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Exploring Shared Fire Services: A Feasibility Study for the Town of Holland and Regional Partners

An Innovation Planning Grant Study

Innovative
Public Advisors



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Executive Summary

The Town of Holland, in partnership with the Village of Holmen, City of Onalaska, and Town of Onalaska, is exploring the future of fire services delivery in the Onalaska/Holmen area. Spurred by rising service demands, staffing shortages, and increased complexity of emergency response, this study evaluates the operational, financial, and governance implications of continued collaboration or deeper integration among these communities.

The study was funded through a Wisconsin Innovation Planning Grant and included extensive stakeholder interviews with municipal and fire department leadership, review of operational data, existing studies, and analysis of governance documents, population trends, referendum history, and service metrics. Key findings include:

- **Rising Call Volume Trends:** Between 2016 and 2024, the Holmen Area Fire Department (HAFD) experienced a 37% increase in total calls, growing from 825 calls in 2016 to 1,131 in 2024. In addition, overlapping calls grew, presenting significant staffing and coverage challenges. HAFD's call volume is heavily EMS-driven, with more than 70% of calls related to medical response in June 2025. Population growth, aging demographics, and increased 911 utilization have all contributed to this upward trend.
- **Staffing Challenges:** Like many departments across Wisconsin, HAFD and neighboring agencies face difficulty recruiting and retaining both full-time and part-time paid-on-call staff. Full-time staffing has increased but remains below comparable communities. Both the HAFD and Onalaska Fire Department rely heavily on mutual aid to fill coverage gaps.
- **Governance and Partnership Dynamics:** The original HAFD tri-party agreement between Holmen, Holland, and the Town of Onalaska shifted in 2023 when the Town of Onalaska departed to contract with the City of Onalaska. While this move simplified governance, it also created coverage inefficiencies, cost concerns, and resulted in this discussion about long-term regional collaboration.
- **Referendum Support and Fiscal Commitment:** In 2022, the Town of Holland passed a public safety referendum with 71% approval to increase funding for full-time firefighter/EMT staffing. The Village of Holmen passed a similar levy adjustment, underscoring both communities' commitment to sustainable fire.
- **Collaboration Opportunities Exist:** Leadership across all four jurisdictions express openness to continued discussions about shared services, co-location of facilities, joint staffing, and potential future consolidation—provided that financial equity, operational quality, and governance fairness are maintained.

This study presents multiple service delivery options and outlines governance models, financial projections, and implementation steps that can guide the Town of Holland and its partners toward a long-term, reliable, and collaborative system. Whether through expansion of current partnerships, formal consolidation, or targeted shared service agreements, a coordinated approach will be necessary to best meet the public safety needs of the growing region.

Introduction

The provision of reliable, responsive, and well-staffed fire services is essential to community safety and quality of life. In recent years, the Town of Holland and surrounding municipalities have experienced growing service demands, evolving public expectations, and significant workforce challenges in the fire service sector. These conditions—combined with aging facilities, shifting intergovernmental relationships, and constrained local revenue growth—have prompted a regional conversation about how best to structure and sustain fire service delivery.

In 2025, the Town of Holland was awarded an Innovation Planning Grant (IPG) from the Wisconsin Department of Administration to evaluate shared fire service options. The grant funded a professional feasibility study to assess the current state of service, identify barriers and opportunities for collaboration, and provide actionable recommendations for the Town and its partners. This study focuses on four jurisdictions:

- Town of Holland
- Village of Holmen
- City of Onalaska
- Town of Onalaska

The communities share geographic proximity and overlapping service territories, and each has played a role in the evolution of the Holmen Area Fire Department (HAFD). While past agreements and partnerships have provided a foundation for collaboration, emerging pressures—including rising call volumes, staffing shortfalls, and operational redundancies—have renewed interest in formalizing or expanding shared services. The study process included:

- In-depth interviews with elected officials, administrators, and fire chiefs from each jurisdiction.
- Review of department data, including call volume, staffing patterns, budget information, and ISO/public safety ratings.
- Analysis of governing documents, intergovernmental agreements, and public referendum materials.
- Comparison with service models in peer Wisconsin communities.
- Identification of short- and long-term opportunities for collaboration, shared investment, and operational efficiency.

The goal of this study is to provide the Town of Holland and its partners with a clear-eyed, actionable understanding of their options—and a pathway toward a resilient and cooperative regional fire system that protects public safety while respecting local values, financial capacity, and governance preferences.

