Emergency Response Outcomes Feasibility Study

Executive Summary

May 2026

Milwaukee County, Wisconsin

MissionCriticalPartners

690 Gray's Woods Blvd. | Port Matilda, PA 16870 | 888.862.7911

Table of Contents

Background and Purpose 1
Methodology 1
Current State Assessment 2
City of Milwaukee – Milwaukee DEC 2
Milwaukee County – OEM-911 3
Other Municipal PSAPs 4
Key Systemwide Findings 5
Future State Overview 5
Implementation Considerations 7
Conclusion 7

Background and Purpose

The County of Milwaukee (County), Wisconsin, Office of Emergency Management (OEM) engaged Mission Critical Partners® (MCP) to examine the feasibility of regionalization among the 12 public safety answering points (PSAPs) across the county. The objective of this study was to identify opportunities to improve emergency communications through greater efficiency, enhanced collaboration, and more consistent service delivery.

Milwaukee County is the largest county in Wisconsin, with a population of approximately 928,000 residents, although it is the smallest by land area at 241 square miles. The city of Milwaukee accounts for 577,222 of those residents. The county consists of 19 municipalities with no unincorporated areas, and both cities and villages operate under home rule authority, giving them significant autonomy over policy decisions and service delivery. As a result, every resident has direct access to municipal services.

At the time of this report, the county had 12 PSAPs, including 11 primary PSAPs and the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee (UWM), which became the twelfth in September 2025. Three PSAPs serve multiple municipalities, with additional consolidation efforts underway. Most PSAPs—excluding the City of Milwaukee Department of Emergency Communications (DEC), County OEM-911, and Bayside Communications Center (BCC)—operate as divisions within local police departments and are considered small based on national size classifications. Milwaukee DEC alone serves approximately 62% of the county population, while the remaining PSAPs serve the other 38%, with OEM-911 and UWM operating across multiple jurisdictions.

OEM stakeholders postulate that regional efforts could help all PSAPs reduce operational costs, improve staffing, reduce turnover, decrease response times, and ultimately provide all individuals in Milwaukee County with the same level of service regardless of where they live. This means their 911 calls are handled similarly, that all citizens have access to trained staff who can support life-saving initiatives like emergency medical dispatch (EMD) and telephone cardiopulmonary resuscitation (T-CPR) on first contact, and that technology and geographic information systems (GIS) support expedited emergency response.

Regionalization is often viewed narrowly as physical consolidation. This study evaluates a broader range of approaches, including policy alignment, shared technology, and coordinated operations, recognizing that improvements can occur without requiring immediate structural change.

Methodology

The MCP team assessed participating PSAPs across eight lenses to develop a holistic understanding of each agency, including their current environments, strengths, and opportunities for improvement. MCP benchmarked these findings against national standards, best practices, and its industry experience. Each lens provides a distinct perspective, highlighting opportunities for agencies to collaborate, share resources, and improve economies of scale and service delivery.

MCP engaged the PSAPs over a three-month period to build working relationships and encourage participation in the study. Outreach included multiple email attempts to PSAP management and police leadership, as well as in-person attendance at two monthly police and fire chiefs' meetings. Engagement efforts were well received by fire leadership, who routinely collaborate with neighboring agencies through an open-border response model. However, because fire leadership does not have direct authority over PSAP operations or personnel, they were unable to commit PSAP staff to data-gathering efforts.

MCP initially planned to conduct comprehensive onsite assessments across all PSAPs to fully understand each agency's perspectives, needs, strengths, and opportunities. Ultimately, two PSAPs—OEM-911 and Milwaukee DEC—fully participated in the study, while UWM joined listening sessions but did not provide data. One PSAP met with MCP while considering participation, and another contributed updated information to supplement publicly available data.

This variation in participation reflects broader challenges in interagency alignment and coordination that are also evident in the system's current operating environment. As a result, the findings incorporate both verified agency data and system-level observations across the county.

