



# CENTER FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENT

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## Policy Brief 2010:03

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## Training Needs of New York State's Local Elected Officials

### Introduction

New York's local elected officials (LEOs) are responsible for making decisions that impact citizens in critical ways. Research on training opportunities for LEOs indicates that essential skill areas such as goal setting, communicating with the public and media, and capital planning are seldom available. LEOs' ability to lead effectively and navigate the complex environment of elected public service can be hampered without such training.

Previous work has identified four issues that inhibit the development of improved governance capacity among this group:

- ❖ *Part-time*: the part-time and secondary nature of service on a governing board makes training a low priority given other time commitments;
- ❖ *Technical complexity*: many board members are overwhelmed by the technical complexity of the public issues facing their municipality;
- ❖ *Micro-management vs. governance*: many elected board members are tempted to over-manage and under lead their municipalities (micromanage rather than govern);
- ❖ *Inadequate training opportunities*: existing training opportunities often lack a skills-based component that would enable LEOs to govern more effectively.

To determine if there is a need for skills-based training among New York State's LEOs, the Center for Local Government at Binghamton University administered a statewide survey in 2009 of local chief elected governing board members: town supervisors, village and city mayors and chairs of county governing boards. Of New York State's 1,604 officials, 565 completed the survey, resulting in a 35% response rate (for more

information about the survey and survey respondents see *2009 Survey of New York's Local Chief Elected Officials: The Details*). Survey responses revealed that LEOs want to learn how to better communicate with the public, cultivate board leadership, and manage performance, among other priorities.

This brief summarizes the respondents' ranking of training needs and is followed by a discussion of LEOs' preferences for the delivery of training. A table summarizing LEOs' responses regarding areas of training needs is included (Table 2, page 5 insert). The next section discusses the top five training needs identified by survey respondents.

### The Top Five

#### 1. Communicating with the Public

Members of local governing boards in New York State rank effective communication as their number one training need. Specifically, they want to: 1) find ways of engaging the public and using their input and, 2) present their own ideas, plans, and information to the public. Training assistance is needed to improve LEOs' meeting facilitation skills and their ability to more effectively inform a broader base of citizens. The meeting based communication training needs include: presenting ideas and plans and effective use of public input.

Effective use of municipal websites as a means of communication is central for many respondents. Seventy percent of all respondents indicated a desire to inform citizens using the internet. Cities saw this as a high need, with far fewer counties citing this as an area in which they desired training. Villages and towns fell in between these extremes. Utilizing technology to communicate to the public may be contingent on the

availability of broadband in rural areas, the technological capability to create and maintain up-to-date websites, and citizens' tendencies toward accessing local government information via the web. A 2001 survey by the Pew Internet and American Life Project found that only half of internet users were able to say whether their local government had a website at all even though more than 80% of local governments had websites at that time.

## 2. Board Management and Leadership

The second highest training priority is developing board management and leadership skills, including the recruitment and training of newly elected and appointed officials. Data from our 2009 survey compared with a similar survey conducted in 2000 highlights the growing recruitment and training need. When asked if LEOs wanted help finding capable people to serve on local appointed boards, 12 percentage points more responded affirmatively than in 2000. Likewise, the desire to train newly elected/appointed officials increased by six percentage points over the same nine year period.

Goal setting was cited by 68% of all respondents as a training need, with villages indicating a higher need in this area compared to other municipal types. The need to create a long-term vision was cited by 78% of respondents as a moderate to great need, a priority that dropped nearly 6 percentage points since 2000. LEOs also indicated that training was needed to more effectively use governing board committees and to learn how to work with other community organizations and groups.

## 3. Technology

Local leaders want to know how to use computer technology to manage information, specifically using the web to inform citizens, utilize e-government, and manage internal information. Yet, initiating technology-based outreach programs may pose a challenge for some of the state's rural communities. While every one of New York State's counties has an operational website, many non-metro municipalities lack broadband (DSL or cable) internet access, which could hamper the use of streaming video or uploading and downloading large documents. One respondent commented: *"much of our area remains without high speed broadband service creating severe restrictions on*

*the use of technology. Public policy efforts to promote broadband in underserved areas have been lacking and inadequate."* Despite the fact that coordinated intergovernmental efforts to expand the state's broadband infrastructure, future initiatives for using technology for citizen engagement will need to be mindful of the wide disparity in connection speeds.

