This is “Legislatures: The Inside Storey” and I’m your host Tim Storey, the CEO of the National Conference of State Legislatures. Several million of our fellow citizens have answered the call of public service and make their career working in local, state and federal government. They are dedicated to making sure that the programs adopted by legislatures at all levels of government are well run and serve the needs of all Americans. Their roles so often behind the scenes are crucial enough that Congress created the National Academy of Public Administration — NAPA. NAPA is committed to excellence in governments at all levels and promoting ways for all public servants to be their best. We are going to learn more about that today with my guest.

Terry Gerton, president and CEO of the National Academy of Public Administration — NAPA. I’m so glad that you could join me today to be on the podcast. Thank you.

Tim, I am delighted to be here, and I’m also delighted to congratulate you on your recent election as a fellow of NAPA. Welcome to the fellowship.

I am a new fellow of NAPA and am pretty excited about that. I see so much potential in it and that’s one of the big things we are going to talk about. I want legislators, legislative staff and others who follow along at home here on “The Inside Storey” podcast to learn about NAPA. Let’s lay the foundation right there. So, tell us about your
role and what is NAPA and what is my discount on auto parts now that I’m a fellow? That’s the big question.

TG: You know I actually have a picture in my office that says NAPA – we don’t do wine or auto parts so I can’t help you with that.

TS: I’ll bet you’ve heard that joke about a thousand times and I was reluctant to use it because of that so I love that you’ve heard it so many times you’ve preplanned with a sign like stop it with the NAPA jokes. What is NAPA? The real NAPA. Tell us about that.

TG: The National Academy of Public Administration is one of only two congressionally chartered nationally academies. You know about the National Academy of Science. But NAPA is its sister organization. We were created in 1967 by James Webb, who at that point was the administrator of NASA who said I know where to go for my scientific expertise. I go to the National Academy of Sciences, but I’m starting up a new organization here. Where do I go for public administration expertise? There is no equivalent organization. So, he got together with some of his buddies and created NAPA. And it was largely at that point convened out of past presidents of the American Society for Public Administration ASPA. So, they got together, and they created the organization and began to bring in experts on public administration and that group then pushed through with Congress a congressional charter in 1984. So, NAPA was created in 1967, but not chartered by Congress until 1984. And our congressional charter specifically tells us that we are supposed to be responsive to government agencies at all levels of government around issues of public administration. And so, we do that predominantly through the fellowship of the academy. People like you with long careers of excellent service in public administration are nominated and elected into fellowship with the academy. So, this is not like a one-year student fellowship or it’s not a visiting fellowship. Once you get elected, in theory, you are a fellow for the rest of your life. And we bring the expertise of our fellows to our government clients through contractual fee for service arrangements predominantly. But for a minute, let me brag on our fellowship because we have nearly a thousand fellows and they come from the entire cross section of public administration. So, about a third of them are or have been professional academics. Folks who are doing leading edge research in universities who are deans of schools of public administration who really bring to us the latest thinking around best practices in public administration. We have about a third who are or were practitioners at the federal level so senior executives in career federal service or political appointees with long tenures in government who’ve led every cabinet agency, managed budgets, worked on the Hill, really know how the federal government process works. And the other third are state and local practitioners. So, we have some former governors. We have city managers, county managers, folks who are in state and local government in all of its different manifestations. And that is what makes the National
Academy of Public Administration really unique. So, when you are looking at whether or not a grant is effective or who should be in charge of a program that several different agencies or levels are responsible for, NAPA is the only good government organization that really looks at that from the intergovernmental perspective thinking about all of the stakeholders that are engaged there. And brings the latest academic research to that construct as well.

Typically, our work is here’s a problem. What should I do about that? We don’t try to just diagnose the problem or say yep, that’s a problem, but rather not only is it a problem, but here is what the latest thinking, the best practices tell us is the solution set for that problem. So, that is the quick elevator pitch on NAPA.

