

Professional Local Government Management

To be successful, [today's complex local government operations require a combination](#) of strong political leadership, policy development, a relentless focus on execution and results, a commitment to transparent and ethical government, and a strategy for representing and engaging every segment of the community. Most of us take for granted the public services our communities provide—from law enforcement and recycling, to emergency response and public transportation. While we often see the people who deliver these services—police officers, sanitation workers, paramedics, bus drivers—we may forget that there are others behind the scenes who help ensure that our public services operate smoothly and efficiently each and every day, 24 hours a day.

Building Communities
It's no small chore.



**Working for the community
and elected officials
with a team of pros,
professional city, town,
and county managers
get the job done.**

Professional city, town, and county managers are just such people. You may know them by various titles: city manager, county administrator, town manager, chief administrative officer. Their primary responsibility is to keep your community running smoothly. These highly trained, experienced men and women are committed to meeting the challenges described above every day. To do so, they work with a range of individuals involved in public safety, public works, community and economic development, and many other service areas. You can count on this team to make your community a great place to live!

City, town, and county managers oversee a variety of operations, such as public safety, community development, and public works.

Under a system of local government called the council-manager form, the elected officials are the community leaders and policy makers who establish a vision for their city, town, or county, and who hire the manager to carry out policy and ensure that all residents are being equitably served. The manager coordinates the work of department heads and other employees, who help ensure the smooth and efficient delivery of services. By building public/private partnerships, managers target all of a community's resources to solve current problems.

While the council-manager form is the structure of government that is most supportive of successful professional management, city, town, and county managers work effectively in all types of communities.

What skills do professional managers bring to their communities?

As the needs of our communities have become more complex, so has the job of city, town, and county managers. In the early years, many professional managers were recruited from the ranks of civil engineers, who were trained to build and maintain the community's infrastructure, such as bridges, roads, and water systems.

Today's managers must also possess the management "know-how" to build strong communities, if not from the ground up, then by ensuring the continuous improvement of community services. Many of today's city, town, and county managers hold bachelor's degrees in public administration, political science, or business. Increasingly, these individuals enter the profession with a master's degree, often in public administration.

City, town, and county managers draw on a wealth of experience and a multitude of skills to get the job done. The job includes:

Administration of personnel—providing direction and leadership to department heads and those who provide direct services to the community.

Management of public funds—ensuring the cost-effectiveness of programs, balancing budgets, and securing the financial health of the community.

Implementation of programs and policies—working with elected officials and community leaders to achieve common goals and objectives for the community.

Coordination of service delivery—anticipating future needs, organizing work operations, and establishing timetables to meet community needs.

Above all else, today's professional city, town, and county managers bring to the communities they serve a commitment to maintaining the public trust and confidence in local government, achieving equity and social justice, affirming human dignity, and improving the quality of life for all residents.

What professional managers do

- Work with elected officials as they develop policies. The manager may discuss problems and recommendations, propose new plans, or discuss issues that affect the community and its residents.
- Ensure that laws and policies approved by elected officials are equitably enforced throughout the city.
- Seek feedback from residents and members of the business community to address and solve problems.
- Prepare the annual budget, submit it to elected officials for approval, and implement it once approved.

- Economically strong, high-quality-of-life communities don't just happen. They need a lot of planning and professional management.
- Investigate citizen complaints and problems within the administrative organization and recommend changes to elected officials.
- Manage the day-to-day operations of the city, town, or county.
- Supervise department heads, administrative personnel, and other employees, and supervise top appointees.
- Solicit bids from contractors and select or recommend the appropriate individual(s) or organization(s) to perform the work.

For more information about the local government management profession, use the menu at the top of this page.

Professional Local Government Management

Hiring a Professional Local Government Manager

Hiring a professional manager or administrator frees elected officials from the administration of daily operations and gives them time to focus on policy-making duties. 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. An educated, highly trained professional oversees the day-to-day operations.

Before a professional manager or administrator can be hired, a municipality's structure of government must be modified to provide for the position. The process of creating a position of city or town manager or administrator can vary from state to state. Some municipalities have the authority to act on their own initiative to adopt local ordinances, laws, or resolutions to create the position of city manager or administrator appointed by the elected governing body. In states where municipalities may write their own charter under home-rule provisions, a number of municipalities have taken advantage of that opportunity to create a professional administrator position. Some states have enacted statutes providing for alternative forms or optional charters for local governments to adopt. Lastly, structural change can also be accomplished in some states by obtaining charters through special legislation adopted by the state legislative body.

