CITIZEN FEEDBACK MECHANISMS IN MUNICIPAL SERVICES

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CITIZEN FEEDBACK MECHANISMS IN MUNICIPAL SERVICES[1]

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Introduction

Citizen participation in community affairs can be approached from many angles. The participants in this seminar have considered it from the consumer's point of view, from the planner's point of view, and from the researcher's point of view, to mention only three. However, I would like to discuss an alternative approach to citizen participation--one that emphasizes the point of view of municipal officials. These are the people who work in city hall or the line agencies, who deal with the delivery of services, and who at the same time would like to engage citizens in some fashion or another in improving services.

From this point of view, the goal is to have officials listen more closely to what residents say. To improve officials' capability for listening, there is an array of citizen feedback mechanisms, some of which have been tried in some cities and that might be tried now in other cities such as Fort Wayne. Some of these projects represent weak forms of feedback in the sense that all they involve is getting information from citizens; others are strong forms in that they call for neighborhood control and power over services.[2]

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[1]A revised version of this paper was presented at the Neighborhood Concepts of Local Government Seminar, Fort Wayne, Indiana, September 1975, sponsored by the City of Fort Wayne.

[2]For a general review, see Robert K. Yin and Douglas Yates, *Street-Level Governments: Assessing Decentralization and Urban Services* (Lexington, Massachusetts: D. C. Heath, 1975).

PREFACE

This paper summarizes much of the work that I have done on citizens and their role in municipal service delivery. The work was done at both the New York City-Rand Institute and the Rand Washington office, and for the reader's convenience there are numerous references to the original reports of this research.

In reviewing the alternative feedback mechanisms, one should keep three lessons in mind. First, no single mechanism is best. Different agencies and different cities have different needs, and the appropriate mechanism depends on the particular situation. Second, initiative from the local level is needed to make a citizen feedback mechanism work best. There is very little, for instance, that can be done by federal officials other than to suggest what others have done. Third, citizen participation must always be regarded as a political issue since there is no way to divorce administration from politics.

General Categories of Citizen Feedback Mechanisms

Citizen feedback mechanisms generally may be divided into those that fall outside of the executive branch of local governments and those that fall within its purview (see Fig. 1). Although the latter category is the subject of this paper, it is useful to remember that many of the traditional types of feedback--e.g., voting, contacting one's legislative representative, and pursuing cases in the courts--fall outside of the executive branch. In the last few years, for instance, the courts have dealt with the important question of equity and the distribution of municipal services.[1] The basis of this legal issue is that residents of one neighborhood in a city may receive poorer services than residents in another neighborhood, even though both groups may pay similar taxes and should receive the same amounts of service. The courts have also dealt with racial discrimination and alleged violations of the 14th Amendment. Other types of mechanisms outside the

[1] See Robert K. Yin, "On the Equitable Outcome of Municipal Services," paper presented at the Operations Research Society of America annual meeting, Boston, April 1974.

executive branch are political organizations and the mass media. Every city has its range of political and civic organizations that express the views of special interest groups, and the mass media often help to provide such forms of citizen feedback as newspaper hotlines and investigative reporting by the local television station.

Some of the problems with these mechanisms outside the jurisdiction of the executive branch are that they tend to work slowly and many citizens cannot use them without special resources. For instance, both time and money are needed to pursue cases in court. Moreover, these mechanisms are also somewhat ineffective because they lack direct links to the municipal services about which citizen complain. In other words, when a citizen complains about an agency to a legislator, the legislator still has to contact the agency to try to influence it. In fact, it is these shortcomings that led to the development of new forms of citizen feedback within the executive branch. This paper discusses five such mechanisms (excluding surveys and polls because their methods of operation are commonly known), treating them in the order of ascending financial and political costs.

