

ICMA



BREAKING INTO LOCAL GOVERNMENT

A Guidebook for Career Transitions

January 2025

ABOUT ICMA

ICMA, the International City/County Management Association, advances professional local government through leadership, management, innovation, and ethics. ICMA provides member support; publications; data and information; peer and results-oriented assistance; and training and professional development to more than 13,500 city, town, and county experts and other individuals and organizations throughout the world. The management decisions made by ICMA's members affect millions of individuals living in thousands of communities, from small villages and towns to large metropolitan areas.

Breaking into Local Government: A Guidebook for Career Transitions

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INTRODUCTION

Entering the realm of local government administration presents a unique blend of challenges and rewards, where each day brings a tapestry of opportunities to shape the very fabric of a community. As aspiring local government administrators or assistant administrators, you're entrusted with the stewardship of vital municipal functions, navigating intricate policy landscapes, and fostering environments conducive to growth and prosperity for both residents and staff.

Yet, within this mosaic lies a myriad of challenges, from the intricacies of budgetary constraints to the complexities of physical and economic development and the ever-evolving demands of a diverse populace. However, amid these challenges lie unparalleled benefits—a chance to effect positive change, to inspire innovation, and to leave an indelible mark on the collective narrative of a community's journey. The path ahead is both demanding and exhilarating, promising a journey filled with discovery, growth, and the profound satisfaction of serving as architects of progress in the communities we call home.

Transitioning into the role of a local government administrator mid-career represents a significant pivot toward public service and community leadership. For those embarking on this journey, it can mark a shift from a different sector or specialization to the dynamic world of municipal governance. Such a transition brings with it a wealth of experience and expertise, enhancing the administrative landscape with fresh perspectives and innovative approaches.

For those newer to the workforce, determining the balance between the best fit for your skills and the greatest opportunities to grow can be an art, not a science. Included in this guide are profiles of fifteen individuals from a variety of backgrounds who have carved their own paths in public service.

No matter how you approach public service, breaking into the field comes with a steep learning curve, as you must quickly learn a new “language,” acclimate to the intricacies of local government, and navigate through a labyrinth of policies, regulations, and community dynamics. Yet, amid the challenges lies a profound opportunity for personal and professional growth, as mid-career changers harness their skills to tackle complex urban issues, drive meaningful change, and leave an enduring legacy in the tapestry of their adopted communities.

First, congratulations for considering a career in the public sector. It is a career that many find to be rewarding. Public service roles offer opportunities that are rare in other fields—from pioneering changes to preserving the best elements of those who came before you, there are few fields that allow individuals to engage so consistently and enthusiastically with their neighbors near and far. There is a reason that many currently in the field call it the most rewarding job they've ever had.

Second, statistics refute the outdated idea that there are too few jobs for too many applicants. There are plenty of jobs and opportunities in local government, and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development identified more than 500,000 municipal-level governments worldwide, and the U.S. Census identifies about 3,000 counties and nearly 20,000 municipal-level governments in the United States alone. According to ICMA's Municipal Form of Government survey, about 75 percent of local governments have a chief appointed official such as a city or county manager or administrator. Beyond that, according to the [U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics](#), there are an estimated 14.1 million jobs in local government nationally.

Like many professions, local government management continues to change. No longer

does the basic career path start with traditional graduate programs from which interns can grow into the positions of management analyst, assistant to the chief administrative officer (CAO), assistant CAO, and ultimately CAO. Because of budget constraints, staff reductions, and a general reinvention of the way we work, today there are many ways to get to the top administrative position in local government.

This change creates opportunity. With an unprecedented number of senior managers at or beyond retirement age and fewer staff prepared to replace them, attracting, preparing, and retaining the next generation of city, county, and town managers requires that we build a robust talent pool. In fact, to fill the existing and anticipated gaps in the management career path, the profession needs to tap a wider talent pool and attract talented individuals seeking to change careers.

Third, this guide was compiled by public management professionals who started much like you—individuals who became interested in public service but were unsure how to enter the field or how to translate their skills to a new sector. These individuals are committed to continuing an industry-wide legacy of open communication, enhancing public knowledge of the role we play in helping our communities be their best, and sharing the generosity of the many public servants who came before and guided us into the profession.

So if you're new to the workforce or looking to enter public service mid-career, we hope that this guide will help you by providing examples, resources, and advice from people who broke into local government at different points in their careers.

SECTION 1

WHERE DO I START?

If you're reading this, it's safe to assume that you're interested in exploring the possibility of a position in local government. But how do you know what that position might look like and whether a local government job is right for you? This chapter is sort of a "quick start guide" to help you answer those questions.

What does a local government do and what can I do in local government? While many people think of police departments and road maintenance when they think of local government jobs, communities need skilled staff in a variety of specialties—from accountants to attorneys, recreation directors to human resources professionals, and beyond.

Whether you want to work outdoors, work in an office, or move between the two; whether you want to have a variety of responsibilities or have a single core focus, local government is likely to have opportunities that work for you.

In short, pretty much anything you can think of, local governments do. What you can do in local government will depend on a few factors:

- Your professional interests
- Your work experience
- The area where you live and the area where you want to work
- What the community needs.

The Local Government Overview on page 8 shows departments that commonly exist in local governments of various sizes. For individuals who come to local government from the private sector, the bottom of the graphic lists these departments, followed by private-sector equivalents. For example, an individual who has worked in corporate governance in the private sector might possess skills that would transfer to city or county administration in local government. The graphic "Key Professional Abilities and Applicable Skills" on pages 14–17 provides more detail on the skills

required in local government jobs and applicable skills from other sectors.

QUESTIONS TO GET YOU STARTED

Each individual and each local government is unique, but the following broad questions can help you zero in on local government jobs that are compatible with your preferences.

Who Do You Want to Work With? Think about who you prefer to work with daily. Do you want to work with an internal team, or to interact with members of the public for most of your day, or to find a balance between the two?

If you prefer to work predominantly with an internal team, the following departments would be a good starting point for you: Finance, Accounting, Procurement, Information Technology (IT) Services. These departments often work together to complete tasks and achieve project goals.

- Procurement staff might develop a request for proposals (RFP) that is issued to alert relevant vendors of a need for services or physical goods; they might collaborate with the finance department to verify that any submitted proposals are viable for the community in terms of initial cost as well as any associated ongoing costs.
- The accounting department would help make sure that vendors have been paid the appropriate amount, at the appropriate intervals, and ensure that the necessary records are kept to allow for verification in the future that public funds were appropriately and ethically spent.

If you want a mix of working with an internal team and with the public, the following departments would be a good starting point for you: Community Development, Public Works,

LOCAL GOVERNMENT OVERVIEW



Private Sector Equivalents

Skills acquired in the private sector often seamlessly transition into similar roles within the public sector, fostering adaptability and expertise transfer across diverse professional landscapes.

City/County Administration: CEO's Office, Administration, Corporate Governance, Human Resources

Finance and Administration: Finance Department, Accounting, Procurement

Technology: Information Technology Services, Innovation, Artificial Intelligence

Public Safety: Security Services, Emergency Response Teams, Military Service

Public Works: Facilities Management, Operations Management

Community Development: Urban Planning, Real Estate Development

Parks and Recreation: Corporate Wellness, Employee Engagement

Health and Social Services: Employee Health Programs, Employee Assistance Programs

Education and Culture: Training and Development, Corporate Social Responsibility

Economic Development: Business Development, Marketing and Sales

Communication and Public Relations: Corporate Communications, Public Relations, Graphic Design

Legal and Compliance: Legal Department, Compliance and Risk Management

Infrastructure and Utilities: Facilities Engineering, Utilities Management

Public Health, Public Safety, Animal Control, Municipal Courts.

While much of the work done by community development, municipal courts, and public safety departments originates from interactions with the public, all of these departments are key internal partners for the local government organization.

- If public safety staff is called upon to develop a plan to manage security concerns at a Fourth of July parade, not only will it be necessary to share information about road closures and access restriction with the public, it will be necessary to work with the finance department to address the overtime that can result from an event that requires all hands on deck.
- In many communities, the public safety department would also coordinate with the parks and recreation staff if the plan calls for the parade to terminate at a local park that is hosting activities for residents of all ages.
- Public health and community development departments work with a wide array of partners, often including state or federal agencies. Consider the COVID-19 pandemic, during which many municipal public health departments coordinated with their state counterparts to track the spread of each wave and worked with external partners to set up accessible vaccination sites after the vaccine became available. All the while, these local departments would engage with other departments in the organization to determine the safest way to provide such essential services as roadwork and water and sewer management.

If you prefer to work predominantly with members of the public, the following departments would be a good starting point for you: Parks and Recreation, Cultural Affairs (including libraries in many jurisdictions), Media Relations, Crisis Communication.

Local government employees in any of these departments spend significant portions of their time at work interacting with members of the public.

- Parks and recreation (which has gained visibility thanks in large part to the television show of the same name) is one of the local government departments that most heavily engages with the public as part of day-to-day operations. This might take the shape of sharing information about upcoming summer camp opportunities with parents, or it might be conducting an exercise to gather public input on what amenities are most desired at a park that is being renovated.
- The crisis communication team has responsibilities even in the absence of any current crisis. Many municipalities assign this team to work on building relationships with stakeholders to make sure that if the worst happens, the team has a robust knowledge base regarding each demographic that needs to be informed of what is happening and what is necessary for residents to do to be safe during the crisis. For example, the team might use the knowledge it gathers to help ensure that hurricane shelters have information available in the most commonly spoken languages in the region or that the local government knows what private partners can help find a safe and secure reunification location for families after a mass casualty event.

What Do You Want to Do? Think about your preferred work duties—do you want to work consistently within your area of expertise, or do you want opportunities to shift into new areas where you must develop expertise as you go?

While every job requires ongoing training and education, some roles require a high level of mastery in a specific field, and others are structured to require a greater breadth of knowledge and experience. For example, consider the roles of a planning department director and an assistant chief administrative officer.

- The planning director needs a great volume of technical knowledge to provide accurate and appropriate feedback to staff, residents, and developers. This knowledge likely involves not only knowledge of the adopted building code in the community, but also relevant federal standards for construction

and industry best practices established by national planning organizations. The director's ongoing education might focus on how to adapt to climate change and manage environmental hazards while helping the community develop the housing, recreational, commercial, and public facilities needed to achieve residents' desired quality of life. A deep mastery of several closely related topics is often one of the criteria that communities look for when hiring for roles like this.

