



Management
Analysis
& Development

**Department of Public Safety
State Fire Marshal**

Shared Services Grant Program Evaluation

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Project team

Beth Bibus

Kristina Krull

Division director

Kristin Batson

Assistant division director

Beth Bibus

Contact information

Telephone: 651-259-3800

Email: Management.Analysis@state.mn.us

Fax: 651-797-1311

Website: mn.gov/mmb/mad

Address: 203 Administration Building
50 Sherburne Avenue
St. Paul, Minnesota 55155

Copies of this report

For more information or copies of this report, contact the **Client Department**.

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Executive Summary

Overall Results of Evaluation

Grantees generally see value in the Shared Services Grant Program and were able to put grant-funded studies and activities to good use. With improvements and enhancements, the grant program can better help fire and rescue departments address some of the significant challenges they face, such as firefighter availability, training, and safety.

Purpose and Methods

In 2016, the Minnesota State Fire Marshal Division (SFMD) contracted with Management Analysis & Development (MAD) to conduct an independent evaluation of the Shared Services Grant Program. The SFMD asked MAD to focus on these questions for evaluation:

- What outcomes does the Shared Services Grant Program hope to achieve? Are these outcomes being measured, and if not, what options are available?
- How have fire service organizations used the results of grant-funded studies? Have the organizations implemented the recommendations? Have the organizations identified other uses for the information?
- Are there barriers to implementation of recommendations from grant-funded studies? If so, what could be done to address them?

MAD reviewed grant program materials, applications, and reports, conducted interviews with grantees, conducted interviews with representatives of fire associations and local government associations, and reviewed other relevant research.

Context: Fire and Rescue Services in Minnesota

Minnesota has over 780 fire departments. One of the most defining features of Minnesota's fire service has been its reliance on volunteers. Volunteer firefighters receive no compensation for their role, or may receive compensation only while they are on-call or when they respond to a call. Volunteers save jurisdictions money, but reliance on volunteers has limitations. Many volunteers have full-time jobs, often in places other than their hometown. This can limit their ability to respond quickly to calls at all hours.

Although the volunteer model has been an effective and cost-efficient way of delivering services for decades, departments are having a harder time maintaining adequate numbers of firefighters on their rosters or responding to calls with sufficient levels of staff. There are several trends contributing to this issue, such as a reduction in the number of volunteers due to population changes and competing priorities, more calls for more types of problems (such as emergency medical situations, technical rescue, and hazardous materials responses), and changes in federal rules, including training requirements.

Shared Services Grant Program

One way to respond to these trends is for fire departments to share more services. Figuring out how and whether to share services can be a long, complicated process. In many of Minnesota's mostly volunteer fire departments, staff do not have the time or skills to dedicate to exploring and implementing shared services.

Program description

The SFMD's Shared Services Grant Program helps fire departments cover the costs of investigating shared services. Grantees can receive up to \$40,000. Recipients must provide a local match of at least 10% of the grant award. Grant recipients most often use the funds to hire a consulting service to complete a shared services feasibility study. Recipients may also use the funds to help implement recommendations from studies or take other steps toward shared services.

Jurisdictions from all over Minnesota have participated in the program. The program has distributed \$719,000 in 26 grants over four grant cycles. Funds are allocated from the state's Fire Safety Account.

Grantee experiences with the grant program and process

In general, grantee groups had overwhelmingly positive things to say about the process of getting a grant. Grantee groups complimented the grant process, calling it smooth, seamless, simple, straightforward, and painless. Beyond the process itself, most grantee groups appreciated the third-party perspective that the grant helped them obtain.

Grantee groups largely did not have complaints about the grant process, though several groups mentioned that they thought the timelines for applying and using the funds were too short or that it was difficult to find an appropriately experienced consultant. Going through the feasibility study process often proved more challenging than getting the grant: for some, it was a struggle to compile the amount of data needed for the studies.

Grantee experiences with grant-funded studies

Grantee groups had mixed responses to their grant-funded studies or other activities. About half of grantee groups complimented the consulting firms they hired, referring to them as flexible, knowledgeable, easy to work with, and professional. About half of the grantee groups complimented the studies for their depth of information or overall quality.

Some groups, however, had negative perceptions about their study. Slightly less than half of the grantee groups explained that the reports recommended steps that the departments were already doing, or that the recommendations were not specific to their organizations. Several also expressed frustration with how their consultants approached the work, and how that ultimately affected the quality of the report and the recommendations. Some found it difficult to move forward with shared services when their grant product did not meet their needs.

Grantee hopes for improvements or changes

Grantees offered ideas or hopes for improvements to the grant program, including: additional assistance from the SFMD, particularly implementation assistance and communication with elected officials and other stakeholders; changes or clarification in grant funding requirements or priorities;

improvements in grant timeline and choice of consultants; and a possible change to the grant program name (to avoid perceptions that the program is about consolidation).

Summary of Evaluation Findings

The review of findings below is organized to respond to the specific research questions posed for this evaluation. MAD considered all of the insights and information provided by grantees, other stakeholders, and SFMD staff in developing the recommendations presented in a later section of this report.

Use of grant-funded studies and other products

Related research questions: How have fire service organizations used the results of grant-funded studies? Have the organizations implemented the recommendations? Have the organizations identified other uses for the information?

Grant-funded studies

Most of the 26 grants have funded feasibility studies; 17 have been completed, and four were underway during the completion of this evaluation. Feasibility studies most often contained recommendations about aligning administrative and operational plans: policies, manuals, standard operating guides, and capital improvement plans. Most studies also included recommendations about aligning training standards and practices.

Implementation products

The grants for implementation work have all paid for highly individualized products. The grant has helped departments obtain professional services such as writing standard operating policies and preparing communication and outreach materials, conducting strategic planning sessions and developing workplans, and studying location possibilities.

Use of grant-funded studies or activities

Although only a few departments used the grant product as a step in moving toward consolidation, all grantee groups reported using the grant products in some way. Many increased their shared services, but even those who did not reported other positive outcomes from participating in the grant.

Shared services decisions

Most of the grantee groups responded that they had implemented at least one shared services strategy after receiving a grant:

- **Automatic aid or box alarm systems:** Slightly less than half responded that they had switched to automatic aid or box alarm systems after participating in the grant.
- **Shared trainings:** Slightly less than half of grantee groups mentioned that they had increased shared trainings after the grant—departments are now training together, training to the same standards, or training in the same way.
- **Standard SOG/SOPs:** Several groups also mentioned that they worked on developing shared standard operating guides/standard operating procedures (SOGs/SOPs), which they follow when responding to incidents.

- **Other sharing:** A few grantee groups mentioned that they implemented other recommendations from the studies, including: sharing administrative resources, sharing equipment and decisions about equipment, developing workgroups and committees, and jointly addressing recruitment and retention issues.

Deciding not to share services

In a few cases, the grant-funded study led to grantee groups deciding *not* to pursue certain forms of shared services. Although those grants did not lead to certain shared services, the grant recipients still relied on and used their grant study in making decisions.

Other benefits of participating in the grant program

Most grantee groups mentioned that participating in the grant helped them in ways outside of specific shared services. Departments experienced improved relationships, found other uses for the data analyses, and educated stakeholders.

- **Improved relationships:** Almost half of the grantee groups explained that the grant process had strengthened the relationship among participating departments, even if they did not share more services in the end. They experienced more openness between departments and had a greater understanding of each other.
- **Use of data analysis:** Several grantee groups mentioned that they found the comprehensive, organized data in the feasibility study a useful outcome of the grant program. They refer back to the report analyses, and use them in ways they did not anticipate, such as during staffing conversations or long-term planning.
- **Educating stakeholders:** About half of the grantee groups noted that the grant products helped them educate stakeholders, particularly elected officials. Not only did the grant process and the products help elected officials gain a better understanding and awareness of fire departments and shared services, but in a few cases, educated elected officials decided to provide additional funding or support other work of the fire departments.
- **Location decisions:** Although only one grantee group had hoped to use their study to decide where to place a fire station, several groups mentioned that they had used the grant studies in location decisions.
- **ISO ratings:** A few grantee groups also noted that their ISO (Insurance Services Office) ratings¹ improved after implementing study recommendations.
- **Other collaborative approaches:** A few grantee groups reported that participating in the grant had led them to consider other collaborative approaches.

Challenges to implementation

Related research questions: Are there barriers to implementation of recommendations from grant-funded studies? If so, what could be done to address these barriers?

¹ ISO is a for-profit organization that assesses the risk associated with municipal fire protection efforts. The company evaluates the elements of a municipality's fire protection system, such as emergency communications and the fire department, and assigns the municipality a score. For more information, see

<https://www.isomitigation.com>.

Identified challenges

Most grantee groups offered insights on the challenges they faced in implementing shared services, frequently citing challenges related to politics, fiscal issues, and time.

Political challenges

Departments trying to implement shared services face political changes both from the municipalities who usually have some oversight over them, and from the other fire departments involved. In particular, departments mentioned the challenge of convincing municipalities as a key barrier to implementation.

Change

A significant theme underlying grantee descriptions of political challenges is change. It can be challenging to convince relevant parties that there is a need to change, and it can be challenging for the fire service to embrace change and deal with perceived loss of traditions and control. Furthermore, in some areas, the turnover of leaders in fire departments and cities can stymie efforts to share services (though this turnover was a boon in a few cases).

Fiscal challenges

About half of the grantee groups mentioned that fiscal concerns negatively affected implementation. In some cases, elected officials did not see how shared services would save them money, even when they understood it would improve services. In others, they did not want to spend any new money to implement the recommendations.

Time challenges

Several grantee groups explained that they did not have much time to dedicate to implementation, particularly given their reliance on volunteer and paid-on-call staff. Even in cases where respondents wanted to spend time on implementing shared services, they could not always prioritize it over other things.

Other challenges

Slightly less than half of groups cited the complexity of implementing shared services as a challenge. Some mentioned that there were simply too many parties they needed to organize, while others explained that the complexity of the changes made implementation go slowly, if at all.

Relief associations not a barrier

Based on the existing literature and pre-study discussions, MAD expected to hear about the challenge of merging relief associations. However, there was surprisingly little discussion about this subject among respondents. Only one grantee group mentioned that relief associations had been a barrier to implementation for them.

Addressing challenges

Grantees shared ideas and advice, some of which was directly related to their experiences with the challenges outlined above. Their advice falls into several main areas:

- Establish clear expectations and goals
- Involve elected officials

- Have an open mind and realize that this is “just a study”
- Keep moving, take small steps
- Build relationships
- Acknowledge that the work takes time

MAD’s Recommendations (below) were developed with these challenges and insights in mind.

Outcomes and measurement

Related research questions: What outcomes does the Shared Services Grant Program hope to achieve? Are these outcomes being measured, and if not, what options are available?

Outcome clarity

The Shared Services Grant Program provides funding to allow fire departments to examine how they may increase cooperation and shared services. Though consolidation or mergers are not the primary goals, several grantees and other stakeholders contacted during this study expressed some lack of clarity regarding the purpose of the program. This could be due in part to changes and refinements in how the program has been described over time, or to a lack of clear articulation of the program’s goals.

Measurement challenges

If the program’s purpose were to lead to consolidation or mergers, then measurement would be relatively straightforward: did departments merge, or not? (This is the approach used by at least one other state with a shared services program focused on consolidation.) Consolidation and mergers are not the primary purposes of Minnesota’s program, so measurement of the program must be more nuanced than a simple “yes” or “no.” Fire departments’ current status with regard to sharing services should also be considered when evaluating whether or not the grant led to increased shared services—there is a continuum of cooperation and shared services, and different groups of departments may be at different points along that scale.

Current program evaluation and measurement

Prior to this study, the SFMD had not conducted a comprehensive evaluation of the Shared Services Grant Program, though they have taken an informal continuous improvement approach to administering the program. Staff conducted an informal survey in 2012 and have collected data on the number of grants funded. They also maintain program and reporting information.

The SFMD does not have a formal means of tracking the qualitative results of grant-funded activities, and improvements are needed in this area to evaluate the program’s success better (see Recommendations below).

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Expand the Fire Marshal Division's involvement

MAD recommends that the SFMD take on an expanded role in the shared services program.² In particular, the SFMD should:

- Provide additional technical assistance on shared services to fire departments (grantees and non-grantees) in areas such as project definition and scoping, group facilitation and stakeholder engagement, and implementation assistance. (See related recommendations below in the section on improving the grant program.)
- Depending on the situation, serve as an educator, cheerleader, or translator for local government elected officials and staff (city and county) to explain the shared services program. This may include providing information to stakeholders regarding challenges to the fire service in general and explaining the consequences of inaction.³
- Offer tailored, regular follow-up to grantees, such as check-ins during a study process or support during implementation phases.
- Consider treating the shared services grant as one element in a larger shared services program, making improvements to the grant, increasing consultation services, and setting goals and measures for program activities.

Recommendation 2: Improve the grant program

MAD recommends that the SFMD make several improvements to the Shared Services Grant Program:

- Establish categories of grants, articulate expected outcomes, and establish performance measures accordingly. Though the SFMD has tried to avoid a one-size-fits-all approach to the grants, program materials and application requirements are still geared towards grantees requesting a full feasibility study. Categories could span the continuum of shared services, from exploratory grants for communities that have had few conversations about sharing services, to training or equipment sharing grants, to full consolidation and related implementation grants. Grant funds and timing would vary based on the type of grant.
- Develop a questionnaire to help interested departments assess the extent to which they are already sharing or collaborating. The questionnaire should also encourage the fire departments to think about what would likely occur if they were to let present trends in their area continue. SFMD specialists should help departments complete the questionnaire, and then discuss how they might make progress in identified areas (perhaps through a grant, perhaps not).

² MAD notes that the SFMD intends to increase and reorganize staffing in this area, and the division had already planned to increase consultation to fire departments in a variety of areas, including shared services.

³ If local government officials are primed to decide whether to take action only based on perceptions of cost *savings*, they may not immediately understand that sharing services can often be about cost *avoidance*—if fire department budgets are small because of the reliance on volunteers, a desire for increased cost-efficiency may be misplaced. An outside perspective from the SFMD could assist these leaders.

