

Help Wanted: Young People for Public Service

by Frank Benest, Ed.D.

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Stop and listen. Do you hear the silence? It's the sound of nobody following in your footsteps. The baby boomers dedicated to public service are quickly approaching retirement age, and far fewer young people are following in their footsteps, creating a large "replacement gap" in the public sector. This gap is particularly pronounced in the professional and managerial ranks, where fewer entry- and mid-level employees are available to step up and lead public organizations into the future.

Young people in Generations X (born 1965–85) and Y (born after 1985) are not nearly as attracted to public service as their baby-boomer predecessors. This is particularly a problem for local government. According to the *Government Employment Report*, local government employs five out of every eight public sector employees.

We in public leadership roles are beginning to address this disheartening trend and are designing ways to draw Generations X and Y young people into the public sector. Elected officials can play a critical role in this effort to attract young people to government service.

What's Behind the Problem?

A number of demographic, political and value issues are converging to create this "quiet crisis" in the public sector. What are these mega-forces at work?

- **Fewer numbers of mid-career professionals.** As baby-boomer managers retire from government, there are demographically fewer young professionals to take their place. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics predicts that by 2006, there will be 151 million jobs in the U.S. economy but only 141 million people in the workforce to fill them. Across all sectors, but especially in the public sector, the greatest turn-over in aging workers will be in the executive, administrative and managerial areas. In fact, according to the General Accounting Office, 53 percent of the federal workforce will qualify for retirement by 2004.
- **An anti-government bias.** In the 1960s and early '70s, many baby boomers were brought up to consider public service as an honorable, even noble, calling. My mother was a public school teacher and a VISTA volunteer. As a baby boomer growing up, it never occurred to me to select any career other than government service. However, for more than two decades, our national leaders have denigrated public service, creating an anti-government bias. Government work is now seen as bureaucratic, mind-numbing and generally second-rate. Our "best and brightest" have not been encouraged to select public service as a career. *The Wall Street Journal*, for example, recently reported that in the 1963 class of Harvard Law School, 30 percent of the graduates selected government service; in the Class of 2000, only 2 percent did.
- **Different values.** Generations X and Y young people exhibit different values than their older baby-boomer managers. They put more emphasis on having a balanced life and are less open to sacrificing family and other personal interests for career advancement.

According to focus groups conducted by the League's City Managers Department, aspiring managers in local government perceive that many senior managers are often singularly focused on work, overwhelmed and abused.

What Can Elected Officials Do?

A working group of the League's City Managers Department has been focusing on the issue of "preparing the next generation" of public managers. In addition to better grooming younger employees already serving in government agencies, there is a critical need to increase the number of young people entering the "pipeline." The working group identified these strategies for local elected officials:

Stop Bashing Government. For more than 20 years, incumbents as well as first-time candidates for local government office took their cue from national leaders who ran against government in general and public employees ("bureaucrats") in particular. Elected officials need to demand excellence. However, demanding great performance is a far cry from "running against city hall" — which has become the norm in campaigns — and bashing staff is common in many council chambers.

If our elected leaders tear down government, what bright, talented young person today would prefer to work for the public?

Insist on Civility. Elected leaders are role models. Mayors and their council colleagues must act in public with civility and decorum even when there are policy disagreements. Democracy demands public discussion and debate about policies. And, yes, democracy can be messy. But the rough and tumble of a public debate in council chambers should not be an excuse for council members or citizens to personally attack each other. Elected officials must model appropriate policy debate and insist on civility by the public. In fact, council members should go beyond civility to promote a "culture of respect."

Again, why would any young person aspire to a public service career when they perceive that the public's work is often times hurtful and even ugly?

Promote the Rewards of Service. Elected officials, as well as city managers and other senior managers, don't do a good enough job of promoting the rewards and joys of public life. Public officials do the public's work because, deep in our hearts, we want to build community, improve everyone's quality of life and simply make a difference. This is especially the case at the local government level, where we can readily see the positive results of our efforts as public servants.