TS: Quick and I’m pretty sure you have barely scratched the surface of what you do. This is not meant to be a pop quiz trap by any stretch of the imagination, but my question is do you have any very rough estimate of how many Americans currently have a career in the public sector, public administration – we would call public servants? Like how many people do that?

TG: Not enough. First of all. I mean you know at the federal government level, we talk about 2.5 million civilians work for the federal government in all of its different characteristics and the people who study the federal workforce say even that is an undercount because of all of the folks in contracted services. You know consultants. All those kinds of folks that also support the federal government. I think the latest number I heard about state and local government was like another 3 to 4 million. So, you think all of that together 6 ½ to 7 million actually on government payrolls plus some other number of folks who are busy providing contractual services to the government. That is not enough to do the things we ask government to do.

(TM): 07:10

TS: At the legislative side of things, I mean, I see a very sort of niche world of public service. There are roughly 25,000 full time legislative staff not counting the 7,386 elected officials. And then there is about another 10,000 who are temporary. They will come in for the session so it’s a tiny fraction of the public service. Of course, these, especially the elected officials, are constantly thinking about these state workforces. You know who technically work for the executive branch and the governor, but you know are often very closely intertwined with legislative directives and statutory guidance. So, I think for you know if you are a state legislator listening to this or a legislative staff director, you know the question is what are the big challenges right now in public sector world? I have a pretty good idea. You already alluded to one when you said not enough. There is definitely a lot of discussion inside legislators about their own staffs and then certainly among legislatures about state you know state employees, state
workforces. A lot of gnashing of teeth. There is a great deal of turnover and it’s the
given the labor market you know next to impossible to fill jobs with qualified people.
So, is that one of the big challenges and what are the other challenges right now for
public administration?

TG: Well certainly the workforce is a big one. And we think about it not just in terms of
numbers, but in capacity right. Do you have the capacity in your government to deliver
the goods and services and benefits programs that you are expecting that government
to deliver. As an example, we talk a lot about grants management and at the federal
level these billions and trillions of dollars that are coming out through new legislation
around infrastructure investment. The ARPA Recovery Act. The CHIPS Act. The
Inflation Recovery Act. All of those are pushing billions of dollars to the states. Well, if
your state government workforce doesn’t have the capacity or the people who know
how to receive those grants and process those grants, account for those grants,
compete for those grants where they have to be competed for, your state government
is not going to receive the additional benefits of all of those programs. So, like a very
straightforward place is to say do I have the capacity to manage the grant money and
the investment money that my state could have access to? That flows right on down to
community. Great big cities typically have large grant staffs. They know how to apply
for those. They are very competitive. But a little town of 25,000 people probably
doesn’t have a grant writer on staff. Whereas that town might really need money in the
Infrastructure Investment Act to put into their water system, right. If you don’t have the
capacity to execute that function of government, your community or your state may be
missing out on tremendous resources that could benefit all of your constituents, all of
your population. So that’s a, it’s not a small limit. We can’t expect government to be
free right. Especially when it comes to people. In the same kind of way, investment in
IT is a huge challenge for governments on all levels. I don’t even want to hazard a guess
as to how many federal IT systems are still on COBOL and FORTRAN. It’s, the number is
not zero right. And yet our funding systems tend not to be organized to allow us to
make capital investments right. They are organized to allow us to pay for expenses as
we incur them, but to transition major IT systems whether that is data collection, funds
distribution. You know the topic du jour is the IRS’s systems, which are still so heavily
paper oriented. We have to make conscious investments in that kind of technology
infrastructure to have government be able to deliver the kind of services that we expect
it to deliver for the residents in our communities. Those are just a couple of resource
questions.

But the other thing that I think we are finding is regardless of the question that you ask
about government right. You could ask climate change. You could ask roads and rails.
You could ask equity and justice. You could ask election management. None of those
problems sits alone right. In these days, every single problem in public governments
and management is a multi-sector, multilevel, multidisciplinary solution set. And if we are not careful, the natural inclination of our system is to silo. So, I think the biggest challenge that we have at every level of government is giving ourselves and the people who work for us the flexibility to get all the right people at a table, a virtual table or a physical table, to really design systemwide solutions to the challenges that we have ahead.

