

Emergency Services Consolidation in Southern Lorain County: Changing Views

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## **ABSTRACT**

The problem this study addressed was that two organizations managing similar resources and operations have led to financial challenges, duplication of efforts and inefficient operations.

The purpose of this descriptive research project was to identify and describe similarities and differences between each respective entity, both financially and operationally. With this information, the following four questions were answered:

1. What is the financial status of both the Wellington Community Fire District and the South Lorain County Ambulance District?
2. What is the effect of a consolidation on personnel costs and facility maintenance of each the Wellington Community Fire District and the South Lorain County Ambulance District?
3. What are the similarities and differences between each organization?
4. What are some factors that might prevent a consolidation of services between the Wellington Community Fire District and the South Lorain County Ambulance District?

The procedures employed for the research project involved an extensive literature review, including an evaluation of financial reports from both entities. Interviews were conducted with the leaders of each organization to obtain their perspective on the feasibility of a consolidation. Additionally, a survey was used to measure the perceptions and attitudes of the employees of each entity.

Results from this study showed that cooperative consolidations while often times difficult, are manageable. Financial analysis showed that both organizations are stable and

thriving. Finally, survey data produced results which indicate division among the employees of each entity regarding the feasibility of an emergency consolidation.

The survey, most notably details that the majority of employees who are not in favor of a consolidation fear that their job is in jeopardy in the event of such consolidation.

The recommendations made include moving forward with a study on consolidation. However, it was also recommended that the leaders of each organization communicate with their employees prior to any such study begins.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CERTIFICATION STATEMENT.....	2
ABSTRACT.....	3
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	5
INTRODUCTION.....	6
Statement of the Problem.....	6
Purpose of the Study.....	7
Research Questions.....	7
BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE.....	8
LITERATURE REVIEW.....	13
PROCEDURES.....	18
RESULTS.....	19
DISCUSSION.....	35
RECOMMENDATIONS.....	39
REFERENCES.....	41
APPENDIX A-Research Project Survey.....	43

## INTRODUCTION

### **Statement of the Problem**

Cooperative service spells fear for many fire departments and elected officials, fear of the future, fear of losing identity and fear of losing control. It's a break from tradition in an industry where the only welcome form of progression is generally in the apparatus and equipment (Snook & Johnson, 1997, p.1).

As financial burdens increase on the average American household, public/governmental agencies must recognize their role in easing or lessening the effect it has on its citizen's finances. While the average American feels changing the national scene is beyond his realm, locally there exists opportunities to change the political climate. In rural Ohio, family farms are disappearing, jobs in nearby metropolitan areas are being relocated overseas, and the "Old Faithful" of jobs in Ohio, Ford and General Motors, are leaving. Simply stated, unemployment is increasing and the average consumer is unable to assume more debt. School districts want and desperately need more money as their tax base leaves or is overcome by the population.

However, as important is the educating of our children, funding of our local emergency services providers is also of utmost importance. Population trends show an annual influx to the less metropolitan areas, increasing the patient load or consumer base for smaller, rural emergency service providers. While many rural providers operate through tax levies, it is vitally important that the consumer's money is well spent. Emergency service provider's levies, while traditionally successful, only add to the ever-increasing financial burden. Therefore it is imperative that sound, structured management of public funds be used in a manner to maximize service to the respective communities.

The six townships and two villages served by the Wellington Community Fire District

and the South Lorain County Ambulance District currently fund the respective districts with two separate tax levies. Both entities are staffed by a combination of career and volunteer/part paid personnel. The problem this study will address is that two organizations managing similar resources and operations have led to financial challenges, duplication of efforts and inefficient operations.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The communities served by the Wellington Community Fire District and the South Lorain County Ambulance District currently fund the respective districts with two separate tax levies, separately staffing two combination entities. The purpose of this descriptive study is to identify and describe similarities and differences between each respective entity, both financially and operationally. With this information, each entity will have a detailed financial analysis of their organization, a financial picture of a consolidated entity, each which may be used to foster change for the future.

### **Research Questions**

The research method chosen for this project was descriptive. The research questions this study will investigate are:

1. What is the financial status of both the Wellington Community Fire District and the South Lorain County Ambulance District?
2. What is the effect of a consolidation on personnel costs and facility maintenance of each the Wellington Community Fire District and the South Lorain County Ambulance District?
3. What are the similarities and differences between each organization?

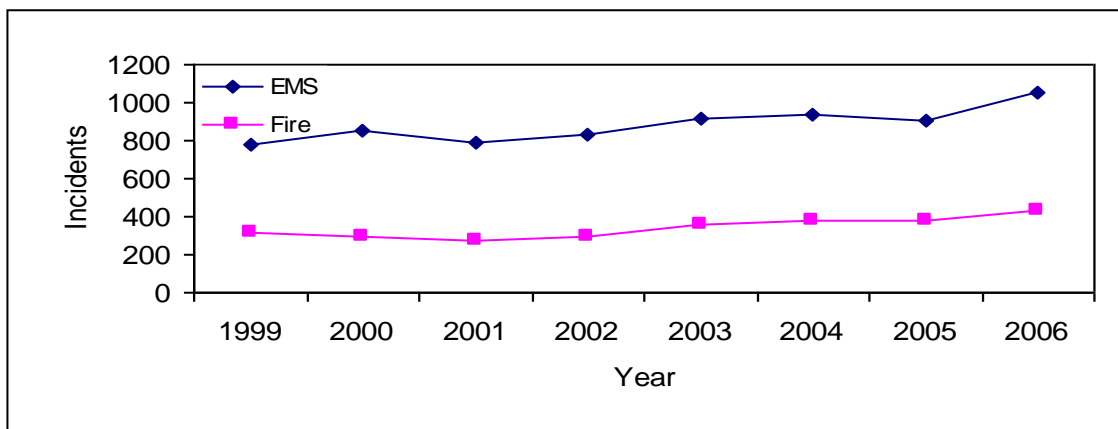
4. What are some factors that might prevent a consolidation of services between the Wellington Fire District and the South Lorain County Ambulance District?

### BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

Often, a typical criticism when the EMS side is confronted with consolidating services is the fact that the fire service is a quasi-military organization, while EMS is not accustomed to that environment. However, history shows us that civilian EMS got its start in the military.

