

# THE COUNTY LANDSCAPE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

ROLES AND  
RESPONSIBILITIES  
OF AMERICA'S  
COUNTY  
GOVERNMENTS



[NACo.org/CountyLandscape](https://NACo.org/CountyLandscape)  
UPDATED FEBRUARY 2024





# AMERICA'S COUNTIES

Counties are one of America's oldest forms of government, dating back to 1634 when the first county governments (shires) were established in Virginia. The organization and structure of today's 3,069 county governments\* are chartered under state constitutions or laws and are tailored to fit the needs and characteristics of the state and local areas.

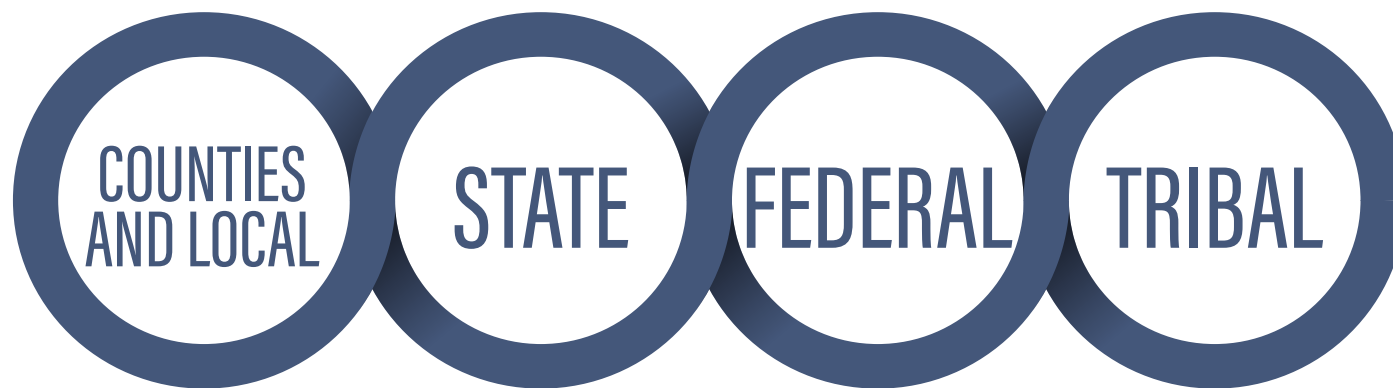
Counties are governed by locally elected officials, including more than 19,350 county elected executives and board members responsible for counties' budgets, policies and oversight. Additionally, more than 18,500 independently elected officers, often known as constitutional or row officers, provide essential leadership and management of county functions, such as auditors, assessors, clerks, coroners, district attorneys, elections, recorders, sheriffs, treasurers and others.

Though organizational structures vary, all county governments are on the front lines of building healthy, vibrant and safe communities.

# COUNTIES ARE VITAL TO OUR NATION'S INTERGOVERNMENTAL SYSTEM

County governments, led by our elected and appointed officials, are instrumental partners in our nation's **intergovernmental system**, which balances, divides and shares power and responsibilities between all levels of government.

Counties are uniquely positioned to implement and administer vital intergovernmental systems, facilitate cooperation of all levels of government, and deliver results and impact for our residents and businesses at the community level.



Annually, counties invest over

**\$600  
BILLION**

in our communities

America's counties employ over

**3.6  
MILLION**

public servants, representing one out of every 50 American workers

\* The 3,069 county governments include all counties, parishes in Louisiana and boroughs in Alaska.

Counties are diverse  
in structure and how  
we deliver services  
to our communities,

yet we all share the mission of achieving healthy, safe and vibrant counties for our residents.

# AMERICA'S COUNTIES

Our 3,069 county, parish and borough governments are on the front lines of delivering vital public services to over 300 million residents across the nation. Our locally elected officials operate under different levels of county authority outlined under state law or local charters, which provide counties with structural, functional and fiscal powers.



