

# Local Government Attorneys of Virginia, Inc. (LGA)



**LGA's members include over 300 local government entities represented by more than 900 individual attorneys**

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## LGA's Purpose and History

The LGA exists to promote “education, professional excellence, and collegiality, serving as a valuable and unique resource on local government law through the Commonwealth.” This is a lofty purpose in our Strategic Plan, but it is consistent with the intent of the small group of people who, almost 50 years ago, started the LGA in order to help each other, broaden their knowledge, and improve the provision of local governmental services in Virginia.

The LGA was envisioned by Attorney General Andrew P. Miller and one of his deputies, the Honorable Gerald L. Baliles, when they attended a one-day meeting for local government civil legal counsel held at the University of Virginia in August 1974, as part of what was then the annual Local Government Officials’ Conference. The five founding members of the LGA realized that the multitude of issues involved in representing governmental entities created a need for a professional organization to provide continuing education and information-sharing opportunities for legal advisors to public bodies. Within a year, the small group organized and provided its first two-day conference offering Continuing Legal Education (CLE) on topics for government lawyers. This was the origin of the LGA, which will celebrate its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2025.

## Member Support

Member support is a foundational objective of the LGA, which is obvious in the five goals in our Strategic Plan: (i) education; (ii) professional excellence and collegiality; (iii) providing a valuable and unique resource on local government law throughout the Commonwealth through legislation, litigation, and research; (iv) member information and technology; and (v) financial sustainability.

LGA membership is viewed through two perspectives: organizationally and individually. We have over 300 organizational members, including almost all Virginia cities, counties, and towns, the Attorney General’s office, governmental authorities, governmental organizations like Virginia Association of Counties and Virginia Municipal League, and private law firms.

Within these localities, organizations, and entities, though, the LGA has 900+ individual members who are the lifeblood of the organization; individual members not only include attorneys practicing “in-house” for a local government entity, but also members of the judiciary, retirees, and law firm attorneys whose practices encompass local government law issues.

LGA’s primary mission for the past five decades has been member support, to provide both legal education and a forum for the exchange of ideas specifically focused on local government law topics. In terms of providing education, the LGA has been an approved Accredited Sponsor by the Virginia State Bar MCLE Board since 1986, when the accredited sponsor program began. For decades, the LGA has provided approximately 25 hours of CLE classes to our members annually, including 3-day spring

and fall conferences, and a summer 1-day regional seminar. It is clear that our members highly value our conferences in that almost 1/3 of them (225-250) attend each of the multi-day conferences. The regional seminar is designed to help attorneys at smaller localities obtain CLE credits, so it is usually held in a location easier for more rural practitioners to participate. The regional seminar typically draws 30-40 registrants and, in recent years, also offers virtual participation.

Our CLE programs, held at locations across the Commonwealth, tackle topics that are bread-and-butter to local government attorneys – like land use (zoning and subdivision), public procurement, civil rights, taxation, utilities, eminent domain, school law, and social services – as well as more general topics also involved in our practices, like employment, real estate, construction, bankruptcy, and current case law. A CLE on ethics and professional responsibility is provided at least once annually.

Moreover, in the past several years, topics and programs involving mental health and substance abuse issues for lawyers have been offered in our conference programming, including at least three CLEs on those topics. In recent years, each multi-day conference has provided free exhibit space for the Virginia Judges and Lawyer’s Assistance Program as well as an Alcohol Anonymous “Friends of Bill W.” meeting.

Recognizing the importance of newer issues that have arisen in the practice of law, the LGA Board of Directors, in spring 2022, created two ad hoc committees: one on Attorney Wellness, and one on Belonging, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion, to ensure that these important topics are incorporated into our programs and policies.

The LGA actively engages in educating and mentoring young lawyers as well as encouraging law students to enter local government practice. For almost 20 years, the LGA has encouraged law students to learn more about municipal practice by funding as many as 12 scholarships for each of its multi-day conferences, with the scholarships covering the conference registration, conference-sponsored meals and social events, and lodging. Recent law school graduates working as law fellows for organizational members are similarly eligible for conference scholarships.

