



How Many People Run Our Towns?

Fact Sheet: Positional Leadership Across Rural and Urban North Dakota

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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 North Dakota there are 53 counties, 357 municipalities, 1,308 townships, 179 school districts, and 767 “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 2,664 governmental agencies requiring leadership. Of the 596,093 residents in the state over the age of 18 (eligibility for positional leadership) we find that 1 in every 45 adults in North Dakota need to serve as a government leader.² North Dakota has the highest demand for governmental positional leaders in the country.

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 North Dakota is thriving, and in 2020 there were a total of 5,269 registered nonprofits across the state.³ These social organizations also require positional leaders. We find in North Dakota that 1 in every 19 people need to serve as a nonprofit leader.⁴ North Dakota ranks seventh in highest demand for nonprofit positional leaders in the country.

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

² This assumes that every government agency requires five people to serve. County governments in North Dakota have either 3 or 5 commissioners. School boards vary in size, with 70% of districts having 5 members, 27% having 7 members, and 4% having 9 members. 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.

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 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 either three or five county commissioners in North Dakota counties, school districts have five (70% of districts), seven (26% of districts), or nine (4% of districts) board members.

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

RUCC	Governments	Population Age >18	Leadership Demands
1 (most urban)			
2			
3	322	305,662	1 in 190
4			
5	104	52,806	1 in 102
6	261	29,730	1 in 23
7	325	90,401	1 in 56
8	377	28,282	1 in 15
9 (most rural)	1,275	89,212	1 in 14
TOTAL	2,664	596,093	1 in 45

The difference in demands for government leadership between the most urban and most rural counties is striking. In the urban counties of the state, 1 in 190 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 14 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			
3	2,194	305,662	1 in 23
4			
5	338	52,806	1 in 26
6	366	29,730	1 in 14
7	819	90,401	1 in 18
8	421	28,282	1 in 11
9 (most rural)	1,131	89,212	1 in 13
TOTAL	5,269	596,093	1 in 19

In the most urban counties across North Dakota, 1 in 23 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 between 1 in 11 and 1 in 13 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	Demand	Percent Gov't
1 (most urban)					
2					
3	322	2,194	2,516	1 in 21	13%
4					
5	104	338	442	1 in 21	24%
6	261	366	627	1 in 8	42%
7	325	819	1,144	1 in 14	28%
8	377	421	798	1 in 6	47%
9 (most rural)	1,275	1,131	2,406	1 in 7	53%
TOTAL	2,664	5,269	7,933	1 in 13	34%

Putting together these two data sources, we find there are a total of 7,933 government and nonprofit organizations demanding leaders in North Dakota (Table 3). All state governments and nonprofits demand 1 in 13 adults serve as a positional leader, ranking North Dakota first, with the highest demand for overall leadership 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 13% of overall leadership demands are derived from governmental sources. Whereas in the most rural counties, governmental make up 53% 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
Adams County	30	31	1,767	1 in 5
Barnes County	85	121	8,740	1 in 8
Benson County	70	39	3,926	1 in 7
Billings County	5	10	737	1 in 9
Bottineau County	80	60	4,981	1 in 7
Bowman County	38	35	2,292	1 in 6
Burke County	49	29	1,641	1 in 4
Burleigh County	61	655	75,621	1 in 18
Cass County	129	940	142,934	1 in 23
Cavalier County	71	60	2,885	1 in 4
Dickey County	55	66	3,774	1 in 6
Divide County	50	32	1,691	1 in 4
Dunn County	15	27	3,056	1 in 13
Eddy County	30	30	1,824	1 in 6
Emmons County	28	44	2,615	1 in 6
Foster County	32	40	2,627	1 in 7
Golden Valley County	25	22	1,274	1 in 5
Grand Forks County	80	389	57,784	1 in 21
Grant County	29	40	1,885	1 in 5
Griggs County	37	35	1,827	1 in 5
Hettinger County	44	32	1,943	1 in 5
Kidder County	58	27	1,877	1 in 4
LaMoure County	59	44	3,170	1 in 6
Logan County	20	28	1,424	1 in 5
McHenry County	79	58	4,099	1 in 6
McIntosh County	21	32	2,054	1 in 7
McKenzie County	42	54	10,366	1 in 19
McLean County	77	95	7,579	1 in 8
Mercer County	24	78	6,358	1 in 11
Morton County	32	196	25,365	1 in 19
Mountrail County	76	58	7,075	1 in 10
Nelson County	58	41	2,473	1 in 5
Oliver County	7	6	1,414	1 in 20
Pembina County	62	90	5,365	1 in 6
Pierce County	29	45	3,096	1 in 7
Ramsey County	57	107	8,927	1 in 10

	Gov'ts, 2017	Nonprofits, 2020	2020 Population Age >18	Demand
Ransom County	42	63	4,315	1 in 7
Renville County	45	26	1,778	1 in 5
Richland County	92	142	12,831	1 in 10
Rolette County	30	57	8,161	1 in 17
Sargent County	48	44	3,057	1 in 6
Sheridan County	29	18	1,016	1 in 4
Sioux County	13	8	2,544	1 in 23
Slope County	27	3	554	1 in 4
Stark County	29	188	24,973	1 in 20
Steele County	32	27	1,407	1 in 4
Stutsman County	96	241	17,254	1 in 9
Towner County	47	25	1,668	1 in 4
Traill County	53	84	6,131	1 in 8
Walsh County	84	103	8,159	1 in 8
Ward County	104	338	52,806	1 in 21
Wells County	59	46	3,180	1 in 6
Williams County	90	160	29,793	1 in 21
State of North Dakota	2,664	5,269	596,093	1 in 13

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	-
3	Counties in metro areas of fewer than 250,000 population	Burleigh County Cass County Grand Forks County Morton County Oliver County Sioux County
4	Urban population of 20,000 or more, adjacent to a metro area	-
5	Urban population of 20,000 or more, not adjacent to a metro area	Ward County
6	Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, adjacent to a metro area	Barnes County Richland County Walsh County
7	Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, not adjacent to a metro area	Mercer County Pierce County Ramsey County Stark County Stutsman County Williams County
8	Completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population, adjacent to a metro area	Emmons County Grant County Kidder County McLean County Nelson County Ransom County Steele County Traill County
9	Completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population, not adjacent to a metro area	Adams County Benson County Billings County Bottineau County Bowman County Burke County Cavalier County Dickey County Divide County Dunn County Eddy County Foster County Golden Valley County Griggs County Hettinger County LaMoure County Logan County McHenry County McIntosh County McKenzie County Mountrail County Pembina County Renville County

RUCC	Description	Counties
		Rolette County Sargent County Sheridan County Slope County Towner County Wells County

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