A look at...
the future of public safety
Public safety and cross-training work for Meridian Township

by Jay Kohl, Director, Meridian Township Public Safety

In an effort to improve its ability to protect the public safety of its residents, the Charter Township of Meridian (Ingham County) decided two years ago to combine its police and fire operations and full paramedic services to establish a public safety department. As the township’s police chief, I was promoted to public safety director and assumed the management of both departments while the township explored the different options for public safety organizations.

Meridian Township ultimately decided to totally consolidate all police, fire and emergency medical service operations over time so that each public safety officer would be cross-trained in all three service areas. The township is currently in the process of evolving into a fully cross-trained department, which could take 10 to 15 years to complete. However, the change to a public safety department has resulted in immediate successes without adversely impacting any employee.

Public safety departments offer consolidated services

Public safety broadly refers to providing a joint police and fire service. Many local governments have totally separate police and fire departments, yet commonly refer to themselves as public safety departments. Separate police and fire departments would not officially qualify as a public safety department since they are not administered by a single manager. A single administrator charged with the management of police and fire operations is what distinguishes public safety from traditional departments. The three basic types of public safety departments are described below:

1. Administrative public safety—The police and fire departments are administered by a public safety director, while the two departments remain separate. None of the members are cross-trained. Communities that adopt the administrative form of public safety will find that police and fire operations are handled more consistently and the departments do not compete for resources. Planning, coordinating and training activities will most likely be improved, since a single manager has control over them. Efficiencies will, however, be limited to the administrative capabilities of the public safety director.

2. Partially consolidated public safety—Police and fire departments remain separate, while a portion of the employees are cross-trained as police officers and fire fighters. In a public safety department that is partially consolidated, a specified percentage of public safety officers, cross-trained as police officers and fire fighters, perform daily activities as police officers and serve as first responders to all fire calls, while being available as an additional source of personnel at major fires. This form of public safety department provides for more police officers on duty at all times. A certain number of police officers and fire fighters continue to fill the traditional positions.

3. Totally consolidated public safety—All sworn employees are trained in police and fire skills. Totally consolidated public safety departments are potentially the most efficient, since all employees are trained as police officers and fire fighters. There are some foreseeable disadvantages to this choice. If employees have to be forced to cross-train, it is unlikely that they will become enthusiastic workers. The value of cross-training could be totally lost by attempting to force disgruntled employees to perform public services.

Public safety departments often face employee concerns

In 1993, prior to establishing the public safety department, Meridian Township was experiencing budget challenges. The demands for police and fire services were on the rise, and both departments, as with many communities, were forced to compete for funding. Overtime costs for fire operations exceeded budget limits each year and had grown to 20 percent of total salary expenses. In an effort to streamline emergency services, the township board and department administrators began considering public safety options.

The township was not looking to public safety as a way to save money. Rather, they viewed public safety as a potential means of providing more services without increasing employees or expenses.

The idea of a public safety department was not foreign to the township. The police department building, which also housed fire administration, was called a public safety building, and the township had been discussing the concept of public safety for more than 25 years. Twenty years ago, a public safety director had been appointed, but did not survive the objections raised primarily by the fire department. The fire fighters were concerned that an employee could not be proficient in both police and fire fighting skills and, therefore, fire services would suffer. They feared that public safety was only being used to cut costs and was actually an attempt by the township board to do away with the fire department. It now appears that it was the township’s lack of commitment to public safety and pressure from unions that resulted in the return to traditional police and fire operations. This experience was used to bolster claims that public safety could never work in Meridian Township.

However, things were different in 1993. The township recognized the value of a consolidated public safety department and was prepared for the many challenges that would be orchestrated against it. The township board had learned by studying other communities with successful programs that cross-trained employees could be proficient in both skills. The board had also determined that, under the traditional system, fire fighters spent less than 10 percent of their on-duty time actually performing a service or training, while staffing schedules resulted in large amounts of overtime. At the same time, the number of police officers available to respond to calls for service was very limited. After months of debate, the township board decided that the benefits of public safety far outweighed the concerns expressed by the fire union.