Community and Organizational Context

The Town of Holland is part of a fast-growing region in La Crosse County, Wisconsin, where increased population, residential development, and shifting governance arrangements are reshaping the landscape of public safety service delivery. This section provides an overview of demographic and organizational characteristics relevant to understanding the Town's current fire service context.

Population Growth and Development Trends

The combined service area historically covered by the Holmen Area Fire Department (HAFD)—which included the Town of Holland, Village of Holmen, and Town of Onalaska—has seen steady population growth. According to Wisconsin Department of Administration estimates:

- The Town of Holland's population has increased by approximately 23% over the past decade, growing from 3,752 to 4,603 residents.
- The Village of Holmen experienced a 27% increase, reflecting significant residential development and suburban expansion.
- The overall HAFD fire district population (including the Town of Onalaska) has grown to an estimated 24,400 residents as of 2022 and is projected to reach 25,385 by 2025.

Between 2020 and 2025, the Village of Holmen alone issued nearly 600 residential building permits and 13 multifamily permits, underscoring the region's sustained growth and the strain it places on fire infrastructure and personnel. The Village's population has increased comparably from 10,662 in 2020, to approximately 12,400 in 2025.



Fire and EMS Referenda and Fiscal Commitment

In November 2022, voters in the Town of Holland passed a public safety referendum to increase the tax levy by \$582,500 annually for the purpose of enhancing fire services. The measure passed with 71% approval, signaling broad community support for investments in public safety.

The referendum enabled the hiring of additional full-time firefighters. Concurrently, the Village of Holmen passed a similar referendum, demonstrating parallel commitment from both remaining HAFD partner communities following the Town of Onalaska's departure from the district. Both the Town of Holland and Village of Holmen's financial share increased as the Town of Onalaska departed to the City of Onalaska during the referenda process.

Organizational Structure of the HAFD

The Holmen Area Fire Department has historically operated as a joint venture between three municipalities: Town of Holland, Village of Holmen, and Town of Onalaska. Each partner contributed to operational and capital costs, with operational shares based on equalized value and capital costs split equally.

In 2023, the Town of Onalaska formally exited the partnership and began contracting with the City of Onalaska Fire Department. This decision altered the governance structure and financial makeup of HAFD, leaving the Town of Holland and Village of Holmen as the two remaining partners.

The current HAFD Board of Commissioners is governed by Bylaws that outline member responsibilities, meeting procedures, capital planning requirements, and oversight authority. Despite streamlined governance, new challenges have emerged—particularly around adequate staffing, financial sustainability, apparatus replacement, and station adequacy.

Mutual Aid and Regional Interdependence

While each fire department maintains its own jurisdiction, mutual aid and automatic aid agreements have become critical to service continuity, especially during overlapping calls or when staffing falls below safe thresholds. HAFD, the City of Onalaska Fire Department, and La Crosse Fire Department regularly rely on one another for coverage support.

These interdependencies reflect a regional reality: no single department can consistently and effectively meet rising public safety demands alone. This has fueled interest among local leaders in exploring more structured collaborations or shared service agreements.

Existing Fire Service Models

Fire services in the Onalaska/Holmen area are currently provided by two primary departments: Holmen Area Fire Department (HAFD) and the City of Onalaska Fire Department (OFD). The Town of Holland, Village of Holmen, City of Onalaska, and Town of Onalaska each maintain unique service relationships with these departments. This section summarizes the current structure, governance, and operational approach of each department, as well as recent changes to service boundaries and partnerships.

Town of Holland

The Town of Holland receives fire and first responder services through the HAFD. As one of two current partners in the HAFD, the Town contributes to both operational and capital costs, and holds representation on the HAFD Board of Commissioners. Following the successful passage of a public safety referendum in 2022, the Town significantly increased its financial contribution to support hiring full-time firefighters.

Town leadership has expressed continued commitment to the HAFD model and openness to long-term collaboration with regional partners. However, they also emphasize the importance of governance equity, transparent budgeting, and sustainable cost-sharing.

Village of Holmen

The Village of Holmen is the second active partner in the HAFD, sharing operational and capital costs of fire services with the Town of Holland and participating in governance through the HAFD Board. The department provides fire protection, EMS, rescue, fire education, and fire prevention services to both jurisdictions, covering nearly 55 square miles and serving a combined population of approximately 17,000 residents.

