

About GMA

Cities of Ethics



GMA's City of Ethics program promotes ethical standards at the local level. While it does not endorse past or present conduct by any city or official, it encourages cities to adopt ethical principles and ordinances that empower citizens and provide clear processes for addressing concerns.

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Becoming a "Certified City of Ethics"

To earn this designation, a city must complete the following steps:

1. Adopt a Resolution Establishing Five Ethics Principles These principles guide the conduct of elected officials both as individuals and as a governing body:

- Serve others, not ourselves
 - Use resources with efficiency and economy
 - Treat all people fairly
 - Use the power of your position for the well-being of your constituents
 - Create an environment of honesty, openness, and integrity
- The resolution must either include or reference these definitions. A majority of the city's elected governing body must sign the resolution. See the Sample Resolution for reference.

2. Adopt an Ethics Ordinance The ordinance should outline permissible and impermissible activities, provide due process for addressing violations, and specify penalties for misconduct. Consult GMA's Sample Ethics Ordinance for essential provisions, and refer to the publication "Ethics in Government: Charting the Right Course" for day-to-day guidance.

Once these are adopted, submit the resolution, ordinance, and a one-time \$85 application fee (for first-time applicants) to:

Georgia Municipal Association
Attention: Gina Gresham
201 Pryor Street, SW
Atlanta, Georgia 30303

The materials will be reviewed by the GMA Ethics Certification Committee, a panel of city attorneys, for approval.

Recognition for Certified Cities of Ethics

Upon approval, the city will receive a plaque, a logo for city materials, and a press release will be sent to local media announcing the designation.

Submission Deadlines

Cities seeking recognition at the **Cities United Summit (January)** must submit materials by **November 30**. For recognition at the **GMA Annual Convention (June)**, materials must be submitted by **April 30**.

Cities of Ethics FAQ

How did the Cities of Ethics Program get its start?

GMA appointed an Ethics Task Force in 1998 to address concerns over a trend toward less confidence in public officials. The Ethics Task Force included municipal elected officials, community and industry leaders, and academics. The result of their work was the publication of a "Model Code of Ethics for Georgia City Officials" in September 1999 and the implementation of GMA's Certified Cities of Ethics program. Most recently, in February 2005, GMA completed an updated handbook that is a compilation of the "Model Code of Ethics" and a prior GMA publication, "Ethics in Government: Finding the Right Course," which was written in 1993. This publication is titled, "Ethics in Government: Charting the Right Course," and can be found on the GMA website.

In 2008 a new Ethics Task Force was appointed to evaluate the existing Certified Cities of Ethics program and make recommendations on ways to improve the program and ensure its effectiveness. In January 2009 the GMA Board adopted the recommendations of the Ethics Task Force and instituted a requirement of re-certification every four years and approved a new sample ordinance.

What is the purpose of the Cities of Ethics Program?

Certification under this program is a way to recognize cities that have adopted principles and procedures that offer guidance on ethical issues, along with a mechanism to resolve complaints at the local level. The program is not in any way an attempt to sanction past or present conduct by the city or any city official.

Rather, it is an attempt to raise awareness about ethics issues at the local level and provide a local forum for the airing and resolution of legitimate concerns. The use of a local ethics ordinance allows citizens to raise their concerns and participate in the ethics investigation process at the local level, where the voice and influence of the individual citizen is strongest.

What is the process for becoming a City of Ethics?

Two steps are required prior to becoming a certified City of Ethics. First, the city and every member of its governing authority must adopt a resolution acknowledging and subscribing to five ethics principles to govern the conduct of elected officials. The ethics principals to be included in the resolution are:

- Serve others, not ourselves
- Use resources with efficiency and economy
- Treat all people fairly
- Use the power of our position for the well being of our constituents
- Create an environment of honesty, openness and integrity

The adopted resolution must include or at least reference the definitions of these principles. A sample resolution is available on the GMA website. A majority of the city's elected governing body must sign the resolution.

Second, cities must also adopt an ethics ordinance that meets minimum standards approved by the GMA Board. The ordinance must contain definitions, an enumeration of permissible and impermissible activities by elected officials, due process procedures for elected officials charged with a violation of the ordinance and punishment provisions for elected officials who have been found in violation of the ordinance.