- As the range of topics can be quite varied, the employee is not expected to have the same level of mastery as an employee whose role is focused on only one of those topics. Still, the assistant CAO is expected to demonstrate the core competencies needed in each area. Even if the assistant does not develop a specialization, he or she might be assigned special projects that draw on transferable skills that have been developed in a different context.

Both employees do incredibly necessary, important work. As you consider your own local government career, consider what you appreciate about previous jobs you have held and your own preferences.

Where Do You Want to Work? Do you want to work for a local government that is close to where you currently live? Local governments are everywhere, and many job searchers find it easier to start by eliminating locations where they would not want to work or where their preferred jobs are less common.

- Consider whether you wish to remain close to family, whether you have friends in other regions, and whether you have a partner or dependent(s) who may need access to job markets and educational opportunities that are more prevalent in one region over another.
- If you want to work for a local government close to where you currently live, it's time to do some research. What municipality do you live in? Does it have a website where you

can look at the departments and learn about any available jobs?

- If you don't want to work for the municipality you live in or if it doesn't have job openings that appeal to you, it's time to start looking for information about other municipalities nearby. Don't be afraid to keep checking every couple of weeks if you don't initially see anything appealing.

Where Would You Be Willing to Move? If you're open to a change in location, what locations would you be willing to relocate to? Are there locations that you would not relocate to?

Some jobs are found in every community— every community needs someone to make sure the bills get paid, and that goods and services are obtained at a competitive price to maximize the use of tax dollars.

Other roles, like water plant management, transportation engineering, and geographic information systems (GIS) analysis, will be more common in large communities that cover a significant geographic area or have a dense population.

Every community has some level of need for such services as stormwater management and fire protection, but regions that have environmental factors that put the community at higher risk will have a greater number of jobs available and will often look for individuals who have skills in a subfield (such as the mitigation of hazardous materials for fire and emergency management jobs located near watersheds or vulnerable populations).

How Does the Local Government Hiring Process Work? You can find a clear explanation in [How the Local Government Hiring Process Works](#) from the [Government Jobs](#) website.

Want to Explore Jobs in Other Areas? [Section 6](#) of this guide has resources that can help.

SECTION 2

EARLY CAREER CHECKLIST

Are you looking to get your foot in the door for your first job after completing a degree? Or have you been working for a few years and are looking to further set yourself apart while preparing for a successful local government career? Here are suggestions of activities that can help you expand your network, enhance your skills, and make you an attractive candidate for a local government position.

Select the opportunities that are most relevant and available to you. And whenever you participate in an activity that increases your skills or broadens your experience, don't forget to include it on your resume and highlight it in your cover letter for potential employers.

- **Seek an Internship/Fellowship.** There is no substitute for actual experience. Check job boards on the websites of professional organizations (many are listed in the Resources section). Approach a city or county manager or staff member and offer your services. Even if no job is posted, perhaps they can create an internship or special project opportunity for you.
- **Job Shadow.** Interested in the operations of your hometown? Want to see what a day in life of a city or county manager or other local government employee is like? Reach out to a manager and see if you can schedule a job shadow and follow him/her around for the day. Because a local government has multiple departments, perhaps you can even shadow several staff members in the same day.
- **Ride Along.** Ever wanted to save a life? Reach out to your local police or fire department and see if you can join a crew for a day. You may also be able to do ride alongs with other local government officials: building/construction inspectors, code enforcement workers, solid waste collection truck drivers, or other employees.
- **Request a Lunch/Informational Interview.** Interested in how your experience stacks up for a local government position? Reach out to a manager or a human resources (HR) director. Send your resume and a cover letter explaining that you'd like their advice on how to set yourself up for future success.
- **Join ICMA and/or Other Associations.** Networking is critical, and local government offers many opportunities to build a great network. Start with the International City/County Management Association (ICMA). Join today, and take advantage of the organization's many trainings, conferences, message boards, and networking opportunities. Seek out the ICMA [state or affiliate association\(s\)](#) in relevant geographic areas. If you're interested in a particular specialty, join an organization in that area, such as the [Government Finance Officers Association](#) or the [American Planning Association](#).
- **Pursue Certification/Training.** Want to distinguish yourself from other job candidates? Add more tools to your toolbox. Develop a professional development plan for yourself. A master's degree can help set you apart. You can also seek credentials in your areas of interest. And if you're working, it's likely your organization may offer some tuition reimbursement.
- **Peruse Job Listings.** There are many jobs out there; you just need to know where to look. ICMA's [Job Center](#) and weekly newsletter list open positions nationwide. Many state associations and municipal leagues may post even more local opportunities
- **Take on a Project.** You want to advance in local government? Show that you have the ability to lead or own a project. Find a need or opportunity and offer to take it on. You

can find opportunities by reaching out to your local municipality and volunteering for a local board or committee.

- **Seek out a Mentor.** Most managers and other local government employees have been where you are. Chances are, they're willing to share their experiences—the good, the bad, and the ugly that have led them to the place they are now. Seek out mentors, whether through official programs (such as the [ICMA Coaching Program](#)) or through the network you're developing. Mentors both inside and outside your organization are great resources who can share different perspectives.
- **Set Goals/Plans.** Specifically, where do you want to be in two to three years? How about in ten years? What areas of local government interest you the most? What organization do you want to be working for? What "title" would you like to have? List your answers and ask a trusted mentor for his or her advice on your goals and how to best work toward achieving them.
- **View a Governing Board Meeting.** If you really want to know how things operate in a city or county, attend the next city council or county board meeting where you live or watch it online. Before a meeting, downloading the agenda and previewing supporting documents will provide insight on specific discussion and action items. Going in person and meeting the elected officials and administrative staff gives you an opportunity to make a great impression.
- **Explore Local Leadership Programs.** Look up your area's Chamber of Commerce or a similar local group and find out whether they offer a leadership program. This is a great format to elevate your skill set, while also making valuable connections in your community.
- **Consider Service Organizations.** Identify a local service organization, such as a Rotary

group, and inquire about opportunities to get involved or become a member (membership may be by invitation). Or reach out to a nearby city or county to see what volunteer opportunities are available. Likely, they have an event or some other project coming up and would welcome all the help they can get.

- **Volunteer for Community Service.** Did you know that a local government has other boards and commissions in addition to the governing body? Most cities and counties have volunteer citizen advisory boards and commissions, such as a planning commission and other department-specific advisory boards (i.e., parks and recreation, library, public safety). Service on one of these boards is valuable experience, and you'll help your community at the same time.
- **Take Advantage of Coaching and Mentoring Opportunities.** Many local government related organizations host events geared specifically to up-and-coming professionals with activities such as coaching and mentoring sessions, resume reviews, and mock interviews. These can occur at national/international conferences such as the [ICMA Annual Conference](#), or at statewide meetings. For example, the Arizona City Management Association annually hosts a Next Generation Leadership Conference. Check the state association website(s) in your geographic area to find out what they may have to offer.
- **Maintain a Presence on LinkedIn and other Professional Social Media Sites.**
- **Learn from Others.** The following article and blog post from ICMA can help you in your search for a local government job:

[How to Get Your First Job in Local Government](#)
[4 Things to Consider When Trying for Your First Local Government Job](#)

SECTION 3

PIVOTING INTO LOCAL GOVERNMENT

It's a somewhat common misconception that in order to have a career in local government, you must start in local government. While that is one path forward, it's not the only one. This section provides guidance and assistance to individuals who have spent time working in other sectors and are unsure of how to successfully pivot into local government.

WHY ARE YOU PIVOTING?

Perhaps you've reached the maximum advancement in your current field. Maybe you want to do work that more directly benefits others. It might even be that an unexpected opportunity or fellowship has been brought to your attention. Whatever your reason for pivoting from an existing career, there are jobs in local government that would welcome you and all that you bring to the table.

Whatever your reason, be prepared to articulate to hiring managers, elected officials, or others involved in the recruitment process why you're making a mid-career change. Sincerity and enthusiasm are key parts of making a significant career change. It can be done, but it requires you to be honest with yourself. What do you want out of your career and why do you think you will find it in local government?

Section 5 of this guide presents stories from fifteen local government professionals who "broke in" to local government. They tell what drew them to the field, how their local government job is similar to and different from what they did before, how they feel about the change, and what advice they offer to others who want to break in. All but one of these individuals had established careers in the military, higher education, or the nonprofit or private sector. They made a change to find more meaning in their work, to have access to competitive benefits and wages, or to tackle a problem that they had been previously working on from a different angle. Read in their own words

what helped them successfully take on the unique challenges and opportunities in local government. As you'll see, many of them find immense satisfaction in working in the public sector.

TRANSFERRING EXPERIENCE

When you're pivoting from one field to another, it can be daunting to consider how to translate your hard-earned skills into something that works in the public sector. Sit down with your current resume and ask yourself some questions like these:

- Who did I have to communicate with and how?
- Have I ever been called upon to find information and share it with a group in a clear, constructive way?
- In what ways did my previous work assignments interact with financial decisions?
- Have I done assignments that required me to manage public experiences?
- Do I have industry-specific knowledge such as applicable minimum standards for common project types or an understanding of the current market prices for common goods or services?
- Have I been trusted with projects or information that require discretion and careful execution of the course that is decided upon?
- What unique value would I bring to a public organization?

You can learn more about the skills expected of a local government administrator by looking at ICMA's [Practices for Effective Local Government Management and Leadership](#) and the "Key Public-Sector Professional Abilities" shown in the figure on pages 14 and 15. On pages 16 and 17, you'll see a figure that shows skills you may have gained

in other sectors that can be transferred to local government.

If you're making a mid-career pivot in a field with professional licensure requirements (e.g., law, medicine, engineering, certain finance fields) shifting into local government may require you to transfer credentials from one state or territory to another. Depending on the community you interview with, you may be offered support with transferring credentials. A question to ask yourself as you go through a job search is "Am I prepared to transfer my credentials at my own expense and without guaranteed administrative support from a future employer?" If pursuing that sort of transfer is unappealing to you, it can serve as an informal geographic boundary for your job search.

