

Public Safety Concept in the Post-9/11 World

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More than 15 years ago, authors Kenneth Chelst and Leonard Matarese described in an ICMA report the efficiencies and successes gained by the consolidation of police and fire departments.¹ They defined the issues surrounding a police-fire merger, identified the key decisions that had to be made, developed a process to assess and overcome environmental barriers to a merger, and presented a mathematical model for predicting the impact on costs and performance of a proposed police-fire merger.

Specifically, they were addressing mergers where police officers and firefighters routinely worked together, rather than just administrative consolidations. Yet, in a post-9/11 environment, does consolidation continue to make sense? Is it an efficient use of human and financial resources? 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?

The driving force toward consolidation is often the opportunity to save money in the provision of police, fire, and EMS services. These services are usually the local government’s greatest expenses and often cause the most difficult management issues. 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.

The earlier report demonstrated that consolidated police-fire agencies offer an opportunity to reduce costs if properly implemented, but consolidation also provides a wide range of other less quantifiable yet potentially more important benefits. One benefit is that consolidation provides additional human resources to engage in what was then a newly recognized style of law enforcement called community policing. In addition, a single emergency management command structure can provide a coordinated response to any emergency.

Over the past decade and a half, many communities have embraced the community-policing philosophy and developed new approaches to interaction with the citizens they serve. The September 11, 2001, attacks demonstrated the critical need for communities to coordinate their responses to emergencies of all types. Unfortunately, many communities have yet to implement a fully functional, coordinated approach to system-wide emergencies.

Because of terrorism, police and fire departments today see their roles differently than they did 15 years ago. As the first responders to potential terrorist attacks with a significant responsibility to prevent such attacks from occurring, local police and fire agencies now have a much heavier workload.

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.

COMMUNITY POLICING

Consolidated agencies can field a larger number of patrol officers to engage in the problem solving that successful community policing requires. The position of public safety officer can attract officers whose skills and interests are broader than those needed for a more traditional police agency. These are exactly the kinds of individuals thought to be the best community-policing officers.

The U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Community Oriented Policing Services continues to support police departments that implement recruiting and hiring processes that attract individuals who have a strong commitment to "service" as opposed to "adventure." This emphasis makes it clear that ensuring public safety involves more than just catching bad guys.

If the effort is to provide a level of services that goes beyond the traditional enforcement model, the public safety concept may well be the ideal. The well-trained public safety officer arrives at the scene prepared and equipped to respond to whatever the problem is. The officer who is as prepared to bandage a child's knee as arrest a drug dealer embodies the spirit of service envisioned in the community-policing model.

Community policing is a philosophy of crime fighting in which police work in a proactive partnership with citizens to identify and solve crime-related problems. The essence of effective community policing is the proactive partnership with a variety of citizens that leads to identifying and solving problems. The focus of community policing is not simply responding to crime but preventing crime and resolving community problems that affect crime.

Effective community policing is the honest acceptance that law enforcement and the community, broadly defined, must work together as partners to fight crime. Adherents to community policing work closely with a variety of organizations, groups, and individuals to develop strategic approaches to educate community members about crime-related issues they may encounter and how to reduce the likelihood of becoming a victim of crime.

Successful community policing reduces actual crime and the fear of crime and also improves the overall quality of life in the community.

COMMUNITY PUBLIC SAFETY

Community public safety is the next evolution of the community-policing philosophy. To achieve community

public safety, local government executives examine all public safety resources and develop implementing strategies to ensure the most effective coverage and response at the optimal cost.

Enhanced use of fire, police, emergency services, corrections, and other public safety resources can result in significant cost reductions and better service delivery. Almost 100 years ago, Grosse Pointe Shores, Michigan, created the first unified public safety department.

Collaborative and coordinated work relationships among fire, police, and other public safety services as exemplified by the public safety officer concept are sorely needed to address the demands of hometown security in this post 9-11 environment. Firefighters, for example, could support law enforcement in non-sworn civilian positions or in soft security roles to relieve police officers of administrative tasks so they could devote more resources to the street.

As more resources are devoted to address homeland security and fewer to local crime problems, it is important to understand that true homeland security cannot be realized at the expense of hometown security. Public safety officers can help ensure citizen engagement and build effective problem-solving partnerships at the local level. 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.

Public safety officers are not needed simply as first responders to emergencies. They can also ensure that critical crime-scene evidence is preserved and collected. Personnel not trained as public safety officers who respond to fire or medical emergencies can unwittingly compromise evidence needed to prosecute terrorists and other criminals. A multidisciplinary and authorized public safety officer can better protect evidence and ensure an effective public safety response.

A public safety officer who is also trained in community policing:

- Works well with a broad cross-section of public safety responders, including law enforcement, to address crime, emergencies, and homeland security concerns.
- Enables proactive responses to social disorder, physical decay, and environmental issues that lead to crime and acts of terrorism and affects the effective reaction to natural disasters.
- Improves collaboration, cooperation, and response by public safety agencies.
- Fosters a shared sense of responsibility between public safety agencies and the community.
- Empowers the jurisdiction to make more effective and efficient use of limited public safety resources.

