

**CONSOLIDATION/REGIONALIZATION OF THE HIALEAH FIRE DEPARTMENT
A PRAGMATIC EVALUATION ON SERVICE DELIVERY**

LEADING COMMUNITY RISK REDUCTION

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Appendices Not Included. Please visit the Learning Resource Center on the Web at <http://www.lrc.dhs.gov/> to learn how to obtain this report in its entirety through Interlibrary Loan.

Abstract

The problem researched was that within Miami-Dade County there had not been an evaluation of consolidation/regionalization models and their possible effects on service levels within the City of Hialeah. The purpose of the study was to evaluate consolidation/regionalization alternatives and describe their possible effects on service levels within the City of Hialeah. This was a descriptive research project. The research questions were:

1. Why consolidate/regionalize fire service provision?
2. What models for consolidation/regionalization are available?
3. How have other fire service organizations consolidated/regionalized the delivery of fire service?
4. Of the identified models, what are their positive and negative attributes?
5. What effect would consolidation/regionalization of fire service have on the services levels provided to the citizens of the City of Hialeah and at what cost?

The procedures involved a review inclusive of fire service and non-fire service literature as well as a survey of Florida fire departments.

The results found convincing rationale for consolidating fire service provision. It was also found that consolidation takes on many formats depending on local agreements. The results of the survey found that in Florida support is strong for consolidation depending on the particular situation. Finally, it was found that a decision to consolidate the Hialeah Fire Department (HFD) with the Miami-Dade Fire Rescue Department (MDFRD) presented too many unknown variables in regard to costs and level of service to move forward with a full consolidation.

The recommendations based on this study, were to consider consolidation as an alternative for the provision of fire services. The HFD should seek to establish cooperative agreements with

neighboring departments as a precursor to full consolidation. A comprehensive study should be commissioned to consider a consolidation of the HFD and MDFRD. Finally, future research should establish consolidation guidelines for use as a template by other fire service organizations.

Table of Contents

Abstract	2
Table of Contents	4
Introduction	5
Background and Significance	5
Literature Review	8
Procedures	21
Results	23
Discussion	26
Recommendations	28
References	30
Appendix A	35
Appendix B	36
Appendix C	39
Appendix D	40

Introduction

The Hialeah Fire Department, established in 1925, is charged with protecting the community against all hazards and mitigating emergency situations. The nature and cost of providing this service has become a topic of discussion between the administrative leadership of the City of Hialeah and Miami-Dade County. The problem is that within Miami-Dade County there has not been an evaluation of consolidation/ regionalization models and their possible effects on service levels within the City of Hialeah. The purpose of this Applied Research Project is to evaluate consolidation/ regionalization alternatives and describe their possible effects on service levels within the City of Hialeah. This is a descriptive research project. The research questions are:

1. Why consolidate/regionalize fire service provision?
2. What models for consolidation/regionalization are available?
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4. Of the identified models, what are their positive and negative attributes?
5. What effect would the consolidation/regionalization of fire service have on the service levels provided to the citizens of the City of Hialeah and at what cost?

Background and Significance

In times of economic constraint fire service organizations must compete for scarce resources (United States Fire Administration [USFA], 1995). This has been evident for several decades with the prevalence of the sharing of resources between fire departments across the nation. This resource sharing often takes the form of a consolidation of services (Compton & Granito, 2002).

In January of 2004 the Miami Herald broke a story titled *Proposal Seeks to Merge Fire Department, County Force*. This article outlined the possibility of merging the Hialeah Fire Department with the Miami-Dade County Fire-Rescue Department (Vasquez, 2004, p. 1b). Given that presently the Hialeah Fire Department is the subject of a possible consolidation/regionalization with the Miami-Dade County Fire Rescue Department and that there is not in existence a model for the merger, an atmosphere of unrest and apprehension is prevalent within the organization. According to Fugate, Kinicki, and Scheck (2002) this type of situation can lead to increased anxiety, stress, absenteeism, turnover, and poor performance in a merger situation. These factors could have very serious negative ramifications on the department's stated goal of continuously seeking ways in which to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of service delivery to the community (Hialeah Fire Department [HFD], 2003).