HAFD operates under a combination staffing model with 12 full-time firefighter/EMTs working rotating 48-hour shifts with 96 hours off, one full-time chief officer, and three paid-on-call firefighter/EMTs. Four full-time personnel respond daily from the single fire station located in the Village of Holmen. Apparatus includes two fire pumpers, one light rescue truck, one water tender, one brush truck, one UTV, one boat, one command car, and one utility vehicle.

In recent years, the Village has been a vocal advocate for transitioning HAFD from a part-time/volunteer model to a full-time structure. This commitment was demonstrated through support for a public safety referendum and, in partnership with the Town of Holland, facilitating the hiring of 12 full-time staff—a significant investment in fire readiness.

The HAFD's previous partnership with the Town of Onalaska was strained by cost disputes and operational disagreements. Village leaders remain open to exploring renewed regional collaboration; however, they emphasize that any future partnership must be built on a clear governance structure, sustainable funding framework, and a binding long-term contract.

City of Onalaska

The City of Onalaska Fire Department (OFD) provides fire suppression and first responder coverage. In 2023, the City formalized a service agreement with the Town of Onalaska, effectively expanding OFD's service area and partially replacing HAFD's former jurisdiction.

The Onalaska Fire Department is a professional, career-staffed agency with a broader organizational capacity and higher total call volume compared to HAFD. In meetings with Mayor Kim Smith and Chief Pete Fletty, city officials expressed openness to future regional partnerships, but emphasized the need for formal planning, adequate resource support, and balanced service expectations.

While OFD has greater capacity, the logistical reality of crossing municipal boundaries—such as City units traveling through Holmen to reach Town of Onalaska incidents—has raised efficiency concerns and renewed conversations about service boundaries and station placement.

Town of Onalaska

The Town of Onalaska was a founding member of the Holmen Area Fire Department but exited the partnership in 2023 in favor of a contract with the City of Onalaska Fire Department. This decision was driven in part by cost considerations: the Town of Onalaska now pays roughly half the amount it previously contributed under the HAFD model, while maintaining service from a fully-staffed department.

However, leadership turnover, time, and renewed interest in intergovernmental collaboration have reopened the conversation about regional partnerships. Town Chair Paula Przywojski and Administrator Mary Rinehart



have expressed willingness to explore future shared service models, though the community's recent fiscal decisions suggest cautious engagement. Concerns about fairness, governance, and operational efficiency remain central to those discussions.

Operational Challenges and Trends

Like many fire agencies across Wisconsin, departments serving the Onalaska/Holmen area are facing mounting operational pressures driven by a convergence of growth, workforce shortages, and increasing service complexity. This section outlines the key challenges identified through interviews, data review, and operational analysis.

Call Volume Trends

Between 2016 and 2024, the Holmen Area Fire Department (HAFD) experienced a 37% increase in total calls, growing from 825 calls in 2016 to 1,131 in 2024. In addition, overlapping calls—multiple calls occurring simultaneously—grew, presenting significant staffing and coverage challenges for a department historically reliant on part-time personnel. HAFD's call volume is heavily EMS-driven, with more than 70% of calls related to medical response in June 2025. Population growth, aging demographics, and increased 911 utilization have all contributed to this upward trend.

Staffing Shortages and Reliance on Mutual Aid

The availability of paid-on-call (POC) and paid-on-premise (POP) staff has declined sharply across the region. HAFD and the City of Onalaska Fire Department (OFD) have both acknowledged difficulties maintaining consistent shift coverage, especially during weekdays. Key staffing concerns include:

- The referendum allowed for the hiring of 12 full-time firefighter/EMTs, restoring reliable three-person shifts. However, minimum staffing is still modest compared to peer communities.
- Both departments rely on automatic and mutual aid, often from La Crosse Fire, to cover overlapping calls, fires requiring multiple units, or staff shortages.
- Staff often perform dual roles which can lead to gaps in fire suppression readiness.

Holmen Fire Chief Ryan Ostreng and Onalaska Chief Pete Fletty both expressed concern that current staffing levels are not yet sufficient for the call volume and that backfilling through callbacks and aid agreements is becoming unsustainable.

