



Council-Manager Form of Government

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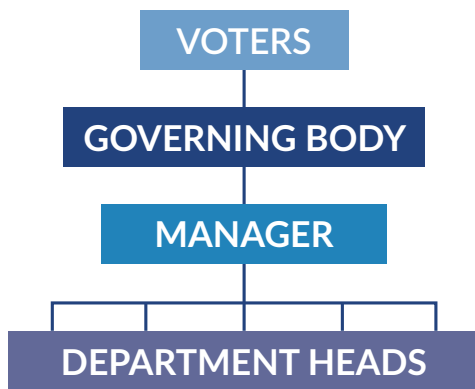
What it is, how it works, and
the benefits to your community

What is the council manager form of government?

The council-manager form is the most popular structure of government in the United States among municipalities with populations of 2,500 or more. It is one of several ways U.S. municipalities and counties can organize.

Under this form, residents elect a governing body—including a chief elected official, such as a mayor or board chairperson—to adopt legislation and set policy. The governing body then hires a manager or administrator with broad executive authority to carry out those policies and oversee the local government's day-to-day operations.

The Council-Manager Form



What's so special about the council-manager form of government?

Born out of the U.S. progressive reform movement at the turn of the 20th century, the council manager form was created to combat corruption and unethical activity within local government by promoting nonpolitical management that is effective, transparent, responsive, and accountable.

The council-manager form of government recognizes the critical role of elected officials as policymakers, who focus on mapping out a collective vision for the community and establishing the policies that govern it. The form also recognizes the need for a highly-qualified individual who is devoted exclusively to the delivery of services to residents.

Think about the structure used by many corporations, in which the board of directors hires an experienced CEO who is granted broad, executive authority to run the organization. While these boards establish the company's overall policy direction, the CEO oversees implementation of that policy.

What types of communities use the council-manager form of government?

Today more than 105 million people in the U.S. live in communities that operate under the council-manager form. Forty-eight percent of the more than 7,300 U.S. municipalities with populations of 2,500 or more use the form, as do nearly 62 percent of municipalities with populations greater than 100,000. More than 800 counties also employ a similar system.

How can council-manager government benefit my community?

- **Flexibility**—The council-manager form can adapt to local needs and demands. While governing bodies in some council-manager communities are elected at large, for example, others are elected by district or by a combination of an at-large-and-by-district system to respond to local needs.
- **Clearly Defined Roles**—While there is no separation of powers between a local government's executive and legislative functions under the council-manager form, there is clear distinction between the administrative role of manager and the political and policy leadership role of the mayor and governing body. Oversight of the day-to-day operations of the local government organization resides with the manager, allowing elected officials to devote time to policy making.
- **A Roadmap for Success**—The council-manager form is the system of local government under which professional management is most likely to succeed. Under this system, professional managers can focus on service delivery, policy implementation, and performance management and can align the local government's services with the values, mission, and policy goals defined by the community and elected officials.

How do we know that council-manager government works?

- The Equipt to Innovate initiative—an integrated, collaborative framework of seven essential elements developed by Living Cities in partnership with *Governing* magazine that define high-performance government and empower innovation—found that top-performing cities in

all but one element use the council-manager form of government.

- Two-thirds of Moody's Aaa-bond-rated communities are run by professional local government managers, and many operate under the council-manager form of government.
- An IBM Global Business Services report titled "Smarter, Faster, Cheaper" found that cities that operate under the council-manager form of government are nearly 10 percent more efficient than those that operate under the mayor-council form.
- The National Civic League, America's oldest advocate for community democracy, has endorsed council-manager government through its *Model City Charter* since 1915.
- Seventy-five percent of communities recognized between 2013 and 2016 with the National Civic League's coveted All-America City Award are council-manager.

Does it cost more for a community to adopt the council-manager form and hire a professional manager?

