

## ‘Snow-bot’ keeps sidewalks clear at county library

by **Meredith Moran**  
staff writer

The Arapahoe County, Colo. library system is enlisting the help of a self-driving snow removal robot to clear out ice and snow to keep the library open and accessible to the public throughout the winter months.

The county averages around 63 inches of snow per year, more than double the national average.

Anthony White, director of innovation and technology for Arapahoe Libraries, said the county gets around five to eight major snow storms each year. The partnership with a company that makes the snow robot, will make the Koelbel location, where the pilot program is taking place, safer to access, he said.

“A lot of folks rely on us, because they’ve got nowhere else to go,” White said.

“When there are snowstorms, we provide a nice, safe, warm place for folks to go ... At our Koelbel library, we have a senior center less than a block away, so those folks ideally still want to walk over and use us, so it is a priority to get cleared, get our staff in safely and hopefully keep the libraries open.”

The snow-removal robot

company is working to create specialized extensions for the library’s needs, including making sure the machine can go up and down stairs and have additional battery packs so that it can function for an extended amount of time, according to White.

With the pilot continuing throughout the year, the robot will also help with foliage clearing during the summer and fall.

The company is set to finish mapping the route at the library’s Koelbel branch in the coming weeks and the first test will be whenever the next major snowstorm occurs, White said.

The hope is to then expand the collaboration to other libraries in the county if the pilot is a success, he added.

Sasi Prabhakaran, the founder of Snowbotix, said he created the technology as a solution to labor shortages and safety issues surrounding ice and snow management.

Struggling with recruitment and retention, local government has faced disproportionate levels of workforce vacancies, as one of only two sectors to not return to pre-pandemic

See **SNOWBOT** page 3



Tony McDowell (right), executive director, Virginia Opioid Abatement Authority, speaks to Stephen Acquario, executive director, New York State Association of Counties and Gina Nikkel, executive director, Association of Oregon Counties Jan. 10 in Washington, D.C. Photo by Charlie Ban

## Opioid fight gets resources, faces pitfalls after settlement

by **Charlie Ban**  
senior writer

Virginia counties have done a lot of the work in the wake of the opioid epidemic — law enforcement, social services, family support — but they have not been the actual provider of behavioral health services.

Following the settlement of the multidistrict litigation against pharmaceutical manufacturers, distributors, marketers and retailers, those counties are finding themselves to be one of the few parties eligible to receive their share of \$54 billion. Grants from that settlement will go to compensate

counties for the work they’ve done in response and to fund ongoing efforts to treat and prevent substance use disorder.

Tony McDowell, executive director of the Virginia Opioid Abatement Authority, thinks that won’t necessarily be bad.

See **OPIOIDS** page 2

## County book club links local population, local interests

by **Charlie Ban**  
senior writer

As Salt Lake County, Utah emerged from COVID-19, Mayor Jenny Wilson worried that the pandemic’s social legacies of isolation and community fragmentation were on track to continue.

Holding conversations

about shared local interests, however, could capitalize on her county’s natural and cultural features and people’s curiosity, so she started a book club of sorts.

“I was really hoping to come up with something that would not be always so political, but instead topics that are issue-driven and that would

unite the community,” Wilson said. “Like a lot of county electeds, I was really trying to figure out what this kind of post-COVID world looks like as it relates to community engagement, while keeping in mind what can be divisive.”

The book club’s debut coin-

See **BOOK CLUB** page 3

# Opioid settlement funds are significant, yet will pale in comparison as epidemic grows

From OPIOIDS page 1

“By and large, Virginia local governments’ role has been on the response side. I think if you get county governments off the sidelines and get into the prevention/treatment/harm reduction piece of the puzzle, I think we’re going to see the tide turn,” he said during NA-Co’s Opioid Settlement Summit Jan. 10 in Washington, D.C. “It’s because of the leadership and the ability to get things done at the local level that we’ll get there.”

Although 30% of Virginia’s settlement funds will go directly to counties, 55% percent will go to the Opioid Abatement Authority, which divides that portion among cities and counties (15%) and partnerships among several counties and cities (35%), with the rest going to state agencies and an unrestricted fund. It will be up to governments to award contracts to service providers,

which will bring county supervisors into a new realm, adding their insights into the process.

Association of Oregon Counties Executive Director Gina Nikkel voiced similar optimism for the future of the county role in follow-through in her state.

“We’ve gone through a decade of not working very closely with the state and not having the local government authority respected,” she said.

“We have a brand-new Oregon Health Authority director and I’m really excited about that. The assistant director who’s been filling in has been remarkable and when she came on board, I told her we need to make sure that we have counties and the state working together.”

The settlement process is three years into an 18-year process, with equal payments coming annually from each of the largest distributors.

The opioid settlement has often been compared to the

Tobacco Master Settlement Agreement, which was often maligned for the diversion of much of the \$206 billion away from resources dedicated to combating tobacco use. Virginia’s abatement fund has offered an incentive to keep counties focused.

**‘We couldn’t have done this without the counties to force change.’**

*- Stephen Acquario, executive director, NYSAC*

“We were very concerned in Virginia that our localities, understandably, wouldn’t understand all the rules and could very easily think that they have more flexibility than they actually do,” McDowell said.

If they use all of their opioid settlement funding for prevention, treatment or reduction efforts, the abatement fund will award them an additional 25% of their allocation.

Nikkel warned that while the settlement seems like a lot of money, substance use disorder has not stopped growing and costs will continue to add up.

“It is a lot of money, but it’s not enough money to do everything that we need to do,” she said. “I would caution you to make sure that whatever your groups are doing in your state, that they act ...[like] this money is only going to cover so much.”

But beyond the money coming to counties from the settlement, Daniel Hinkle, senior state affairs counsel for the American Association for Justice, said the action that counties took made a difference.

“It’s not just the money that they brought in. They stopped their activities, Johnson & Johnson stopped distributing opioids because of this litigation,” he said. “It was only because you all came together to hold them accountable that we really got our first traction and trying to end this epidemic.”

Stephen Acquario, executive director of the New York State Association of Counties concurred.

“We couldn’t have done this without using the counties to force change,” he said. “I’ll never forget talking to a former county official in our state who asked why we would do the pharmaceutical industry, that they’re a good employer right in our county.”

“We had to break through that mindset and explain what was happening — that it was well beyond the capacity of being a good neighbor.”

## Going on the offensive

Rahul Gupta, director of the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy, shared optimism for how the country can change course on the opioid epidemic.

“Treatment has become more accessible in the last two or three years,” said Gupta, who previously served as public health director in Kanawha and Putnam counties in West Virginia. “We have more telehealth. That means that people, no matter where they are, can get treatment.”

He said the nation and counties can address the demand and supply sides, and the national drug control plan addressed both aspects. And doctors were already responding.

“I do think that we are seeing a significant shift over the last decade or so in over-prescribing trends,” he said.

Connecting incarcerated people with substance abuse disorder treatment and supplying them with naloxone and overdose training could drastically reduce overdoses within days of their release, he noted.

“Common sense says that let’s make sure that they get the treatment while they’re in the jail so that when they come out, not only is it improved to not have reincarceration chances but also improve the economy of your community,” he said.

Making naloxone available over the counter has not only removed barriers to the supply but has made individuals more familiar with its use, he noted.

“I like to see this as available as an automatic defibrillator or a fire extinguisher,” Gupta said.

He also stressed the importance of education campaigns that can teach young people the dangers of buying illicit drugs online, along with the likelihood that they could be laced with fentanyl.

Gupta also said it is crucial for more cargo vehicles to be screened at border crossings, noting that 90% of opioid smuggling come via legal ports of entry. That and continued support of the High Intensity Drug Trafficking Areas program would serve as a force multiplier to support local law enforcement efforts.

All of these programs and measures are designed to work and be funded in concert with the opioid settlement.

“The settlement funds, I strongly believe, are to support, not supplant, the federal and state and local resources that are available,” he said. “What I found is the secret here is awareness — it’s important for county-level elected officials to be aware of what dollars are eligible from the federal gov-

See OPIOIDS page 6



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| STATE               | POPULATION GAIN  |
|---------------------|------------------|
| Connecticut.....    | 1.58% or 56,582  |
| South Carolina..... | 1.25% or 65,309  |
| Delaware.....       | 1.24% or 12,471  |
| Florida.....        | 1.13% or 249,064 |
| Arizona.....        | 1.07% or 77,995  |

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2021-2022

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## County library gets innovative

From SNOWBOT page 1

levels of employment.

The company is also working to recruit traditional snow removal contractors, so that they can contribute their knowledge into extending the robot's technology.

"Robots can do some things that are really hard for a human to do," Prabhakaran said.

"Our goal is to take humans from the hazardous work environments. The streets are good, because they have trucks and they're able to do things without hurting themselves, but when it comes to the sidewalk, it's really challenging, because you have to take your hand shovel or use gas-powered

'The streets are good...when it comes to the sidewalk, it's really challenging.'

equipment and it's freezing cold — that's not something easy for humans to bear."

Arapahoe Libraries teamed up with his company through the Colorado Smart Cities Alliance, a non-profit organization that connects governments and businesses to increase innovation and improve communities across the state.

Arapahoe County's library system is the only library in the Alliance. The robot company previously worked with the city of Greeley to clear snow and ice from its sidewalks, bike paths and other areas that are traditionally difficult to manage.

Prabhakaran said he's hoping to continue and expand government partnerships.

His company's next major project will be to work on addressing vegetation control along roads and highways.

"This is a one-of-a-kind opportunity, because getting into the government system is not an easy thing for a start-up like ours," Prabhakaran said.

"... It's a perfect playground for us to test our technology to verify and validate how automation can benefit a community." **CN**

## County events are issue-driven, not political, to unite community



Terry Tempest Williams draws a strong crowd for her appearance at Salt Lake County's book club. Photos courtesy of Salt Lake County

From BOOK CLUB page 1

cided with the NBA All-Star Game in February 2023 at Vivint Arena in Salt Lake City. The county had partnered with the Utah Jazz basketball team to conduct community programming and Wilson saw that opportunity to capture local interest in the game.

The Salt Lake County Library system made 46 copies of Jacqui MacMullan's "Basketball: A Love Story," for loan and Wilson conducted a community book discussion in conjunction with the All-Star Game weekend, with plenty of input from former Jazz coach Frank Layden.

