

ROLE OF COUNTY GOVERNMENT

County government is Maine's oldest form of government, pre-dating statehood and even the Declaration of Independence. Maine has 16 counties. The county is the only form of regional government whose officials are directly elected by the voters. There has always been a role for county government, providing democratic institutions which operate at the regional level between municipalities and the state.

This briefly describes the many functions of county government today. If you would like to know more about county government, call your county clerk's office or the Maine County Commissioners Association for more information.

COUNTY COMMISSIONERS

The voters in each of Maine's 16 counties elect three commissioners (York County elects five) to four year terms to oversee the operation of county government. Each commissioner serves a separate district within the county. Commissioners, as the counties' chief elected officials, are ultimately responsible for the fiscal operations and policy decisions affecting county government. Additional duties include municipal tax abatement appeals and hearings on maintenance of town roads. They also serve, in effect, as the municipal officials in Maine's many unorganized territories.

LAW ENFORCEMENT AND CIVIL PROCESS

Maine's 16 elected county sheriff departments are responsible for the majority of criminal investigations in the state. In 1994, sheriffs' departments investigated 72% of all non-homicide criminal cases in Maine. Sheriffs' departments also handle a large share of rural highway patrol. In the years 1995, 1996 and 1997 county patrol officers handled an average of 18% of Maine's highway traffic accidents. Counties' share of rural patrolling has stayed the same, even while public funding has declined. County sheriffs' departments are also responsible for serving all civil lawsuit complaints and related documents throughout the state.

CORRECTIONS

Maine's 15 county jails are responsible for persons arrested by municipal, county and state law enforcement officials, and who require detention prior to trial. In addition, most adults sentenced to nine months or less serve their time in a county jail. County jails accounted for 38% of all prisoner days in the year 1998. The average daily inmate population at county jails was 994 compared with 1,591 in the state's correctional facilities. Approximately half of the county jail inmates were there awaiting trial or sentencing.

REGISTRY OF DEEDS

All real estate deeds and related documents are filed in the Registry of Deeds in each county. In addition to collecting filing fees, the elected Registers of Deeds collect the Real Estate Transfer Tax which totaled over \$13 million in 1997. By state law, counties are allowed to keep only 10% of these funds. In 1997, approximately \$11,700,000 was turned over to the state from county Registries.

COUNTY TREASURERS

Each county has an elected Treasurer who maintains the county's financial records. The Treasurer is also responsible for investment of tax revenues.

UNORGANIZED TERRITORIES

Much of Maine's land area is located outside of any organized municipality. The residents of these unorganized territories require the same services as residents of incorporated municipalities. County government provides these residents with services, including road and bridge maintenance, solid waste disposal and public safety while the state provides for education.

DISTRICT AND SUPERIOR COURTROOMS

Much of the state's District and Superior courtroom space is provided by county government. Superior Court space is provided at no charge to the state. This space has a rental value of approximately \$1.5 million compared to equivalent space on the private rental market.

DISTRICT ATTORNEY

County government provides extensive support for each of Maine's elected District Attorneys. This support includes office facilities, staff, equipment and witness fees.

REGISTRY OF PROBATE

The Probate Court system is under the jurisdiction of the Maine Supreme court and funded by Maine's counties. The Probate Court handles all estates, as well as guardianship, conservatorship, changes of name, adoptions and other legal matters. Both the Probate Judge and the Register of Probate are elected positions in each county.

EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT AGENCY

Each county operates an Emergency Management Agency which is responsible for the coordination of municipal and county-wide efforts in times of natural and man-made public health emergencies. Each county EMA must develop and maintain plans for coping with disasters, such as toxic chemical spills. Approximately half the cost of the EMA office is reimbursed by the federal government. County government pays the other half.

MUNICIPAL DISPATCH SERVICES

Several counties provide dispatching services to fire, police and rescue departments in the surrounding municipalities. This coordinated approach gives smaller communities full-time, professional dispatch services they could not afford individually.

SOLID WASTE MANAGEMENT

Several of Maine's counties are helping to take the lead in solid waste management. Lincoln County is now in its 20th year of operating a recycling program. Franklin, Oxford, Penobscot and Piscataquis Counties have formed regional solid waste planning commissions consisting of both public and private entities. By working through their county governments, local officials can develop a regional approach to the solid waste problem.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Several county governments assist regional economic development efforts through funding of programs. Franklin County employs its own Economic Development Director who promotes the county to prospective employers. Waldo and Washington Counties help fund and oversee Job Opportunity Zones created by the Legislature.

AIRPORTS

Hancock, Knox and Oxford Counties own and maintain county airports. Aroostook, Somerset and Washington Counties provide financial assistance to airports in their areas.

RISK MANAGEMENT POOL

In 1989, seven counties formed a self-funded risk management pool to provide property and liability coverage at reduced cost and guaranteed availability. The fund contracts with a claims adjuster, an excess insurance broker and an administrator to provide professional management of its program. In its first year of operation, the Pool saved taxpayers tens of thousands of dollars in insurance premiums. Currently, all 16 counties belong to the Pool.

HUMAN SERVICES AND OTHER PROGRAM FUNDING

Some counties provide grants to vital human service organizations, including daycare, elderly, mental health and youth services. Without the private, non-profit agencies which provide these services, some level of government would have to provide services directly at greater cost to the taxpayer.

Other programs supported by county government include the Cooperative Extension Service and Soil and Water Conservation Districts.

WORKFORCE INVESTMENT ACT PROGRAM

Maine's county commissioners are taking a lead role in the new federal Workforce Investment Act program. In conjunction with local Workforce Investment Boards in four regional service delivery areas, they are overseeing approximately \$9,000,000 in federal job training and career development funds in all Maine counties.