

# Q&A

## Meet GFOA's New Executive Director, **CHRIS MORRILL**



Christopher J. Morrill took over as GFOA's executive director on July 1, 2017, after 30 years in local government finance and management positions, replacing long-time executive director Jeff Esser. *Government Finance Review* sat down with Chris to talk about his first months on the job, the experiences he brings to leading the organization, and his thoughts about the future of GFOA.

**Q** WHAT GOT YOU INTERESTED IN GOVERNMENT SERVICE?

**A** When I was in middle school, my dad chaired the charter commission that changed the form of government in my hometown (Southbridge, Massachusetts) from town meeting/selectmen to council-manager. My dad then served as chair of the newly formed town council. I had a front row seat to observe the impact that well-run local government can have on people's lives. I studied political science at Holy Cross College, worked as a Main Street manager in Lynn, Massachusetts, and then went to UNC Chapel Hill for a master's in public administration, focusing my coursework on local government management.

**Q** YOUR CAREER PATH WASN'T EXACTLY TYPICAL.

**A** Yes, I've had some incredible opportunities to serve. My first job out of grad school was as a budget analyst in Catawba County, North Carolina, and then I moved to Savannah, Georgia, where I would spend the next 20 years of my career, off and on. A few years into my position with the City of Savannah, my wife, Kim, and I came close to buying a house and before we made it final, we asked ourselves: "Is there anything we want to do before we settle down?" And it turned out that both of us had wanted to volunteer in the Peace Corps. Coincidentally, the Soviet Union had just broken up and was looking for volunteers with local government management experience. We were accepted and arrived in Kiev, Ukraine, in November 1992, in the first group of volunteers to enter the Soviet Union.

Peace Corps Ukraine was incredibly difficult — and tremendously rewarding. With the remnants of the Soviet system still present, I experienced what it was like to live in a society where government is designed to control, not serve. I served the deputy mayor in Lviv, a city of 1 million people in western Ukraine. After two years there, working on housing privatization and government reform, nothing seems too hard to take on.

I have learned more through my involvement with GFOA than any other professional development opportunity. I've built strong professional relationships and made many lifelong friends.

After my Peace Corps service, I was rehired by the City of Savannah, and five years into my second stint there, I was contacted by Research Triangle Institute to serve as a local government finance advisor to the South African National Treasury. From 1999 through 2001, I served under a United States Agency for International Development project, assisting the South African government with developing local government finance legislation, municipal budget reforms, and capacity-building programs.

After two years in South Africa, the assistant city manager position in Savannah became available. I was hired and returned to the States, working in this position for 10 years before I got the opportunity to serve as city manager in Roanoke, Virginia, a beautiful, welcoming community. Although I never felt the need to serve as a city manager, I found the opportunity to lead an organization — build the staff team and mold the culture — very rewarding.

**Q** WHEN DID YOU FIRST GET INVOLVED IN GFOA, AND HOW HAS IT INFLUENCED YOUR CAREER?

**A** When I was 28 and serving as a management analyst in Savannah, the assistant city manager took a chance and appointed me budget director. That year, I attended my first GFOA national conference in Denver — and I was hooked. I found the sessions relevant and applicable to my work in Savannah. I learned a great deal

and enjoyed the delegates that I met. After that really positive experience, I volunteered to be a trainer in the budget academy, served on three standing committees, and used GFOA consulting for implementing Budgeting for Outcomes and assistance with implementing an ERP system. I eventually applied for the executive board and had the honor of serving as president in 2012 to 2013.

I have learned more through my involvement with GFOA than any other professional development opportunity. I've built strong professional relationships and made many lifelong friends. And by applying best practices and GFOA research

in my organizations, I have been able to better serve the communities where I've worked.

**Q** WHAT MAKES YOU EXCITED ABOUT GFOA?

**A** Our mission. By serving our members, we are helping build stronger, more financially resilient communities. In these challenging times — revenue constraints, service demands, and upheaval in Washington, D.C., and many states and provinces — GFOA's work is more important than ever.

