

CT Council of Governments Report: Public Safety Answering Points & Municipal Assessment

The Secretary of the Office of Policy and Management Secretary has requested that the state's Councils of Governments (COGs) submit reports showing plans for consolidation of Public Service Answering Points (PSAPs) and establishing a phase-in approach to municipal assessment, as well as implementing the COGs top three (3) priorities. Because both PSAPs and assessment are state-wide issues with many common themes for the COGs, the Connecticut Council of Governments Association (CTCOG) is submitting a unified report for those common themes and plans. Individual COGs may or may not expound on additional points or information or progress that may be unique to their regions in their individualized reports to the Secretary. Moreover, each COG will report individually on progress regarding its three highest priorities listed in its December 2019 report to the Secretary.

In addition, since the inception of the pandemic in the spring of 2020, COG's have been requested by the State to perform multiple functions regarding COVID recovery, including forming and staffing Regional Long Term Recovery Steering Committees and attending numerous meetings regarding COVID response and recovery. For this Fiscal Year, this effort is being funded by Regional Service Grant (RSG) funds. CTCOG is including in this report a section regarding work that all COGs have been performing for the COVID recovery efforts, because COVID recovery has become a priority for all COGs at this time.

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1. Public Safety Answering Points

CTCOG has long recognized the benefits and the potential of PSAP consolidation. The 2012 Kimball report commissioned by the State and referenced in many previous reports, is still applicable today. The report concluded that 3 Regional PSAP centers statewide would be ideal for the State of Connecticut. Understanding that consolidation to 3 PSAPS is likely not achievable, there are still potential gains and efficiencies that could be achieved through consolidation.

The largest difference between 2012 and today, almost 10 years later, is the robust fiber connection established between police and fire stations. The Public Safety Data Network (PSDN) is an ultra-high speed fiber optic network that serves as a dedicated data transport infrastructure and interconnectivity pathway for public safety and government applications and services throughout the state. The network consists of approximately 8,800 miles of dark fiber connecting 515 nodes or Points of Interest (POIs) and is designed with the highest level of redundancy. This network connects the 110 PSAPs in Connecticut that provide the 911 Emergency Answering service to the citizens of the state. Given the advancements in technology, the PSDN could provide the infrastructure and opportunities for leveraging new technologies.

1.1. Opportunities for the Way Forward

CTCOG sees several potential paths as opportunity areas to consolidated PSAPs that meet economies of scale and would work with the COG structure:

- Establish virtual regional PSAPs.
- Stand-up a regional system and offer a voluntary buy-in solution for municipalities.

➤ *Critical Elements from the State*

In order to move forward with discussions on consolidation there are actions from the State that would pave the way to enable COGs to assist or achieve PSAP consolidation.

- **Clear goals and definition of acceptable consolidation.** Statewide, there are 110 PSAPs. Numerous reports and studies have made it clear that that is too many. CTCOG agrees. Our member municipalities, though, may or may not. CTCOG proposes the State define two straightforward and simple metrics as targets, or at a minimum, soft goals. These goals would give COGs the ability to encourage members and showcase the benefits of consolidated emergency response.
 - Call volume (daily, weekly, or annual)
 - Ability to respond to larger emergencies (this could be measured by FTEs or the ability to take X number of calls within a short time period)
 - Set goals based on national standards or averages (such as the number transfers, response times or others). The state could set goals that require PSAPs to meet or exceed certain national standards that would lead to voluntary consolidation.

- **Effective subsidizing.** Currently, most PSAPs have very little or no incentive for consolidation. Currently, there is a disconnect between PSAP leadership and municipal leadership. This, we believe, should be corrected. One solution is that the statute be modified to require both municipal CEO representation and a comprehensive annual report to each community served. Within such report should be a consideration of consolidation or sharing of services to reduce costs and improve efficiencies. The current subsidy does not encourage or incentivize consolidation. Gradually changing the formula over multiple years to reward consolidation would give additional incentives to the municipalities.

The state could and should define what constitutes "regional" or a minimum "critical mass" to qualify as a PSAP eligible for subsidy. [House Bill 6052](#) and [HB 6302](#) have likely been introduced as potential vehicles to structure a PSAP consolidation process. The current language of 6302 does set a threshold of PSAPs serving populations of 40,000 - similar to previous legislative proposals. The related subsidies for municipalities with small, stand-alone PSAPs previous legislative proposals have targeted is minimal and thus have not served as an effective consolidation incentive. An effective incentive rewarding consolidation would be significantly more impactful than these proposals.

