

Counties walk the walk on door-todoor outreach

by Charlie Ban senior writer

Emails never seem to stop. A call on the phone is just as likely to be a scammer on the other side of the globe. A knock on the door?

It's so quaint and whoever is there took the time to walk to your house. It's worth an answer.

That's what Union County, N.J. was banking on when it tried an age-old but overlooked tactic for reaching residents to make them aware of county services.

"We've found that if you've never asked for help before, you might not know how to ask for help," said Deputy County Manager Amy Wagner. "For a lot of people experiencing challenges who aren't used to working with the county, they might not even realize what options are out there. Or how to access them,"

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the county hired canvassers to inform residents about testing and vaccination processes, leaving door hangers with links to more information if no one answered. In years since, they have focused more on promoting human services programming, including food security, mental health, employment assistance and solar power

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NACo President Gore seeks out leadership challenges

by Charlie Ban senior writer

James Gore searched the world and found what he was looking for back home in Sonoma County, Calif.

That was where, when he was a kid, his mother and grandmother first talked to him about his future. "My mom and my grandma sat me down and said, 'We want you to do good things in this world. We believe in you," he said. "When I was a teenager, I was always a happenchance leader — I'd raise my hand when they'd call for volunteers and get involved that way. Then when I

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Sonoma County Supervisor James Gore takes the lead at NACo



(Left to right) NACo President James Gore, a Sonoma County, Calif. supervisor, pauses for a photo July 15 after being sworn in, with First Vice President Judge J.D. Clark of Wise County, Texas; Second Vice President Commissioner George Dunlap of Mecklenburg County, N.C. and Immediate Past President Commissioner Mary Jo McGuire of Ramsey County, Minn. in Hillsborough County, Fla. Photo by Denny Henry

by Mary Ann Barton editor

Surrounded by his family, Sonoma County, Calif. Supervisor James Gore was sworn in July 15 as NACo's new president at the association's Annual Business Meeting at the Tampa Convention Center in Hillsborough County, Fla.

The California native leads the NACo executive committee, which includes First Vice President Judge J.D. Clark of Wise County, Texas; Second Vice President Commissioner George Dunlap of Mecklenburg County, N.C. and Immediate Past President Commissioner Mary Jo McGuire of Ramsey County, Minn.

Dunlap was elected in a threeway race, getting 67% of the vote or 1,658 votes with Charlotte County, Fla. Commissioner Bill Truex garnering 20% or 488 votes and Cascade County, Mont. Commissioner Joe Briggs taking 13% or 326 votes. Rounding out the executive committee are regional representatives Tammy Tincher of Greenbrier County, W.Va., who takes over as the new Northeast Region representative and Supervisor Kurt Gibbs of Marathon County, Wis., as the new Central Region representative. They round out the regional representation which includes Briggs as the West Region representative

County visits those who don't know about benefits, but need them the most

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assistance.

"We have mostly been promoting outward-facing things that our constituents would need and might not know about," Wagner said. "There was a lot less uptake than we expected of the services that are available and we thought there was a good chance they just didn't know much about them. We're not short on need. but we just thought there were more people who would be interacting with the county if they knew what we offered."

Rachel Holland agreed. She's the New Jersey government relations liaison for the Civic Operations Group, which Ocean County (along with five others in the state), has contracted for canvassing outreach. She noted that a lot of media compete for residents' attention, making it harder for counties' outreach

efforts to break through, even direct methods.

"I don't really take much faith in the polling efforts because people don't answer the phone these days," she said. "Most of the time, we're promoting programs that aren't a secret, but if they've been printed anywhere in the newspaper, they're probably on an inside page and people haven't seen it."

Holland noted that even targeted advertising on social media sites like Facebook was having diminishing returns for counties hoping to spread their news.

"It might be a matter of not having the right algorithm, but beyond that, people are busy and if you're working and managing a family, it might not occur to you to seek out what the county is offering," she said. "I think that some people, even if they aren't expecting it, are refreshed when they open the door and find someone from the county



A member of the Union County Outreach Team talks with a resident about services available through the county. Photo courtesy of the Civic Operations Group

trying to help them out."

Union County doesn't profile the communities it canvasses.

"We're verv socioeconomically diverse, but there's need everywhere, even right in those very affluent suburbs," Wagner said. "We don't make assumptions about particular ZIP codes.

"People have mental health challenges in all kinds of households. We don't want people to be forgotten because of where they live."

The canvassers the group hires receive daily training and wear ID badges and bright vests bearing the county seal to identify them. They get clearance to do

door-to-door communications. circumventing anti-solicitation ordinances. County officials help lend some legitimacy to the can-

'I did not get one negative piece of feedback about this program. Not one.'

vassers by appearing with them at public events, with faith communities and organizations like the YMCA, informing members that the county is sending people to go door-to-door. Some counties send "reverse 911" messages to residents to tell them the canvassers are not solicitors.

The contractor gives the county regular updates with the number of doors knocked, resident contacts and services that caught their attention.

And Union County's efforts have already caught the eye of a local nonprofit leader, who has asked to distribute copies of the flyers that canvassers leave.

"As government entities, we get criticized regularly for things that we do and how we spend money," Wagner said. "I did not get one negative piece of feedback about this program. Not one. Wow, everything that we heard back was positive." CN

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STATS SNAP

BACK TO SCHOOL

DATE RETURNING	NO. OF STUDENTS
July 17-28	
July 31-Aug. 4	7%
Aug. 7-11	
Aug. 14-18	
Aug. 21-25	
Aug. 28-Sept. 1	
Sept. 5-8	
Source: Pew Research 2023	



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James Gore met the challenge in 2017 when wildfires swept Sonoma County, Calif.



NACo President James Gore addresses the Annual Business Meeting July 15 after being inaugurated at the 2024 Annual Conference. Photo by Denny Henry

From GORE page 1

was in my late 20s and early 30s, I decided I wasn't going to make public service my mission, and it wasn't going to be happenchance anymore."

In the meantime, he studied agricultural business, worked as a lobbyist for the wine industry, then turned his sights toward service. First as a Peace Corps volunteer in Bolivia, then in a series of roles in the U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural **Resources Conservation Service** during the Obama administration, working in impoverished areas throughout the United States.

But with a 1-year-old daughter. Gore and his wife Elizabeth moved back to his childhood hometown in 2013. And soon after, a seat on the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors opened, and he won, albeit sooner than he anticipated pursuing public office. One of his early supporters said his misgivings were unfounded.

"Once I met Jimmy, I knew he had the right energy," said Valerie Brown, a former Sonoma County supervisor who served as NACo president from 2009-2010. "He is a big thinker. You watch certain people, and you can see how well a role will suit them. With his background, supervisor seemed like the right place for him to put his background and experience to work for a place he cares deeply about."

Rather than seeing government purely as the tool for solving problems, Gore views leadership as an opportunity to galvanize people to work on behalf of the greater good.

"Instead of people talking about what's wrong or hoping somebody does it or hoping there's a government program, we need a bunch of people just to stand up and take action," he said.

And the people elected to county office need to be assertive to get what they want and not be bashful about what counties do, which is "getting stuff done," Gore said.

"We need to remind each other that we're doing the work on the ground and that we don't have to choose in the county world to fight or focus on every wedge issue that divides us in this country," he said. "We are the ones who get it done on the ground each and every day.

"As the president of NACo, my biggest goal is to make sure that we are owning our place, by not asking for it and demanding it. but by sitting at those tables and forcing our way into the room so that we are the ones driving those solutions," he said.

Taking action

In 2017, he took on the chairmanship of the NACo Resilient Counties Advisory Committee, initially planning to focus on sustainability, water management and energy development, all issues that would help fortify his county's future. Instead, he saw the more existential definition of resiliency when the Sonoma Complex Fires burned 87,000 acres of Sonoma County, including much of Gore's district.

The traumatic process saw Gore rise to the moment in a way that reflected his mother and grandmother's confidence in him when he was a child.

"I've never done such meaningful, purpose-driven work. I knew exactly what I needed to do," he said. "It wasn't about



Gore and wife Elizabeth walk to the stage after he was elected NACo 2nd VP in 2022. Photo by Denny Henry

getting up and giving speeches. It was about delivering for people who were in a horrible situation."

The task spoke to the many different facets that government leadership represented. The Board of Supervisors changed permitting regulations and amended the county code. They negotiated with insurance companies. They held forums for residents to air their concerns. Organizing both for the benefit of people who had lost their homes but also those who were at risk of subsequent fires. And they set a new attitude about vulnerability to natural disasters.

That meant organizing preparedness exercises and shifting the county into a proactive posture. It meant taking the county's emergency operations center out of a bunker and into a visible position at the meeting point of different county functions, and it was changing the public's perspective.

"I was educating people on the risks, asking them to take ownership, that they are the key to being ready and being prepared," Gore said. "Once they're prepared, they don't have to be fearful. We don't have to scare them all the time."

"I saw so much need in other communities and I really didn't want other communities to wait until it was 'their turn.' I wanted to be a part of saying, 'Wake up, wake up others and stav awake. Don't live in complacency.' So, for me, that was a magical time, and it was very, it was difficult. It was painful. The burden of it, the grief that was in the community, the mental health issues, the fear, the rebuild, the costs, the money, all these other things were swarming. But for me, it was a time to deliver locally."

The work at home

When subsequent fires and floods hit Sonoma County, that planning and training paid off, though the 2017 fires remained a seminal moment in the county's collective psyche.

"The fires have been the hardest event for people to cope with, harder even than the pandemic," Gore wrote in NACo's "Governing on the Ground" book in 2022.

He also noted that the work he did in 2017 took its toll on

him, and he was vocal about the need for county officials to address their own mental health challenges in light of the stress their work adds to their lives.

"I was so focused on emergency management that I was becoming very brittle and edgy," he wrote. "I leaned in and went back to counseling and started to work through my discomfort. Not because I was in the midst of a crisis, but from the perspective that I'm healthy but wearing thin, and I need to address it. So, I made the time for self-care, meditation, prayer and took care of myself and my wife and children. I see a lesson in this for my community. It doesn't just need a rallying cry. It also needs a deep breath."

Despite those challenges, Gore thrives on the challenge of county leadership, and strives to demonstrate the example to his daughter Opal and son Jacob the same drive his mother and grandmother instilled in him.

"I want my kids to know that the best things in the world are the things that also are the hardest," he said. "The easy way out is not a way to live life. If you see something that's not working, you've got to get involved. And once you get involved, you can't be one-dimensional. You



challenge your beliefs. "I want them to know that they have their hands on the future." Listen to a full inter-

view with NACo President James Gore on the County News Podcast by scanning the QR code or visiting www.naco.org/podcast. CN



GET TO Ionia County, KNOW... Michigan!

by Meredith Moran staff writer

Ionia County, Mich., established in 1831, is named for the region in ancient Greece of the same name, located in what is today Turkey. Its county seat, the city of Ionia, hosts what is billed as the world's largest free-admission fair every July. The fair has more than 40 rides, and events include a "Monster Truck Throwdown," a rodeo and the "Banana Derby," where monkey "jockeys" are strapped to dogs that run around a racetrack at high speed.

The 4,500-acre Ionia State Recreation Area, which features meadows, forests, a lake and a river, sprawls across the county.

There are hiking, equestrian and ski trails in the recreation area, and more than 199 species of birds, as identified by the Audubon Society. Six inland lakes surround the city of Ionia.

Clarence "Bud" Budington Kelland, who billed himself as the "best second-rate writer in America," was born in the county and spent his early years there. Kelland wrote 200 short stories and 60 novels over his nearly 50-year writing career. Other notable Ionia County natives include Billy Strings, a Grammy Award-winning bluegrass musician and Myron G. Barlow, an internationally renowned figurative painter best known for his paintings of rural French women.

The city of Portland is referred to as "The City of Two Rivers," as it's nestled between the Grand River and the Looking Glass River, where visitors can fish, canoe and kayak. The Portland Riverwalk is a 15-mile trail that connects parks in the area and overlooks the two rivers. A "Beatnik Bazaar" is held in the city of Belding each month. The artisan and farmers market started out with only 10-12 vendors in the parking lot of a local hardware



store and has since grown to more than 150 vendors.

The village of Clarksville, which has a population of roughly 400, has a museum that features hundreds of turnof-the-century farm and agricultural equipment, including hay balers and hammer mills. The museum's curator collects the vintage items and then cleans, paints and refurbishes them.

All of the equipment is functional. He also serves as a volunteer firefighter and the museum has three vintage fire trucks still in operating condition, which he takes to local parades.

The village uses the slogan "Take the last train to Clarksville, Mich." on its website, in reference to The Monkees' song "Last Train to Clarksville." (The song was actually based on Clarksdale, Ariz., but was changed to "Clarksville" because the band thought it sounded better in the song.)

Get to Know features new NACo member counties.



BEHIND THE SEAL

CLEARWATER County, Idaho

Clearwater County was named after the Clearwater River, translated from the Nez Perce term "Koos-Koos-Kai-Kai."

The seal features mountains, forests, rivers and the Dworshak Dam.

The tallest straight-axis concrete dam in the Western Hemisphere, the Dworshak Dam is the third tallest in the United States, towering 717 feet over the North Fork of the Clearwater River.



Would you like to see your county's seal featured in County News? Contact Charlie Ban at cban@naco.org

NACO OFFICERS

• President **James Gore**, Director of Governments Affairs **Mark Ritacco** and Public Affairs Project Manager **Alyx Hawkins** attended the South Carolina Association of Counties Annual Conference, held July 29-31 in Charleston County.

• Immediate Past President **Mary Jo McGuire** attended the Association of Arkansas Counties Annual Conference, held Aug. 7-9 in Garland County.

• Second Vice President **George Dunlap** and Digital Editor **Charlie Ban** attended the North Carolina Association of County Commissioners Annual Conference, held Aug. 8-10 in Forsyth County.

NACO STAFF

• Aminah Lambert has joined NACo as controller. She previously served as interim CFO at American Battlefield Trust and the National League of Cities. She earned a Master of Business Administration and



versity.
 Shontrice Barnes
 has joined NACo as a

program manager for resilient economies and communities.

a bachelor's degree

from American Uni-

She previously served as a senior program associate at Prosperity Now. She earned

a master's degree in public policy and gender sexuality and women's studies from George Washington University and a bachelor's degree



and African American studies from Virginia Commonwealth University.

in political science

 Anthony Chapman has joined
 NACo as senior

account manager for NACo EDGE Public Promise Purchasing. He previously

He previously worked as an aerospace specialist at Timken-Global Manufacturer of Bearings and Power Transmission Products. He earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Business Administration from Bluefield State University.

• Legislative Director **Seamus Dowdall** attended the Mountain Connect conference in Denver County, Colo.

• Legislative Director **Brett Mattson** attended the Center for Homeland Defense and Security State Local Tribal and Territorial Government Convening in Monterey County, Calif.

• Director of Member Experience **Jack Peterson** attended the Midwest State Association Retreat in Dane County, Wis.

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Washty and egree Chapman





Author Tareq Azim, on stage, responds to a question from NACo President Mary Jo McGuire Saturday, July 13, during the Opening General Session. Photo by Denny Henry

Author Tareq Azim shares strength borne by fear

by Charlie Ban senior writer

Tareq Azim knew all kinds of fear.

He saw the fear that imprinted on his mother's life when her father was taken from her home in Afghanistan by Soviet troops, never to be seen again.

His own fear sprung from his peers seeing his father pay for groceries with food stamps, decades after he fled his homeland to raise his family in San Francisco as a refugee.

Or the terror when he visited Afghanistan with his father in 2004, a monthlong trip that extended to five years.

What he learned about fear was to turn it on its head.

"It's actually exposing something about you that you've been neglecting, and that circumstance, that situation, is almost forcing you to open up that version of yourself to actually feel and taste what freedom feels like," he told the Opening General Session audience during a conversation with NACo President Mary Jo McGuire.

"That's why I think we should deal with fear," he said.

"When we're building our teams, we should really get down with our teammates and be able to have a once-a-month conversation about 'How do people define fear? And what do they fear?"

For Azim, fear exists in a world of potential.

"There's nothing that's ever come into my life that hasn't been an opportunity to disrupt the narrative that's in my own head," he said.

"The disruption of this narrative was always my battle with this disease called fear."

Azim, a personal trainer and coach, entrepreneur and hotelier, shared his experiences and perspectives and how they've shifted. away from his identity as a soccer player — which was heavily influenced by his culture — to football, which led to a collegiate-playing career and his epiphany shortly after landing

'I don't think that fear was designed or created or imposed on this by our creator to stop us from everything. It's to get us closer to things.'

"I became very obsessed with wanting to change narratives," he said of himself as a teenager. Those mediations led him to a conclusion that can seem counterintuitive.

"I don't think that fear was designed or created or imposed on us by our creator to stop us from everything. It's to get us closer to things."

His early narrative shifted in high school, when he moved

in Afghanistan after graduation.

He felt urged to contest the narrative that Afghanistan was uncivilized and hostile toward women.

"I realized my entire purpose in this world to this day has been the reconciliation of internal peace with the power of sport... and to create a federation for women in Afghanistan to play sports," he said.

"There [were] massive politi-

cal issues competing, which was this narrative of the oppression of women. Yes, that's very true to the uneducated, but there's a massive cohort of educated folks that want solutions to remove this oppression."

Azim details the journey to building the Afghan Women's Boxing Federation in his book "Empower: Conquering the Disease of Fear." He describes approaching former Taliban foreign minister Wakil Ahmed Muttawakil, and the consideration that fear played in the process, but also the confidence that his task was worth taking a chance.

"Going to see Muttawakil would be a risky move," he wrote. "Was it really worth it, just to get girls in Afghanistan to box? The more I considered that question, the more I landed on the same answer: Hell yeah."

GENERAL SESSION | **SPEAKERS** Olympic gymnast: 'Check your ego at the door' to excel

by Meredith Moran staff writer

Three-time Olympic gymnast Dominique Dawes championed teamwork, saying "checking your ego at the door" is the key to success, at NACo's General Session on July 14. She inspired a ballroom filled with county officials from across the country, whom she called "the heartbeat and bloodline" of their communities back home.

"What you all do on a day-today basis is what I did for a bit for my Olympic career," Dawes said. "You're planting positive seeds, you're educating, you're empowering, you're inspiring, you're ensuring that there's a safe environment, not only for our children, but also for our families and adults, so I want to thank you for what you've committed and been called to do."

Gymnastics is an individual sport, but Dawes and her U.S. Olympic teammates had to work together and uplift each other to get the gold in 1996, she said. The U.S. Olympic gymnastics coach had the team pick affirmations from a jar each day and one of them stuck with Dawes, shifting her perspective on success: "Team together, everyone achieves more."

"You cannot work in harmony



Dominique Dawes holds her Olympic gold medal as she delivers an inspiring address to NACo members July 14 at the Tampa Convention Center. Photo by Denny Henry

with one another if you have an ego," Dawes said.

"So, what my team was able to do — that became known as 'the Magnificent Seven' — the next day, we went to practice, and we took those blinders off that had always been on our heads. The sport of gymnastics is 'me, myself and I, focus on getting your job done,' but at those Olympic games, there was something bigger than just me."

Dawes, who won a gold medal in the 1996 Olympics for the team event, said material measures of success are "fleeting" and don't last forever; she stores her gold medal, which is beginning to tarnish, in a junk drawer next to packets of duck sauce and spare batteries, she said. Real success is planting a positive seed in someone else's life and creating a legacy, she added.

"It's very hard these days, where there's a great deal of tension, a lack of forgiveness, a lack of love, but remember we should not judge others until we walk a lifetime in their moccasins," Dawes said. "And so, if we make that concerted effort to check our egos at the door, we will see life differently and we will embrace all of the greatness that is right in front of us. That is truly success.

"And success is not standing on top of a mountain top, success is not standing on top of a podium with a hand over my heart, success is standing right in front of us each and every day, but you will not embrace it, you will not see it and you will not live it, if your ego is attached."

Four themes emerge from NACo AI committee report

by Mary Ann Barton editor

The co-chairs of NACo's Artificial Intelligence Exploratory Committee delivered a summary of their report July 14 at the General Session.

Palm Beach County, Fla. Commissioner Gregg Weiss and Travis County, Texas Judge Andy Brown stepped onto the stage to discuss the highlights.

"On behalf of NACo's exploratory committee, we are thrilled to give you our final report 'The NACo AI Compass," Weiss said. " It will serve as both a guide and a resource to help counties acclimate and learn about the vast power of generative artificial intelligence."

The committee "was tasked with investigating the broad applications of generative artificial intelligence and how this novel technology will impact and augment — notice I said augment county functions and services," he noted.

The committee featured 16 county leaders from across the country representing a broad spectrum of demographics and functions.

