



VETERANS GUIDE TO FINDING A JOB IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

AUGUST 2025

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ICMA, the International City/County Management Association, advances professional local government through leadership, management, innovation, and ethics. ICMA provides member support; publications; data and information; peer and results-oriented assistance; and training and professional development to more than 13,000 city, town, and county experts and other individuals and organizations throughout the world. The management decisions made by ICMA's members affect millions of individuals living in thousands of communities, from small villages and towns to large metropolitan areas.

Veterans Guide to Finding A Job in Local Government

August 2025

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TASK FORCE TO DEVELOP CAREER HANDBOOK FOR VETERANS

In 2024, ICMA established a task force to update the *Veterans Guide to Finding a Job in Local Government*. This guide is designed for both veterans exploring career opportunities and local government hiring authorities. The initiative aimed to expand the talent pipeline by encouraging consideration of those who have served in the military. The guide reflects the collective efforts of ICMA member volunteers over the past year.

Although there are numerous approaches to writing resumes and conducting job searches, careers in local government are often overlooked by veterans. At the same time, hiring managers may unintentionally dismiss veteran candidates due to their limited direct experience in the local government field. While this guide does not cover every aspect of the job search process, its primary goal is to spark dialogue and reflection as we work toward attracting and retaining top talent to serve our communities.

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INTRODUCTION



As a veteran reenters the civilian workforce, many seek careers that offer purpose, stability, and opportunities to make a lasting impact. Local government service can be an ideal match, providing roles that support community well-being while utilizing the leadership, discipline, and problem-solving abilities gained through military experience. From city planning to emergency management, public works to administrative support, local governments are filled with positions where a veteran can thrive.

Despite the wealth of opportunity, navigating the path to public service employment can be complex. Each city, county, or municipality has its own hiring process, terminology, and requirements. Veterans may also be unfamiliar

with how their military training translates to civilian roles or unaware of the hiring advantages available to them through veteran preference programs. Understanding how to approach this system is key to unlocking these job opportunities.

This guide aims to bridge the gap between military service and civilian government careers at the local level. It offers practical advice on how to search for openings, interpret job descriptions, and present experience in a way that resonates with hiring managers. Most importantly, it empowers veterans with the knowledge and confidence needed to take the next step in their careers while continuing to serve the public in a meaningful way.



SECTION 1

CONSIDERING A CAREER IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Serving in local government after serving in the military can seem like a natural transition for many veterans. Here are some reasons why a job in local government can be a great path:

1. Continued Service and Leadership

- A veteran has already demonstrated a commitment to serving their country, and local government allows a veteran to serve in a new way in their community.
- Leadership skills gained in the military translate well into local governance and public service.
- A veteran has experience with complex systems and is trained to see the big picture.

2. Problem-Solving and Discipline

- Military experience fosters problem-solving, adaptability, and discipline. These valuable skills are important to tackling local issues like public safety, infrastructure, and economic development.
- A veteran is accustomed to working under pressure and making tough decisions.
- A government official often must make difficult decisions with limited resources and high stakes, just like in military service.

3. Advocacy for Veterans and Public Safety

- A veteran can bring firsthand experiences to policies that impact military families, Veterans Affairs services, and local veteran support programs.
- A veteran tends to prioritize issues like emergency response, first responders, and installation/community safety.
- A veteran understands the importance of security at all levels—local, state, and national—that can guide policies on public

safety, cybersecurity, and infrastructure improvements.

4. Bridging the Gap Between Citizens and Government

- Some people feel disconnected from their government, but a veteran can build trust and serve as a relatable leader who understands service, sacrifice, and teamwork.
- A veteran's experience working with varied groups helps them connect with different parts of the community.

5. Strengthening Community Resilience

- From disaster preparedness to strategic planning, a veteran brings a mission-oriented mindset that can enhance local government effectiveness.
- A veteran's ability to work across departments and organize efforts makes them valuable assets in a crisis.
- A veteran is trained to assess situations quickly, consider long-term impacts, and act decisively.

6. Strong Ethical Foundation and Accountability

- A veteran is trained to uphold integrity, honor, and accountability—essential qualities in a government role.
- A veteran understands the importance of mission-driven leadership and ethical decision-making, which helps build trust within the community.

7. Experience in Teamwork and Collaboration

- Military service teaches a person how to work with diverse teams, which is crucial for working with other government officials, departments, and community leaders.

- A veteran knows how to unite people toward a common goal, overcoming differences for the greater good.
8. Commitment to Public Service Over Personal Gain
 - A veteran typically has a service-first mindset rather than seeking power or personal gain.
 - A veteran's focus is often on mission success and community well-being rather than political gamesmanship.
 9. Mentorship and Inspiring the Next Generation
 - A veteran serving in government can mentor young leaders, showing them the importance of service, discipline, and leadership.
 - A veteran serves as role model for civic engagement and can encourage others to step up and contribute.

A NOTE TO VETERANS

A veteran might have joined the military searching for something different than their current life, wanted to experience new challenges, or even serve their country from a greater perspective of protecting freedom. As a veteran prepares to transition from the military to a potential role in local government, one must remember that serving in the military has given the veteran exceptional skills and a unique perspective that is needed in the civilian world. The journey ahead is not just a change of employment but an exciting opportunity to continue serving the community in new and impactful ways.

Expand Horizons

At times, a veteran is told what job he or she can do because it is all based on the needs of the military first and foremost. Going into the civilian world, a veteran has the freedom to explore a variety of paths. One profession that many people tend to overlook or not fully understand is local government, which can benefit from a veteran's experience, education, and leadership skills.

