

Executive Summary

This report details a Fire and Emergency Services Master Plan for Hernando County, Florida. Specifically, the study involves Hernando County Fire Rescue, Spring Hill Fire Rescue, Brooksville Fire Department, Hernando Beach Volunteer Fire Department, High Point Volunteer Fire Department, and Tri-County Volunteer Fire Department. The first section of the report provides a thorough and detailed evaluation of the agencies, their management, assets, operations, and service delivery. Recommendations for individual, short-term improvement are provided. The second section identifies the anticipated changes in the population, risk factors, and service demand that will be faced by Hernando County as anticipated growth and development take place in the future. The third section of the report provides feasible strategies for changes and improvement to the deployment of facilities, apparatus, and staffing that would be necessary to maintain or achieve the target levels of performance identified for the urban, suburban, and rural zones of the county. The fourth and final section of the report evaluates potential organizational, governance, or operational changes involving various cooperative efforts among the six fire departments that were identified by ESCi as viable alternatives in an effort to reduce costs or increase efficiency and effectiveness throughout Hernando County.

Staff members from all fire and rescue agencies within Hernando County, as well as interested Hernando County residents, have provided a great deal of written and verbal information to the project team. Many staff members have been generous in their effort to provide us with accurate and complete information. We are grateful for their able assistance and cooperation throughout this process.

Emergency Services Consulting inc. (ESCi) recognizes that information, by its very nature, is often incomplete as it changes from moment to moment. Every effort has been made to compile data that is as comprehensive and as accurate as possible. The information gathering process included a broad evaluation checklist of each organizational unit, measuring results against acceptable industry standards and best practices. Whenever possible, ESCi made quantifiable comparisons to other fire service organizations. Checklists and documentation were followed up by one-on-one interviews with key staff members from the agencies and every program area.

Section I

This section provides an in-depth evaluation of each of the agencies involved in this study and describes their governance, management components, staffing systems, current resource deployment, and service delivery performance. In addition, the agencies' facilities and apparatus were inventoried, reviewed, and evaluated.

The evaluation found the departments operating with an expected level of effectiveness. One or more facilities were identified as being in only fair condition, and not all were capable of 24-hour staffing. Front-line apparatus were generally found to be in good condition and well suited to their applicable use.

Current workload analysis identified no unusual or unexpected service demand for a community of this nature. Workload history showed steady growth in overall service demand. The analysis of system-wide performance and outcomes reveals that the system is not currently meeting the informal performance objectives identified by the departments. Further analysis by geographic information systems software (GIS) indicates that the current facility and resource deployment is not capable of these response times at the stated performance objectives. Gaps in service delivery capability were visually identified and noted. Additionally, some redundancy was found within the current deployment.

As a result of the individual agency evaluations, 85 individual or collective recommendations for short or mid-term improvements were provided. These recommendations range from relatively minor operational issues to more significant governance or policy considerations. The recommendations are compiled in an appendix near the end of the report.

Section II

This section created population and service demand projections necessary for the creation of future deployment models. The section includes a review of population forecasts indicating continued growth in the community. As a result of this in-depth analysis, it was determined that overall service demand can be expected to increase by 37.4 percent over the next 22 years across the County.

A community risk analysis, based on occupancy types, demographics, and population density, is provided along with a graphical representation of the countywide analysis. As with population forecasts, the community risk analysis is another building block on which the future deployment models are based.

Section III

This section provides the major components of a multi-year fire and emergency services master plan. It contains detailed recommendations for necessary deployment of facilities, apparatus, and staffing over the course of the master planning period.

The specific recommendations were made with a regional consideration, as requested in the original scope of work for this project. This means that individual jurisdictional boundaries were downplayed and redundancy of service capabilities was avoided. The regional master plan considers that the closest and most appropriate units will be dispatched to any given incident, regardless of where that incident is located. With each given deployment strategy, thorough analysis is provided that projects the specific response time performance of the system if the recommendations are followed. It is stressed throughout this study that the projected performance can only be achieved through the “closest and most appropriate unit response” concept identified as a goal of this project by the County.

The following is a summary of the master plan recommendations made throughout this section.

