



# Position Statement

## **Consolidation of Fire/Emergency and Law Enforcement Departments and the Creation of Public Safety Officers**

The International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFC) restates and reaffirms its position in opposition to the consolidation of fire and emergency services departments with local law enforcement agencies, including the transition to public-safety officers who are cross-trained to perform both fire/emergency medical services and law-enforcement functions.

Current economic conditions have led to pressure for municipal governments to reduce costs. Among the national trends being promoted by some public administration and management consultants is the consolidation of critical public-safety functions.

The IAFC opposed such action while still in its infancy in 1877 and has continued to do so over the organization's lifetime. A review of the history of the IAFC's policy statements opposing this issue—in 1877, 1954, 1957, 1963/1964, 1980, 1991—shows that the timing reflects, in all but one case, periods when the U.S. economy was in the midst of, or immediately recovering from, a significant downturn in the U.S. economy.<sup>1</sup> This suggests that the recent trends are not sound economic innovations relevant to today's environment, but rather recycled quick fixes meant to balance strained local budgets.

Conversely, ensuring quality of service and the safety of our citizens and responders must continue to be the central priority of any public-safety agency and any municipality that supports them. The IAFC has examined the issue as it relates to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century fire/EMS department and continues to believe the consolidation of fire/emergency service departments and law-enforcement agencies creates a hazardous environment for the public and responders.

- The basic mission of fire/EMS and police departments is vastly different. Despite a shared goal of public safety, the mission, objectives, tactics and threats remain separate and distinct at both at an operational and public-expectation level.
  - The activities of law-enforcement officers and firefighters/paramedics require vastly different training. These critical skills not only require different initial training, but also very different ongoing education and exercise.
  - The activities of law-enforcement officers and firefighters/paramedics require extensive training periods to learn life-critical skills and abilities. The acquisition, maintenance, training and proper use of highly technical

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<sup>1</sup> In the single exception (1963-64), the IAFC position explicitly focused on the restoration of departments that had previously been consolidated, which may have reflected a trend toward consolidation during the recession of 1960-61.

protective equipment and technologies requires significant continuing education and skill-validation methodologies.

- o The fire/EMS service typically enjoys a position of trust in the community that transcends fear of authority or reprisal. Law enforcement's mission to prevent crime from different threats creates varied public opinion and reaction, including being perceived as a threat.
  - o Responder's typically have a personal predisposition to be better suited for the distinct duties and environment of either fire/emergency or law-enforcement service. Personnel who must repeatedly switch between two roles are subject to even higher levels of stress that may contribute to inefficiency, morale or health issues. A preference for one or the other role may also diminish efficiency or lead to higher job dissatisfaction.
  - o Together, these differences in perspectives are critically important to not only address traditional threats to public safety, but also the still-evolving homeland-security missions of local responders.
- The consolidation concept replaces the functional unit of a fire department (company unit) that can rapidly assess and respond to many hazards with the limited response of an individual or two individuals in a single unit. These small numbers are unacceptable for the fireground, urgent medical care and other situations where citizen and public-safety personnel lives are dependant on rapid intervention.
  - Similarly, consolidation exchanges the team concept for individual action. Individual action on a fire or EMS scene leads to unsafe acts, inefficiency and chaos, which too often has fatal consequences.
  - Consolidation complicates specific mission-based focus, resulting in confusion and hazardous inefficiency in on-scene operations. In addition to hazardous response conditions, such an environment can contribute to personnel morale and retention problems.
  - Despite the infrequency of fire in any given community, the United States has a clear and present fire danger, with more fire-related deaths than many of our industrialized counterparts. Likewise, Americans are at continued risk for heart-attack, stroke and other diseases that routinely require EMS services. Consolidation supporters seek to diminish the criticality for fire prevention and suppression activities and traditional medical services based on the infrequency of these events in some individual communities.
  - Furthermore, efforts to view the fire/EMS service only in the context of fire suppression or general emergency medical care are outdated and dangerously narrow. The fire and emergency service department encompasses diverse skill sets meant to address a wide and growing range of threats to the public, including vehicle accidents, search and rescue, natural disasters, hazardous materials, radiological threats, bio-security and pandemic identification and response.

