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SPOTLIGHT

COMMENTARY: Celebrating 20 years of ethics training

Calvin Bellamy

Sep 7, 2025



Cal Bellamy

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Calvin Bellamy

It was Monday of Thanksgiving week 2005, November 21st to be exact. The temperature that evening was in the low 40s and the sky was overcast. But inside Teibel's restaurant, the spirit was lively and upbeat. Local history was being made.

That evening, the town councils of Highland and Munster and the city council of Crown Point met together. A meeting of three councils at the same time and place is unusual in itself. But these three communities had a common purpose: adoption of an interlocal agreement creating the Shared Ethics Advisory Commission (SEAC). They also approved our Code of Shared Ethics and Values, which serves as the basis for our ethics training programs.

Today, 20 years later, SEAC is still going strong. SEAC is an all-volunteer organization that arranges ethics training for communities that wish to join us. Our practical ethics training includes programs for front-line employees, department heads and private citizens serving on their community's boards and commissions.

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SEAC also hosts an annual Ethics Summit open and free-of-charge to the general public. Also, during each local election, candidates are asked to commit to providing ethics training and strong whistleblower protection.

Twenty years ago, we could not find another organization providing ethics training for multiple communities with all-volunteers and no paid staff. Finding no relevant model, SEAC volunteers used trial and error, imagination and some associated professional input to grow into what we are today. SEAC's history can be divided into four pieces:

Formation. In the years between 2006 and 2010, SEAC began defining itself and its mission. In the earliest years, SEAC hosted general meetings discussing the concept of ethics, but we soon realized that an organized training curriculum was needed.

With the help of volunteers from Calumet College and Purdue Northwest, our first training curriculum was developed; volunteer trainers recruited from the staff of member communities; and formal ethics training began on an individual community basis. During this time, two additional communities joined SEAC, bringing the number to a total of five.

Growth. SEAC's second five years was a period of rapid growth with a total of 17 additional communities joining between 2011 and 2015. To mark our fifth anniversary, SEAC hosted its first Ethics Summit open to the general public free of charge. There has been an Ethics Summit every year since then except the COVID year of 2020. During this second period, SEAC began specialized ethics training for department heads and private citizens serving on their community's boards and commissions. During each election cycle, we also initiated the Candidates Ethics Action Pledge which every local candidate is asked to sign.

Maturity. During the years between 2016 and 2020, SEAC continued to offer and improve all of the ethics training developed in the earlier periods. We also welcomed two new member communities. See the full listing of SEAC's 23-member communities on our website **sharedethics.com**.

Internally, SEAC reorganized its structure. Previously, we acted as a committee of the whole, but with the increasing membership and the variety of ethics training programs, a division of labor was needed. Three committees were formed — Training, Communication, Summit Planning and these are overseen by an executive committee consisting of the Commission president, vice president and committee chairs. ⊗

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Covid and Beyond. Much of our training came to a halt during the period of the Covid lockdown. We took this pause as an opportunity to improve our presentation materials and refresh our logo. An all-new training curriculum was developed combining computer-based and in-person training. A handy reference booklet was developed in 2022. This Ethics Guide is intended for distribution to every employee of our member communities. In eight, well-illustrated pages the Guide describes our Code of Shared Ethics and Values and provides a plain language discussion of some of the biggest ethical issues public employees might encounter.

What Can You Do? Promoting ethics in local government requires the involvement of everyone. Ask your local political leaders if your town, city or county is a member of SEAC. If so, thank them. If not, ask them why not. We also invite you to attend the 2025 Ethics Summit (late October). There's no cost and it is open to everyone. To register for the Summit or learn more about SEAC, visit our website, **sharedethics.com**.

Together, we can make a difference.



Calvin Bellamy, a lifelong resident of Northwest Indiana, is a co-founder of SEAC and continues to be actively engaged in SEAC's activities. The opinions are the writer's.



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