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[Home](#) > [New sroom](#) > [Press Releases](#) > [2011](#) > Governor Christie's Ongoing Best Practices Initiative Getting Results for Local Property Taxpayers

Governor Christie's Ongoing Best Practices Initiative Getting Results for Local Property Taxpayers

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Results Demonstrate Stronger Local Government Accountability and Management as Municipalities Continue to Incorporate Best Practices into Daily Operations

Trenton, NJ – As part of the Christie Administration’s continued commitment to rein in the cost of government, maximize taxpayer dollars and provide sustainable property tax relief, Governor Chris Christie today released the Year Two Best Practices Checklist results, which demonstrate that the majority of municipalities are adhering to good governance practices and working to achieve greater efficiencies. These results -- for the approximately 545 municipalities operating on a calendar year budget -- were compiled by the Department of Community Affairs (DCA). Earlier this year, DCA also began working with all 21 counties to complete similar Best Practices Checklists, with results to be released next year.

This is the second year of the Best Practices Initiative and all calendar year municipalities responded to the 50-question survey of Best Practices standards. More than 98 percent of the towns received scores that earned them their full aid payment, with the vast majority demonstrating they are taking best practices seriously. Only a handful of towns were penalized this year, compared to the 161 municipalities in the first year.

Today’s announcement marks the latest achievement in the Christie Administration’s efforts to deliver property tax relief and promote efficiency and accountability in local government, which includes the 2 percent property tax levy cap, Transitional Aid program, tool kit reforms, and municipal consolidation efforts.

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"The Best Practices Initiative is an effective way to encourage municipalities to consider, embrace and implement a wide range of procedures and protocols that will help improve financial accountability and transparency that will inevitably lead to savings for property taxpayers," said Governor Christie. "While we continue pressing for additional property tax relief like civil service reform and ending sick time payouts abuse, municipalities can do their part to control property taxes by implementing these common sense, good government practices. I am encouraged to see that the vast majority of cities and towns have truly begun undertaking the Best Practices Checklist in earnest."

The Best Practices Initiative is designed to provide standards by which local government officials can perform an assessment of municipal and county operations. The 2011 checklist included 50 questions in categories such as General Management, Budget Preparation & Presentation, Health Insurance, Personnel, Public Safety, Energy and Municipal/School Relations. Some questions from last year were included again in order to track municipalities' progress with Best Practices standards and gauge their improvements.

"The goal of the Best Practices Initiative is not to be punitive. Rather it is an opportunity for municipalities to assess how they are conducting business, compare those practices against other municipalities, and to find new, cost-effective ways of providing services," said DCA Commissioner Lori Grifa. "There were also new questions designed to encourage financial accountability and transparency or to ensure compliance with various laws and regulations where compliance has been lacking."

Municipal governments had to meet an established percentage of the checklist items in order to receive all or part of their final state aid payment. As last year, credit was given for all "yes" answers and answers of "not applicable" where an appropriate explanation was given. Answers committing to achieve best practices this year were also given credit, but DCA will verify those municipalities for compliance. Responses are due on April 1 for local governments that operate on a fiscal year budget.

In addition to the Best Practices Initiative, the Christie Administration has required that all municipalities participating in the Transitional Aid program agree to State oversight and strict guidelines in order to receive state financial assistance. Governor Christie, with the bipartisan support of the Legislature, enacted Cap 2.0, which is a 2 percent cap with limited exceptions on municipal property tax levy increases that requires the authority of voters to exceed the cap, reformed the Interest Arbitration system for public employee contracts, achieved significant savings for local governments through pension and benefit reforms and advanced a series of tool kit reforms that assist towns and school districts in holding down pay increases and finding efficiencies.

Earlier this year, the Christie Administration also proposed legislation to allow consolidating municipalities to spread one-time costs associated with consolidation over a five-year period and directed the DCA to provide consolidating municipalities a grant to cover 20 percent of the cost of implementation. These efforts helped the recent successful consolidation vote in Princeton Borough and Princeton Township, and are expected to encourage future municipal consolidations.

To view a copy of the Best Practices Checklist or the CY 2011/SFY 2012 Best Practice Inventory Question Worksheet, visit <http://www.nj.gov/dca/lgs/bestpractice/bestpractice.htm>.

Press Contact:

Michael Drewniak
Kevin Roberts
609-777-2600



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Office of the Governor

PO Box 001

Trenton, NJ 08625

609-292-6000