

## SPOTLIGHT ON: HOMELESSNESS



Counties can help solve homelessness. **Pg. 7**

Program puts homeless on solid ground. **Pg. 8**



N.J. county offers housing options for youth. **Pg. 9**



# CN

## CountyNews

CYBERSECURITY AWARENESS MONTH: SECURE YOUR COUNTY'S ASSETS. **PG. 4**

COUNTY PROGRAM HELPS FORMERLY INCARCERATED FIND HOMES. **PG. 13**

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION of COUNTIES

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# DEVASTATION

Counties dig out from deadly Hurricane Helene



Flood waters rise Sept. 27 from the French Broad River in the River Arts District in Asheville in Buncombe County, N.C. after Tropical Storm Helene pounded the area with rain. Photo by Colby Rabon / Carolina Public Press

by **Charlie Ban**  
senior writer

After a week, the days were washing together for Kristi Pukansky.

Even before Hurricane Helene started pouring rain onto

Watauga County, N.C., the county's emergency management planner was helping respond to flash floods just three days prior to Helene's arrival.

"We had actually an EF 1 tornado touch down in the Blowing Rock area on Wednesday night

(Sept. 25), so we really have been reeling from weather from that point forward," she said. "We're going nonstop — working, sleeping, working, sleeping.

"We knew coming in that this was going to be a once-in-a-century event."

Watauga County was one of several Appalachian Mountain counties severely flooded by Helene.

With more than 200 confirmed dead nationwide as of

*See HELENE page 2*

## Utah Association of Counties takes on health benefits for EMTs

by **Charlie Ban**  
senior writer

Brandy Grace always knew dinner time with her mom was fleeting.

She was a volunteer emergency medical technician, and that meant living in a state of readiness.

"I grew up knowing that if my mom's pager went off, she was going to jump in the vehicle and take off," Grace said.

"Witnessing firsthand what it's like to have a mother as an EMT, the time commitment it requires and the emotional toll it takes, I've always had an appreciation for people who serve in that capacity."

Her curiosity offered her an insight that would fit into a larger pattern that she recognized as an adult.

"I remember always asking, when she got home, if she was helping someone in Scipio," the Millard County, Utah town where her family lived, "but

nine times out of 10, it would be someone on the freeway."

Now, as the CEO of the Utah Association of Counties, she sees a lot of her member counties struggling to recruit and retain volunteer EMTs, and she's taken it on herself to give them some help.

While Utah benefits from numerous national parks, national monuments and other attractions, they are usually located in more rural counties, with populations and tax bases that aren't suited to support millions of visitors who get injured or lost every year. The residents who live

*See JOBS PLAN page 3*

## Urban opioid education moves to rural counties

by **Meredith Moran**  
staff writer

A hospital program in Fulton County, Ga. that educates patients on opioids, and is working to prevent misuse and dependency at the source, is expanding to four rural counties in Georgia: Coffee, Lowndes, Rabun and Stephens.

The Life Care Specialist model provides patients who are prescribed opioids with education, support and a pain management plan that addresses tapering off of the opioids as

*See RURAL page 3*

# Death toll at more than 215 across six states

From HELENE page 1

Oct. 3 and hundreds more missing nearly a week after the flooding began, Helene is so far the second deadliest tropical storm in the last half century, after Hurricane Katrina.

That death toll includes two North Carolina county sheriff's deputies — Jim Lau, a Macon County courthouse security officer, whose truck was washed away and an unidentified Madison County deputy.

In addition to high and fast-moving flood waters, fallen trees, mudslides and washouts have devastated transportation networks, with some counties tracking more than 200 roads interrupted and interstate travel cut off in some places between North Carolina and Tennessee. Water systems have been interrupted, prompting boil advisories throughout the region and necessitating water deliveries.

Counties have been coordinating shelters, food and water distribution, information and

making efforts to vet or refer people to donation managers. Watauga County, for example, has coordinated with the Boone Area Chamber of Commerce Foundation for Hurricane Helene Relief Efforts.

