2021 Wisconsin Municipal Needs Assessment

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INTRODUCTION
In the Fall of 2021, the Whitburn Center for Governance and Policy Research distributed a brief survey to municipal leaders throughout the State of Wisconsin. The goal was to better understand and connect the work of the Center with the needs of Wisconsin local governments. The invitation described our goal: to be a meaningful resource for Wisconsin local governments, particularly those with unmet needs. Twenty-seven participants responded. This brief provides a summary of the findings from this initial municipal needs assessment.

RATING MUNICIPAL RESOURCES
Participants were asked to rate the extent to which they agreed that their government has adequate resources to do its job in several areas (with 1 being *Strongly Disagree* and 5 being *Strongly Agree*). Figure 1 provides the mean scores, ordered from highest to lowest. The higher the score, the more respondents agreed that their government has adequate resources in that area.

The top three scores were in the areas of: Public Safety, Budgeting & Financial Management, and Fire & Emergency Management. The three areas in which respondents most disagreed – meaning they did not have adequate resources - included Grant Writing, Volunteer Recruitment, and Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion (DEI).
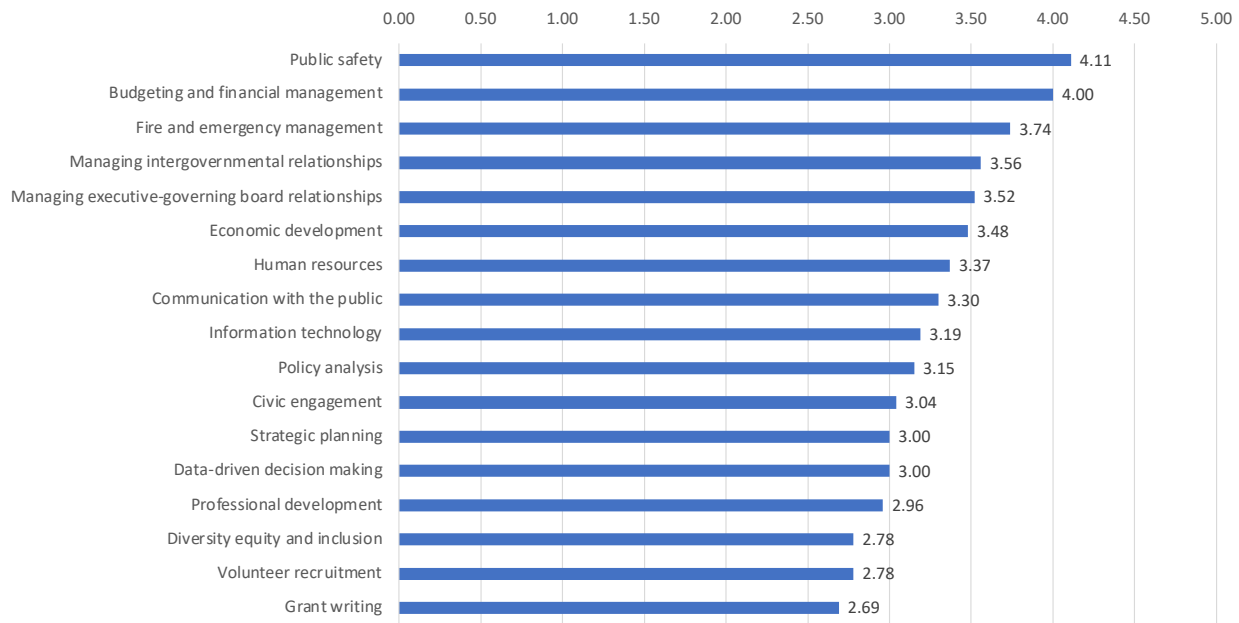

