

## Section 2: Roles and Responsibilities

# Chapter 10: Training of municipal officials

### **Elected officials**

In this era of unprecedented change, citizens expect more of their elected officials. The public expects responsiveness and accountability at all levels of government. What better place to start than at the local level, where citizens can experience directly the difference that good decision-making and ethical standards can make in a community? Local government is more important than ever before. People who are elected today must demonstrate their professionalism and integrity.

As a leader in your municipality, you should place importance on continual training and updating your knowledge base, as well as emphasizing the development of the knowledge and skills of employees. As an elected official, mindful of the liability exposures to your municipality, you should be aware of established case law and its relevance to your municipality.

### **Case Law**

The case of *Geraldine Harris v City of Canton, Ohio*, decided February 28, 1989, by the U. S. Supreme Court, impacts all local governments in the area of personnel and training.

Harris, detained by the Canton police, brought a civil rights action against the city, alleging violation of her right to receive necessary medical attention while in police custody. The U.S. District Court for the northern District of Ohio decided in Harris' favor and the city appealed. Harris won her case against Canton by proving that the Canton police clearly needed better training and that city officials were "deliberately indifferent" to that need.

The U.S. Court of Appeals, Sixth Circuit subsequently held that inadequacy of police training may serve as a basis for municipal liability. The court concluded that the lack of training for the police force in this case was reckless and negligent and Harris' civil rights were violated.

In a 1995 case, *Hilliard v. Walker's Party Store, Inc.*, decided in Federal District Court in Michigan, it was held that a municipality may be liable in a federal civil rights action when policy makers are on actual or constructive notice of the need to train employees, but fail to adequately do so. The focus must be on the adequacy of training in relation to tasks that particular employees must perform.

The common denominator in both cases is the fact that the government officials in charge were not correctly trained to handle the situations and to treat the persons concerned with proper care and concern.

The importance of comprehensive and timely training for municipal employees is not limited to police officers with respect to potential liability for the municipality. Although most case law addresses police officer liability, the concept of failure to train may be applied in other areas.

Municipalities must be continually aware of the need for training. In terms of practical application, each person in municipal employment should keep a log documenting all aspects of individual training. The person in charge of training for the municipality should have an identical log and periodic inspection should be made to ensure that individual logs are up to date.

New employees should receive written policy and procedure manuals and sign a log that they have received this manual, which

affirms the municipality's desire to provide correct training and orientation. Employees should be routinely scheduled for training to comply with municipal policies and to keep current with changes in the law as it affects job duties and responsibilities. A positive aspect of the *Canton v Harris* decision is that it stimulated the demand for current training and updates on changes in the law and provides the added benefit of having better trained employees. Of top priority today is sharpening techniques and skills to implement higher productivity among public employees while maintaining high quality services and controlling costs.

Training for elected officials to assist them in becoming better leaders is a prime focus for the Michigan Municipal League's education programming. In 1997, an Elected Officials Academy was established. In addition, the Michigan Association of Mayors formed the Institute of Mayors and Presidents to address issues unique to those who are at the helm of Michigan's cities and villages.

A number of other programs are geared specifically for the elected official. These programs help elected officials hone their skills and gain the knowledge they need to govern and lead citizens in cities and villages throughout the state. Many of these sessions are held in the evening and on weekends for the convenience of elected officials.

For more information on education seminars and on-site trainings, call the MML and ask for Education services.

### **About the author . . .**

#### **Member Resource Services**

The Member Resource Services Department is comprised of many different services of the League, including educational services, publications, web and graphic design, the business partnership program, and information services. This department provides member officials with resources and educational opportunities on a vast array of municipal topics.