



**STRATEGIES TO SUCCESSFULLY
NAVIGATE 911
CONSOLIDATION**

Consolidating 911 communication centers and public safety answering points (PSAPs) is a growing trend throughout the country as communities look to improve services, implement new technology, find operational efficiencies, and be more cost effective.

Much like business acquisitions and mergers, it takes at least one entity to take the initial step to explore consolidation.

The consolidation process involves five different stages. The first step is to determine if consolidation is viable, how it could be implemented and how it would be governed. Communities who agree to move forward with consolidation then navigate the four remaining stages of implementation: facility integration, technology integration, training and migration.

If you are considering consolidation, it's essential to explore how you'll collaborate with other communities and identify the benefits that will result from this process. As with any complex program that involves multiple parties and long timelines, issues will arise throughout the entire consolidation process. You'll need to address staff concerns about their jobs, who's in control, when will it happen and any benefits changes – to name just a few of the questions.

By following these strategies, communities can overcome these challenges and lay a path to successful consolidation.

STRATEGY

IDENTIFY YOUR COMMUNITY'S NEEDS AND POTENTIAL PARTNERS

911 communication centers and PSAP facilities continually look to improve services to their communities. Despite limited budgets and reduced funding, they must address ongoing challenges of reduced staffing, staff retention, implementing enhanced and evolving technology, and facility maintenance.

**THERE ARE AN ESTIMATED
5,783 PRIMARY AND
SECONDARY PUBLIC SAFETY
ANSWERING POINTS IN THE U.S.**

Source:

National Emergency Number Association (NENA),
based on December 2017 data



The dispatch area of Scott Emergency Communications Center in Iowa features natural light, acoustic control and under-floor air, making for a better work environment.



The consolidated JeffCom 911 in Colorado addresses long-term space needs by converting existing space into adaptable and flexible work environments.

PSAPs and their governing boards typically begin exploring a consolidation when they are looking to solve these challenges, or are presented with a state or local mandate to consolidate. When exploring consolidation, it is important to reach out to potential partners to ascertain what challenges they may be facing and if consolidating services would mutually benefit your communities. One of the common benefits is cost sharing of technology upgrades. Another advantage might be improving training or being more staff-efficient.

Once you have identified potential consolidation partners, it's essential to conduct a feasibility study to explore consolidation options. Feasibility studies typically involve a review of each participating communities' current service levels, operations, technology, facilities and political environment to find synergies and opportunities.

The resultant study will provide different service and operational scenarios and their effects on initial and long-term costs. They can also help communities understand the varying types of consolidation to choose from:

- **Full consolidation:** All PSAPs (law enforcement, fire and EMS) are co-located into a new, single, standalone agency.
- **Partial consolidation:** One or two PSAPs are integrated into an existing agency and follow their governance.
- **Co-located consolidation:** Agencies share one physical space and potentially share resources, but remain independent.
- **Hybrid consolidation:** A mix of full and co-located consolidation approaches.

From a facility point of view, the feasibility study may include information about whether an active/active or active/inactive scenario would be best for backup and redundancy. With active/active, two or more active dispatch centers operate within a single organization and are the backup for the other. In active/inactive scenarios, one or more centers are active and one or more are inactive until needed for backup or to support growth or a surge in calls.

Feasibility studies should be closely examined to determine how consolidation will benefit residents and the PSAP's ability to respond. They can also provide the information to overcome a community's concerns about funding, services and personnel.

STRATEGY

CHOOSE A WELL-RESPECTED CHAMPION TO BE THE CATALYST FOR CHANGE

It's difficult for consolidation efforts to succeed without identifying a champion or change agent to take ownership of the process and take responsibility for its success. Identifying a point-person to oversee consolidation can help make the process smoother. Ideally, this person is identified early in the process and remains a consistent leader throughout all stages of consolidation.

The project champion needs to be empowered to make decisions. More importantly, these decisions should be based on information obtained through stakeholder input and consensus.

Key attributes for change-agent candidates include:

- **Leadership skills:** The person should be able to connect with others on the team and earn their respect and trust. They need to demonstrate the ability to keep communities and individuals focused on big-picture goals.
- **Ability to make tough decisions:** Consolidation involves making many decisions, both big and small. The change agent should be able and willing to listen to, consider and respond to concerns, then be confident in making decisions.
- **Organization skills:** Overlapping timelines and deadlines are common in consolidation projects. The leader should be organized to provide clear direction throughout the project.

IN THE U.S., THERE ARE AN ESTIMATED 240 MILLION 911 CALLS MADE ANNUALLY.

Source:

National Emergency Number Association (NENA)



Lake County 911 in Indiana centralized 15 entities into one center. The kitchen is a community space for employees to connect with each other and alleviate stress.



Lyons Township Area Communications Center in Illinois consolidated three call centers into one location. The challenge was to efficiently integrate and train all staff on the new dispatching systems.