- As part of the grant application process, assist grantees in defining the project and establishing scope for the external consultant's work. Consider offering additional resources or assistance to applicants in selecting an external consultant.
- Once program changes are developed, conduct additional outreach to ensure that potential grantees are aware of the program. *Note:* the SFMD's usual methods of outreach (regional meetings, conferences, newsletters, etc.) may be sufficient—but new information should be shared in a coordinated way, and the SFMD should look for ways to contact departments that may be unfamiliar with the program.
- Consider whether additional outreach efforts could be coupled with a needs assessment, and then modify activities accordingly. This could be a formal effort such as adding a few questions to a planned survey of all fire departments, or it could be an informal solicitation of input from individuals on the SFMD's email listserv (though the latter option may only include those who are already familiar with the program).
- Consider offering the grants at the beginning of the biennium so that grantees can conceivably extend the grant performance period into another fiscal year. This would allow needed time for grantees who are engaged in complex shared service activities.
- Consider changing the name of the grant to convey the broad goals of the program properly. The current name may be too closely connected with perceptions that the grant's purpose is consolidation. The name change could be communicated when other program changes are announced.

Recommendation 3: Establish program performance measures, improve program evaluation

The SFMD should establish measures to monitor program performance, track data to allow evaluation over time, and communicate results to stakeholders regularly.⁴ Specific ideas for improvements include:

- Program performance measures could be tailored to the specific type of grant: for example, a grant to explore shared training efforts would be coded differently than a grant to implement a recommendation to consolidate departments.
- The shared services assessment questionnaire described above could offer useful comparison information to show whether the grant program or other SFMD efforts are having the intended effect: questionnaires could be completed before and after a grant activity was completed and then results could be examined to see how far they had progressed. Questionnaire data from fire departments who did not receive grants could be compared to those who received grants.
- Mixed-methods approaches, where quantitative and qualitative data is explored, may be especially helpful in examining less tangible efforts such as increased collaboration.⁵

⁴ A Results-Based Accountability (RBA) approach may be useful in identifying relevant program performance measures. Additional information about RBA is located in the footnote on page 25.

⁵ See, for example, Bruce B. Frey, Jill H. Lohmeier, Stephen W. Lee, and Nona Tollefson, "Measuring Collaboration Among Grant Partners." *American Journal of Evaluation*, September 2006.

Recommendation 4: Improve information sharing

MAD recommends that the SFMD work with grantees and stakeholders as needed to improve how information on shared services is communicated to fire departments. In particular, MAD recommends that the SFMD:

- Develop and distribute templates commonly needed during shared services efforts, including Joint Powers Authority/Entity agreements and standard operating guidelines.
- Develop and distribute a synthesis of advice on cooperative relationships and shared services, using expertise in the SFMD, lessons learned from previous grant-funded activities, and information from this study.
- Look for ways to connect fire departments across the state that are considering or implementing shared services so they can learn from each other's experiences, including expanding current referral efforts and workshops/sessions at conferences. Consider tracking these efforts for later review and evaluation.

Recommended timeline for acting on recommendations

MAD recommends that the SFMD take the following approach to making improvements identified above:

1. Define program goals: overall and across the continuum of shared services.
2. Define the types of grants and other program activities that will accomplish these goals, which may include the activities described in Recommendations 1, 2, and 3.
3. Determine what data to track to measure the performance of the grants and the program generally.
4. If appropriate, decide on a new name for the program or grant.
5. Conduct outreach, which may include a needs assessment.
6. Commit to evaluating the program, reporting results, and changing the program to address current and emerging needs.

Introduction

In 2010, the Minnesota State Fire Marshal Division (SFMD) began offering funds to local fire and rescue departments⁶ through the Shared Services Grant Program. Sharing fire and rescue services can offer many benefits, and some communities see a need for alternative ways to provide local fire and rescue services. Leaders in state government started the grant program to make it easier for departments to explore, improve, and implement shared services. Interested parties can apply for up to \$40,000 through the grant program. Recipients use the funds to pay a consultant agency either to complete a shared services feasibility study, or to help implement recommendations from other studies.

The program has distributed 26 grants over four grant cycles. In the first three grant cycles, the program received more applications than they could fund. In the 2015 cycle, however, the program initially received only one application. Program staff extended the application deadline, spoke with interested parties, and in the end funded four applications. Feedback from grantees from previous grants, coupled with this seeming drop in applicant interest, prompted the SFMD to want to evaluate the program.

Purpose and Scope

In the winter of 2016, the SFMD contracted with Management Analysis & Development (MAD) to conduct an evaluation of the Shared Services Grant Program. The questions researched were:

- What outcomes does the Shared Services Grant Program hope to achieve? Are these outcomes being measured, and if not, what options are available?
- How have fire service organizations used the results of grant-funded studies? Have the organizations implemented the recommendations? Have the organizations identified other uses for the information?
- Are there barriers to implementation of recommendations from grant-funded studies? If so, what could be done to address these barriers?

The evaluation focused on the current status of the grant program to identify how fire departments have or have not used the feasibility studies or other grant-funded activities. MAD did not evaluate how the feasibility studies themselves were conducted, or how other firms approached research or developed recommendations. The evaluation is not intended to assess options comprehensively for how the state could encourage shared services, and MAD did not conduct research to examine how fire departments have accomplished shared services without a grant.

⁶ For simplicity, this report describes grantees as “fire departments,” though some departments provide fire and rescue services.

Methodology

MAD conducted the evaluation between January and June 2016 using several methods:

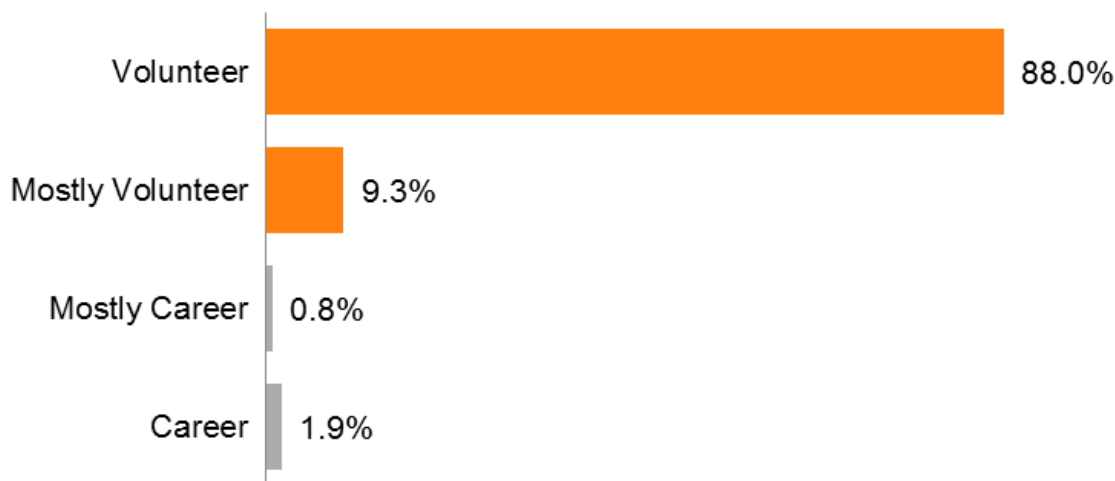
- Review of grant program materials, applications, and reports
- Interviews with at least one representative from each grant
- Interviews with representatives of fire associations and local government associations
- Focused review of relevant literature and statistics about fire and rescue organization trends
- Focused review of similar grant programs from other states, including two interviews

Fire and Rescue Services in Minnesota

The state had 782 fire departments in 2014,⁷ or 0.92 fire departments for every city. One of the most defining features of Minnesota's fire service has been its reliance on volunteers. Volunteer firefighters receive no compensation for their role, or may receive compensation only while they are on-call or when they respond to a call.

Minnesota has the second highest percentage of departments that rely entirely or mostly on volunteer firefighters in the country.⁸ The figure below shows the distribution of fire departments by member type. In 2016, 88% of Minnesota fire departments only had volunteer firefighters. An additional 9.3% of departments reported that more than half of their members were volunteers.

Figure 1. Minnesota Fire Departments by Member Type, 2016⁹



Data source: 2016 National Fire Department Census, U.S. Fire Administration

⁷ Minnesota State Fire Marshal. *2014 Fire in Minnesota*. 2014.

⁸ U.S. Fire Administration. *US Fire Administration Census Quick Facts 2016*. Accessed April 18, 2016. <https://apps.usfa.fema.gov/census/summary>.

⁹ This data represents the vast majority of Minnesota departments. A small percentage of Minnesota fire departments do not submit their statistics to the U.S. Fire Administration.

The high rate of volunteer firefighters has historically been a low-cost way to deliver services. A report found that the volunteer fire service results in an annual national savings of \$37.2 billion, averaging to more than \$45,000 per volunteer.¹⁰

Volunteers save jurisdictions money, but reliance on volunteers has limitations. Many volunteers have full-time jobs, often in places other than their hometown. This can limit their ability to respond quickly to calls at all hours.

Although the volunteer model has been an effective and cost-efficient way of delivering services for decades, fire chiefs and experts interviewed during this evaluation report that many departments are having a harder time maintaining adequate numbers of firefighters on their rosters or responding to calls with sufficient levels of staff. There are several trends contributing to this issue: a reduction in the number of volunteers, more calls for more types of problems, and changes from the federal government.

Fewer volunteers

One of the key challenges for departments is a shortage of volunteers. A 2016 report from the National Fire Protection Association found that the overall number of volunteer firefighters did not change significantly between 1986 and 2014.¹¹ However, because of population changes, the rate of volunteer firefighters per 1,000 people protected has decreased from 8.05 in 1987 to 6.43 in 2014. The report shows that the nation experienced a noticeable drop in the number of volunteers beginning in the late 2000s.

The decrease in volunteer rates affects rural areas more than urban ones. The same report found that that 95% of national volunteer firefighters are in departments protecting fewer than 25,000 people.¹²

A 2007 report from the U.S. Fire Administration documented many reasons for the decline in volunteer firefighters:¹³

- *More demands on people's time in a hectic modern society;*
- *More stringent training requirements;*
- *Population shifts from smaller towns to urban centers;*
- *Changes in the nature of small town industry;*
- *Internal leadership problems; and*
- *A decline in the sense of civic responsibility.*

¹⁰ St. Joseph's University Public Safety and Environmental Protection Institute. *Economic Impact of the Volunteer Fire Service*. 2004.

¹¹ Hylton J.G. Haynes and Gary P. Stein. *U.S. Fire Department Profile 2014*. National Fire Protection Association. January 2016.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ U.S. Fire Administration. *Retention and Recruitment for the Volunteer Emergency Services: Challenges and Solutions*. May 2007. List adapted from text on page 2.

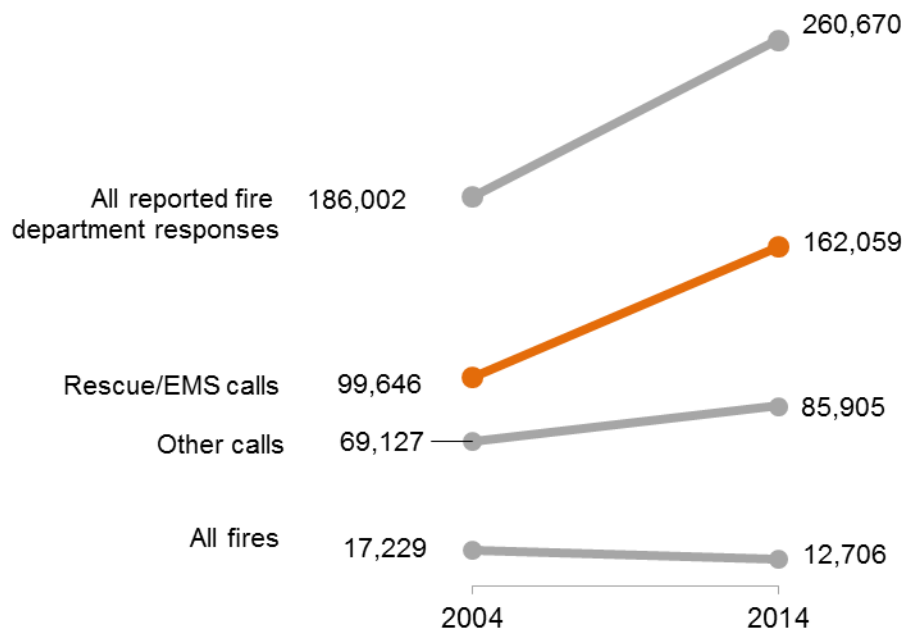
During the MAD study, several Minnesota chiefs and other stakeholders confirmed that the national trend is playing out at the local level. They noted that they have a harder time finding volunteers than they used to, and that volunteers do not stay in their position as long as previous volunteers.

Changes in incident types

While departments have had a harder time recruiting and retaining staff, the responsibility of a fire department has been changing. The public now expects fire departments to respond not only to fires, but also to emergency medical situations, hazmat situations, technical rescues, and more.¹⁴ Fire chiefs and other stakeholders consulted for this study shared examples of an expanded role for the fire service beyond fire and rescue and sometimes into areas more traditionally associated with human or social services (such as effectively becoming the organization that checks on the welfare of aging residents or residents with disabilities who intentionally or unintentionally call 911).

Figure 2 below shows the frequency of incident types that Minnesota fire departments responded to in 2004 and 2014. Overall, fire departments responded to 40% more incidents in 2014 than 2004, even though the number of responses to fires decreased. Most of the increase in incidents came from a significant jump in the number of Rescue/EMS calls. Departments responded to 63% more Rescue/EMS calls in 2014 than they did in 2004.

Figure 2. Minnesota Fire Department Responses to Incident Types, 2004-2014



Data source: Minnesota Fire Marshal's *Fire in Minnesota* reports, 2004 and 2014¹⁵

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ In 2014, 99% of Minnesota fire departments submitted data. In 2004, 93% submitted data.

Departments have to play a more expansive role and respond to more calls than they did before even as they struggle to fill their ranks (and fit expenses within budgets).

Federal changes

On top of staffing issues and increasing responsibilities, departments must adjust to changing rules and statutes at the federal level. The 2007 U.S. Fire Administration's report provides several key changes that have made it harder for departments to respond to calls. The following excerpt is one example the report cites:

OSHA issued an interpretation in 1995 of one of its long-standing standards to require fire department to have four firefighters assembled at a structure fire before an interior attack could be made on the fire. The intent of this ruling is to require two firefighters to stand by outside of the structure as a safety team for the two firefighters who enter. Unfortunately however, this ruling creates an additional burden on departments that are already struggling with the size of their memberships. To comply with the ruling, some departments have had to increase the number of volunteers on a duty shift, which ultimately creates more time demands on the members.¹⁶

Changes like this reinterpretation make it more critical for departments to have enough staff when responding to calls, even while facing increasing difficulty recruiting and retaining volunteers.

Shared Services

One way to respond to these trends is for fire departments to share more services. If departments are unable to maintain sufficient staffing levels and expertise, they can work more closely with other nearby departments to maintain or improve their services.

