

State Government Efficiency Review Committee
Linda Hinton, Government Relations Manager
Iowa State Association of Counties
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Thank you for the opportunity for the Iowa State Association of Counties to provide input on ways that the state can partner with local government to gain efficiencies. Just as state governments have concerns about the impact of the actions of the federal government on the efficiency of their operations, local governments have concerns about similar actions taken by the state government. Local government operations are impacted by actions taken by the legislature, state agencies, the Governor and the courts. In some cases the impacts are intentional, but often they are unintended. Local governments would appreciate if the state would take the time to determine the impacts and work with local officials to address these impacts when making changes that will effect local governments.

Two recent examples are property tax reform and mental health redesign. In both cases, the impacts could have been mitigated by delaying the implementation by one year. Currently, state and local staffs are scrambling to implement the changes made by SF 295. As state government has slimmed down over the past decade, the manpower to do the work assigned to state agencies is stretched. In the case of SF 295, the Department of Revenue is working hard with local government officials, but this cooperative effort suffers from the lack of resources. At the county level assessors, auditors, and treasurers are all working diligently, above and beyond their regular duties, to ensure that the systems are in place to meet the tight time frames set out in the law. With a retroactive effective date, there is no time for state and local officials to provide feedback to the legislature and make necessary changes and clarifications to the legislation that would benefit all involved including the tax payers.

In relation to mental health redesign, major changes have been implemented every year for the past three years. This creates a vacuum of reliable data about the service system, since no one knows by the time the legislature convenes what the impacts of that year's changes will be. Last year, the state took over the funding of Medicaid services, this year it is the shift from providing services based on legal settlement to residency and the mid-year implementation of the Iowa Health and Wellness plan, next year it will be the implementation of the regional system. We will continue to encourage the legislature to allow the regions to operate for a period of time, before making any additional changes.

Another action by the state that impacts the efficiency of local government is state agency downsizing. For example, counties have experienced increased costs due to the transfer of road jurisdiction and the elimination of DHS offices. Counties are required to provide office space to the Department of Human Services. When the state reorganizes DHS as they did twice in the past decade, counties are left with leases on space, remodels done to meet the needs of the state agency, and equipment. In addition, county offices are picking up the slack to help residents access services. Counties are acutely aware of this now as the enrollment for the Iowa Health and Wellness plan begins.

An example of duplication of effort that has a fiscal impact on counties is the maintenance of manure management plans. These plans and their amendments must be submitted and kept on file by both the DNR and the counties where the storage structure is either located or proposed to be located in the county where the manure is to be applied. These plans present significant storage issues for counties and there is minimal interest in accessing these plans by the general public.

There are obvious changes that could be made to make local government more efficient. Local governments have long sought access to the ICN and changes in the requirements that notices be published in newspapers as ways to improve efficiencies at the local level. There are still counties that would like to be able to access the ICN, and the connections are available in the county courthouses. In regards to posting notices, it is time to recognize that Iowa's citizens will be getting their information through alternative formats in the future. We have suggested that a transitional step would be to require local governments to publish information about how to access required information in the newspaper. In two particular cases, tax sales and drainage district changes, this would significantly decrease costs. In the case of drainage districts, the adjoining landowners are required to be notified by mail so the publication of a proposed district could be substituted with a notice of where the plan can be accessed without concern that impacted landowners will not receive notice.

In discussing this opportunity to testify, we remembered that there once was a commission that looked at state and county issues, the Iowa Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations. The IACIR was created by the General Assembly in 1982 in order to foster communication and cooperation between state and local governments. The IACIR was designed to provide a forum for dialogue and understanding of intergovernmental issues, to study issues affecting Iowa government, and to make recommendations to the Governor, General Assembly, state agencies and local governments. It would seem that something like this commission could provide an avenue for better communication of the impacts of legislation and regulatory changes on local governments. Interestingly, an issue that Commission reviewed in the 90's was election day hours. This and the pre-registration time frames are changes that could be made in the election process that would save costs at the local level.

Thank you for the opportunity to address the interim committee, I look forward to your questions.