

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



State, Local, and Tribal Governments

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STATE, LOCAL, AND TRIBAL GOVERNMENTS

By David P. Agnew

Introduction

The intergovernmental system in the United States is complex and ever evolving: The structures themselves are varied across the country, and the relative power and responsibilities of different government entities are constantly shifting in response to new laws and political conditions.

As a consequence, there will always be significant flux in the intergovernmental system. At the same time, the overall effectiveness of government at every level is fully dependent on the different pieces working coherently together. Each cabinet department and independent agency at the federal level must work closely together in coordinating their intergovernmental activities.

The White House Office of Intergovernmental Affairs (IGA) is a key actor in the federal government. This office is uniquely situated to help make the overall intergovernmental system work more effectively. It also occupies a unique platform from which to lead the discussion about the critical importance of intergovernmental relationships, how to reduce tensions, and how to promote collaboration between the various levels of government. Working with elected officials, intergovernmental associations, federal departments and agencies, and other stakeholders, IGA is poised to lead this conversation in a productive direction.

Nearly all federal departments and independent agencies have their own intergovernmental offices. While this chapter will focus on the White House Office of Intergovernmental Affairs, many of the functions of that office will also be performed at the departmental and agency level. As a political appointee, it is highly likely that you will engage with state, local, and tribal officials at many points during your tenure.

About the White House Office of Intergovernmental Affairs

As discussed above, IGA is an important tool for any White House seeking to advance effective governance and make progress for the American people. The office was established during the Eisenhower Administration to serve as the point of contact for state and local governments within the White House, an action inspired by the need for better federal, state, and local coordination during the construction of the Interstate Highway System. Over the years, IGA's role has evolved considerably. Today it plays an important role, usually behind the scenes, by helping to foster a productive and nuanced working relationship between federal, state, local, and tribal governments, as well as with other federal organizations.

Though IGA is relatively small, it serves an enormous set of constituencies, literally covering tens of thousands of elected officials across the country. During the Obama Administration, the office consisted of three core teams:

- **State government team.** This team is responsible for coordinating with governors, state legislators, and other statewide elected officials such as lieutenant governors, attorneys general, and state treasurers. In practice, much of this team's focus revolves around the creation of strong working relationships with governors and their staffs, as the federal-state relationship serves as the backbone for implementing many federal priorities and policies. The office also works with state legislators, particularly on matters of state policy.
- **Local government team.** This team is responsible for coordinating with mayors, county officials, and other local officials, and it maintains a wide and intensely local set of connections in America's cities, towns, and counties. On many occasions, the most important and direct impact the White House can have is through relationships it has with local governments, particularly in times of crisis. As President Obama said to a large group of mayors in 2010, "You're the first interaction citizens have with their government when they step outside every morning. The things that make our cities work and our people go—transit and public safety, safe housing, sanitation, parks and recreation—all these tasks fall to you."
- **Tribal government team.** This team is responsible for coordinating with the 566 federally recognized tribes. It works very closely with the Department of the Interior and other federal agencies to make sure that our nation's tribal government-to-government relationships are handled effectively and to ensure that tribal interests are well represented in federal policy debates and program implementation. This team also coordinates the Tribal Nations Conference, an important annual gathering of America's tribal leaders initiated by President Obama in 2009.

Key Roles Played by Intergovernmental Offices

During the Obama Administration, as in many previous administrations, the White House Office of Intergovernmental Affairs served as an instrument to help government work better, and it worked closely with federal entities to achieve this objective. IGA, department, and agency intergovernmental offices play the roles discussed below:

Personal relationships with elected officials. Success for the White House IGA, department, and agency intergovernmental offices lies in creating and maintaining strong personal relationships with state, local, and tribal government leaders and their staffs. Without an extremely wide range of direct relationships, intergovernmental offices simply cannot do their jobs effectively. From the beginning of the new administration, intergovernmental staff will reach out to elected officials directly. Nearly every state, local, and tribal

official will welcome these contacts, who will form the basis for cooperation and collaboration during the remainder of the administration. While much of this outreach will occur based on specific issues, it's important to realize that nearly every entity within the federal government needs to maintain relationships with, and an understanding of, the interests and needs of its intergovernmental partners at the state, local, and tribal levels.

