



**LOCAL  
GOVERNMENT  
INSTITUTE  
OF WISCONSIN**  
BRINGING LOCAL GOVERNMENTS TOGETHER TO SERVE

## **Local Government Institute White Paper on Education Needs and Current Resources of Local Elected Officials January 9, 2013**

This document is the third in a series of white papers completed by the Local Government Institute (LGI). The [first of these papers](#) provided an overview of currently available educational resources for local elected officials. The [second paper](#) discussed educational needs of local officials, with an analysis of a recently completed survey of officials. This paper discusses the gaps between needs and resources and provides recommendations on ways to fill those gaps.<sup>1</sup>

### **Content Area Needs**

The second white paper in this series, linked above, asked local officials to indicate whether more resources were needed in a variety of topic areas. The three areas which most local officials indicated there was need for additional educational content were “Using Computer and Internet Resources to Inform Citizens or Perform Government Functions,” “Training for Newly Elected Officials,” and “Collaborating with Other Units of Government or Outside Groups.” This section reviews currently available resources for those three topic areas and makes recommendations on either what additional resources should be provided or how currently available resources can be better provided to local officials.

### Using Computer and Internet Resources

In answering the survey on educational needs, 53 percent of respondents indicated that more resources are necessary on how to best use computer and internet resources to inform citizens or perform government functions. Some resources on the subject currently exist. For example, the Wisconsin Digital Government Summit was held in December 2012 to educate local government managers and internet technology professionals – though not local elected officials – on technology issues. In addition, a seminar on the use of social media to promote economic development was held at the 2012 Wisconsin Counties Association (WCA) conference.

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<sup>1</sup> The author would like to acknowledge input provided by local government member association staff, UW-extension staff, and others, which was invaluable in the development of this white paper.

Many rural areas in Wisconsin lack high-speed broadband internet connections, which serves as a barrier to effectively using technology. Indeed, more than half of town officials, who often represent rural areas, indicated that more training for computer and internet resources is necessary, compared to 40 percent of municipal officials. This issue, rather than the availability of educational resources on using the internet, may continue to present a substantial barrier to the effective use of computer and internet resources for local governments.

It may be helpful to create a “best practices” video or short-course that could highlight the work done in municipalities or counties that successfully use computer and internet resources. For example, the City of Madison has established a [Legislative Information Center](#) that provides information on city council and committee actions. That city’s [website](#) provides information on subjects such as snow plowing, community events, and property taxes. Internet Technology staff or council members from Madison or other communities could be asked to present at member association annual conferences.<sup>2</sup> As with the 2012 WCA conference seminar on social media, special subjects relating to computer and internet use could be presented at forthcoming local government conferences.

In addition, more research may need to be done to see whether local officials would benefit from the development of basic computer skills. If so, member associations may want to partner with local education providers, such as technical colleges, to provide members with classes on such skills at annual conferences or other seminars.

#### Training for Newly Elected Officials

The strong interest in additional resources for newly elected officials expressed in the local official survey may reflect the steep learning curve that officials face when first entering office. Many already available resources reflect the needs of newly elected officials, such as resources on open meetings law, budgeting, and parliamentary procedure. However, it may be helpful to establish a suggested core curriculum which would provide an explicit list of suggested resources that local government staff could provide to newly elected officials.

Such a curriculum could include both “foundational” and “advanced” courses, providing an opportunity for those officials who have had some exposure to educational resources to continue their education. The development of this core curriculum could help member associations, the Local Government Center, and the LGI determine where additional gaps exist in current resources. For example, it may be worthwhile to produce a video series with matching written materials on each item in the core curriculum to allow for easy viewing and understanding.

In addition, the member associations could work with the Local Government Center and the Local Government Institute to provide newly elected members with a standard package of materials after their election to office. This could include the LGI white paper on

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<sup>2</sup> Wisconsin local government member association include the Wisconsin Counties Association, Wisconsin Towns Association, and League of Wisconsin Municipalities.

currently available resources, giving newly elected officials better ability to pursue education and training opportunities.