"It's an account of basketball's history — the good, the bad and the ugly," she said. "I took a lot from it that I'll be able to use as the mother of a basketball player. It gave me this great perspective that's allowed me to have conversations with my son about how the sport isn't all about which NBA player hit 50 points tonight or did the Jazz win or lose. There's more about the journey of the player and the background in that, that we don't always see."

The county managed to draw journalist and Salt Lake County native Terry Tempest Williams for the second con-

vening to discuss her *New York Times* article "I am Haunted by What I Have Seen at the Great Salt Lake," addressing the degradation of the environment in and around the Great Salt Lake.

"It's a topic that's incredibly relevant locally and one that's going to have long-lasting repercussions for the region," Wilson said. "People were haunted by what Williams wrote and the incredible photographs that accompanied the article."

The lake's shrinking has been so gradual, and hard to perceive from a local perspective, given its size, that while Williams' article wasn't necessarily a wake-up call for most Salt Lake County residents, she was able to supply crucial context about the lake's changes and the consequences they presented.

The book club left the library for a discussion at the observatory in conjunction with the annual solar eclipse.

In keeping with the times, the "book club" relaxed its media style and introduced a short film, "Eclipse: The Sun Revealed," which examined the history and science behind eclipses, and safe viewing procedures.

"We're looking at history and relevant themes, like the



Terry Tempest Williams discusses her *New York Times* story.

great Salt Lake for example, taking advantage of film and the eclipse and we're trying to be as creative as possible and keep it relevant to the county residents," Wilson said. "I would love to pick material that's relevant. It doesn't always have to be recently published, but I want to get the authors involved whenever that's possible."

Wilson is aiming to capitalize on the stories of migrants who have settled in Salt Lake County in the book club's next meeting, distributing copies of a book about refugees who have settled there, which the county's Office of New Americans produced.

She also hopes to touch on the history of World War II-era Japanese internment in Utah, with a potential bus trip to an internment camp museum.

"One of our goals is to have

local voices shared through this opportunity," she said. "There's just an abundance of talent here in Utah."

Salt Lake County plans to hold three or four book club meetings per year, but Wilson suggested that if other counties want to follow suit with their own "book clubs," the best approach she has found is to work backwards while scheduling the meetings.

"We don't want to be so backed into the time frames around executing some of this, so we lose our ability to get the right host, like with Terry Tempest Williams," Wilson said. "Figure out when the author is available and then work backwards. That level of flexibility is really important. It would be too much to do this every month, yeah, but three or four times a year it's been a good goal for us." **CN**



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# Ballot measures offer keys to housing affordability

by Ben Kelly

A visitor, lost and wandering, spots a helpful-looking person.

“Excuse me,” he says, ‘I’m trying to find the train station. Do you know the way?’

‘Of course, I know several ways there,’ the local replies, ‘just not from here. So you decide.’

Elections feel like this same scene. Authorities know the destination but with so many routes, the right one is unclear. Voters often know the destination, but landmarks are unfamiliar and the decision is left to them. The complexity increases when the decision on the ballot is about affordable

and governors are making policy in zoning and land use — traditionally the domain of city councils, county boards and planning commissions.

A sampling of new state laws includes loosening regulations on parking requirements in new developments, fast-tracking local development permits, promoting density with duplexes, townhomes and accessory dwelling units and allowing dense housing development in commercial zones.

These are policies that get voters’ attention.

Municipal and county governments have mostly opposed this trend at state legislatures, and voters may soon get their

Beach County, Fla.; Bernalillo County, N.M.; Boulder County, Colo.) and at the municipal level (Denver, San Antonio, Austin, Baltimore, Greensboro, Kansas City, Charlotte, Columbus, Seattle, Los Angeles).

## State legislative gatekeeping

Pressure is being applied to the gatekeeper status that many state legislatures hold on local elections. In Minnesota, recent state law now requires localities to obtain a green light from the statehouse before forwarding a sales tax question to voters. Rochester, N.Y. took this route and voters responded by approving funds for housing and infrastructure. In the 2022 session, Colorado’s statehouse passed a bill allowing localities to seek voter approval for spending coveted tourism-related taxes on workforce housing and childcare. A majority of voters in dozens of cities and counties there have said “yes.”

Advocates and legislators in Massachusetts have advanced legislation to undo the state’s preemption on rent control and tenant rights and allow localities to put the question directly to voters. Ohio and Florida legislatures recently went a different direction, preempting local governments from enacting rent control or asking their voters to decide. Utah and Florida state legislators also passed laws that limit local voters’ abilities to challenge some zoning and land use decisions at the ballot.

There are many dimensions of the housing crisis where state legislatures will determine policy while local governments might prefer direction from local voters — not just on zoning and rent control and financing, but social housing, homelessness shelter and legal services to prevent evictions.

## The election roadmap for 2024

The buildup of state and local housing debates indicates 2024 will be a landmark election cycle.

California voters will decide on removing certain state limitations on how local governments regulate rents. Another

statewide measure in California will ask voters to lower the threshold for affordable housing bonds — a common funding strategy for local jurisdictions — to win at the ballot.

At the local level, voters will weigh in on dozens of housing-related elections across the entire calendar. The turnout of eligible-to-vote adults in some lower-profile elections (such as primaries and municipal elections in the spring and summer) may be as low as 20% but will climb as high as 80% in November, particularly in areas of presidential battleground states, and those states with highly competitive races for senators, governors, House

members, and other local positions.

The persistence of the housing crisis means new solutions are needed. As policy decisions continue to find their way onto the ballot, in many cases, voters will be the ones setting the direction. **CN**

*Ben Kelly is a public policy researcher and strategic communications consultant specializing in economic development, housing, urban planning, transportation and elections. This work was conducted as part of a project on state housing policy to advance NACo’s ongoing efforts on housing affordability.*



‘The buildup of state and local housing debates indicates 2024 will be a landmark election cycle.’

housing — both the route and the destination itself can be disorienting.

## The higher profile of ballot measures

Decision-making on housing has great political salience and urgency, which is demonstrated through the increased policy debate in state capitols. In 2020, the National Conference of State Legislatures tracked 1,100 housing and homelessness-related bills in the legislatures of states and U.S. territories. By 2023, that grew to more than 2,700. Most voters neither saw nor heard much about them.

But the state and local government direction-setting on housing is changing. First, the affordable housing crisis means more state legislators

say. A coalition led by local governments in California is pursuing an initiated referendum for November 2024 that would limit many of the land use and zoning bills enacted in Sacramento in recent years. Policymakers and elected officials are watching to see if a voter revolt will reverberate in states where legislators have reshuffled the hierarchies of local control in land use.

Voters are also deciding on how to pay for affordable housing. This includes more ballot measures — usually at the local level — for property taxes, bonds or other dedicated taxes to catalyze more affordable housing.

Voters have approved dozens of these local referenda in recent years at the county level (Buncombe County, N.C.; Palm




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# 'We can save tens of thousands'

From OPIOIDS page 2

ernment, from the state and what is coming down and the differential between the two, so we can hold each other accountable.

"We predict that we can the trajectory of this crisis and save tens of thousands of lives. If we get this right, we're going to save so many people's lives that we're going to be able to make communities not only healthier, but also economically stronger."

Miriam Delphin-Rittmon, administrator for the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) said that support for harm reduction measures would help reduce overdose rates.

First Responders Comprehensive Addiction and Recovery Act Grants, for example, will train first responders to use naloxone. The Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2023 extended the ability to prescribe buprenorphine for the treatment of opioid use disorder.

der. SAMHSA's harm-reduction framework was designed with the social determinants of health in mind, which Delphin-Rittmon said will makes the policy more effective.

"It's actually the first time that there's been a concerted collaborative coordinated effort across government around implementing harm reduction in the community level," she said. "We're really, really excited about that."

Latika Davis-Jones is secretary of the Pennsylvania Department of Drug and Alcohol Programs, an 11-year-old agency which funds and monitors 47 single county authorities, along with several multi-county authorities.

She noted the increasing importance of using fentanyl test strips to evaluate the purity of drugs as part of the harm-reduction approach.

"We're seeing a significant increase in deaths where fentanyl is now being combined with non-opioid drugs like cocaine, methamphetamines and benzodiazepine," she said.



ONDCP's Rahul Gupta (right) and Gina Nikkel. Photo by Charlie Ban

"This really underscored the need for us to provide education and resources such as tactics like carrying naloxone and making sure that individuals have access to test strips."

"We definitely have the evidence to suggest that poly-substance use is real and the ability to treat not only alcohol produced this order in combination with other drug use is an urgent need."

Davis-Jones also noted a growing racial disparity among overdose deaths in Pennsylvania.

"It was also a major driver as to why we used \$6 million of our opioid settlement funds

to provide grants to BIPOC-led and BIPOC-serving organizations across the Commonwealth," she said.

Gregory Branch, director and health officer for Baltimore County, Md.'s, Department of Health and Human Services, said stigma remains a barrier to recovery.

"We go around the community to talk about addiction... showing them that these are people, who are real people, with real goals and dreams who happen to have this disorder. It changes their mentality and their thought process as to how they're going to relate to them, so we've got to decrease

that stigma."

Funding remains, as it has, the major question for just how much counties can do to address substance use disorder in their communities.

"The work that we do at the county level lives and dies in relationship to the grants that we receive," Branch said. "Counties have been excellent stewards of resources and the funding streams made available to us, and we've been able to work with our local and state and federal partners toward more successful outcomes."

But he warned that too many strings can get messy. As additional synthetic drugs like fentanyl and xylazine may fall outside of the bounds of certain grants and can leave counties behind as the opioid-based drug arms race escalates.

"These partnerships that we have could be strengthened by allowing more flexibility as it relates to the utilization of funding streams," he said. "Too often, grants are very, very prescriptive. They don't allow for us to work at the local level and to be as successful as possible." **CN**

## ON THE MOVE

### NACo STAFF

● **Zoey Scates** has joined NACo as a conference and meetings associate. She was previously a business development and event coordinator for The Well News and earned an undergraduate degree from the University of Southern Indiana.



Scates

● **Jack Callahan** has joined NACo as a program associate and previously interned at the Texas General Land office. Jack is a Master of Public Administration student at Texas A&M University.