## COUNTY GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT

**Assess and collect taxes**, including those for other public entities such as public schools, municipalities and special purpose districts

**Administer elections** through the funding and management of over **100,000 polling places** staffed with over **630,000 certified poll workers** each election cycle

**Employ one in every 50 American workers** to help provide essential community services and facilities, such as parks and recreation, public libraries, public safety, emergency management, and community and economic development



## FEDERAL TO COUNTY NEXUS

Provide mandated **healthcare for low-income, uninsured or indigent residents** in a majority of states

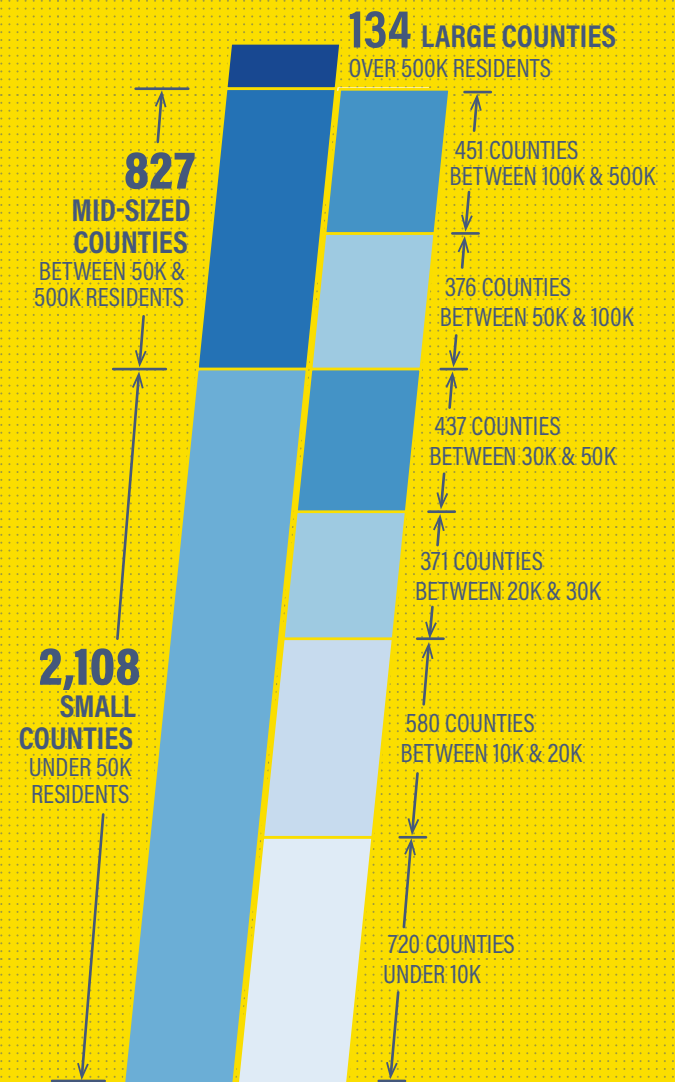
**Manage more than \$562 million in federal Payment in Lieu of Taxes funds** within 1,723 public lands counties, which are critical to services, such as law enforcement, fire protection, and search and rescue

**Invest nearly \$269 million in federal Secure Rural Schools funding**, critical to counties and schools impacted by the decline in federal revenue sharing from timber harvests on federal public lands

**Oversee and implement Community Development Block Grant funding** to provide affordable housing for renters and homeowners and provide critical public investments to low-income households and neighborhoods

**Administer funds from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)** in the ten states that delegate SNAP administration to county agencies, covering nearly one-third of program recipient households

## COUNTY BREAKDOWN BY POPULATION SIZE





## CONNECT COMMUNITIES

Own and maintain **45 percent of public road miles** and **38 percent of bridges** which help keep residents physically connected

Invest **\$134 billion** in building, maintaining and operating public facilities, such as courthouses, jails, dams and reservoirs, water purification systems, libraries, ports and sewage treatment facilities

Own or support operations of **more than one-third of public airports** and **40 percent of public transportation systems**



## KEEP AMERICA HEALTHY

Manage and govern **more than 1,900 local public health departments and authorities** which support the health and safety of our residents

Employ **nearly 533,000 hospital and healthcare workers** and own or support **more than 900 public hospitals** that provide inpatient medical and specialized care critical for low income and uninsured individuals

Operate more than **700 long-term care facilities** and more than **750 behavioral health authorities**



