

Counties primarily serve as an arm of state government. Unlike cities and villages, which have considerable power over what happens within their boundaries, most of what counties can (and cannot) do is determined by state law and the state Constitution.

Counties exist mainly to provide services to people at the local level that are ordered by the state and federal government. In many cases, programs to help these people are funded by the state or federal government, but need someone “on the ground” to make sure that people get the right kind of help. That is where counties come in.

The types of services counties provide fall into three main categories: health and human services, public protection, and transportation. The important thing to remember about all three categories is that counties help people when they need help the most.

Human services includes things like helping low-income families get food stamps and low-cost child care; helping low-income, elderly, and disabled people get access to medical care; helping to protect abused and neglected children and removing them from dangerous family situations, and helping people with developmental disabilities and mental illnesses get the support they need. County public health departments are responsible for inspecting restaurants to make sure they are clean and safe, protecting people against the spread of infectious diseases, and providing health screenings and other assistance to low-income people.

Public protection includes operating the courts system and the county jail, having sheriff’s deputies patrol towns and other communities that don’t have their own police force, and running the juvenile detention facilities. It also includes making sure juveniles who get in trouble with the law get the counseling and other help they need to get back on track.

Transportation includes plowing snow and fixing potholes on Interstate, state highways and county roads. Some counties, such as Dane, Milwaukee, and Outagamie, also operate their local airport. And under a bill passed in 2009, some counties may also develop their own regional transportation systems to provide mass-transit for their residents.

Counties also play an important role in protecting the environment. Counties determine how land in towns should be used, whether for development or agriculture or business. Some counties buy and set aside land for parks and other open spaces. And many counties operate landfills.

There are 72 counties in Wisconsin, ranging from the very urban, such as Milwaukee and Dane, to the very rural, such as Green and Lafayette. One county, Menominee, encompasses the entire Menominee tribal reservation. County governments actually existed before Wisconsin became a state as a way for the federal government to administer what was then the Wisconsin Territory.

All counties in Wisconsin are governed by a board of supervisors. Due largely to Wisconsin’s tradition of encouraging citizens to participate in local government, county boards in Wisconsin are much larger -- in

many cases, three to five times larger -- than county boards in other states. The county board enacts ordinances, which are laws that in most cases apply only to towns and not the cities and villages within a county.

The day-to-day operations of counties are managed in three different ways. Typically, in smaller counties, the county board appoints an administrative coordinator to oversee county departments. Some counties may choose to hire a full-time professional administrator, who is hired and can be fired by the county board, to oversee the county departments.

In 11 counties, residents elect a county executive who functions much like any other elected executive, such as the governor or city mayor. In those counties, which include Milwaukee, Dane, Kenosha, and Racine, the executive has the power to veto actions taken by the county board.

Counties get the money to operate through three main sources: federal and state funding, property taxes, and sales taxes. Sixty counties have a half-percent county sales tax that helps to pay for county services; 12 counties do not have the county sales tax. State law also allows counties to charge residents a vehicle registration fee, also known as a wheel tax, but currently no counties do so.