Mentoring for new lawyers and new members of the LGA occurs principally through the Young LGA Practice Group (YLGA), which our Board formed more than a decade ago to ensure that attorneys newer to our profession could network, have a voice, and obtain leadership roles in the organization. The YLGA hosts a networking event at each of our multi-day conferences and also provides input into the LGA’s CLEs directed at newer practitioners, which are provided at least annually.

### Member Participation and Support

Perhaps the most surprising aspect of the 25 hours of CLE offered annually by the LGA is that they are prepared and presented almost exclusively by members willing to share their knowledge and experiences to benefit their colleagues. The high level of information sharing and collegiality among LGA members is also evident in the LGA

member electronic forums where inquiries and responses providing guidance, experience, and opinions are regularly posted. This informal ability to reach out to colleagues across the state is a valuable resource for our members, especially since the vast majority of localities across Virginia have only 1-2 attorney offices handling the plethora of legal issues that arise when you serve as general counsel to a local government.

While our electronic forums can effectively provide members a way to obtain a prompt response to a pressing question, more detailed and thoroughly researched information about 29 different legal topics encountered in the practice of local government law are available through the *Handbook of Virginia Local Government Law*, which is available electronically to all members. The *Handbook* contains over 1600 electronic pages of legal research and analysis on topics of significant value to local government practitioners. And by now it probably won't surprise you to learn that the *Handbook* is prepared and updated annually by LGA members.

Finally, each LGA member receives an electronic monthly newsletter, the *Bill of Particulars*, which principally contains summaries of recent legal decisions and opinions of interest to local government attorneys, but also includes information about our organization, conferences, members, and job postings. This is the only member benefit that isn't prepared by LGA members; the LGA has for many years contracted with the National Legal Research Group to prepare and distribute its newsletter.

In terms of additional information and communications amongst members, we have a robust website, <https://lgav.memberclicks.net/>, which includes a searchable membership directory, important foundational documents like the LGA's Policies and Procedures, and its Strategic Plan, as well as substantively helpful information such as the *Handbook*, the electronic forums, prior conference CLE materials (2007-present), and substantive work product from the LGA's committees and practice groups. The website includes information about the LGA Board of Directors and staff, links to job opportunities, and highlights about LGA Award winners.

As mentioned earlier, our members are the LGA's lifeblood and they are actively engaged in volunteering their time to support and provide the many LGA programs and membership materials. In total, over 1/3 of LGA members (more than 260) regularly volunteer their time and talent annually to support the LGA's mission.

There is a 13-member Board of Directors, with 5 officers who are elected to 1-year terms, and 8 at-large directors who are eligible to serve two consecutive 2-year terms. There are 8 standing committees (Amicus, Awards, Conference Policy, Ethics, Finance, Law School Liaison, Outreach, and Publications) on which a total of 114 LGA members are eligible to serve two consecutive 2-year terms. New committees are also created to address issues on an as-needed basis; currently, there are four of these, comprised of 19 LGA members.

Conference planning and presentation involves approximately 60 different LGA members annually, with 10-15 members serving on each conference committee to set

CLE topics and speakers, and then about 15 members who prepare and present CLEs at each conference. The *LGA Handbook* has 43 authors who update their material annually. Finally, the LGA has 8 topical practice groups [Eminent Domain, Employment, Housing, Local Taxation, Procurement, Social Services, Town Attorneys and the YLGA]; each practice group is led by 1-2 attorneys, adding a total of about 12 actively engaged members.

### Sustained Community Outreach Projects

Several long-term LGA standing committees focus on work to improve the overall reputation of lawyers and the justice system. The Ethics Committee, in its role as a liaison with the Virginia State Bar's Standing Committee on Legal Ethics, reviews and comments on proposed ethics rules that affect the practice of local government law. The Ethics Committee also arranges for an annual CLE for LGA members on a pertinent legal ethics topic. Both tasks help ensure high ethical standards for local government lawyers and the justice system.

