

# THE PITFALLS OF PUBLIC SAFETY SAFETY MERGERS

Consolidation of fire and police puts public safety at risk

In Iron Mountain, Michigan, where members of Local 554 already struggle with inadequate staffing, fire fighters must also wait — sometimes with significant delay — for a cross-trained police officer to arrive before they can legally respond to a fire.

Operating under a functionally consolidated police and fire department, three fire fighters are supplemented with a cross-trained police officer responding as the fourth.

“We are waiting at least five minutes — and as many as 24 minutes — for our public safety officer,” says Kevin Pirlot, 1st District Vice President for the Michigan Professional Fire Fighters Union (MPFFU) and a member of Local 554.

Earlier this year, Local 554 waited so long for the public safety officer it called in off-duty fire fighters in order to respond to a hospital fire.

The operation in Iron Mountain is not

unique among consolidated public safety departments in which police officers and fire fighters are cross-trained as public safety officers.

The IAFF argues against consolidation of police and fire services, citing issues including inadequate training, insufficient on-the-job experience, reduction in fire department staffing, ineffective fire suppression, loss of the fire fighting team concept and low morale.

In the 1970s, Dallas-Fort Worth International Airport fire protection was merged under a single public safety department. “Because of our location, it took a long time for mutual aid to arrive,” says Michael Adams, president of DFW Airport Local 4221. The system, which was designed to provide maximum response, was changed following September 11.

In Grants Pass, Oregon, fire and police operate under partial consolidation — supervisors are cross-trained, but fire fighters and police officers respond separately.

Oregon recently adopted standards for fire certification. “Most of our supervisors are unable to keep up with the hours the training requires,” says Randy DeLonge, president of Grants Pass Local 3564. In fact, he says, supervisors do not take charge of the fire ground because they are not trained to do so.

The Grand Pass Fire-Rescue Department transitioned to partial consolidation in an attempt to save money by reducing staffing. Battalion chief functions were transferred to the law enforcement side. “In practice, sergeants are not required to show up on the fire ground, and many do not carry their gear with them,” says DeLonge. “The double duty is unrealistic because of the volume of law enforcement calls.”

Instead, fire department corporals — who do not have disciplinary authority or management pay — manage the fire operations on the fire ground. Therefore, fire and police are operating separately, but the fire service must function with fewer personnel.

In Bristol, Tennessee, a consolidated system was recently eliminated by the new city manager. Bristol Local 3227 says it was a way to cut fire department staffing.

“In our case, the city was giving police officers incentive pay to cross-train as fire fighters as EMTs,” says Alan Howard, pres-



PHOTO BY DAVID GRUBBS — BILLINGS GAZETTE, BILLINGS MT

ident of Local 3227. “The idea was to supplement us on the fire ground, bringing us up to safe standards. But in reality, if police were already responding to a law enforcement call, they would not show up for a fire call.”

Because police were having a hard time pulling their weight on both sides, the system broke down in other areas. “Morale was also low because, despite their higher pay, police did not want to perform their fire duties,” says Howard.

Issues with double duty are not uncommon in consolidated systems. “I’d head out on a call only to find a note on my turnout gear from the cross-trained police officer saying that he’d meet me at the scene,” says Monty Nye, a member of Meridian Township, MI Local 1600. “They did not take it seriously.”

Meridian Township implemented the system after convincing the public that fire department staff would actually be increasing. “But, what was really going on was that they were counting the cross-trained police officers,” says Nye.

The Township returned to separate departments after Local 1600 members



convincing the Town Council to form a police-fire commission. After some study, the commission recommended that the Township return to separate departments.

William Mominee, president of Johnson City, TN Local 1791, says, “We didn’t know who was going to be on our team on any given day. It was really hard for everyone to gel together and be effective in an emergency. The bottom line is that it is hard for someone to be a professional in both fields.”

Johnson City abandoned the public safety system in July 2004. ■

---

*The IAFF argues against consolidation of police and fire services, citing issues including inadequate training, insufficient on-the-job experience, reduction in fire department staffing, ineffective fire suppression, loss of the fire fighting team concept and low morale.*

---

## Political Action Prevents Consolidation

Several IAFF affiliates facing public safety consolidation have successfully found their way out through political action.

In Goffstown, New Hampshire — where the Board of Selectman voted to consolidate the two departments under one public safety director — members of Goffstown Local 3420 secured citizen support to vote against consolidation.

“With assistance from IAFF 3rd District Vice President Mike Mullane and Professional Fire Fighters of New Hampshire President Dave Lang, we launched a successful multi-faceted campaign,” says Bill Connor, president of Local 3420.

Not only did citizens vote down the consolidation, but also voted to replace Selectman Gossett McRae, the author of the consolidation proposal, with

Manchester Association of Fire Supervisors Local 3820 member Nick Campanano

“It’s all about grassroots efforts,” says Connor. “You have to talk to the citizens it affects, and you have to get politically involved. Those two things really helped our cause.”

Meridian Township Fire Fighters Local 1600 member Monty Nye agrees that political action is key in these situations. “You’ve got to hit it head-on right from the start,” he says. Local 1600 received tremendous citizen support. “We were able to get our opponents voted off the Town Council. Then, the new Council worked with us to reverse the consolidation.”

In some cities, successful political action can be more difficult when dealing with city managers who are

appointed, not elected. In Johnson City, Tennessee, Local 1791 President William Mominee says political action helped, but it was also obvious to the public that the system was not working.

“We were able to keep our friends on the council and replace one who was against us, which got us the majority vote,” says Mominee. When Local 1791 faced a hostage situation simultaneously with two fires, staffing was depleted. “That really demonstrated to every one why keeping the system would have been a major risk to public safety.”

The IAFF is prepared to assist regarding public safety consolidation proposals. Contact the IAFF for the newly revised Public Safety Consolidation Manual at (202) 824-1546. ■