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## The Heart of a City: Using Empathy for Connected Municipal Public Policy

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“Using ourselves as vehicles of change, whether we are municipal employees, elected officials, voters or just concerned citizens will be crucial to the success of turning local government institutions into more empathetic organizations and rebuilding trust in government institutions.”

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# The Heart of a City

## Using Empathy for Connected Municipal Public Policy

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By Sara Kline

### Abstract

This article explores the relationship between empathy and the practices used to design and implement municipal public policy. Given the challenges faced by government at all levels to capture the trust and support of the public, using empathy is a useful tool for municipal governments to employ.

Building upon Brown (2010, 2018) and the power of connection, I argue empathic municipal public policy should strengthen the connection among citizens, city government, municipal employees, and elected officials. With further conversation and practice, utilizing empathy as a primary driver of municipal public policy will foster improved relations between citizens and municipal government. OD practitioners have a valuable role in facilitating greater trust and a more positive relationship between citizens and government.

**Keywords:** empathy, municipal, organizational culture

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*“All I want my local government to do is pick up my trash and then leave me alone.”*

*“You can’t fight City Hall.”*

*“Taxes are too high, and I never get anything out of paying them.”*

*“Every politician is corrupt and a liar. You’re no different.”*

These are common sentiments people express when questioned on their attitudes about government. Each of these statements has been said directly to me more than once. I have served as a City Councilperson, Mayor, and Safety Director and now hold a Cabinet-level municipal position as Parks and Recreation Superintendent. All these different municipal positions, both elected and appointed, have exposed me to the reality that many

citizens feel quite disconnected from the government that serves them.

Thoughts like this often derive from a feeling that no one understands the needs of a resident, or worse, that the needs are understood but policymakers do not care. The level of distrust in government is significant and is impacting the fabric of our democracy. In the yearly survey by the National Election Study, conducted annually since 1958, the share of the American public who says they can trust the government “always” or “most of the time” has not risen above 30% since 2007. This represents a significant drop from 1958 when approximately three-quarters of the American public identified trust in the government always or most of the time (Pew Research, 2022). Despite this, the best opportunity for improvement is at the level of government closest to home.

Just as people feel most acutely what is closest, they know and build a relationship

with what is nearest. Local governments build a relationship with constituents not possible for larger, more removed forms of governmental authority. This relationship is reflected in data that demonstrates a higher degree of trust in local government than in any other government structure. Reporting on a poll for *Gallup News*, Brennan (2021) shared that “confidence in local government remains higher (66%) than it is for state government (57%).” Although America trusts state government slightly less than local government, “Americans’ trust in their state and local governments’ ability to handle problems under their purview continues to be higher than trust in the federal government and its three individual branches” (Brennan, 2021). This polling has remained stable since the 1970s and has seemed to be insulated from the distrust felt toward the government at the federal level.

It is in the interest of everyone that we work as a society to rebuild trust and forge a strong relationship between citizens and our government. As citizens and OD practitioners, we need to use the existing strengths of local government and the relationships cities have with residents to build upon the trust and positive feelings many people retain toward their local government. By doing so, trust may slowly be transferred to governmental authority at more distant levels such as at state and federal government. Using ourselves as vehicles of change, whether we are municipal employees, elected officials, voters or just concerned citizens will be crucial to the success of turning local government institutions into more empathetic organizations and rebuilding trust in government institutions.

The fracturing of American society over the past decade along political fault lines, culminating in violence toward people who hold opposing views, or those attempting to carry out Constitutionally authorized duties, such as the breach of the United States Capitol on January 6, 2021, makes this problem in need of urgent attention. Every level of government is at risk. I propose to start the process of rebuilding trust and forging strong

relationships between citizens and their government by using empathy as a pillar of municipal public policy.

