

CLOQUET AREA FIRE DISTRICT

CLOQUET, MINNESOTA



REIMAGINING EMERGENCY SERVICE DELIVERY

The Cloquet Area Fire District (CAFD) is a unified fire, rescue and medical emergency service provider that works to enhance the safety and improve the quality of life within the communities it serves. CAFD accomplishes this through the redesign of local government services in order to provide higher levels of service in an economically sustainable and transparent manner.

STORY BY MORGAN MERCER

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Everybody was used to making their own decisions and serving their own small slice of geography.

— KEVIN SCHROEDER, Cloquet Area Fire Department

YEARS ACTIVE
Founded in 2010

GEOGRAPHY
Minnesota,
Native Nations

BUDGET
\$250,000–\$499,999

LEADER
Kevin Schroeder

INNOVATION

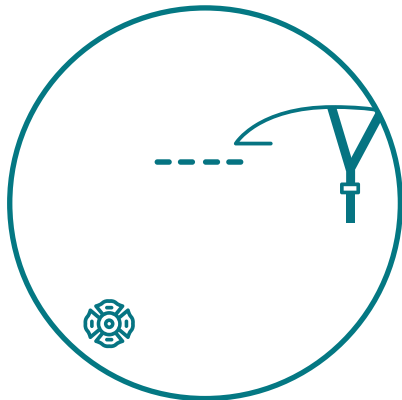
CLOQUET AREA FIRE DISTRICT (CAFD)

CAFD is a first-of-its-kind cooperative emergency service provider that boosts safety through streamlined teamwork and preventative practices.

BREAKTHROUGH



Breaking with more than 100 years of tradition, three cities in northeastern Minnesota came together to reimagine small town emergency services. Now after merging multiple districts, CAFD offers a wider array of services to more people in a cost-effective and efficient way.



WELCOMING DIVERGENT IDEAS

CAFD staff let community members drive the conversation to redefine what emergency services might look like under a merger. Cloquet's fire chief even went so far as to invite departments that had no interest in joining the new district to participate in learning sessions.



FINDING SOLUTIONS

When faced with the daunting task of drafting and passing new legislation to create the state's first joint department, CAFD reached out to legislators, community members and other departments around the country who were familiar with the work. CAFD's partners donated time and resources to help them learn quickly, improvise and push through a challenging process.

CAFD'S KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF INNOVATION



CREATES A SHARED VISION



CONTINUES THROUGH SETBACKS



SHARES OWNERSHIP

Placing Community Before Ego

FOR YEARS, LOCAL TRADITION and ego fueled competition between fire and emergency service departments. Quality care took a backseat to a town's pride in seeing its name painted above a door. With less money coming in, due to declining tax revenues and increasing budget pressures, a group of community members realized the old system required an update. It was time to throw out a 120-year-old structure and seek a united front. "Everybody was used to making their own decisions and serving their own small slice of geography," said Kevin Schroeder, the current fire chief in Cloquet, and one of the original partners who spent hours brainstorming how to bring competing departments together. "Up here, the idea of multiple communities sharing a resource was brand new."



The future of emergency services is a team sport.

— KEVIN SCHROEDER, Cloquet Area Fire Department



CAFD LISTENS ACTIVELY

From the beginning, Kevin and his team hosted community-wide public meetings to discuss the possibility of joining the districts together. But they didn't get the large community turnout they had hoped for. That is, until they offered free food. "It started out as a joke, but the first time we offered a lunch meeting and let the community members know lunch was on us we filled the room," Kevin said.



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o save emergency services in small rural communities, Kevin and a core group of people saw one way forward: a merger. In the face of inconsistent funding, rising service demands and an increase in cost to provide those services, they asked rural departments to trade in their individual identities in favor of creating a new, stronger team. Luckily, supporters of the merger found people in Cloquet, the Township of Perch Lake, the City of Scanlon, and the Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa who recognized the future of cost-effective emergency services lie in a joint effort.

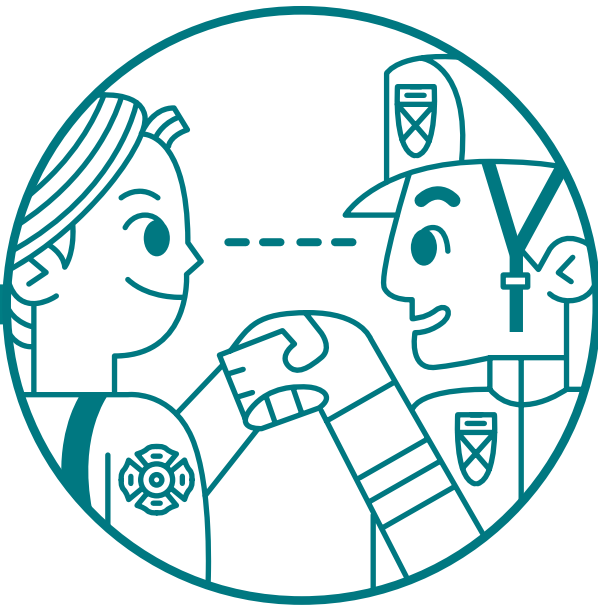
In 2010, they established the Cloquet Area Fire District and began to serve a new community of 22,000 people. But years of changing tradition didn't come without pushback. "When you're arguing about what the name is over the door on your building, you are effectively ignoring the true reason why you're there to start with," said Kevin. "It eats up time, it eats up people's patience and it wears people down, but it doesn't make any progress." For CAFD, the name over the door didn't make or break success. Instead, it was the people who saw a vision of the future, the people who put community before ego.

