

**ICMA 2011 Annual Awards Program  
Program Excellence Awards Nomination Form**

**SECTION 1: Information About the Nominated Program**

Program Excellence Award Category (*select only one*):

- Community Health and Safety
- Community Partnership (Winner of the same award from the Ohio City/County Management Association in February 2011)
- Community Sustainability
- Strategic Leadership and Governance

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Name of program being nominated: Northeast Fire Collaborative

Jurisdiction(s) where program originated:

1. City of Loveland, OH \*
2. City of Blue Ash, OH \*
3. City of Mason, OH \*
4. Symmes Township, OH
5. City of Sharonville, OH
6. Sycamore Township, OH

Jurisdiction population(s): Data from the 2010 Census: 102,350 Total

1. City of Loveland, OH 12,081
2. City of Blue Ash, OH 12,114
3. City of Mason, OH 30,712
4. Symmes Township 14,683
5. City of Sharonville, OH 13,560
6. Sycamore Township, OH 19,200

\* City Managers in these communities (Tom Carroll, David Waltz, and Eric Hanson, respectively) are members of ICMA.

Month: March Year: 2009

Name(s) and title(s) of individual(s) who should receive recognition for this award at the ICMA Annual Conference in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, September 2011.

Name: Tom Carroll, on behalf of Fire Chief Otto Huber

Title: City Manager Jurisdiction: Loveland, OH

Name: Eric Hanson, on behalf of Fire Chief John Moore

Title: City Manager Jurisdiction: Mason, OH

Name: David Waltz, on behalf of Fire Chief Richard R. Brown

Title: City Manager Jurisdiction: Blue Ash, OH

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**SECTION 2: Information About the Nominator/Primary Contact**

Name of contact: Michelle Knowland

Title: ICMA Management      Jurisdiction: City of Loveland  
Fellow

Street address: 120 W Loveland Ave

City: Loveland      State/Province: OH

Zip/Postal Code: 45140      Country: US

Telephone: 513-683-0150      Fax: 513-583-3040

E-mail: mknowland@lovelandoh.com

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**SECTION 3: Narrative**

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**Problem Assessment: *Mutual Aid Residential Fire***

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In 2007, multiple agencies responded to a mansion fire in Southwest Ohio. Because there were no fire officers from the local jurisdiction at the scene, the fire suppression was commanded by a relatively inexperienced firefighter in that community. Although everyone in the family had exited the home, an aggressive interior attack was made with numerous tactical and safety errors that resulted in five firefighters from several jurisdictions suffering serious burns.

This mutual aid fire risked the lives of numerous firefighters and caused serious injury due to a lack of a coordinated response and little or no hazard zone management or incident command presence. As a result, Fire Chiefs from Loveland-Symmes, Blue Ash, Sharonville, and Sycamore realized that placing their firefighters in a situation where multiple jurisdictions with different policies, different training levels, different risk management tolerances and varying fire suppression tactics was unacceptable. The mansion fire provided a *piercing moment of clarity* that a new approach to fire ground safety and multi jurisdiction response was desperately needed.

In the Cincinnati region, as in many other metropolitan regions across the country, first- and second-ring suburbs incorporated to avoid becoming part of a central city. The fact that the region is ringed with smaller communities means that fire service is balkanized with dramatically different service levels from community to community. Previous attempts to reduce the patchwork of fire services in Southwest Ohio have failed, largely because the local fire department is a key part of a smaller community's self identity. Moreover, in the Cincinnati region, adjacent suburbs have widely varying fire service levels (e.g. volunteer vs professional firefighters, paramedics vs advanced life support services, etc.). Thus, prior attempts to consolidate or merge departments have proven unworkable.

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The Northeast Fire Collaborative (hereinafter referred to as NEFC) concept acknowledged the shortcomings of previous attempts to merge or consolidate fire departments because wholesale consolidation is politicized, contentious, and difficult to achieve. Yet, the mansion fire revealed that different departments needed to operate cohesively to protect the public and firefighters themselves. A third way had to be found, and found during the worst economic climate in 80 years with heightened scrutiny over taxes and government.