Figure 1. Mean Scores for Municipal Resource Needs

Figure 2 presents this data in another way. It shows the proportion (%) of respondents that either agreed, were neutral, or disagreed on the question. This shows similar results. Again, the top three areas in which respondents felt they had sufficient resources were: Public Safety, Budgeting & Financial Management, and Fire & Emergency Management. The three areas in which respondents disagreed to having adequate resources were: Professional Development, Grant Writing, and Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion (DEI).
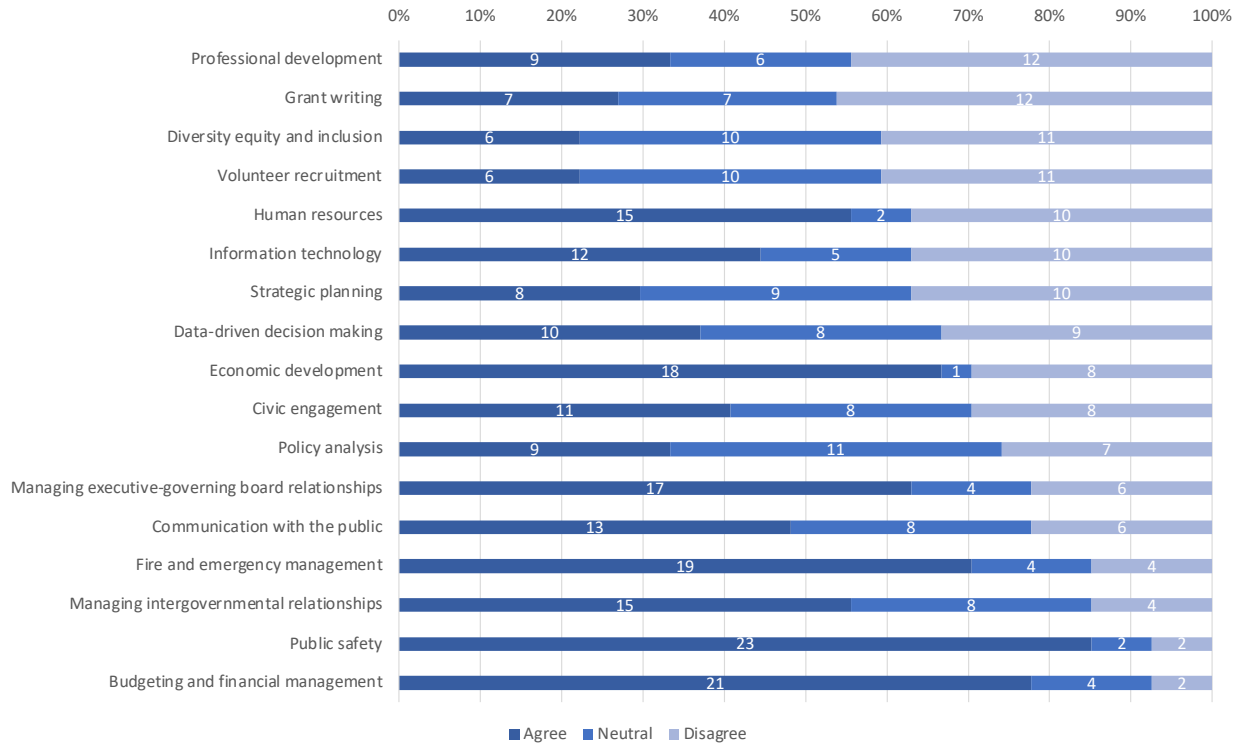
Figure 2. % Respondents Agreed, Neutral, or Disagreed on Adequate Resources

UNDERSTANDING ISSUES AND NEEDS

Respondents were also asked five open-ended questions. They shared their opinion of the top three: 1) most pressing issues facing Wisconsin local governments; 2) needs of their municipality; 3) needs of their municipal manager/executive; 4) needs of their municipal staff; and 5) needs of their city council/village board/county board. Findings for each question are presented below. Responses categorized under each theme are provided in Appendix A.

1. What are the three most pressing issues facing Wisconsin local governments?

Respondents noted the top three most pressing issues facing local governments as funding, human resource management and turbulent political and social environments. Around funding, responses centered on cuts to intergovernmental revenues, restrictive levy caps and increased health and human services costs. To human resource management, responses centered on unqualified job candidates, too few candidates to fill open positions and struggles around staff retention. To the political and social environment, responses noted "state government ineffectiveness," "polarization of everything," increased drug use and suicides.

2. What are the top three needs of your municipality?

Respondents noted the top three needs of their municipality as funding, human resource management and social services. Common answers around funding noted levy cap limits and specific funding needs including broadband coverage and sewer and water maintenance. Human resource management noted a lack of skilled employees to fill open positions and the need for staff training and development. Social services noted housing insecurity, drug treatment options and a lack of inclusiveness.

