

**THE STATE OF PUBLIC SECTOR  
ETHICS IN LOCAL CITY  
GOVERNMENT 2014**

**A CASE STUDY: CITY OF MCALLEN**

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The state of ethics in the public sector in 2014 is a huge topic. This commentary focuses on ethics in local city government. Many local cities have ethics written into their mission statements in the form of value statements. For example, part of the mission statement for the City of McAllen, Texas stresses three core values: “Integrity: Devoted to truth and honesty; Accountability: Provide courteous, open and responsible public service; and Commitment: Dedicated to responsiveness and excellence. ([http://www.mcallen.net/info/mission\\_stmt.aspx](http://www.mcallen.net/info/mission_stmt.aspx))”

This paper will be a case study of the City of McAllen and how they put ethics into practice from the code of ethics that are part of those of the American Society of Public Administration (ASPA). This paper focuses on the three common areas of the City of McAllen's and ASPA's code of ethics which, when followed, can improve ethical behavior, and cities are being guided by values to improve their decision making. They are employing ethics to 1) advance the public interest, 2) promote democratic participation and 3) promote an ethical organization ([http://www.aspanet.org/public/ASPA/Resources/Code\\_of\\_Ethics/ASPA/Resources/Code\\_of\\_Ethics](http://www.aspanet.org/public/ASPA/Resources/Code_of_Ethics/ASPA/Resources/Code_of_Ethics)).

There are many definitions for ethics in the public sector. The definition that will be used in this paper is from Professor Donald C. Menzel's book, *Ethic Moments in Government*: “Ethics are values and principles that guide right and wrong behavior” (Menzel, 2010). Ethics is crucial today in the public sector, especially in local government. These city employees are tasked to be ethical in their decision making, especially the executive office which includes the City Manager, Fire Chief, Police Chief, Public Works department head, and Park and Recreations

department head to name a few. Public administrator's lives are less stressful when they instill ethical values in their city. The consequence of not making ethical decisions is mistrust and even, in the extreme, jail time for public officials who are dishonest when dealing with public funds.

This paper will focus on three areas where public sector ethics can be encouraged and are advancing the public interest, promoting democratic participation and promoting an ethical organization.

First, a very important focus area in public sector ethics today in local government is advancing the public interest which starts with the City Manager. His or her role is to know the current and long-term goals of their citizens. Public distrust is common place and City Managers need to change this perception. City Managers, such as in what has been done in McAllen, Texas, can do this by letting the public know what is behind the decisions being made and how they will benefit the city in the long run. Raymond Cox, III in his article for the PA Times in March 2003 mentions:

“How does an ethical perspective help leaders make hard choices? Hard choices imply not only a complicated situation, but also a desire to act ethically, a focus on the outcome of the decision and a willingness to accept public scrutiny both during the decision and after the outcome is known” (Cox, 2003).

It is also greatly important to inform the public in advance of their decisions. Cox explains that public servants need to demonstrate a “willingness to explain to others how the decision is made, before it is made” (Cox, 2003). Local city government leaders help change the perception of distrust among its citizens as they listen and better understand the needs of the community. A big part of this is customer service. Linda deLeon and Robert B. Dehart make this point in their joint research article, *The Political Theory of Reinvention*:

“Certainly, no one would argue with the idea that government should provide the highest quality service to its citizens, within the constraints of the law and available resources. Similarly, many state and local governments in the United States and abroad are making efforts to improve customer service” (deLeon & Denhardt, 91: 2000).

The second area of public sector ethics on which local city governments focus in promoting ethical values is democratic participation. One way a city can achieve ethical behavior is by sharing information with their citizens through public announcements and hearings. City governments need to be sure that as many of its citizens know about and participate in these types of interactions as possible. They can do this by using their communication resources for the city’s website, social media, cable TV and public announcements--on the radio, billboards and signs on public transportation. Citizens excited about and wanting to participate in local government are the starting point to promoting democratic participation. According to Robert Denhart ( 2002) : “...citizens still want to act. They are proud of their communities and their country and they want to help bring about positive change...These activities constitute “laboratories of citizenship” today, arenas in which people are seeking to work out new relationships one with another.”

Transparency is also an important factor for building trust in citizens and getting their participation. Cities can do this by posting the yearly budget as well as decisions that are made on a weekly basis on their website, through regular public news releases and by local citizens in neighborhood councils. Recently the city of McAllen has updated its website and technology software to better serve its citizens by having a 311 number to route all calls and answer complaints and request services. ([www.mcallen.net](http://www.mcallen.net)) According to Cooper and Kathi (2005), “It is argued that if public policies are set to satisfy societal values, then it is desirable that local city agencies involve citizen organizations like neighborhood councils in planning and delivery of services.”

The third and final focus area in public sector ethics discussed in this paper is promoting an ethical organization. One way this is done is by hiring new employees based on skills and competency and promoting current employees based on merit. In the City of McAllen every employee wears a name badge and on the back of the badge it has the city's ethics in their mission statement. ([www.mcallen.net/hr](http://www.mcallen.net/hr)) This brings honesty and integrity to local city government. Where corruption and dishonesty have become the norm among politicians, local government can be different by showing its ethical values.

ASPA mentions the key for promoting an ethical organization is for it to “strive to attain the highest standards of ethics, stewardship, and public service in organizations that serve the public” ([www.aspanet.org/codeofethics](http://www.aspanet.org/codeofethics)). Cities that require its employees to have continual education and training show the public the governmental workers are competent professionals. These trainings include technology, cultural competence and conflict resolution and so provide appropriate steps towards an ethical organization.

This occurs when local government employees, such as in the case of the City of McAllen, see themselves as public servants and stewards of the public's property and treasure. As local city governments take on the stewardship mentality, they are less likely to waste public funds and focus can be made on effective and efficient ways to spend public resources. “The leader serves as a role model for his or her subordinates about the types of behaviors that are seen as ethically acceptable and how ethical problems and questions should be addressed” (Reed and Cohen, 1, 2011).”

In conclusion, public sector ethics in 2014 is alive and very important to local city government. As McAllen city leaders place ethical values at the forefront of their decision

making and policy decisions, they have confidence from the public. McAllen city government leaders show their commitment to ethics by focusing on areas of improvement which include advancing the public interest, promoting democratic participation and promoting ethical organizations. As these steps are taken, local city administrators let their citizens know they are putting them first and are truly acting in their best interests; trust is improved and participation increases.

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