PUBLIC SERVICE AND PERSONAL LIFE

Perhaps one of the greatest differences between a local government job and a job in other sectors is the visibility that often accompanies public service, particularly for those in senior positions. While an early- to mid-career position in many departments follows a standard interview and background check process, some roles will require a more intense interview—and some of that will occur in public.

For example, the recruitment process may include a public interview with not only potential future bosses assessing you, but also members of the public able to hear your responses to the

KEY PUBLIC-SECTOR PROFESSIONAL ABILITIES

Communication skills: Ability to clearly communicate all types of information to different levels and types of people, utilizing the appropriate method(s) in order to be understood

Be clear and concise

Effectively communicate key points verbally and in writing

Listen reflectively

Be diplomatic and polite

Understand the role of the media

Confidently speak before an audience

Be genuine

Interpersonal skills: Ability to interact effectively with others, both professionally and personally

Be assertive/self-confident

Be flexible/adapt or pivot

Be humble/self-honest

Display humanity/empathy/meet people where they are

Set appropriate boundaries/accept feedback

Be inclusive/treat others respectfully

Negotiate/mediate/resolve conflict

Maintain confidentiality/determine what information should be shared and when

Maintain work/life balance

KEY PUBLIC-SECTOR PROFESSIONAL ABILITIES

Leadership skills: Ability to influence, guide and encourage others toward achieving a strategic vision or common goal

- Demonstrate ethical behavior/integrity/authenticity
- Be visionary/inspire and motivate others
- Think strategically/plan long term
- Be decisive/determine how and when to act
- Identify and bring key stakeholders to the table
- Delegate/share power/give credit
- Balance a positive attitude with reality
- Think creatively
- Know your limitations/trust others with more knowledge or expertise
- Team build and foster potential

Management skills: Ability to manage the daily activities and operations of an organization in order to execute a strategic vision

- Be on time/meet deadlines
- Demonstrate financial acumen/budgeting skill
- Be knowledgeable about and comply with local, state and federal regulations and law
- Provide attention to detail/circle back
- Manage projects/coordinate across departments/entities
- Think critically/solve problems
- Demonstrate familiarity with applicable software applications
- Strategically align or adjust goals
- Coach/cheerlead/motivate

Political acumen: Ability to understand and successfully navigate in a public arena

- Persuade/influence others
- Know your audience and read the room
- Understand the importance of time and place/patience
- Identify unspoken/underlying issues and agendas
- Respectful treatment regardless of position
- Anticipate future events and individual behaviors

questions asked by your interviewers. Some communities adopt this practice for department head positions; others reserve it for the chief administrative officer. A number of communities might choose to opt out of public interviews and focus instead on a series of interviews with a small panel to better assess certain technical skills.

Regardless of the interview process, many communities publicize the hiring of a new manager or senior leader in local media. It can be a strange experience to see your face on the local news station’s website, with an article detailing your experience and often with quotes from your new boss(es) about what they hope you will achieve for the community. If you’ve moved to a new region to accept your job, this visibility can

be an overwhelming introduction not only for you but also for your family.

While the initial public interest often decreases as you settle into the job, many communities have members who will continue to keep an eye on how you conduct yourself in public—not just while you’re clocked in, but when you’re at the farmers’ market or picking your kids up from school.

Many people will be pleased to see that you buy local produce or goods; others might take this as an opportunity to approach you with frustrations about local services. In the wake of a controversial school board decision, you might find your decision about where your children are being educated under scrutiny. For those coming out of industries where your personal life is not subject

APPLICABLE SKILLS FROM OTHER SECTORS

Communication skills: Ability to clearly communicate all types of information to different levels and types of people, utilizing the appropriate method(s) in order to be understood

Research and editing, news writing

Communications, marketing, report writing, audience identification

Active listening, public relations, counseling

Diplomacy, customer service

Media relations

Public speaking

Self-awareness, sincerity, rapport building, nonverbal communication

Interpersonal skills: Ability to interact effectively with others, both professionally and personally

Balancing confidence and conviction with humility

Flexibility; ability to solve problems

Self-awareness, self-honesty, identification of emotions

Emotional intelligence, empathy, supportive behavior, compassion

Understanding of values and priorities, professionalism, assertive communication, acceptance of criticism

Collaboration

Conflict management, questioning and clarifying, neutrality

Discretion, caution, self-control

Self-care, prioritization, willingness to seek support

APPLICABLE SKILLS FROM OTHER SECTORS

Leadership skills: Ability to influence, guide and encourage others toward achieving a strategic vision or common goal

Respect for ethical standards, leading by example

Ability to innovate and motivate subordinates

Business acumen, ability to set goals and develop high-quality business strategies and plans

Decision making, ensuring strategy aligns with objectives, persistence

Delegation, team building, event planning

Encouraging employee engagement

Adaptability, flexibility

Problem solving

Self-honesty, teamwork

Training a high-performing managerial team

Management skills: Ability to manage the daily activities and operations of an organization in order to execute a strategic vision

Reliability, trustworthiness, strong work ethic, organized, timely

Financial expertise; accounting or bookkeeping skills, grant management, investments

Risk assessment and management, data interpretation, regulatory and legal expertise, relationship building and networking

Data analysis, global compliance, time management, self-direction

Planning, accountability, logistics

Critical thinking, problem solving, thinking out of the box

Computer literacy, social media experience

Strategic planning, ability to define and break down goals, track progress, execute plans

Evaluation, motivation, guidance, mentoring

Political acumen: Ability to understand and successfully navigate in a public arena

Negotiation skills, influence and persuasion

Situational awareness, ability to pivot

Grounding in reality; ability to defer gratification

Curiosity, observation

Mutual respect, validation, kindness

Environmental and risk awareness

to this level of interest, it can be disconcerting. Be prepared to lean on your colleagues in the field—we've all had to learn to professionally set boundaries with local residents, lest we find ourselves holding a carton of melted ice cream in the grocery store while we listen to a constituent.

Another aspect of your personal life is the satisfaction many people find in devoting their careers to public service. For example, much work in local government is about mitigating issues that started decades ago while thinking boldly and creatively about how best to set your community up to face today's challenges. It requires collaboration, exploration, and a willingness to advocate for others.

Whether it be rolling out an innovative way for local businesses to tap into grant funding to allow them to recover after a disaster, designing and constructing a new recreation center that makes healthy fun available to all, or engaging the public in educational outreach about how your community is adapting to new environmental hazards, seeing that you have helped build a vibrant, resilient community is a joy that keeps many in the field for decades.

TIMELINES

Patience is key to any job search, and this may be especially true for a local government job search. The timeline from a job getting posted publicly to

the new hire starting on their first day has been a source of criticism over the years for many communities.

Part of the perceived delay in hiring is due to the robust background check that is part of the hiring process. Local governments have an ethical obligation to ensure that anyone hired as staff is ethical and appropriate in all situations. Certain positions have access to sensitive financial or personnel information or have responsibility for operating large vehicles. These positions are often subject to additional checks of driving records, credit history, and certain other position-specific reviews. Don't be disappointed if you find yourself working through a longer hiring process than what is common in the private sector—having time to make sure a role is the right fit is important not only for the community but also for you.

OTHER RESOURCES

Take time to look at the resources in this guide about professional organizations, common department structures, key professional abilities, and tips and tricks from your future colleagues. Once you've explored the resources and individual profiles, consider exploring the [ICMA website](#) for more information and to start your job search.

SECTION 4

TIPS AND TRICKS

Members of the task force that created this guide brainstormed a series of tips, tricks, and “lessons learned” based on their experience. Here are suggestions to help you navigate your entry into local government.

ABOUT THE FIELD

- Learn “government speak.” Spend time reading staff reports and agendas and research any terms you don’t know yet.
- Check your politics at the door; professional local government jobs are not political. In fact, a core principle of the [ICMA Code of Ethics](#) is the importance of political neutrality. You are not the star player on the government stage; the elected officials and the communities we serve are. And residents need to have confidence that public service decisions are not influenced by political pressure.
- Join a professional organization for government that supports the field you’re interested in; network there and find a mentor. Most of these groups have a mentoring program. Or join one of the organization’s committees and get involved that way.
- Find a mentor, and don’t restrict yourself to one or two. In much the same way as we learn what to do and not to do from observing an older sibling, friend, or coach, mentors can help you develop your skill set.
- Use informational interviews to learn more about the profession. Many professionals love helping others out, and they may help you make other connections.
- Have someone review your resume to make sure it translates into “government speak.” In your cover letters, explain why you want to make a transition to working in government.

- Know the ICMA Code of Ethics and refer to it for guidance. What’s perfectly acceptable in the private sector could be an ethical violation (or even a legal violation) in local government.

ABOUT BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

- All good work starts with relationships. Connection comes before content. This is true in all fields; it’s definitely critical in local government.
- Think of relationships broadly—with colleagues, local and regional officials, residents, businesses, nonprofits, and every place that local government “touches.” Build relationships in every sector. Have lunch or coffee with someone; participate in community events; attend the dinners and galas. Look for opportunities to get time with people.
- Use LinkedIn or other networking resources to stay connected with those you meet professionally.
- Know your strengths, and your “strengths over-used.” Adjust accordingly. Cultivate self-awareness.
- Be humble, hungry, and people-smart (as Pat Lencioni writes).
- Vulnerability builds trust, and not the other way around. Start with vulnerability to build relationships that are deep and authentic.
- When someone shows you who they are, believe them. Be friendly with all, but recognize that not all are friends.
- Get comfortable being a “cubicle psychoanalyst” when it comes to working with elected officials. Enhance your ability to break down the motivations of policymakers and navigate the complexities of their

thinking. Your success can be enhanced by your ability to read the room.

ABOUT GROWING AND ADVANCING

- Recognize that every day is a job interview.
- Apply for the next-level job, even if you're not 100 percent sure you're ready. Let the employer decide if you're ready or not.
- Whatever the question at hand, always check: What do the organization's codes, charters, and ordinances say on the subject? Always check the code.
- Give any new role twelve to twenty-four months. It takes time to adjust and evaluate the role and the organization.
- Don't quit if you're outgrowing a position; instead, ask for more responsibility or a different role.
- Avoid career-ending behavior. (If you have to ask whether a behavior is career-ending, it's probably something to avoid.)