Current State Assessment

City of Milwaukee – Milwaukee DEC

Established in 2019 by the Common Council and later codified by City Ordinance in October 2021, Milwaukee DEC was created with the specific intent of overseeing a unified police and fire communications model. In February 2025, the City consolidated its police and fire call-taking and dispatch functions, unifying what had previously been separate PSAPs under police and fire leadership. This transition placed civilian management authority over both centers, including positional and managerial oversight, and created an opportunity for a complete departmental restructure. Civilian-led PSAPs are a documented best practice in emergency communications, associated with greater leadership stability, deeper industry expertise, and increased neutrality when dispatching for multiple agencies.

Governance structures are in place, with active engagement between the director, City leadership, and internal management team. Defined roles and a deep organizational structure provide clear separation and delineation of duties at each level. Creating functional alignment across former police and fire operations remains ongoing work—not surprising given this level of organizational change—and staff feedback reflects variability in how roles are understood and applied as the organization continues to evolve. Investments in leadership development, including supervisor training and a planned leadership academy, demonstrate a focus on building internal capacity and fully realizing the organizational benefits of consolidation.

Operationally, Milwaukee DEC falls into the category of a large to mega-sized PSAP, with 24 call-taking-only positions and 28 positions equipped with both dispatching and call-taking functionality. A transition toward universal call-taking is underway and has improved staffing flexibility and shift coverage. Milwaukee DEC answers 911 calls within 15 seconds 96.9% of the time, exceeding industry standards. MCP does not recommend changes to the law enforcement dispatch model but identifies an opportunity to enhance fire dispatch by shifting to a model that includes a tactical dispatch position.

Milwaukee DEC reported handling 504,978 emergency calls, 235,409 non-emergency calls, 515,237 law enforcement incidents, and 130,046 fire/emergency medical services (EMS) incidents in 2024.

As of December 2024, Milwaukee DEC employed 104 telecommunicators and 17 dedicated supervisors, compared to an authorized strength of 184 full-time employees (FTEs)—a staffing shortage of approximately 35%. MCP's analysis indicates that DEC should budget for 134 to 142 full-time telecommunicators to meet operational demand, which falls within its authorized level. In 2024, DEC hired 52 FTEs with a trainee success rate exceeding 90%, meaningfully closing the gap.

Milwaukee DEC's training and quality assurance (QA) programs are well-established, with dedicated staff to administer both—an important structural element for a PSAP of this size. The training program includes structured classroom and on-the-job components supported by documentation that reflects national standards. Ongoing efforts include modernization of fire training and continued refinement of training materials. The QA program goes beyond traditional call review to include radio and dispatch performance, consistent with industry standards and best practice recommendations. While current review levels do not meet industry benchmarks, planned enhancements, including procurement of an artificial intelligence (AI) QA solution, would address this gap.

MCP observed leadership's commitment to stakeholder engagement and internal development. As a newly formed entity, strategic planning, continuity planning, and policy alignment are still developing. Staff identified opportunities to strengthen consistency between documented policies and operational practice and to improve transparency in decision-making.

Milwaukee DEC operates a Hexagon computer-aided dispatch (CAD) system, Solacom Guardian call handling, and a Harris radio system—the only Harris-based system in a region otherwise operating on Motorola solutions. This isolates DEC from regional radio infrastructure, requiring patching for every fire mutual aid event involving county agencies, and limits interoperability during multi-jurisdictional incidents. DEC is in the process of connecting to the statewide Emergency Services Internet Protocol (IP) network (ESInet), with a go-live anticipated in July 2026. The agency is housed in a secure, purpose-built facility with sufficient space, modern infrastructure, and features that support telecommunicator wellness.

