

PEER KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE SERIES

# SANDY CHANCEY

Sandy Chancey joined the Eastern Plans Council of Governments (EPCOG) in 2009 as a transportation planner, moved on to the Workforce Development program, worked as the Executive Assistant, and finally became the Executive Director, all in a span of just 18 months. In December 2010 she was named Interim Executive Director and has “been here ever since.” “Shortly after I joined, I learned that they hadn’t been doing audits, [which] were already five years behind. I started looking for another job thinking, ok, this isn’t going to work out. There was a lot of turmoil in the organization at the time. Since I’ve been Executive Director, we’ve really been on a rebuilding path.”

Sandy began by taking immediate steps to address EPCOG’s finances. The organization’s board of directors hadn’t approved an audit since 2004 and the “books were not auditable”. EPCOG hired an accountant, and it took about three years to get the organization’s finances back on track. “We had to institute a lot of new policies and rewrite existing policies to ensure those checks and balances and internal controls stayed in place.” The changes were well received by staff and EPCOG’s board, “which wanted to make sure we survived.” Sandy knows that she has been “blessed with wonderful boards and supportive board members.” Key to her success was “being completely honest.” Her communication with them has been open and transparent, and she kept them involved in necessary changes.

Every organization has limited resources, but with only four full-time and two part-time staff, Sandy must ensure adequate staff capacity and always ask “will this benefit our members” when evaluating programs. For example, when Sandy joined EPCOG, it served as the fiscal administrator for the Regional Workforce Board. Sandy determined that the program wasn’t a great fit for EPCOG and prevented it from growing in other areas. Although the decision to not continue administering the program was unpopular with some, it allowed EPCOG to respond to community demand and shift its focus and resources to economic and community development. The organization is now able to prioritize helping its member communities with infrastructure, including roads, water, and waste services, and connecting them to federal and state funding sources. Sandy feels confident that EPCOG is helping its community’s



*Eastern Plains Council of  
Governments*

*Executive Director, 2010-Present  
Transportation Planner- 2009-2010*

## KEY TAKEAWAYS:

- You need to take the time to know your communities really well
- “Even if you hit a wall, there is always a way around it, and someone can show you the way”
- Review and as needed rewrite policies to ensure there are appropriate internal controls
- You always want to be at the table, even just playing a convening role
- The relationships you build will be key to your success
- Make sure your member communities are comfortable talking to and working with you

economies grow while emphasizing and honoring their unique cultures and histories. This includes partnering with Main Streets USA/NM and helping to promote tourism in the region connected to Route 66.

EPCOG participates in a weekly meeting with the New Mexico Association of Regional Councils (NewMARC), the association of all seven EDA-funded Economic Development Districts (EDDs) in the state, and state and federal staff, to discuss funding and grant opportunities. NewMARC convenes the COGs weekly, allowing smaller COGs to share challenges and benefit from the resources of larger COGs, like GIS, which they share on a project-by-project basis. NewMARC was also critical when Sandy began in the Executive Director role. She was able to use her fellow Directors as a sounding board and NewMARC also connected Sandy with an accountant when one was needed. “I could not have righted the ship without the other directors in New Mexico...they are tremendously helpful to me.” Sandy also brought up her relationship with NADO. She tells everyone that it “has been tremendously helpful” and provides great training and networking.

Being a small organization has both advantages and challenges. Given that Sandy only has two staff, it isn't hard to “keep tabs on everything”. Teamwork is critical, and everyone is expected to work closely together. Ideally, work can be assigned based on staff strengths, though every day is different and staff is expected to wear many hats and respond to community needs and demands. “There is no way to get bored working here.” Sometimes Sandy and her staff have to say ‘no’ - her staff of three can get overburdened with work quickly. But Sandy knows that the key to EPCOG's relationship with the community is being there to problem solve and assist, no matter the request. If EPCOG can't help a member, they are dedicated to working to find someone who can connect them with an appropriate resource. Like other COGs, EPCOG faces challenges of finding staff and having enough funds to pay for enough staff and pay high enough salaries to attract employees.

On reflection, Sandy wishes that upon becoming Director she had “spent more time evaluating staff and their roles at the organization. There were certain staff members no one wanted to work with, which I didn't learn the full extent of for a while.” Sandy had many words of wisdom and elaborated on key things she incorporates into her work. “You need to take the time to get to know your member communities REALLY WELL, and listen to their complaints and needs.” As a new Director, it is important to realize that “communities will have an existing relationship with your organization- make sure they're comfortable talking to and working with you.” COGs should “always want to be at the table, playing a convening role” while building key relationships. A “COG in a wheel, that's what we try to be. We may not be the ones to solve that problem, but we can be the ones to help you solve that problem.”



*Serves Curry, Quay, Guadalupe, Harding, Union, Roosevelt, De Baca counties*

## KEY PROGRAMS AND SERVICES INCLUDE:

- Economic & Community Development
- Strategic planning and technical assistance for local communities, including the CEDS
- Comprehensive & Land Use Planning
- Grant Writing & Research
- Transportation Planning

Founded in 1972  
32 member board of directors

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