

Recruiting Gender Balanced Boards and Commissions: *A Guide for Cities and Counties*



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This document aims to provide guidance and advice to county and city boards and commissions in Iowa in achieving gender balance. Much of the work to achieve gender balance centers on attracting more women to participate in local government.

Gender balance on state-level boards and commissions has been required since 1987. In 2009, the Iowa Legislature extended this expectation to county and city boards and commissions, effective January 1, 2012; however, there is no reason to wait. Cities and counties would be best served by developing diverse lists of qualified citizens to serve now. Though some board and commission seats won't expire for some time, cities and counties never know when they may have an unexpected vacancy. Moreover, some local boards and commissions have many long-term members, and recruiting other qualified individuals now will provide ample time for mentoring and skill development as "the torch" of leadership is passed.



Why should we target specific types of people to join local boards and commissions?

You likely already know why recruitment is important in and of itself—serving on a board or commission is a significant and meaningful way for citizens to participate in civic life.

Diversity of experiences is critical in developing representative and balanced local practices and policies. Actively seeking out new members will create more visibility of the board or commission's presence in the area, showing its commitment to the community's well-being. Recruitment may also attract qualified individuals who had never thought to work in local decision making or politics before. Diversity of board and commission membership, be it race, gender, age, or other factors, may help cities and counties more effectively communicate with and serve more citizens.

Further, citizens in your community—like anywhere—are busy and likely already have commitments. It's important to demonstrate to them the benefits they will receive by serving. Members get to share expertise while directly participating in shaping the local community. For some, serving on a board or commission can lead to higher leadership opportunities.

Although women make up more than half of the Iowa population, they are underrepresented on some local boards and commissions, especially those that make economic decisions for communities. Likewise, men are underrepresented on other types of boards and commissions, such as library boards and others. Across most communities in Iowa, more women need to be engaged. Encouraging women to join local boards and commissions now will open future leadership possibilities up to other women in your area, and will provide positive role models for women and girls interested in local community development.

Our board does not discriminate based on gender or any other factor. Why do we need gender balance?

During the 2009 legislative session, the 83rd General Assembly passed HF243, a bill that extends the expectation for gender balance from state boards, and commissions created by the code, to the local level. Beginning January 1, 2012: "All appointive boards, commissions, committees, and councils of a political subdivision of the state that are established by the Code, if not otherwise provided by law, shall be gender balanced...unless the political subdivision has made a good faith effort to appoint a qualified person to fill a vacancy on a board commission, committee, or council in compliance with subsection 1 for a period of three months but has been unable to make a compliant appointment." (Iowa Code, Chapter 69.16A(2)).

This means that a county or city which makes a good faith effort to appoint a qualified person

to fill a vacancy for three months, but is unable to make an appointment, may fill the opening regardless of balance. The legislation, also states that local governments are to utilize a fair and unbiased method of selecting the best qualified applicants, while providing for gender balance. This means that a standard protocol, application, or process is used to determine qualifications. Such a process need not be complicated. In fact, the more transparent and simple it is, the better for recruitment.

Prior to this law change, some Iowa municipalities reported having no formal application process; anecdotally, it was said that “it’s who you know” that gets one appointed. Because of this, many talented and qualified women were simply not considered. It stands to reason that implementing gender balance on local boards and commissions may greatly expand the number of women in leadership roles in Iowa communities.

Diversity should be encouraged on all boards but the mandate is only applicable to statutorily defined boards and commissions at the local level, and does not apply to a board or commission set up locally and with no Iowa Code authority/guidance.

It is already hard enough to find members to serve. How can we find enough interested women?

Recruiting women to serve is probably the easiest way to fill local boards and commissions. Women in Iowa volunteer at significantly higher rates than do men, and Iowa ranks 7th in the nation in civic volunteering. Women with children under age 18 volunteer at a significantly higher rate than do women without young children, and women who work volunteer at a significantly higher rate than those who don’t. Adult women outnumber adult men in 90 of Iowa’s 99 counties.



While women volunteer significantly in this state, they are less likely to be approached about leadership possibilities on local boards and commissions. For instance, research shows that though women are elected just as often as men when they do run for office, they are three times less likely than men to be asked to run. Approaching women and asking them to serve is an excellent way to find new and highly qualified members.

At the same time, cities and counties may find themselves challenged to make board and commission opportunities stand out as a unique opportunity. Work with women from local leadership groups, schools and other organizations to brainstorm what “messages” might resonate best with women in your community. It might be valuable to give strong consideration to newcomers to your community, who can bring outside experience and have not likely been asked to volunteer for so many things.