Facility Limitations and Apparatus Strain

As call volumes increase, so does wear on apparatus and the need for upgraded facilities. Key facility and equipment concerns include:

- The primary HAFD station is centrally located but will require expansion or replacement within the next decade.
- City of Onalaska's existing station is capable, but it is too small for the additional firefighters that are needed. Also, its expanded service to the Town of Onalaska creates logistical inefficiencies (e.g., traveling through Holmen territory to reach some calls).
- Apparatus Strain: In recent years, the fiscal commitment has been directed toward addressing staffing shortages, leaving less funding available for critical facility upgrades and apparatus replacement. This challenge is compounded by the increasing cost of fire service equipment and vehicles, along with extended lead times for ordering and receiving new apparatus—often exceeding two years. As a result, agencies face mounting pressure to maintain aging fleets, increasing maintenance costs, and potential reliability concerns.
- Some older vehicles are nearing end-of-life, raising concerns about unplanned capital costs in the absence of a shared replacement schedule.

Response Time Challenges and Coverage Gaps

Response data shared by both departments shows that average turnout and response times are within acceptable ranges for the core areas they serve. However, outlying areas of the Town of Holland and Town of Onalaska experience longer response times, especially during overlapping calls or when mutual aid is required. Factors impacting response times include:

- Inadequate daytime staffing.
- Limited POC availability during work hours.
- Delays from cross-jurisdictional responses and lack of nearby station infrastructure in some locations.
- Unfilled or dropped calls that require secondary dispatching from outside agencies.

In interviews, both fire chiefs noted the importance of exploring station co-location or shared facilities to address these service gaps, especially along border areas.

Financial Overview

The delivery of reliable fire services requires sustained investment in personnel, training, equipment, and facilities. For small and mid-sized municipalities, maintaining a high level of service while balancing cost equity can be particularly challenging—especially in shared-service environments where governance and funding responsibilities are divided. This section reviews recent public safety investments, budget trends, referendum outcomes, and the fiscal implications of various service models.

Recent Investments and Referendum Outcomes

In 2022, both the Town of Holland and Village of Holmen turned to voters to secure additional funding for public safety:

- Town of Holland passed a \$582,500 annual levy increase through referendum, which was approved by 71% of voters. This increase was earmarked for enhanced fire and EMS staffing.
- Village of Holmen passed a similar referendum, approved by 67% of voters, demonstrating strong public support for investing in local emergency services.

These investments enabled the hiring of 12 full-time HAFD personnel (four per shift), stabilizing operations after a period of dangerously low staffing and frequent reliance on mutual aid. However, the referenda also raised public expectations for reliable and efficient service delivery—adding urgency to discussions about long-term sustainability and cost management.

Changing Cost-Sharing Models

The Holmen Area Fire Department (HAFD) historically operated under a tripartite cost-sharing agreement among the Town of Holland, Village of Holmen, and Town of Onalaska. Under that agreement:

- Capital costs were split evenly (per partner).
- Operational costs were apportioned based on equalized value, adjusted annually.

When the Town of Onalaska exited the partnership in 2023 and contracted with the City of Onalaska Fire Department (OFD), the HAFD budget and governance structure were significantly impacted. The remaining two partners—Holmen and Holland—now carry a larger share of total costs and must jointly plan for capital needs without a third cost-splitting entity.

This shift simplified governance but increased the financial burden on the two remaining partners, especially regarding long-term capital investments (e.g., station replacement, apparatus upgrades).

Comparative Costs and Contracting Arrangements

The Town of Onalaska's decision to contract with OFD was driven in part by cost. Interviews with local leaders and department heads revealed the following:

- The Town of Onalaska pays less than half of what it previously contributed to HAFD under the three-party agreement.
- The City of Onalaska, which now serves both its own residents and the Town, has absorbed these additional calls using its existing infrastructure, but acknowledges this model is not sustainable without additional investment or staffing.

- Town of Holland and Village of Holmen leaders have voiced concerns about financial equity—particularly the idea that similarly situated communities are receiving comparable levels of service at unequal cost.
- There are service concerns (regardless of cost) from some Town of Onalaska residents due to response time challenges from the current OFD station location.

These differences underscore the need for clearer financial frameworks and shared-service formulas if deeper collaboration or district-wide consolidation is pursued.

Long-Term Funding Considerations

Moving forward, all four jurisdictions face several key financial considerations:

- **Facility planning:** The existing HAFD station is considered inadequate, and both Holmen and Onalaska have conducted recent studies and identified the need for new or improved facilities. Coordination around capital investment and station siting will be essential to cost containment.
- **Apparatus replacement:** Each department is currently managing its own replacement schedule. A joint capital improvement plan could reduce duplication and create purchasing efficiencies.



