



# Professional County Management



**The Benefits to  
Your County**

**ICMA**

*Leaders at the Core of Better Communities*

# Political Leadership and Professional Management in Today's Counties



**H**iring a professional administrator, appointed by the county's board or commission, is a trend on the rise in county government. Historically, most counties were governed by commissions or boards whose members had both legislative and executive responsibilities. This system functioned effectively when county government was limited in scope and complexity. With the expansion of the responsibilities of counties however, the policy-making demands of governing bodies greatly increased, as did the need for technical competence in the management of the operation and delivery of services. Today's elected board members can better fulfill their legislative or policy-making roles and maintain their overall control of service delivery by delegating the day-to-day management of the county to an appointed professional administrator.

## Making the Change to Professional Management

Employing a professional manager or administrator frees county elected officials from the administration of daily operations and gives them time to focus on the policy issues that will guide the future of the county. It empowers elected officials to provide leadership, develop a vision for the community, determine what services to provide citizens, lobby the state legislature on the community's behalf, and communicate and forge new relationships with constituents. The professional manager, appointed by the governing body, oversees the day-to-day operation and the implementation of policy.

Before a professional manager or administrator can be hired, a county's structure of government must be modified to provide for the position. That can be accomplished in one of several ways: In states where counties may adopt home-rule charters, a number of counties have taken advantage of that opportunity. In other counties, structural change has been accomplished by obtaining charters through special legislation. Some states have enacted statutes providing for alternative forms or optional charters for counties. In an increasing number of counties, measures to modernize operations have been taken without adopting a charter or utilizing general or special legislation. These counties, on their own initiative, have enacted local ordinances, laws, or resolutions to create the position of county administrator or county manager, which is appointed by the county's elected governing body.

## What Value Does a Professional Manager Bring to a Community?

**Professional managers bring value to a community because they:**

- Work in partnership with elected officials to develop sound approaches to community challenges by bringing together resources to make the right things happen and produce results that matter

- Bring a community-wide perspective to policy discussions and strive to connect the past and future while focusing on the present. They help the governing body develop the long-term vision for the community that provides a framework for policy development and goal setting
- Promote ethical government through commitment to a set of ethical standards that goes beyond those required by law
- Encourage inclusion and build consensus among diverse interests (including those of elected officials, the business community, and citizens) by focusing on the entire community rather than the centralized interests of one or two individuals
- Promote equity and fairness by ensuring that services are fairly distributed and that administrative decisions (such as hiring and contracting) are based on merit rather than favoritism
- Develop and sustain organizational excellence and promote innovation. Professional managers focus relentlessly on efficient and equitable service delivery, policy implementation, and evaluation. They align the county's administrative systems with the values, mission, and policy goals defined by the community and elected officials.

## **How Your County Would Benefit from Hiring a Professional Administrator**

The appointed manager or administrator is charged with carrying out the policies established by the elected officials and with delivering public services efficiently, effectively, and equitably. Elected officials, in turn, have more time to concentrate on creating a vision for the community's future.

- Day-to-day operations are managed by a professional who is educated and trained in current county management practices, state and federal laws and mandates, and cost-effective service delivery techniques

- Responsiveness to citizens is enhanced by centralizing administrative accountability in an individual appointed by the elected governing body
- The professional manager or administrator brings to the communities they serve technical knowledge and experience, academic training, management expertise, and a dedication and commitment to public service.

## **Ethical Conduct: Honoring the Public Trust**

County Administrators who are members of the National Association of County Administrators (NACA) and/or the International City/County Management Association (ICMA) are bound by a Code of Ethics, which states that every member of either organization shall act with integrity in all personal and professional matters so that they will merit the respect and trust of elected officials, employees, and the public. This stringently enforced Code specifies 12 ethical principles of personal and professional conduct, including dedication to the cause of good government. Members believe in the effectiveness of representative democracy, the value of government services provided equitably to residents within a community, and are committed to standards of honesty and integrity that go beyond those required by the law.

