

# MTAS: Where yesterday is the

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Birthed amidst a swirl of social, economic, and industrial changes, the post World War II period, the Municipal Technical Advisory Service (MTAS) has remained a source of stability for Tennessee's municipalities since April 15, 1949. Anticipating the needs of towns and cities for the past 60 years, the agency has illuminated the path of local governments well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century with a tradition of consulting services and training opportunities unsurpassed by any other state agency in the nation.

"MTAS is a jewel a lot of other states do not have," said former MTAS consultant Randy Williams, director of Client Services at TML's Risk Management Pool. Williams, who once served as interim MTAS Executive Director in the 1980s, marvels how the agency's efforts on behalf of cities throughout the years are never static.

"There are some seeds planted years ago by MTAS that are just now coming into fruition," Williams said. "A lot of times, MTAS would produce an earlier study that would be shelved, and then later dusted off to become part of a city's charter. MTAS is a mechanism for municipal staff to work better with elected officials, a mutual third party that strives to enhance changes and a great informational resource for new administrators or other government officials, particularly those who might move here from out of state."

By its 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary, MTAS had flexed its muscles, establishing branch offices all across the state. Gone were the two-day commute from the Knoxville office to reach and serve cities. Rapid advances in technology and the information highway loomed large and the scope of local government needs would be expanding. Education and training of employees and city officials would become a necessity and the services provided by the original four consultants would branch out and diversify from areas of law, accounting, management, and public relations into municipal areas in wastewater, fire and police departments, human resources and computer technology.

Support staff member Anne Lowe, who served more than four decades with MTAS before her 1998 retirement, recalls this challenging period. "Technology changed how we assimilated and distributed information to cities," said Lowe. "As a clerk typist in 1956, I originally took my typing test on an old Royal manual typewriter. Then came electric, and copy machines, word processors and the CPT computer where we typed a lot of codes and

as quickly as I learned one program; it would be time to learn another all over again." Cities were struggling with technology as well, some more than others, said MTAS finance and accounting specialist Ken Joines, who came on board in 1970.

"People were afraid of computers," Joines explains. "Only five cities had computers when I began. The cost simply was not within reach for some cities. Most, if they had computers, didn't need my expertise. Some people were more adaptable to learning than others. Then, there were cities where people had no experience in bookkeeping. I'd say debit or credit and they'd look at you like you had spoken a foreign language." Joines retired in 1997, after serving 27 years including a period as MTAS assistant executive director in 1982.

As career fields became less gender oriented, more women were becoming interested in serving in the field as MTAS consultants. "I was hired in 1984 to work in the areas of water and waste water," said Sharon Rollins, consulting program manager, recalling her early years at the Nashville office as an engineering consultant. "My first call was to the city of Lakewood. I advised them about stormwater control and infrastructure issues. My first day at the office, I arrived to find my computer still in the box and a group of older male consultants. I was the only woman. I had interviewed in East Tennessee and thought I had made a mistake. But, they were kind to me and took me under their wings. We would have lunch together at the same cafeteria every day at 11:30."

In the coming years, the MTAS library would undergo radical changes as well. Under the direction of Elizabeth McNutt and then Elizabeth Sodemann, who retired in 1980, the broad collection of reference materials was primarily geared toward the education of consultants, "a wealth of knowledge on operating trends in municipal government that would deepen the effectiveness and authority of the consultant's advice."

Following Sodemann's 1980 retirement, the goal of applying the MTAS library at the state level fell into the capable hands of Carol Hewlett, who earned her masters degree in library science from the University of Tennessee. "I worked as a Career Planning officer at U.T. when Dr. Hobday called and asked for librarian applicants," said Hewlett. "They recommended me. I was the first full time librarian. Elizabeth Sodemann had told Dr. Hobday that they needed one. At the time, there was not a lot of outreach to city officials and staff. Elizabeth Sodemann had the vision, and I carried it on."

Hewlett and a small staff of volunteers began conducting telephone and Internet surveys as a way to find out about general issues affecting cities.