Nearby Buncombe County, home to Asheville, has been the epicenter of damage in North Carolina, with 61 confirmed deaths as of Oct. 2. Several counties are lending their dispatchers to help supplement Buncombe County's 911 Call Center staff, including New Hanover, Stanly and Wake counties.

Buncombe County's Register of Deeds office is coordinating local volunteers to perform wellness checks, for which the county has received more than 12,000 requests for the county of nearly 270,000 residents.

County Manager Avril Pinder said that early assessments haven't indicated significant damage to county facilities, though those assessments have been secondary to prioritizing service delivery to residents. But the cal-

endar was on her mind.

"In a couple weeks, we'll have an election, so we're also working on making sure we have the facilities that are early voting sites," she said. "That is our first priority as we go back to assessing county operations. The first priority would be making sure early voting sites are ready and available. We'll start working on getting our poll workers trained.

"Operations still have to happen even though [we are] in the middle of a disaster, so we're trying to split our team. We're so grateful to our state partners to send crews in from across our state, across our nation now to help us, so that we can get our teams back to doing the work that they'd normally be doing."

MaryAnn Tierney, who is FEMA's regional administrator for Western North Carolina, toured Buncombe County and said that currently, safety is the agency's top priority.

"The recovery is going to take a long time, and FEMA will be here for the duration of the response and the recovery," she said.

In addition to FEMA assistance, 1,000 active-duty soldiers have been deployed to North Carolina to help state, local and federal recovery efforts.

Across the Great Smoky Mountains, Unicoi County, Tenn.'s EMS department lost four of its five ambulances while responding to calls during the storm. Northwestern Emergency in Ashe County, N.C. has offered three of its ambulances on an indefinite lease.

"It's a huge impact," Unicoi County EMS Chief Anthony Buckner told WJHL-TV News. "It's getting us back up to where we need to be to sufficiently serve the citizens of the county. Of course, we've got increased call volume with taking patients out of the county because we have no local hospital to go to, so it's tremendously helping us



Residents line up for gas in Buncombe County, N.C. after Tropical Storm Helene. Photo by Colby Rabon / Carolina Public Press

out to get back on our feet."

Giles County, Va. suffered its second worst flooding in history but avoided injuries in large part because of how well residents heeded warnings, Emergency Services Director Jon Butler said.

"The way the communities came together and supported each other, it really has been something special to see," he said.

Pukanky saw similar efforts in Watauga County to great effect, particularly while communities remain isolated during recovery.

"We've seen a lot of neighborhoods that are checking on each other or making lists of resources of their own, not wanting to duplicate efforts," she said. "They are trying not to tread too heavily on compromised roads, so they're picking up resources for their neighbors, sharing phones so each household has a working phone."

Pukanky said that while volunteer efforts have been crucial to Watauga County's recovery thus far, she stressed that coordinated efforts through established agencies — Samaritan's Purse in Watauga County's case, not only made work more efficient, but kept smaller groups

and "freelancers" out of danger.

"It doesn't make good use of their resources if somebody is gifted a certain thing and has acquitted for that, then they really need to coordinate through a volunteer service where they can be put in the best place to mobilize," she said.

## Federal update

With bipartisan support, the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs in September passed the Disaster Survivors Fairness Act, which provides FEMA with expanded authorities to better support individuals and communities recovering from disasters.

The bill would enhance FEMA's ability to fund disaster mitigation projects and expanding support to homeowners, allows FEMA to reimburse states that implement innovative post-disaster housing solutions, bolsters development of post-disaster solutions for renters. It also would require FEMA and the Government Accountability Office to conduct studies and reports to identify challenges and improve the administration of post-disaster assistance, increasing transparency in the process.

## SNAP/STATS

### Arts & Humanities Month

OCTOBER

STAT	NUMBERS
Full-time jobs.....	4.9 million
Job compensation.....	\$504 billion
% of GDP .....	4.3%
Contribution to GDP .....	\$1.1 trillion
Average spent at arts event .....	\$48

Source: National Endowment for the Arts; Americans for the Arts

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## Rural counties in Georgia adopt opioid education program developed in urban hospital

From RURAL page 1

quickly as possible to prevent dependency.

