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Smart Governance Best Practices

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About the National Association of Counties

The National Association of Counties (NACo) is the only national organization that represents county governments in the United States. Founded in 1935, NACo provides essential services to the nation’s 3,068 counties. NACo advances issues with a unified voice before the federal government, improves the public’s understanding of county government, assists counties in finding and sharing innovative solutions through education and research, and provides value-added services to save counties and taxpayers money. For more information about NACo, visit www.naco.org.
County Administration and Management
Marriage Bureau Service Expansion and System Management
New Castle County, DE
Population: 538,986

After recent economic downturn, many counties have started innovative programs with the goal of increasing revenue wherever possible. At the same time, these programs are also increasing the number of services available to county residents. With forecasts of declining revenue and budget cuts, the Marriage Bureau of New Castle County started an expansion program to increase revenue while surpassing their current level of service. Utilizing constituent input and opinion data, the Marriage Bureau was able to identify ways in which they could create better marriage ceremonies while simultaneously making profit.

The Marriage Bureau Service Expansion and Service Management Program has increased revenue, efficiency, and constituent satisfaction through an expansion of product and service offerings, better record-keeping, and decreasing costs. Through the new program, constituents are now able to receive Spanish-speaking ceremonies, ceremony witnesses, photographs, DVD’s, gift certificates, name-change kits, and heirloom certificates. Additionally, this program established an innovative online marriage portal, where individuals could utilize an online licensing application and even view live web broadcasts of ceremonies. Entitled “Web Marriage”, the new system was developed entirely in-house to reduce costs. This program has facilitated the integration of online requests, simplified records search and maintenance, improved data transfer, created in-house statistics information, and much more. Couples are now able to receive instant information regarding their licensing and product order information. Additionally, the program has also allowed mobile license issuance for couples incapable of appearing in person for the application process.

In today’s climate of budget cuts and economic downturn, it is especially important for counties to maintain and improve their services while also finding innovative methods of increasing profits. The Marriage Bureau of New Castle County has accomplished both of these priorities through its expansion and management system. Overall, these innovations have led to a 56% increase in revenue and a 28% decrease in non-wage expenses since 2007.

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Job Order Contracting (Joc) Program
Lake County, IL
Population: 704,596

In many counties, the procurement and contracting process can be very inefficient and arduous. Often, there is a backlog of funded, but unexecuted projects including maintenance, capital improvement, and facility assessment projects. These projects are vital to the community but may not be completed due to the limited staff resources and the time required for traditional bid procurement. In Lake County, IL, traditional bid procurement stipulates that every construction project greater than a bid threshold of $30,000 follow the exact same process. This inefficient method of procurement means that even the...
most simple of projects must undergo a long process of red tape and backlog.

In response, Lake County initiated its Job Order Contracting (JOC) program in an attempt to move projects through the procurement process more quickly. The program is a fixed priced and competitively bid delivery method for the efficient completion of a large number of multi-traded repair and rehabilitation projects. Included with this program is the JOC Construction Task Catalog (CTC) which contains thousands of material and labor construction assemblies, customized to Lake County’s Standards to compete with unit prices. JOC candidate contractors bid an adjustment factor on the unit assemblies, which then become the basis for all future project pricing. The company with the lowest total combined adjustment factor is deemed the “County’s JOC Contractor” and enters into a maximum value, fixed term contract with Lake County. This organization becomes the preferred source for all JOC appropriate projects.

This indefinite delivery / indefinite quantity (ID/IQ) procurement tool has allowed for work to be completed effectively, efficiently, and economically resulting in a high quality finished product for Lake County government and Lake County taxpayers. Between November of 2010 and April of 2011, Lake County retrofitted more than $1.2 million in energy efficient lighting and controls throughout County facilities.

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Fast Pass System
Macomb County, MI
Population: 841,126

Long lines and overcrowded waiting rooms are often the image of many county clerk offices around the country. In Macomb County, the vital records section of the clerk’s office processes over 180 transactions per day, with many of these customers arriving between the hours of 11:30 a.m. and 1:30 p.m. The customers must complete a form, wait in line, see a clerk, wait for the clerk to process the customer’s document or request, pay for the transaction, and finally receive their document. At the busiest times, or when the office is short-staffed, this can increase wait times for customers dramatically. In response, Macomb County created its Fast Pass system to increase efficiency and customer satisfaction.

