

# Continuing Education

## Requirements for County Officials



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Written by Zach Laris  
Research Intern

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### **About NACo – The Voice of America's Counties**

The National Association of Counties (NACo) is the only national organization that represents county governments in the United States. Founded in 1935, NACo provides essential services to the nation's 3,066 counties. NACo advances issues with a unified voice before the federal government, improves the public's understanding of county government, assists counties in finding and sharing innovative solutions through education and research, and provides value-added services to save counties and taxpayers money. For more information about NACo, visit [www.naco.org](http://www.naco.org).

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For more information regarding this issue brief, contact:

Research Division National Association of Counties  
25 Massachusetts Ave. NW  
Washington, D.C. 20001

☎ 202.393.6226

Visit us online at [www.naco.org](http://www.naco.org).

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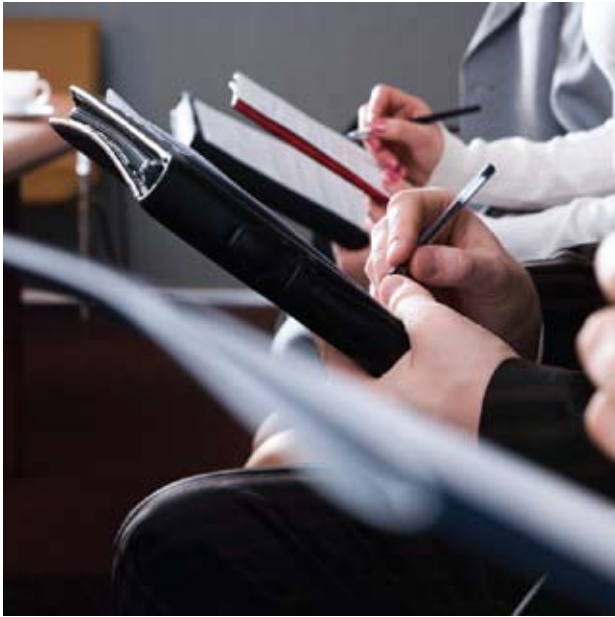
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# Continuing Education Requirements for County Officials



This issue briefing, based on a review of programs and interviews with continuing education program organizers, provides a state-by-state view of the various ways county officials may undergo continuing education. State programs, often organized by a state association of counties or through a university partnership, generally enhance county officials' leadership and organizational skills with the overall goal of improving county governance. The following outlines state programs while highlighting some of the more comprehensive models and also reporting on the overall views from state leaders as to the best educational strategies.

## What is Continuing Education for County Officials?

In addition to required training for specific positions most states offer continuing education programs to county officials. The curriculum includes classes pertaining to specific functions of county governance. States typically provide these programs in one of two ways: as a mandatory requirement to retain office, or as a voluntary program in which officials may elect to participate. These classes cover a diverse range of topics, such as leadership, community planning, local government finance, and local government law.

Offering continuing education is a way for counties to improve the quality of their service delivery by better preparing officials to fulfill their duties. Some common positions that benefit from continuing education programs are: county executives/commissioners, county auditors, county clerks, county treasurers, tax collectors/assessors, prosecutors, public administrators, and coroners. To assess the way these programs work, whether they are effective, and what, if any, differences

exist between mandatory and voluntary continuing education programs, NACo staff conducted interviews with executives and staff of state associations of counties in November and December of 2007.

## Why Do County Officials Need Continuing Education?

A transition from the private to the public sector, or even between offices within the public sector, can be daunting. There are many nuances and issues that officials need to fully understand to execute their responsibilities effectively. Given to the nature of bureaucratic office environments, a new official, even when highly qualified, may be deficient in certain skills, knowledge, or understanding of their work environment. To alleviate the learning curve, and to ensure that county officials reach their full potential, continuing education programs are employed.

