

The Regional Government for Iowa

County governments are the quiet, consistent providers of essential services. Structurally, the county continues to serve as the regional government for Iowa. It performs many state administrative functions such as the issuance of licenses and permits. Also, it provides public services of a purely local nature such as the enforcement of zoning ordinances, the provision of health and indigent care, and the maintenance of county jails. These services vary in degrees for different areas. In some instances, only the rural region is served (sheriff's office), while in others the whole county is served (court functions). Counties also cooperate among themselves in providing other services to meet their citizens' needs.

The vast number of public services that counties provide leads to a rather complex and somewhat confusing array of offices, boards, and commissions. Citizens elect a county auditor, recorder, attorney, sheriff, treasurer and a 3-5 member county board of supervisors. The county board of supervisors then appoints individuals to serve as directors for the other offices in the courthouse or in some cases a commission that is overseen by the county board of supervisors appoints a director. A conservation board, for example, directly oversees a conservation director. While the county board of supervisors is the chief formulator of county policy, it is clear that the administration of county government programs is guided by a variety of elective and appointive offices, and a number of semi-autonomous boards and commissions.

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Common County Services & Coordinating County Office

Beer & Liquor Licenses - Auditor
Birth Certificates - Recorder
Boat Registration - Treasurer
Bridge Construction\Maintenance - Engineer
Budget Information - Board of Supervisors
Building Permits - Zoning
Camping Information - Conservation
Child Care Resource - Community Services
Claims and Warrants - Auditor
Community Health Programs - Public Health
County Website - Information Technology
Death Certificates - Recorder
Deeds and Contracts - Recorder
Disaster Planning - Emergency Management
Drivers Licenses - Treasurers
Economic Development - Board of Supervisors
Election Information - Auditor
Food Permits - Environmental Health
Forest Reserve - Conservation
Handgun Purchase Permits - Sheriff
Hunting and Fishing Access - Conservation
Hunting and Fishing Licenses - Recorder
Jail Administration - Sheriff
Maps (highway, drainage districts) - Engineer
Maps (plats) - Recorder
Maps (political boundaries) - Auditor
Marriage License - Recorder
Mental Health Facilities - Community Services
Passports - Recorder
Permits (tile crossings, underground work) - Engineer
Permits (building, conditional use) - Zoning
Prosecutor (state laws, local ordinances) - Attorney
Real Estate Transfer Information - Recorder
Real Estate Mapping - Assessor
Subdividing - Zoning
Tax Credit Claim - Treasurer
Tax Levy Information - Auditor
Tax Payments - Treasurer
Vehicle Titles and Registrations - Treasurer
Veteran's Assistance - Community Services

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The Structure of County Government

Elected and Appointed Offices

Prepared by the:

Iowa State Association of Counties

The Duties of County Offices

County board of supervisors: The county board is the executive branch of county government. The supervisors serve as the policymakers for the county and administer the various county programs. Their powers include reviewing budget requests, appropriating funds, establishing county tax levies, enacting ordinances, filling employee vacancies, and hearing reports from county officers. The board is also responsible for overseeing economic development in the county. Boards of supervisors responsibilities are defined by Iowa Code chapter 331. The Board consists of either three or five members.

County attorney: The county attorney's position is unique in that it is provided for in the state constitution. Other offices are products of legislation. The attorney's primary responsibilities are to provide legal counsel for the board of supervisors and to act as legal representative for the county in court cases. With regard to the latter responsibility, the county attorney represents the county either as a defendant or plaintiff in a civil suit. In cases where a crime has been committed in the county, he/she acts as the prosecuting attorney and presents the county's case at the trial. The county attorney is also responsible for fine collections and juvenile justice.

County auditor: The county auditor serves in an office which is very diversified. One of the auditor's many duties is to serve as secretary to the board of supervisors. As such, the auditor has control over the records of the board. Auditor's election responsibilities include registering voters, supervising precinct election officials, publishing election notices, and acting as custodian of poll books. Auditors are commissioner of elections for school board, city, county, state and federal elections. Real estate transfers and numerous other records are handled through the county auditor's office. Lastly, the county auditor does indeed audit bills or other claims against the county. Warrants in payment are then prepared. The auditor also maintains accounting records on all appropriations for the county's various departments.

County recorder: The primary function of the county recorder's office is to record various legal documents. Detailed records are kept for various legal instruments (deeds, mortgages, condemnations, affidavits, and powers of attorney). Other records include: birth certificates, death certificates, marriage licenses, uniform commercial code filings, military discharges, trade names, articles of incorporations, deeds of trust for railroad corporations, hunting licenses, and boat and snowmobile licenses.

County sheriff: The sheriff is the chief law enforcement officer for the county. Administration of the county jail is only one of the sheriff's many duties. The sheriff is also required to make special investigations into alleged law violations when directed by the county attorney. In unincorporated areas of the county the sheriff is responsible for law enforcement. The sheriff also provides law enforcement services for towns that contract with the office. Finally, the sheriff issues all gun permits and is in charge of the county drug task force.

County treasurer: The treasurer's office is one of the primary offices where people come to do business. Anyone owning property or a vehicle is served by this office. Treasurers receive payment for motor vehicle registration and sales/transfers of vehicles. It is the treasurer's duty to register vehicle titles and distribute license plates. The county treasurer oversees all county funds and handles investment functions. As such he/she is required to make a semiannual settlement with board of supervisors and to report all fees collected. It is the treasurer's duty to collect all taxes certified by the county auditor. In addition, the county treasurer makes monthly reports to the state auditor of all taxes paid to the state and for soldiers' bonuses. These funds are paid to the state treasurer when they are requested.

Appointive Offices:

The county assessor is appointed through a merit examination prepared and given by the State Tax Commission. A list of qualified persons is drawn up and a special conference board selects the assessor. The county assessor is an officer of all major taxing jurisdiction in a county.

The community services department provides short term assistance for individuals and families in need. This includes financial assistance for rent, food, and shelter. The department focuses on individuals with

developmental disabilities, mental health, and substance abuse. Youth shelter and detention facilities are offered. Included in this department is central point of coordination, general assistance, case management, and veteran affairs.

The conservation office is overseen by a board appointed by the county board of supervisors and is responsible for county parks, wildlife habitat improvement, and wetland preservation. The department also provides environmental education and various activities such as camping, canoeing, fishing, hiking/bike trails, and horseback riding.

The emergency management office is responsible for disaster planning on a county-wide basis. This includes emergency evacuation plans, airplane crashes, floods, tornadoes, industrial accidents, terrorism, and civil unrest.

The engineer's office is responsible for general supervision of construction, maintenance (including snow removal), and repair of highways and bridges of the county. An annual report on all the roads in the county, including their present condition and their needs must be made by the engineer to the Iowa Department of Transportation.

The environmental health office prevents disease by controlling community environmental health threats and providing local education on environmental health issues. The department works to ensure air quality and environmental health through inspections on septic tanks, swimming pools, and restaurants.

The information technology office develops/maintains computer software applications that facilitate a county's business operations. The department is responsible for maintaining the county website and planning for future technology needs.

The public health nurse investigates communicable diseases and provides health planning and education for the county. The department offers childhood immunization, international travel clinics, and treatment of sexually transmitted diseases.

The zoning office is responsible for building code enforcement, utility planning, and zoning enforcement. The department implements the comprehensive land use plan in unincorporated areas of the county.