With the introduction of the Fast Pass system, customers have the option to schedule an appointment on the county clerk’s website by indicating what type of service they want and by providing their contract information. After the customer completes their request and application, they are given the option of paying by credit card using Google Checkout, or choosing to pay once they arrive at the office. When the customer arrives for their scheduled appointment, they check in at a public computer terminal in the clerk’s lobby, or via their Internet-enabled phone. Counter clerks are instantly notified that a Fast Pass customer is in the lobby. Clerks are also able to see the schedule in advance, along with a performance record. With this program, customers visiting the clerk’s office can schedule an appointment in advance, allowing the customer to skip the wait in line. This also allows the clerks to prepare the customer’s order in advance. Most importantly, this shifts the demand during the busy times to the less busy times, allowing staff time to
complete work and customers to be spread throughout the day.

This program has increased efficiency in the clerk’s office dramatically. On top of this, the program has also boosted staff morale, as their work load is now more manageable. Furthermore, customers are far more satisfied with this program as it allows them to spend minimal time at the clerk’s office. In all, this program is a great success for the county.

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In order to increase efficiency and remove unnecessary red tape from certain projects, many local governments have begun to consolidate some of their departments. In Crow Wing County, the government began to consolidate many of its departments in 2008. The primary goals of the consolidation were to improve customer service and coordination among land related programs and staff. Through this consolidation, Crow Wing County combined five departments into one individual Land Services Department.

The five consolidated departments were the Planning and Zoning, Solid Waste, Lands, Survey and the Assessor’s Office. Through this program, these five offices were moved into one individual building. In order to ensure competency of the new department, the county utilized the LEAN process to cross train department wide administrative staff to provide services to customers across program lines. Furthermore, the consolidation established a quarterly department newsletter emailed to local elected officials countywide summarizing the activities of the Department and upcoming matters. Most beneficial to the new department was the introduction of new GIS capabilities as a result of the consolidation, which allows the land services division more reliable control over their data.

This initiative resulted in a more efficient, effective, and competent method of delivering land services to county residents. Staff positions were re-crafted to create Land Service Specialists who are assigned to specific areas of the county to meet with applicants onsite within 10 days of an application. This practice has resulted in better environmental protection and better customer service. Landowners appreciate the service, which often results in improvements to the applications that benefit the customer and the environment.

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In 2009, Richland County realized that their two full-time business inspectors were only capable of inspecting 8.25% of businesses inspector per year, meaning that it would take two inspectors six years to inspect all businesses in the unincorporated areas of Richland County. The county determined that 75% of new businesses will fail within
their first three years of operation. Therefore, many businesses may open and close without ever having obtained a business license inspection. Clearly, this method of inspection is very inefficient and costly. In response, Richland County created their Canvas the County program.

The program employed a series of temporary inspectors to canvass local businesses during a two-week period. The inspectors were sent out to issue fees and other fines for businesses that were not correctly following county business guidelines. For example, businesses could receive fines for breaking rules that relate to new food tax rates, smoking regulations, and other issues. The inspectors were employed temporarily and carpooled in an effort to save money on automobile expenses. Additionally, the inspectors were directed to canvass dense business districts in an attempt to increase efficiency. The operating costs of the program were budgeted out to $21,000. However, after two weeks of inspecting, more than half of the budget was left over, prompting the county to pursue a third week of inspections. After three weeks, the program cost only $10,009 of the original $21,000 budget.

With such low operating costs, this program can be easily replicated and implemented in any county. The results of the program are outstanding. In three months, this pilot project generated $261,133 in business license fees and $49,470 in penalties, for a total of $310,603. With a program cost of $10,009, the return on investment was 31:1.

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Problem Solving Courts - A County-Courts Partnership
Winnebago County, IL
Population: 295,127

Since the 1960’s, national and local crime rates have been steadily declining but jails remain overcrowded within certain districts. As a result, there has been an interest in changing the prosecution and incarceration system in America. Winnebago County of Illinois started their Problem Solving Courts campaign in an effort to alter the incarceration process to make it a more resourceful process that actually gives solutions to problems rather than a punishment.

Working directly with the 17th Judicial Circuit Court, Winnebago County has established a comprehensive prosecution process that seeks to find meaningful solutions for criminal proceedings. Their program is based on five platforms: (1) Diversion Programs; (2) Deferred Prosecution; (3) Specialty Courts, such as drug and mental health courts; (4) Alternative-to-incarceration models; and, (5) re-entry models. Over the past four years, the program has focused primarily on specialty courts and alternative-to-incarceration models. As a result, the 17th Judicial Circuit Court has established a wide array of specialty courts that allow the prosecution to handle the case in a different manner than through the traditional “get tough” policies practiced by typical criminal proceedings. Aside from specialty courts, the campaign encourages rehabilitation as an alternative to incarceration.