We need members with specific qualifications, and it seems fewer women have these. How can we fill our board?

First, make sure you are not operating under unchallenged assumptions about the qualification of women and men for certain positions. One elected official reported he found it difficult to find women to serve on the Condemnation Board because he believed “not many women are farmers or realtors.” In actuality, women are the majority of realtors in his community, and statewide, women are owner/operators or partners in 47% of Iowa’s agricultural land (Women, Food and Agriculture Network, 2008).

Second, utilize local clubs and organizations, or even statewide associations, to get out the word about the skill set you require. A Parent Teacher Association may be helpful in identifying a father to serve on an Empowerment Board; a local labor union, community college, or contractor may help find a female electrician to serve on an Electrical Code Board.

Last, you may wish to revisit the locally determined requirements for board and commission appointments. Some have been not been updated for a very long time, and you may find that there is not a good reason for continuing with some restrictive requirements, or that some entities just have too many members. For example, one community might make its Veterans Board easier to fill by eliminating the requirement for veterans of specific wars; another might update the eligibility to also include spouses of veterans, who clearly are affected by the provision of veterans services. Some cities and counties may wish to reduce the size of certain boards if a very large membership does not add an obvious value.

Simple strategies for recruiting qualified candidates:

- Step back and make sure you and other representatives of the city or county are positive in the way you talk about opportunities to serve on boards and commissions. Some appointing officials make the mistake of portraying participation as contentious, boring, or too time consuming. When officials talk openly about “going through the phone book to find candidates,” that is potentially denigrating to the board and to potential candidates. While you don’t want to misrepresent the commitment, make sure any frustration you have with the board or with filling the position does not taint the view you are providing of the opportunity. If there are real, ongoing problems with specific boards and commissions, such as continually straying from the agenda and going over time, try to address them before bringing in “new blood.”
- Cross train board and commission members and encourage them to try something new. A veteran of the Planning and Zoning Board might welcome a change of pace in going to an Arts or Historical board. A devoted Library Board member could bring much to an economic development advisory council.
- Hold information sessions where people already gather in order to provide information about your boards and commissions. Many local groups are always looking for a lunch speaker. Tell them about the opportunities you have and be sure and make a pitch for the specific people and skill sets you need.
- Maintain visibility in your community, emphasizing that boards and commissions are open to diversity and change. This is especially important in communities with a long history of “gender segregated” boards and commissions. The more people are aware of real opportunities to serve on a board or commission, the more likely women are to seek appointment.
- You may find it helpful to bring in outside observers to a meeting to determine if there is anything about the entity that may not be inviting to diverse candidates. Sometimes, groups may fall into habits or traditions without being aware that they might be creating an exclusionary environment, such as distributing flyers to members that say “Bring your baked goods to the next meeting” or “Wives are welcome.”
- Actively work to consider women in your community as potential board or commission members. Ask for recommendations from a variety of community leaders. If you were an employer advertising a position and you didn’t get the type of applicants you were looking for, you would step up your search. Women have been much less likely to be recruited than men, yet they are just as likely to take a position when asked. One County Auditor reports, “I always ask women. When you just tell them how often the board meets and for long, I find they say yes more often.”



- In a one-on-one setting, encourage individual women you know and admire to seek appointment on boards and commissions. Many women have grown up in families or cultures that undervalue women’s contributions, or may have themselves grasped a little too firmly on the Midwestern ideal of humility. You may find that women more than men tend to question their own qualifications for a board or commission, or may believe that “traditional female” approaches to leadership, such as building consensus, are not what you are seeking. Help them to see how their strengths are needed to enhance the community.

Basic Tips for Recruiting Women to Local Boards and Commissions

Information about boards and commissions is critical to making a decision to commit to seeking membership. Candidates need to fully understand the function, purpose, and mission of any board or commission before seeking an appointment. While prospective members will need to do the work to understand your board or commission, it is important to provide means for them to do so.

Tips for facilitating research:

- Provide publications or websites that list current boards and commissions. Lists could indicate relevancy of each board and commission to specific areas of interest.
- Explicitly establish the purpose of the board or commission, including the law that establishes its existence and mandates its duties. Provide its enabling statute.
- While few boards and commissions do not have paid staff, most do have web pages linked to the official county government website. Your board or commission web page should provide materials of the organization, such as minutes, newsletters, strategic plans, and annual reports. Provide a list of current members on the county or city website.
- Advertise meetings or events to allow women interested a first impression of how the body operates. Have a few people look at your ad or flyer to see if they can help you make it more inviting.





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