

Leveraging Local Change: The States' Role

**An International City/County Management Association (ICMA)
White Paper**

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Leaders at the Core of Better Communities

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A Policy Issue White Paper

Prepared on behalf of the ICMA Governmental Affairs and Policy Committee

May 2014

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Executive Summary

This paper is derived from the twin assumptions that persisting economic hard times require local managers and governing boards to adopt budget balancing strategies that go well beyond the typical “business as usual” approaches used in past recessions, which in turn produce fundamental and lasting changes in local services and structures. A review of two recent studies examined how cities and counties have responded to severe economic challenges. The political costs involved in taking bold actions such as core service elimination, expanded interlocal and intersectoral partnerships, and jurisdictional realignment appear to have outweighed perceived rewards. However, the effects of looming state budget cuts and service shifts, reductions in federal discretionary grant-in-aid programs, and shrinking tax bases could cause managers and elected officials to revisit strategies relative to their service delivery priorities and intergovernmental relationships.

It is also possible that, as the “creators” of local governments, states will have an important catalytic role in efforts to realign local structures and services with the realities of economic conditions. At this point leaders in about one-fourth of the states have proposed “top-down” (mandate) or “bottom-up” (facilitative) approaches to leveraging local change. However, there is some evidence that state facilitative strategies could lead to greater collaboration in the delivery of local services.

Introduction

Since the arrival of the Great Recession, local governments have been confronted with increasingly difficult

policy and program choices in response to declining economies and growing budget constraints. The relatively easy decisions have been made and implemented: salary, travel, and training freezes; across-the-board budget cuts; temporary furloughs and layoffs; vacant position eliminations; fee increases; reserve fund withdrawals; maintenance and vehicle replacement deferrals; and minor service reductions such as library hours, police response times, and trash collection frequency.¹ The ‘low hanging fruit’ has been picked in many jurisdictions, and for some fiscally distressed local governments it is doubtful whether these steps will be sufficient to adjust to further economic decline.

According to the National League of Cities, local fiscal conditions are slowly improving in some parts of the country (Pagano and McFarland 2013). But managers and elected officials in other states are being challenged to move from a short-term “crisis mode” orientation to thinking the unthinkable about how to deliver services in the “New Normal” (Martin, Levey, and Cowley 2012). In these communities, revenues are not growing at past rates and may be declining, the scope and level of some services have been reduced, cutbacks have not been fully restored, and personnel and payrolls are remaining stable or shrinking. These downsized local governments will have a smaller functional footprint and need to rely on expanded partnerships with private and non-profit organizations to meet citizen needs (Miller 2010; Hilvert and Swindell 2013). According to former Indianapolis mayor Stephen Goldsmith, these conditions will produce “a fundamental, transformational realignment of the way that governments choose their tasks, define success, and generate the revenue to fund their work” (Goldsmith 2010).

As a result of the New Normal, it is assumed that policies, programs, and practices, which during better economic times would not have been on the agenda, will now be considered, and more collaborative strategies and adaptive realignments will be called upon. Among these are: expanded outsourcing to other local governments, non-profit organizations, and private firms; eliminating, sharing, or consolidating services; and merging local jurisdictions.

For decades, critics of local government structure and advocates for leaner public bureaucracies have called for these and other reforms. Scholars and practitioners recognized that few if any purely local problems existed and that most “wicked problems” ignored boundaries and required transcendent approaches. Nevertheless, jurisdiction has remained a powerful focus, especially for local officials (Frederickson 2005). There were few political rewards or financial “drivers” to create a sense of urgency for local professionals and elected officials to take action, until the Great Recession. Some public officials, like Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel, have observed that “You never want a serious crisis to go to waste,” and that New Normal conditions present an opportune time to launch strategies to reinvent local government structure, functions, and relationships (Greenblatt 2011, 26).

But have local governments seized the opportunity to make dramatic and lasting changes? Has the economic crisis disrupted the local status quo? Are bold and innovative partnerships between governmental and nongovernmental organizations being leveraged, especially in communities that have experienced New Normal conditions? Two recent studies suggest that in these respects the crisis may have been wasted.

Strategies for Coping with Crisis

To test the propositions about the effects of the New Normal, a list of possible coping strategies was developed by one of the authors in consultation with the International City/County Management Association (ICMA); Center for State and Local Government Excellence staff; and members of the ICMA Governmental Affairs and Policy Committee. The strategies were organized into four groups—personnel, core services and programs, service partnerships, and restructuring—with related initiatives (see Table 1). While the degree of difficulty varied, these actions typically went beyond traditional responses to severe economic downturn in terms of their impact on current operations, long-term effects, and political difficulty. ICMA’s daily *News Briefing* issues from April 15, 2009, to April 15, 2011, were

Table 1 Coping Strategies for Local Government

Strategy	Number of Stories
Personnel*	96
Benefit reductions	9
Furloughs	13
Layoffs	60
Pay cuts	13
Reduced work week	8
Retirement incentives	11
Core Services and Programs	85
Department and agency elimination/streamlining	30
Position elimination	26
Program elimination	4
Service reduction	25
Service Partnerships	41
For-profit organizations	12
Interagency	2
Interlocal	24
Non-profit organizations	0
Volunteers	3
Restructuring	24
Form of government change	9
Jurisdictional consolidation/merger/disincorporation	15

*Initiatives do not total 96 due to combinations of personnel-related initiatives

reviewed electronically using these key words to identify and classify communities that had considered these initiatives. A total of 246 stories were found. A follow-up review of 138 stories from April 15, 2011, to April 15, 2012, was conducted, which revealed very similar local responses to those reported in the Committee’s White Paper (Stenberg 2011).

A review of these stories revealed that the severity and impact of the New Normal varied widely from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. With few exceptions, the number and boldness of the community strategies reported in the *News Briefing* were associated with the fiscal health of their states. States experiencing considerable fiscal stress

in recent years—such as Arizona, California, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Michigan, Nevada, New Jersey, North Carolina, and Ohio—accounted for about two-thirds of the cases reported, with California communities being the most frequently covered.

Local Leveraging Initiatives

Of the four areas where coping strategies were examined—personnel, core services and programs, service partnerships, and restructuring—most of the proposals and actions involved local personnel. This focus is not surprising given the large proportion of local budgets accounted for by personnel salaries, benefits, and retirement contributions. Until the Great Recession, the size of the local workforce, payrolls, and health care and retirement contributions had been steadily rising. These cuts also could be made relatively quickly and produce sizable budgetary savings without generating many citizen complaints.

While recognizing that personnel reductions would be painful, questions about their long-term effects did not receive much attention. For example, how will the public react to closed facilities, longer lines, reduced hours of operation, and less customer service? Who will be required to participate in targeted pay cuts or furloughs (positions or salary ranges), and what are the social equity considerations? How will lost city and county managerial capacity be rebuilt in the New Normal environment? And how can the next generation of employees be attracted to local government careers if there are no entry-level jobs?

Closely related to the personnel initiatives were actions affecting local services and programs. In some communities these impacts were targeted on particular functions—like libraries, parks and recreation, and police, fire, and ambulance services—while in others they were more across-the-board. Budget constraints caused managers and elected officials to probe the structure and operations of local departments to find cost-savings by coordinating or combining related services and positions. A few communities considered merger of functionally related units, such as moving police, fire, and emergency medical services under a public safety umbrella or consolidating 911 dispatch services.

It could be expected that the financial pressures on local governments resulting from the Great Recession would significantly increase reliance on interlocal and intersectoral approaches to continue services and save money. An example could involve regional service delivery arrangements that would realize greater economies of scale, administrative efficiencies, and

social equity than conventional, uncoordinated, and limited previous approaches. Yet, elected officials and staff seemed to be reluctant to embark on collaborative partnerships with other jurisdictions and service providers, or to consolidate functions or governmental units with neighboring jurisdictions in order to maintain services or to reduce the size, scope, and costs of local government. More than half the stories involved interlocal agreements, sometimes among municipalities, but chiefly between counties and cities, and, in one case, a state agency was involved. These contracts are the oldest and most popular tools for intergovernmental cooperation at the local level, so this finding could be expected. Fire and police were the most commonly affected functions. Other contracted services were emergency dispatch and response, water, wastewater operation, health clinics, wireless communications, libraries, and transit.