**Q** WHAT ARE GFOA'S GREATEST STRENGTHS?

**A** First, our membership. With more than 19,000 members in diverse governments throughout the United States and Canada, we have the ability to bring best practices and innovation to thousands of communities. I have been so impressed with the professionalism, commitment to excellence, and dedication of our members. That is why I have stayed involved for so many years.

Another great strength is the GFOA staff team. I knew we had a good staff while serving on the board and volunteering on committees. Now, after a few months on the job, I realize that the skills and passion our staff brings to serving our members is even greater than I thought. It's a wonderful opportunity to work with these folks as we continue to improve an already-strong organization.

**Q** WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE TO SAY TO MEMBERS AND POTENTIAL MEMBERS?

**A** Your GFOA is here to provide you with resources and training, and to advocate in D.C. on your behalf, so you can better serve your organizations and communities. I hope you will take advantage of all we have to offer, and work with us so we can better serve you and your colleagues. I encourage our members to play a leadership role in their organizations. Finance officers should be at the table for important decisions, strategic planning, and economic development. Please use our materials to educate your coworkers, elected officials, and communities. We can better advoca-

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cate for you in Washington if you tell your stories — how mandates, funding cuts, or tax reforms affect your communities.

**Q** WHAT ARE YOUR GOALS FOR GFOA?

**A** Over the next year, I'll be visiting state and provincial association conferences to learn more about your opportunities and challenges. I'll also be meeting with the Big Seven organizations (the Council of State Governments,

**Leadership Books That Have Influenced GFOA's Newest Leader**



*Switch* and *Decisive* by Chip and Dan Heath (Crown Business, 2010 and 2013)

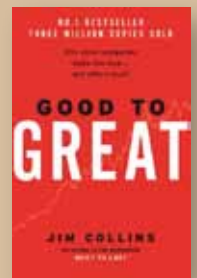
*Good to Great* and *Great by Choice* by Jim Collins, 2017 GFOA annual conference keynote speaker (HarperBusiness, 2001 and 2011)

*18 Minutes* by Peter Bregman (Business Plus, 2011)

*Brief* by Joseph McCormack (Wiley, 2014)

*Reality-Based Leadership* by Cy Wakeman, 2014 GFOA annual conference keynote speaker (Jossey-Bass, 2010)

*Drive* by Daniel Pink (Riverhead Books, 2009)



*Change the Culture Change the Game* by Roger Connors and Tom Smith (Portfolio, 2011)

*Leadership and Self-Deception: Getting Out of the Box* and *The Anatomy of Peace by the Arbing Institute* (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2002 and 2015)

*Thanks for the Feedback* by the Harvard Negotiation Project (Viking, 2014)

National Governors Association, National Conference of State Legislatures, National League of Cities, U.S. Conference of Mayors, National Association of Counties, and International City/County Management Association) to see how we can work together to better serve all of our members.

I'll continue working with GFOA's team to support our members with best practices, training, support, and advocacy, so you can better serve your communities. I hope to expand GFOA's social media presence as an additional resource for information and conversation, especially as we look to attract millennials to jobs in government.

**Q** WHAT ARE YOUR RECOMMENDATIONS OR ADVICE FOR GETTING MORE INVOLVED IN GOVERNMENT, AND IN GFOA?

**A** Serving in state, provincial, and local government provides opportunities to build better communities. I think that in the day-to-day challenges we often face, it is easy to lose sight of these opportunities. I've found that on some of those toughest days, learning something new from GFOA resources or contacting a colleague I've met through the organization has helped rekindle my passion in government finance and the positive difference it can make in people's lives.

A theme I've heard in my travels and discussions with GFOA members is that talent retention and attraction is one of their greatest challenges. I believe the new or recent grads have a passion for service, but instead of considering government finance, they look instead to non-profits or the private sector. I'd love for us to help them understand the great personal satisfaction and the impact they can make through a career in government finance.

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