## What Types of Continuing Education are Available?

Different states offer opportunities for continuing education to their officials in different ways. Some have mandatory programs, others voluntary, and some have none whatsoever. Additionally, the number of credit hours required and the organization that runs the program vary between states. Table 1 below represents the various types of continuing education (or lack thereof) offered by each state. *Refer to Table 1 on the following page.*

## Mandatory Education

The majority of states offer some form of continuing education to officials due to the proven success of such programs. A major point of contention is whether the program should be mandatory, voluntary, or a combination of the two. A combination of mandatory and voluntary continuing education for county officials refers to states where legal standards differ by position, such as a state where county commissioners are mandated to undergo continuing education, but county clerks have voluntary continuing education offered to them. The following states are relatively unique in that they mandate continuing education for some officials, while leaving it optional for others:

- Georgia (*mandatory for county commissioner, voluntary for some others*)
- Iowa (*combination of both applied to a multitude of positions*)
- Nebraska (*mandatory for chief executive/county commissioner, county clerks, county treasurers, and tax collectors/assessors, voluntary for others*)
- Utah (*Mandatory for chief executives/county commissioners, auditors, clerks, treasurers, tax collectors/assessors, and sheriffs, voluntary for others*)

**Table 1 – Summary of Continuing Education Programs for County Leaders by State**

Table Key:

M = mandatory

V = voluntary

N = no program

Information in this table is based on a state-by-state review of programs and interviews with continuing education program organizers. The review and interviews were conducted by the National Association of Counties between November and December of 2007 for an issue brief titled "Continuing Education Requirements for County Officials."

States with programs with no university affiliation run their state programs through their state's association of counties and/or through partnerships between those associations and municipal leagues.

State	M	V	N	Credit Hours Required for Certification	Partnership with an Accredited University
AL	X			72	Jacksonville State University
AK			X	N/A	N/A
AZ			X	N/A	N/A
AR	X			30	University of Arkansas and Arkansas State
CA			X	N/A	N/A
CO			X	N/A	N/A
CT			X	N/A	N/A
DE			X	N/A	N/A
FL		X		42	No
GA	X			48	University of Georgia
HI			X	N/A	N/A
ID		X		None Awarded	None
IL		X		24	University of Illinois
IN		X		30	Ivy Tech Community College
IA	X			Varied by position	No
KS		X		48	No
KY		X		40	No
LA		X		None Awarded (seminar format)	No
ME			X	N/A	N/A
MD			X	N/A	N/A
MA			X	N/A	N/A
MI			X	(currently developing a voluntary program with Michigan State University)	
MN			X	N/A	N/A
MS		X		Varied by position	No
MO	X			20	No
MT		X		40	No
NE	X	X		Varied by position	No
NV		X		40	No
NH			X	N/A	N/A
NJ		X		Variable	The College of New Jersey
NM		X		36	New Mexico State University
NY		X		32	No
NC		X		No Requirement (new program)	University of North Carolina
ND		X		40	No
OH	X	X		Varied by position	No
OK		X		51	No
OR		X		None Awarded (seminar format)	No
PA		X		60	Pennsylvania State University
RI			X	N/A	N/A
SC		X		27	No
SD		X		40	No
TN		X		80	University of Tennessee
TX		X		Varied	University of Texas
UT		X		80	No
VT			X	N/A	N/A
VA		X		24	No
WA		X		65	No
WV		X		None (one day class)	No
WI			X	N/A	N/A
WY			X	N/A	N/A

In cases where continuing education is mandatory for county officials, it is typically mandated by the state legislature, but enforcement varies greatly between states. In most states those officials who do not complete their mandatory education face punitive measures ranging from fines or exemption from a pay raise, to publication of their failure to comply, all the way to formal removal from office.

### Georgia Model

Georgia has a program that was developed with the University of Georgia Carl Vinson Institute of Government which has proven effective in preparing its county officials for office. Although the institute's program is mandatory for new county commissioners, there is no penalty levied against those who do not complete the education. Rather, those who complete their continuing education are given a pay raise of \$100 a month. The program is so popular and successful that 98 percent of new county commissioners participate.