Basic communication and execution. The White House IGA will typically spend a great deal of time and energy executing a set of core responsibilities that promote the efficient and effective operation of the government. Often, this involves communicating critical information in a timely manner, either from the White House to elected officials or from these officials to the President and other federal officials. During times of disaster or tragedy, this is of paramount importance. This is also necessary when the President, Vice President, or First Lady travels and needs to interact with elected officials. This daily flow of information and feedback—on programs and policies and situational details—is crucial.

Moments of crisis. Intergovernmental offices have no task of greater importance than coordinating aggressive federal assistance during a moment of crisis or tragedy. During the course of any administration, there will certainly be many natural disasters to deal with—including hurricanes, tornadoes, floods, and fires—as well as all too frequent manmade tragedies. The White House IGA plays a formal role in the decision to declare federal disasters under the Stafford Act, and it coordinates direct communication between the President and other federal leaders with governors and mayors in the crucial hours after a tragedy or disaster strikes.

In the days leading up to Superstorm Sandy, IGA helped coordinate direct contact with governors, mayors, and tribal leaders to prepare for the storm's arrival. In the storm's aftermath, IGA helped coordinate a massive federal response carried out by an unprecedented government-wide push for assistance. These efforts were designed to supplement and enhance the strong federal structures that existed at the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and other federal agencies.

Partnerships with the intergovernmental associations. IGA also serves as the lead federal engagement coordinator with a wide range of organizations that play a pivotal role in promoting effective governance. These organizations include:

- National Governors Association (NGA)
- U.S. Conference of Mayors (USCM)
- National League of Cities (NLC)
- National Association of Counties (NACo)
- National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL)
- Council of State Governments (CSG)
- National Conference of American Indians (NCAI)

These organizations convene their members to learn from each other, seek changes to federal policy, and educate Congress and the administration on their

constituents' key issues. Each organization has a series of large meetings: typically a winter meeting in Washington, D.C., and a summer meeting in another city. These gatherings are important moments for intergovernmental offices to cultivate relationships, solicit direct feedback, and showcase administration priorities and leaders.

A bipartisan voice. At a time of increased polarization in Congress, IGA has a unique and valuable opportunity to work across party lines. During the Obama Administration, IGA worked to create positive relationships with Republican governors and mayors. Officials at these levels of government are accustomed to collaborating across party lines, and they always appreciate federal officials willing to work with them to get something done. This bipartisan collaboration is also very important at the local level, and state and local officials are usually very willing to look beyond partisanship to achieve results for their citizens.

Collaboration on policy development and implementation. One of the most important and useful roles of intergovernmental offices is to advance overall cooperation between the different levels of government. State, local, and tribal officials are often frustrated by what they see as a lack of collaboration with federal agencies, and they frequently ask IGA staff for help. The IGA team can quite often play a key role in facilitating a solution by using knowledge of policy issues and relationships with appropriate federal officials. During the implementation of the Recovery Act, for example, one of IGA's responsibilities was to organize regular calls with Vice President Biden and groups of mayors, county officials, and governors.

Special task forces and committees. Creating special task forces and committees comprised of state, local, and tribal leaders provides the White House IGA a unique opportunity to solicit meaningful input and influence federal policy and action. In 2013, President Obama created the President's State, Local, and Tribal Leaders Task Force on Climate Preparedness and Resilience. Comprised of eight governors, 16 mayors, and two tribal officials, the task force members gathered input from their fellow elected officials and considered ways that the federal government could more effectively partner with them to prepare for and combat the impacts of climate change. This sort of formal, bipartisan collaboration can be an important tool to gather information widely and galvanize federal policy changes and action. Agency officials will be expected to play leading roles in these types of initiatives, and they will necessarily provide much of the staff support needed to make these initiatives successful.

Recommendation

The White House Office of Intergovernmental Affairs, department, and agency intergovernmental offices must create mechanisms for aggressive two-way communication. Given the breadth of the state, local, and tribal constituencies, it's important for all federal government offices involved in intergovernmental activities to create strong, flexible, and robust systems for communication between every level of government.

These communication systems must allow information to flow to the White House, as well as departments and agencies, from elected officials across the country, and conversely to allow the federal government to communicate information directly to these elected officials. Nearly every form of communication—including social media, conference calls, video calls, emails, and face-to-face meetings—will play crucial roles in the daily flow of back and forth information.

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