Other alternative arrangements involved contracting out services to private firms, including garbage collection, recycling, fleet management, nursing homes, mailroom functions, water system, wastewater collection and treatment, street and sidewalk maintenance, and arts centers. Surprisingly, no stories of outsourcing to non-profit organizations were covered, and only three focused on the use of volunteers to provide former local services like parks (softball and soccer programs, maintenance), animal control, and museum and library staffing. And few innovative regional partnerships were under consideration.

As mentioned, the fewest number of proposals and actions were found in the restructuring category. Initiatives were undertaken in 16 states to make local governments more efficient, economical, and effective through city-county or city-city consolidation, downsizing the governing board, or changing the form of government. Of the total cases, 14 involved city-county consolidation and one involved city-city consolidation. Only one proposal was successful: the merger of Princeton Borough and Princeton Township, New Jersey, which was approved in November 2011 and promised annual savings of \$3.2 million (November 23, 2011). This was the fourth attempt at a unified Princeton since the 1950s. There were at least four facilitating factors. First, New Jersey's Local Option Municipal Consolidation Act provided flexibility to the participating jurisdictions by authorizing phased implementation, use of advisory districts to harmonize planning and zoning, and use of service and debt districts to align costs and benefits. Second, the Borough and Township governing boards requested

and received approval from the Department of Community Affairs' Local Finance Board to create a Joint Consolidation/Shared Services Study Commission to conduct a feasibility study. This study, "Municipal Services & Financial Overview: Borough and Township of Princeton," was released by the Center for Governmental Research in January 2011, and illustrates how university and nongovernmental organizations can help leverage change by providing objective data and impartial analysis. Third, the Borough and Township already shared several key services including schools, human services, public health, sewers, fire protection, recreation, and regional planning. Fourth, the communities were homogeneous in terms of the age, race, and income profiles of their residents. Basically, there was one community with two governments.

Jurisdictional consolidation remains an unpopular restructuring option even in hard economic times. Good government groups, the business community, and local officials can promise economies of scale, administrative efficiencies, greater accountability and less 'buck-passing,' taxpayer savings resulting from mergers, and can advocate for change in the status quo. However, research shows that, with few exceptions, existing consolidations have produced unimpressive results on the efficiency, economic development, and equity fronts (Jimenez and Hendrick 2010). Voters usually do not agree that "bigger is better." Distrust of distant government, parochialism, and racial, economic, and political polarization are among the factors that trump pro-merger campaign arguments.

This summary of coping strategies to deal with the Great Recession suggests that during the 2009–2012 time period city and county leaders were taking conventional and incremental actions, not bolder, more innovative and comprehensive approaches. Even communities in fiscally hard-pressed states focused on solutions that were relatively low risk, whether it was to avoid raising revenues or unwillingness to make fundamental changes in local functions, relationships, and structures. Some core services like police and fire witnessed personnel and service cutbacks, and other popular functions like libraries, parks, and recreation were pared. But these were modest, not dramatic, changes.

Change in Local Government: Dramatic and Permanent?

A second recent research project further probed the question of whether the fiscal pressures on local governments can produce more than incremental responses

(Ammons, Smith, and Stenberg 2012). The research tested the following hypothesis: "Local governments across the nation will respond to severe financial stress by imposing on themselves fundamental and permanent changes in their services and structures, or will have such changes forced on them by their states. These changes will be lasting, so as to ensure not only survival from the immediate crisis but also avoidance of distress from a similar cause in the future" (67S).

Information was collected on 39 of 75 local governments that had filed for Chapter Nine bankruptcy protection, had their general obligation bonds downgraded to junk bond status, or were forced to accept state-appointment of a financial control board (FCB) to manage local affairs during the 1971–2005 period. Officials from 18 of these local governments consented to telephone interviews, while relevant state documents were found for 21 others. The research objectives were to determine whether "major," "moderate," or "minimal" changes had been made in immediate response to the crisis, the permanency of the changes, and whether local services or governmental structure retained effects from the earlier crisis.²

Officials in almost all of these communities either reported only modest responses to their earlier crisis or had no knowledge of the residual effects. Nearly 60 percent of the interviewees said that their local government's structure was no different or had only minimal differences compared to their neighboring jurisdictions. The interviewees were unable to identify important structural or service array differences attributable to past crises. And only one city, Prichard, Alabama, attributed having lower service levels than its counterparts to its financial troubles, which led it to file twice for bankruptcy protection. There is little evidence from these cases to support an expectation that severe fiscal distress will produce dramatic and lasting change.

State Financial Controls

Fifteen states have passed legislation since the Great Depression of the 1930s establishing an agency or system for monitoring the fiscal health of their cities (Levine, Justice, and Scorsone 2013, 392–395). When fiscal conditions deteriorate, one of the "top-down" tools that states have used to leverage changes in how local governments conduct business is a financial control board (FCB) or emergency manager appointed by the governor pursuant to state legislation in response to deterioration in local fiscal health. State financial control boards often have been granted extraordinary

power to relieve fiscal distress—including authority to fire employees, impose hiring freezes, reduce salaries, restructure debt and retirement contracts, restrict borrowing, install budget control systems, raise taxes, sell assets, and reduce services. Because they are not accountable to the voters, are free from political considerations, and can set aside normal democratic processes like voting and referenda, FCB experts are able to take prompt and tough actions on remedial steps to help save communities from defaulting. When major cities—such as New York, Cleveland, Chicago, Philadelphia, Yonkers, Washington, DC, Detroit, and Harrisburg—have FCBs appointed, citizens, politicians, investors, and the media pay attention. Detroit Mayor Dave Bing said the governor’s proposed Recovery Plan and Financial Advisory Board “...looked more like a takeover than a joint effort to solve the city’s financial perils,” and the mayor complained, “It forfeits the electoral rights of the citizens of Detroit guaranteed by the democratic process” (Oosting 2012).

The official reports reviewed and interviews conducted with officials of communities subjected to FCB oversight revealed actions and results generally similar to those reported by officials of local governments that had filed for bankruptcy protection or had experienced severe bond downgrades. Only two of the 22 examined local governments with FCB oversight reported major structural change as a result—Chelsea, Massachusetts, and Duquesne, Pennsylvania. Among the major structural reforms undertaken by Chelsea when it was placed under receivership were adopting the council-manager form of government, restructuring departments and replacing agency heads, and shrinking staff. Not surprisingly, there was consistent resistance to change. Duquesne closed its only high school and moved to a K-8 school system in response to experiencing continued fiscal distress and losing half of its population while under FCB control. The other FCB communities offered no evidence of major structural reform or major service reduction in their official reports to their FCBs. Their budget balancing efforts were typically short-term fixes or modest revenue adjustments, including wage and hiring freezes, sale of local government property, and increases in property tax rates.

The States’ Role in Leveraging Local Change

These two studies and other research on the responses by local governments to fiscal hardship, such as recessions, state aid reductions, and the loss of federal general

revenue sharing, have demonstrated the resilience of city and county officials. They are also consistent with the chief findings from previous examinations of cutback management³ coping strategies, including:

- First, to balance budgets, local governments will rely mainly on spending cuts. Most revenue enhancement areas will involve fees with only minimal increases in taxes, if any.
- Second, to reduce fiscal stress, cities and counties will focus on productivity and efficiency improvements instead of adopting new innovative practices, especially those requiring new resource investments.
- Third, the choice of options by managers and elected officials usually follows a budget-cutting hierarchy in which the ‘low hanging fruit’ is picked first (such as temporary cutbacks and deferrals and across-the-board budget reductions and spending/hiring freezes), followed by increasingly painful actions like permanent position eliminations, furloughs and layoffs, and significant reductions in core services.
- Fourth, after an initial period of cutback and as budget conditions stabilize and begin to improve, pressures mount to restore the affected services and personnel to previous levels.