- **Encourage municipalities to understand the benefits.** The primary benefits of consolidation are in quality of service and better response times which equate to lives saved. A primary reason for PSAP consolidation is the opportunity for better response times in a disaster or major emergency. Simply put, it is the ability to answer and respond to emergency calls that matters most. Call transfers risk losing calls and delays that may cost lives. Many of the smaller PSAPs were overwhelmed during some of the recent weather events (the microburst that affected many Connecticut towns readily comes to mind) and a consolidated PSAP would have been better able to handle those emergencies. This benefit needs to be stressed with the municipalities through existing communication channels.
- **Significant state capital investment.** Building consolidated regional centers, or moving to consolidated regional centers, will require significant capital investment. When towns need to upgrade outdated equipment or upgrade their CAD/RMS system, the state could encourage consolidation by offering significant state investment if the municipality is moving to a consolidated model.
- **Encourage a long-range view of consolidation.** With clear goals laid out, the State can encourage municipalities over the long-term to consolidate and reap the benefits of consolidation. Savings and efficiencies will be gained, but those savings will be over the long-haul. Large PSAP consolidation will take five years if done aggressively. The monetary savings from those five years will be reaped years after that consolidation takes place.

1.2. Virtual Regional PSAPs

The State has made significant investment in its robust fiber optic network and Connecticut Statewide Police Emergency Radio Network . Currently almost every firehouse or police station is connected to these networks. There is potential to leverage the networks and create Virtual Regional PSAPs.

Many call centers today actually are answered from the customer service representative's individual homes. From the outside, a Virtual Regional PSAPs would appear as a single PSAP but from the back-end perspective, the locations of the actual "Regional PSAP" would be dispersed across the participating municipalities. This virtual PSAP would address concerns related to dark stations, understaffing and excessive call volume.

CTCOG is interested in exploring the possibility of virtual regional PSAPs including the necessary infrastructure, required equipment and other technical aspects of virtual consolidation. From a high level, it appears that the current infrastructure could be used, but a deeper review would be necessary to verify what is required and identify deficiencies in the current infrastructure. Although individual COGs may vary, CTCOG sees this as a potential option worth pursuing and plan to explore the "how-to" and options in further detail during the next fiscal year.

1.3. Voluntary Buy-in Solution

The second way forward for large PSAP consolidation is standing up a regional PSAP with two or more key municipalities and creating a structure for other municipalities to "buy-in" as their equipment or software needs require updating and replacement.

This is a more traditional model of larger scale PSAP consolidation. Depending on the region, it is possible an existing PSAP could be used as the base for the consolidation and "adding" additional municipalities and functions.

Some areas in Connecticut already have this structure in place and can add additional members (within a certain size) with the right incentives. Other areas in Connecticut would require willing partners and significant capital investment to set-up a consolidated buy-in solution.

1.4. Challenges

As with all plans, programs and opportunities, consolidated PSAPs are not without specific challenges. CTCOG will address a few major themes in the challenges that CTCOG, in general, has faced when discussing PSAP consolidation with its members. The challenges can be divided into two major categories: technical and people. CTCOG believes the technical challenges can be overcome with the right planning and careful implementation. The people challenges are the ones in which CTCOG believes state incentives and encouragement will be key.

➤ *Technical Challenges*

The technical challenges to consolidation are: cost, systems integration, and effective service provision.

Cost. With the Virtual Regional PSAPs, it is likely the initial capital costs would be less than a traditional consolidation models. There are, however, still necessary costs with any consolidation. Ideally, equipment across the shared areas would be standardized. The cost of equipment, however, is a significant capital investment many municipalities are reluctant to make until absolutely necessary. Moreover, municipalities may simply analyze the capital costs of the regional system against their existing system and choose not to invest because of a lack of costs savings, without comparing opportunity costs and potential benefits of integration (i.e., lives saved). In addition, there will be one-time consolidation and coordination costs during the implementation process. With voluntary buy-in solution, if the region does not have a system already in place, there will be additional capital costs for buildings and equipment.

Systems Integration. The Computer Aided Dispatch and Records Management System (CAD/RMS) is critical in the PSAP operations. Many police departments in Connecticut purchase proprietary CAD/RMS systems that may not be able to tie in with other systems in neighboring municipalities. This information, in general, is not shared across municipalities. Integrating the CAD/RMS is a critical piece to any consolidation and will require careful planning and selection of the right system for the region to allow for integration and easier ability for towns to move from their current system.

