

DRAFT

**Walworth County Fire/EMS Study Committee
March 23, 2017 Meeting Minutes
Walworth County Government Center, County Board Room 114
100 W. Walworth Street, Elkhorn, Wisconsin**

The meeting was called to order by Moderator/County Administrator David Bretl at 2:00 p.m.

Mr. Bretl introduced himself and welcomed the members of the Committee. Because this Committee was established by the County Board, it is subject to public record and open meetings law. The meetings will be tape recorded and live video streamed. He cautioned members against talking outside of meetings when a quorum of the Committee might be present.

Bretl announced he made a slight change to the resolution forming the study group by adding the EMS directors as non-voting members and adding alternate members to serve in the absence of a voting member.

All voting members were present: James Weiss-Administrator for the Village of Williams Bay; Denise Pieroni-Delavan City Administrator; John Peters-Lake Geneva Fire Chief; Bruce Vander Veen-Sharon Fire and Rescue Chief; Dave Nelson-LaGrange Assistant Fire Chief; Lowell Hagen-Town of Whitewater Chair; Dale Wilson-Walworth County Human Resources Director and LaGrange Fire and EMS member.

Alternates and non-voting members present included Dr. Steve Andrews-Aurora Emergency Medical Director; Dr. James MacNeal-Mercy Health Emergency Medical Director; Ken Monroe-Village of Bloomfield President and County Board Supervisor; Fred Schalow-Bloomfield Fire and EMS.

Moderator Bretl informed the audience that there would be opportunity to offer input during the two public comment periods allotted.

Public Comment – Cheryl Kaufenberg, Village of Darien Trustee, said she hoped the Committee would successfully develop and implement recommendations on service consolidation.

Background concerning study committee

Bretl said most departments have been concerned about levels of service for several years. At a meeting of county and city officials, the group discussed the issue and forwarded a resolution to the County Board urging a study to identify and develop objectives towards a resolution of the issues. The Board authorized the creation of the study committee. Bretl polled members on major issues to include in the study.

Committee goals

Denise Pieroni said most of the departments are supported by volunteers, and sustaining effective fire and EMS services is impossible without essential changes. She suggested the Committee begin as though none of the current systems exist, and develop a plan to succeed from a service provision perspective.

Bruce Vander Veen said it's imperative that personal motives be set aside to work toward a group goal of meeting customer expectations by providing efficient, cost-effective service through consolidations, if feasible.

Dave Nelson said it is important to look collectively at the similarities and differences between the municipalities and departments. Staffing is a universal issue due to the continual drop in volunteers and there needs to be a way to provide resources to support struggling departments. He emphasized long-range planning has to occur to achieve sustainability.

Lowell Hagen said Whitewater Township doesn't have its own EMS or fire service and residents on Whitewater Lake comprise a large portion of the population. Approximately 60% of lake residents are seasonal residents. The City of Whitewater covers the Township, and their service costs have risen 25% over the last three years due to financial constraints. Every time the City responds to a Township call it costs \$900. Hagen said expenses will continue to rise unless more cost efficient services become available countywide.

John Peters said it is important to effectively communicate as a group. Service provision should be the top priority, while considering fiscal responsibility. The study group is comprised of representatives from different disciplines and viewpoints, and Peters said it will be helpful to draw on members' expertise and experience.

James Weiss emphasized if the Committee doesn't receive buy-in from all municipalities and departments, the study efforts will fail. Debate and compromise will be necessary.

Bretl asked the Committee about volunteerism and whether there is an effect on service times or cost. He also asked about the difference, if any, in service delivery between fire departments and EMS. Vander Veen said EMS in the county is on the verge of derailing, not due to the quality of service provision, but because a small core of qualified, overworked and underpaid individuals are performing the service. Pieroni said she believes improved response times and service shouldn't be based on corporate limits. Peters emphasized that service delivery is a problem nationwide. Nelson said statistics on response times are needed to ascertain what the level of service is now in both rural and urban settings, and to establish optimum goals with cost estimates. Peters said other entities have developed models that can be used in evaluating and establishing standards. He added that aging Baby Boomers are going to produce an increase in call volume. Last year, Lake Geneva responded to approximately 1,300 calls, 70% of which involved elderly citizens. Weiss said the Committee's charge is to represent citizens, municipalities, fire departments and EMS providers. Goals to benefit each sector need to be considered.

Bretl asked for input from audience members. David Rowbotham, Town of Walworth Supervisor, suggested the Committee collect data from all departments to pinpoint where the majority of calls are coming from. The tax base is shrinking for allocations, and any directive needs to come from the taxing units and taxpayers. Rowbotham said departments work together on mutual aid calls and thinks collaboration would work on a permanent basis. Ken Monroe said from his experience in Bloomfield, combining departments is a long and difficult undertaking and requires commitment from all parties.

Gene Decker, Town of Geneva Supervisor, said the Town shares services with Lake Geneva and Elkhorn, and contracts with Paratech for EMS in certain areas. He estimated that less than 30% of EMS calls involve life threatening situations. He suggested investigating a centralized countywide dispatch system with well-trained personnel who could make informed decisions on what is needed for response. He also suggested segregating fire and EMS delivery to produce greater cost efficiencies.

Village of Fontana Fire Chief Wolfgang Nitsch said the Village has gone to 24/7 coverage, and response time is down from 10-15 minutes to 4 minutes. Since staffing the fire department full-time, three lives have been saved. He feels that consolidation of services is a good idea, although it should be done cautiously and with education and facts to back up any decisions.

