



Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) About Updates to the Tompkins County Government Administrative Manual

In early 2008, the Government Operations (GO) Committee initiated a plan to have the Administrative Manual of Tompkins County Government Policies and Procedures updated. The goal is to have at least 50 percent of the information contained within it current by the end of 2009. A list of those policies identified for review and revision can be found at <http://www.tompkinscountyny.gov/ctyadmin/policy/15yearpolicy.pdf>. Offered here is a brief FAQ, which answers the most common questions County staff have about this important effort to make our Administrative Manual an up-to-date functional management tool.

1. Why is there the need for a comprehensive Administrative Manual update at this time?

Currently, there is no coordinated approach to updating sections of the Administrative Policy Manual or stated guidelines on how this should be done. The need for a coordinated approach is critical because the information contained in the Manual is used to support all departments and administrative units of the County. The Manual consists of six core sections and 94 subsections. The majority of the recorded policies (63%) originated in 1981, indicating that most of the information is approximately 26 years old. Roughly 75% of the policies have been revised at least once; however, revision dates range from 1984 to 2006, which is a significant span of 22 years. Inconsistencies in our policies need to be identified and resolved. Policies and procedures that are inaccurate or outdated jeopardize the overall quality of our operations. Because we rely on our policies and procedures for guiding our management, financial, and administrative decisions and actions, it is important that we have a plan and a process in place for routinely ensuring the accuracy and currency of the County's Administrative Manual.

2. I just recently became aware of this. When did this update effort start and how was it communicated?

In 2007, the Government Operations (GO) Standing Committee adopted the goal to “administer the development of a plan, including guidelines and process, for routine review and/or updates to the County Administrative Policy Manual.” The plan was approved and initiated in January 2008. Based on the plan, at least 50 per cent of the information contained within the Manual will be made current by the end of 2009. It is an aggressive goal, but the GO Committee believes it is attainable with the cooperation of county department and administrative leadership.

The update effort has been communicated in a number of ways, including presentations and routine updates at monthly department head meetings; communications from Mike Hattery, 2008 GO Committee Chair; pop-ups on the Administrative Manual web site (e.g., “Did you know...?” messages that are displayed with each logon to the Administrative Manual); and routine report-outs to the Government Operations Committee.

3. How many policies and procedures are slated to be updated and in what timeframe?

To date, 49 policies and/or procedures have been identified for updating based on the following criteria:

- a.) no review or update made since the "Effective Date";
- b.) no review or update made within the past 15 years of the "Most Recent Revision" date; or
- c.) a policy is changed because of labor contract negotiations.

It is anticipated that the Responsible Departments will proceed with the necessary content revisions, working throughout 2008 and 2009, with the goal of having all updates completed and approved by the GO Committee as of the end of 2009.

4. Will all Departments be affected by the update exercise?

Based on the criteria used to determine those policies and procedures in most need of revision, only six departments are involved directly: Clerk of the Legislature, County Administration, Facilities, Finance, Personnel and Information Technology Services. However, depending on the content that needs to be updated, these departments may need to reach out to other departments for guidance and feedback. Also, Policy 01-04, which contains all of the required steps for adding new policy/procedure or revising existing policy/procedure, provides for an Impact Review. An Impact Review is conducted by designated department/division personnel for assessing the impact of the new or revised policy/procedure on day-to-day operations, critical timelines/deadlines, or existing financial or human resources. So even though you may not be called upon to help prepare revised content, you may be called upon to review new content and document your feedback.

5. If my department is a designated “Responsible Department” with a list of policies and procedures to be revised, what’s the next step?

The guidance you need on how to modify the Administrative Manual can be found in the recently updated Policy 01-04 (<http://www.tompkinscountyny.gov/ctyadmin/policy/01-04.htm>).

This policy indicates the steps to take to establish new or modify existing policy and procedures. It also includes relevant definitions, as well as links to the forms you will use to create or modify policy and procedures. If you have questions, please contact County Administration at 274-5551.

6. I don’t know where to begin. How do I get help?

First, review the recently updated Policy 01-04 (<http://www.tompkinscountyny.gov/ctyadmin/policy/01-04.htm>) (see Item #5 above.) If you have questions, don’t hesitate to call County Administration at 274-5551. We will be happy to schedule a time to discuss this initiative with you and other members of your staff.

7. How do I know if the policy I am reviewing actually needs to be a policy or if it should be a procedure?

As defined in Policy 01-04 (see above), a policy is “a Legislative statement of intention to guide political, management, financial, or administrative decisions and achieve rational outcome(s).” A procedure is defined as “a prescribed set of steps, actions, or activities generally needed to obtain consistent results.”

A policy reflects a formal position taken by a legislative body, such as a resolution of the County Legislature or a state or local law. A procedure reflects activities dictated by sound administrative practice, but not based on legislative intent.

8. How many references do I need?

Since a policy reflects a statement of legislative intent, in the case of a policy, at least one reference must be included. Multiple references should be cited if the policy arises from more than one legislative basis (for example, from both state and local law.) You should cite as many references as apply.

9. What happens if the policy is just to follow state, local or civil service law, how in-depth do I have to go?

You should include information in sufficient depth to provide the reader an overview of the policy's general intent and must clearly state where the policy can be found, including any process steps related to the policy that are not listed elsewhere.

10. What if I don't have the time to revise the content of the policy or procedure but I do have time to reformat the existing language according to the new template—is that okay?

The intent of this update effort is to have all content reviewed for accuracy and to ensure that the written policy or procedure reflects current practice. If any of the content of the old policy or procedure is incorrect, then the content must be updated. Also, if the current content does not mirror what we do or, conversely, is not stated clearly and with sufficient detail to guide and ensure good practice, then the content must be updated.

If the content does not need updating, then it is expected that the policy or procedure be reformatted according to the new template (<http://www.tompkinscountyny.gov/ctyadmin/policy/policy.doc>) and sent to County Administration with a note explaining why a content change was not needed at this time.

Even if there is no change to the policy or procedure, the reformatted information will be forwarded to the appropriate Standing (Program) Committee(s) as outlined in Policy 01-04.

11. Given all of my other responsibilities, not to mention the unforeseen "priorities" that come my way, I don't have time to read through a bunch of policies. Is this really a necessity?

Yes, it is necessary because the majority of the recorded policies (63%) originated in 1981, indicating that most of the information is approximately 26 years old. It is recognized that this is one of those tasks that is easy to put off for more pressing needs; however, policies and procedures that are inaccurate or outdated jeopardize the overall quality of our operations. We hope you will agree that now is the time to contribute to making our Administrative Manual an up-to-date, functional management tool.

If you have questions about the GO Committee Administrative Manual maintenance plan, please contact the Department of County Administration at 274-5551, or contact the Department Secretary, Doreen Lauper, via e-mail at ctyadmin@tompkins-co.org. You may also contact the GO Committee members if you have any questions or concerns.