## CREATE PROSPEROUS COMMUNITIES

Employ **over 3.6 million public servants** who help provide essential services to over 300 million residents, collectively making county governments one of the largest employers in the nation

Invest **\$12.8 billion** annually in the construction, operation and support of housing and redevelopment projects, and are key players in community planning, land use, zoning, and enacting policies and other regulations that expand housing access and affordability

Implement local policies and intergovernmental initiatives that foster economic development, promote residential, commercial and industrial development, and support job creation and business retention



## FOSTER SAFE AND VIBRANT COMMUNITIES

Invest **\$107 billion** annually in justice and public safety, **operate 91 percent of local jails**, which processed 7.3 million admissions in 2022

Provide essential first responder services through sheriffs, police departments, constables, 911 operations, firefighters and EMT/EMS professionals

Engage in all aspects and phases of emergency management such as: planning, preparedness, mitigation, response and recovery. As the regularity and costs of disasters increase, counties are working hard to protect our residents, property, infrastructure systems and local economies

## OUR NATION'S VETERANS



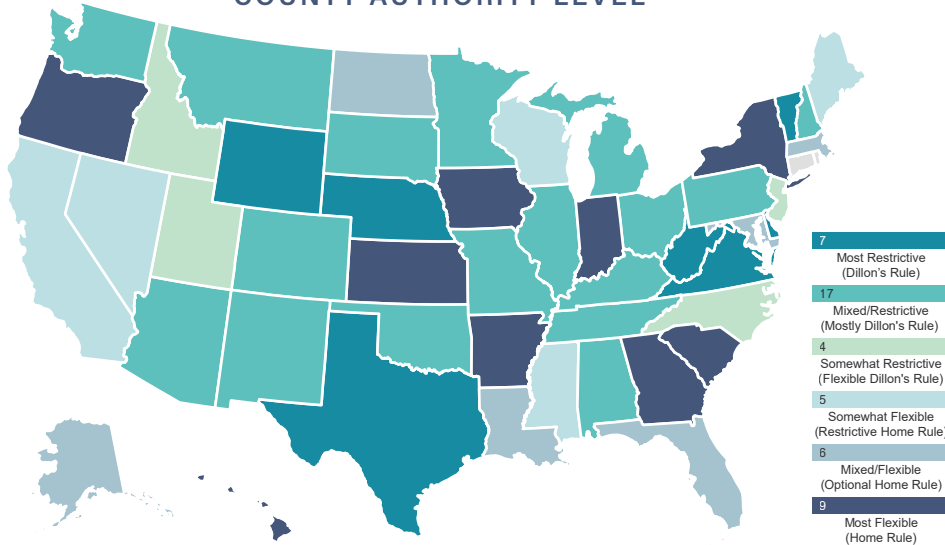
Fund and operate, almost exclusively through local tax revenues, County Veterans Service Officers (CVSOs) in **29 states and the District of Columbia**

CVSOs help veterans claim **more than \$52 billion in federal VA benefits** each year

Are home to **nearly 17 million veterans**, comprising seven percent of residents living in our counties