Stay Open and Adaptable

Transitioning to a civilian career is a significant change, and it might take time to find the right or most fulfilling job. A veteran must keep an open mind and be patient with the process. It is common to start in a position that might feel like a step back. See it as a strategic move. There is always a learning experience, no matter what the position, that will pave the way to a more challenging and senior level position.

Prepare and Plan

The transition process for a veteran involves more than just finding a new job. It is about learning new skills for the job search as well as learning about oneself. A veteran must start planning early. It is about using the time to go to school, pursue additional training, and obtain necessary certifications. Being proactive about the transition process will make things easier and set one up for success.

Sharing the Story

Military service is a powerful narrative of commitment, resilience, and skill. When applying for jobs, a veteran should confidently share how their military experiences prepared them to serve in local government. During the interview process, a veteran will most likely highlight specific instances where training and experiences made a difference. One critical thing a veteran is told is to remember to speak more "civilian than military." That will take practice.

Concluding Thoughts

Preparation is a priority! A veteran is told that the transition process begins 18-24 months before their separation or retirement date. Even if one is not 100% sure of leaving the military, the research is not a waste of time. Another aspect of the transition is that a veteran should start reaching out to their network, because information gathering will help make the best decision. The transition from military to civilian life is a journey of growth and opportunity that can also be stressful. A veteran is an asset to many levels in local government, and should

believe that their strength, leadership, and dedication make a difference in public service.

EXPERIENCE LEVELS OF A VETERAN

Early Career Veteran

After serving up to six years in the military, a veteran's transition into local government brings a strong sense of duty along with leadership and problem-solving skills. Having learned new skills and experienced the "real world" or "first adult job," a veteran at this level should be able to work under pressure, be open to learning, and be capable of taking direction. Their military background instills discipline, accountability, and a mission-driven mindset, making them trusted staff members in the community. This group of veterans are the future of local government, and it is incumbent upon current local government leaders to recognize this as well as know that this pool of candidates is a step ahead based on their military experience.

The Three Stages of a Mid-Career Veteran

With six to ten years of military service, a veteran steps into local government with a wealth of leadership experience, strategic thinking, and a deep commitment to public service. Having managed teams, coordinated complex operations, and made critical decisions under pressure, they bring discipline and a solution-oriented approach to governance. Their ability to assess challenges, allocate resources effectively, and work collaboratively enables them to address key community concerns with confidence. At this stage, the veteran feels more assured in their job skills but is still refining their leadership abilities. They are focused on career progression—preparing for promotion exams, excelling in performance evaluations, and completing professional military education. While they may have begun mentoring junior members, they are still developing higher-level leadership competencies. This is often a pivotal time when veterans consider whether to commit to a full military career or transition into civilian life. Many

explore specialized roles such as recruiter, drill instructor, special operations, or instructor duty to further sharpen their expertise and broaden their experience.

By the time a veteran reaches 10 to 15 years of service, they are typically thinking of completing a 20-year career. At this point, they focus on developing strategic leadership skills to effectively lead units, teams, and departments. Still actively involved in operations, they are also beginning to influence policy and training within their organization. Many prepare for higher command roles or special staff assignments, positioning themselves for broader responsibilities and more impactful contributions. Simultaneously, thoughts of life after the military begin to emerge, prompting early retirement planning and exploration of post-service opportunities.

With 15 to 20 years of military service, a veteran could enter local government as a highly experienced leader with a proven track record in strategic decision-making, crisis management, and public service. At this advanced stage, their mindset shifts toward retirement planning, financial stability, and transitioning to a civilian career. They are increasingly focused on their legacy—how they will be remembered by peers, subordinates, and the community. Their roles often involve managing large teams, leading organizations, or overseeing high-level strategic operations. A veteran at this stage is evaluating career moves, considering whether to aim for higher command positions such as E-9 or O-6 and above, retire, or shift into a civilian role. They are also deeply engaged in mentorship, policy making, and advising senior leadership, leaving a lasting impact on both the military and their future civilian endeavors.

Senior Veterans

With over 20 years of military service, a veteran could transition into local government with an unparalleled depth of leadership, strategic vision, and problem-solving expertise. Decades of experience in high-stakes environments have sharpened their ability to manage complex operations, allocate resources effectively, and lead diverse teams toward a common goal. Their

Understanding the importance of collaboration, a veteran has the skills to work across political lines to find practical, results-oriented solutions that benefit the entire community.

extensive background in mentoring, logistics, crisis management, and organizational leadership makes them exceptionally equipped to tackle critical community challenges, as well as grow staff. This ranges from infrastructure development and public safety to economic revitalization and disaster preparedness. Having dedicated much of their life to service, a veteran brings a mission-first mindset to governance, ensuring policies and decisions are driven by integrity, accountability, and the well-being of their constituents.

A veteran's leadership extends beyond decision-making as they mentor emerging leaders, foster public engagement, and advocate for initiatives such as veteran services, first responders, and underserved populations. Understanding the importance of collaboration, a veteran has the skills to work across political lines to find practical, results-oriented solutions that benefit the entire community. Their commitment to service did not end with their military career, and it could be honed into a new mission: ensuring local government thrives through dedicated, experienced, and principled leadership.

Setting a Pace

The transition from military to civilian life is both a shared and uniquely personal journey for each veteran. While certain aspects of the experience are common, the specific path and challenges can vary significantly. One frequent point of frustration is adapting to the pace of operations within local government. In contrast to the military's often fast-moving, mission-driven environment, local government functions within a democratic framework that naturally involves layers of bureaucracy and political considerations. The resulting differences in speed and decision-making processes can be challenging at first, but

understanding this context is key to navigating and succeeding in a public sector role.