Urban Indicators

Urban indicators, or the data (records) collected by every municipal agency, are one of the cheapest ways of getting citizen feedback. An examination of fire alarm data in New York City, for instance, reveals that false alarms have a very rhythmic pattern, with a peak that tends to fall around July 4th.[1] The pattern seems to be

[1]See Robert K. Yin, "The Development of Social Indicators: The Case of Fire Alarms," paper presented at the Eastern Sociological Society annual meeting, Boston, April 1972.

Table 1 shows data from a survey reported in the *Municipal Yearbook*. The survey covered large cities (those over 100,000) and small cities (those between 25,000 and 100,000), and Table 1 indicates the proportion of these two groups of cities that regularly held neighborhood meetings. The meetings may have been convened by chief executives, legislative bodies, or planning boards.

Meetings are certainly a fairly easy and cheap way of increasing feedback, discussion, and personal contact between officials and citizens. Meetings are most frequently used to ascertain citizens' responses to the plans for building new facilities. However, as a feedback mechanism, meetings usually do not give residents much power. Often residents do not have sufficient time to prepare for a meeting, and they may not have the resources to put forth their case effectively. The most that is usually achieved is an exchange of views; there is little real control over services on the part of residents.

Grievance Procedures

A third type of feedback mechanism, grievance procedures, is slightly more expensive but provides more feedback and control. Grievance procedures are probably the most prevalent mode of citizen feedback (see Table 2). This mechanism usually involves a single telephone number a resident can call or a single place that a resident can visit if he or she has a problem.

The typical city-wide grievance procedure is not intended to displace in any way each local agency's complaint procedures. On the contrary, city-wide grievance procedures are specifically intended to deal with those problems where a resident does not know to which agency

an obvious reflection of youths being on the street in the hot summer, but that may not be so. An examination of the false alarms in Detroit reveals that Detroit's pattern is exactly the reverse. Thus, a different theory of urban activity would have to be developed. The point, however, is that different cities have different service needs, and the existing municipal records can often serve as indicators of these needs. Many indicators do have regular patterns, and officials can easily and cheaply monitor them for deviations signaling that something has changed and leading to further inquiries.

Another kind of indicator might be the relocation patterns of families. Every city has some agency--e.g., the Red Cross or the welfare department--that keeps records of the times when, because of an emergency, families have had to relocate. Mapping such patterns sometimes gives clues about the neighborhoods that are likely to need help in the future. Families on welfare in particular may move because of an emergency, and they may relocate in a neighborhood experiencing the incipient stages of decline. Monitoring relocation patterns could thus lead both to services intended to help the relocated family adjust to its new neighborhood and to further inquiry concerning the general conditions of the neighborhood, which might prevent further problems. In summary, urban indicators are derived from records that are already on hand; all that is necessary is to monitor them with an analytic eye.[1]

Neighborhood Meetings

A second kind of feedback mechanism is the neighborhood meeting.

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[1]For a field-oriented approach to urban indicators, see Robert K. Yin, *Participant-Observation and the Development of Urban Neighborhood Policy*, The New York City-Rand Institute, R-962, February 1972.

to turn. Using New York City again as an example, suppose that there is the body of a dead dog on the roof of a building and a resident wants to get the carcass removed. Now, whom should the resident call? It might be the sanitation department, the housing department, or even the health department. There is a large number of similar occasions when a citizen does not know just whom to call or is unaware of the detailed organization of government agencies. Since city-wide grievance procedures can be given better publicity than the complaint procedures of single agencies, more people are likely to be aware of them. And, a city-wide grievance mechanism may be able to deal effectively with a problem because it has arisen before in some other neighborhood.