TS: I’m fond of a saying and I can’t remember who said it now that great leaders are great simplifiers. The more you can simplify these overwhelming daunting problems, the better off you will be in terms of you know not getting people to step forward and go on offense against these things. Do you ever worry that things are just too complex now? I mean you didn’t even mention cybersecurity in IT. And everything seems to always point to a resources problem like we need more resources right and then that’s such a difficult starting point.

(TM): 13:10

TG: I think these are hard and complex problems and we shouldn’t try to make them too simple. But I think there’s kind of a simple approach to them. Think about who is affected by this program and are you listening to their voice. Think about who owns or has control of any of the inputs into this process and are they at the table. Make sure that you don’t fall subject to the we’ve always done it that way problem. Do you have the courage to say yeah, but it’s not working anymore and is there a better way to do it. So, voice of the customer, cross agencies, stakeholder collaboration, new ways of moving and then try and test right. So, kind of what I outlined there are some things that we’ve been researching and publishing in our agile government center where you take the concepts of agile software design, and you transition them to management, and they are really helpful right. Do you understand the mission? Do you understand who your customer, your client is, and what they want? Do you understand who else you need to talk to to find the solution set and then start trying and testing. Another great management saying is don’t let the perfect be the enemy of the good. Try something. Get something going. Do it in 120-day sprits. Come back and say well that worked. Let’s build. Or that didn’t work. Let’s change. Even though the problems are complex, that to me gives you a framework of starting to bite off progress and solutions.

TS: What advice do you give to legislators and legislative leaders who you know their ultimate pressure points are the elections themselves and the constituents who are coming to them and saying you know I want you to do everything, but whatever you do, don’t raise my taxes you know. Cut the other person’s priority so you can fund my priority. When you think about public administration and the challenges, how do you counsel elected officials who have those cross currents?
TG: That is a great question and it’s a line of conversation that we’ve been trying with some federal legislators for a while, which is before you pass another law about any program, stop. And let’s go back to say what do you want this program to do right. What is the outcome that you are seeking. Is it smoother rail transportation? Is it better water systems? Is it new services to communities that have been left behind? What is the outcome of the legislation? And now let’s think about how we can optimize the amount of resources that you are about to appropriate that goes to outcomes and not to overhead. I’m just talking legislative programs as opposed to other pieces. But what we’ve done for a long time is write legislation that is very specific about compliance and not very specific about outcomes. And one of the pieces of work that we did early in COVID was to look at the CARE’s Act which actually pushed money out to states with very little oversight regulation.

TS: We were lobbying hard for that actually. That would be sort of that was our preference.

TG: But we had members of Congress going we are not really comfortable with this, and we want somebody to come back and tell us whether the flexibility was the right thing to do. And we would say yes. We were able to articulate so many cases where states and communities got very innovative and really created all kinds of new solution sets that served their residents in the way that the law was intended that the funds were intended and that really reduced the amount of oversight reporting, special IT systems. All of this other kind of stuff. If I could give just one piece of advice, it would be to legislate in a way that focuses on outcomes. We will take care of the accountability of the process, but don’t, we don’t need to specify that at the level of detail that we have in the past. And make more of those resources available to deliver the programmatic outcomes. That’s how you get better outcomes without raising taxes.

