

In-Service Training Award in Memory of Clarence E. Ridley



FRANK I. BENEST

ICMA's In-Service Training Award is presented to the administrator or administrators who have developed and implemented highly effective in-service training programs for local government employees. This award was established in memory of Clarence E. Ridley, a pioneer in the field of local government management. This year, ICMA presents the award to Frank I. Benest, city manager of Palo Alto, California.

Human resources are the most valuable commodity of any organization, and local governments are no exception. As city manager of Brea, California, from 1989 to 2000, and of Palo Alto since then, Frank Benest has shown his commitment to human resources by making employee development a top priority.

During his 11 years as city manager of Brea, Dr. Benest worked with the city's personnel director to develop a number of in-service initiatives. He began by organizing a

multidepartmental team to survey all employees and develop an annual program of training courses. In addition to expanding the number and topics of training courses, the city instituted an annual Employees' Conference at its on-site training center. Developed in response to the fact that most employees do not have an opportunity to attend professional conferences, the program mirrors such conferences, complete with keynote speakers, concurrent sessions, and refreshments. Each conference is offered twice so that all employees can participate.

Dr. Benest has made employee development a priority in Palo Alto as well. When he took over as city manager, he quickly learned that employee retention was a major concern, with some administrative service areas experiencing turnover as high as 15–20 percent. Dr. Benest convened an Employee Retention Team, which identified employee learning and organizational support for upward mobility as key strategies for retaining talent. He and the executive team then made a commitment to provide a career path within the government, particularly for supervisory and management positions. The city responded with a number of key learning initiatives.

For instance, the city retooled its Management Academy and developed new supervisory and leadership certificate programs. In addition, all management and professional employees now propose for themselves a "learning development plan" as part of their annual work plan. This work plan is then used as part of the employee's annual performance evaluation. Computer-based training and self-development opportunities, such as a "brown bag" series on career development, are offered as well.

Recognizing that it is difficult for a public agency in the Silicon Valley to recruit much-in-demand information technology (IT) employees, the city also organized its own Tech

Academy to train city employees for IT positions. Other certification programs allow employees to earn certificates in customer service, supervisory skills, business writing, and Web design.

In addition, the city has partnered with community organizations to encourage ongoing education. It upgraded its training facilities at the Cubberley Community Center and collaborated with Foothill Community College to develop a joint state-of-the-art computer training lab. In conjunction with Foothill College, the city offers an onsite A.A. degree program; through Menlo College it coordinates a B.A. program (offered at a discount for city employees); through St. Mary's College it offers a blended online and intensive weekend program toward a master's degree; and through the University of Phoenix it offers a more traditional master's program. Palo Alto also partners with the chamber of commerce to cosponsor Disney's "Keys to Excellence" Institute, which is offered to both public and private sector employees.

Finally, the city's safety training programs have been credited with reducing the number and severity of worker-related injuries as well as the number of workers' compensation cases.

Thanks to the commitment of Dr. Benest, the city has increased its investment in employee development by 33 percent and expanded the number of in-service courses from 250 in 1999–2000 to 620 in 2002–2003. Due in part to this investment, staff turnover has decreased significantly. A large part of the credit goes to Dr. Benest for his commitment to giving employees the skills they need to succeed in their current jobs and the opportunity to move up the career ladder. ■