Far from finding ways to reinvent themselves, most of the initiatives reported in the two research studies have been consistent with the cutback management ‘hierarchy of pain.’ As a result, locally-induced change has been evolutionary, conventional, and incremental. Stability and status quo characterize the world of general purpose local government in most places, and economic crisis is but one of a number of competing pressures that confront local officials.

This world is very different from that of special purpose units of government. Since the 1950s, the profile of special purpose units has been dramatically changed by the consolidation of smaller and rural school districts and by the explosion in special districts and public authorities. The former was a result of demographic and economic trends calling for larger school systems that could attract talented teachers and principals, deliver quality curricula, and offer modern facilities. The latter was due to budget pressures on general purpose units that caused certain functions to be taken out of the general fund and put on a pay-as-you-go basis instead of being covered by property taxes (Shafroth 2013, 66).

State intervention to leverage change has been politically acceptable only under extreme financial exigencies affecting one jurisdiction. As the FCB

experiences indicate, even in these circumstances only modest changes have been made, which normally have been temporary and sometimes not able to overcome desires to return to the old ways of doing business. These pressures and responses have not combined to disrupt the status quo to produce dramatic, permanent changes in the scope, quality, and delivery of services or in governmental structures. (Svara and Thoreson 2009, Stenberg 2011, Hoene and Pagano 2011, Ammons, Smith, and Stenberg 2012, Nelson 2012).

As the “creators” of local governments, however, could states play a pivotal role in efforts to realign local services and structures to prepare for the fiscal challenges that may lie ahead (as a result of anticipated cutbacks in federal discretionary spending, accompanied by potentially adverse state actions including reducing financial aid to local governments, shifting greater service delivery and funding responsibilities to counties and cities, and increasing unfunded mandates)? Some have concluded that another wave of retrenchment will usher in a decade of “fend-for-yourself localism” (Greenblatt 2011). In this context, can state governments be called upon to push more aggressively for major changes in local services and structures that cannot be accomplished locally due to the force of organizational inertia? And, if so, should their actions be facilitative (“bottom-up”), directive (“top-down”), or a combination?

Research indicates that many local elected officials and managers believe their state has been more of an adversary than a partner in these efforts, acting intrusively, not cooperatively (Kearney, Swicegood, and Bowman 2011; Bowman and Kearney 2011). As one city manager participating in a 2010 ICMA survey responded: “State agencies rarely provide value to local governments, but always steal resources, increase costs...and obstruct local authority.” (Kearney, Swicegood, and Bowman 2011, 18). A Michigan Public Policy Survey conducted by the Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy found that 70 percent of Michigan county officials reported that they can “seldom” or “almost never” trust the state government. The resulting push-back by city and county officials is attributable to “...a two-word mantra: ‘local control.’” They see states as meddling in the affairs of local government. And they fear that, under consolidation, communities that always have made decisions for themselves will be forced to abide by the dictates of outsiders (Goodman 2008, 26). Basically, those holding this view would hypothesize that the states will neither empower local governments to adapt nimbly and entrepreneurially to economic challenges, nor will they

provide leadership in facilitating or orchestrating local service and structural responses to fiscal retrenchment.

For example, in Florida the topic of interlocal cooperation is frequently an important part of state-level policy conversations, but the state has actually done very little to incentivize this form of alternative service delivery. In fact some recent actions may be viewed as an (unintended) disincentive to work together. Governor Rick Scott’s review of all independent districts was based on a widespread view that they often have too much authority and too little oversight and accountability. Taxing authority for some independent districts has been rolled back through legislation in recent years based on the same concerns. The governor also abolished the Department of Community Affairs (DCA), the state agency charged with overseeing growth management issues. As a result, significant authority over growth management was essentially handed back to local governments, although bills have been introduced to return that oversight and authority to the state. While there have been some studies on service sharing and consolidation by the Office of Program Policy and Governmental Accountability (OPPAGA), there does not seem to be a major, strategic focus on assisting or incentivizing local government change. The Florida Legislative Committee on Intergovernmental Relations, which historically was an important proponent at the state-level for interlocal cooperation and service-sharing, was defunded in 2010.

Other research suggests that state rules can play important roles in inducing local officials to cooperate with other jurisdictions and to take actions that otherwise would be avoided because they would be too politically costly (Krueger and Bernick 2010; Krueger, Walker, and Bernick 2011). Those adhering to this view hypothesize that states will induce and facilitate major changes in local services and structures that cannot be accomplished locally due to organizational inertia. For example, a research report on regional consolidation prepared for the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston by the New England Public Policy Center concluded: “...in states with fragmented public service provision, state legislatures could encourage further regionalization by adopting stronger and more targeted regulations and fiscal incentives. Such measures would likely result in accelerated regionalization, compared with the situation in which local governments pursue intermunicipal partnerships and service sharing without these types of intervention” (Kodrzycki 2013, 28).

The survey of city managers noted above reached a fundamental conclusion that devolution has two faces: states are giving localities greater discretionary authority over their finances, especially their ability to raise

revenues and issue debt, while at the same time they are “withdrawing state-shared taxes and fees, ‘borrowing’ from state-funded local government accounts, and imposing new financial requirements on local governments.” The authors called this a version of “shift and shaft” federalism (Kearney, Swicegood, and Bowman 2011, 18). Others have called it “devolution by budget cut” (Greenblatt 2011, 26).

Bottom-Up and Top-Down Approaches

There are two possible approaches states can take to leveraging greater interlocal collaboration and change: the “bottom-up” approach and the “top-down” approach. The former is basically a facilitative strategy, while the latter is more directive.

The “*bottom-up*” or “*carrot*” approach involves the state giving localities greater discretionary power to work across jurisdictional and public-private boundaries to forge strategies and build relationships for delivering services more efficiently, effectively, and equitably. This approach is sometimes called “second order devolution” (Bowman and Kearney 2011). Examples include statutory authorization or administrative actions providing for:

- expanded authority for local governments to enter into service sharing, transfer, or consolidation agreements;
- facilitation of local management improvement practices such as collective purchasing and private contracting arrangements;
- expanded authority to use regional councils of governments or state areawide districts to provide local services;
- liberalization or standardization of procedures for downsizing governing boards, changing forms of government, and consolidating or dissolving jurisdictions;
- state funding to support local planning studies for charter revisions and other actions to enable shared or consolidated services and merger or dissolution of local units;
- strengthening the power of voters to compel service or jurisdictional mergers;
- designating a state office to provide technical assistance to local government service sharing or merger initiatives and structural reform efforts;
- incentives in state aid formulas for regional collaboration or local unit consolidation; and
- establishing a statewide benchmarking system to provide the public and policy-makers with information about local productivity and progress.

The “*top-down*” or “*stick*” approach involves governors or legislators taking steps to induce realignment of local services or structures through legislation and other actions, such as:

- restrict annexation activity and impose limits on local revenues and creation of new local units;
- strengthen the authority and capacity of counties to serve as regional governments, expand their scope of authorized services, and sort-out and mandate transfer of functional responsibilities between counties and municipalities;
- transfer financial and/or administrative responsibility for a service to the state;
- create metropolitan authorities to provide services on an area-wide or regional basis;
- mandate regional cooperation in service delivery;
- mandate regional consolidation of a local service;
- eliminate or reduce the number of “non-viable” units—like some townships, rural school districts, and small general purpose local units—having very limited size and functional responsibilities or weak financial bases; and
- curtail or terminate state aid or local revenue authority to units that fail to meet effectiveness criteria (size, cost-savings, etc.).

Some Leveraging Examples

A review of research reports, academic studies, and national websites featuring news of relevant state initiatives—including ICMA’s *Smart Brief*, *Governing.com*, and *Stateline.com*—revealed a range of leveraging examples embracing the above approaches during and since the two research studies summarized earlier. This review was supplemented by surveys of the executive directors of state municipal leagues and county associations in Fall 2013. The purposes of the surveys were to identify legislation that had been introduced and enacted in any of the above areas between 2010 and 2013, gubernatorial proposals relative to major changes in local services and structures, and related studies by commissions, universities, and others. Officials in 38 states responded to the survey and follow-up telephone interviews.

