



How Many People Run Our Towns?

Fact Sheet: Positional Leadership Across Rural and Urban Iowa

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Governmental Leadership

Positional leaders are crucial components of our communities and there are many governmental positions – both elected and appointed – to fill. In Iowa there are 99 counties, 943 municipalities, 348 school districts, and 551 “special” districts which provide oversight functions related to water, sewer, cemeteries, highways, airports, fire protection, soil and water conservation, and hospitals.¹ This amounts to a total of 1,941 governmental agencies requiring leadership. Of the 2,450,103 residents in the state over the age of 18 (eligibility for positional leadership) we find that 1 in every 252 adults in Iowa need to serve as a government leader.²

Nonprofit Leadership

Social life as seen through the nonprofit lens reflects who we are as communities. We recognize many of these groups such as the American Red Cross, 4-H Clubs, and Humane Societies. There are also community-specific groups such as bicycling associations, community improvement groups, libraries, arts and cultural groups, and lake associations. The nonprofit sector in Iowa is thriving, and in 2020 there were a total of 26,269 registered nonprofits across the state.³ These social organizations also require positional leaders. We find in Iowa that 1 in every 16 people need to serve as a nonprofit leader.⁴ Iowa ranks second, behind Montana, with the highest demand for nonprofit positional leaders in the country.

The Rural-Urban Continuum

There are important differences in leadership between urban and rural places. The Rural-Urban Continuum Code (RUCC), created by the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Economic Research Service, assigns counties on a continuum from

¹ Source: 2017 Census of Governments, 2020 Decennial Census, U.S. Census Bureau.

² To simplify, an assumed calculation of five leaders needed for each governmental agency will be used, this also keeps in line with previous reports.

³ Source: 2020 National Center for Charitable Statistics, Internal Revenue Service

⁴ This assumes that every nonprofit group requires six people to serve. Data on average board sizes range from 12 to 15 and estimates for optimal board sizes range from 5 to 7.

large metropolitan to small nonmetropolitan. The full list of the counties assigned to each Continuum Code can be found in the Appendix.

The demand for government leadership can be calculated by taking the number of residents over the age of 18, divided by the number of governments requiring boards. The size of these boards are not available by each type of government, rather the analysis will assume that five resident positions will be demanded by each. This is a conservative estimate as while there are five county elected board of supervisors in Iowa counties, school districts have five or seven board members.

Table 1: Number of Governments by Rural-Urban Continuum Code

RUCC	Governments	Population Age >18	Leadership Demands
1 (most urban)	-	-	-
2	347	943,580	1 in 544
3	195	526,758	1 in 540
4	74	98,671	1 in 266
5	121	147,414	1 in 243
6	469	328,068	1 in 140
7	428	275,625	1 in 129
8	157	69,770	1 in 89
9 (most rural)	150	60,217	1 in 80
TOTAL	1,941	2,450,103	1 in 252

The difference in demands for government leadership between the most urban and most rural counties is striking. In the urban counties of Iowa, 1 in 544 residents over the age of 18 must serve as a governmental leader (Table 1). In the most rural counties of the state this demand dramatically increases to 1 in 80 residents.

The demand for nonprofit leadership can be calculated by taking the number of residents over the age of 18, divided by the number of nonprofits. Here we assume that each nonprofit board will require six resident members.

Table 2: Number of Nonprofits by Rural-Urban Continuum Code


RUCC	Nonprofits	Population Age >18	Leadership Demands
1 (most urban)	-	-	-
2	12,816	943,580	1 in 12
3	3,673	526,758	1 in 24
4	781	98,671	1 in 21
5	1,364	147,414	1 in 18
6	3,233	328,068	1 in 17
7	2,961	275,625	1 in 16
8	766	69,770	1 in 15
9 (most rural)	675	60,217	1 in 15
TOTAL	26,269	2,450,103	1 in 16

In the most urban counties across Iowa, between 1 in 12 and 24 residents over the age of 18 must serve as a nonprofit leader (Table 2). There tends to be a high concentration of nonprofits in urban areas due to proximity to economic and political centers of activity. In the most rural counties of the state this demand is around 1 in 15 residents. Combined with the governmental leadership demands, and that rural community leaders have multiple hats they wear, is likely more true in our rural communities where there is a higher demand for leaders.