The City of Hialeah is located in the highly urbanized area of South Florida. Hialeah is the second largest incorporated area within Miami-Dade County and the fifth largest city in the State of Florida. Hialeah is also home to one of the largest manufacturing sectors within the State. The City encompasses an area of approximately 23 square miles and a population of nearly 240,000 residents (City of Hialeah, 2004). The fire department in existence since 1925 has grown over the years to meet the varied emergency service needs of the community. Being rated a Class One department by the Insurance Services office in 1986 highlighted the Hialeah Fire Department's ascension in stature within the community (Drozd, 2003). As a result, the department had enjoyed an atmosphere of growth and relative tranquil labor management relations up to approximately 1995. Since that time the department has undergone a reduction within administrative staffing and no increase in operational staffing levels. The service demand (call volume) on the department has increased by approximately 51 percent over this time period.

This has led to an atmosphere of strained labor relations between the Union and the City's Administration. This difficult relationship over the preceding years has also caused a disparity in staffing and compensation with neighboring departments.

The possible consolidation of service with the Miami-Dade Fire-Rescue department is viewed by some as a quick fix to many of the problems facing the Hialeah Fire Department. However, the impact on the current and future service provided to the community has not been explored nor have the options available to consummating a consolidation of the two departments.

This research is important to the Hialeah Fire Department so that it can find the best method in which to meet its established goal of continuously improving the service provided to the community. This study will further provide an analysis of the options available to the City's administrative leaders for consolidating/regionalizing fire service. Finally, this research will provide the City's Administration the information needed to make an informed decision on consolidation and the background to negotiate the most favorable terms for the provision of fire and emergency services, that is, if consolidation is deemed to be in the best interest of the community.

The National Fire Academy's *Leading Community Risk Reduction* course advises in Unit 6, Evaluating of the Student Manual, to be able to modify a risk-reduction initiative in order to improve its effectiveness, given evaluation information (National Fire Academy [NFA], 2003, p. SM 6-1). This project will describe those consolidation/regionalization models available and evaluate the potential impacts each could have on service delivery to the community.

This research is also related directly to the United States Fire Administration operational objective "to promote within communities a comprehensive, multi-hazard risk reduction plan led by the fire service organization" (NFA, 2002, p. II-2). Describing the available

consolidation/regionalization models and recommending the system that would provide a comprehensive service delivery option to the City of Hialeah will accomplish this objective.

Literature Review

The purpose of this literature review is to describe the concept, models, current applications, attributes, and possible ramifications of consolidation/regionalization of fire service provision. The desired outcome of this literature review is to identify the merger or consolidation model that will provide the greatest benefit to the majority of the Hialeah Fire Department's (HFD) stakeholders. This literature review includes a review of State Statutes, published trade journals, fire service journals, magazines, textbooks, Executive Fire Officer (EFOP) applied research projects, and information available from the Internet.

In order to appropriately broach the topic of consolidation/regionalization of fire service provision, a proper foundation should be established through definition. According to the American Heritage Dictionary a consolidation is "the merger of two or more commercial interests or corporations"(Morris, 1971 p. 285). Robey and Sales (1994) describe a merger as being the commingling of the assets of two firms to produce a new entity. Compton and Granito (2002) characterize consolidation as the merging of two or more agencies. While consolidation is the merging of two or more agencies there are also other forms of consolidation that are practiced to varying extents.

1. Administrative consolidations, combine administrative staffs, but maintain separate operations (Compton & Granito, 2002).
2. Functional consolidations merge various operational units such as communications, purchasing, fire prevention and investigation, training, and personnel recruitment (United States Fire Administration [USFA], 1987).

3. Partial consolidations, allow departments to share resources but remain autonomous. This could take place when two departments share and respond from one station.
4. Full consolidations; incorporate all administrative and operational aspects into a single organization (Pittard, 1990).

While there are various forms of consolidations practiced within the fire service the most common remains that of functional consolidation followed by a full consolidation of services.

Why consolidate/regionalize fire service provision?

Citizens historically have viewed fire departments as a vital public safety component in any community, consisting of dedicated and highly trained individuals who willingly risk their lives to protect those whom they serve. Because of this positive image there has been minimal opposition to the budgets of fire departments in past years (Coleman, 1990). The tragic events of September 11, 2001 also highlighted the value that the fire service brings to communities throughout the United States and the world (Barr & Eversole, 2003).

However, over the years citizens have also become discriminating consumers of government service. There have been movements to limit government spending through tax reform. In California this was displayed by the passage of Propositions 8 and 13, which provided for spending and taxing limitations. Other states including Florida have followed California's lead with similar tax provisions (Harrigan & Vogel, 1999). Currently, in Florida there is a petition drive seeking to place on the ballot in 2004 an initiative to lower property taxes by doubling the current Homestead Exemption of \$25,000. If passed, it is estimated to amount to a two billion dollar tax cut (Associated Press, 2004).