In the fall of 2023, the committee organized itself into four working groups, Weiss said. Four key themes emerged during the committee's yearlong explora-

See AI REPORT page 7



Palm Beach County, Fla. Commissioner Greg Weiss summarizes the work of the AI committee as Travis County, Texas Judge Andy Brown looks on. The two co-chaired the committee. Photo by Denny Henry

GENERAL SESSION | **SPEAKERS** NACo Commission on Mental Health and Wellness unveils policy priorities at 2024 Annual Conference

by Mary Ann Barton

The NACo Commission on Mental Health and Wellbeing outlined their policy priorities to improve mental health in its final report unveiled Saturday, July 13 at the Annual Conference.

The 39-page report, titled "From Crisis to Solutions: Policy Catalysts for Improved Outcomes," explores policy priorities including:

1. Amending exclusionary policies under Medicaid

2. Enhancing local crisis response systems

3. Strengthening the mental health workforce

4. Enforcing mental health parity

Members of the Commission, who met and examined the issue over the past 18 months, took to the stage at the opening General Session, flanking the co-chairs who addressed NACo members at the Tampa Convention Center.

"The commission, with the support of all of you, has made considerable progress in collaboration with federal, state and community leaders achieving key reforms that will ensure health care benefits for justice-involved youth, improve access to crisis services and align mental health coverage with physical health," said Los Angeles County, Calif. Supervisor Kathryn Barger, who co-chaired the group.

"We have advanced legislation that would address mental health professional shortages and healthcare disparities through various means such as workforce development, telehealth and community health centers," she said.

King County, Wash. Executive Dow Constantine, the commission co-chair, also weighed in.

"Commissioner Barger and the commission and I are honored and thrilled to be able to present the commission's achievements and milestones in this, our final report," he said. "This report emphasizes crucial data, effective strategies and recommendations for government at all levels."

"It also encourages federal policymakers, local leaders and stakeholders to back and execute policy reforms that boost local capabilities to tackle this crisis," Constantine said.



King County, Wash. Executive Dow Constantine discusses the final report of the NACo Commission on Mental Health and Wellbeing July 13 at the Opening General Session as his co-chair, Los Angeles County, Calif. Supervisor Kathryn Barger and other commission members look on. Photo by Denny Henry

"These reforms include eliminating federal restrictions on Medicaid benefits for incarcerated individuals; streamlining resources to establish crisis call centers and improve crisis response infrastructure; encouraging and enforcing parity policies across all insurers and all providers."

Other policy reforms suggested in the report, he said, include "establishing career paths for behavioral health professions, particularly in underserved areas and augmenting funding for improvement of an ample and representative workforce."

"It takes people to treat people," he noted.

"We've made substantial progress in promoting our priorities for mental health service and policy reform, but there is a lot more to accomplish," he said. "As the formal work of this commission closes, we implore all county leaders to leverage this report, leverage the work we've been doing, and take the

> lead in tackling mental health issues in every community."

Scan the QR code to view a PDF copy of the report.

From AI REPORT page 6

tion of generative artificial intelligence:

1. Preparing the Workforce

2. Establishing an Ethical Framework

3. Promoting Policy Models

4. Enabling Responsible Applications

The group met in Silicon Valley for hands-on demonstrations.

"We discovered the power that generative AI can bring to everything from county service deliveries to efficiency in the existing county workforce."

Each theme prompted the committee to study the impact of generative artificial intelligence deeply, specifically through the

lens of county governance.

The goal of the report and toolkit is to enable county government to recognize low-risk versus high-risk implementations of artificial intelligence and generative artificial intelligence and address the challenges that both bring to local government.

The report represents the cumulative discussions and contributions of various county leaders across the country – from all geographies, stripes, and perspectives, providing a framework for approaching generative artificial intelligence.

Find more in-depth information and resources using the County Compass toolkit by scanning the QR code.



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CAUCUSES & SUMMITS

Counties need to highlight security measures to public before elections

by Meredith Moran staff writer

The future of election administration is "on the shoulders" of large urban counties, which can best ensure the security of elections through increasing communication with the community, supporting election administrators and creating a crisis plan that brings everyone to the table, in case of a cyber or physical attack, panelists said July 13 at the Large Urban County Caucus business meeting.

A forthcoming University of Kansas study shows that there is a correlation between the amount of funding allocated to election infrastructure and public trust in elections, according to Keara Mendez, director of advocacy for the Center for Tech and Civic Life.

Large urban counties can cultivate public trust in elections by investing in updated voting equipment and properly training and supporting their election administrators, she said.

"All of us are working in a situation where either counties or states are trying to make old equipment work in new environments, and it's creating a pressure cooker where county officials are the ones on the frontlines," Mendez said.

"And when folks are activated online, it's this room's responsibility to respond ... so this polarization, this extremism, is a nationwide problem, but it is one that large counties need to rise to the occasion and respond to."

Adding to the polarization are foreign election influence campaigns and AI — "gasoline on the fire," Mendez added.

That's why it is more important than ever for large urban counties to publicly acknowledge and promote any security measures added to election offices, according to Carolina Lopez, executive director of Partnership for Large Election Jurisdictions.



Carolina Lopez (top), John Cohen and Keara Mendez take part in a discussion about the future of election administration. Photo by Leon Lawrence III

"In this age when the people that need to hear the message may not be listening to the media, hearing from you as trusted community leaders and really the pillars of our community, that can be the difference," Lo-

'The FBI and DHS are not coming on their white horse...'

pez said.

Large urban counties need to better support their election officials against increased targeting — including threats of violence, "doxing" and swatting — they face amid an increasingly polarized political climate, said John Cohen, executive director of the Center for Internet Security, Program for Countering Hybrid Threats.

The digital and physical worlds are now "fully interconnected and intertwined," which further complicates the threat environment, he added. At the county level, directors for law enforcement, fire, police and EMS need to develop a plan together in case of an emergency, Cohen added.

Large urban counties must have a crisis communication plan on Election Day in case the county registrar or secretary of state's office is hacked, as well as a communication strategy to alert people if there is a threat or act of violence, he said.

"The FBI and the Department of Homeland Security ... they're not coming down on a white horse to deal with any of the threats that are going to be originating potentially in your communities in the months ahead, because the foreign and domestic threat actors ... and others with illicit content who are targeting your communities, have figured out how to target vour communities at a level that national solutions may not be well suited to, so the impact of these threats are going to be in your counties and may involve you or your staff being targeted." CN



Lily Ballengee describes the outreach efforts the U.S. Department of Transportation is engaging in to spread the news of its ROUTES Initiative. Photo by Lana Farfan

DOT helps rural counties find funding, with deadlines

by Charlie Ban senior writer

Some say "roots" and others go with "rao-ts," however rural county officials choose to pronounce it, the ROUTES Initiative — Rural Opportunities to Use Transportation for Economic Success — offers resources for them to make the most of federal funding.

All rural counties have a roads department, but far fewer rural counties have personnel who can spend their time writing grant applications and finding funding for projects beyond maintaining infrastructure, so ROUTES is designed to make federal programming more accessible.

"The bipartisan infrastructure law did provide a lot of money, \$44 billion in fact, for rural communities. It's great, but it's also stressful and it's a little overwhelming," Lily Ballengee told the Rural Action Caucus July 13. She is a transportation planner in the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) Rural Transportation Policy Office.

"We want you to prioritize your time focusing on what matters to you instead of filtering through all of that" information that doesn't pertain to rural counties, she noted.

The initiative collects DOT

resources that apply to rural communities, offers direct technical assistance and is designed to be more accessible with understaffed counties in mind. ROUTES also a monthly email newsletter with funding updates.

"Often that [means] taking a very detailed resource and trying to condense it down to what matters most to rural, and in some cases, it's developing specific resources for your communities alone," Ballengee said.

Those resources include a rural grant applicant toolkit, which operates like a compendium of it takes to get a DOT discretionary grant and an explanation of what it means to present a "ready" project to the department for funding. It also explains postaward requirements.

"I'm sometimes told that getting the awards is the easy part figuring out to do with it after the end is the harder part and figuring out the reporting structure," she said. "This helps give you some ideas of what to do and where to start."

Along the same lines, the DOT Navigator helps walk applicants through the process, including how to buttress their efforts with data and where to find it. It also includes a Benefit-Cost Analysis spreadsheet template.

From DOT page 8

"I do a lot of rural and tribal debriefs with unsuccessful applicants and unfortunately data is often kind of one of those challenges — it could be the difference between a highly-rated project and a recommended project [that succeeds]," Ballengee said. "Compiling data can be hard for rural communities — it's too costly, it's time consuming. That's not to say you don't have to do any [data work] of your own, but hopefully this can be helpful."

She touched on other DOT programs of interest to rural counties. The rural and tribal assistance pilot program is a technical assistance program to help rural and tribal communities be more competitive in future applications. It's currently funded for \$25 million; there is no local match requirement, but it's firstcome, first-serve. "You can do everything from hire staff to retain technical, legal and financial advisors to do all those planning studies that are so important," she said. The only thing is it's no construction."

The railroad crossing elimination program sets aside funding for rural and tribal, with an additional pot of money set aside for communities with less than 20 residents per square miles, all to enhance safety around at-grade rail crossings. Applications are due Aug. 23.

The Reconnecting Communities Program aims to improve access to daily needs including work, school, medical care, food, nature and recreation. The deadline is Sept. 30.

The Safe Streets and Roads for All funds road safety infrastructure programs has an Aug 29 deadline.

The Charging and Fueling Infrastructure Grant Program helps fund publicly accessible electric vehicle charging stations, along with other alternative fueling infrastructure, including hydrogen, propane and natural gas. Applications are due Aug. 28. The department also published a rural electric vehicle infrastructure toolkit, what Ballengee calls, "the first attempt, really, to figure out 'What can rural communities do to get a bite of the electric vehicle apple?"

Counties could heal dissatisfaction with democracy

by Charlie Ban senior writer

When voter enthusiasm is waning and the national mood seems stuck in neutral, the United States is not alone.

Studies by the Pew Research Center over six years have indicated a multilateral dissatisfaction with representative democracy, from Canada to Germany to Kenya and Nigeria.

"This problem of distrust is not going to be solved at the national level," Rachel Dean Wilson said during a July 14 summit — "Navigating Current Global Trends Across Western Democracies." She's the managing director of the German Marshall Fund's Alliance for Securing Democracy and U.S. Elections.

When political tensions threaten to further divide Americans, it falls to county governments to build on connections and demonstrate a responsiveness that engenders trust and confidence.

"Each time we go through a crisis for a period of time, we come out of it stronger," said Orange County, Fla. Mayor Jerry Demings. "Right now, I think we're in one of those defining moments in the history of our nation, where we're polarized around political issues and the two-party system."

The simple but challenging way for counties to do that is not only by performing their roles effectively and reliably, but by emphasizing transparency and demonstrating the public's role in participatory democracy, panelists noted.

Wilson offered examples of national governments that spurred efforts that led ground-up trust in democratic institutions, rather



Davison County, S.D. Auditor Susan Kiepke recounts asking her friends if their college-aged children would be interested in working her county's post-election audit. Orange County, Fla. Mayor Jerry Demings sits to her left. Photo by Denny Henry

than taking heavy-handed topdown approaches. By building relationships with community and civic organizations, Sweden develops the trust that leads residents to know how to find answers about elections and government. The Australian Election Commission launched a "stop and consider" campaign to encourage social media users to be thoughtful in posting to social media.

"Build the build the connections now and those channels of communications before you really need them," Wilson said.

Two county officials who have overseen elections detailed the outreach efforts they hoped would win over residents skeptical of a government function that has seen outsized attention, and pressure, from the public.

Susan Kiepke, Davison County, S.D.'s auditor, recruited her friends' college-aged children to work a post-election audit, giving them experience and perspective to share with their peers and their parents.

"They were excited because they were in a new process and got to experience that firsthand," she said.

Curtis Koch, Davis County, Utah's auditor, previously served as county clerk, and he has invited the public to "election integrity nights," where they could ask him and his staff any question, even questions that would otherwise be seen as offensive.

Despite some long nights and challenging talks, he saw them as "growing pains" toward a better understanding.

"I walked away as an election official more educated about what the public was seeing [and] they walked away more educated, and when we have follow-up conversations, even if they still didn't have full faith and confidence, you could tell the education was there and we were talking on a higher level the next time," he said.

In a decade that included three traumatic and destructive volcanic events, Hawaii County, Hawaii has challenged itself to win the confidence of its residents and did so by employing the local philanthropic community to expedite aid. The CHANGE grant program sought out organizations addressing various local aspects of the community - community and economy, health and wellness. arts and culture. natural environment, government and civics and education. In doing so, Hawaii County Councilmember Sue Lee Loy said she hopes to be able to quickly demonstrate the county's responsiveness to residents' needs, and faster than the typical deliberative government pace.

"The best way to be prepared is to always be prepared to do it before, during and after," she said. "What we found is that our nonprofit agencies were the very first that could mobilize quickly. They lived in the communities, they already stuck together, they all had a mission."

Richard Wike, director of the Pew Global Attitudes Research division, said studies found Americans are often more divided ideologically than others around the world, with higher levels that effective polarization.

"Not only do we disagree with the other side, but [people] don't like people on the other side, you don't want to live near them, you don't want your children to marry people who are politically different from you," he said.

That could result, he said, from the United States' entrenched two-party system.

Charisse Phillips, a former U.S. Foreign Service officer, stressed the importance of emphasizing normalcy, both in terms of democratic processes and social mores, drawing a contrast to abnormal, antisocial behavior that can sow dissent.

"The important thing is to make sure people understand how the process is supposed to work — by underscoring our shared values, talking less about how polarized we are and more about what we have in common," she said.

Wike noted that framing issues in a way that reminds people of our shared national identity as Americans can reduce some of these polarizations, particularly election officials who evoke patriotism.

"There's experimental research for example to show you can reduce affective polarization [by] priming people to think about the 4th of July or about the U.S. Olympic team or these [other] things that bring us all together."

WORKSHOPS

Counties: Get outreach plans to most vulnerable population in place before disaster strikes

by Meredith Moran staff writer

To ensure residents have adequate support following a disaster, counties need to be proactive, creating channels of communication across agencies before a disaster hits, and get creative with outreach, panelists said July 12 at the Human Services and Education Policy Steering Committee meeting.

"The usual challenges we face in connecting low-income and underserved residents with supports and resources from antiquated technology and poor data integration to low levels of trust and communications gaps are only exacerbated during these times of crisis," said El Paso County, Colo. Commissioner Cami Bremer, NACo Human Services and Education Committee vice chair.

Meeting people where they are has worked best for El Paso County.

That has included offering both in-person and virtual services through the Adult Protective Services Division and adopting outreach strategies such as visiting with residents at grocery stores and other community events.

That's where they might find families following a disaster who may need the county's services, according to Bremer.

Building relationships in the community to fill in the gaps has also been crucial, she added.

How to ensure benefits aren't disrupted during a disaster

"We have good, strong local collaborations with food pantries and nonprofit partners to make sure that any gaps are taken care of," Bremer said.

"We use much of our block grant funding to ensure that when the county says, 'Hey, we're going to be on a bit of



Shelby Boston, director of employment and social services for Butte County, Calif., discusses how a registry helped save people's lives during the Camp Fire. Photo by Leon Lawrence III

delay for SNAP benefits due to budgetary issues at the federal level,' we have our food pantries ready to go and they have the resources and ability to provide for our citizens."

El Paso County has also embedded disaster response specifically for human service clients and benefits delivery into its department of human services, creating an emergency management specialist position that works in conjunction with the Office of Emergency Management so that residents' benefits don't disappear during disasters, when they need them most.

At the federal level, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Administration for Children and Families is working with partners — including the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) on housing, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) on food and nutritional assistance and the Small Business Administration (SBA) on childcare.

The partners are working to develop a disaster-related hu-



Natalie Grant, director, Office of Human Services Emergency Preparedness and Response, makes a point at the workshop. Photo by Leon Lawrence III

man services community of practice and help build disaster capability at the local level, according to Natalie Grant, the director of the department's Office of Human Services Emergency Preparedness and Response.

HHS is also working with tribal nations and people who have survived disasters to better understand the intricacies of what people need following a crisis.

"What we're doing now is really taking and curating from many of you and definitely soliciting more information about your experiences so that we can design a framework, a sort of common language and an operating architecture, that can enable us to better relate to each other during times of crisis," Grant said.

Evacuation plans for people who need extra help

In Butte County, Calif., one out of two people receive some kind of support through the county's employment and social services. The county has created a registry of anyone who receives inhome support services and has an agreement with the sheriff's office that people on the registry receive an early evacuation notice when possible and a deputy is sent out to each person's home who might be unable to evacuate on their own, often because of mobility limitations, according to Shelby Boston, director of employment and social services for Butte County, Calif.

"After the Camp Fire, it became very clear the registry is what saved people's lives," Boston said.

"We had an 80-year-old man who came to me in the shelter, and it was 7 in the morning when that fire broke out,"" she said.

Lots of people, when they're retired, they don't get up like many of us at 5, 6, 7 o'clock in the morning and he was asleep, and he said had he not received that phone call, he would have perished in the fire," she explained.

Disasters are traumatic, so increasing communication among recovery programs so survivors don't have to constantly relive the disaster to get access to services can help the community heal sooner, Boston added.

"As a survivor, as someone who lived in the community that was destroyed [by the fire], I had to tell my story multiple times to access services, whether it was with FEMA, whether it was with the insurance company, whether it was trying to get a new dentist, everything goes away when you have a catastrophic event," Boston said.

"In my opinion, as emergency providers and human and social service directors and organizations, we need to do a better job of thinking about the survivor and their trauma experience and not making them have to tell their story time and time again, and the only way we can do that is by having better coordination and planning."

WORKSHOPSPublic agency expanding first

responder network

by Mary Ann Barton

Twenty-three years after the 9/11 tragedy, a public agency created in its wake to help better connect first responders during emergencies is continuing to ramp up improvements to its networks.

During the 9/11 terrorist attacks, first responders became frustrated trying to communicate with each other, revealing fundamental challenges that needed fixing.

"Out of those communication challenges that were captured in the 9/11 Commission report, it became a very poignant issue for the public safety community, which really rallied around the need for Congress to address this question," said Dennis Alvord, assistant executive director of the First Responder Network Authority, July 12 at the NACo Telecommunications & Technology Steering Committee meeting.

Signed into law Feb. 22, 2012, the authority is an independent agency within the U.S. Department of Commerce National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) that oversees FirstNet, a national communications network dedicated to emergency responders and the public safety community.

AT&T was awarded a 25-year contract in 2017 to help build out and operate the network.

AT&T and FirstNet have been under fire in recent months from opponents of a plan to award adto the entity. The NCTA (the Internet and Television Association), and others including the CIO of Boston, the New York MTA and Verizon, are opposing a proposal to assign the 4.9 GHz band to FirstNet and AT&T. The Coalition for Emergency Response and Critical Infrastructure, opposing the plan, argues that the band should remain in the control of local authorities, Fierce Network reported.

ditional public safety spectrum

"PSSA [the Public Safety Spectrum Alliance, an entity proposed to manage the band] would take the 4.9 GHz band out of the hands of local public safety entities and give it to FirstNet, and in turn AT&T, gutting the policy the Commission set forth last year in favor of local public safety control of the band," wrote Verizon SVP/Federal Regulatory and Legal Affairs William Johnson in a filing with the FCC. Verizon says access to the spectrum would be a \$14 billion "windfall" for AT&T

AT&T said in an FCC filing last month it would gain "no license, lease or other spectrum use authorization" because the spectrum would go to a "band manager," the Public Safety Spectrum Alliance.

Meanwhile, the FirstNet network currently serves more than 28,000 public safety agencies and organizations in every state and territory in the United States, with over 6 million connections on the network, completed last year. The authority Board recently approved a \$684 million budget package for 2025 that includes funding to cover and evolve the Nationwide Public Safety Broadband Network.

"We work very closely with public safety to make sure their voice is heard," said Alvord. The Public Safety Advisory Committee (PSAC) provides recommendations and advice to the authority.

Earlier this year, the authority, along with AT&T, launched an initiative to invest more than \$8 billion in the next 10 years to enhance its network. Plans call for:

• Building thousands of new FirstNet sites across the country including 1,000 new sites within the next two years.

• Creating a standalone 5G core to enhance current functionality.

Expanding mission-critical services for public safety operations — voice, data and location.
 Upgrading FirstNet's dedicated fleet of deployable network assets with 5G connectivity.

• Providing always-on priority and preemption across all AT&T 5G commercial spectrum bands.

The 2012 law that created the authority included a sunset provision to terminate the program 15 years after it was enacted. Rep. Lizzie Fletcher (D-Texas), introduced the FirstNet Reauthorization last year.

