



Local Government  
CENTER

# Strengthening County Government: Three Cs for Effectiveness

## INTRODUCTION

The mission of the University of Wisconsin -Extension’s (UWEX) Local Government Center (LGC) is to provide focus, coordination and leadership to UWEX educational programs in local government and to expand the knowledge base for local government education.

The Center delivers educational programs on the basics of local government and on emerging issues. The former includes programs addressing the budget process, open meetings, parliamentary procedures, meeting management and the public records law. The second category involves programming focusing on issues such as land use, inter-governmental collaboration, LEAN government and deliberative governance. Educating in local government requires staying abreast of developments that can affect local officials. To do this, LGC Specialists maintain strong working relationships with other UW institutions and programs, state agencies, and the associations that represent local governments in Wisconsin. Center staff regularly monitor legislation, regulations and the state’s political environment to remain current and effective in their educational programming. Also important is information and feedback received from county-based UWEX educators, who are in a good position to both see and assess local learning needs.

### Collaboration

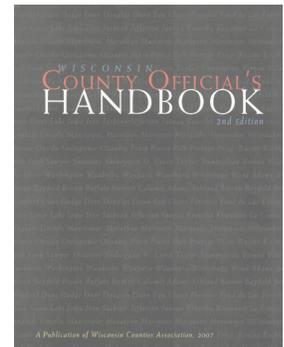
### Capacity building

### Compliance

This story focuses on three elements that contribute significantly to LGC’s success: **collaboration**, **capacity building**, and helping local government officials **comply** with state and federal laws and regulations. To illustrate these elements, the Center’s work with **county** government will be featured.

## Collaboration

A special example of **collaboration** is the relationship between UW-Extension, the Local Government Center, Wisconsin counties, and the Wisconsin Counties Association (WCA). UW-Extension’s Cooperative Extension division is a partner with counties and the federal government in providing county Extension Offices in every county. The LGC supports county Extension educators in these offices through inservice training and collaboration that delivers customized educational programs to meet specific local needs. In recognition of the importance of this relationship, WCA’s Executive Director is a valued member of UW-Extension’s Board of Visitors and Leadership Wisconsin’s Board of Directors. WCA fully collaborates with LGC in designing and delivering LGC’s programs for county officials, and counts on LGC specialists for presentations at their conferences and district meetings, help in staffing and providing resources to support the work of WCA public policy committees, and authorship of chapters found in their *County Official’s Handbook*.



WCA continues to be a vocal supporter of UW-Extension and the Local Government Center.

In anticipation of the 2012 County Officials Workshops series, Mark O’Connell, WCA Executive Director, recorded a videotaped introduction and welcome for broadcast at the beginning of each program. In that recording Mark made the following remarks:

“This year’s workshops are especially notable, since the Local Government Center is celebrating its twentieth year of operation, and UW-Extension is celebrating 100 years of service to the citizens of Wisconsin.”

“I wasn’t around a hundred years ago, but I do know today the value that UW-Extension and the Local Government

## Local Government Center 2012-13 Narrative

Center provide to the counties and the citizens of our state.”

“Today you will learn, you will make new friends, you will network, you will generate new ideas, and most assuredly after today, you will be a prepared, effective county board member.”

“UW-Extension plays an essential and critical educational role in your county. To learn more about Extension, visit their website—or better yet, go down to the Extension Office, introduce yourself, spend a few hours with the people who will help you make Wisconsin a better place in the future, and help make you a more successful county board elected official. I know you’ll be glad you did.”

Every other year, LGC collaborates with the Wisconsin Counties Association to design the *County Officials Workshops* agenda and tour. These workshops often represent the first introduction to the roles and responsibilities of their position, and the rules and guidelines they must adhere to. It also provides them with the opportunity to meet other

more individualized orientation sessions offered to new supervisors, often coordinated with help from local county UW-Extension offices. In 2012, two key WCA staff members joined LGC specialists to teach sessions at seven workshops presented around the state.



Current and former LGC Specialists along with Program Leader Tom Blewett and Cooperative Extension Dean Rick Klemme received the “Friend of the County” award in 2008 from WCA Executive Director Mark O’Connell and then WCA Board President Dennis O’Loughlin.

### *Comments from 2012 County Officials Workshops participants (206 participants)*

*As a result of participating in today’s program, I will:*

- *Be a more effective elected official*
- *Better understand my duties and responsibilities*
- *Be a much better supervisor*
- *This was well needed, planned and well-presented*
- *Be able to conduct my duties as supervisor more effectively*
- *Undoubtedly be a more effective and confident supervisor*
- *Be better informed*
- *Cherish being a county supervisor*
- *Be a well educated and responsible supervisor*
- *Understand my responsibilities better*
- *Be better informed of issues relating to my position and duties*

*Five out of six participants rated the program either Excellent or Very Good. The average rating for the workshops was 4.11, on a five-point scale, with 5=Excellent and 1=Poor.*

officials from adjacent counties and talk about issues of similar concern. Attendance at the County Officials Workshops has varied over the years from 200 to 250 supervisors. Since their inception, over 2,000 county officials have attended. These workshops provide the foundation for

The last few years have seen the retirements of several Center Specialists. WCA staff have volunteered to be part of each interview process for their replacements.