- Take on more responsibilities, even if you aren't getting paid more. It will pay off later.
- Write it down. Have a system for keeping track of your projects and priorities; 90 percent of career success is the basics—following through, hitting deadlines, and producing quality work.
- Dress for the job you want, based on what you see around you in the organization.
- There is a common saying that if your community is not growing, it is dying. Internalize that. Always try to learn more about your field, because if YOU are not growing . . .

ABOUT MAKING A DIFFERENCE

- Pass it on. Be the mentor, sponsor, and coach that you had or always wanted to have.
- Do the best you can until you know better. And when you know better, do better.
- Work to make the impossible possible.

CASE STUDIES

SECTION 5

STORIES FROM THE FIELD

This section brings you stories of the career journeys of fifteen local government professionals who broke into local government from the private or nonprofit sector, the military, higher education, or federal or state government—and/or who took

advantage of an internship or fellowship that gave them direct experience in the field. The years of local government experience reflect the number at the time of writing. You can use the following matrix to identify individuals whose career paths interest you.

Name & Position • Reason for Change	Page Number	Years in Local Government	Education sector	Federal / State sector	Intern / Fellow / Student	Military	Nonprofit sector	Private sector
Ana Garcia, City Manager Dania Beach, FL • Public Service/Desire to Serve	24	32						X
Craddock Stropes, Senior Management Analyst Carlsbad, CA • Benefits • Work/Life Balance	26	18			X		X	
Dale Pazdra, Deputy City Manager Coral Springs, FL • Lack of Job Security • Organizational Culture • Public Service/Desire to Serve	28	18						X
Gary Hill, City Manager Bountiful, UT • Always Worked in Local Government	30	24			X			X
Jessica Seibert, County Administrator Aitkin County, MN • Organizational Culture • Public Service/Desire to Serve • Work/Life Balance	32	16+						X
Joe Franco, Special Assistant to the Public Works Director Tacoma, WA • Lack of Job Satisfaction • Pay • Public Service/Desire to Serve	34	2.5	X		X			
Josie Dolenz, Budget Analyst II Greeley, CO • Public Service/Desire to Serve	36	10		X	X			X

Name & Position • Reason for Change	Page Number	Years in Local Government	Education sector	Federal / State sector	Intern / Fellow / Student	Military	Nonprofit sector	Private sector
Kara Roberson, Strategic Communications Officer Wentzville, MO • Organizational Culture • Public Service/Desire to Serve • Retirement Security	38	17		X			X	
Lacy Lewis, Supervising Management Analyst Sammamish, WA • Lack of Job Satisfaction • Organizational Culture • Work/Life Balance	40	7			X		X	
Myles Tucker, Support Services Manager/Assistant to the Town Manager Needham, MA • Desire to Leave Active Duty • Public Service/Desire to Serve	41	5			X	X		
Pamela Landi, Assistant City Manager Wilton Manors, FL • Lack of Job Satisfaction • Work/Life Balance • Burnout (24/7 Culture)	43	18		X	X			
Shannon Trapp, Chief of Staff Durham County, NC • Burnout • Organizational Culture	45	1.5	X	X				X
Sharon Eveland, City Manager Sandersville, GA • Lack of Job Satisfaction • Public Service/Desire to Serve	47	7			X	X		X
Thomas Prior, Organizational Performance Management Analyst Loudoun County, VA • Always Worked in Local Government	49	4			X			
Yesenia Mejia, Fiscal Services Director, Maricopa Association of Governments, Phoenix, Arizona • Benefits • Public Service/Desire to Serve • Work/Life Balance	51	20		X				X

CASE STUDY



ANA GARCIA City Manager, Dania Beach, Florida

Community Population: 35,000
Years of Local Government Service: 32
Sector Experience: Private

“We (cities) are the closest form of government to the people, and that resonated with me. I knew I could cast a wider net on the positive impact I could make in the community.” This is the reason Ana Garcia decided to break into local government—to make a difference. She has had an impact on the profession as a mentor and leader paving the way for women of color to serve in executive leadership roles in Florida, as she was the first Hispanic female in the state to serve as a director of parks and recreation. Garcia was promoted to assistant city manager and has been a city manager since March 2019, serving the Dania Beach, Florida, community.

Impetus for Change

Garcia has worked since high school, in fast food, at a gym, and at a dry cleaner, but she found herself in private-sector sales and management after high school. Her work ethic was instilled in her through the examples set by her family, who immigrated to the United States when she was a child, and the values and skills that she learned through group sports from a young age. Garcia gained experience with managing finances and reevaluating return on investment that has proven beneficial as she advanced, but she felt something was missing. She found she had a heart of service and wanted to help and affect the lives of as many people as possible.

Similarities and Differences

Customer service is an important part of working in the private sector. Garcia shared that she

“Being responsive is another service-related similarity that crosses over into our work in local government. The same care and concern for customers in the private sector should be given to residents in the communities we serve.”

has always taken the “customer is always right” approach even if it meant a loss for her business. Customer service is about going above and beyond. She has applied the same principles to her work in local government, putting residents first. “Quality of life is the service we’re providing to our residents,” said Garcia. Being responsive is another service-related similarity that crosses over into our work in local government. The same care and concern for customers in the private sector should be given to residents in the communities we serve. Garcia has created a RISE culture at the city of Dania Beach—**R**espect, **I**ntegrity, and **S**tandard of **E**xcellence. “It’s important to approach public service from the perspective of a resident; everybody’s voice matters. You stop growing when you think you know it all,” Garcia said.

A difference that someone breaking into local government can expect is the role we play amid crisis and great challenges. Garcia reflected on dealing with hurricanes and, of course, what we all experienced with COVID. “We are the first responders. When everything else is shut down, our community is depending on us—police, fire,

parks, and recreation,” said Garcia. “But in the end, it gives us a sense of purpose.” Serving as a disaster service worker goes beyond the emergency. When people have lost their homes or need services, as public servants, we find ways to connect residents in need to those resources and services.

Evaluation of Change

An obstacle you can expect in local government is the demands on your time. “You have to have an unselfish heart and realize that the rewards of the time you put in sometimes don’t align with a lot of monetary gain,” said Garcia. However, the returns come in different ways like knowing the difference you’re making in the community. Change is another obstacle that is consistent in the public sector. Learning to pivot is important because change could come in the form of a pandemic or a natural disaster, or it could come every two years with a change of leadership through elections.

“Go for it! If you have a passion to serve, listen to your heart. I still pinch myself and don’t take for granted what an immigrant kid has been able to accomplish in my city.”

Guidance for Breaking into Local Government

Garcia’s advice for individuals considering making the jump is “Go for it! If you have a passion to serve, listen to your heart. I still pinch myself and don’t take for granted what an immigrant kid has been able to accomplish in my city. Stay humble, lead with a heart of service, and put people first. Also, allow yourself to be mentored and be a mentor to others!”

CASE STUDY



CRADDOCK STROPES

Senior Management Analyst, Carlsbad, California

Community Population: 114,160

Years of Local Government Service: 18

Sector Experience: Intern, Nonprofit

Craddock Stropes reflected on her experience breaking into local government: “A good friend I knew through the theater world had just gotten a position at the city of Carlsbad. No one calling at 2 A.M. with wild artist requests, no having to pick up people at the airport, no having to worry about running out of budget and keeping the lights on.” Stability, work/life balance, and benefits. Her advice: “A desire to serve the community is not enough. Respect the level of technical expertise and ingenuity that is required of public service and prepare yourself to think differently to apply the skills you’ve acquired. Have patience for the process.”

Impetus for Change

The decision to break into local government was a practical one for Stropes, although it seems that a career in local government may have been tapping on the door without her knowing. As a communications student in college and a modern dancer, she found an internship opportunity with the Los Angeles County Arts Commission. It was that internship that led her to her first career in nonprofit arts administration, but planning for the future, she was seeking stability and work/life balance and benefits as she was expanding her family. A friend recommended a position in parks and recreation with the city of Carlsbad that was similar to her work in the nonprofit sector, so she made the jump into public service.

Similarities and Differences

There are many parallels between the nonprofit sector and the public sector, particularly as it

“Local government focuses on development of programs and opportunities to enhance the community’s well-being and life, which is not very different from the nonprofit sector.”

relates to service. “Local government focuses on development of programs and opportunities to enhance the community’s well-being and life, which is not very different from the nonprofit sector,” said Stropes. Work in nonprofit organizations is often focused on ensuring that people feel included, which aligns with the prioritization of diversity, equity, and inclusion in the development of public spaces, programming, and services for the whole community.

A key difference, however, is in the role of donors as a key funding source for nonprofits. In local government, tax revenue is a primary revenue source, but there is a legal and ethical obligation to use public funds in service to the public, which is different from the responsibility a nonprofit has to its donors. “A nonprofit has donors and supporters and volunteers, but they don’t necessarily drive the mission of the organization,” said Stropes.

Evaluation of Change

Breaking into local government was a step backward for Stropes, going from an executive management role in the nonprofit sector to

a coordinator in city government, but the stability in work/life balance and benefits was a key determining factor for taking this step. “Government is often perceived as slow to change, but I was surprised to find a great deal of innovation, creativity, and forward-thinking approaches abounding in all aspects of service provision,” said Stropes. “From instituting programs, engaging the public in community planning, exploring public-private partnerships, solving the most heart-wrenching and challenging social issues, and engineering infrastructure solutions with generational staying power—the ingenuity of local government professionals continually impresses and inspires me.”

Guidance for Breaking into Local Government

Reflecting on what advice she would pass on to someone considering breaking into local government, Stropes said, “Be prepared to think differently and be able to draw parallels between different sectors and what’s possible in the public sector. Be patient with the process and always

“Be prepared to think differently and be able to draw parallels between different sectors and what’s possible in the public sector. Be patient with the process and always put the community first; do the right thing for the community the right way.”

put the community first; do the right thing for the community the right way.” Making a transition between careers can be intimidating, but there are many parallels that make the transition easier. It’s not always apparent, but local government innovation often draws on practices from the private and nonprofit sectors. Stropes closed by saying, “Don’t discount what you bring to the table or let the job titles deter you, because your skill set is probably a great match for an area of service that you’ve never considered.”