For more information or to find a FirstNet public safety regional advisor near your county, visit firstnet.gov/advisor.



Dennis Alvord, assistant executive director of the First Responder Network Authority, speaks July 12 to members of the NACo Telecommunications and Technology Steering Committee. Photo by Denny Henry



Coconino County, Ariz. Supervisor Lena Fowler talks about cultural tourism July 13 at the Arts & Culture Commission meeting. Photo by Leon Lawrence III

County, Native Americans work together to create 'cultural tourism'

by Meredith Moran staff writer

Coconino County, Ariz. and the Navajo Nation have built a partnership to create cultural tourism initiatives, educating visitors on Native American history and traditions and benefiting the local economy.

"When we talk about cultural tourism, there is no border, there's no such thing," Coconino County Supervisor Lena Fowler said July 13 at the NACo Arts and Culture Commission meeting.

A member herself of the Navajo Tódich'ii'nii (Bitter Water) clan, Fowler said "it's just all about partnership and learning more about each other, so that we can create trust and understanding."

Coconino County hosts "Navajo Bridge Star Parties" in partnership with a local observatory. tribal nations and national parks where visitors stargaze and learn about Native American teachings. The county also partnered with the Navaio Nation to create the Navajo Interpretive Museum, which sits on unincorporated county land, and the Native American Music Festival, which will be held for the first time this year. These cultural tourism initiatives not only educate tourists on the Navajo "way of life," but also help support the local economy, Fowler said.

"To establish that deep relationship, it takes time," Fowler said. "And it takes a lot of desire to be able to do that, commitment, and then you've got to strategize for that success, and the result is economic success. That's where our county revenue comes from — 'How healthy is our business community?' And 'How healthy is our community?' And that's what we strive for."

An initiative Coconino County has come to be known for is its roadside jewelry vendors. The Navajo Nation works with the county, the Forest Service, Glen Canvon and Grand Canyon National Park, among other partners, to sell handmade jewelry on the side of the road at sites across the county. Ghost beads, which are used as protection from negative energy in Native American culture, are one of the many cultural jewelry pieces sold by the Navajo Nation, Fowler said.

"In that process, we tell the stories about what our jewelry is all about," Fowler said. "Jewelry for us is not just jewelry, it's actually controlling the energy around us."

A percentage of the profits from the roadside jewelry sales are set aside for the community and go into a scholarship fund for students, Fowler noted.

"Through these cultural experiences that our visitors — and even us, the people who live there — experience, it creates such a wonderful memory, and it's such a great experience that we carry with us and take home with us." **EN**

WORKSHOPS

Public lands challenges are as varied as their counties

by Charlie Ban senior writer

The experience of managing their way through public lands challenges has given some Western county officials insights into how they can better play the hands they've been dealt and how to improve partnerships with the federal government.

In each case, the presence of public lands — whether national parks, national forests or Bureau of Land Management areas — draws visitors, which can buoy a local economy, but the diffusion of responsibility often leaves counties without a hand on the wheel.

In Nevada County, Calif., slices of different forested land around the Yuba River, controlled by different federal, state and private entities, have effectively left the county without any



Commissioner Adam Snow describes the \$10,000 difference between the valuation of 10 privately owned acres and 10 federally managed acres across the street from each other in Washington County, Utah. Hawai'i County, Hawai'i Councilmember Sue Lee Loy is to his left. Photo by Charlie Ban

authority.

"There's no county land there, but people use county roads to get there and they stay in our hotels and restaurants and they park along our roads and make it hard to get in for Search and Rescue and there aren't really any toilets," said Nevada County Supervisor Heidi Hall.

"We realized early on without having land there or really

any authority, the best thing we could do is to be a convener and to try to help secure funds for things."

For six years, the county has been convening a group that includes the Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Forest Service, the state park system, the sheriff's office, various fire agencies and local nonprofits related to the river.

The group addresses fire danger, pet and human waste, safety issues and more, in hopes of coordinating a response to improve conditions.

That's meant fundraising for chemical toilets, organizing river ambassadors and supplying life vests. And Hall eyes a more formal composition.

"My goal had been for \$10,000 here and \$10,000 there," she said.

See CHALLENGES page 13

Mental health support key to substance use recovery

by Meredith Moran staff writer

Although substance use is down among youth in general, unintentional overdoses continue to rise, which is largely being driven by fentanyl and fake pills, data shows.

The path forward? Investing in mental health support, along with education on substance use for teens before they're exposed to it, and harm reduction and peer support recovery once they are, said local, state and federal experts Friday, July 12 at NA-Co's Health Steering Committee meeting.

At the federal level, SAMHSA (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration) is prioritizing prevention messaging, harm reduction, removing barriers to access medications for substance use disorder (including getting the opioid-reversal drug Naloxone into communities) and peer-centered recovery support, according to Sonia Chessen, SAMHSA's deputy assistant secretary.

Engaging youth in prevention efforts surrounding drug use is important, she added, pointing to SAMHSA's Fentanyl Awareness Youth Challenge, which encourages youth to pitch their own ideas on the best ways to educate their peers about the dangers and prevalence of fentanyl and fake pills.

Kevin Tanner, commissioner of the Georgia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities, echoed the importance of peer-centered recovery support at the state and local level.

"People listen to people who are living their same experiences," he said.

Substance use and mental health are often co-occurring disorders, and young people who experience major depressive episodes are at least twice as likely to use substances, Chessen said.

SAMSHA's Strategic Prevention Framework-Partnerships for Success recognizes the overlap and works to address both by promoting community-based substance misuse prevention and mental health services, she added.

Counties are at the "forefront of the mental health crisis" and often play a critical role in delivering services to vulnerable populations, including youth, said Chatham County, Ga. Commissioner Helen Stone, chair of the Health Steering Committee.

She pointed to the Georgia Behavioral Health Authority's partnership with counties to open child and adolescent crisis centers as an example of how state and local entities can work together to support youth.

"A great deal of our work is done in close proximity to local community-based organizations, state agencies and other sectors to enhance service delivery, expand access and fortify support systems for young people," Stone said.

"These collaborative efforts are vital in addressing the unique and complex needs of youth in our communities."

Cambria County, Pa., which has consistently had one of the highest overdose death rates in the state, is using opioid settlement dollars to provide stronger mental health support for its youth.

The county is partnering with REACH, a local clinical mental health non-profit, to place mental health clinicians in its high



SAMHSA is prioritizing peer-centered recovery, among other ways to combat youth substance use disorder, Sonia Chessen, SAMHSA's deputy assistant secretary, said July 12 at the NACo Health Steering Committee meeting. Photo by Leon Lawrence III

schools.

The project, RISE (Referral, Intervention, Support and Engagement), was created in response to a county comprehensive needs assessment on substance use prevention.

The assessment found that many of its residents had undiagnosed, and therefore untreated, mental illnesses growing up, which led to them self-medicating with alcohol and drugs.

RISE aims to reduce opioid

overdoses and substance use disorder through tackling the root of mental health issues, according to Cambria County Commissioner Scott Hunt.

Since it started in 2022, RISE has served 892 students.

The settlement dollars will allow the county to fund the program for 18 years.

"If we can even save one or two people from going down this road, it will be money well spent," Hunt said.

WORKSHOPS

From CHALLENGES page 12

"We've managed to do a whole lot to help with the safety for people and to keep the beauty of the river alive but it's not nearly enough. We've decided to put this in our master rec plan so that we can really go for the big bucks...go for those million dollar grants."

Meanwhile, Hawai'i County, Hawai'i added a 2% property tax to create an open space fund, with finances to purchase open space adjacent to national parks and to fund stewardship efforts.

"What we've done with our stewardship program is incentivize our stewards to take and honor those properties and use cultural incentives to redevelop those areas to be held in perpetuity in open space," said Councilmember Sue Lee Loy.

For Washington County, Utah Commissioner Adam Snow, the fact remains that not only is the Payments in Lieu of Taxes (PILT) program unreliable, it's often inadequate for the services counties provide on federal lands.

"It's hard to provide the resources for our children, our schools, our teachers — all of the things that all counties and municipalities are trying to afford when you don't have the funding to do so," he said.

Although Utah's counties have all passed resource management plans, they remain at the mercy of shifting federal priorities that have turned what had been consistent policy into a series of sprints and stops with the change in administrations.

"The problem with resource management planning is that it has become so political that it's impossible to plan — you can't plan more than four years out," Snow said.

"When a national monument is designated until ... the planning process takes about four years," he noted.

"Then a new president comes in and completely changes it," Snow said. "This ping-pong ball of land management is bad for the natural resource, it's bad for an economy and it's unsustainable, because by the time you rewrite it for your new boss, your boss has changed again and it will happen again," he said, noting that even consecutive administrations with similar ideologies will vary.

"It's a short-term win, longterm loss and if you actually care about the natural resource, it is a bad way to manage the land."

CISA offers tools to protect you and your county

by Mary Ann Barton editor

Disinformation campaigns by foreign adversary bots, rumors flying on neighborhood message boards, increasingly partisan politics — all play a part in making for a more unsafe world for county officials.

During a panel discussion July 13, NACo members heard harrowing stories about threats of violence against county officials, how it impacts their lives and solutions they can take to protect themselves, their families and co-workers.

"I don't think we ever had a panel exactly like this before, but because of what we've seen in the last few years — there have been tremendous changes and threats made against public officials — we have to have these panels now," said County Executive Mark Poloncarz of Erie County, N.Y., who was elected in 2011 as county executive.

He began getting "not so nice comments and threats" during the COVID pandemic and then it eventually escalated to "threats against my life," Poloncarz said. Individuals showed up with weapons at his office, protested in front of his home and loudly knocked on his door late at night.

For about two years, Poloncarz was under the sheriff's office dignitary protection. "Some people think it sounds great, 'You've got drivers! They take you everywhere you want!' It's not great. Your entire daily routine is completely tossed out



David Stafford, Region 4 Election Security Advisor for CISA, talks July 13 about tools available to make counties and county officials safer. Photo by Denny Henry

the window."

Poloncarz boiled down his advice to: "What I would put out to you — you cannot take anything lightly. It doesn't matter if it's a phone call, an email, a one-onone conversation that gets heated. You don't know the state of mind of that individual."

Fellow panelist Jen Marson, executive director of the Arizona Association of Counties & Arizona Sheriffs' Association, said her experience has been "a little bit different" than Poloncarz, due to her position, but nonetheless challenging as well.

Her life has been turned upside down, she said, due to her position, often finding herself testifying "40 times a week" as "the legislative face of elections in Arizona. I'm the one who testifies on all of the bills related to elections, usually in opposi-

tion..."

At the association for 22 years, she noted that "this is very personal. I consider these people [members of the association] to be members of my family. It impacts your staff. For us, this started in 2016. I was called to come and testify right after a very contentious election. We're seated in the front row and there are literally people throwing things at our heads. Nobody stopped it. Nobody on the dais said, 'Hey, knock it off.' And the things said to us were horrible things."

The situation "ramped up," in 2020, she said, when a rural county recorder's pets were poisoned on her property.

"We've had so much turnover in election directors and recorders in our state because this is too much."

Since November 2020, 55%

of Arizona's chief local election officials are new.

In four of the six largest counties, both the elections director and county recorder are new since that time.

Marson said she "knew it was out of control in Arizona" when she was threatened. "So, when I got the email, and then the voicemail and the letter left at the office, that said 'Hey, we see you walking to work, it would be a shame if my car went off the road and hit you one of these days,' for me, that became very real. So now I drive to the Capitol."

Her advice to anyone facing similar harassment is to keep a record of any threats, "even if it's a note on your phone. Just keep a record. That would be one of my recommendations."

"I've heard some people say,

'I'm not going to let them win, I'm not going to change my routine." But she tells her members, "'Please let it disrupt your life.' That pride is not worth your life. If that means you take a different route to work, tell a supervisor, get some counseling, to me, that's worth it. That's the message I would share with you today."

Former elections administrator, David Stafford, now the Region 4 Election Security advisor at the federal Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Agency (CISA), said working in county elections has always been difficult, but "then you add this layer on top of that, you run the risk of people being upset with you."

CISA is a resource offering products and services such as assessments and training exercises to counties and others. "Think about FEMA, how FEMA has regions," he said.

CISA's protective security advisors, usually former military or law enforcement, offer free safety assessments. "They are looking at physical space," Stafford said. "We deliver confidential assessments back to the stakeholder, what you're doing right and what needs to be improved."

The assessments include a series of recommendations, identifying no-cost and low-cost solutions.

Stafford also recommends checking out the #Protect2024 page on the CISA website. "It's really, really good," he said. "We have buckets of things that will protect your office, website and emails."

WORKSHOPS Artificial intelligence teases agricultural 'revolution'

by Charlie Ban senior writer

Irrigation. Crop rotation. Fertilizer. Pesticides.

Next up, artificial intelligence? The tools that have fueled agricultural advances have thus far have been organic, but the potential for "machine-learning" to grow and treat crops more effectively has captured Nathan Boyd's attention.

He is the associate director of the University of Florida Gulf Coast Research and Education Center. He has also spent his career developing weed management plans, not computer systems, so he comes in focused more on outcomes than processes

"In agriculture, we're just in the beginning of another revolution and when we emerge out on the other side, agriculture is going to be very different than it is today," he told the Agriculture and Rural Affairs Steering Committee July 12. "Growers will adopt new technology and as long as it makes sense and as

long as it makes economic sense, and there's been for decades a push toward modern agriculture to get bigger, stronger, faster, the result has been bigger and bigger farms."

He demonstrated the opportunity for automated processes to alleviate labor shortages that have stymied agriculture's recent growth in Florida.

"The strength of AI is its ability to identify things over a range of conditions, range of sizes and range of developmental stages," he said. "Machine vision in the past could not do that."

Equipping machinery with cameras and new programming that can detect disease in crops much faster than human inspection. farmers can intervene faster and reduce crop loss. More efficient herbicide use will not only cut costs, but also reduce environmental consequences.

Boyd is helping develop a state-funded Center for Applied Artificial Intelligence, which will pursue research into labor and production efficiency solutions, priorities that were identified after consultation with different community groups.

"From the very beginning, we've made it a priority to work with grower groups so that this facility actually addresses the needs of growers," he said.



He is also prepared to meet skepticism about integrating artificial intelligence into agriculture, especially through a state-funded effort.

Skepticism surrounding artificial intelligence often centers on job displacement, but Boyd said the trend of employment rising in Florida following automation illustrated an expansion of agriculture as an industry thanks to new efficiencies. He said it would probably not mean the loss of jobs.

"The reality is here in Florida, is that we don't have a workforce to do this and we're struggling to find people, so we have to automate in order to ensure that agriculture stays in business," he said.

Those efficiencies will also work to lower the cost of this technology.

We're really focused on developing smaller equipment that a small grower can buy; one big grower can buy 10, but it's still going to help all types of agriculture and hopefully benefit everyone," he said. CN

A key to managing disasters: Targeted communication

by Mary Ann Barton editor

"Prepare when the sky is blue," is his mantra, Brunswick County, N.C. Commissioner Frank Williams, chair of the NACo Resilient Counties Advisory Board, told members July 13 at the Annual Conference.

It's a message that many emergency managers and county officials heed. One way to use that "blue sky" time is to plan a risk communication plan, according to Heidi Stiller, the South regional director of the National Ocean Service Office for Coastal Management at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

"Often, we start with 'I'm going to come up with a message," she said. "You need to back up, and ask 'What's my overall goal? Who is my audience?""

The first step, she noted, is to not only define your audience but the outcome you hope to achieve. "You've got to get really specific,"

she said, offering the audience a three-step blueprint to reach that goal.

Step 1. Define your risk communication audience and outcome.

• Challenge: What is your biggest risk communication challenge? (such as keeping flood risk mitigation on elected officials' minds as they make decisions about the county's safety and future).

• Audience: List the audiences you're trying to reach. Consider who you want to take action or who is most at risk. Then get specific. Segment your audience. What characteristics will you use to segment your audience (such as by geography or demographics)?

• **Outcome:** What action do you want your audience to take because of your efforts?

Step 2: Understand your priority audience.

• What do you know about your audience? How do you know this information? What assumptions



Heidi Stiller of NOAA talks to members of the NACo Resilient Counties Advisory Board July 13 about how to sharpen communication efforts before and during a disaster. Photo by Denny Henry

are you making about them? What would you want to learn about them? How will you learn more about them?

Step 3: Connect with vour audience.

• How will you connect with your audience? Consider where you will find them. How will you design the interaction to meet their needs?

In addition to the three-step blueprint, Stiller also stressed the importance of learning why some residents will not evacuate. Find out their barriers - are they worried about their pets? Find solutions and communicate that information, before a disaster is imminent. "We can't wait for audi-

ences to come to us," she said. "You must go where folks are. Are you trying to reach business owners? Go to the Chamber of Commerce. Are you trying to reach neighborhoods? Go to the HOA or the farmers' market."

Another way to reach residents

is through established partnerships such as local churches. "Establish those partnerships, find out who those trusted members of the community are," she noted. "They can be great communicators for us."

Explaining the risk is also valuable, she said, but "you don't want to just throw science at people, that's tempting, but you need to explain. Stories are super powerful, seeing the visuals and hearing the story about what can happen."

When crafting a message to the public, "use plain language,"



dumbing it down. Use short words and short sentences." A clear message should

"identify actions people can take and the benefits or losses avoided, she said. "Such as, "Turn Around, Don't Drown."

Find resources on the Digital Coast Risk Communication Topics Page by scanning the QR code.

WORKSHOPS Most foreign-owned ag land remains in friendly hands

by Charlie Ban

Despite cycles of concern about foreign ownership, less than 4% of U.S. private agricultural land is owned by foreign entities, and only 12 states have enacted laws limiting foreign ownership. And despite that fervor, state legislatures are not easy sells on new restrictions, and no state has banned foreign ownership outright.

Harrison Pittman, director of the National Agricultural Law Center, noted that concern about foreign ownership of land in the United States has been present for nearly 250 years — it comes up twice in the Declaration of Independence and has followed the political context of the times, with concern shifting toward various geopolitical rivals, with recent policy proposals targeting China, Iran, North Korea and



Harrison Pittman, director of the National Agricultural Law Center, describes the cycles of sensitivity to foreign ownership of U.S. agricultural land. Photo by Denny Henry

Russia.

"In the 1970s, there was a concern that Middle Eastern countries, wealthy oil-producing countries, could purchase enough farmland to effectively control the food supply, quite similar to arguments that are made at times with respect to China today," he told the Agriculture and Rural Affairs Steering Committee July 12.

But he said transparency regarding ownership is an area for development on the federal side.

"When we get a farm bill ...this is destined to be a part of it," he said, building on the reporting requirements established by the Agricultural Foreign Investment Disclosure Act of 1978. Roughly 12 states have separate reporting requirements.

The majority of foreign ownership of U.S. land is in the Southeast and the West, but the majority of laws are now focused on the Midwest. Half of foreign ownership is forested land, and Canada owns most of that. Just more than 28% is cropland and 21% is pastureland. Russia, by comparison, owns roughly 100 acres total in the United States, and China has a 0.9% interest in total U.S. land.

Pittman said that further restrictions on foreign ownership are challenged by political considerations.

"There's a lot of competition ideologically between ownership, private ownership, property rights to other legitimate concerns over national security... these things kind of bounce into each other," he said. "It gets really difficult both to find political consensus and then to keep

SPEEDREAD

Share of foreign ownership of U.S. agricultural land • Canada (32%)

- Netherlands (12%)
- Italy and United
- Kingdom (6% each)
- Germany (5%)

political consensus." The state laws passed in 2023 have very specific restrictions, including banning governments and political parties of China, Iran, North Korea and Russia from buying land in Alabama; individuals, entities and governments from those countries from buying Florida land and prohibiting foreign parties from buying Arkansas land. The Arkansas law, Pittman said, ended up streamlining the process by eliminating the state-level reporting requirement.

NACo President James Gore: 'We have to lead with courage'

From ANNUAL page 1

and Commissioner Ron Berry of Roane County, Tenn., as the Southern Region representative.

Family: A running theme in Gore narrative

Gore was sworn in by his daughter Opal as his wife Elizabeth, son Jacob and other family members looked on.

"How about those kids?" he said as he took the microphone before about 3,000 county officials from across the country.

"As we walked in here this morning, Ilooked at mykids, Opal and Jacob, and said, 'You know how there's all kinds of problems in the world, right? Well, you see all those people? They are the ones fixing things. These are the ones fighting for us...all of us."

"They are the ones delivering results," Gore said. "And kids, the only real results in this world come from imperfect, relentless progress. There is no progress that is perfect."

'We the counties...'