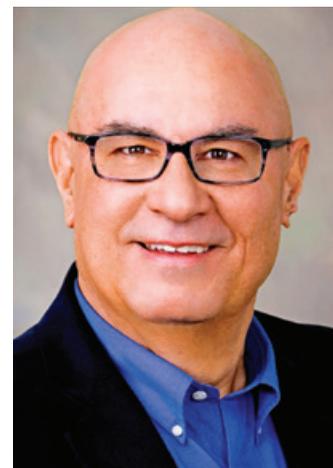


Callahan

## PROFILES IN SERVICE

### LENNY ELIASON

**NACo Board member**  
Past President of NACo  
Commissioner  
Athens County, Ohio



ELIASON

**Number of years active in NACo:** 25

**Years in public service:** 27

**Occupation:** Full time county commissioner

**Education:** Master's in public administration from Ohio University

**The hardest thing I've ever done:** Train to run a marathon.

**Three people (living or dead) I'd invite to dinner:** George Washington and my two grandfathers that I never knew.

**A dream I have is to:** Fly a fighter jet.

**You'd be surprised to learn that I:** Played rugby in college

and continued until I was 32 years old.

**The most adventurous thing I've ever done is:** Hike 86

miles and climb Baldy Mountain with my son and his Boy Scout troop at Philmont Scout Ranch.

**I'm most proud of:** My children's accomplishments and the staying power of my presidential initiative.

**Every morning I read:** USA Today, Cleveland Plain Dealer, Politico.

**My favorite meal is:** Salmon patties with creamed peas and mashed potatoes.

**My pet peeve is:** People who talk to hear themselves talk.

**My motto is:** Treat others as you wish to be treated.

**My favorite way to relax is:** Work on puzzles.



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# CountyNews **HOT** topics

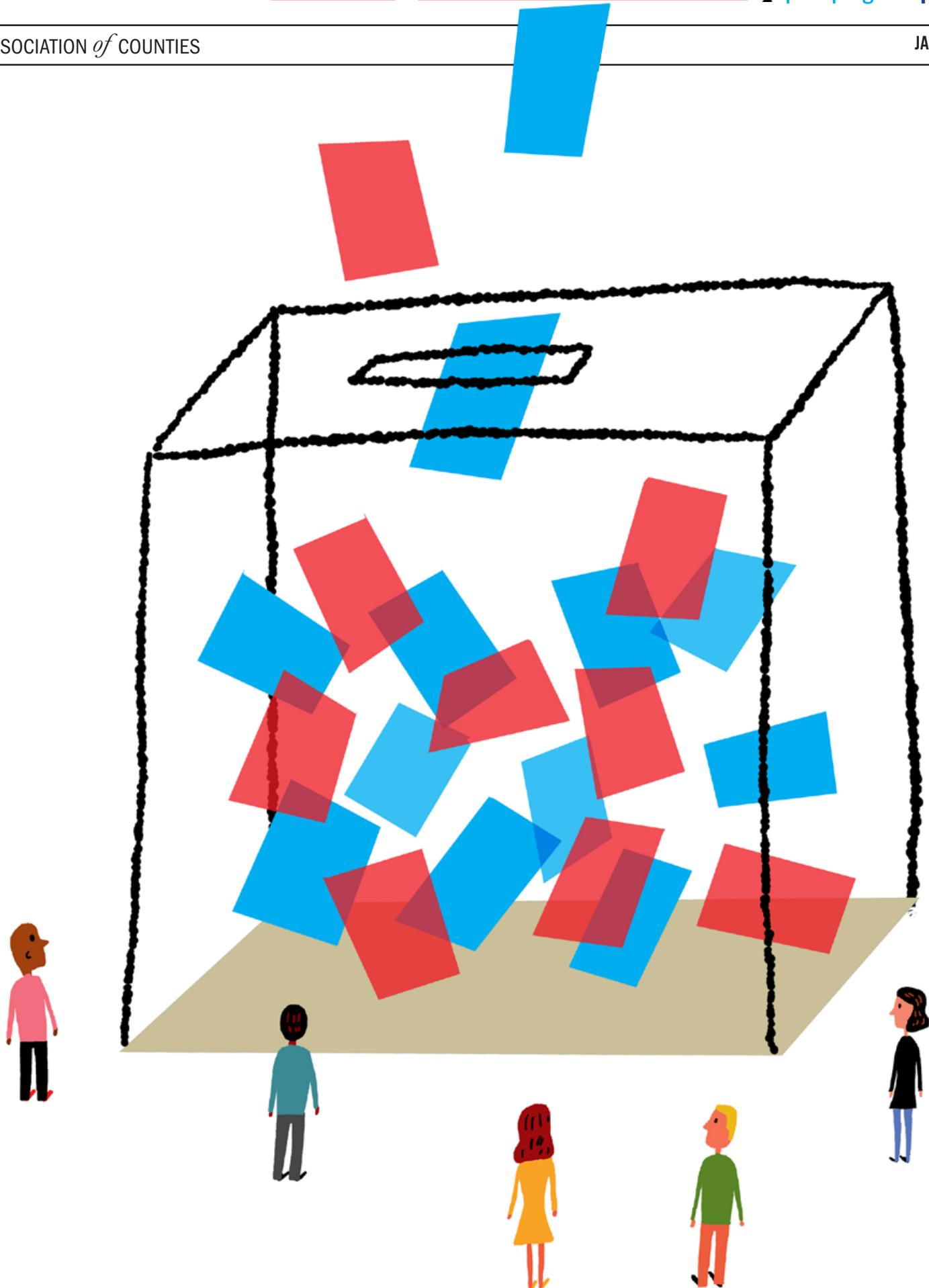
## **ELECTIONS**

Election officials voice support for voter roll organization. **pg. H3**

N.C. counties testing signature verification in pilot program. **pg. H5**

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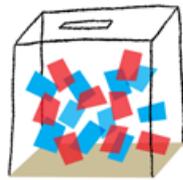


# **ELECTIONS**

For county officials, getting it right is just part of the challenge.

# The ever-changing election landscape

by **Mary Ann Barton**  
editor



## ELECTIONS

The Nov. 5, 2024 presidential election looms large, with plenty to consider: What will voter turnout look like? Will election administrators have enough workers? Will security be a concern?

Local election administration has always been something of a patchwork quilt across the country. That's no different even within some states.

In Davis County, Utah, County Clerk Brian McKenzie runs the elections. In most of the counties there, it's a duty of the person whose job holds the dual title of clerk/auditor. But in Utah, a state law allows county boards to decide if they want to change that, splitting the county clerk/auditor position into two jobs. That's what Davis County decided to do beginning in 2022.

"As they talked about this in their meetings, they were looking at the complexity of both of those jobs — they are both very demanding," McKenzie said, noting that clerks also handle many other duties in addition to elections.

"It's difficult for a county our size [more than 367,000 as of the 2021 Census] to manage those duties and dedicate the resources needed. They took into account the size of the county, the demands, the expertise that's needed and you're looking at that and looking for someone to serve as chief financial officer, looking for a GFOA or CPA or something like that [for the auditor portion of the job] and that doesn't always equate to someone knowledgeable about elections."

"Elections have definitely advanced in sophistication, technology and legislative requirements," said McKenzie, who has worked in election administration and seen those changes over the past 18 years.

### Appointed county administrator vs. elected county clerk

In Texas, a new state law takes away an appointed election administrator position in any county with a

population of 3.5 million or more. The only county that is impacted by that is Harris County, which appointed its first election administrator in 2020.

Those who back the new law point to what they say was mismanagement (citing long wait times and ballot paper shortages) of a 2022 election by a newly appointed election administrator. Since the new law went into effect last fall, the elected County Clerk Tenesia Hudspeth will administer elections and elected tax Assessor-Collector Ann Harris Bennett will handle voter registration.

"The public needs to know that there is a chief election official for the county who is committed to conducting the elections with a nonpartisan spirit and in accordance with the law to enable all voters equal access to the voting process," Hudspeth said in a statement to Votebeat.

In Cascade County, Mont., a newcomer to election administration won an election by 40 votes, ousting someone with 16 years of experience. After problems arose with elections under the new county clerk, the Board of Commissioners took advantage of a state law that allows them to appoint an election administrator.

"The law here in Montana says the clerk and recorder will be the elections administrator unless the local governing body decides differently," said Cascade County Commissioner Jim Larson. "I voted to overturn it."

Larson said he hopes they will have some interviews for the new elections administrator position "done by the end of this month."

His advice to other counties facing an issue with someone in the job who is inexperienced: "If I'd let this go, it never would have healed itself. We had to cut the cord here and go to work on this whole thing. It'll calm

down."

"If I had to tell somebody else, if they feel uncomfortable with their current situation and they have a statute like we do, where they can take it, if you have a feeling like that, you should probably do it sooner rather than later."

### Vote-by-mail

In "mostly mail" elections, all registered voters are sent a ballot in the mail. The voter marks the ballot, puts it in a secrecy envelope or sleeve and then into a separate mailing envelope, signs an affidavit on the exterior of the mailing envelope and returns the package via mail or by dropping it off, the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) points out.

Ballots are mailed out well ahead of Election Day, and thus voters have an "election period," not just a single day, to vote. Mostly mail elections can be thought of as absentee voting for everyone, according to NCSL. This system is also referred to as "vote by mail." Here's a look at the vote-by-mail landscape:

- Eight states — California, Colorado, Hawaii, Nevada, Oregon, Utah, Vermont and Washington and the District of Columbia — allow all elections to be conducted entirely by mail.

- Two states — Nebraska and North Dakota — permit counties to opt into conducting elections by mail.

- Nine states — Alaska, Arizona, Florida, Kansas, Maryland, Missouri, Montana, New Mexico and Wyoming — allow specific small elections to be conducted by mail.

- Four states — Idaho, Minnesota, New Jersey and New Mexico — permit mostly-mail elections for certain small jurisdictions.

It's a formula that's worked well in McKenzie's county, where they're celebrating the 10-year anniversary of vote by mail this year. "Folks out there think 2020 was the year we switched out,"

he said. "We're excited about that, what we've been able to accomplish."



Over those 10 years, the county has seen an increase in turnout for municipal elections. "Pre-mail, we were thrilled with anything over 10%. Now, it's 30 to 50%. That's a good thing, right?" he said. "More people are getting involved, the people getting elected more appropriately represent the people they're serving."

Although Davis County is the smallest county geographically in Utah, it counts 194,000 active registered voters. McKenzie notes that the county maintains a 99.9% accurate voter database. "It's the cleanest in the history of our state," he said.