To better understand the often slow or seemingly unpredictable pace of local government, it is advisable for a veteran to become familiar with the organization's structure and operations. Gaining insight into how a local government functions, including the roles and authorities of elected bodies such as the council, commissioners, or board, as well as executive leadership like the mayor, chief administrative officer (CAO), and assistant chief administrative officer (ACAO), can provide valuable context. Additionally, understanding how various departments interact within the organization will help clarify decision-making processes, reporting relationships, and the rationale behind the timing and execution of initiatives.

A veteran is encouraged to explore these dynamics by reviewing their local government's organizational chart; attending public meetings, such as city council or board sessions; reading the city or county charter; and connecting with employees. These steps can offer firsthand knowledge of how governance operates and where key decisions are made.

The compensation received by veterans during their military service, when measured against the extensive hours worked, is comparatively modest on an hourly basis. As veterans transition to civilian employment, many seek opportunities that offer higher wages or the stability of a consistent paycheck. While local governments may not always be able to compete directly with private sector salaries, they frequently provide comprehensive benefits packages and dependable, steady employment that can be highly attractive. Additionally, for those veterans who want to continue their service in the National Guard or Reserve, local government employers are typically supportive and accommodating of such commitments, recognizing the value of ongoing military service.

SECTION 2

UNDERSTANDING LOCAL GOVERNMENT POSITIONS

Understanding local government positions is essential for grasping how cities, counties, and towns operate effectively to serve their residents. Local government structures typically include both elected officials, such as mayors, councilmembers, and commissioners, and appointed professionals like city managers, department heads, and administrative staff. Each role is designed to balance the size and scope of government operations ensuring the efficient management and delivery of public services, ranging from police and fire protection to sanitation and public works. The division of responsibilities among these positions creates a system of checks and balances that aims to be responsive to the community's needs while adhering to legal and budgetary constraints.

Elected officials in local government are supposed to represent the voice of the people and are responsible for setting broad policy goals, passing ordinances, and approving budgets. Their decisions directly impact such areas as local taxation, zoning, and community development initiatives. Because they are accountable to voters, these officials often focus on addressing constituent concerns, building public trust, and shaping the long-term vision of the community. Their role is pivotal in ensuring that the government reflects the values and priorities of its citizens.

On the other hand, appointed officials and professional staff bring expertise and continuity to local government operations. A CAO, for example, oversees daily administration, implements policies set by elected bodies, and coordinates among various departments. Other specialized positions, such as finance director, public works supervisor, and human resources manager, ensure that technical and operational functions run efficiently. This professional layer is crucial for translating policy decisions into actionable programs and for

maintaining consistent service delivery, even as elected leadership changes over time or are only part time.

As a veteran exploring career opportunities in the public sector, it is important not to limit the search solely to city and county governments. There are many special-purpose organizations, such as port authorities, airport authorities, transit agencies, and utility districts, that also offer positions well-suited to a veteran's skills and experience. These agencies are responsible for managing vital public services and infrastructure, and they need professionals in areas like operations, security, engineering, administration, and finance—roles that are often very similar to those found in traditional local government settings. Broadening the search to include these entities can open additional pathways to meaningful and stable employment.

For instance, port authorities and airport agencies often value the leadership, discipline, and logistics experience that a veteran brings, offering positions in operations management, security coordination, and emergency response. Likewise, utility districts and transit agencies regularly hire for technical and supervisory roles where problem-solving abilities and commitment to mission success will be strong assets. By considering these special districts and authorities, a veteran not only increases their chances of finding a job that aligns with their skills, but also is a bridge to that sense of mission and public service.

POSITIONS IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Local government offers a wide variety of jobs that support the essential services communities rely on every day. Public safety roles, such as police officers, firefighters, emergency medical

A veteran accustomed to leadership roles and mission-focused operations often excels at all position levels in local government.

technicians, and code enforcement officers, are among the most visible positions, and a veteran might find these fields to be a natural fit due to their prior service, discipline, and leadership experience. In addition, public works and infrastructure jobs, including equipment operators, utility workers, engineers, and maintenance staff, are ideal for a veteran with mechanical skills and logistics backgrounds. These jobs play a crucial role in keeping roads, water systems, and public buildings functioning properly. These frontline and technical roles ensure the safety, cleanliness, and efficiency of the community.

Beyond public safety and public works, local governments also employ professionals in administrative and managerial roles that keep operations running smoothly behind the scenes. Veterans with experience in planning, personnel management, and finance often transition well into positions in human resources, procurement, budget analysis, and risk management. Planners and zoning officials help guide growth and development, ideal for those with strategic thinking skills. Parks and recreation staff manage community programs and maintain green spaces, which can appeal to veterans interested in community engagement. Library staff, public health workers, and social service coordinators serve important functions by enhancing the quality of life for residents through education, health initiatives, and support services.

Leadership and policy-making positions round out the structure of local government. Elected officials like mayors, city councilmembers, and county commissioners set the direction and priorities for the community, while appointed executives such as city managers and department heads oversee the implementation of policies

and the day-to-day management of staff and resources. A veteran accustomed to leadership roles and mission-focused operations often excels at all position levels in local government.

In addition to these core roles, local governments also offer specialized positions that require technical expertise and professional certifications. Environmental specialists, for example, help ensure compliance with regulations and promote sustainability. These roles are well-suited for a veteran with a background in environmental sciences or engineering. Building inspectors, permit technicians, and safety officers are a strong match for a veteran experienced in construction, facilities management, or military engineering. Geographic Information Systems (GIS) analysts and IT specialists are increasingly in demand, making these positions excellent opportunities for a veteran with technical or intelligence backgrounds looking to apply their skills in mapping, data analysis, and technology integration.