Milwaukee County – OEM-911

OEM-911 is a medium-sized communications center that serves dual missions—the 911 call-taking and dispatch side handles traditional emergency call-taking and dispatch functions, and the Command Duty Officer (CDO) side serves as a specialized medical liaison for medical transport units and hospitals. OEM-911 operates within the County structure, a fully civilianized team led by a civilian director who reports to the OEM director.

Leadership demonstrates a commitment to relationship building across agencies; governance and interagency communications are largely relationship-driven, with direct engagement between OEM-911 leadership, staff, and stakeholders. While this approach supports collaboration, it relies on individual relationships and would benefit from additional formalization over time. MCP observed the desire and intention to collaborate, though long-standing relational barriers with other PSAPs present challenges to fully realizing that vision.

Job descriptions exist but are not consistently updated or centrally accessible. Nonetheless, staff report a general understanding of roles and expectations and did not cite major issues with role clarity or reporting structure. Formal leadership development pathways and promotional structures are limited. MCP found a positive team environment at OEM-911 with supportive staff relationships and direct communication from leadership. Opportunities to build on this foundation include formalizing job descriptions, promotional pathways, and decision-making frameworks to improve consistency, transparency, and staff development.

Operationally, OEM-911 plays a central role in the county 911 system as one of seven primary PSAPs for wireless 911 calls made outside the city. It takes incoming wireless 911 calls for Wauwatosa, West Allis,

Greenfield, Cudahy, Hales Corners and Greendale, and West Milwaukee, then transfers them to the appropriate jurisdiction for further call processing and dispatch. In 2024, OEM-911 received 64,385 transfers and transferred 37,572 calls to other PSAPs. Research documents that warm handoffs average 41 seconds, with a 90th percentile of 86 seconds—delays that compound across the volume OEM-911 manages and directly affect the ability to meet call-answering performance standards.

OEM-911 independently carries several countywide responsibilities that distinguish it from other PSAPs in the region. These include sole authority to activate tornado sirens and exclusive Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) certification to issue wireless emergency alerts to cell phones for public notifications such as active shooter incidents, evacuations, and other high-profile events. Because no other agency in the county holds these authorities, OEM-911 telecommunicators must maintain proficiency in systems and protocols unique to their operation and must exercise real-time judgment on activation decisions during incidents when call volume and operational demands are already elevated.

MCP's staffing analysis found significant challenges at OEM-911. At the time of this assessment, OEM-911's starting pay was approximately $23 per hour, compared to a regional range of $30 to $35 per hour. This compensation disparity drives turnover—averaging 27% annually—which contributes to ongoing vacancies, elevated workload, increased overtime, and the extension of shifts from eight to ten hours. Uncompetitive pay drives turnover, turnover deepens vacancies, and vacancies increase workload on remaining staff—perpetuating a cycle that is difficult to break without addressing compensation as a foundational issue. OEM-911 frequently loses trained staff to other agencies offering higher pay and less workload after investing significant resources in their development. MCP's analysis indicates OEM-911 should have a total of 36 authorized full-time telecommunicators to meet existing operational demand. Despite these challenges, OEM-911 telecommunicators answer 911 calls within 15 seconds 97.81% of the time, surpassing the industry standard.

OEM-911 maintains a training program certified by the Association of Public-Safety Communications Officials (APCO) International—a distinction held by fewer than 100 public safety communications centers nationally—with consistent documentation, structured classroom and on-the-job components, and a trainee success rate averaging 85% between 2022 and 2024. This investment in training does not, however, translate to retention, as reflected by the agency's 27% turnover rate.

QA at OEM-911 incorporates a continuous quality improvement (CQI) model that evaluates individual performance with a focus on system-level outcomes, particularly in EMS-related incidents. This model provides a broader system perspective beyond individual call handling. While outcome-based evaluation can risk applying hindsight to telecommunicator decision-making, OEM-911's implementation reflects a deliberate effort to use system outcomes as a learning tool rather than a punitive measure.