Several times during his speech, Gore made a point to in-

clude everyone in the audience. In fact, "we" was not only a running theme in his speech but it's the theme of his upcoming year as NACo president: "We the counties, we the leaders and we the future."

The theme leads up to next year's Annual Conference in Philadelphia, as preparations get underway for a celebration of the country's 250th birthday.

At times during his address, Gore sounded like a Sunday preacher delivering a sermon to his flock.

"Like you, I step boldly into the chaos of local public service, each and every day, for one reason," he said. "Because I refuse to subject my kids to a pessimistic future. I refuse to subject my kids, your kids, and all of the kids out there to a fatalistic tomorrow.

"How about you? Are you with me? Raise your hands if you're with me. And now, give a high five to the person sitting next to you and thank them for working with you, imperfectly, relentlessly, in those trenches of democracy.

"In church, we call this passing of the peace. Today, we'll call it the passing of the purpose."

'Embrace the mess'

Gore gave a nod to some of the divisions roiling the country.

"Because even though it's one of the hardest things to do, living with gratitude, and embracing grace, is the only way to rise above, and not succumb, to the angst, the dismay, and the anxiety that threatens our democracy," he noted.

"Those words. Angst. Dismay. Anxiety. They speak to a general, almost universal sense of unease that surrounds us these days," he said.

"You all know what I'm talking about. This malaise. Yucky. Fearful. Angry. 'Not happy with the now.' And not confident in the future. We serve our communities as public leaders through disruptive times: Climate extremes, natural disasters, societal clashes.

"Neck deep in the midst of a disruptive digital revolution, sometimes called the Third Industrial Revolution, where technology and Artificial Intelligence fly ahead of us so fast, we can't seem to keep up.

"We have an economy that is upside down, with more than 70% of Americans living paycheck to paycheck," he said. "Sounds nasty, doesn't it? So why would I stand here before you all and give voice to this malaise...this mess? Because the only way through the storm is through the damn storm. The only way through the mess is to embrace the mess."

Leading with courage

"And to do that, we have to lead with courage," he said. "The courage to say what needs to be said and do what needs to be done. The courage to be disliked for doing that.

"But also, what about a different kind of courage? How about, the courage to laugh in the face of the storm? To smile and find camaraderie and shared purpose and dare I say it, joy? Joy within the mess?

"Isn't that what we're doing here? Isn't that why we're all here, with NACo, at this conference? Sure, we're here to share best practices," he said. "To learn from each other, and leverage solutions. Sure, we're here to advocate for federal policies that help us improve our communities, absolutely.

"But also, aren't we here to embrace that 'Get Stuff Done' attitude, together, as members of the middle?" he asked.

"No, I am not talking about the political middle, I am talking about the radical, practical, passionate middle. Where real life happens."

'We're the ones we've been waiting for'

"And you know what? We are the ones we've been waiting for. We. Just like the founding of our country, it started with, 'We the People. We the Counties. We the Leaders. We the Future."

"And as we embark on our work this year, as we march toward our 250-year anniversary, we will deploy our resources to investigate, study and highlight the best of the best, bubbling up from our counties. From the ground up.

"We are going to drive our organization, our message toward this marker. Because even though it's a huge moment for our country, it's also just another day in business, for us at the local level. We have delivered, we do deliver, and we will continue to deliver, relentlessly for our communities."

Staff Writer Meredith Moran contributed to this report.

SAVE THE DATES Upcoming NACo Conferences

2024 Joint Board of Directors, Large Urban County Caucus and Rural Action Caucus Symposium

December 4-7 Sonoma County, Calif.

2025 NACo Legislative Conference

March 1-4 Washington, D.C.

2025 Western Interstate Region (WIR) Conference

May 20-23 Pennington County, S.D.

2025 NACo Annual Conference & Exposition

July 11-14 City and County of Philadelphia, Pa.







2024 NACo PCTURES ALL PHOTOS BY CONFERENCE IN POCTURES NOTED



Conference attendees visit the Apollo Beach Nature Preserve in Hillsborough County, Fla. Over the last 28 years, the county and its partnering agencies have restored native habitats, including estuarine marsh, tidal creeks, beach dunes and upland islands and added amenities, including nature trails, picnic pavilions, beach access and an ADA-accessible observation tower. Photo by Lana Farfan

Gracie Kelly, associate director, Government Affairs, Kentucky Association of Counties, pauses for a photo with Councilmember Bill DeCosta of Kaua'i County, Hawaii in a meeting.





Hennepin County's Kareem Murphy, director of Intergovernmental Relations and Liz Young, Public Policy manager at awards lunch.



Toombs County, Ga. Commissioner David Sikes takes the microphone during voting for Second Vice President at the Annual Business Meeting.

NACo. DAVID DAVENPORT MEMORIAL SCHOLARSHIP	DATE July 15, 2024				
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TWELVE THOUSAND AND %100	\$12,000.00				
OR NACo Presidential Scholarship	Mary Vo Medicin				



Student Abigail Mc-Neil of Ramsey County, Minn., accepts the David Davenport Memorial scholarship from NACo President Mary Jo McGuire.



Diane Whidden of Charlotte County, Fla. plays ball during the Annual Business Meeting.



Mecklenburg County, N.C. Board Chair George Dunlap celebrates his win as second vice president with his supporters.



Asst. Chief Deputy Debrah Mitchell of Pulaski County, Ark. (right) and Councilwoman Deloris Frazier of Orangeburg County, S.C. chat at the July 12 first-time attendees' breakfast.



NACo President James Gore (left) "hearts" the crowd at the Annual Business Meeting as Second VP J.D. Clark of Wise County, Texas looks on.



Early risers gather July 13 near Tampa Bay for a bike ride at the 2024 NACo Annual Conference in Hillsborough County, Fla.



Council Chair Mel Rapozo of Kauai County, Hawaii jousts with Commissioner Irene Fernando of Hennepin County, Minn. at the opening reception in the exhibit hall.



Bob McKee, deputy director, Public Policy, Florida Association of Counties, shows off his juggling skills during a talent competition at the opening reception in the NACo Exhibit Hall.



Tarrant County, Texas Commissioner Roy Charles Brooks (left), former NACo president, acknowledges applause for his years of service. Paul Beddoe (right), a longtime former NACo Government Affairs staffmember, worked closely with him.



NACo members from Hawaii sing July 14 during the **General Session.**



(L-r): Commissioner Mary Hamann-Roland of Dakota County, Minn., Supervisor Latifa Faisal of Story County, Iowa and Lackawanna County, Pa. Arts and Culture Director Maureen McGuigan pause for a selfie.



Palm Beach County, Fla. Commissioner Gregg Weiss takes a dip July 15 during the Annual Business Meeting.



NACo past presidents (l-r) Roy Charles Brooks, Greg Cox, Mary Ann Borgeson, Chris Rodgers, Colleen Landkamer, Mary Jo McGuire and Glen Whitley pause for a photo at the Annual Business Meeting.



Kris Jacobsen, executive director of the South Dakota County Commissioners Association, chats at the first-time attendees' breakfast.



Attendees enter the NACo Exhibition Hall July 12 at the Annual Conference.



Immediate Past President Denise Winfrey of Will County, Ill. waves to the crowd.

A NACo guitar sits waiting to be played at the opening reception, Tampa Convention Center.



Attendees tour the Hillsborough County Veterans Memorial Park and Museum. The park's Veterans Resource Center is a one-stop shop showcasing the teamwork of local, state and federal partners dedicated to serving those who served. Photo by Lana Farfan



checks in at registration.

Sherry Koonce (far left) collector, Faulkner County, Ark., and Tracy La Pierre, administrative assistant, deputy tax collector, Faulkner County. Ark., attend the closing reception at the Tampa Aquarium.



Hillsborough County's Kyle Beverland (right) gives a tour of the Hillsborough County Resource Recovery Facility to Tracy Straub of Marion County, Fla. and Dexter McCoy of Fort Bend County, Texas. Photo by Lana Farfan

Public Leadership in the Arts Award goes to Ludgood

Mobile County, Ala. **Commissioner Merceria** Ludgood accepts the **Public Leadership in** the Arts Award July 13 from Jay Dick of Americans for the Arts and Dakota County, Minn. **Commissioner Mary** Hamann-Roland, who chairs the NACo Arts and Culture Commission, at the Tampa Museum of Art. Photo by Denny Henry

by Mary Ann Barton editor

Surrounded by her peers July 13, Mobile County, Ala. Commissioner Merceria Ludgood received the Public Leadership in the Arts Award from Americans for the Arts at a reception held at the Tampa Museum of Art during the NACo Annual Conference.

Ludgood held her award, a glass bowl created by artist Nicholas Nourot, before addressing the gathering. "Thank you to NA-Co's Arts and Culture Commission and Americans for the Arts for this recognition," she said, surrounded by members of the commission as well as members of the Women of NACo leadership networking group, who co-hosted the event.

Ludgood is being honored for her work highlighting a unique story about a slave ship, the Clotilda, which landed in Mobile 50

years after the practice was outlawed in the United States. After the ship was discovered in 2018 and verified the following year, a community called Africatown, founded by survivors of that dire voyage, needed help sharing their story.

Ludgood spearheaded an effort to build Africatown Heritage House to tell the story and house the ship's artifacts. It opened in July 2023. She partnered with the History Museum of Mobile to develop "Clotilda: The Exhibition at Africatown Heritage House," which features West African art, primary artifacts, pieces of the ship and more. A sculpture she commissioned and named, called the Memory Keeper, is featured in the Memorial Garden, symbolizing the survivors, their voyage and their lives in Alabama.

"The arts can trigger difficult conversations," Ludgood noted

in her remarks. "They offer ways to tell tragic stories while weaving in hope and triumph throughout. Adults can find release, healing and a place where they feel understood. The arts can change a community's self-image. All of this has happened in my county because of the arts."

Last month, Mobile County also celebrated the opening of Africatown Hall & Food Bank, featuring Afro-centric art. It will also house the Africatown Redevelopment Corporation, a community food pantry as well as serve as a meeting and work space for local organizations working to meet not only community needs, but its location as a cultural/heritage tourism destination.

Ludgood was also recognized Sunday, July 14, before a wider audience at the General Session at the Tampa Convention Center. CN



BRIGHT IDEAS | GWINNETT COUNTY, GA. **County Community Gardens Fight Food Insecurity**

PROBLEM:

Local food banks needed fresh produce to give to residents.

SOLUTION:

The county established community gardens in county parks

by Meredith Moran staff writer

Gwinnett County, Ga. is working to fight food insecurity by establishing community gardens in its county parks, where volunteers help grow produce that is donated to local food pantries.

Through its "Live Healthy" initiative, Gwinnett County leases plots of land in its parks for people who want to grow their own food, but don't have the space to. There are roughly 400 plots across 11 county parks. To lease one of the 4 x 8 raised bed spaces, Gwinnett County residents pay an annual fee of \$35 and agree to volunteer at least 12 hours each year to maintain the community share rows.

The initiative has donated more than 25,000 pounds of food in four years to local food pantries, co-ops and faith-based organizations, according to Bradley Livesay, Live Healthy Gwinnett's program coordinator.

"It's all fresh, locally grown produce," Livesay said, "which they're really excited to get, because a lot of the times, what they're getting in from the Atlanta Food Bank or other places, is more shelf-stable type food."

Each community garden has two volunteers who are designated "ambassadors," who help oversee the day-to-day maintenance of the garden.

Shirley Bohm, a 79-yearold ambassador at Vines Park, grew up on a farm and has been gardening her whole life. She doesn't have enough space for gardening in her backyard, so the program was a great way for her to continue her love for growing and helping the community, she said.

"I've always gardened at every place that I've lived, so it's just in my blood," Bohm said. "I really enjoy it, it's very satisfying, and I love working in the soil and seeing plants grow. There's something about growing things that's very relaxing."

Vines Park donated nearly 2,700 pounds of produce from its community garden to the local food co-op last year alone.

"I'm pretty lucky that, as old as I am, I can still get out and work. I've got enough money to support myself and I have a house and all of that kind of stuff," Bohm said.

"Everybody doesn't have that. And it's really nice to be able to do something for people who aren't as lucky as you are. So, the community garden concept ... besides just growing and picking things that you grew yourself, to be able to donate it to somebody who really needs it, that's a nice feeling."

It's currently the warm season, which goes from late April through September, so the types of food being planted in the community gardens include peppers, okra, eggplant, tomatoes, beans and zucchini, among others. Kale, collard greens, carrots and radishes are some of what gets planted in the cool season, according to Livesay.

More than 130 languages are spoken throughout Gwinnett County and more than 25% of the population was born outside the United States. It's the most diverse county in Georgia, and that's reflected in the community gardens, Livesay said.

"Because the gardens are so spread out, you can really see the cultures that are utilized in the garden," Livesay said. "So, if you go to Peachtree Ridge Park, there's an Asian community that's up there, and they're growing sesame at that garden, or if you go down to Lenora Park, there's a population that's from the Caribbean islands where they're growing Grenada peppers."

Tori Johnson is an ambassador at West Gwinnett Park, which is currently growing Japanese eggplant, tomatillos, dill and jalapenos. She said she loves to garden because of the "zen" feeling it brings her.

"We've been giving food to Neighborhood Cooperative Ministries, and some of us [gardeners] volunteer over there too, and it's just fun to see people come up to get their food distribution, and they get this really good, organic, beautifully grown produce that they're like, 'Wow, I can't believe you did that for us.' ... And we learn something each year.

"We've learned about trap crops, we've integrated more pollinators and planted things that will attract beneficial insects, so it's a big learning experience."

The community gardens also offer environmental education to the community, for everyone, ranging from children to the elderly.

One cooking program through the county teaches children as young as five years old how to use kitchen utensils safely and they take fresh ingredients from the garden to make guacamole.

The first community garden the county opened is across the street from a senior center, so all of the garden beds are raised and ADA accessible, so someone is still able to garden in a wheelchair without having the barrier of needing to bend over.

The 11 community gardens are spread out across the county, but all of the ambassadors meet quarterly to share best practices and discuss anything they're struggling with.

"Some of our sites do all of the planting in above-ground raised beds, some sites have inground rows that we've tilled up, others have a high tunnel," Livesay said. "So, it's really valuable feedback for us that we're able to take and then just kind of go out and improve the program."

The sense of community is one of the best parts about the program, Bohm said, and community gardens are something that can be easily replicated anywhere, she added.

"It sounds kind of dorky, but we really are becoming a community," Bohm said.

"We help each other when somebody's on vacation or somebody has a conflict. Your neighbors will help water or help pick. We had a picnic potluck, we send out a little newsletter, we're sharing recipes. You see somebody in the garden, so you wave, even if you don't come in, everybody knows everybody now."

Gwinnett County's Community Garden Ambassador program won the Best in Category Achievement Award this year in the Volunteer category.



Gwinnett County, Ga. volunteers pause for a photo at Vines Community Garden at Vines Park, where crops are grown for residents.

RESOLUTIONS ALL PHOTOS BY DENNY HENRY



COUNTY PRIORITIES TAKE CENTER STAGE AT ANNUAL CONFERENCE

uided by its 10 policy steering committees, the NACo Board of Directors approved more than 100 new policy resolutions and a variety of platform changes to the American County Platform. The resolutions set policy positions for NACo for the next year, articulating county priorities for the upcoming farm bill, voicing desire to reform the Antiquities Act, recommending ways to improve efficiencies in the Land and Water Conversation Fund Act and much more.

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Reform H-2A

Administrative Rules

ISSUE: The existing H-2A program is designed to help American farmers find additional workers from outside of the United States and bring them into the country to provide seasonal labor. The current administrative rules create procedural and economic challenges in hiring these seasonal workers hindering the success of the program.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges the U.S. Department of Labor to consider reforms to existing H-2A administrative rules by addressing the following items: 1) streamlining housing, transportation and worker certification approvals; 2) re-evaluating the job description specificity requirement to offer more generalized descriptions for farm workers; 3) creating a greater distinction between full-time, part-time, seasonal and harvest workers; 4) creating a simplified application processing system with a central portal housed under the United States Department of Agriculture; 5) ensuring timely certification and arrival of farm workers; and 6) removing burdensome job posting and hiring requirements.

Secure Key County Priorities in the 2024 Farm Bill

ISSUE: The U.S. Farm Bill helps counties make critical investments in infrastructure, economic development, workforce training, nutrition and conservation within some of our nation's most underserved communities. Preserving the law's programs is key to the strength and stability of our local, regional, state and national economies. With Congress hard at work to reauthorize the 2024 Farm Bill, counties must identify and advocate for key county priorities in this critical legislation.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo supports the following priorities for the 2024 Farm Bill:

1. Improve ease of access and flexibility of Farm Bill Programs - Streamline application processes and reporting requirements for Farm Bill programs, along with adopting a more equitable funding award structures for rural counties by using competitive grants over loans. Provide long-term certainty for communities seeking to utilize federal resources authorized in the Farm Bill adopting multiyear funding terms for Federal funding. Along with this minimize or eliminate local matching requirements.

2. Maintain and expand support for farmers – Agriculture

is the backbone of the American economy and subsequently has a huge impact on counties. Programs particularly important to Counties include the Agricultural Risk Coverage (ARC) Program, the Price Loss Coverage (PLC) Program, the Livestock Indemnity Program (LIP), the Livestock Forage Disaster Program (LFDP) and the Federal Crop Insurance Program (FCIP).

3. Provide stronger support for small mid-size producers - small farms constitute almost 90 percent of the nation's farms. These producers play a crucial role in rural economies. Counties support reauthorizations of the Farming Opportunities Training and Outreach (FOTO) program and increased funding for the Local Agriculture Market Program (LAMP). Counties also support maintaining and improving farm safety net programs targeting new, beginning, and underserved producers.

4. Maintain and expand Farm Bill conservation programs – The protection of the Nation's ecosystems starts with

the conservation efforts of our Rural Communities whether by the American Farmer, Rancher or Forester. Counties support the reauthorization of producer-led voluntary conservation programs administrated by USDA, including the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) and the Agricultural Conservation Easements Program (ACEP). Counties also support increased funding and long-term funding for NRCS Watershed programs.

5. *Invest in the capacity of rural counties* – 70 percent of America's Counties are rural. Robust investment in the expertise and capacity of rural counties will empower rural policymakers to plan and execute local-led community development strategies. Counties call on congress to include at least \$1 billion dollars in mandatory funding for grants-based rural capacity-building programs into the 2024 Farm Bill. Counties also support extending eligibility for

🕪 NACo urges expansion of Low-Income Housing Tax Credit program

From RESOLUTIONS page 23

the Community Facilities Direct Loan & Grant Program to rural governments to provide financial assistance to county operated facilities. In turn, population thresholds should be increased where possible when considering eligibility for rural development programs, while insertinglanguage that would prioritize low-population counties.

6. Invest in high-speed internet access - According to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) 14.5 million Americans lack quality broadband internet access. Counties support authorizing the **ReConnect Program through** the Farm Bill. Counties also support reauthorizing the Distance Learning & Telemedicine Program, which would increase the quality of life and help rural America thrive. Finally, counties support reauthorizing the Community Connect Grant program, which will continue to invest in community orientated connectivity which will support economic growth and help with education, healthcare and public safety in rural America.

7. Expand Opportunities for the rural economy – Several parts of the Farm Bill authorize programs that help rural communities with economic development and business creation. Counties support reauthorizing the Rural Business Development Grants Program and the Rural Investment Stronger Economy (RISE) Grant Program to provide enhanced opportunities for rural businesses and create good-paying jobs.

8. Elevate the County role in federal land management - Counties support efforts to expand the partnership between county government and the federal government for land management and forest health all while promoting economic growth and a better partnership between both levels of government. Counties support fully extending the Good Neighbor Authority (GNA) eligibility to counties and tribes and full receipt-sharing with county governments for Stewardship

End Result Contracting. Counties also support reauthorization of the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program (CFLRP) and the Landscape-Scale Restoration (LSR) Program which will create a robust cross-boundary landscape management practice.

Amend Classification Criteria for Small Meat Processing Plants

ISSUE: EPA has proposed new regulations regarding effluent discharge from small meat processing facilities defined by the EPA as employing fewer than 1,000 workers.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to amend its classification criteria for meat processing plants to more accurately reflect the multitude of different size and type of meat processing operations and consider regulatory actions that are sustainable for all of the business model sizes and types.

