Public Management Program

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Training Needs of New York State's Local Elected Officials

Introduction

New York State's local government elected officials are responsible for making decisions and setting policies that influence their communities' health, safety and development. Training opportunities that address the time constraints and learning preferences of the largely part-time governing board members remains important for the effectiveness of New York State's local governments. The growing technical complexity of many local public issues and the need for key governance skills only reinforces this need.

This policy brief summarizes the training needs for governing board members identified by a survey of New York State's local chief elected officials (CEOs). To identify training needs and preferences among these leaders, the Public Management Program at the State University of New York's College at Brockport administered a statewide survey in 2019 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 local governments, 493 CEOs completed the survey, resulting in a 31% response rate (for more information about the survey and survey respondents see *2019 Survey of New York's Local Chief Elected Officials: The Details*). Survey results revealed that local elected officials want to learn how to better communicate with the public, cultivate board leadership, identify their responsibilities, and plan for capital improvements, among other priorities.

This brief summarizes the respondents' rankings of training needs, followed by a discussion of their preferences for the delivery of training, and local reimbursement practices for training. We asked respondents to rank training topics by level of need; no need, moderate need, and great need. We then reviewed the combined percent of those responding with moderate and great need for this policy brief. Appended Table A1 summarizes survey responses regarding areas of training needs.

In 2009 we conducted a comparable survey which included a nearly identical set of training topics. Appended Table A2 provides a comparison of responses from the 2009 and 2019 surveys. In 26 of 29 training topics, respondents identified an increased need for training over the 10 year period from 2009 to 2019. Across all 29 training topics the respondents' identification of need for training increased by an average of 7% per area between 2009 and 2019. The 29 training topics are grouped into seven general areas. In the discussion below we will highlight important shifts and changes over time in both specific topics and the broader areas of training.

The Top Five Areas

1. Board Management and Leadership
Members of local governing boards in New York State rank board management and leadership skills as the top area of training need. Four training topics in this area of need were identified by 70% or more of respondents; 1) creating a long term vision for the community (90%), 2) board goal setting (77%), 3) working with other community organizations and groups (76%) and 4) effectively using committees (73%). Respondents also indicated that training was needed to more effectively use governing board committees (68%).

Data from our 2019 survey compared with the surveys conducted in 2009 and 2000[1] emphasizes the growing recruitment and training need for local government elected and appointed officials. In each succeeding survey the need for training in finding capable people to serve on local appointed boards has grown substantially, increasing 12% between 2000 and 2009 and another 9% from 2009 to 2019. Similarly, the need to train newly elected/appointed officials increased by 6% between 2000 and 2009, and increased another 8% by 2019. As noted in the *2019 Survey of New York's Local Chief Elected Officials: The Details* brief, 89% of respondents are fifty years or older. The skewed age distribution of CEOs toward retirement age makes it imperative that municipalities and those who assist them find methods and means to address recruitment strategies to expand their talent pools and provide startup training for local government participants with little or no previous experience.

2. Communicating with the Public
Members of local governing boards in New York State rank effective communication as their second most important area of training need. Specifically, they want to: 1) find ways of engaging the public and using their input (73%) and 2) present their own ideas, plans, and information to the public (78%). Training assistance is needed to improve board member 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 the effective use of public input.

3. Technology
Effective use and management of municipal websites as a means of communication is a priority training area for many respondents (73%). While websites are deemed important for information outreach, training in the use of social media to enhance citizen engagement was seen as a high need as well (71%). The rapid transformation of media platforms and the speed and sound-bite size of information transmission to citizens makes it crucial that municipalities keep abreast of social media best practices.

4. Budgeting and Finance
Planning and budgeting for capital improvements (80%), annual budget development and process (70%), and learning how to calculate the cost of services (69%) were identified as high need training topics. Support for the need for training in 1) budgeting for capital planning (9%) and 2) budget development and process (8%) grew substantially between 2009 and 2019. (For additional results on capital planning see Brief 4 Capital Planning Practices).

5. Local Government Law and Powers and Duties
Understanding local government law and the duties of governing boards are essential topics for serving as a local board member. These topics are closely linked to the board management and leadership skills noted above. Respondents prioritized all three training topics in this area. The three are overview of powers and responsibilities of your government (72%), overview of local powers and duties of your office (70%), and how to find answers to specific legal questions that arise (69%). Local officials in the 2019 survey indicated a substantially higher need for training in this area in comparison with the 2009 survey. The three training items in this area averaged a 12% increase in comparison with 2009 expressions of need for training.

Top Ten Training Topics
Table 1 includes the top training topics ranked by percent of respondents that indicated moderate or great need in 2019. The table also includes the rankings for these items in the 2009 survey. Five of the top seven ranked topics are conceptually related to Board Management and Leadership (all but Planning and Budgeting for Capital Improvements and Presenting Ideas, Plans and Information to the Public). While a number of items were highly ranked in both 2009 and 2019, the comparative rankings help demonstrate the growing emphasis over time of the need for training in Board Management and Leadership topics and those clustered as Technology topics.

