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Editing sample

Good afternoon. My name is Jeff Wells~~z~~, and I am ~~the c~~Co-D~~d~~irector of the North Hudson Regional Fire and~~&~~ Rescue (NHRFR). I want to thank the committee members, and other state and local officials in attendance, for ~~giving me~~ this opportunity to share ~~with you~~ the success story of my organization~~the NHRFR~~. I am testifying~~hope to show you~~ today about~~that~~ our fire department's experience~~success can be used as an example of how~~ with regionalization, and its possible application ~~can be a benefit~~ to other municipalities in New Jersey.

The NHRFR encompasses~~is made up of~~ five municipalities located in northern Hudson County~~;~~: North Bergen, West New York, Union City, Weehawken and Guttenberg. Together, t~~T~~he towns, with approximately 200,000 residents, extend over~~cover~~ 12 square miles ~~and are home to approximately 200,000 residents. We live and operate in~~ to form one of the most densely~~st~~ populated areas in ~~New Jersey, a state that has the highest number of people per square mile in~~ the country.

Our communities~~,~~ fit~~huddled~~ together closely, like the pieces of a~~tightly fitted~~ jigsaw puzzle,~~pieces~~ between the Hudson and Hackensack Rivers, and each has~~have~~ a century-long history of a proud, independent fire department~~s~~ with its~~their~~ own procedures, organizational structure~~own departmental hierarchies~~ and ~~their own alarm~~ response routes. But ~~they also had a more recent history~~even before the formation of the NHRFR, we demonstrated ~~of steadily increasing cooperation that highlighted the~~ many of the benefits of cooperating together like a consolidated force.

In fact, in the early '80s, well before "regionalization" became a buzzword of the Whitman administration, the five towns ~~consolidated their communications. C~~centralized~~ing~~ the 9-1-1 call center ~~for~~ to save money and ~~the municipalities immediately~~ improved response times ~~and cut back on expenditures. This positive step was taken well before "regionalization" became a buzzword of the Whitman administration, and showed that we were ahead of the times as far as New Jersey was concerned~~. However, b~~B~~efore the NHRFR~~regionalizing our fire services~~, each of the ~~five~~ fire departments had its~~their~~ own management structure and administrative staff. There were five chiefs with five sets of officers, and five separate maintenance departments.

There were~~The five departments operating independently of each other had~~ many drawbacks to this setup~~, one of which had to do with funding~~. For example, w~~W~~hen new gear ~~or~~, rigs or an engine were required~~needed~~, or a firehouse ~~or engine was in~~ needed ~~of~~ repairs, each town had to write its own~~five separate~~ purchase order~~s were written up~~ and submit~~ted for funding~~ it for separate approval. None of our towns independently could afford everything it~~they~~ wanted, or in many cases, needed.

A~~nother~~ second inefficiency~~trouble area~~ involved~~was~~ fire response routes. ~~As I mentioned previously our towns are right on top of each other. For example one side of the street could be North Bergen, while the other side of the street is Union City.~~ Often~~There were many times when~~ a firehouse in a neighboring~~one~~ town was located closer to the~~a~~ emergency~~fire~~, but ~~located in the other town, however they were not allowed to go because~~ "first responder" rights were based on political borders~~went to the town that the fire was in~~.

~~How did the municipalities of North Bergen, West New York, Union City, Weehawken and Guttenberg significantly improve their firefighting capability while reducing costs?~~

~~The answer can be summed up in a single word: Regionalization.~~

However, a~~A~~fter a decade of study on the local and state levels,~~ reviews that~~ including~~ed~~ a bipartisan review by a state commission,~~ it became clear to~~ the mayors of the five North Hudson towns concluded~~that regionalization of fire fighting services~~ they would save lives and money by regionalizing their firefighting services~~while saving tax dollars~~.

So, i~~I~~n January~~,~~ 1999, after months of careful planning and ~~cooperative~~ negotiation with ~~the individual~~ municipal unions~~ involved~~, the government launched the North Hudson Regional Fire and~~&~~ Rescue (NHRFR)~~ was launched as~~, the State's largest and most sophisticated regional public--safety entity.

And after seven years on the job, NHRFR~~it~~ has produced ~~the year-in, year-out~~ positive, ~~and~~ verifiable results~~ that any municipality considering~~ on the benefits of regionalization ~~can bank on~~.

Prior to 1999~~regionalization~~, 10--to--15 firefighters and about four vehicles would respond to a "~~F~~first a~~A~~larm"~~ of a fire~~ --- the crucial early moments ~~of a fire~~ when lives and property are most at risk. Today, thanks to better deployment and funding~~more available capital equipment dollars~~, the NHRFR sends 25-to--32 firefighters and at least~~minimum of~~ 10 pieces of equipment~~ to a first alarm response~~.

The improved~~And thanks to that better~~ deployment has also reduced~~of companies around~~ the average regional~~,~~ response times~~ have been cut on average by nearly a minute,~~ from just under five minutes to four minutes. The combination of more resources and faster response times~~ to first alarms~~ has~~ led to a~~ decreased ~~in~~ deadly multiple-alarm fires by approximately 50 percent since the creation of the NHRFR.