Leadership is viewed as participatory and engaged. Ongoing efforts to strengthen relationships and coordination across agencies have improved communication, though broader system alignment remains influenced by historical and organizational factors. The County is investing in future capacity through construction of a new 32,000-square-foot facility in Wauwatosa, scheduled for occupancy in April 2026, with console capacity for up to 50 workstations—positioning it as a potential regional asset.

Other Municipal PSAPs

The remaining PSAPs vary significantly in size, structure, and operational capability, contributing to a highly decentralized system. Most are embedded within law enforcement agencies and operate with flat organizational structures, limited career advancement opportunities, and no shared policies or procedures across jurisdictions. This model creates challenges in balancing dispatch needs with field responder priorities and reinforces operational silos that limit consistency in protocols, training, and response practices.

Governance reflects this decentralization. While agencies participate in broader intergovernmental meetings, no unified PSAP leadership structure exists, and fire agencies have limited participation in regional decision-making. The resulting divide between disciplines compounds coordination challenges, particularly during multi-agency incidents where differences in staffing, training, and operational approach limit interoperability.

The system's reliance on call transfers creates additional operational burden. Only a subset of PSAPs serve as primary answering points, generating a high volume of transferred calls that introduce delays, increase workload, and create opportunities for information loss during handoffs. Technology environments compound this—multiple CAD, records management, and geographic information systems limit data sharing and require manual coordination, while radio system differences necessitate patching between systems, introducing further complexity.

Funding and planning structures mirror the operational picture. Most PSAPs do not maintain standalone strategic plans, and funding is distributed across multiple levels, limiting coordinated investment in facilities, continuity planning, or regional infrastructure. At the same time, existing and planned consolidations signal that appetite for coordination exists and that the current structure, while decentralized, is not static.

Key Systemwide Findings

The current environment reflects a fragmented system in which governance, operations, staffing, and technology vary significantly across agencies. This fragmentation drives inefficiency at multiple levels—duplicated systems, inconsistent service delivery, and a reliance on call transfers that introduces delays and increases operational burden. Workforce challenges compound the picture, with staffing shortages, high turnover, and limited career pathways present across the region; these pressures are not unique to Milwaukee County but are documented patterns in fragmented 911 systems nationally.

Governance structures and interagency relationships reinforce these conditions. Historical and organizational factors have produced siloed operations that limit coordination, particularly across disciplines, and technology environments are not standardized—reducing interoperability and increasing complexity during multi-jurisdictional incidents. Facilities and infrastructure reflect the same variability, with some agencies lacking the capacity to support future growth or meaningful regional coordination.

Future State Overview

Based on local, state, and national evidence, regionalization in some form is feasible among Milwaukee County PSAPs—a finding consistent with prior studies conducted in the county over the last decade. A reduction in primary PSAPs is recommended and would reduce call transfers, improve interoperability, and provide more consistent service delivery regardless of where a resident lives or calls from.

Regionalization is not a single outcome. MCP has identified three interrelated pathways: policy and operations-based regionalization, which involves shared protocols, training, and QA without structural change; technology and shared systems regionalization, which involves coordinated procurement and infrastructure to reduce duplication and improve interoperability; and physical regionalization, which involves co-location or consolidation of PSAPs to eliminate call transfers and workforce competition entirely. These pathways can be pursued sequentially or concurrently, and the benefits compound as more initiatives are deployed.

Table 1: Regionalization Approaches

Regionalization Area	Example Actions	Expected Outcomes
Policy & Operations	Shared protocols, joint QA, coordinated training	Improved service consistency and alignment
Technology & Systems	Countywide CAD system, ESInet completion	Reduced delays and improved interoperability
Facilities	Co-location, targeted consolidation	Reduced duplication and improved coordination

MCP recognizes that Milwaukee DEC must remain independent. Its size, population served, and call and incident volumes place it in a category that no other entity in the county is positioned to absorb. The dual-structured model—a large city PSAP alongside a separate regional or multi-jurisdictional center—is a nationally recognized approach used in Seattle and King County, Washington; Minneapolis and Hennepin County, Minnesota; and Columbus and Franklin County, Ohio, among others. This distinction does not limit regionalization; it defines its realistic starting point.