John Locke and the Enlightenment thinkers identified that government was of, by, and for people. By transferring some individual liberties to the collective through the social contract, we ensure that our needs can be addressed by our government (Locke, 1689). Certainly, representative government was not thought of at that time in the way modern democracies consider it, but the notion that there are things no individual can provide for themselves, so government does that on our behalf, is familiar to modern readers.

The concept of “home rule” is rooted in the belief that the closer a government is to the people it serves, the better it can understand the needs of those people. This formal legal practice was instituted in the early 1900s, allowing municipalities and other forms of local government to retain authority in matters relating to the local community that were not expressly reserved for states or the federal government (Cities 101—Delegation of Power, 2021). Although there are excellent, indisputable reasons for the superior authority of a federal or state government, the United States has a strong tradition of placing value on local entities to self-govern in many matters. The Constitution states that authority not reserved as part of the federal government remains with the states. The states, in turn, have utilized the concept of home rule to transfer authority to local entities. It is this system most Americans are familiar with.

Government services inevitably flow from the public policy that creates a program or service. A government culture of empathic thinking in public policy development promotes employees utilizing their ability to make decisions at the programmatic level to best serve residents. Constituents will reward the government agency that sees their needs through an empathic lens with trust, confidence, and positive feedback. As in any relationship, these are the elements of a successful bond. If a strong and trusting relationship between citizens and the government is a path

forward to repairing the fractured nature of American democracy, all parties involved must be willing to use paradigms that speak to the needs of the people and communities served.

Empathy is one such paradigm that can affect systems and promote organizational change to internal and external constituents. Defined as “the ability to share someone else’s feelings or experiences by imagining what it would be like to be in that person’s situation,” empathy is the very core of what responsive public policy aims to achieve (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). Public policy crafted without consideration of the situation and perspective of constituents and their needs is likely unresponsive at best and harmful at worst.

A healthy, functioning government is essential to a just society. Government employees make public services work well, or not at all. I have seen first-hand how empathy in local government organizations can change citizens’ lives for the better. Public policy decision-makers who strive to improve outcomes and quality of life for residents are rewarded by a community that trusts, values, and provides positive feedback to those decision-makers. Employees can execute programs and services that are positively received, and elected officials can reap the rewards of a citizenry that appreciates their efforts at quality decision-making.

### Local Government Impact

Working for a municipal street department, local fire district, parks and recreation agency, or community development division of a city may seem removed from the people you serve. However, the actions of public employees can definitively have a positive or negative impact. Using empathy to design public policy and the resultant services goes beyond positive customer service or efficient programs. It seeks to design policy and services that understand and address the needs of the community in such a way that the resident already knows they are interacting with an organization that values them before they even talk with an employee.