Many local governments have reduced their overall costs under competent management. Savings can come from decreased operating costs, increased efficiency and productivity, improved revenue collection, and effective use of technology. The economic health of the community may also benefit from the implementation of improved business development and retention strategies.

How can my community adopt the council-manager form of government?

Methods vary, but most communities can adopt council manager government through a charter, local ordinance, state enabling law, or by voter referendum. For information on how your community can adopt council-manager government, contact your state municipal league or association of counties. You can find contact information for these organizations at icma.org/state-localgovassns.

Once my community adopts council-manager government, how do we find a professional manager?

The vacancy is often announced in ICMA's weekly e-newsletter and state league publications and qualified

candidates are invited to apply. Elected officials may also hire an executive recruitment firm to assist them with the selection process. Interested parties apply directly to the governing body, which reviews the applications and interviews qualified candidates. ICMA makes no recommendations regarding candidates. Additional information is available in ICMA's Recruitment Guidelines Handbook. Visit icma.org/documents/recruitment-guidelines to download a copy.

What kind of educational and on-the-job experience do professional local government managers generally have?

Sixty-five percent of managers surveyed by ICMA indicated that they had earned a master's (usually in public administration, business, or public policy), or other advanced degree. Survey respondents also said that they had spent an average of more than 20 years working in the local government management profession.

What is ICMA and why is membership in that organization important?

ICMA, the International City/County Management Association, is the professional and educational "home" for more than 11,000 appointed managers and administrators serving cities, towns, counties, other local governments, and regional entities in 32 countries throughout the world.

In addition to gaining access to valuable resources and lifelong professional development opportunities, appointed local government managers who are members of ICMA are bound by its Code of Ethics, which commits members to a set of ethical standards of honesty and integrity that go beyond those required by the law. This stringently enforced code specifies 12 ethical principles of personal and professional conduct, including dedication to good government. For more information, visit icma.org/ethics.

Finally, through its Voluntary Credentialing Program, ICMA recognizes individual members who are qualified by a combination of education and experience, adherence to high standards of integrity, and an assessed commitment to lifelong learning and professional development. ICMA members who meet these requirements may earn designation as an ICMA Credentialed Manager. For more information on ICMA's Voluntary Credentialing Program, visit icma.org/voluntary-credentialing-program-overview.

Key Roles in Council-Manager Government



THE ROLE OF THE MAYOR OR CHIEF ELECTED OFFICIAL

Typically, the mayor or board chairperson in a council-manager community is a voting member of the governing body who may be either directly elected, as in 69 percent of council-manager communities, or who is selected by and from among their colleagues on the governing body. The mayor or chairperson is the public face of the community who presides at meetings, assigns agenda items to committees, facilitates communication and understanding between elected and appointed officials, and assists the governing body in setting goals and advocating policy decisions.

THE ROLE OF THE ELECTED OFFICIALS

Under the council-manager form, the elected officials are the legislative body and the community's policy makers. Power is centralized in this body, which approves the budget and adopts local laws and regulations, for example. The elected officials also focus on the community's big-picture goals, such as community growth and sustainability.

The elected officials hire a professional city, town, or county manager based on that person's education, experience, skills, and abilities and NOT on their political allegiances. The elected officials supervise the manager's performance, and if that person is not responsive and effective in their role, the elected officials have the authority to remove her or him at any time.



THE MANAGER'S ROLE

The manager is an at-will employee who can be fired by a majority of the elected officials, consistent with local laws or any employment agreements. This person

- Prepares a budget for the governing body's consideration.
- Recruits, hires, supervises, and terminates government staff.
- Serves as the governing body's chief advisor by providing complete and objective information about local operations, discussing options, offering an assessment of the long-term consequences of decisions, and making policy recommendations.
- Carries out the policies established by the governing body.

WHAT ROLE DO RESIDENTS PLAY?

Under council-manager government, local governments often actively engage and involve their residents in community decision making. Residents can guide their community by serving on boards and commissions, participating in visioning and strategic planning sessions, and designing community-oriented local government services.