The evidence supporting shared service models is consistent across geography and governance structures. Redundant systems and staffing inflate operational costs by 10% to 25% annually; fragmentation weakens cybersecurity, continuity, and public accountability; and coordinated systems reduce costs, improve performance, and increase resilience. The following case study outcomes reflect documented results from consolidations nationally.

Table 2: Case Studies and Outcome of Consolidation or Regionalization

Operational Area	Typical Outcome of Consolidation/Regionalization	Supporting Data
Call Handling	60 – 90 seconds faster through elimination of transfers	JeffCom 911 (CO), APCO PSC 2025
CAD-to-CAD Integration	3 – 4 minutes faster dispatch coordination	JeffCom 911; MCP benchmarking
QA/QI Consistency	15% – 25% higher training completion and accuracy	MCP Model for Advancing Public Safety® (MAPS®) data, South Dakota Study
Facility Optimization	20% – 40% reduction in capital duplication	South Dakota Study, Wisconsin County Model
Shared Technology	10% – 25% operating expense savings and improved uptime	Virginia Use Cases (KPMG, 2023)

Operational Area	Typical Outcome of Consolidation/Regionalization	Supporting Data
COOP/Disaster Recovery	Achieved “five nines” uptime with shared redundancy	National Emergency Number Association (NENA), Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) 2022 guidance

Implementation Considerations

Progress toward regionalization is influenced more by organizational alignment than technical feasibility. Technology exists, infrastructure is developing, and the operational case is documented. What remains variable is the willingness of agencies to prioritize regional benefit alongside local control—a dynamic shaped in part by decades of municipal competition and limited interagency familiarity that has not consistently extended to PSAP operations.

These are not insurmountable barriers. Informal monthly gatherings among PSAP leaders have already resumed, and small-scale consolidations across the county demonstrate that appetite for coordination exists. Near-term opportunities do not require structural change and can begin to build the trust and shared understanding that more complex regionalization depends on. Formalizing the PSAP directors meeting, advancing shared training through BCC's existing grant mandate—which has not yet been broadly realized—and completing ESInet connectivity for the remaining PSAPs are actionable steps that require commitment more than capital. With Milwaukee DEC's ESInet go-live anticipated in July 2026, eight of twelve county PSAPs will be connected on a common network—a meaningful foundation already taking shape.

The most significant near-term opportunity may be a countywide CAD system procurement. Milwaukee DEC has expressed interest in replacing its current system, and OEM-911 operates on a separate platform, creating data silos that complicate every multi-jurisdictional incident in the county. A shared CAD system would improve interoperability, eliminate manual coordination burdens, and reduce response delays. Critically, it would create a shared infrastructure that gives smaller agencies a practical and low-friction pathway to join—without surrendering operational identity. Technology regionalization of this kind has historically served as a foundation for deeper integration over time.

Conclusion

Milwaukee County's emergency communications system reflects a decentralized model that supports local control but produces operational inefficiencies, service variability, and financial duplication that its residents ultimately absorb. The case for change is not ideological—it is empirical, documented, and consistent with what this study, prior studies, and national evidence all demonstrate.

Full countywide regionalization is not immediately achievable, and this study does not recommend forcing it. What is achievable now are the foundational steps that make deeper regionalization possible over time: formalizing interagency leadership structures, completing technology connectivity already underway, and pursuing shared procurement that brings the county's two largest PSAPs onto a common platform. If Milwaukee DEC and OEM-911 commit to a shared CAD environment, the infrastructure exists for other agencies to follow. The pathway to a more unified, resilient, and equitable 911 system for Milwaukee County residents runs through those decisions.