

# **BENEFITED FIRE DISTRICTS – ONE STEP IN TRANSFORMING IOWA’S EMERGENCY RESPONSE SYSTEM**

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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. Resources are often directed to fire suppression rather than EMS and overall emergency response.
4. Permissive legislation to allow formation of benefited fire districts combined with benefited EMS districts is a first step in restructuring the system.
5. EMS benefited district legislation exists but is not utilized.
6. Two additional, supporting steps will facilitate the ability of local governments to develop rational emergency response districts: completion of a mapping system and education.

## **Opportunity Statement**

Iowa’s fire departments and emergency medical (EMS) departments represent the backbone of emergency response and home land security.

However, Iowa’s emergency response system is utterly gerrymandered, driven by a zero sum financial proposition, provides little incentive to develop rational response plans or share services beyond simple emergency mutual aid and is severely underfunded. There is vast room for improvement.

## **The Causes and Consequences**

The system is complex, tangled 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:

- Over 3,000 separate taxing and governing bodies for Iowa’s departments including about 1900 townships, 947 cities, 55 “grandfathered” benefited fire districts, perhaps 600 EMS departments as well as an unknown number of 28E Agencies, corporate departments and township departments
- Approximately 870 separate, independent fire departments, approximately 600 EMS services with many of these services mixed and entwined.

- 80% of fire departments serve population bases of fewer than 5,000, over half serve less than 2,500
- Resource allocation is often focused on fire suppression with little appreciation for the increased role of EMS and all other types of emergency response
- 15% of fire 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 nearly 40 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 some cases, response boundaries remain based on 1950's school districts, others on 1940's telephone company boundaries
- For a variety of reasons, including a funding structure static since 1975, the majority of cities subsidize fire protection in townships – city residents pay for the cost of protecting rural residents
- While Iowa Code Section 28E allows joint service provision, taxing and bonding authority remains with the cities and townships, thus merely shifting much of 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 of dollars
- In most cases, there is a significant disconnect between cities and townships

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

### **One Solution**

This plethora of improvement opportunities indicates myriad and wide ranging potential changes including: cultural and political changes, boundary evaluations and changes, increased levy limits, leadership training, increased funding, volunteer recruitment and retention programs and so on. However, in order to achieve a base level of organizational structure on which additional changes can be built, this document confines itself to a single, fundamental improvement affecting the structure of how emergency services are delivered in the state.

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

Benefitted districts provide a constituent determined response area of sufficient size, social and economic capital and other resources to provide adequate emergency response services.

Benefitted 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 districts were prohibited. Interestingly, beginning in 1995, the legislature permitted benefited EMS districts (see 357 F and G). However, the legislation goes largely unused.

The simplest approach to achieve this change is amending current legislation by combining Section 357 B, F and G and allowing “fire, emergency medical and other emergency response” districts. More sophisticated and targeted legislation could be developed. However, this strategy offers a simple starting point.

Importantly, this legislation would not necessarily reduce the number of fire and EMS stations only the number of governing and taxing bodies. Each small city could and perhaps should have a “department” (station). Fire and EMS departments are important civic and social capitol in small towns. They are often focal points for community activities. In most cases, a “department” could remain in each city. Such legislation will provide significant efficiency advantages in financing and managing. Legislation allowing benefited districts could change the way departments do business and respond to emergencies while continuing the important social focus at the city / township level.

An important byproduct of this legislation could be to redistribute resources from a focus on fire suppression delivery to a more comprehensive emergency response delivery.

It must be noted that, despite permissive legislation since 1995, it is doubtful there are more than one or two, if any, benefitted EMS districts. This clearly demonstrates a need for additional supporting steps.

### **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 fire, EMS and rescue 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 had a base data and about 30 had complete response boundary data and department attributes. ERIS was an extremely powerful tool that could be resurrected and 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 current system and if legislation allows benefitted districts, it does not follow the system will be reconfigured. Such a change represents a major historical, cultural and values shift.

It is imperative that a methodical, statewide educational effort be funded to, and coordinated by, the Fire Service Training Bureau (Department of Public Safety) to help educate communities and their emergency services concerning the benefits and means of reorganizing. There are other potential partners who would support such regionalization (such as Iowa Firefighters Association, the Iowa Emergency Medical Services Association, the Iowa Emergency Management Association, the Iowa Fire Chiefs Association, the Iowa Professional Fire Fighters, FEMA and USDA Rural Development). Thus state and federal partnerships may be utilized to leverage 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. Further, the system continues to focus on fire response rather EMS and emergency response. Legislation allowing of the use of benefited districts for fire protection in conjunction with EMS 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.