

Council-Manager Form of Government

Overview

Council-manager government combines the strong political leadership of elected officials with the strong managerial experience of an appointed manager or administrator. All power and authority to set policy rests with an elected governing body, which includes a mayor or chairperson and members of the council, commission, or board. The governing body in turn hires a nonpartisan manager who has very broad authority to run the organization. This appointee serves at the pleasure of the council and has responsibility for preparing the budget, directing day-to-day operations, hiring and firing personnel, and serving as the council's chief policy advisor. Born out of the U.S. progressive reform movement at the turn of the 20th century, the council-manager system was designed to combat corruption and unethical activity in local government by promoting effective management within a transparent, responsive, and accountable structure. Since its establishment, the council-manager form has become the most popular structure of local government in the United States. The form is also widely used throughout the world in countries such as Canada, Australia, the Netherlands, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom.

History

The first appointment of an individual to a position similar to that of today's local government manager occurred in 1908 in Staunton, Virginia, where a "general manager" was employed to oversee the administrative functions of the municipality. The first formal adoption of the council-manager plan took place in Sumter, South Carolina, in 1912. The following year, Westmount, Quebec, adopted the plan and so introduced the council-manager form of government to Canada. In 1914, Dayton, Ohio, accepted the council-manager plan and became the first municipality of substantial size to operate under the new form of government. Sixteen years later, Durham County, North Carolina, became the first county to institute a form of government that embodied the concept of professional management.

The International City Managers' Association, as it was then called, held its initial meeting in 1914 at a time when only 32 local governments in the United States and Canada had adopted the council-manager plan. The meeting was held in Springfield, Ohio, at the invitation of O. E. Carr of Cadillac, Michigan, and H. M. Hardin of Amarillo, Texas. Mr. Hardin, who had recently been appointed to his first position of professional management, felt the need to share his experience and information with the small group of his fellow professionals.

The council-manager plan grew steadily from 1914, slowed only by the difficulties of war and depression. By 1918, there were 100 local governments with the council-manager plan. In 1930, the total increased to 400, and since 1945 the rate of increase has averaged 50 places annually, except for record years 1973 and 1976. (In 1973 there was an increase of 159 local governments and in 1976, 133 were recognized.) By December

1985, ICMA had verified the existence of the plan in 2,563 U.S. local governments. The number of local governments with the council-manager form continued to grow throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s. Today, there are 3,003 ICMA-recognized local governments operating under the council-manager form of government in the United States.

During the 1960s, the profile of local government began to show significant changes. Not only were there complex new problems created, but variations in organizations and structure became evident. Some cities, towns, and counties began providing for an appointed official responsible for overall administrative affairs without adopting the council-manager plan as it was originally conceived. Likewise, the development of councils of governments and regional councils brought new and innovative structures to local government.

Today, this system of government is used in 48.9% of American cities with populations of 2,500 or more.