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CAFD STAKEHOLDER



WELCOMING DIVERGENT IDEAS



CAFD VALUES INCLUSIVITY

CAFD prescribed to a flexible meeting agenda that blocked out time for the public to share thoughts and ask questions. CAFD tracked every issue, positive and negative, on giant sticky sheets of paper stuck to the walls of the room. Kevin and his team challenged the community to think in terms of solutions, not problems. For each challenge raised, the group explored whether the merger could solve the issue or if another solution fit better.

Picture this: Your organization schedules a public meeting and the executive director asks you to send an open invitation to the most vocal opponents of your work. Crazy, right? Not if you want true collaboration. Cloquet's fire department wanted to combine several local fire and emergency service departments into one team, but CAFD didn't just want to hear from those in favor of the merger. It also wanted to bring in departments that had no interest in being part of the new joint district. "We wanted the people we worked with to hear [the opposition's] side. That was part of the transparency," said Kevin. "Everybody brings ideas to the table. Usually the best solution is a combination of very divergent ideas."

"We didn't want to jump to conclusions about what the public wanted from us. We had never asked before," Kevin said. "We provided fire, ambulance and rescue services for more than 100 years, but we had never asked what that meant to the public." So that's where they started. They asked the community what these services meant to them, what they expected and what services were essential. Then CAFD sat back and listened. "There were actually sessions where our staff did very little talking and you had an hour-long discussion where all you did was capture the points being discussed in the open room." Even if communi-

ty members got off topic from the day's agenda, CAFD let the conversation continue as long as the discussion felt productive. This attitude allowed community members to drive the conversation, discuss what was on their minds and feel like CAFD heard them.

Throughout the process CAFD remained transparent, too. Every document from the merger became public domain, and the public could access them via the district's website or at its headquarters. In one month, nearly 400 people checked out the weekly records.



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— KEVIN SCHROEDER, Cloquet Area Fire Department



CAFD HEADQUARTERS



CAFD HEADQUARTERS / CAFD FIRE TRUCK



FINDING SOLUTIONS

The CAFD team thought they had cleared the largest hurdle. After months of public meetings, the community finally stood firmly behind their vision to merge the fire and ambulance districts. But the bigger challenge was yet to come. CAFD assumed state statutes existed on the books to support the merger, but they were wrong. Suddenly the team faced a massive task—draft and pass a new

legislative bill to become the first independent fire and ambulance district in Minnesota. They felt completely overwhelmed. “It was an obstacle we had not anticipated,” said Kevin. “But we’re fire and ambulance people. We just sit down at the desk, look at the problem and find a solution.”

CAFD started by asking a basic question: How do you submit a bill to the legislature? “We



We improvised when needed and kept moving.

— KEVIN SCHROEDER, Cloquet Area Fire Department



CAFD EXHIBITS RESOURCEFULNESS

By pooling resources, the merged districts got a chance to focus on prevention and education for the first time. Through partnerships with Minnesota Safe Kids, the State Toward Zero Deaths roadway safety initiative, regional health care organizations, county health departments and schools, CAFD developed a formal public education program and a fire prevention curriculum that reached nearly 10,000 people its first year. CAFD provided fire safety kits, classes for 2,000 elementary school students, and training in CPR, first aid and babysitting. Then in 2015, CAFD joined with Red Cross to install fire and carbon monoxide alarms in homes, addressing vulnerabilities before they turned into 911 calls.

went to the state of Minnesota to look for templates for the CAFD. There were examples for joint emergency medical services and also for joint fire services, but there were no laws on the books to do both,” Kevin said. “We learned quickly like most businesses that stay relevant. We improvised when needed and kept moving.” CAFD brought partners together and started divvying up tasks, like researching legislative language or looking for similar examples of merged districts around the country. The team collected information from groups like the International Association of Fire Chiefs, League of Minnesota Cities and the National Fire Administration in Washington, DC. CAFD formed an important partnership with the state of Oregon and its office for consolidated emergency services. The director sent the team CDs and booklets full of information on a variety of topics including the legislative process.

After drafting the initial language and running it by local attorneys, CAFD submitted its bill to local officials who passed it on to state lawmakers. Legislators passed the bill in that same year, a feat most people told CAFD would take three years. The group broke new ground by becoming the first independent fire and ambulance district in the state with its own independent tax authority. “We went from a local collaboration to a statewide one.

We couldn’t have done it without the expertise of people all over the state who were willing to step up and say, ‘What you’re doing up there makes sense and here’s some help to get through this,’” said Kevin.

The merger was like a marriage of sorts—no need for two couches and that much Tupperware in one household. The newly formed group cut back on administrative and overhead costs, and downsized the number of vehicles it owned. Consolidating resources freed up money to increase wages, standardize equipment and meet national standards set by the National Fire Protection Association. Improved service also saved taxpayers money. After merging, CAFD’s Insurance Service Organization (ISO) Public Protection Classification Rating improved, ranking it within the top 10 percent of fire departments in the state. As CAFD’s ISO rating improved (a score that measures the efficiency and capabilities of fire departments), home insurance costs dropped, saving homeowners hundreds of dollars. “The amount of redundancy was absolutely incredible as each community tried to provide service on their own,” Kevin said. “By partnering with other agencies, we bring our strengths to the table and they bring their strengths to the table. Together we make a much bigger impact than we would have individually.”

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CAFD STAKEHOLDER