

“So, You Work for the County. What Do You Do?”

A day in the life of county government administration

BY BENJAMIN M. EFFINGER AND
DR. IAN M. COYLE, ICMA-CM

You could say we are a pair of government enthusiasts with a penchant for all things public administration. Between the two of us, we have service to our country (thank you, Ben), a city, a town, a village, multiple colleges and universities, a nonprofit, and a

state government department; and we both presently serve in leadership positions at our respective county governments, one urban and large (Ben) and one more rural and small (Ian).

A colleague of ours just recently started in county government, after years of work

in cities, and the comment was made jokingly, “Welcome to the dark side.” Counties tend to be thought of a touch differently. Professional management came a little later to counties, and even ICMA took decades to add “county” officially to the association’s name. Colleagues even joke, “Shouldn’t it be ‘ICCMA’ if you *really* want to include the counties?” There are also fewer of us numbers wise, with about 3,140 county governments to approximately 20,000 municipalities.

Fast forward to 2023. Full-service county government in the United States has the most robust, diverse breadth of service provision in all of local government. You see, counties have the traditional core elements of any local government—public works, public safety, administrative and financial divisions, and the like—yet have dozens of

other departments replete with scores of services that municipal governments do not. These range from administering and covering the costs of burials for those who cannot afford to do so, hospice programs through public health departments, full-spectrum mental health services, regional planning and sustainability services, investing pooled public funds through public financial services, operations of skilled nursing facilities, and elections administration.

The theme of this article, “A day in the life,” is a riff on a story that Ian was sharing with his son. As Ian tells the story:

My son asks me at the dinner table, “How was work?” (We have dinner as a family every

night—something I would recommend to everyone.) I said, “Well, I was amazed at the diversity and scope of what I was involved with today. I think I need to write about this.” And here’s what I went on to say:

What is most exciting to me in doing this work of local government management is there are just so many areas of responsibility, service, programming, and interest. Just today, I was involved with:

- Discussions around bringing broadband to thousands of addresses

Counties tend to be thought of a touch differently. Professional management came a little later to counties.

in the county through a county-spurred public-private partnership.

- Approving public information releases.
- Discussing shared services governance matters with the elected officials.
- Working through emergency housing issues with social services.
- Preparing for negotiations with a union.
- Finalizing draft figures for the budget.
- Discussing staffing, ambulance purchases, response times, and sustainability with EMS.

My work makes the days fly by. It makes the days enjoyable. And it makes me appreciative of the days, as these tasks are focused on improving community well-being and that is why we are in this business!

We thought it might be of interest to the readership of *PM* to review just a handful of snippets of a recent workday for each of us, some context on the responsibility/task areas, and why the specific subject matter is important to our county government as a provider of core public services.

Ben in Los Angeles County, California

The following are a few aspects of Ben's day-to-day operations that demonstrate the various roles of the county-level public servant:

Investments and Revenue Maximization:

Each day, Ben oversees the operation of his cash management team, which is responsible for the daily incoming revenue, outgoing disbursements, and daily cash position of the county. The team analyzes all incoming and outgoing funds, ensures the correct balance of liquidity necessary to satisfy county

debts, and positions excess funds to be invested within the county treasury pool.

These functions are performed on behalf of all county departments, treasury pool participants (which can be cities or other municipal agencies), and specifically, the county Office of Education, which utilizes the county treasury for its funds. All of these functions are performed in adherence with the county investment policy, ensuring safety, liquidity, and yield, in that specific order. The goal is to have little to no residual funds left in the county bank account at the end of the day because idle cash is not earning for the county treasury pool. In the end, these sets of activities maximize dollars for the county and reduce the reliance on other forms of taxation for revenues.

Human Resource Management: Currently, Ben's team has vacant positions at three different levels of his



cash management operation. This hampers the team's productivity on a day-to-day basis, placing higher workloads on other analysts and forcing the supervisory staff to wear several different hats throughout the course of the workday. In total, there are 12 budgeted full-time employees that work in the division, and with three vacancies, the

team is operating at a 25% workforce deficit for day-to-day-operations.

The challenge focuses on both *recruitment strategy* and *succession planning*. In actively working with his departmental human resources manager, Ben has defined a recruitment strategy that will allow him to present open recruitments for entry-level positions within his division and departmental promotional opportunities for team members that may be ready for increased roles and responsibilities within the division. The most important factor in the hiring process is ensuring that you are not just hiring to meet the current need, but hiring for future potential that can be factored into the division succession plan.