3. What are the top three needs of your municipal manager/executive?
Respondents cited professional development, funding and resources and policy development. Around professional development, respondents noted a need for strategic planning and economic development training. To funding and resources, respondents noted a need for competent staff, additional HR and CEO-level compensation that matches levels offered in competing jurisdictions and states. To policy development, respondents noted a lack of support from elected officials and skills managing political turnover on small governing boards such as city councils.

4. What are the top three needs of your municipal staff?
Respondents noted training and development, wage increases, and political and administrative support. For training and development, respondents noted a lack of professional development opportunities for department heads, training for new staff, and knowledge around technical skills. To wage increases, respondents noted compensation that is not competitive with surrounding jurisdictions or achieving adequate levels of support for family. To knowledge around technical skills, respondents noted a need for increased financial literacy, human resource management skills and industry best practices.

5. What are top three needs of your city council/village board/county board?
Respondents noted the top three needs of elected officials as governance training, policy training and community engagement. To governance training, respondents noted education on governance, local government 101 training, and intergovernmental relations, especially with state government. To policy training, respondents noted a need for increased budgetary development training and strategic planning. To community engagement, respondents noted a lack of ability to communicate accurate information to the public, authoritative sources of information and number of people running for office, especially minority community engagement in running for local office.

KEY FINDINGS
The goal of this survey was to connect with municipal leaders with unmet needs throughout the State of Wisconsin. Responses provided key takeaways that the Whitburn Center will consider as it seeks to better serve local government professionals. These include, but are not limited to:
- Focusing on providing the most useful resources related to Grant Writing, Volunteer Recruitment, Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion (DEI), and Professional Development. This also includes providing better access and awareness of such knowledge and opportunities.
- Addressing the most pressing issues facing local governments and municipalities that responded to this survey, including inadequate funding, human resource challenges, turbulent political and social environments, and social service provision.
- Highlighting the pressing needs of municipal managers and staff, including professional development, funding and resources, and policy/managerial/technical skills training.
- Prioritizing and distributing resources to boards, councils, and commissions that can enhance skills and knowledge related to governance, budgetary development, intergovernmental relations, and community engagement strategies, especially as it pertains to enhancing representation of minorities such as women, African American, Hmong, and younger generations.

Issues separated into priorities 1,2 and 3 based on where respondents placed the issue in their survey response.

1. In your opinion, what are the three most pressing issues facing Wisconsin local governments?

Funding

1. Municipal Levy Limits; meeting the budget, mainly due to levy limit; Funding from the State for mandated programs; inadequate financial support from state government; Sustainable Funding; Continued cuts to aid; Funding; funding for Health & Human Resource Dept.; Funding; Transportation
2. Mandated services that do not have a revenue stream to support them - Human Services; Fiscal responsibility and restricted caps in levy; Lack of state financial support; Inability to react to high inflation under levy limits; Budget constraints due to levy cap; Sustainable Funding; Inflated wages and levy caps that do not keep up with inflation; Medi-caid/medi-care reimbursements for long-term care; Infrastructure and Capital, Funding; economic development; increasing cost of drug related issues
3. Unfunded mandates; Balancing budgets; Lack of financial resources/revenue restraint; funding options; Need for broadband infrastructure; declining condition of infrastructure; Construction costs to add new development; Economic development; Capital Projects

HR management

1. Competition for skilled labor; Ongoing staff retention and quality recruitments; Hiring appropriately trained personnel; Workforce; Workforce shortage- lack of applicants; Recruitment and Retention; Inflated costs of staffing, particularly nursing home staff costs; Workforce recruitment/retention; staff recruitment; recruitment
2. Increasing costs of wages and benefits; keeping qualified employees; hiring enough staff to do the jobs they are asked to do; Adopting plans to place individuals properly in fair pay grids.; EMS/ Fire services and being able to staff these services; Quality Staffing; available labor pool; Qualified Employees; Retention
3. Transitioning our work in post-COVID world; Address staff training needs through use of team assessments of organizational goals; Employee Retention / Recruitment; Challenges replacing retiring work force; attracting high quality employees; retirement