Departments have a variety of options to consider when sharing services, only one of which is a complete merger. The report from Minnesota's Fire and Rescue Shared Services Task Force outlines the six most common types of shared service models:¹⁷

- **Administrative** – *Two or more fire departments maintain separate operations while some administrative/staff functions are combined.*
- **Partial** – *Each department remains legally separate, but groups from each perform special functions. (e.g. Sharing and staffing a fire station; developing a jointly owned training facility; creating Joint Powers Agreements in order to facilitate beneficial purchasing arrangements, or owning capital infrastructure such as radios, SCBA, or turnout gear.)*

¹⁶ U.S. Fire Administration. *Retention and Recruitment for the Volunteer Emergency Services: Challenges and Solutions*. Page 20.

¹⁷ Governor's Fire and Rescue Shared Services Task Force. *A Blueprint for Shared Services*. 2010. List adapted from text on page 10.

- **Functional** – Legally separate but perform as if one department. (Examples: Combined dispatch; combined training; standardized on-scene protocols.)
- **Operational** – Remain legally separate but join admin and operations and delivery of services is performed as if one department.
- **Selected Geographical** – Often found in large cities, departments combine in low-incident areas.
- **Full** – Two agencies completely merging into one, single, legal agency.

Sharing services in any of these ways might help departments maintain their existing level of fire and rescue services. For example, departments with automatic aid or box alarm systems¹⁸ can rely on each other's staff to respond if needed in an incident, rather than each department maintaining full 24/7 staff coverage for a wide range of incidents on their own. Beyond typical contract arrangements, where one fire department provides coverage for part or all of a community, fire departments can also contract with each other to provide services during hard-to-staff periods.¹⁹

Sharing services can also improve the quality of services offered. It might increase the number of firefighters who are available to respond to an incident, or it might lead to regional specialization. In the latter, each department in an area might take responsibility for offering a well-developed specialty resource, rather than all the departments trying to provide all the services independently (e.g., structural collapse, ice and water rescue, and technical rescue teams).

The shared services task force report noted that departments often hope for cost savings from sharing services, particularly from consolidation.²⁰ However, the report stressed that even if there are cost savings, which is not always the case, the savings may not occur until years after consolidation has happened.

There are many reasons to pursue shared services, but according to fire chiefs and other experts interviewed for this evaluation, improved services should be a primary goal. Furthermore, shared services may be a way for communities to *avoid* future costs, such as paying for staff or purchasing infrequently used but expensive equipment.

Minnesota's Shared Services Grant Program

Figuring out how and whether to share services can be a long, complicated process. It can involve analyzing complex data, aligning intricate standard operating guides and policies, and managing relationships between fire staff, elected officials, and communities. In many of Minnesota's mostly volunteer fire departments, staff do not have the time or skills for exploring and implementing shared services.

¹⁸ These arrangements are further described in the footnote on page 14.

¹⁹ For example, at least one Minnesota department has an agreement where a larger neighboring department provides fire services from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday to Friday, the hardest time for a volunteer department to find staff coverage.

²⁰ Governor's Fire and Rescue Shared Services Task Force. *A Blueprint for Shared Services*. Page 2.

In 2009, the state of Minnesota recognized a need for more comprehensive information about shared services. Governor Pawlenty's Executive Order 09-13 called for a task force to "investigate issues and the comparative benefit attendant to different models for shared fire and rescue service delivery."²¹ The Fire and Rescue Shared Services Task Force completed its work in 2010, and summarized its findings and recommendations in the report "A Blueprint for Shared Services."

Members of the task force concluded that local jurisdictions needed grant funds to help cover the costs of shared services feasibility studies. Before the task force had even finished its report to the governor, members had established and funded the Shared Services Grant Program.

The grant program helps by paying an external consultant to provide expert information, analysis, and sometimes facilitation. Grant recipients most often use the funds to hire a consulting service to complete a shared services feasibility study. Recipients may also use the funds to help implement recommendations from studies or other take other steps toward shared services.

The grant program provides funding to enable fire departments to study or implement ways of "increasing efficiency, effectiveness, or cost savings through voluntary and cooperative shared services,"²² and the program's website makes it clear that shared services "does not necessarily result in financial savings, nor does it mean that fire departments must formally merge."²³ However, as described further in this report, currently articulated grant funding requirements are geared towards grantees that plan to undergo a very comprehensive study leading to more formal shared service arrangements.

The SFMD administers the grant program with funds distributed from the Fire Safety Account.²⁴ The Fire Services Advisory Committee (FSAC) administers the account and has allocated \$200,000 per year to the Shared Services Grant Program for four of the past six years.²⁵ Due to a lack of applications, the program did not spend the full \$200,000 in 2015.

Application process

Before they may apply for the grant, recipients must find a consultant firm they would like to hire and obtain a cost estimate. Then departments must submit an application containing:

- Letter of intent to cooperate from each participating jurisdiction
- Contact information for applicants

²¹ Ibid.

²² "Shared Services Grant Program." Accessed April 18, 2016. <https://dps.mn.gov/divisions/sfm/programs-services/Pages/Shared-Services.aspx>. Paragraph 4.

²³ Ibid. Paragraph 2.

²⁴ In 2006, the Minnesota Legislature established a surcharge on homeowner and certain commercial insurance policies. The surcharge generates approximately \$13 million annually. The legislation also created the Fire Safety Account to hold the revenue, and the FSAC to make recommendations to the Commissioner of Public Safety on how to spend the funds. The funds can only be spent on the Minnesota Board of Firefighter Training and Education, Fire Marshal programs and staff, regional response team programs, and fire service programs with the potential for statewide impact.

²⁵ The program did not distribute funds in 2011.

- Budget request
- Narrative explaining their background with shared services and how they would use the funds

The maximum individual grant amount is \$40,000. Recipients must provide a local match of at least 10% of the grant award, which may include the administrative costs of managing the grant.

An evaluation committee comprised of representatives of key fire service stakeholder organizations scores the applications based on set criteria. In 2015, they used the rubric outlined in Table 1.

Table 1. Shared Service Grant Application Evaluation Criteria

Criteria	Points
Describe how the applicant envisions that their study will address or implement the Study Requirements ²⁶	35
Number of jurisdictions committed to the study (more jurisdictions, more points)	20
Size of population and geographic area served by applicants (similar to above)	10
Describe your history of working together successfully	10

The committee submits funding recommendations to the Commissioner of Public Safety, who then makes the final decision on which applications to approve.

Awarded grants

The program has distributed \$719,000 in 26 grants over four grant cycles. The 2015 grants were awarded in December and were in progress at the time of this evaluation. The grant recipients have been:

2010

- Bemidji Area*
- Benson / Clontarf / Danvers/ DeGraff
- Carlton / Wrenshall / Esko
- Cloquet Area Fire District
- Hamel / Loretto*
- Minnetrista / Mound / St. Bonifacius
- Stevens County*
- Stillwater / Lake Elmo / Mahtomedi

2012

- Bemidji Area*
- Chisago City / Lindstrom
- Columbia Heights / Fridley / St. Anthony
- Hamel / Loretto*
- Hibbing Area
- Laurentian North Firefighters
- NowThen / St. Francis / Ramsey
- Stevens County*

²⁶ The study requirements are detailed in the Grant Products Analysis section of this report.

2014

- Burnsville / Eagan / Savage / South Metro Fire
- Crow Wing County
- Kandiyohi County
- Northfield Area Fire and Rescue
- Polk County
- Renville County

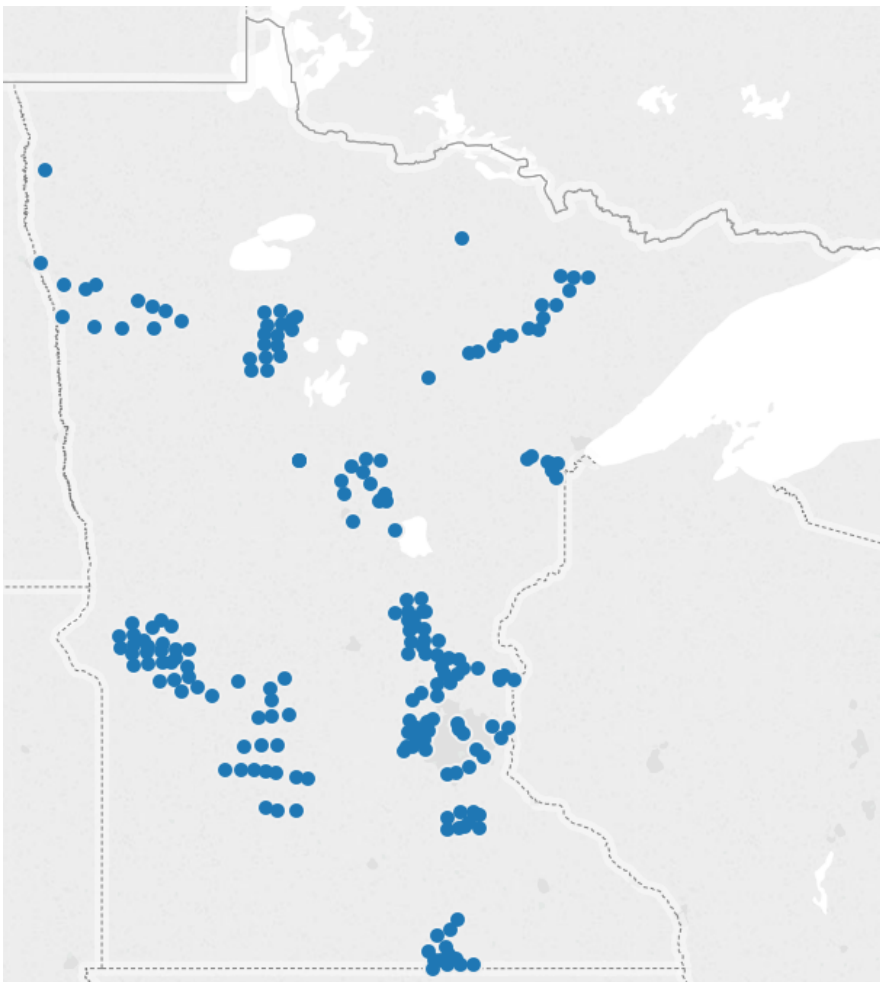
2015

- Albertville / Otsego
- Albert Lea Area
- Long Lake / Loretto / Maple Plain
- Milaca Area

*These recipients first received grant funds in 2010 for shared services feasibility studies. They received additional funds in 2012 for implementation work related to the feasibility studies.

Figure 3 shows the geographic distribution of jurisdictions who have been a part of a grant project. Jurisdictions from all over the state of Minnesota have participated in the program.

Figure 3. Jurisdictions that Have Participated in the Shared Services Grant Program



Evaluation and measurement of the Shared Services Grant Program

Prior to the current study, the SFMD had not conducted a formal evaluation of the grant program. Staff have taken an informal continuous improvement approach to administering the program, listening to grantee feedback and adjusting the program as possible. In 2012, the division informally surveyed some participant experiences and results. The division also collects data on the number of grants funded, and maintains program and reporting information. But the division has not yet adopted consistent performance measures.

2012 grant survey

In the fall of 2013, the SFMD conducted an informal survey of the 2012 grant recipients. The questionnaire asked 15 questions about the process, the program itself, and the results the recipients had achieved. Examples of questions asked include:

- Were the expectations of the applicants clear?
- How could the process be improved?
- Was the program broad enough to enable you to apply for what you needed to accomplish locally?
- What were you able to accomplish with the grant funding?
- What do you see moving forward locally as a result of the study?

Five of the eight grant recipients responded. They overwhelmingly had positive comments about the grant process (e.g., expectations, application) and about the program itself (e.g., timelines, parameters). Two mentioned that the timelines were shorter than they would have liked. Most respondents answered that they would apply for more funds if they were available, and would have liked to use the funds for professional services, more coordination, standardized operating procedures, and more.

None of the respondents mentioned that they had increased shared services, but the survey was conducted only a few months after the grant ended. Many of them were hopeful that they would be able to implement changes in the future, including several that were planning to move towards consolidation or a fire district.

Other measurement

Currently, the SFMD does not have established performance measures or related tracking systems. Information on grantees is maintained in program files. MAD compiled this data to present the descriptive information in this report, such as number and location of grantees, and grantee funding amounts.

Data collected for the program focuses on quantity and—with the 2012 survey described above—quality. Data collected does not yet allow the SFMD to assess whether the grant program has the intended result of increasing voluntary and cooperative shared services (i.e., whether anyone is better

off because of the grant).²⁷ The program currently has no systematic way of tracking and comparing grantees' actual or perceived collaboration or sharing of services.

As MAD conducted this evaluation, it became clear that evaluation would be challenging because of the wide variety of uses grantees had in mind for their shared services study (see page 30 for a summary of how grantees intended to use the study). Grantees may have intended to execute a discrete shared service component (such as enhanced training), but they were applying for the same grants (and received similar studies) as those communities who were considering full consolidation.

The program's intent differs from shared grant programs for the fire service in other states reviewed for this study, which have more narrowly defined outcomes: consolidation or regionalization. (See *Appendix A. Other Grant Programs* for information about those programs.) Measurement and evaluation in those contexts is less complex: those programs can use a simple yes or no answer or an accounting of cost savings to demonstrate success. Under the Minnesota program, a more nuanced approach is necessary, using a mix of qualitative and quantitative data. (The Recommendations section of this report beginning on page 53 offers MAD's ideas on how evaluation and measurement can be improved going forward.)

Grant Product Analysis

The Shared Services Grant Program has funded 21 feasibility studies and five pieces of implementation work. This section describes the efforts that the grant program has funded and identifies relevant trends among reports.

Feasibility Studies

Most of the grants have funded feasibility studies; 17 have been completed, and four were underway during the completion of this evaluation. While each study has had a unique process and product, all

²⁷ This approach to program performance is adapted from the Results-Based Accountability (RBA) framework. RBA can be beneficial in evaluating a program because it allows focus on program-level accountability while also attending to population-level accountability. A program should be contributing to a population-level outcome, though it is often more appropriate to focus on program-level outcomes. In the RBA framework, the important questions about any service or program's performance are:

How much did we do?

How well did we do it?

Is anyone better off?