Foreign Ownership of U.S. Agriculture Land and Assets

ISSUE: Foreign ownership of U.S. agricultural land doubled from 2009 to 2019. Foreign investment in U.S. agricultural

land grew to about 40 million acres in 2021. Policymakers and the public have become increasingly concerned about foreign influence and control of the U.S. food supply. Several bipartisan bills have been introduced in Congress to tighten federal oversight of foreigners' proposed purchases or to outright prohibit the ability of buyers from China, Russia. North Korea and Iran to purchase U.S. farmland or agricultural businesses. Approximately twenty-four states forbid or limit foreign corporations and governments from acquiring or owning an interest in agricultural land within their state. Growing foreign ownership of U.S. farmland, particularly by China, poses a direct threat to America's food security and national security. Safeguarding our farmland and food supply is important to county governments and merits increased scrutiny and attention from policymakers at all levels of government.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges Congress to pass bipartisan legislation blocking the ability of hostile foreign nations from acquiring U.S. farmland or agricultural businesses. Further, NACo supports a coordinated effort between the federal, state and county governments to ensure foreign nations don't exert undue influence over U.S. agri-

culture policy.

Examine the Impacts of NRCS Conservation Programs on the Development of Rural Counties

ISSUE: The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) assists county farmland preservation groups with buying conservation easements from farmers to protect prime farmland, while simultaneously encouraging the development of the same rural areas. These two actions are often at odds because federal conservation easements prevent infrastructure development, even with the owner's consent. Utilizing public funds for the purpose of making future public projects less viable is both wasteful and self-defeating. Rural communities also have the smallest number of resources to guide the confluence of development and conservation effectively.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo calls on the USDA to restructure the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) programs, bringing them in line with the modern infrastructural needs of rural communities, while providing opportunities for both conservation and development.

Support the Agriculture Industry

ISSUE: A lack of legislative and financial support can have detrimental effects on the agriculture industry in the United States.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges the U.S. Congress to pass legislation in support of the livestock, ranching, and other farming industries commensurate with an acknowledgement that agriculture is one of the bedrocks of the United States economy.

COMMUNITY, ECONOMIC AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

Low Income

Housing Tax Credit

ISSUE: To build and preserve more affordable housing through the expansion of the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit program.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo encourages Congress to pass the Affordable Housing Credit Improvement Act (AHCIA) of 2023 to expand and preserve the nation's affordable housing stock.

New Markets Tax Credit

 $\label{eq:support_support} \textbf{ISSUE:} Support the permanent$



Support legal migration to strengthen local economies

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extension of the New Markets Tax Credit (NMTC) program in order to promote community development and economic growth by attracting private investment in low-income communities with high unemployment and poverty.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges Congress to provide a permanent extension of the New Markets Tax Credit (NMTC) and other enhancements to the program to allow for private sector investment and economic growth in low-income communities.

Support Legal Migration to Strengthen Local Economies and Workforce

ISSUE: The role legal immigration plays in our nation's workforce and local economies.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges Congress and the administration to enact legislative and regulatory proposals that support and provide improved and efficient legal avenues for immigrants to enter the United States, both permanently and temporarily, and contribute to the workforce and local economies and maintain the area standard industry wages for the local marketplace.

Support the Land Ports of Entry Modernization Trust Fund Act

ISSUE: The bipartisan Land Ports of Entry Modernization Trust Fund Act is an effort to act on trade and commerce opportunities presented at the U.S. southern border while strengthening border management capacity. From machines to agriculture, trade with Canada and Mexico supports jobs in all 50 states.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges Congress to pass the Land Ports of Entry Modernization Act which will strengthen border trade and management. The legislation establishes a trust fund to construct new ports of entry, expand and improve existing ports of entry, procure technology for inspecting and processing traffic passing through ports of entry, and hire U.S. Customs and Border Protection staff. From machines to agriculture, trade with Canada and Mexico supports jobs in all 50 states.

Support WIOA Reauthorization and Increased Investment

ISSUE: Quickly changing economic conditions emphasize the need to reauthorize the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) and empower it with increased investments, greater flexibility, and reduced bureaucracy.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges the reauthorization of, and increased funding for, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act. NACo further recommends that within the Act, Congress provides greater flexibility to the private-sector led Workforce Development Boards and eliminates bureaucratic burdens.

Support the HELPER Act

ISSUE: First responders put their lives on the line every day to keep our families safe, and teachers dedicate themselves to educating the next generation. However, many public servants cannot afford to buy a home in the communities they serve, and the American dream of homeownership has slipped out of reach.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges Congress to pass the HELPER Act, which will provide affordable homeownership opportunities to first responders and teachers across the Nation.

Family Emergency Shelter

ISSUE: We are finding that families for whom we provide emergency shelter through a system that is funding 100% locally (not with federal dollars), they are required to report the benefit as income and that counts toward their income eligibility for the federal programs mentioned below. Our state informed us that this is based on guidance they've received from the relevant federal agency (USDA, HHS, etc). While the Biden-Harris Administration removed the previous administration's Public Charge rule, we also remain concerned that a change in Administration next year would bring that back and harm access to safety net benefits for non-citizen residents in need of support.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges the federal government to incentivize counties to provide emergency shelter to families in crisis. NACo further urges the federal government to remove financial penalties and disincentives that discourage or prohibit families in crisis from seeking and securing emergency shelter when facing homelessness.

Increase Funding for Community Development Financial Institutions and the Rural Housing Service Reform Act

ISSUE: Many rural and tribal communities are capable of increased community development and levels of homeownership but lack the financial institutions and access to capital to achieve their potential. Assistance from the federal government through Community Development Financial Institutions (CDFI) provide capital access for these communities to flourish.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges Congress to increase federal funding for Community Development Financial Institutions (CDFI) and to pass the Rural Housing Service Reform Act (S. 2790/H.R. 6785).

Reauthorize the Economic Development Administration

ISSUE: Support appropriations and reauthorization of the U.S. Department of Commerce Economic Development Administration.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges the U.S. Congress to appropriate funding and reauthorize the U.S. Department of Commerce, Economic Development Administration (EDA) as follows:

• Congress should significantly increase its annual investment in EDA to enhance the reach and impact of the agency.

• Focus on EDA's core infrastructure and economic adjustment programs - public works, economic adjustment assistance and partnership planning. Congress should also authorize additional funding for special initiatives so as not to steer funding away from EDA core programs.
Increase EDA funding for Public Works and enhance the scope of related activities, particularly related to broadband and resiliency.

• Strengthen EDA's National Technical Assistance program for small and distressed rural communities to allow greater access and leveraging of federal, state, local and regional economic development programs.

• Encourage regional collaboration by rewarding and incentivizing local governments, businesses and communities to participate in the Comprehensive Economic Development.

• Elevate EDA's role as an integrator of federal economic development planning programs and formalize EDA's role as the federal government's lead integrator for economic development and central facilitator for interagency collaboration and resource integration.

• Expand EDA Disaster and Recovery Relief eligibility. EDA has a significant role to play in post- disaster relief and longterm recovery assistance for impacted communities. In areas where a major disaster or emergency has been declared under the Stafford Act, EDA grant recipients should be eligible for up to 100 percent of the cost of the project.

ENVIRONMENT, ENERGY AND LAND USE

Justice40 Initiative, Similar Environmental Justice Initiatives and Encouragement of Government Coordination on Implementation

ISSUE: The climate resilience challenge is most severe in disadvantaged communities, which are hurt "worst and first" by flooding, extreme heat, extreme cold, and other results of climate change. To build an equitable climate- resilient future, reparative climate resilient infrastructure investments are necessary

to close the infrastructure gap that has resulted from past policies, and to enable communities that have been subject to disinvestment, underinvestment, and marginalization to fully participate in and benefit from such development. The Infrastructure and Investment Jobs Act (IIJA) and Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) created funding sources to advance environmental justice, and spur economic opportunity by investing in reparative climate resilient infrastructure for the purpose of advancing the principles of the Justice40 Initiative at the local level.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges the federal government to work with county governments to implement the federal Justice40 Initiative and similar Environmental Justice (EJ) Initiatives by providing technical assistance and coordination to access and maximize funding to implement related projects and include EJ language when writing grant programs and guidance to highlight Justice40 or similar EJ initiatives, especially for Notice of Funding Opportunities (NO-FOs).

Support the Mississippi River Restoration and Resilience Initiative

ISSUE: To support a non-regulatory approach for planning and financial assistance for Mississippi River projects that improve the quality of drinking water, promote flood resilience, habitat restoration and prevent the spread of aquatic invasive species.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo supports passage of the Mississippi River Restoration and Resilience Initiative (MRRRI), which will create a new, non-regulatory Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) geographic grant program to provide federal planning and funding support to enhance river restoration, resilience projects and program activities in the Mississippi River states from the Headwaters to the Delta.

Property Assessed Clean Energy Financing

ISSUE: Counties can create

Reduce 50% match to 20% on environmental restoration projects

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voluntary assessment programs, such as Property Assessed Clean Energy (PACE) financing, that allow homeowners to borrow funds from the County for specified improvements and repay the funds through an assessment on the property. These programs support important local policy objectives. A Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB) proposed rulemaking (Docket No. CFPB-2023-0029) would subject Counties that operate PACE financing programs to the consumer creditor laws and regulations set forth under the Truth in Lending Act (TILA) and Regulation Z as though they were a for-profit lender originating home mortgages. This would create a costly and unnecessary burden on Counties and infringe on long-standing constitutional principles that reserve the administration of property taxes and assessments to state and local governments.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo opposes the application of Regulation Z on PACE financing provided directly by Counties without the use of a private PACE company and strongly urges CFPB to revise its proposed regulations to exclude County-operated PACE financing programs. By excluding County-operated programs CFPB would acknowledge that Counties are government entities with legitimate public policy objectives, not for-profit lenders.

Request New Members on the Department of Energy's Defense Nuclear Facilities Safety Board

ISSUE: Presidential appointment and Senate confirmation needed of up to four new members on the Defense Nuclear Facilities Safety Board.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges the president to appoint additional members of the Defense Nuclear Facilities Safety Board (DNSFB), the U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee to report out favorably members of the Board, and for the U.S. Senate to confirm up to four new members of the Board this year.

Reinvesting in Shoreline Economies and Ecosystems Act

ISSUE: Federal Outer Continental Shelf (OCS) impact assistance laws should be updated through legislation to provide more parity in federal offshore oil and gas revenue sharing to the four GOMESA states and provide revenue sharing from offshore wind development to supporting coastal states.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges the passage of the Reinvesting in Shoreline Economies and Ecosystems (RISEE) Act as this legislation addresses new federal offshore energy development to meet current and future energy needs and to provide long-term funding streams to enhance coastal resilience.

Complete a New Five-Year Plan and Resume Federal Onshore and Offshore Leasing

ISSUE: The federal government's position on executing offshore leasing is important to America's counties regarding the funding of conservation, recreation, restoration and protection of vital national resources.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges the Administration to hold all three offshore lease sales in the 2024 - 2029 OCS Leasing Program and to hold regular offshore lease sales, to maximize the funding streams of the royalty revenue for the purposes of conservation, recreation, restoration and protection of vital national resources. And, in the absence of expedited lease sales by the Administration, NACo urges Congress to immediately pass legislation instructing the Administration to hold multiple region wide, commercially viable offshore and onshore lease sales each year, excluding those areas covered by the GOMESA moratorium as further extended by Presidential Action on September 8, 2020, covering portions of the Central Gulf planning area and areas in the Eastern Gulf of Mexico including, Florida, North Carolina and Virginia.

Promote Nuclear Energy Innovation

ISSUE: Nuclear energy plays

an essential role in securing our country's clean energy future. That's because the generation of electricity from nuclear plants emits no carbon dioxide or air pollution and is the country's largest source of clean energy yet is being underutilized.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges federal government agencies to promote nuclear energy innovation for existing and new nuclear deployment, including the development of nuclear microgrids.

Reduce Local Match Requirements for Federal Environmental Restoration Projects

ISSUE: Federal environmental restoration grant programs generally require 50 percent matching funds from the applicant agency. Federal transportation grant programs more often require a 20 percent match from the local agency partner. Reducing match requirements for environmental restoration projects to 20 percent would bring these programs into alignment with transportation programs and enable local agency partners to put more and larger projects on the ground more quickly.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo encourages the Executive Branch to reduce match requirements for federal environmental restoration programs from 50 percent to 20 percent.

Improve Efficiencies of the LWCF Program

ISSUE: The National Park Service administers the Land and Water Conversation Fund Act (LWCF). Input from state, regional, county and local LWCF funding recipients to refine interpretation of LWCF will improve cost-effectiveness, efficiency, land stewardship and outdoor recreation.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo encourages the National Park Service to work with state, regional, county and local Land and Water Conservation land managers to define reasonable access, recreational development timeframe requirements, and small acreage conversion requirements.

Support EPA Ozone Reclassification

ISSUE: The western half of the United States deals with a wide variety of geographical landscapes and weather patterns that makes the region more susceptible to higher concentrations of ozone. As wildfires and weather patterns become increasingly unpredictable, it has placed the region in a vulnerable position related to attainment of the 8-hour ozone National Ambient Air Quality Standard (NAAQS). Many regions and monitoring sites experience levels of background and non-locally controllable emissions that are 80% or more of their monitored emissions. Ozone originating either out of state, out of the country, or at higher altitudes is causing readings at levels that a region has no ability to affect, regardless of local investment.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges the president to direct the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to develop tools and create policy directives that hold regions accountable to locally produced ozone, while treating background ozone and non-locally produced ozone separately. NACo further urges the President to direct the EPA to seriously consider the recommendations in the bipartisan letter sent to the President on this topic and signed by the Governors of Colorado, Utah, Arizona, and Wyoming.

Rare Earth and Critical Minerals

ISSUE: The U.S. is increasingly reliant on foreign countries for the minerals needed by our manufacturing, technology, energy, transportation, and defense sectors. In 2022, imports made up more than one-half of the U.S. for 51 nonfuel mineral commodities. China has become the largest single source of foreign mineral imports and controls 85% of the global mining capacity. China currently processes anywhere from 60 to 100 percent of all the minerals needed for batteries and electric motors. By nearly every measure, China has cornered the market for critical minerals and resources. Some estimates suggest that at least 336 new mines will be needed for graphite, lithium, nickel, and cobalt to meet EV demand prior to 2035. Even as our nation's mineral needs skyrocket for everything from electric vehicles to advanced energy technologies and critically important defense systems, the U.S. is stumbling when it comes to our mineral supply chains.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges Congress to pass bipartisan legislation that will reduce our dependence on hostile foreign nations for critical minerals and to look for innovative ways to onshore the critical minerals supply chain in order to strengthen our nation's energy security while respecting tribal sovereignty, local authority and the principles of consent.

NEPA Reform

ISSUE: The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) was signed into law in 1970 to ensure consideration for the effects of proposed federal actions on the environment, ranging from road building and mining projects to alternative energy projects. Since its inception, NEPA has proven time-consuming and costly for the federal agencies implementing it and the businesses seeking permits. A typical NEPA review now takes over four and one-half years and is over 600 pages long. The overall process regularly takes over a decade to complete. In many cases, NEPA not only slows projects, but stops them altogether. By comparison, Canada, Australia, and the European Union have reformed their permitting laws and adopted policies to ensure that permitting is completed within three years or less while protecting the environment.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges Congress to pass bipartisan legislation that would speed up the approval process for critical infrastructure, transportation, utility corridors, establish reasonable and firm review timelines.

Water Control Infrastructure Drawdowns Before Flooding Events

ISSUE: A resolution urging federal agencies to enact operating procedures consistent with its

NACo urges Postal Service to consult counties on service changes

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mission and design to reduce downstream flooding from imminent stormwater events.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) to revise federal guidelines in coordination with local governing authorities that operate water control projects to reduce downstream stormwater events.

Amend U.S. Code Title 16

ISSUE: A resolution urging the United States Congress to amend 16 U.S. Code § 803 (a) (2)(B), to include recommendations from local agencies exercising administration over flood control in the issuing of licenses for waterpower and resources.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges the United States Congress to amend 16 U.S. Code § 803 (a)(2) (B) as follows: (B) The recommendations of Federal, State, and Local agencies exercising administration over flood control, navigation, irrigation, recreation, cultural and other relevant resources of the State in which the project is located, and the recommendations (including fish and wildlife recommendations) of Indian tribes affected by the project.

Innovative Water Management

ISSUE: Extreme weather is increasing the need for counties to have the opportunity to utilize innovative water management tools such as Forecast Informed Reservoir Operations (FIRO) and subseasonal to seasonal (S2S) weather research forecasting.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges the strengthening, through additional funding of Congressional appropriations directed toward the implementation of FIRO initiatives, improvement of S2S weather research forecasting and reauthorization of the Weather Act.

Oppose Material Preference Legislation

ISSUE: There is a national effort to eliminate local control of water, wastewater, and stormwa-



Tarrant County, Texas Commissioner Roy Charles Brooks addresses the board.

ter infrastructure systems, which would deny engineers, utilities, local governments, and public entities the ability to design water systems in the manner that best serves the needs of their communities.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo supports local control of decisions related to water infrastructure and opposes Material Preference Legislation, or so-called "open competition" or "innovative materials" legislation. NACo is neutral as to which materials communities select for water infrastructure projects because NACo recognizes that communities have unique needs regarding water infrastructure and their autonomy to address those needs should not be restricted or limited in this manner.

FINANCE, PENSIONS AND INTERGOVERN-MENTAL AFFAIRS

Timely Enactment of Federal Budget Appropriations, No More Shutdowns

ISSUE: The purpose of this resolution is to urge Congress and the President to work together to enact all federal budget appropriations bills by Oct. 1 of each new fiscal year, thereby avoiding continuing resolutions and government shutdowns, which create costly delays and uncertainty in providing federal assistance and programs for U.S. counties and their residents. ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges Congress and the president to commit to working together to reach an agreement on all spending legislation by Oct. 1 of each year. This is a fundamental responsibility of both Congress and the President and should be taken more seriously. Counties work hard to get their budgets approved on a timely basis, and Congress should do the same. Our citizens deserve no less.

Empower State and Counties to Enforce the Collection of State and Local Taxes on Short- and Long-Term Rental

ISSUE: Discrepancies in the ability of counties to enforce the collection of occupancy tax on short-term and long-term rental properties have resulted in the loss of potential tax revenue used for county services and development projects.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo supports federal efforts that support the authority for all counties to enforce laws that provide for the collection of taxes on short- and long-term rentals.

Reform the Windfall Elimination Provision

ISSUE: The existing windfall elimination provision (WEP) in Social Security, which reduces Social Security benefits for workers who also have pensions from earnings not covered by Social Security, could dissuade individuals from switching to careers in public service/county government.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges Congress to enact legislation reforming the windfall elimination provision (WEP) in Social Security to reduce benefits fairer for individuals who split their careers in the public and private sectors.

Federal Government Nonpayment of Special District Fees

ISSUE: The federal government refuses to pay its fair share of special district fees, arguing it is a tax rather than a fee.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo supports federal regulatory and legislative efforts to ensure the federal government pays its fair share of special district fees.

Federal Standards for Use of Artificial Intelligence in Voting Systems

ISSUE: The advent of generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) poses both benefits and risks to the administration of elections at the county level. Appropriate federal agencies should develop guidance and standards for the use of generative AI in election administration and adequate resources to assist counties mitigate the risks generative AI poses.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges the U.S. Election Assistance Commission (EAC) to develop standards and guidance for the use of generative AI in voting

systems, and in election administration generally, and supports federal legislation requiring the EAC to do so. Additionally, NACo urges the U.S. Congress to dedicate adequate resources to the EAC for the development of these standards and to assist counties in mitigating the risks generative AI presents.

Equal Mileage Reimbursement for Volunteer Drivers

ISSUE: Mileage reimbursement rates for volunteer drivers for counties

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges Congress to enact the Volunteer Driver Tax Appreciation Act of 2023 to ensure equal mileage reimbursement between the charitable and business mileage rates.

Consult Counties on Service Changes and Processing Center Consolidation

ISSUE: Since 2021, the U.S. Postal Service (USPS) has been implementing service changes and consolidating of local processing centers into regional processing hubs. This has ultimately led to a decrease in on-time deliveries as counties and our residents have experienced significant delays that have been disruptive to county operations.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges the U.S. Postal Service to consult with counties on the impacts of major service changes and work with counties to ensure negative impacts are mitigated so individuals can receive their mail in a timely manner.

Ensure Local Control Over Election Resource Allocation

ISSUE: Counties need the flexibility to allocate election resources based on their unique needs and challenges.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo supports policies that ensure counties have the autonomy to allocate federal and state election resources in consultation with local election officials to address their specific needs.

Maint attacks Increase awareness, training to prevent heart attacks

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Recognize Election Workforce as Critical Infrastructure

ISSUE: Election officials, including both temporary poll and election workers and permanent staff of election offices, are essential to the democratic process and should be recognized as critical infrastructure.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo affirms that election officials, including both temporary poll and election workers and permanent staff of election offices, are an essential part of the nation's critical infrastructure and urges the federal definition of critical infrastructure in elections to expand to include its critical workforce.