CASE STUDY



DALE PAZDRA

Deputy City Manager, Coral Springs, Florida

Community Population: 135,000

Years of Local Government Service: 18

Sector Experience: Private

“I wanted my life back. I found my peace and a way to make an impact in local government.” Dale Pazdra, deputy city manager in Coral Springs, Florida, broke into local government in 2006 after a career in human resources in the private sector that required a lot of travel and time away from his family. Several years before making a career change, Pazdra attended a workshop in his city. “After attending the workshop, I knew my ultimate goal would be to join the city where I could be a member of their leadership team and make our community a better place to live, work, and raise a family. I was so impressed by the transparency, willingness to share best practices and core values that contributed to their success,” said Pazdra.

Impetus for Change

Time away from his family made it very challenging to stay motivated. Pazdra’s prior career as a human resources director in the private sector became more stressful with a long commute, and before making the decision to transition into local government, he felt the organizational culture no longer aligned with his values and he sensed a sense of lack of job security. Pazdra was searching for a career change that would allow him to be closer to his family, have a better work/life balance, and give him purpose. “I made a change for the right reasons—professional reasons but also for my family,” said Pazdra. He wanted that connection to the community, and he was able to find a career where he could find balance and make an impact by breaking into local government.

“A difference between private and public sectors is intention. In local government, it’s important to show up authentically and demonstrate care for employees and the community.”

Similarities and Differences

The private sector and local government are equally demanding but in different ways. Both involve a lot of meetings, but in government there’s an extra layer in public service, which is community. The amount of time spent in meetings is similar, but community meetings are held at times that are convenient for the community, which can be in the evenings or on weekends.

A difference between private and public sectors is intention. In local government, it’s important to show up authentically and demonstrate care for employees and the community. When Pazdra started with the city, the technology and tools were not as advanced and accessible as they were in the private sector, but since then the city has made significant investments in upgrading the technology and tools. Change and innovation can take longer in local government, but Pazdra said, “I do not regret leaving the private sector. My skills and leadership capabilities have also grown by joining an organization where my core values are aligned with the organization where I’m serving.”

Evaluation of Change

You have to have patience—patience in finding the right position when breaking into local government and patience with implementing change. When Pazdra decided to explore a career in local government, he learned that the turnover rate at the city of Coral Springs was low, which meant he needed to be patient to wait for the right opportunity with the city. Pazdra said, “After joining the city, it took a while to get employees on board with change, so I had to pace myself.” He had to change his perspective, slow down, and practice active listening to help lead and facilitate change.

Guidance for Breaking into Local Government

There’s something new to learn every day, so you need to prepare to be continually challenged to do new things. “If you’re a person who cares

“If you’re a person who cares about others and cares about serving and you find that kind of work meaningful, local government is the place for you. You need to come into it with a servant heart.”

about others and cares about serving and you find that kind of work meaningful, local government is the place for you. You need to come into it with a servant heart,” said Pazdra. Compensation is important, but it’s also important to look at the bigger picture. Evaluate what you feel is missing from your current career and see if a career in local government can fill that void—benefits, culture, connection, community, work/life balance, and service.

CASE STUDY



GARY HILL City Manager, Bountiful, Utah

Community Population: 44,500
Years of Local Government Service: 24
Sector Experience: Private, Student

When your mentor is a mayor, you might find yourself on the road to city management one day. That was the case for Gary Hill, city manager in Bountiful, Utah. The seed was planted early, and breaking into local government was a clear goal for him. After 24 years in local government, Hill said, “The breadth of meaningful issues I have had the opportunity to work on is almost inexhaustible. I love having a new challenge nearly every day.”

Impetus for Change

Hill had his own lawn care business as a student. It was encouragement from his mentor that helped him decide to pursue a career in local government. Breaking into local government gave him purpose but also financial stability. “As a student, I was encouraged to look into city management as a career,” said Hill. “I was interested because I felt I could benefit my community, have a fulfilling, dynamic career, and provide for my family.”

Similarities and Differences

Hill didn’t change career tracks so much as start one. “I was intrigued by the dynamic nature of city government,” he reported. Hill’s mentor, a former mayor in a neighboring community, suggested that a career as city manager would be a good fit for Hill’s strengths. “I enjoy organizing, planning, building, and being with people. City management ticked all those boxes and more.”

“As a student, I was encouraged to look into city management as a career. I was interested because I felt I could benefit my community, have a fulfilling, dynamic career, and provide for my family.”

Evaluation of Change

“Finding opportunities for advancement felt like a big challenge, and finding jobs that can give you the correct skill sets and opportunities seemed daunting,” said Hill. Be forward-thinking when preparing for the position you want. Once you break into local government, and once you’re feeling established in your new role, be open with your supervisor about your goals and ask for opportunities to gain experience in new areas. Hill was provided with opportunities to learn and grow, but he was proactive about seeking those opportunities as well. Also, don’t forget about building your network. Get involved with associations to build that network, and you’ll walk away with professional connections and friendships.

Guidance for Breaking into Local Government

Develop and emphasize transferable skills. To achieve success toward any goal, you have to identify what you need in order to succeed and the steps that will get you there. With breaking

into local government, your “need” is to build transferable skills that will help you break in, and the “steps” are to develop those skills with intention and learn to communicate how those benefit your current and future employers. “I started with policy analysis and built from there,” said Hill. “I asked my supervisors and peers what skills I would need to be a city manager, and then I looked for chances to develop them.”

“To achieve success toward any goal, you have to identify what you need in order to succeed and the steps that will get you there.”

CASE STUDY



JESSICA SEIBERT

County Administrator, Aitkin County, Minnesota

Community Population: 16,126

Years of Local Government Service: 16+

Sector Experience: Private

“A new world of public service had been opened to me and I found my people. I love working with mission-focused individuals,” said Jessica Seibert as she reflected on her experience breaking into local government. She found her passion in public service and working side by side with colleagues who are dedicated to solving problems and making their communities better. If you’re on the fence about whether local government is right for you, keep reading. Sometimes the things we’re most worried about are not obstacles at all.

Impetus for Change

Prior to breaking into local government, Seibert started to find that the organizational culture in her financial role in the private sector left her feeling that she didn’t fit in. She was missing time with her small children because of a long commute, which was a key factor in making a career change. She found herself working hard to “climb the ladder” in the fast-paced private-sector environment, but she felt something was missing. “I didn’t fit the corporate culture of putting profits before people,” said Seibert, but it wasn’t until she transitioned to her career in local government that she realized that the satisfaction in putting people first—service—was what was missing. On the advice of a colleague, she explored an opportunity in local government and found the work/life balance and job satisfaction she had been searching for.

“All of the technical aspects of the job that I was most worried about when I started are really not what matters most. It’s all about people!”

Similarities and Differences

Leadership skills are transferable between the private and public sectors, and change is inevitable in both. Although the approaches to implementing change may look different, both have a focus on continuous improvement. A key difference is that the public sector is more mission-focused and less profit-focused. Furthermore, salary ranges for the same or similar positions can be different in the private and public sectors, so it’s important to do your homework. In addition to researching various positions and learning about the skills needed to be successful in those roles, be sure to look at compensation and benefits.

Evaluation of Change

Seibert had many fears in making the decision to change careers. “I felt my age was an obstacle. How was I going to show them I was ready for this now instead of going through the internship process?” Seibert asked. Not all skills are transferable, so at the time, she focused on continuing her education, but as she reflected on her experience later, she said, “All of the technical

aspects of the job that I was most worried about when I started are really not what matters most. It's all about people!" Seibert worked hard to prove her ability at a time when women in local government administration were minorities faced with such questions as "Can a woman do the job?" A lot has changed since then, and Seibert has shown that yes, a woman can do the job! Seibert said, "It didn't take long to earn their respect, but it can still be an obstacle depending on who I am working with. I simply stick to what I know is right and move forward."

Guidance for Breaking into Local Government

What is Seibert's advice? "To break into local government, I had to research what employers were looking for and position myself to take action. You need to build your network and

"Don't let your fears hold you back from exploring a career in local government."

volunteer. If you can't get into the role, find ways to get involved." Once you make the transition, you have an established network of people who understand the nuances of transitioning into a public-sector job. Keep up with change in the profession and take advantage of development opportunities. Don't let your fears hold you back from exploring a career in local government. In closing, Seibert said, "Being a county administrator is the most rewarding and challenging work I've ever done. I hope by reading stories of the interesting twists and turns some of us have taken to get where we are, others will be inspired to consider public service."

CASE STUDY



JOE FRANCO

Special Assistant to the Public Works Director,
Tacoma, Washington

Community Population: 229,000

Years of Local Government Service: 2.5

Sector Experience: Education, Fellow

As a first-generation college graduate, Joe Franco was on a career track to be a director of admissions at a university, but job satisfaction, pay, and a desire to serve his community in a meaningful way brought him to the decision to break into local government. His advice: “Build relationships and be patient with the process. Figure out what you’re passionate about changing in your community and be part of that change.”

Impetus for Change

Franco has always had an interest in local government and even considered politics, but when he started feeling burned out and frustrated with the lack of growth opportunities (despite eight years invested in education), and tired of a long commute, he decided it was time to break into local government. He was looking for fulfillment and for ways to assist underserved communities. Although it was a step in the opposite direction, he applied for an opportunity with the ICMA Local Government Management Fellowship program with the city of Tacoma, Washington, and made the transition. After serving as a fellow for two years, he was offered a permanent position with the city.

Similarities and Differences

Prioritizing access and communication are necessary in both education and local government; the difference is serving the student community versus the whole community, with a focus on equitable access to resources and services for underserved populations. The

“Build relationships and be patient with the process. Figure out what you’re passionate about changing in your community and be part of that change.”

similarities center on service, so leading with a service mindset is important to bring with you if you transition into public service.

Some differences, however, are the dynamic nature of local government compared with the cyclical and predictable nature of education (beginning of the year, semesters, end of year) and the need to be flexible and adaptable in the public sector. Local government can also bring information overload because there are so many layers to the work and so many issues, so having patience with the process is important to success.

Evaluation of Change

The decision to make a career change is never easy. Evaluate your career trajectory, including what you bring to the table and what you hope to get out of the next stages in your career. ICMA offers many free career resources, like this guide, that can help if you’re considering breaking into local government, but also consider how transitioning into the public sector may align with your long-term career goals. The experience as an ICMA fellow is an invaluable opportunity that can be a great start to a career change.