In most government organizations, managers focus primarily on the first question, sometimes look at the second, and only rarely consider the third. Source: Friedman, Mark. *Trying hard is not good enough: How to produce measurable improvements for customers and communities*. Santa Fe, NM: FPSI Publishing, 2005.

studies are supposed to follow certain criteria. As per the grant materials, a feasibility study should take into account the following subjects:²⁸

- Governance of regional fire and rescue shared service districts that take into account geographic area, population density, and other factors that encourage voluntary participation by communities and fire service providers
- Funding sources for operation of the service district, cooperative training among component departments, and equipment procurement
- Efficiency and effectiveness of emergency response and overall benefit to the population served
- Employment issues associated with combining existing agencies and entities into a regional or multi-jurisdictional, shared-services entity
- An analysis of best practices in the creation and functioning of public safety-related, shared-services delivery models
- A preliminary set of operating procedures for cooperative, shared fire-and-rescue service systems

Report structure and contents

In accordance with those requirements, the grant-funded feasibility studies generally contained a few key sections:

- 1) **Organizational description:** a summary of each department's staff, facilities, equipment, policies, documentation, programs, etc.
- 2) **Analysis:** analyses of and possibly recommendations on service delivery and performance, facility locations, etc.
- 3) **Shared services opportunities:** options or recommendations for ways in which departments can share services
- 4) **Next steps:** suggestions for how the departments can proceed in further exploring or implementing shared services

Consultants always customized the organizational description and analysis sections in line with the departments' requests and based on the data submitted by departments. As a result, these sections did not show any specific trends. In contrast, the remaining two sections on opportunities and next steps showed clear themes and trends.

²⁸ "Shared Services Grant Program." Accessed April 18, 2016. <https://dps.mn.gov/divisions/sfm/programs-services/Pages/Shared-Services.aspx>. List adapted from section 7.

Feasibility studies most often contained recommendations about aligning administrative and operational plans: policies, manuals, standard operating guides, and capital improvement plans. Most studies also included recommendations about aligning training standards and practices.

Other common recommendations that appeared in at least five studies related to:

- Staffing levels/positions/scheduling
- Property inventories and inspections
- Personnel (discipline, performance evaluations, etc.)
- Recruitment and retention
- Programming (fire prevention, health and safety, outreach, etc.)

Of the 17 feasibility studies completed to date, Emergency Services Consulting International (ESCI) has authored 12. The firm also completed work for three of the implementation grants. Given ESCI's prominence in the grant program, the following section provides additional details about their reports and recommendations.

ESCI feasibility studies

Almost all ESCI feasibility studies followed a very similar process and structure, with the exception of the NowThen / St. Francis / Ramsey grant in 2012. The bulk of a typical ESCI feasibility study contained these background sections:

- 1) **Organizational overview:** information about departments' geography, demographics, management, governance, policy documents, budget and finance, etc.
- 2) **Capital assets:** an overview of facilities, apparatus, capital improvement plan, etc.
- 3) **Staffing and personnel management:** a description of staffing levels and performance, recruitment and retention, compensation, discipline, etc.
- 4) **Service delivery and performance:** an analysis of service demand, resource distribution, response performance, incident command, mutual and automatic aid systems, etc.
- 5) **Support programs:** an overview of training and educational programs, fire prevention and life safety education, etc.

In these sections, ESCI reports sometimes offered recommendations for how the departments could improve their efficiency or effectiveness, unrelated to shared services. For example, the report might have advised a department to create and update foundational policy documents, or to implement a formal disciplinary process.

After the background information, ESCI studies always included a section on opportunities for cooperative efforts. The section usually began by describing the four types of consolidation: administrative, functional, operational, and legal. Then it outlined specific options for partnering strategies, typically functional strategies. Sometimes the report language presented "options." Other times the language strengthened to "recommendations." Some reports listed many strategies as options, with some specifically recommended for implementation.

In the grant-funded reports to date, ESCI provided 38 functional cooperative strategies. Of these 38 strategies, 22 appeared in only one or two reports. Some of the strategies, however, appeared more often than that. ESCI included one particular strategy (Develop Standard Operating Guidelines) in 10 of the 12 studies. Table 2 lists the functional cooperative strategies that appeared in four or more grant-funded studies.

Table 2. Frequency of ESCI Functional Cooperative Strategies in Grant-funded Studies

ESCI Functional Cooperative Strategy	Frequency
Develop Standard Operating Guidelines	10
Provide for Joint Incident Command and Operations Supervision	7
Develop and Adopt Common Training Standards	6
Develop Uniform Pre-Incident Plans	6
Create a Unified Occupational Medicine Program	5
Develop an Annual Shared Training Plan	5
Consolidate Training into a Single Training Program	4
Create a Shared Training Manual	4

After the shared strategies section, ESCI reports usually included an outline for how the departments could continue to explore or implement shared services. The next steps often involved holding a visioning session with policymakers, establishing a joint implementation committee, board, or workgroups, and developing a strategic plan for implementation.

Implementation Products

Unlike the feasibility studies, the grants for implementation work have all paid for highly individualized products. The grant has helped departments with the following implementation steps:

- **Bemidji:** Professional services assisted the Bemidji Area Fire Services Research Committee in its ongoing efforts to develop a Joint Powers Entity.
- **Cloquet Area Fire District:** A consultant planned and facilitated a two-day strategic planning process about the future of the fire district.
- **Loretto-Hamel:** A consultant group developed workplans for implementing a merged fire department and created shared standard operating guides.
- **Stevens County:** A consultant group developed shared operating policies and guidelines for the departments.
- **Northfield Area Fire and Rescue Service:** An architect studied potential fire station locations/options for a newly created joint fire department.

Interview Analysis

Overview and methods

The SFMD provided MAD with grantee application materials, which included primary contact information. MAD initially communicated with the program contact listed on each grant application, and asked that person to contact other relevant parties for a group interview. In cases where the program contacts were no longer with the listed department, MAD attempted to find other involved parties who could speak about the grant and its outcomes.

In all, MAD conducted phone interviews with representatives from all 23 grant recipients (three recipients received two grants). Most interviews involved more than one representative from each grant; 12 of the interviews involved three or more representatives. In total, MAD interviewed 67 grantee representatives: 51 fire chiefs, six city managers/administrators, and six other relevant individuals.

MAD conducted grantee interviews in spring 2016. All interviewees were conducted by phone; some grantee groups provided additional information via email. MAD used a semi-structured approach to the interviews: interviewers used the same base set of questions for all interviews but allowed the conversation to flow freely, with follow-up questions based on the specific interviewee group's experiences. Recipients from the 2015 cycle were asked fewer questions than other recipients because their grants were still in progress at the time of interview. (*Appendix B. Interview* and *Appendix C. Interview* contain additional relevant information.)

Interviewees were generally candid and forthcoming with their responses, though some acknowledged that the length of time since their grant activity meant that their responses to a few questions might be imprecise. Several grantees asked that particular comments or anecdotes be kept private. In this analysis, MAD has attempted to provide as much information as possible without disclosing private or nonpublic data.

MAD has adopted two conventions in this analysis:

- General terms like *most*, *several*, or *a few* are used instead of reporting frequencies or percentages of responses.
- To provide more concrete qualitative information, paraphrased statements from interviewees are included *in italics*. Though the statements accurately reflect the sentiment and content of interviewee comments, they should not be viewed as direct quotations attributable to individuals.

This section provides summaries of interview results for these main topic areas:

- How grantees shared services before the grant
- How grantees hoped to use the study or other grant activity
- Experience with the grant program and process
- Use of grant-funded studies or other products

- Challenges to implementation
- Potential improvements identified
- Insights and advice from grantees
- Suggestions on how to measure success of the grant program
- Other concerns expressed by grantees
- Positive feedback offered by grantees

Pre-Grant Sharing Services

MAD asked grantee groups to describe what services they had been sharing prior to receiving a grant. Only a few answered that they had formed consolidated departments or fire districts prior to receiving a grant. Most responded that they had had mutual aid agreements in place before applying, including several countywide agreements. Most also noted that they had conducted at least joint training or drills with the other grant parties.

In addition, several groups answered that they shared one or more pieces of equipment or equipment decisions prior to receiving a grant. Other pre-grant shared services mentioned by grantee groups included:

- Shared standard operating guides
- Shared specialty teams, e.g., dive team
- Shared facilities
- Other types of collaborative groups, e.g., advisory committees, chiefs associations

Examples of interviewee comments:

- *Before the grant, we had mutual aid. We worked on some multiple agency grants for equipment, but we weren't really sharing services.*
- *To some degree we were doing training together. We were doing drills together once or twice a year.*
- *We don't share much equipment. We have a couple of specialized devices that we share across the county. We also have some training equipment that we store and maintain for others in the county.*

Pre-Grant Hopes for Use

MAD asked respondents what they had hoped to do with the information from their grant-funded study or other activity. Their hopes ranged widely. Some wanted very specific information for specific purposes, while others hoped to learn generally more about how shared services might look in their departments. Grantee groups that received implementation grants had specific goals in mind for the tailored products they received.

From a broader perspective, several grantee groups explained that they wanted to gain support for existing ideas or plans. A few also mentioned that they hoped to increase their overall level of service. Addressing the recruitment and retention issue was a common motivator for considering shared services. About half of grantee groups mentioned it while discussing what they had hoped to achieve with the grant.

More specifically, several grantee groups responded that they had hoped to explore a consolidation of their departments. A few groups answered that they had hoped to learn more about becoming a fire district, or using Joint Powers Agreements (JPAs) or something similar to share decision making. Most grantee groups, though, mentioned that only they hoped to increase shared services in some way.

Examples of interviewee comments:

- *We wanted to find a sustainable model for the future. The current model just isn't, whether that's financial, staffing, or capital-wise. We don't feel our individual departments are sustainable. We wanted to look beyond this year and next year, and figure out how to make organizations better off.*
- *I'm hoping that by looking at the whole encompassment of all of us, we can do more long-range planning of the group, like plan what trucks we need to replace. We've talked about sharing equipment in the past, but the study will look at these other ideas on where we could share. I hope the document comes out and lays out some areas we may not have thought of that could 1) save money or 2) not save money but increase service to the residents.*
- *I wanted to have something to reinforce what I tell my elected officials. Sometimes the elected officials need to hear it from someone who gets paid \$100 an hour to say the same thing we've been saying.*

Experience with the Grant Program and Process

MAD asked interviewees to describe their experience with the feasibility study process or other grant activity. Their responses were diverse. Some had thoroughly positive experiences with the grant program, while others were disappointed by the quality of their grant-funded studies. Interviewees offered a variety of comments about both the grant program and the feasibility studies.

Shared Services Grant Program

Respondents provided feedback about the process of getting a grant, the work involved with participating in the grant, and the benefits of the grant.

Positives

In general, grantee groups had overwhelmingly positive things to say about the process of getting a grant. About half of grantee groups complimented the grant process, calling it smooth, seamless, simple, straightforward, and painless.

- *I think the process is very easy to use. The forms and the process of applying are much easier than most of the grant programs that we run into. You should see what we fill out for some other grants.*
- *They do a great job of making the process relatively painless... I've filled out lots of applications and requests for reimbursement, and I'd change other programs if I could... These grants are firefighter friendly... There are lots of chiefs who are volunteering—they don't have time or aren't able to fill out complicated forms.*

Beyond the process itself, most grantee groups appreciated the third-party perspective that the grant helped them obtain. They explained that having the recommendations come from a neutral party made it easier to discuss shared services, and that it gave the recommendations more weight than if departments had suggested the changes themselves.

- *The grant allows you to have a conversation—it forces the conversation. We can say, “We can get a grant to do this,” and that helps get the conversation going.*
- *As the largest community in the area, we did not want the smaller departments around us thinking we were trying to overtake them. The report is unbiased, and I think the rest of the communities and the people they serve see that it’s something that we’re going to have to work towards. It’s not something they’re forced into doing. It shows the advantages of doing it. The small town fire departments don’t look like they’re jumping ship on local communities.*
- *It was easier to get data from the other cities with an outside source, rather than us asking to see their data.*
- *We work together more than other departments, but having an outside party come in and make some recommendations gives it some validity that might not be there if one department suggested it to another.*

Challenges

Grantee groups largely did not have complaints about the process itself. Several groups mentioned that they thought the timelines for applying and using the funds were too short, or that it was difficult to find an appropriately experienced consultant.

- *There was a short time frame for applying for the grant. For several communities, they may not think it’s a totally bad idea, but they weren’t prepared to join because they had not discussed it with their elected officials. We had a month. Those of us in the room who have had conversations like this before—we were able to move forward.*
- *One issue was that we pretty much got approved for this and started this process right after the year started, but everything had to be wrapped up and done by June 30. We felt very rushed on that part.*
- *We had to find our own consultant. I found another study, read it, and contacted that company. Otherwise I would’ve had to find one that I felt knew enough about public safety.*

Based on interviewee feedback, going through the feasibility study process proved more challenging than getting the grant itself. Most grantee groups reported that they struggled with the amount of data they had to compile for the studies. In particular, departments with few or no full-time staff found it difficult to find the time and expertise to gather the information.

- *I think the biggest challenge was getting all the data from all the departments. It took a long time to get the data for budgets and call volume. A lot of that had to do with the fact that a lot of the departments are paid-on-call or volunteer departments. For someone to take the time to get the information together, or to even know how to get it out of the system, was one of the biggest challenges.*
- *There’s such diversity of department types here, which made gathering information challenging. Some don’t have email contacts. Some people haven’t filled out a survey or gathered that type of information before. With the consultant being so far away, it seemed like we were doing all of the legwork. Sometimes we had to put it together for the smaller departments—we had someone on staff who was familiar with this type of work and could help.*

A few grantee groups even mentioned concerns about the accuracy of the data, given how difficult it was to collect.

- *On the data side, we used a notebook, not a system, and that's not different than other departments. The data is only as good as the person typing it in.*
- *It was hard to find the right person to get the information. The person who may know everything isn't the one in charge. That was an initial issue, but after that it went pretty well. That said, I questioned how much the information was entirely accurate. I don't think they were giving false information, but it could have been more complete.*
- *I understand their need to obtain information, but that process is crippling to some departments. I think that really skews the overall effectiveness of the study as those departments are not getting evaluated correctly.*

Although some departments found the data collection challenging, several grantee groups noted that it was a necessary step that allowed the consultants to conduct their analyses. A few groups also mentioned how beneficial it was to have their data compiled in one place.

- *Gathering the information was a real eye-opener for us as to the age of our equipment and testing procedures. At first, I couldn't figure out why they needed all the information they asked for. But it was a lot less painful than I thought. It's a good snapshot of each department and what they're doing, so I think it was necessary. It really brought out some of our weakness and some of our strengths.*
- *Now I've got a flashdrive that's here, and the city has copies, of a lot of documents and information that were scattered all over the place. That will be a find five years from now. We can see some benefit of just having to get the information.*

Grant-funded studies or other activities

Interviewees also provided feedback about their experience with consultants and the quality of their grant products.

Positives

Grantee groups had mixed responses to their grant-funded studies or other activities. About half of them complimented the studies for their depth of information or overall quality. About half also complimented the consulting firms they hired, referring to them as flexible, knowledgeable, easy to work with, and professional.