We found noteworthy initiatives and actions taken in recent years in 11 states: Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Vermont, and Wisconsin. Interestingly, most of these states are clustered in the Northeast and Midwest. However, as indicated below, in only four of these states—Indiana, Michigan, New Jersey, and New York—was state leveraging

a component of a *broader strategic initiative* by the governor and legislature to achieve major state policy goals, such as reducing pressures on property taxes by promoting more efficient and effective local service delivery or making local government operations more transparent and accountable. In the other states, the initiatives were considered promising innovations, but the incentives were relatively limited in terms of the funds available and participating local governments.

With respect to the legal relationship between local units and their state government, only one state had given localities broad home rule authority and liberally construed devolution of powers (Michigan), while three had granted them home rule authority over most structural, functional, and financial matters (New Jersey, New York, and Ohio). Two other states (Minnesota and Wisconsin) had more limited statutory authorizations over structure and functions, while three (Oregon, Pennsylvania, and Vermont) limited the grant to structures or form of government and one (Indiana) restricted it to only functions. Only one state (North Carolina) was classified as “modified” Dillon’s Rule, as localities have a broad statutory authorization to work with one another and counties and counties may choose the council-manager form of government (Krane, Rigos, and Hill 2001, 476–478).

Strategic, Large-Scale Approaches

Indiana

Indiana was a pioneer in the “top-down” approach to city-county consolidation in the late 1960s with the merger of the City of Indianapolis and Marion County via state legislation to form “Unigov.” No other state has taken such a step. The state also has also been a partner with local governments in some areas. For example, under the OneIndiana joint purchasing initiative, 160 localities have been able to participate with the state on road salt contract bids, which in 2009 saved \$8.5 million, about 40 percent of their previous year costs. The Indiana Association of Cities and Towns and the Association of Indiana Counties worked closely with the departments of Administration and Transportation on the salt partnership.

More than four decades after Unigov, Governor Mitch Daniels proposed a legislative initiative to overhaul local government, which included replacing three-member boards of county commissioners with a single county executive and eliminating townships. The latter proposal would have removed more than 5,000 elected officials. Governor Daniels’s call followed release in December 2007 of the report by the Indiana Commission on Local Government

Reform, which had been charged by the governor with examining the structure of local governments in the state and making recommendations for reform to reduce costs and increase efficiency and effectiveness. The commission found: “Our many complex layers of government are often difficult to understand, monitor and hold accountable” (Indiana University 2007, 3). Indiana has 3,086 units of local government, including 1,008 limited-purpose townships, and 10,700 elected officials, 1,100 of whom assess property. Among the recommendations were a series of proposals to strengthen and streamline the 92 counties through a single elected county executive and unified legislative body, and to transfer all present township responsibilities to the county executive. All local governments were encouraged to take voluntary action to coordinate and consolidate units and services. A state office would be designated to provide technical assistance to these governments, and a statewide benchmarking system would be established to provide citizens and policy-makers information on local implementation progress and productivity.

The Farm Bureau, among other interest groups, opposed Governor Daniels’s proposal, and most of the legislation to restructure local governments failed to pass. However, by March 2013, about one-third of the Commission’s 27 recommendations had been acted on. Among the accomplishments were shifting property tax assessment duties from townships to the county assessor, which resulted in elimination of 168 elected township assessors; transferring child welfare funding from counties to the state; consolidating emergency public safety dispatch systems; tightening restrictions on school bonds; providing more joint purchasing opportunities for schools, libraries, and local governments; and establishing a statewide benchmarking system. Among the recommendations on which no action had been taken were those to:

- establish a single elected chief executive and a unified legislative body for each county;
- transfer duties of the auditor, treasurer, recorder, assessor, surveyor, and sheriff to the elected county executive;
- transfer duties of poor relief, fire protection, emergency medical services, and cemeteries from townships to the elected county executive;
- shift funding for trial courts, probation, and public defender to the state;
- strengthen powers of voters to compel school and township consolidations.

It should be noted that Governor Daniels's successor, Mike Pence, signed a bill in May 2013, with "misgivings," that fine-tuned the Unigov consolidation by eliminating four at-large seats on the City-County Council, while enhancing the powers of the Mayor of Indianapolis over county officeholder budgets and appointment of a majority of members of the Metropolitan Development Commission.

Michigan

A March 2011 story reporting on Michigan Governor Rick Snyder's support for local government consolidation noted that with "nearly 1800 separate cities, villages, and townships stretched across 83 counties, consolidation seems way overdue" (Wattrick 2011). Governor Snyder indicated that he would support legislation allowing local governments to set up metropolitan authorities, subject to voter approval. Governor Snyder's initiative came in the wake of a proposal by his predecessor, Jennifer Granholm, in 2010 to set aside \$50 million of the State Aid Fund for a grant competition for school districts to demonstrate savings through consolidation and service sharing. The incentives were intended to help cover the up-front costs of restructuring, such as technology purchases, but the legislature did not include the Fund in its education budget appropriation.

Like locally initiated proposals, Governor Snyder's plan and related legislative proposals to streamline Michigan's 2,314 local governments, 1,242 of which are townships, were greeted with opposition and proved politically unacceptable. A consolidation assessment report found no strong evidence that merger had slowed the growth rate of governmental costs or bolstered economic development. In response to Governor Snyder, Wayne County Executive Robert Ficano said, "I just think it's unreasonable to think such a large merger would be even feasible at this point" (Wattrick 2011).

Also in 2011, Governor Snyder proposed, and the legislature passed, Public Act 63, the Economic Vitality Incentive Grant Program (EVIGP), which accompanied the State's constitutional revenue sharing program and provided financial incentives to cities, villages, and townships for combining operations. These funds were intended to offset costs incurred with mergers, interlocal agreements, and other cooperative undertakings. A year later, Public Act 236 renamed EVIGP the Competitive Grant Assistance Program (CGAP) and appropriated \$10 million for the first round of FY 2012 awards, half of which was earmarked for public safety. Counties, authorities, school districts, community colleges, and

universities were made eligible. Among the criteria for judging proposals were cost savings, efficiencies, taxpayer benefit, commitment to collaboration and best practices, and completion timeline. Over \$4.3 million was awarded by the Michigan Treasury Department to 27 EVIGP projects. Another \$10.5 million was awarded to 32 applicants in the second round, \$4 million was awarded to 11 communities in the third round, and \$6 million was awarded to 17 local units in the fourth (FY 2014) round. A total of 87 applicants received \$24.8 million in grants over the four rounds. Nearly all of the recipients proposed service consolidations—especially fire, police and public safety, 911 emergency dispatch and communications, and information technology—while only two mergers were proposed—the City of Watervliet with Watervliet Township (\$565,000) and Onekama Township with the Village of Onekama (\$355,365).

Turning to Detroit, the governor's "top-down" effort to end the city's long-standing fiscal decline through appointment of an Emergency Manager, bankruptcy attorney Kevyn Orr, garnered national attention. A May 2013 report pursuant to the state legislation that created this office concluded that the city was "insolvent," and that the financial crisis had exhausted its ability to borrow to cover its obligations. Contrary to the strong words used to describe the state's actions, like "take-over" and "forfeiting electoral rights," "partnership" has been increasingly used, even though huge changes in personnel, services, and pensions loom on the horizon. Detroit joins three other Michigan cities having emergency financial managers—Pontiac, Ecorse, and Benton Harbor—and the ripple effects of their struggle for financial survival could be more widespread. As the largest American city in history to declare bankruptcy, Detroit is considering a range of financial and structural options to regain solvency, such as transferring street light maintenance from a city department to a special district and selling city-owned art from the Detroit Institute of the Arts collection. According to the *Detroit Free Press*, fiscal exigency has spurred discussions between Detroit and Wayne County officials about merging services such as jails, health, and bus systems. Former Mayor Dave Bing observed that a high level of trust between the two governments will be crucial to the success of merger talks (June 4, 2012). Detroit has not been awarded a CGAP grant.