- **Personnel costs:** Full-time staffing is now the operational baseline. Sustaining these positions—and potentially adding more—will require stable long-term revenue sources.
- **Fire protection fees:** Several officials referenced the possibility of introducing a fire protection fee. While this could diversify revenue, will require detailed cost allocation, and robust public engagement to avoid political backlash.

Governance and Oversight

Effective governance is the foundation of any sustainable shared service model. As the Onalaska/Holmen area considers future collaboration on fire, decision-makers must weigh not only operational and financial considerations, but also the structure through which decisions are made, funds are allocated, and accountability is maintained. This section examines the historical and current governance of the Holmen Area Fire Department (HAFD) and Onalaska Fire Department (OFD), legal frameworks for joint oversight, and potential models for future regional coordination.

HAFD Governance Structure

HAFD is governed by a Board of Commissioners, originally established under a formal intergovernmental agreement among the Town of Holland, Village of Holmen, and Town of Onalaska. The governing framework is outlined in a set of bylaws that define Board responsibilities, member representation, quorum requirements, budget oversight, capital improvement planning, and meeting procedures. Key features of the current governance model include:

- Each member community appoints representatives to the Board.
- The Board approves the annual budget and capital plan.
- Operational oversight is delegated to the Fire Chief, who reports to the Board.
- The Board meets regularly and may form subcommittees as needed (e.g., budget, personnel, apparatus).

With the Town of Onalaska's departure in 2023, the Board composition and cost allocations were adjusted to reflect a two-party governance model between Holmen and Holland.

OFD Governance Structure

OFD, located on the City Hall campus, is governed by the City of Onalaska Common Council and Police and Fire Commission. The Common Council provides policy direction, approves the department's annual budget, and oversees long-term capital improvement planning. The Police and Fire Commission manages personnel matters, including hiring, promotion, discipline, and oversight of the Fire Chief, in accordance with Wisconsin State Statutes. Together, these bodies operate within the framework of municipal ordinances and established bylaws, which define governance responsibilities, meeting procedures, quorum requirements, and standards for transparency and accountability in department operations.

Current key topics for OFD:

- A fire protection fee is proposed for implementation in the 2026 budget.
- OFD applied for a Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) Grant to fund six additional full-time firefighters in 2026.
- As of August 6, 2025, OFD responded to 1,468 calls for service and is on pace to reach nearly 2,500 by year-end.

Legal Authority for Intergovernmental Collaboration

Wisconsin law permits a range of intergovernmental agreements and service-sharing arrangements under §66.0301, Wis. Stats. Municipalities may:

- Enter into contracts for shared fire/EMS.
- Establish joint departments or fire districts.
- Share personnel, equipment, and facilities.
- Pool resources for training, inspections, or prevention programming.

In the Onalaska/Holmen area, both formal agreements (e.g., HAFD bylaws) and memoranda of understanding (MOUs) have been used to structure service partnerships. Continued or expanded collaboration may require updated legal agreements to define service boundaries, cost formulas, dispute resolution procedures, and termination clauses.

Implications of Governance Equity

Several interviewees expressed concern about equity in decision-making and financial contributions. The history of HAFD governance reveals both the benefits and challenges of multi-jurisdictional oversight:

- The departure of one partner (Town of Onalaska) simplified governance but created budget strain.
- The City of Onalaska, though now providing services to the Town of Onalaska, lacks a formal governance link to that agreement beyond negotiated contract terms.

If deeper regional integration were pursued, new governance structures would be needed to ensure that all participating entities have a voice proportional to their investment and risk. Possible future governance models include:

- A joint fire district, governed by an inter-municipal board.
- A lead agency model, where one municipality provides service under contract with input from a regional advisory committee.

- A new intergovernmental cooperative entity, authorized under state statute to levy taxes, issue bonds, and own capital assets.

Each option carries tradeoffs in terms of administrative complexity, transparency, and political feasibility.

Stakeholder Insights and Perspectives

A key component of this study involved gathering input from elected officials, municipal administrators, and fire department leadership across the four jurisdictions: Town of Holland, Village of Holmen, City of Onalaska, and Town of Onalaska. Through interviews and meetings, a number of common themes, concerns, and priorities emerged that reflect both shared values and lingering differences in approach.