How Your Municipality 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 city and town 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.
- Professional managers or administrators bring to the communities they serve technical knowledge and experience, academic training, management expertise, and a dedication and commitment to public service.

Duties of an Appointed Manager or Administrator

- Carries out the policies adopted by the elected officials.
- Manages city or town services, which may include public works, public safety, planning and economic development, parks and recreation, libraries, youth services, resource recovery and recycling and utilities.
- Prepares a comprehensive annual budget and capital improvement program.
- Ensures fiscal responsibility and modern accounting practices.
- Develops performance measurement systems for city or town services.
- Applies for and administers federal, state, and private foundation grant funding.
- Recruits, hires, and supervises the workforce of the city or town, including key department heads.
- Prepares council or board meeting agenda materials.
- Develops long-range plans with guidance from elected officials and assists in the achievement of common goals and objectives.
- Facilitates the flow and understanding of ideas and information between and among elected officials, employees, and citizens.

Ethical Conduct: Honoring the Public Trust

City and town managers or administrators who are members of the International City/County Management Association (ICMA) agree to abide by a strict [Code of Ethics](#). The ICMA Code of Ethics specifies 12 ethical principles of personal and professional conduct, including complete dedication to democracy and the fair and equitable delivery of services to all residents. These standards go well beyond those required by law and include the provision that members shall refrain from participating in the election of the members of the employing legislative body as well as refraining from all political activities which undermine public confidence in professional administrators. The professional administrator must demonstrate ethical and legal awareness in personal and professional relationships and be dedicated to the highest principals of honesty, integrity, and excellence in management.

Responsiveness to Citizens

City and town 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's or administrator's responsiveness is tested daily.

How to Hire a Professional Manager or Administrator

Consider your municipality'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.

ICMA can offer your municipality 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 <http://icma.org/pdf/recruitment2.pdf>.

Begin your search

Determine whether you want to conduct your own search or work with an executive recruitment firm.

Prepare and place advertisements in the appropriate publication (e.g., the *ICMA Newsletter* and state association publications).

Make the selection

Review resumes 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 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.

ICMA Local Government Recognition

ICMA Local Government Recognition | [Directory of ICMA-Recognized Local Governments](#)

The ICMA recognition process identifies those local governments which by ordinance, charter or other legal document have established positions of professional authority. Recognition means the community is identified as one that provides a legal framework conducive to the practice of professional management.

ICMA recognition falls into two categories—council-manager and general management. The criteria related to the council-manager government category are less flexible than those for the general management category. The reasons for this derive from the historical significance and the nature of the council-manager form.

A few of the more frequently asked questions about recognition are:

What is recognition?

Recognition is the formal acknowledgment by the membership and the ICMA Executive Board that a local government has established a position of professional management for its appointed executive.

How long does recognition last?

Recognition lasts as long as the legal basis establishing the position of professional management remains unchanged. A change in managers does not affect the recognition status of the local government; a change in the form of government does.

What kind of local governments are eligible for recognition?

Any general purpose city, town, village, township, borough, county, council of governments, or state/provincial association of local governments that has established by legal documents a form of government that satisfies the ICMA recognition criteria is eligible.

What is the basis for recognition?

Compliance with the ICMA recognition criteria is the basis. Evidence of meeting the criteria is either an ordinance, resolution, charter, special act of the state legislature, or another legal document establishing a position of professional management.

What kinds of recognition are there?

There are two kinds: recognition under the council-manager (CM) criteria and under the general management (GM) criteria. Councils of governments and state/provincial associations of local governments are always recognized under the GM criteria; local governments may be recognized under either CM or GM criteria depending upon their individual features.

The criteria for the council-manager category are less flexible than for the general management category. The reasons for this are the nature of the council-manager form and its historical significance. It represents an easily definable form of local government with a limited variety of implementation. On the council-manager form rests ICMA's origin; the membership has come to see it as the preferred form of governmental organization. Although it is not seen as the only means of providing for overall professional management, the intent is to recognize its contributions to local government by distinguishing it within the wide variety of administrative organizations in democratic governments throughout the world.

What happens after recognition?

The local government is listed in ICMA's *Who's Who* online as a jurisdiction that provides for a position of professional management.