# THE COUNTY BASICS

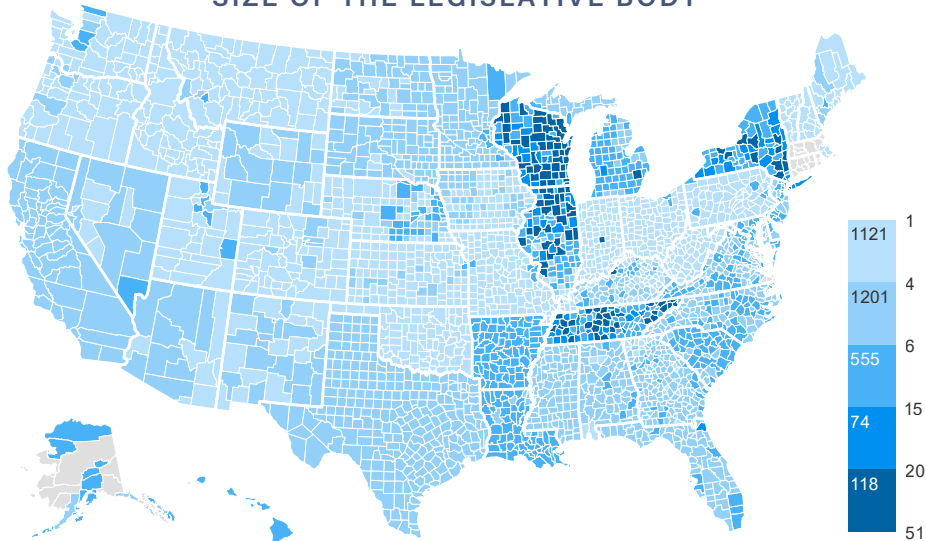
COUNTY AUTHORITY LEVEL



Government authority is essential in determining how quickly and effectively counties can respond to the needs of our residents. **Thirty-one (31) states, representing 58 percent of county governments, grant counties the option to operate under the Home Rule system of authority**, allowing county governments more flexibility than the alternative Dillon's Rule with more restrictive state control. While working within these systems, counties provide critical services to our communities, covering many areas, including public health, infrastructure, emergency response and economic development.

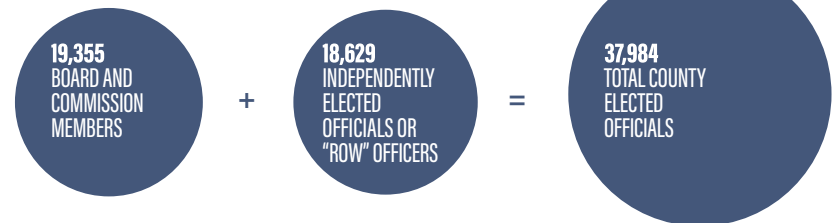
Under **Home Rule** authority, counties have the authority to legislate independently from state statute. Under **Dillon's Rule** authority, counties operate only within areas defined and allowed by state constitution and statute.

COUNTY GOVERNMENT STRUCTURE:  
SIZE OF THE LEGISLATIVE BODY



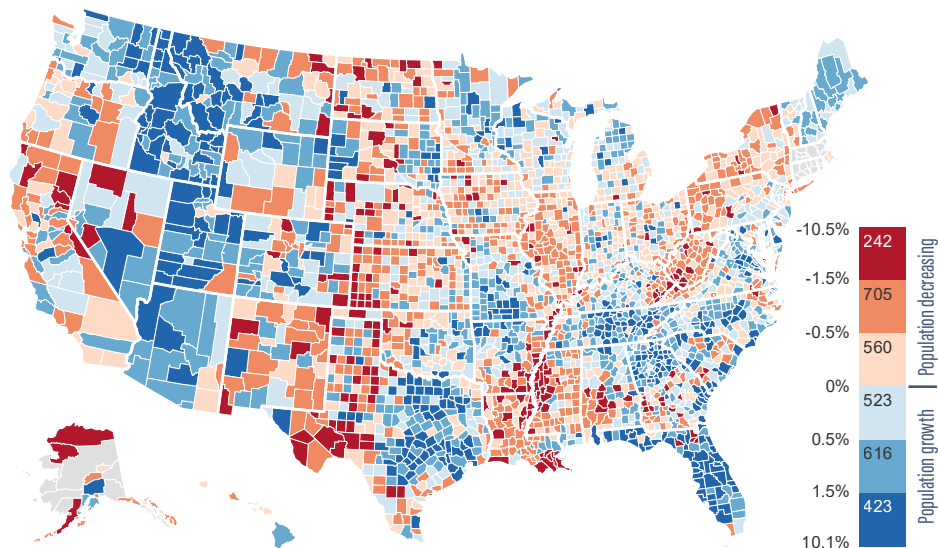
**Counties provide vital services across America, including those mandated by federal and state policies and those requested by our communities.** Counties often build and maintain parks, community centers, libraries and cultural centers. Counties are responsible for managing elections, from presidential to local. While balancing numerous administrative responsibilities, counties deliver essential services to ensure healthy, vibrant and safe communities.

