

**Municipal Responsibility for Emergency Services in Pennsylvania**

Acts 7, 8, 9, and 31 of 2007/8 codified the duty to provide emergency services for boroughs, first and second class townships, and third class cities.

“(a) The [municipality] shall be responsible for ensuring that fire and emergency medical services are provided within the [municipality] by the means and to the extent determined by the [municipality], including the appropriate financial and administrative assistance for these services.

(b) The [municipality] shall consult with fire and emergency medical services providers to discuss the emergency services needs of the township.

(c) The [municipality] shall require any emergency services organizations receiving [municipality] funds to provide to the township an annual itemized listing of all expenditures of these funds before the [municipality] may consider budgeting additional funding to the organization.”

**Education**

For many elected officials, volunteer fire companies appear to be self-sufficient. Volunteers arrive to provide fire suppression when called upon. When an emergency occurs inside their municipality, a volunteer fire company responds. Elected officials patronize fish fries and bingo nights in support of the volunteers. Until they understand the threats facing the volunteer fire industry, elected officials are less willing to provide necessary support.
**Support**
Elected officials with positive impressions of their volunteer fire departments may be more receptive to requests for financial and administrative assistance. Showcasing the public value provided by volunteer fire in the community can bolster requests and highlight the cost savings provided by a volunteer service provision model.

**Relationship-Building**
Many volunteer fire companies report a strained relationship with their municipality. Elected officials are averse to take on the additional financial and administrative burden of fire services and may communicate reactively rather than proactively. Engaging with elected officials early on in their tenure allows fire companies to open up lines of communication that build strong relationships.

**TEMPLATE: INTRODUCTORY EMAIL TO ELECTED OFFICIALS**
To begin the dialogue, reach out to your elected official with an email to begin the process. This email template can serve as an introduction or an opportunity to reignite conversations.

An editable version of the email template can be accessed via this link: [Introductory Email]

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**Dear [Elected Official]:**

My name is [Name] and I am the Chief of [Department] in [Municipality]. As your fire chief, I am concerned over the challenges facing fire departments in our region. I would like to set up a meeting to discuss the future of fire services in our municipality.

I received a report from the Congress of Neighboring Communities that outlined the problems facing fire companies in Allegheny County. Fragmentation in our region has caused a number of challenges for the 180+ fire departments, and solving them will require us to work more closely together. Our ability to be effective stewards of public safety rests on us making tough decisions about the future of our services. Our constituents depend on the effectiveness of our services.

I believe we can find a mutually beneficial solution to these problems, and work together to improve our fire department's services, improve our working partnership between the municipality and our department, and ultimately improve how we help our residents.

Please let me know if you have any thoughts or questions. Thank you for your time and I look forward to hearing from you.

[Name]
Making the Case

Establishing Value

After a connection has been made with elected officials, volunteer fire companies can seize the opportunity to open up a dialogue regarding fire services. Elected officials may not be familiar with their fire department’s service catalog. They may not be aware of the costs of fire services or understand their responsibility to provide service to the community.

Engaging with elected officials provides a chance for fire departments to not only showcase their public value, but also an opportunity to underscore the complementary relationship between fire service providers and elected officials. Effective communication will establish value and provide a guide for elected officials to play an active role in service provision in their community.

Negotiating Agreement

When working with elected officials, keep these points from Fisher & Fry’s *Getting to Yes* in mind:

- **Remember to separate the people from the problem.** Like volunteer firefighters, elected officials aim to serve their communities. Both sides have a similar goal of building a better municipality, even though they may not always agree on the path forward. Try to understand why an elected official might hold a particular point of view and recognize that their opinions and decisions are not personal.

- **Focus on each side’s interests rather than positions.** Ask the elected officials about their positions and why they hold that point of view. Be ready and willing to offer your own interests and explain your underlying reasons. Starting a dialogue on each other’s interests will direct the conversation toward a solution and can form the basis for a mutually beneficial result.

- **Be open to collective problem-solving.** While you can come prepared with proposals, working with your elected officials to develop new ideas allows both sides to play an active role. Brainstorming together reduces the potential for all-or-nothing positions and can generate solutions that are compatible and complementary.

- **Keep to the facts.** When facing a difficult conversation, use objective criteria to keep the discussion grounded. Using national standards from the NFPA or the ISO as a framework can ensure both parties are evaluating fire services with the same criteria.

Following Up

After the first meeting, reach out again in two to three weeks to continue building the relationship. Elected officials may be more receptive to requests when you’ve kept in contact even without an ask on the table. Sending monthly reports or personal invitations for events can strengthen your relationship and can provide an opening to discuss concerns as they arise.

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For an introductory meeting, the conversation should revolve around three topics: education, action items, and communication. This PowerPoint presentation is tailored to address the three main themes.