In March 2013, the governor signed amendments to the 1990 Emergency Financial Manager Act that require local governments to submit financial projections to the state and give state-appointed emergency managers power to set aside labor contracts, fire local

officials, and dissolve a community or school district. In addition to seeking to cut revenue sharing by one-third, Governor Snyder proposed to make such state aid contingent on local adoption of cost-saving measures like securing wage and benefit concessions from public employees and agreeing to consolidate services.

New Jersey

New Jersey's current governor and his predecessor both criticized the fragmented structure of local government in their state—featuring 566 municipalities, 616 school districts, and 186 fire districts—claiming that the layering of bureaucracy contributes to high property tax burdens. But they have been unable to muster political support to mandate or induce dramatic changes. In 2008, former Governor Jon Corzine proposed unsuccessfully to eliminate state aid for towns under 5,000 population and to cut in half aid for towns with 10,000 or fewer residents. His successor, Chris Christie, has moved forward with other “top-down” initiatives, such as the state's takeover of poorly-performing public schools in Camden, joining state-controlled school systems in Paterson, Newark, and Jersey City. In the wake of Hurricane Sandy, Governor Christie announced construction of a dune system to protect the Jersey Shore despite opposition from some beach communities and property owners. And the governor, with bipartisan support from legislators, has endorsed service sharing as a way of reducing property taxes. A number of counties have shared service coordinators and are now exploring consolidation of police and schools with neighboring jurisdictions.

Interest in these strategies can be traced to a 2006 report by the Joint Legislative Committee on Government Consolidation and Shared Services. The committee recommended creation of a permanent unit to study the need for consolidation and service-sharing and legislation to streamline and facilitate local processes in these areas.

One year later, the legislature passed the Uniform Shared Services and Consolidation Act to help reduce property taxes by promoting greater government efficiency through shared services, regionalism, and consolidation. In the introduction to the bill, the legislature noted the obstacles of political resistance, overlapping and antiquated laws, and civil service issues and committed to removing these hurdles: “The State largely has employed a ‘carrot’ approach to incentivizing consolidation and service sharing for over 30 years, and for real progress to occur in reducing the rate of property tax increase, the ‘stick’ approach is

appropriate...” The act authorized local units to enter into agreements to provide or receive services by adopting a resolution and to contract for joint services. The act also sought to make the 1977 Municipal Consolidation Act more attractive by authorizing local governing bodies or registered voters to petition the Local Finance Board of the Division of Local Government Services in the Department of Community Affairs to create a Municipal Consolidation Study Commission to prepare a consolidation plan. Upon approval of the plan by the affected governing boards or voters, the division was directed to create a task force to facilitate consolidation and provide technical assistance. The director of the division was required to establish a Sharing Available Resources Efficiently program to provide grants and loans for local feasibility studies of shared service agreements, joint service operation contracts, or municipal consolidation. Eligible expenditures were consultant fees and one-time start-up costs such as terminal leave benefits.

More recently, Senate President Stephen Sweeney, a Democrat, has joined Republican Governor Christie in a bipartisan effort to bolster implementation of the joint committee's recommendations. The legislation reintroduced in the 2012 session by President Sweeney embraces a more punitive “stick” approach than the 2007 act. The preamble to the bill states: “Experience with the old laws and experience with the ‘Uniform Shared Services and Consolidation Act’ ... has made it clear that shared services, joint meetings, and consolidation cannot be effective and viable options when the local units are tied to Civil Service rules and tenure provisions limiting their economic feasibility.” Under the bill, S2, New Jersey's Local Unit Alignment, Reorganization and Consolidation Commission, established in the Department of Community Affairs, would conduct studies of the structure and functions of counties, municipalities, and schools to determine whether consolidation would produce greater efficiencies and tax savings. The commission's consolidation or shared services proposals are to be transmitted to the governor and legislature, and put before the voters of the affected jurisdictions at the next general election. Voters would be asked to approve shared or consolidated services that are recommended, but any town that does not pass the recommended changes would lose state aid equivalent to the projected cost savings.

The New Jersey State League of Municipalities opposed the proposal to take away state aid, and unions opposed S2 because it superseded civil service and tenure provisions. Rex Reid of the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employ-

ees stated that “S2 is a veiled attempt to remove civil service regulations and tenure rights granted through collective bargaining” (Friedman 2012). President Sweeney explained his position: “My approach quite honestly is the stick approach. If you don’t share, we’re going to reduce your state aid. Then for the people in the local community, there’s no state involvement, there’s no state money. They want more expensive government? They got it.” (Magyar 2012; Goodman 2008). The Senate passed the bill, but the House failed to do so.

Another noteworthy New Jersey initiative was taken by the Christie Administration in 2011 to promote local accountability and transparency. A Local Best Practices Checklist of budgeting, management, and cost-control tools was developed by the Division of Local Government Services. Each local government was required to fill out the survey annually in order to receive its December 1 state aid payment. A sliding scale of up to five percent of this payment could be withheld by the Division for municipalities failing to reply “yes” or “not applicable” to fewer than 40 of the 50 questions on the survey. The Best Practices Inventory responses must be certified as being accurate by the chief administrative officer and chief financial officer, and certified that the results were on the agenda for discussion at a municipal governing board meeting by the clerk. The first question in the 2013 inventory dealt with shared services: “Did your municipality actively negotiate (i.e. meet with representatives from a neighboring town, your county or another local unit) and/or enter into at least one new shared service agreement in the preceding year?”

An August 2011 survey revealed both progress and challenges that lie ahead for locally-initiated service-sharing. With 30 percent of the 566 municipalities responding, 82 percent reported using shared service contracts in the previous year. Several obstacles to shared services were identified, however: “40 percent said opposition from citizens was the primary obstacle; 36 percent indicated that concern over the loss of home rule was a driving barrier, and 34 percent indicated issues related to shared service contracts presented challenges” (Sadeghi and Callahan 2011, 5).

New York

According to a staff member of the New York State Association of Counties, the State spends an estimated \$80 million annually across different programs to incentivize collaboration among its 1,860 local governments. However, not all of these funds have

been awarded every year. The Department of State administers two of the main incentive programs noted by interviewees—Local Government Efficiency (LGe) Grants and Local Government Citizen’s Reorganization and Empowerment Grants.

In an April 2008 report, “21st Century Local Government,” the bipartisan New York State Commission on Local Government Efficiency and Competiveness called for greater state encouragement of local service sharing. Since 2005, a Shared Municipal Services Incentive program had been included in the state budget. In response to the commission’s recommendation, the 2008–09 budget included \$29.4 million for Local Government Efficiency Grants to support planning studies of ways to achieve cost-savings through shared or consolidated service initiatives, as well as for city or county charter revision studies that covered functional consolidation, service sharing, mergers, or village dissolution. In addition to these incentive grants, competitive grants were made available to help defray joint function implementation costs such as transitional personnel. LGe grants were also offered for “transformative” pilot projects that had cost-savings potential.

Examples of possible 21st century demonstration projects included regional smart growth planning and development, multi-county service provision, consolidated school operations, expansion of county services, countywide or multi-municipal policing, and metropolitan municipal corporations. Municipalities that consolidated jurisdictions or services were eligible to receive financial incentives, such as a percentage of the combined property tax revenues, an increase in state discretionary aid, or a flat amount over a five-year period. The Department of State’s Division of Local Government Services also provides training and technical assistance to local governments to help control costs, promote efficiencies, and coordinate joint provision of state services. According to the Department’s website: “Overall, this program has been a great success and is expected to result in more than \$418 million in savings to taxpayers from \$46 million invested in 294 shared services and consolidation projects.”⁴

In 2012, a Local Government Performance and Efficiency Program was included in the LGe portfolio. This program provides awards to local governments that have produced recurring financial savings or lowered property tax growth. In 2013, more than \$12 million in three-year grants was awarded to 13 local governments. The projects varied widely from privatization of home care services and nursing homes, to departmental restructuring and re-engineering, to

efficiency initiatives. The estimated combined annual savings of successful applicants was \$32 million, which must be demonstrated each year in order to receive continued funding.