The problem is that young people do not perceive these rewards. While a number of recent surveys (including recent studies by Hart-Teeter and the Pew Foundation) strongly indicate that the Net-savvy younger generation wants to contribute to the community, most young people consider only the nonprofit sector — not the public sector — as the place to make a difference. Elected officials need to consciously articulate the benefits of public service if we are to attract a new generation of employees.

Reach Out to Students. The recent poll by the Hart-Teeter firm suggests that young people don't consider public sector careers because "no one asks them." Therefore, elected and appointed officials need to reach out to both high school and university students and discuss:

- The nature of local government;
- Careers in local government; and
- The rewards and benefits of public service.

According to the curriculum administrators in my local school district, by the time young people graduate from high school, they have received only a minimal amount of formal instruction in local (as opposed to federal and state) government. The curriculum standards in most states do not require formal instruction, and state tests do not assess any knowledge of local government. We must change that. Moreover, most students do not fully realize that local governments employ a large number of clerks, accountants, engineers, human resources professionals, and general administrators as well as the police officers, firefighters, librarians and other professionals normally associated with local government.

Therefore, elected officials are needed to visit classrooms, discuss local government careers and present the wonderful possibilities of public life.

Introduce Teens to Public Affairs and Service. Many public sector professionals were originally introduced to local government through youth involvement and youth service programs operated by city governments. Tried-and-true programs include:

Volunteer service programs for which students receive high school credit and/or recognition;

- Student Day in Government;
- Youth representatives serving on city commissions and boards;
- Youth commissions;
- Paid and unpaid internships of all kinds;
- Explorer programs tied to police, fire or other departments; and
- "Volunteen" programs, in which teens receive a stipend for volunteering in city programs during summer months.

The League of California Cities and the National League of Cities (NLC) have an inventory of successful youth involvement and service programs. Elected officials can ask city management to contact the League or NLC to do a search of exemplary efforts.

Recently, the working group on "Pre-paring the Next Generation" conducted focus groups of young local government professionals. These young professionals often were "hooked" into their public sector careers through an internship or a summer job in recreation. (I got my start in public service as a junior recreation leader at age 14.) Consequently, as part of a larger university liaison program, the working group is in the process of developing and promoting a statewide network of internships offered by local governments, so interested university students can get a taste of local government work.

A Legacy Issue

Involving young people in local government used to be a "nice thing to do." With dramatic declines in the total number of young people available or interested in working in local government, attracting bright and talented young people to public service is a critical business issue for government. As the elected leaders of local government, council members need to think of their role in promoting public service, especially among young people.

Furthermore, elected officials need to challenge city management on how it is responding to this "quiet crisis." Council members may even need to articulate a performance expectation for the city manager and other senior managers that they personally demonstrate a commitment to mentoring and developing new talent.

In addition to developing new service programs, improving municipal facilities or fixing up the city's infrastructure, wouldn't it be a wonderful legacy for elected officials to engage a whole new generation of young people in public service?

Seven Ways for Elected Officials To "Hook" Teens on Public Service Careers

1. Work with your counterparts on the school board to offer class credit for students who volunteer in local government or other community service. Develop a community service requirement for graduation. Provide a mayor's certificate and an additional graduating tassel of a different color for those who volunteer for public service.
 2. Involve young people as campaign volunteers. Orient them to the issues of the campaign. Assign them to develop issue papers of interest to young people. Make it fun and promote it as a resume-builder for college.
 3. Recruit one or several young people to intern for you during the summer. Use unspent campaign funds to pay a stipend, or students can use the experience on their resume.
 4. Ask the personnel department to develop a list and descriptions of typical local government careers offered through your city. Hand out the list during your next talk to students. Pair up for the presentation with a young professional on staff who can talk about his/her job and how it is possible for young people to also work someday for the public.
 5. Organize with city staff a Student Day in Government. Challenge participating students to develop proposals that address a real-life problem troubling the community.
 6. Ask your city manager if you can address all the summer recreation leaders and lifeguards at the beginning of their summer orientation. Promote the joys of service and careers in local government.
 7. Involve scout groups in local government projects. Encourage scouting groups to offer a badge in government service.
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