When implemented at Grady Memorial Hospital in Atlanta, the Life Care Specialist model demonstrated a 25% reduction in prescription opioid use, with no adverse effect on pain control. Other benefits found in a study on the program included increased patient satisfaction scores and support for the hospital's patient care team, as well as a reduction in pain-related emergency room visits and readmissions post-discharge from the hospital.

The Georgia Rural Health Innovation Center, Mercer University School of Medicine and the CWC Alliance are working together to expand the Life Care Specialist program to rural counties across Georgia. The death rate involving opioids is 31% higher in rural counties than in urban counties, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The CWC Alliance gets its name from Christopher Wolf,

the son of Cammie Wolf Rice (the founder of the alliance), who was diagnosed with ulcerative colitis, a chronic inflammatory bowel disease, when he was in middle school. Wolf was prescribed opioids following surgeries he underwent for the disease, which marked the start of a 14-year battle with opioid misuse and dependency that killed him.

Wolf is one of the more than 560,000 people in the United States who have died from overdoses involving opioids since 1999. The opioid crisis claims more than 187 lives each day, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Tragedies like the death of her son are avoidable, Rice said, through education on opioid use at the time of prescription and the promotion of pain management alternatives in replacement of overprescription. Life Care Specialists can help turn that corner, she added.

"Had Christopher had the intervention of an LCS, he would be here," Rice said. "It was such a missing piece in his health-

care journey and the multiple times he was in the hospital. We did not know what we did not know."

According to a study on opioid use disorders published by the Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Clinics of America, opioids can lead to physical dependence in as little as 4-8 weeks. An estimated 3% to 19% of people who take prescription pain medications develop an addiction to them and roughly 45% of people who use heroin started with an addiction to prescription opioids, according to the American Medical Association.

"Doctors, with pain, don't know a lot about things other than medication," said Jean Sumner, dean of the Mercer University School of Medicine, who is also an internist. "They understand the risk, they understand the negatives, but [with Life Care Specialists], now they have a position that actually is like a colleague who has the practical clinical knowledge to achieve pain control for their patients without the need to prescribe, or the need to pre-

scribe as much."

Life Care Specialist training involves 11 online learning modules (which include opioid education, addiction and treatment, trauma-informed care and pain management approaches), through the Mercer University School of Medicine, and a clinical practicum at Grady Memorial Hospital, where trainees work alongside Life Care Specialists.

Bailey King, senior Life Care Specialist at Grady Memorial Hospital, oversees the practicum training. On a typical day, a Life Care Specialist sees roughly five to eight patients, she said. If a patient is in the hospital for two weeks, they'll be seen every day by a Life Care Specialist, and they will continue with follow-ups after discharge if the patient has a history of substance use disorder or mental health issues.

### Expansion to rural counties

Mountain Lakes Medical Center in Rabun County has had a Life Care Specialist, Mandy Kuntz, since March, and

Stephens County Hospital's Life Care Specialist is currently going through the training process and will start next month, according to Rice. The South Georgia Medical Center in Lowndes County and the Coffee Regional Medical Center in Coffee County are going through the assessment and onboarding process, respectively, she added.

The volume of patients is higher at Grady Memorial Hospital, but Rabun County's Mountain Lakes Medical Center has seen more patients with co-occurring disorders, experiencing mental health crises and substance use disorder, than its urban counterpart, according to King.

Life Care Specialists in the rural hospitals will have the opportunity to meet with all patients pre- and post-surgical care, while at the urban trauma center, they meet specifically with orthopedic, sickle cell and palliative care patients after surgery, King said.

"If someone had a car ac-

See RURAL page 6

## Health benefits in Utah help recruit part-time emergency medical technicians

From JOBS PLAN page 1

there are also living in different patterns and trying different things than the visitors.

"We do like tourism, we like the benefits to local economies and small businesses in these areas, but we also want to make sure that they have a really positive experience which means that we need to be able to manage the impacts from the additional people visiting," Grace said.

Working with former Piute County Commissioner Darin Bushman, a former EMT himself, Grace probed counties for what would help draw in volunteers, and health insurance was the answer.

Bushman is now division director for the state Bureau of Emergency Medical Services and was named 2023 Advocate of the Year by the Rural EMS Directors Association.