"Here in our county, voters have all the options," McKenzie said. "We're small geographically, you can drive from one end to the other in half-an-hour. We have 15 vote centers, 16 drop boxes, we pay return postage on vote-by-mail ballots. The best person to decide how to cast their vote is the voter."

Of the 194,000 active registered voters, 95 to 98 percent take advantage of the vote-by-mail option, McKenzie said. "We do not have long lines at all. That to me is a measure of success, it works for them."

### Recruitment

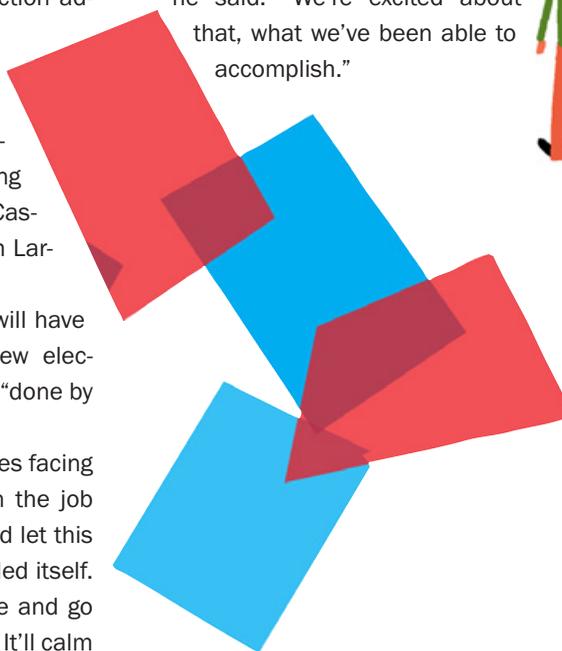
Although some election administrators have a tough time getting enough poll workers to help on Election Day, in Davis County, they use an online application process that is "there all the time," McKenzie noted. "A lot of it is word of mouth," with people who have worked on past elections, telling friends and family about their experience, he said. "And so we bring in those folks as well."

### New: Election observation area

New this year in Davis County is an election observation area. "We're just about finished with our new election observation area, bringing people right up close to everything we're doing, within 6 feet or less when we're handling ballots," he said.

"Security has always been a top priority for us," he said. "We have some legislative things that have come through that have enhanced security, such as video surveillance. We have a new observation area, and enhanced security for that as well. We revise our plans, especially after the things that have happened with suspicious mail delivered to our colleagues around the country in November. We have continuity plans, so we can make sure we are keeping people safe."

"We think that's really, really important, making sure they are accessible, transparent and secure."





# COUNTY ELECTION OFFICIALS VOICE SUPPORT FOR VOTER ROLL ORGANIZATION

Utah Association of Counties President Curtis Koch (right), makes a point as Wise County, Texas Judge J.D. Clark (left) and others look on. Photo by Hector Emanuel

by **Charlie Ban**  
senior writer

County election officials in nine states have lost access to a crucial service for checking the integrity of their voter registration lists, and more may follow. The nonprofit Electronic Registration Information Center — ERIC — joins 24 states and the District of Columbia in a data-sharing agreement that checks for voters registered in multiple states. It was founded in 2012 by a bipartisan group of seven secretaries of state.

Since 2022, Alabama, Virginia, Iowa, Texas, Missouri, Florida, West Virginia, Louisiana and Ohio have left the organization and Utah, a founding member, is considering doing the same. The Utah Association of Counties recently passed a resolution supporting the state's continued membership.

"It is an incredible tool," said Curtis Koch, president of the Utah association and Davis County's auditor, who previously served as clerk/auditor and oversaw the county's elections. "As a county that's been involved in administering safe, secure and transparent elections by mail since 2014, ERIC is a key tool to doing that."

Census data shows that among the states that left ERIC, Alabama, Florida, Virginia and West Virginia saw migration rates in 2022 that were higher than average, adding to the number of likely new registered voters that counties in those states would have to validate.

Through ERIC, every 60 days, member states submit their voter registration data

and corroborating information from their departments of motor vehicles and ERIC staff generates four reports:

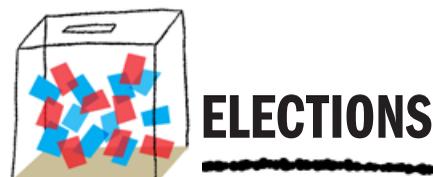
1. Voters who appear to have moved from one ERIC state to another
2. Voters who appear to have moved within the state
3. Voters with duplicate registrations in the same state
4. Voters who have died (using voter registration data and Social Security death data)

"The misconception I think a lot of folks have, is that it's somehow touching our voter rolls," Koch said. "It is not touching our voter rolls. States submit their information and ERIC says 'There's an anomaly here, go look at it, take care of yourself,' and it's up to the clerk whether to act on the information."

In ERIC's first 10 years, it identified 12.5 million cross-state movers, 26.9 million in-state movers, 1.1 million in-state duplicates and nearly 600,000 deceased registrants, among 31 states and Washington, D.C.

In May 2023, Virginia withdrew from ERIC, citing concerns about the increased costs that remaining members would bear as others left — annual dues range from \$15,000-\$74,000 — and a confidence that the commonwealth would be able to independently replicate ERIC's functionality. In 2022, Virginia established data-sharing agreements with several bordering states — Tennessee, West Virginia and Washington, D.C. — along with Georgia, Ohio and South Carolina, to check for duplicate voter registration.

Ohio has worked out similar agree-



ments with Florida and West Virginia. Alabama will compare its voter database with the Postal Service's National Change of Address list, the Social Security Death Index and Alabama Voter Integrity Database, driver's license data and partnerships with Florida, Georgia, Tennessee, Mississippi and Arkansas.

In Texas, which also withdrew, Travis County Voter Registration Division Director Chris Davis said that while such a system has been hinted at in his state, county elections officials are no closer to seeing proof of that than they were at the time of the withdrawal.

"We haven't had any information about what the successor or what a successor program would look like," he said. "I don't think there is one right now."

Travis County has both gained a lot of

potential voters as the Austin metropolitan area has grown, but it also sees a steady stream of departures when students from the University of Texas and other colleges leave town after registering to vote earlier in their tenure.

"We want to be informed if students who registered to vote for a presidential election but haven't been in Texas since, maybe they left town moved to another state, if we could then put these voters in the state of suspense, there really is no other way if we're not in some kind of interstate checklist," Davis said.

In Linn County, Iowa, home to 7% of the state's voters, Auditor Joel Miller was emphatic about the opportunity the state took out of his and his colleagues' hands.

"I think it was a dumb move," he said. "Was this the end-all, catch-all solution? No, but it was a tool to flag people, yeah, to identify them that there might be something wrong with voter registration."

"For officials to talk about finding fraud and then throwing a tool like this away, it just doesn't make any sense." ■

## HOT TOPICS

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# Numbers stack up against the hand-count movement

by **Charlie Ban**  
senior writer

Hand counting ballots is not as easy as one, two, three.

Especially because counting votes would take seven different people, according to Mohave County, Ariz. Elections Director Allen Tempert, spending approximately three minutes on each ballot.

One person to call the vote. Two people — one for each party — to confirm that vote. Two more people marking separate tally sheets, and at least one person validating those marks. Tempert conducted a feasibility study in 2023 to determine what would be needed to make hand-counting Mohave County's primary mode of tallying votes in 2024, which determined a rough cost of \$1.1 million to count the presidential preference election, the primary election and the general election. Mohave is one of several counties to consider the change following skepticism toward machine-counting procedures that has found little basis in fact.

"It just isn't going to work," Tempert said at an Aug. 1, 2023 Board of Supervisors meeting "It's not made for the day and time. That's why they made machines. That's why they made a punch card machine. That's why they made

machines prior to that — they had little things like an abacus prior to that... all the way up until now, they have electronic machines to count."

And none of this parsed the question of legality, just practicality from a standpoint of accuracy, confidentiality, timeliness and cost. In a test case of 850 ballots in mid-2023, it took that Mohave County team of seven people three eight-hour days to complete the work, and they still came away with 46 errors. And these weren't a bunch of volunteers off the street, Tempert told the Board of Supervisors, they were a "dream team" of seasoned election staff members who had worked with his department for at least 10 years.

The feasibility study found that the dream team:

- Called the wrong candidate and both watchers failed to notice the incorrect call
- Marked votes for incorrect candidates

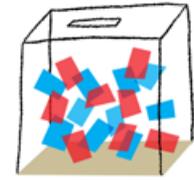
and the watchers failed to notice the error

- Called too fast, causing candidates to be double-marked or missed
- Failed to pay attention because of boredom or fatigue

"I would need people to show up for three straight weeks seven days a week, eight hours a day and the perfect scenario to get 105,000 ballots tabulated by hand," Tempert said, a scenario which would include no attrition by any of the volunteers. With no increase in the number of votes, it would take 657 eight-hour days to tally 105,000 ballots.

The effort would need roughly an additional one full-time employee to oversee the human resources effort to recruit, train and retain volunteers, which would include 245 tally workers, 30 write-in talliers, 56 recount talliers and three security staffers to transport ballots.

The facility needs would require the elections department to use the county fairgrounds building, after



## ELECTIONS

installing sound baffling and cameras for each counting area, costing roughly \$100,000.

Even if volunteers were recruited and retrained, Tempert's biggest concern is from confidentiality, evoking D-Day and the Manhattan Project, and noting that sequestering the workers was unrealistic.

"We run ballots through tabulation machines — there are only two people in this whole place that know anything about what the results could be and that's my deputy director...and myself," he said. "If I have people hand-tallying results, I cannot guarantee confidentiality no matter what piece of paper you have them signed to say 'I swear I will not [disclose partial results].'"

"It's obviously impossible to get hundreds of people together to do hand-tallying and for them not to go home and tell their husband or their wife or their best friend what they have seen, what's been going on all day long."

The Board voted 3-2 against hand-counting the 2024 ballots. **HT**

'It just isn't going to work.'



# Rural county elections staff face harassment, misinformation

by **Susan Kiepke**  
Davison County, S.D. auditor

As a county auditor in South Dakota, I have been running elections for about 17 years.

Election officials in South Dakota are elected as county auditors or finance officers, but as you can see, election official isn't in our title.

A few of the larger counties may have dedicated staff for elections, but in most counties, auditors, finance officers and staff wear many hats and ultimately,

the auditor or finance officer is fully responsible for the administration of elections.