Political/social environment

1. State government's ineffectiveness; Gerrymandering; Combating vaccine and mask mandates; Eroding credibility with citizens due to political environment; Interference from the State Legislature for Local Control; meth epidemic
2. Polarization of everything; Increasing politicization of local issues; the growing political partisan influence in local elections; State/local relations; Climate change; Inclusiveness

3. Drug use, suicides; an engaged electorate; The degradation of community/social relationships and soft infrastructure; Combating Milwaukee Crime creeping into our county; Housing; dealing with what looks like societal breakdown--political polarization; resistance to masks and vaccines; ongoing civil unrest and its relationship to governance; Increasing partisanship within the community; Increased partisanship in a previously nonpartisan level of government causing incivility and loss of focus on what local government exists for; dealing with the DNR; Lack of data-driven policy formulation

2. In your opinion, what are the top three needs of your municipality?

Funding

1. Expanding broadband availability for new businesses; quality sewer and water for all; Transportation; high-speed internet to rural areas; Funding; more financial support from state gov't; Financial resources; shared understanding around economic development goals - incorporated vs. unincorporated areas; Alternative Funding Sources; implement initiatives that allow us to meet our levy limits and erp (joint services, transportation utility, etc.); Increased and sustained road funding; funding for mental health issues; Funding; grant writing
2. good roads including accommodations for cyclists and pedestrians; Businesses; Broadband; Infrastructure Funding; Economic development--TID growth; Levy cap removal; More control over local revenue decisions; Revenue under the caps; Better funding for long-term care facilities; professional and financial support of collaborative justice
3. Cost to provide services versus ability; Innovation/diversification of tax base; Ability to increase revenues for additional services without encouraging additional development; levy caps and mandates; Infrastructure/roads; Increasing funding for infrastructure maintenance and replacement; Levy limits -- funding critical infrastructure

Human resource management

1. additional administrative staffing (micro need); Professional Development of lots of new staff; County needs all municipalities to take a cooperative approach to achieving adequate service for citizens; Long-range Planning; Additional fire/police staff, especially command staff; Workforce; Applicants for positions particularly social services; Human Resources; Converting to full-time fire department; an expanding labor force; Council/staff disconnect; Retirements
2. good employees; Higher salary scale to attract/retain employees; Assistance with implementing federal, state and local district requirements (MMSD, DNR - lead pipe inventory, etc.); Employing technology to enhance service delivery; Adequate Staff; recruitment/staffing shortages
3. Better utilization of data in management and decision making; Employee studies and morale; Did I mention APPLICANTS?; Issues relating to the needs of our EMS/ Fire dept; Ability to focus on management and data analysis to improve the operation of the city; Additional Staff**;** Better Communication

Social Services

1. Managing growth with housing; Affordable housing
2. high housing cost to purchase and long-term shortage of developable areas; the need for more housing and buildable lots being available; affordable housing; Increasing Health and Human Services; Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and engagement; Identifying each communities specific needs; drug treatment; inclusiveness; Homelessness resources
3. enough mental health services for those in need; Building community support through better use of media; support for nursing home operations; Public safety initiatives; court system holding criminals accountable; Workforce housing

3. In your opinion, what are the top three needs of your municipal manager/executive?

Professional Development

1. Assistance with management analysis; Addition support on HR and Financial issues; Ensuring strong succession planning within the organization; Planning and Economic Development Resources; trust of those he supervises; Too many requirements strain talent; competent staff; Leadership development; Additional support for peer networking; Demonstrate a public perception of solid management skills; a public relations, strategic communications capability; Multi tasking
2. Being a willing change agent; Professional networking and support; a wider variety of willing mentors; legal knowledge; Cooperative Staff; Economic development assistance; Strategic planning; Better data on municipal operations; Developing an inaugural strategic plan for the organization
3. technology upgrades; Program Audits; Financial literacy; fiscal knowledge

Funding and Resources

1. Depth of resources; grant writing support; Balancing budget needs; Increased compensation; high-speed internet to rural areas; Funding; Resources and quality employees; Resources for professional development; Additional support for education; Employees; Support staff
2. Funding Resources; Increased funding; Better funding for long-term care facilities; Innovative funding sources; Staff to help reduce current workload; more HR resources; assistance with ensuring maximization of technology resources by staff
3. Additional discretionary funds to support reactionary project demands; Additional support staff; Time off