### Capacity Building

The Local Government Center plays a key role in building county government *capacity* to govern. It does so by providing educational programming to help county officials gain an understanding of the physical, economic, social, legal, demographic, and political environments in which they operate. Especially important to officials is understanding and learning how to frame important issues and challenges so they can respond effectively to them.

The Center has helped county officials gain knowledge and understanding of the structure, roles, and functions of county government. Officials have learned to appreciate and understand their roles and duties within county government, and their responsibilities to the public.

LGC also increased county government capacity through training in the skills and tools local officials need to govern effectively. These include the capability to interact with constituents, and to work together with other officials to define issues, identify policy alternatives and understand their potential impacts, make sound decisions, and oversee policy implementation. LGC has integrated learning around these capabilities, through their programs and, in collaboration with county Extension educators, through specialized local training available when needed.

## Local Government Center 2012-13 Narrative

The Center has delivered content for building awareness and knowledge by focusing on the fundamentals of governance and service as a county official. Sessions on the structure and process of government, open meetings and public records laws, ethics and conflicts of interest, and running meetings and parliamentary procedure were taught face-to-face during the *County Officials Workshops* and through statewide WisLine teleconferences. Center specialists also collaborated with county Extension educators to present regional and county programs on these topics for local audiences, and have prepared factsheets, companion materials, and two instructional DVDs to support them. Much of this is available from the Center's website at [lgc.uwex.edu](http://lgc.uwex.edu).

Since open meetings is an important topic to the general public, the Center made its open meetings factsheet available in Spanish.

The Local Government Center has made a special effort to offer programs which spotlight and increase local officials' awareness and knowledge of emerging issues and new information. For example, the Center provided practical information to local government managers who found themselves managing public employees without a union contract following the repeal of most collective bargaining rights through Wisconsin Act 10. An outgrowth of this work was an article titled "Managing in a Labor Contract Void" authored by then Center Specialist Al Probst published in the on-line edition of Public Management Magazine by the International City/County Management Association (ICMA) in March of 2013. The Center also

offered timely WisLine sessions on the impact of the telecommunications deregulation and broadband expansion on local governments, the growth of sand and non-metallic mining and its regulation, land use legislation and case law, as well as financial management, administration, reporting, assessment, taxation, road building and maintenance, planning

and zoning, and relations with state government departments. *County Officials Workshops* included sessions on emerging and important issues to their respective governments. This program content enabled county government leaders to keep up to date on emerging issues and their potential impacts on local government, and to develop effective action strategies.

The Center has made timely information available to county Extension educators on their county's changing fiscal environment, especially the state budget process and the fiscal impacts proposed budgetary changes could have on state and local services and functions. County educators shared this information with their county officials, who found this information valuable in fiscal planning and annual budgeting. In the fall of 2012, the Center partnered with several WCA staff members and county comptrollers to present a program on how county budgets have changed over the years to a six county Intercounty Coordinating committee. Also in 2012, the Center used distance technology to deliver a webinar designed to help participants understand the policies, practices and rules that apply when developing local budgets. The stream of this webinar is still available on the LGC website and it was downloaded 162 times from July 1 through December 31, 2013.

LGC programs have continued to address the development of county officials' skills, and capabilities. The Center has addressed skills needed by county government offi-

*From 2012 County Officials Workshops participants in the Emerging Issues Education session:*

- *Today's sessions have been an incredible resource! Continue to educate myself on county issues.*
- *Excellent discussion of state government programs jail-human services, transportation issues*
- *On the pathway to using available resources to be a more effective legislator*
- *Be more active and more alert on issues facing county government*

cial to interact effectively with peers and government employees, and to govern effectively. Sessions on collaborative leadership, running meetings, and introducing efficiency initiatives were included in Center programs this year. LGC specialists worked with Extension educators in several counties to create and present programs to



### UW-Extension Local Government Center

Political Openness Award  
2012-2013 POPEE

OPENNESS in GOVERNMENT AWARD

PRESENTED BY  
Wisconsin Freedom of Information Council

DEVOTED TO PROTECTING WISCONSIN'S TRADITION OF OPEN GOVERNMENT

The Wisconsin Freedom of Information Council names the Local Government Center one of the winners of their annual Opee Awards in the spring of 2013. This award recognized the Center's work teaching on the topic of the state's Open Meetings and Public Records law and the release of its new Open Meetings DVD (see: <http://fyi.uwex.edu/lgcprogramstore/2012/11/open-meetings-video-teaser/>).

