

# Rural Policy Plan: Municipal Board and Staffing Constraints

## Goal

Massachusetts' rural municipalities need a more streamlined workforce training system, better tools to share staffing, and stronger recruitment and retention programs for both town staff and local officials.

## Key Rural Municipal Board and Staff Capacity Issues

Massachusetts' rural municipalities face serious challenges in finding and retaining qualified candidates for numerous positions that are critical to effective government functioning. In addition, many towns struggle to find members for the town boards, committees, and commissions that form the backbone of Massachusetts local government.

1. In Massachusetts, there is no formal education and training pipeline for many vital municipal positions; employees must frequently learn on the job. Positions of particular concern are town administrators, assessing staff, building inspectors, town accountants, treasurer/collectors and health inspectors. In the smaller governments typical in rural areas, these single staff positions generally comprise an entire department and they are therefore not able to learn from a manager or predecessor.
2. The limited financial resources available to small towns results in lower wages and part-time hours, hampering attraction and retention of employees. Another factor is the looming wave of baby boomers expected to retire from key municipal roles while the millennials that could backfill these jobs are re-investing in urban communities and less likely to relocate to rural areas for work.
3. Given the above challenges, rural communities are particularly reliant on the existence of a robust set of municipal volunteers on planning boards, conservation commissions, boards of health, boards of assessors, finance committees and more. Yet, over the past decades, there has been a dramatic decrease of availability of these volunteers at town level. Many town elections have few or no contested elections while vacancies on appointed boards result in a lack of quorum and the ability to conduct business. This declination is the outcome of both a decrease in rural manufacturing and farming jobs that were once within the community and cultural shifts in how people want to volunteer their time and money

*Examples that highlight the issue*

Of particular concern in terms of volunteer and staffing constraints is the dearth of qualified first responders -- both staff and volunteers. The growing requirements for training and certification for EMTs and Firefighters is an additional barrier to those mentioned above, and many departments are in crisis mode, with fewer than a handful of first responders available in Charlemont, for example.

### **Existing Policies and Programs**

- **DOR/DLS Community Compact Grant Program** -- Among the best practices that towns can apply for funding to meet are exploring cross-jurisdictional sharing projects for municipal staffing roles.
- **Annual Certification Programs** -- A number of municipal staff roles have optional annual certifications that provide continuing education and baseline training. Not enough of these programs offer legislatively required financial incentives for those who complete them, and few are mandatory. Some examples include Suffolk University's Certificate Program, MA Collector/Treasurer, MA Accountants, DLS Assessors Training, and the Local Public Health Institute. Among the few municipal roles in the state with required credentials are Veterans Service Officers, Building Commissioners and Inspectors, and Animal Control Officers.
- **Optional Training and Certification for Board Members**— Relatively few certification programs exist for municipal officials, and many have annual or biannual continuing education programs in a centralized location(s) that are challenging for rural officials to reach. Training programs include the MA Assn of Health Boards Certification, the Citizen Planner Training Collaborative annual series, and the MA Board of Library Commissioners' Trustee Institute.
- **Local Government Workforce Skills Gap Report** -- The Local Government Workforce Skills Gap Report is the product of a working group convened by Lieutenant Governor Karyn Polito. It contains a number of recommendations to address a statewide challenge in recruitment that would benefit rural communities, including workforce training, mentorship, and greater civics education.

### **Best Practices**

- **Citizens Academies** are designed to educate residents and offer the opportunity to engage in committee and board work. They are also an opportunity for residents to provide better-informed feedback to Town departments, board, and committees. Programs are typically designed to present information about how government works and important questions facing the Town; and develop a pool of informed residents who would be willing to serve as local leaders on boards, committees, and commissions. They also help citizens to participate more effectively in Town Meetings, particularly by increasing an understanding of the budget process. Local models include those in Lexington, Easthampton, Pittsfield, and others. Bringing these to more rural communities is an idea with promise.
- **Supplementing Staff through Senior Tax Work-Off and Student Internship Programs** - Senior tax programs typically match “volunteers” to assist departments in exchange for a tax abatement yet the level of applicants with advanced qualifications to the key roles referenced above is lacking. Efforts to match young people with government work such as in the towns of Westminster and Sutton hold promise.
- Suffolk University Certificate program

## Recommendations

1. **The Legislature and professional associations should invest in training programs for municipal roles.** A cluster of recommendations was identified in this area. They include increasing the frequency of professional organizations’ existing programs while also opening programs to non-members and those not currently working in local government; codifying informal practices like the DLS new Town Managers; creating college credit workforce training opportunities; and increasing use of online training.
2. **The Legislature should pass the volunteer ambulance driver legislation.** This bill (S.1416/H.1857) would allow struggling local emergency medical services to use non-EMTs to drive ambulances, making better use of scarce first responder resources in rural areas.
3. **The Legislature should create and pass changes to retiree work restrictions for critical municipal shortages.** Such a bill would relax restrictions for those willing to work to provide technical assistance as circuit riders in rural towns.
4. **The Administration and RPAC should implement the recommendations of the Local Government Workforce Skills Gap Report.** The state should provide funding for campaigns to increase engagement in local government volunteerism, including: an educational media campaign to encourage local government service; creation of a

template curriculum for Citizens Academies to encourage volunteerism; and ensuring that the new legislative requirement for K-12 civics education, includes a specific focus on local government. The Mass HIRES network should create a consolidated municipal job posting site across all municipalities similar to the model in Maine.

5. **The Legislature should create and pass legislation to make it easier to transition town roles from elected to appointed**, currently a cumbersome process. Making this change easier to effect would greatly improve the quality of important town government functions, as well as make them easier to share with neighboring towns.
6. Expand workforce credential requirements or stipends for achieving certification (treasurer/collectors, town clerks)

**Relevant reports:** Special Commission on Local and Regional Health, Municipal Workforce Skills Gap Report

**List of Stakeholders for Appendix.** Many people, agencies and organizations were consulted in the drafting of this Plan. Recommendations contained in this document are not necessarily supported or endorsed by all parties listed below.

- Massachusetts Municipal Association
- Small Town Administrators of Massachusetts
- MA Dept of Revenue Division of Local Services
- Regional Planning Agencies: MRPC, FRCOG, CMRPC
- MA Treasurer Collector Association
- MA Municipal Accounting Association
- MA Assn of Assessing Officers
- Assn of Town Finance Committees
- Suffolk University
- Community College Workforce Programs
- MA Firefighters Association
- Fire Chiefs Associations
- MA DPH State Office of Rural Health
- MA DPH Office of Local and Rural Health
- Local Public Health Institute
- Special Commission on Local and Regional Health

