

Public safety & emergency management

Public safety is a core responsibility of city government. Washington's cities are made safer places to live, learn, work, and play thanks to high-quality police, court, prosecution, public defense, and jail services delivered by municipal staff. Some cities are direct providers of some or all of these services, and cities without their own services partner with neighboring cities or their county to provide public safety services. On average, nearly half of a city's operating budget is spent on police officer and firefighter salaries, emergency medical services, courts, and jails. The majority of those expenses include costs for vital public safety personnel.

Fire and emergency medical services

Service delivery options

A city can provide fire protection and emergency medical services (EMS) in several different ways:

- Establish a municipal fire department under the direction of an appointed fire chief. (See Chapter 7 for civil service requirements related to firefighters.)
- Establish a volunteer fire department under the direction of an appointed fire chief. (See Chapter 7 for workers' compensation and pensions for volunteer firefighters.)
- Annex into a fire district and transfer a portion of the city's property tax authority and control over service levels to the fire district.
- Annex into a regional fire service authority, which is created through the merger of fire departments or fire districts and, like a fire district, has its own property tax authority.
- Enter into a contractual arrangement with another jurisdiction to provide for all or a portion of fire protection or EMS services:
 - Some cities and towns contract with the fire district (rather than annexing to the district or operating their own department). This option allows cities to maintain control of service levels and budgetary impacts but may relieve the city of issues such as liability, personnel supervision, and direct costs such as equipment.
 - A city or town can also contract through an interlocal agreement with a neighboring city or town for fire protection, EMS services, or both.
- Participate in an emergency medical services district, which has its own property tax authority.
- Create an ambulance utility (specific requirements apply).

Mutual aid agreements

Washington's Interlocal Cooperation Act authorizes fire departments to contract with other departments to provide mutual fire suppression assistance. Many municipalities enter into such contracts with other cities or fire districts to provide backup assistance in emergency situations.

For more information on partnership options and interlocal agreements, see Chapter 2.

Cities with one or more full-time paid firefighters must establish a civil service commission to oversee hiring and hear appeals. For information on civil service requirements, see Chapter 7.

Police and law enforcement services

Cities are required to provide police and law enforcement services, but state law gives cities flexibility in how they fulfill that duty. Neither the state constitution nor state law requires a specific number of law enforcement officers, or a specific level of services provided; this is a matter of policy for the city council to decide. Once a city determines how it will provide law enforcement services, specific laws on how such services are delivered apply.

Service delivery options

A city can provide law enforcement protection in a number of different ways:

- Establish a municipal police department under the direction of an appointed police chief or marshal.
- Enter into a contractual arrangement with another jurisdiction—the county, a neighboring city, or Washington State Patrol—to provide for all or a portion of law enforcement services.

The level of service and cost must be negotiated between the jurisdictions.

Cities with more than two full-time police officers must establish a police civil service commission to govern hiring and hear appeals. For information on civil service requirements, see Chapter 7.

Mutual aid agreements

The Interlocal Cooperation Act and the Washington Mutual Aid Peace Officers Powers Act authorize a law enforcement agency to contract with any other law enforcement agency to provide mutual assistance. Many small cities enter into such contracts with other cities, the county, or the state patrol to provide backup assistance in emergency situations.

For more information on interlocal agreements see “Working with other entities,” Chapter 2.

Risk management and liability

Risk management and liability issues related to law enforcement are a significant concern for cities. To reduce liability, many city insurance programs have training programs and specific requirements, such as procedures for hiring police chiefs.

Courts, prosecution, and jails

Each county, city, and town is responsible for the prosecution, adjudication, sentencing, and incarceration of misdemeanor and gross misdemeanor offenses committed by adults in their respective jurisdictions. They can use their own courts, staff, and facilities, or create contracts or interlocal agreements to provide these services.

More than 100 cities run their own courts with elected or appointed judges. Although the city council may appoint the court’s judge and determine the court’s budget, the judge is responsible for running the court, including supervising court staff, and is not subject to council or executive oversight.

Once a city establishes its own criminal code or municipal court, it may not terminate the municipal court or repeal the criminal code without first entering into an agreement for payment of criminal justice costs with the county or another city.