A University of Wisconsin affiliated educational program and an online database, both described in detail later in this paper, could also be helpful in providing educational resources to newly elected officials.

#### Collaborating with Other Units of Government or Outside Groups

Government collaboration has become increasingly important as funds for local governments become tighter and service needs become greater. Indeed, the Local Government Institute has provided resources such as case studies and workshops on improving collaboration.

Collaboration could be provided as a topic at forthcoming member association conferences. Examples from the LGI [case studies series](#) on local government collaboration in Wisconsin could be used as a starting point for education on collaboration. Local officials from different units of government who have participated in a collaborative process outlined in the case study series could present their experiences at in-person trainings at the conferences. Such presentations could be taped and provided as a video series available online or on DVD.

#### **Bridging Access Gaps**

The two primary barriers to education and training listed by local officials were “lack of time” and “travel distance.” Additional efforts to bring educational opportunities closer to local officials may help increase use of content that now exists. This section provides ideas on how educational resources could be better provided to local officials.

#### *Delivering Content at Regular Meetings*

One opportunity to bridge the time and travel distance gap is to provide educational resources to local elected officials at their regularly scheduled board meetings. Indeed, a substantial proportion of local officials who responded to the survey of needs indicated that receiving resources at regular board meetings was a convenient way of obtaining educational content.

Short videos on different subjects could be shown during board meetings. For example, the Local Government Center recently produced a 10 part video series on open meetings law, with each video approximately five minutes in length.<sup>3</sup> One or two videos could be played at a board meeting, with discussion to follow. Local government or UW-Extension staff could be responsible for taking any questions from board members and obtaining answers from Local Government Center or member association staff, to be answered at the next board meeting or earlier. Short educational sessions could be built into each board meeting, with board members or board leadership prioritizing topics for discussion.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://fyi.uwex.edu/lgcprogramstore/2012/11/open-meetings-video-teaser/>

### *Biennial Learning and Skills Development Plans*

The member associations could support educational activity by mailing to members or board chairs on a biennial basis a simple form and stamped return envelope to indicate education and training needs. These forms could be returned to either association offices or county extension offices, with association staff or extension agents then working with board members to coordinate the delivery of educational resources.

Educational resources could be provided to local officials at regular board meetings, as discussed above, or at other meetings scheduled for receiving the educational content. These plans could be completed every two years, providing learning opportunities for any newly elected officials and ensuring that incumbent officials continue to be exposed to new learning opportunities. An example of the form is included later in this document.

### **Other Potential Changes in Delivery of Education and Training**

#### *Database of Educational Resources*

A substantial portion of responses from municipal officials (15 percent) indicated they were not aware of what trainings or resources are available. While a smaller portion of county and town officials indicated the same, it is likely that all local officials would benefit from a centralized database that listed educational resources. The database could provide a menu of options, with individuals able to select certain topics or a certain medium, such as online video or in-person trainings. If used in conjunction with the local government educational plan concept listed above, extension agents could utilize the database in helping local governments develop their learning plans.

The database could serve as a repository of links to written resources, video and audio resources, and in-person conferences and workshops. For example, drop down menus could allow users to search by type of content (conference, written, etc.), subject of content (budgeting, open records, etc.), date of presentations, or location of presentations.

#### *Educational Program with the University of Wisconsin*

A number of university-based institutions exist across the United States to provide educational content to local officials. For example, the University of Michigan – Dearborn administers the [Institute for Local Government](#), which provides training seminars and technical assistance for local elected officials. The New York State Comptroller, along with Hofstra University and Cornell University, has established the [Local Government Leadership Institute](#), which provides one day conferences on timely local government issues. Cleveland State University holds a [Leadership Academy](#), which provides nine curriculum modules that run every three weeks over a six month period. Elected board members are trained alongside local government executives and leaders in state government and nonprofit organizations.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Additional description of this program can be found in “Developing the Governance Capacity of Local Elected Officials” by Vera Volsgang-Coombs and Melissa Miller. The article appeared in *Public Administration Review*, Vol. 59, No. 3, 1999.