As jails in Winnebago County have historically been overcrowded, the Problem Solving Courts campaign has given a solution to the incarceration dilemma. The establishment of specialty courts combined with alternative punishments has saved the county a great deal of money and time that would have otherwise been spent on an inmate. As
a result of the mental illness specialty court alone, a total of 25,389 jail days were saved between 2005 and 2010 for an expense savings of $1,523,340 at $60 per day. While this campaign may save jail space and money, it costs Winnebago County around $2.3 million annually on staffing and programs for its alternative criminal justice approaches. On top of this, the County typically allocates around $5 million for other aspects of the program.

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**The CHAMP Program**

Jefferson County, TX  
Population: 252,390

In recent years, investigations by the Texas legislature recognized that there has been an enormous amount of uncollected money in the judicial system. In response, the state legislature enacted an article which requires collection for improvement programs of counties with large populations. However, Jefferson County found that the system established by the legislature to collect unclaimed judicial money was not functioning during the recession. The county saw that their revenue began to dwindle while the number of warrants they issued began to rise. In response, the county implemented it’s CHAMP program to ensure that defendants actually pay their fines.

An acronym for Justice Court – In House Payment Improvement Program, the initiative established an adjudication system that educates the public on paying court fines. The program sends out letters to defendants which highlight the many new ways they can pay their obligations, including a new in-house credit card payment initiative. The letter is mailed immediately upon receipt of the ticket. In addition to the mailing initiative, the CHAMP program also includes an educational DVD for defendants to watch while they wait for their meeting with the judge. The short and informative video explains why the court is mandated to do payment plans and how the defendant can pay their fines. Additionally, the film teaches the defendant on court room etiquette and answers frequently asked questions.

Since the full implementation of the program in 2011, intake has increased tremendously. In less than six months, the county saw $93,500 more in revenue than during the same time span a year earlier. By the end of the first year, the county had actually begun to dispose more cases than they took in.

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Automated License Plate Readers Enhance Victim Restoration
Sacramento County, CA
Population: 1,421,959

In 2010, the Sacramento Area was ranked sixth in the nation as a “hot spot” for stolen cars. Auto theft can have a devastating effect on the life of a victim. Vehicles are frequently stolen from lower-income neighborhoods and may be the family’s only source of transportation to work, school and vital services in the community. In response to the vehicle theft crisis, Sacramento County established an automated license plate reader program to reduce vehicle theft and enhance victim restoration.

The Sacramento County Probation Department equipped two patrol vehicles with Automated License Plate Reader (ALPR) technology in April 2010. The ALPR cameras automatically check a statewide list of stolen vehicles while officers are in the community during the course of their normal duties, putting more “eyes on the street.” Over 3,000 license plates can be scanned per hour and at speeds of up to 100 miles per hour. An ALPR camera is also mounted on a Probation Department Field Office, increasing efficiency and reliability.

The longer a car is missing, the greater the impact to the victim. With the introduction of this initiative, stolen cars can be promptly returned to their rightful owner. As of February 7, 2012, 139 cars have been recovered and returned to their owners. In addition, several alleged car thieves have been arrested. Overall, this has been a very successful program for both law enforcement and county residents.

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Financial Management

The Public Assistance Real Property Repayment System
Suffolk County, NY
Population: 1,494,434

In light of the recent financial crisis, a common dilemma for many individuals is the repayment of bonds and mortgages. However, in Suffolk County, this dilemma has been occurring for a while under their public assistance program, which financially assists home buyers with a public assistance mortgage. Over the past few years, the county has realized that many public assistance recipients would either neglect to notify Department of Social Services regarding the impending sale of their home or forget the existence of the bond and mortgage and therefore the County was unable to immediately recover monies owed. In many cases the County Attorney’s Office would need to get involved to try to recover from the public assistance recipient, title company, or even third parties. Often the realization that the property was sold occurred years later and the County was without any legal recourse to recover.

Acknowledging that the current method to recoup public assistance was inadequate, DSS reached out to the County Clerk to determine if there was a better and more efficient way of tracking properties and...
identifying land transfers. After several meetings between DSS and the computer staff of the County Clerk’s Office, a plan was developed using the County Clerk’s existing land record retrieval system. It was decided that a new system would be required that was user friendly for those not familiar with searching land records that would require minimal training. The new system, Public Assistance Real Property Repayment System, provides for an internet based program, allowing for access in DSS offices throughout Suffolk County. The new program provides DSS the ability to monitor, in near real time, any real property transfers connected to public assistance recipients. Suffolk County is now better equipped to recover these claims. The new system provides for an internet based program which allows for access in DSS offices throughout Suffolk County.

