

HARTFORD'S PURSUIT OF EXCELLENCE

The Town of Hartford may be "the most nationally accredited municipality in New England," according to Town Manager Hunter Rieseberg.

Hartford's "Pursuit of Excellence" program began three years ago as a way to enhance the quality and value of available public services and practices, as measured against national standards. As part of this program, Rieseberg asked all departments to achieve accreditation in their respective fields. Hartford's various departments had previously participated in self-assessment programs through VLCT PACIF and VOSHA's Project Worksafe. National accreditation was a complement these efforts, and a way to take them to the next level.

Striving toward national accreditation provides measurable goals, and also forges plans for future growth and improvement. At first a few staff members were reluctant to assume the additional work. Eventually, according to Rieseberg, these staff members became quite supportive - some even took leadership roles - as they better understood the process and the benefits of accreditation.

National accreditation is just that - a process. The standards are designed with the size of the community in mind. Achieving accreditation is only the beginning. There are follow-up visits from peer teams every three to five years, depending upon each accreditation program. In between these visits, organizations are given specific tasks or goals to achieve.

Since Rieseberg's call to action, the Finance Department, Recreation Department, and Fire Department have all earned national accreditation. The Finance Department has earned a Certificate of Achievement (its equivalent of accreditation) for Financial Reporting for three years in a row from the national Government Finance Officers Association. Hartford is the only community in Vermont to have this recognition, said Rieseberg. Representatives from the Recreation Department recently traveled to Reno, Nevada, to accept their national accreditation award, becoming the first Vermont community, only the second in New England, and the smallest community in the country with such accolades. The Fire Department earned its accreditation last fall, becoming the only Fire Department in New England with such an award, and one of only 93 in the country. In the Fire Department's recent search for a new Chief, many of the candidates stated the national accreditation as a major attraction to the position and department. Candidates remarked in their interviews or applications that the accreditation demonstrated that the department was "progressive," "committed to quality," and "a step above."

Hartford's Police Department is currently working toward its accreditation and hopes to attain it by the end of the year. The Department of Public Works plans to achieve national accreditation in 2006, while the Finance Department has begun working toward an additional Certificate of Achievement for Budgeting. Bill Hall, Finance Director, likes the accreditation process because it "forces the department to meet high standards for financial reporting, and provides a great opportunity to compare its performance against national standards." Hall feels Hartford's "Pursuit of Excellence" program demonstrates the Town's desire for top-level service for its citizens, and improves the community's image statewide.

Rieseberg is very enthusiastic about his municipal departments' hard work. The accreditation programs provide a springboard for improving services and for the performance of often overlooked, but very necessary internal assessments. Rieseberg likes that "accreditation provides a municipality with an excellent opportunity to conduct a broad based internal assessment of its operations as measured against national standards and evaluated by established leaders in that particular industry." He also believes that it is an affordable way for a municipality to conduct the same sort of review or analysis that might be unaffordable if a private sector consultant was hired.

This affordable and effective self-assessment tool is one of the prime reasons Rieseberg would recommend this process to other municipalities. He also lists the enhancement of public image and department credibility as a major external benefit. Achieving national accreditation insures value for taxpayers when individual departments use best practices and cutting-edge programs. Accreditation also encourages long-term planning and new ideas, while improving and streamlining operations.

Any interested municipalities should contact Hartford Town Manager Hunter Rieseberg for more information. He is more than willing to share Hartford's story. VLCT sends its congratulations to Hartford, and best wishes for continued success.

- Tara Fischer, Research and Information Assistant, VLCT Municipal Assistance Center
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