While training and education programs are currently provided through the UW-Madison Certified Public Manager Program and the UW-Green Bay local government education programs, there are not curriculum-driven programs for local elected board members. One program that could provide a framework for such a local elected board member program is the [Bowhay Institute for Legislative Leadership Development](#), which provides five days of intensive leadership and professional development training to state legislators throughout the Midwest and Canada in at the UW-Madison campus. The Bowhay Institute is housed at the UW-Madison La Follette School of Public Affairs along with the Midwestern Legislative Conference of the Council of State Governments.

A similar institute could be targeted at either recently elected local officials needing to learn the basics or at experienced officials who need advanced training, such as those newly elected to board leadership positions. A program that trains elected board members alongside elected or appointed executives may provide unique opportunities for learning. Member association staff, UW-Extension staff, and University of Wisconsin professors could all participate in the development and delivery of an educational curriculum to local elected officials in Wisconsin.

The institute's educational seminars could be held on Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays, allowing busy local officials time to complete private work and government obligations during the week. Those who complete the program could be provided with a certificate demonstrating their completion. Funding from grant foundations, private companies, local government associations, or others could be used to subsidize the cost of operating the program, minimizing or making free the cost of the program for participants and thus encouraging their participation.

#### *Encouraging Local Government Policy and Funding on Education and Training*

As local government budgets become tighter, funding to provide education and training to elected board members often becomes an attractive place to cut. Unfortunately, this can produce the effect of diminishing the capacity of local government officials at a time when it is needed most.

Work already being done may help to reverse this trend. Some Wisconsin local government member associations are providing discounted rates for first time attendance at annual conferences. This may help local officials better see the value in receiving education and training if they would not otherwise attend such a conference, increasing their likelihood of supporting funding for attending conferences in their government's budgets.

In addition, member associations could develop a model policy on education and training that could be used by local governments. Such a model policy, passed by local resolution or otherwise, could provide a consistent framework for local governments to ensure that both new and continuing elected officials are able to best address complicated issues. Such policies could also cover the education of appointed board members or government staff who interact with governing boards.

**Conclusion**

Improved capacity and decision making among local officials should result in better outcomes for Wisconsin's citizens. From transportation to public safety, local governments in Wisconsin play a major role in the day-to-day lives of individuals throughout the state. By making educational resources both more relevant and more convenient, all residents of Wisconsin will benefit.

## **Wisconsin Local Government Learning and Skills Development Agenda Form**

Dear local elected official or staff person,

This is the 2013 [organization] learning and skills development agenda. The purpose of this document is to establish a learning and skills development plan for local elected officials with your unit of government. Please complete this form and return it in the included addressed envelope. After you submit this form, staff from [organization] will contact you directly to establish a plan for delivery of educational content. If you have any questions, please contact [name and contact information for staff person].

### ***Contact Information for local official or staff person responsible for coordination***

Name of contact and position: _____
Government (i.e. Sawyer County or City of La Crosse): _____
Address: _____
Phone number: _____
Email address: _____
Best day(s) and time(s) to contact: _____
Best method of contact – circle one or more:    phone    e-mail    postal mail

### ***Educational Areas of Interest (check all that apply)***

<input type="checkbox"/> Annual budget development, process, and administration
<input type="checkbox"/> Open meetings law
<input type="checkbox"/> Communication with the public
<input type="checkbox"/> Managing government body and committee meetings
<input type="checkbox"/> Training for newly elected officials
<input type="checkbox"/> Collaborating with other units of government or outside groups
<input type="checkbox"/> Using computer/internet resources to inform citizens or perform government functions
<input type="checkbox"/> Managing conflict between board members, administrators, other units of government
<input type="checkbox"/> Overview of the powers and responsibilities of your government or office
<input type="checkbox"/> Finding the balance between policy and administration
<input type="checkbox"/> Other (please indicate here): _____

-Continued on Next Page-

***Best Way to Receive Educational Content (check all that apply)***

- During regular board meetings
- Teleconference
- Written materials
- Internet based webinar
- Recorded video
- Recorded audio
- In-person facilitator
- In conjunction with other area local officials