Criteria for Recognition of a Council-Manager Position

(Adopted October 11, 1969, and revised July 22, 1989)

Appointment

The manager can be appointed by the majority vote of the council for a definite or indefinite term and must be subject to termination by a majority vote of the council at any time.

Guideline

It is recognized that the process for appointing the manager may include participation by others in nominating or recommending candidates to be considered. However, the final

responsibility or authority of appointment as well as dismissal of the manager must lie with a majority of the council.

Policy Formulation

The position should have direct responsibility for policy formulation on overall problems.

Guideline

Final authority for policy formulation rests with the council, but the manager should play an integral role in developing and analyzing alternatives for the council's consideration and be responsible for implementation of council-approved policy.

Budget

The manager should be designated by legislation as having responsibility for preparation of the budget, presentation to the council, and direct responsibility for the administration of the council-approved budget.

Guideline

While the manager should have responsibility for preparing and presenting the budget to the council, it is recognized that many parties often participate in the budget process and may contribute to the development of the manager's recommended budget. Once approved by council, the manager is responsible for implementing and administering the budget.

Appointing Authority

The manager should be delegated by legislation the full authority for the appointment and removal of at least most of the heads of the principal departments and functions of the local government.

Guideline

The manager's ability to independently select the most qualified personnel for key department head positions and remove them when necessary is essential to his or her administrative effectiveness. Within this context, it is recognized that a manager may choose to consult with and seek consensus from council on the appointment and dismissal of key department heads. Though the preferred arrangement is for the manager to have independent authority to appoint and remove key department heads, recognition in the C-M category will also be extended to those communities in which council is given the authority by legislation to confirm, validate or ratify such personnel actions, as long as responsibility for recommending them remains with the manager.

Organizational Relationships

The department heads whom the manager appoints should be designated by legislation as administratively responsible to the manager.

Qualifications

Qualifications for the position should be based on the educational and administrative background of the candidates.

Guideline

Appointment to the manager's position should be based on professional experience, administrative qualifications, and education to ensure that the community is served by a competent, well-trained professional. Political affiliations should not in any way influence appointment.

Recognition of a General Management Position

(Adopted April 19, 1969, and revised July 22, 1989)

Appointment

The position should be filled by appointment made by an elected representative or representatives and shall be responsible to an elected representative and/or representatives.

Guideline

This criterion relates to the basic concept that overall management is the link between the political leadership and program execution. It is essential that the person filling the position of overall management be appointed by and responsible for the legislative body or the chief elected official of the local government.

Policy Formulation

(Same as for council-manager position.)

Guideline

The position of overall management has a primary characteristic of responsibility for creative initiative in the development of public policy alternatives and recommendations for consideration by elected officials throughout the broad spectrum of the local government's functions. Responsibility for policy formulation means that the person in the position has access to the council and works with its members even though he/she may report directly to the mayor. In the case of a council-appointed administrator, his/her access should be direct.

Budget

The position should have major responsibility for the preparation and administration of the operating and capital improvements budget.

Guideline

Both elements should be present because it is through the administration of the operating budget that basic management control is exercised, and it is the budget preparation process that concerns itself with resource use. In applying the criterion, the term "major responsibility" refers to appointed positions and not elected positions. This may become critical in evaluating the work of a mayor-appointed administrator.

Appointing Authority

The position should exercise significant influence in the appointment of key administrative personnel.

Guideline

The direct or legal appointive power will vary considerably. The fact that the position may have authority only to recommend the appointment of department heads should not in and of itself exclude the local government from recognition. Neither is there any fixed formula as to which or how appointments may be influenced.

It will be necessary to view this in the context of the position's total responsibility, particularly the budget process. One important element is that the position should have authority to appoint a sufficient share of the management staff to control budget preparation and administration.

Organizational Relationships

The position should have a continuing direct relationship with the operating department heads on the implementation and administration of the programs.

Guideline

The important factor here is that the position be recognized within the local government organization as the principal general management professional. The relationship is most clear if the position has direct supervision over department heads. The real issue, however, is what day-in and day-out influence the position has over department heads. At a minimum, it should be expected that overall management responsibility includes the status of first peer among administrative peers in a horizontal organization.

Qualifications

(Same as for council-manager position.)

Guideline

This criterion simply means that the person should be chosen on merit and that he/she should have significant administrative experience and educational background. It excludes the strictly “political” appointment. It does not mean, however, that the person must have local government experience per se.