Lt. John Ennis, Walworth County Emergency Operations Manager and member of Elkhorn Fire Department and EMS, stressed the importance of looking at both population and demographics; areas with special and long-term care facilities will have a higher volume of calls. When providing volunteer service, respondents have to get dressed and drive to the station to pick up necessary equipment and vehicles before heading to a call. Often calls are a result of individuals who are not experiencing life threatening conditions, but lack transport to the hospital for treatment. Elkhorn is investigating a paramedic program whereby people could call the EMS provider, who would make in-home visits to assess whether they need an ambulance.

Dale Wilson said trends in population growth need to be studied; there is a possibility that growth in Walworth County could decline; thus service needs would decrease, or vice versa. Local jurisdiction and constituent needs vary, which is why it is important that this committee be transparent in communicating its mission and goals. Response expectations are very different from a customer and service perspective, and it is important to include those considerations in calculating an acceptable minimum.

Dr. MacNeal commented that a countywide EMS district can be formed as a taxing body, but not a fire service. He has worked in systems where “institutional pride” has been a barrier to effective service. Because of staffing shortages, some departments have relied on private services to fill the gaps; however, it is essential to establish uniform medical guidelines for Advanced Life Support (ALS) units, under local medical directorship. All responders should be tied into emergency communications systems and have the ability to be tracked by GPS.

Dr. Andrews said approximately 1% of service calls are extremely time-dependent, and in those instances the time it takes volunteers to arrive at the scene can affect whether the customer survives. He said full-time staffing is a better guarantee of efficient service, and there are many examples of places where mergers have succeeded; however, there are also instances where consolidation has failed because of the inability of parties to set aside institutional pride.

John Peters drafted a mission statement, primary goals and operating principles for group consideration. The basic operating principles included: 1) Trust; 2) Clear, open comprehensive strategic plans with no personal or departmental “agendas”; 3) Respectful communication; 4) Fact-based decision making; 5) Always working toward improvement; 6) Participation and accountability; and 7) No assumptions.

Denise Pieroni made a motion, seconded by Bruce Vander Veen, to adopt the basic operating principles (“ground rules”). Motion carried 7-0.

Meeting Schedule

Consensus was to hold the meetings the third Thursday of each month at 2:00 p.m. Frequency of meetings may change.

Bretl summarized the input received as a framework for committee goals:

Devise a system: to serve a changing population; that will provide appropriate response times; staffed with sufficient personnel; that is affordable; not redundant in terms of equipment and stations; that will satisfy customer needs; that will have established minimum guidelines for ALS units operating within the county; that will explore options and develop a best practices model; that will provide customer based recommendations; that will increase and improve service; and will identify recommendations to the State based on the outcome of the current legislative study.

Discussion on committee leadership

Bretl said he doesn't need to continue moderating at meetings, and suggested holding elections for Chair and Vice Chair at the next meeting. He believes the study will have more credibility and buy-in if leadership is provided by committee members.

Next steps the committee will take

Discussion ensued on gathering data to review, including departmental statistics on personnel and equipment; maps of county population density; the number of calls for service countywide, population growth projections, how many units and equipment currently exist, etc.

Peters recommended face-to-face meetings with departments and municipalities to get statistics on their equipment and manpower and what they feel their primary individual needs are. He suggested developing a survey format to use in the interviews. Group consensus was to form a sub-committee to develop the survey questions to be used in the interviews with municipalities and departments. Volunteers were solicited from the committee. **Lowell Hagen made a motion, seconded by Bruce Vander Veen, to appoint John Peters, Denise Pieroni, Dave Nelson, Dale Wilson and Dr. Steve Andrews to the sub-committee. Motion carried 7-0.**

The sub-committee will hold its first meeting on Friday, April 7th at 1:00 p.m. in the Government Center Board Room.

Public Comment

Tim O'Neill, Delavan Fire Chief said a lot of good ideas were presented and suggested the Committee look at what will work long-term for the future, instead of what has been done in the past. He suggested that when developing standards for response times that National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) and established medical standards be considered.

Ken Monroe noted State Senate Bills 31, 32 and 33 pertain to their statewide study on fire and EMS provision. He recommended monitoring the hearings to see what legislators are proposing.

County Board Chair Nancy Russell suggested that as documents and research are produced, information should be sent to members as soon as possible to keep momentum going and allow members ample time to read material before meetings. She agrees with increasing qualified EMS personnel and using dispatchers with enhanced training to make determinations on individual calls.

Shaun Marquis, EMS physician for Mercy Health, stated the purpose of the Committee is to improve outcomes in the community, and to identify what departments need to do to meet that challenge, i.e., recruitment and retention, training, experience and oversight and continuing education. He added when response times are improved, there is a shorter return to service time.

Steve Loudon, Delavan EMS, thanked the Committee for undertaking this difficult challenge. The County EMS group meets every other month at either Aurora or Mercy and asked if someone from the Committee could attend the meetings to provide an update on the study progress, which will also serve to discourage the generation of false information.

Discussion ensued about materials to bring to the next meeting. Bretl said he would obtain demographic data and population projections from the Southeastern Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission

(SEWRPC) and post the information on the County's website under Fire/EMS Study Group. Pieroni said it would be helpful to have a map showing locations and times of calls for the past couple years, and where stations and critical facilities are located.

Confirmation of next meeting date and time: The next meeting is scheduled for Thursday, April 20, 2017 at 2:00 p.m.

Adjournment

On motion by Dale Wilson, seconded by Denise Pieroni, Mr. Bretl adjourned the meeting at 4:03 p.m.

Submitted by Becky Bechtel, Administrative Assistant/Deputy County Clerk. Meeting minutes are not considered final until approved by the committee at the next regularly scheduled meeting.