This section summarizes those insights, drawn directly from stakeholder conversations conducted throughout the spring and summer of 2025.

Commitment to Public Safety

Across all jurisdictions, stakeholders emphasized a deep commitment to delivering high-quality, reliable fire and EMS. Officials universally acknowledged that public expectations are growing, facing the realization that part-time or volunteer-only models are no longer sufficient to meet the demands of modern emergency response.

There was widespread recognition that the referenda passed in both the Town of Holland and Village of Holmen reflect not just a willingness to invest, but also a public mandate for career staffing and quicker response times.

Cautious Optimism for Renewed Collaboration

Multiple stakeholders noted that the departure of the Town of Onalaska from the HAFD partnership in 2023 created both challenges and opportunities. While it simplified internal governance, it also forced remaining partners to bear more of the financial load. Recently, however, Town of Onalaska officials signaled a willingness to re-engage in regional discussions, and stakeholders expressed cautious optimism.

Concerns About Cost Equity and Fairness

One of the most frequently cited concerns involved financial equity. Stakeholders from the Town of Holland and Village of Holmen expressed frustration that similarly situated communities (e.g., the Town of Onalaska) are now receiving professional service at lower cost, having exited the shared governance model.

This dynamic has created tension around fairness, long-term investment, and the perceived value of regional service planning. It is viewed by many that sufficient time has passed to warrant a renewed four-party

agreement. Both departments are considering new station locations and are led by collaborative-minded Fire Chiefs.

Operational Realities and Staffing Pressures

Fire chiefs and municipal leaders alike emphasized that the current staffing levels—while improved—remain vulnerable, especially during major incidents, overlapping calls, or simultaneous incidents. The transition to full-time staffing was seen as essential, but not sufficient on its own. Chiefs Ostreng and Fletty both underscored the importance of:

- Maintaining safe minimum staffing levels that meet industry standards.
- Expanding regional training opportunities.
- Addressing mutual aid fatigue.
- Exploring shared stations to reduce drive time and duplication.

Desire for Long-Term Planning and Structure

Perhaps most consistently, stakeholders expressed a desire for a structured, long-term plan—whether that results in a consolidated department, shared facilities, or phased-in service agreements. Leaders want clarity around governance, funding formulas, capital planning, and operational expectations. There is general agreement that:

- Any new arrangement must be formally documented and legally defensible.
- Public education will be essential to building support for future changes.
- Trust and transparency must underpin all intergovernmental decisions.

Opportunities for Collaboration and Shared Services

As demands on local fire services increase, regional collaboration offers a path toward operational efficiency, fiscal sustainability, and improved service delivery. Through stakeholder input and analysis of current operations, this study identifies several viable models for shared services among the Town of Holland, Village of Holmen, City of Onalaska, and Town of Onalaska. These models vary in structure, cost, and complexity, but all aim to strengthen service coverage, reduce duplication, and improve response outcomes.

Expanded Mutual and Automatic Aid

All four jurisdictions already participate in mutual aid agreements, and some automatic aid arrangements exist. However, mutual aid is often reactive and informal, and it places strain on already stretched departments. A more structured automatic aid system, governed by a written agreement, and tied to dispatch protocols, could:

- Ensure consistent and timely initial and secondary response.
- Reduce delays during overlapping incidents.
- Improve regional reliability without full consolidation.

Opportunity: Codify and expand automatic aid across jurisdictional lines with clear expectations for participation, coverage, and reimbursement (if applicable).

Co-Location or Shared Stations

IPA has reviewed and supports the findings of other recent studies completed by Holmen-area agencies, which highlight the benefits of coordinated facility planning, resource deployment, and regional collaboration to improve service coverage and efficiency. Response time data and geographic realities point to opportunities for strategic co-location or shared fire stations, especially in overlapping service areas between Holmen, Onalaska, and the Town of Onalaska. Examples include:

- A shared station along the border of Holmen and Town of Onalaska to reduce travel time from the City of Onalaska.
- Joint facility planning for areas of projected growth to reduce capital redundancy.

Benefit: Improved coverage, reduced capital outlay per jurisdiction, and optimized staff deployment.