Guidance for Breaking into Local Government

“You have to have a heart of service,” said Franco. “I knew that it was time to make a career shift and follow my heart to serve my community.” Be patient with the process and take advantage of resources available to you. Get involved and strike up a conversation with someone working in local government. Building those relationships and getting involved with affiliate associations will be helpful when making the decision to change careers. You may also find a mentor or two along the way.

“The decision to make a career change is never easy. Evaluate your career trajectory, including what you bring to the table and what you hope to get out of the next stages in your career.”

CASE STUDY



JOSIE DOLENZ **Budget Analyst II, Greeley, Colorado**

Community Population: 110,000

Years of Local Government Service: 10

Sector Experience: Federal, Fellow, Private

From data entry and sales, to finance, bartending, and owning her own business, Josie Dolenz developed transferable skills that helped her break into local government. “I started out as theater major 20 years ago. Maybe that’s where the idea that I can do anything started, but my career prior to government reflected this completely.” Her interest was piqued when she took a city management class, so when an ICMA [Local Government Management Fellowship](#) position opened, she applied with confidence and was excited for the opportunity to serve her community.

Impetus for Change

Dolenz’s parents were both postal workers, so public sector service is generational for her. She worked in the postal service before returning to the private sector, building her resume with skills in communications and project management. Although her original trajectory was leading her to a career in the nonprofit sector, the class changed her perspective, and she knew that local government would give her the opportunity to use her experience for the benefit of the community.

Similarities and Differences

Private- and public-sector organizations have similarities, but the pace differs. Local government can be slower than the private sector to implement change, but diversity, equity, and inclusion strategies, for example, are more widely adopted in local government, Dolenz notes.

“Local government gives us the opportunity to have a great impact on our communities, but it also comes with the responsibility of ensuring services to the whole community.”

“Local government gives us the opportunity to have a great impact on our communities, but it also comes with the responsibility of ensuring services to the whole community. “Public-sector work can come with higher stakes; take emergency situations, for example. Even as a Management Fellow, some of my work meant bridging communication gaps that could cost organizations their funding.” Accountability also differs between the two sectors. The private sector is not highly regulated compared with the ethical and legal responsibilities for transparency and accountability found in the public sector.

Evaluation of Change

After finishing her fellowship, Dolenz was faced with where to go next. “It felt a bit like being handed a janitor’s keyring,” she said. “If you don’t know where each key goes, you’re just trying to open locked doors with the wrong keys.” Taking the time to grow your experience and relationship resources in local government can be valuable assets as you navigate your career path in public service.

Guidance for Breaking into Local Government

“Even if you took a winding path to break into local government, you’re building your experience along the way,” says Dolenz. Be patient and remember that your time investment is not wasted. Dolenz recommends a fellowship for anyone in a public administration program to gain practical experience. The ICMA [Local Government Management Fellowship](#) program is an opportunity to network and put theory into practice.

“Taking the time to grow your experience and relationship resources in local government can be valuable assets as you navigate your career path in public service.”

CASE STUDY



KARA ROBERSON

Strategic Communications Officer, Wentzville, Missouri

Community Population: 47,500

Years of Local Government Service: 17

Sector Experience: Federal, Nonprofit

“Deciding to break into local government wasn’t a surprise. My mom worked in city government and dad was a county worker,” said Kara Roberson. Organizational culture, desire to serve the community, and looking ahead to a financially secure retirement led her to make the decision to leave her career in the nonprofit sector for local government. The diversity and impact of the work of public service organizations have drawn her to make the transition to public-sector communications for the city of Wentzville, Missouri. “This ever-changing environment keeps me engaged and excited, reaffirming my love for local government and its multifaceted nature,” she said.

Impetus for Change

Even through her parents had established careers in local government, Roberson’s path to her first local government position began after working in the nonprofit sector and for a short time with the Federal Reserve. As a communications professional, she found herself limited to singular-themed messaging about financial policies and impacts with the Federal Reserve, or single-audience messaging through her work with the nonprofit. The impact and service to a broader demographic was missing. After spending seven years in nonprofit management, she hit the promotional ceiling, and the siloed culture of the organization wasn’t bringing her satisfaction either. She wasn’t originally interested in breaking into local government, but a few interesting opportunities piqued her interest.

“This ever-changing environment keeps me engaged and excited, reaffirming my love for local government and its multifaceted nature.”

Similarities and Differences

Both nonprofit and public-sector organizations have governing bodies—a board of directors for a nonprofit and an elected council for a city. Both also have stakeholders who lack understanding of projects or initiatives, so the organization needs to provide information in an accessible, easy-to-understand way to share its story. Roberson says, “In the nonprofit world, your audience is the membership, but in local government, your audience is much more diverse—different perspectives and interests—which is a key difference. Each day presents new challenges, opportunities to learn, and unexpected situations to navigate.” In addition, the political landscape of local government can present challenges, particularly when it relates to differing priorities and interests of elected officials.

Evaluation of Change

“My family encouraged me to take the leap into local government, and I learned it was exactly where I was meant to be,” said Roberson. “I also felt more secure in my job and loved my ability to connect with community members.” She found satisfaction in understanding the value of the

approval process and policy-driven culture of local government. It can slow projects down, but it increases accountability. Be patient and take time to understand the processes and why they're in place. Roberson says, "As a resident you have a totally different perception of what's happening in local government than you have when you decide to break in. You don't know what you don't know!" Many skills and experiences gained in private and nonprofit sectors, such as project management, strategic planning, budgeting, and stakeholder engagement, are highly transferable to local government.

Guidance for Breaking into Local Government

Be fearless in your decision to break into local government. There may be failures along the way, and that's OK if you keep your resident

"Many skills and experiences gained in private and nonprofit sectors, such as project management, strategic planning, budgeting, and stakeholder engagement, are highly transferable to local government."

hat on-put service and community first in your local government journey. "My advice is to network and leverage your transferable skills and experiences while also familiarizing yourself with the unique dynamics of local government," said Roberson. Stay adaptable and open-minded. The landscape of local government is always changing; new challenges and opportunities emerge constantly.

CASE STUDY



LACY LEWIS Supervising Management Analyst, Sammamish, Washington

Community Population: 67,455
Years of Local Government Service: 7
Experience: Intern, Nonprofit

After several years working in the nonprofit sector, Lacy Lewis found herself burned out and frustrated with lack of opportunities to grow doing the work she loved, helping foster youth and victims of domestic violence. She went back to school to obtain a master's degree in public administration, and through her program, she decided breaking into local government was the right next step for her.

Impetus for Change

After high school, Lewis was unsure what her next steps would be. A friend helped her get a job at a nonprofit emergency shelter for women who were victims of domestic violence. This experience led to her first management position at the age of twenty-one, and she found joy and purpose working with the nonprofit, but she was faced with limited opportunities to grow within the organization. When she was ready to explore new opportunities, she went back to school, intending to apply her degree to advancing her career in nonprofit work, but to her surprise, she fell in love with city management. "City management was a much clearer path for me to utilize my management and leadership skills while also serving the public," said Lewis.

Similarities and Differences

Both nonprofit and public-sector agencies are service-centered, whether serving clients or communities, and employees have a responsibility to be good stewards of dollars. They operate differently, however. Local government has more processes, policies, and procedures, which is a

"Change can be scary, but it's important to invest in gaining the necessary experience and let that experience and your education help you get to the next level in your career."

necessity for transparency and accountability.

Evaluation of Change

"Because I didn't have a background in government at all, I had to start from square one and get an internship," recalls Lewis. "This was tough because I felt like I was starting over." Change can be scary, but it's important to invest in gaining the necessary experience and let that experience and your education help you get to the next level in your career.

Guidance for Breaking into Local Government

Lewis's path wasn't always direct or easy. She was offered a position by the State Department but after three weeks, the bureau she was working with was eliminated. Turning a negative into a positive, she landed at the city of Dallas, Texas, and that experience helped her decide that public service in a medium-sized city (like Sammamish) was the best fit for her. "If I was not an ambitious person, this might have stopped me, but I worked hard to gain as much experience as I could," Lewis said.

CASE STUDY



MYLES TUCKER

Support Services Manager/Assistant to the
Town Manager, Needham, Massachusetts

Community Population: 32,000

Years of Local Government Service: 5

Sector Experience: Intern, Military

After serving as an active-duty Air Force officer, Myles Tucker wanted to continue serving in a different way, by breaking into local government. “My friends’ parents worked in local government, and my friend and I were always the ‘helpers,’” said Tucker. His exposure to local government and public service at a young age led him to his career in service to his country and then in service to his community.

Impetus for Change

Said Tucker, “My dad was a local journalist, and growing up in a smaller Massachusetts town, I always knew what was going on in local government.” Before starting active duty, he interned at the state house, which helped him understand the impacts of state and local government. Knowing he would come back to local government after his military service, he completed a master’s degree in public administration at night. Following his military service, Tucker served as a management analyst with San Mateo County, California. It was through his mentor, the town manager of Needham, Massachusetts, that he was presented with the opportunity to serve in his current position as support services manager/assistant to the town manager.

Similarities and Differences

The military and public sector are very similarly aligned in the way they are organized. Many skills required in the military are transferable, such as project management and development, analytical skills, and management. “Leadership skills are

“This is a unique career, at the frontlines of democracy, where your actions every day impact folks’ lives.”

transferable, and the military trains us to lead from day one,” said Tucker. Something different from his military experience is the community-level connections you make in local government. This rapport and these relationships give us the ability to make a difference in the communities we serve.

Evaluation of Change

No one day is the same. “In the roles I’ve been in, I’ve been consistently surprised at the lack of monotony,” said Tucker. “I always thought that I would lose that coming from the military, but I’m never at a loss for a new (sometimes a bit wacky) experience.” Dealing with democracy in action can be challenging, but people need and want to be heard. It’s our responsibility as public servants to facilitate those conversations. The pace can be slower than in the military, which takes adjustment and patience. Have patience with the process and yourself.

Guidance for Breaking into Local Government

Be humble, credible, and approachable. You’re working for the public by choice and you’re responsible for making ethical decisions in a high-trust environment. Tucker says, “This is a

unique career, at the frontlines of democracy, where your actions every day impact folks' lives." As you're making the decision to break into local government, focus on the deep "why" of what's appealing to you about local government service. This will help you with the interview process and with the transition, but it's also a really great reminder when things get tough, and you need to ground yourself.