The public's perception of many governmental services has changed. Osborne and

Gaebler (1992) tout that government should recreate the way in which service is provided to become more efficient and effective. Consolidation is not only viewed as a way to produce efficient and effective government and increase levels of service, but as a method in which to save money (Ellis, 2000).

The demand on governmental entities is at the forefront of consolidation efforts. At every level of government the demands on the limited resources are increasing to provide everything from parks, streets, clean water, and public safety services (Pittard, 1990). Consolidation is considered to produce a more effective and efficient fire service by not only reducing cost but also by providing for enhancements in administration, communications, fire prevention, training, equipment purchase, and maintenance (Earle, 1998; King, 1998). It is the pervasive view that consolidations will produce benefits such as better coordination of service provision and economies of scale (Boyne, 2003).

Economies of scale are often cited as a reason to consolidate services and can exist when operating costs increase at a lower rate than outputs (Katrishen & Scordis, 1998). Coleman (2003) cited the attributes of departments with large-scale operations and their ability to provide services more effectively than smaller operation could due to economies of scale. He cited the areas of information technology, clerical support, communications, purchasing power, and benefits packages as areas that could be provided at more cost effective rates by a larger organization. Klingler and Bradshaw (1997) also espouse economies of scale. They use Miami-Dade County as an example where gains have been realized in the provision of fire service through agreements. They stated that,

These arrangements were negotiated because they offer persuasive advantages for Dade County and municipalities. For Dade County, there is the opportunity to

expand services within a given geographic area using economies of scale. For the municipalities, the arrangement offers the opportunity to reduce capital costs, personnel costs, and legal liability risks. In addition, because fire fighters are heavily unionized, it offers the opportunity to avoid the immediate political and economic costs associated with collective bargaining (p. 157).

The reasons to consolidate as highlighted above are persuasive in and of themselves, from the need to reduce the cost of providing services to the rationale of economies of scale. However, one final issue that has not been directly mentioned and needs to be considered as an advantage of consolidation is fire fighter safety. This is and should be a paramount concern in any discussion in regard to the provision of fire services (Giorgio, 2000).

What models for consolidation/regionalization are available?

During the 1990's, consolidations were sparse, numbering an estimated 20 to 30 occurring nationally. As of the year 2000, this number had grown to over 500 attempts at consolidation; these consolidations have taken various formats over this time period (Jensen, 2000). Florida has also participated in the trend towards the consolidation of its decentralized fire protection system. Consolidation in Florida is seen as a way to meet increased demand for services due to population growth and development (Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability [OPPAGA], 2001).

In Florida there are several types of consolidation/cooperative agreement models including:

- Mutual Aid Agreements - interlocal agreements between two or more fire departments, that allow participants to request assistance from neighboring departments.
- Automatic Aid Agreements - interlocal agreements between two or more fire departments

whereby participants automatically provide and/or received assistance from the closest available department.

- Functional Consolidation - two or more departments maintain separate operations, but cooperate in functional areas such as standard operating procedures, joint purchasing, and joint training.
- Merger - combining two or more departments into one new legal entity.
- Consolidation of Fire Services - consolidating all fire departments within a county; the result would be either one self governed, independent special district or one county-governed department or dependent special district.
- Consolidation of Fire and Emergency Medical Services - consolidating all fire departments and emergency medical service providers within a county; the result would be one county-government department.
- Consolidation of Fire and Police Services - consolidating all fire and police departments within a county; the result would be one county-government public safety department.

These models have been used to varying extents by the multitude of fire service organizations found within the state. Fire Departments in Florida are made up of City, County, Special Districts (Independent and Dependant), Volunteer, and various other forms of fire protection systems. Other than cooperative agreements between fire service organizations, the State of Florida provides very little direction in regard to the provision of fire service and possible consolidation thereof. However, there are provisions within Florida Statutes chapter 189 and 191 for the provision of special districts and independent special fire control districts, which may be used as a basis for consolidation (OPPAGA, 2001).