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**Program Implementation**

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Following the mansion fire in 2008, four frustrated fire chiefs began meeting to work on revising the model of fire service for their communities. Chief Brown of Blue Ash, Chief Huber of Loveland-Symmes, Chief Hammonds of Sharonville and Chief Jetter of Sycamore Township identified the common objectives that needed to be achieved, which include

1. Coordinating multi-jurisdictional fire response so that the closest fire department – regardless of political jurisdiction lines – responds first;
2. Ensuring skilled fire officers establish and maintain incident command;
3. Forging a shared hazard zone management philosophy and approach;
4. Implementing and training on shared policies and tactics so that firefighters from different departments approach the emergency the same way;
5. Deciding in advance – before the 9-1-1 call is made – that responding firefighters will risk their lives only to save savable lives, will risk a little to save savable property, and will not risk anything for unsavable property; and
6. Reducing costs and improving efficiencies to address the economic challenges caused by the global recession.

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Having identified these objectives, the participating chiefs met for many hours and reached agreement on how all the departments would respond to and fight a fire in each other's communities. Debates about fire tactics and procedures were long, always passionate, and involved every chief making concessions on the shared approach. Through this extensive and at times painful process, all departments have come to approach the response to fire and EMS situations using the same set of procedures, and all departments have had to change and adapt to the new, shared SOPs and SOGs.

Once SOPs and SOGs were established and agreed upon, the four departments began training together. This combined training not only built relationships and helped the crews from different departments bond with each other, it has also proven to be more cost effective. Because the departments were professional and of similar quality and performance expectations, the training increased mutual regard at the firefighter level. Through training together on an ongoing basis it became clear to all firefighters and junior officers that this collaborative was not a fad, but was a new, sustained way of doing business. On a number of occasions during active commercial fires, the principles from the training ground were successfully applied and it became self evident that departments could collaborate without losing their autonomy.

After seeing the success of the collaborative and recognizing the potential to further enhance the NEFC, the City of Mason joined in 2009. This brings the collaborative to its current size with 345 firefighters protecting 105,000 people in 71 square miles overlapping portions of four counties in the northeastern portion of the Cincinnati metropolitan area.

The NEFC continues to evolve. Presently the collaborative is working on shared vehicle maintenance, developing shared vehicle specifications for replacing ambulances and fire trucks and reducing expenditures through joint purchases. Two of the jurisdictions are contemplating

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the creation of a Council of Governments (COG) to jointly purchase a reserve pumper. When successful, this COG will serve as the foundation for deepening the partnerships between and among the member departments, with the potential for huge cost savings on shared heavy fire equipment in the years to come.

Thus, the several departments are continuously looking to enhance the levels of intergovernmental cooperation and collaboration. This effort has only just begun.

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**Results or Measurable Outcomes**

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The immediate result of the NEFC was putting more firefighters and paramedics on the fire scene faster with the appropriate management to handle the situation. This means each of the member departments can meet the NFPA 1710 guideline every time without increasing full-time equivalent firefighters. Individually, these departments could never afford to have those resources solely committed to their community. Meeting NFPA emergency response guidelines no longer means ‘emptying’ fire districts for every run. The closest NEFC units respond regardless of jurisdictional boundaries. This is an overall improvement in service by having units available in each district more often.

What makes the NEFC unique is that it goes miles beyond mere mutual aid agreements and compliance with NFPA guidelines.

Practically speaking, the collaborative requires each of the responding departments approach any emergency situation the same way. The collaborative achieves not just more firefighters on the scene, but it puts trained firefighters from multiple jurisdictions on the same fire scene working with the same tactical approach and risk management philosophy. Thus, the

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participants approach the emergency as if they are one large department, even though they remain independent.

In order to ensure training on hazardous zone and risk management, the Northeast Command Training Center was established with all NEFC fire departments sharing in the cost. This Command Training Center enabled the NEFC to divert from traditional training methods with high-tech, state-of-the art web-based and in-class virtual simulation training. In this environment firefighters are able to be placed in a realistic fire ground scenario to test their skills of operating at the tactical and strategic level of fire ground operations. By utilizing this type of training, the NEFC was able to retrain and facilitate cultural change in a very short time period that in traditional methods would have taken years to accomplish.

Not only is this training effective and cost efficient, it is incredibly innovative. The NEFC Command Training Center is one of only two in the Great Lakes Region. This training has also been adopted by the International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFC) Health and Safety Committee, the International Fire Service Accreditation Congress (IFSAC), and the Great Lakes Division of the IAFC.