- Facilities
 - Close HCFR Station 24 in Brooksville
 - Close Station 31 in High Point if tax dollars become necessary for support.
 - Relocate Station 22 west between Interstate 75 and Kettering Road
 - Relocate Station 12 to Highway 19 and Ridge Road
 - Construct “Spring Hill Station 5” on Spring Hill Drive between Persian Ave. and Eldridge Road
 - Optional: Construct Station 16 between U.S. 19 and U.S. 98 on Thrasher Ave.
 - Optional: Construct Station 25 near the intersection of Spring Lake Highway and Hayman Road

- Fire Apparatus
 - Relocate tanker from Tri-County FD to HCFR Station 23
 - Relocate Hazmat trailer from Station 21 to Station 22
 - Relocate brush trucks from BFD Station 1 and HCFR Station 11 to HCFR Station 12 and Hernando Beach Station 51
 - Optional: Add an engine at new Stations 16 and 25
- Staffing
 - Operations staff should increase to a total 347.5 FTEs based on the Redeployment Staffing Model
 - Operations staff should increase to a total of 370.00FTEs based on the Full Deployment – Operational Staffing Model
 - Administrative and Support staffing should increase by a total of 14 FTEs based on the Full Deployment – Administration and Support Staffing by Department model when combining the three current career departments
- EMS Units
 - Redeploy rescue units on 12-hour shifts rather than 24-hour static deployment
 - Nine units on day shift
 - Four in Spring Hill, one in Brooksville, one at Station 11, one at Station 12, one at Station 21, and one at Station 22
 - Eight units on night shift
 - Four in Spring Hill, one in Brooksville, one at Station 11, one at Station 12, and one at Station 22
 - Relocate rescue unit from Station 24 to BFD Station 1
 - Add two dedicated non-emergency transport (NET) units from 7:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. seven days/week

Section IV

This section provides a detailed explanation of ESCi's findings regarding potential *Opportunities for Cooperative Effort* between the following agencies: City of Brooksville Fire Department, Hernando County Fire Rescue, Hernando Beach Volunteer Fire Department, High Point Volunteer Fire Department, Spring Hill Fire Rescue, and Tri-County Volunteer Fire Department. This section details a number of organizational concepts including the consolidation of selected

groupings of fire departments, as well as the consolidation of all of the county's fire departments. The concepts examined do not represent all possible arrangements of the participating agencies, only those judged by ESCi's project team as likely to be successful in gaining acceptance. Considerations include:

- Functional unification – Defined as the cooperative joining of one or more programs or services through the enactment of contractual agreements between entities. Such intergovernmental agreements are normally used to allow organizations to share resources, improve service, and to save money at the program level.
- Operational unification – Represents the creation of a single *organization* with a unified structure and chain of command from two or more (previously) independent fire departments. Operational consolidations are usually implemented through the execution of an intergovernmental agreement between the governing boards of the entities.
- Legal unification – Characterizes the consolidation of two or more fire entities into a single new *agency*. Legal consolidations are usually enacted under a process established by state law. The action joins not only programs and organizations, but also the units of government.

In identifying potential cooperative opportunities, the project team considered the key issues now challenging each agency. Some issues represent roadblocks to integration, while others provide a unique chance for improvement. As an element of the review, affected staff and other officials provided local and internal perspective on organizational culture, community expectation, and other significant matters.

The section identifies 28 collaborative opportunities, detailing them in a directory. Each listing includes an alphabetical designation, a title, a summary description, and a discussion that includes guidance and financial considerations. A table is provided that summarizes the 28 opportunities arranged by the affected organizational section. Of the 28 strategies, 25 represent the functional unification of a specific program or task, while three entail unification of two or more organizations.

The list below summarizes the potential cooperative efforts available to the emergency services agencies serving Hernando County.