[1]Hattery, 2001. Summarizes a statewide survey of local CEOs in 2000 with limited comparable survey questions.

Table 1: Top 10 Training Needs for Members of Local Governing Boards

Percentage CEOs Selecting "Moderate/Great Need" Comparison of Percentage and Rank between 2019 and 2009 Surveys				
Training Needs for Members of Local Governing Boards	**2019 Rank**	**2019 Total**	**2009 Rank**	**2009 Total**
Finding capable people for local appointed boards	1	93%	2	84%
Training for newly elected/appointed officials	2	93%	1	85%
Creating a long-term vision for the municipality	3	90%	3	78%
Planning and budgeting for capital improvements	4	80%	6	71%
Presenting ideas, plans and information to the public	5	78%	4	75%
Setting goals for board work and achieving them	6	77%	10	68%
Working with other community organizations and groups	7	76%	13	67%
Establishing and maintaining websites for information outreach	8	73%	7	70%
Effective use of public input and involving the public	9	73%	5	73%
Assessment and evaluation of technology projects and agreements	10	73%	20	63%

Training Methods:
Experience and Preferences

Respondents were asked to indicate which methods of training they had tried and of those which do they prefer. As indicated in Table 2, non-response rates were relatively high on these survey items ranging from about a third to nearly three-fourths of survey participants. Of those responding, over a third of respondents indicated that they have tried each training method in the survey with the exception of Online Learning (29%). The survey results indicate that local officials are actively participating in a broader range of training methods in comparison to survey results from 2009. For example, in 2009 63% indicated that they had not tried Webinar based training while in 2019 over half (52%) indicated that they have tried this method - reflecting an increase of 15% over the ten year period. Similarly, in 2009, 83% of respondents indicated that they had not tried a Podcast, while in 2019 35% have tried Podcast base training – reflecting an increase of 8% in ten years.

In 2019, the highest percentage of respondents prefer Face-to-Face training. However, only one training method, Podcast, had a higher percent of respondents indicate "Do Not Prefer" in comparison with those who "Prefer" the option. The results indicate that local officials that have tried alternatives to Face-to-Face training, on average prefer them as a learning option. In comparison with 2009 results, the growth in exposure to alternative training methods (alternatives to the face-to-face standard) is accompanied by modest but substantial acceptance of these alternative methods.

While it might be expected that those under 50 (about 13% of respondents) would "Have Tried" podcasts and online learning at higher rates than their older peers (those over 50)our results indicate that both groups have tried these alternative training methods at about the same rates with very similar levels of preference to respondents as a whole.

Table 2: Training Methods - Experience and Preferences

Training Method	Have Tried	Have Not Tried	No Response	Prefer	Do Not Prefer	No Response
Face-to-Face	44%	7%	48%	51%	3%	46%
Podcast	35%	31%	33%	11%	20%	69%
Webinar - Live	52%	13%	35%	23%	17%	60%
Webinar - Archived	39%	29%	32%	19%	13%	68%
Online Learning	29%	39%	32%	16%	12%	72%

Meeting Attendance, Travel, and Reimbursement

Half of the CEOs in the 2019 survey indicated they had attended a regional local government conference in the last year; a decline of 6% from the level reported in 2009. A much smaller group of 2019 respondents, 39%, reported attending a statewide municipal conference during the year. This is a slight decline from the 41% attending a statewide event in 2009. County (83%) and city (54%) officials indicated higher rates of attendance at statewide events than their town (34%), and village counterparts (43%). Village (56%) and city (58%) respondents led town (47%) and county (50%) respondents in attending regional local government conferences.

When respondents were asked how far they had traveled for training in the past year (excepting statewide or national municipal conferences), over half (55%) indicated they had traveled 100 miles or less, and about 17% traveled less than 55 miles. CEOs traveled an average of 139 miles to attend such training opportunities in the previous 12 months. In comparison to 2009, CEOs had traveled 107 miles on average to attend such training opportunities in the previous 12 months.

Over half (57%) of all respondents said that their local governments routinely pay for local governing board members to attend training sessions, while only 5% stated that their governments did not provide such funding. This represents a substantial decline from 2009 when local officials indicated that three quarters (75%)

of their government routinely paid for attendance at local trainings for board members.

Summary

- Local government officials identified an increased need for training over the 10 year period from 2009 to 2019 for the training topics included in this study.
- Comparing results from 2019 and 2009 demonstrate the growing emphasis over time for a need to train on topics of Board Management and Leadership, Local Government Law Powers and Duties, and Technology.
- In particular, the 2019 -2009 - 2000 comparisons indicate a growing need for training covering recruitment for local boards and for new local government elected and appointed officials.
- The training topic "Planning and budgeting for capital improvements" is a persistent need and is increasing overtime.
- Survey results indicate a broadened use and acceptance of alternative training methods by local officials – consistent with the increased use of new training methods by the New York's statewide associations and other local government training partners.
- The 2019 survey indicates a declining attendance at both regional and statewide training events and declining local government financial support for training in comparison with 2009.