“The development of modern civilian Emergency Medical Services (EMS) stems largely from lessons learned in providing medical care to soldiers injured in military conflict” (National Highway Traffic Safety Administration [NHSTA], 2005, p.7).

Throughout the history of the Wellington Community Fire District and the South Lorain County Ambulance District, cooperation and coordination of services has been prevalent. However, while 45% of our nation’s emergency medical systems are fire-based (Garman et al., 2004), the question raised is operating two separate organizations still warranted and effective? Based solely on the amount of fire and EMS runs, as illustrated in Figure 1, the continued upward trend could lead to an over-extended service, as they exist today.



**Figure 1.**

EMS Incidents Versus Fire Incidents

Whether jointly responding and operating at motor vehicle accidents or the sharing of employees, the districts have in the past, and will continue to function as one entity, at least in a theoretical limited capacity.

In conducting this study, one item becomes strikingly clear, both through formal and informal research. Attitudes and emotions are heightened.

“It is common for such transitions to be emotionally charged events for those closely involved, and emotions often lead to serious mistakes. When emotions are allowed to overtake rationality, departments should expect some limited attrition of volunteers” (Scott et al., 2005, p.9).

The South Lorain County Ambulance District was established December 30, 1976. Prior to that date, undertakers or funeral home owners provided ambulance services locally. As training requirements and time constraints burdened those services, the move was made for those individuals to no longer provide these necessary services to the community. In response to that, the formation of the South Lorain County Ambulance District was designed. The ambulance district would be supported by a one-mill levy and include the residents of the Village of Wellington, Wellington Township, Brighton Township, the Village of Rochester, and Rochester Township. In November of 1977, Penfield Township would enter into the district, as well.

One representative from each of the political subdivisions would sit on the Board of Trustees and determine policy and administer tax dollars collected by the levy, under the guidance of an appointed district clerk.

Since its inception, the South Lorain County Ambulance District has grown to include the township of Huntington, serving a total population of 11,301, in a 105 square mile area (Lorain County Community Development [LCCD], 2005). Additionally, with the inception of the South



Lorain County Ambulance District, the initial structure, a simple, two-bay garage, has been replaced in 2005 by a three-bay facility, with administrative offices and living quarters, which is located east of two sets of railroad tracks, dividing the district.

EMS staffing in its infancy was accomplished with 30 volunteers with a simple goal of providing a service to their community. Through time, staffing levels have changed, however the current South Lorain County Ambulance District roster lists 30 members, with differing levels of training. One of the major changes in the South Lorain County Ambulance District's growth has been with the addition of full-time or career employees. In the 1980's, the Board of Trustees employed their first full-time director, with full-time personnel soon to follow.

Staffing is accomplished by manning a "day squad" with one paramedic and two emergency medical technicians, 6:00 am until 6:00 pm, seven days a week. Full-time personnel staff the day squad, with a mix of part-time personnel filling in. All personnel, on a sign-up basis, fill the weekend shifts. From 6:00 pm until 6:00 am, crews consisting of one paramedic and two emergency medical technicians, rotate throughout the week. Each crew is on call for twelve hours, and then is off for two consecutive nights before being on call again.

During the evening shifts, one medic and at least an emergency medical technician cover back-up shifts. However, during the daytime hours, as is often the case in other areas, back-up personnel are scarce. In fact, quite often, if a second call comes in during the daytime, the back-up squad may only consist of one person. The Wellington Community Fire District First Responders are called, per an agreement with the South Lorain County Ambulance District, to provide personnel for every daytime back-up call. During such times, it is not uncommon for Wellington Community Fire District personnel to begin patient care, waiting for the arrival of the

second ambulance. Additionally, fire personnel have been involved with transporting patients when staffing of the ambulance is inadequate.

The district operates two ambulances, with a third kept in reserve.

The South Lorain County Ambulance District has financially survived throughout its twenty-nine year history through a series of five-year tax levies. Revenue from the levies has provided nearly 100% of funding, with occasional donations from local civic organizations. Between 2000 and 2003, revenue for the South Lorain County Ambulance District consisted of \$480,730 to \$481,637 (South Lorain County Ambulance District [SLCAD] records, 2006). Fiscal year 2004, revenues topped \$893,030 (SLCAD, 2006) with an additional 1.5 mill levy passed for three years. In fiscal year 2005, the South Lorain County Ambulance District showed \$904,868.82 in revenue, \$686,849.60 in expenditures (SLCAD, 2006). However, when the \$362,938.49 carryover funds are added in, the district shows a net worth of \$582,207.71 to start 2006 (SLCAD, 2006), as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Financial Status of the South Lorain County Ambulance District*

Financial Breakdown	Amount
General Fund Carryover from 2004	\$362,938.49
General Fund Receipts for 2005	\$904,868.82
General Fund Expenditures for 2005	\$686,849.60
General Fund Carryover from 2005	\$580,957.71
General Fund Receipts as of September 2006	\$813,993.63
General Fund Expenditures as of September 2006	\$546,244.48
General Fund Cash Balance as of September 2006	\$849,956.86

The Wellington Community Fire District operated as the Wellington Fire Department from its beginning in 1881 until 1970, when the Wellington Community Fire District was formed. The current district provides coverage for the Village of Wellington and the townships of Brighton, Huntington, Penfield, and Pittsfield. Each political entity is represented on the Board of Trustees, which administers and oversees the funding for the Fire District, aided by an appointed clerk.

The Fire District has evolved into a combination department, with the addition of a full-time Fire Chief in 1996 and a full-time firefighter in 2001. Along with a complement of paid-on-call firefighters numbering 31, the department is covered by a crew from 8:00 am until midnight, Monday thru Friday, and 8:00 am until 12:00 pm on Saturday and Sunday. Other members respond by the use of voice pagers, when called.

The Wellington Community Fire District consists of two buildings, Station One, which houses an engine and rescue truck, is located in the Village Square, east of the CSX railroad. Station Two, which is the administrative headquarters, houses an engine, rescue, ladder, tanker, and a first response vehicle. Station Two is located northwest of the CSX railroad. Currently, Station One is owned by the Village of Wellington with all utility costs and repairs the responsibility of the fire district. Station Two is owned by the Board of Trustees, has office space for the district's clerk and administrative offices for the Fire Chief and on-duty firefighters.