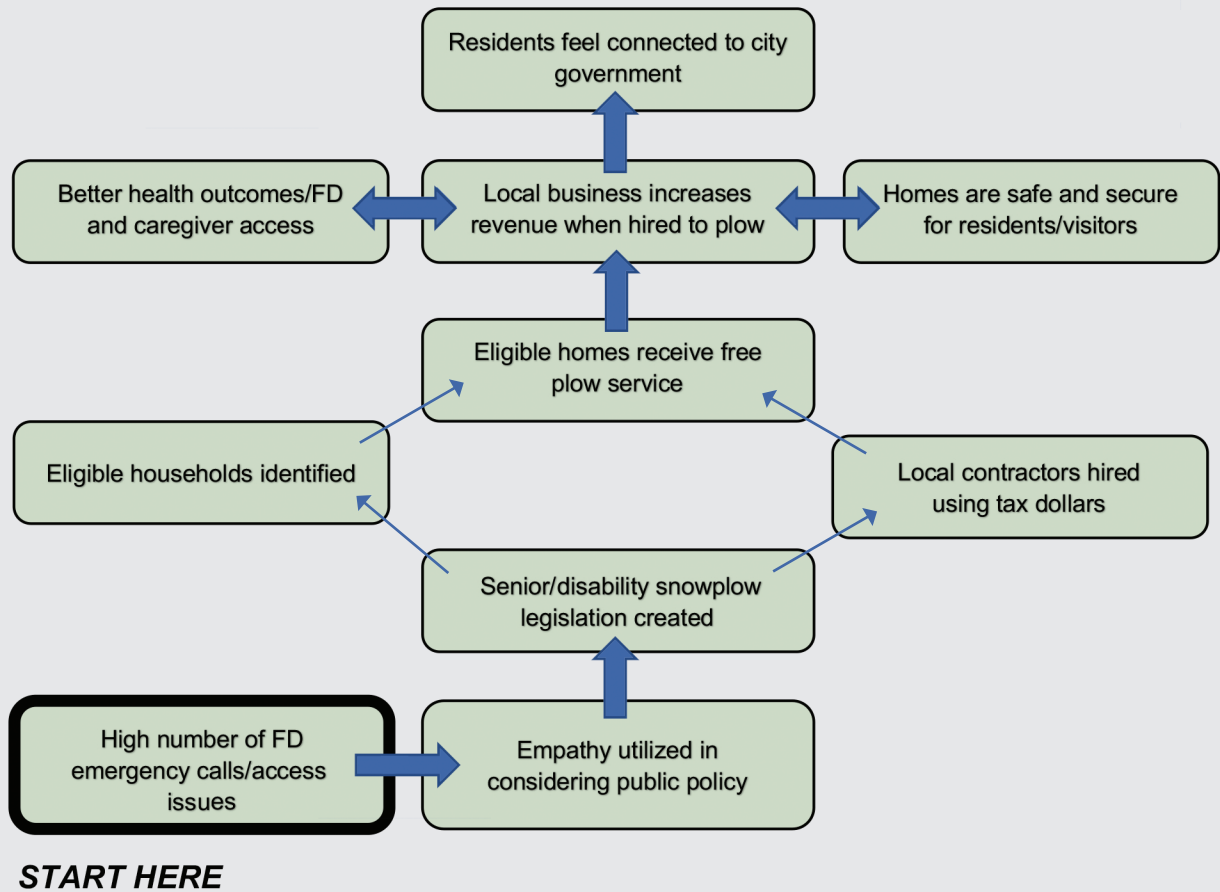


Figure 1. Senior/Disabled Snowplow Program (Note. This figure demonstrates program design.)

Some examples of this thinking are illustrated as follows:

- » A municipal parks department is tasked by public policy to offer community events that provide opportunities for families to gather. The same policy asks the parks department to assess the needs of the community and tailor programs to ensure inclusion. Utilizing an empathic approach, the parks department offers sensory-friendly options at its community events because the staff understands that their community has families with loved ones who live with sensory disorders. The empathic public policy and resultant inclusive programming mean people feel comfortable and bring their family member living with autism, instead of staying home and feeling isolated. This increases the trust and connection between that family and their local municipal parks and recreation department and staff.
- » Snow and ice control is a common municipal public policy in cold climates

to ensure overall public safety. Typically, property owners are responsible for snow and ice control on their driveways and sidewalks. However, if a city uses empathy to relate to the challenges faced by certain elderly or disabled residents, and offers free snowplowing services for those homeowners, their caregivers have easier access to provide supportive care and the fire department can effectively respond to emergencies. This pragmatic solution to a seasonal issue means that homeowners who might otherwise suffer from isolation, lack of medical care, or who may attempt to clear the snow themselves and become injured are kept safe. Not only does this increase the goodwill between these homeowners and their municipality, but it can also be a factor in lowering overall costs to taxpayers: keeping people safe and in their home is less expensive than caring for someone in a facility, especially if a simple

solution like this can allow a resident to remain independent.

