

## Building a Collaborative Intergovernmental System

By Terry Gerton



In the wake of the devastating COVID-19 pandemic, the U.S. Congress in 2020 and 2021 allocated more than [\\$4 trillion](#) to pull the country through an unprecedented national public health and economic crisis. However, to do the work of restoring public health and supporting communities, Congress turned to state and local governments. This is an excellent example of all levels of government coming together to solve an urgent problem, but one we don't see often enough.

In the 21st century, no significant public initiative fits entirely within one government agency or even one level of government, and our federal system presupposes that all levels of government have an important role to play in the democratic process. Effective problem-solving usually requires federal, state, and local governments to work together, often with the private and nonprofit sectors. When intergovernmental responses become bogged down by bureaucratic processes, conflicting rules, competing objectives, organizational stovepipes, and overlapping programs, the public's needs can go unmet.

The National Academy of Public Administration has long supported improving the intergovernmental system. Our Fellows and staff have worked with governmental officials, universities, and associations for many years to develop solutions for the most difficult public management challenges. Many of our Academy Fellows lead or have led alliances that are crucial to resolve the tests facing our intergovernmental system today, including the National Association of Counties (NACo), the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL), the National Governors Association (NGA), the Council of State Governments (CSG), the International City/County Management Association (ICMA), the National League of Cities (NLC), the U.S. Conference of Mayors (USCM), and the Government Finance Officers Association (GFOA).

To address the current significant challenges facing the intergovernmental system, the Academy today announced the establishment of the Center on Intergovernmental Partnerships (CIP) to help rebuild the collaborative capabilities necessary to develop and implement effective policies and programs across levels of government. The CIP has the support of the aforementioned associations, including generous pledges of financial support from NACo and NCSL, making us optimistic that real change can be affected. To begin, the CIP will undertake several critical activities:

- **Examine the immediate issues that face the U.S. federal system** stemming from the extraordinary challenge to wisely use the unprecedented funding that Congress has appropriated in the CARES Act and the American Rescue Plan. The Academy's recent study of CARES Act funding highlighted the need to improve coordination of national response for a program of this complexity and urgency. This will certainly be true as additional funds for jobs, education, and infrastructure are provided.

- **Work with governments at all levels and across sectors to identify leading practices** for establishing accountability and visibility for these crucial national recovery programs. This may include identifying new organizational arrangements and program structures to facilitate rapid and clear communication about regulations, funds availability, priorities, and outcomes.
- **Serve as a forum for dialogue and problem-solving** on intergovernmental issues. We will continue to work with partners from all levels of government to identify best and promising practices for intergovernmental organizational arrangements and on-the-ground coordination between levels of government. Through intersectoral and intergovernmental coalitions that can become permanent platforms for problem-solving, we will look for ways to improve outcomes for people and places, including those that have been left behind in the current economy and society.

Our Fellows and staff recognize that intergovernmental challenges are, to some extent, inherent in the nation's federal system. The debates about the appropriate roles of different levels of government have been with us since the founding. But all of us—of whatever party or ideology—want an intergovernmental system that works for the American people.

The importance of a high-performing intergovernmental system has been particularly highlighted over the past 18 months. As the nation has grappled with an unprecedented global pandemic, leaders at every level of government have been forced to identify, assign and integrate responsibilities and resources to address the significant health and economic challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The urgency of the challenges facing our nation compels us to act. Now is the time to develop the strategic capacity to support collaboration across all levels of government and with private and nonprofit sector partners to ensure the country implements its ambitious recovery programs in the most effective, efficient and equitable way.

The Academy, with its long history of engagement in intergovernmental operations, its non-partisan perspective, and the expertise of its Fellows, is perfectly positioned to make the greatest impact. We look forward to working with allies from all sectors to resolve systemic challenges so that our government can deliver public services effectively and, by doing so, earn back the trust of its people.

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