"When you think about it, a lot of these people are farmers or ranchers or they work for a small construction company



UAC leaders meet with Moab Valley Fire Protection District members. From left: Marki Rowley, Millard County clerk and UAC secretary; Shelley Brennan, Duchesne County recorder and UAC immediate past president; Carter Lloyd and Doran Michels, firefighters, Brandy Grace, UAC CEO; TJ Brewer, firefighter; Sheri Dearden, UAC COO and Bill Winfield, Grand County commissioner. Photo courtesy of Brandy Grace

and maybe they have a spouse who works somewhere where they're offered health insurance, but a lot of them just don't have access to health insurance," Grace said.

"They're providing health-care — they should get it themselves."

After a few years of lobbying, the Legislature passed a bill allocating \$14 million for 23 of the state's counties and small municipalities to offer a high deductible health insurance plan to certified EMTs who respond to 20% of calls. So far, 120 EMTs are on the program, which the Utah Association of Counties administers.

Ben Armstrong, EMS director at Kane County Hospital, acknowledged that his department uses fewer volunteers than other Utah counties, but one Kane County EMT who had stepped away from volunteer work got more involved again after the program was established and was making use of it to gain coverage for his family.

"It's worked out well for him,"

he said. "We just recently started a basic EMT program and have about twice as many students that we anticipated, and my intent is to make sure that they are aware of this program as we kind of get closer towards the end of this course in the hopes that some of them may opt to work with our volunteer program."

That kind of staffing is crucial to providing service that will keep visitors traveling to their counties.

"I think that most people assume that when you call 911, that help is coming," Grace said. "We have tourists from outside our communities, outside the state, outside the country even, who don't even realize the challenges that we have with getting volunteer EMTs, and so they just assumed that help would be there if they needed it, and the reality is that we're really struggling to provide that service."

"I think our citizens are aware of what is available to them, but tourists, not so much." **CN**

# Secure Our World: Protecting County Digital Assets

by Rita Reynolds

October 2024 marks the 21st Cybersecurity Awareness Month. It is hard to comprehend how the volume of data that we now protect has grown significantly since 2004. And the growth is not slowing down. It was a much simpler world decades ago, when the data we needed to protect was written mostly on paper and kept in a drawer, a filing cabinet or eventually thrown away.

Today, digital data or “assets” can be on your computer, in the cloud, on an external drive, on a mobile device, on your watch and other devices such as cameras. The list will continue to expand substantially, especially with the exponential growth and broad implementation of artificial intelligence.

Protecting your county digital assets is a full-time job and involves not just your technology department, but all county staff to ensure the safekeeping of those assets. To aid in that responsibility, there are a plethora of resources available through the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency. These resources are located at <https://www.cisa.gov/cybersecurity-awareness-month> and include tip sheets, social media posts,



videos and more that your county can download and customize to share with your staff throughout the month of October as well as the rest of the year.

As you avail yourself of those resources, remember that you should be paying close attention to cyber security and awareness throughout the year. This includes taking the following four steps each day to ensure your online safety.

## Recognize and report phishing

Most successful online intrusions result from a recipient of a “phishing” message accidentally downloading malware or giving their personal information to a spammer. Do not click or engage with these phishing attempts. Instead, recognize them by their use of alarming language or offers that are too good to be true. Report

the phish and delete phishing messages.

## Use strong passwords

Make passwords at least 16 characters long, random and unique for each account. Use a password manager, a secure program that maintains and creates passwords. This easy-to-use program will store passwords and fill them in automatically on the web.

## Turn on multifactor authentication (MFA)

Use MFA on any site that offers it. MFA provides an extra layer of security in addition to a password when logging into accounts and apps, like a face scan or a code sent by text. Using MFA will make you much less likely to get hacked.

## Update software

When devices, apps or software programs (especially antivirus software) notify us that updates are available, we should install them as soon as possible. Updates close security code bugs to better protect our data. Turn on automatic updates to make it even easier.

