

TRANSFORMING IOWA'S EMERGENCY RESPONSE SYSTEM:

A FIRST STEP

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Submitted by

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Abstract

1. Iowa's emergency response delivery and financing structure is severely impaired, irrational and antiquated.
2. The impairment is historical and legislated.
3. Permissive legislation to allow formation of benefited fire districts is a first step in restructuring the system.
4. Two additional, supporting steps will facilitate the ability of local jurisdictions to develop rational fire districts: completion of a mapping system and education.

Problem Statement

Iowa's "fire departments" represent the backbone of emergency response and "home land security". However, the emergency response system is utterly gerrymandered, driven by money, provides little incentive to develop rational response plans or share services beyond simple emergency mutual aid and is severely under funded.

The Causes and Consequences

The system is so complex, intertwined and historical; separating causes from consequences is difficult. One factor often feeds into another, in a self reinforcing matrix. Some of the origins and results of this matrix include:

- Nearly 3,000 separate taxing and governing bodies for Iowa's "fire departments" including about 1900 townships, 870 cities, 55 "grandfathered" benefited fire

districts as well as an unknown number of 28E Agencies and “township” fire departments

- 872 separate, independent fire departments
- 80% of departments serve population bases of fewer than 5,000, over half serve less than 2,500
- 15% of departments (about 130 departments) operate on less than \$5,000 per year
- Almost the entire cost of emergency services is borne by the two smallest units of government: cities and townships
- A major portion of funding is based on a governmental structure designed in the 1800’s before Iowa was a state and designed for providing education (townships)
- The legislated levy limit for township fire protection was established over 30 years ago
- In 1975, a “gold rush” occurred in which small, well organized departments grabbed large township areas, thus increasing their tax base; large cities declined to respond beyond their borders; the others were left with the dregs.
- In other cases, some response boundaries remain based on 1950 school districts, others on 1940 telephone company boundaries
- For a variety of reasons, including a funding structure static since 1975, the majority of cities subsidize fire protection in townships
- While Iowa Code Section 28E allows joint service provision, taxing and bonding authority remains with the cities and townships, thus merely shifting the focus of the problem from one agency to another
- Emergency response is the only essential public service supported to a significant degree by donations (63% of departments fund raise with one fourth of budgets based on fund raising)
- The emergency response system in Iowa is overwhelming a volunteer force (90%), providing little expertise or energy to significantly change the system at a state level
- To replace the volunteer system would cost literally millions and millions
- In most cases, there is a significant communications disconnect between cities and townships.

- Fire Departments are not “fire departments” anymore, yet the departments persist in focusing their public image on a bygone persona; they are emergency response departments providing every form of emergency response save law enforcement

One Recommendation

The plethora of problems indicates myriad and wide ranging potential changes in the system, including increased levy limits, leadership training, increased funding, volunteer recruitment programs and so on. However, in order to achieve a base level of organizational structure on which additional changes can be built, this presentation confines itself to a single, fundamental change affecting the structure of how emergency services are delivered in the state.

The legislature should enact permissive legislation allowing formation of “benefited emergency response districts”. Such special taxing districts could provide emergency service on a rational response basis utilizing a critical mass sufficient to support efficient service.

Benefited fire districts are not new in Iowa. Prior to the 1975 legislation which required townships to provide fire protection, benefited districts were allowed (Section 357B). With the 1975 legislation, existing benefited districts were grandfathered but new ones were prohibited. Interestingly, beginning in 1995, the legislature permitted benefited EMS districts (see 357 F and G).

The simplest approach to achieve this change is amending current legislation by combining Section 357 F and G and allowing “fire and other emergency response”.

Importantly, this legislation would not necessarily reduce the number of “fire stations” only the number of governing and taxing bodies. Each small city could have a “department” (station), although the way a department does business and responds will change significantly for the better. Departments are important civic and social capitol in small towns. They are often focal points for community activities and could be fostered by such legislation while providing significant efficiency benefits.

Two Additional Supporting Steps

While changing legislation is a vital step, local jurisdictions need help to move from their current condition. Two additional actions could significantly increase chances for success and promote change:

1. Complete the “Emergency Response Information System” (ERIS)

This project provides a geographical information system (GIS) data base of all fire/EMS/rescue district boundaries in Iowa overlaid with virtually any geographical information available. A pilot project was funded in large part by IDOT (with assistance from the Fire Service Training Bureau and the Center for Transportation and Research,

ISU). In ERIS, an existing overlay of political boundaries, roads, rivers, pipe lines, railroads, etc. is combined with emergency response boundary information and associated with attributes for each department, indicating number and location of vehicles and equipment, number of people available by time of day, services offered, contact information etc. The long range goal of ERIS is to provide information for local jurisdictions showing graphically the boundaries of the emergency response departments serving an area, the capabilities and capacities of the services and who and how to make contact. All 99 counties have base data and about 30 counties are complete with response boundary data and department attributes. ERIS is an extremely powerful tool that can be used by citizens, legislators, elected officials, local jurisdictions and emergency service providers to view the tangle of their current system and assist them in determining remedies to solve many of the problems of emergency response.

2. Educate and provide incentives to help communities reorganize

If the ERIS tool is available to assist communities in assessing their system and if legislation allows benefited districts, it does not follow the system will be reconfigured. It is imperative that a methodical, statewide educational effort be funded to and coordinated by the Fire Service Training Bureau to help educate communities and their emergency services concerning the benefits and means of reorganizing. There are other potential partners who support such regionalization (such as USDA Rural Development) and thus some state/federal partnerships may be utilized to leverage state efforts. Further, the state needs to provide incentives to assist local governments in reorganizing.

Summary

Due to historical and legislative influences, the current system of delivering emergency services in Iowa is fundamentally flawed. The boundaries of emergency response areas are driven primarily by financial issues and there are few resources to assist local governments in changing the system. Resumption of the use of benefited fire districts will provide a tool for local jurisdictions to manage their emergency response boundaries. Such legislation must be accompanied by providing a mapping tool, education and incentives.