

DRAFT

Rural Policy Advisory Commission

Rural Policy Plan: Opportunities for Increased Service Sharing among Rural Municipalities

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Section 1 Goal for Enhancing Rural Conditions for this Focus Area:

With decreasing budgets and populations, increasing requirements for services, and rising costs, Massachusetts' rural municipalities would benefit from additional support and incentives to promote cross-jurisdictional service sharing that can sustainably improve municipal services.

Section 2 Key Issues

In rural communities, entire departments are often comprised of one employee or even a part-time employee. Pooling resources through cross-jurisdictional sharing is a means to harnessing economies of scale and improving efficiency. Unfortunately, there are many barriers to making organizational changes that would benefit municipal services.

- **Cost to consider feasibility:** Rural municipalities do not have the financial resources or staff capacity available to conduct necessary analysis.
- **Startup resources:** Many rural municipalities do not have the financial resources available to cover the up-front costs associated with collaboration or service sharing. Sometimes municipalities will not see an immediate return on their investment. These financial dynamics impede municipalities from entering into collaborations.
- **Geography:** Transportation challenges are a major impediment to collaboration when covering large service areas. However, there are regional programs that overcome geographical constraints and manage expectations for maintaining office hours for shared staff. For example, accountants from the FRCOG Accounting Program have a 500 square mile service radius.
- **Building trust in shared governance:** The best shared municipal programs have clear planning processes and strong governance and cost-sharing agreements. These take time and trust to build but can be very effective. Towns in the Quabbin Regional School District have formed an Educational and Municipal Partnership among leadership from five towns in order to foster communication and develop robust intergovernmental agreements.
- **The bureaucratic burden of reporting to multiple boards:** Facilitating the communication necessary between towns presents a challenge for regional departments. As is done with South County Emergency Medical Services, towns can take steps to designate authority to a program oversight committee.

Section 3 Existing Policies and Programs in MA

- **Community Compact Program:** Participating communities agree to implement at least one best practice that they select from across a variety of areas. The community's chosen best practice(s) are reviewed between the Commonwealth and the municipality to ensure that the best practice(s) chosen are unique to the municipality and reflect needed areas of improvement. If a municipality selects regionalization as a best practice, the program makes state funds available that towns could use to explore sharing important municipal staffing roles.
- **Efficiency and Regionalization Grant Program:** The purpose of this competitive grant program is to provide financial support for governmental entities interested in implementing regionalization and other efficiency initiatives that allow for long-term sustainability. These grants provide funds for one-time or transition costs for municipalities, regional school districts, school districts considering forming a regional school district or regionalizing services, regional planning agencies and councils of governments interested in such projects.
- **District Local Technical Assistance (DLTA) Funds:** State funds are distributed among the state's 13 Regional Planning Agencies (RPAs) to provide cities and towns with technical assistance to help move municipalities forward with projects that meet State Sustainable Development Principles, create municipal partnerships, address regional priorities, and serve as a model for other towns. Many RPAs dedicate funding to service sharing endeavors. This program requires a 10% match from participating municipalities.
- **State 911 Department Support & Incentive Grant:** The State 911 Department, as part of the Executive Office of Public Safety and Security, is responsible for administering the State 911 Department Public Safety Answering Point and Regional Emergency Communication Center Support and Incentive Grant Programs. The purpose of these grants is to assist Public Safety Answering Points (PSAPs) and Regional Emergency Communication Centers (RECCs) in providing enhanced 911 service and to encourage the development of regional PSAPs, regional secondary PSAPs, and RECCs.
- **Regional Planning Agencies (RPAs) and Councils of Government (COGs):** These are public organizations that serve the local governments and citizens within their planning districts by dealing with issues and needs that cross city, town, county, and even state boundaries through planning, policymaking, communication coordination, advocacy, education, analysis, and technical assistance. The RPAs research, analyze and provide leadership on a wide range of their members' responsibilities, including assessing, planning, and implementing service sharing initiatives.
- **Laws that allow for service sharing:**

- Intermunicipal Agreements & Massachusetts General Law Chapter 40, Section 4A, the most commonly used form of contracts in regionalization projects and are often used to create mutual aid agreements, shared service agreements and agreements between municipalities and host agencies.
- The Joint Powers Act, Massachusetts General Law Chapter 40, Section 4A 1/2 is legislation that allows two or more units of local government to jointly perform municipal services through the creation of a new regional entity.
- Municipal officials may also draft and seek approval of special legislation allowing for the creation of new regional entities. Such legislation must be introduced by a state legislator and passed by the Massachusetts Legislature.
- **Private Sector Service Providers:** From Assessing to Building Inspection, private vendors are available to perform a wide variety of services for municipalities. Of course, any procurement would be subject to Massachusetts General Law Chapter 30B, legislation related to the procurement of supplies and services. Small communities benefit from harnessing their collective buying power and collaborating on joint procurements.