In closing, I asked a GenAI tool to create a poem that will help us all to remember the top best practices in cyber security:

*When phishing comes, don't take the bait,*

*Report it quick, don't hesitate.*

*Strong passwords keep your data tight,*

*Sixteen characters, random is right.*

*Turn on MFA, it's the way,*

*To keep intruders far away.*

*Update your software, don't delay,*

*Stay secure, come what may!* **CN**

Rita Reynolds is the chief information officer for NACo.

## National Retirement Security Month Is Here!

National Retirement Security Month (NRSRM) begins in October but at Nationwide® we believe in the importance of preparing for retirement all year long. That's why this year we are launching our “Make Any Day a Holiday” campaign to encourage participants to make any day a holiday by saving for their future. Make any day a holiday when you save for your future!

When it comes to planning for retirement, every step you take toward a more secure future is worth celebrating. That's because building healthy financial habits and contributing to your retirement savings are key to providing the sta-



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is on your side

bility and comfort you want for yourself and your loved ones. Whether you're trying to accumulate savings, develop withdrawal strategies or adjust your approach, we're here to give you the support that you need.

Our new plan sponsor campaign webpage offers resources to help you engage with your participants in retirement planning this month and throughout the year. These include virtual backgrounds for your

calls to act as visual reminders, emails, digital displays and more.

These resources are available to all county employees whether you have a retirement plan through Nationwide or not. With half of all Americans being at risk of not being able to maintain their pre-retirement standards of living in retirement, we believe financial literacy and education is key to helping America's workers

enjoy the retirement they deserve.

Our employee webpage includes general finance education, resources for talking about finances and retirement with your family, and simple steps they can take to better understand and manage their finances.

Take some time to review the information on our plan sponsor webpage with resources for you and share the employee webpage with employees and co-workers to boost their financial knowledge. Remember, these resources are available beyond just the month of October.



# Calif. county celebrates Youth Justice Action Month

by Megan Siwek

Since 2008, the U.S. Department of Justice Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention has made National Youth Justice Action Month (YJAM) an annual campaign to raise awareness to the experiences of young people and families involved with the youth justice system. Since that time, the month has continued to be recognized by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention and others in the field.

This October, counties are encouraged to host events like youth job fairs, town halls and policy roundtables to support the transformation of the juvenile justice system.

Santa Clara County, Calif., a leader in youth-led change, showcases how counties can take ongoing action to improve the juvenile justice system. The Youth Advisory Council (YAC), a collaboration between Fresh Lifelines for Youth (FLY) and the Santa Clara County Juvenile Probation Department, empowers young people to shape the juvenile justice system.

In 2017, the county's probation chief launched an initiative to improve policies and build trust between probation officers and youth. The department selected FLY, a local nonprofit, to partner on the project. FLY held focus groups with youth of different demographics to understand what

was working and what needed improvement.

Miracle Teo initially engaged in the focus group to share her experience as a young adult on probation and enjoy the gift cards and food served at the session. Soon after, she learned that the county Probation Department wanted to create the Youth Advisory Council and would compensate members for participating, and she became a council founder. FLY explained how the council would be led by youth and for youth, but this compensation from the county Probation De-

'...we can transform and make the system better.'

partment signified that they valued youth and were committed to this mission.

The council is entirely youth-led, with support from the council coordinators — one supervisor from FLY and one from the county probation department. Council members developed their own code of conduct, structure, agenda, roles and accountability measures. As they developed bylaws, they determined that each member would receive a \$200 monthly stipend, which covers two meetings and one-on-one professional coaching sessions. As the council grew, members began to serve as "youth justice consultants,"



Fresh Lifelines for Youth (FLY) executive team members visit the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery County, Ala.

earning \$25 per hour for additional roles on other councils and workgroups.


"The Youth Advisory Council wasn't just about taking from young people; it was about pouring back into them and helping them reach their goals, whether through career readiness, mentorship, or other support," Miracle said. "It encouraged me that through our experiences, we can transform and make the system better."

The council's first major initiative was creating an orien-

tation for youth and families entering probation, aimed at breaking stereotypes and building positive relationships. Probation officers quickly noticed an improvement in how youth engaged with their sessions.

