



## PUBLIC POLICY FORUM

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### **Report suggests steps to enhance emergency communications and dispatching in Milwaukee County**

A report released today by the Milwaukee-based Public Policy Forum recommends several strategies that could be undertaken collectively by Milwaukee County and its 19 municipalities to enhance emergency dispatching and call-taking in the county. The report – commissioned by Milwaukee County's Office of Emergency Management (OEM) – also considers the prospects for consolidating some of the county's 13 separate dispatch agencies (also known as Public Safety Answering Points, or PSAPs).

"Our analysis finds that while there is not a strong desire at this time among Milwaukee County municipalities for further PSAP consolidation, planning around a new OEM command center facility offers an opportunity to seriously contemplate such action in the future," said Forum President Rob Henken. "In the meantime, we recommend implementation of three important data integration initiatives among the existing PSAPs that would provide enhanced public safety situational awareness and improved emergency medical services across municipal boundaries to benefit the entire county."

The report stemmed from Milwaukee County's desire to consider how to consolidate its own dispatching functions in light of the January 2015 merger of Emergency Management, Emergency Medical Services, 911 Communications, and Radio Services into the new Office of Emergency Management. The merger led OEM to begin planning a new County Command Center, which would house OEM's various dispatch and emergency communications services (among other functions), and which could potentially be expanded to include dispatching currently handled by other County departments – such as the Highway Division and transit system – as well as some municipal PSAP operations.

"The notion of consolidating dispatch services is not new to Milwaukee County municipalities," says Henken. "The seven North Shore communities consolidated their PSAPs in Bayside in 2011, while St. Francis recently eliminated its dispatch center and now purchases dispatch services from Oak Creek. Consequently, Milwaukee County leaders saw their internal dispatch consolidation efforts as an opportunity to explore the creation of a new, larger PSAP that also might be an attractive option for municipalities looking to be relieved of their individual dispatching responsibilities."

Last summer, OEM commissioned a study by the Forum to delve into possibilities for consolidating County emergency communications and dispatch functions in a new Command Center facility, while also exploring the feasibility of furthering the consolidation of municipal PSAPs. The Forum subcontracted with Winbourne Consulting, LLC – a nationally-recognized public safety communications consultant located in Arlington, VA – to handle the technical side of the analysis, while the Forum managed the project and provided fiscal guidance and analysis.

The report recommends several initiatives to enhance emergency communications between OEM and dispatchers at the airport, transit system, and highway division. Meanwhile, its analysis of municipal PSAPs found that opportunities exist to immediately develop a more integrated approach to sharing data and improving dispatch capabilities among all municipalities. It makes specific recommendations in the following areas:

- **CAD-to-CAD** – the report proposes a technological solution that would allow Computer-Aided Dispatch (CAD) data from individual dispatch centers throughout the county to be shared with all other dispatch centers. This would provide an enhanced county-wide public safety situational awareness capability and expedite the utilization of mutual aid between neighboring jurisdictions.
- **Common GIS-Based Public Safety Mapping** – the report suggests that public safety layers be added to current county-wide GIS mapping efforts. The enhanced map would be integrated with the CAD-to-CAD solution and could be used by all public safety agencies and PSAPs in the county to enhance incident location identification.
- **Emergency Medical Dispatching** – the report recommends development of a county-wide Emergency Medical Dispatch (EMD) capability that would build upon recent efforts to provide dispatcher-assisted pre-arrival instructions to 911 callers for cardiac incidents. A full EMD program provides an enhanced level of service from basic pre-arrival instructions.

The report also includes a case study of a hypothetical consolidation scenario between the City of Wauwatosa and OEM that is intended to serve as a guide for any municipality considering potential consolidation of its PSAP into the OEM Communication Center. The case study assumes that Wauwatosa would contract with OEM for 911 emergency call taking, related non-emergency public safety call taking, and dispatching services. Non-emergency functions that are currently handled by Wauwatosa's PSAP – such as prisoner monitoring and administrative police calls – would be retained by the Wauwatosa Police Department.

The analysis indicates potential annual net savings of about \$150,000 for Wauwatosa in operating and capital expenditures combined. Potential operational improvements include improved dispatch processing times for 911 wireless calls emanating from Wauwatosa; cost efficiencies in purchasing, technology maintenance, and PSAP staffing; and higher retention rates and staff effectiveness through new career ladders and opportunities.

"PSAP consolidation is a national trend and will receive increased attention in Milwaukee County as the cost of technology upgrades grows, and as challenges involved with recruiting and retaining staff continue to worsen," says Henken. "In light of those circumstances, the potential collective savings and operational efficiencies indicated by the case study should lead to careful consideration of the possibility of merging stand-alone municipal PSAP operations in Milwaukee County with the OEM Communication Center, particularly if OEM moves forward with a new facility."

The full report by Winbourne Consulting – as well as a Report Brief prepared by the Forum – can be accessed at the Forum's website: [www.publicpolicyforum.org](http://www.publicpolicyforum.org).

Milwaukee-based Public Policy Forum, established in 1913 as a local government watchdog, is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to enhancing the effectiveness of government and the development of southeastern Wisconsin through objective research of public policy issues.

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