Table A1: Percent Responding to Training Needs by Chief Elected Officials, 2019

Training Needs for Members of Local Governing Boards	No Need	Moderate Need	Great Need	Moderate/Great Need Combined
Communication: Working Effectively with Citizens and the Media				
Effective use of public input and involving the public	27%	61%	12%	73%
Presenting ideas, plans and information to the public	22%	62%	16%	78%
Strategies for improving information flow within your organization	29%	56%	14%	71%
Board Management				
Managing board and committee meetings	48%	45%	8%	52%
Training for newly elected/appointed officials	7%	50%	43%	93%
Effectively using committees to get board work done	27%	55%	17%	73%
Policy for board operation and conduct (Robert's Rules, etc.)	39%	45%	16%	61%
Leadership				
Setting goals for board work and achieving them	23%	58%	19%	77%
Creating a long-term vision for the municipality	10%	56%	34%	90%
Finding capable people for local appointed boards	7%	31%	63%	93%
Working with other community organizations and groups	24%	62%	14%	76%
Working with a diverse board	38%	51%	11%	62%
Managing conflict	32%	53%	15%	68%
Budgeting & Finance				
Annual budget development and process	30%	51%	19%	70%
Administration of the annual budget	37%	47%	15%	63%
Planning and budgeting for capital improvements	20%	52%	28%	80%
Calculating cost of services and related fees and prices	31%	55%	13%	69%
Oversight and Evaluation of Public Programs				
Evaluating contracting out for services	31%	58%	12%	69%
Developing and reviewing contracts	33%	58%	10%	67%
Managing performance of people and programs	34%	55%	11%	66%
Developing performance measures and criteria	33%	54%	13%	67%
Working with consultants and other specialized services	37%	57%	7%	63%
Local Government Law, Powers and Duties				
Overview of powers and responsibilities of your government	28%	56%	16%	72%
Overview of local powers and duties of your office	30%	54%	15%	70%
How to find answers to specific legal questions that arise	31%	51%	18%	69%
Technology and Information Management				
Establishing and maintaining websites for information outreach	27%	56%	17%	73%
Utilizing e-government for delivery of services	29%	58%	13%	71%
Policy oversight and use of social media for citizen engagement	27%	56%	17%	73%
Assessment and evaluation of technology projects and agreements	27%	60%	14%	73%

Table A2: Training Needs for Members of Local Governing Boards

Percentage CEOs Selecting "Moderate/Great Need" Comparison of Percentage and Rank between 2019 and 2009 Surveys				
Training Needs for Members of Local Governing Boards	2019 Rank	2019 Total	2009 Rank	2009 Total
Communication: Working Effectively with Citizens and the Media				
Effective use of public input and involving the public	9	73%	5	73%
Presenting ideas, plans and information to the public	5	78%	4	75%
Strategies for improving information flow within your organization	15	71%	16	64%
Board Management				
Managing board and committee meetings	29	52%	28	51%
Training for newly elected/appointed officials	2	93%	1	85%
Effectively using committees to get board work done	12	73%	9	68%
Policy for board operation and conduct (Robert's Rules, etc.)	28	61%	29	51%
Leadership				
Setting goals for board work and achieving them	6	77%	10	68%
Creating a long-term vision for the municipality	3	90%	3	78%
Finding capable people for local appointed boards	1	93%	2	84%
Working with other community organizations and groups	7	76%	13	67%
Working with a diverse board	27	62%	29	52%
Managing conflict	21	68%	22	60%
Budgeting & Finance				
Annual budget development and process	16	70%	21	62%
Administration of the annual budget	26	63%	26	55%
Planning and budgeting for capital improvements	4	80%	6	71%
Calculating cost of services and related fees and prices	20	69%	11	68%
Oversight and Evaluation of Public Programs				
Evaluating contracting out for services	18	69%	18	63%
Developing and reviewing contracts	22	67%	17	64%
Managing performance of people and programs	24	66%	14	67%
Developing performance measures and criteria	23	67%	12	68%
Working with consultants and other specialized services	25	63%	23	59%
Local Government Law, Powers and Duties				
Overview of powers and responsibilities of your government	13	72%	19	63%
Overview of local powers and duties of your office	17	70%	25	58%
How to find answers to specific legal questions that arise	19	69%	27	55%
Technology and Information Management *				
Establishing and maintaining websites for information outreach	8	73%	7	70%
Utilizing e-government for delivery of services	14	71%	15	66%
Policy oversight and use of social media for citizen engagement	11	73%	8	70%
Assessment and evaluation of technology projects and agreements	10	73%	20	63%

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