

The Capable County

Name: _____

What is a County?

You already know that the United States is divided into smaller units of government called states. But what are states divided into? Counties! A **county** is the next smallest unit of government below a state. Counties make it easier to provide services directly to people. The county *seat* is the town or city in each county that serves as the home for the county government.



Counties in the state of Illinois

Counties Provide Services to You

You've probably benefited from county services without even realizing it. Have you ever driven on a road? Needed a copy of your birth certificate? Called 911? Although every county is different, maintaining roads, keeping vital records, and providing emergency services are the kinds of services that counties might provide. But that's not all. Here is a list of more services that counties might provide for their residents:

- Run elections
- Operate courts and jails
- Run hospitals
- Offer mental health services
- Provide clean water
- Keep property records
- Plan how land will be developed
- Give relief to the poor
- Run disease prevention programs
- Maintain parks

Paying for County Services

It takes money to provide all these services. Counties have three main sources of money to pay for it all: the federal government, the state, and the county itself. The smallest share of a county's money comes from the federal government. A bigger share—usually almost one-third of a county's money—comes from the state.

But the biggest source of money for a county is the county itself. Most of this money comes from **property taxes** people or businesses pay on land and buildings they own inside the county. Some counties also have a **sales tax** on items sold inside the county. Finally, counties raise money by charging **fees** for services the county provides. For example, a county may provide garbage collection, but people who participate have to pay for that service.

Sometimes the federal or state government make counties provide certain services but don't give counties any money to pay for those services. These demands are called **unfunded mandates** because they are mandated (ordered) but not funded (paid for). For example, counties are responsible for running elections, but they do not receive any money to pay for the elections. Counties must provide these services even if it means raising more money on their own.

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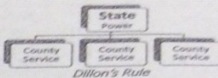
A county by any other name...

is still a county. But in Alaska counties are called *boroughs* and in Louisiana they are called *parishes*.

The Capable County

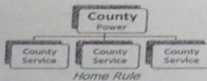
County Power

Counties don't have magic powers. Instead, they get their power from one of two places. In some states, the state itself gives counties the power to carry out duties and provide services. Those states follow **Dillon's Rule**, which says that a county must get authority from the state legislature before it can provide services. These states see the county government as just another part of the state.



Dillon's Rule

In other states, counties are considered to have natural powers of their own. Maybe this is a little like magic, but it's actually called **Home Rule**. Under **Home Rule**, counties have the power to make decisions for themselves about what services to provide. In these states, counties have some independence from the state. But don't get the wrong idea—even in these states, state laws always trump county laws.

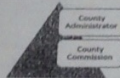


Home Rule

Who's In Charge Around Here?

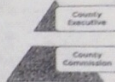
There are three ways a county's government might be organized:

Commission Only County citizens elect several people to sit on a commission (also called a board). This board has some "legislative" power because it passes county laws (which are called ordinances) and figures out the county's budget. It has some "executive" power because it decides what the county's policies will be and carries out the laws it passes. Commissions also share some of their power with elected officials who oversee specific departments, such as the sheriff, clerk, or county judge.



Commission/Administrator/Manager Under this system, the commission gives some of its "executive" power to an administrator. The commission chooses the administrator and has the power to fire that person. The administrator carries out the board's decisions.

Commission + Executive Under this system, an elected person separate from the commission has the county's "executive" power. This executive can sometimes veto decisions the board makes. This is more like a real legislative and executive branch, because the commission and the executive can check each other's power.



Counties Go Way Back

Well before the United States was formed, England was divided into units called "shires." English shires served the local community and represented the national government. The thirteen English colonies in America borrowed the shire system and adapted it to their needs. When the United States government was formed, the writers of the Constitution did not say how local government should be run. As a result, county governments continued and developed into the county system we have today. Vermont's county seats are still called shire towns!



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