In one particularly interesting type of grievance procedure, a single person--an ombudsman (or an ombudsperson)--serves in a city-wide capacity. Several cities have tried this approach. The office of ombudsman originated in Europe, where an ombudsman was appointed by the legislative branch and citizens would then bring their problems to the ombudsman, who could in turn recommend new legislation. In American cities, the ombudsman has most frequently been attached to the mayor (or executive branch). Fig. 2 is a map showing some of the states and cities that at one time or another have had some kind of ombudsman. In Dayton, which has about 250,000 people in the central city and is the city that has had an ombudsman for the longest period of time, the operation cost about $100,000 annually. There were about 12 staff people working full time, and they dealt with about 5,000 complaints a year.[1] What makes an ombudsman work better or worse is

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[1]See Robert K. Yin, "Cable-TV and Public Interest Programs in Dayton," in L. L. Johnson et al., *Cable Communications in the Dayton Miami Valley*, The Rand Corporation, R-943-KF/FF, Santa Monica, January 1972.

the personality of the ombudsman, the backing he or she gets from the mayor, and the extent to which the mayor uses the ombudsman as a public relations official.

Neighborhood Facilities

In many cities, including New York and Boston, the city governments have actually located multi-purpose facilities that are within walking distance (about one-half mile at the maximum) of the residents in the neighborhoods. Besides being local centers for receiving citizens' complaints, these facilities sometimes serve as places where residents can pay their local taxes or water bills. Functions normally carried out in a downtown city hall, in other words, can be decentralized in this way to a neighborhood facility.

Fig. 3 shows the organization chart for one of the most well-known examples of neighborhood facilities, the little city halls in Boston. Boston has had 14 little city halls covering its neighborhoods, and the entire operation cost about $1.5 million a year. There are about 100 staff people who handle between 70,000 and 80,000 complaints a year, which is no small undertaking. The city halls are not necessarily located in new buildings; they can be trailers or storefronts.

Moreover, a city does not necessarily have to start from scratch. Too often it is forgotten that there already are neighborhood facilities. In Somerville, Massachusetts, a suburb of Boston that just touches on Cambridge and Boston and has about 100,000 people, there are five branch libraries.[1] Most residents are within walking distance

[1]See William A. Lucas and Robert K. Yin, *Serving Local Needs with Telecommunications*, The Rand Corporation, R-1345-MF, Santa Monica, November 1972.

(one-half mile) of at least one of these libraries, and those that are not may be near firehouses or other municipal buildings that could serve as community centers. In the case of an information and referral service or a grievance procedure, the library staff could be trained, under certain conditions, to perform those activities, so that a city would not even have to start with a totally new staff.[1]

Neighborhood Organizations

The fifth and last kind of feedback mechanism covers programs with which most officials are well acquainted. These programs have frequently, but not always, stemmed from the federal Community Action and Model Cities efforts and involve a neighborhood organization formed either by election or by appointment. The organization may have considerable resources at its disposal and may attempt to improve the services in the neighborhood or to deal with residents' problems.

In a study done a couple of years ago, we wanted to identify those factors in neighborhood organizations that made such organizations powerful in the sense that neighborhood residents could influence service agencies.[2] We found that of the possible organizational features and functions, three were most frequently correlated with the occurrence of citizens' power: paid staff, a grievance procedure, and review over budget formulation. Of these three, the availability of paid staff turned out to be of greatest importance. In fact, some of the most serious political battles concerning local organizations are

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[1]See Robert K. Yin et al., *Neighborhood Communications Centers*, The Rand Corporation, R-1564-MF, Santa Monica, November 1974.

[2]See R. K. Yin et al., *Citizen Organizations: Increasing Client Control Over Services*, The Rand Corporation, R-1196-HEW, Santa Monica, April 1973.

often over the question of paid staff: those who do not want a powerful organization do not want to give it enough resources to hire its own staff. If one considers neighborhood organizations in their most powerful form, one is starting to consider neighborhood government, but there are two important qualifications: A genuine neighborhood government must be constitutionally based--i.e., there must be some provision for it in the city charter or the state constitution--and the neighborhood government must have some kind of taxing authority.