- Consolidation adversely affects the local, regional and national-response capabilities by diminishing the efficacy of mutual-aid agreements and other contributions to national and international response efforts. Consolidated systems may not have the depth and breadth to provide assistance to a large-scale incident while maintaining basic services in their own communities. Likewise, the ability to receive effective mutual aid may be diminished by the same mission confusion reflected at the local level. At the very least, consolidating communities would need to revisit and rewrite all existing mutual-aid agreements, regional and national response plans and any exercise and training associated with them, costing precious time and resources.

While service quality is certainly the most critical area of concern, the IAFC believes that consolidation also provides a false economic sense of security that only further harms the public-safety environment in both the short and long terms.

- Consolidation does not affect the volume of calls for fire, EMS or police assistance, and jurisdictions still need to meet that demand. This may be especially burdensome to communities that have seen rapid growth in the past several years, but are now faced with servicing a larger population with less revenue. The economic downturn may also increase demand for emergency services as housing markets cause population shifts (positive and negative), and possible increases in crime, including fire-related insurance fraud.
- Cross-training and purchasing of equipment of consolidated agencies, as well as higher personnel turnover sometimes witnessed in communities where consolidation has occurred, contribute to the same or higher expenses as maintaining separate departments.

Many communities have unprecedented levels of cooperation between the fire/EMS department, law-enforcement agencies and the city manager based on an improved understanding of how their distinct missions and critical skill sets intersect to achieve shared goals. There are also many resources available to improve critical coordination, data collection and efficiency within a community and with neighboring jurisdictions, including the Labor-Management Initiative, mutual aid and accreditation. This environment should be leveraged to create new and effective solutions.

The IAFC makes the following recommendations to both fire/EMS service personnel and their colleagues in public-safety and public administration:

- Fire/EMS service leaders must take an active role in addressing budget issues, including:
  - o presenting and explaining relevant data;
  - o understanding nonpublic-safety budget changes that may impact quality or demand of service;
  - o working with city leaders, other public-safety leaders and fire-department personnel to explore sound budget alternatives that benefit the community.

- Departments and fire chiefs should immediately begin to pursue the fire-department accreditation and chief fire-officer designation process through the Center for Public Safety Excellence, an independent nonprofit organization whose accreditation process was developed jointly by IAFC and ICMA. The process includes a community risk assessment, which is essential prior to any emergency-response resource change. The goal of the process is to develop a long-term quality improvement plan for the fire department, including cost considerations.
- Decisions regarding fire/EMS service and public-safety resource changes should not be made without the following:
  - o Collection and evaluation of good data regarding the community's resources, demographics, risks and threats.
  - o Development of a standard of cover for the response area that outlines the expected levels of service based on a community risk-assessment process.
  - o Discussion with—not just buy-in from—all public-safety agency leaders, including how the community's broad economic picture may impact public-safety quality of or demands for service.
  - o Discussion and understanding of the impact of any decisions and models set in place to address any unintended consequences—political, operational, environmental or legal—of those decisions.
- Establishment of metrics to gather specific data relating to the impact of structural, operational or budget changes on service quality.
- Public education and understanding of the decisions and the consequences they will have.

**Conclusion:** Fire, EMS and law-enforcement staffing models are complex and cannot be based on establishing a cheaper method of service delivery without regard to overall system impacts. Economic changes in the local economy are just one of many challenges faced by the fire and emergency service. They are as real today as they were yesterday, and will be again in the future.

The IAFC remains opposed to consolidation, which offers a false short-term hope and real long-term problems. Quality of service should never be sacrificed and preventable loss of life should not be dismissed to balance a bottom line. Alternatively, fire/EMS chiefs should work collaboratively to seek real solutions to building strong and efficient departments, based on data-driven models, which can leverage the highs and weather the lows of these natural and ever-present economic changes.

**ADOPTED BY: IAFC Board of Directors**

**DATE: January 23, 2009**