In June 2009 Governor Andrew M. Cuomo signed The New N.Y. Government Reorganization and Citizen Empowerment Act, effective March 21, 2010, establishing uniform procedures for the consolidation or dissolution of local government units, except for school districts and some special purpose districts. Consolidation proceedings can be initiated by joint resolution by governing boards or by elector initiative. In the latter, a majority of the electorate in both jurisdictions must vote in favor of merger in the referenda. If the measures fail, a four-year moratorium takes effect.

In 2012, a Citizen's Re-organization and Empowerment Grant (CREG) program was established to implement the municipal restructuring provisions of the 2009 act, including provisions for citizens to petition their town or village to vote on consolidation or dissolution. Grants may be used for reorganization plan studies or implementation and may not exceed \$50,000. A ten percent local matching cash contribution is required, and projects must be completed within three years. Service sharing and consolidation studies and initiatives are not eligible for CREG, nor are school districts, cities, and counties. Eight noncompetitive grants totaling \$275,000 were awarded in 2013. Among the purposes were an evaluation of the dissolution of a town's water and sewer district and transfer to the county, and completion of a dissolution plan for a village. According to the State Department's website, CREG "...is part of Governor Cuomo's continuing efforts to provide taxpayer relief through innovative analysis of governmental functions and services."⁵

Smaller-Scale, Incremental Attempts to Leverage Local Change

The preceding case examples can be thought of as large-scale or major, strategic initiatives on the part of states to leverage local change around shared services and consolidation. In each state, our coverage is intended to be illustrative, not exhaustive. And the jury is still out regarding whether the various initiatives have achieved their intended results. Nevertheless, clearly both "bottom-up" and "top-down" strategies are being pursued, sometimes in tandem. As one early assessment of states (Indiana, Maine, New Jersey, and New York) "pushing" localities concluded: "The truth, though, is that states don't have to choose between giving local governments a helping hand or a

swift kick in the butt....The message, it seems, is that if localities are going to come together, state and local government will need to join forces to make it happen" (Goodman 2008, 27).

In our research, we found many other examples of smaller scale efforts to incentivize change. These efforts do not seem to be part of a strategic push on the part of state government to spur transformational change at the local level. Rather, they are more narrow attempts to stimulate change, most often in a narrow aspect of local governance. These initiatives are still noteworthy, however, in that they offer insight into the variety of ways states are, and may be, playing a role in leveraging local change.

Minnesota

With more than 2,700 counties, cities, and townships, Minnesota ranks fifth in local governmental units per capita and eighth per square mile. There have been 25 city and township mergers or annexations since 1980. A 2011 survey by the Office of Legislative Auditor found only 31 percent of county, 25 percent of city, and 8 percent of township respondents strongly agreeing or somewhat agreeing with the statement: "Our city, county, or township would benefit from consolidating with another local government" (Dornfeld 2012, 3). The legislature eliminated agencies that assisted local governments considering collaboration on service sharing or consolidation, such as the State Planning Agency, Minnesota Municipal Board, and the Board on Innovation and Cooperation.

One area where local service sharing has been facilitated by the state is the Shared Services Grant Program for fire protection administered by the State Fire Marshal and Department of Public Safety. Grants ranging from \$25,000 to \$40,000 have been available since 2010 for two or more fire services agencies to hire outside consultants to develop voluntary best practices shared services models or feasibility studies and to help cover implementation costs. Among the study coverage requirements are regional fire and rescue shared service district governance, funding for training and equipment, response times, employment issues, and operating procedures.

In April 2012 the Program Evaluation Division of the Office of the Legislative Auditor released a report, "Consolidation of Local Governments," that revealed opportunities for consolidation particularly among smaller jurisdictions with capital-intensive services or equipment needs.⁶ The report observed "local government officials are often open to considering consolidation proposals, but view its implementation as potentially

complex, costly, and controversial. They also voiced a strong desire to manage consolidation and collaborative efforts themselves and not have them mandated by the state.” The staff recommended that the legislature facilitate these local efforts by providing grants to local governments interested in evaluating consolidation possibilities, including county-administered joint pilot projects; reviewing state funding policies for local capital projects to ensure they do not inhibit localities from considering the need to consolidate or collaborate with neighboring jurisdictions; and requiring the Municipal Boundary Adjustment Unit and counties to provide more information to citizens and local officials about consolidation and relevant state processes. The Association of Minnesota Counties indicated its support for the report and recommendations.

All 87 Minnesota counties have passed resolutions calling upon the legislature to pass the Minnesota Accountable Government Innovation and Collaboration (MAGIC) Act. The legislation would give counties waivers and exemptions from statutes and rules to plan, develop, and implement more efficient ways to deliver services through joint or individual pilot projects which, if successful, could become statewide models. Examples of possible projects are lowering water pollution levels and reducing welfare dependency. Affected state agencies must approve county plans, including their outcome goals and performance measures, in advance and success must be demonstrated within three years. The bill was approved by the Senate, but ultimately did not pass due to concerns about negative impacts on public employees.

The Minnesota legislature has encouraged localities to implement a common set of performance measures by providing an incentive of 14 cents per capita to each participating jurisdiction. However, in 2011, of the 854 cities and 87 counties only 13% of the cities and 38% of the counties applied to the state’s auditor and received approval to participate in the project. In 2012, participation had dropped to 7% and 29%, respectively (Barrett and Green 2013: 60). According to interviewees, one reason for this drop was the legislature’s failure to approve exemptions from state property tax levies for participating communities.

North Carolina

Over the years there have been many state government actions that can be seen as having an effect on changes in service delivery arrangements in North Carolina’s local governments; however, there has been no strategic focus on this issue from the General Assembly or Governor’s office. Some of the more

notable policy changes include legislation in 2012 that introduced several changes to the laws related to organization and governance of local public health agencies. The changes made it easier to create consolidated, multi-county public health agencies as well as consolidated human services agencies. As a result, there have been some multi-county mergers and the issue of human services consolidation at the county level is gaining some traction in the state. A decade ago there were major reforms in mental health services, and in more recent years similar thinking has guided efforts to reform the organization of human services at the county level.

There have also been prominent local bills during the 2013 session where the General Assembly essentially forced consolidated service delivery; in one case, mandating a municipal-county water system merger in Asheville, and in another, mandating creation of an airport authority in Charlotte (where the airport has been a city function). In a move away from regionalization, however, the General Assembly discontinued the meager operating fund assistance to regional councils of government. None of these actions seem to be precedent-setting policies, however, nor does it appear that they are part of a broader, state-wide strategic effort to influence local change, with the exception of consolidation in the area of human services which has long been pushed by the state.

There are some more function-specific policies that are influencing service consolidation at the agency-level. The state 911 board, for example, offers generous grants to 911 dispatch centers that merge (across jurisdictions). The agency has a top priority of encouraging service consolidation wherever possible as a means of improving both service efficiency and operational effectiveness. In fiscal years 2011–2012, the 911 board awarded \$26.8 million to five multi-jurisdictional dispatch center (known as public-safety answering points or PSAPs) consolidation projects. These recent municipal-county (and even one multi-county) mergers are viewed as success stories and models, with the grant money acting as a catalyst for change. Another function-specific action involves the state making available new or enhanced collective purchasing opportunities for local governments.

