

TOGETHER WE ARE STRONG

Regional delivery of key services can boost customer satisfaction and both the effectiveness and fortunes of cities and their employees.

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People think of great ideas as being born of a sudden inspiration – a "Eureka!" moment ever since the ancient Greek scholar Archimedes stepped into his bathtub and understood water displacement. Sometimes, great ideas start with just a casual conversation.

Several such conversations were the genesis of the idea behind the development of the City of Keller Police Department's regional dispatch, jail, and animal adoption center. The regionalization of municipal services has led to more-satisfied residents, better-compensated department employees, and more efficient police departments. By limiting duplication of services, the regional agreements have saved taxpayers vast sums of money and prompted more cities to consider replicating Keller's successful multijurisdictional blueprint.

A Star Is Born

In 2007, City of Southlake Police Chief Marlin Price and City of Keller Police Chief Mark Hafner had become chiefs in the neighboring cities around the same time and had become friends. Southlake's police department was working out of trailers and desperately needed a new facility. But a building involved a huge capital outlay and an uncertain

operational environment for Chief Price's 911 dispatch center while a new facility was built. During a series of conversations between Hafner and Price about how they could improve their organizations, Hafner suggested consolidating services.

Timing is everything in government, and in this case the timing was fortuitous. In 2005, Keller had completed the first phase of a renovation and expansion of its police facilities, with the design work performed by Brinkley Sargent Architects (now Brinkley Sargent Wiginton). Southlake had infrastructure needs that Keller could fulfill with its state-of-the-art dispatch center.

While the two communities lacked a plan for proceeding as a new multijurisdictional entity, there was no shortage of cheerleaders for the project. Local fire departments had long pushed for the police to create a regional 911 dispatch center and, on the face of it, you could see the logic. Among the systemic failures of the World Trade Center disaster was the use of different radio frequencies by separate public safety organizations, and with the rise in cell phone use in the fifteen years since, problems can multiply. With different dispatch centers serving these immediately adjacent communities, 911 calls placed from cell phones might get sent from the nearest cell phone tower to the wrong jurisdiction, leading to delays in response times.

Fire departments operate from a place where boundaries are readily dropped and aid given to neighboring communities

in times of need. These departments had actually met to discuss a huge regional 911 dispatch system comprising all of Tarrant County's 1.8 million residents. However, police and fire dispatch are different animals. The number of police calls dwarfs fire calls by a factor of 40 or more, and a countywide system couldn't possibly meet the needs of all its largest and smallest communities.

Constructing a Partnership

Keller's agreement with Southlake was the beginning of a regional partnership that has since grown to include neighboring Colleyville, and expanded (in step with the phase two expansion of Keller's police facility) to encompass Keller's dispatch center, jail, and animal adoption center, as well as Colleyville's courthouse. But before it could grow, a plan was needed to ensure the success of the initial partnership. Southlake had its own chief, officers, support staff, and facilities that would have to work within a new regional structure. The citizens of both communities would require assurance that their services would not suffer, while the department's employees would have to be assured about their roles in the new partnership.

Anticipating a 24- to 30-month transition and realizing that the regional approach would require fewer employees — particularly dispatchers and supervisory staff — the department stopped filling vacancies and some employees left for outside positions. The employees who remained were given operational parameters and tasked with determining how the regional department should function. This was logical and beneficial, allowing those whose jobs were most affected to take ownership.

On a macro level, the most important issue was writing an interlocal agreement (10 years plus two five-year renewals) and fee structure ensuring the partners would only pay for what they used and that no community would be subsidizing another. This was achieved by studying past usage data (such as number of 911 calls from each jurisdiction, and police and fire calls dispatched to each) and inserting a mechanism through which regular adjustments are made (in this case, every three years). Southlake wouldn't help defray the capital cost on the building, but it contributed (and continues to contribute) a percentage of Keller's administrative costs, including salaries and utilities. It's a methodology and formula that the respective city councils trust, and the agreement also includes an out clause, which either party can activate with 24 months' notice.

The process involved careful consideration — the chiefs studying history, usage, and how their communities are policed, and the employees studying internal operational practices. Did the communities match up in a way that made a regional approach workable? By the time Southlake had signed on, many aspects of such partnerships had been made clear.



One of the primary obstacles in forming a partnership is the concern among chiefs and department staff that it will result in a loss of control. In fact, the opposite is true. The partnership makes the chief a paying customer who is in a position to make demands about the level of service given his or her constituents and who has the power to end the relationship. This keeps everyone sharp and lines of communication open.

While both staffs shared these concerns, job satisfaction was especially low among emergency communications dispatchers. Part of the reason was that the dispatchers weren't busy enough, so they were asked to perform a variety of other functions during their downtime. They were greeters, they did paperwork for courts, and they wrote up tickets at night. They wanted to be valued in their jobs as emergency communications dispatchers with a commensurate pay scale, but the department was something of a revolving door.

It quickly became apparent that taking on calls of a second community led to greater job satisfaction. And because of the efficiencies created by the merger, the department was in a position to increase pay for the dispatchers and other employees. Keller created a regional stipend that is added to employees' paychecks every two weeks. Its visibility on pay stubs reminds employees that they are valued by the department for the exemplary service they provide to residents in those communities.

