

The Continuing Education of the Town Clerk

Last month, Town Clerk Susie Haughwout described how she and a few dedicated co-workers saved Town records as Tropical Storm Irene inundated Wilmington. She attributed much of her success to preparation: *“I can’t emphasize enough how years of attending training kicked in during the emergency. I had attended numerous sessions on records preservation, disaster preparedness, incident command and records management.”*

Many Vermont municipal clerks and treasurers agree, and their training typically involves a slew of initials: VMCTA, IIMC, NEMCI&A (formerly NEMCI), CMC, MMC, CVC, and CVT.

The **CVC** (Certified Vermont Clerk) and **CVT** (Certified Vermont Treasurer) are certification programs that the 76-year-old Vermont Municipal Clerks’ and Treasurers’ Association (**VMCTA**) offers to Vermont’s clerks and treasurers. The designation is awarded after a clerk or treasurer successfully attends training sessions in elections, vital statistics, recording and records management, municipal law, and more. The certifications need to be re-accredited every five years, a requirement that recognizes the need for continuing education.

Presently, 65 Vermont clerks have earned a CVC designation from VMCTA; more than half of them are also Certified Vermont Treasurers.

By contrast, only a dozen Vermont clerks have attained the designation of **CMC** (Certified Municipal Clerk). The CMC, and its big sister, the **MMC** (Master Municipal Clerk), are offered by the International Institute of Municipal Clerks (**IIMC**), a professional, nonprofit association that promotes continuing education through college-based institutes and provides networking services to its members around the world. IIMC grants the CMC certification to clerks who have completed three years of attendance at a recognized institute (such as **NEMCI&A**, the New England Municipal Clerks’ Institute and Academy) and/or fulfilled other educational requirements. The MMC certification is granted to clerks who have completed IIMC’s Master Municipal Clerk’s Academy, a program with even more rigorous educational components. Unlike VMCTA, IIMC has no requirement to re-certify its graduates, since they sign a continuing education commitment letter.

Poultney Town Clerk and Treasurer Pattie McCoy began working towards her CMC certification in 1993 and received it in 1996; in 2005, she was awarded an MMC designation. “I am grateful my predecessor pushed me to seek these designations,” she says, “because “there is no college or university that teaches you how to become a municipal clerk.”

Manchester Town Clerk Linda Spence holds the only other MMC designation in Vermont. “Because of my affiliation with IIMC,” she says, “I now network with clerks from all over the United States and the world. IIMC is a wonderful entity that gives both professional and personal growth to its members along with many educational and networking opportunities.”

“It has been an empowering experience for every clerk who has ever graduated from the program,” she adds.

Patti Lewis, Fayston Town Clerk/Treasurer and Selectboard Assistant, is one of Vermont's two Directors to the NEMCI&A Board. (Dorset Town Clerk Sandy Pinsonault is the other.) She calls the training the institute offers nothing less than life changing. In 2007, she completed a three-year educational program through NEMCI&A. "Most of us who go through the NEMCI&A program then go for our Certified Municipal Clerk designation," she says." In 2014, my goal is to obtain that certification as well. Then, on to the MMC designation."

"The public speaking classes taken at NEMCI&A were the best." says Sandy Pinsonault. "I am now able, without too much fear, to stand in front of a large group of people and speak." Other course topics at the institute include communication skills, management theory, inter-governmental relations, media relations and written communication, public speaking, and parliamentary procedure.

Alison Kaiser, Stowe Town Clerk and VLCT Board member, graduated in 2011 from NEMCI&A, having also earned a Clyde McGee Scholarship to return to the academy. McGee, a professor of political science at Trinity College, asked many thought-provoking questions about how government worked, and he and Kaiser often had long debates about the education funding system. "We're told that you'll get professional development skills (there)," she says, "but you don't realize how valuable the skills you develop will be."

"It is a piece of the continuing education puzzle" Kaiser adds. "When you have all those levels of certification, it's further proof to your taxpayers that you're committed to learning. You can't attend these programs and hope to just skate through!"

"A lot of clerks in Vermont do not belong to our association," says Sandy Pinsonault, referring to VMCTA, "and therefore can't receive the CVC designation. "We get excuses of (a lack of) education funding, 'my selectboard won't let me,' or 'I can't close my office to attend.' And in some cases, these are towns that face problems because they aren't up to speed on changes in law" or the clerks "have been doing the job for so long, they don't feel they need training."

Thus, some clerks favor the idea of making clerk training obligatory. In 2006, the Vermont Municipal Land Records Commission – whose members included South Burlington City Clerk/Treasurer Donna Kinville, Marshfield Town Clerk/Treasurer Bobbi Brimblecombe, and Pattie McCoy – issued a report to the Vermont Legislature that recommended such a mandate. The problem the commission ran into was how to require the training when most clerks are elected. Because some towns didn't want to pay for the training, said Kinville, "we discussed creating a training fund by collecting certain fees, such as a fee from PTTRs (property tax transfer returns)." Or, if clerks had to research land records online, they could charge a fee for the service and then earmark a portion of that fee to a training fund, thereby eliminating any expense to the towns.

The commission's follow-up report to the legislature a year later noted other difficulties with mandatory training. *"Many municipalities do not finance education for the clerks and the clerk is made to pay for any training out of his/her own pocket and pay for a person to sit in their office to cover his/her hours or close the office and not get paid the time that they are training. Do we create an accreditation program that does not charge for training (revenue needed) or do you create a statute that mandates every municipality pay for education of the clerk? Is this program just for clerks or all support staff in the clerk's office?"*

Talk to any of these Vermont's town clerks and treasurers and you'll soon be convinced of their dedication to continuing their professional and personal growth, to raising the standards of the municipal clerk profession and the level of administrative expertise needed in the increasingly complex world of municipal government, and to their lifetime commitment to continuing their education.

David Gunn, Editor
VLCT News

Vermont's Certified Municipal Clerks

Doreen Aldrich, Rockingham
Deborah Beckett, Williston
Nicole Daigle, Derby
Colleen Haag, Shelburne
Sandra Harris, Vernon
Elizabeth Jenks, Winhall

Alison Kaiser, Stowe
Tammy Legacy, Roxbury
Patti McCoy, Poultney (also MMC)
Sandy Pinsonault, Dorset
Linda Spence, Manchester (also MMC)
Georgette Wolf-Ludwig, Fairlee