Examining responses related to technology issues by municipal type, a greater percentage of cities indicated a desire to learn about the uses of technology followed by villages and towns. Counties ranked the need for using technology lowest at 50%. However, an overwhelming 86% of counties indicated a desire to learn more about instituting e-government for the delivery of specific services, far and above any other municipal type.

## 4. Performance Management

LEOs would like to improve local capacity for developing performance measures and criteria and for managing the performance of people and programs. Again, city officials' needs for training in both of these areas were greatest among all municipal types with 87% citing a desire for help in developing performance measures and 80% wanting help in managing people and programs. Only 65% of counties and towns indicated this as a priority.

Developing and reviewing contracts was also a high priority, with 64% of all respondents citing this as an area in which there is a need for training. A comparable percent of respondents wants assistance in evaluating the practice of contracting out for services as well. Studies dating back to the 1980s demonstrate a relatively high level of contracting and shared service activity among New York State's local governments. It appears that municipal leaders have a continuing need to improve their skills in this area.

## 5. Budgeting and Finance

Planning and budgeting for capital improvements and learning how to calculate the cost of services were also a high priority. However, there was a wide disparity in responses by municipal type. Cities ranked planning and budgeting for capital improvements as a moderate to great need but only half of counties cited this as an area in which they want to be trained. This is likely due to the fact that most counties already have a formal

multiyear capital plan or a multiyear capital planning process. Elsewhere in the survey, over 70% of counties indicated that they currently have a multi-year capital plan or process.

### Training Preferences

Respondents were asked to indicate which methods of training they have and have not tried in the past. More than three-quarters of respondents have been part of a face-to-face training program and nearly half have been participants in a training program that used video downloads. While it may be expected that those under 50 (about 20% of chief elected respondents) would have higher participation rates using this method, LEOs over 50 years of age were more likely than younger respondents to have been part of this type of training program by 12 percentage points.

Respondents *prefer* face-to-face training, but they also indicated a strong desire to try new methods as well (see Table 1). In response to the question, “*For those kinds [of training methods] you have not experienced indicate if you would like to try this approach,*” approximately one-third said they would like to be part of a training program that incorporated video downloads, face-to-face training, webinars, and PC-based courses.

Training Method	Have Not Tried	Would Like to Try
Video download	51%	37%
Face to face	20%	34%
Webinar	63%	34%
PC-based course	77%	32%
Podcast	83%	25%
Correspondence course	76%	21%

### Convenience and Affordability

Nationwide, LEOs’ efforts to seek training are hampered by the same difficulties articulated by our respondents: a lack of time and a need for affordable training opportunities. Given the choice of weekdays, weekends, mornings, afternoons or evenings, the age of respondents was tied closely to their response: individuals under 50 years of age were more than twice as likely to choose training held on a Saturday compared to those over 50 years of age. Of the four

seasons, respondents said that the summer should be avoided for training.

Over half (56%) of chief elected officials indicated they had attended a regional local government conference in the last year. A much smaller group, 41% reported attending a statewide municipal conference during the year. In both cases, county and city officials indicated having much higher rates of attendance than their town and village counterparts.

When LEOs were asked how far they had traveled for training in the past year (excepting statewide or national municipal conferences), over half (54%) indicated they had traveled less than 60 miles and about 30% traveled less than 30 miles. On average, LEOs had traveled 107 miles to attend a training program in the previous 12 months.

Three-quarters of all respondents said that their local governments routinely pay for local governing board members to attend training sessions, with only 9% stating that their governments either did not provide such funding or they did not know whether or not such funding existed. However, where professional development and training budgets exist in local governments, they are often inadequate and are the first area targeted when budgets are reduced. Therefore, LEOs need *cost-effective* training opportunities.

### A Governance Skills Training Program

One of the most revealing findings from the survey was a clear desire on the part of LEOs to receive training on building important governance skills. If this type of program met their location and timing needs, two-thirds of all respondents said they would attend. Village leaders showed the greatest interest followed by cities, towns and counties.

