How Government Works

Understanding how our government works will help you more effectively engage the greater community with your project. The United States government is set up with many levels. At the top is the federal government. If a law is passed on a federal level, it is a national law effective in all 50 states.

The next levels of government are state, county and city. State laws are ONLY effective in the state in which they are passed. County laws are ONLY effective in the county in which they are passed and must follow both federal and state laws. Finally, city laws are ONLY effective in the city in which they are passed and must abide by all federal, state, and county laws. If the scope of your project involves passing legislation or enacting a policy, read this guide to determine which levels of government you may need to work with to get that accomplished.

Executive Branch – responsible for executing policies written into law. The executive branch cannot, by itself, pass laws; however, it can mandate the way laws are enforced.

- Federal: President of the United States
- State of Arizona: Governor’s Office
- Pima County: County Administrator
- City of Tucson: Mayor and Council

Legislative Branch – responsible for passing new legislation. These elected officials are the only people allowed to OFFICALLY propose legislation.

- Federal: Congress (both the House of Representatives and the Senate)
- State: Arizona State Legislature
- County: Pima County Board of Supervisors
- City: Mayor and Council

Judicial Branch – responsible for settling disputes about laws.

- Federal: Circuit, Appellate, and Supreme Court
- State: Superior Court and State Supreme Court
- County: County Superior Court
- City: Tucson City Court

The Arizona Court Systems

- Limited jurisdiction - these courts can only see cases that occur within their jurisdiction, and they do not have to keep permanent records of court proceedings such as Justice of the Peace courts and Municipal courts.
- General jurisdiction- the Superior Court of Arizona is a statewide trial court that keeps permanent records of its court proceedings. Each county has a Superior court that oversees general cases.
- Appellate Jurisdiction- these courts see cases that have been appealed, or when rulings are being challenged at the lower court levels. Most cases go to the Court of Appeals, but the Supreme Court will hear cases if it involves elected officials or issues between countries.

Above this statewide system is the federal court system, which generally handles cases that are federally related. Federal cases are primarily civil cases that involve legal issues that fall in the jurisdiction of the federal government, not the state government. If the ruling is challenged then the case moves to the Federal Court of Appeals where the case will be reexamined. Finally, at the top of the federal court system is the US Supreme Court, and the legal interpretations are the final word of law in the U.S. In order to make it to the Supreme Court the case must have gone through the state and/or lower level courts.