The Wellington Community Fire District has relied upon a general property tax levy throughout its history. Currently, a 2.5 mill levy, which was reduced from 2.75 mills in 2005, serves as the main source of revenue, and will generate approximately \$1,253,779 in 2006 (Wellington Fire District [WFD] records, 2006), as detailed in Table 2.

**Table 2**

*Financial Status of the Wellington Community Fire District*

Financial Breakdown	Amount
General Fund Carryover from 2004	\$405,835.15
General Fund Receipts for 2005	\$990,520.52
General Fund Expenditures for 2005	\$552,852.19
General Fund Carryover from 2005	\$843,503.48
General Fund Receipts as of September 2006	\$717,899.80
General Fund Expenditures as of September 2006	\$1,207,389.50
General Fund Cash Balance as of September 2006	\$386,933.40

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

One of the most difficult aspects of this undertaking has been perceptions and attitudes of individuals from both emergency service providers. Through the literature review, differing, unbiased opinions were obtained, allowing this author to put aside personal feelings and concentrate on facts and historical findings regarding emergency services consolidations.

Snook & Johnson (1997) study the history of cooperative service consolidations, as well as trends for the future. Detailing how funding, or lack of funding, has often spurred the wheels of change, leading to a consolidating of services. The authors emphasize that surviving is not the option anymore, but administrators must investigate creative ways to possibly deal with less funding, yet provide improved services to the consumer. Snook & Johnson go on to say, “The question: Is there something we can do together to become more effective or efficient” (p.2)?

Through the use of task forces, a term common to firefighting, administrators will be better prepared to utilize their resources for potential cooperative service consolidations,

according to Snook & Johnson. Planning, while certainly important, is secondary to communicating and keeping all parties informed. The authors focus on better utilization of organizational resources, with the ultimate goal of efficiency.

In Scott et al. (2005), the process of changing the makeup or look of a department is addressed in depth. The authors outline both the benefits, as well as the pitfalls of leading change. Their work emphasizes that there exists no standard procedure for changing service parameters, but explain a variety of approaches that have proven successful in other municipalities. Outlined in this publication are indicators for administrators that a change is needed. Whether it is reduced staffing, extended response times or community growth, organizational administrators must recognize the signals and prepare for changes. Addressed in terms of transitioning from a volunteer to a combination organization, the study also pays particular attention to the casualties of the transition. Emotionally, this type of change will be taxing on the members who may fear the loss of position or stature. Agreeing with the Snook & Johnson (1997) study, efficiency is one of the major goals of consolidations; the authors of this study believe improving service at a reduced cost is also a reason to institute change.

In an article published by Garman et al. (2004), significant weight is placed on delayed access to patients in a rural setting. Due to several factors, such as distance from a trauma center or lengthy response times, patient survival is decreased in the rural setting. Whether it is based on distance to a hospital or a reliance on an ever-decreasing volunteer population, patient care will suffer. One could then contend that inadequate staffing could in fact cause delays in response, therefore decreasing potential patient survival. Through better personnel utilization, potential response delays should be minimized.

Lowe & Cohilas (2005) found while studying the unification of the Clayton County Georgia fire and EMS systems under one command that attitudes and views would need to be assessed. The authors found that, for example, while the paramedics generally were supportive, others, such as suppression personnel viewed the unification differently. Any area that undertakes such a procedure will undoubtedly be forced to deal with such attitude problems, according to the authors.

Garza (2000) investigated five urban fire and EMS mergers, noting while each was not simple, each has been successful. Successful in that a positive change occurred for each jurisdiction. The author noted, for example, that in the city of Norfolk, Virginia, resistance was met from both sides. However, the former chief of the Norfolk Fire and Paramedical Services detailed that although attitudes were differing, average response to EMS calls went from 13.2 minutes to 5.3 minutes. Additionally, average response to fire calls drastically decreased. Similar decreases in response times were noted when New York City merged its NYC-EMS with the FDNY. Garza (2000) also noted that while attitudes and perceptions were strong from both sides in Norfolk, the same was found in New York, San Francisco, and Louisville. Conversely, prior to a new mayor taking office in St. Louis in 1997 and ordering the merging of the St. Louis Fire Department and the St. Louis EMS, members of the St. Louis EMS had actually petitioned the city to allow EMS to merge with the fire department.

In a web-based article, Goldfeder (2004) examined problems with volunteer fire organizations and how to change the outlook from dysfunctional to functional. One such tool addressed was mergers. The author stated, "In some cases, the members of your fire company may need to look at the big picture of what is best for the community such as merging small volunteer companies into larger volunteer companies."

The author stresses that bigger is not necessarily better, but if increased membership is achieved with a merger, duplication of services can be overcome. He also points out that in smaller communities, fire-based EMS is failing. The call volume, in conjunction with low member participation, drains the department's mental and physical resources.

Statistics gathered from the United States Census Bureau and Lorain County Community Development Department projections demonstrated an 18% increase in the population of the townships of the fire district since 1990, and a 21% increase in the townships served by the South Lorain County Ambulance District. An increasing population directly relates to an increase in call volume for each of the entities. As the population increases in any area, the proven reality is that an increase in call volume should also occur.

From the Kansas City Star (2006), a study was conducted, evaluating fire departments in the Kansas City metropolitan area. Fifteen departments were evaluated to measure the efficiency of their service. Budget, the number of fire calls, as well as the number of fire staff were compared against the total response calls and total fire losses. Nine of the fifteen evaluated departments were providing fire and EMS services, while six were traditional fire-only departments. The results of the study were weighted in favor of the combination service providers. In fact, the three departments that tied for first in this study all provide fire-based EMS to their citizens. Consequently, the two departments that were ranked fourteenth and fifteenth were fire service providers only. The study revealed that while department efficiency can show drastic improvements, cost to patients is decreased, as well as lower response times.

In a (2006) web-based article, Marion County Indiana officials detail the cost savings as the Indianapolis Fire Department merged with the Washington Township Fire Departments.

