

The 5 Keys to Successful SHARED Services



By Susan Bass Levin
Commissioner, Department of Community Affairs



Commissioner Levin awards a \$250,000 COUNT Grant to the Somerset County Business Partnership in September 2006. The grant will allow SCBP to expand its role in planning and facilitating a new level of shared service initiatives among the Somerset County Administration, the county's 21 municipalities and 19 school districts, the County Vocational & Technical School and Raritan Valley Community College.

Let's use common sense. Traffic doesn't stop at a town's border. Neither do things like weather, crime, public safety or emergency services. When problems cross local boundaries, so too should the solutions. Partnerships work. Sharing services reduces costs and duplication without affecting the quality of the work and, thereby, increases government efficiency.

Governor Corzine and the state Legislature are taking action. At the end of July, as part of the Special Session on Property Tax Reform, the Joint Legislative Committee on Government Consolidation and Shared Services was created. The committee has been meeting regularly to hash out state government's role in encouraging shared services.

Governor Corzine understands that shared services are a key component to achieving real property tax reform for the long term. At DCA, we have implemented initiatives that already allow local governments to start realizing the benefits of shared services arrangements.

Our SHARE Program provides grants to study and implement new joint services. As we better assess the shared services needs of New Jersey's municipalities, we adapt our program whenever and wherever possible.

Sharing services may not cut our property taxes in half, but it does show that we care about making government work better.

This isn't about complex academic analysis—it's about practical government, doing more with less and providing the highest quality of service to our communities.

Isn't that why you ran for office or decided to serve in local government in the first place? It's about making a difference in the lives of our residents.

Sharing services makes good economic sense. It is the practical, real world application of the law of supply and demand. You have limited resources to meet the increasing demands for services. The keys to success in this area are leadership, communication, imagination, common sense and flexibility/willingness to compromise.

Leadership

Shared services start with an idea and someone who is willing to push and bring that idea to fruition. Success depends on strong local leadership and support from local elected officials, who will provide the spark

and the follow through. But you have to push—it can take months, sometimes years.

Elected officials and administrators should meet with their counterparts in neighboring towns and the school

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Communication

Communication—both formal and informal—is essential to shared services. The first “sharing” should be shared communications—both within your boundaries (schools, fire districts, libraries) and globally outside your community. Reach out to your local peers—you don't need to wait for an invitation.

district. Build trust with one another. Organize quarterly or semi-annual meetings. Identify common needs, discuss planned projects or goals, and consider how you might work together. Whatever time frame works for you, set a schedule and keep to it.

Before doing anything new (new hires, new equipment), see if another

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town or your school district can share. Before bidding for goods and equipment, check cooperative purchasing contracts, especially the county system. And remember; don't overlook your library, fire districts, volunteer fire companies, and local, regional and county level authorities.

Imagination

Be open to new ideas. Don't fall into the "we have always done it this way" trap. Try new things—or at least think about new things. Not every idea for a shared service may be practical, but the more you consider, the more likely you'll find success.

Common Sense

Sharing services is all about common sense. You can start with relatively simple, small and even obvious opportunities and build on success toward more complex service areas. Plan, prepare and implement, just as you would any other campaign.

Sharing services can have as much emotional content as programmatic. Besides working out the technical aspects, pay attention to perceptions of inequality or unfair advantage and take the necessary precautions to address and correct them. Develop clearly worded, understandable agreements that spell out the duties, rights and obligations of each participant. And make sure you put it in writing.

SHARED SERVICES

AND HOME RULE ARE NOT ONLY COMPATIBLE BUT INTEGRAL TO AN EFFECTIVE LOCAL GOVERNMENT.

Flexibility/Willingness to Compromise

If you can't reach an agreement on one service or program, don't let that prevent other attempts. Use all of your available resources to the best of your ability. Staff and employees have the experience and skills you need. Get them involved. Where additional help is needed, call us (609-292-6613).

One last but important point to consider is that we must be willing to compromise: Have you ever found yourself thinking, "What does that tiny little town know about sophisticated government?" Or, "What can that big city possibly know about community spirit?" It's hard enough to get your council to stay with you—right mayors? And wow, mayors can be so stubborn and self-centered sometimes—right council members? And elected officials just think about the next election—right all of you administrators? That kind of thinking won't help if we are going to make shared services work.

We need to let go of those balloons and work together with our neigh-

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bors. Shared services and home rule are not only compatible but integral to an effective local government. Using interlocal agreements to share services allows local officials to establish the terms, conditions, service levels and costs that best meet the needs of their communities. The time has come for us to work together to make a significant impact on the future of local government in New Jersey.

Shared Services Incentives

DCA's SHARE Program, short for Sharing Available Resources Efficiently, provides financial assistance to local governments—including municipalities, counties, fire districts, school districts and nonprofits that act as regional coordinators—for the study or implementation of shared and regional services between local entities.

The SHARE Program has awarded more than \$4.2 million in 86 grants over the last two years. The program offers feasibility study grants and implementation grants. A few months ago we announced new guidelines that include:

- 10 percent local match for feasibility studies
- Implementation grants now up to \$200,000 with no local match
- A new COUNT Grant for counties and regional organizations
- SHARE has no application deadlines. We are ready when you are.

Formerly, feasibility grants were offered up to \$20,000, provided the applicant matched 50 percent. The required match has been reduced to 10 percent.

Implementation grants, formerly up to \$100,000, are now up to \$200,000. And we have eliminated the local match requirement, which had been 25 percent.

Our recently introduced COUNT program is aimed specifically at county governments, encouraging them to use their central positions to coordinate shared services arrangements among local entities. The ceiling for COUNT grants is \$100,000. But we have extended them from one-year to three-year grants, so that the maximum an applicant can receive is \$100,000 a

year for three years. No matching funds are required.

COUNT grants are bringing new players onto the field. So far, six counties have received grants. These grants underwrite county efforts to identify and facilitate new shared service opportunities.

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Atlantic, Camden, Cape May, Monmouth, Somerset and Union Counties will each have a full time Shared Service Coordinator's position. Besides working to expand the county's capabilities in shared services, these coordinators will work with local and school officials to identify, develop and implement new shared services between local units. They also plan countywide and regional meetings on

shared services topics. The county's role is to assist and facilitate. Reach out to them and see how they can help you.

If your county has not yet applied for a COUNT Grant, encourage your freeholders to do so. COUNT assistance is available for up to \$300,000 over three years.

DCA also offers a Best Practices Handbook, available online at www.nj.gov/dca, which walks you through the process of getting started, identifying partners and programs, developing agreements and using SHARE Grants.

If you would like more information about DCA's SHARE Program, please contact our Division of Local Government Services at 609-292-6613. ▲



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