Another important area within local government is community engagement and communications. Positions such as public information officers, community outreach coordinators, and emergency management specialists are particularly good fits for a veteran who has experience in public affairs and crisis communication. Elections staff play a vital role in upholding democracy, and their structured, detail-oriented work can appeal to a veteran accustomed to accountability and procedure. Economic development professionals, who help create jobs and grow the local economy, also benefit from a veteran's strategic planning and networking skills. All these roles contribute to building a stronger, more resilient community, which allows a veteran to continue their service in a new, impactful way.

SECTION 3

TRANSLATION OF SKILLS

A veteran transitioning to civilian life often brings a wealth of valuable skills that translate effectively into local government roles. Their experience in leadership, discipline, teamwork, and problem-solving provides a strong foundation for public service careers. Additionally, a veteran is accustomed to working under pressure, following procedures, and adapting to rapidly changing situations. These skills are highly relevant in government positions such as public safety, emergency management, and public works. Understanding how these competencies align with local government needs is the first step in making a successful career transition.

Leadership is one of the most transferable skills a veteran has to offer. Whether leading a unit, managing logistics, or coordinating large-scale operations, a veteran has practical experience in directing teams and ensuring mission success. These abilities translate well into supervisory and managerial roles in local government, including positions such as department heads, operations managers, and project supervisors. The structured and mission-driven environment of local government is often familiar to a veteran, allowing them to step into leadership positions with confidence and competence.

Additionally, a veteran brings solid technical skills that are in high demand across many local government departments. Those with backgrounds in vehicle maintenance, construction, engineering, and communications can find opportunities in public works, utilities, and transportation agencies. A veteran who worked in intelligence, cybersecurity, or information technology can transition into roles in IT services, GIS mapping, and data analysis for cities and counties. Their ability to operate and maintain complex systems makes them an ideal candidate for positions that require precision, safety awareness, and accountability.

Communication and interpersonal skills developed during military service also have great value in

local government settings. A veteran often has experience working with diverse teams, managing conflicts, and interacting with the public or partner organizations. These skills are particularly useful in roles involving community outreach, public relations, code enforcement, and human resources. Furthermore, many local governments recognize and respect military service, making them supportive workplaces for veterans, including those who continue to serve in the National Guard or Reserve.

Veterans are well-suited for local government roles because they have a deep commitment to public service. Transitioning into a civilian role within local government allows them to continue contributing to their community in a meaningful way. Many find fulfillment in knowing their work, whether maintaining safe streets, ensuring clean water, or supporting community programs, has a direct impact on residents' quality of life. By effectively translating their military experience into civilian terms and targeting positions that match their skills, veterans can build rewarding careers while continuing their tradition of service.

TWO SIDES OF THE SAME COIN

In the military, the skills of enlisted members and officers differ significantly, reflecting their distinct roles. Enlisted personnel are the backbone of the force, specializing in technical and tactical skills. They are hands-on experts who operate equipment, perform maintenance, and execute missions. Their training focuses on mastering specific trades, such as mechanics, information technology, aviation maintenance, and infantry tactics. As they advance in rank, enlisted members also take on leadership responsibilities, managing small teams and training junior personnel. However, their primary expertise remains in technical and operational execution, with skills that include aircraft maintenance, vehicle operation, weapons handling, logistics, and utilities.

Officers, on the other hand, are trained for leadership, management, and high-level decision-making. Their primary role is to plan missions, lead personnel, and manage resources such as equipment, budgets, and time. Officers command enlisted members and other officers of lower rank, oversee operations, and often serve as the face of their units in broader military and civilian settings. They typically hold college degrees and receive specialized training in leadership, strategy, and critical thinking. Their skills include operational planning, team management, budgeting, logistics coordination, strategic communications, and ensuring policy and legal compliance. In short, while enlisted members focus on hands-on expertise and tactical execution, officers concentrate on leadership, strategy, and resource management. Both career tracks require discipline and leadership, but they emphasize very different professional skills.

TRANSLATING SKILLS

Due to the highly specialized vocabulary and extensive use of acronyms within the military, it can be challenging to identify the equivalent terminology used in civilian professions. To assist with this translation, veterans are encouraged to utilize the transition assistance services available at their installations, as well as the wide range of business websites, AI-driven platforms, and community resources created specifically to support veterans. Successfully transitioning from military service to the civilian workforce requires a veteran to effectively communicate their skills and experiences in a manner that is clear and relatable to human resources personnel and hiring authorities, particularly in local government. They may not be familiar with military terminology or roles.

Before a veteran can effectively translate their military background, it is essential to engage in thoughtful self-reflection. It is not as easy as it sounds and this process involves identifying key skills, leadership experiences, and technical proficiencies gained during service. Beyond listing day-to-day responsibilities, a veteran should consider how they accomplished their tasks, what specific competencies they employed, and how

Effectively translating military experience into civilian terms enables a potential employer in local government to clearly understand how a veteran's background aligns with the requirements of the position.

their contributions supported overall mission success. This foundational step is critical for clearly and confidently communicating one's value to a civilian employer, particularly those in local government who may lack familiarity with military roles and terminology.

Military roles frequently involve responsibilities and skill sets that are highly applicable to civilian careers. However, the language and context in which these skills are presented can vary greatly between military and civilian sectors. Effectively translating military experience into civilian terms enables a potential employer in local government to clearly understand how a veteran's background aligns with the requirements of the position. This translation is essential in demonstrating the relevance and value of a veteran's experience to hiring managers and decision-makers.

