

## ‘An invaluable service’ Officials turn to Member Information Services for answers, advice

**D**oug Stier has the Michigan Townships Association on speed dial. Any time the **Ray Township** (Macomb Co.) treasurer has a township question, he turns to MTA’s Member Information Services (MIS) Department.

Stier credits former MIS Liaison Jim Beelen, whom he called his “go-to guy,” with helping him learn the ropes when he was a brand-new treasurer. Years later, Stier still calls MIS on a regular basis. He knows that no matter what the issue is, he can always get an answer when he calls MTA. “Our entire board agrees that this service is invaluable,” Stier said.

Answering questions is the name of the game for the MIS Department. Five days a week, their sole responsibility is making sure members have the information they need to perform their duties well and serve the public effectively and efficiently. From morning to evening, MIS staff take calls from township officials on all facets of township governance and administration—from wondering when new officials can be sworn in, what their township can lawfully purchase or how a new law will impact their job.

Some days, each of the MIS staff will take as many as 30 calls. And when they’re not taking calls, they’re busy responding emails and faxed inquiries.

No question is too difficult or too obvious, MIS Director Michael Selden said. “That’s what we’re here for. That’s part of the value of your membership dues—the access to our department,” he said. “We answer some very complicated questions that take quite a bit of research, time and effort. And we answer a lot of simpler questions that are often just a quick phone call. People sometimes feel like they’re bothering us, but what our entire department does is answer those questions.”

For 17 years, MTA has offered a truly unique and invaluable service to members through its MIS department. The Association searched intentionally and purposefully for staff with a breadth and depth of knowledge and local government experience. In addition to an understanding of state statutes and best practices, the three MIS employees can draw from their extensive background to provide member township officials with common-sense answers, advice, reassurance—and sometimes just a listening ear. It’s a service that’s virtually unheard of among other associations in Michigan and beyond.

## An MTA core value

Answering member questions has always been a part of MTA's core values, but it wasn't always its own department. When MTA first started, a variety of staff took member phone calls in addition to their other duties until 1985, when a staff member was hired to exclusively answer questions and teach workshops, while others continued to take calls here and there. The number of staff devoted to member questions and workshops was expanded to two in 1996.

It wasn't until MTA was reorganized in the year 2000 when the function became a recognized department with a director. Long-time MTA employee Evelyn David, who retired from the Association after 21 years in 2009, was the first department director.

Today, the department is staffed with three individuals who each bring their unique backgrounds and expertise to the job.

Selden joined MTA in 2015 after a combined nine years as a city manager in Bangor and Wayland, Mich. With his experience, in addition to a master's degree in public administration from the University of Michigan in Flint, he's well-equipped to offer advice on everything from budgets to personnel and everyday township operations. He also has a background in working with police and fire departments, as well as writing grants and media relations.



Selden



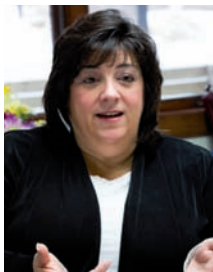
Mullhaupt

MTA veteran Catherine Mullhaupt has held a variety of roles at the Association since joining in 1991, and she is now staff attorney. She provides township officials and employees with information and resources regarding the day-to-day functions of township government.

Her areas of expertise include, but are not limited to, administrative policies, board responsibilities, the Freedom of

Information Act, millage questions and special assessments. Mullhaupt has a Juris Doctor degree from Thomas M. Cooley Law School, and was admitted to the State Bar of Michigan in 2006, where she is a member of the Public Corporation Law Section Council.

MIS Liaison Cindy Davis has helped members with their questions since coming to MTA 13 years ago. A former **Williamstown Township** (Ingham Co.) clerk and planning commission member, she's been in the shoes of MTA members. "I have that experience of sitting at the board table," Davis said. "I've sat in those hot seats before." Davis also has a degree in human resource management, is a certified assessor, and is well-versed in cemetery management.



Davis

## Working to provide tools and knowledge

The hot topics that the MIS Department addresses change throughout the year, from board of review to the election season and beyond. And if the person you call doesn't know the answer to your question, they'll almost certainly be able to find it for you. "We have one another as resources. We operate as a team," Selden said. "We also work with MTA legal counsel so that if there are questions we aren't sure of, they can provide us with answers. While it's not official legal advice, it provides better direction for our members."

The MIS department works tirelessly to ensure that all MTA members have the tools and knowledge they need to best serve Michigan citizens. They don't want township officials to rely on what Davis calls "Martha's Law," meaning things are done a certain way because that's the way "Martha" always did it. "Maybe Martha isn't doing it correctly. It may not even be lawful," Davis said. "It's always better to check."

Selden always recommends calling, even if you think you know the answer to your question. "One simple call to do the right thing is a lot easier than doing the wrong thing, calling afterward and having to undo something you've already done," he said.

Each of the MIS staff works to ensure that members are as informed as possible, even beyond taking their questions. All three teach at a wide variety of MTA seminars and workshops, including *New Officials Training* as well as at the MTA Annual Educational Conference. Davis is an annual instructor at MTA's *Board of Review Training*, while Mullhaupt authors the popular "Hello, MTA...?" column in *Township Focus*. Each frequently attends MTA County Chapter meetings, conducting "mini workshops" on variety of topics. Additionally, the department maintains the "Answer Center," on the members-only section of [www.michigantownships.org](http://www.michigantownships.org) where members can find entire packets of resources and hundreds of topic pages with information.

**Larkin Charter Township** (Midland Co.) Clerk **Sandy Reardon** always looks forward to attending seminars taught by MIS staff. She's one of the department's regular callers and she knows she can rely on them for help any time a township issue comes up. "Without them, I would not be able to fulfill the expectations of my job and aid others in this elected position," Reardon said.

## Got township questions?

### MTA's got answers!

Member township officials and employees may contact MTA Member Information Services staff with questions Monday through Friday, from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Inquiries can be submitted via phone at (517) 321-6467, fax at (517) 321-8908, or email to:

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