Conclusions

From the municipal official's approach, there are at least three important lessons about citizen feedback mechanisms. First, effective feedback and participation require that citizens have the same level of decentralized or centralized organization as the relevant municipal service. Neighborhood based indicators, meetings, and organizations can create all sorts of pressure on city hall or on local agencies, but if the local agencies are centralized and do not operate on a district basis, it may be difficult for them to respond directly to a neighborhood's problem. To take but a simple example, suppose that a neighborhood has two or three playgrounds in need of repair and that residents set priorities by deciding which playground is to be repaired first. If the public works or recreation department is not controlled at the district level, the district official must send a requisition to a central office that does not necessarily discriminate according to neighborhoods.[1] The requisition ends up on a pile of other requisitions

[1] See Robert K. Yin et al., "Administrative Decentralization of Municipal Services," *Policy Sciences*, Vol. 5, March 1974, pp. 57-70.

that is dealt with according to a priority imposed by administrative accident rather than by local priorities, and the citizen feedback mechanism has only a frustrating effect.

Second, if a feedback mechanism does not lead to a perceptible response, the mechanism may fall into perverse disuse. In a grievance procedure that fails to produce some result, even the official who is supposed to deal with the complaints--the ombudsman or the neighborhood complaint officer--will be frustrated. Suppose that some residents want to remove a vacant building and it is agreed by all that this is a desirable action. In New York, it may take as much as two years from the initial request before the building is torn down. In other cases, the local complaint officer may have difficulty reaching the housing department or some other agency to deal with a complaint. If any of these situations occur frequently enough, the complaint system may adapt by closing shop in a unique way: The local complaint officer might tie-up the telephone line by continually talking to his or her friends, the complaint office might move out of its storefront location to a less accessible place, or the office might fail to publicize its presence. The citizen feedback mechanism exists, but cannot be used by residents.

Third, as stated at the outset, no single mechanism works best. Different mechanisms become differentially advantageous, depending upon the nature of the problem, a city's prior history of citizen participation, and the specific line agency involved. The most successful efforts may indeed stem from multiple efforts in which a variety

of feedback mechanisms, including surveys and polls, is used over a variety of situations.[1]

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[1]See Robert K. Yin, "Goals for Citizen Involvement," paper presented at the American Association for the Advancement of Science annual meeting, New York, January 1975.

Figure 1

ALTERNATE CITIZEN FEEDBACK MECHANISMS

NON-EXECUTIVE BRANCH	EXECUTIVE BRANCH
Voting	Urban Indicators
Complaints to Legislators	Neighborhood Meetings
Court Cases	Complaint Mechanisms
Civic Organizations	Neighborhood Facilities
Newspaper Hotlines	Neighborhood Organizations
	Surveys and Polls

Table 1

REGULAR NEIGHBORHOOD MEETINGS

Meetings Held By:	Large Cities* (n = 90)		Small Cities** (n = 380)	
	No.	%	No.	%
Chief Executive	22	24	61	16
Legislature	4	4	14	4
City Board or Commissions	32	36	51	13

SOURCE: Carl W. Stenberg, "Decentralization and the City," *1972 Municipal Year Book.*

*More than 100,000 population.

**25,000 to 100,000 population.

Table 2

COMPLAINT MECHANISMS

Mechanisms	Large Cities* (n = 90)		Small Cities** (n = 380)	
	No.	%	No.	%
Special telephone number	43	48	93	24
Special complaint bureau	52	58	109	29
Ombudsman or community service officer	41	46	76	20