The LGA Amicus Committee evaluates opportunities for the LGA to file amicus briefs in appeals involving issues impacting local government law. If the committee decides that an issue is appropriate for the LGA to file an amicus curiae brief, it arranges for a brief to be filed on the LGA's behalf, with the brief often being prepared by members who may offer their services gratis or at a reduced price. The LGA has filed or participated in filing almost 40 amicus curiae briefs over the years, thereby helping to ensure that Virginia's appellate courts receive appropriate, thorough analysis of the potential legal impact of an issue on local governments and Virginia residents.

Finally, the *LGA Handbook* is principally a benefit of membership – which includes LGA's judicial members – but we also annually provide it to the Virginia State Law Library of the Virginia Supreme Court. The *Handbook* is a respected treatise on local government law, as is evident from the Virginia Supreme Court citing to the *Handbook* in two of its opinions issued in 2023. By presenting important information and analysis on significant topics, we are helping to improve our judicial system.

Because most of LGA's dues are paid by taxpayers, through localities' budgets, the LGA does not routinely provide funding to charitable organizations; instead, it provides education and support to ensure that local government attorneys across the Commonwealth can do excellent legal work that benefits all Virginia residents.

### New Projects in Past Calendar Year

In addition to the sustained projects to benefit members, the justice system, and Virginia residents, the LGA has recently undertaken a new collaborative project, Leadership Training, in partnership with the Virginia State Bar Local Government Section and the Virginia Institute of Government. Because chief counsel for localities serve as leaders within the local government and their communities, these three entities have just initiated a full 2-year curriculum to assist local government lawyers in preparing to fulfill

these leadership roles [see <https://vsb.org/GV/groups/GV/gv-training.aspx>]. The curriculum includes a 2-day leadership seminar, CLE on pertinent topics, and management classes. Almost 50 LGA members participated in the inaugural 2-day leadership seminar held in February 2024.

### Novel Projects and Pro Bono Advocacy

The LGA regularly forms ad hoc committees to address timely legal issues by creating and providing members with extensive research and best practice recommendations. One recent example is an extensive review of legal authority and constraints on public demonstrations in the wake of civil unrest in Charlottesville during the Unite the Right rally. The ad hoc committee provided LGA members a 44-page legal outline and also presented a CLE at the 2018 VSB Annual Meeting. Another good example is our COVID-19 committee which provided timely legal analysis of the panoply of legal issues that arose during the recent pandemic. In addition, LGA routinely recommends subject matter experts in local government law to serve as participants on groups such as the Freedom of Information Advisory Council, the Boyd-Graves Conference, and the Opioid Abatement Authority.

In 2017, we presented a CLE highlighting pro bono service as a means to close the justice gap, and, in 2014, the LGA partnered with the Richmond Bar Association and Sands Anderson law firm to provide seminars educating lawyers about serving on nonprofit boards. In 2008, the LGA created and published a Pro Bono Guide which was recognized with a Virginia State Bar Merit Award; that guide continues to be available to members on our website.

The LGA actively encourages its members to engage in pro bono activities; in fact, we have an award, the David P. Bobzien Pro Bono Award, to encourage pro bono activities and recognize members who engage in pro bono services and/or facilitate the understanding of or access to the legal system through educational, participatory, or outreach services.

### Conclusion

The LGA has grown considerably in the past 50 years, from its five founding members in 1974 to 900+ members today, but it remains an organization where people appreciate and support each other. Over the years, the LGA has had a significant positive impact on its members, the legal community, and localities across the Commonwealth. Local government forms the bedrock of our democracy and the mission of the LGA is to educate and support local government attorneys so they can provide the best advice and guidance to Virginia's localities to the benefit of all citizens.