The benefits of the administrative public safety model alone were significant in Meridian Township’s decision to go with public safety. However, the township decided to become a totally consolidated public safety department, including medical first responder training. In a significant decision, the township chose not to force current employees to cross-train and was able to avoid layoffs by doing so. The township discovered that they could accomplish the total consolidation of the departments by simply evolving through all three types of public safety organizations over time. Total consolidation will be accomplished over a number of years as employees leave or retire and new employees are required to be cross-trained.

Meridian Township’s efforts are already paying off

The first two years of Meridian Township’s public safety merger have been very successful. Over $600,000 has been saved through the administrative changes alone. The greatest savings came from a reduction in overtime, while the average daily staff levels were actually increased. This was accomplished by revising staffing policies so that more staff are on-call on a daily basis, but on-duty only when they are needed. Other savings resulted from providing on-duty and in-house training.

The money saved has been reinvested in public
safety improvements. Of the savings, $500,000 was put toward renovating an existing fire station, and $70,000 was authorized to purchase an ambulance. Both of these items had been rejected in earlier, proposed public safety budgets and a millage attempt. The balance of the public safety savings went to advanced training that resulted in an increase of 25 percent more paramedics and certifying all police officers as medical first responders. This increased the number of state certified medical personnel by 87 percent. Department personnel are not yet fully cross-trained, so savings are expected to increase and services will improve as more employees become cross-trained.

Equally impressive were the improvements made to fire responses. Between December 1994 and December 1995, the number of employees that were available for a major fire emergency grew from 47 to 63, an increase of 36 percent. By December 1996, that number will be increased to 77, a two-year increase of 64 percent. These results contradict the preliminary concerns that the fire department’s services would suffer if the township went to public safety. In fact, the emergency medical and fire services have been the greatest beneficiaries of the public safety consolidations.

The results are encouraging. The public safety model has not been used to cut programs and has actually increased the dollars appropriated for public safety services. The township board and administration have demonstrated their commitment to fire suppression and fire safety. The township has not done away with the fire department—in fact, the members available for fire service has dramatically increased over the two-year period. Consequently, the fire department is more visible than ever. Meridian Township’s citizens are better served in their needs for fire, police and emergency medical services.

*A long-term commitment to public safety can result in improved services*

Township boards must have the courage, creativity and commitment to succeed in establishing a cross-trained public safety department. Courage, to face the obstacles that challenge any attempts to deviate from providing traditional fire services. Creativity, to develop a public safety department that would best suit the unique nature of the community to be served. And finally, a commitment to support public safety over time. A long-term commitment is necessary because the process of changing to public safety is slow, and there will always be internal forces that prefer to return to the “good old days.”

Meridian Township’s elected officials are now being rewarded by a public safety department that is delivering more services at no additional costs to their taxpayers. Public safety, for Meridian Township, is not only more efficient, it is more effective.

Jay Kohl served 21 years as a member of the Detroit Police Department, achieving the rank of lieutenant. He has a masters degree in security administration and a law degree from the University of Detroit. He was hired as chief of the Meridian Township Police Department in 1990, and now serves as director of Meridian Township Public Safety.

"The number of state certified medical personnel has increased by 87 percent."
Public safety may be the most visible service—and arguably, the most important—a township can provide. It can also be the most heavily mandated and costly to offer.

Although there is no statutory requirement to do so, many Michigan townships offer some public safety service to their residents, including full-time or on-call fire departments, fire protection mutual aid agreements with other local governments, township police departments, contracts with the county sheriff's department or the state police and emergency medical services. However, as the federal and state governments move to "reinvent" government and township revenues shrink, township officials must increasingly examine the way they fund these public safety services.

As communities change and residents place more demands on police, fire and emergency medical services, township officials must examine the ways in which they provide public safety.

To assist township officials in better understanding some of the challenges and opportunities facing public safety, the Michigan Townships Association asked five public safety officials to discuss what they felt would be the most significant changes, mandates, developments or trends impacting their services over the next five years. The one theme running through the following articles would appear to be that now, more than ever before, township officials need to be open to alternative or innovative methods for providing police, fire and emergency medical services.