LEOs who attended a statewide or regional local government conference in the 12 months previous to the survey had a greater interest in participating in a certification program, suggesting that those who are accustomed to networking and knowledge sharing would be more willing to enroll in a more intensive certification-based training program.

## Summary

LEOs were split when asked how much of their own time they would be willing to commit to a multi-session key skills training program: 24% indicated they would commit an average of two hours each week, 28% would commit one hour each week, and 20% said they could spend ½ hour each week. One respondent noted a preference for *“more frequent, shorter training sessions sited at more locations to accommodate today’s schedules and lack of available time.”* When asked about how many days on site they would be able to spend at a regional site for training, almost half said they would be willing to attend two half-day training events at a nearby site.

Chief elected officials in New York State indicated strong support for a skills-based training program. In two consecutive statewide surveys taken over the past decade, over 60% of survey respondents support a multi-session, key skills training program, particularly in the areas of communicating with the public, board management and leadership, technology, performance management, and budgeting and finance.

A sizable percentage of LEOs possess less than 5 years of experience in their current position. Assuming this trend continues, there will be a continuing need for skills-based leadership training. Those who have participated in regional or statewide conferences would be more likely to enroll.

LEOs would be willing to commit two to eight hours per month and travel for two or more half-day regional meetings as a part of a certification training program. A general willingness to try new electronic training venues indicates that a “blended learning” approach, one that uses distance learning methods combined with face-to-face interaction, could attract a significant number of LEOs to a more comprehensive training program.

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**Table 2: Percent Responding to Training Needs by Chief Elected Officials\***

Training Needs For Members of Local Governing Boards	No Need	Moderate Need	Great Need	Moderate/Great Need Combined
<b>Communication: Working Effectively with Citizens and the Media</b>				
Effective use of public input and involving the public	25%	56%	17%	73%
Presenting ideas, plans and information to the public	24%	55%	20%	75%
Strategies for improving information flow within your organization	29%	49%	15%	64%
<b>Board Management</b>				
Managing board and committee meetings	46%	43%	8%	51%
Training for newly elected/appointed officials	14%	51%	34%	85%
Effectively using committees to get board work done	29%	46%	22%	68%
Policy for board operation and conduct (Robert's Rules, etc.)	47%	40%	11%	51%
<b>Leadership</b>				
Setting goals for board work and achieving them	30%	51%	17%	68%
Creating a long-term vision for the municipality	20%	42%	36%	78%
Finding capable people for local appointed boards	13%	34%	50%	84%
Working with other community organizations and groups	32%	52%	15%	67%
Working with a diverse board	46%	38%	14%	52%
Managing conflict	39%	45%	15%	60%
<b>Budgeting &amp; Finance</b>				
Annual budget development and process	35%	43%	19%	62%
Administration of the annual budget	45%	40%	15%	55%
Planning and budgeting for capital improvements	26%	47%	24%	71%
Calculating cost of services and related fees and prices	30%	50%	18%	68%
<b>Oversight and Evaluation of Public Programs</b>				
Evaluating contracting out for services	34%	52%	11%	63%
Developing and reviewing contracts	35%	54%	10%	64%
Managing performance of people and programs	31%	49%	18%	67%
Developing performance measures and criteria	30%	48%	20%	68%
Working with consultants and other specialized services	38%	50%	9%	59%
<b>Local Government Law, Powers and Duties</b>				
Overview of powers and responsibilities of your government	35%	48%	15%	63%
Overview of local powers and duties of your office	41%	43%	15%	58%
How to find answers to specific legal questions that arise	42%	38%	17%	55%
<b>Technology and Information Management</b>				
Using computer and internet resources to inform citizens	28%	48%	22%	70%
Utilizing e-government for delivery of specific services	32%	48%	18%	66%
Computer technology for managing municipal information	28%	48%	22%	70%
Assessing the merits of staff proposals for new technology	35%	49%	14%	63%
<b>Policy vs. Administration, Public Issues, Policy Process</b>				
Supervising administrators and staff that report to the board	41%	44%	13%	57%
Finding the balance between policy and administration	39%	46%	13%	59%

\* 2009 Survey of Local Elected Officials. Center for Local Government, Binghamton University. Due to space limitations, "Refused", which ranged from 2-3% for each training need, was omitted. Rows do not equal 100%.



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