



PELL CENTER
*for INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS
and PUBLIC POLICY*

100 Ochre Point Avenue
Newport, RI 02840-4192
Tel: 401-341-2927
Fax: 401-341-2974
www.salve.edu/pellcenter

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For additional information, contact Mia Lupo (401) 341-7462

mia.lupo@salve.edu

Newport's Municipal Workers Improving Customer Service and Operational Efficiencies
Focus on Leadership Practices and Effective Problem-Solving Enabling Positive Change

NEWPORT, RI – The need to balance increasing customer expectations with limited available resources certainly is nothing new for most employees these days. The City of Newport is no exception, although the workers' "customers" are the citizens. Continuous improvement to the quality of service with the resources at hand is gaining momentum with Newport's municipal workers, thanks to help from a local leadership development program.

Funded in part by a grant from the [Rhode Island Foundation](#), a local public sector leadership program is enabling Newport's leaders to continue improvements on many fronts, including customer service, workplace culture and operational efficiencies. The program, called Leadership Matters, is the result of a partnership between the Pell Center at Salve Regina University and a non-profit created by public sector leaders called the Public Sector Consortium.

"I don't think our situation is any different from organizations everywhere," said outgoing Newport City Manager Jane Howington. "Like others, we're doing our best to keep the services we provide at the best level possible while working with fewer resources. These conflicting demands can lead to getting stuck in the day-to-day, and not see how we can impact the big picture," she added.

In addition to Howington, three other municipal leaders participated in the inaugural program: Finance Director Laura Sitrin, Director of Public Services William Riccio, and Councilwoman Naomi Neville. Rhode Island Senator Lou DiPalma also participated, together with leaders from Middletown, Pawtucket, and Salve Regina University. DiPalma's participation provided a dual benefit. His participation provided insight to the challenges through his constituents' eyes and enabled him to better understand how legislative policies directly affect civil servants' day-to-day work.

The comprehensive training takes place in phases over the course of several months in order to promote lasting change. It takes a multi-part approach that addresses key areas including leadership skills and solutions-focused problem-solving. The program offers ongoing advisory support, and each town's participants rely on each other for ideas and support.

"As a result of the training program, I've begun to adjust my leadership style with my own team to a more facilitative approach," said Sitrin. "It's proving to be more effective, because it not only works to engage people in the solutions, but we get lots of different ideas and solutions to problems that are often difficult to resolve," she added.

For problem-solving, the participants learn to focus on outcomes, and that challenges often are symptoms of issues with larger, interdependent systems. Participants are required to identify a specific improvement opportunity and then work with their teams to achieve success by getting

to the root cause and implementing change. For Newport, that issue was how to focus on the “customer” and continuously improve services while maximizing existing resources.

“Getting everyone involved in defining how we wanted to develop a strong model of customer service while balancing our resources is something that touches everyone in City Hall. It made it very easy for people to become motivated and willing to participate,” said Sitrin.

For Newport’s civil servants, this program has required a different approach that focuses from the outside in. Instead of “what’s in my job description,” the approach now is “who depends on me and for what?” The question is not just about colleagues, bosses, and employees, it’s also about citizens and what they really expect from their public servants.

“Because everyone was on board and felt empowered, we were able to start affecting positive change quickly. Our ultimate focus is to improve the level and efficiency of service that our citizens receive. But a big part of that is working to improve the systems, how the departments can work together to deliver services, and to build a collaborative culture. Of course, we can’t solve every problem, and we still have the same resource constraints. But we can work together to move the needle by shifting our thinking, putting different systems in place and focusing on outcomes,” said Howington. “What do we want it to look like in the future? Well then, together let’s work backwards from there,” she added.

“The best thing about the program itself is that the support continues well after you leave the room,” said Howington. “With the ongoing guidance from the outside, there’s help to change habits, behaviors, and mindsets. I know that Laura and the team will continue with this positive momentum without me. And I will leverage what I’ve learned in my new job,” she added.

“Everyone works so hard to affect positive change. But so often, as soon as it’s accomplished, we jump ahead to the next thing, and then the next,” said Howington. “I think this is a great way to acknowledge team accomplishments and reinforce that they’re really making a difference,” she added.

“Our work is to find the most impactful ways to make these improvements and stay in touch with our customers to make sure we are on the right track,” said Sitrin. As Newport’s civil servants continue their work, they are creating a formal mechanism to gauge improvements in customer service and citizen satisfaction over time. “Already, we’re seeing more smiles on people’s faces, and positive comments, so we’re really looking forward to being able to quantify that, as well as to learn about where we can continue improving,” she added.

The [Pell Center for International Relations and Public Policy at Salve Regina](#) is a multidisciplinary research center focused at the intersection of politics, policies and ideas. Dedicated to honoring Sen. Claiborne Pell's legacy, the center promotes American engagement in the world, effective government at home and civic participation by all Americans.

The [Public Sector Consortium](#) is a nationally focused non-profit organization based in Cambridge, MA and dedicated to helping leaders in the public sector to create and sustain high-performing organizations. The Consortium partners with leaders and citizens at all levels of government to reinvent the practice of public leadership for the public good.