STRATEGY

HAVE THE DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS EARLY AND STEER THE DISCUSSION BACK TO THE FACTS

It's likely your community and 911 center staff will have questions about consolidation. What might it mean for them and their jobs? Will any services be potentially compromised or will response times change? Other common concerns include staffing and service changes, as well as a loss of local control and dispatcher familiarity if services are moving to a different location.

These concerns will likely arise as soon as you begin discussing consolidation, and typically continue, on some level, beyond the go-live date.

The conversations will be difficult, but it's important to address questions and issues as early as possible by focusing on the facts. Building consensus and agreement around benefits can help achieve ownership in the process.

For a loss of local service concern, it may be helpful to identify the benefits of a larger, more diverse PSAP. For example, while you may not have a 911 center immediately in your neighborhood, pooled resources may help your community access more services than it could have individually. A consolidated approach may also ensure redundancy, interoperability, improved computer aided-dispatch mapping, or the long-term stability of your local public safety departments.

STRATEGY

REMEMBER THE HUMAN ELEMENT AND ADDRESS CONCERNS

People – both community members and staff – will be impacted by consolidation. Depending on the level of change, the impact may be large or small.

Any change or disruption can cause fear and concern, as well as raise emotions. It's important to acknowledge these feelings and try to understand others' perspectives.



Scott Emergency Communications Center is the consolidated public safety answering point for eight entities in Scott County, Iowa. The building was designed to provide multiple levels of hardening with 100 percent redundant systems.

Some strategies that can help address fears and concerns include:

- **Sharing the “why:”** Change is disruptive, and can feel particularly overwhelming if the reasons why it’s happening aren’t shared. Throughout the process, make sure to regularly and clearly communicate the reasons why your centers are consolidating.
- **Finding opportunities for collaboration:** Find and promote opportunities for your staff and community members to help define and shape the collaboration process, which will help create ownership and harmony. Work on teambuilding to connect individuals from different locations with each other.
- **Continuing to drive excitement:** Consolidation can be a lengthy process, and it’s important to keep excitement going. Continue to talk about the new opportunities and advantages that consolidation will create, and find ways to connect the broader project with individuals. Discover what motivates them, and identify opportunities for them to champion aspects of the project.

STRATEGY

ASK FOR ADVICE AND GUIDANCE FROM EXPERIENCED PEERS, CONSULTANTS AND VENDORS

Peers who have previously experienced a consolidation process can provide valuable insights regarding staffing, operational lessons learned and other challenges they faced from their community, employees or other stakeholders. Their knowledge and guidance can help make the complex consolidation process smoother.

Similarly, consultants and vendors can be expert resources to help with different phases of consolidation, from facility to technology to operations.

Consultant firms can provide feasibility studies. Technology companies or vendors can help you choose the technology that integrates systems and best fits your needs.

Architects that have experience and expertise in public safety dispatch design can assist in creating a comprehensive approach to new or existing facilities.



Co-located emergency management agency operations rooms, like this one at Scott Emergency Communications Center in Iowa, may bring additional collaboration opportunities to a consolidation project.

Emergency communication centers no longer need to be bunkers, and architects can lead the design discussion around next-generation dispatch and help stakeholders explore how a building can enhance day-to-day operations. This includes creating an interior designed to promote high-performing and positive work environments, improve communication/data connectivity, and ensure the continuity of operations. Experienced architects will focus on designing a long-lasting, easy-to-maintain facility that integrates your specific criteria for hardening, survivability and redundancy.

Architects should be introduced early in the consolidation process so they can help determine an existing facility's condition or create programmatic needs for a new or expanded facility. These experts can also provide building project costs, construction timelines, ideas for phasing, or how best to renovate and/or expand existing facilities.

It is important that the right consultants are brought on board early and are integrated into the team, as their experiences will provide valuable insight and can help avoid unwanted surprises along the way.

SUCCESSFUL CONSOLIDATION IS A COMMUNITY EFFORT

911 communication centers and PSAPs are essential to the health and safety of a community, and a successful consolidation effort can have wide-reaching, positive effects.

Navigating your 911 consolidation process relies on extensive planning, smart strategies and commitment to your community. Wold Architects and Engineers has helped numerous communities across the U.S. successfully create consolidated PSAPs that improve service in their area.

For more information and to discuss how Wold Architects and Engineers can help your consolidation process, call (888) 254-6789 or email info@woldae.com.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Roger is a partner with Wold Architects and Engineers. He has been with Wold for 30 years, and is an expert in the field of mission-critical design for 911 facilities and government organizations. His focus is to collaborate with clients and guide stakeholders through the planning and design process to achieve operational and integration success.



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Joel has spent his career at Wold Architects and Engineers working with municipal and public sector clients. Joel has special expertise in the planning and programming of public safety and 911 facilities that translate the goals and objectives of the client into a highly functional, operational-based facility paying attention to continuity of operations. He is a partner with the firm and leader in our Government business sector.

On the cover:

Scott Emergency Communications Center is the consolidated public safety answering point for eight entities in Scott County, Iowa.