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FINANCE TEAM

Rebuilding Trust Together

How the City of Springfield's Citizens Government Academy turned residents into community champions

BY TOCHI MADUEKE

In Springfield, Ohio—a city of more than 58,000 residents—recent years have tested the relationship between government and community. A tragic bus accident, a rapidly growing immigrant population, and a subsequent viral wave of misinformation that garnered national attention strained that relationship in ways the city had never experienced.

Among the most visible examples was a widely circulated and false narrative during the 2024 presidential debate claiming that the immigrants in the City of Springfield were harming pets, notoriously captured in the statement: “They’re eating the dogs. ... They’re eating the cats. ... They’re eating the pets

of the people that live there.” The claim drew national attention, aggravated local tensions, brought in outside actors, media scrutiny, and even repeated threats against the community.

Reflecting on that period, City Manager Bryan Heck described the sustained strain on the community and its institutions. “We saw 13 straight days of bomb threats in our community... just a really heightened and increased tension, not only within Springfield but from people coming in from the outside,” as the city grappled with fear, confusion, and distrust. Public records requests surged, public officials became targets of online attacks, and the city incurred significant unplanned costs.

In the aftermath, city leadership was faced with the realization that the cost of not informing the public can be far greater than the investment and time required to do so. Thus, they needed to answer the question: How do we build trust in a community where facts and information have become subjects of distrust and division?

Moving beyond traditional communication

The answer lay in rethinking communication and public engagement. For years, the City of Springfield, like many governments, relied on traditional channels such as local



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newspapers and public meetings to communicate with residents. As those approaches become less effective and media consumption habits shift, Heck explained that “it became an ever-increasing challenge to find new ways to engage and provide information.”

City leaders recognized that improving messaging alone would not solve the problem. What was needed was a different model of engagement, one that allowed residents to see government up close, ask burning questions, understand how it all works, and get information directly from public administrators.

As Heck put it, “Our best citizens are our most informed citizens, and the responsibility lies with city government to make this a reality.” Citizens Government Academy (CGA) emerged from this realization.

Inside the Citizens Government Academy

Springfield’s CGA is a 10-week program designed to give residents a comprehensive understanding of local government operations. Participants meet every other week in the evening for three-hour interactive sessions covering everything from governance structure to budgeting, public safety, and economic development.

“It’s really designed to be anything and everything for the public to learn about what goes on [and into] in their local government,” Heck said. The program emphasizes interaction over presentation. Residents engage directly with staff across departments, ask candid questions, and participate in hands-on learning.

The inaugural Spring CGA class of 25 residents began in January 2026

and wrapped up in May 2026. When the city opened applications, all 25 spots filled within two days—a clear signal that residents were eager for this kind of opportunity. Those who did not get a seat will be offered a spot in the fall academy. The level of community interest in this initiative was pleasantly surprising to city management and contradicts the common misconception that the average citizen is uninterested in local affairs. The community’s response to the rollout of the CGA showed residents are quite interested in learning more about their community if given the opportunity. As Service Director Chris Moore noted, “That was a signal for us. If you have people willing to give you ten evenings, three hours at a time, you have to embrace that level of engagement.”

One of the most impactful sessions of the Spring CGA was an open-ended

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leadership forum. Moore, voted top class presenter by participants, recalled the depth of engagement: “We talked for three hours straight.” Heck added, “I didn’t use a single one of the questions I had prepared. They just kept asking and engaging.”

Participants also took part in activities such as mock commission meetings, simulations of the budget development process, and other hands-on exercises, allowing them to experience firsthand the complex process of public decision making.

Creating informed community champions

While education is central to the academy, its broader purpose is to create what city leaders describe as community champions.

“The idea is to build champions in the community around information,” Heck explained. Many participants entered the program motivated by what they were seeing online. “At least half of them said they wanted to combat misinformation,” he added.

The program equips residents with firsthand knowledge and encourages them to share that knowledge beyond the classroom. As Assistant Finance Director Nikki Weber noted, “The majority of them wanted to be champions. That’s going to benefit us in the long term.” Participants themselves recognized this responsibility; staff shared that one participant mentioned their plan to share what they learned more broadly in the community. Through this multiplier effect, the academy extends its impact far beyond its participants.

That enthusiasm about being community champions was evident after every session—most participants stayed well past the three-hour mark to continue conversations, never rushing out the door.