Since 2017, the council has helped develop a probation dismissal protocol, consulted on restructuring a youth facility and participated in training new probation officers. Teo's involvement led her to serve on the Annie E. Casey Foundation advisory board, ultimately

leading to a career as a consultant.

The council has set an example of how youth-led initiatives can create meaningful change. As Teo shared, "if I were to offer one piece of advice for county leaders looking to work with justice-involved youth, speak with them to see what would work in their community. Let youth lead the process." 

*Siwek is a justice program manager in NACO's Counties Futures Lab.*

## Five Ways to Support Wellbeing on World Mental Health

Thursday, Oct. 10, is World Mental Health Day — a vital opportunity to raise awareness about mental health challenges and support essential causes.

This day encourages us to prioritize our mental health and inspires those around us to do the same.

With nearly half of U.S. adults expected to face a mental health challenge in their lifetime (46.4 percent), your advocacy is crucial for improving lives in our communities.

Join NACO's Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) USA in mak-

ing mental wellbeing a global priority by implementing these five impactful actions:

- 1. Share Your Story:** Every journey with mental health is unique and valuable. Sharing your experiences can inspire others and help break down stigma, demonstrating the power of support and resilience.
- 2. Engage in Mental Health Conversations:** Equip yourself and your communi-



THURSDAY, OCT. 10, IS WORLD MENTAL HEALTH DAY

ty to discuss mental wellbeing openly. Create safe spaces for dialogue—through workshops or informal discussions with friends and family. Your engagement can foster meaningful conversations and enhance understanding of mental health.

**3. Practice Self-Care:** Prioritizing self-care is essential for your mental wellbeing

and sets a positive example for others. Integrate self-care routines and healthy coping strategies into your daily life to emphasize the importance of mental health.

**4. Support Mental Health Initiatives:** Get involved with organizations or initiatives that promote mental health. Volunteer your time, skills, or resources to support fundraising, awareness campaigns, or policy advocacy related to mental health.

**5. Get Trained in MHFA:** Join the movement to train one in every 15 people to recognize

and respond to mental health and substance use challenges. As a trained First Aider, you'll be equipped to support those in need within your community. Learn more at [MHFA.org/NACO](https://MHFA.org/NACO).

Your commitment to mental wellbeing extends beyond personal efforts—your actions help create stronger, more compassionate, and resilient communities.

Wishing you a meaningful World Mental Health Day!

*This article was provided by Mental Health First Aid.*

## NOW I KNOW

## ...Staff Will Meet the Challenge

by John Shafer  
Umatilla County, Ore.  
commissioner

Even though I was a long-term county employee and a mayor and I thought I was ready to be a commissioner, I wasn't fully aware of the full range of what counties do until I took office. I knew we handled roads and sewage, but the first few weeks I was learning, it truly felt like trying to drink from a firehose. Managing records, marriage licenses, running elections... I just took all of that for granted and figured someone behind the scenes was making it happen.

You get used to the county staff being able to keep things running, you feel like you have everything set to go for a few



Umatilla County, Ore. Commissioner John Shafer chuckles in recognition after a fellow commissioner relates a story. Photo by Charlie Ban

years. Then someone wants to retire, and my first thought was that it was almost paralyzing — how can we go on without this person? But the right

people step up when they have the opportunity.

They've learned underneath the previous department head or they come in from another

agency with their plans. Our assessor, who walked me through everything, retired. When I had first met with him to learn about what he did, I felt like I was getting a master's level class on taxes. How would we ever replace this guy? He knows everything and we were lucky to have him. But his deputy took over and blossomed when she had the opportunity to lead the department herself. She had her own approach, and it matched the challenges and the moment. My mentor, George Murdoch, had told me to watch out for her, and I eventually saw the potential he saw.

You always have to plan for what comes next, because family changes could mean someone is moving away, or

maybe someone is looking to try something different and this job was just the next in their professional development. So, you can feel confident and proud of your staff as they are organized, and also recognize that when they are challenged to change the way they work, or the people they work with, that they're adaptable. **CN**

*Now I Know explores experiences that have shaped county officials' approach to their work, as told to Senior Writer and Digital Editor Charlie Ban.*

*The NACo Career Center connects professionals with opportunities in all levels of local government. Learn more at <https://jobs.naco.org/>*

## Empathy key to opioid help

From RURAL page 3

cident or was shot, and they come to Grady, you can't prepare them for surgery," King said. "They're in and out, but in the rural communities, they'll get to work with them pre- and post-op."