Beyond operations, there are financial and administrative benefits as well. The buying power of five departments with almost 350 firefighters makes vendors more aggressive in pricing to protect market share. Through the pooling of the NEFC buying power, collaborative departments saved in 2010 30% on turnout gear, 25% on disposable EMS supplies, and 50% on annual ladder testing. Based on this success, NEFC departments are working on joint RFP's for uniforms, annual physicals and vehicle maintenance bids.

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The NEFC has therefore achieved all of its objectives that were established in 2008 and additional opportunities for coordinated autonomy with improved efficiency are being continuously identified and acted upon.

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**Lessons Learned**

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The NEFC model is easily repeatable by other jurisdictions in other locations, both in Ohio and around the country. A similar collaborative is being formed presently in suburban Dayton, Ohio. There is little reason why this could not be done in other metropolitan areas in other professionally run local governments. Below is a summary of the lessons that have been learned, which may help those who follow in the NEFC's footsteps.

The collaborative is unique as it was initiated by the Fire Chiefs themselves. It was not imposed upon them by an unfunded mandate or legislative dictate, and they took the time and space necessary to forge their own agreements on tactics and strategy. Spirited debate and compromise on tactics, operating procedures, and guidelines is crucial to achieve a successful collaborative. Different chiefs in different regions forming their own collaborative might make different tactical or procedural decisions than the NEFC; the crux is that the chiefs themselves deliberate and decide how their individual departments will forge a unified set of SOPs.

What the chiefs accomplished went beyond mere independence yet was short of a merger, all while achieving the efficiency and economy of a larger fire department. The political and economic ramifications of the outright merging of organizations has proven Sisyphean even under the best of circumstances. The NEFC therefore provides a third way in which coordinated, autonomous departments can achieve economies of scale while sidestepping merger pitfalls.

Residents are expecting and demanding changes in government operations, particularly in

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the expensive public safety arena. The fire service must change its business model in order to survive because the amount of financial and human resources will not increase in the coming years. The ability to provide an improved service model with less cost on a voluntary basis without further regulatory action is unique for one department let alone when several departments are involved. The essence of professional management in local government is to proactively shape the way in which inevitable change occurs. Since its founding, ICMA has advocated the importance of local government leaders adapting to changing community needs through professional city management. The NEFC is an example of professional local government managers getting ahead of the curve, adapting to the changing community demands, and doing so without this change being imposed from outside.

When it comes to financial matters, the NEFC built on early successes before taking on the more complicated challenges of collaboration. This method may work for jurisdictions that look to purchase turnout gear, EMS supplies, and other shared expenses before collaborating on larger projects such as joint specifications and purchasing of heavy equipment. There are plenty of ways for departments to save money through collaborative purchasing and demonstrate cost savings to build confidence from the public and elected officials.

Service quality is just as important as quantity. The intent of NFPA 1710 was to provide adequate staffing on the fire ground for the safety of firefighters. NFPA 1710 did not address the training and competency of command officers. The NEFC did. Now, enough Chief Officers respond on structure fires from the five departments to fill the eight critical functions of incident command. This allows the first-responding company officer to be placed back with his or her company, not assigned to a incident command function that he or she is not adequately trained or experienced enough to handle. Interestingly, it is common for the incident commander of a fire

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inside the City of Loveland to be a chief in Blue Ash or Mason and so forth. The resident in need of help is not concerned with the badge on the command officer's sleeve or insignia on the apparatus, only that her house and family are assisted as needed by the best combination of fire professionals.

The unique level of staff-generated collaboration generated considerable media attention, which in turn spurred a great deal of feedback from citizens not only in the member communities but in communities not involved in the collaborative as well. Discipline has been required to ensure that the NEFC does not grow too large. It is better to have multiple, manageable collaboratives adjacent to each other rather than growing one collaborative too much. Departments not willing to embrace the collaborative, risk-based approach to dilute the benefits of the NEFC or spread its shared resources too thin may not be appropriate to add to a collaborative because of the disparity. Instead, these jurisdictions are encouraged to form their own collaborative with like-minded and sized entities.

The leadership—elected and appointed—of each community continues to be very proud and supportive. Several of the communities have passed official resolutions to support the Chief's in this new venture. The Departments are now wearing collaborative clothing and patches while on duty as well as identifying Fire and EMS equipment with NEFC lettering.

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**Conclusion**

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Collaboration is the only way the fire service is going to survive in the future as tax dollars become tighter and greater services are demanded. By embracing change and shaping the outcome, the NEFC has shown a path forward for other urban and suburban fire departments in Ohio, and indeed, around the country.