By effectively integrating specialized training with notable achievements, a veteran can demonstrate both technical proficiency and leadership capability, presenting a well-rounded professional profile. This comprehensive approach ensures that a veteran's military background is positioned to highlight its direct relevance and value within a local government position.

SECTION 4

BUILDING YOUR RESUME

When building a resume for a job in local government, a veteran should start by clearly translating their military experience into civilian terms. Avoid jargon, acronyms, and rank-specific language that hiring managers outside the military might not understand. Instead, focus on the core skills behind your service—leadership, teamwork, problem-solving, and discipline. For example, instead of listing your rank and unit, you might say “Supervised a team of 20 personnel in logistics operations” or “Managed maintenance and readiness for a fleet of vehicles valued at \$2 million.” This helps local government employers see your capabilities in a context they recognize.

Next, emphasize skills and experiences that align with the public service mission of local government. Veterans often bring strong experience in areas like public safety, emergency management, logistics, facilities maintenance, IT systems, and personnel administration, all of which are highly relevant to local government. If a veteran has experience working on community engagement, cross-agency coordination, or training programs while in the military, highlight those as well. Tailor each resume to match the job description, pulling out the most relevant aspects of service that demonstrate how specific challenges the department is facing were resolved.

It is also important to showcase leadership and accountability. Local government values people who can be trusted to manage public resources and serve the community with integrity. Highlight moments of leading teams, managing budgets, enforcing policies, or ensuring compliance with regulations. These experiences map closely to responsibilities in government roles. It is always good to use metrics and specifics whenever possible, such as “Reduced supply chain delays by 15%” or “Trained 50 new personnel in safety protocols.” Numbers help ground accomplishments and make the impact clear.

Finally, a veteran should remember to include any formal education and certifications. It will

Five Solid Tips for Creating a Strong, Effective Resume

- 1. Tailor It to the Job.** Customize your resume for each position by emphasizing the skills and experiences that match the job description. Use keywords from the posting to get past automated screening tools (ATS).
- 2. Keep It Clear and Concise.** Stick to one page (or a maximum of two if you have extensive experience). Use bullet points, consistent formatting, and avoid large blocks of text. Prioritize readability.
- 3. Focus on Achievements, Not Duties.** Instead of listing responsibilities, highlight specific accomplishments using numbers or measurable results (i.e., “Reduced processing time by 30%” or “Managed a budget of \$500K”).
- 4. Use Professional, Simple Design.** Avoid flashy fonts, colors, or graphics (unless it is for a design field). A clean, organized layout makes a better impression and is ATS friendly.
- 5. Proofread Carefully.** Typos and grammar mistakes can be costly. Review the resume multiple times and, if possible, have someone else proofread it, too.

Side note: ICMA has the CoachConnect program, where veterans have signed up to be a mentor or assist another veteran in joining local government.

help set the resume apart from other candidates. Many government jobs value degrees in public administration, criminal justice, or business, as well as certifications in project management (PMP), emergency management through FEMA, or information security. Many local governments give veteran preference points in the hiring process.

LAUNCHING THE SEARCH

As a veteran considers separation or retirement from military service, there are several proactive steps that can help ease the transition to civilian life. A veteran must attend the transition assistance class at their installation. There are many resources available to a veteran but that is also the challenge. There are so many it becomes confusing or overwhelming. In addition, the veteran is encouraged to engage in job-seeking strategies commonly used by civilians. These include conducting online job searches; networking with civilian acquaintances, especially those who have previously transitioned out of the military; utilizing services offered by local workforce centers; and participating in local job fairs.

A veteran tends to gravitate toward serving their community after military service, which is why a career in local government often holds strong appeal. To explore opportunities, a veteran is encouraged to regularly review job postings on their local government's website, as well as the job board maintained by ICMA and those of relevant state-level associations.

SEALING THE DEAL

In a local government job interview, a veteran should start by confidently translating military experience into civilian terms, just as was done on the resume. The veteran should discuss their experience and how it directly applies to the job, whether that's managing logistics, handling emergencies, or coordinating diverse teams. This helps the HR representative or hiring manager easily connect the veteran's military service with the responsibilities of the government role.

A veteran must be ready to discuss why they are interested in serving the community in this new capacity and how military values—duty, integrity, and service—align with the government or agency's goals.

Another important technique for a veteran to share, in a subtle way, is the research done on the local government. A veteran must be ready to discuss why they are interested in serving the community in this new capacity and how military values—duty, integrity, and service—align with the government or agency's goals. It is significant for a veteran to share specific stories that demonstrate their adaptability, accountability, and commitment to the public good.

Finally, a veteran could handle behavioral questions using the STAR (situation, task, action, result) method, which is familiar to many veterans from military evaluations and makes answers structured and clear. When asked about challenges, a veteran should focus on how problems were resolved and how the team was supported, rather than dwelling on difficulties. A veteran needs to show their readiness to transition by expressing enthusiasm about learning the specific systems and processes of local government, while also emphasizing their core strengths—leadership under pressure, discipline, and mission focus. Closing with gratitude and a reaffirmation of the desire to contribute to the community leaves a strong, positive impression.

Here are three examples of using the STAR method:

1. Tell me about a time you led a team to accomplish a difficult task.

Situation: While deployed, our unit faced critical supply shortages that threatened our ability to complete missions.

Task: As the logistics supervisor, I was responsible for finding a solution to resupply more than 200 personnel in a remote location.

Action: I coordinated with multiple units, rerouted available transportation assets, and implemented a new inventory tracking system to prevent future shortages.

