

Lifelong learning

MTA conferences, workshops help officials master their roles & responsibilities

MTA's Professional Development Retreat was nothing short of a lifeline for **Debbie Eckhout**.

The brand-new treasurer of **Arcadia Township** (Manistee Co.) was completely green when she took office July 1, 2015. So when she had the chance to attend MTA's *Treasurer's Retreat* that September, she jumped at it.

Eckhout spent the two days at Boyne Highlands scribbling pages of notes and listening to advice from other treasurers. When she returned to work, she referred constantly to her notes and handouts any time she needed information on investments, personal property tax collection and her statutory duties.

"Starting out so green in this job is intimidating," Eckhout told MTA. "Knowledge is power! Handling \$2.5 million in taxes collected is a huge responsibility. MTA has helped a lot with building my confidence."

Public service isn't an easy job

Being a township official is not an easy job. How does an individual make the move from citizen to elected leader? Where does one learn how to effectively lead a community, carry out statutory duties and serve as a board member? What mechanisms are in place to provide ongoing awareness of, and guidance about, new laws and court cases that affect

townships? Who can offer insight and solutions for problems that arise throughout the year?

Professional development is the tool that enables an elected leader to successfully carry out his or her role as public servant. And MTA is dedicated to ensuring that all township officials—from those newly elected to public office to those who have served townships for decades—have the same opportunity that Eckhout had when she first took office.

MTA educational workshops and conferences—held throughout the year, in all corners of the state—are designed to equip township officials to meet their statutory requirements and better serve residents in their community. Officials who attend these educational programs agree that they are essential for anyone who wants to do the best they possibly can in their job. And ultimately, the people who benefit are the community members, who can enjoy a township run by effective, knowledgeable leaders.

Lynda Sower, Otisco Township (Ionia Co.) clerk, has attended MTA trainings since 2012 and simply says, "I don't know how anyone could begin to do a good job in their township if they do not attend MTA's very helpful classes."

'Education is key'

MTA's Annual Educational Conference & Expo (www.michigantownships.org/conference.asp) is the can't-miss event for township officials who want to expand their knowledge and up their game. This premiere event brings together more than 1,000 officials for three days of education and networking, as well as pre-conference educational opportunities. MTA strives to gather the very best local government thought-leaders, trend-watchers, and policy and governance experts to create a learning experience that's not available anywhere else. There's also plenty of time for township officials to network with one another, whether it's in a class, at the expo or during an after-hours evening event.

In years past, attendees braved the freezing January temperatures to travel to the Conference. Those days are coming to an end, as we are switching to a spring Conference. The 64th Annual Conference & Expo is scheduled for April 10-13, 2017, right in our state's capital.

Somerset Township (Hillsdale Co.) Clerk **Deb Spicer** hasn't missed a Conference since she was elected in 1996. Her eyes were opened at her first-ever event 20 years ago to what her responsibilities were and how she can make informed decisions. She knows that continuing education is crucial to being an effective leader, and she has tried to attend every seminar she can that pertains to her job.

"Education is key to being an effective elected official and being responsible to your residents," Spicer said. "Being in government is nothing like a regular business. There are so many do's and don'ts that you can and can't do."

'Information shared, new ideas given'

While Conference is our premiere event, it is far from the only opportunity for education. MTA provides a wide variety of educational workshops throughout the state each year. Topics range from the basic "nuts and bolts" duties of township officials, to advanced policy issues that our members face. All programs are tailored to address core competencies for elected township officials, and they're held everywhere from the northern tip of the Upper Peninsula to southeast Michigan, and all regions in between.

Coldwater Township (Branch Co.) Clerk **Diane Morrison** came away from MTA's recent *Election Tips and Tricks* workshop with plenty of ideas for making the township's elections run more smoothly. It's one of the many seminars and conferences she's attended since 2006, something she credits with helping her and her fellow board members become more knowledgeable and professional.

"Township government is not run like the private industry. There are statutory duties, rules and laws that we need to follow," Morrison said. "Between the speakers and fellow township officials, there is information that is shared and new ideas that are given to become an efficient, professional and knowledgeable member of your township board, making training a valued asset to taxpayers."

From our annual *Board of Review Training* each February, to office-specific training at our *Professional Development Retreats*, MTA offers half- and full-day sessions, evening

classes and multi-day events to accommodate a variety of schedules. Every other year, MTA also heads north for our *UP North Summit*, where officials spend two days attending general sessions and breakouts—in the beauty of Michigan's Upper Peninsula.

Don't want to travel far? Let MTA come to you! *MTA On the Road* regional meetings (see page 20 for the remaining dates of this year's tour) bring updates on the latest issues affecting townships to nearly every area of the state. Attendees leave armed with information and strategies to make their board more effective and better serve their residents.

To accommodate the schedules of today's busy township officials, MTA also offers webcasts—delivering MTA training online straight to your township hall, office, local library or home. Every March and November, members can take advantage of a special 50 percent discount on all MTA webcasts (see the inside back cover for details).

For township officials who want to bring their learning to the next level, MTA offers our Township Governance Academy (TGA). This voluntary credentialing program is intended to give township board members the knowledge and skills they need to make effective decisions for the benefit of their township. Graduates leave the program with new ideas and "best practices" on how to deal more effectively with everyday issues that their board faces.

'Keep yourself as informed as you can'

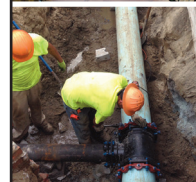
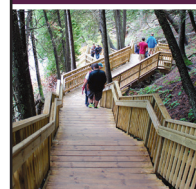
Without attending MTA's education programs, Sower said she would not have known about many state and federal laws as well as other changes she needed to make at her township.

"Learning is beneficial to keep things running smoothly," she said. "Thank you, MTA, for being there for me whenever I need you."

Spicer agreed. "I can't stress enough how important it is, as an elected official, to keep yourself as informed as you can. Things are changing every day, and without the help and knowledge that is available through MTA, elected officials would not be able to do their jobs efficiently. Education is key to doing your job effectively, so get as much as you can!"

Stay in the loop about MTA educational offerings by visiting the "MTA Training" page on www.michigantownships.org, looking for registration brochures mailed to each township, watching your email inbox for eblasts, and checking out the "Knowledge Center" section in each issue of *Township Focus*!

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