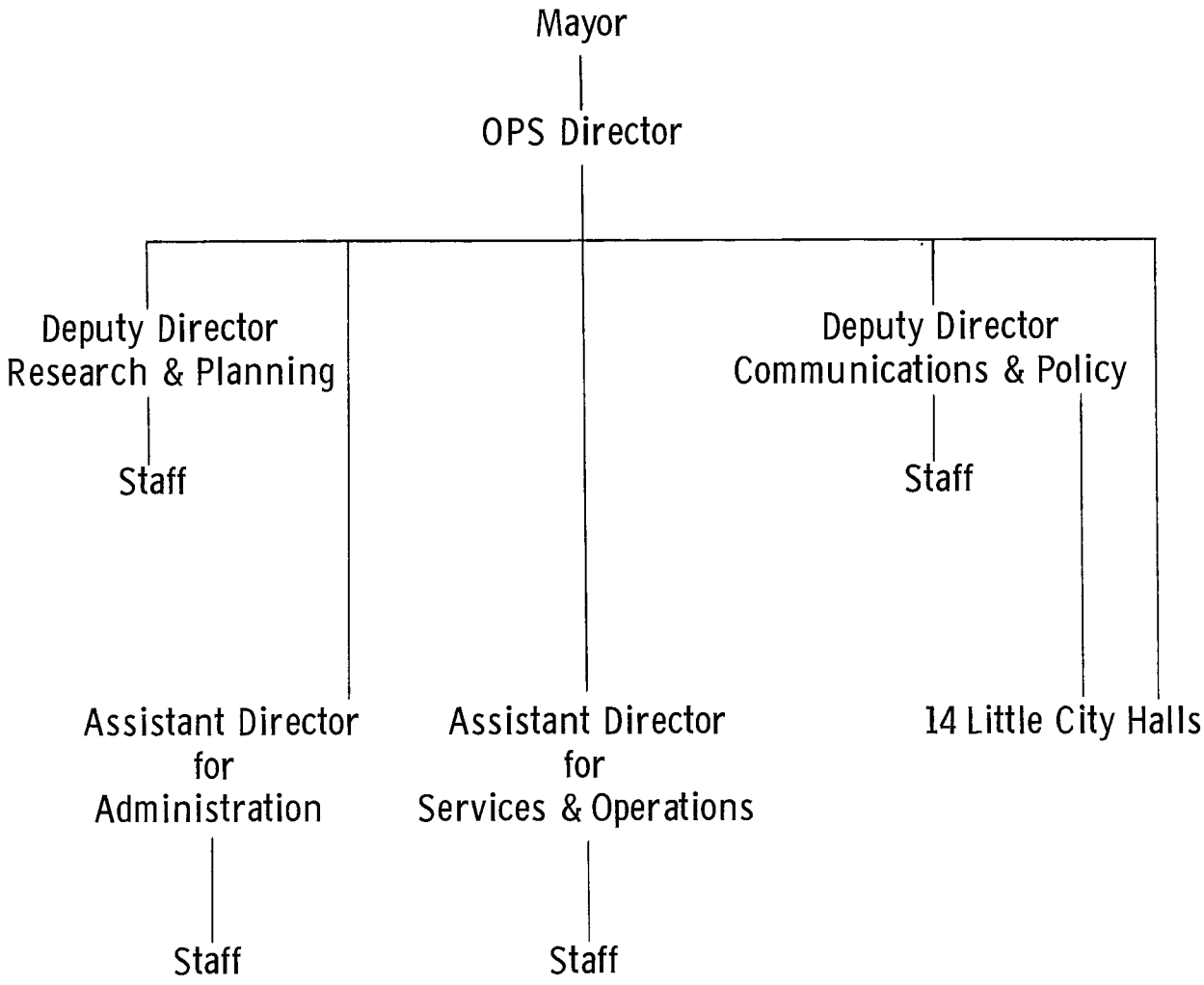
SOURCE: Carl W. Stenberg, "Decentralization and the City," *1972 Municipal Year Book*.