Joint Staffing Models

Given widespread recruitment and retention challenges, a joint staffing model—where full-time personnel are shared among departments—could enhance resilience without requiring full consolidation. This might include:

- Cross-staffing arrangements between HAFD and OFD.
- Rotational staffing to cover peak hours or special events.
- Shared hiring, training, and scheduling systems.
- Reduced redundancies for key positions such as administrative assistance, training officer, and shift command.

Precedent: Similar models are in use across Wisconsin, particularly in suburban or rural areas where full consolidation is not politically or fiscally feasible.

Regional Capital Planning and Procurement

Multiple stakeholders cited concerns about duplicative equipment purchases and uneven apparatus replacement schedules. A collaborative capital improvement plan (CIP) could:

- Align timelines for vehicle and equipment upgrades.
- Enable bulk purchasing or cost-sharing.
- Prioritize interoperable and complementary assets.
- Reduce duplicative or redundant equipment.

This approach does not require full integration, but it does require shared planning and long-range coordination.

Consolidated Fire District or Regional Department

The most comprehensive—and complex—option is the creation of a regional fire district or consolidated department. This model would unify governance, staffing, facilities, and finances under a single intergovernmental entity. Key elements may include:

- A governing board with proportional representation.
- Unified staffing and operations.
- Shared capital and operating budget.
- Joint levy or service fee authority.

Considerations:

- Requires legal agreement under §66.0301, Wis. Stats.
- Demands upfront investment of time, trust, and political capital.
- Offers highest potential for long-term efficiency and equity.

Phased Approach

Many stakeholders expressed preference for an incremental path, building trust and alignment before any major structural change or consolidation. A phased approach could allow each jurisdiction to maintain autonomy while pursuing common goals at a manageable pace. A phased approach may include:

- Formalizing automatic aid protocols.
- Initiating joint capital planning.
- Exploring shared staffing pilots.
- Evaluating co-location feasibility.
- Reassessing consolidation once foundational elements are in place.

Implementation Considerations and Next Steps

The path toward more effective, equitable, and sustainable fire services will require deliberate planning, coordinated decision-making, and strong intergovernmental relationships. Whether the communities pursue expanded collaboration or full consolidation, several practical steps can help guide the transition and reduce the risks associated with change.

Short-term Recommendations

These actions can be initiated immediately to address operational gaps and build trust among participating jurisdictions:

Establish a Regional Fire Working Group

Form a structured intergovernmental task force or working group with representatives from the Town of Holland, Village of Holmen, City of Onalaska, and Town of Onalaska. This group should be empowered to evaluate service models, coordinate timelines, and recommend next steps.

Formalize and Expand Automatic Aid Agreements

Update and standardize automatic aid protocols among departments. This should include agreed-upon triggers, coverage expectations, and dispatch procedures to ensure faster, more reliable response to overlapping calls.

Initiate Joint Capital Planning Discussions

Share equipment and apparatus replacement schedules to identify opportunities for coordination, shared purchasing, or co-investment in regional assets.

Evaluate Shared Staffing Pilots

Explore part-time or shift-based staffing models that cross municipal boundaries. Consider launching a pilot to test shared full-time key positions such as administrative assistance, training officer, and shift command.

Mid-Term Recommendations (12–24 Months)

With foundational collaboration underway, the next phase should focus on deeper integration and long-term planning:

Conduct a Joint Station Siting and Facility Study

Identify optimal locations for future stations based on response time analysis, call volume data, and population growth patterns. Consider co-location opportunities in areas with overlapping jurisdictional needs.

Develop a Regional Service Agreement or MOU

Establish a more formal service-sharing framework between departments that covers staffing coordination, financial contributions, training alignment, and capital cost-sharing.

Engage in Public Communication and Education

Begin a public outreach campaign to educate residents on current service challenges, the rationale for collaboration, and potential cost and service benefits. Transparency will be critical to build long-term support.

Long-Term Considerations (24+ Months)

If short- and mid-term steps are successful, communities may explore more comprehensive and permanent structural solutions:

Pursue Formation of a Regional Fire District or Consolidated Department

This would require intergovernmental negotiation, legal review, and public input. Key components would include governance structure, cost allocation model, facility ownership, and labor integration.

Secure Long-Term Funding Solutions

Evaluate options for stabilizing revenues—such as referenda, fire protection fees, or state/federal grants (e.g., SAFER grants for staffing support). In the summer of 2025, OFD applied for a SAFER Grant to fund six firefighters. Shared service models will require shared financial responsibility.

