

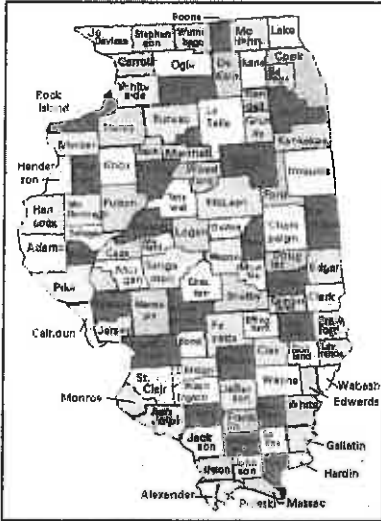
The Capable County

Name: _____

What is a County?

You already know that the United States is divided into smaller units of government called states. But what are states divided into? Counties! A **county** is the next smallest unit of government below a state. Counties make it easier to provide services directly to people. The *county seat* is the town or city in each county that serves as the home for the county government.

A county by any other name...
... is still a county. But in Alaska counties are called *boroughs*, and in Louisiana they are called *parishes*.



Counties in the state of Illinois

Counties Provide Services to You

You've probably benefited from county services without even realizing it. Have you ever driven on a road? Needed a copy of your birth certificate? Called 911? Although every county is different, maintaining roads, keeping vital records, and providing emergency services are the kinds of services that counties might provide. But that's not all. Here is a list of more services that counties might provide for their residents:

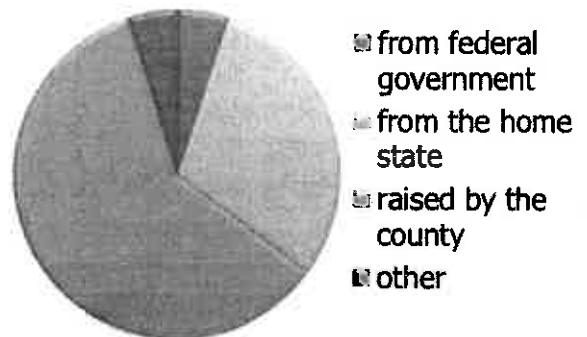
- Run elections
- Operate courts and jails
- Run hospitals
- Offer mental health services
- Provide clean water
- Keep property records
- Plan how land will be developed
- Give relief to the poor
- Run disease prevention programs
- Maintain parks

Paying for County Services

It takes money to provide all these services. Counties have three main sources of money to pay for it all: the federal government, the state, and the county itself. The smallest share of a county's money comes from the federal government. A bigger share—usually almost one-third of a county's money—comes from the state.

But the biggest source of money for a county is the county itself. Most of this money comes from **property taxes** people or businesses pay on land and buildings they own inside the county. Some counties also have a **sales tax** on items sold inside the county. Finally, counties raise money by charging **fees** for services the county provides. For example, a county may provide garbage collection, but people who participate have to pay for that service.

Revenue Sources

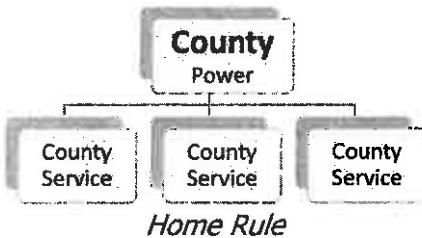
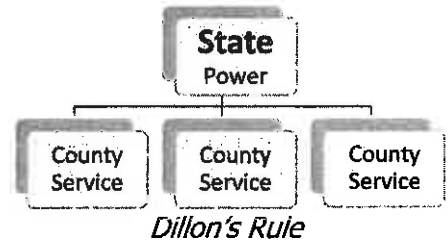


Sometimes the federal or state government make counties provide certain services but don't give counties any money to pay for those services. These demands are called **unfunded mandates** because they are mandated (ordered) but not funded (paid for). For example, counties are responsible for running elections, but they do not receive any money to pay for the elections. Counties must provide these services even if it means raising more money on their own.

The Capable County

County Power

Counties don't have magic powers. Instead, they get their power from one of two places. In some states, the state itself gives counties the power to carry out duties and provide services. Those states follow **Dillon's Rule**, which says that a county must get authority from the state legislature before it can provide services. These states see the county government as just another part of the state.



