

DAILY RECORD

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Miller's ethics advice travels well

by Bradley Parsons, Staff Writer

As an ethical adviser to politicians, Carla Miller never has to worry about staying busy.

Miller, a partner at Miller, Skinner & Jolley, also serves as the City of Jacksonville's co-ethics officer. She oversaw the development of the City's ethics code, which is attracting international attention as more governments grapple with institutional corruption.

To say the gospel of good ethics is catching on would be an understatement. Since Miller was quoted June 23 in a New York Times story on ethics programs, her travel schedule has gone from busy to chaotic.

Miller just returned from Santa Clara University where she presented ethics best practices to an Ethics and Leadership Camp, which Miller described to the Times as "Ethics Boot Camp."

Governments world wide are volunteering for duty under Miller. She consulted with Providence, R.I. on that city's ethics code and has been asked to bring her expertise to Iraq, which might be termed the ethics officers' Everest.

"I'm trying to assemble a team now to help Iraq's Integrity Office build up an ethics program," said Miller. "It's an essential part of the development of that young government. Without a strong Integrity Office and Inspector General, it will make a difficult job an almost impossible one."

That's because a government's legitimacy is linked to its integrity, said Miller. Corruption and unaccountability from leaders lead inevitably toward disillusioned followers, she said.

Miller said she'll have to give some consideration to cultural differences while building a program for Iraq. But she expects the basic principles of governmental ethics to travel well.

"You'd be surprised how universal some of the key elements to the program are," she said.

Miller has posted a list of ethics best practices on her Web site, CityEthics.org. Miller's Ethics Initiative urges the establishment of high standards followed by intensive education and procedures to keep government accountable.

Miller cautions against making guidelines too specific. The range of unscrupulous behavior presents too many possibilities to outlaw everything.

"If you look at federal regulations on gifts, there are 15 pages of specific gifts you can't take and I'm sure new ones will have to be added," she said. "You can't just project all the things a person might do wrong. You have to instill broad principles and hope that people are going to do the right thing even without a rule shoved in their face."

Jacksonville's ethics program was among the first to try this "Values-based" approach. In fact, Jacksonville was one of the first municipalities to concern itself with ethics.

Shortly after Miller volunteered to help develop Jacksonville's program in 1999, she called around to see what other cities were doing. She discovered that Jacksonville stepped ahead of the game just by getting started.

"I wanted to see what other cities were doing and what I discovered is: Jacksonville was way ahead of the pack," said Miller.

Today, Miller's Web site allows cities and ethics officers to swap best practices and keep up with new developments. As the demands on Miller's time have grown, the Web site has become an indispensable tool.

"I've got more than 100 cities on the site, all swapping ideas about what works and what doesn't," said Miller. "Just from the interest in the site and the number of calls I've received, you can see there's a huge emerging need for ethics programs."