Humanizing public service

A major outcome of the academy has been its ability to humanize local government. In many cases, residents encounter public officials only through headlines, social media posts, or brief public comments. The academy replaces that distance with direct interaction and dialogue.

“A big part of this is humanizing public servants,” Finance Director Katie Eviston said. “You’re not just seeing a salary posted online, or a sound bite. You’re actually having a conversation.” The program also creates space for difficult topics; issues such as compensation, homelessness, and service tradeoffs are discussed openly and transparently.

Eviston described one such moment: “Nobody brought up salaries, even though it’s something we see online all the time. So, I said, let’s talk about it. Let’s explain how it actually works.”

That willingness to engage directly helps replace assumptions with understanding. Participants consistently leave with a deeper appreciation for both the complexity of local government and the people behind it. As Eviston reflected, “They told us, ‘We feel more informed, but we also see how much you all care about this community.’”

The cost of misinformation

The City of Springfield’s experience highlights the tangible cost of misinformation.

In a single quarter, the city incurred more than \$1 million in additional costs responding to heightened tensions and misinformation. This included security, crisis communication, and operational disruptions.

“We had to hire executive security,” Weber said. “You’re essentially taking your leadership team offline while still trying to run the city.” At the same time, public trust eroded. Records requests surged, and staff faced sustained scrutiny. “We’ve seen a major increase in requests,” Weber noted. “There’s a level of distrust where people want to see everything.”

Set against the more than \$1 million in crisis-related costs incurred in a short period of time, the CGA’s financial footprint is de minimis, with most existing costs related to printing and light refreshments. As Eviston framed it, the cost of engaging the public is minimal, compared to the cost of not doing so: “The cost of not informing your community is too great.”

An investment in civic infrastructure

City leaders view the academy as a communication tool, but even further, as an investment in the underlying civic infrastructure for democracy.

Civic education has declined in many traditional settings, leaving gaps in the public’s understanding of how local government functions. “Civic lessons aren’t really happening in the same way



any more,” Heck said. “We have a responsibility to help inform people about what their local government actually does.” Initiatives like the CGA help fill that gap by providing accessible, practical education. The initiative also reflects a welcome shift in how local governments think about engagement. Rather than treating communication and engagement as one-directional, the City of Springfield is creating opportunities for dialogue, learning, and shared responsibility.

“Civic literacy is the infrastructure for democracy,” Eviston said. “If we want strong communities, we need informed and engaged residents.” This point connects directly to GFOA’s Financial Foundations Framework, which identifies building trust and open communication as foundational to effective local government. [For more on that, go to gfoa.org/financial-foundations.] That

trust and communication foster community buy-in and support the kind of collective decision making that allows cities to move forward together.

For Moore, the level of participation and interest in the CGA reinforces the importance of this work. “Public participation is usually hard to get,” he said. “When you have a waiting list for something like this, that tells you everything.”

Looking ahead

The City of Springfield’s inaugural CGA class has just graduated, and the city is already planning its next session. Applications for the fall academy will open in the second week of July 2026, and demand is expected to remain strong. Leaders are also thinking about long-term sustainability, including building a network of engaged alumni

who continue to serve as informed voices in the community.

Based on their experience of challenges and now the early success of the CGA, the city’s top management has some advice to offer other governments as it pertains to public engagement.

“Make the time,” Heck said. “This isn’t the only tool, but it’s one way to reach people and build understanding.” It is the responsibility of the city to inform its residents. So, making it a priority should be a priority.

Moore offered a similar perspective: “If people are willing to show up and engage like that, you have to make it a priority.” Residents are willing to invest time in understanding their local government when the opportunity is presented to them. The challenge is finding meaningful, community-tailored ways for them to do so.

Endeavors like the CGA are an investment in long-term resilience. This kind of active engagement with the public puts buzzwords like “transparency” and “communication” into action, Eviston noted.

Conclusions

Strong collaboration among high-level leadership is very important in having these discussions and ensuring public engagement endeavors. The CGA is showing early success because top leadership across all departments bought into the vision and committed to playing their part in it.

In a time when trust is fragile and misinformation spreads quickly, the City of Springfield’s Citizens Government Academy offers us a practical example of what it looks like to take an active approach to rebuilding the relationship between government and the people it serves. 📧



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