## **Responsiveness to Citizens**

County managers or administrators are appointed by and serve at the pleasure of the elected legislative body. They generally do not have guaranteed terms of office or tenure. They are evaluated based on their responsiveness to the elected legislative body and to the community and on their ability to provide efficient and effective services. If the administrator is not responsive to the elected officials, he or she may be terminated at any time. In that sense, the manager or administrator's responsiveness is tested daily.

## How to Hire a Professional Manager or Administrator

### 1. Consider your county's unique demands and needs

Many managers and administrators have studied local government management at the graduate level and have held positions of increasing authority. Beyond the basic education and experience requirements of the position, you should develop a job description that encompasses your expectations and outlines measurable objectives that you want to accomplish. You should also develop a management profile of the administrator that matches your expectations.

NACA and ICMA can offer your county materials to facilitate this process. ICMA's *Recruitment Guidelines for Selecting a Local Government Administrator* contains tips on recruiting applicants, determining finalists, and interviewing techniques. To locate a downloadable copy of this document, go to the ICMA JobCenter ([jobs.icma.org](http://jobs.icma.org)).

### 2. Begin your search

Determine whether you want to conduct your own search or work with an executive recruitment firm. Prepare and place your advertisements in publications that will attract the most qualified local government candidates such as the *ICMA Newsletter*, NACA County Administrator newsletter, and the ICMA JobCenter.

### 3. Make the selection

- Review résumés and identify potential candidates based on their experience and the criteria you developed earlier
- Select the top candidates and schedule interviews with your evaluation panel
- Upon reaching a decision, negotiate the terms and conditions of employment with your new county manager or administrator and formalize a written agreement
- At this time, it is important to develop mutually agreed-upon goals and establish an annual review process through which the elected body and the manager or administrator can discuss performance.

## Resources

### **National Association of County Administrators (NACA)**

777 N. Capitol St., NE, Suite 500

Washington, DC 20002-4201

Membership information: 202-962-3554

County administrator information: 202-962-3557

NACA promotes and advances the goals and objectives of county governments throughout the United States. Consistent with this charge, NACA encourages professional excellence and improves the management of county government through the *NACA Idea Exchange*, meetings, seminars, and conferences. For information about recruiting and hiring a professional county administrator call the number listed above. For more information about NACA, call the membership office at the number listed above.

### **International City/County Management Association (ICMA)**

777 North Capitol Street, NE, Suite 500

Washington, DC 20002-4201

Phone: 202-289-ICMA

Fax: 202-962-3500

Website: [www.icma.org](http://www.icma.org)

The International City/County Management Association (ICMA) promotes excellence in local government through professional management. ICMA provides an information clearinghouse, technical assistance, and training and professional development to nearly 9,000 chief appointed administrators, assistant administrators, and other individuals throughout the world. To obtain an informational packet on the benefits of professional county management, visit ICMA's website at [icma.org/formofgovt](http://icma.org/formofgovt) or email Jared Dailey, Assistant Program Manager, at [jdailey@icma.org](mailto:jdailey@icma.org).

## **National Civic League (NCL)**

1145 Market Street, Suite 300

Denver, CO 80202-1728

Phone: 303-571-4343

Fax: 303-571-4404

Website: [www.ncl.org](http://www.ncl.org)

Email: [ncl@ncl.org](mailto:ncl@ncl.org)

The National Civic League is a nonpartisan citizens organization founded in 1895. Its purpose is to serve as a clearinghouse for information on methods of improving state and local government; to encourage citizen participation in state and local government and to provide guides, model charters and laws on specific subjects. The *Model County Charter* (1990) was specifically prepared for states that have granted the authority to adopt charters as a method of county restructuring. For more information, visit the League's website at [ncl.org](http://ncl.org). For assistance and information about the professional administrator position, contact NACA.

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