Continuing and effective service provision. In implementing either of the two options, planning will be critical to the continuity of service throughout the transition process. In addition, effective transfer of data and sharing of local knowledge will be critical on enabling continual service that addresses local knowledge and service concerns.

➤ *People Challenges*

Challenges related to people will be more difficult to overcome and will require state assistance, encouragement, and incentives. The primary challenges in this area are political opposition as well as union or labor concerns.

Political Opposition. Much of the opposition to PSAP consolidation is not technical, but political. Some municipalities or fire districts often have stakeholders who are indifferent to consolidation, and in some cases, publicly against consolidation efforts. In addition, public attitude and concerns over “dark stations” must be addressed at the beginning of the process and continually throughout the various stages of implementation. State incentives and encouragement would help support COGs in this effort while working towards PSAP consolidation to effect significant increases in public safety and security.

Union and Labor Concerns. For PSAP dispatchers who are under union contract and integration / regionalization would require transition periods or negotiations so that the any union or labor concerns are addressed. In addition, for PSAPs that have police officers who act as dispatchers (whether regularly or on an as-needed basis) expectations and requirements also will have to be negotiated and addressed in any consolidation process.

1.5. PSAP Conclusion

CTCOG believes there is a way forward regarding PSAP consolidation. Clear goals, the right incentives and the right investment from the state will provide a pathway to help move this process forward. Bills in this legislative session (HB6052 and HB6302) may be important first steps. In the meantime, in addition to the items outlined above, each COG will continue to respond to its members and plan to conduct various activities to help in moving towards effective PSAP consolidation.

2. Phase-in Approach to Regional Municipal Assessment

Although each region and COG have different needs and different levels to which some assessment functions have been regionalized (or are exploring opportunities in assessment), this is another area where there are unified efforts and consistent themes and plans throughout all COGs.

There are several distinct areas that can be addressed in the phased in regional municipal assessment at the state or CTCOG level. They are as follows:

1. Data Standardization
2. Software and Vendor Procurement
3. Effective Collection and Customer Facing Solutions
4. Personnel Qualifications and Standardization.
5. Regional revaluation

2.1. Data Standardization

Currently CTGIS Network and OPM are working on creating standardized reports for municipalities to submit their Computer Assisted Mass Appraisal (CAMA) data. Each region currently collects this information per statute and standardizing this information will enable back-office service provision and better development of regional tools and studies. This effort is currently underway.

Moreover, some towns do not have accurate or updated parcel data. Many small municipalities which lack the necessary resources update parcel information infrequently. State assistance in ensuring consistent and accurate parcel data across the entire state would enhance the use of standardized CAMA data and regional GIS systems.

Consistent CAMA data combined with regularly updated planimetric data would offer the opportunity for more accurate assessments and discovery of properties or portions of properties that have not been assessed but should be.

In addition to CAMA and parcel data, digitization of land records is the foundation for enabling regional back-office workflows and shared building department approaches.

2.2. Software and Vendor Procurement

➤ *Software*

Municipalities vary widely in their assessment software. There are multiple vendors, but also multiple versions within vendors. Moreover, some assessment vendors will only work with a limited number of software applications and will not perform assessment services for some municipalities with different software. Consequently, reviewing and cataloging what software municipalities are using and potentially initiating statewide or regional procurement opportunities could offer an area of potential savings.

A common software solution would also assist with better and more effective vendor procurement and easier interface with the chosen vendor.

Challenges of creating the common software solution is the willingness of municipalities to participate. The costs of converting to a new software coupled with the ability to master such software often cause hesitation - even from one version to an upgrade of the same software. This additionally hinders the filling of vacancies for Assessor jobs in towns where the software in use is not understood by an otherwise qualified applicant. The state could conduct a common bid for CAMA software and in turn work with the Assessment Association to provide training and technical assistance.

➤ *Vendor Procurement*

CTCOG would like to note that there are only a few vendors who have the capability of servicing the revaluation of an entire region. In addition, the variation across municipalities poses the real challenge in vendor procurement. Some municipalities will use the vendor for all properties - others conduct elements themselves as well as variations in usage of data mailers. There is no consistency in approach. Given this reality, any expectations of procurement and savings from regional revaluation procurement should be approached with caution.