"As you're making the decision to break into local government, focus on the deep 'why' of what's appealing to you about local government service."

CASE STUDY



PAMELA LANDI

Assistant City Manager, Wilton Manors, Florida

Community Population: 11,340

Years of Local Government Service: 18

Sector Experience: Federal, Intern

From intern, to federal, to local, Pamela Landi has had an accomplished career in public service, but it was lack of job satisfaction and the desire for work/life balance that led her to break into local government. “Even after a career in government, I’m still fascinated to learn new things for the first time about business operations. I love my job!” said Landi. “Because we are a small city, we have flexibility and an ability to impact our community in so many positive ways.”

Impetus for Change

Said Landi, “I never intended to make a career out of public service, only to do an internship that would bolster my network and resume, but I loved helping people and making good policy, and I had the chance to do that in my work with a U.S. congressman.” After fifteen years of service at the federal level, she still found joy in public service, which is why even after feeling burned out and taking time off, she found herself serving in a different place—local government. She left the federal government for a county position in government relations but was quickly promoted to director, a position she held for many years before an unexpected opportunity presented itself to make the jump to city government. Admittedly, Landi lost the sense of direct connection to the community in her director role, but since serving as assistant city manager for Wilton Manors, Florida, she’s been able to reconnect with the feeling and purpose.

“Even after a career in government, I’m still fascinated to learn new things for the first time about business operations. I love my job!”

Similarities and Differences

Working at any level of government is centered on service to the public, so all levels are the same in that sense. However, the level of connection and impact may differ based on your organization and role. Reflecting on her current and past roles, Landi noted, “Adapting to differences in organizational culture is also a challenge. Our city manager believes in fostering a culture of kindness foremost, above arbitrary deadlines, and I was accustomed to “running a tight ship” with my past experience. In the eight years I have worked at the city of Wilton Manors, I have learned so much about how to empower people and encourage high performance by helping them achieve their own goals.”

Evaluation of Change

Treat your process of breaking into local government like any project. In local government, you have to be resourceful. You may find yourself responsible for something new that you have little or no experience with, but if you’re adaptable and ask questions, you can be successful and turn the

experience into a valuable resource for you in the future. If you really want the job, prepare and do your research.

Guidance for Breaking into Local Government

Figure out what you like to do and the culture you'd like to work in. "Don't apply blindly because you need a job," said Landi. "That will often come across in an interview." Be humble but confident. Be able to genuinely convey your competencies, but don't boast or brag. When preparing for the interview, memorize five talking points that

"If you're adaptable and ask questions, you can be successful and turn the experience into a valuable resource for you in the future."

can serve as a response to many questions, and understand that a local government is usually looking for a good fit for its organizational culture, as well as a qualified applicant.

CASE STUDY



SHANNON TRAPP

Chief of Staff, Durham County, North Carolina

Community Population: 325,000

Years of Local Government Service: 1.5

Sector Experience: Education, Private, State

Shannon Trapp's career has taken her across multiple sectors, but the common theme along her journey has been service to community. What has been her driving purpose? "I wanted to make a difference in the lives of young people," she said. "Although my journey has brought me to serve in a different capacity by breaking into local government, I still thank the young people I have had the privilege of serving for allowing me to be part of their professional journey."

Impetus for Change

Trapp worked in state government with the North Carolina Department of Transportation as the director of HBCU (historically black colleges and universities) outreach, after a 15-year career in higher education at public universities, the majority of which served black and other minority students. The pandemic caused a shift in how institutions in higher education functioned. "What I loved most about the college campus culture was the sense of community—but that was hard to feel from behind a [computer] screen," said Trapp.

She used the time of transition to engage in self-discovery, which led her to realize she was burned out and questioning her passion. "I needed to reactivate the joy I once felt in working with young people. I wanted to feel a renewed sense of purpose." Working in state government, she found that the organizational culture didn't align with her purpose and values. After a brief stint as a real estate agent, she decided to see if breaking into local government was the right next step on her journey.

"Although my journey has brought me to serve in a different capacity by breaking into local government, I still thank the young people I have had the privilege of serving for allowing me to be part of their professional journey."

Similarities and Differences

Reflecting on the transition to local government, Trapp said, "What has been most surprising to me is how small the learning curve was in transitioning from higher education administration to local government administration." There were many parallels in the work, but surrounding herself with a network of people with similar experiences in local government helped her navigate the differences and challenges, like service delivery goals and expectations. In higher education, the ultimate goal is to help students achieve a degree that will set them up to enter the workforce by providing services and resources for a limited time period. In local government, the goal is to help all residents, of varying ages, identities, and experiences, thrive, and those services and resources can be for a lifetime.

Evaluation of Change

As she reflected on her experience, Trapp said, "A significant difference between state government and local government in my experience is that

local feels more like community and family—you can see the direct impact of your work, whereas in state government, you often don't see the direct impact because it's broader." She described local government as "immediate family" and state government as "extended family," and she believed that serving her "immediate family" aligned with the purpose she felt she was missing. She also had a strong support system and a mentor in a county manager who also transitioned from higher education. These connections made Trapp more comfortable with her transition, as did her husband, who had previously served as an elected official.

Guidance for Breaking into Local Government

"Battling imposter syndrome is hard," said Trapp. "New environments can evoke insecurities and cause us to question our abilities. I had to find strategies to maintain my confidence." Invest time in learning the lingo and ask for help when you're faced with something you don't understand. The internet, learning by attending public meetings, and asking lots of questions helped Trapp navigate the acronym landmines and local government language that can make the early stages of any career change feel intimidating. "It's OK to admit you don't understand," she said. "It took courage to admit it, but that vulnerability was better than the scrutiny I might have faced for not knowing." Find ways to maintain your

"New environments can evoke insecurities and cause us to question our abilities. I had to find strategies to maintain my confidence."

confidence. The more you learn, the more confidence you'll have.

Trapp encourages everyone to have a coach/mentor/sponsor in local government who can give an authentic snapshot of the work and how your skills could be transferable. Build your network by volunteering to serve on a local government board or commission, and don't be turned off by the prospect of an entry-level role or internship to get your foot in the door and build your network and confidence.

Trapp closed with this final insight: "At some point in your professional career, you transition from work/life balance into work/life integration. Balance suggests that you compartmentalize your professional life and personal life and set boundaries for when you immerse yourself in each. Integration recognizes that as you continue to excel, there may come a point when you cannot separate the two, so you must find ways to integrate work and life."

CASE STUDY



SHARON EVELAND City Manager, Sandersville, Georgia

Community Population: 5,813
Years of Local Government Service: 7
Sector Experience: Intern, Military, Private

After Sharon Eveland had served eight years in the U.S. Navy as a military linguist and intelligence analyst, it was a local city manager who encouraged her to break into local government as an intern. Making the decision to take on an unpaid internship as an MPA student and stay-at-home mother was not a simple choice, but she felt that public service had always been knocking at her door, so the time was right to break into local government. “I was raised to understand the importance of public service and of giving back to the community,” she said. “I wanted (needed) purpose in my life, and I knew that local government would give me that.”

Impetus for Change

Eveland worked hard to prepare herself for a postmilitary career. As she explored what that path might look like, a city manager encouraged her to pursue a master’s degree in public administration and a local government internship, which—combined with her military experience—would help her transition to a career as a local government professional. “I wanted to be fulfilled in my career and be given a sense of purpose.” Eveland’s father worked in local government as a planner, so one could say that the seed was planted early in her life. When she was required to complete an internship as part of her degree program, it was natural for her to consider breaking into local government.

Similarities and Differences

Joining the Navy was a choice for Eveland, as was the decision to continue serving in local

“I wanted (needed) purpose in my life, and I knew that local government would give me that.”

government. For her, serving in local government would provide the continued job satisfaction that would allow her to carry over her military experience, but the transition did not come without a learning curve. “In the military, there are significant repercussions for failure to perform or to do your job,” she said. “It simply went without saying that if you told a subordinate to do something, it was going to get done.” Eveland has adapted during her local government experience. Coming from a military background, she was accustomed to a hierarchical structure of leadership and chain-of-command that is strictly adhered to, and she had to let go of that. She has also had to dispel the assumption that someone with a military background is strictly a top-down leader, and she has established herself as a supportive leader, but as all great leaders do, she acknowledges that there will always be room for continual growth.

Evaluation of Change

Being exposed to local government through her father laid the foundation for her journey. “I did a short stint in the private sector and was miserable. It was just a paycheck and didn’t bring me any joy or satisfaction. I missed the sense of belonging and purpose that I felt in the military,

and I realized that it was because I wasn't doing work that aligned with my values." Even though she always felt that landing in local government was in the cards, the transition required patience. We all need to take the time to build trust within the organization and the community we serve.

Guidance for Breaking into Local Government

For a working mother, a career change adds a layer to the already high demands of work/school/life balance, but finding purpose and satisfaction in your career should be a driving factor if those are missing from your current job. Eveland's first piece of advice is, "Do it! Build your network and find a mentor in local government." Connecting with state associations and recruiters can be invaluable. Ask for help reviewing and improving your resume and focus on the skills you

"Do it! Build your network and find a mentor in local government."

have and how they connect to the position you're looking to apply for.

Also, be prepared to be comfortable with being uncomfortable. Despite similarities between the military and local government, they are very different from one another in application, and moving between them can be a difficult mental transition, especially if there is no break and the individual goes directly from the military into local government. Find the balance between empowering those around you and creating structure but avoid micromanaging and adopting an authoritarian leadership style.

CASE STUDY



THOMAS PRIOR Organizational Performance Management Analyst, Loudoun County, Virginia

Community Population: 440,000
Years of Local Government Service: 4
Sector Experience: Intern, Student

“I’ve always worked in local government.” Thomas Prior went from student to local government, but he recalls that the moment he knew he would break into local government was when he was thirteen. When he was in eighth grade, he had a job shadowing opportunity, and that’s when his love for service began. Throughout high school, he continued his civic engagement by volunteering and attending local events, but it was advice from a mentor that helped him define the pathway to public service.