TS: So, we also know that the nature of particularly the nature of the media in the United States is that for all of those programs and flexibility and innovation that happened under the CARE’s Act, or under the COVID, the first COVID—you know there were four COVID packages—and then inflation and then the Infrastructure Bill, too, was in there. For all of those stories, there is the one story of the dog park that got built next to the mayor’s house because the mayor has three dogs and oh you know there’s those stories. They seem inevitable right. But there is this strongly embedded American culture perception of government, of public workers, of government workers. As someone who is maybe the spokesperson for all of public administration, not to give you too much pressure there, how do you answer those folks because I know legislators think about those things.
TG: You are right and there is no easy answer for that. The most productive response is have your counterpoint ready, which was you are right. It cost us $50,000 and that dog park did get built, but we saved $500,000 of your money by not having to report at this level of detail. And that $500,000 went here. Or you are right. We do have three people to plant one tree and you could do it for one. But those three people also take care of safety. They make sure that you don’t cut a utility line. They make sure that the trees don’t go on the wrong side of the property line right. So, you are never going to get away from that one failure story. But if you have the flipside story to tell, over time the success story outweighs the mistakes story.

TS: Is that something that NAPA does is try to tell those stories?

TG: We do. We try to tell the stories about people who are out there doing great things in their communities. We have a weekly podcast where we feature a lot of our fellows who are out doing amazing things, especially related to our grand challenge, and we try to tell their stories as well. Like how did you get into public administration. Why do you keep doing it? What is the benefit? Why do you stay with it? Personally, for me, they are incredibly hard warming. I know most of these folks and their stories are just amazing. But the average person may not know why, you know, a city manager stays doing that kind of work. Or how they engage their city council with their community to really make sure that they are addressing those solutions. So, we do that. We have daily newsletters that go out that kind of highlight success stories and the news in public administration. And in many of our studies, we try to put forward examples of where great things are happening because there is a lot of good work going on. I’m talking to a fellow public administrator, but the people who are doing this work are so compelled by it. They want to do good for their community, for the people they live and work with. They are oftentimes frustrated by the system, but they are always trying to make it work for the communities that they serve and that’s a really a powerful place to be.

TS: Well, that seems like the obvious segue to the question of what about you Terry Gerton? How did you find yourself as someone who is in such a key role and care so much about the general good in serving the public? How did you get here?

(TM): 21:06

TG: Well, my typical answer is divine intervention because no one would have ever plotted my course if you had set out to do it. Really my exposure to public service started when I went to West Point, which I did because I knew that I needed a job, and I didn’t know what else I wanted to do, and I would get a free four-year education and a five-year job. Service in the military and the community engagement that entails in the service ethos that kind of gets bonded into you was hard to leave behind. So, when I retired after 20
years, I joined the career civil service in the Department of Defense. I did that for about 8 ½ years and then I tried consulting for a little while. I was probably a failed consultant. But I learned a lot in that process. I came back as a political appointee in the Department of Labor working on veteran employment right after the great recession when veteran employment was tending towards 13 to 15%. And that was first of all an amazing learning experience. But second of all something I’m really proud of and what we were able to do systemically to change the processes by which veterans transitioned into civilian opportunities. By the time I left, veteran unemployment was below the national unemployment average, and it stayed there even through COVID. It makes me feel like the systems we put in place held. And from there, I was fortunate enough to come to NAPA and to get engaged there in a different level of service and engagement. So, it’s really been a lovely career path. Every job I’ve had, I’ve thoroughly enjoyed, but it’s not one that anyone would ever pick out of a planning book.

TS: There is a lot to talk about there. What is this remarkable success? I mean almost a legacy of being part of the veterans’ unemployment issue. Cause I know you can never declare permanent success, but it would seem as if there is a lot of very black and white data that this is a success story. This is something that you know some resources were put into. Emphasis was placed on and we can now say there’s been tremendous progress on it. I hope you take pride in that. You should.

TG: Well, I do. And it gets back to the question you asked me before like how do you people solve these problems. Well, it took getting the Department of Defense, the Veteran’s Administration and the Department of Labor to the table with the state workforces, with employers to understand what was happening. With community colleges to understand how they could bring credentialing to the fore. I mean it took all kinds of different people. It took Congress to pass legislation that every veteran, every separating service member should go through a transition training program so that they would at least be exposed to the resources that were available to them. And it takes perpetual attention to the process. Because it’s easy to say well veteran unemployment is now 3%. We’ve solved that problem. We don’t need that program anymore. We still need that program because 200,000 people leave service every year.

