Glen Whitley’s 2010-11 Presidential Initiative
County Government Works:
An Initiative to Raise Awareness and Understanding of Counties

TALKING POINTS

Glen Whitley’s presidential Initiative encourages all county officials to help raise awareness about the essential services and programs county governments provide to America’s communities. Here are some talking points to assist you in speaking to business leaders, community organizations, nonprofits, youth groups, faith-based organizations and others about the role and responsibilities of county government. The suggested information below will help you discuss counties from a national perspective and from a state and local perspective. Don't be afraid to give it your own spin. Always try to bring printed information about your county for your audience and encourage them to visit your county's website.

The National View of Counties

- There are 3,068 counties in the country
- All states except Connecticut and Rhode Island have county governments
- Counties are also called parishes in Louisiana and boroughs in Alaska
- Delaware and Hawaii have the fewest counties, only 3 and 4 respectively
- Texas has the most counties with 254
- 37 jurisdictions are consolidated “city/counties,” such as San Francisco
- The largest county by population is Los Angeles County with 10 million people
- The smallest county by population is Loving County, Texas with just 60 people
- The largest county is North Slope Borough, Alaska, 86,000 square miles
- The smallest county is Arlington County, Virginia, 26 square miles
- There are 80 counties with a population of more than 500,000
- There are 2,142 counties with a population of less than 50,000

The History of Counties

- County government form has its roots in England where counties served as the administrative arm of the national and local governments.
- The county structure was adopted by colonists in North America. Our counties were created as administrative districts of the state to make sure that services are efficiently delivered locally. As a level of government close to the average citizen, county officials provide a measure of local control over important matters that affect our families and the communities in which we live.
Services provided by county governments include:

- Courts, including records of civil lawsuits and criminal justice cases
- Record keeping for property, business filings and births, deaths and marriages
- Public Safety; the operation of jails and medical examiner services
- Property assessment and tax collection
- Oversight of federal, state and county elections and help with local elections
- Public health with a focus on disease prevention, immunization, healthy lifestyles and sometimes running hospitals
- Handling emergency services and some oversight of a local emergency response
- Maintenance of county roads and bridges
- Providing a human services safety net including mental health care programs; access to job search and retraining efforts
- Some counties participate in the delivery of drinking water; wastewater treatment; solid waste collection and its disposal
- Some counties participate in land use planning and economic development

County government structure

- County authority is generally derived from the state constitutions
- County authority is diverse and differs widely from state to state.
- There are three basic forms of county government:
  - The commission form of county government has a governing body made up of an elected board of commissioners or supervisors that serves as a legislative body chaired by an elected or appointed executive. It can adopt budgets, hire employees and generally oversee county business.
  - Under the commission and administrator or manager form of county government, the county board of commissioners appoints an administrator who serves at its pleasure. That individual may have broad authority including the power to hire and fire department heads and formulate a budget.
  - The separation of powers principle is the basis for the council and elected executive governance system. A county executive is the chief administrative officer, typically with authority to veto ordinances enacted by the county board (subject to a possible override) and hire and fire department heads.
- 37 states provide some “home rule” authority to counties, while other states mandate county government structure
- All county governments are governed by an elected board that can range in size from as few as three members to as many as 45 members
- A sheriff, usually elected, is the top law-enforcement official in most counties.
- Some states authorize other appointed or elected officials including judges, justices of the peace, constables, auditors, clerks, district or county attorneys
Our County

- Describe your home county and its government structure. Identify the titles of officials, the officeholders, their responsibilities and their term of office. Name the key departments and explain their function and the services they perform.
- Describe your county’s history and significant events. Make sure to hand out informational pamphlets with facts about the county. Include useful phone numbers and website addresses.
- Outline some of your county’s services and programs available to children, families, seniors, and veterans and other groups.
- Talk about your county’s budget. Explain how much of it is mandated spending by state and federal government and how much is under local county authority.
- Talk about how counties work together regionally and how they enter into cooperative purchasing agreements to lower costs and work efficiently. Explain how counties speak with one voice through the various state associations of counties and the National Association of Counties (NACo).