When I started administering elections, I was able to use schools for polling places. I am no longer able to do so due to security concerns.

I used to have more precincts with five poll workers at each pre-

cinct. I have cut down on precincts, polling places and now only have three poll workers at each precinct, primarily due to security concerns.

Security has become a major concern for election officials all over the country.

There is so much misinformation and disinformation being generated and circulated these

has been alleged that CVRs (Cast Vote Records), as well as audit logs aren't proprietary, which they currently are in South Dakota.

We've been accused of not being bonded properly, not being insured properly, not being transparent.

I could go on, but I think you get the idea. The people who come in aren't always calm, hence the request for se-

emergency, there may not be security available.

I hate that elections have gotten so negative. I used to look forward to them. They were fun and people were happy. Now people come to my office and verbally attack myself and my staff.

The good news in all of this is election officials who haven't bought into the misinformation, have bonded together. In South Dakota, we rely heavily on one another to testify in front of legislatures, to lean on one another when we are scrutinized and to embrace one another's strengths.

We believe strongly that our elections are run with integrity, honesty, professionalism, knowledge and transparency.

We have wonderful people across our country who step up to serve as poll workers, resolution board members and post-election audit board members.

I have met many election officials for both rural and urban areas. I believe people serve as election officials because we care about the process, and we care about our constituents.

The majority of people are kind and good-hearted and believe in our election process. **HT**



Kiepke

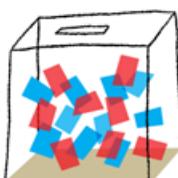
'For the first time since running elections, I have requested security be posted at all polling places from 6 a.m. until the last poll worker leaves.'

days that in my county of 20,000, I have asked our sheriff to be present at each commission meeting in 2024.

I never know when folks will show up to try to convince our commissioners that the DS850 scanner and tabulator that we use to count ballots has a microchip in it that feeds information to

Russia.

We have to dispel other misinformation. It



## ELECTIONS

# TEN COUNTIES TO TEST SIGNATURE VERIFICATION FOR VOTE-BY-MAIL IN NORTH CAROLINA PRIMARY

by Meredith Moran  
staff writer

Ten North Carolina counties are testing out signature verification for absentee ballots cast during the March primary that, if implemented statewide, would make North Carolina the strictest voting-by-mail process in the country.

The pilot program will not impact whether a vote is counted for the primary, as the signature verification process will begin after every vote is canvassed.

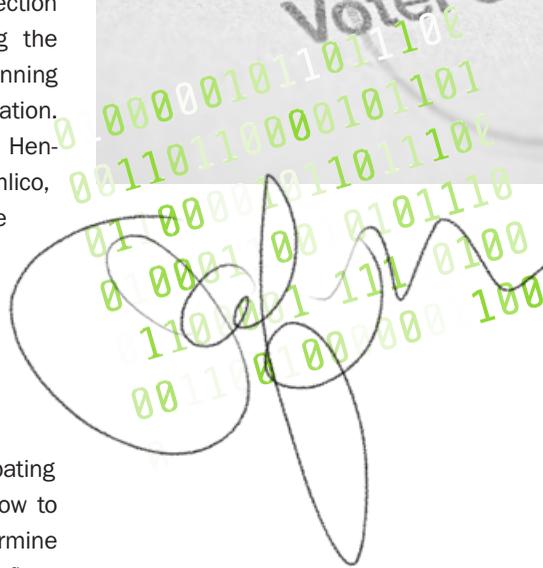
The pilot program was created through a state law enacted last year, which includes numerous changes for election management including shortening the mail-in ballot return window and banning private grants for election administration. Bertie, Cherokee, Durham, Halifax, Henderson, Jones, Montgomery, Pamlico, Rowan and Wilkes counties were chosen to participate in the signature verification pilot using a system of random selection that factored in rankings for population size, racial diversity and regional location.

Election workers in the participating counties will receive training on how to use the software and how to determine if a signature is valid following any flags from the software, according to Patrick Gannon, North Carolina State Board of Elections' public information director. Some of the logistics of the pilot program, including selection of a signature verification vendor and the timeline of the training, are "still up in the air," according to Karen Brinson Bell, executive director of the State Board of Elections.

"They handle the ballots during the election through the primary, but the actual 'rubber meets the road' is really going to be post-primary, so that gives us some time to work through that if necessary," Brinson Bell said.

"This has been a short runway, when you consider that the budget and the authorization for all of this happened mid-October."

According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, signature verification is the most common method states use to confirm that mail ballots come from the intended voter, however the pilot program has drawn some controversy as North Carolina already requires a copy of photo identification and two signatures of witnesses or a notary for mail-in-voting.



software will pull signatures from the state election management system to verify the signatures on mail-in ballots.

The North Carolina State Board of Elections must report its findings and recommendations from the pilot — including the estimated cost to implement signature verification across the state and feedback from the participating county boards of elections — to the General Assembly by May 1.

While the pilot program was funded by the legislature, Brinson Bell said it's unclear if the cost of signature verification, would fall onto the counties if it were to be implemented statewide, because voting equipment is a county expense.

The funding devoted to the pilot program covers the necessary equipment and software for signature verification, but not personnel, according to Brinson Bell, which means more work for election workers.

"We'll be looking to see how we can support them through it," Brinson Bell said. "But in an ideal world, the software is going to do some of the sorting and some of the work so that it's not a big lift for the staff in these county offices."

While the software vendor hasn't been finalized, Brinson Bell said that the State Board of Elections is looking at other states that use signature verification, specifically Utah and Oregon, to inform what would be the best fit for North Carolina.

According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, Utah poll workers compare the signature on mail ballots to the signature in the voter's registration record and in Oregon, the county clerk compares the signature on the return

identification envelope with the one on the elector's registration record.

North Carolina sometimes has a "second primary," which is essentially a run-off a candidate can request if no candidate reaches the necessary vote percentage in the primary to become the nominee; any "second primary" could potentially be "another stressor" in the process with the signature verification pilot for election workers, Brinson Bell said.

"We do have some very large candidate lists in even some statewide offices, so the potential is there," Brinson Bell said.

"We just don't know the results yet to know if that would happen. There are some challenges, but [election workers] are up to it, and luckily, we do have a strong participation with absentee by mail, but it's not our most popular method of voting — that's typically early voting — so I think it can be manageable."

Jones County, the smallest county in the pilot, only has two full-time election workers, according to Jennifer King, the county's election director.

"We're always willing to step in and help out any way we can," King said. "So, if us doing it can take that off some other county in the state, then I'm perfectly fine with that."

"But I feel like I need to start playing the lottery," she joked. "Out of 100 people, 10 got chosen and we were one of them, maybe I need to start playing, that's pretty good odds."

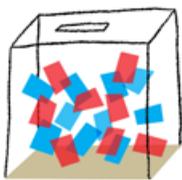
King said she thinks it's good that the pilot includes counties with a wide range in population, so that if signature verification becomes state-wide, there is a "better picture" of how it might impact a county based on the size of its operations. Jones County has a population of under 10,000, while the pilot's largest county, Durham, has around 326,000 residents.

Racial diversity is another factor considered in the pilot.

Bertie County has the largest percentage of non-white voters out of the participating counties and 60% of its population is Black. LaToya Peele, the county's election director, said it's an "honor" for the county to be included in the pilot.

"It'll just be something added that we have to do with our workloads," Peele said.

"And of course, as directors of elections, it's our duty to make sure our voters are fully prepared for everything that comes along. With us being a part of this pilot program, it will give Bertie County kind of a preview of what's to come, with us in the testing stage of this process, so that will help us further educate the community if and when it becomes law." ■



## ELECTIONS

During the 2020 primary election, 9.1% of absentee-by-mail ballots were rejected in North Carolina, while the rate lowered during the general election to at most 2.4%, according to State Board of Elections data.

The National Vote at Home Institute is a nonpartisan group that works to increase voter access to voting-by-mail. The nonprofit's executive director, Barbara Smith Warner, said the addition of signature verification in North Carolina would be "a solution in search of a problem."

"It crosses the line from voter security to voter suppression, I would argue," Smith Warner said. "We are big believers in signature verification as an organization, but that's not what this is. North Carolina, they already have multiple layers of security and the idea of this giving more security is pretty head-scratching."

The National Vote at Home Institute suggests using a variety of signatures the state has access to from the voter over time, including potentially a driver's license or marriage certificate, as a "best practice" for signature verification, according to Smith Warner. In North Carolina, Brinson Bell confirmed that the



# County News Podcast: Election officials talk shop

Boone County, Mo.  
Clerk Brianna Lennon

by **Charlie Ban**  
senior writer

In late 2020, Brianna Lennon and Eric Fey were commiserating that because of the COVID-19 pandemic, throughout one of the most technically challenging elections in American history, election officials weren't able to get together to talk

about the minutiae in election worker recruitment, ballot design or have the casual conversations that switched on the lightbulbs in their heads.

And that's when they needed that information exchange the most.

Then Lennon, the Boone County, Mo. clerk, asked her colleagues nationally if they knew of any podcasts for people like

them, and within a few months, she and Fey, the Democratic director of elections for St. Louis County, were producing their own podcast, titled "High Turnout, Wide Margins."

They recently joined NACo for the inaugural episode of the *County News Podcast*, to talk about how they combat staffing challenges during election sea-

son, what county leaders should know about their election departments and the guests they've had a chance to talk to over nearly 100 of their own podcast episodes and more.

Scan the QR code or visit [www.naco.org/podcast](http://www.naco.org/podcast) to start listening, or listen to the *County News Podcast* using your preferred audio player.

## ELECTION RESOURCES



### Committee for Safe and Secure Elections

The Committee for Safe and Secure Elections features cross-partisan experts in election administration and law enforcement who aim to support policies and practices that protect election workers and voters from violence, threats, and intimidation. The Committee also works to build relationships and trust between election officials and law enforcement to better equip both to prevent and respond to threats and violence against voters and election workers. [safeelections.org/resources](http://safeelections.org/resources)



### Elections Infrastructure Information Sharing & Analysis Center

The EL-ISAC is a community of dedicated election officials and cybersecuri-

ty professionals working side-by-side to ensure the integrity of elections among U.S. state, local, tribal and territorial governments. <https://www.cisecurity.org/ei-isac>



### U.S. Election Assistance Commission

serves as a national clearinghouse of information on election administration and provides a variety of resources of election officials, including election management guidelines, webinars, best practices and opportunities for local officials to meet and exchange ideas.