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<th>TOPIC</th>
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<th>SLIDES</th>
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| Education      | Review your department, the state of fire service in the region, service components and costs, and threats and opportunities for volunteer fire service | • Department Overview  
• Fire Service in Allegheny County  
• Service Components  
• Service Costs  
• Opportunities and Threats |
| Action Items   | Discuss expectations for volunteer fire command staff and elected officials, reiterate accountability | • Fire Departments and Elected Officials: A Partnership  
• Accountability to the Community |
| Communication  | Provide email, phone, and social media links to allow elected official to keep in touch | • Contact Information |

The PowerPoint presentation can be accessed at this link: [Presentation to Elected Officials](#)
GETTING THE WORD OUT
Connecting with the Community

Fire departments are inherently public-facing. When community members call 911, firefighters play an important role as first responders. In addition to providing fire suppression and emergency response, they provide support to people experiencing a traumatic life event.

On-scene support is far from the only interaction firefighters have with the public. Volunteer fire companies have always been community-focused organizations. From fish fries to parades, our region has come to value and rely on the events hosted by our volunteer fire companies.

There’s a reason that events like bingo and pancake breakfasts are the go-to fundraisers for volunteer fire companies: they are moneymakers. However, they can also serve as a venue for educating the community on the public services provided by volunteer departments and highlighting the public value of volunteer firefighters.

TEMPLATE: FLYER FOR AN OPEN HOUSE

For many communities, the annual open house held by their volunteer department is a much-anticipated event. While the food and fun are the draw, open houses allow fire departments to show the community more about their work. Equipment demonstrations allow the public to get hands-on experience, while firefighters can provide information on the costs, maintenance, and training that is required to purchase and operate the tools. Kids can gear up in turnout gear as firefighters talk about the weight of the gear and how each component protects them in a fire.

Open houses can also serve as a recruiting event—make sure to have paper applications or a computer for electronic applications set up for interested guests. Photos and videos captured during open houses can be used for future recruiting or fundraising communications.

This template can be accessed at this link: Open House Flyer
Improving fire services in Allegheny County will take a collaborative effort. This toolkit is aimed at the volunteer firefighters who have been driving the conversation, but elected officials and the community also play a role in determining the future of fire service delivery in the region.

Through education, communication, and outreach, volunteer fire departments can proactively engage with elected officials and the community. These efforts can spur conversations that turn into actions.

**The Good Governance Trifecta**

Governance is the act of public decision-making. No longer exclusive to politicians and public administrators, all members of a community can be active participants in making decisions that impact their municipality. The traditional government has historically operated independently of its constituents and of the organizations that support it. In recent years, an increased emphasis on accountability, transparency, and efficiency has prompted the public to be proactive in working alongside their elected officials to improve their community. However, many citizens are still removed from all levels of governments. Civic engagement should be encouraged by service providers, elected officials, and all levels of government to make certain that the public is represented in public decision-making.

Public safety is an issue that concerns all of us. As individuals, we may not call for fire services on a daily basis. But as a community, fire service is a daily necessity. We all want reassurance that there are first responders like our volunteer firefighters on the other end of dispatch to help anyone in need. It is a base-level service that we all count on to ensure a safe, livable community. Through outreach, volunteer fire departments can invite their elected officials and citizens to join them in moving toward a fire service delivery system that is more efficient, cost, equitable, and sustainable.

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“It has to be a collaboration between the fire departments, the elected officials, and the community itself.”
**Recommendation I: Build Partnerships between Stakeholders to Develop Collaborative Capacity**

| Criterion | Status Quo | Action Steps | Overall
| --- | --- | --- | ---
| **Cost** (What financial repercussions will this have for municipalities/region?) | High | Low | Medium | Low
| **Efficiency** (Does this maximize utility for all stakeholders?) | Low | High | High | High
| **Effectiveness** (How well will this address the issue?) | Low | Medium | Medium | Medium
| **Equity** (How will this alter the distribution of benefits and costs?) | Low | High | Medium | Low
| **Stakeholder Acceptability** (Is this an acceptable course of action for stakeholders?) | High | Medium | Medium | High
| **Sustainability** (Is this viable long-term?) | Low | High | High | Medium

**Action Steps**
- Engage in resource sharing to develop mutually beneficial collaborations
- Provide joint training to create low-stakes environments for fostering concerted operational capacity
- Encourage proactive practices in educating elected officials and the public on the value of fire services

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**Recommendation II: Focus Efforts on Regionalized Fire Service Delivery**

| Criterion | Status Quo | Action Steps | Overall
| --- | --- | --- | ---
| **Cost** (What financial repercussions will this have for municipalities/region?) | High | High | Low | Medium
| **Efficiency** (Does this maximize utility for all stakeholders?) | Low | High | High | High
| **Effectiveness** (How well will this address the issue?) | Low | High | Medium | High
| **Equity** (How will this alter the distribution of benefits and costs?) | Low | High | High | High
| **Stakeholder Acceptability** (Is this an acceptable course of action for stakeholders?) | High | Medium | Low | Medium
| **Sustainability** (Is this viable long-term?) | Low | High | Medium | High

**Action Steps**
- Create a regional office to provide administrative support for volunteer companies
- Codify standard levels of service and training across Allegheny County
- Undertake a strategic planning process to begin shared service provision