Special Districts: General Provisions Florida Statute Chapter 189 (2003) defines a

Special District as a “ local unit of special purpose, as opposed to general purpose government within a limited boundary, created by a general law, special tax, local ordinance, or by rule of the Governor and Cabinet” (p. 5). Special districts are similar to other forms of local government. They have governing boards that establish policy and they also provide essential public services. The distinction between special districts and general government is that special districts provide a specialized service as opposed to general governmental services. The major advantage of a special district is its singular focus, allowing for resources to be directed to the benefit of the individual service provided. There are two types of special districts under Florida Statute 189, dependent and independent. A dependent special district is characterized by having the ultimate authority residing in the same governing body as that of a single county or a municipality. For instance, either the established county or municipal government would still govern a dependant special fire district. An independent special district on the other hand, has its own elected governing body. Another key feature of Special Districts is that they are empowered to levy ad-valorem taxes (Special Districts: General Provisions, 2003). In Florida there are currently over 1,200 Special Districts providing a myriad of limited purpose services including, fire control, library, port, mosquito control, water control, community development roads, and hospital services. Of the total Special Districts in Florida there are 67 Fire Control and Rescue Special Districts.

Florida Statute Chapter 189 was the precursor to Chapter 191 *Independent Special Fire Control Districts* adopted in 1997, which provides the statutory authority to the State Legislature for the development of Independent Special Fire Control Districts. Chapter 191 was enacted to provide for standards, direction, operating procedures, and the governance of Independent Special Fire Control Districts. Independent Special Fire Control Districts are the same as an

Independent Special district as outlined in Chapter 189 of the Florida Statutes (Appendix A).

The most significant differences between the two types of special districts fall in the area of governance and revenues. As mentioned above, a dependant special district will always be a subunit of either a county or municipal government and as such any tax levy must be reported as part of the counties' or municipalities' total tax rate as well as any other liabilities. This is a key consideration given that in Florida there are caps on allowable tax rates. Depending on the financial situation within a particular county or municipality this could be the overriding consideration when choosing between a dependant and an independent district. If a governmental entity were approaching its tax cap, then an independent special district would be a viable option. An independent special fire control district has the advantage of being able to levy its own taxes up to a maximum millage rate of 3.75 exclusive of debt service on bonds. Independent special fire control district have added facility to charge non-ad valorem assessments, user, and impact fees for their services (Independent Special Fire Control Districts, 2003). While there are several types of consolidation models in Florida, no singular model has emerged as the clear choice.

How have other fire service organizations consolidated/regionalized the delivery of fire service?

The provision of fire service takes on several different formats. In Florida the most prevalent formats are through City and County Governments, Special Districts, and Volunteer organizations. The way in which fire service organizations consolidate also varies amongst fire service agencies. The most important consideration in consolidations should be that both the fire departments and the citizens they serve benefit by reducing the costs of the fire service and increasing the level of service provided (OPPAGA, 2001).

The method in which costs are reduced and service levels are increased must be closely

monitored in any consolidation/regionalization model. There are key points that should be considered prior to a consolidation. The entities consolidating must assure that adequate equipment and personnel are available to protect both jurisdictions. There should be arrangements defining how many units may be absent from a particular area at any given time. For example, if two entities consolidate with varying levels of service, some citizens may see service levels decline due to units responding to broader coverage areas than prior to a consolidation. These increased coverage areas could lead to increases in response time, thus reducing service levels to some segments of the consolidated department.

Current fire insurance rates should also be considered in any consolidation. If two departments with similar Insurance Service Office (ISO) ratings consolidate then any negative or positive effect on insurance rates would be averted. However, if two departments with differing ISO ratings were to consolidate, then there is the potential that insurance rates in the new coverage area could change. This change could either cause for insurance rates to rise or drop depending on the circumstances. In either case, the indirect cost or benefit of the changing insurance rates should be considered when structuring the consolidation agreement (Fire/EMS/Safety Center, 2001).

In a consolidation all terms and conditions should be clearly delineated and agreed to by all parties. Some of the key provisions that should be listed included

1. Costs and how they are calculated with periodic financial reports,
2. Duration of the agreement with renewal, amendment, default, and termination clauses,
3. Services to be provided with level of service agreements,
4. Provisions for increases to service levels with associated costs,
5. Dispute resolution formats,

6. Standards of cover to be provided,
7. Worker compensation, Retirement, Health Insurance and disability provisions,
8. Disposition of existing property including, stations, vehicles, equipment, continuing maintenance, and expenses,
9. A designated liaison or point of contact for all service related issues, and
10. Liability designations (Broward County, 1999).

The listed guidelines have been used to some extent across the country under various consolidation arrangements with varying degrees of success. Another consideration for the successful consummation of a consolidation includes a solid transition and governance plan that clearly sets out how and when various aspects of the merger will take place along with delineating how governing councils, commissions, and boards will work together (City of Pleasanton, 1995).