TS: What was your job in the Army? Just curious. I assume you went into the Army.

TG: I did. I started off as a maintenance officer, which my husband would scoff at today.

TS: Because you don’t do all the maintenance on the vehicles. Is that the thing?

TG: I do not do the maintenance on the vehicle, but I started as a maintenance officer and then I took on a secondary specialty in resource management. Then when I got out and
became a civilian that was where I focused and became comptroller and looked at resourcing strategies and those sorts of things.

TS: And then it gets to again to this notion of public service because I think we all somewhat assume you could take those skills. You could be a consultant. There are more transactionally lucrative jobs that people could pursue, but why does the public service. Why should it draw people? Why should people do that when it may affect how much they take home and how much they have for retirement?

TG: My graduate work was in economics so we would talk about non-monetary compensation here, right. The feeling that you get from doing good. You know you can do good in lots of ways in lots of small organizations and big organizations. But you cannot affect the lives of your fellow citizens for good at the scale you can when you are engaged in government right. And so, if you want to make a difference, if you want to be engaged in the work of serving others so that their outcomes are better, there’s no place to do it where you can have more impact than public service or in government. And I think that’s a challenge we have right now for this for the new generations right. They are very public service motivated, but they don’t associate that opportunity with government employment and so there is a huge communications opportunity for all of us to better tell the story about how service and government is an incredible way to support your fellow human beings.

TS: I see that, by the way, back in legislature world getting you know talented, qualified people to agree to run for public office. It is not lucrative generally at the state level. The intangible. The relational benefits that come from that are often very negative in many ways. The negative perception and what they have to go through you know from detractors and some of the evil vile that they get from the other side. It comes from both sides by the way. So, I think this question you know of calling people to public service is really important. We are going to have to articulate that as I think you’ve done a pretty nice job here. Let me ask you this. You had the good fortune to be around great public administrators. Obviously, the academy is filled with close to 1,000 of the you know the elite public administrators in the nation. Who are the heroes in your mind? Who are the people that stand out that have influenced you that have said things, that have done things that you know really left a lasting impression. Ahm people you want to emulate.

(TM): 27:31

TG: That is such a hard question because I remember the very first like fellow meeting that I went to when I was when I became the president of NAPA and there was an individual there who was literally a rocket scientist at the beginning on NASA, right, figuring out
how to do all of that. Former comptroller, you know, of the United States. Head a GAO. There were so many people around the table. And I was like oh my gosh. I can’t believe I’m sitting here having lunch with people whose names are in public administration textbooks. One person who has just an amazing story across his life is Dwight Ink, right. If you haven’t heard of Dwight Ink, he just passed away last year just before his 100th birthday. He served seven sitting presidents. He was the federal coordinator of response to the Alaska earthquake back in the ’60s. He worked on nuclear response. He worked on the Civil Service Reform Act. He just had this amazing career at the highest levels. Nobody knows his name right. If you are outside of the public administration service space, you wouldn’t know Dwight Ink. He was this amazingly humble human being and yet he left such a legacy of public service impact. He started in city management and worked his way up to the federal level. And I think he really exemplifies the characteristics that we want in our public service right. Humility. Concern for other people. An understanding of the mechanisms of government and how to leverage them to get outcomes for people that matter. And a lifetime commitment to that service. So, Dwight would be like the exemplar for me of what a lifetime of public service is all about.

TS: You touched on those characteristics, those traits, those skills. But you know let’s say you are telling your new group of interns when you step away from this world, retire, win the lottery or whatever you do, you want to be Dwight Ink. What was his essence that they should emulate? That they should strive for?

TG: I just think a natural concern for other people and a willingness to work hard to make their lives better. And I’ll say only this in addition. Our fellowship is amazingly long lived. Like our oldest fellow right now is 102. Dwight passed away just before he was 100. We have a number of fellows in their 90s. They have been at this for a long time. They are not stepping back, and I think so much of that longevity is a function of their intellectual curiosity. They never stopped engaging in their community and the world around them. They are interested in what’s happening and how to make it better. I mean they are at our meetings offering solutions and very seldom is it ‘well, back when I was doing that job.’ It’s like here is what’s happening now and here is how lessons can be learned and here is how solutions can be developed. And that is the manifestation of the ethos. Staying engaged. Never getting tired of the battle to do better when it comes to government.