Anderson (2003) studied alternatives in EMS service delivery in the city of Delaware, Ohio to determine a system that would work more efficiently in the city. Faced with tremendous population growth, the City of Delaware was confronted with nearly triple the amount of EMS runs to fire runs. Staffing levels were consistent, however during EMS runs, fire personnel were decreased. Simultaneous EMS runs severely depleted personnel. The author studied six different scenarios, or hypothetical departments, all with varying personnel and response priorities.

In his Ohio Fire Executive Program research paper, Jump (2002) studied the City of Wapakoneta's fire department and the city's EMS provider, which, while not affiliated with the fire department, was a division of the city. Faced with many of the same problems as other areas, such as decreased staffing, Jump identified the advantages and disadvantages of the then current operation, the combining of operations, and also the possibility of contracting with a private provider.

A review of the literature for this project provided documented cases of EMS/fire consolidations. The overwhelming consensus was that while a consolidation of services, where needed, is possible; a smooth and flawless transition should not be expected. In several instances, services that undertook the consolidation process showed cost savings, improved response times, as well as a better utilization of personnel. The literature review was not limited to small departments, however. Larger studies involving New York, Louisville, and San Francisco were also utilized, giving this project a thorough sampling of experiences. Most importantly to the researcher was that the personal issues, such as fear of a new situation, fear of job loss, as well as genuine stubbornness happened to be present in all of these examples, both large and small.



## **PROCEDURES**

The initial work done for this descriptive research product began with preliminary instruction through the Ohio Fire Executive Program staff. Following that initial week of classroom instruction, time was spent compiling applicable articles from refereed journals, books, and other periodicals that were on-hand within the fire department's library. Articles that dealt specifically with service consolidations were sought so as to help determine pitfalls of such transitions, as well as to possibly understand attitudes that may surface during such an undertaking.

Using the National Fire Academy's Learning Research Center, research projects, as well as research based articles were obtained through an interlibrary loan, utilizing the local library. This information would look on the national level to processes and procedures for previous service consolidations. Additionally, while three previously completed Ohio Fire Executive Program research projects were gathered through the Ohio Fire Executive Program's Administrative Assistant, it was abundantly clear that more research was available nationally.

Several avenues were utilized to obtain statistical information, most notably, census information, as well as financial figures obtained from the respective fiscal officers of each public entity. Annual financial records were compared and information, such as district expenses and revenues was collected in order to compare and contrast the fixed and soft costs of each organization.

To gain an organizational perspective of a possible service consolidation, interviews were conducted of the current Fire Chief, Assistant Fire Chief, as well as the South Lorain County Ambulance District Director. The interviews focused on problems that were anticipated within in each organization in the near future, as well as potential solutions to these anticipated

problems. Each interviewee was also asked for their opinion on the efficacy of a service consolidation, noting any potential issues that may surface.

Additionally, a written survey, Appendix A, was prepared so that each member of the Wellington Community Fire District and South Lorain County Ambulance District could participate. The survey would be hand delivered to each member, thirty-three from the Wellington Community Fire District and twenty-seven from the South Lorain County Ambulance District. Six employees are shared employees; therefore a survey was not given to those employees in their South Lorain County Ambulance District capacity.

## **RESULTS**

The overall goal of this applied research project was to determine the feasibility of an emergency services consolidation. Through interviews and a research survey, the attitudes of the affected individuals was gauged and noted. Several questions asked of survey respondents dealt with their attitudes toward the financial status of a consolidated organization. Coincidentally, a detailed analysis of the official documented finances will serve as an objective measuring stick to the financial status of each organization, as well as a consolidated organization.

Research Question One: What is the financial status of both the Wellington Community Fire District and the South Lorain County Ambulance District? In answering this question, financial reports from the Fiscal Officers from each entity were obtained, with the appropriate responses noted in Table 3. While subtle differences in the terminology were noted, the finished, general financial statements are similar.

**Table 3***Financial Status of the Wellington Community Fire District and South Lorain County Ambulance District*

Financial Breakdown	Fire	EMS
General Fund Carryover from 2004	\$405,835.15	\$362,938.49
General Fund Receipts for 2005	\$990,520.52	\$904,868.82
General Fund Expenditures for 2005	\$552,852.19	\$686,849.60
General Fund Carryover from 2005	\$843,503.48	\$580,957.71
General Fund Receipts as of September 2006	\$717,899.80	\$813,993.63
General Fund Expenditures as of September 2006	\$1,207,389.50	\$546,244.48
General Fund Cash Balance as of September 2006	\$386,933.40	\$849,956.86

Each entity operates on similar levies, with revenues also similar. In 2005, the Wellington Community Fire District passed a five-year, 2.5 mill tax levy. The levy was reduced .25 mills from the previous levy. In November of 2006, the South Lorain County Ambulance District passed a 3.0 mill levy, which replaced a 2.0 and 1.5 mill levies. Each entity was able to reduce their respective levies based on projected revenues provided by the Lorain County Auditor's office.

Each organization has enjoyed healthy annual carry-overs, supplementing the budgets for future capital improvements and equipment purchases. The only large variation is evident in fiscal year 2006 when the fire district's expenditures shows a higher figure than the revenue. In 2006, the fire district used a portion of it's savings to purchase a new \$606,000 ladder truck.

Financially, each organization, for the most part has shown sound fiscal responsibility in their history, with the exception of an EMS shortfall in 2004 due to a lack of planning. During

that time, as a new building project was undertaken, a second, 1.5 mill emergency levy was needed to supplement the budget for the upcoming year.

Research Question Two: What is the effect of a consolidation on personnel costs and facility maintenance of each the Wellington Community Fire District and South Lorain County Ambulance District? While personnel costs can account for over 90% of a totally full-time organization, smaller departments, with less full-time staffing should not see such a high percentage. As documented in Table 4, in fiscal year 2006, the portion of the Wellington Community Fire District’s budget dedicated to personnel salaries was 28% of the total budget, while 49% of the South Lorain County Ambulance District’s budget was earmarked for salaries. One of the major differences between the two entities is that South Lorain County Ambulance District pays employees to either be available for backup duty or to be on primary during the evenings. The Wellington Community Fire District does not pay for standby personnel.