Policy Development

1. confidence of county board; county board of supervisors that are competent; more cooperation from elected state reps and senators; a wider variety of sounding boards
2. Being a leader in public policy development; Elected Officials Training; More consistent support from elected officials; Respect for the Chain of Command from elected officials; Public safety initiatives; board support; Managing the political turnover that is coming on

a 9-member body of elected officials; support for inclusiveness initiatives for the community; people willing to innovate; Supportive council/leadership; Cooperative Elective Officials

4. In your opinion, what are the top three needs of your municipal staff?

Training and development

1. Professional development of Department Heads; Additional training education; On-going, systematic training for new staff; Training - Technology, Time Management, and DEI; good administrator; Professional development/career advancement; fiscal knowledge
2. Opportunities for continuous learning and development; Keeping up with training; Better defined career paths and succession plans; growth opportunities; math skills
3. leadership and communications training; Ability to grow; office skills; Modernized workplace policies that reflect emerging trends and common best practices

Pay/Benefits

1. wages/benefits that are adequate; Retention of benefits and working conditions; Wages; increased wages and benefits; increased compensation; Increased wages to improve competitiveness; Funding; Funding
2. Wages that are competitive within the region; Affordable health insurance; Competitive wages in a tight labor market w/ high inflation; more revenue source options; Adequate compensation/benefits; Adequate Pay; Reasonable day care
3. Better pay; Discretionary savings/funds for support projects; Achieving adequate pay for family support; Sustainable Benefits; Adequate Benefits

Administrative and political support

1. Support from elected board and council; Being a "high performing" agency in the public's eye; an appreciative public; Support by administration/council; lighter work loads, translate to more co-workers; Additional workers; filling staff vacancies timely; Better IT infrastructure; high-speed internet to rural areas
2. Being seen as true leaders throughout the state; Supportive supervisors and managers; Better funding for long-term care facilities; proper budget; sense of being an appreciated member of a team; better work/life balance; Employee Burnout Support; decreased workload and responsibility; New equipment and tools when required; Additional resources to fix problems new and old; procurement flexibility; Data to drive decisions
3. Equipment and tools to make work more efficient; Technology and equipment to do job efficiently and effectively; a HR dept; Additional staff; ability for government to out source; more diversity among staff; Support from leadership; public appreciation instead of approbation; More support from residents/elected officials; COVID to go away; Public safety initiatives

5. In your opinion, what are the top three needs of your elected officials?

Governance Training

1. Education on governance; Board development from proper role to parliamentary procedure; Training and Education; DEI Training; Clearly identified goals for the group vision - less "task", more aspirational; Understanding their role; Additional resources to understand the issues of local government; Continued committee level education/engagement;
2. Strategic planning; Code of conduct; competent elected board supervisors
3. More local control; More local government 101 stuff. How everything works, what the restrictions are, etc.; great administrator is key; Effectively coordinate policies and procedures to benefit all communities involved in governance;

Policy Training

1. Combating vaccine and mask mandates; improve relationship with state elected officials; More time to focus on long-term strategic planning; Advance programs which benefit a wide variety of citizens; Budget development training; Keeping taxes low; economic development; Supporting an acceptable tax levy; Flexibility to providing more funding as needed; Funding, but not through Tax Levy
2. Election integrity initiatives to fight the rampant 2020 voter-fraud in Milwaukee, Dane, Kenosha, Racine, and Brown county; Strategic planning resources; More time to focus on big picture policies; Economic development training; Capital Projects; funding for Health & Human Services
3. Better funding for long-term care facilities; to make better budget decisions; Financial literacy; Lower taxes; stronger municipal code in development/enforcement areas; Addressing deferred maintenance needs across parks, facilities, infrastructure, etc.; Housing

Communications/Engagement

1. Clear and helpful input from the departments we oversee; to be more engaged; Increased communication; public interest in and knowledge of electing good people; ability to get accurate information to the public
2. to access better information; Public participation when requested; Improving customer service; We need more diversity. 5 of 29 are female, but we need more young members and Hmong and/or African American members; mitigate conflict between conservative and progressive views; fortitude - getting past the noise of social media;
3. Connection with constituents; Communication/Chain of Command; more people need to run for office; consensus building - less me, more we; Communication; Better tools to engage the whole community instead of small one issue interest groups.