A – Consolidate All Hernando County Fire and EMS Agencies

B – Consolidate Spring Hill and Hernando County Fire Rescue

C – Consolidate Brooksville Fire Department and Hernando County Fire Rescue

D – Develop Standard Operating Guidelines

E – Shared Specialty Teams

F – Develop a Joint Support and Logistics Services Division

G – Establish a Hernando County Fire Investigation Team

H – Develop a Hernando County Fire Safety Education Coalition

I – Develop a Hernando County Juvenile Fire Setter Intervention Network

J – Create a Unified Occupational Medicine Program

K – Contract with Hernando County Emergency Communications Center

L – Create a Unified Wellness and Fitness Program

M – Implement a Computerized Training Records Management System

N – Develop and Adopt Common Training Standards

O – Create a Hernando County Training Manual

P – Implement and Cooperatively Use a Video Conferencing System

Q – Develop an Annual Hernando County Training Plan

R – Consolidate Training into a Hernando County Training Division

S – Develop a Hernando County Fire and EMS Training Facility

T – Develop Mutual Training Strategies

U – Develop Uniform Fees for Service

V – Purchase Uniform Emergency Apparatus

W – Develop a Model Labor Agreement for Hernando County Fire Departments

X – Jointly acquire AVL and MDC or MDT Capabilities

Y – Develop Uniform Pre-Incident Plans

Z – Provide for Joint Staffing of Stations and Apparatus

AA – Provide Hernando County IC and Operations Supervision

AB –Purchase and Implement an Electronic Staffing Program

Of the three options for legal unification or consolidation between two or more departments within Hernando County, we consider two of those options to be conditionally feasible, as summarized below.

A – Consolidate All Hernando County Fire and EMS Agencies - FEASIBLE

Partnering Strategy A would be economically feasible, with a projected savings of \$728,744 and potential future additional cost avoidance of over \$500,000 annually. Delivery of emergency response would be blended through closest response without regard to jurisdictional boundaries. Reasonable and uniform levels of service delivery would be applied based on the nature of the response area (urban, suburban, or rural) rather than on governmental unit boundaries. Redundancy in administration, support services, planning, and other areas would be eliminated or avoided in the future.

However, the feasibility of this strategy is not unconditional. Its success would hinge upon the following obstacles being adequately addressed and overcome:

- The potential cost savings may not offset the significant obstacles in place between the individual agencies at this time. Political will and the overall support of the entire community towards unification is (at this point) questionable at best. Cultural differences and attitudes of animosity have been cultivated in these agencies by individuals intent on avoiding the very possibility of unification; those attitudes and differences will need to be managed to acceptance.
- Although some areas would see a possible reduction in cost, some areas could see an increase without necessarily realizing an increased level of service. It would be critical to foster the concept of “the greater good” and focus on potential future service delivery improvements through shared efforts.
- Concerns abound, particularly in the Spring Hill district, over the potential for a decrease in service delivery due to reallocation of the existing resources and staff from Spring Hill to other areas of the county. The community has a reasonable and legitimate worry that these resources, paid for through that district’s revenue, would be lost. This concern would need to be addressed. The master plan section of this report could be used as the primary source to identify that this course of action is not recommended. In fact, the existing resources are not only identified to stay in place, but additional resources are recommended for future deployment in the Spring Hill area to accommodate growth and

improvements in urban area service delivery. Support for and adoption of the master plan as the future service delivery vision would likely be an important component of this unification strategy.

- This strategy will require the appropriate selection of viable and sustainable revenue sources. Of the various political action or implementation options discussed in the strategy, ESCi identifies one preferred option to be the most advantageous to both the successful and long-term unification of the agencies as well as the sustainability of appropriate levels of funding with the least impact to other county funding needs and constraints. As stated in the strategy options, implementation in this fashion would require, at a minimum, the following actions:

Gain consensus for the inclusion of the city of Brooksville in both the funding and operations of a single county-wide fire department. Petition the Florida State Legislature for the creation of a new county-wide independent special fire control district, inclusive of the city of Brooksville, governed by an appointed Board of Fire Commissioners with equitable representation of all areas served. Proceed with dissolution of the existing Hernando County and Spring Hill fire districts and the unification of all fire departments under the proposed organizational staffing plan. The special fire control district could fund fire protection through the establishment of an ad valorem tax, the use of fire protection assessment fees¹ or a combination of both. This policy option would legally merge the fire protection system of the city of Brooksville into the Hernando County system, requiring legislative action for reversal.

If the viability of this unification strategy is considered but is ultimately deemed impractical, the concept of dropped borders or “closest unit response” to all emergency incidents must still be pursued if the system performance that is projected in this master plan is to be achieved. We would further recommend that the strategy to provide joint supervision and incident command be adopted.

¹ Assessment fees could not be used for funding of EMS services.

B – Consolidate Spring Hill and Hernando County Fire Rescue - FEASIBLE

Partnering Strategy B would be economically feasible, with a projected savings of more than \$630,000 during the current fiscal year. As with Option A, additional future cost avoidance is likely under this strategy if implementing the deployment recommendations in this master plan. Delivery of emergency response would be blended through closest response without regard to jurisdictional boundaries. Reasonable and uniform levels of service delivery would be applied based on the nature of the response area (urban, suburban, or rural) rather than on district or unit boundaries. Redundancy in administration, support services, planning, and other areas would be eliminated or avoided in the future.