The terms and conditions of a consolidation have been found to be a major factor from a political point of view. Elected officials frequently have concerns over the ramifications of approving a consolidation. The provisions of any consolidation must assure that the decision to move forward will not require a large expenditure of political capital. A consolidation agreement that is viewed as unpopular or controversial will quickly erode political support. Therefore, a slow measured approach to consolidation where the positive attributes are accentuated and negative exposure is limited will provide essential community and political support (Tri-Data, 1997).

Of the identified models what are their positive and negative attributes?

Compton and Granito (2002) outline five common forms of consolidation administrative, functional, area, partial and full consolidation. The Office of Program Policy Analysis and

Government Accountability (2001) lists seven types of *Cooperative Agreements* including, mutual aid agreements, automatic aid agreements, functional consolidation, merger, consolidation of fire services, consolidation of fire and emergency medical services, and the consolidation of fire and police services. The International City/County Managers Association (ICMA) (1990) and Ellis (2000) list four types of consolidations as the most common forms: functional, partial, operational, and mergers.

There are several positive aspects of the various forms of consolidation. Generally, consolidations provide career enhancement opportunities for employees, due to the overall larger workforce. They allow for economies of scale when purchasing great amounts of equipment at a reduced unit cost. These arrangements could also provide benefits in the areas of response time, fire station placement, staffing levels, reduced duplication of efforts, uniform training, common standard operating guidelines, and a potential lowering of a city's insurance rating (Rule, 1992). While there is a host of sources that discuss the positive aspects of consolidation, the pool of available materials outlining consolidations negative aspects is limited.

One challenge to any consolidation is that of where control of a consolidated force rests. Territorialism has the potential to create problems between members of the departments as each segment of the consolidated departments vie for control over operating procedures and policy development. Members of the community could also feel disenfranchised believing that they are contributing more in resources to the consolidated department than they are receiving in services. Finally, the major negative point to any consolidation is that some elected officials will have to relinquish a certain level of control to determine the level and scope of emergency services provided to the community. This could be the greatest hurdle to overcome when considering a consolidation (Tri-Data, 1997).

In order to ascertain a broad perspective of the positive and negative attributes associated with consolidation, a survey of the Florida Fire Chief's Association was conducted (Appendix B). Based on the survey, it was found that large portions of the departments surveyed participate in some type of cooperative agreements. Participation varied among the common forms of consolidation. The overriding consensus derived from the survey is that most departments surveyed have an awareness of the positive benefits of consolidation and have considered it in some format. It also found that attempts at consolidation were more times than not unsuccessful. Finally, of those respondents that had undertaken consolidation efforts the majority was satisfied with the results.

What effect would the consolidation/regionalization of fire service have on the service levels provided to the citizens of the City of Hialeah and at what cost?

Currently, the City of Hialeah Fire Department provides a full range of emergency services to residents, businesses, and visitors of our community. The services provided include fire suppression, emergency medical service, fire prevention/education, hazardous materials response, dive rescue, training, and emergency communication/dispatch. These are all provided at a cost of approximately \$23,273,688 million derived mainly from property taxes and user fees.

The provision of service is conducted from seven fire stations strategically located throughout the 23 square miles of coverage area. Each fire station is responsible for covering an average area of 3.28 square miles. Contained within the stations are seven suppression units, seven Advanced Life Support (ALS) transport units, two aerial apparatus, and a hazardous materials unit. The department also operates its own State of Florida certified Training Center as well as a Public Safety Answering Point (PSAP)/Communications Center (HFD, 2003).

In 2003, the Hialeah Fire Department responded to 29,670 calls for service with an

average response time of just over five minutes to all areas of the municipality. The Hialeah Fire Department operates with an ISO Class One rating. Normal staffing consists of three Firefighter\Emergency Medical Technicians (EMT) or EMT paramedics per suppression, ALS, and aerial units, one of which is an officer. The hazardous materials unit is normally staffed with two Firefighter\Emergency Medical Technicians (EMT) or EMT paramedics. Organizationally, the Department consists of a Fire Chief, a Deputy Chief of Operations, and four Divisions Chiefs of Rescue, Training, Fire Prevention, and Logistics. All functions are organized under each of the outlined positions (Appendix C).

The Miami-Dade Fire Rescue Department (MDFRD) provides a similar type of fire service to that of the Hialeah Fire Department. It is set up functionally the same but provides service to a much larger area, covering approximately 1900 square miles with 58 stations, an average coverage area of 33 square miles per station. They responded to over 282,000 calls for service in 2003 with an average response time of just over seven minutes within the urban area and just over ten minutes outside the urban area. They provide their service to the County residents with an ISO rating of Class three (Miami-Dade, 2003).