Monitor and Evaluate Impact of Reforms

Track performance metrics (e.g., response times, cost per call, mutual aid reliance) to ensure reforms are achieving their intended outcomes. Use data to support continuous improvement.

Implementation Risks and Mitigation Strategies

Potential Risk	Mitigation Strategy
Loss of local control	Use joint governance structures with clear representation
Unequal cost or benefit distribution	Create transparent, formula-based cost-sharing models
Political turnover or lack of leadership alignment	Establish intergovernmental agreements that survive leadership change
Public opposition	Conduct early and ongoing community engagement and education
Legal or logistical hurdles	Engage legal counsel and fire/EMS advisors early in planning.

The Town of Holland and its regional partners are at a pivotal moment in the evolution of local fire service. Years of population growth, increased call volumes, and persistent staffing challenges have created both pressure and opportunity—demanding a more coordinated, collaborative approach to public safety.

This study provides a detailed look at the current service landscape, the operational and financial realities facing each jurisdiction, and the viable models for moving forward. While no single path will meet all community needs perfectly, a phased, cooperative strategy can help ensure that residents across the Holmen area receive timely, high-quality emergency services in a fiscally responsible manner.

Final Recommendations

Based on stakeholder input, data analysis, and regional trends, the following steps are recommended:

1. Maintain and Strengthen the Holland–Holmen Partnership

The existing partnership between the Town of Holland and Village of Holmen through the Holmen Area Fire Department (HAFD) has demonstrated stability and community support, especially following successful referenda in both communities. Continued investment in full-time staffing, transparent budgeting, and equitable capital planning should remain a top priority.

2. Initiate Intentional Regional Conversations with Onalaska Communities

Engage the City of Onalaska and Town of Onalaska in structured conversations about shared services, automatic aid, and future service models. Focus on building trust, providing information, aligning expectations, and identifying common ground in areas such as shared stations, staffing, and capital planning.

3. Develop a Regional Implementation Framework

Create a step-by-step roadmap for expanded collaboration, starting with:

- Formalized automatic aid agreements.
- Shared staffing pilots.
- Joint capital and apparatus planning.
- Facility siting studies.

This framework should allow for incremental progress while preserving flexibility and local autonomy.

4. Evaluate the Feasibility of a Regional Fire District

Over the long term, a regional fire district or consolidated department offers the greatest opportunity to streamline governance, pool resources, and improve service outcomes. While politically and logistically complex, such a model is worth exploring once foundational partnerships are strengthened and stakeholder alignment improves.

5. Prioritize Public Engagement and Transparency

As changes to service delivery are considered, public trust will be essential. Residents must understand the reasons for reform, the financial implications, and the benefits of regional cooperation. Ongoing communication through meetings, mailings, and digital platforms will be key to building support and maintaining accountability.

The future of fire service cannot rest on outdated models or informal arrangements. It must be built on professional standards, fiscal equity, and a shared commitment to protecting life and property. By acting now with clarity, collaboration, and courage, the Town of Holland and its partners can shape a public safety system that serves their communities well for decades to come.

Innovative Public Advisors

Dear Town of Holland Board and Administration,

Thank you for the opportunity to support the Town of Holland through the completion of *Exploring Shared Fire Services: A Feasibility Study for the Town of Holland and Regional Partners*. This important initiative reflects the Town's forward-thinking leadership and continued dedication to high-quality service delivery, operational efficiency, and regional collaboration.

This study was made possible through the engagement and insight of Town officials, staff, and neighboring jurisdictions. We are also grateful to the elected officials, fire chiefs, and municipal administrators from Holmen, Onalaska, and the Town of Onalaska who participated in interviews and provided thoughtful input that shaped this report.

Our analysis confirms that the Town of Holland is part of a region served by committed public safety professionals and leaders who recognize both the urgency and opportunity of strengthening intergovernmental cooperation. With sustained investment, clear governance, and a shared vision, the Town and its partners can chart a path toward a more resilient, equitable, and effective fire service system.

We commend the Town of Holland for initiating this timely and transparent process. It is our hope that the findings and recommendations in this report serve as a foundation for continued dialogue, planning, and collaboration. Innovative Public Advisors remains available to assist with next steps—whether that includes implementation support, intergovernmental negotiations, funding strategies, or future facilitation.

Thank you again for the privilege of partnering with the Town of Holland. Please do not hesitate to reach out if we can be of further service.

Sincerely,



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