"They were very popular," Hewlett recalls. "We'd call 10 or more libraries about



small issues relevant to municipalities or city officials; it was a short exchange, about 10 items about gas rates, fire, personnel, police. We shared the results with city officials, putting it on a data base and also writing up reports to give to consultants." Hewlett also assisted Tennessee's cities with managing their materials and information resources.

"We were unique in that very few users ever walked in the door, yet we were able to share a great deal of information," said Hewlett.

Leaving MTAS in 1999 for a job as head of the Moss Point Library in her home state of Mississippi, Hewlett is now Director of the Jackson George Regional Library in Pascagoula, Miss. She credits MTAS for her good foundation in local government.

"I am proud of MTAS. I would not have been as prepared for my work without them. Now, whenever I visit a local government, it's like meeting old friends," she said.

Ten years ago passed since the torch was passed to Frances Adams-O'Brien. With a Masters in Library Science from the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, overseeing the transference of the library's hard copy materials to data base fell under her leadership and is a crowning achievement in bringing municipal information and resources instantly to consultants and cities.

In addition to consultant requests, the MTAS library now receives a substantial number of requests directly from cities and other entities across the state as well.

"Between January and July 2008, I had the chance to help 152 different cities. That's a lot of cities!" O'Brien said. O'Brien notes that compared with information requests of the 50s, dealing with rabies control, delinquent taxes or annexation of "fringe areas," today's requests have more to do with what other cities are doing about matters of importance, policies, job descriptions and salary information.

"Last winter, when there was a shortage of road salt, one city asked us to research the use of whey products for road deicing," she said.

Designing a single database, called Knowledgebase, that would provide access to legal opinions, RFP's, job descriptions, sample forms, ordinances/resolutions, reports, surveys and publications as well as MTAS studies, has been challenging, according to O'Brien. "Our goal was to create a "one stop" data base for customers. Knowledgebase is the most used database on the MTAS website," she added.

A pilot project in the following three months will provide live chat on the MTAS website where library staff will be available to field questions and requests through a free application called Meebo. Additionally, the library with the aid of consultants, plans to conduct a complete review of its 3,000 electronic documents as well as the other 10,000 print materials on hand to ensure that they are current and the best information available.

"We will continue to look at new technologies like Facebook, Twitter, and podcasting to see if any of those will help us to achieve our goals," O'Brien said. "I try to remember that the latest technologies are only a means to an end, not the end itself. We look at what we are trying to do and then for a tool that will help us do that. In the long run, the library will continue to be responsive to customer needs in work to anticipate customer's needs and to find new more efficient and innovative ways to provide municipal information resources."

In 2009, serving a state of more than 50 million people, MTAS annually completes more than 1,000 major municipal management projects and provides an average of 6,000 other services. Among these services, the delivery of municipal training by MTAS consultants is paving the highway of success for hundreds of city officials every year.

The Elected Official Academy (ELO) Municipal Administration Program course (MAP), Municipal Management Academy (MMA) and the agency's latest addition, the Certified Municipal Finance Officers Program (CMFO) helps to ensure that city officials and staff possess the necessary tools to perform day to day tasks.

While MTAS had nothing to do with the political lobbying that defined its founding father, Herb Bingham and the Tennessee Municipal League, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century the agency serves as a bridge for cities striving to stay abreast of legislative mandates.

"We have got to stay ahead, to keep cities progressive," said Kurt Frederick, municipal training consultant. Frederick coordinates and develops training classes with MTAS consultants and serves as institute director for the Tennessee Association of Municipal Clerks & Records. "We offer comprehensive training to cities free of charge with a time honored tradition of meeting city officials one on one," said Frederick. "The Elected Officials Academy has received more training requests than any year than ever before. Every time there is

# future and tomorrow's today

change in legislation, classes can be developed in areas such as planning and zoning requirements, codes and business tax changes. I'd say one of our biggest training challenges today is helping cities learn how to retain their original sense of character while in the middle of extensive development."

"Over the years, the city administration profession has grown as life becomes more complex," said Gary Jaekel, Nashville municipal management consultant. "Most were at one time, engineers. Now, city officials have to be certified to do what they do. You can't do

the job unless you're certified. We always are trying to make sure that the content of our classes is current and offer the timeliest information for Tennessee's cities.