- *I don't think we ever would have been able to get into the depth of the analysis on our own. Without the study, we couldn't answer a lot of the questions. It gave us answers for city administrations and councils. They hear other organizations are changing, but I don't think we could have made a recommendation or had an educated answer without the study.*
- *The recommendations were right on the ball. They were right where they were supposed to be.*
- *We were very happy with the outcome of the feasibility study. It was specifically detailed. It gave us a more enlightened look of what it would be like to have more shared service.*
- *The data provided was excellent. They compiled it well, it was done timely, and the staff doing the study were good. They had rigid deadlines to get it done, but they were flexible to meet our availability.*

Challenges

The recipients who received grants for implementation work had only positive things to say about their products. The feasibility studies, however, received more mixed reactions from grant recipients.

Some took issue with the quality and accuracy of their studies. Slightly less than half of the grantee groups explained that the reports recommended steps that the departments were already doing, or that the recommendations were too boilerplate. A few also mentioned that the consultants summarized the data incorrectly, or provided recommendations that wouldn't work for them.

- *The recommendations in the study were frustrating. We were already doing a lot of that in this area. If they would have dug differently... Well, I was disappointed in the draft we saw. Some of it was the wording and the recommendations—they seemed boilerplate and cut and paste.*
- *I probably expected this going in, but I was still a little disappointed with the canned response. If you looked at other studies, you could see what was done. From my perspective, you could predict it if you read the previous studies. There wasn't a lot of meat on the bones based on the information we gave.*
- *Box alarms work for locations that are seven miles apart. I'm not sure if we can do one for the whole area—we're too big. I'm hoping some of the other recommendations are obtainable.*

Even some of the grantees who were satisfied with the recommendations did not find the overall study as helpful as they would have liked. For example, a few groups would have liked the recommendations to offer clearer next steps for them to pursue. They did not feel equipped to move further towards shared services.

- *We thought that the recommendations would seem straightforward, but it's pretty hard to implement when you're a volunteer. We would have liked them to share some outlines going forward. We thought we could use this going forward, and add and delete as necessary. The report came back with bullets of what we could do, but it doesn't state how you would achieve it, or how you'd start attacking the issue.*
- *We wanted more direction. We expected more hammered down recommendations: to be successful, do this. We were also hoping for more specific information on each department, like what needed improvement in each. We expected something more pointed, but it was just a bunch of feel good stuff. With no teeth to the recommendations, we can't do much, not without an outsider to tell the council members that we're in dire straits and that we need to do something before someone gets hurt.*

Several also expressed frustration with how the consultants approached the work, and how that ultimately affected the quality of the report and the recommendations. Some found it difficult to move forward with shared services when their grant product did not meet their needs.

- *The consultant kind of said he did not want to put in recommendations that would close fire departments or "be harmful." Maybe the report makes it seem rosier than it is. More pointed recommendations could help make it safer, could make cities open up purse strings or the county to offer assistance. We've got a struggling community.*
- *The consultant came in closed minded. We have a variety of department types, and they said that's a limitation, too. But that's not going to be uncommon in Minnesota: there are varieties of paid-on-call, full-time, etc. So they should have pushed through that to see what can be done.*

- *The consultants did not listen very well—they were doing what they do for other towns. They did not have a grasp of what a small rural community would be looking for. They brought big city ideas. They knew what they were doing, but some of the information wasn't relevant.*

Use of Studies or Other Grant Products

MAD asked grantee groups how they had used the information or recommendations from the grant studies or other products. Although only a few departments used the grant product as a step in moving towards consolidation, all grantee groups reported using the grant products in some way. Many increased their shared services, but even those who did not reported other positive outcomes as a result of participating in the grant.

Shared services decisions

Most of the grantee groups responded that they had implemented at least one shared services strategy after receiving a grant.²⁹

Automatic aid, training, and SOGs

Of the shared services strategies, grantee groups most commonly reported that they had implemented automated systems. Slightly less than half responded that they had switched to automatic aid or box alarm systems after participating in the grant.³⁰

Slightly less than half of grantee groups mentioned that they had increased shared trainings after the grant. More departments are now training together, training to the same standards, or training in the same way. Several groups also mentioned that they worked on developing shared standard operating guides/standard operating procedures (SOGs/SOPs), which they follow when responding to incidents.

- *The grant helped get people to the table for the box alarm system. I don't think we'd be where we are if not for that process. I'm not sure it would have worked if I had just called people. The grant has definitely been a stepping stone on the way to regionalization of automatic aid.*
- *We're training together now and training in the same way. We're saving money because we have a big training instead of a lot of small ones. The towns divvy up the costs, so we're getting more training for less money.*
- *The report said to "improve operating guidelines," so we updated those. A lot of it was with the standard operating procedures: we talked about the way we ordered trucks so our controls are similar. For cross-training or for guys who work in our department part-time, that was pretty helpful.*

²⁹ Groups who received implementation grants used their products in slightly different ways than those who received feasibility studies. Consultants created tailored products for specific purposes, and grant recipients were largely able to accomplish their goals once receiving their product.

³⁰ All Minnesota fire departments are a part of a statewide mutual agreement system, under which they can call another department for assistance when responding to a local disaster. Many departments also have stronger mutual aid agreements with their neighbors, as noted in the Pre-grant Sharing Services section. Under automatic aid, though, a dispatcher automatically notifies multiple departments about a fire. In a box alarm system, departments pre-plan which emergency responder units will contribute staff and equipment resources to different situations.

Other shared services

A few grantee groups mentioned that they implemented other recommendations from the studies, including:

- Sharing administrative resources
- Sharing equipment and decisions about equipment
- Developing workgroups and committees
- Jointly addressing recruitment and retention issues

One grantee group moved towards formally sharing services—they hired the same insurance company, used the same bookkeeping system, and shared SOGs—but the merger never came to fruition.

Deciding not to share services

In a few cases, the grant-funded study led to grantee groups deciding *not* to pursue certain forms of shared services. For example, one grantee group chose not to merge departments based on what their study found. Although those grants did not lead to certain shared services, the grant recipients still relied on and used their grant study in making decisions.

- *I was very surprised that one of the recommendations was to keep doing what we were doing. I had thought their recommendation would be that we needed to flip this 180 degrees, that we were doing this all wrong, but they said, “Why don’t you keep on doing what you’re doing?”*
- *When I go back to the whole question of whether we should have merged, the report found there wouldn’t have been much change in the bottom line, in the dollars. And that’s what the politicians and the managers looked for. More than service or scope of service, it was the dollar. The financial needle wasn’t going to be moved enough by a merger to take a risk from a political standpoint.*

Grant influence

Although most grantee groups increased shared services after receiving the grant, the grants themselves were not always the inspiration for increased shared services. Several grantee groups noted that the grant products helped progress work that had already been underway, or that the grants had helped reaffirm tentative decisions. As the next section discusses, though, in multiple cases the grant products helped persuade stakeholders outside of fire departments to move towards shared services.

Other benefits of participation

Most grantee groups mentioned how participating in the grant helped them in ways outside of specific shared services. Departments experienced improved relationships, found other uses for the data analyses, and educated stakeholders.

Improved relationships

Almost half of grantee groups explained that going through the grant process had strengthened the relationship among participating departments, even if they did not share more services in the end. They experienced more openness between departments and had a greater understanding of each other.

- *I think that we’ve gained some benefit from the study just in the actual legwork and figuring out the information the consultant wanted. To put the data together, we all communicated with each other a lot*

more than we do on a day by day basis. We did a lot of comparing of how each of us are doing things. We actually gained a lot just from participating in the study, even not knowing the recommendations they'll come back with.

- We have more transparency among our organizations. We looked into each other's books, and saw our shortcomings and room for improvement. We now have a good rapport. We can talk about our concerns and issues and know that it will stay within this room. It's tough, though—we're not decision makers in our cities. But we're sharing information.*
- We're continuing the open lines of communication, and that's a success. Even though we haven't implemented formalized shared services, we have built and continue to build our working relationships. We've improved by leaps and bounds.*

Uses of report data

Several grantee groups mentioned that they found the comprehensive, organized data in the feasibility study a useful outcome of the grant program. They refer back to the report analyses, and use them in ways they did not anticipate, for example during staffing conversations or long-term planning. They explained that they would not have been able to collect that much information or conduct that detailed level of analysis on their own.

- Having all that information packaged into one book was helpful. I refer back to it quite a bit when talking about staffing or planning. I also recreate some of those same report pieces and update them.*
- The report was an eye-opener to thinking about better using our capabilities. We may have been taking for granted that there was a similar level of training among departments. But now I think if we had a call with some departments, I'd use certain firefighters as a pump operator and not inside the structure. I think that's a good thing: it was an eye-opener on capabilities.*
- Having all this data packaged together is helpful to hand off to new chiefs when they arrive. It seems welcoming.*

Educated stakeholders

About half of the grantee groups noted that the grant products helped them educate stakeholders, particularly elected officials. The grant process and the products helped elected officials gain a better understanding and awareness of fire departments and shared services.

In a few cases, groups mentioned that educating elected officials made it easier for their departments to obtain more funding from municipalities; they were able to demonstrate that they were already efficient and that they had additional needs. In other interviews, several grantee groups offered that the grant products had helped them convince elected officials to support decisions about automatic aid, fire station locations, and other shared services.

- When we recommended that the city increase our budget and capital replacement budget, the city actually bought into that idea, and that was due to the third-party information. That rarely happens—usually they chop our budget.*
- We never would have done this study without the grant. We could never afford it on our own. The recommendations were on our radar, but we needed to show the elected officials. When a third party*

comes in and tells us something, they're likely to hear it better. I've educated numerous councils with the study and used parts of it in presentations. I saw a council member use a part of it in a discussion.

- *Our elected officials and other municipal departments saw the study. It expedited the process in implementing automatic aid—things moved quicker than if we'd been on our own.*

Other benefits

Participating in the grant also helped grantee groups in other unexpected ways. For example, although only one grantee group had hoped to use their study to decide where to place a fire station, several groups mentioned that they had used the grant studies in location decisions. A few grantee groups also noted that their ISO (Insurance Services Office) ratings³¹ improved after implementing study recommendations.

Finally, a few grantee groups reported that participating in the grant had led them to consider other collaborative approaches:

- *We contract with townships, and the cities have recently experienced some pushback. One of the report recommendations said that we may want to look at more inclusion of those folks in the contracting process. We did not do that at first, but now a situation has come up, and we're rethinking that. Maybe it's a different format, not a fire district, where they can feel included in process.*
- *If we look at it in the future, it seems clear that we could maintain who we are individually, but maybe have a paid coordinator, not only to advocate for fire departments but to be that point person. If we run into daytime staffing issues, maybe it does it make sense to have all those people available to both departments.*
- *We're moving to instant message responding. There's a software program from county dispatch that sends pages and texts. The software also has other features that make it easier to communicate internally within departments. Not everyone has signed up, but it came out of a box alarm meeting and the shared services study.*

Challenges in Implementation

MAD asked grantee groups what challenges they faced when trying to implement shared services. Most grantee groups offered insights, frequently citing challenges related to politics, fiscal issues, and time.

Political challenges

Departments trying to implement shared services face political changes both from the municipalities who usually have some oversight over them, and from the other fire departments involved. In particular, departments mentioned having to convince municipalities as a key barrier to implementation. As one grantee put it:

³¹ ISO is a for-profit organization that assesses the risk associated with municipal fire protection efforts. The company evaluates the elements of a municipality's fire protection system, such as emergency communications and the fire department, and assigns the municipality a score. For more information, see <https://www.isomitigation.com>.

The change challenge for us is getting the politicians and administrators on board with change. The chiefs can sit in a room and talk about what we want to do, but when all is said and done, convincing the politicians and administrators to get on board to help facilitate change, that's really a big deal for us.

Before change can occur, parties often have to agree there is a problem. However, a few grantee groups mentioned how their partner departments and municipal leaders did not believe they had to change the way they delivered fire services.

- *My city council was still rowing that boat of "what's the problem?" My council really hasn't felt the heat yet because we have so many other plans. I can foresee there are some government officials that take a look at the report, that learn we need hire a person—they're going to say, "You've done it this way so long. Why can't you keep doing it?" They've got to understand that we're not getting everything done that has to be done.*
- *We're not in a position to force the other departments into this. They need to see what we're doing is not working anymore.*

Even if parties all agreed that change was needed, some departments still ran into resistance to change. Slightly less than half of grantee groups mentioned that they struggled with changing fire service traditions, and fears about loss of identity or control. A few also described how having one larger city working with smaller, rural communities was sometimes viewed as a takeover.

- *The obstacles we face in making change is hard enough in fire service—there's 100 years of tradition. Fire department name brands and traditions and things like that really hold it up. Change takes time. Our departments have different colored fire gear. Even to have them think about changing the color of their gear—it's like, no way!*
- *There were fears of loss of identity. We had to overcome perceptions about box alarms, and that still stands in the way. We'd like to do joint recruitment and streamline things, but there's a fear of loss of control. It took months to convince people that the box alarm was not a hostile takeover.*
- *We have what we have, and we're proud of it, and it has a long, historic tradition. There's a culture in fire service, especially in smaller communities, to have their fire truck pretty well cleaned up and go through their parades. It's about losing their identity, if we just say we're going to take them over.*
- *We aren't ready, I guess maybe because of tradition. When we're buying our equipment, we all think locally, and don't think of other departments. I'm guilty of it, too.*

Several grantee groups described how the individual parties who happened to be in the room affected the course of implementation. In some situations, that meant one or two individuals derailed implementation, while in others, the turnover of key, supportive parties stalled implementation. In contrast, a few others explained how turnover worked in their favor because the newer parties were more receptive to shared services.

- *Each of the municipalities had a couple representatives on a shared services grant committee. They were elected officials and city managers, but their egos preceded them and they couldn't get along.*

- *The problem is, those original elected officials are not still around, and so it was really a short-lived study. There was an election and a lot of change, and the new people had no clue that this was done. That leaves it in a tough spot. They're not going to read a big report.*
- *We have several new chiefs around here. Most of them have the same vision that we do: open things up to do things better. Some of our restriction in the past was them not wanting to open up and being a little bit vulnerable to—I don't want to say to scrutiny exactly... but they didn't want to reconsider the way they've been doing things for a hundred years.*
- *A manager in the city government tried to take over and set mandates that weren't feasible. But they should have had no role at all. It disrupted the whole process. Instead of working on shared services, we were putting out political fires.*

Fiscal challenges

About half of grantee groups mentioned that fiscal concerns negatively affected implementation. In some cases, elected officials did not see how shared services would save their communities money, even when they understood it would improve services. In others, they did not want to spend any new money to implement the recommendations.