Figure 1 illustrates a free snowplow program that was designed using empathy as a pillar. In this Figure, the value of empathy is illustrated in the quality of life for the recipients, enhanced revenue for the business community, and overall savings for taxpayers. In this scenario, local contractors benefit from increased business, residents who qualify for the program are assured they will be able to have safe access out of their driveways and caregivers will have safe access into their home after snow events. Taxpayers are assured that individuals can remain independent instead of being placed in a nursing facility at a greater cost to Medicaid and Medicare. This program also saves local tax dollars by allowing safe access for the Fire Department and lowers possible injuries if the Fire Department personnel need to transport a patient outside their home over a snowy, icy sidewalk and driveway. All these

positive outcomes increase the connection among municipal workers, public policymakers, residents, and local business owners, leading to greater trust and more positive relationships.

Only by looking at the community and its residents through the lens of empathy can public policy decision-makers craft policy that encourages employees to act in an empathetic manner. When empathy is a pillar of the organization, it creates a cultural shift within the municipal structure and becomes a value that is reflected in all the actions of the city. When empathy is a value of the organization both

appropriately. I argue that empathic municipal public policy will help reassure taxpayers that their local taxes are spent on programs, services, and infrastructure that meets their needs because it was designed with their needs as a primary consideration. There is evidence that the use of an empathic model in public policy can also decrease the financial burden on taxpayers. This decrease can be shown in specific programmatic goals and by an overall improvement in quality of life, lowering the need for acute and emergency interventions, which by nature of their structure cost more.

**It is critical to discern the difference between empathy and sympathy. As discussed earlier, empathy is imagining yourself in someone else's circumstances, while sympathy is defined as "feeling of sincere concern for someone who is experiencing something difficult or painful." Municipal services are funded through taxation, so a reasonable use of taxpayer monies must be a strong consideration when developing public policy. Sympathy for a group or individual does not necessarily mean good public policy for the whole. Nonprofit organizations that exist to address a specific range of social issues are best suited for that work.**

internally and externally, connection grows. Employees feel valued by their employer (the municipality) and residents feel connected to their city. It cannot be overstated how this becomes a cycle of fulfillment for all parties: residents, employees, and elected officials. "A widespread sense of empathy starts to influence the culture of a place, giving it a sense of clarity and mission. People spend less time arguing about things that ultimately don't matter. Empathy can even start to ensure more ethical behavior in a way that no policies and procedures manual ever could" (Patnaik & Mortensen, 2022). When municipal culture is positively affected in this manner, I believe it can only be a benefit to all the stakeholders.

One of the challenges often cited is the frustration taxpayers may feel when they do not believe their tax dollars are utilized

Thinking through service delivery with an empathic value system can diminish the need for duplication or corrective services, reducing the need for staff or material costs. "Higher-empathy policy-making practice leads to better policy, which leads to better services, which leads to efficiency and cost savings, as well as happier people out there in the world" (Collingwood-Richardson, 2018).

The benefit of empathy to municipal public policy and operations is clear. Once municipal leaders agree that empathy is a construct that increases trust between local government and residents, as well as improves outcomes for programs, a path must be developed to forge a more empathic municipal operation. There are examples of how to increase empathy in both individuals and organizations, as well

as municipalities that are already implementing empathy as a core value.

### **Empathy in Action**

It is critical to discern the difference between empathy and sympathy. As discussed earlier, empathy is imagining yourself in someone else's circumstances, while sympathy is defined as "feeling of sincere concern for someone who is experiencing something difficult or painful" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Municipal services are funded through taxation, so a reasonable use of taxpayer monies must be a strong consideration when developing public policy. Sympathy for a group or individual does not necessarily mean good public policy for the whole. Nonprofit organizations that exist to address a specific range of social issues are best suited for that work. However, using empathy to craft responsive public policy and the resultant services means a community's needs are imagined by public policy decision-makers and executed by municipal employees in the form of services.

Zaki (2020) discussed how individuals can learn to be more empathic and the value that it brings to society by arguing that empathy is a skill, not an innate trait (2020). Given that skill development is an intrinsic element to most employee development programs, including government employee programs, it would benefit cities to add this skill base to their training regimen. Simply stating empathy as a value will not be enough to both craft empathetic public policy and ensure that services are carried out with empathy as a value.