Washington courts

<p>Washington Supreme Court</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appeals from the Court of Appeals • Administers the state court system
<p>Courts of Appeal (Division I – Seattle; Division II – Tacoma; Division III – Spokane)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appeals from lower courts
<p>Superior Courts (serve the county, or cluster of counties, in which they are located)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Civil matters • Domestic relations • Felony criminal cases • Juvenile matters • Appeals from courts of limited jurisdiction
<p>Courts of Limited Jurisdiction</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Municipal courts, therapeutic or community courts, district courts, municipal departments, traffic violations bureaus (TVBs) • Misdemeanor criminal cases, including driving under the influence, reckless driving, and fourth-degree assault • Traffic, nontraffic, and parking infractions • For municipal courts: violations of municipal or city ordinances • Domestic violence protection orders • Civil actions of \$75,000 or less • Small claims up to \$10,000

Emergency management planning

Local governments have the responsibility to protect the health, safety, and welfare of their residents, to protect the economic base of the community, and to preserve the environment. The middle of an emergency is the worst time to think about what processes you need to have in place. Instead, proactive mitigation policies and actions can be an investment in the future, creating a safer, more disaster-resilient communities by:

- Protecting public safety and prevent loss of life and injury
- Reducing harm to existing and future development
- Preventing damage to a community's unique economic, cultural, and environmental assets
- Minimizing operational downtime and accelerating recovery of government and business after disasters
- Reducing the costs of disaster response and recovery, and reducing risk-exposure for first responders
- Helping to accomplish other community objectives, such as leveraging capital improvements, infrastructure protection, open space preservation, and economic resiliency

Valuable assistance is available from state and federal government agencies, but cities must be aware of guidelines and restrictions in place for accessing that support. To comply with the state comprehensive emergency management plan and program, cities must establish a local organization or join a joint local organization for emergency management. There are also specific federal planning, reporting, and training requirements that must be met before cities can qualify for certain federal grants or assistance.

Immediately before, during, and after an emergency, all available resources will be tapped. When local resources aren't enough, a city can use its previously established mutual aid or interlocal agreements with adjoining local jurisdictions and/or seek help from the State Emergency Management Division.

Declaration of state of emergency

A city's mayor or manager, following the recommendation of the emergency management agency and/or the city emergency management coordinator, can declare a "State of Emergency." Such a declaration provides for extraordinary local powers such as expenditures for emergency assistance to residents and measures to protect public health, safety, and property, and is generally a preliminary step in the process of asking for county/state/federal assistance.

National Flood Insurance Program

Among FEMA's many resources, the National Flood Insurance Program aims to reduce the impact of flooding on private and public structures. It does so by providing affordable insurance to property owners and by encouraging communities to adopt and enforce floodplain management regulations.

Know the law

- [RCW 52.04.061 - City annexation to fire district](#)
- [RCW 52.26.100 - City annexation to regional fire service authority - transfer of civil service employees](#)
- [RCW 35.23.440 \(21\) - Service levels for second class cities](#)
- [RCW 35.27.370 \(6\) - Service levels for towns](#)
- [RCW 35A.11.020 - Service levels for code cities](#)
- [RCW 35.21.775 - Cities and towns - Provision of fire protection services to state-owned facilities](#)
- [RCW 35.21.779 - Fire protection services for state-owned facilities - Contracts with Department of Commerce](#)
- [RCW 41.08 - Civil service firefighters](#)
- [RCW 35.103 & 35A.92 - Fire department performance measures](#)
- [Article XI Section 11, Washington State Constitution - Police and sanitary regulations](#)
- [RCW 10.93 - Washington Mutual Aid Peace Officers Powers Act](#)
- [RCW 41.12 - Civil service for city police](#)
- [RCW 35A.12.020 - Chief law enforcement officer \(code cities\)](#)
- [RCW 35.23.021 - Police chief \(second class cities\)](#)
- [RCW 35.27.070 – Town marshal](#)
- [RCW 38.52 - Emergency management](#)
- [RCW 35.33.081 - Emergency expenditures - Non-debatable emergencies](#)
- [WAC 118-30-040 - Responsibilities of political subdivisions](#)
- [WAC 118-30-060 - Plan requirements](#)