In other states, counties are considered to have natural powers of their own. Maybe this *is* a little like magic, but it's actually called Home Rule. Under **Home Rule**, counties have the power to make decisions for themselves about what services to provide. In these states, counties have some independence from the state. But don't get the wrong idea—even in these states, state laws always trump county laws.

Who's In Charge Around Here?

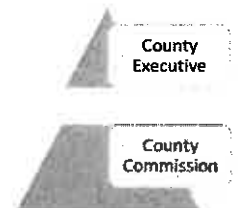
There are three ways a county's government might be organized:

Commission Only County citizens elect several people to sit on a commission (also called a board). This board has some "legislative" power because it passes county laws (which are called ordinances) and figures out the county's budget. It has some "executive" power because it decides what the county's policies will be and carries out the laws it passes. Commissions also share some of their power with elected officials who oversee specific departments, such as the sheriff, clerk, or county judge.



Commission/Administrator/Manager Under this system, the commission gives some of its "executive" power to an administrator. The commission chooses the administrator and has the power to fire that person. The administrator carries out the board's decisions.

Commission + Executive Under this system, an elected person separate from the commission has the county's "executive" power. This executive can sometimes veto decisions the board makes. This is more like a real legislative and executive branch, because the commission and the executive can check each other's power.



Counties Go Way Back

Well before the United States was formed, England was divided into units called "shires." English shires served the local community and represented the national government. The thirteen English colonies in America borrowed the shire system and adapted it to their needs. When the United States government was formed, the writers of the Constitution did not say how local government should be run. As a result, county governments continued and developed into the county system we have today. Vermont's county seats are still called shire towns!

The Capable County

Name: _____



My County Government Fact Sheet



The Basics

County Name: _____ County Seat: _____
State: _____ When was it established? _____

Draw your state, and put a star where your county is located.

Draw your county seal.

Factoids

How many people live in your county?

The population in my county is...
growing or shrinking

What is the largest city in your county?

My county is more...

rural or urban or mixed

How large is your county (in square miles)?

My county has...

industry agriculture business

major university major tourist site

other: _____

County Government

My county has a ...

County Commission/Board

County Administrator

County Executive

Where are the county offices located?

Pick three agencies or department and briefly describe the kind of work they do.

1) The _____ department
focuses on _____
_____.

2) The _____ department
focuses on _____
_____.

3) The _____ department
focuses on _____
_____.

How many departments or agencies are in your county government?

The Capable County

Name: _____

A. True or False? Circle true (T) or false (F) for each statement. If the statement is false, cross out the part that is wrong and correct it on the line below.

1. Counties in the United States come from an ancient American Indian tradition. or

2. Rules for counties and local governments are spelled out in the U.S. Constitution. or

3. Counties have adapted to meet the needs of the communities they serve. or

4. Counties all across the United States are managed the same way. or

5. Most of counties' money comes from the federal government. or

6. The first counties were units of government created as "districts." or

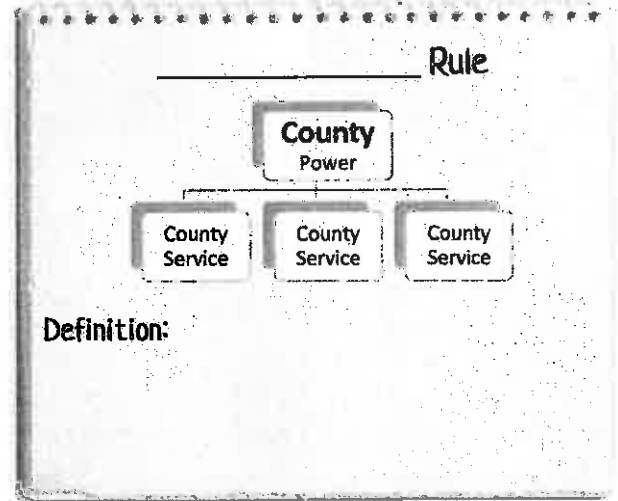
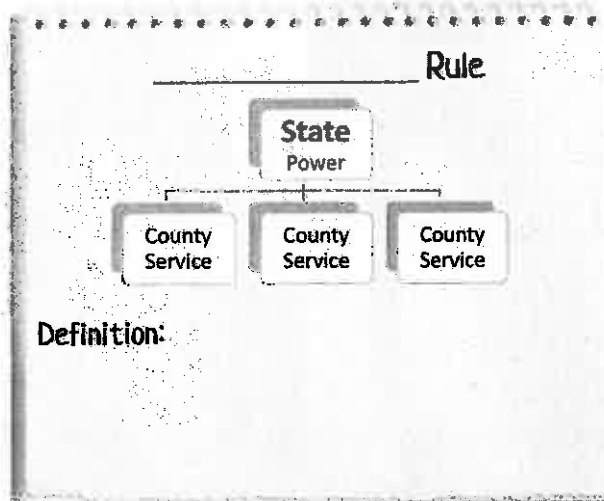
7. The main in-county source of income for most counties is the sales tax. or

