Off to a Great Start

Ideas for Creating a Comprehensive Elected Official Orientation Program

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Introduction

You’ve just had an election and there are newly elected officials on your governing body. The next step is to establish an orientation to provide them with all of the tools to be successful in this new journey. But, you are unsure about what is necessary for an effective orientation. This article serves as a guideline for what should be included in commission council orientations.

Responsibilities and Duties

The League’s Governing Body Handbook: A Reference for Elected Municipal Officials serves as a valuable tool for municipal elected officials and incorporates provisions explaining major federal and state laws concerning municipal operations. It also includes practical ideas and suggestions for those in public service.

An important topic in the Handbook is the essential responsibilities and duties of elective office. Responsibilities and duties include reading; training and education; observation; consultation with residents; interaction with advisory boards; and attendance at and participation in Governing Body meetings.

• Reading. An elected official should familiarize themselves with the issues before the Governing Body, especially before meetings with agendas and other supporting materials.

• Training and Education. The League offers various trainings and educational opportunities for officials to amplify their public service careers. Offerings include Regional Suppers, Governing Body Institute, the Annual Conference, and the Municipal Training Institute to name a few.

• Observation. General observation of the appearance and functions of the city can assist in pinpointing and preventing issues.

• Consultation with Residents. Engaging with residents is a tool in remaining accessible after election. Attendance at community events, hosting town halls, and responding to residents’ phone calls or emails are easy ways to continue citizen interactions and to receive input.

• Interaction with Advisory Boards. While the Governing Body typically makes final decisions, officials should keep in mind those that volunteer on boards and commissions. Differences in opinions are inevitable but it is extremely important to express appreciation for the contributions of those on boards to their betterment of the city.

• Attendance at and Participation in Governing Body Meetings. Attendance at meetings is perhaps the most important responsibility. Meetings are a platform for residents to see what the Governing Body’s priorities are and to meet the council.
Depending on the community that a council serves, responsibilities and duties may vary and it is an important discussion to have.

**Important Documents**

A significant part of orienting a new elected official, or providing a refresher, is to equip governing body members with important city documents for reference. These documents can include the city code, list of officials with contact information, organizational charts, various community projects, and promotional materials.

New governing body members should familiarize themselves with the City Code relating to administrative issues and be aware that in Kansas the city procedures can be governed by state law, city charter ordinances, and ordinances. A list of officials with contact information is a significant document in times of questions, concerns, or emergencies. Organizational charts serve as a method to address the chain of command, especially when there are specific duties that must be done or concerns that need to be addressed by a specific individual. Clear organizational charts eliminate confusion within roles, lack of coordination among functions, failure to share ideas, and slow decision-making. Information about community projects equips governing body members with necessary background and current details, especially if a resident has questions. Promotional materials are a good way to introduce governing body members to city communication methods and the official social media of the organization.

There are countless other materials and documents that can be included in an orientation packet and they may be specific to a city such as procedural policies, board and committee lists, and strategic plans and priorities.

**How to Run Effective Meetings**

Governing body – also known as council – meeting planning and organization have great influence in what the body can accomplish. There are several factors that contribute to the success of effective meetings.

- **Master Meeting Calendar.** Preparing a calendar for the year with meeting times and special business information is a tool to outline the priorities of the council.
- **Prepare an Agenda.** Preparing a written agenda to be distributed to the council, the news media, and others that requested it via Kansas Open Meeting Act, in addition to memoranda and minutes, can assist in running efficient and effective meetings. However, discussion during meetings can be outside the scope of the agenda. It is important for officials, officers, and department heads to communicate about potential topics that can be brought forward.
- **Keep to the Schedule.** Beginning meetings on time and sticking to a schedule contributes to the efficiency of the meeting.
- **Use Motions to Permit Discussion.** It is a best practice for a city’s Governing Body to adopt a code of procedure and to require all persons to abide by it. Motions should be used to discuss any matter.
- **Use a Consent Agenda.** A special consent agenda can be used to approve multiple, routine items by a single motion and vote. These items can include minutes, payment of claims, and certain staff reports to name a few. If a councilmember wishes to talk about an item on the consent agenda, it must be separated from the consent agenda and considered at a later time on the regular agenda.
• **Use Committees.** Committees are designed to delegate matters and provide them with the necessary study by committees or officers to get full consideration and recommendation.

• **Public Comment.** If the city allows for public comment, it should be made clear to those appearing before the Governing Body that they have an allotted amount of time for their presentation. Public comment should be limited to only certain times.

• **Importance of Formal Procedures.** There should be a sense of formality and decorum that is appropriate for an official meeting. Without formal procedures, meetings become more inefficient and less effective.

**Conclusion**

For a governing body to function at its highest level, governing body members must be provided the necessary materials and information. Responsibilities and duties allow governing body members to understand the expectations of their public service. Important documents such as the city code, organizational charts, and promotional materials contribute to elected officials’ understanding the scope of their positions. Lastly, running effective meetings are vital to ensure that important topics are discussed in a timely manner. With these tools and assistance from staff and other governing body members, a governing body member should have all they need to be properly oriented and to begin their public service career. For more information regarding the League’s Governing Body Handbook, please visit the League website at lkm.org/store.

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### Orientation Packet Contents

- Governing Body Code of Procedure
- Current Budget
- Capital Improvement Plan
- Organizational Chart
- Roster of City Officials (elected and key staff with contact information)
- City Code
- Planning and Zoning Code
- Latest Audit
- Current Comprehensive Plan
- *Governing Body Handbook* (League Publication)
- Current Strategic Plan / Goal Setting Documents
- Rosters of all City Boards and Commissions
- Schedule of Meeting Times
- Code of Ethics Ordinance
- Statement of Substantial Interest
- *Kansas Open Meeting Act / Kansas Open Records Act Manuals* (League Publications)
- City Flyer on Public Information Requests
- City Newsletter / City Publications
- City Map with Wards (if applicable)
- City-Provided shirt or jacket
- City Manager/Administrator’s Contract

### Additional Items to Consider in Your Orientation Program:

- Appropriate HR forms
- Payroll forms (if needed)
- Security/access cards to City Hall (if needed)
- Purchasing card (if applicable)
- Business cards
- Name badge
- Name plates
- Set up appointment for official photo
- City E-mail address and login instructions
- City-provided technology (provide training as needed)
- Train elected officials on how to use Microphones or other technology in meeting room
- Request an official biography and preferred contact information for city website

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**Sources:**