However, as with Strategy A, the feasibility of this strategy is not unconditional. Its success would hinge upon the following obstacles being adequately addressed and overcome:

- The potential cost savings may not offset the significant obstacles in place between the individual agencies at this time. Political will and the overall support of the entire community towards unification is, at this point, questionable at best. Cultural differences and attitudes of animosity have been cultivated in these agencies by individuals intent on avoiding the very possibility of unification, and those attitudes and differences will need to be managed to acceptance.
- Concerns abound, particularly in the Spring Hill district, over the potential for a decrease in service delivery due to reallocation of the existing resources and staff from Spring Hill to other areas of the county. The community has a reasonable and legitimate worry that these resources, paid for through that district's revenue, would be lost. This concern would need to be addressed. The master plan section of this report could be used as the primary source to identify that this course of action is not recommended. In fact, the existing resources are not only identified to stay in place, but additional resources are recommended for future deployment in the Spring Hill area to accommodate growth and improvements in urban area service delivery. Support for and adoption of the master plan as the future service delivery vision would likely be an important component of this unification strategy.
- This strategy will require the appropriate selection of viable and sustainable revenue sources. Of the various political action or implementation options discussed in the strategy, ESCi identifies one preferred option to be the most advantageous to both the successful and long-term unification of the agencies as well as the sustainability of

appropriate levels of funding with the least impact to other county funding needs and constraints. As stated in the strategy options, implementation in this fashion would require, at a minimum, the following actions:

Petition the Florida State Legislature for the creation of a new independent special fire control district, covering all unincorporated areas of the County while excluding the City of Brooksville. The new district would be governed by an appointed Board of Fire Commissioners with equitable representation of all unincorporated areas served. The special fire control district could fund fire protection through the establishment of an ad valorem tax, the use of fire protection assessment fees or a combination of both. Proceed with dissolution of the existing Hernando County and Spring Hill fire districts (MSBU and MSTU) and the unification of the two fire departments under the proposed organizational staffing plan.

C – Consolidate Brooksville FD and Hernando County Fire Rescue – NOT FEASIBLE

Partnering Strategy C would see an increase in total projected budget of \$142,769. Although some residents might see a decrease in costs while others see an increase in cost, ESCi believes the overall system cost increase would not be well accepted given the current tax situation for the state of Florida.

Cooperative Efforts/Functional Consolidation Options D through AB

Historically, while fire departments have been managed and operated quite independent of one another, they have shared certain services or functions. Shared services may include: personnel, apparatus, equipment, and expertise. In this report, 25 additional opportunities for cooperation that do not involve full unification of agencies are provided, ranging from shared training manuals and joint standard operating guidelines to joint logistics programs.

The concept of shared services is the most basic level of cooperation that can, to a large extent, improve efficiencies of the Hernando County fire and EMS providers. Short of creating a single-service provider, we believe that program-level collaboration offers the best prospect for the county fire and EMS departments.

Regardless of the outcome of any agency unification strategy that may be pursued, ESCi recommends that these agencies execute the maximum number of collaborative strategies identified in Options D through AB as possible.

Summary

The success of adopting and implementing change, improvement, or cooperative opportunities, however, depends on many things. In ESCi's experience with dozens of functional, operational, and legal unifications, leadership is the single factor that most frequently determines success. Nearly always, a key staff, councilor, or board member champions the concept, garnering the support of the various affected groups (political, labor, member, and community). In addition, good leadership fosters an organizational culture receptive to planning, calculated risk taking, and flexibility. The manner in which leaders promote a trusting relationship between all groups and aid two-way communication between the groups is essential.

The ESCi project team began collecting information concerning the fire protection systems of Hernando County in January of 2007. The compilation of that information and the preparation of this report have required nearly 11 months to complete. The team members recognize that the report contains an extremely large quantity of information and ESCi would like to thank the volunteers and staff of the study departments for their tireless efforts in bringing this project to fruition.

ESCi would also like to thank the various individuals and external organizations for their input, opinions, and candid conversations throughout this process. We sincerely hope that the information contained in this report is utilized to its fullest extent and that the emergency services provided to the citizens of Hernando County are improved by its implementation.