If a consolidation of the department were to be pursued with the MDFRD, there could be savings by eliminating duplicate or redundant services and/or divisions. These areas include all administrative positions with associated support staff, i.e. Fire Chief, Deputy Chief, and all functional divisions (Appendix C). The savings would be offset to some extent by the cost to increase staffing levels to four Firefighters per suppression and aerial units. Further saving would be realized by the combining of the departments' communication and training functions.

The costs to the citizens of Hialeah would have to be looked at broadly and is not easily quantifiable due to several factors. A factor to consider is the potential increase to fire insurance

rates, which could occur if the city's current Class One ISO rating could not be maintained (Fire/EMS/Safety Center, 2001). Other costs to consider are those of higher cost user fees and impact fees charged by the Miami-Dade County Fire Rescue Department. These increased costs would offset any potential savings. If the MDFRD millage rate were applied to the City of Hialeah's property values (City of Hialeah, 2003) the cost of fire service provision would be reduced to approximately \$15,553,134, representing a savings of \$7,720,554 (Miami-Dade County, 2003). However, a provision within the Metropolitan Dade County charter Section 18-26 states "The service level provided by the District shall include a uniform level of fire and rescue service throughout the District and to those governmental entities which may from time to time contract with the District" (p. 2607). Given this provision the current level of service provided to the citizens of Hialeah could not be guaranteed at the MDFRD current millage rate. In fact, Section 18-34 of the County charter stating,

Any municipality may contract with the District for the delivery of additional fire and rescue services. Any services provided by the District in accordance with any such contract shall be in addition to the fire and rescue services provided under Section 18-26 (p. 2614).

This provision could add significant costs to the citizens of Hialeah if the same level of services were desired under the consolidation, thereby negating potential savings (Metropolitan Dade County, 1990). The same level of service could possibly be provided at a significant savings to the City of Hialeah given that fire protection services to neighboring areas have historically been provided with little relation to actual costs. In these arrangements often times fire protection is subsidized to new coverage areas (Fire/EMS/Safety Center, 2001).

In summary, based on this literature review it was found that there were many compelling

reasons to consolidate the provision of fire service. The means and methods of consolidation were found to be unique to the time and circumstances of each individual department or experience. Of the various models researched each could be adjusted to suit local needs. Positive attributes and negative attributes differed depending on each individual organization's perspective. The effect that a consolidation would have on any entity is strictly dependant on the structuring of terms, conditions, and quantifiable costs. This holds true for the possible consolidation of the Hialeah Fire Department.

Procedures

This research utilized a broad array of literature inclusive of fire service and non-fire service related resources. The Learning Resource Center (LRC) at the National Fire Academy was used for fire service related information as well as the Internet, Interlocal Agreements, and the Hialeah Fire Department's library. Non-fire related information was secured from Questia Online Library, Florida Statutes, City of Hialeah documents, Miami-Dade County ordinances, the Internet, and the author's personal library.

The search of the LRC provided various Executive Fire Officer research papers that provided many different perspectives on consolidation. The common set of search terms were used across all research medians including, consolidation, fire consolidation, fire service consolidation, merger, economies of scale, special districts, special fire districts, and fire districts.

A convenience sample of Florida Fire Chief's Association (FFCA) members was conducted to obtain a cross section of views on consolidation and its related issues. The association was surveyed by e-mail as provided for through Membership Services section of the Florida Fire Chief's Association. The survey was limited to the State of Florida fire departments

because they are governed and operate under the same laws and regulations. The National Directory of Fire Chiefs and Emergency Medical Services Administrators estimates that there are 620 fire departments in Florida (National Public Safety, 2004). The FFCA e-mail database contains 2,099 members that were sent the survey. For a descriptive project a minimum of 10 percent is considered sufficient as cited by Clark (1997).

The survey asked 11 total questions (Appendix B) designed to solicit information on the type of fire service organization, finances of each organization, participation in cooperative agreements, consolidation formats, actual consolidations, rationale and benefits of consolidation, and individual perspectives on consolidation. The responses of each survey were tabulated and analyzed. Each question was designed to extrapolate the breadth of knowledge and experience with the various forms of consolidation discovered from the literature review. The final set of questions coupled with the comments section was designed to gain a broad perspective on the views and concerns associated with the different forms of consolidation.

Limitations

A limiting factor of this research was that consolidation is such a broad subject with so many different formats, that it is was difficult to find consensus among the literature to formulate a best practices approach to consolidation. Given this factor, a better focus on differentiating between the various types of consolidation and focusing primarily one type would have been beneficial.

