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Boot camp for city officials teaches 'a culture of ethics'

At a seminar in California, municipal leaders learn how to stay on the straight and narrow in times of temptation.

By [Daniel B. Wood](#) | Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

SANTA CLARA, CALIF.

Wearing lanyards and camp T-shirts, the 23 "campers" sat in a circle in the dark around a flickering TV screen. They watched horror videos of real-life public officials who went astray, tempted by bribes, nepotism, and other shady opportunities to benefit themselves over the public they were elected to serve.

The viewers' "counselors" were ethics specialists wearing "moral compasses" around their necks and putting their "campers" - city officials and ethics commissioners from Florida, Texas, and Arizona - in simulated ethical dilemmas.

After hearing a tale of an Oklahoma official who sold her pharmacy rather than appear unethical in a legislative vote that might have benefited her business, one participant said, "I think that's stupid. Why sell your business just so the public can have more trust in the process?"

Billed as the first of its kind boot camp for municipal ethics, the two-day gathering here at Santa Clara University on June 21 and 22 could become a model, some experts say. It would serve as a way for local elected officials, academics, and ethics commissioners to prepare for ethical dilemmas that officials deal with in office.

"Usually when an ethics commissioner and public officials come together, it is with sweaty palms and high heart rate because it is an adversarial situation in the heat of battle," says conference designer Judy Nadler, former mayor of Santa Clara and senior fellow at the University's Markkula Center for Applied Ethics. "This was conceived as a way to see how they can both work together to support a culture of ethics in their cities to sidetrack problems before they happen."

Since the Watergate scandal in the 1970s, only a handful of national institutes devoted to ethics training for public officials have been created. State legislatures, police departments, and corporations often respond to one-time local events or seek to cover themselves when public-relations problems occur.

Not much attention has been paid to municipal governments, although they have more public servants than state and federal governments and are often not as savvy about possible ethical problems. Local governments in various states do have their own programs, but these often only meet minimal legal requirements.

Several high-profile scandals, including the collapse of Enron, drug doping in the Olympics, and steroid-abuse in baseball have resulted in a national trend to get serious about tackling ethics.

"Controlling conflicts of interest and self-dealing has been on the agenda of every government since the Ancient Greeks ...[but] I believe we are seeing something new and troubling," says Kirk Hanson, executive director of the Markkula Center. "Efforts to compromise the integrity of government are much more aggressive because the stakes are so much higher. The election of a friendly city council member or state legislator, or even the insertion of a short sentence into law, can now mean millions to a special interest group."

Instead of an intellectual exercise, organizers hoped to create an "experiential" component to help participants create real change in their cities. They took a silent walk to the local church

mission to reflect on their values and goals.

Public officials also tried to imagine how they would feel about seeing their own names in newspaper stories under real-life headlines: "Citizen group to impeach mayor"; "Attorneys sue city and council members." Or how positive behavior could generate different headlines: "Council member lauded for doing right thing"; "Mayor creates ethics commission."

The Markkula's "boot camp," which lasts two days, will become an annual event at the university, and Ms. Nadler has been asked to take it on the road.

"With this program, the Markkula Center is trying to go well beyond just the basic requirements of local and state laws," says Michael Josephson, founder of the Josephson Institute of Ethics. California has recently mandated two hours of ethics training for public officials, and other states require four or six hours.

Ethics theory, case studies, and the expertise of colleagues including Nadler, who has 25 years of public service, also helped participants get a better idea of their challenges. "I got a better feeling that the best ethics programs touch the subject every day, that it gets DNA coded into the organization at every meeting, every project," said attendee Terri Traen, general manager for the City of Scottsdale, Ariz. "Ethics is a daily, hourly enterprise."

The seminar brings together public officials from various states. "What is happening on this nationally is no one has yet been connected to anyone else," says Carla Miller, founder and president of City Ethics, which seeks to establish government ethics programs nationwide. Countries including Australia, Canada, China, Kosovo, and Iraq are asking her for guidance in setting up ethics programs in emerging democracies, she says. "They are looking to the US for the big picture in how to handle this, so we better have our house in order."