U.S. EAC Clearinghouse Resources for Election Officials: <https://www.eac.gov/election-officials>



### The Election Center (the National Association of Election Officials)

conducts conferences, workshops and seminars throughout the year and also runs the Certified Elections/Registration Administrator (CERA) program along with faculty from Auburn University's public administration program. These college-level courses provide professional growth and development opportunities for election officials, with the goal of continuous improvement. <https://www.electioncenter.org/>



### The International Association of Government Officials

is an organization created by a merger of the International Association of Clerks, Recorders, Election Officials & Treasurers and the National Asso-

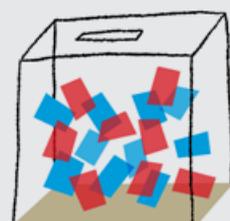
ciation of County Recorders, Election Officials & Clerks, holds events and disseminates information in support of local election officials. <https://iaogo.org/>



### The University of Minnesota's Humphrey School of Public Affairs

conducts an online certification program in election administration. <https://www.hhh.umn.edu/certificate-programs/certificate-election-administration>

## ELECTIONS



# Navigating the storm: Profound challenges in election administration

by Katharine Clark

Santa Fe County, N.M. clerk

As the Santa Fe County clerk, I am at the forefront of a rapidly changing and increasingly challenging landscape in election administration. The environment post-2020 has introduced unprecedented difficulties. Notably, the alarming trend of entire election offices resigning due to ongoing harassment is a clear testament to the stress and turmoil facing election officials nationwide.

Despite the recognition of elections as critical infrastructure by Congress, the election administration field has been doubly impacted. Across the country, we are witnessing a profound loss of election officials and personnel. The impact is more acute in smaller counties, where offices often run with as little as 3-5 people. The departure of even one person in such settings can have a significant impact, resulting in a loss of 20%-33% or more of the institutional knowledge crucial for running efficient and fair elections.

A comprehensive report by Issue One reveals that since 2020, a significant number of states have witnessed the departure of more than 40% of their chief or high-ranking election officials. This exodus signifies a substantial loss of expertise and experience in a field already grappling with numerous challenges. The implications of this trend are profound, impacting the very foundation of our democratic processes.

In this post-COVID era, the issue of staff attrition is not unique to election administration. In Santa Fe County, we see similar patterns in other critical public service areas, such as corrections and public safety. These sectors are struggling with fewer applicants, higher rates of retirements and significant turnover. This widespread issue across various public sectors underscores a systemic challenge in maintaining a robust and committed public service workforce.

Most public offices at the local, state and federal levels are also grappling with retirements, turnover and vacancies, primarily due to wage inflation and competition for staff. The situation is exacerbated by the rapidly evolving job market and shifting workforce expectations. The complexities of modern public service roles, coupled with stagnant wages, create a challenging environment for attracting and retaining talent.

The decline in public service interest is



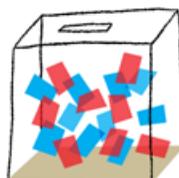
Clark

a broader societal issue. Evidence of this trend is visible in various sectors, notably, despite past positive robust reputation and recruitment, the smallest firefighting classes ever seen. This decline affects not just the provision of essential services but also the collective civic engagement and commitment to public welfare.

As we approach the 2024 elections, several significant challenges confront us:

**Harassment and threats:** The increase in threats and harassment toward staff and volunteers, ranging from mailed fentanyl powder and bomb scares to doxing, is deeply concerning. Such a hostile environment not only impacts staff morale but also deters even the most civic-minded individuals from participating in the election process.

**Stagnant wages**



## ELECTIONS

**in election offices:** The wages in election offices have not kept pace with other public sectors, including corrections and public safety. This discrepancy is particularly ironic given the critical nature of elections. The growing wage gap further highlights the need for a reevaluation of compensation structures within the field of election administration.

**Increased complexity in election processes:** In recent years, significant changes in elections across the political spectrum have added layers of administrative complexity. These changes, though well-intentioned and often needed, have increased the demands on election staff and created a need for specialized skills such as technological expertise, sophisticated communications capabilities and in-depth knowledge of evolving legal frameworks. Despite these increasing requirements, salaries in election offices have not adequately adjusted to reflect the new competencies needed to run modern, complex elections. And clerk offices have not been able to expand recruitment to new staffing pools meaning there is higher competition for workers available without proper compensation to recruit them.

To effectively address these challenges, targeted efforts are essential:

**Refuse to make harassment the new normal:** Implementing strong laws to protect election officials and volunteers from threats and harassment is a critical step. Additionally, it is vital for public servants and society at large to actively reject a culture of harassment and to challenge baseless claims. Maintaining a respectful and safe environment for those working in elections is non-negotiable.

**Retain election officials:** Raising the salaries of election

workers is of utmost importance. When examining the pay of local election offices, they often make less than living wage. In my own office, staff have been homeless or had to take on second jobs or have to travel long distances from the election offices endangering election processes in an emergency. This is not just true for Santa Fe County, but across the country when compared to other offices, it is often the clerks' offices who are at the bottom. Raising salaries, along with professionalizing civil service and strategically managing the workforce, is necessary to ensure that election administration remains an attractive and sustainable career path.

**Reimagine elections offices:** In conjunction with higher pay, elections offices will need their county support to increase capacity for additional processes or procedures. Changing internal structures, updating job descriptions, building skill certifications and increasing career ladders within the election field will help increase capacity, build staffing resiliencies and support the election official workforce.

**Invest in elections:** Comprehensive investments in the election process are critical. This includes establishing internships, youth outreach programs and recognizing election personnel as integral to our critical infrastructure. Advocating for additional funding from the Help America Vote Act (HAVA) directly to local counties as well as increased financial support from state legislatures are imperative steps in fortifying our election infrastructure.

These challenges, though formidable, are not insurmountable. Our collective goal is to uphold a democratic process that is fair, secure and efficient. Immediate and thoughtful action is essential to safeguard the future of our democracy and the boots on the ground that ensure it happens. **HT**



# Federal policy can strengthen election worker safety

by **Paige Mellerio**

As we enter the 2024 election cycle, county election officials across the country are bracing themselves for what's ahead. There's a general sense of anxiety about what this year could bring and how typically mundane aspects of election administration could be distorted and misconstrued online.

There's no denying that the persistent misinformation and conspiracy theories surrounding election administration have led to heightened tensions and distrust in public officials in communities across the country. In the most extreme cases, this has resulted in targeted threats and relentless harassment toward county election officials for simply doing the job they were elected or appointed to do.

Counties aren't alone in this — state election officials receive their fair share of threats and harassment. State legislatures and election offices should take action to protect county election officials and to their credit, a handful have to some degree. In Arizona, California and Oregon, election officials are protected from "doxing," searching for and publishing private or identifying information about a particular individual. In Colorado, Minnesota and New Hampshire, they are protected from intimidation, threats or other attempts to interfere in election administration.

The federal government has an obligation to protect county election officials

too. After all, races for federal office take up most of the ballots counties are required to print (and pay for) each election cycle. This isn't to say there hasn't been progress toward protecting election officials at the federal level — there has. In 2021, the U.S. Department of Justice launched the Elections Threats Task Force to investigate and if appropriate, prosecute, reported incidents of threats against elections workers.

Additionally, in Fiscal Year (FY) 2023 the U.S. Department of Homeland Security required states to use 3% of their Homeland Security Grant Program allocation on election security activities. Congress also funded the State & Local Cybersecurity Grant Program, which can be used on election infrastructure, for the first time in FY 2023 and the USDPJ clarified that Edward Byrne Memorial Justice Assistance Grant (Byrne JAG Grant) funds can be used on election worker protection.

*(For more information about the grant, visit <https://bja.ojp.gov/program/jag/overview>.)*



**Klobuchar**



**Durbin**

Protections for election workers should go beyond administrative action that can easily sunset or be reversed. Congress should work to protect election officials and invest in the individuals who dedicate their careers to upholding our democratic institutions. Congress could consider the following policies:

- **Expanding existing protections for election workers** including making it a crime to threaten, intimidate, harass or coerce election officials and prohibiting the dissemination or disclosure of certain personal information of election officials for the purposes of threatening and harassing election officials

- **Authorize grants** for local governments to recruit, train and retain high quality poll workers, increase physical security at polling places and election offices and to establish or expand grant programs to protect election officials' personal information at their discretion to address the

election workforce shortages that have resulted from the heightened ten-

sions around elections

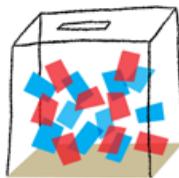
- **Increase and annually fund** Help America Vote Act grants to assist county election officials fund election administration activities and to ensure secure and accurate elections

- **Promote intergovernmental collaboration and cooperation** between federal, state and local law enforcement agencies and provide law enforcement agencies with resources to investigate reports of threats and harassment toward election officials

Protecting election officials shouldn't be a partisan issue in Congress and at the county level, it's not. At both the 2022 and 2023 NACo Annual Conferences, bipartisan election officials from across the country championed a policy resolution urging Congress to impose appropriate penalties for threatening, harassing and doxing county election officials.

As a result, NACo has endorsed the Election Worker Protection Act (S. 1318) led by Senate Rules Committee Chair Amy Klobuchar (D-Minn.) and Senate Judiciary Committee Chair Dick Durbin (D-Ill.). We encourage counties to urge their members of Congress to support this bill and other efforts to protect county election officials at the federal level. 

*Mellerio is an associate legislative director staffing NACo's Finance, Pensions and Intergovernmental Affairs Policy Steering Committee.*



## ELECTIONS



**GET TO KNOW...**

**Tippah County, Miss.**

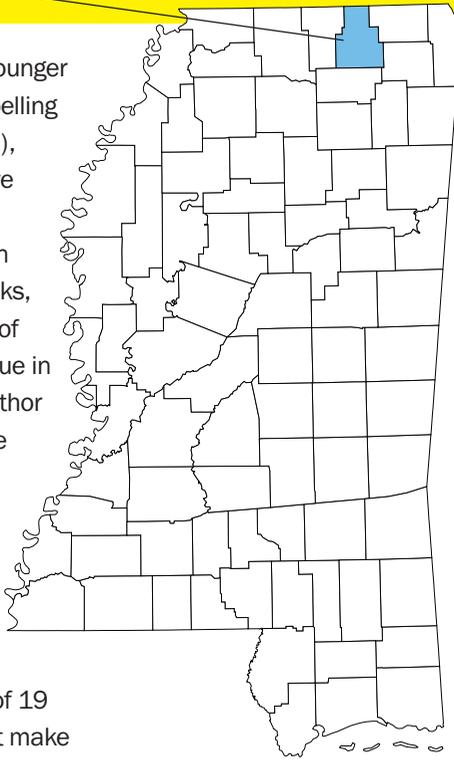
Tippah County, founded as one of the 10 original counties in Mississippi formed from the Chickasaw Session of 1832, was named for the Chickasaw word meaning “cut off,” after the creek of the same name that flows through the county into the Tallahatchie River. The Chickasaw Nation’s traditional territory was located in northern Mississippi, northern Alabama, western Tennessee and southwestern Kentucky.