- *Our city has not implemented any recommendations on facilities maintenance. We're cooperating with neighboring departments on responses—all of us work together and that's improved greatly. But a lot of the recommendations have to do with internal city stuff, and the city doesn't want to spend any money.*
- *We did not do a lot after the study. It was very disappointing. The study was paid for by a grant, but now that it's about spending our own money, it's different. We couldn't get buy-in on mutual aid work, joint purchasing, inspections, or training. A lot of equipment required inspection or recertification, and we learned that a lot of departments hadn't done that. Mostly they hadn't done it because of costs, but partly because they did not know it needed to be done. There would be a cost to do it.*
- *I think part of it comes down to money. That's really going to be the challenge because the consensus among the city leaders is typically, "We think it's a great idea. How much is it going to save?" But we're not talking about saving money—we're talking about making the service as good as it can be, and a little more efficient. It's not cheaper. It's more of a cost avoidance thing. We're trying to prolong the volunteer service model. That's as cost effective as you can get. If we can come up with concepts and a plan that don't cost anything, they're all in on that. When you start talking about money, though, it's like pulling teeth.*
- *More than service or scope of service, the politicians and the managers looked for the dollar savings. All the cities have a good thing going and they did not want to interrupt that. They're all getting a good bang for their buck, compared to the averages. They all wanted to say, "It's not going to save money, so why change the good thing we've got going?"*

Time challenges

Several grantee groups explained that they did not have much time to dedicate to implementation, particularly given the number of volunteer and paid-on-call staff. Even in cases where respondents wanted to spend time on implementing shared services, they could not always prioritize it over other things.

- *When you do a couple drills a month and answer 70-80 calls, and then do all the paperwork, at the end of the day there's just not enough time to take on those other things. It's more than a volunteer can do to put them together, and it's more than you can assign to someone who's not experienced in firefighting. Part of it too is that for volunteers, a lot of what we do is keep equipment running and operational, so the paperwork sometimes gets to be not nearly as much fun. Guess which one we do first: go to a parade or do paperwork?*
- *The issue keeping us from moving faster on implementation is time and staffing. We had to change our priorities to keep staff working on the grant.*
- *The main problem we've had with implementing is retaining staff, and the commitment to doing the legwork. I'm extremely busy. It's hard to manage my job and the fire department. I can give lip service to this work, but honestly I can't give it much time. I tried and I'm not able to take it to the level I'd like to. Maybe in the future someone else can.*

Other challenges

Slightly less than half of groups cited the complexity of implementing shared services as a challenge. Some mentioned that there were simply too many parties they needed to organize, while others explained that the complexity of the changes made implementation go slowly, if at all.

- *The implementation phase is a killer. I have multiple cities I work for through contracts. It's hard enough to get one council to agree on change, but to get four to five to make change?*
- *They [study consultants] recommended we provide joint staffing of stations. We need to get training to the same standard and level, and we can do that. I know a firefighter from the other department is ready, but my HR folks will say, "There's no way—he can't come in." It's the same thing if I sent a staff person to work in another department. They ask, "Who's paying? How will it work? What's the liability and the workers' comp and the pay scale and the retirement account?" And you see it gets to be too much.*
- *It wasn't a challenge to do the study. We're taking baby steps to try to move forward, but it's like trying to start a train. It's hard to get moving.*

Some other challenges brought up by grantee groups included:

- Overcoming past personal disagreements between departments
- Resistance to automatic aid from law enforcement dispatch
- Lack of statewide legislation to authorize fire districts
- Developing training programs that work for small farm communities

Based on the existing literature and pre-study discussions, MAD expected to hear about the challenge of merging relief associations. However, there was surprisingly little discussion about this subject among respondents. Only one grantee group mentioned that relief associations had been a barrier to implementation. Another grantee group agreed that it would have become an issue if they had moved towards a full merger, but they had decided not to pursue that route. A third grantee group stated that they experienced no relief association barrier because all their firefighters were already covered under the state plan.

Identified Potential Improvements

Several of MAD's interview questions sought information from grantees regarding improvements that could be made in the grant program—from small technical changes to potentially large changes. Notably, these grantees were not necessarily dissatisfied with the program as it is. Often, they were quite pleased with how the program is run and with what they learned through the study. Some acknowledged that their expressed wishes might not be realistic.

Additional assistance from the SFMD

Most of the grantee groups expressed a desire for the SFMD to play a more active role in encouraging shared services or providing additional support to grantees, including help with implementation, help with communication, and other assistance.

Implementation

The most common request, from about half of the grantee groups, was a desire for implementation support or guidance, such as direct implementation support or specific grant funds for implementation (described further below). Examples of hopes for implementation support included:

- Help and guidance on next steps
- Directing help particularly to understaffed departments
- Facilitation of groups and communities
- Someone to contact for advice or help testing ideas
- Help with drafting documents
- Specific help with developing joint powers agreements or other documents—not necessarily as part of the grant program

A few grantee groups also urged the SFMD to check in more with groups on implementation progress, either through an external study or through visits with SFMD staff and grantee groups.

Stakeholder and elected official communication

Several grantee groups said they would like the SFMD to provide more assistance in communicating with elected officials, city administrators, and other stakeholders about shared services. These comments primarily came from grantees that had encountered political challenges during the study or implementation.

- *If the State Fire Marshal's Office could have a solid, knowledgeable representative present at those type of kick off-meetings, I think that would be a huge message there of how important this is.*
- *The State Fire Marshal needs to change the program. We need a program to educate city councils and managers on the concept and benefits of sharing services—and about successful attempts.*
- *Maybe somebody from the State Fire Marshal could come in and at least convince the majority [of council members] to make a change.*
- *We work on mutual aid and sharing services and sharing staff—we look at this stuff every day. City administrators don't. And of course the Fire Marshal's Office does. I think there could be a major improvement in facilitating these things from the get go and through to the end—to make sure they come*

back with some recommendations for change or improvements. That's where the Fire Marshal needs to be present.

Other assistance from the SFMD

Grantee groups offered other hopes and ideas for involvement of the SFMD, including:

- Identification of successful grantees to promote the program and talk about how they overcame challenges
- Fire service specialists helping to gather information for the study and to motivate grant participants
- Providing more guidance and information about how much time and work would be needed to complete the study
- Stepping in to resolve conflicts among communities or ensure quality work from consultants
- Obtaining more funds for the grant program

Improvements or changes to the grant program

Changes to grant focus or clarity in use of funds

About half of the grantee groups expressed hopes for changes or expansions to how grant funds could be used. Some of these activities may be allowable under the current grant guidelines, so it is possible that only clarification is needed.

- Offer grants to pay for drafting legal documents
- Make changes to allow grant funds to be used to eliminate barriers to sharing services (including legislative barriers)
- Continue a competitive process and consider having funding be driven by content of application (not limited per award)
- Award funds to those communities that are doing something different—beyond the typical shared services recommendations from grant-funded studies
- Have a program to educate elected officials (as noted above)

Implementation funding

As described above, most grantees described challenges with implementing shared services—several of them directly suggested that the grant program should focus more on implementation (with a few commenting that they knew this request may seem a bit self-serving).³² A few of these grantee groups suggested that there may be a limit on new information or insights to be gained from the feasibility studies. One suggested that these studies might be “beating a dead horse.”

Besides having additional funding available for implementation, some specific suggestions included:

- Include implementation funding and requirements in the first grant application: if partners commit to getting a study, they commit to taking some next steps
- Make grant funding priorities for “phase 2” or consider separating grants so there is a pool of money dedicated to next phases of the work

³² A few other grantees expressed that they were not certain if or how grants could be used for implementation.

- Support and initiate implementation and change efforts, which may include a few steps taken over a five-year period
- Consider splitting funding into different types of shared services—communities that are looking to expand shared training or set up auto-aid systems may need different assistance than those working towards full consolidation or a fire district

Improvements in choice of consultants

Several grantee groups thought that there should be better or more options for consultants to conduct grant-funded studies. A few specifically said that there should be a list of consultants from which to choose. Others said they would have liked a consultant with more experience in Minnesota or in regions or departments more similar to theirs. Others reiterated their concerns about the need for strong recommendations, quality reports, or their dissatisfaction with boilerplate recommendations.

Incentives

Grantees often described the importance of shared services to address the challenges of the fire service in Minnesota, and a few members of grantee groups suggested that there be incentives for grantees to participate in the shared services program, or even that departments should be forced to evaluate shared services (that opinion was not shared widely). Some ideas for incentives included:

- Distribute statewide funding in a way that acknowledges those departments that share services
- Provide more training opportunities to those departments that share services
- Offer financial incentives to act on recommendations
- Other incentives that motivate participation

Changes to the grant timeline

A few grantee groups recommended that there be changes to the timing of the grant. It would be helpful to have more time to organize partners to apply for the grant, sooner notice regarding whether grants were awarded, and more time to work with the consultant to complete the study. Grantees described feeling rushed to pull together an application or complete a large study in less than six months. (About half of these interviewees were from a recent grant cycle that had a more rushed than usual application timeline.)

Change the name of the grant

According to a few interviewees, the name of the program itself can steer departments away from participating in the grant or moving forward with good ideas. These interviewees suggested that the SFMD change the name of the grant. There are too many associations with the name “shared services,” they explained—the grant program is not solely about merging or forming fire districts, and there are many benefits to getting the information from the study besides developing formal agreements.

Better sharing of information from grant-funded activities

Several grantees said that they hoped for improvements in how information is shared. Some examples include a catalog, inventory, or summary of recommendations from the various studies, grantee stories about challenges and successes, or identification of common barriers to shared services. (Interviewees sometimes offered their view that the SFMD should be compiling and sharing this information.) These

interviewees explained that this type of information could be used to educate reluctant partners before applying for a grant, or to help elected officials understand the importance of shared services.

Insights and Advice from Grantees

MAD asked grantee groups if they had any advice to share with other communities who are considering sharing fire services. All groups offered advice in response to this question, and most offered other helpful insights and ideas in responses to other interview questions. Sometimes, their insights came from reflections on what had not worked well for them in their grant process. Other times, they focused on what had worked well in the process or had helped them overcome challenges.

Clear expectations and goals

Most grantee groups said that having clear expectations and goals is important to success—for the grant process and study itself, and for implementing shared services.

Shared vision

Several grantee groups emphasized that communities should have a shared vision of what they want—not necessarily how they want to get there, but where they want to go.

- *We decided early on that we wanted to maintain or improve structure or services provided to our people or the community – if we can't accomplish that, there was no sense moving forward.*
- *We were concerned [about potential changes]. We talked about it, and we decided: Whatever is best for the area is best for everyone...*
- *Make sure people understand that it's good for communities to work together—do that before starting the study.*
- *The focus needs to be on service delivery, not parochialism or jurisdictional boundaries. The conversation for consolidated and shared service is designed to increase service. To be successful you need to get beyond [boundaries] and really focus on the core goal. You almost need a mission at the start: what you want to do, what you want to accomplish, and how to do it.*
- *I think the biggest advice that I have is have some plan on what you're gonna do with the data. We kinda did but we kinda didn't. You have to have longer term planning, a bigger vision—you need to know what your next step would be.*

Shared understanding of the work

The need for a clear and shared understanding of the work required under the grant came up in several interviews: the application process is just the start—more effort is needed to pull together relevant information, work with the consultant, and complete the study.

A few grantee groups said that everyone involved needs to understand the amount of information and front-end work required from grantees—which should not come as a surprise to chiefs and departments. As one grantee noted:

Make sure all fire departments are all in – start to finish. They may say they're ok with doing it, but they may not realize a time commitment for the study.

A few participants suggested that grantees learn how to work with a consultant and define project scope.

- *Advice for others: You need a clear definition and know what you're looking for. In the study for sure, make sure they understand what you're wanting to know and do.*
- *Be clear on what you want – determine scope. Make sure it's a wide enough scope. Don't skimp. We weren't wide enough for what we needed.*

One grantee group described the usefulness of a memorandum of understanding among the parties to the grant—this helped ensure that elected officials, staff, and other stakeholders had clear understanding of the work underway, removing possible areas of political controversy.

A few grantee groups talked about the importance of staff available and ready to do the work involved in coordinating the grantees during the study process and beyond.

Shared understanding of what the study can and cannot do

A few grantee groups emphasized that all participants should understand the benefits of the grant-funded study before getting a grant—the study provides useful information, and it may a starting place for improving services. Additionally, a few grantee groups shared that participants need to understand that the study is not an end—it is a beginning.

- *You wanna make sure that you know this is only one of the steps in the process. We all thought it was gonna be a fix all. Here's what you do, check these boxes, send in this form, and it takes care of it itself. That didn't happen. You have to make sure everybody has same expectations – what study is and isn't going to do. Point out what the process is, what it's gonna give us.*
- *The study is not silver bullet – change does not come over night. There are excellent recommendations that we had – if people are open minded and leaders are open minded, good things can come. But it's not automatically and not overnight.*

Involve elected officials

A little less than half of the grantee groups described the importance of involving elected officials. If these leaders are involved throughout the process, they are more likely to understand the challenges fire departments are facing, support the study itself, and be prepared to consider changes.

- *You need better commitment from elected officials at the start – have a plan first and then go after the grant. Having the officials give some commitment—showing that they want to do this.... We were doing our own thing and they said “sure, give us info” But that wasn't a big commitment.*
- *Generally, if you're looking at change, make sure political will is there. Make sure politicians are on board. There's possible upheaval and upset.*
- *We failed to secure multiple champions from elected officials. That was a problem. We had a few, but when they weren't there anymore, we had no one to pick up the ball. If had to do something differently, I would engage more elected officials...*
- *If they don't have elected official support early on, they might as well not even do it. Because then the report comes out, the study is done, but without support beforehand, they're probably not gonna get*

anywhere. You get a three-ring binder report with a lot of good ideas, and some really, really simple suggestions that aren't hard to implement – but then people don't want to do it.

- *We made sure elected officials were a part of the conversation from the start – they were on board from the creation. That allowed a much greater level of conversation to take place about the fire services that we provide, and a greater level of buy-in about what the fire department was doing at the time, and where we ended up going toward. I see that missing in many other grant applications approved... They stay in the fire world and never come out of that. We made sure we did that.*

Have an open mind

Most of the grantee groups suggested that it is important to have an open mind and to start at least thinking about shared services—to suspend judgment until the group receives information.

- *It's important to be open minded. You have to move past animosity, resentment, anger, fear – sometimes people have ego in this that cloud's their judgment. Emotions can be powerful and can cloud our thinking.*
- *For any community, I'd say get one done--get a study. I'm a firm believer in having shortcomings highlighted – the only way to improve is by finding problems –whether it's the elephant in the room or something we never thought of.*

“It's just a study”

In slight contrast to those grantee groups that recommended having a clear shared vision at the beginning of the process, several grantee groups described how useful it can be to minimize the level of commitment required by the grant. This can avoid conflict and get groups moving forward in a discovery mode.