**COUNTY ELECTED LEADERSHIP CONSIST OF:**





## PERCENT CHANGE IN POPULATION — 2021 TO 2022



**53%**

OF ALL COUNTIES  
INCREASED IN  
POPULATION  
BETWEEN 2021  
AND 2022

More than half of all counties experienced population growth between 2021 and 2022. **Counties in the southern and Western regions of the country experienced the most substantial gains.**

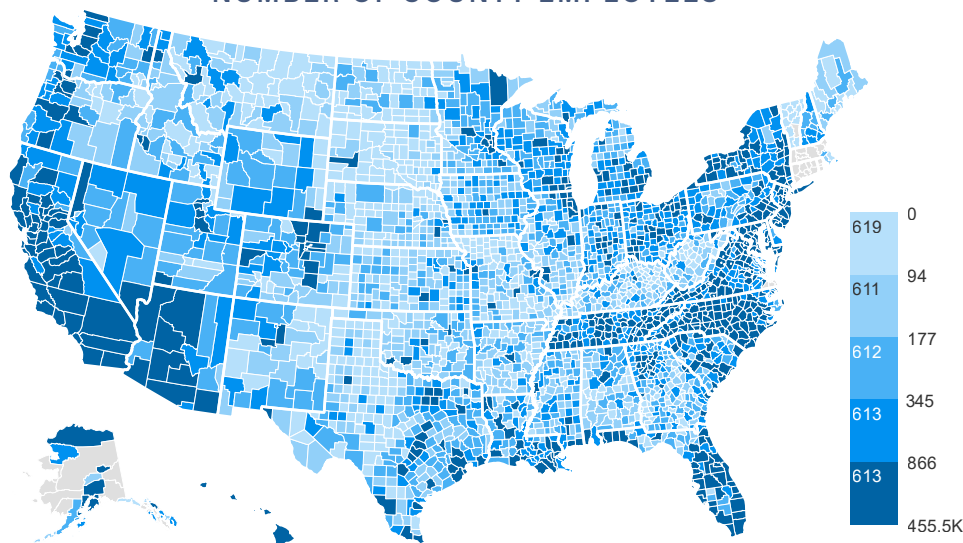
The fastest-growing counties:

- Whitman County, Wash. (10.1 percent)
- Kaufman County, Texas (8.9 percent)
- San Juan County, Colo. (8.5 percent)

**The racial and ethnic demographic makeup of counties are shifting.** In 2020, **375 counties** were majority people of color — an increase from the 2010 baseline of **317 counties**.

People of color encompasses those identifying as Hispanic, Black or African American, Asian, American Indian and Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander.

## NUMBER OF COUNTY EMPLOYEES



County governments are critical to the nation's workforce, **employing more than one in every 50 American workers.**

COUNTIES EMPLOY OVER  
3.6 MILLION PUBLIC  
SERVANTS, INCLUDING:

**382.000**   
LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICERS

**325.000**   
HOSPITAL WORKERS

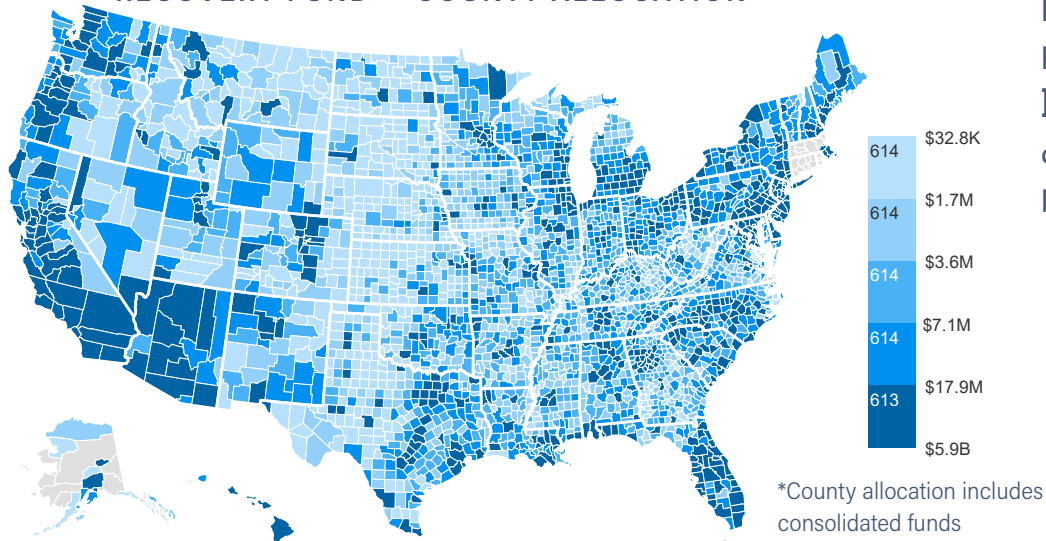
**248.000**   
HUMAN SERVICES WORKERS

**207.000**   
PUBLIC HEALTH WORKERS

**101.000**   
FIRE PROTECTION WORKERS

# FEDERAL TO COUNTY NEXUS

## AMERICAN RESCUE PLAN ACT (ARPA) RECOVERY FUND — COUNTY ALLOCATION\*



The Coronavirus State and Local Fiscal Recovery Fund (Recovery Fund), part of the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA), which NACo helped develop and strongly advocated to pass, allocates **\$65.1 billion** directly to every county, parish and borough in the country. Counties are allocating these critical recovery funds to a broad array of investments under four categories:



PUBLIC HEALTH  
AND ECONOMIC  
RESPONSE



PUBLIC SECTOR  
REVENUE

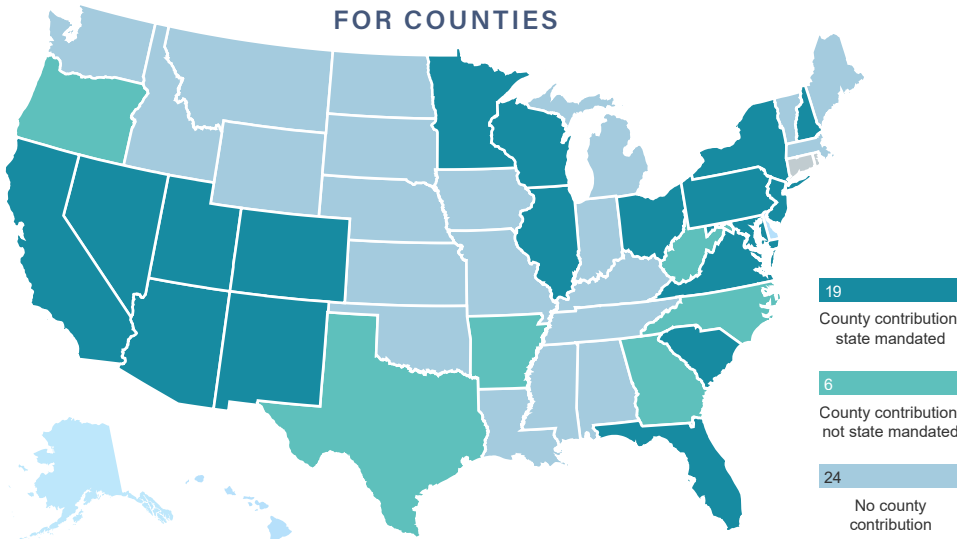


PREMIUM PAY  
FOR ESSENTIAL  
WORKERS



WATER, SEWER  
AND BROADBAND  
INFRASTRUCTURE

## MEDICAID CONTRIBUTION MANDATES FOR COUNTIES



Medicaid operates and is jointly financed as a partnership between federal, state and local governments. Counties across the nation often deliver Medicaid-eligible services and, in many instances, help states finance the non-federal match and administrative costs