Ohio

In the wake of cutting local government financial aid by approximately 50 percent, reducing their share of utility taxes by half, and eliminating an estate tax that earmarks 80 percent of the revenues to localities, Governor John Kasich and his administration have urged

local units to embrace shared services. The governor's staff surveyed local government and school system leaders to identify collaborative best practices, and issued a report in June 2012, "Beyond Boundaries: A Shared Services Action Plan for Ohio Schools and Governments," with 10 recommended areas where shared services could save money. With more than 3,900 local governments and school districts, the report observed: "The size and fragmented nature of Ohio's governmental structure creates inherent inefficiencies in service delivery to citizens and back-office functions" (2), and estimated that these local jurisdictions were already saving about \$1 billion annually through regionalism and collaborative projects. A story in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* reported that Randy Cole, Policy Advisor to Governor Kasich, "bluntly warned a small group in Columbus that embracing a shared-services approach might be local governments' only saving grace if they want to stay solvent." Cole said, "My plea to you is don't just fight the cuts, fight for reform" (Fields 2012).

Legislation was recently approved to facilitate establishment of interlocal sharing agreements and to strengthen county capacity to serve as regional governments. In addition, the Department of Administrative Services has expanded its Lean Ohio network to include local governments. According to its website, the program's mission is to "make government services in Ohio, simpler, faster, better, and less costly" through continuous improvement.⁷ Experts are available as internal consultants on the use of tools such as Six Sigma training, strategic planning, data collection and analysis, and meeting facilitation.

H.B. 153 established a Local Government Innovation Fund administered by the Ohio Department of Development to assist local units plan and implement more efficient and effective service delivery through collaborative projects. A 15-member Local Government Innovation Council was also created. The legislature authorized \$45 million for 2012–2013, \$9 million for planning grants and \$36 million for implementation loans. Over the first three rounds during 2012, 90 grants totaling \$6.3 million and 13 loans totaling \$4.3 million were awarded through a competitive application process. Loans are capped at \$500,000 while the maximum grant is \$100,000 per collaborative jurisdiction. According to interviewees, less than 20 percent of eligible jurisdictions have submitted an innovation proposal. With respect to whether this initiative demonstrated a partnership with the state, one local interviewee was skeptical: "...cutting taxes has been the mantra. It hasn't really been about making government more

efficient or partnering with local governments. It feels more like 'Oh, by the way, we are going to try to throw this bone—the local government fund—and hope you can be more efficient that way.'"

Oregon

In Oregon, a series of legislation was passed to allow the state to take over certain local government services (e.g., elections and tax collection) in counties facing serious fiscal distress. The main impetus for these changes were the financial crisis some timber-reliant counties were facing as federal payments were set to end, coupled with a demand from some of the local governments to offload services back to the state. Additionally, legislation was enacted that set aside money to assist local units with interlocal cooperation or local unit consolidation. Local governments that wish to take advantage of this incentive have to submit to the state's emergency boards specific requests for funds that would come from the governor's office.

Governor John Kitzhaber also made early childhood programs a state-wide priority, and regionalization was a key to his approach (Hammond 2012). This approach essentially means counties would have to come together regionally to align their programs toward a stated goal of having all children reading by the first grade. Funding was provided to assist in the regionalization effort, although observers say progress has been slow.

Pennsylvania

Interlocal cooperation and shared services are an important dimension of local government in Pennsylvania given the state's more than 2,500 municipalities. Anecdotally, interlocal cooperation and functional consolidation are common at the municipal level, but the state government has not really "pushed" these approaches in any kind of strategic sense. Pennsylvania is a limited home rule state; thus, while there have been some legislative attempts to raise the profile of interlocal cooperation (such as a bill in 2008 that was to be an "act providing for cooperation between political subdivisions and for the award of grants to recognize such cooperation"), they have not been enacted or implemented.

A Center for Local Government Services housed in the State Department of Community and Economic Development provides technical assistance to local governments. This unit has a consulting budget to provide municipalities with help around service consolidation, but it is reportedly very small and not something done on a proactive basis. Local governments may receive

some technical help upon request, but there is not much of a concerted effort for service consolidation from this agency (although they did publish a guidebook on “Intergovernmental Cooperation” in 2006).

The General Assembly’s Local Government Commission recently conducted a study of Act 47, which addresses so-called “distressed” municipalities. The study discusses combination (merger) and dissolution as option. The Commission also proposed changes to the law that focus on how to assist a distressed municipality through a time of financial crisis. This included exploring whether it would be appropriate to dissolve and be absorbed by the county. The group rejected this and instead included some provisions for counties to provide assistance to distressed municipalities on an interim basis. There is little consideration of consolidation and nothing to suggest that the State will make service (or political) consolidation a priority in the near future. Like other states surveyed, there appears to be interest and activity here and there, but no strong strategic direction from the Governor’s office or General Assembly to incentivize interlocal cooperation or shared services as a primary vehicle of local government change.

Vermont

Local government in Vermont centers on municipalities (which include towns, cities, and villages) and school districts. Vermont is a fully incorporated state, which means there are no unincorporated areas. While counties exist, their functions are extremely limited. All of the charters go back to before the state was created—to land grant towns from royal governors. The legislature does not force mergers and there is no annexation.

There are 246 incorporated cities or towns and 246 local school districts (one in each town). Additionally, Vermont has regional school districts which operate the high schools. Municipalities allocate budgets back to the school districts. Most of the action in terms of shared services and service consolidation has been on the municipal side, including:

- In the last 70 years, 29 villages have merged back into their towns. There has been some reduction in service duplication here. All but two of the mergers were prior to the year 2000.
- A local interviewee noted the state offers a “good structure” for contracting with neighboring towns for services and intergovernmental service delivery.
- Solid waste has been turned over to regional solid waste districts. There are some regional water systems.
- There are some examples of shared public safety services.

In terms of school districts, enrollments are declining and the state has taken over the responsibility for funding schools. Vermont tries to balance a strong philosophy of local control (having town meetings and budgets approved by voters) with the need to merge and incentivize such mergers where they make sense. In 2010, Act 153 was passed to provide incentives and a structure for school district mergers. In 2012, the law was revised. Called Act 156, it expanded the type of cooperative activities that would be supported. Yet there has been little activity under this scheme, apparently because the incentives are so meager. The incentives include funding to support planning in the form of grants to hire consultants ranging anywhere from \$5,000 to \$20,000. Districts may receive in the neighborhood of \$150,000 for implementation, which, again, might be viewed by some as inadequate. There were also tax incentives built into Act 156, allowing for several pennies off the tax rate for a few years as an additional incentive to consolidate. To date there has been little change in terms of interest in school consolidation. Apparently the incentives are not powerful enough.

Wisconsin

A Special Committee on Local Service Consolidation was established by the Wisconsin legislature to “... determine whether current law should be amended to facilitate the methods by which local units of government can partner to efficiently and cost-effectively provide services, including police, fire, and educational services, to their constituents.” The committee was in place for only the 2011–2012 legislative session. Pursuant to the committee’s recommendations, legislation was introduced in 2011 to create a local governmental unit consolidation program to encourage merger or greater interlocal cooperation by providing loans to study or implement consolidations of local units that have a demonstrated probability of reducing costs or improving the level of services provided, contributing to regional cooperation, and minimizing competition for economic development among localities. The bill was not passed. However, the 2013 biannual state budget authorized \$200,000 for grants to local units to help pay for “LEAN” government consultants to implement programs that increase the value of goods and services with the fewest resources.

Conclusions and Implications

Although often criticized for its fragmentation and duplication, the American system of local government has also been responsive and resilient. There has been a steady increase in the creation of special districts,

yet at the same time, the number of county and city governments has hardly changed in six decades. However, great strides were made in building local government capacity through such measures as adoption of the council-manager form and merit systems, growth in staff professionalism, and expansion of modern budgeting systems and management techniques such as strategic planning and performance measurement.