To date, the PARPRS has identified $2.3 million of potential public assistance recoveries, with $867,000 having been recovered to Suffolk County. In a time when budgets are strained, county governments will need to look for innovative ways to recoup their money. The Public Assistance Real Property Repayment system is a great example of an efficient government plan that not only saves money but increases the quality of service that residents can attain.

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Information Technology

Data Mining Solution for Child Welfare Fraud Detection
Los Angeles County, CA
Population: 9,830,420

In county government, there is only so much that can be done to combat social welfare fraud. In the arena of child welfare, fraud has become an increasingly large concern that not only reduces the amount of money available to those who are actually in need, but it has also damaged public confidence in child welfare programs. Fraud is frequently perpetrated by organized fraud rings and collusive activities undertaken by providers working with welfare participants. In response, Los Angeles County implemented an innovative data mining solution for child welfare fraud detection.

Utilizing an SAS Fraud Framework for Government, the county has incorporated data mining technology with social network, predictive, and forecasting analysis applications. The deployment of predictive fraud detection models has allowed investigators to identify and expedite the review of suspicious cases much earlier than would be the case using traditional investigative techniques and procedures. In identifying cases that match historical patterns of fraudulent activity, investigators can focus on cases with a higher probability of fraud. Consequently, the DMS technology has improved efficiencies in the investigative process since fraud investigators have more time to devote to the review of these high-risk cases.

In its first four months of operation, the use of the DMS has resulted in 125 additional referrals for child care fraud investigations. As a result of the Social Network Analysis functionality, the county has uncovered two conspiracy groups consisting of 16 cases
and has done so significantly earlier than would have been the case using traditional fraud detection procedures. This early detection significantly reduces the duration of fraudulent activities and thereby generates substantial savings for the county.

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Shared Services Program
Johnson County, KS
Population: 545,876

Many small municipalities are currently under intense budget pressure from decreasing revenue and increased service expectations from their residents. However, new technological tools and solutions offer local governments efficient ways to provide services but they often struggle to find adequate technology support. Additionally, software and hardware costs can prevent governments from making process improvements. In Kansas, the City of Mission benefited from Johnson County’s Information Technology Shared Services Program, a program designed to solve the technology dilemma for small municipalities.

A team of Information Technology Services (ITS) subject matter experts conducted a high level analysis of the City of Mission’s technology environment and produced a quote for services. This quote detailed the support services that could be offered and the cost of those services. The quote also recommended replacement of several hardware components as well as the implementation of industry standard best practices for technology management. The ITS quote for services was significantly lower than the cost of obtaining a lower level of service from the City’s current provider. Both organizations agreed to create an inter-local agreement for ITS to provide technology support and services to the City. ITS evaluated the state of the City’s hardware assets and recommended replacements in several areas. Using ITS hardware purchasing expertise and County vendor contacts, the City was able to replace nearly every component of their technology infrastructure at a cost that fit in their budget. This included everything from servers to switches to desktop computers.

The City is enjoying much lower costs for technology support with a higher level of service. This program has allowed certain city staff to reduce the time spent on technology problems and focus on their other areas of responsibility. They also report experiencing increased productivity and reliability as a result of the upgrades. Overall, this county initiative has had a long-term benefit on local municipalities.

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Transformative Technology Initiative
Muskegon County, MI
Population: 172,068

As globalization pushes county governments into the modern era more and more every day, it has become very evident that local governments must transform their technological infrastructure to not only connect with the rest of the world but to also provide better services for county residents. In Michigan, Muskegon County wanted to continue to provide exceptional services to residents, but was held back by its aging technological infrastructure. Specifically, Muskegon County was running on an aging network with a prohibitively slow connection speed. Security was also a problem; the network servers were housed in an unsecured room, which overheated very frequently. In response, Muskegon County started their Transformative Technology Initiative.

The initiative started with an upgrade to a fiber optic network in 2005. Muskegon County installed the first phase of a new VOIP system, which improved communication and financial efficiencies. By upgrading the capability of the fiber optic network, Muskegon County was able to stretch its network, meaning more coverage, while retaining high percentage availability. The upgraded system also facilitates the design of a highly available, multiservice network. Ultimately, Muskegon County consolidated its network from multiple technologies to one, immediately eliminating inefficiencies in the system and changing the network management to a much more holistic approach. Muskegon County subsequently replaced its 35 disparate, unsecured servers with a five blade data service center with two new virtualized appliances. Virtualized data center architectures make it easier to respond to business demands, ultimately consolidating massive amounts of data and providing easy, virtual access to the data at any time.