Table 3: Number of Governments and Nonprofits by Rural-Urban Continuum Code

RUCC	Gov'ts	Nonprofits	Total Organizations Demanding Leadership	Overall Demand	Percent Gov't
1 (most urban)	-	-	-		-
2	347	12,816	13,163	1 in 12	3%
3	195	3,673	3,868	1 in 23	5%
4	74	781	855	1 in 20	9%
5	121	1,364	1,485	1 in 17	9%
6	469	3,233	3,702	1 in 15	15%
7	428	2,961	3,389	1 in 14	14%
8	157	766	923	1 in 13	20%
9 (most rural)	150	675	825	1 in 13	22%
TOTAL	1,941	26,269	28,210	1 in 15	7%

Putting together these two data sources, we find there are a total of 28,269 government and nonprofit organizations demanding leaders in Iowa (Table 3). Iowa governments and nonprofits demand 1 in 15 adults serve as a positional leader,



ranking Iowa fourth highest in the country. One additional difference between the most urban and most rural places lies in the proportional relationship between the government and nonprofit sectors. In the urban counties, just 3% of overall leadership demands are derived from governmental sources. Whereas in the most rural counties, governmental make up 22% of overall leadership demands - almost ensuring the need to cross government-nonprofit boundaries to fulfill leadership supply.

See how your county stacks up in Table 4 below.
For questions, contact Ben Winchester, benw@umn.edu.

Table 4: Number of Governments, Nonprofits, and Residents Age 18+ by County

	Gov'ts, 2017	Nonprofits, 2020	2020 Population Age >18	Demand
Adair County	10	62	5,834	1 in 14
Adams County	9	43	2,891	1 in 10
Allamakee County	14	95	10,782	1 in 17
Appanoose County	18	99	9,608	1 in 14
Audubon County	12	47	4,437	1 in 13
Benton County	27	164	19,458	1 in 17
Black Hawk County	21	682	102,527	1 in 24
Boone County	17	172	20,533	1 in 18
Bremer County	17	176	19,135	1 in 17
Buchanan County	18	152	15,150	1 in 15
Buena Vista County	23	119	15,327	1 in 18
Butler County	17	93	11,127	1 in 17
Calhoun County	17	71	7,806	1 in 15
Carroll County	23	185	15,779	1 in 13
Cass County	14	105	10,235	1 in 15
Cedar County	17	140	14,283	1 in 15
Cerro Gordo County	35	363	34,430	1 in 15
Cherokee County	16	107	9,132	1 in 13
Chickasaw County	14	94	9,183	1 in 14
Clarke County	7	49	7,332	1 in 22
Clay County	20	131	12,704	1 in 14
Clayton County	24	164	13,339	1 in 12
Clinton County	26	282	35,887	1 in 20
Crawford County	21	104	12,099	1 in 17
Dallas County	25	293	72,050	1 in 38
Davis County	11	59	6,384	1 in 16
Decatur County	16	46	5,873	1 in 16
Delaware County	21	79	13,359	1 in 23
Des Moines County	18	301	30,442	1 in 16
Dickinson County	17	129	14,332	1 in 17
Dubuque County	31	599	76,916	1 in 21
Emmet County	14	72	7,330	1 in 15
Fayette County	23	171	15,310	1 in 13
Floyd County	18	123	11,969	1 in 14

	Gov'ts, 2017	Nonprofits, 2020	2020 Population Age >18	Demand
Fremont County	21	50	5,121	1 in 13
Greene County	12	82	6,818	1 in 12
Grundy County	16	88	9,393	1 in 15
Guthrie County	19	112	8,232	1 in 11
Hamilton County	18	85	11,564	1 in 19
Hancock County	14	86	8,405	1 in 14
Hardin County	33	167	13,066	1 in 11
Harrison County	33	105	11,168	1 in 14
Henry County	20	140	16,167	1 in 17
Howard County	11	98	7,093	1 in 11
Humboldt County	18	78	7,266	1 in 13
Ida County	10	62	5,399	1 in 13
Iowa County	22	128	12,763	1 in 15
Jackson County	24	121	15,254	1 in 18
Jasper County	25	232	29,446	1 in 19
Jefferson County	11	181	12,724	1 in 11
Johnson County	20	690	122,084	1 in 29
Jones County	17	129	16,239	1 in 19
Keokuk County	24	85	7,654	1 in 12
Kossuth County	21	202	11,653	1 in 9
Lee County	19	217	26,398	1 in 19
Linn County	42	1,120	176,911	1 in 26
Louisa County	23	83	8,372	1 in 14
Lucas County	11	64	6,614	1 in 15
Lyon County	16	120	8,487	1 in 11
Madison County	14	126	12,321	1 in 15
Mahaska County	15	155	16,933	1 in 17
Marion County	19	329	25,620	1 in 12
Marshall County	23	238	30,017	1 in 19
Mills County	24	77	10,925	1 in 19
Mitchell County	14	91	8,085	1 in 13
Monona County	25	61	6,822	1 in 14
Monroe County	7	53	5,796	1 in 16
Montgomery County	14	133	8,062	1 in 9
Muscatine County	25	261	32,767	1 in 19
O'Brien County	15	115	10,884	1 in 14