Result: Within two weeks, we restored full supply levels and reduced future resupply time by 30%, directly improving mission readiness. This experience taught me the importance of cross-agency coordination, which I believe applies directly to managing resources in local government.

2. Describe a time you had to solve a problem under pressure.

Situation: During a severe training accident, several personnel were injured, and emergency evacuation was delayed.

Task: As the on-scene leader, I needed to ensure their safety and coordinate an effective response.

Action: I quickly assessed the injuries, assigned roles to my team for first aid and crowd control, and established direct communication with medevac units while keeping command informed.

Result: All injured personnel were evacuated within the golden hour, and our after-action

review led to updated emergency protocols across the base. My ability to stay calm and lead under pressure is something I'm eager to bring to emergency management roles in local government.

3. Give an example of when you improved a process or made operations more efficient.

Situation: In my last assignment, I noticed that our vehicle maintenance scheduling was inconsistent, leading to frequent mission delays.

Task: My goal was to streamline the maintenance process to improve operational readiness.

Action: I designed and implemented a new digital scheduling system, trained the team on its use, and worked with higher headquarters to standardize the process.

Result: Downtime dropped by 40%, and our unit was recognized for best maintenance readiness in the division. I believe this experience in process improvement would directly help me contribute to efficient operations in the city department.

SECTION 5

FOCUSING ON PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

As a veteran works to translate their military experience into civilian terms, it is important to look for ways to align them with local government needs. The one consistent theme from other veterans in local government is that a veteran often brings many leadership skills that resonate with public sector hiring managers. For example, instead of saying “platoon leader,” say “team leader responsible for operations, personnel management, and resource allocation.” Other areas include compliance, logistics, public safety, and budget administration.

No matter where a veteran is in their career, education is important while serving in the military but especially for when they go into the civilian world. Degrees important in the public sector include, but are not limited to, public administration, criminal justice, emergency management, and human resources. Additionally, targeted certifications like Certified Public Manager (CPM) and Project Management Professional (PMP), or attending courses and reading publications produced by ICMA can boost the resume (visit learninglab.icma.org). Many veterans qualify for educational benefits, so leveraging programs like the GI Bill for this purpose is a smart move.

To gain familiarity with local government structure and processes, as stated before, a veteran needs to study the way the target city, county, or district operates. This includes how councils, boards, and departments interact. Think about attending public meetings, reading municipal codes, or following local policy changes to get some insight. This shows potential employers that a veteran is serious about transitioning to a public service role and understands the unique environment of local government. Plus, not many people in general do this level of preparedness, so a veteran will definitely stand out.

Developing skills in community engagement and public communication is the same in many ways but also different than what is done in the military.

Developing skills in community engagement and public communication is the same in many ways but also different than what is done in the military. Unlike the military, where operations may be internal, local government roles often require direct interaction with citizens. There are many volunteer opportunities in local government like boards or commissions, which place staff in direct connection with citizens. Demonstrating experience or readiness to work with the public is key in most municipal jobs.

A veteran should build a professional network within local government circles. As stated before, there are many willing veterans in local government who will “bend over backwards” to assist another veteran. There are local government associations (i.e., Georgia City County Management Association, Texas City Management Association, and Florida City and County Management Association) that list job openings, as do many local government websites. Networking can provide inside knowledge on job openings and expectations, and referrals can be especially helpful in government hiring processes, which can be competitive and bureaucratic.

Local government is evolving, with increasing emphasis on technology and efficiency. A veteran should take advantage of workshops, webinars, and online training platforms to stay current. Emphasize on the resume and in interviews a willingness to be flexible and to grow in the public service sector.



How Visible Is Too Visible

A veteran's social media presence can absolutely play a role in professional development, especially when aiming for a local government job. Here is how to think about it:

- 1. Maintain a Professional Image.** Hiring managers in local government, and in the private sector as well, often check online profiles. A veteran needs to clean up their public social media to ensure it reflects professionalism and aligns with the values of public service—commitment to impartiality, professional integrity, and clear boundaries. Avoid posting anything controversial or partisan.
- 2. Use LinkedIn Strategically.** LinkedIn is a powerful tool for building a professional brand. A veteran can showcase their background, highlight transferable skills, connect with local government professionals, and follow city or county departments to stay informed about job postings and trends.
- 3. Engage with Public Sector Communities.** Platforms like Twitter (now X), LinkedIn, or even Facebook have groups and pages for local government professionals, veterans in public service, and municipal associations. Following and engaging with these can help a veteran learn, network, and stay on top of developments in the career field.
- 4. Share Thoughtful Content.** Some good topics to post about include leadership, public administration, veteran transitions, or community engagement. This positions a veteran as someone serious about public service and personal growth, which can make a good impression on potential employers.
- 5. Avoid Overexposure.** While being active is good, be cautious about oversharing personal details or strong opinions. In local government, reputations are built on trust, discretion, and balance. It is better to err on the side of being seen as thoughtful and measured.

SECTION 6

RELATIONSHIP OF EVALUATION TO COMPENSATION

PAY IT FORWARD

As veterans, we live by the principle of never leaving anyone behind. That commitment does not end when we hang up the uniform. It carries into how we serve our communities today. Local government needs the skills, discipline, and heart that veterans bring, but too many struggle to find their place after service. We have a duty to change that. We can open doors, mentor those making the transition, and build pathways that bring more veterans into public service. By lifting our fellow veterans, we strengthen our workforce, our communities, and our shared mission to serve. Let us lead the way and make sure no veteran is left behind in the journey to meaningful, rewarding work.