Impetus for Change

Prior was involved in local government as a teenager. “I benefited from a community that prioritized youth civic engagement and recognized the significant impact local government can have on an individual’s life,” he said. Between the ages of fourteen and eighteen, Prior served on his city’s youth advisory board. During that time, he had opportunities to learn about the inner workings of city hall and was inspired to pursue a career in local government. As a youth board member, he had a network of city staff who mentored and supported him.

Similarities and Differences

In its simplest form, working in groups in school parallels the collaborative work in local government. Group members share ideas and often differences of opinion, and in local government our “grade” is evaluated by the community and our elected leadership through the lens of operational effectiveness. “I spent many years in a pipeline to a career in local

“Following graduation from my master’s in public administration program, one of the biggest obstacles I faced was intentionality, which is required to learn new technologies and expand your network.”

government. However, no one prepared me for the number of times I’ve had to describe the difference between a mayor and a city manager,” said Prior. What wasn’t surprising, however, was the caliber of local government professionals he has worked with over the years and the service-driven purpose that shows through the work they do in public service. “I continue to be inspired by those I work with and those in my network who are striving to make a difference in their communities,” said Prior.

Evaluation of Change

“Following graduation from my master’s in public administration program, one of the biggest obstacles I faced was intentionality, which is required to learn new technologies and expand your network,” he said. Prior was committed to learning from case studies and innovation in local government through his school but also by attending conferences. Education and knowledge aren’t enough, however. Maintaining a diverse network of connections in and around the profession and maintaining a level of

connectedness among your peers after graduation provides a level of support and resources as you navigate perception versus reality, and theory versus practice as a student breaking into local government.

Guidance for Breaking into Local Government

Prior's advice: "As a student, there are many opportunities and lots of postgraduate programs. Local government professionals rarely say no to mentoring and advising people about careers in local government." Mentorship, in many ways, is an extension of the service-based work we do through growing the profession and providing service to the next generation of local government leaders. Students breaking into local

"As a student, there are many opportunities and lots of postgraduate programs. Local government professionals rarely say no to mentoring and advising people about careers in local government."

government may be surprised at the complexity of some of the issues but learn to take the small wins. In closing, Prior said, "When you reflect on the work you're doing, you see that you have made a difference."

CASE STUDY



YESENIA MEJIA

Fiscal Services Director, Maricopa Association of Governments, Phoenix, Arizona

Service Area Population: 4,890,000

Years of Local Government Service: 20

Sector Experience: Private, State

“Experiences with job uncertainty led me to reflect on how I wanted to proceed with my career.” This was the point at which breaking into local government became a possibility for Yesenia Mejia. She had been laid off, but that time gave her the opportunity to examine career options. Some options were in the financial field working 50-60 hours per week, but there was also the option of choosing to make less money in exchange for work/life balance and serving in a meaningful career.

Impetus for Change

After working as a banker for many years for a financial institution that underwent three mergers in a five-year period, the concerns about security brought about Mejia’s evaluation of what a career change might look like. She went back to school, and when she landed the position with a large accounting firm, she was concerned with work/life balance. Was she trading job uncertainty for long hours? An accounting firm was always the plan, but to her surprise, the local government positions she had applied for months before when she was still in school would reemerge. After six months with no word about the government positions she had applied for, she had moved on, but now she had options.

As a finance professional, Mejia understood the value of pensions and benefits, and on reflection, she opened the door to breaking into local government. “I understood the value of benefits, specifically a pension,” she said. “This knowledge, coupled with my desire to serve the community and maintain a work/life balance, is what led me

“Do your research to learn the differences, challenges, and barriers, and take the time to understand the “why” of the job you’re interested in before making the leap.”

to seriously consider positions in public service.” Her transition to government began with a state government position. While she enjoyed that position, a friend encouraged her to look into local government. “It took a few years,” said Mejia. “I wanted to work for my local government where I lived because I felt this is where I would make my work output and personal benefit connect in more ways than just pay and benefits, but also as a taxpayer and resident.”

Similarities and Differences

The financial world and local government have many similarities—the abundance of rules and regulations, the need to provide customer service, and the ability to think critically and solve problems. At the same time, you can expect slower processes, and a higher level of scrutiny in local government, and more transparent and collaborative processes compared with the private sector. However, deciding to break into local government can provide opportunities for meaningful work. Do your research to learn the differences, challenges, and barriers, and take the time to understand the “why” of the job you’re interested in before making the leap.

Evaluation of Change

What was truly surprising to Mejia was how long the hiring process took. Be patient with the process, and in the meantime, work on identifying how your private-sector or other industry experience will transfer to local government. “The responsibility of translating how your experience applies to the job is on you,” said Mejia. “You must have the desire to serve the community and work within your position to make a positive impact. You’re accountable to your community.”

Guidance for Breaking into Local Government

Be diligent in completing your application. The biggest mistake you can make is applying for different jobs with the same resume. You must be able to translate your skills to the specific position you’re applying for. Break up the jargon and make it meaningful to the hiring organization, but also think about how to make your information stand out.

“You must have the desire to serve the community and work within your position to make a positive impact. You’re accountable to your community.”

Mejia said that internships are key in recruitment and retention strategies. “Contact the hiring agencies to see if they have internship opportunities. They might see you’re a good match.” Even if there isn’t an internship opportunity, get involved. Learn which departments might interest you and build relationships. Learn the basics and processes as a resident. “It gives you an opportunity to move throughout the department and try different things and keep the same employer,” said Mejia.

SECTION 6

RESOURCES

ASSISTANTS' ASSOCIATIONS (ENTRY TO MID-LEVEL)

State assistants' associations provide opportunities for networking among entry-level and early career staff.

Illinois Association of Municipal Management Assistants (IAMMA)

Municipal Management Association of Northern California (MMANC)

Municipal Management Association of Southern California (MMASC)

Urban Management Assistants of North Texas (UMANT)

Urban Management Association Southeast Texas (UMAST)

NATIONAL, STATE, AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT ORGANIZATIONS

International City/County Management Association (ICMA)

ICMA is the world's leading association of professional city and county managers and other employees who serve local governments; it provides a job center, a fellowship program, and numerous publications for members at all career stages.

- [ICMA Career Guides](#)
- [ICMA Job Center](#)
- [ICMA Coaching Program](#), which includes a one-to-one coaching program, CoachConnect
- [Student Intern/Entry-level Career Resources](#), particularly [Careers in Local Government Management](#)
- ICMA Local Government Management Fellowship (LGMF), a career-development opportunity designed to attract recent graduates of MPA/MPP or related programs

to be placed in full-time management-track local government positions.

- [SheLeadsGov](#)
- [Veterans Resources](#)
- [Veterans Local Government Management Fellowship](#)

National League of Cities (NLC)

NLC is an organization of city, town and village leaders who are focused on improving the quality of life for their current and future constituents.

- [Career Center](#)
- [Resource Library](#)

National Association of County Administrators (NACA)

NACA encourages professional development for county administrators and provides information and resources to its members to improve the management of county government.

- Job Listings (links to the [ICMA Job Center](#))

Urban Institute

The Urban Institute is a nonprofit think tank that conducts economic and social policy research to help advance upward mobility and equity.

- [The Urban Institute Internship Program](#)

Engaging Local Government Leaders (ELGL)

ELGL is a professional association focused on all levels of local government with a mission of fostering authentic and meaningful connections grounded in practices of equity and inclusion.

- [ELGL Job Board](#)
- [Analyst Academy](#)

National Association of Counties (NACo)

NACo represents county governments in the United States.

- [Counties 101](#) website dedicated to explaining how counties work

Bloomberg Harvard City Leadership Initiative

The City Leadership Institute is a yearlong program of the Bloomberg Center for Cities at Harvard University; it advances research and develops new curriculum and teaching tools to help city leaders solve real-world problems.

- [City Hall and Summer Fellowships Program](#)

Taubman Center for State and Local Government

Harvard Kennedy School's Taubman Center supports current and future public-sector leaders in improving the governance of states, counties, metropolitan regions, and cities.

- [Economic Development Post-Graduate Fellowship](#)
- [Tony Gómez-Ibáñez Summer Fellowship](#)

Association of Metropolitan Planning Organizations (AMPO)

AMPO is the leading transportation advocate for metropolitan regions.

- [Job Board](#)

American Society for Public Administration (ASPA)

ASPA is the leading professional membership association for public service.

- [Career Information](#)
- [Student Webinar Series](#)

Network of Schools of Public Policy, Affairs, and Administration (NASPAA)

NASPAA is an international association and accreditation body of public affairs schools, also known as schools of public policy and administration, at universities in the United States and other countries.

- [Information on Public Service Degrees](#)

Institute for Local Government (ILG)

ILG empowers local government leaders and delivers real-world expertise to help them navigate complex issues, increase their capacity, and build trust in their communities.

- [Webinars, Articles and Subject Area Descriptions on All Areas of Local Government](#)

NATIONAL AND EQUITY AFFILIATE ORGANIZATIONS (ALL CAREER LEVELS)

National Forum for Black Public Administrators (NFPBA)

- [NFPBA Mentor Program](#)
- [Career Center](#)

Local Government Hispanic Network (LGHN)

- LGHN chapters in [Central Texas](#), [Florida](#), [Colorado](#), and [Illinois](#)
- [Job Board and Student and/or Associate Memberships](#)
- [Career Hub](#)

International Network of Asian Public Administrators (I-NAPA)

- [Job Board and Resources for Local Government Professionals](#) (links to the ICMA Job Center)

CivicPRIDE

CivicPRIDE is the first nationally recognized LGBTQIA+ professional association and support network for local government management.

The League of Women in Government (LWG)

- [Resources and Articles](#)
- [Job Board](#)

ABOUT THE TASK FORCE

In 2023, ICMA created the Task Force on Updating the ICMA *Guide to Breaking into Local Government*, originally published in 2013. The focus was on broadening the profession's base of talent to include career changers at all career stages.

This guide is the culmination of the work that was done by ICMA member volunteers over a nine-month period. Along with stories that highlight the variety of ways that people transition into local government careers, it provides helpful resources for those interested in exploring the possibility of a local government career.

The task force started meeting in December 2023 and completed work in September 2024. The task force divided its work into three teams focusing on content, storytelling, and marketing and outreach.

We would like to thank all the task force members and the other ICMA members who contributed to the overall success of this guidebook.

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