**Table 4**

*Personnel Costs of the Wellington Community Fire District and South Lorain County Ambulance District*

	Fire	EMS	Fire/EMS
Personnel Costs as of September 2006	\$178,688.85	\$270,241.86	\$448,930.71

Pay structure for firefighters essentially falls into four categories: full-time fire chief and firefighter salary, part-time firefighter station coverage, part-time firefighter’s call pay, and annual salaries for each firefighter. Those employees that are not full-time are paid a structured hourly fee when on duty or at incidents. The district’s two full-time employees are salaried and not paid for calls outside of their normal daily shift. The cost of the full-time employees, station coverage in the evening and weekends, as well as the annual salaries of the part-time employees

is relatively predictable and constant. However, depending upon the call volume for the year, the part-time employee's salaries may fluctuate.

The South Lorain County Ambulance District employs a full-time director, an assistant director and four full-time employees with varying levels of certification. Three personnel are on duty, at the station, from 6:00 am to 6:00 pm, seven days a week. Additionally, twenty-four hours a day, one to three employees are paid to be available on the back-up squad, in the event a second call is received. After 6:00 pm, three personnel are paid to respond in the primary squad, from their homes. Hopefully, not lost in the figures is that the Wellington Community Fire District has an initial response crew on duty 66% of each day, while the South Lorain County Ambulance District has an available first response crew available 50% of each day.

When comparing facility expenditures of both entities, it is important to realize that while the fire district operates from two different stations, maintenance to Station One is minimal. Station One is "leased" to the fire district by the Village of Wellington. Utility costs, while paid for by the fire district, consist of four fluorescent lights and water that is flushed through the toilet. Maintenance issues that arise for the station are handled by Village employees, at Village cost.

The South Lorain County Ambulance District operates from one station and devotes 3% (.032) of its annual budget to facility maintenance and utility costs, compared to a similar figure (.029) by the Wellington Community Fire District, as documented in Table 5.

**Table 5**

*Facility Maintenance Costs of the Wellington Community Fire District and South Lorain County Ambulance District*

	Fire	EMS	Fire/EMS
Facility Maintenance Costs as of September 2006	\$16,663.29	\$14,606.93	\$31,270.22

In terms of a consolidated entity, the overall savings would be minute. The geographical factor in this equation, the CSX railroad track, continues to divide the fire district and ambulance district in half. A consolidated entity would still require a station on the north side of the railroad in addition to a south station. By eliminating fire Station One, utility costs savings would be under \$200 annually.

Research Question Three: What are the similarities and differences between each organization? When studying the make-up of both the South Lorain County Ambulance District and the Wellington Community Fire District, one of the most obvious similarities is the area served by both districts. With two minor exceptions, the customer base for both entities is identical. When a state route or township road is closed, communication between the entities to determine alternate routes takes place. Through the years, both groups have worked well together in our shared areas.

Similarly, both districts also share several employees. In 2003, when six members of the fire district were seeking a basic emergency medical technician class, certified instructors from South Lorain County Ambulance District taught the class. Since that time, up to thirteen fire district employees have also been ambulance district employees. As a combined entity, familiarity with the processes and procedures is very common.

In terms of employees, one of the more common similarities that exist, as it does in smaller departments, is the decrease in available manpower. Smaller departments are continually in search of qualified individuals, who can make themselves available for service. The primary reason fire district personnel are automatically called to assist in back-up EMS incidents during the daytime is because it is difficult to staff the second squad. Individuals are no longer able to leave their primary places of employment to respond to a fire or EMS call, as was the case in

years past. While each department is able to staff a primary response apparatus, the unknown exists concerning personnel on the second or third apparatus.

Another similarity is that each district is governed by a board of trustees from each respective township. Each township is represented by a trustee or council person, who is entrusted with the job of representing his or her political entity on the board of trustees.

Each organization currently has ownership of adequate facilities. With the exception of fire Station One, the EMS headquarters and fire Station Two are well-situated within the Village to provide adequate response, well-maintained, and capable of expansion if needed.

Financially, both the Wellington Community Fire District and South Lorain County Ambulance District operate on similar tax levies. These levies produce similar amounts and traditionally, each organization has been able to carry funds to the next year. With the exception of 2004, when the South Lorain County Ambulance District was forced to obtain an emergency levy, both districts have managed their funds appropriately.

Finally, both districts have adequate resources in terms of apparatus. While there is not necessarily a replacement plan in place, the three apparatus in service for the South Lorain County Ambulance District are well-maintained. The fire district apparatus are on a 25-30 year replacement schedule, depending upon the intended use. Since both districts are financially stable, replacement schedules should be in place to ensure that apparatus purchases are always anticipated.

In terms of the differences that exist between the two groups, four specific differences are most important. Primarily, while listed as a similarity, the coverage area is also considered a difference. Both entities are responsible for fire and EMS coverage of the Village of Wellington, Brighton Township, Huntington Township, Penfield Township, and Wellington Township. The

fire district is also responsible for Pittsfield Township, while the ambulance district is responsible for Rochester Village and Township. This service area difference, while manageable in the event of a consolidation, brings several problems, the most noteworthy being an existing fire department in the Village of Rochester. This alone could prove to be a significant problem in terms of consolidating the ambulance and fire districts. No mention has been made, nor is there any apparent need to eliminate the Rochester Fire Department.

A significant difference is the ability of each district to sufficiently provide coverage for its own respective district. Currently, all South Lorain County Ambulance District operations occur from one location. As previously stated, the Village of Wellington is divided by a CSX railroad track. This line supports 50-75 trains per day. Weekly, two of the four, if not more, Village crossings are blocked for extended periods of time due to switching or simply mechanical breakdowns. During these times, travel to the north or west requires an extensive detour throughout the service area to respond to a call. Conversely, the Wellington Community Fire District operates from two stations, on opposing sides of the railroad. Each station is equipped with a heavy rescue and an engine. Regardless of blocked crossings, fire district personnel can respond with the bare essentials to anywhere in the district.

Informal conversations have taken place between the fire chief and the EMS director regarding this situation. While re-locating the two apparatus from Fire Station One, to the South Lorain County Ambulance District headquarters, and re-locating one ambulance to Fire Station Two, two problems would be solved. First and foremost, the ambulance district would then have both sides of the railroad covered, and less importantly, the old Station One, could be eliminated. These conversations, while informal, could lead to the change. However, at this time, the South Lorain County Ambulance District is not interested in such a proposal.