Provide Federal Workforce Dollars for Election Worker Recruitment, Training and Retention

ISSUE: Effective election administration relies on welltrained and adequately staffed election workers, including both temporary poll and election workers and permanent staff of election offices, but securing and maintaining this workforce requires adequate funding.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo advocates for federal workforce funding to be made available for the recruitment, training, and retention of both temporary poll and election workers and permanent staff of election offices.

Expand Election Funding Beyond HAVA

ISSUE: Elections require support from various county resources and current funding can be insufficient.

ADOPTED POLICY: National Association of Counties (NACo) supports local counties' ability to request additional Help America Vote Act (HAVA) grants from the Election Assistance Commission (EAC) directly for local election operations and long-term local election infrastructure. Additionally, NACo supports using federal infrastructure funding beyond the HAVA funding category to meet federal and state



Commissioners Wendy Piper (right) of Grafton County, N.H., and Tammy Tincher of Greenbrier County, W.Va.

election infrastructure requirements, such as ADA compliance and broadband enhancements for polling sites.

Improve Voter Database Accuracy Through Data Sharing

ISSUE: Accurate voter databases are essential for fair elections, and improved data sharing can enhance accuracy.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo affirms that states and local municipalities own their voter data. NACo supports creating a collaborative portal for both state and local election officials with state and federal entities such as the postal service and the social security administration to improve the accuracy of voter databases.

Increase Awareness of Cultural Resources and Improved Consultation with Native Communities by the Armed Forces

ISSUE: The recent environmental review for the Air Force Maui Optical and Supercomputing Site Small Telescope Advanced Research Facility (AMOS STAR) illustrated a continuing lack by the United States Armed Forces to effectively engage the native community in its decision-making process.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges the U.S. Military to consider first the concerns and sensibilities of the indigenous communities when planning new or expanded military facilities and bases. Such consideration should, at a minimum, provide for early and meaningful consultation with native communities, regardless of their federal status, and place a higher priority on recognizing and avoiding cultural impacts to those communities.

Impose Appropriate Penalties for Threats Against Election Officials, Election Workers and their Families

ISSUE: The purpose of this resolution is to urge Congress to enact legislation that will impose appropriate penalties for harassing or intimidating, threatening or causing harm to, attempting to pressure, or disseminating personal information of election officials, election workers or their family members. Such incidents have led to unwarranted stress to and increased resignations of election officials and workers and to costly protective measures.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo calls

upon Congress to enact legislation that will impose appropriate penalties for offenses including but not limited to the following: harassing or intimidating election officials in the performance of their duty, threatening or causing harm to election officials or their families, attempting to pressure election officials or their family members to violate state law or the Constitution, and disseminating by any means the personal information of election officials or their family members. Additionally, NACo believes the appropriate federal agencies should provide assistance to counties in ensuring the physical safety of election officials through funding, resources and trainings.

HEALTH

Advance CPR and AED Training and Implementation

ISSUE: According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the estimated annual incidence of heart attack in the United States is 805,000 attacks, 605,000 are new attacks and 200,000 are recurrent attacks with Americans suffering a heart attack approximately every 36 seconds. Counties need better resources to coordinate robust awareness of and training in life saving CPR/AED programs.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges the federal government to work with local, community and government agencies to (1) increase awareness and the need for cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) and automated external defibrillator (AED) training in their local communities (2) increase funding to organizations that conduct CPR/AED training programs both "hands only" and CPR certification training (i.e. American Heart Association. Red Cross, Fire Departments, Hospital Systems, Counties & County Organizations, Departments of Public Health, etc.) (3) work to improve defibrillator access in vulnerable populations, and work with marginalized populations to provide education and training to improve survivability from a heart attack and improve health outcomes (4) support local, state, and federal programs that advance heart health awareness, to include federal incentives to providers for the provision of blood pressure checks to increase screening for and early diagnosis of heart disease.

Federal Funding for Doula and Social Support Services and Training

ISSUE: Health and Human Services officials and stakeholders reported that the COVID-19 pandemic worsened factors contributing to maternal health disparities, like access to care, cardiovascular problems and other underlying conditions, which contributed to a 78% overall increase in maternal mortality rates in the U.S. between 2000-2020. The maternal death rate for Black or African American (not Hispanic or Latina) women was 44.0 per 100,000 live births in 2019, then increased to 55.3 in 2020. and 68.9 in 2021. In contrast. White (not Hispanic or Latina) women had death rates of 17.9, 19.1, and 26.1, respectively. According to a 2021 report from the American College of Obstetrics and Gynecologists, "continuous one-to-one emotional support provided by support personnel, such as a doula, is associated with improved outcomes for women in labor. Doulas can provide individually tailored, culturally appropriate, and patient-centered care and advocacy; however, only about 6% of women who give birth receive doula care.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges the federal government and Congress to assist counties by providing funding for 1) Increased Doula services and training and certification; 2) Support community-based organizations in building and diversifying the doula workforce; 3) Increase education/technical assistance to encourage counties and states to implement Medicaid coverage for doulas and sufficient reimbursement rates to ensure expanded access to Doula care for Medicaid enrollees, along with the extension of Medicaid postpartum coverage; to ameliorate maternal health outcomes for all women and address racial disparities in

funding to support local behav-

ioral health crisis response infra-

structure, including providing

Medicaid reimbursement for

• Enforce parity laws and pol-

icies in order to ensure equal

coverage for behavioral health

treatment and medical care, in-

cluding moving towards parity

for reimbursement rates.

Comprehensive

Behavioral Health

Crisis Care and 988 Implementation

ISSUE: Federal support is

needed for implementing, im-

proving, and sustaining nation-

wide local crisis support systems

for people experiencing a behav-

ioral health crisis and calling the

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges

support for federal legislation to

ensure that all people, including

those on tribal land, have access

to comprehensive crisis care ser-

vices to stabilize patients in cri-

new 988 call centers.

these services: and

Declare fentanyl, other substances a federal emergency

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maternal health, mortality, and morbidity.

Declare a Federal Emergency in Response to the Crisis of Fentanyl and Other Substances

ISSUE: A federal declaration of emergency is needed to open up additional resources and authorities to address the fentanyl crisis in communities across the country.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges Congress and the administration to take action to address the crisis of fentanyl and other substances. A federal declaration of emergency is needed to open new and immediate avenues to enhance capabilities, coordination, and collaboration across local, state, tribal, and federal agencies to promote public health and safety.

Funds to Reduce Cases of Syphilis and Congenital Syphilis and Fund Equity Treatment of the Disease

ISSUE: According to the CDC's 2022 STI Surveillance Report, the number of Primary and Secondary Syphilis (PSS) cases in the U.S. rose 78.9% in

Congenital Syphilis increased 183% in the same timeframe. On November 7, 2023, the CDC recommended concerted actAlion while reporting that more than 3,700 babies were born with syphilis in 2022, which was more than 10 times

the last 5 years. The rates for

which was more than 10 times the number in 2012. People from racial and ethnic minority groups are experiencing the brunt of the newborn syphilis epidemic. While newborn syphilis cases are increasing overall, babies born to Black, Hispanic, or American Indian/ Alaska Native mothers were up to 8 times more likely to have newborn syphilis in 2021 than babies born to White mothers.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges the United States Congress to increase funding for pre-natal testing and treatment of syphilis and target populations who are affected by social and economic factors that create barriers to high-quality prenatal care and who have suffered from ongoing declines in the prevention infrastructure and resources. NACo further requests that funding be allocated for education avenues on the spread and symptoms of syphilis for the public and medical workers, including primary doctors, gynecologists, and specialists to help them identify, treat, and cure syphilis.

Menopause Research and Treatment Funding

ISSUE: Other than a study by the Women's Health Initiative (WHI), a long-term study launched by the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute in 1991 that enrolled more than 161,000 women across the country, average age of 61, which ended in 2005 and from which there is still not enough data available, no other comprehensive longterm study has been funded or initiated. Doctors, gynecologists, specialists, and nurses are not currently educated on the multitude of symptoms that can arise from perimenopause, menopause or post-menopause and most often do not treat women suffering from these symptoms or their complications.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges Congress to approve H.R.6749 the Menopause Research and Equity Act of 2023 which will fund more comprehensive research on menopause and the long-lasting effects of menopause on women's health, and further urges that funds be allocated for the education on the symptoms and effects of menopause for medical workers, including primary doctors, gynecologists, and specialists to help them identify symptoms leading to, during and after menopause.

Support County Behavioral Health Priorities

ISSUE: Counties nationwide face a behavioral health crisis, including growing numbers of residents requiring treatment for substance use disorder (SUD) and serious mental illness/ severe emotional disturbance (SMI/SED). Counties need the federal government to continue to reform the behavioral health care system at the federal level to support state and local efforts and continue to make significant investments to implement the work at all levels.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges Congress to continue to address the nation's behavioral health crisis in a bicameral, bipartisan fashion, and to support counties' work serving residents in need of care. Congress should enact legislation to:

• Further amend the Medicaid inmate payment exclusion;

• Repeal the Medicaid institutions for mental diseases (IMD) payment exclusion;

• Authorize and fund direct and flexible grant programs to counties to support the recruitment, training, and retention of a sufficient behavioral health workforce, and increase funding for existing behavioral health workforce programs;

• Continue to sustain federal



Erie County (N.Y.) Executive Mark Poloncarz addresses NACo Board members.

sis and direct them to the most appropriate treatment options. Such legislation should direct the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to ensure a standard set of behavioral health crisis services are universally available, including: 24/7 crisis hotlines and call centers; mobile crisis services, that is, crisis first responders with specialized skills and training, including social workers, mental health professionals, and peer support specialists, to minimize the involvement of law enforcement in incidents that do not pose a risk to public safety (e.g., the Crisis Assistance Helping Out On The Streets, or "CAHOOTS" model, pioneered in Eugene, Oregon); behavioral health urgent care facilities; 23-hour crisis stabilization and observation beds; and shortterm crisis residential options. Legislation should also provide coverage of behavioral health crisis services for all patients no matter the source of their health insurance. The U.S. Congress should authorize and appropriate adequate funding for the development of these services in counties (and Indian Country), including technical assistance from HHS and a platform for See RESOLUTIONS page 30

Allow Medicaid payments for inmates



Lincoln County, Nev. Commissioner Varlin Higbee (left) and Las Animas County, Colo. Commissioner Felix Lopez repeat the Pledge of Allegience during the NACo Board of Directors meeting.

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communities to share successful ideas and services. The legislation should establish a panel of experts to improve coordination and communication between primary and secondary 911 call centers (PSAPs) and 988 crisis hotline call centers, so that those in need are quickly connected to the appropriate service.

NACo further supports legislative and regulatory action that provides flexibility and direct funding to counties for the launch, infrastructure, and modernization of the new hotline through the newly established Behavioral Health Crisis Coordinating Office; supporting the 250+ existing regional and local National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (NSPL) call centers; forming a new pilot program for mobile crisis response, peer teams, and in- home crisis stabilization; and providing resources for specialized services, including language and culturally appropriate programming for historically underinvested populations, including communities within counties that are located on American Indian Reservations.

NACo supports the ongoing work of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to improve wireless call routing to the 988 Lifeline, including the proposed rule published in the Federal Register on May 29, 2024. NACo strongly supports

the proposal to require wireless carriers to implement georouting solutions for calls to 988 so that calls are routed based on the geographic location for the origin of the call, rather than the area code and exchange associated with a wireless phone. NACo also supports efforts to implement georouting solutions for wireless calls, non-wireless calls, and text messages to the 988. NACo urges the FCC to move as expeditiously as possible to review stakeholder comments and issue final rules.

NACo supports amending Medicaid by authorizing Medicaid financing for regional and local NSPL call center operations, and crisis programs; and excluding psychiatric acute care crisis beds (in facilities with more than 16 beds) from the institutions for mental disease (IMD) payment prohibition.

NACo supports legislation to support behavioral health crisis response on the ground with Health Resources Services Administration (HRSA) Capital Development Grants that include crisis receiving and stabilization programs, and call centers; behavioral health workforce training program expansions; and access to and oversight of mental health and substance use disorder crisis response services.

Additionally, NACo supports expanded funding and technical assistance for counties to address behavioral health crises by implementing the following:

Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) training for law enforcement; 24-hour walk-in crisis centers, accessible to all whether brought by a peer, family member, police officer or on their own, where a person in crisis or pre-crisis can obtain the resources they need to alleviate or avert the crisis; trained and certified peer supporters and peer mentors to respond at the scene of crisis, in crisis centers, and as part of follow-up; and the development and continuation of virtual platforms for crisis response teams; and linkages/ referrals to non-crisis mental health support resources.

Medicaid IMD Exclusion Reform

ISSUE: The federal Medicaid statute prohibits federal Medicaid payments to states for services provided in institutions for mental disease (IMDs), which are defined as hospitals, nursing facilities, or other institutions of more than 16 beds that are primarily focused on treating mental illness, including substance use disorder. The IMD payment exclusion has resulted in unintended consequences, including undermining mental health parity for Medicaid beneficiaries, and contributing to critical treatment bed shortages.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges Congress to amend the Medicaid statute to allow states that have a plan for providing appropriate outpatient care, to receive federal Medicaid payments for services provided in IMDs for people with severe mental illness (SMI) and substance use disorder (SUD). Until permanent IMD reform legislation can be enacted and implemented, NACo urges the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) to give maximum flexibility to states and counties to waive the IMD exclusion in order to provide clinically indicated, quality residential or inpatient treatment for people with SMI and SUD, while maintaining an appropriate continuum of community-based care. CMS should permit additional flexibilities under its SUD and SMI Section 1115 demonstration waiver opportunities for states and counties to provide longer lengths of stay for the treatment of clients with the most acute and complex conditions.

Legislation and Administrative Waivers to Lift the Medicaid Inmate Exclusion Prior to Reentry

ISSUE: Support for federal legislation and Medicaid Section 1115 waivers to lift the statutory Medicaid inmate exclusion for services provided to persons in custody for a certain period prior to their reentry into their communities.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges support of legislation which would allow Medicaid payment for medical services furnished to an incarcerated individual during a specified period preceding the individual's release. NACo also supports advancing such provisions via the earliest available legislative vehicle. NACo also urges the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) to approve, with maximum flexibility, states' requests for Section 1115 waivers to test delivering and paying for Medicaid services to an incarcerated individual during a specified period preceding the individual's release.

Repeal or Delay of Pending Statutory Cuts to Medicaid Disproportionate Share Hospital Payments

ISSUE: Current federal law re-

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quires \$24 billion in reductions over three fiscal years to Medicaid disproportionate share hospital (DSH) allotments, beginning in the second quarter of FY 2025. These cuts would be devastating to county public health care and hospital systems, and other hospitals that serve large numbers of Medicaid beneficiaries and uninsured or underinsured patients.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges Congress to repeal or delay the harmful statutory reductions to Medicaid DSH allotments before they go into effect, as scheduled, beginning January 1, 2025.

Amend the Health Resources and Services Administration's Federal Tort Claims Act Health Center Policy Manual

ISSUE: Federally Qualified Health Centers were provided malpractice like insurance via the Federally Qualified Health Clinic Assistance Act. The guidance for submitting claims is provided through a manual that is updated via a regulatory process last updated in 2014. The manual clearly states "the covered entity and covered individuals will not be financially liable for any claims arising from their covered activities" yet HRSA does have a history of denying claims brought by victims (or their estates) of crimes perpetrated by court-ordered patients.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges regulatory action to amend the Tort Claim Act Health Center Policy Manual to clarify that an individual court-ordered into treatment at a FQHC is a patient of the entity and that claims arising from the actions of such patients are covered activities.

Amend the Medicaid Inmate Exclusion Policy in the Federal Social Security Act

ISSUE: The Medicaid Inmate Exclusion Policy forces local taxpayer dollars to be used for providing health services to pre-trial detainees who are eligible for Medicaid through their Constitutional rights.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges

Increase funding for Child Care and Development Fund

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Congress to amend the Medicaid Inmate Exclusion Policy in the Social Security Act, allowing pre-trial detainees to access Medicaid services while awaiting trial.

Support the Role of Direct Support Professionals

ISSUE: Direct support professionals (DSPs) play a critical role in the care provided to people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. There is an inaccurate representation of the number and turnover rates of DSPs due to miscategorization in the Standard Occupational Classification System.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges federal efforts to develop a discrete occupational category for DSPs to help states and the federal government better interpret the shortage of these professionals in the labor market and collect data on the high turnover rate of DSPs.

HUMAN SERVICES AND EDUCATION

Decrease the Error Rate of the E-Verify System

ISSUE: The error rate in the E-Verify System keeps authorized workers from employment which impacts government and local employers' ability to attract and hire a diverse workforce.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges Congress to require SSA and U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services to reduce the error rate for the E-Verify system to less than 0.1%. Counties specifically call on the SSA and USCIS to create systems that will reduce errors that disproportionately impact our Latinx, LGBTQ+ and women residents. NACo further supports working with the E-Verify Platform to improve human made errors by making sure the requested information regarding naming conventions within government data bases. the I-9 Form and the E-Verify application process are consistent.

Re-Establish the U.S. House Select

Committee on Aging

ISSUE: As the nation's population rapidly ages, counties face increasing demand and challenges in providing comprehensive systems of care to our older residents. We need more holistic work by both chambers of the U.S. Congress to study and address an array of aging issues including workforce, housing, health, welfare, education, and long-term care. However, currently, only the U.S. Senate has a committee dedicated to these critical issues.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges Congress to re-establish and make permanent the House Select Committee on Aging.

Implement New Child Care Development Fund Regulations

ISSUE: On March 1, 2024, the Administration for Children and Families issued a final rule outlining new affordability requirements for the federal child care subsidy program, the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF). Without additional federal funding, states and counties may not have sufficient resources to implement the rule without reducing access to the program.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges Congress authorize additional funding for the CCDF program to ensure lead agencies can follow affordability rules without reducing available child care subsidies.

Preserve Federal Benefits Eligibility for Participants in County-Led Income Support Pilots

ISSUE: Counties across the nation are investing local dollars in pilot programs to provide direct income support to vulnerable residents. However, receiving assistance at the local level may interfere with participants' eligibility for other important federal health, nutrition, housing and anti-poverty programs, disincentivizing and penalizing pilot participation.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges the federal government to ensure individuals participating in county-led income support pilots do not lose eligibility for other federal assistance programs.

JUSTICE AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Federal Policy Recommendations and Best Practices from the National Judicial Task Force to Examine State Courts' Response to Mental Illness

ISSUE: State and local courts – along with all aspects of the criminal justice system – play a significant role in identifying and addressing the increased prevalence of individuals suffering from a mental illness in our communities.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges support of the federal policy recommendations and best practices from the National Judicial Task Force to Examine State Courts' Response to Mental Illness. These include, but are not limited to:

• Modifying mental health codes to adopt a standard based on capacity and not conduct for ordering involuntary mental health treatment similar to the standard for court-ordered treatment of other illnesses

• Expanding the use of Assisted Outpatient Treatment (AOT)

• Encouraging law enforcement agencies to train their officers in the use of Crisis Intervention Training (CIT)

• Supporting the adoption of the Sequential Intercept Model (SIM)

• Encouraging chief justices and state court administrators to assist local judges in convening stakeholders to develop plans and protocols for their local jurisdictions

• Educating policymakers on how increased funding for mental health treatment can reduce jail and prison costs

Increase Flexibility for Building Code Requirements in FEMA's BRIC Program Scoring Criteria

ISSUE: The Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities (BRIC) Program includes an applicant's building codes as part of the scoring criteria, but numerous states have not adopted the most recent code requirements, leaving many counties unable to create competitive applications.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges FEMA to examine the building code requirements in the BRIC application process and provide alternative scoring or credit opportunities for counties that are unable to meet these requirements due to state level restrictions.

Advocate for the Availability and Affordability of Property Insurance

ISSUE: As disasters continue to increase in frequency and severity, homeowners, commercial businesses, and special districts in disaster prone areas face drastically higher insurance premiums, and in many cases. higher-risk communities don't have access to insurance at all. While programs exist for floods and earthquakes (i.e. National Flood Insurance Program managed by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the California Earthquake Authority, respectively), there is no central regulatory agency or insurance program for wildfires, hurricanes, tornadoes, and other disasters. Subsequently, insurance surplus line and re-insurance carriers (non-admitted carriers) are only regulated in the insured's home state (15 U.S. Code § 8202 – Regulation of non-admitted insurance by insured's home State); thereby leaving little or no alternative to homeowners, businesses, and special districts at risk or loss of insurance.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges Congress and the administration to study and identify potential solutions to address the availability and affordability of residential and commercial property insurance, including but not limited to the Senate Finance Committee, the Senate Budget Committee, the House Financial Services Committee, and the Federal Insurance Office. Such an effort should also address the ability and role of various levels of government in providing incentives for risk mitigation efforts and/or consider expanding federal insurance program(s).