TS: You highlighted intellectual curiosity and sort of maybe there is a tie to longevity in this world as well right. If you are committed to something that matters beyond yourself and you are constantly sort of seeking to learn and expand that knowledge, that island that you are on and making the coastline bigger, the more you learn, the bigger the coastline gets. I like that metaphor of an island and knowledge. Maybe there is
something to that. That’s a key to success. It’s a key to being a legend that people recall and say like hey let me tell you about somebody that fits this. I mean you must have had you must have served under all kinds of leaders with titles, commanders and all that kind of thing. Is there any leadership trait that you think is key to success? You know sort of shifting from sort of the public administration which are all leaders in their own ways. But I’m just thinking about you know what is the consummate leader. What image does that bring to mind?

(TM): 32:00

TG: You know I think the one leadership trait that I’ve seen that matter the most is transparent communication. It’s one I’ve always tried to practice as well. It never helps to deny right. It doesn’t help to deny that there is a problem. It doesn’t help to deny responsibility. It always helps to acknowledge whatever it is that you are working on and accept responsibility. And it always helps to be very transparent about what you are doing to fix the problem and to report back on those fixes. And whenever I’ve worked for a leader who has practiced those basic communication tenants, you know what comes through is courage. What comes through is care for the workforce and the organization. What comes through is commitment to the values of the organization. Because to transparently communicate means you have to set aside your own pride and ego and focus on the welfare of your organization. And when you do that, the people who work for you pick it up. They pick up that ethos. They pick up the values. They build trust with that leader, and they are willing to do things if that leader asks that they wouldn’t for someone who didn’t exhibit care and commitment and transparency. So, for me, I think that’s the most important feature because it embodies all of the rest.

TS: We talk on this podcast a lot about institutions. At the core of mission at NCSL is the institution of the legislative body, the people’s voice. The cornerstone of democracy. Article I of the Constitution and all other state constitutions as well so this is music to my ears because I think to lead these institutions you have to be committed to the institution and believe in it something much bigger than yourself and then practice this this notion of transparent communication. So, I hope some people hear that and take that to heart. We should probably wrap up Terry. What a terrific privilege for me to talk to you and as is often the case, this conversation could go on for far longer. Any last thoughts for our elected and legislative staff out there who are doing their best to elevate public service?

TG: Well Tim I want to thank you for the opportunity to join you today. It has been a lot of fun. For folks who are the state legislature level, I think again just focusing on what really is a benefit to your constituents right and how can the programs that you are passing legislation around have greater impact. Think about that as you design
legislation. The institutions are important and threatened and we need to be careful about how we look at them for the future. We want democracy to survive. Federalism is a wonderful thing, and every level has its role to play. We all have a role in protecting the institution.

TS: Those are terrific words because it is at the end of the day, it’s about the people of our states, of our Country, by the people, of the people, for the people. And you got to put that spotlight right back to that core serving others. I am grateful and appreciative for what you do and excited about you know being part of your organization as well. And thanks for your leadership, Terry. Hopefully we will continue this another time, but thank you so, so much.

TG: Well Tim thank you again and thank you for NCSL’s support of NAPA’s work.

TS: I’m Tim Storey and I’ve been talking with Terry Gerton, President and CEO of the National Academy of Public Administration. Thanks for joining me on “Legislatures: The Inside Storey.”

Ed: Thanks for listening to our podcast. We encourage you to review and rate NCSL podcasts on Apple podcasts, Google Play, Pocket Casts, Stitcher, or Spotify. We also encourage you to check out our other podcasts: “Our American States” and the special series “Building Democracy.”

(TM): 36:25 music