Schumann, Zaki, and Dweck (2014) concluded that putting effort into increasing empathy is necessary to increase empathic skills. Additionally, they found that holding the mindset that empathy can be fostered is key to the successful enhancement of empathic skills.

By studying the effects of empathy bias and counter-empathic responses among intergroups and out-groups, Cikara, Bruneau, Van Bavel, & Saxe (2014) found that people tend to have a more empathic view of people within their inter-group, with inter-groups described as people of similar

cultural or social groups (2014, p. 110). However, this is not a set definition, but rather a loose parameter to understand the concept. Given that the municipal government is serving an “inter-group” of residents all living in the same political subdivision, reminding decision-makers that each member of that community is part of their inter-group may be beneficial in helping them in seeing stakeholders through an empathic lens. Rather than viewing distinct neighborhoods, demographic subsets, or special interest advocates as unique challenges, it can be helpful to see them as part of the fabric of that municipality’s inter-group.

Whether through regular conversations among teams and their managers, as part of public meetings, or in internal and external communications, it is necessary to continuously reinforce this message (as it is all skills) until they are routine and automatically part of the processes of the organization. Efforts toward activating empathic thinking should also be part of a new hire orientation for municipal workers with elements tailored to the specific duties and responsibilities of their department. Skill development programs focused on empathy is an area OD practitioners have a unique opportunity to provide support for organizational change in local government.

Research shows that organizations can manifest greater empathy. Choosing to value empathy in an organizational culture creates multiple positive outcomes (Brower, 2021). The stakes for positive outcomes are greater in government agencies than in other sectors. Bad public policy or ineffective public services can directly affect the quality of life in an entire community and cut across economic, racial, gender, and cultural backgrounds. Simply put, not using an empathic lens in municipal public policy can create a disastrous outcome for many people.

An empathic lens helps employees in seeing the importance of their work and empowers employees to make decisions that ensure the betterment of the overall community. Although not a traditional focus of government or municipal public policy, making empathy a priority or foundational pillar of a municipal organization

is a “critical component of quality care in that it builds communication, understanding, and trust” (Meyer, Johnson, & McCandles, 2022, p. 359). Additionally, having empathy be a value and regular part of training for municipal government organizations aids employees in seeing their customers (residents of the community) through a lens of value.

### Municipal Reference Points

Some municipalities have taken the step of incorporating empathy into their mission or value statements. This sends a clear message both externally and internally. Employees are reminded that public policy and resultant services are to be designed and delivered with an empathic lens. The public is reassured that their circumstances and needs are considered when decision-makers designate priorities.

Cities both small and large have begun to articulate the importance of empathy in their approach to municipal policy and services. While there are many more that attempt to embody the principles of caring, compassion, and consideration, empathy is a specific construct, and it bears note when cities call out empathy as a value and driving force behind decisions.

Examples include:

Phoenix, AZ

*“We exhibit empathy by listening to each other and to the public in our efforts to deliver services that improve people’s lives” (City of Phoenix Mission, Vision and Values, 2013).*

Huntsville, AL

*“We treat every person with respect, and we demonstrate an empathetic understanding in our efforts to serve them” (Huntsville Police Department, n.d.).*

Cleveland Heights, OH

*“Cleveland Heights employees are empathetic, proactive, and responsible to our residents, businesses, and visitors” (Mission and Vision Statement City of Cleveland Heights, n.d.).*

American democracy must rebuild and strengthen the relationship between

citizens and their government organizations. Given the proximity between citizens and their city, coupled with the already higher trust level between citizens and their municipal government, it is a promising place to focus these efforts. OD practitioners have a vital role to play in this critical need for our political system. Each of us is a stakeholder in our American democracy and the unique skill set of OD practitioners positions us to bring needed systemic change when and where it is needed most.

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