Once a veteran secures the right government position, they can help a fellow veteran navigate their own transition. What helps on both sides is getting involved with a professional organization like a local government state association, ICMA's Veterans Committee, and ICMA's CoachConnect. Staying committed to serving as both a mentor and a friend, recognizing that every veteran faces this transition and will seek support.

1. **Mentor Fellow Veterans Entering Public Service.** Offer guidance to veterans applying for jobs in local government and help them translate military skills into civilian job qualifications, prepare for interviews, and navigate the hiring process.
2. **Advocate for Veteran Hiring Initiatives.** Work within your government entity to support or propose policies that encourage veteran recruitment, such as veteran preference points, targeted outreach, or internship programs for transitioning service members.
3. **Serve as a Liaison with Veteran Communities.** Use your role to bridge local government

services with the veteran communities, whether that is through connecting with nonprofits that cater to veterans as they offer job seeking assistance, organizing job fairs, or supporting in the VA benefits process.

4. **Lead by Example in Public Service.** Demonstrate the value a veteran brings to local government through a strong work ethic, leadership, and commitment to serving the community. A veteran in local government should lead by example to inspire both veterans and non-veterans alike.

SUPPORTIVE STORIES

While each veteran's transition experience, from finding the right job to adjusting to a new professional environment, is unique, there are clear similarities in our stories that can serve as inspiration for others. The paths we take may differ in detail, but the core themes of resilience, adaptability, and a desire to continue serving our communities remain consistent. By sharing these experiences, we not only highlight the challenges but also the triumphs that come with starting a new chapter after military service. Hearing about how others navigated their way forward can provide reassurance and practical insights for those just beginning their own transition.

There is always a gold nugget of wisdom to be found when we listen closely to the journeys of those who have gone before us. Whether it is a strategy for translating military skills into civilian roles, advice on networking, or simply the encouragement that success is possible, these shared experiences become valuable tools for others. Each story contributes to a larger tapestry of veteran success, reminding us that while the road may be challenging, it is also filled with opportunity and growth. By learning from one another, we strengthen not only ourselves but

also the broader community of veterans making their mark in local government and beyond.

We asked some veterans about their transition to local government, and share our questions and their responses here:

PETER TROEDSSON
City Manager
Albany, Oregon

1. What made you decide to look for a job in local government?

As I approached the 30-year mark, I was serving at the Pentagon as the Coast Guard's liaison to the Office of the Secretary of Defense. Facing military retirement, and not ready to end my career of service, I began to consider how I could make use of my education and experience. I did not want to join the federal work force or a defense contractor, but I recalled how I had really enjoyed working with teams of motivated and hardworking people on complex missions and projects. I began to look at opportunities in municipal government.

With my background as a helicopter pilot, commander of a Coast Guard air station, group commander of operational and logistical units, and subsequently as chief of staff of the Coast Guard's Eighth District, I used each of those job opportunities to grow my leadership skills. I was exposed to a wide variety of management issues, and an appreciation for public service at all levels. What it did not provide was experience in anything close to the council-manager relationship, arguably the single most important role of a city manager. This experience just had to be gained "on the job."

2. Did you have trouble translating your military skills?

The challenges of transition to management in the civilian world were many. Most of them were relatively easy to handle, especially if one had taken the time to prepare and think about those challenges ahead of time. Exchanging the uniform for civilian clothes can be a significant emotional event—even beyond the need to pick out different professional clothes every day. The Coast Guard

uniform had been my identity for 30 years. But nothing lasts forever, and I prepped myself to look forward to the next phase, which was to continue leading organizations, and to continue my quest to become a better leader. The fundamentals of good leadership transcend the differences between the military and civilian world, and it was interesting (and even fun) to apply leadership lessons learned in my Coast Guard career to my city government responsibilities...and to continue to learn new lessons that could only be learned in local government. One example that is not necessarily applicable around the country is the issue of dealing with labor unions. In a military service, we almost take it for granted that individual members all pull toward common goals, an assumption that cannot be made in a labor union environment. The challenge: how to make the best of this situation.

3. What was your biggest challenge being in the civilian world?

A transitioning service member benefits from humility and willingness, and even a desire to continue to learn. The seniority and credibility gained during years of service does not accompany you into civilian life. If you accept this with a positive attitude and a commitment to work just as hard as you did in your service, I am convinced that you will be successful in your second career.

RALPH "BO" CLAYTON
Assistant City Manager
Newport News, Virginia

1. What made you decide to look for a job in local government?

I have been very open about this. I would never have even considered a job in local government had my last job not been as a garrison commander. That is telling for me as I reflect, because so many of our veterans have the necessary skill sets to enter local government and be a true asset. However, because they lack any experience in their general military missions, they do not even consider it many times because of no exposure to it, unless they have contacts in local government. I believe that is a big hurdle for local government recruitment.

2. Did you have trouble translating your military skills?

Yes. I had to sell myself from the standpoint of being comfortable leading in ambiguous environments and an ability to adapt as well as read the atmospherics of situations (politics, citizen demands, etc.). In fact, a colleague recently interviewed a veteran (lieutenant colonel) about a job, and he asked me to review her resume, and decipher it for him. He tried to understand what the veteran actually did and how it may apply to the current job. The veteran had been a Battalion XO (like a chief operating officer in an organization of 3,000-5,000 people), and Brigade S3 (operations officer tasked to plan, coordinate, and oversee all training and operations), as well as working as a project manager for force structure/organizational design in the Research and Development directorate at US Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC). This organization is the Army's "think tank + school system" all rolled into one. It ensures that soldiers not only learn basic training but also keep up with new tactics, technology, and leadership skills throughout their careers. This veteran also worked U.S. Army Futures Command, which is an organization tasked with transforming the Army to ensure future readiness by developing and integrating new technologies, concepts, and capabilities. She did not do a good job of translating her capabilities.