Our biggest challenge is to stay on top of various legislation that applies to how organizations function, how to deliver water and sewer as changes are handed down by the federal government. We not only function as a bridge, but a bridge for cities and the federal and state government."

"Government financial matters have changed significantly over the last 25 years," agrees Dick Phebus, Finance and Accounting Consultant in Martin. "The most significant change was with the issue of GASB Statement 34 which redesigned the format in

which government financial reports are presented. The new statements focus on a government-wide perspective not just the individual funds as had been reported in the past. The CMFO program was established as a way to improve the financial competency in Tennessee municipalities. Many areas such as police, fire, water and sanitation, and sewer treatment; already require certified managers or employees, however, there was no such certification for the finance and accounting function. The program will enhance the finance officer's ability to properly account for and report mu-

accepted accounting principles as required by the state. The ability to record and report financial data in the most accurate and timely manner will assist management and elected officials in making important decisions in the future."

"I'm happy to be providing day to day help with municipal problems," said Rex Barton, police management consultant in Knoxville. "We provide an important contact between law enforcement and cities. We also have a lot of calls from cities wanting technical assistance with the courts. The Law Enforcement Training Academy and the Municipal Court Clerks training have stayed busy."

"Cities have a lot more hoops to jump through," said Ray Crouch, MTAS Fire Consultant. "Our biggest issue has been to explain that a volunteer fire department does not mean less training. We pushed hard for a Tennessee Fire and Codes Academy."

Ironically, Crouch was busy writing an upcoming MTAS Hot Topic article concerning the new firefighter minimum training law passed by the 2009 General Assembly. The law establishes a 16-hour class that must be taken by anyone who enters the fire service before responding to an emergency, requires that every firefighter take a basic firefighter class, as defined by the Tennessee Fire and Codes Academy, and provides exceptions for firefighters who already have five years experience.

"In the last 18 years, technology has gone from being an unnecessary gadget to an essential job-related tool," Crouch continued. "With gleam in his eye and pausing for dramatic effect, Crouch revealed a new MTAS project that will work in conjunction with the Tennessee Emergency Management Association (TEMA) combining technology with fire equipment resources. A geo-coded database will contain all the fire departments in the state and list the number of pumps and all other equipment on hand.

"If a city has an incident that is bigger than they can handle, TEMA will punch in a code and in a matter of seconds find out which city has the equipment that is needed," Crouch said. "We have already started training people in all nine development districts. Each county will designate a contact person. TEMA has a server, and MTAS has a server. In the event of a disaster, we'll still have all the data."

Today, the agency established at the University of Tennessee and charged in all matters related to municipal government, has provided more than 41,272 training hours to 6818 participants in 2008.

"As Tennessee cities face an increasing citizen demands and the need to provide more services to residents, we will ensure that MTAS is fully equipped to help municipal officials as they lead their communities," said Herb Tallent, MTAS executive director.

Today's MTAS can be described as a



complex tapestry, a web of brilliant minds, information bearers, teachers, leaders, shoulders to lean on, helping hands, listening ears. The relationship forged between the agency and the state's municipalities is more than unique; it's a convoluted mix of consultants and mayors, support staff and city managers, citizens and people from all walks of life who are involved with and care about cities. In a 60-year bond between an agency and the entities it pledged to serve since its creation in 1949. On its 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary and beyond, towns and cities will always have a friend in MTAS.

Photos from top left to right: Ann Lowe, retired support staff; Rex Barton, police management consultant; Sharon Rollins, consulting program manager; Ken Joines, retired finance and accounting specialist; Ray Crouch, fire management consultant; Frances Adams-O'Brien, MTAS librarian; Vic Hobday, former MTAS executive director, presents an award to former MTAS librarian, Carol Hewlett; Mike Tallent, MTAS executive director; Randy Williams, director of Client Services; TML Risk Management Pool; Kurt Frederick, municipal training consultant; Dick Phebus, finance & accounting consultant; Gary Jaekel, municipal management consultant; Herb Bingham, former TML executive director; Sue Dixon, former TML secretary; Jennie Moscovitz, former MTAS secretary; and Bob Lovelace, former MTAS fringe area consultant outside the Nashville office in the early 1950s.