Another limiting factor is that the results of the survey sent to Florida Fire Chief Association members may not be representative of the membership, as the response rate was lower than expected. Furthermore, the survey could also have provided a better differentiation between the types of consolidation in order to solicit more relevant information.

Definition of Terms

Ad Valorem – A Latin term meaning according to value. Generally considered taxes assessed upon real property within a given time period.

Millage Rate – Expressed in dollars and cents per \$1,000 of taxable value. One mill equals \$1.00 per \$1,000 of property value.

Results

The goal of this research was to describe consolidation/regionalization models, their positive and negative attributes, and how other fire services organization were structuring consolidations. The ultimate outcome of this research was to describe consolidation/regionalization alternatives and their possible effects to the fire service provided by the Hialeah Fire Department so that policy makers could make an informed decision.

Research Question 1: Why consolidate/regionalize fire service provision?

The research found that while the fire service in general is well respected and valued (Barr & Eversole, 2003), consumers of governmental services throughout the United States are becoming very tax conscious (Harrigan & Vogel, 1999). Thus, consolidation is seen as method to provide increased levels of service at reduced costs (Ellis, 2000). The rationale behind consolidation of fire service provision is that improvements could be realized by exercising economies of scale across all areas of the fire service (Coleman, 2003).

Research Question 2: What models for consolidation/regionalization are available?

The research revealed that there are several consolidation models available and in use across the nation. Consolidations models include, Mutual Aid Agreements, Automatic Aid Agreements, Functional Consolidation, Mergers, Partial Consolidations, and Full Consolidations (Compton & Granito, 2002; Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability

[OPPAGA], 2001; Pittard, 1990). The results showed that there is no clear-cut consolidation model that is universally accepted or endorsed, and in Florida there are no established guidelines in regard to consolidation of fire service provision.

There are however, provisions under Florida Statutes for the establishment of Special Districts and Independent Special Fire Control Districts that could be used for the consolidation of fire departments. There are currently approximately 62 Fire Control and Rescue Special Districts with 55 independent and 12 dependant districts (OPPAGA, 2001).

Research Question 3: How have other fire service organizations consolidated/regionalized the delivery of fire service?

The research data reveal that the most important consideration when consolidating is the structure and content of the agreement coupled with the assurance that both entities benefit in terms of increased level of service and costs. The structure of any agreement should contain basic provisions that provide for adequate equipment, personnel, standards of cover, costs, duration of the agreement, employee compensation, disposition of property, and dispute resolution (Broward County, 1999; Fire/EMS/Safety Center, 2001). A final critical consideration concerning the structure of a consolidation agreement is that the concerns of elected officials be accounted for. An agreement that is considered controversial will rapidly lose the support of citizens and their elected officials (Tri-Data, 1997).

Research Question 4: Of the identified models what are their positive and negative attributes?

A survey instrument revealed that when asked if their departments participate in written mutual aid agreements, 92.5 percent of the departments responded affirmatively. This number dropped to 75 percent when they were questioned on participation in a written automatic aid agreement. Of the total respondents 67.5 percent answered that they had considered

consolidating at some point. The type of consolidation considered by each agency was asked with full consolidation garnering 49 percent, followed by functional consolidation 29 percent, partial consolidation 15 percent, and administrative consolidation at seven percent. Of those that answered that they were considering a consolidation only 35.5 percent had achieved said consolidation. When questioned as to the rationale behind considering a consolidation, 44 percent of the respondents cited increases in effectiveness and efficiency as the most significant motivating factors and 59 percent believed that the communities they serve would benefit most. Of the departments that were able to follow through on their plans to consolidate, 77 percent strongly agreed that the consolidation undertaken delivered the results promised. Finally, when asked if they would support consolidation efforts, over 45 percent of the respondents strongly and with 30 percent remaining neutral. The comments received with the survey suggest two key points. First, the structure of the consolidation was viewed as critical “consolidation is not a one size fits all”. The second, overriding issue was who would be the controlling party, “I would support consolidation if we were the dominant department” (Appendix D).

Research Question 5: What effect would the consolidation/regionalization of fire service have on the service levels provided to the citizens of the City of Hialeah and at what cost?

The research found that the consolidation of the Hialeah Fire Department could potentially provide savings. However, there are many factors that need to be considered, such as increases in manning, user fees, impact fees, and insurance rates if consolidation were desired (Fire/EMS/Safety Center, 2001). In addition the level of savings is uncertain given the provisions contained within the Code of Metropolitan Dade County outlining that a uniform level of service will be provided across the fire district. The Code also established that any municipality that would require an increased level of service would have to pay additional charges (Metropolitan

Dade County, 1992).