I happened to be re-reading *Speed of Trust* by Stephen Covey, and was reminded that in local government, too many times I see my directors and others looking for the perfect applicant, the one with all the exact credentials and capabilities for the job, when what they really need is a leader who has the mental capacity to learn new applications and apply lived experiences to the current problem set or issue, which they may not get with the 'technical expert' they seek. I put it like this: in the military I did not necessarily need a "combat leader"; what I needed was a "leader with combat experience."

3. What was your biggest challenge in the civilian world?

Understanding how civilians think and speak and chain of command issues especially as they relate to rank, change in pay, etc. I do think I have had an issue with chain of command in terms of seeing directors delay on executing the city manager's

guidance; similar to what you may have seen from federal civilians in a military command where they tried to "wait the commander out." I think the most challenging issue for me has been the political games and influence and their impact on a decision. What I mean is best said by one of my former Army bosses when I was a garrison commander: "Facts and logic have no bearing in an emotional issue." That rings true in local government. We can have the best laid out city strategy, planning, and engineering design with months/years of work that can be upended by a citizen telling a personal story during a council meeting...and we have to adjust.

CASEY LUCIUS
Assistant City Manager
Marco Island, Florida

1. What made you decide to look for a job in local government?

I started by running for city council as a concerned citizen and new homeowner after seven years in the Navy. I spent four years on the city council in Pacific Grove, California, and I realized that I like "operations" more than "policy." I wanted to be the one doing the work rather than making the decisions. About a year after being on city council I started consulting with local governments. I then moved to Florida where I decided to apply for a job in local government and it turned out to be the perfect fit.

2. Did you have trouble translating your military skills?

It is always difficult to translate military skills to non-military organizations, but the keys are 1) people, 2) communication, and 3) problem solving. In the military, we quickly learn how to work with diverse groups of people, the importance of clear and concise communication, and how to propose and implement solutions. These are skills that apply in any organization, so instead of getting stuck in acronym soup, I try to focus on these big three.

3. What was your biggest challenge being in the civilian world?

I appreciate a system where expectations are clear and personnel are empowered to execute based on those expectations. In the civilian world, there is

sometimes a lack of discipline in maintaining high standards, and a lack of confidence in carrying out what's required. I work through this by setting expectations for others and I repeat them often.

ALICK SMITH
Assistant Public Works Director
St. Marys, Georgia

1. What made you decide to look for a job in local government?

After retiring/transitioning out of the military, I wanted to continue to serve and positively impact whatever community we decided to call home. Serving in local government also provides me with opportunities to work in the field and interact with residents, businesses, and elected officials while seeing the tangible results of our efforts. Additionally, local government service is a calling as my father served as a councilman and the mayor for decades and my mother started as the town clerk and worked her way up and retired as the town's chief financial officer. And one of my brothers is the resiliency engineer for the city he where he lives.

2. Did you have trouble translating your military skills?

I was fortunate that my military and professional skills easily translated to work in the civilian sector. My leadership and teamwork skills have truly enhanced my worth to the local government where I work. I think my biggest challenge has been taking the time to understand how local government operates or is supposed to operate because the rules and regulations for just about everything are not the same at the local government level as compared to the federal government and Department of Defense. For this, the ICMA Veterans to Local Government Management Fellowship and the required ICMA courses on local government management were extremely helpful in bridging the gap in my knowledge.

3. What was your biggest challenge being in the civilian world?

Initially, it was having to decide what to wear every day. Now, it is incorporating and blending my military mindset, approach, and best practices into the local government's culture, approach to issues, and best practices. However, I am truly fortunate that my local government is very open to my thoughts, ideas, and recommendations to improve how we operate and interact with the public.



SECTION 7

RESOURCES

Breaking into Local Government (ICMA, January 2025). Along with stories that highlight the variety of ways that people transition into local government careers, it provides helpful resources for those interested in exploring the possibility of a local government career.

Managing Local Government: Cases in Effectiveness (2nd edition). This book reveals the real-life dilemmas experienced by local government professionals making important decisions on the job. Each case highlights one or more of the 18 management practice areas identified by ICMA as fundamental to effective local government management.

Managing Local Government Services (3rd edition). This comprehensive guide for meeting the current demands in today's world will help you provide the best possible service to your community. This book has been written for local government professionals who are responsible for the efficient, effective, and equitable administration of services to citizens.

ICMA Veterans Programs. The Veterans Advisory Committee was established in October 2020, and its mission is to enhance local government through the inclusion of veterans who share the passion, skills, and knowledge to succeed in public service. This committee's goals are to:

1. Bring awareness to ICMA members about the skills of veterans.
2. Raise visibility of a local government career path among military members.
3. Develop and strengthen relationships between the veteran community and local governments.

City-County Management Senior Fellowship Program. This is a tailorable program designed to enable senior leaders in the military to be assigned to a local government position that is similar to their military position to gain a better understanding of city/county management.

Public Management (PM) magazine. A monthly magazine, published by ICMA, featuring concise, timely articles on the profession of local government management.

ICMA Coaching Program. CoachConnect is ideal for anyone looking to enter the world of local government. This program offers personalized online mentoring sessions with experienced local government professionals.

ICMA Learning Lab. ICMA offers professional development programs that can be tailored to an individual's unique needs. Among the offerings are webinars and e-learning opportunities, workshops, leadership development programs, and a credentialing program.

State Associations. Most states have a professional association for local government managers and administrators that provide a local support network as well as offer educational and professional development opportunities.



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