

ASU program helps strengthen governance at local level

School of Public Affairs-based training prepares municipal clerks to manage tasks for Arizona cities and towns

By Mark J. Scarp, ASU News
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There's a suspicious-looking campaign sign in your neighborhood. Or you need to know who's buried in the town cemetery. Who are you gonna call?

More than likely, your municipal clerk.

While most people may see city and town clerks just taking minutes at council meetings, their duties are often more varied, especially in rural communities, said Michelle Hill, manager of [an Arizona State University program](#) that trains and certifies Arizona clerks.

Hill, program manager for the [School of Public Affairs](#)-based [Bob Ramsey Executive Education](#), began administering the long-standing program this year for the Arizona Municipal Clerks Association. Its members include elected and appointed clerks.

Each June, the program instructs clerks toward designations of certified municipal clerk and master municipal clerk. Becoming a certified clerk requires 40 hours of annual instruction over five days during three consecutive years, in what is called "the institute."

A clerk earns master status by undertaking an additional 24 hours over three days, again each year for three years, in what is called "the academy."

In each, participants learn ways to do their jobs more efficiently and effectively, as they are called upon to perform a wide variety of tasks in areas ranging from the uneventful to the potentially volatile, Hill said.

"Clerks are also in charge of elections, which means they get a lot heat here in Arizona, where they are often controversial," she said.

In addition to enforcing rules about where political signs may or may not be placed, clerks' election-related responsibilities often include overseeing campaign fundraising and verifying petition signatures.

Sometimes, some unusual duties

Clerk duties, especially in rural areas, may also include fairly unusual tasks. In the Pinal County town of Eloy, the clerk runs the town cemetery and maintains local death records, among other responsibilities, Hill said.

“They’re jacks- and jills-of-all-trades,” she said.

Municipal clerks are the often-overlooked backbone of our local governments, quietly ensuring that cities and counties run smoothly, said [Shannon Portillo](#), Lattie and Elva Coor Presidential Chair and director of the School of Public Affairs.

Clerks play a vital role in maintaining transparency and democratic processes, said Portillo, who served as a county commissioner in Kansas before moving to Arizona to teach at ASU.

“When I ran for election in my home community, the county clerk’s office was an invaluable resource — guiding me through the paperwork and ensuring the entire process was clear and accessible,” Portillo said.

Effective de-escalation techniques

In addition to instruction on best practices in the basics of clerking, Hill said participants learn effective ways to work with the public in today’s charged political environment.

“It’s de-escalation training. In Arizona especially, people get heated about politics, and some people come up to the clerk’s window angry at how they certified an election whose results they disagree with,” Hill said. “We teach clerks what to do when someone shows up at your desk yelling at you.”

One de-escalation technique is to get quieter as the customer gets louder, she said.

Evonne Aldana just completed her second year of the Certified Municipal Clerk Institute. Aldana, deputy clerk of the Pinal County city of Casa Grande, said the experience has deepened her understanding of municipal operations, leadership and ethics, as well as provided invaluable networking with other municipal clerks across Arizona.

“Sharing challenges and solutions with peers has been both encouraging and insightful, reinforcing a strong sense of community within our profession,” she said.

Aldana said she has implemented agenda management improvements, streamlined onboarding processes for boards, committees and commissions, and enhanced communication by applying leadership strategies from the program.

“Networking with fellow clerks has introduced new tools and best practices that I’ve brought back to my office — strengthening efficiency, service delivery and collaboration within our city team,” she said.

Judy Martinez, deputy clerk of the East Valley town of Gilbert, just completed her second year in the Master Municipal Clerk Academy. Martinez said her experience has led her to focus even more on efforts to increase voter registration in her community.

“Additionally, I want to explore how AI tools can make our team more efficient, allowing for more time to initiate new projects and develop training programs for various departments within our organization,” Martinez said.

Hill said this year, 46 clerks participated in the institute and 22 in the academy. “I cannot stress how impressed I was with all of these participants,” Hill said.

Portillo said the ASU clerks training program aligns with the school’s mission to prepare public service professionals for ethical, inclusive and effective leadership.

“Our emphasis on administrative best practices, legal standards and community engagement directly supports the work of clerks across Arizona, helping strengthen governance at the local level,” Portillo said.

The School of Public Affairs is part of the [Watts College of Public Service and Community Solutions](#).

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Main image



Clerks from Arizona cities and towns at the recent ASU Bob Ramsey Executive Education training for designation as a certified municipal clerk or a master municipal clerk. In annual sessions, ASU trains clerks to better handle a wide variety of functions. ASU photo by Bob Ramsey Executive Education