A difference also exists in training levels between the two organizations. An emergency services consolidation would require a large degree of cross training in the interim. Initially, more employees that are fire and EMS certified would allow for a smoother transition. Currently, 70% of the Wellington Community Fire District roster is Firefighter 2 certified and 67% are certified as an EMT-B or higher. Among those, the fire district employs three paramedics and one intermediate EMT. However, the training levels at the South Lorain County Ambulance District do not match as highly in terms of firefighting. Shared employees notwithstanding, on the EMS side, two employees are Firefighter 2 certified and five employees are at the minimal Firefighter 1A level.

The final difference between the two entities is from a planning perspective. The fire district has taken the lead in planning for many years. From apparatus purchases, levy promotion, and staffing levels, the Wellington Community Fire District has continually made an effort to plan and implement procedures which improve the services to the community, as well as promotes the image of the fire district.

Since 2004, the fire district has continually increased the amount of station coverage it provides. Working within the constraints of the budget, weekend staffing of the station was begun in 2004. Starting in 2006, coverage of the fire station until midnight began. All told, the fire station is covered by a first response crew 66% of the time. Whether it is station coverage, protocols, or apparatus purchases, the fire district has shown that through proper, responsible planning; even an organization with limited funds can flourish.

The South Lorain County Ambulance District has not changed its level of staffing for some time. While most area departments have gone to a two person squad, a three person, and occasionally a four person squad is the norm. Meanwhile, the backup squad during the daytime

will have one or possibly two members assigned for a second call. Occasionally, fire district personnel have been asked to be “available” during the day to help cover the backup squad.

Medical apparatus purchases, which can cost easily six figures, must be planned. However, where a five year replacement plan formerly existed, no plan is in effect today. During the building of the current EMS headquarters, an additional levy had to be obtained to enable the South Lorain County Ambulance District to meet its financial obligations in 2004. Planning and forethought several years prior to the building project beginning should have taken place to ensure that financially, the then current levy would be sufficient.

Research Question Four: What are some factors that might prevent a consolidation of services between the Wellington Community Fire District and South Lorain County Ambulance District? In answering this question, this author focused on two distinct areas of concern. The first area of concern focused on the legalities of a consolidation and secondly attitudes of the affected individuals.

An extensive literature search was done attempting to locate information concerning legal issues that might arise to inhibit an emergency services consolidation. However, at least within the State of Ohio, legal issues are not apparent. The main legal point of contention is the different makeups of the two districts. However, there currently exists no legislation that would prevent two districts from merging to form one district. The laws of the State of Ohio allow the newly formed district to contract with other entities. For example, a consolidated fire and EMS may contract with Pittsfield Township for fire protection and Rochester Village for its EMS service. Snook & Johnson (1997) point out that one of the more important steps to consolidating public entities is to have a strong legal presence involved to help with the legal hurdles that will

be encountered. So while the legal issues associated with an emergency services consolidation are not to be unexpected, by no means are they prohibitive of such an undertaking.

Aside from potential legal hurdles to jump, by far, the single factor that could very well prevent a consolidation between the Wellington Community Fire District and South Lorain County Ambulance District is the attitude of the employees of each entity. To assess the attitudes of these individuals, a short, sixteen question survey was hand delivered to all employees of each district. Thirty-three surveys were delivered to all of the employees of the Wellington Community Fire District, with twenty-six returned and completed. Of the twenty-seven surveys delivered to South Lorain County Ambulance District personnel, only thirteen were returned and of those thirteen, only eleven were complete. Evaluation and tabulation of the responses was completed and listed in Tables 6 through 15.

**Table 6**

*Gender of those surveyed*

Gender	Fire	EMS
Male	26	10
Female	0	3

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As survey question one, Table 6 shows, in terms of gender, the Wellington Community Fire District is 100% male and the South Lorain County Ambulance District is composed of 40% males. An unfounded conclusion is that the fire district does not allow females to be hired as firefighters. Again, this conclusion is drawn due to the fact no females are currently on the fire district roster. Truth be told, only two females have ever applied for employment. One of the females was not hired based on qualifications and the other female was not interviewed due to a prior felony.

**Table 7***What is your age?*

Age Range	Fire	EMS
18-21	0	0
22-30	3	2
31-40	11	5
41-50	7	4
>50	5	1

This author felt that, in terms of employee age, as reflected in question two, Table 7, the older employees may be less inclined to be in favor of a consolidation. Of the sixteen employees, from each entity, over the age of forty, ten indicated that they would be in favor of a consolidation. However, only one of the four EMS employees who answered this question indicated that they were in favor of a consolidation. One consideration which can not be ignored is the tendency of the older employees to fear job loss in this situation. The American fire service has never been accused of embracing change; surprisingly however, the data seems to indicate that the older fire district employees are willing to accept this change.

**Table 8***What is your level of EMS training?*

Training Level	Fire	EMS
No training	3	1
First Responder	6	0
Basic EMT	14	8
Intermediate	1	1
Paramedic	2	3

**Table 9***What is your level of fire training?*

Training Level	Fire	EMS
No training	0	5
36 hour	7	4
Firefighter 1	1	1
Firefighter 2	18	3

A consolidated entity would eventually require that its employees be cross trained for fire, as well as EMS. Survey questions three and four, as detailed in Tables 8 and 9, differentiate levels of various training. In the initial stages of the consolidation, certainly those already cross trained will be more beneficial, or flexible in terms of scheduling. The survey data shows that of the currently cross trained EMS employees, three of the seven respondents were in favor of a consolidation. Sixteen of the seventeen fire district employees who responded and are cross trained at least to the basic level, were in favor of a consolidation.

**Table 10***How long have you been EMS certified?*

Years	Fire	EMS
<1 year	5	2
1-3 years	9	3
4-8 years	8	4
9-12 years	1	1
>12 years	3	3

EMS certifications for Wellington Community Fire District personnel have only recently been instituted. It wasn't until the late 90's that all employees were to be trained to the First Responder level. In 2004, that level was increased to the basic level for all new employees.

