

PUBLIC OFFICIALS *of the* YEAR

GOVERNING

THE STATES AND LOCALITIES

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2012 PUBLIC OFFICIALS *of the* YEAR

When there's something in your house that's broken, you call in a repairman to fix it. The same is true in government. And while states and localities may not necessarily be broken, the past few years have left many of them in serious need of repair. The Great Recession and its long, unsure recovery have meant historic revenue declines for governments at the same time they're facing mounting fiscal pressures from things like Medicaid, pension obligations, and other public assistance programs.

Governments need fixers, and this year's eight Public Officials of the Year are some of the best handymen and repairwomen in public service. They've closed massive budget gaps by finding new sources of revenue and making sure government dollars are spent in the best, most responsible way possible. They're mending broken agencies, ensuring that government services reach the people who need them most. They're implementing new technologies to make government faster, more efficient and more responsive than ever. (Sometimes the repairs are more literal: One city manager has led a massive rebuilding effort after a devastating tornado decimated his town.)

The best fixers know how to work together to get the job done. These honorees have shown a true commitment to cooperation, often reaching across the aisle to tackle problems. A Republican governor forged a fiscal compromise with his Democratic Legislature. A county executive worked with a city mayor to merge services and drive down costs. Two state representatives of opposite parties in a tied state House opted to share the speakership, an unprecedented decision to join together in the task at hand.

What's broken can be fixed, and it can be made better than it was before. But it takes the kind of tireless work and dedicated leadership shown by these eight honorees. When they saw government in need of repair, they rolled up their sleeves and got to work.

The Watchdog

ELAINE M. HOWLE

Auditor, State of California

Good work is often rewarded with more work. Take California State Auditor Elaine Howle. For 12 years and through three governors and six legislative sessions, Howle has worked tirelessly to root out wasteful spending and failing programs, and to find ways to make government run better. Her wins have resulted in greater responsibilities and an enhanced role in her state. At a time when many departments in California are facing major cuts—along with many state auditors' offices around the country—Howle's office is growing.

Not a lot of auditors are involved in electoral redistricting. But when election-reform advocates pushed through a 2008 ballot initiative to create an objective, a political method of redistricting, they knew they wanted Howle for the job. (The ballot actually referred to Howle's office by name.) She was charged with recruiting, screening, and assembling the group of citizens who would serve on the board tasked with creating new districts.

Howle embraced the historic responsibility, says Kathay Feng, Executive Director of California Common Cause and architect of the ballot initiative. "They were very diligent and thorough about this whole process," says Feng of Howle's office. "It ended up being the thing that increased people's confidence in the commission."

Like any good auditor, Howle has come up with plenty of ideas for saving money in a state facing a \$16 billion deficit. Her audits have raised questions about the solvency of high-speed rail and state custody of juvenile offenders. This year she was given broader authority in an unusual role for a state auditor, to start looking into the finances of local governments—an important responsibility in a state where three communities declared bankruptcy this summer alone. The hope is that Howle will be able to spot problems before they grow into full-blown scandals.

Regard for Howle is so high that last fiscal year, the state Legislature increased her \$17 million annual budget by about \$8 million. The funding will allow her to hire more than 50 new auditors who can proactively investigate high-risk



areas, such as the state's teacher credentialing program. Howle's office made headlines last year when it produced an audit outlining serious lapses by the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing, which had a backlog of 12,600 unprocessed reports of arrests and prosecutions of state educators. That lengthy list potentially allowed questionable teachers to remain credentialed—and working with students—for years. Today, the commission is implementing all of Howle's recommendations, she says. "The part that's satisfying and rewarding is that people are taking the issue seriously."

—Ryan Holeywell