Section 4 One or Two Best Practices that could be brought to MA or expanded if here already.

Expand successful programs and use them as models for other efforts. Some Massachusetts communities are organized in public health districts or other formal arrangements for sharing of local public health services. About 1.5 million Massachusetts residents (about 23% of the Massachusetts population) receive local public health services through sixteen groups of two or more communities (total of 116 communities). Public Health Cross-Jurisdictional Sharing improves the public's health through environmental health inspections, code enforcement, education, wellness, and special programs.

Shared Animal Control Officer/Kennel Programs have been able to professionalize Animal Control Services for towns in Rutland Regional Animal Control, Palmer Regional Animal Control, Athol/Orange Animal Control, and towns participating with the Franklin County Sheriff Regional Dog Kennel.

Shared Emergency Medical Services/Fire Programs are able to improve the availability and quality of service. Examples include South County EMS based in Deerfield and Hilltown Community Ambulance in Huntington.

Utilize regional organizations, state partners, and private service providers to improve municipal services. State Partners like DESE, MassCOR, and DLS should work with the Rural Policy Advisory Commission to further support municipal services. RPAs and other regional

service providers should focus on expanding regional services models such as PVPCs Regional Accounting Program and FRCOGs Cooperative Inspection Program.

Section 5 Policy, Program or Investment Recommendations to Improve Rural Conditions

- 1. Build pool of experienced TA providers from DLS, RPAs, existing cross-jurisdictional sharing models, and compensate them to help others.** This could be similar to the Peer to Peer Technical Assistance Program model from DHCD and could include facilitators to manage the important group process of creating the financing, staffing, and governance models for cross-jurisdictional sharing.
- 2. Incentivize communities to adopt a Shared Services Policy.** This policy could identify priorities for collaboration, potential partners, and responsible parties for moving goals forward. These policies could be shared with other towns to spark partnerships and analysis.
- 3. Continue to support Efficiency and Regionalization grant funding and transition grant funding to be allocated on a rolling basis or in multiple rounds.** Seed capital is crucial for new regional projects for software and equipment purchases that allow projects to demonstrate shared efficiencies early. The success of a collaborative effort almost always relies on the timely availability of this funding. Increased flexibility would be more effective than an annual grant opportunity, and moving it away from being funded solely through appropriation would make it more stable.
- 4. Build incentives for cooperation into emerging grant programs.** Upon creating a program, there is an opportunity to structure the program so that it encourages regionalization. A new program like the Municipal Vulnerabilities Preparedness (MVP) program could be crafted with the intent for municipalities to collaborate, creating opportunities to priorities grant funding for regional efforts.
5. The Public Health Council should adopt the Special Commission on Local and Regional Health's Workforce Credential Standards, and the Legislature should fund and DPH should implement the State Action for Public Health Excellence (SAPHE) program recommended by the Commission to support cross-jurisdictional sharing of local health department functions.
- 6. The Rural Policy Advisory Commission should create incremental models for the complete merger of town government functions.** This model would provide a roadmap for merging different functions at different times or all at once, and would include an ability to keep town identity intact.

7. Towns should explore private sector partnerships as a way to share municipal services.

Private vendors have proven to be an efficient and effective means of providing municipal services. Small communities can benefit from harnessing their collective buying power and collaborating on joint procurements.

9. Regional Planning Agencies should increase their capacity to facilitate the development of shared municipal functions, as well as their capacity to act as a host agency where advisable.

RPAs should explore how to better leverage DLTA funds and other resources into implementable shared programs.

Stakeholders consulted: Many people, agencies and organizations were consulted in the drafting of this Plan. Recommendations contained in this document are not necessarily supported or endorsed by all parties listed below.

- General/Town Admin
 - Massachusetts Municipal Association
 - Small Town Administrators of Massachusetts
 - MA Dept of Revenue Division of Local Services
 - MRPC, FRCOG, CMRPC
 - MA Treasurer Collector Association
 - MA Municipal Accounting Association
 - MA Assn of Assessing Officers
 - Assn of Town Finance Committees
 - Massachusetts Selectmen’s Association
 - Worcester County Selectmen’s Association
 - Collins Center at UMass Boston

- Fire
 - MA Firefighters Association
 - Fire Chiefs Associations

- Treasurer/Collectors
 - Worcester County Treasurer Collector Association
 - Massachusetts Treasurer Collector Association

- Town Accountants

- Massachusetts Municipal Accounting Association

- Public Health:
 - Massachusetts DPH Office of Local and Rural Health
 - Local Public Health Institute
 - MA DPH State Office of Rural Health
 - Special Commission on Local and Regional Health