The county seat, Ripley, has held First Monday Trade Days since 1893. The largest flea market in the state is held weekend prior to the first Monday of each month and is the oldest recorded continuously running open flea market in the country. While the entire county has just under 22,000 residents, according to the 2020 census, the market attracts more than 200,000 visitors annually.

**Nobel Laureate William Faulkner, who is regarded as one of the most significant American writers of all-time, grew up in Ripley until he was 5 years old before moving to Oxford.** His great-grandfather, Col.

William C. Falkner (the younger Faulkner changed the spelling of his last name in 1918), who is considered to have been an inspiration for many of the characters in his great-grandson’s books, was a longtime resident of the city, which has a statue in his honor. Falkner, an author himself, also founded the Ship Island, Ripley and Kentucky Railroad Company, which formed the county’s town of Falkner around the railroad’s first station.

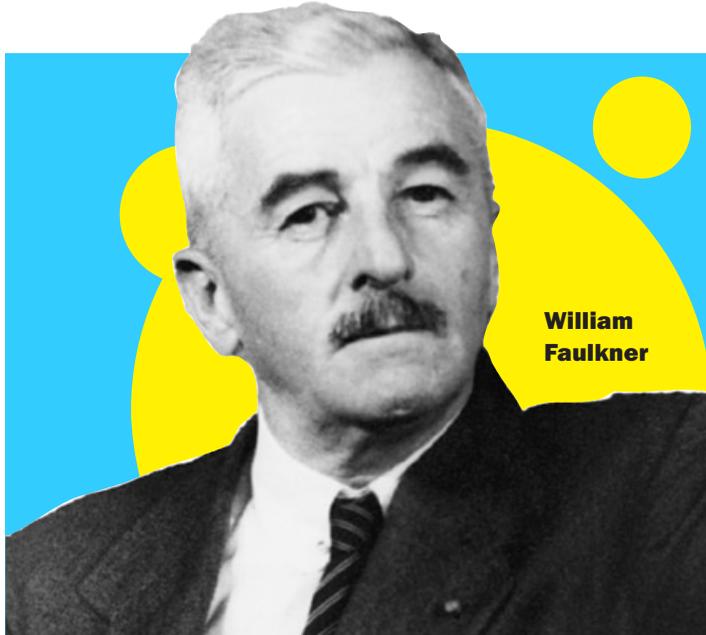
Tippah County is one of 19 throughout the state that make



up the Mississippi Hills National Heritage Area, which was federally designated as one of 62 “heritage areas” throughout the country for its notable role in the Civil War and civil rights movement. The majority of the area was originally Chickasaw territory and went on to be the sites of the luka and Corinth battles in the Civil War. Notable people from the Mississippi Hills National Heritage Area include writer Tennessee Williams, blues singer Howlin’ Wolf, Elvis Presley, journalist Ida B. Wells and James Meredith, the first Black student at the University of Mississippi.

The Holly Springs National Forest, 155,000 acres of public land, sprawls across six counties, including Tippah. The forest offers camping, swimming, boating, hiking and fishing opportunities, and staff also work to restore short-leaf pine ecosystems in the forest. The 145-acre Tippah County Lake, which currently has the record for the largest redear sunfish caught in the state, is also located in the county.

*Get to Know features new NACo member counties.*



**William Faulkner**

**BEHIND THE SEAL**

**HARDY COUNTY, W.VA.**

**H**ardy County’s seal features the various agricultural businesses that built its economy: A cow, chicken and turkey, as well as corn and a spinning wheel (wool). Its land use breaks down 63.18% agricultural, 16.11% residential, 4.03% commercial, .15% industrial and 16.53% public (forest service and state parks). *Public Relations Specialist Peggy Moomaw assisted uncovering the seal’s background.*

The green shaded part of the seal represents U.S. Forest Service land and state parks.

The year 1786 commemorates the county’s founding.



The mountaineer represents the strength and spirit of West Virginia.

The seal also has the U.S. and West Virginia flags, signifying the unity of state and country.

*Would you like to see your county seal featured in Behind the Seal? Contact Meredith Moran at mmoran@naco.org.*

**WORD SEARCH**

**SANTA FE COUNTY, N.M.**

Created by Mary Ann Barton

L X C N Z B C C Q T M L Z F Z H S I G T  
 L U E G D A I Z H Y Y O B S G J O X T N  
 O Z Y T M R X M K S B A U Z F P X I K E  
 A L S X O I O K D T J I N N E X A H X W  
 S T B T M P R A Q D F G E R T A O C G S  
 M G S E U V D L W B X R A V R A X A M P  
 H I N D U S T R I E S O G T L B I O D A  
 H O G W V P Q Z W V C E S S L M B N Y P  
 N O I T A R B E L E C G T V E D E W S E  
 M W I R F O S V U F Q Y N B V L K V N R  
 U R I P E G A P N N Q G A C U L I T D P  
 O S P J T Y J A M X M O R R I M Y H V E  
 M V W W T F T K R D Z P U C V M Q Y C N  
 T H R O N E S R A V I M A N D U A Q I A  
 Q C M P K E O V A M U F T L Y D S A C Q  
 X N V I L E I Q R I Y O S P R B P R T X  
 K R J Z R N T S U Y L X E R L S D S J M  
 C C D R D V J F G N F C R A L M L V A R  
 L A Z F J B N G B T D Z Q B E M G I O C  
 Z V S K R A P I F A T S W A N I R V M H

**ARTS:** One in 10 jobs in the county are connected to the arts. The county is home to more than 200 art galleries and art markets.

**CELEBRATION:** The county is home to the nation’s oldest community celebration, the Santa Fe Fiesta, which was established in 1712.

**CHILES:** A key ingredient in the county’s cuisine.

**GEORGIA:** The late artist Georgia O’Keefe made her home here; her work is featured at the Georgia O’Keefe Museum in the county.

**HISTORIC:** The county is home to the oldest public building in the country, the Palace of the Governors, built in the early 17th century. The building is now home to the New Mexico History Museum.

**INDUSTRIES:** The largest industries in the county are government, hospitality and tech. The county is also the nation’s third-largest art market.

**MOUNTAINS:** The Sangre de Cristo Mountains lie 15 miles northeast of the county. The highest point is Santa Fe Baldy, at 12,632 feet above sea level.

**NEWSPAPER:** The *Santa Fe New Mexican* is the local newspaper, in print since 1849.

**OPERA:** This architectural wonder, an open-air adobe structure built in 1957, hosts five operas each summer.

**PARKS:** The county is home to several national parks including Bandelier National Monument, Pecos National Historical Park and the Valles Caldera National Preserve.

**PUEBLO:** The name for Native American communities in New Mexico. There are 19 in the state and at least eight near the county.

**RESTAURANT:** Be sure to stop by the Plaza Café, in business since 1905.

**SPAIN:** The region was a part of Spain starting in 1610 when it was named Villa Real de la Santa Fe de San Francisco de Asis.

**THRONES:** “Game of Thrones” writer George R.R. Martin makes his home in the county.

**TRAIL:** The Santa Fe Trail, which stretched from Missouri was used by traders and pioneers from 1821 to 1880.



2024 NACo

# Achievement Awards

CELEBRATING  
**54** YEARS OF  
INNOVATION

**EARLY BIRD  
SUBMISSION DEADLINE:**

February 23, 2024 at  
11:59 p.m. ET

**SUBMISSIONS DEADLINE:**

March 30, 2024 at  
11:59 p.m. ET

**NOTIFICATIONS OF  
ACHIEVEMENT AWARDS:**

Early May 2024



## HOW TO **APPLY**

Does your county have an innovative program that improves county government and enhances services for county residents? Apply for the 2024 Achievement Awards! There are 18 categories ranging from information technology, health, criminal justice, human services and many more.

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Contact **[awards@naco.org](mailto:awards@naco.org)**

## BRIGHT IDEAS | LOS ANGELES COUNTY, CALIF.

# Los Angeles County Expands Voting Options for Incarcerated

### PROBLEM:

Incarcerated individuals awaiting trial had difficulty participating in elections via absentee voting.

### SOLUTION:

Provide in-person voting.

by **Meredith Moran**  
staff writer

For the first time, eligible incarcerated individuals in all Los Angeles County jails will have the opportunity to vote in-person during the March primary and November election as part of the county's Free the Vote initiative, which aims to increase civic engagement in its justice-involved population.

Each county jail will operate a Flex voting center during scheduled time blocks throughout the state's 10-day voting period where inmates can register to vote on-site and fill out their ballot through a streamlined process, made possible through a partnership between the county's Sheriff's Office and Registrar Recorder's Office.

While Los Angeles County jail inmates have had the ability to vote-by-mail for some time, it wasn't until the Voting While Incarcerated pilot program at the Century Regional Detention Facility for Women in 2020 that incarcerated individuals were allowed to cast their vote in-person at a jail.

Los Angeles County Registrar-Recorder/County Clerk Dean Logan said that the in-person voting expansion is a "game changer," because it allows incarcerated individuals to vote without the advanced preparation involved with absentee voting, which requires multiple steps over the span of months.

"It certainly provides more independence in the act of voting than the original vote-by-mail model does," Logan said. "... Our Board of Supervi-

sors, from a policy level, have adopted a 'Care first, jails last' type of approach, so there's a priority in L.A. County of recognizing that just because somebody's justice involved, they still should have access to basic public services, and civic engagement and participation is a part of that."

In-person voting is an expansion of county jail inmates' voting options, not a replacement of the previous process, so they can still vote-by-mail if they choose to. While voting-by-mail is proven to be secure and safe, Logan said the added option of in-person voting could encourage more incarcerated individuals to vote.