Procurement: An additional aspect of Ben's daily routine is ensuring that his team has the tools and resources necessary to perform their functions at the highest level possible. Part of the responsibility is drafting, collaborating, releasing, and evaluating requests for proposals (RFPs) for goods or services that his team

Los Angeles County Courthouse





Hemlock Lake in Livingston County, New York

needs to perform their duties. Currently, Ben is evaluating treasury management systems (TMSs) through the RFP process to determine a contract award for the needed and desired services.

This contract is critical for county operations because the fiscal administration of county funds is the heartbeat of local government. Without the funds, incoming or outgoing, the county cannot provide its constituents with critical services like public health, social services, emergency response, and disaster management and mitigation. Ben, although not a contract management specialist, serves in the role of a subject matter expert and will serve as the county contract manager for the awarded contract to ensure that the county receives the goods and services outlined in the contract and remediates any contract deficiencies under the awarded contract.

Ian in Livingston County, New York

On any given day, Ian finds himself in a variety of situations where county government is

“at work” for the residents of Livingston County.

Nursing Homes: One of the jewels of Livingston County’s suite of services is the Center for Nursing and Rehabilitation. While many skilled nursing facilities are privately run, counties across the United States run, operate, or directly support around 750 nursing homes. In Livingston County, this is a “home” for over 215 of our area residents. Running and operating a nursing home is perhaps one of the more unique departmental offerings in the spectrum of local government service, providing 24/7, round-the-clock specialized care and support for residents and families. The county home provides dialysis, therapy, memory care, and a host of other quality-of-life amenities for our older population.

Mental Health Awareness and Suicide Prevention: While not a technical county department, county staff lead, participate, support, and chair the Suicide Awareness and Prevention Taskforce through a local nonprofit health partnership. County personnel volunteer their time to support the community and focus on prevention mechanisms, awareness campaigns, and mental health destigmatization efforts. Their work culminates annually in a series of events in September for Suicide Awareness Prevention Month in the county. A candlelight vigil is held to honor and remember those whose lives were lost tragically to suicide. These same county staff see the effects of lives cut short, from social services to the youth department to probation and mental health. They

therefore commit even more passionately to the cause and to prevention, and these efforts are a source of immense pride in Livingston County.

Public Defense: When someone commits a crime in the United States, through the landmark Supreme Court decision in the *Gideon v. Wainwright* case, they have right to legal representation. Therefore, this is a federal-oriented right, but the federal government in turn makes the states provide this service. In some states, the state government in turn continues to downward mandate shift to county government, and in New York, this is the case. Every day, a team of dedicated attorneys performs legal defense work for residents of Livingston County. While at times these crimes are heinous and headline-worthy, the constitutional duty to provide representation is upheld and carried out by county employees.

Conclusion

As you can see, a day in the life of a local government administrator can take you in several different directions, involve many diverse departments, and cause you to “wear numerous hats” throughout the course of the workday. There are many benefits of working for county government, including abundant opportunities for collaboration with other agencies and exposure to unique challenges that can only be experienced at county-level government because they are beyond the scope of responsibility of most municipal agencies.

In addition to the operational components that

differentiate municipalities from county governments, there is also the political aspect that makes counties unique. County supervisors or commissioners and city councils operate within their respective areas and often need to find balance and symbiosis with their counterparts in order to provide the best level of public service to their respective communities.

Despite the differences between city and county government operations, the ultimate goal is to be of service to the communities they represent, and the benefit to the public servant is being a part of the change that is happening in their own backyard. **PM**

DR. IAN M. COYLE, ICMA-CM,

is the county administrator in Livingston County, New York. Ian also consults regularly with other local governments on executive search and leadership coaching through his firm, Pracademic Partners. He is on the board of directors of the National Association of County Administrators.



BENJAMIN M. EFFINGER, MPA,

is operations chief of the cash management division of the Los Angeles County Treasurer and Tax Collector. He serves on the communications team of the ICMA Veterans Advisory Committee and is president of the University of La Verne’s College of Law and Public Service Student Public Administration Association, where he is currently pursuing his doctorate in public administration.