Local governments have demonstrated a remarkable ability to bounce back in the wake of crises without fundamentally altering their jurisdictional boundaries, core services, or personnel. While there has been somewhat greater collaboration among local governments and between cities and counties and non-governmental organizations, and changes have occurred in the mode of delivery of some services, most of this activity has involved a limited range of functions and it has not permanently altered the size or shape of local units. Coping and adaptive strategies, rather than transformational approaches, have typically characterized the response by local leaders (Thoreson and Svava 2011), but these could still be important tools to leverage change. For example, an article in the *2013 Municipal Yearbook* reported that more than 80 % of the 1,417 managers who responded to a survey used interlocal collaboration as a management strategy because it “was the right thing to do,” leveraged resources, and produced better outcomes (O’Leary and Gerard 2013, 59). Some 86 percent of the respondents indicated they had recently collaborated in such functional areas as fire and emergency response, economic development, infrastructure planning and development, and housing. *These results suggest that in many communities there could be a foundation of interlocal activity on which state actions to facilitate greater collaboration could be built.*

While a few states have moved ahead to facilitate or mandate dramatic changes in local service and structural arrangements, the majority has not done so. There are examples of efforts to incentivize increased interlocal cooperation, service sharing, and outright service consolidation. Yet, most of these efforts appear to be modest in scope and not part of a larger, strategic agenda to influence fundamental changes in how local governments do business. It is too soon to determine whether these efforts have been successful. States that have acted in some way seem to favor facilitative (or “bottom-up”) strategies, although at least three (Indiana, Michigan, and New Jersey) have attempted what could be characterized as top-down or “stick” strategies.

But most of the state efforts reported from our survey seem to be too modest financially to be

significant levers for change. In other words, the “carrot”-type incentives seem to appeal to jurisdictions already considering service-sharing or other alternative service delivery methods. There is scant evidence from participating jurisdictions that the incentives are spurring bold explorations of new alternatives or are acting as a real stimulus to break through organizational inertia.

Among local officials, there remains considerable suspicion and distrust regarding the motivations of governors and legislators, and with few exceptions they have successfully resisted gubernatorial calls for dramatic changes in the service and structural status quo. As one observer of the “stick” approach to consolidation noted: “Given the opposition, it’s not clear that states are pushing consolidation in the right way. Part of the reason they became involved in the first place is that, when municipalities are left to their own devices, they find the political obstacles insurmountable. To date, though, the obstacles have been nearly as great when states are doing the pushing” (Goodman 2008, 27).

If locally-initiated responses to economic crises and state incentives or mandates have failed to disrupt the jurisdictional status quo, are there other ways to produce greater local collaboration and change? As shown in some of the examples reported in this paper, universities, think tanks, and nongovernmental organizations can help hasten history in some jurisdictions by conducting studies of consolidation or service sharing possibilities and options, and it is helpful for states to provide financial support for such studies. For example, in 2009, a bill was introduced in the Kansas Senate to create a study commission to prepare a plan for consolidating the 105 counties in the state into 13 “districts.” The bill failed to get out of committee, but the Kansas Advisory Council on Intergovernmental Relations conducted a study that estimated that merger into 25 districts would produce \$826 million in savings (Svava 2012). Blue ribbon commissions and business leaders also have proven influential in bringing government officials to the table to discuss common problems and joint remedial strategies.

While data and analysis can be helpful, politics, finances, equity, and history usually determine outcomes. As has been seen, the forces that perpetuate the status quo are powerful and changes often are temporary and evolutionary, not permanent and revolutionary. Based on this review, it appears that neither the Great Recession nor state actions have induced cities and counties to initiate fundamental and permanent

alterations in the scope, quality, or delivery of services in many communities. Nor did they produce dramatic changes in the local jurisdictional or intergovernmental landscape. Leveraging change from both inside and outside government is a formidable challenge.

Nevertheless, *there is evidence that state facilitative strategies could lead to greater collaboration in the delivery of services.* The experience of several consolidated 911 centers in North Carolina is instructive. The director of the state’s 911 board has made dispatch center merger a top strategic priority and has provided significant resources (in the form of more than \$26 million in grants) to spur action by communities that may not otherwise have acted. Having several million dollars to build a new shared facility can go a long way in allaying concerns over merging agencies across multiple jurisdictions. All of the stakeholders can point to a new facility and know that such a facility would not be possible were it not for the incentive grants.

Perhaps this and other examples of significant incentives offer insight into how states, in collaboration with municipal leagues and county associations, might fruitfully be agents of change in terms of local government service delivery. At least four approaches seem worth exploring based on our research:

1. *Using a positive incentive, bottom-up (or “carrot”) approach emphasizes a supportive relationship*—as opposed to adversarial—between the state and its constituent units of local government. States and local governments are best served by approaching local change with a partnership mentality.
2. If state officials are serious about leveraging local change, then they have to be willing to *provide serious incentives.*⁸ Minor, incremental benefits are not likely to overcome significant organizational inertia. Serious resources must be committed in order to influence change where it would not otherwise occur. As indicated in the New York and New Jersey examples, it is also beneficial for the incentives to be *anchored in a broader gubernatorial and legislative strategic initiative*, such as property tax relief, performance management, or best practices.
3. As opposed to broadly authorized areas for service-sharing and consolidation, local government representatives could work with state officials to *identify*

specific functions that are ‘ripe’ for collaboration and where an investment of state financial and technical assistance could be a catalyst for change. Likely areas include 911 dispatch, water and sewer utilities, and public safety services (fire and police). This strategy is consistent with Ohio’s “Beyond Boundaries” report, which recommends: “State associations that have participated in developing this Shared Services Plan should take a leadership role in developing draft agreements; educating their members; facilitating the relationships regionally—both within and across their memberships; training their members in using the tools available to them and communicating about shared services consistently over the next few years” (Ross and Keen 2012, 21).

4. Proponents of local change need to be clear-eyed about collaboration taking time. It is important that state incentives leverage real results in terms of local government efficiency and effectiveness. But these results often are not realized immediately. Local representatives could cooperate with state agencies to *develop realistic multi-year goals, objectives, and funding streams* for shared or consolidated services projects, together with appropriate accountability mechanisms.

More time will be needed to determine whether service sharing and service consolidation has produced greater efficiency and effectiveness, and whether the state enabling statutes and programs will survive political leadership transitions. But if predicted economic pressures mount on local governments, it may be prudent for associations representing cities and counties in the state capitol to *work with governors and legislators on ways to incentivize interlocal collaboration.* Given the power of the functional and structural status quo at the local level, and the unlikelihood that fiscal crises will disrupt organizational inertia, the state’s role as facilitator of collaborative relationships and service realignments could be important. In this respect, governors and legislators could become allies, not adversaries, of city and county managers and elected officials who seek major changes in services or structures but cannot muster the local political support for doing so.

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Endnotes

- 1 See Kemp (2012) for several articles discussing municipal governments' responses to the "budget crunch."
- 2 "Major" change included permanent reduction or even elimination of major services, elimination or merger of departments, establishment of intergovernmental service delivery agreements, or changes of governmental form or structure. Adopting revised but fairly common service delivery options, such as contracting, was categorized as a "moderate" change. Budget reductions, tax increases, debt restructuring, multi-year capital improvement planning, and collective bargaining agreement restructuring were categorized as "minimal," as they do not require a fundamental change in structure or service level, although even these steps can be very difficult to take.
- 3 There is a rather robust literature in public administration on "cutback management." A helpful review of the literature can be found in Scorsone and Plerhoples (2010). Charles Levine also wrote some now-classic articles on the topic in *Public Administration Review* (1978 and 1979).
- 4 <http://www.dos.ny.gov/lg/> (accessed February 28, 2014)
- 5 <http://www.dos.ny.gov/press/2013/creg2-21.html> (accessed February 28, 2014)
- 6 See <http://www.auditor.leg.state.mn.us/ped/2012/consollocgov.htm> (accessed February 28, 2014)
- 7 <http://lean.ohio.gov/> (accessed April 7, 2014)
- 8 A logical question here is, "What are serious incentives?" Unfortunately, there is no simple answer other than it seems reasonable that a state-local partnership model would include the state authorities asking local government officials about what kinds of incentives would make a difference. The "what kind?" and "how much?" answers are likely context dependent, based on the unique political and administrative environment in a given state, as well as the unique characteristics of the types of services under consideration.

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