

Promoting Good Governance Within Your Agency



Question

How can my agency determine whether it is engaging in good governance practices and identify area where improvements can be made?

Answer

Good governance depends on officials and staff knowing and understanding the duties and responsibilities of their agency — and their position within the agency — as well as the relevant laws and requirements that govern it.

Good governance also requires transparency to ensure that an agency is acting on behalf of the community's well-being. Hal Conklin, former mayor of Santa Barbara and a League past president, describes the hallmarks of good governance as “complete transparency, both on the part of the agency as a whole and the individuals in the agency. Public agencies must be encouraged to set the bar high — to be both transparent and public about their transparency.”

Local government agencies must take great care to effectively use public resources, which are often limited, to address the community's greatest needs.

Michael Kasperzak, a council member and former mayor of Mountain View and a League past president, suggests that good governance entails engaging the community and making decisions by acting on behalf of the community's best interests. To understand the concerns of the community, decision-makers and staff must encourage participation in council meetings, make themselves available to community members outside council chambers and help the public better understand how they can share their concerns.

How Can an Agency Promote Good Governance Practices?

An agency can adopt a variety of protocols and procedures to minimize the risk of missteps and promote the public's trust and confidence in its governance practices. California law provides

some guidance on procedural requirements for local agencies, and many professional organizations have developed best practices that go beyond the minimum standards. Such organizations include the League's City Managers' Department, California State Association of Counties, Government Finance Officers Association and California Special District Leadership Foundation.

The Institute for Local Government (ILG) recently released "The Good Governance Checklist: Good and Better Practices," a new self-assessment tool for local government agencies (available at www.ca-ilg.org/goodgovernance). The checklist is designed to help local officials and staff determine whether their agency is engaged in basic good governance practices (some of which are required by law) and identify where the agency has set its sights higher and is using better governance practices.

Many agencies are already implementing many of the practices highlighted by the checklist. The list also suggests ideas for instituting additional policies and practices that help promote good governance and minimize the risk of missteps that could undermine or damage public trust and confidence.

The Good Governance Checklist is organized by the following areas:

Stewardship of Public Resources covers items related to transparency in agency finances and accounting practices. Topics include budgets and financial reporting, auditing practices and implementing effective internal controls as well as common day-to-day issues such as expense reimbursement and allowances and the use of agency resources and equipment.

Transparency comprises items related to the requirements of California's open government laws, such as the Ralph M. Brown Open Meetings Act, California's Public Records Act, conflict-of-interest laws and disclosure requirements. Beyond the legal requirements, this section also includes practical tools and tips that can help an agency improve its transparency efforts and effectively engage the public that it serves.

Education, Training and Personnel presents ways to help an agency ensure that its employees and officials receive critical information about their duties and responsibilities as part of their orientation and that their ongoing training needs are understood and met. This section also outlines personnel policies and hiring practices for local agencies and ways to encourage dialogue with staff regarding potential concerns about agency activities.

Campaigns focuses on information that can help candidates run a fair campaign and reminds staff and officials of the prohibitions related to the use of public resources for political purposes.

The checklist also incorporates practices that promote **intergovernmental collaboration and partnerships** as well as ways that an agency can include sustainability in its governance practices.

The City of Santa Monica beta-tested the checklist. City Manager Rod Gould sat down with department heads and advisory staff to compare their city's practices with those outlined in the checklist. Gould was pleased to see that they were already engaging in many of the practices listed. Where they weren't, the checklist served as a catalyst to stimulate discussion about areas where the city could make improvements. Gould says, "For any organization committed to improving its governance practices, this checklist is a great tool to get the process started."

Make Good Governance Efforts Ongoing

The Good Governance Checklist (available at www.ca-ilg.org/goodgovernance) can be used as an initial assessment tool, a way to spur conversations within an agency about where improvements can be made and a mechanism for regularly re-evaluating your agency's practices over time.