



RESEARCH BRIEF

What Do County Commissioners Do All Day?

By

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County governments were originally created as administrative divisions of the states. Each state government in the country has designed, through its constitution and statutes, the authorities and powers that counties may exercise. Many states are “**Dillon’s Rule**” states (after Justice Dillon of the Iowa Supreme Court) which means that counties can only exercise the authorities that are expressly granted to them by law. Other states grant counties the powers and authorities to do any activities that are not expressly granted to another entity. These two historical interpretations of authority contribute to the differences in county government operations from state to state.

Traditional state mandated services performed by counties include:

- Recording of deeds
- General governmental administration
- Property tax assessment and collection
- Law enforcement and corrections
- Judicial administration
- Poor relief (public welfare)
- Road, bridge and airport maintenance
- Recreation and parks



The urbanization of counties in the late 20th century has brought about an increasing move into city-like services. As former city dwellers migrate into suburban areas and formerly rural areas, they carry with them the desire for the same level of service that they had become accustomed to in the city. Increasing population growth, and rising property taxes as a source of revenue, fueled county expansion into new formerly urban service delivery areas, such as:

- Planning
- Zoning
- Solid Waste Collection
- Mass transit
- Communications
- Parking
- Sanitation
- Transportation
- Utilities (including water, electricity, cable television and gas)

How are counties managed?

The governing officials in each county are elected either by district or at large by popular vote of the citizens. Although county commissioner is by far the most common title of these officials, many states call them many things. Such as:

Mayors (AK)

Supervisors (AZ, CA, IA, MS, NE, NY, VA, WI, WV)

Councilors (DE, IN, MA, NM, TN, WA)

Justices of the Peace (AR, KY)

Judges (KY)

Police Jurors (LA)

Freeholders (NJ)

What does it take to be a county commissioner?

In most states, the law requires that the candidate must have resided in the county for a set period of time, usually at least 12 months, and be at least 21 years of age.

Another requirement in many states is that the individual has not been convicted of any crimes.

What kind of experience is best for a county commissioner?

County commissioners come from all walks of life. They can be teachers, nurses, lawyers, doctors, business people, farmers and homemakers. Recently, candidates have become younger and younger, including college students. There is no best experience for elected office, but any experience that may have provided knowledge about finance, budgeting, communications, law and personnel is beneficial.



How does a county commissioner learn to do the job?

Many states now make training available to newly elected officials. Many state universities have governmental training institutes that officials can attend. Some states require newly elected officials to attend training for a required period; others offer certification for training completion.

If the state does not require or provide training, it can be obtained through national organizations, such as NACo, which sponsors “Newly Elected Official Training Institutes” at two of its national conferences, or from many state associations of counties, which often conduct “Training Sessions for Newly Elected Officials.”

What does a county commissioner do all day?

For most county commissioners, the position is a part time job; at least that is what they tell you. But the reality is that as an elected official you are on duty and on call for 24 hours a day.

The most important thing that a commissioner does is stay in touch with constituents. Daily, a commissioner speaks with citizens about what they want. A particular vote on a particular issue, a complaint about taxes, a problem with a sidewalk or a street light, are just a few things that commissioners address daily.

To effectively carry out the role of commissioner requires making decisions. To make good decisions, a commissioner needs good information. Gathering the necessary data and statistics requires time by the commissioner or staff.

Meetings are a major part of every commissioner’s role. Regularly scheduled commission meetings, special sessions, and public hearings are a part of the job. Attending community functions such as neighborhood meetings, business openings, school activities, strawberry socials and club meetings is also required.

Conducting meetings with citizens, as a means of informing them about issues is, another activity commissioners should be doing. A state of the district meeting is conducted periodically by many commissioners.



Establishing a working relationship with the media takes time and trust on both sides.

Last, but not least, is working closely with other members of the county commission to build coalitions. This is a major activity and one that takes time and skill. Building teams and creating support with fellow commissioners is how any elected officials gets the job done. A majority is needed in every vote.

Many counties have constitutional or row officers that are responsible for many other aspects of county government administration. These officers vary from state to state, but can include the sheriff, the coroner, the probate judge, clerk of court, auditor or treasurer, judges, tax collector or assessor and the recorder. Establishing a good working

relationship with them and appreciating the responsibilities of each of these elected officials can make the job easier since in most instances the county commission must provide the funds for each of these offices.

What issues are currently facing commissioners?

Routinely, commissioners are faced with the task of raising sufficient revenue to run the government and provide the services expected by their constituents. Taxes and fees are the most common way that governments raise revenue and increases are not generally popular with citizens. An effective commissioner educates citizens about the need for increases to continue service delivery as they expect and to maintain the quality of life in the county.

Mandates and the devolution of responsibilities from other levels of government are an ongoing concern for elected officials. Federal legislation such as the Americans with Disabilities Act, the Welfare Reform Act and the National Voting Rights Act (Motor Voter) have placed major responsibilities at the county level, with little or no financial assistance.

Why do people want to be a commissioner anyway?

Generally, what spurs people to become involved in local politics is a specific issue. Once they have become involved and learned how to work in the local political process they often discover that they have something to offer the community, and are interested in its future.

An effective county commissioner can leave a legacy of good works and make an impact on people's lives. It is the closest level of government to the people and one that provides the greatest challenge and creates leaders for the future.



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