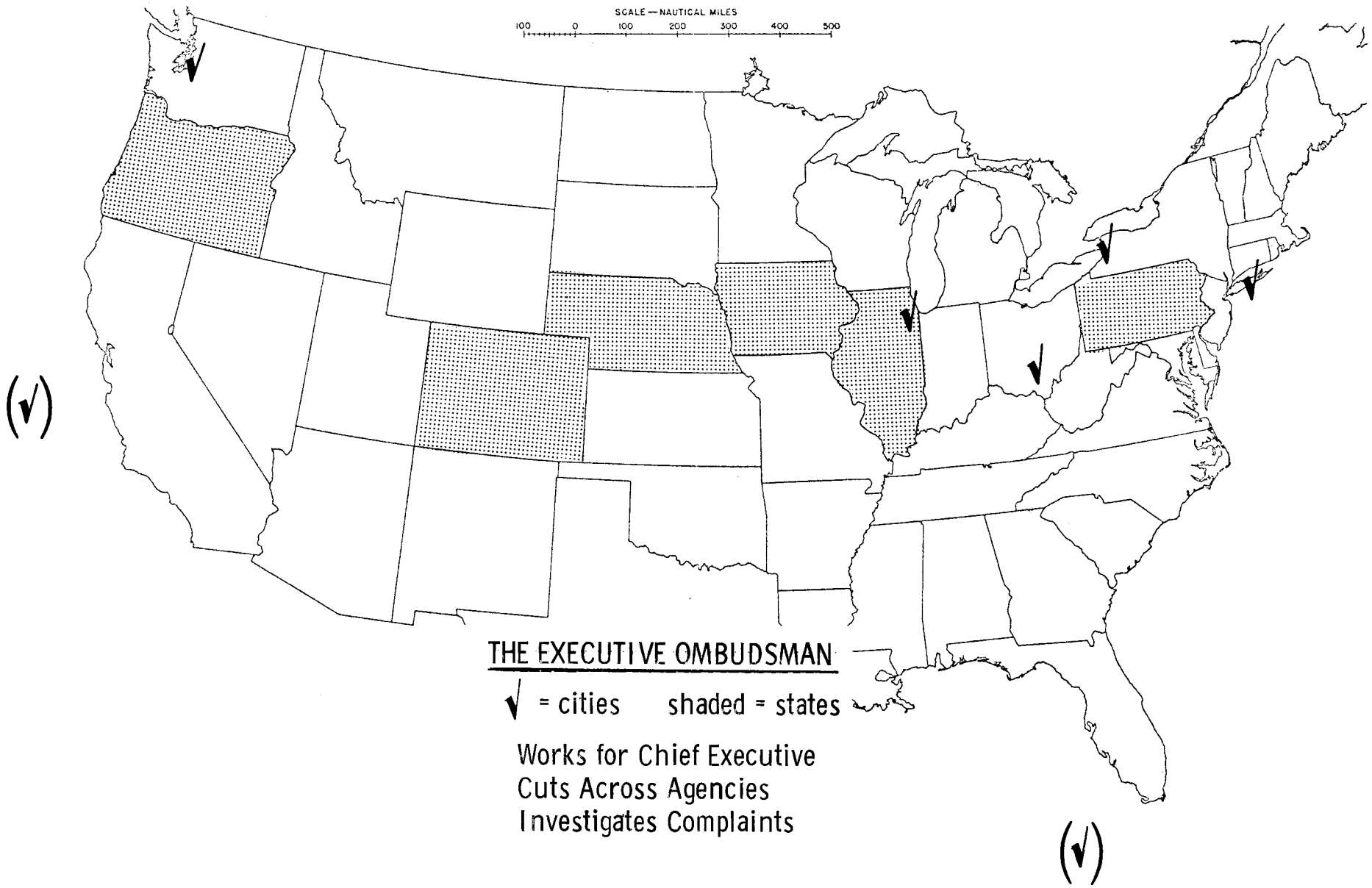
*More than 100,000 population.

**25,000 to 100,000 population.

Figure 3

ORGANIZATION CHART OF THE OFFICE OF PUBLIC SERVICE
(Boston)





THE EXECUTIVE OMBUDSMAN

√ = cities shaded = states

Works for Chief Executive
Cuts Across Agencies
Investigates Complaints