Discussion

The results indicate that there are many compelling reasons to consider the consolidation/regionalization of fire service provision. Given that the trend is towards a greater accountability in the use of tax dollars and with citizens actively supporting taxing limitations (Associated Press 2004; Harrigan & Vogal, 1999), it is contingent of the fire service to take its fiduciary responsibilities seriously. Consolidation not only has the potential to provide for sound fiscal policies, it also provides many opportunities for the improvement of fire service provision (Boyne 2003).

The areas in which consolidation could benefit departments range from resource sharing to economies of scale through joint purchasing. A benefit of consolidation is its potential effect on firefighter safety (Giorgio, 2000). One of the greatest concerns is when multiple agencies work together. Consolidation could ultimately provide for the interoperability of equipment, procedures, and communications, thereby enhancing firefighter safety while saving tax dollars.

Secondly, it was found that there are many forms and formats available to reap the benefits of consolidation. In fact, consolidation is so compelling that attempts have increased at a rapid pace increasing from approximately 30 in the 1990's to over 500 attempts by the year 2000 (Jensen, 2000). Consolidation is only limited by the creativity of those considering it as an option. Consolidation does not have to be an all or nothing proposition; the reality is that every fire service organization could and should practice some form of consolidation. Whether through mutual aid agreements, automatic aid, functional consolidation of a communications center, or a full consolidation operations there are options.

The third research question of this project explored how other departments had structured

their consolidation agreements and those elements that are generally recognized as important. There is a host of information that can be used to structure a sufficiently comprehensive agreement that will provide for the interest of all parties involved in a consolidation. Within any agreement a most important point is to delineate how the parties in the agreement will work together, i.e. city councils, commission etc., for they may ultimately decide whether to move forward or maintain the status quo (City of Pleasanton, 1995).

A survey that was used to gather information on consolidation within Florida drew very interesting responses. It was found that many of the respondents were practicing some form of consolidation or cooperative agreement. A majority, 67 percent indicated that they were considering consolidation. Compton and Granito (2002) found functional consolidations to be the most common, while the survey showed that full consolidation was being considered at a 49 percent rate followed by functional consolidation at 29 percent. A low percentage of departments considering consolidation were able to complete the process. The survey showed that the subject of consolidation elicits very strong feelings. The overriding concerns seem to be the structure of the agreement and which entity controls the situation. This was consistent with much of the literature on consolidation.

Finally, when consolidation and its effect on fire service provision within the City of Hialeah were evaluated, the results were mixed. There could be gains by consolidating; however, there are many uncertain variables that do not allow for an accurate assessment of the possibility. The main issue is the level of current service versus the level of service that would be provided if consolidation were achieved. Given the provisions of the Code of Metropolitan Dade County that provides for a uniform level of service throughout the fire district (Metropolitan Dade County, 1992). The conclusion is that the City of Hialeah would most likely either suffer a reduction of

service or have to pay increased costs to secure the same level of service provided currently. This would place the citizens and policy makers of Hialeah in a difficult position given that they are accustomed to the levels of service currently being provided.

Recommendations

The results of this research support consolidation/regionalization as a viable alternative for the provision of fire services. There are many elements of consolidation/regionalization that could provide benefits to the fire department as well as members of the community. Therefore, based on the foregoing information and results the proceeding recommendations are offered for the success of the Hialeah Fire Department.

The Hialeah Fire Department should begin to establish cooperative agreements with neighboring departments so that the benefits of consolidating could be garnered. This could begin with common standard operating guidelines, medical protocols, and progress to more definitive forms of consolidation up to and including full consolidation.

When considering consolidation/regionalization the department needs to establish solid criteria that will protect the well being of the employees, the citizens, the fire department, and the City of Hialeah in general. A measured approach is suggested in any form of consolidation in order to build consensus and ensure that the course of action being considered is in the best interest of all stakeholders.

It is suggested that a comprehensive study be commissioned if the consolidation of the Hialeah Fire Department and Miami-Dade County Fire Rescue is to be considered. There are too many unknown variables to proceed at this time with a full consolidation of services. The costs of maintaining the current levels of service must be weighed accurately against any potential or perceive savings.

Finally, future research should look at bench marking best practices in consolidation. The potential benefits to the fire service warrant developing sound guidelines that could be used as a template for any fire service organization that is considering consolidation.

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