The Morganton, North Carolina, Department of Public Safety was formed in 1976 from separate police and fire departments. The department has 102 employees—67 sworn personnel and 35 civilians. The Field Operations Bureau oversees the operations of the fire stations and six specialty units—criminal investigations, special emergency response team (SERT), the school resource officer program, drug awareness resistance education (DARE) program, community policing, and the K-9 program.

According to City Manager Sally Sandy, “In Morganton, the public safety concept works because there is a strong political and management commitment to it.” Chief of Public Safety Mark Talbert adds, “More importantly, there is a strong commitment on the part of employees to making it work. Our employees understand the public safety concept and are committed to delivering the best services to our citizens.”

Chief Talbert has 22 years with the Morganton public safety department and believes that the public safety concept offers improved communications between fire and police and reduces rivalry that may exist in traditional public safety agencies. Combining fire and police authorities into a public safety officer with dual responsibilities under the same organizational umbrella

has helped to create stronger working relationships between these two major public safety components as well as with the public they serve.

PUBLIC SAFETY AND UNITY OF COMMAND

The public safety concept also offers a continuity of command that traditional police and fire agencies lack. Whatever the emergency, the chain of command ultimately leads to one individual responsible for the entire event. In such a system, the various players, regardless of their specialties, are part of the same team, operating under the same leadership and, most important, within the same communications system.

The critical nature of that continuity of command and communications was evident after the September 11 attacks on New York City. Analysis afterward showed clearly that police officers and firefighters could not communicate with each other through a shared radio network. In fact, each emergency service had set up its own command post, and even officials of a single department were not able to communicate with each other.

An investigation by the National Institute of Standards and Technology found that the New York City police and fire departments “were not working together at the same command post, and they did not formulate unified orders and direction for their departments.” Although the consequences of this inability to communicate and coordinate are impossible to quantify, the importance of addressing the issue became obvious to the 9-11 Commission and others.

Professionals in the field have known for a long time that it is difficult to coordinate emergency services. In fact, a management protocol called the Incident Command System (ICS) has been around for years. In 2006, the federal government required that all local governments have an ICS plan before they can qualify for federal funds. Nonetheless, such formal plans alone cannot ensure a coordinated response when two or more responding agencies report to different command staffs and operate on different com-

munication systems.

The importance of what is now called interoperability, the ability of emergency response agencies to use interoperable communications, has been recognized by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). The SAFECOM program, managed by the DHS Science and Technology Directorate’s Office for Interoperability and Compatibility (OIC), is one of several programs designed to assist in the coordination of interoperability efforts at the local, tribal, state, and federal levels, with the goal of improving emergency preparedness and response.

A recent survey by SAFECOM found that despite five years of effort, full interoperability still remains an elusive goal. Among the key findings of the survey was that smaller agencies tend to be less advanced in interoperability than larger agencies.

Setting up a consolidated public safety agency with its continuity of command and communications presents an outstanding opportunity for local governments to address the operability issue as part of a larger effort to improve delivery of day-to-day services and maximize emergency response capabilities.

Woodbury, Minnesota (population 57,000), a city whose population has grown by more than 500 percent over the past 25 years, in 1996 combined its police, fire, and emergency medical services into one department under the leadership of a public safety director. The city earlier had decided to provide advanced life support through the police department, with police medics responding to calls in specially equipped squad cars.

Currently, 18 of the department’s 58 sworn officers are paramedics. The fire department, which combines paid-on-call and career personnel, provides ambulance transport. The system has worked well for the past 11 years, and the citizens of Woodbury give the public safety department high marks for service, with more than 90 percent rating services as above average or excellent in the city’s biennial community survey.

Like other localities nationwide, Woodbury is having trouble attracting paid-on-call firefighters. In an effort to ensure rapid response to fire calls, the city recently embarked on a further consolidation where some public safety officers will be trained as firefighters although none will be trained in police, fire, and EMS. As an integral part of this change, the city is creating a management system in which one individual will be responsible for management of all public safety services, whether police, fire, or EMS.

City Administrator Clinton Gridley explains: "To complete the full integration process and to ensure that all the resources of public safety are coordinatively brought to bear on any particular situation, the city of Woodbury will be implementing a watch or shift commander system that will assign one individual per shift in either the police or fire division to make key field decisions and to orchestrate our activities.

This role will not involve creating another management layer, but

rather will be a flexible designation for each shift." By creating this position, Woodbury will ensure full unity of command because at all times one individual will be in command of all public safety responses.

SUMMARY

The world of emergency services delivery has changed dramatically over the past decade. Local officials are being asked to provide services far beyond the scope of traditional police and fire department activities. Preparation and training for responses to chemical and biological attacks are now part of most agencies' routines.

At the same time these additional demands on limited resources are occurring, greater emphasis is placed on partnering with the community, requiring even greater resources. All the while, local government leaders face the never-ending pressure to hold the line on the costs of operations. Local leaders seeking to meet these unprecedented demands can examine and gauge how

merged police and fire services can benefit their communities. **PM**

¹Kenneth Chelst and Leonard Matarese, "Forecasting the Outcome of Police/Fire Consolidations," Management Information Services Report (Washington, D.C.: ICMA, Volume 23, No.4, April 1991).

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The opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.

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