One of the key benefits during the transition was shared responsibility for planning, and jointly settling on procedures so that staff from different communities could work well together. A similar benefit, once the regional department began operating, was that employees were freed from their former informational silos. Officers sharing the same frequency and dispatchers becoming involved across more than one jurisdiction created, in essence, one big police department. This was a boon to public safety since criminals know no borders, and to job satisfaction. A regional dispatch

was the glue that brought the departments, with their separate identities intact, together.



Building on Success

Colleyville, which had stayed on the sidelines as Keller and Southlake forged their partnership, joined the party in October 2010, creating a period of rapid change.

Colleyville had a predicament similar to Southlake's of several years before. The city had a state-of-the-art holding facility but lacked the around-the-clock detention officers to adequately staff it. (Dispatchers were called on to observe detainees on camera.) At the same time, Keller was preparing for the second phase of its police facility expansion and renovation, transforming a space that was barely big enough for Keller into a facility large enough to permit regional use. The new regional detention center would have to go beyond "state of the art" to be responsive to the needs and protocols of the different community police forces that would use it.

Discussions between the chiefs resulted in what amounted to a trade of regional operations and management, made possible by the filing and 2011 passage of state legislation, House Bill 984, allowing cities with a contiguous border or those within a half-mile of each other to conduct court in one of the cities. Keller abandoned its court in favor of an interlocal agreement with Colleyville that merged their respective operations into a single municipal court, the first of its kind in Texas. And with the former court space freed up in its police building, Keller embarked on its phase two expansion, both of the regional jail and animal control (a new addition to its menu of shared services).

Animal control centers are surprisingly complex and expensive for cities to staff and operate. Many centers remain in the mold of the "dog catcher" of old, with as many strays destroyed as adopted. Keller, which had a more successful adoption rate than most, saw its substandard facility as a ticking time bomb with local animal rights groups.

Meanwhile, Southlake and Colleyville had agreements in place with other communities to kennel strays picked up by their animal control officers.

Adding animal adoption to the regional mix required the same type of study of past data, and resulted in two cost-sharing models, one if the police department managed the adoption center, and one if a partnership deal could be struck with the Humane Society of North Texas (HSNT). Southlake, Westlake, and Colleyville, all of which shared Keller's goal of a no-kill shelter, signed an animal services agreement in October 2012. Ground was broken soon after on the adoption center – adding four times the previous capacity for dogs and double the capacity for cats, a 1,700-square-foot dog courtyard, a medical area for minor surgical procedures, a larger adoption and socialization area, room to expand the center's volunteer program, and the rest of the phase two renovation.

The HSNT partnership took a year of negotiation before it was signed in October 2013, but it was worth the wait. Building a shared facility is saving the communities as much as \$200,000 in annual personnel costs. Handing the operational reins over to HSNT has meant that once regional animal control officers sign over animals, HSNT can use its better business model to find them homes. The size and quality of the new facility also allows Keller to handle overflow from the Humane Society's Fort Worth headquarters as needed.

Employees who were once wary of the regional approach now ask with anticipation what community will be the next to sign on. There has, in fact, been a fifth partner added – the City of Roanoke, which in August 2012 entered into an interlocal jail agreement with Keller covering its class C misdemeanor suspects. There remains space in the jail and the dispatch center for another full-fledged partner.

It is hard to say how much further the regional department can expand. The most important commonality that allows it to succeed – the similar demographics of the individual communities – may well restrict future partnerships from taking root and flourishing.

Efficiency by Design

With data sharing across jurisdictions becoming more common and states working to make statewide public safety interoperability a reality, it's clear that more chiefs understand the many benefits that come with the sharing of information and operational authority. But the sharing of facilities is equally advantageous because it reduces costs and offers many possibilities for designing in new operational efficiencies.

Efficiency in personnel – replacing seven dispatchers and three supervisors in three locations with four dispatchers

and one supervisor in one — requires technology upgrades to ensure good service in all three jurisdictions. An obvious application of this would be cameras and telephones in short- or unstaffed stations so that residents of those communities can reach the fully staffed police department at odd hours. A less obvious application developed in Keller during the jail renovation streamlined the release process to make it less labor intensive. A public address system, remote door controls, and color-coded paths on the floors mean that prisoners can be released without staff leaving the control room. Similarly, working with both the IT and finance staffs, designers specified cash/credit card kiosks where bail and bonds can be posted, ending the necessity for a cashier and the hassles inherent in processing hundreds of thousands of dollars through the jail. The new facility, run with an iPad, tripled Keller's original square footage while maintaining the same staff.

Interestingly, advances in technology are making it possible for police departments to return to an earlier era, when many counties handled the policing for multiple communities. Half a century ago, citizens of some communities like Keller didn't like the level of service — deputies were absent from smaller communities and response times lagged — so they provided the funds to start their own departments. Small cities were more flexible and responsive.

But times are changing, and many citizens and city councils want their cities to be state-of-the-art and provide exceptional services without increasing taxes. Demographically similar and regionally adjacent communities might benefit from replicating Keller's effective and efficient regional model. ★

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