As a result of implementing the VoIP phone system, phone bills were instantly reduced from $75,000 to $20,000 per month (2005). In the latest installment (2011), the cost of employee phone usage and management has been further reduced to approximately $1,200 a month. In all, this technological upgrade has resulted in savings of more than $200,000 per year. On top of these savings, the county has seen countless other costs being cut by this program.

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Libraries
Amnesty Program for Patrons with Overdue Fines
Orange County, CA
Population: 3,018,963

County libraries are constantly looking for ways to recoup their losses, save money, and increase traffic into the library. However, many county residents rarely return to libraries after they begin to rack up large overdue book fines. In response, Orange County started an amnesty program to fix the overdue fines dilemma.

In light of the current economic climate, OC Public Libraries sought to restore the borrowing privileges of customers currently unable to check out material due to outstanding fines and encourage them to return overdue materials to the library so they would once
again be available for other library borrowers. To this end, the county instituted a one week Amnesty Program for patrons with overdue fines, coinciding with the libraries birthday. During Amnesty Week, attendance increased by over 4,500 library visitors over the same week of the previous year, in addition to an increase of almost 3,000 items being checked out. This indicates that more patrons were returning to the library to borrow materials and utilize the county’s various library services. In addition, 6,717 overdue items were returned to the shelves of branch libraries during this week. At an average book cost of $25, this equates to $167,925 in returned library materials.

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**HCL / ACF Industries Partnership to Process Library Materials**

Hennepin County, MN  
Population: 1,154,623

After the recent economic crisis, many local governments found themselves cutting jobs and finding ways to save money. As is the case with many counties, county libraries were some of the most innovative departments in regards to saving money and increasing productivity. In Hennepin County, the local library system engaged in a partnership with the Department of Community Corrections and Rehabilitation to utilize Adult Corrections Facility residents to process library books.

Through the program, the partnership provides valuable work experience to residents who volunteer to participate in the program.
A big priority for any county in America today is to improve and revitalize the local transit system. As metropolitan areas continue to sprawl into rural regions, local governments are constantly planning the inevitable rise in population and traffic. Undeniably, a growing region needs a strong transit system. However, as budgets get tighter every year, it becomes more difficult to build an advanced transit network. In response, Hennepin County partnered with neighboring governments to create the new Transit Improvement Board to give a solution to the transit dilemma.

The Counties Transit Improvement Board (CTIB) is a joint powers board in Minnesota that formed in 2008 to accelerate transit development in the metropolitan counties of Anoka, Dakota, Hennepin, Ramsey and Washington. These counties individually authorized the imposition of a one-quarter percent sales tax and a twenty dollar motor vehicle excise tax devoted to regional transit development. Through CTIB, these five counties work together to achieve consensus on awarding the proceeds of this sale tax as grants to regional transitways. This revenue provides a reliable, long-term source of transit funding for capital development and operations that reduces reliance on property tax dollars.

In all, a total of $467 million in grants has been awarded to nine transitway corridors in five counties since the creation of CTIB in 2008. Through grants awarded 2008-2011, CTIB has provided approximately $64.1 million in property tax relief. The Counties Transit Improvement Board is an example of leadership by counties that generated a creative solution to address a shared problem.

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Volunteers

Casa Peer Coordinator Program
Maricopa County, AZ
Population: 3,827,371

As a result of budget reductions, the CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocates) of Maricopa County Program began to recruit, train, certify and support community volunteers who advocate for children in foster care, typically one case at a time. A program that has seen the loss of staff positions due to budget constraints, Maricopa County’s decision to create a volunteer infrastructure to support the state-required program has proven to be very successful.

With the encouragement and support of the National CASA Association, CASA of Maricopa County introduced the Expand CASA! Pilot Program in September 2010, training an inaugural class of fifteen CASA volunteer advocates to serve as Peer Coordinators. Maricopa County utilized existing CASA volunteer advocates, in good standing with the Program, to assume coordination type duties and provide support to brand new CASA advocate volunteers joining the CASA of Maricopa County Program. Adding additional coordinators reduces the number of individual volunteer advocates assigned to each coordinator, allowing for a more meaningful, responsive coordinator and volunteer advocate relationship. The creation of a mid-manager coordinator...
position enhances the volunteer experience of incoming volunteers and strengthens the senior volunteer advocates affiliation to the CASA of Maricopa County Program, thereby increasing retention by providing opportunities for growth.

The program has been very successful, with over 400 volunteers affiliated with the program, of which only thirty-one volunteers have exited. This program is a great example of a county initiative to increase the quality of service for children in foster care. Not only does this program increase the competency and accountability of foster care volunteers, but it also creates a more friendly and happy community.

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