	Gov'ts, 2017	Nonprofits, 2020	2020 Population Age >18	Demand
Osceola County	9	58	4,782	1 in 12
Page County	21	105	12,021	1 in 16
Palo Alto County	20	87	6,971	1 in 11
Plymouth County	19	141	19,215	1 in 20
Pocahontas County	13	81	5,473	1 in 10
Polk County	52	9,220	371,655	1 in 7
Pottawattamie County	32	358	71,810	1 in 31
Poweshiek County	16	138	15,037	1 in 17
Ringgold County	17	46	3,623	1 in 10
Sac County	15	77	7,614	1 in 14
Scott County	33	888	133,731	1 in 24
Shelby County	14	116	9,108	1 in 12
Sioux County	23	265	25,861	1 in 15
Story County	26	550	82,031	1 in 24
Tama County	23	112	12,990	1 in 17
Taylor County	13	46	4,516	1 in 13
Union County	16	96	9,361	1 in 14
Van Buren County	13	73	5,485	1 in 11
Wapello County	19	238	26,940	1 in 18
Warren County	29	224	39,080	1 in 26
Washington County	18	161	17,073	1 in 16
Wayne County	14	63	4,792	1 in 11
Webster County	30	245	29,204	1 in 18
Winnebago County	25	93	8,473	1 in 12
Winneshiek County	17	183	16,206	1 in 14
Woodbury County	27	586	78,384	1 in 21
Worth County	12	70	5,760	1 in 12
Wright County	16	131	9,733	1 in 11
State of Iowa	1,941	26,269	2,450,103	1 in 15

Appendix 1: Rural-Urban Continuum Code counties

RUCC	Description	Counties
1	Counties in metro areas of 1 million population or more	-
2	Counties in metro areas of 250,000 to 1 million population	Benton County Dallas County Guthrie County Harrison County Jones County Linn County Madison County Mills County Polk County Pottawattamie County Scott County Warren County
3	Counties in metro areas of fewer than 250,000 population	Black Hawk County Bremer County Dubuque County Grundy County Johnson County Plymouth County Story County Washington County Woodbury County
4	Urban population of 20,000 or more, adjacent to a metro area	Clinton County Marshall County Muscatine County
5	Urban population of 20,000 or more, not adjacent to a metro area	Cerro Gordo County Des Moines County Lee County Wapello County Webster County
6	Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, adjacent to a metro area	Allamakee County Boone County Buchanan County Cass County Cedar County Cherokee County Chickasaw County Clarke County Delaware County Fayette County Greene County Hamilton County Hardin County Henry County Howard County Iowa County Jackson County Jasper County Lucas County Marion County Monona County Montgomery County Page County

RUCC	Description	Counties
		Shelby County Tama County Union County
7	Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, not adjacent to a metro area	Appanoose County Buena Vista County Carroll County Clay County Crawford County Dickinson County Emmet County Floyd County Franklin County Hancock County Humboldt County Jefferson County Kossuth County Mahaska County Mitchell County Monroe County O'Brien County Osceola County Palo Alto County Poweshiek County Sioux County Winnebago County Winneshiek County Wright County
8	Completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population, adjacent to a metro area	Adair County Audubon County Butler County Clayton County Fremont County Ida County Keokuk County Louisa County Lyon County
9	Completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population, not adjacent to a metro area	Adams County Calhoun County Davis County Decatur County Pocahontas County Ringgold County Sac County Taylor County Van Buren County Wayne County Worth County

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