- *There's really nothing that is requiring – it's kind of painless at this point. No feathers being ruffled. We're just gathering information. When we have the recommendations-- that might be when we start to see less support...*
- *Because of the fact that it's a nonbinding study, even though it does take some time to do it, I can't see a downside of doing it unless you don't want people to know you're not doing your job efficiently. We're trying to do a better job with less money—hopefully.*
- *My sales pitch has been that it's a nonbinding study. Someone isn't telling us to do this, this, and this. We can look at their recommendations and they can show us where we can do a better job.*
- *Don't make the assumption that because you're doing the study it's because you wanna merge. It's important to make sure you're in communication– we're not saying we're going to merge, we're going to study it. I think a lot of people assume the purpose is to merge departments, but – my advice is communication early to make sure they're aware that there's not a preconceived conclusion. It's a study and that's all it is.*

Keep moving, take small steps

Several grantee groups emphasized the importance of making some progress on sharing services even if departments are unable to implement all of the recommendations right away.

- *It was a big elephant – I tried to take it into bite sized chunks to start--a handful of things getting implemented and discuss next steps.*
- *We're trying to take recommendation and do it in baby steps... and from there, the levels of cooperation will increase*
- *A lot of these are bigger picture things to do, we need buy in for others. You work in your little group like we're doing...get what you can done, done.*
- *Don't try to bite off too much at first, take something small first and start there. For us, an easy place is joint training. Training is also good for seeing shortcomings – you can see what you need to work on. Stay small and work towards bugger – it'll go from there and continue the conversation.*

Build relationships

Among chiefs and departments

Several grantee groups talked about the need for chiefs to build strong relationships with each other and their respective departments.

- *You have to have personal relationships before approaching departments about sharing services. No one is gonna look for your help if they don't get along with you – and how will you get along if you don't talk? You gotta have a relationship before saying let's jump in bed – one step at a time.*
- *I'd suggest you build a partnership and then look for funding. We looked for partners after learning about the funding. For us –we never had discussion before grant—and now we haven't really used the study.*
- *Here's some advice: when you want to do a study, people should get together and work together for a while – you can quickly learn whether you can work together in formal shared services*

Shared leadership among grantee departments

Relatedly, a few grantee groups advised that leadership should be shared among grantee participants. Sometimes they spoke from challenges associated with having a primary champion for the effort. While having a strong leader can be extremely helpful, there are pitfalls, especially if the champion retires or leaves the community.

- *I'd recommend having not just one person be the focal point. Plan ahead – have two or three people totally involved in the process.*
- *We'd make sure to send the same message – we met as a group and talked a lot as a group. And the fire chiefs talked with our people separately. We explained what we were doing and they knew us and what we were trying to do.*

Staff

The importance of engaging staff in the study and possible organizational change came up in a few grantee groups. These participants stressed that being open and transparent about the purpose of the study can alleviate fears.

- *Be inclusive of staff. As much as you want to try to be positive, people are suspect of change. Depending on size and what change is, go slow, make sure that you give time ...not everyone will be on board...*

don't hide stuff, be transparent, be factual. People are different: I have some staff with over 40 years of service. I have people 60 years old down to 20 years old. That's a generation gap, and you have to adjust your and their expectations about pace of change.

- *You must be up front with staff. We don't like change – as humans, as firefighters. Anytime there's talk about merger, people worry.*

Other stakeholders

Involving other stakeholders is also important, according to several grantee groups. As examples: townships that contract fire services from city departments, representatives from city departments besides the fire service, county government officials, business groups, and the general public.

Know that this takes time

Sharing services takes time, and several grantee groups suggested that communities and departments should be aware of and acknowledge that reality. It takes time to build necessary relationships, educate relevant stakeholders, and actually do the work. Changes in the make-up of elected bodies or community priorities can also mean that fire departments that are ready for change must wait for the tide to turn.

- *Take the time to fully understand what you are asking to participate in. If the department is not open minded to "sharing," or if some do but there is strong opposition to it, maybe some of the preliminary obstacles need to be overcome before taking on something such as shared services.*
- *My advice: Go slow. If it's a big change, go slower. With fire service, there was no change in 150 years, but in last [several] years there's been more change than ever. 2-3 generations from now, all these recommendations for sharing services or merging will be the norm – but it'll take time.*
- *One thing I've personally learned through the entire process is you have to have patience. There are certain things that you just cannot accomplish rapidly. Sometimes your sole duty is just to keep everyone focused and moving, even if it's at a slow pace to keep them together as a group.*
- *[Delay] is not a failure. I've seen this type of change before. You have to wait for your time – that's where we're at now. Most people involved feel good about what came out of the grant and think it's the right thing.*

Measurement Suggestions

MAD asked interviewees if they had ideas for how the SFMD could measure the success of the grant program.

Members of several interviewee groups described having difficulty with this question, noting challenges with identifying degrees of sharing services before and after the grant and with the differences among groups that received the grants, as well as the "squishy" aspects of collaborative work. As one noted:

I can say we work together better, we're working together more. But there's not numbers on that...Did I get \$1K worth? \$10K worth? I can't say that...But I can say that without the grant, we wouldn't be doing as well.

Members in about half of the interview groups urged the SFMD *not* to measure success solely by looking at whether or not the study recommendations were implemented or whether fire departments merged or consolidated.

- *Ours worked – that’s how we perceive it. We meet monthly, we train together. When a fire call comes, we are on a box alarm system. Not perfect, but it works. We see chiefs supporting each other more, knowing each other better, knowing their equipment and departments. There’s a better understanding. And we’re saving money because we have a big training instead of a lot of small ones—more training for less money. I’m not sure if others would agree that this is success. If someone expected there to be a single department out of this grant, that didn’t happen.*
- *We feel there was value in doing it. I would consider that a success. It was not a waste. We got information out of it that was meaningful and we’re using some of it. We don’t think we’re ready for some of the other stuff now, if ever, but we have a framework for the future and we have good information...You may not be able to measure it monetarily.*
- *I think a lot of it you have to look at the intangibles. The fact that we’ve done four steps – others might not have implemented anything, but it’s the fact that it’s this information that we were given that’s allowed us to make an educated decision. Based on that, we didn’t move forward with things because we got information that said don’t move forward with it. But because we didn’t implement everything, that might not be labeled a success*
- *Success for us will be whether elected officials review the study and really consider it and make a decision based on that. I wouldn’t want to gauge success based on a specific action. Getting elected officials information and unbiased opinions so they can make decisions—that will be a successful outcome.*

Conversely, members of several interviewee groups suggested that checking to see if recommendations had been implemented would be a good way to measure success. This sentiment was often couched with caveats recognizing that this may not be an appropriate measurement in all cases. A few members of these groups emphasized that there should be a way for the state to ensure that grantees were using the funds wisely, not “studying stuff forever,” as one put it.

Grantees offered other ideas for how the SFMD could measure whether the program is successful, including:

- Periodic follow-up by the SFMD or designee (options varied regarding the ideal frequency of follow-up, from once a year to once every few years—or even every 15 years).³³ One offered that the results of these follow-up contacts should be shared in annual reports and publications.
- Reports back from grantees on their progress—preferably using a standard format.
- Examine whether departments have improved relationships because of the grant: Are the departments communicating better? Are they sharing information and ideas?
- After-action review or similar approach led by the SFMD representatives.
- Examine how many departments were involved—the more, the better.
- Examine how ISO ratings changed after the grant.

³³ A few grantees mentioned that the current study is an example of that type of follow-up.

- Gather input from the cities involved through surveys or other means: fire service, city staff, and elected officials.

Other Concerns Expressed

During MAD’s interviews for this project, about half of the interview groups expressed concerns or offered thoughts that were not directly (or overtly) related to the Shared Services Grant Program itself, but may make shared services more relevant or have an impact on the fire service overall.

Recruitment and retention, sustainability of volunteer model

About half of the grantee groups described ongoing challenges with recruiting and retaining fire fighters, particularly volunteer firefighters—work expectations, family life, and other interests and commitments are identified as barriers to volunteerism. A few talked bluntly about what they see as a significant challenge now and in the future: the volunteer model is not sustainable, yet government staff and elected officials (and some fire chiefs) are reluctant to acknowledge this reality.

A few were encouraged by what they had heard at the state level about a study or plan to evaluate and improve recruitment and retention.

For a few fire departments, equipment and budgets are not a concern—they have funding for equipment, but not the firefighters to train to use it. For other departments, replacing aging equipment with limited budgets is a challenge on top of recruitment and retention.

A few grantee interviewees expressed grave concerns about the situation of some smaller fire departments—lack of firefighters to respond, lack of training to respond safely, and lack of resources for equipment inspections. For some departments, it can be a challenge to maintain the required number of members on the roster to qualify for pension assistance.

A few chiefs shared their concern about relying on understaffed and potentially undertrained fire departments in a mutual aid situation. These chiefs emphasized a desire to help, coupled with a concern that they would be viewed as trying to take over.

Some grant-funded studies, noted interviewees, recommended that fire departments share staff. The grantees explained that moving fire fighters around is not an easy solution. City attorneys and human resources advisors caution against sharing staff because of liability concerns, but writing the agreements to address these concerns is challenging. One chief wondered why such legal agreements are necessary when there is statewide mutual aid and the League of Minnesota Cities Insurance Trust covers so many cities.

Other policy concerns

A few grantee interviewees expressed other policy concerns. For example, the state’s approach to regulating ambulance services could be changed to further support fire departments and address barriers to sharing services. A few grantee groups talked about the necessity of a fire district in their area to ensure stability and permanence, and described the challenges with forming a district under current state law. (Joint Power Agreements, noted one, are not lasting enough to support the type of change needed for sharing critical services.)

Positive Feedback about the SFMD

Though MAD did not specifically ask grantees for their opinion about the SFMD, about half of the grantee groups offered compliments to the SFMD. Several directly commended current and past fire marshals and their staff, describing individuals as great resources for information and assistance, and thanking current and past fire marshals for their advocacy. A few said that they were glad that they had been contacted for the study, and that they are glad the fire marshal was following up in this way. A few interviewees described the grant program as being especially well run and being a great opportunity for communities.

Key Findings & Recommendations

Key Findings

The review of findings below is organized to respond to the specific research questions posed for this evaluation. MAD considered all of the insights and information provided by grantees, other stakeholders, and SFMD staff in developing the recommendations presented in a later section of this report.

Overall

Grantees generally see value in the Shared Services Grant Program and were able to put grant-funded studies and activities to good use. With improvements and enhancements (noted in the Recommendations section), the grant program can better help fire departments address some of the significant challenges they face, such as firefighter availability, training, and safety.

Use of grant-funded studies and other products

Related research questions: How have fire service organizations used the results of grant-funded studies? Have the organizations implemented the recommendations? Have the organizations identified other uses for the information?

Grant-funded studies

Most of the 26 grants have funded feasibility studies; 17 have been completed, and four were underway during the completion of this evaluation. Feasibility studies most often contained recommendations about aligning administrative and operational plans: policies, manuals, standard operating guides, and capital improvement plans. Most studies also included recommendations about aligning training standards and practices.

Implementation products

In the four implementation-focused grants, the grant has helped departments obtain professional services such as writing standard operating policies and preparing communication and outreach materials, conducting strategic planning sessions and developing workplans, and studying location possibilities.

Use of grant-funded studies or activities

Although only a few departments used the grant product as a step in moving towards consolidation, all grantee groups reported using the grant products in some way. Many increased their shared services, but even those who did not reported other positive outcomes from participating in the grant.

Most of the grantee groups implemented at least one shared services strategy after receiving a grant. The most common of these included:

- Automatic aid or box alarm systems
- Shared trainings
- Standard SOG/SOPs

In a few cases, the grant-funded study led to grantee groups deciding *not* to pursue certain forms of shared services. Although those grants did not lead to certain shared services, the grant recipients still relied on and used their grant study in making decisions.

Other benefits of participating in the grant program

Most grantee groups described how participating in the grant helped them in ways outside of specific shared services. Departments experienced improved relationships, found other uses for the data analyses, and educated stakeholders.

Challenges to implementation

Related research questions: Are there barriers to implementation of recommendations from grant-funded studies? If so, what could be done to address these barriers?

Identified challenges

Most grantee groups offered insights on the challenges they faced in implementing shared services, frequently citing challenges related to politics, fiscal issues, and time.

Political challenges

Departments trying to implement shared services face political changes both from the municipalities who usually have some oversight over them, and from the other fire departments involved. In particular, departments described the challenge of convincing municipalities that there is a need for action.

Change

A significant theme underlying grantee descriptions of political challenges is change: it can be challenging to convince relevant parties that there is a need to change, and it can be challenging for the fire service to embrace change and deal with perceived loss of traditions and control. Furthermore, in some areas, the turnover of leaders in fire departments and cities can stymie efforts to share services (though this turnover was a boon in a few cases).

Fiscal challenges

Fiscal concerns also stood in the way of implementing shared services. In some cases, elected officials did not see how shared services would save their communities money, even when they understood it would improve services. In others, they did not want to spend any new money to implement the recommendations.

Time challenges

Time to dedicate to implementation is a challenge, particularly given the number of volunteer and paid-on-call staff. Even in cases where grantees wanted to spend time on implementing shared services, they could not always prioritize it over other things.

Relief associations not a barrier

Based on the existing literature and pre-study discussions, MAD expected to hear that merging relief associations was a barrier to implementation. However, there was surprisingly little discussion about this subject among respondents, and only one grantee group indicated that relief associations had been a barrier for them.

Addressing challenges

Grantees shared ideas and advice, some of which was directly related to their experiences with the challenges outlined above. Their advice falls into several main areas:

- Establish clear expectations and goals
- Involve elected officials
- Have an open mind and realize that this is “just a study”
- Keep moving, take small steps
- Build relationships
- Acknowledge that the work takes time

MAD’s Recommendations (below) were developed with these challenges and insights in mind

Outcomes and measurement

Related research questions: What outcomes does the Shared Services Grant Program hope to achieve? Are these outcomes being measured, and if not, what options are available?

Outcome clarity

The Shared Services Grant Program provides funding to allow fire departments to examine how they may increase cooperation and shared services. Though consolidation or mergers are not the primary goals, several grantees and other stakeholders contacted during this study expressed some lack of clarity regarding the purpose of the program. This could be due in part to changes and refinements in how the program has been described over time, or to a lack of clear articulation of the program’s goals.