Risk Rating 2.0's Implementation and National Flood Insurance Program Reauthorization

ISSUE: Imploring FEMA for further transparency regarding implementation of Risk Rating 2.0; urging Congress to include provisions in the reauthorization of the National Flood Insurance Program that ensure equity, address affordability, and empower counties.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges implementation of the following to improve FEMA's administration and communication to address concerns around Risk Rating 2.0's (RR2.0) implementation:

• Provide tailored training webinars to floodplain managers, resilience officers, building officials, and elected officials to delineate the methodology, methods to mitigate premium increases, and changes to the Community Rating System

Release publicly accessible and digestible technical documents and interactive modules that illustrate and breakdown the methodology and risk factors
Identify community-level or territory-level risk factors, like "concentration risk," while identifying how jurisdictions can work to improve their score

• Implement a public-facing premium estimator to improve participation and risk communication

• Develop a public-facing, property-level risk portal to display risk factors used and inputs assigned to each community and property

• Make modifications to the methodology that more accurately reflect the value of property-level and community-level mitigation measures, while including additional mitigation measures in the methodology which more fully reflect investments in stormwater management and flood protection

• Facilitate a third-party review of the methodology to evaluate possible inaccuracies and dis-

Streamline application for FEMA individual assistance

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close margins of error

• Create a line of communication so that jurisdictions can formally submit concerns and request reforms to risk factors

As a reassertion of NACo's previously-adopted NFIP resolution, NACo sets forth county-level NFIP reauthorization priorities that will improve NFIP's participation, flood protection, and transparent and affordable insurance premiums. NACo urges congressional committees of jurisdiction to continue consideration of long-term reauthorization legislation, while involving additional local and state stakeholders in the processes of drafting legislation and holding committee hearings regarding the reauthorization of NFIP. State and local input will amplify Congress's understanding of real impact to communities' wellbeing and enhance Congress's ability to act on both persistent and novel concerns. The following needs should be pursued legislatively in a longterm reauthorization:

• Affordability – Limit rate increases to no more than five percent per year on any policy, inclusive of any surcharges and fees, especially given rolling rate increases due to RR2.0. Place a hard cap on annual premiums of one percent of the total coverage of the property. Rates should be maintained as affordable for all policy holders. Allow for monthly payment of premiums. Create a means-tested affordability program with wide eligibility.

• Mitigation – Increase federal investment in property and community mitigation, not only through loans; provide mitigation credits to residential property owners for proven flood proofing methods, beyond elevation; oppose unfunded mandates on local governments for mitigation efforts; modernize Increased Cost of Compliance to encourage mitigation.

• **Mapping** – Improve transparency, use the most effective technology, and include input from local governments; develop a method to pay for elevation certificates.

• **Solvency** – Further address repetitive loss properties; limit NFIP payments to Write Your Own (WYO) companies; increase the pool of policyholders through enforcement and expansion of affordable options; forgive the NFIP's debt and reallocate interest payments to mitigation and solvency.

• Consumer Protection -Create a policy review process; regionalize Flood Insurance Advocates; amend force-placing provisions to keep policyholders in NFIP instead of a surplus line. • **Privatization** – Require private insurers to cover the entire spectrum of risk (i.e. no cherry-picking of preferable policies); allow consumers that leave NFIP for the private market to re-enter NFIP; ensure private insurance market development does not undermine community flood mitigation through the

Streamlined Application Process for FEMA Individual Assistance

Community Rating System.

ISSUE: Once federal assistance is available, citizens often find themselves having to complete many similar applications collecting the same information that is then sent to various agencies or departments within the same agency. This process is arduous, redundant, and often times confusing. County commissioners are often asked for help supporting a streamlined application for individual assistance so that one universal application can be applied to the various federal programs that are available in the aftermath of a disaster.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges efforts to create a streamlined or universal federal application for individual assistance for federal aid programs that are available in the aftermath of an emergency, which will help accelerate community recovery.

Include Earthen Structures in Definition of Levees

ISSUE: The lack of recognition of existing levee structures, that have proven effective for over 50 years, because they do not meet the definition of "Levee" as defined in Title 44 CFR parts 59, 60, 65 & 70.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges FEMA and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to collaborate on a study of the efficacy of earthen structures which have been in existence for a period of longer than 30 years, have not been breached by a natural disaster and do not have documented history of how it was engineered, and produce a report that outlines viable steps to accept as a levee. The study should be conducted no later than the end of FY 2026.

Federal Support for Medical Examiners and Coroners

ISSUE: NACo supports the strengthening of Medical Ex-

aminer and Coroner offices to improve the quality and timeliness of medicolegal death investigations which directly impact the criminal justice and public health systems.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges the implementation, support and funding of federal legislation that will provide grants and microgrants specific to strengthening Medical Examiner and Coroner Offices (ME/C) to improve the medicolegal death investigation system which is often managed at the county level. NACo supports the development, implementation and funding of national standards, certification of personnel, accreditation of ME/C offices and data modernization of the medicolegal death investigation system.

1. COMEC: The Collaborating Office for Medical Examiners and Coroners (COMEC) which is housed under the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) should be fully funded.

2. Quality of Personnel: The Department of Justice (DOD) and the COMEC should provide programs to fund training and the certification of forensic pathologists and medicolegal death investigators.

3. Accreditation: The DOD and the COMEC should provide funding to ME/C offices to meet national office accreditation requirements and national standards related to forensic medicolegal death investigations. 4. Data Modernization & Interoperability: Federal funding should be available to ensure ME/Cs have access to, and utilize, electronic case management systems to allow interoperability between forensic/criminal justice and public health stakeholders.

Restore of Emergency Management and Homeland Security Grants

ISSUE: In 2024, without prior communication or consultation with local government agencies, Congress and the Administration enacted significant, draconian cuts to all Emergency Management and Homeland Security grant funding and the Disaster Recovery Fund (DRF). Reducing these grants without any notice significantly risks the capabilities and capacity developed by counties, local governments, and states over many years.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges Congress to restore the drastic cuts to EMPG and the suite of homeland security grants to the states and local governments in the 2024 appropriation in partnership with the National Emergency Managers Association (NEMA) and the International Association of Emergency Managers (IAEM).

PUBLIC LANDS

Oppose BLM's "Public Lands Rule"

ISSUE: The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) does not have the authority to implement a "use" not Congressionally approved.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo opposes the "Public Lands Rule" implemented by the BLM.

Nuclear Power to Protect Public Lands

ISSUE: Wind and Solar Power generation have a huge land footprint as compared to conventional sources of electrical generation.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo supports safe and reliable nuclear power generation due to its



Mecklenburg County, N.C. Board Chair George Dunlap speaks at the Annual Business Meeting.

Provide sufficient funding for search and rescue on public lands

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small land use footprint and because it is far more efficient than solar and wind energy generation; therefore saving our public lands for Congress' true intended public land uses as listed in FLPMA.

Amendments to PILT Population Caps

ISSUE: Counties, boroughs, townships, and parishes with populations of under 5,000 have monetary caps within the PILT formula that place them in an unfavorable position in relation to counties with populations greater than 5,000.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo supports amending the PILT formula to extend the population multipliers to include additional multipliers for local governments with populations in the range of 4,000, 3,000, 2,000, and 1.000. The increase in the 4.000 multiplier when compared to 5,000 population would have the same ratios as the difference in 50,000 and 40,000 population. The increase in the 3,000 multiplier when compared to 4,000 population would have the same ratios as the difference in 40,000 and 30,000 population. This will continue on for counties with populations of 1,000 or less. All local governments with enough qualified federal land acres would have a minimum payment no less than the population cap of local governments of 1,000 population.

Amend the Antiquities Act

ISSUE: The Antiquities Act has been abused by many presidents restricting multiple use of federal lands and waters which was not the intent. It was intended to protect "landmarks," "structures," and "objects" "of historic and scientific interest."

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo Supports Amending Current Statute "54 USC Ch. 3203: MON-UMENTS, RUINS, SITES, AND OBJECTS OF ANTIQUITY From Title 54—NATIONAL PARK SERVICE AND RELATED PRO-GRAMS Subtitle III—National Preservation Programs DIVI-SION C—AMERICAN ANTIQ-



Okeechobee County, Fla. Commissioner Terry Burroughs addresses the NACo Board.

UITIES

CHAPTER 3203—MONU-MENTS, RUINS, SITES, AND OBJECTS OF ANTIQUITY §320301. National monuments(a) Presidential Declaration.—The President may, in the President's discretion, declare by public proclamation historic landmarks, historic and prehistoric structures, and other objects of historic or scientific interest that are situated on land owned or controlled by the Federal Government to be national monuments.

(b) Reservation of Land—The President may reserve parcels of land as a part of the national monuments. The limits of the parcels shall be confined to the smallest area compatible with the proper care and management of the objects to be protected.

(c) Relinquishment to Federal Government.—When an object is situated on a parcel covered by a bona fide unperfected claim or held in private ownership, the parcel, or so much of the parcel as may be necessary for the proper care and management of the object, may be relinquished to the Federal Government and the Secretary may accept the relinquishment of the parcel on behalf of the Federal Government.

Strike (d)Limitation on Extension or Establishment of National Monuments in Wyoming.— No extension or establishment of national monuments in Wyoming may be undertaken except by express authorization of Congress.

(Pub. L. 113–287, §3, Dec. 19, 2014, 128 Stat. 3259.)

Amend (d) to: Limitation on Extension or Establishment of National Monuments.—No extension or establishment of national monuments may be undertaken except by express authorization of Congress.

Amend the Recreation and Public Purposes Act

ISSUE: Support congressional action to amend the Recreation and Public Purposes Act to require the U.S. Department of the Interior to establish a Pilot Program that authorizes commercial recreation concessions on land patented or leased under the act.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges the support of legislation that would allow counties that have federal lands within their park system the opportunity to offer concessions operated by third-party vendors. This would increase public recreational opportunities and enjoyment of these lands operated by counties.

Permitting and Funding Process for the Removal of Invasive Species

ISSUE: Support congressional action to address the permitting process and funding for the removal of invasive species from many of the rivers throughout the southwest.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges the passage of federal legislation and/or regulatory policies that would allow county governments to comprehensively remove the salt cedar from rivers within their jurisdictions. Implement the Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Commission's Recommendations

ISSUE: The United States is experiencing a wildfire crisis where fires are increasingly extreme, large in scale, and devastating to communities and landscapes. Implementing major changes to policies and practices that guide how the Federal Government seeks to reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire and respond to and support local jurisdictions facing post-wildfire impacts and recovery, will help address the major gaps and issues that families and communities face with wildfire and reoccurring post-wildfire flooding.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges Congress and the administration to make significant changes in policies and practices regarding how it responds to and supports local jurisdictions and communities in addressing post-wildfire impacts and recovery. NACo calls on Congress to expeditiously pass legislation that implements the Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Commission's recommendations.

Forest Restoration Funding

ISSUE: Continued funding and investments in Forest Restoration to manage the threat of catastrophic wildfires must be maintained and enhanced to ensure the transition from the planning phase to the implementation phase of forest restoration continues.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges Congress and the administration to continue to provide enhanced funding for Forest Restoration at levels at or above those that were appropriated in The Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) and Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) which will be sunsetting in Fiscal Year 2026, just two years away. NACo further urges Congress and the Administration to continue these investments and enhanced funding for forest restoration to implement the work that must be done to protect communities, forests ecosystems, and local economies from the impacts of catastrophic wildfire on federal lands.

Add Law Enforcement on Public Lands

ISSUE: Public lands are being used now more than ever. Due to the shortage of federal law enforcement on public lands, including the Bureau of Land Management, the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the U.S. Forest Service, the onus to respond to law enforcement issues and emergencies falls on counties, which are unable to keep up with the calls for services on public lands.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges Congress, upon the specific request of an individual county, to provide federal funding and necessary resources to federal agencies and/or to county law enforcement or other county agencies, under inter-jurisdictional cooperative agreements, to enable acquiring and securing necessary law enforcement officers for federal lands in order to provide adequate routine patrolling, provide necessary emergency response and services, and to ensure adequate law enforcement of federal issues on federal property.

Search and Rescue

ISSUE: For several years, rescuers in many parts of the country have seen a dramatic uptick in calls for help. That's in part because more Americans are going outside; the National Park Service has seen more than 300 million visitors each of the last five years, the highest numbers on record. Search and rescue efforts are imposing greater and greater

Set targeted grazing

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financial burdens on local governments. Counties are forced to pay for search and rescue operations through local taxes, donations and reimbursements from the state.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges Congress to provide sufficient funding to counties for the costs incurred by local communities responding to individuals visiting federal public lands.

Efficient Hiring Practices and Adequate Sustainable Staffing Resources on Federal Recreation Public Lands

ISSUE: The nation's federal land management agencies - including the U.S. Forest Service (USFS), the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), the National Park Service (NPS), and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) - are critically understaffed. The agencies have long suffered from large nationally centralized human resource bureaucracies that slow down hiring and onboarding, diminish local recruitment efforts. and in some cases, jeopardize timely successful employment of seasonal workforce, specialized positions (i.e. archeologists), law enforcement, and seasonal firefighters - all of which are critical to the maintenance and security of public lands and associated gateway communities.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges Congress, to provide additional federal funding and resources to increase staffing at USFS, BLM, NPS, and FWS, and other federal agencies that provide access to, hold jurisdictional responsibility, provide public safety or other administrative or specialized service to federal recreational public lands and impact adjacent gateway communities. Furthermore, NACo urges the administration to review, evaluate and take the necessary actions to improve public administrative hiring practices that guarantee reasonable hiring timelines, minimize bureaucratic processes, and promote the authority and accountability of local federal administrative

control over hiring processes. In addition, NACo urges the administration to provide adequate workforce housing, including the acquisition, leasing of and use of public federal lands for workforce housing, when applicable.

Eradicate the Spotted Lanternfly

ISSUE: The spotted lanternfly was accidentally introduced to Berks County, Pennsylvania in September 2014 through an international shipment from China. Since then, the invasive species has caused significant agricultural, environmental and economic damage, especially harming the grape industry and other businesses in the Mid-Atlantic United States. Because the spotted lanternfly is attracted to and takes nourishment from the "Tree of Heaven" (Ailanthus)—an invasive plant found in nearly 90 percent of the United States-most of the nation is threatened by this invasive insect.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo supports a coordinated effort between the federal, state and county governments to eradicate the spotted lanternfly, an invasive species that targets important agricultural and forest commodities as well as quality of life issues. NACo also calls on the federal government to provide significant financial resources to assist the Commonwealths of Pennsylvania and Virginia and county governments in combating the spread of this invasive species.

Use Targeted Grazing for Wildland Fire Management

ISSUE: Targeted grazing can offer an alternative method of fuel load management on our nation's public lands to reduce the growing threat of wildland fire.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo calls on the federal government to establish a program to target livestock grazing in and adjacent to areas at high risk of wildland fire. Such a program should compensate livestock owners for the cost of establishing these efforts to reduce wildfire fuel loads on public lands.



Gloria Whisenhunt, a Forsyth County, N.C. commissioner speaks to NACo Board members.

Amendments to PILT Side B Funding - Establishing a Minimum

ISSUE: Counties, Boroughs, Townships, and Parishes with large Federal entitlement acreage and small populations have monetary caps within the PILT formula that place them in an unfavorable position in relation to the majority of all other Counties.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo supports amending the PILT formula to establish a base funding to all counties by setting the peracre variable on the Alternative B to a minimum funding level adjusted by the CPI every year. The maximum payment to counties would not be adjusted. The current population threshold would remain at 50,000.

Increase the Minimum Level for a 1099-MISC/1099-NEC Filing When Performing Natural Disaster Mitigation Activities

ISSUE: The Internal Revenue Service mandates the filing of a 1099 form for any work worth more than \$600, creating burdensome paperwork for county governments.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo encourages the administration to increase the minimum level for a 1099-MISC/1099-NEC form to be filed from \$600 to \$5,000 or create an exemption of any Natural Disaster mitigation reimbursement funded by a federal grant. This is in line with H.R.

3937 that would dramatically increase the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) 1099 Form reporting threshold for services performed for individual contractors or subcontractors from \$600 to \$5,000.

Historic Routes Preservation Act

ISSUE: Title to thousands of county roads in underserved and rural communities are disputed in costly and prolonged litigation with the federal government under R.S. 2477. Meanwhile, these roads are in poor condition and badly in need of repair and maintenance which has ongoing negative effects on rural economies, safety and connectivity.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges Congress to pass the Historic **Routes Preservation Act to cre**ate and mandate an efficient administrative process for the adjudication of county R.S. 2477 rights-of-way claims. This Act would require that the administrative adjudication process incorporates a judicial test established by the judicial system for R.S. 2477 determinations. Such judicial test would grant jurisdiction over R.S. 2447 rightof-way claims to counties that met certain acceptance criteria including; affirmative action by the county on or before October 21. 1976, a formal resolution or declaration of ownership, inclusion of the road in official map that reflects ownership or maintenance responsibility, construction, improvement, repair or maintenance of a highway by county governmental authority before October 21, 1976, or continuous use of the road by the public for a period of not fewer than 5 consecutive years end on a date that is on or before October 21, 1976.

Policy Updates that Require Early Engagement with County Governments with Ski Areas on Public Land

ISSUE: Ski areas are no longer seasonal and no longer restricted to skiing and related activities. As such, existing policies are no longer adequate to address the ever expanding use of public lands in ski areas and the resulting pressure on adjacent communities. County governments are expected to provide taxpayer funded infrastructure and services to these year-round resorts but have little opportunity to participate in decision making and revenue sharing.

Adopted Policy: NACo urges Congress and the Forest Service to update Forest Service policies for ski area permitting to ensure ski resort management on National Forest lands best serves the public, is mindful of County government needs and responsibilities, and is consistent across all National Forests.

BLM Coordination with States and Counties

ISSUE: The Grand Staircase-Es-

FCC, don't ban bulk billing; it keeps broadband affordable, accessible

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calante National Monument sits on 1.9 million acres of Bureau of Land Management (BLM) lands that have been managed as Taylor Grazing Act livestock grazing districts for nearly a century. The BLM threatens to issue an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) and Resource Management Plan (RMP) completely hostile to grazing, completely out of compliance with Federal Land Policy Management Act (FLPMA) coordination and consistency requirements, the Council on Environmental Ouality's National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) regulations and the resource management plans of the State of Utah and Garfield and Kane Counties.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges Congress to force the BLM to develop EISs and RMPs for the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument and other National Monuments in established BLM grazing districts that:

• Fully comply with all FLPMA and NEPA coordination and consistency requirements,

Fully coordinate with counties and states in formulating RMPs and associated EISs, and
Achieve maximum consistency between those federal RMPs and the plans and policies of states and counties, to the fullest extent possible while still consistent with Federal law.

TELECOMMUNI-CATIONS AND TECHNOLOGY

Collaborate and Take actions to Ensure Communities are Not Left Behind in Broadband Deployment

ISSUE: Projects awarded under the Rural Digital Opportunity Fund (RDOF) program and other high-cost broadband deployment programs, have shown no signs of progress and appear to have a high risk of default, are preventing many unserved and underserved areas from being eligible for Broadband, Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) funding, elevating the

probability that some communities will ultimately be excluded from federally funded broadband infrastructure deployment opportunities.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) to collaborate to ensure effective deployment of their respective programs and to take actions necessary to ensure that no community is left behind. Specifically, NACo urges the following: 1) the FCC to grant amnesty from penalties for RDOF awardees who, due to changes in the economic conditions and assumptions, are unable to proceed with their projects and wish to default, 2) the NTIA to extend priority consideration to and approve waivers submitted by a state to make RDOF locations serviceable by the BEAD program, when the RDOF awardees have not made significant material deployment progress before the BEAD program sub-grantee selection process commences, 3) the FCC and NITA to require reverification of ISP ability to perform based off previous application and award, and 4) the FCC and NTIA to submit semi-annual reports to Congress regarding the progress of BEAD and other high cost broadband deployment programs in each state and quantifying the number of unserved and underserved residences that remain under their respective programs as a continuation of the interagency agreement formed under the Broadband Interagency Coordination Act of 2020. This proposed policy aims to ensure affordable, reliable high-speed internet coverage for all Americans, particularly in traditionally

Address the Lack of Cellular Phone Coverage for Unserved and Underserved Areas of the United States

unserved or underserved areas.