**Table 11**

*How long have you been fire certified?*

Years	Fire	EMS
<1 year	1	5
1-3 years	5	3
4-8 years	4	2
9-12 years	6	2
>12 years	10	1

**Table 12**

*Would a South Lorain County Ambulance District and Wellington Community Fire District consolidation present a personal benefit to you?*

Response	Fire	EMS
Yes	11	2
No	10	8
Unsure	5	2

Nine of the respondents to question seven, Table 12, who did not believe a consolidation would benefit them personally, indicated that they were in favor of a consolidation. Again, eight of those respondents were fire district employees.

Question eight was separated into four different categories. Again, this question provokes answers, which while subjective, provides insight into the perceptions that the

employees have regarding finances, facilities, and operations. Unless one has experience in budgeting, scheduling, and management, it will be difficult to get anything but subjective data from this.

The author's personal experience shows that unless an employee is involved with the budgeting process, he or she most likely will not have a working knowledge of the process. Quite simply, as long as the apparatus is fueled and they receive a paycheck every two weeks, the entity is in good financial standing.

Also, realizing that 42% of the fire district employees feel a consolidation of services would benefit them, it is not surprising to see the overwhelmingly positive responses to question eight. Conversely, while the majority of ambulance district employees did not perceive a personal benefit, it is also not surprising to see the majority of their responses to question eight as in the negative. Attitudes, which through the literature review, as well as personal observations, were expected. Not only are the attitudes present, but they are very strong. Perspectives differ greatly. This author or most fire district employees refer to this as a consolidation or merger. Ambulance personnel refer to this proposal as a takeover.

**Table 13**

*In your opinion, what benefits, if any could occur if a consolidation of services occurred?*

Question	Response	Fire	EMS
Improved financial standing	Definitely	10	0
	Somewhat	8	3
	No	3	7
	Unsure	5	3
Improved personnel utilization	Definitely	17	2
	Somewhat	7	2
	No	2	7
	Unsure	0	2
Improved facility utilization	Definitely	19	1
	Somewhat	4	2
	No	0	4
	Unsure	3	6
Improved service to the community	Definitely	19	3
	Somewhat	4	1
	No	2	8
	Unsure	1	1

As documented in Table 14, question number nine looks at the potential negatives to a consolidation of services. Relatively speaking, fire district employees found few negatives to an emergency services consolidation. Four of the twenty-six respondents indicated uncertainty in terms of job security; however, they were in the minority.



**Table 14**

*In your opinion, what disadvantages could occur if a consolidation of services occurred?*

Question	Response	Fire	EMS
Pay decrease	Definitely	0	3
	Somewhat	0	1
	No	20	1
	Unsure	6	8
Job security	Definitely	1	5
	Somewhat	3	4
	No	17	2
	Unsure	5	2
Financially unstable organization	Definitely	0	3
	Somewhat	1	1
	No	18	5
	Unsure	7	4
Poorer service to the community	Definitely	0	3
	Somewhat	0	3
	No	25	6
	Unsure	1	1

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Again, not surprisingly, ambulance district respondents generally indicated that negative outcomes would exist if a consolidation occurred. For example, four of the thirteen respondents perceived a pay decrease would occur. Further research might ask if the respondent is aware of

the pay scale of each entity. Further investigation would show the average hourly salary of a fire district employee is greater than the average hourly salary of an ambulance district employee.

Also a perception, but the ambulance district employees were split on the feeling that a consolidated organization would provide a poorer service to the community. Fire district employees felt quite the opposite, with 96% indicating that not to be the case.

Question ten asks for a simple yes or no answer on the employees feeling for a consolidated organization. Nearly 85% of the fire respondents indicated their favor for this, while only 25% of the South Lorain County Ambulance District personnel were in favor of this action.

**Table 15**

*Are you in favor of a consolidation of the two organizations?*

Response	Fire	EMS
Yes	22	3
No	4	9

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**DISCUSSION**

“Those individuals who can look past personal agendas, comfort zones and internal or external pressures will ultimately adopt solutions that not only address, but also guarantee that the needs of the citizens served are met” (Snook & Johnson, 1997, p.2).

While off-the-cuff conversations or day room debates are certainly not considered research, many of those same findings surfaced during the course of this project. Certainly, one very common theme among authors of such studies is that attitudes play a huge role in an emergency services consolidation. Lowe & Cohilas (2005) noted specifically that fire suppression personnel and paramedics in Clayton County Georgia viewed such an undertaking

strikingly different. From this study one need not look further than survey question ten to see the division of the two departments. Analysis reveals an overwhelming percentage (.846) of the Wellington Community Fire District personnel in favor of a consolidation, as opposed to a majority (.75) of South Lorain County Ambulance District employees not in favor. A dividing line could not be more evident.

When presented with the facts, employees must put away personal feelings and focus on adapting to the necessary change. However, if an employee is not aware that change is needed, how do they move forward? Scott et al. (2005), in their report for the International Fire Chiefs Association, help document and record when a department may need to make a transition. One of the authors' indicators for change addresses missed calls. While no issues have surfaced regarding an initial EMS call, inadequately staffed backup calls are an issue. Through an interview and having conversations with the fire chief, on several occasions, fire personnel are considered the backup EMS squad. Seven times in 2006, Wellington Community Fire District personnel either drove the ambulance or assisted in the ambulance en-route to the hospital. Certainly, seven out of one-thousand and fifty-two calls is a small percentage; but would it have been acceptable for those seven calls to go un-manned? This indicator of change that Scott et al. (2005) described, in conjunction with lack of available staffing should indicate that a change in the process is needed.

However, in late 2003, when a consulting firm was brought before the combined boards, detailed their services and provided an estimated cost, the South Lorain County Ambulance District Board of Trustees were not interested. The fire service has long been criticized, most often by our own members, that we as a profession are stubborn and opposed to change. Yet when presented with an opportunity to simply investigate a change, the fire service, at least in

our small area, was very much in favor of the study. The collected survey data proves that a change to a consolidated entity makes sense, at least from the fire side. The difference, in this author's opinion is based solely on the perception of consolidation versus take over.

Scott et al. (2005), as well as the Johnson & Snook (1997) studies both address the fear of job loss and possibly rank demotion. Certainly, the data gathered from the survey indicates job security issues from the ambulance district employees. Pay decreases, as well as job concerns are obviously on the mind of those employees. Six of the eight EMS employees who were at least somewhat concerned with their job in the event of a consolidation, are not surprisingly against a consolidation. However, all four of the fire district employees who were at least somewhat concerned with their job in the event of a consolidation, were all in favor of an emergency services consolidation.