Newly elected officials are provided with a "toolkit" once they begin work, which is an extensive collection of information regarding county government operations in Georgia. This is an informative resource that can be used both while on-the-job and in preparation for classes. Once enrolled in the certification program, officials are expected to take 48 credit hours worth of classes. Commissioners may pursue their education further with the Certified Commissioners Advanced Program (CCAP), where commissioners complete a project, study on-site about an issue in Georgia, and write a paper afterwards detailing their findings. Georgia has streamlined its continuing education program and the CCAP program with set curriculum, which means there is now more consistency in the education officials receive. Jerry Griffin, Executive Director of the Association of County Commissioners of Georgia, says that he is proud of how well Georgia's continuing education program has worked, and that it has fostered positive interaction between county officials.

One of the major benefits of this and any continuing education program is that these classes and seminars allow for officials to meet with one another and exchange experiences and advice. Mr. Griffin has found that enhanced dialogue among Georgia officials fosters continuous improvement in county operations and governance.

## Voluntary Education

Most states have voluntary continuing education programs offered to their county officials. States that operate their programs on a voluntary basis typically do so with an incentive package. Awards, certificates, certification, public recognition, higher pay rates, and bonuses are examples of incentives that states frequently use to encourage participation.

### Florida Model

Florida has had a voluntary continuing education program since 1996, run by the Florida Counties Foundation. County commissioners have 18-24 months to complete 42 credit hours of study. These credits are awarded for required courses, a myriad of electives that can be chosen to tailor the experience to an individual's position and intellectual interest, and for extracurricular events such as conferences.

The state offers certification as an incentive to officials to complete their studies, and some individual counties have their own incentives. Certification provides officials with an air of legitimacy and assures the public that county officials are competent and capable. Since the program's inception, its graduates have often brought up their certification during elections to assure the public of their ability. This incentive alone drives many to seek out voluntary continuing education programs.

One complaint about voluntary programs is that officials from rural and suburban counties participate much more than urban officials. In Florida, of the 200 total graduates of the program since inception, 111 are still in office. Only two of those officials are from populous large counties. Latreze Gooding, the Director of Education and Events of the Florida Association of Counties, suggests that this is due to higher demands on county officials in urban areas, as well as their opportunity to have a larger staff, allowing them more freedom to delegate tasks to specialized individuals. This means that although those from smaller counties do participate at a higher rate, they may also benefit more from the education than those who come from more populated counties.

## States without Continuing Education Programs

There are several states that do not have continuing education programs or are currently in the process of developing them. Reasons for not having education programs vary between the states, but most interviewees from states without programs suggest that it is either unnecessary for them to implement a program, or that they simply do not have adequate funding but hope to develop and implement a program in the near future. Joe Evans, Executive Director of the Wyoming County Commissioners Association, stated that there was "no real reason" for such a program in Wyoming, and contended that Wyoming county officials are qualified

enough that they need only on-the-job experience and guide books. On the other hand, Paul McIntosh, Executive Director of the California State Association of Counties, explained that his association is trying to cover for a lack of resources in state government, so the association may implement its own continuing education program similar to that of Florida. He went on to say that continuing education is critical for county officials to improve their ability to effectively operate county governments.

## ■ Conclusion

Overall, most of the contacts made for this issue brief recognize the efficacy of continuing education and would rather have a program than not. Continuing education programs are on the whole effective and improve the capability of county governments to run efficiently. Focused interviews with state association of counties executives suggest that the benefits of continuing education stem from its capacity to make government run more smoothly through effective networking and sharing of ideas. Comments from interviewees and background research both seem to indicate that mandatory programs are no more effective than voluntary ones. As Stephen Acquario, Executive Director of the New York State Association of Counties, pointed out when asked whether his state's program would benefit from a transition to mandatory participation, "voluntary programs are working just fine". Most of the executives interviewed noted that programs have a profound impact on county government operations in their respective states. At a low cost of typically under \$200 to officials, these programs provide useful and up to date information on how to effectively govern at the county level. It would be advantageous to county officials nationwide to explore continuing education options.

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