Unfunded Mandates and How They Affect You

What is an unfunded mandate? A ‘mandate’ is “an official order or commission to do something”. So, a mandate from the state to the counties is a rule or order that the counties must, by law, carry out. An unfunded mandate, then, is a rule or order that the state gives to the counties without providing any additional funding to carry out the new rule.

How does this look in real life? Many of our legislative priorities are unfunded mandates. Public Health Services are required by the state, and of course, counties want to keep their citizens healthy. However, the state does not give enough money to the counties to carry out basic Public Health Services. Other examples of this are:

* Trial Court Indigent Defense
* Building and Servicing Ballot Drop Boxes
* Election Costs
* Court Costs
* Public Safety Regulations

What happens if the counties don’t have money in their budgets to fully fund mandates? Unfortunately, other services are affected. For instance, road work is unable to be accomplished or law enforcement officers are unable to be hired because there are less resources to put to those services.

Are you wondering - wait, where do my taxes go? Aren’t counties supposed to have adequate money from all the taxes I pay? Well, county revenues are capped at no more than 1% increase a year, while inflation rises faster than that rate. State taxes are able to bring in significantly more money due to population increases and different economically wealthy locations, but the counties are not seeing any of benefits of this tax revenue.

The legislature must ensure that the counties are funded so that they can carry out all the mandates and requirements set by the state. It is the state’s obligation to citizens of all counties to have equitable and reasonable funding.

Fun fact: In 1993, the citizens of Washington State passed Initiative 601 that, in addition to establishing state spending limits, created a requirement that local governments must be reimbursed by the state for the costs of any new programs or increased services imposed on them. So, not only are unfunded mandates difficult for counties to deal with, but they have been addressed by the citizens of Washington State and the citizens want their local governments reimbursed.