"From the individual voter's perspective, the in-person option gives them that ability to

actually see the process from start to finish and know that their ballot is in a secure ballot box and it's coming back to be counted," he said.

Following the success of the 2020 pilot program, the Voting While Incarcerated initiative was brought to the Peter J. Pitchess Detention Center in 2022 and will now be offered in all seven county jails.

Logan credits the program's expansion to not only the "critical coordination" between the Sheriff's Office and Registrar Recorder's Office, but also its work with advocacy organizations and justice-involved agencies through the Free the Vote initiative to get the word out about in-person voting at the jails.

"I think part of the success of

it is having them engage with the incarcerated individuals," Logan said. "So that they understand the importance of voting as opposed to simply just putting notices during mealtime that voting is going to be available next week at 11 a.m., but actually giving them information that encourages that level of participation and makes it relevant to those people."

In-person voting in local jails is also offered in Washington, D.C and certain sites in Denver County, Colo., Harris County, Texas and Cook and Will counties in Illinois. Logan said his advice to other counties looking to implement a similar program is to create a strong relationship between the Elections Office and Sheriff's Office and be aware of the necessary

training and voting equipment involved.

"In our county, part of what makes this work is that we're able to actually get connectivity so we can access our voter database from the jail facility," Logan said. "So, we can register people to vote on site and update their record, but also maintain the security of making sure that that's somebody who hasn't already voted or something of that nature."

"In smaller counties, where they may not have the resources, I think it's still doable in those jurisdictions, it just may require more manual interaction than what we do here."

Because the Registrar Recorder's Office doesn't have direct contact with county jail inmates, the Free the Vote coalition helps promote voting and provide information to incarcerated individuals. According to Logan, that could look like an incarcerated individual getting information on voting registration and available voting options through their public defender or information about ballot measures through American Civil Liberties Union outreach so that they can do research and be prepared to vote.

"This is all around the idea of being some form of restorative justice to ensure that while they're waiting in many cases to go to trial, that they already maintain those rights and to encourage them to exercise them, but also even for those who may be ultimately convicted and go into the state prison system, to encourage them to remain engaged and active and to be aware that they have those rights returned once they're no longer incarcerated." **CN**



*The In-Person Voting for Incarcerated Individuals program earned Los Angeles County the 2023 NACo Achievement Award for Best in Category in Civic Education and Public Information.*

# NEWS FROM ACROSS THE NATION



## FLORIDA

- The **INDIAN RIVER COUNTY** Sheriff's Office is offering **yoga classes in the county jail**. A volunteer teacher leads participants in a program that, as the office's Facebook page describes, "transforms healing, promotes tension relief, peace, emotion control, self-reflection and well-being of people in the criminal justice system."



## CALIFORNIA

- Aiming to cut down on **real estate fraud**, the **ALAMEDA COUNTY** District Attorney's Office will now automatically mail a letter to the person who's been paying a property's property tax bill to make sure they're aware of any transfers.

The letter, written in English, Spanish and Chinese, will include a portion of the deed document that sealed the deal, *The Oaklandside* reported, and if the recipient sees the notice and thinks there's something suspicious about the change in ownership, they're advised to call the DA's office.

- When a parent is incarcerated, that cuts back the crucial face time a child receives. The **SAN BERNARDINO COUNTY** Sheriff's Department Community Service and Reentry Division has partnered with the

school district to expand the visiting time allowed so parents can read to their children and foster relationships despite the challenging setting. The **Love for Literacy** program debuted in December with a Santa Claus-themed event that included gifts for the children.

"It was a special moment that families enjoyed together despite the unfortunate circumstances," said San Bernardino County Superintendent Ted Alejandre.

- **SAN DIEGO COUNTY**'s Shallow Rental Subsidy Program will provide \$500 a month in **rental assistance** to 220 senior households chosen

by lottery. This follows a study that showed that one in four people experiencing homelessness in the county is over 55 years old, a growing demographic.

## ILLINOIS

The **CLARK COUNTY** Public Library will offer a new writing program exploring how writing can promote positive changes in the world. **Writing for a Change** will be held through a series of six sessions with three local authors who will lead participants "on ways their writing can be used for positive change in the community and beyond," the *Springfield News-Sun* reported.

## INDIANA

Gov. Eric Holcomb (R) has appointed **BOONE COUNTY** Council President Elise Nieshalla as **state comptroller**. She will oversee the state's accounting; disburse tax distributions to cities, counties, towns and schools; pay the state's bills and employees and administer the state's deferred compensation plan.

## IOWA

The **JASPER COUNTY** Sheriff's Office is using American Rescue Plan Act funding to fill in rural **emergency response service gaps** with an advanced life support pilot program. Two deputies have received para-

medic training, and while they are often operating in reserve, they can step in and serve as the primary care provider, as they have the highest level of care experience among the volunteer EMTs, the *Newton Daily News* reported.

## MARYLAND

**MONTGOMERY COUNTY**'s Department of Permitting Services has introduced a **Customer Bill of Rights**, outlining the measures and recourses afforded to property owners, while also clarifying customer responsibilities. Customers may escalate their concerns to a supervisor, manager or the director and request translation services and expect accountability. But in turn, they must employ quality control



prior to permit submission and scheduling inspections, provide clear and timely notification to staff of any changes to plans and projects or for the purposes of scheduling inspections and maintain civil, courteous and respectful conduct and communication.

## MICHIGAN

The **OAKLAND COUNTY** Healthy Equity Council and Pontiac Community Founda-

See **NEWS FROM** page 11

## FLORIDA

- A **LEE COUNTY** program funded by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development will help residents with home repairs following **damage caused by Hurricane Ian**. The "Lee Cares Plan" offers financial assistance for home repairs, home ownership and relocation assistance for those in flood zones.

Recipients are required to reside in the assisted home for at least five years, with Lee County implementing a "soft mortgage" that decreases by 20 percent each year.



**From NEWS FROM page 10**

tion have partnered for a federally funded new mini-grant program to address the long-term racial or systemic health **inequities made worse by the COVID-19 pandemic**. Grants of up to \$159,000 will be awarded to 10 non-profits located in Oakland County or that serve Oakland County residents. Projects include transportation initiatives; food or health care access; language barrier reduction programs; affordable housing and mental or behavioral health.

**MISSOURI**

A 16-week **GREENE COUNTY** program is helping families in which a parent is fighting substance use disorder. **Celebrating Families** is funded through a grant from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention and it gathers families for a meal before dividing them into smaller groups to develop the skills needed to talk about substance abuse in the home. All participants have lost custody of their children as a result of their substance use disorder, KYTV-TV reported. The Greene County Juvenile Department received a grant to expand services, including an Early Intervention Court, scheduled to start in 2024.

**NEVADA**

Facing a dearth of qualified foster families, **CLARK COUNTY**'s Department of Family Services is offering **expedited training for prospective foster families**, who, pending passage and approval of various background screenings, will be able to care for infants, children, teens or sibling groups immediately after completing the program. The fast-tracked training takes two to three weeks, compared to the traditional seven-week program.

**NORTH CAROLINA**

The **WAKE COUNTY** Board of Commissioners permanently **conserved 125 acres of a local farm**, marking the single largest dedication of funds for farm-



**VIRGINIA**

• **HENRICO COUNTY** will purchase one of the **most historically significant parcels of land** in the United States — buying the 2,095-acre Varina Farms plot along the James River with the intention of preserving it. The *Henrico Citizen* reported that the farm is where John Rolfe — whose figure graces the county seal — developed the new strand of tobacco whose proliferation saved the failing Virginia Colony at Jamestown in the early 1600s. The village that developed after his death served as the county seat for 120 years. Half its acreage is farmland and the other half forestland that is actively maintained.

land preservation in the county and state and one of the largest in the nation.

Partnering with the county and Triangle Land Conservancy, a father and son team voluntarily agreed to place most of their farm into the Wake Soil and Water Conservation District's Farmland Preservation Program, which will permanently safeguard the property from development. Wake County used nearly \$1.1 million in deferred taxes as part of the newly expanded Farmland Preservation program. The remaining 60% was donated by the landowners. Triangle Land Conservancy will hold and monitor the easement in perpetuity to ensure that this land is truly protected.

**PENNSYLVANIA**

**MONTGOMERY COUNTY**'s Department of Health and Human Services will operate a new **call center for residents experiencing homelessness**. The helpline number will connect callers with a coordinated entry specialist. By replacing the United Way of Southeastern PA's 211 call center, the county aims to provide more direct, local expertise and responses to calls.

**TEXAS**

**EL PASO COUNTY** will introduce a **guaranteed income program**, issuing \$500 monthly to 130-140 households. The \$500,000 set

aside for this program came from the American Rescue Plan Act.

**VIRGINIA**

• **ARLINGTON COUNTY** will develop regulations for **office conversion projects**. The policies will encourage the retention of an existing office building and converting it into a different use. "Adaptive reuse" projects must currently go through the county's full site plan review process. In 2023, the county made several zoning changes to allow certain businesses to operate without seeking special permissions, including micro-fulfillment centers, urban farms, breweries, dog boarding facilities, pickleball courts and podcast studios.

• **FAIRFAX COUNTY**'s new

**Pathfinder Kitchen Initiative** offers case management, mental health and substance use assessments, affordable housing and other services to people accused of non-violent crimes in lieu of incarceration. Participants will get an opportunity to learn culinary skills at an operating restaurant and earn the certification needed to work in the food service industry. It's part of the Commonwealth Attorney's Taking Root diversion program

**WISCONSIN**

**MILWAUKEE COUNTY** is the first in the state to pass a **"Rights of Nature" resolution**. The nonbinding statement declares that "Milwaukee County land and waterways deserve to be protected and maintained, to be healthy, robust and resilient," in County Executive David Crowley's words. "Rights of Nature" is a global movement with roots in the Indigenous community broadly aimed at making sure nature has the same legal protections humans do.

**SOUTH CAROLINA**

The **ANDERSON COUNTY** Library's new LEAP program — **learning, experience, adventure and play** — allows students to check out pickleball equipment and musical instruments. The *Independent-Mail* reported that the program includes many items not typically found in libraries, including learning tablets, musical instruments, sports equipment, video games and outdoor activities.



*News From Across the Nation is compiled by Charlie Ban and Meredith Moran, and we would like to hear from counties about new policies and programs. Contact cban@naco.org and mmoran@naco.org.*



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