Who decides whether a city has qualified to become a Certified City of Ethics?

GMA encourages all cities to apply for the City of Ethics program, but city officials should be aware that approval is not automatic. Ordinances and resolutions submitted by each city are reviewed by the GMA Ethics Certification Committee, which is

comprised of the Executive Committee of the GMA City Attorneys' Section. This committee compares materials submitted by cities with the recommendations of the GMA Board. If this panel of attorneys determines that both the ordinance and resolution submitted by each city meet the established requirements, then the city's application for certification as a City of Ethics will be approved.

Once a city adopts an ethics ordinance and qualifies as a City of Ethics, does GMA enforce the ordinance?

No, GMA does not act as an enforcement or regulating agency. Ultimately, it is the local electorate that determines the acceptable level of ethical conduct by the character of those elected to and retained in office.

Is periodic recertification required to maintain the City of Ethics designation?

Beginning January 1, 2009 certification and re-certification will be good for four years. To remain a Certified City of Ethics, prior to the expiration of the four year period the organization must submit to GMA for review a resolution re-adopting the five ethics principles and a copy of any changes to the city's ethics ordinance.

Cities that have been certified for more than four years as of January 1, 2009 will be required to re-certify on schedule reflecting the order in which they were originally certified and thereafter they will be required to re-certify every four years.

GMA encourages each Certified City of Ethics to periodically train new and existing members of the city's governing body on the ethics principles and the ethics requirements imposed on the city by federal, state and local law and ordinance.

What recognition do cities receive for achieving Cities of Ethics certification?

Each city designated as a Certified City of Ethics will receive a plaque and a logo which can be incorporated into city stationery, road signs and other materials at the city's discretion. In addition, GMA will send press releases to the local media notifying them

that the city has earned this designation.

Which cities are already certified as Cities of Ethics?

There is a complete list of certified Cities of Ethics and Organizations available on the GMA website.

Is there also a Counties of Ethics program in Georgia?

Counties meeting GMA's criteria can be recognized as a Certified County of Ethics.

What role does the State Ethics Commission play in monitoring local government ethics violations?

The State Ethics Commission was created in 1987 and is responsible for enforcing Georgia's Ethics in Government Act. The Ethics Commission is governed by five members and is responsible for investigating, reporting on, and prosecuting violations of the Ethics in Government Act, as well as for maintaining and publishing annual reports on lobbyist spending and campaign financing.

All state and local officials are required to comply with the provisions in the Act, including filing annual campaign financing disclosure statements. More information on the requirements of the Act can be found in GMA's publication "Ethics in Government: Charting the Right Course" and on the website of the State Ethics Commission.

Where can I find more information about ethics in local government?

For additional information about the Cities of Ethics program and local government ethics in general, city officials should consult GMA's publication, "Ethics in Government: Charting the Right Course." This publication can be printed directly from the GMA website. This is an excellent reference for city officials who are considering the process of developing and enacting comprehensive codes of ethics and in facing ethical dilemmas on a day-to-day basis.

GMA makes available on its website a sample ordinance as a starting point for cities in drafting their own ordinance. This

ordinance cannot be adopted as drafted because it contains alternate provisions requiring that only one of them be selected. GMA's publication on ethics also contains sample language for use in ordinances and resolutions for the City of Ethics program. It should be noted that the sample ordinances and resolutions provided by GMA are meant to serve as a guideline only.

Cities should always consult with their city attorney prior to enacting ethics ordinances. Careful consideration must be given to state laws that govern local officials and how they may interact with any proposed changes in the local law. Ethics ordinances that conflict with state laws and constitutional provisions will likely be declared invalid in a court of law.

Another excellent resource to reference when drafting an ethics ordinance is "Establishing, Following Ethics Rules Raises the Level of Trust" by Richard Carothers. Finally, in addition to the City of Ethics program, GMA also offers training on ethics through the Municipal Training Institute and at the Newly Elected Officials Institute.

Counties and Organization of Ethics

Cities of Ethics Resources