Because firefighting capabilities have~~manpower has~~ more than doubled, the number of fires becoming~~that grow into~~ more serious multiple alarm blazes has dropped by more than 60~~%~~ percent, ~~(~~from an average of 53 to ~~just~~ 21 last year~~)~~. Only~~Just~~ 19 residents were injured in fires in 2005~~(~~, none fatally~~)~~, and overall injuries, ~~(~~including firefighters~~)~~, have decreased~~are down~~ 44% percent since regionalization~~ started~~.

With~~Remember that~~ more than 200,000 people living~~e~~ in these densely populated North Hudson towns~~.~~, and m~~M~~any homes built with~~are older~~ wood frame structures~~ that~~ pre-dating~~e~~ modern fire--prevention codes~~ requirements~~, these statistics are truly remarkable.

~~Unfortunately, NHRFR recently lost one of its own, firefighter Vincent Neglia. Neglia gave his life in the line of duty. Vincent Neglia died a hero and will always be remembered for his fearlessness and dedication to his job.~~

Although firefighting capabilities~~manpower~~ have increased~~is much greater~~, the number of firefighters has declined by six~~6%~~ percent through economies of scale~~efficiency savings~~. However,~~It's important to note that not one single~~ no firefighters were~~was~~ laid-off or demoted, and no firehouses were closed as a result of regionalization. -Today, the NHRFR operates a full complement of 18 fire companies~~ that are~~, each staffed by a minimum of three firefighters at all times~~.~~, a significant improvement since~~ This was not true before~~ regionalization.

Today, the NHRFR works well with just~~has~~ one Fire Chief, ~~one~~ purchasing system,~~ one~~ maintenance program, ~~one~~ capital--improvement budget~~,~~ and ~~one~~ training program~~— not one for each town as it was before regionalization~~. It~~Today, the NHRFR~~ operates a highly--trained emergency rescue company, ~~(~~for great heights or extremely tight spaces~~)~~, and a marine unit for~~that patrols~~ the Hudson River. Because of our efficiency, we have~~are able to~~ secured important public--safety grants to protect our residents in this post 9-11 era, and have installed a sophisticated~~like our state of the art~~ radio--communications system.

None of these purchases would have been possible independently. None of the departments individually could have maintained and operated both a~~the~~ marine rescue unit and~~/or~~ a highly-trained rescue company. None~~Nor would any~~ of the departments would have qualified for the $1.2 million grant required for~~it took to get~~ a new communications system. These capabilities and purchases make our~~the~~ r~~R~~egional department the most likely first responder~~s~~ to terrorist~~ic~~ attacks in~~, and around~~ northern New Jersey and the surrounding area.

~~There's also no doubt that t~~Taxpayers also~~are~~ benefit~~ing~~ from our regional department. One quarter of our current firefighters were hired under new labor contracts~~ that~~ designed to increase productivity and provide the same~~reduce fringe~~ benefits at a reduced cost~~s~~. These savings will continue to grow as new firefighters replace retiring members.

When~~ factors like~~ the cost of health benefits, pension contributions and equipment upgrades are calculated~~included in budget numbers~~, and the impact of the state REAP program is included~~calculated~~, each of our five towns is paying only~~about~~ one~~1%~~ percent a year more since regionalization~~started. Please remember that this includes a~~, despite the many~~large number of~~ start-up costs in~~necessary to~~ forming the new department.

The direct tax savings to homeowners through the state's REAP grant program provide~~are~~ a powerful incentive to support regionalization. For example, without ~~If~~ Union City's~~, for example, didn't have~~ $2.6 million in REAP grants this year, the average homeowner's tax bill there would be almost $400 higher. ~~Similar savings are being achieved in~~ North Bergen, West New York, Weehawken and Guttenberg are experiencing similar savings.

Today~~Now~~, as New Jersey considers~~studies~~ regionalization and pooling~~sharing~~ services among towns to reduce~~as a possible answer to the state's~~ property taxes~~ problem~~, many people are studying~~looking at~~ the NHRFR~~ as a case study~~. We hope~~ that taking a look at~~ our department's success story will be helpful in this process.

Through attrition, reductions in overtime, consolidation of administrative personnel~~,~~ and other economies, these five Hudson County towns created one of the safest, most efficient and cost-effective ~~regionalized~~ fire departments in the country, saving taxpayers money and substantially increasing protection for residents' home and businesses.

~~We believe that~~ Governor Corzine's~~ did a smart thing by budgeting~~ $250 million program of~~for~~ financial incentives~~ (like the~~, including REAP~~),~~ ~~to~~ encourages towns to pool their resources, regionalize and share services. We're proud of our~~everything that we have~~ accomplishments~~ed~~ and anticipate~~are confident of achieving~~ even greater cost savings for taxpayers as our new department matures.

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