There are two potential approaches to structuring regional vendor procurement. One method is for the participating municipalities to structure their assessment on a rotating basis over five years, such that the vendor has consistent workflow throughout the life of the contract. Another method is to have all the participating municipalities have their re-assessment performed in the same year. NECCOG has successfully used an approach where first, REVAL dates are restructured so that there is an equalization of parcels per year. Second, NECCOG's vendor conducts a full inspection on 50% of parcels each year and use that information to provide the so-called statistical update. This was designed by assessors and has worked very well. All methods have their strength and weaknesses. Statutorily, CTCOG recommends municipalities and regions having the ability to structure their procurement and assessment in a format that best fits the regional needs.

2.3. Effective Collection and Customer Facing Solutions

In discussing and reviewing assessment and collection, municipalities have little or no information on the benchmark of what constitutes effective tax assessment and collection. Setting standards or understanding and communicating standards to municipal leaders is one of the first steps in receiving buy-in for regional assessment.

Another area of need in some municipalities is the need for effective customer facing solutions. Many of the smaller municipalities have part time assessors and face challenges in hiring a part time assessor but in also servicing municipal customers because the part time assessor is only available once or twice a week during limited hours. These municipalities would benefit from a consolidated effort that could enable access to an assessor by phone or virtually every day of the week and in-person office hours on a more consistent basis.

2.4. Benefits of Regional Assessment

The goal of regionalized municipal assessment should be multi layered: increased and better customer service through more effective data, and in some cases, more assessor availability, and finally, more effective tax collections and increase accuracy in assessments. All these areas are benefits which would benefit both the municipality and the citizen.

CTCOG would like to note that those hard dollar savings do exist in various areas in regionalizing assessment, but those savings will not be significant enough to motivate many municipalities to “buy-in”. The alternative benefits (including increased revenue through better assessment and effective collections) are more likely to motivate municipalities to pursue opportunities in Regional Assessment.

2.5. Where the State Can Help

Given the challenges and some opposition to regional assessment, some areas where the State can be helpful or assist COGs are outlined below.

- Continue to assist and encourage the CAMA standardization efforts.
- Standardize motor vehicle assessment at a statewide level. Comparatively speaking, motor vehicle evaluation, assessment and appeals require a larger portion of the assessment time than the value it offers. Standardizing motor vehicle assessments, for example a set statewide depreciation schedule from MSRP, would eliminate considerable amount of work and effort by the assessor without sacrificing quality, revenues, and local control.
- Allow municipalities the use of GIS and orthoimagery in lieu of physical visits. This would enable municipalities to focus on high value changes more effectively and drastically reduce costs.
- Encourage digitization of land records, building documents and workflows to facilitate shared back off solutions.

- Support the creation and maintenance of high quality statewide base map data in GIS these include municipal boundary layer, land parcels, aerial photography, and transportation network.
- Consider a consistent high resolution orthographic aerial acquisition on a regularly scheduled basis. Many state agencies already commission and use some level of orthographic aerial acquisition services. Many of these are not helpful to municipalities because of the low level of resolution. Given the relative inexpensiveness of such a project (\$2 - \$2.5 million dollars for the entire state), a consistent statewide flight would benefit all regions and should be part of the state's budget and process instead of projects that happen intermittently and unpredictably.

2.6. CTCOG's Role in Assessment

CTCOG will continue to support the current efforts in CAMA data standardization across municipalities, including efforts to improve statewide GIS.

CTCOG will continue to explore opportunities to help provide better assessment services, especially in the smaller municipalities as well as in vendor procurement.

Finally, CTCOG will work for towards additional back-end support and efficiencies including increasing availability of public information and documentation.

3. COVID-19 Recovery Activities

In March 2020, Connecticut's Regional Councils of Governments were called upon by the Governor to lead the long-term recovery planning from the COVID-19 Pandemic. The COGs have been were also asked to support their DEMHS emergency planning regions in both planning for response and recovery emergency support functions. Additionally, each COG has supported their municipalities and CEOs in addressing the challenges facing municipal governments during COVID.

Although not originally included in our approved FY21 RSG work plans, RSG has allowed COGs to continue supporting state, regional, and local response and recovery efforts. This includes helping the state's recovery and resiliency contractor the Global Resilience Institute / McCyrstal Group, leading the five DEMHS region long-term recovery planning steering committees, participating in state steering committees, identifying unmet needs in our communities and regions, planning for COVID-19 testing and vaccination sites, and applying to EDA for economic recovery planning grants.