## Local Government Center 2012-13 Narrative

develop skills needed to increase board cohesiveness and focus, and build trust, respect, and sound relationships among board members. Participating County supervisors reported that these programs had a significant impact in helping them be better informed and prepared, increased their skills, and enhanced overall board performance and effectiveness. Most recently, in response to an increasing number of requests, LGC has prepared an educational program on *Civility in Public Discourse*.

The following two examples represent the type of specialized support Center staff provide to county-based UW-Extension educators in addressing complex local needs.

After the Sauk County Board of Supervisors Chair and County Administrative Coordinator identified “a need for a more cohesive board of supervisors with sharper focus, and improved communication and trust between board members,” county Extension educator Jennifer Erickson called on the Local Government Center for help in developing and delivering an interactive board development training series. Jennifer reported that the series was “highly innovative, well received by supervisors, and extremely successful.” For their work on this project LGC was highlighted in an issue of *Wisconsin Counties* magazine. Three months after the completion of the series, board supervisors were asked what changed as a result of the program. Comments included:

“...board meetings are less adversarial. We have a plan in place to deal with more difficult issues. ...people feel like they can be heard now.”

“Much more collegial, less confrontational than in the past. We are getting resolutions with better reasoning behind them. I see more respect for others’ opinions.”

“Better information received before the board meeting. We are better informed.”

“We are beginning to be more aware of our processes of discussing and making decisions.”

Jefferson County identified the need for “more education, communication, and trust building among all levels of county government,” as its most important strategic issue. In response, county Extension educator Steve Grabow

adapted materials from several sources and conducted a series of workshops with the county’s Administration and Rules Committee and all county department heads. This initiative resulted in nine recommendations, with seven either accomplished or underway. Monitoring also documented 14 actions that occurred to improve county government communication. Steve’s curriculum was shared with Extension colleagues and a presentation of results was made to a multi-county group.

### Compliance

The Local Government Center provides educational programming to raise awareness, increase knowledge, and build skills for a special responsibility of county officials: **compliance** with the laws and regulations of larger units of government.

Wisconsin counties are unique in that they have a dual role in government. On one hand, they are units of local governance, carrying out local functions, such as planning and zoning, local road maintenance, parks, and law enforcement. On the other hand, they carry out mandated decentralized state functions, such as enforcement of state laws, maintaining public records archives, issuing marriage licenses, courts, human services, and emergency management that serve people in all jurisdictions within a county’s boundaries.

County government officials are concerned with understanding and complying with new or modified responsibilities and requirements mandated by state and federal government. They want to know what these requirements mean to them and their constituents, what specific actions they need to take, and what costs may be involved. To meet this need the Local Government Center designed programs and materials that provide timely, up-to-date information and education to help county officials learn what they need to comply.

The Local Government Center’s *County Officials Workshops*, Wis-Line programs, fact sheets, and other publications, address the requirements necessary to adhere to state statutes. In some cases, such as compliance with Wisconsin’s Open Meeting Law, the Center addresses an individu-

*Participants in the County Officials Workshops consistently express their high appreciation for the instruction provided. On the end of program evaluations, many participants request additional training. In collaboration with the Wisconsin Counties Association, the Center is responding to these requests by developing a second round of advanced training for county officials that may be offered in the Fall of 2014.*

al's responsibility. In others, such as public records, fiscal administration, and transportation, the Center addresses county government's organizational responsibilities. During this past year, Center specialists received and responded to numerous requests from individual county governments directly or through county Extension educators, for advice or assistance in complying with state laws and regulations.

The content of LGC programs, such as those presented in the *Current Issues Affecting Local Government Officials* WisLine series, included timely presentations to address new or potential compliance requirements.

By partnering with the Center that is known for its scholarly work and neutral position on issues, WCA can successfully navigate its sometimes conflicting role as an advocate of county government and the authority on county board operations. LGC played a key role in developing the WCA's response to the recent Attorney General's opinion that determined that county supervisor and administrative coordinator positions were legally incompatible and helped examine efforts to locally limit or otherwise alter county board terms under the Administrative Home Rule statute.

One area of compliance where LGC continues to play an important educational role is the requirement for citizen access to, and involvement in, county government decision making processes. The Center's programs addressed this requirement, and its specialists worked with county Extension educators to help county governments understand access and participation requirements, and design the means for effective compliance.



Former Center Director Dave Hinds (top row middle) receives the 2012 Chancellor's Award for Excellence from State Representative Therese Berceau (top left) and UW Colleges & UW-Extension Chancellor Ray Cross (top row right) along with Center Specialist Al Probst, Center Office Operations Associate Tenley Meyer, Center Director Chuck Law and Outreach Specialist Larry Larmer. Not pictured are Center Specialists Dan Hill and Philip Freeburg.

In coming years Local Government Center specialists will continue to work with present and new local government audiences to understand their responsibilities and challenges, and to identify their educational needs. The Center will continue to update and create new program content as new issues and requirements arise, and will lead the way in developing innovative means for providing learning opportunities that meet the needs of Wisconsin's modern-day local government officials.