Measurement challenges

If the program’s purpose were to lead to consolidation or mergers, then measurement would be relatively straightforward: did departments merge, or not? (This is the approach used by at least one other state with a shared services program focused on consolidation.) Consolidation and mergers are not the primary purposes of Minnesota’s program, so measurement of the program must be more nuanced than a simple “yes” or “no.” Fire departments’ current status with regard to sharing services should also be considered when evaluating whether or not the grant led to increased shared services—there is a continuum of cooperation and shared services, and different groups of departments may be at different points along that scale.

Current program evaluation and measurement

Prior to this study, the SFMD had not conducted comprehensive evaluation of the Shared Services Grant Program, though they have taken an informal continuous improvement approach to administering the program. Staff conducted an informal survey in 2012 and have collected data on the number of grants funded. They also maintain program and reporting information.

The SFMD does not have a formal means of tracking the qualitative results of grant-funded activities, and improvements are needed in this area to evaluate the program’s success better (see Recommendations below).

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Expand the Fire Marshal Division's involvement

MAD recommends that the SFMD take on an expanded role in the shared services program.³⁴ In particular, the SFMD should:

- Provide additional technical assistance on shared services to fire departments (grantees and non-grantees) in areas such as project definition and scoping, group facilitation and stakeholder engagement, and implementation assistance. (See related recommendations below in the section on improving the grant program.)
- Depending on the situation, serve as an educator, cheerleader, or translator for local government elected officials and staff (city and county) to explain the shared services program. This may include providing information to stakeholders regarding challenges to the fire service in general and explaining the consequences of inaction.³⁵
- Offer tailored, regular follow-up to grantees, such as check-ins during a study process or support during implementation phases.
- Consider treating the shared services grant as one element in a larger shared services program, making improvements to the grant, increasing consultation services, and setting goals and measures for program activities.

Recommendation 2: Improve the grant program

MAD recommends that the SFMD make several improvements to the Shared Services Grant Program:

- Establish categories of grants, articulate expected outcomes, and establish performance measures accordingly. Though the SFMD has tried to avoid a one-size-fits-all approach to the grants, program materials and application requirements are still geared towards grantees requesting a full feasibility study. Categories could span the continuum of shared services, from exploratory grants for communities that have had few conversations about sharing services, to training or equipment sharing grants, to full consolidation and related implementation grants. Grant funds and timing would vary based on the type of grant.
- Develop a questionnaire to help interested departments assess the extent to which they are already sharing or collaborating. The questionnaire should also encourage the fire departments to think about what would likely occur if they were to let present trends in their area continue. SFMD specialists should help departments complete the questionnaire, and then discuss how they might make progress in identified areas (perhaps through a grant, perhaps not).

³⁴ MAD notes that the SFMD intends to increase and reorganize staffing in this area, and the division had already planned to increase consultation to fire departments in a variety of areas, including shared services.

³⁵ If local government officials are primed to decide whether to take action only based on perceptions of cost *savings*, they may not immediately understand that sharing services can often be about cost *avoidance*—if fire department budgets are small because of the reliance on volunteers, a desire for increased cost-efficiency may be misplaced. An outside perspective from the SFMD could assist these leaders.

- As part of the grant application process, assist grantees in defining the project and establishing scope for the external consultant's work. Consider offering additional resources or assistance to applicants in selecting an external consultant.
- Once program changes are developed, conduct additional outreach to ensure that potential grantees are aware of the program. *Note:* the SFMD's usual methods of outreach (regional meetings, conferences, newsletters, etc.) may be sufficient—but new information should be shared in a coordinated way, and the SFMD should look for ways to contact departments that may be unfamiliar with the program.
- Consider whether additional outreach efforts could be coupled with a needs assessment, and then modify activities accordingly. This could be a formal effort such as adding a few questions to a planned survey of all fire departments, or it could be an informal solicitation of input from individuals on the SFMD's email listserv (though the latter option may only include those who are already familiar with the program).
- Consider offering the grants at the beginning of the biennium so that grantees can conceivably extend the grant performance period into another fiscal year. This would allow needed time for grantees who are engaged in complex shared service activities.
- Consider changing the name of the grant to convey the broad goals of the program properly. The current name may be too closely connected with perceptions that the grant's purpose is consolidation. The name change could be communicated when other program changes are announced.

Recommendation 3: Establish program performance measures, improve program evaluation

The SFMD should establish measures to monitor program performance, track data to allow evaluation over time, and communicate results to stakeholders regularly.³⁶ Specific ideas for improvements include:

- Program performance measures could be tailored to the specific type of grant: for example, a grant to explore shared training efforts would be coded differently than a grant to implement a recommendation to consolidate departments.
- The shared services assessment questionnaire described above could offer useful comparison information to show whether the grant program or other SFMD efforts are having the intended effect: questionnaires could be completed before and after a grant activity was completed and then results could be examined to see how far they had progressed. Questionnaire data from fire departments who did not receive grants could be compared to those who received grants.
- Mixed-methods approaches, where quantitative and qualitative data is explored, may be especially helpful in examining less tangible efforts such as increased collaboration.³⁷

³⁶ A Results-Based Accountability (RBA) approach may be useful in identifying relevant program performance measures. Additional information about RBA is located in the footnote on page 3.

³⁷ See, for example, Bruce B. Frey, Jill H. Lohmeier, Stephen W. Lee, and Nona Tollefson, "Measuring Collaboration Among Grant Partners." *American Journal of Evaluation*, September 2006.

Recommendation 4: Improve information sharing

MAD recommends that the SFMD work with grantees and stakeholders as needed to improve how information on shared services is communicated to fire departments. In particular, MAD recommends that the SFMD:

- Develop and distribute templates commonly needed during shared services efforts, including Joint Powers Authority/Entity agreements and standard operating guidelines.
- Develop and distribute a synthesis of advice on cooperative relationships and shared services, using expertise in the SFMD, lessons learned from previous grant-funded activities, and information from this study.
- Look for ways to connect fire departments across the state that are considering or implementing shared services so they can learn from each other's experiences, including expanding current referral efforts and workshops/sessions at conferences. Consider tracking these efforts for later review and evaluation.

Recommended timeline for acting on recommendations

MAD recommends that the SFMD take the following approach to making improvements identified above:

7. Define program goals: overall and across the continuum of shared services.
8. Define the types of grants and other program activities that will accomplish these goals, which may include the activities described in Recommendations 1, 2, and 3.
9. Determine what data to track to measure the performance of the grants and the program generally.
10. If appropriate, decide on a new name for the program or grant.
11. Conduct outreach, which may include a needs assessment.
12. Commit to evaluating the program, reporting results, and changing the program to address current and emerging needs.

Appendix A. Other Grant Programs

MAD searched for other state-run grant programs that help fire departments share services or consolidate. MAD researchers identified several programs that help local governments share services, but only a few that had helped fire departments specifically. MAD interviewed representatives from two programs to learn what services they offer and what outcomes they measure. These two programs are profiled below.

Pennsylvania

The Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development offers funding to local governments through the Municipal Assistance Program (MAP). MAP funds work in three categories: shared services, community planning, and floodplain management. At one point, the three categories each had their own grant program, but the state government consolidated them into one program. The shared services part has existed for more than 20 years, and provides funds to counties and municipalities that wish to legally consolidate or regionalize shared services.

In the past, the program received \$2.3 million annually to distribute, but that amount decreased to \$600,000 several years ago. In fiscal year 2015, MAP distributed funds to 16 grant applications, including five to fire department projects. The average grant amount for fire departments that year was \$22,520.

The grant helps recipients pay for up to 50% of eligible costs of their grant-funded activity. Among other things, the program has paid for legal, financial, and rebranding costs, miscellaneous equipment, meeting facilitators, and evaluations and management studies.

In addition to the grant funds, MAP also offers technical assistance. Program staff often spend at least half of their time in the field helping local governments regionalize or consolidate. They have developed handbooks and checklists for departments to follow, and offer peer consultant services. A staff person from the program reported that three-quarters of their projects require only technical assistance and not grant funding.

Staff report that the key outcome they track is whether the local governments followed through on their consolidation or regionalization. The program exists to assist with those actions and does not track other outcomes.

New York

The New York Division of Local Government Services offers a competitive grant program as part of its Local Government Efficiency Program (LGE). The grant program pays for activities that assist with consolidation, mergers, and shared services. It intends to help local governments achieve cost savings and improved efficiency. The state legislature began the program in fiscal year 2005, and provides \$4 million annually for the competitive grant program.

The program can fund projects for any type of local government service; many of them have been related to infrastructure. A staff person estimated that they fund ten to 15 projects per year, and that

they have assisted with five to ten fire department mergers during the life of the program. Recipients have used grant funds for legal expenses, professional costs (e.g., hiring a consultant), capital equipment, temporary personnel, and even facility expansions.

Staff track the financial impact of the consolidation or shared service. As a part of the application process, local governments must submit a tax impact worksheet that calculates the estimated impact of the change on the local tax levy. After the first year, program staff contact the grant recipients to learn the actual financial impact. The program has not done much financial tracking past the first year, but staff have had others, like school capstone groups, assess the impacts of some individual projects.

Analysis

These two programs are both much larger than the Shared Services Grant Program: they offer more funds to more recipients for a wide variety of local government services. They do not track many program outcomes other than their key respective goals: consolidation and cost savings.

Part of the reason for their different measures and direction may be related to the structure of their fire departments. Unlike Minnesota, Pennsylvania and New York fire departments are typically not affiliated with a local municipality. They are largely independent nonprofits started by private citizens. They face a larger financial challenge compared to Minnesota departments, which may explain some of the emphasis on consolidation.

These two programs exist to encourage consolidation and regionalization, which is a more targeted, specific goal than that of the Shared Services Grant Program. Tracking easily measureable outcomes is theoretically easier than for Minnesota's Shared Services Grant Program.

Appendix B. Interview Questions

Grantee Interviews

1. Introductions: Please briefly describe your role and your organization/jurisdiction.
2. Were you sharing services before the grant? To what extent?
3. Who was involved in decisions about applying for the grant (role in organization/jurisdiction)? Did everyone in your organization/jurisdiction agree that a study/other grant activity was the right thing to do?
4. What were you hoping to do with the information from the feasibility study/other grant activity?
5. In general, please describe your experience with the feasibility study process/other grant activity. What went well? Did you face any challenges while the study was being conducted? If so, please describe.
6. How have you used the information or recommendations from the study/other grant funded activity?
7. Thinking about the specific recommendations, which ones were you able to implement? Which ones have you not implemented? What worked and what didn't work?
8. What challenges did you face, how did you overcome those challenges?
9. What (if anything) surprised you about the study process or results? What (if anything) surprised you about trying to act on the recommendations?
10. Looking back on your experience, what did the grant allow you to do that you weren't able to do on your own?
11. With what you know now, what advice would you give communities that are thinking about doing a feasibility study (other grant activity)? What advice would you give to those looking at implementing study recommendations?
12. Do you have any suggestions for how the Fire Marshal could measure the success of the Shared Services Grant Program?
13. If you had three wishes for how the grant program could be changed, what would they be?
14. Is there anything else you'd like to add? Is there other information that we need to complete this evaluation?

2015 Grantee Interviews

1. Introductions: Please briefly describe your role and your organization/jurisdiction.
2. Were you sharing services before the grant? To what extent?
3. Who was involved in decisions about applying for the grant (role in organization/jurisdiction)? Did everyone in your organization/jurisdiction agree that a study/other grant activity was the right thing to do?
4. What are you hoping to do with the information from the feasibility study/other grant activity?
5. What stage of the study/other grant activity are you in now? What is going well so far? Have you faced any challenges or encountered any surprises? If so, please describe.
6. Realizing that it may be early in the process, do you foresee any challenges in implementing the recommendations from the study or other grant activity? If so, please describe how you might overcome these challenges.
7. Again, realizing that it may be early in the process: With what you know now, what advice would you give communities that are thinking about doing a feasibility study (other grant activity)? What advice would you give to those looking at implementing study recommendations?
8. Do you have any suggestions for how the Fire Marshal could measure the success of the Shared Services Grant Program?
9. If you had three wishes for how the grant program could be changed, what would they be?
10. Is there anything else you'd like to add? Is there other information that we need to complete this evaluation?

Association/Stakeholder Interviews

1. Introductions: Please briefly describe your role and your organization.
2. Are you familiar with the State Fire Marshal's Shared Services Grant Program? What do you know about it?
3. What do you think are the strengths of the Shared Services Grant Program?
4. Are you familiar with specific grantees' efforts? If so, please describe successes and challenges--related to the grant program itself, the feasibility study, or implementation.
5. What does the grant allow recipients to do that they weren't able to do on their own?
6. Do you see areas of improvement for the shared services program? Please describe.

7. Do you have any suggestions for how the Fire Marshal could measure the success of the Shared Services Grant Program?
8. If you had three wishes for how the grant program could be changed, what would they be?
9. What advice would you give communities that are thinking about sharing fire services?
10. In general, what challenges do fire services face when they are *examining whether to share services*? How do they overcome those challenges (if they do)?
11. In general, what challenges do fire services face when they are *implementing ideas about sharing services*? How do they overcome those challenges (if they do)?
12. Thinking about the challenges and opportunities that the fire service will experience in the coming years, how important will sharing services be?
13. Is there anything else you'd like to add? Is there other information that we need to complete this evaluation?

Appendix C. Interview Organizations

Grantee Interviews

MAD interviewed at least one representative from each grantee group. Most interviews involved more than one representative from each grant; 12 of the interviews involved three or more representatives. In total, MAD staff interviewed 67 grantee representatives: 51 fire chiefs, six city managers or administrators, and six other relevant individuals.

- Albert Lea Area
- Albertville / Otsego
- Bemidji Area
- Benson / Clontarf / Danvers/ DeGraff
- Burnsville / Eagan / Savage / South Metro Fire
- Carlton / Wrenshall / Esko
- Chisago City / Lindstrom
- Cloquet Area Fire District
- Columbia Heights / Fridley / St. Anthony
- Crow Wing County
- Hamel / Loretto
- Hibbing Area
- Kandiyohi County
- Laurentian North Firefighters
- Long Lake / Loretto / Maple Plain
- Milaca Area
- Minnetrista / Mound / St. Bonifacius
- Northfield Area Fire and Rescue
- NowThen / St. Francis / Ramsey
- Polk County
- Renville County
- Stevens County
- Stillwater / Lake Elmo / Mahtomedi

Other Stakeholder Interviews

MAD interviewed representatives from relevant organizations to gain their perspectives on the Shared Services Grant Program:

- Association of Minnesota Counties
- League of Minnesota Cities
- Minnesota Association of Townships

- Minnesota Professional Fire Fighters
- Minnesota State Fire Chiefs Association
- Minnesota State Fire Departments Association
- State Fire Marshal and Division staff