8. A county executive can be fired by the county commission. or

9. Unfunded mandates are services the federal government demands and pays for. or

10. A county commission can act as both a legislative and executive branch. or


B. County Power. Label and define Home Rule and Dillon's Rule.





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C. County to the Rescue! Help each person below find the county service they need.


 I broke my arm, and I need to go to the emergency room.


 Sniff! I need a copy of my grandma's death certificate.


 It's that time of year again—I need to get a flu shot. Ouch!


 I need counseling, but I can't afford it.


 Help! Someone is trying to break into my apartment!

 Can they really build a gas station next to my house?

 I cleaned out my shed and loaded my truck full of trash.

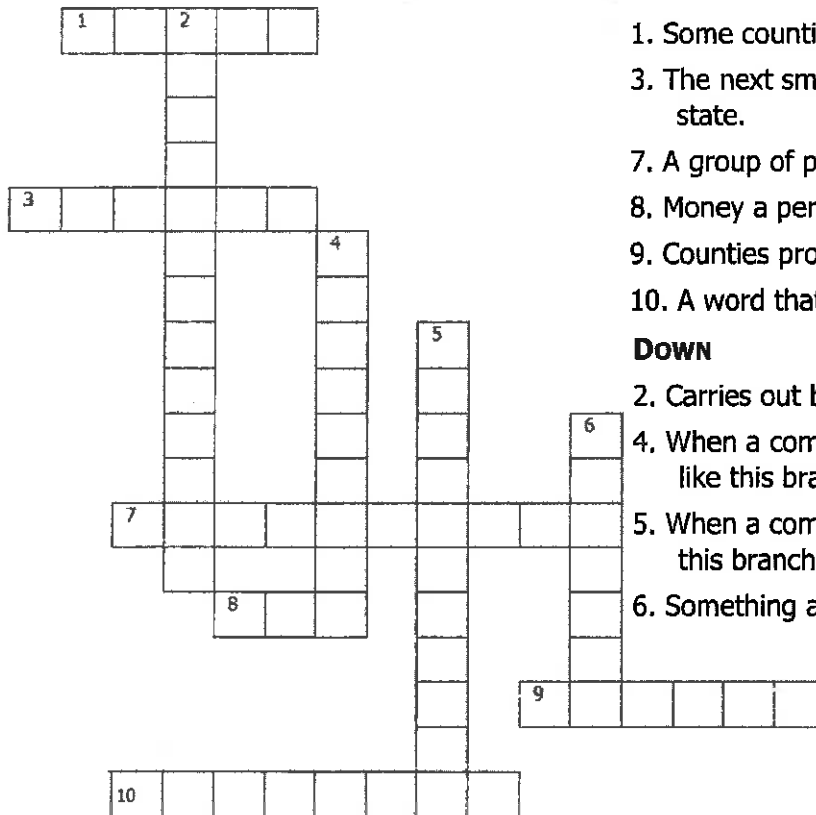
 I just turned 18, and I can't wait to vote!

 I need a copy of the deed to my house.

 The road by my house has a big pothole.

- A. Hospital
- B. Emergency Services
- C. Property Records
- D. Mental Health Services
- E. Waste Management
- F. Disease prevention
- G. Road maintenance
- H. Elections
- I. Land Use Planning
- J. Vital Records

D. County Crossword. Use the clues and the reading to complete the crossword puzzle.



ACROSS

1. Some counties get their power from this.
3. The next smallest unit of government below a state.
7. A group of people in charge of a county
8. Money a person pays for a county service
9. Counties provide services directly to ____.
10. A word that means "not paid for."

DOWN

2. Carries out board decisions in some counties.
4. When a commission decides the county's policies, it is like this branch of government.
5. When a commission passes county laws, it is partly like this branch of government.
6. Something a county has been ordered to do.

