New Era for Government Training Service Organization

With 87 counties, 853 cities, 1,972 townships, 341 school districts, and numerous special districts, Minnesota ranks sixth in the nation in the number of local government entities. This strong emphasis on local governance has its benefits but also its challenges. For example, how do local policy makers, staff, and appointed officials in diverse settings and from diverse backgrounds gain the knowledge to make informed decisions about the future of their communities and the skills to work effectively with other stakeholder groups?

In 1976, CURA convened a group of local government officials, state legislators, and higher education representatives to address this very question. Government Training Service (GTS) was the result. Structured as a public, joint powers organization, its governing members have included the Association of Minnesota Counties, League of Minnesota Cities, Minnesota Association of Townships, Minnesota Regional Development Organizations, Minnesota School Boards Association, Minnesota State Colleges and Universities, State of Minnesota, and University of Minnesota.

The guiding principles behind the creation of GTS were to bring together the providers and consumers of education and training, to develop quality programs available to all local governments so that each local entity did not have to “reinvent the wheel,” and to consider economies of scale. What emerged was a vehicle ideally suited for addressing intergovernmental and multisector educational needs. Through the years, GTS proved to be a valuable training arm for smaller public sector groups and associations that did not have staff or expertise to address specific issues or problems in their communities. Conferences and workshops on topics as diverse as community policing, government information technology, violence in the community, or quality in education brought people together to develop a common understanding of the issue, learn about innovations and best practices in other communities, share diverse perspectives, solve problems, and sometimes even generate new knowledge.

Unfortunately, in times of major budget deficits, education and training are often the first budget items to be cut. Our small but critical Minnesota legislative appropriation, in place since 1981, was just one of many cuts made during the 2003 state legislative session. In addition, Local Government Aid was reduced significantly and legislation was passed limiting state contracts for the biennium. Finally, neighboring Minnesota Public Radio bought the building that housed the GTS office, forcing us to find new quarters. These factors converged to create an unpredictable future for GTS.

During nine months of discussion that involved representatives from the governing-member organizations, several things became clear. First, GTS provided valuable programs and services, and many clients wanted to continue working with the program. Second, our experience and expertise in collaborative efforts had potential benefits and applications for the nonprofit community in Minnesota as well. Finally, many new opportunities could be pursued through creation of a new structure, development of new products and services, and interaction with new audiences. Consequently, the GTS governing board decided to officially dissolve the joint powers organization on March 31, 2004, and member organizations transferred the GTS name, intellectual property, contracts, and monies to a newly incorporated nonprofit organization.

On April 1, 2004, staff came to work for the nonprofit Government Training Services (the addition of a small “s” to our name heralded a big event!). We have a new seven-member transition board, charged with creating bylaws and policies to govern the new entity, and recruiting a permanent governing board by the beginning of our first full fiscal year on January 1, 2005. Our transition board members include three individuals from the previous governing board—Monica Dwyer Abress, Mark Karnowski, and Brenda Norman—as well as Helene Johnson, Stuart Mason, Bob Ryan, and Patty Wilder. Their time and effort working on these important tasks have been greatly appreciated.

Today, the new GTS has an expanded mission and a different address. We are now located at 2233 West University Avenue in St. Paul, in a building shared with many other nonprofit organizations. We dedicate our time to helping those who provide services to Minnesota citizens and communities meet current needs for knowledge and skills, and prepare for the changes to come. We continue to provide a full range of conference, education, and project management services, but we now place a stronger emphasis on bringing together intergovernmental and multisector groups to address issues that require concerted efforts by diverse stakeholders. These issues can arise on a statewide, countywide, or communitywide basis.

Recent initiatives have included facilitating citizen engagement efforts; offering a workshop titled Local Government 101 to various public and nonprofit audiences to help clarify the different functions of townships, cities, counties, and schools; and developing the GTS Training Network to provide discounted training opportunities to local government members throughout the state. Information on all programs and services offered by GTS is available at www.mngts.org.

During the past 27 years, the priorities and resources of each GTS member organization have evolved, the social context in our state has changed, technology has emerged as a key force, and budgets have cycled up and down. It has been a challenging but exciting journey. We are thankful to those who had the vision to create and guide GTS as a public organization, and are proud to carry on that legacy through a structure that is better adapted to the needs of today.

—Helene Johnson, executive director of Government Training Services