“It's difficult to get people to see beyond their own agenda and see what's best for the citizens” (Snook & Johnson, 1997, p.23).

To change the attitudes of the players in this game, the key is communication.

“It is essential that all members of the organization identify the department's mission and core values” (Scott et al., 2005, p.5).

It is the basic mission for both organizations to serve and protect the public. Individual job security is not the focus. What should be, and for the most part is the focus is on providing the best possible service to the community, at an affordable price. Asking employees if a consolidated department would create a better financial structure is pointless without further educating them of the true picture. Initially, all employees should be briefed on the finances, for example cost of personnel, utilities, as well as supplies. If restructuring shift coverage, explain the reasons a change is needed. Undertaking such a task as an emergency services consolidation

requires, as Scott et al. (2005), Snook & Johnson (1997), and others a massive amount of communication. The better informed the employees are, their ability to make recommendations and to buy-in to the program increases significantly. The employees that show concern for their jobs might not feel that way when confronted with different staffing scenarios. The fears of the older employee on having to undergo firefighter training may be totally unfounded. However, without effective communication, that may not be relayed to the employee.

An unsolicited comment on two surveys actually felt one of the reasons for consolidation was so that the fire district may move into the newer EMS headquarters, thus getting rid of the old fire station. Only three of the thirteen EMS respondents believed that better facility utilization would take place if a consolidation occurred, as opposed to twenty-three of the twenty-six fire respondents. With no formal plan in place it is impossible to predict how each facility would be used. The likely scenario would move the two fire apparatus from the old fire station and place them at the ambulance headquarters and place one ambulance, on the other side of the railroad tracks in Fire Station Two. The fire district headquarters would not change. Currently, the fire district headquarters has a day room, fitness area, and provisions for overnight stays. All of those items are also available at the EMS headquarters, but not needed to improve the current situation. To perceive that the impetus for a consolidation is to have a newer facility is ludicrous.

The implications to the respective organizations this research product has are both financial and personnel driven. However, in regards to those two items, one goal of improved service to the community should be the focus. Two financially strong organizations could very well become one financially strong organization. The restructuring of how personnel are used

and the associated costs with those personnel should improve how responses are handled, as well as the standard of care that the citizens expect.

Employees of each district should, through this project, be able to familiarize themselves with the overall financial picture of each entity. Additionally, gaining an understanding of facility and personnel usage will enable the employee to make an informed decision concerning the feasibility of an emergency services consolidation.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

While the selected literature for this project focused heavily on the attitudes that will be faced, and the survey data indicates the same, any further push towards an emergency services consolidation must take this into account. The problem this study set out to address was that two organizations managing similar resources and operations have led to financial challenges, duplication of efforts and inefficient operations.

A consolidated entity would create a financially strong operation, which would have the means for adjusting personnel usage to allow the staffing of two rescue squads, at all times. The general public is taxed to the limit now and should be receiving the best, most appropriate care all the time, not just from 6:00 am to 6:00 pm.

It is the recommendation of this author to pursue a consolidation of services study. This should not be completed internally, however. Numerous firms exist to work with the entities and help develop a sensible plan for consolidation. The data collected supports that the majority of affected individuals feel a consolidation of services is warranted. The hiring of a consulting firm, splitting the costs, would give each group an evaluation of their organization. The evaluation would include financial operations, pros and cons of the organization, facility usage information, as well as staffing issues. Essentially, the evaluation would simply tell each entity

what their strengths and weaknesses are. Additionally, the consulting firm's evaluation would define the necessity or lack thereof of a consolidation of services.

However, prior to any consultation, it is paramount that the leaders of each organization communicate with their employees to inform them of the process. As leaders, it is their duty to continually seek means of improvement for their department and to ensure that the best available service is provided to their customers. By communicating with their employees, alleviating any concerns regarding job security, pay issues, or other items, the leaders will have an increased ability to have the membership buy-in to the program.

Future readers of this project should also strive to evaluate the attitudes of those affected employees in such ventures. Realizing that while it is important to know what an employee is thinking, but also why he or she is thinking that way is vitally important to the research. Additionally, future research should also include surveying or interviewing of the policy makers in this arena. Council members, trustees, and board members are technically the final word when it comes to authorizing a consolidation of services. Their opinion, and insight, may help create the path to an emergency services consolidation.

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## APPENDIX A

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. The information gathered from this survey will be used in a research project for the Ohio Fire Executive Program. The data collected is confidential and any findings that may result from this project are not necessarily binding. When you have completed the survey, please place it in the envelope marked Ohio Fire Executive Project Survey, located in my mailbox.

1. Gender  Male  Female
2. What is your age?  18-21  22-30  31-40  41-50  > 51
3. What is your level of EMS training?  
 No training  First Responder  Basic EMT  Intermediate  Paramedic
4. What is your level of fire training?  
 No training  36 hr  Firefighter 1  Firefighter 2
5. How long have you been EMS certified?  
 < 1 year  1-3 years  4-8 years  9-12 years  > 12 years
6. How long have you been fire certified?  
 < 1 year  1-3 years  4-8 years  9-12 years  > 12 years
7. Would a South Lorain County Ambulance District and Wellington Fire District consolidation present a personal benefit to you?  Yes  No  Unsure
8. In your opinion, what benefits, if any could occur if a consolidation of services occurred?  
Improved financial standing  Definitely  Somewhat  No  Unsure  
Improved personnel utilization  Definitely  Somewhat  No  Unsure  
Improved facility utilization  Definitely  Somewhat  No  Unsure  
Improved service to the community  Definitely  Somewhat  No  Unsure
9. In your opinion, what disadvantages could occur if a consolidation of services occurred?  
Pay decrease  Definitely  Somewhat  No  Unsure  
Job security  Definitely  Somewhat  No  Unsure  
Financially unstable organization  Definitely  Somewhat  No  Unsure  
Poorer service to the community  Definitely  Somewhat  No  Unsure
10. Are you in favor of a consolidation of the two organizations?  Yes  No