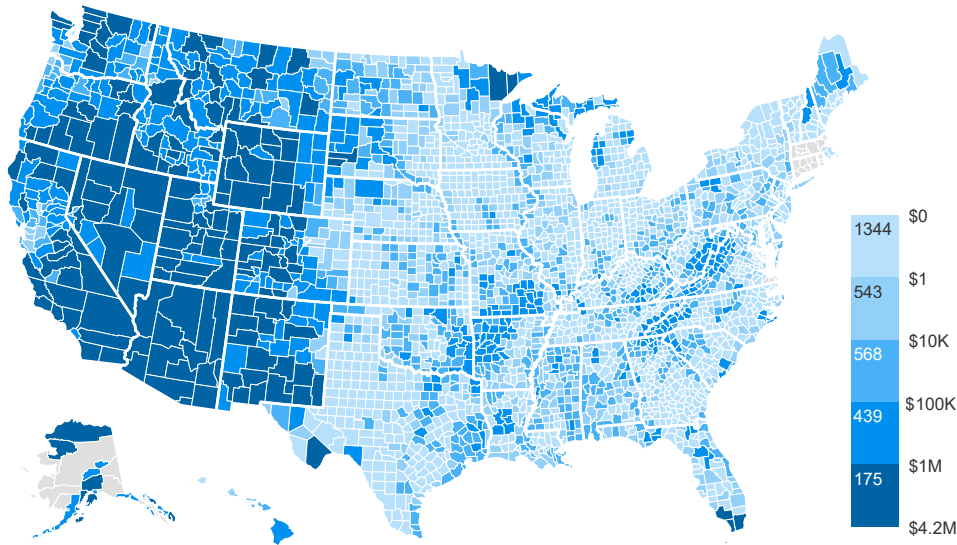
## COUNTIES CONTRIBUTE TO MEDICAID IN 25 STATES



19 STATES,  
MANDATE  
COUNTIES TO  
CONTRIBUTE TO THE  
NON-FEDERAL  
SHARE OF  
MEDICAID COSTS

6 STATES,  
IN WHICH COUNTIES  
CONTRIBUTE TO  
MEDICAID WITHOUT A  
STATE MANDATE FOR  
ADMINISTRATIVE AND  
PROGRAM COSTS,  
SUPPORT OUR

## PAYMENTS IN LIEU OF TAXES (PILT)

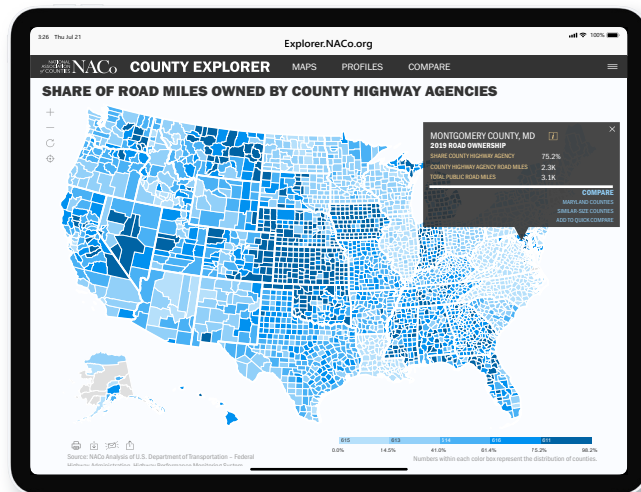


**Payments in Lieu of Taxes (PILT) provide federal payments to counties and other local governments** to offset losses in revenues. Since federal public lands are exempt from county Property Taxes.

**62** percent of America's counties have federal public land within our boundaries; the federal government owns roughly 640 million acres (or 28 percent) of land in the U.S.

### PILT FUNDING IS CRITICAL FOR COUNTY SERVICES INCLUDING:

- Road and bridge maintenance
- Law enforcement
- Fire protection
- Emergency management
- Search and rescue
- Solid waste disposal
- Emergency medical
- Environmental compliance



## COUNTY EXPLORER

NACo's County Explorer tool is the one-stop shop for accessing county-level indicators. With more than 1,000 maps, the interactive tool provides data about counties, states and the nation. Each indicator in County Explorer tells a unique story.

### Features:

- Compare counties across 13 categories, over 100 datasets and more than 1,000 data points across local issues, including county economies, transportation and infrastructure, health and public safety
- County and state level data summaries on various topics, including county bridge inventory, housing affordability, Payment in Lieu of Taxes, veterans.
- User-friendly interface and compatible with mobile devices
- Interactive legend to explore different trends on data within counties



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## NACo's MISSION

STRENGTHEN AMERICA'S COUNTIES.

## NACo's VISION

HEALTHY, SAFE AND VIBRANT COUNTIES ACROSS AMERICA.



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