

County Civil Service Commissions

Establishment and Functions

The Wisconsin Statutes provide for the establishment of County Civil Service Commissions as part of a County Civil Service system to manage human resources issues applicable to county employees.

Chapter 59.52(8)(a) of the Wisconsin Statutes provides for Wisconsin County Boards to establish “a civil service system of selection, tenure and status, and the system may be made applicable to all county personnel, except the members of the board, constitutional officers and members of boards and commissions. The system may also include uniform provisions in respect to classification of positions and salary ranges, payroll certification, attendance, vacations, sick leave, competitive examinations, hours of work, tours of duty or assignments according to earned seniority, employee grievance procedure, disciplinary actions, layoffs and separations for just cause, as described in Para. (b), subject to approval of a civil service commission or the board.”

Of note here is that constitutional elected officers, such as the Sheriff, are not subject to the supervision of the Commission, although, in most cases, their subordinates are.

In most cases the commission will oversee these functions rather than perform the actual “hands on” human resources functions which are commonly performed by staff.

Such a Civil Service Commission, established under the statutory system, operates much like the Police and Fire Commissions which provide a similar function for municipal police and fire personnel.

Establishment of a Civil Service Commission in now way negates or modifies any existing labor agreements. Any changes to labor contracts must still be negotiated and those contracts are binding on the Civil Service Commission.

Chapter 63.01(1) of the Wisconsin Statutes establishes the requirement for a County Civil Service Commission in every county containing 500,000 inhabitants or more. It specifies that the commission shall be comprised of five (5) members who are legal residents of the county. Appointments are made by the county board based on “recognized and demonstrated interest and knowledge of the

problems of civil service.” Elected or appointed public officials of the county are prohibited from appointment to the commission. Under their home rule authority, counties with smaller populations may opt to establish a Civil Service Commission.

This chapter also specifies that “no person holding any elective or appointive public position or office of any sort in said county government shall be appointed thereon.” No county board members, county employees, or other elected officers are allowed on the commission.

Chapter 63.01(2) specifies the term of office for commission members. Appointments are made by the Board Chair subject to confirmation by the Board of Supervisors. After initial staggered terms to facilitate commission establishment, terms will be for a period of five (5) years starting on the first day of January. The statute also specifies that commission members must be paid a salary of not less than two hundred dollars (\$200) per year.

Chapter 63.03 requires counties who adopt a Civil Service Commission to divide all offices and positions in the public service in the county shall be divided into 2 classes, namely, the classified and the unclassified service and later subchapters provide detail for the various positions and offices.

In summary, Wisconsin counties, depending upon their size, either must or may establish a Civil Service Commission made up of non-elected, ideally neutral and interested citizens. Those Commissioners oversee the human resources functions of the county, with the exceptions specified within the statutes, and must comply with the instructions set forth in the statutes.

Alan Probst
Local Government Specialist
Local Government Center
University of Wisconsin - Extension