ISSUE: Many areas of the United States, particularly in rural areas, are either underserved or not served at all by cellular phone carriers preventing residents and visitors from accessing emergency services through

E-911.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to:

• Direct additional funding for the build-out and rapid deployment of additional cellular communications capabilities in the unserved and underserved areas of the Unites States through the Federal Communications Commission's High Cost Program and 5G Fund for Rural America; and

• Ensure that telecom industry leaders are required to build cellular communications in the hardest to serve regions of the United States through enforceable deployment commitments for providers who receive federal funding for build-out.

Don't Ban Bulk Billing Practices in Multi-Dwelling Units on the Basis of Broadband Affordability and Access

ISSUE: The FCC has proposed to ban the practice of "bulk billing arrangements" on the basis of improving affordable broadband options for residents of multi-family units. However, a ban on the practice could have the adverse effect of disincentivizing broadband buildout to affordable housing units, reducing affordable options to broadband for residents, and further exacerbating the digital divide for affected households.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges the Federal Communications Commission to pause in their effort to ban the practice of bulk billing arrangements, and to call on service providers and MTE owners to increase the transparency of their bulk billing arrangements in a manner that is accessible to residents. Transparency measures for service providers and MTE owners would include: the broadband speeds offered to tenants; the preferred rate for offered services; the technology utilized to deliver service: and the terms and conditions contained within the contract for services.

Modernize 911 Fee Distribution

ISSUE: Update and modern-

ize access line fees allocation to ensure the proper jurisdiction is receiving the 911 fees associated with access lines.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo requests the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to recommend state implementation of a system utilizing current technology to automate 911 fee distribution, in partnership with access line providers, so that the county of residence of the customer(s) receives the appropriate 911 fees associated with any access lines residing within the appropriate county's jurisdiction. NACo further urges the FCC to study the impact that the lack of an automated system may have on the collection of 911 revenues based on local residency.

TRANSPORTATION

National Railway Safety for Local Communities

ISSUE: Recognizing the importance of public safety and environmental health in counties across the country where rail lines are located, the Federal Railroad Administration must address key concerns around blocked crossings, freight train lengths and the routing of hazardous materials through local communities.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges Congress and the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA), in collaboration with local and other relevant stakeholders, to take immediate action to address delays that result in idling freight trains, which have harmful environmental impacts in our local communities, and create blocked at-grade crossings, which adversely impact public safety and harm economic development. This should include funding for counties and recommendations on the strategic placement of grade separations, and mandating reasonable lengths of freight trains as determined by comprehensive federal studies and assessments that identify risks associated with long freight trains, including public safety impacts and any increased risks of derailment.D

To enhance public safety and minimize the risks associated with the transportation

of hazardous materials, NACo urges the FRA to undertake a study to determine safer, innovative methods of routing these materials through the country. Current practices have shown to be detrimental to our communities based on recent events. The study should incorporate: (1) a full assessment of railways in relation to critical infrastructure and explosive materials including fueling stations and gas lines. (2) an assessment of community communication with an emphasis on first responders, (3) a review of safety standards for rail cars, (4) should consider the use of advanced technology and risk assessment tools to determine the safest and most efficient routing options for hazardous materials, and (5) a current assessment of track conditions.

Amend Federal Law Regarding the Use of Federal Highway Administration Emergency Relief Fund

ISSUE: Current law governing the use of Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) Emergency Relief (ER) funds does not allow enough time for Counties with projects to repair roads damaged in federally declared disasters to advance to the construction stage.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges Congress to amend federal law, specifically 23 CFR 668.105(h), to allow entities receiving FHWA ER funds six years after a disaster occurrence to advance projects to the construction obligation stage, as opposed to two years in current law. Additionally, NACo urges FHWA to suspend its recent practice of rejecting extensions to the two-year rule while Congress debates a change to current law.

Support a Program Dedicated to Inland Waterway Navigation Infrastructure

ISSUE: Funding for America's Inland Waterway Navigation Infrastructure is a critical investment in the long-term strength and economic security of the United States; and there is in-

Provide direct funding for county-supported ports

From RESOLUTIONS page 35

creasing urgency required for immediate action to repair and replace failing infrastructure.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges Congress to immediately initiate a program dedicated to funding Inland Waterway Navigation Infrastructure as NACo recognizes that moving goods on our Nation's Inland Waterway systems is one of the least expensive, safest and lowest carbon footprints of all transportation modes.

County Road Funding for Forest Health

ISSUE: Forest health demands thinning of forests which require the use of county roads that most often lack federal designation and design standards to receive federal funding needed to get products to the mills and other processing facilities to maintain forest health and prevent wildfires.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges Congress and the U.S. Department of Transportation (USDOT) to supply funding for specific county road maintenance and upgrades necessary to protect health, safety, and welfare. These roads connect U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management (BLM) lands to processing and handling facilities which reduce the risks of wildfire and promote forest health.

Provide Direct Funding for Ports

ISSUE: Although progress has been made in recent years to fully unlock the Harbor Maintenance Trust Fund, its roughly \$12 billion balance continues to go underutilized, creating a maintenance backlog and slowing development projects.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges Congress to fully utilize the Harbor Maintenance Trust Fund by providing direct funding for county supported ports, which will ensure that these ports have adequately maintained, supported, and operated maritime transportation systems that are critical to the national economy, security and supply chain.

Provide for Direct Funding to County Owned Roads and Bridges in the FY 2026 Surface Transportation Reauthorization and Maintain Levels of Investment

ISSUE: Counties own 44 percent of the nation's public road miles – more than any other level of government – and 38 percent of bridges yet receive no direct funding to support these critical assets that serve many more than just our residents. As a result, billions in deferred maintenance backlog exist at the local level across the country that compromise both traveler safety and network efficiency.

The Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIIA/P.L. 117-58) provided dozens of new competitive grant programs where counties are directly eligible; however, due to human and financial capacity constraints and other factors, these opportunities remain out of reach for many. For counties who have been successful, these programs have become vital for sustaining and enhancing transportation infrastructure where a cliff in FY 2026 would have a devastating impact.

Unfortunately for all, most grants depend on federal appropriations that are rarely enacted on a regular schedule, which means funding is neither timely nor guaranteed. Under these circumstances, counties cannot enjoy the same funding and planning certainty as state departments of transportation who receive funding directly from the federal Highway Trust Fund via formulas.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges Congress to ensure the safety and integrity of county owned roads and bridges does not continue to depend solely on competitive grant opportunities by taking the following steps:

1. In the near term, return solvency to the Highway Trust Fund using a permanent fix that accounts for inflation, declining gasoline tax revenues and all users of the roads;

2. Over the next two years, establish a federal formula, developed in coordination with local governments, that directs funding to counties or local public agencies who own, operate, and maintain road and bridge infrastructure;

3. In FY 2026, enact a new, long-term reauthorization timely upon the IIJA's expiration at current or increased levels that protects competitive grant opportunities, especially those that prioritize local and rural applicants.

Study an Updated Formula for Federal Highway Funding

ISSUE: Federal highway funding is currently allocated based on divisions established in FY2012, following guidelines from the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users. The current apportionment mechanism is outdated and makes it difficult for Congress, state governments, and the public to assess whether current funding methods effectively meet regional and national transportation needs.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges support of the directive outlined in the most recent Transportation, Housing, and Urban Development appropriations bill that requires the U.S. Government Accountability Office to conduct a study on the formulas used to determine Federal-aid highway apportionments, as well as highway formula funding in Division I of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (P.L. 117-58) and encourages appropriate agencies and lawmakers to have open conversations on determining the right criteria and types of funding to ensure that states can adequately address their federal highway infrastructure needs. NACo recognizes the critical role that federal funding plays in ensuring that the nation's highway infrastructure remains structurally safe and efficient in the movement of people and goods.

Aeronautical Revenue Use for Aviation Climate Initiatives

ISSUE: Limitations on aeronautical revenue use impede counties' ability to invest in aviation climate initiatives.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges the Federal Aviation Administration to allow airport sponsors to utilize aeronautical revenues to invest in alternative energy production and/or storage facilities offsite that benefit the operation of the airport and its users.

Reform Competitive Grant Programs for Transportation to Support Counties of All Sizes

ISSUE: 70 percent of America's counties are considered rural with populations below 50,000, resulting in limited tax bases with serious human and financial constraints that often



Prairie County, Mont. Commissioner Todd Devlin reports on the Public Lands Steering Committee, which he chairs.

Allow DOT to increase grants to keep up with costs of labor, materials

From RESOLUTIONS page 36

prevent access to U.S. Department of Transportation competitive grant programs on the front end and significantly complicate administering an award on the back end. The structure of federal transportation programs - the majority of which require local matches from applicants no matter the size of the entity and are funded on a reimbursable nature, where a county must make an upfront investment - make federal transportation funding unworkable in communities across the country.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges Congress to include additional options to waive or decrease local match requirements for U.S. Department of Transportation (USDOT) competitive grant programs based on a population threshold, developed in coordination with local governments, within notices of funding opportunities (NOFOs) and reduce and simplify reporting require-

ments to help rural counties with limited staff capacity. Further, NACo urges USDOT to include language in NOFOs, modeled after the amended FY 2024 NOFO for the Rebuilding American Infrastructure with Resilience and Sustainability (RAISE) grant program, that allows USDOT to negotiate with counties for the advanced repayment of federally funded infrastructure projects.

Expand **Opportunities to Account for Inflation** in Signed Grant Agreements

ISSUE: The impacts of inflation continue to degrade infrastructure investments at all levels of government. Congress recognized this issue in the recently passed Federal Avia-

tion Administration (FAA) Act of 2024 (P.L. 118-63), including a provision that allows for the FAA to increase the government's

share in an already signed Airport Improvement Program grant agreement to account for labor or material cost inflation. Counties and other eligible entities would benefit greatly from expanding this practice to other modal administrations within the U.S. Department of Transportation.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges Congress to expand the practice of allowing the U.S. Department of Transportation to account for labor and materials cost inflation in already signed grant agreements to other modal administrations, including the Federal High-

M T

way Administration, Federal Transit Administration and the Federal Railroad Administration.

The Board also passed a series of updates to the American County Platform, which you can find in full by scanning the QR code

WORD EARCH

PIMA COUNTY, ARIZONA Created by Mary Ann Barton

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ANZA: The Anza Trail or the Juan Bautista de Anza National Historic Trail runs through the county. The 1,210 trail extends from Nogales to San Francisco.

BIRDS: The county is a birder's paradise with more than 400 species found in the county.

CACTUS: The county is home to two cactus forests including Saguaro National Park and Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument.:

CHARRO: The oldest Mexican restaurant in the county is El Charro Café, in business since 1922. Some say the Chimicanga was born here.

ELEVATION: The highest point in the county is the 9,185-foot peak Mount Lemmon.

GEOGRAPHY: Pima County lies at the northern range of the Sonoran Desert and is comprised of mountain ranges, river valleys, and cactus forests.

INDUSTRY: The main industries in the county include aerospace, defense, photonics and optics, renewable energy and natural resources.

NEWSPAPER: The local newspaper is the Arizona Daily Star, founded in 1877.

PIMA: The county is named for the Pima Native Americans also known as Tohono O'odham, indigenous to the area.

RESERVATION: The county is home to the second largest Native American reservation in the country with a population of about 11,000. The reservation is more than 4,000 square miles.

SAVANNAH: Among many celebrities from the area. NBC-TV Today Show host Savannah Guthrie grew up in the county.

SONORAN: The Sonoran Desert is part of the county. The iconic Saguaro Cactus can only be found in the desert.

TEMPERATURE: The highest temperature recorded in the county was 112 degrees July 8, 2024. The lowest was 6 degrees in 1913.

TUCSON: The largest city in the county is Tucson. The population has grown from 320 in 1820 to more than half a million people today.

UNIVERSITIES: There are at least 10 colleges and universities in the county including the University of Arizona.

PROFILES IN SERVICE

DAN McCOY

NACo Board member Albany County, N.Y. **County Executive**

Number of years active in **NACo:** 12

Years in public service: 24 years, seven months

Occupation: County Executive

Education: Associate's Degree

The hardest thing I've ever done: Going to war and leaving my family.

A dream I have is to: Be the best I can be.

The most adventurous thing I've ever done is: Tough Mudder (a series of obstacle course races).

My favorite way to relax is: Reading books

I'm most proud of: Being a dad

Every morning I read: Politics, newspaper

My favorite meal is: Chicken parm



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McCoy

My pet peeve is: When people say we can't do it.

My motto is: Get it done.

The last book I read was: "The American Soul: Rediscovering the Wisdom of the Founders," by Jacob Needleman

My favorite movie is: "Les Miserables"

My favorite music is: Rock/ Blues/Rap/Country

My favorite U.S. president is: JFK, Teddy Roosevelt

My county is a NACo member because: NACo aims to unite everyone to influence federal legislation effectively. We must stand together as one voice, representing the entire country, as we are only as strong as our weakest link.

You'd be surprised to learn that I: Have a black belt

in karate.



ARKANSAS

MISSISSIPPI COUNTY is offering up to \$50,000 for manufacturing workers to buy or build homes. The goal is to **attract and retain top talent**, WREG-TV reported. The county's "Work Here. Live Here" initiative enables eligible workers to receive a forgivable loan of up to 10% of the home's purchase price, ranging from \$100,000 to \$500,000. Local industries have invested \$2.2 million in the program.

CALIFORNIA

• Speaking of dogs, the SONO-MA COUNTY Animal Shelter has a new way for canines to get some outdoor exercise thanks to a local teen. The Press Democrat reported. Recent high school grad and longtime Boy Scout Logan Zumstein, 17, spent over a year creating outdoor agility equipment for the dogs at the Santa Rosa shelter as part of his Eagle Scout Service Project required to advance to the highest rank of the 114-year-old youth program. "The dog agility equipment we had was kind of old and falling apart," said Sherrill Dunning-Riley, a board member of the nonprofit Friends of Sonoma County Animal Shelter. "I said, 'You know what, I need to find some Boy Scouts.""

COLORADO

After realizing state funds to help families with **childcare costs** were being returned to the state because applicants



FLORIDA

• **ORANGE COUNTY** recently unveiled eight new **pickleball courts** with four distinct pods to accommodate different levels of play. The architect-designed, \$1.5 million lit courts also include a shady tent and tables for spectators and players to rest between games. The county was introduced to pickleball in 2016, by USA pickleball ambassador Dave Vander Weide. "As Orange County continues to grow, we need to continue investing in amenities like this one," said Mayor Jerry Demings at a ribbon-cutting ceremony.

didn't qualify, **DELTA COUN-TY** raised the poverty level incomes guidelines to 225%, allowing more families to take advantage of the program, *High Country Shopper* reported. The change was made after commissioners heard about the problem from the county human services department.

FLORIDA

• SEMINOLE COUNTY is spending \$26 million to shore up a neighborhood to **prevent flooding**, WOFL-TV reported. The county is in the process of approving deals to gain rights over property-owners' land to make improvements. The improvements include new storm drain structures, upsized storm drain piping and new stormwater management ponds. The neighborhood was swamped by Hurricane Ian in 2022.

ILLINOIS

COOK COUNTY has introduced a free payment plan calculator for **property taxes**, to help residents struggling to pay their tax bills, WLS-TV reported. The new tool was expected to launch earlier this month. Last year, the Illinois General Assembly created a task force that recommended options to prevent tax-delinquent owner-occupied homes in the county from being sold at an annual tax sale.

MISSOURI

In recognition of August as



ranked #1 in a recent survey by the Communications Workers of America, in a "Report Card for **Broadband Projects** Funded by the American Rescue Plan." County projects were ranked by transparency, equity and labor standards. Read the report at: https://cwa-union. org/report-card-broadband-projects-funded-american-rescue-plan

National Child Enforcement Awareness Month, CLAY COUNTY Prosecuting Attorney Clay Thompson recently announced the launch of the county's eighth "Warrant Amnesty Program." The program helps non-custodial parents with outstanding child support warrants resolve their cases and deliver much-needed funds to custodial parents. The prosecuting attorney's office has reached out to qualifying non-custodial parents, sending letters to inform them of the program and how they can get their warrants lifted. The approach has led to the resolution of hundreds of cases in previous years, directing thousands of dollars into the hands of custodial parents.

NEW JERSEY

MERCER COUNTY Executive Dan Benson is inviting senior citizens (residents 60 or older) to submit artwork to the county Senior Art Show, the *Trenton Daily* reported. The show is

jointly organized by the County Office on Aging and county Division of Culture and Heritage. "Our long-running Senior Art Show really showcases the breadth and depth of artistic talent among our Mercer County seniors," said Benson. "I absolutely encourage interested seniors to submit their

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CALIFORNIA

• The devastating Park Fire, which as of last week had consumed more than 100 structures across **BUTTE**, **PLUMAS**, **SHASTA** and **TEHAMA counties**, has one silver lining, several news outlets reported. A rescuer, Trevor Skaggs from the Butte County Sheriff's Office, traveled by helicopter and ran a half mile to retrieve a mother Rottweiler and her four puppies after their owner's truck had broken down three days earlier. He gave the mother and the puppies water and bites from a protein bar before getting them to the helicopter. After flying to the Chico airport, the dogs were sent to the North Valley Animal Disaster Group, the sheriff's office said.



OHIO

• In 2022, rural **MEIGS COUNTY** began offering **transportation services** to its residents — with two drivers and one dispatcher. Since then, they have served more than 700 people, more than half of them senior citizens. In two years, the service grew to 10 drivers and 15 wheelchair-accessible vehicles. The county recently announced they are expanding services by building a \$4 million transportation hub, WOUB-FM reported. The hub will feature garage and office space.

From NEWS FROM page 38

work, and I encourage all of our residents, regardless of age, to stop by the show during its run."

OHIO

• The **BUTLER COUNTY** Commission is asking voters to approve a new **mental health levy** that would cost taxpayers \$18 per \$100,000 in value annually and collect \$6.6 million, WCPO-TV reported. The Mental Health and Addiction Recovery Services (MHARS) Board operates on federal, local and state funding but 57% of its revenue comes from two local tax levies.

The MHARS Executive Director Scott Rasmus said this is a new levy, but it will replace the existing .5-mill, 10-year levy that first passed in 1985 and was last renewed in 2014. If successful, they will retire the old funding source that expires this year. That levy costs taxpayers \$5 per \$100,000 and collects about \$2.4 million.

SOUTH CAROLINA

BERKELEY COUNTY recently held an informational workshop for developers interested in the county's new **homeownership development** program, WCSC-TV reported. The county initiative helps fund construction costs for affordable housing projects and is funded by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's HOME Investment Partnerships Program.

TEXAS

• EL PASO COUNTY recently issued a disaster declaration, saying the state's mass **arrests of migrants at the border** have cost the county millions of dollars and overwhelmed its criminal justice system, *The Texas Tribune* reported. El Paso County Judge Ricardo Samaniego signed the disaster declaration, a necessary step for the county to become eligible to apply for up to \$5 million of grants reserved for local gov-

ernments that participate in Operation Lone Star, the state's multi-billion-dollar border security mission.

"The numbers are just horrendous," Samaniego said, referring to the number of migrants held in the El Paso County Jail because of Operation Lone Star. The costs of housing, feeding and attending to their medical needs come out of the county's already-strained budget.

• SCURRY COUNTY Judge Dan Hicks officially declared a disaster and requested assistance from the state late last month after 103 earthquakes struck the county within eight days, KTVT-TV and other news outlets reported. Businesses and residences have suffered some damage, Hicks said. The earthquakes topped out at a 5.1-magnitude that took place July 26. Geophysicist Justin Rubenstein with the U.S. Geological Survey said it is "almost 99% likely" to be linked to local oil fields.

PENNSYLVANIA

The **FRANKLIN COUNTY** Commissioners recently announced the 2024 recipients of a county **nursing scholarship program**. Six area high school graduates will receive a one-time \$2,500 scholarship to pursue a nursing career. Since 2017, the program has provided financial assistance to 48 senior high school students pursuing a bachelor's degree in nursing. Scholarships are funded by proceeds from the 2013 sale of a county nursing home.





VIRGINIA

The ARLINGTON COUNTY Fair is gearing up for its 47th year Aug. 14-18. The country's smallest county by land area just across the Potomac River from Washington, D.C. expects to attract about 150,000 people. In recent years, **the fair has seen a real jump in attendance.** "Coming out of the pandemic, people just wanted to do stuff and do stuff that was outside," Matt Richard told Arlnow.com. Adding a beer garden, more rides and free entertainment, as well as stepping up outreach and marketing, all drummed up interest.

Do you have some news to share? Please send your news releases and photos to Mary Ann Barton: mbarton@naco.org.



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