A college degree is not a requirement for being a Life Care Specialist, but it's important that an applicant has "empathy and non-judgmental compassion, because the rest can be taught," and a background in behavioral health, according to Rice. All Life Care Specialists also must be from, or have a connection to, the rural county they're serving, she added.

From 2020-2023, the use of opioids nearly doubled in Stephens County, according to a Mountain Judicial Circuit report. Life Care Specialists having a connection to the communities they're serving makes "all the difference in the world," said Stephens County Administrator and Planning Director Christian Hamilton.

"Knowing they have a vested interest in seeing growth and development in your commu-

See RURAL page 15

## GET TO KNOW...

## Johnson County, Nebraska

by Meredith Moran  
staff writer

Founded in 1855, Johnson County, Neb. was named for Richard Mentor Johnson, an army officer in the War of 1812 and the ninth vice president of the United States. Johnson, who served under President Martin Van Buren, is the only vice president elected under the provisions of the Twelfth Amendment, which states that the Senate will elect the vice president if none of the candidates receive an electoral majority.

The county has a population of roughly 5,920, according to the 2020 census. The largest city in Johnson County and its county seat, Tecumseh, was originally named Frances and was later renamed for the Shawnee Indian chief who was killed by Johnson during the Battle of the Thames in the War of 1812.

Tecumseh is home to the Montz Motorcycle Museum, which showcases more than

100 motorcycles dating to 1902, and the Johnson County Historical Museum, which features exhibits on what life was like in the county in the early 20th century, including a preserved one-room schoolhouse relocated to the museum's grounds. The city is an hour's drive from Omaha, which hosts the College World Series baseball tournament each year. (Another fun fact: Omaha is also where the TV

dinner was invented.)

The TV miniseries "Amerika," which depicted life in a small town in America after it was taken over by the Soviet Union, was filmed in Tecumseh.

Sculptor and dancer Paul Swan, who's referenced in the song "Funny Face" and was featured in Andy Warhol's 1965 film "Camp," was raised

in the Johnson County village of Crab Orchard, which today has a population of roughly 44 people. Swan's bust of the writer Willa Cather, whose novels focused on frontier life on the Great Plains, is in the Nebraska Capitol Building. Swan spent much of his life in New York and Paris but is buried in his family's plot in Crab Orchard. In 2019, a play about his dance recitals in his later life, titled "Paul Swan Is Dead and Gone," ran in New York.

**Other notable people from Johnson County include Roy Barcroft, who was best known for playing the "bad guy" in numerous Westerns including "The Fighting Seabees,"** which he starred in alongside John Wayne, and Betsey Baker, who was the oldest verified person that had ever lived when she died at the age of 113 in 1955. **CN**

*Would you like to see your county profiled in County News? Contact Meredith Moran at [mmoran@naco.org](mailto:mmoran@naco.org).*



Allan Lane as Red Ryder becomes "Marshal of Cripple Creek" ('47 Republic) and captures outlaw Roy Barcroft.

by **Jeff Olivet**  
and **Helene Schneider**

# COUNTIES CAN HELP SOLVE HOMELESSNESS

As county leaders, you play a major role in improving the lives of your residents. You provide a safety net for people when times are tough. You ensure public safety. You help people through public health crises. And you are critical to the work of ending homelessness in your county. At the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH), we recognize your power, especially when it comes to preventing and ending homelessness. At USICH, we harness the collective power of 19 federal agencies, and our senior regional advisors help local and state governments harness yours. Our regional advisors can help you create cross-system partnerships, implement evidence-based practices, and use resources in the most efficient and effective ways. We are here for you (find your regional advisor using the QR code below).

Counties are where big ideas meet reality and where national initiatives come to life. One such initiative is ALL INside, which we launched last year in coordination

with the White House and several of the many local governments with high numbers of unsheltered homelessness. The goal of ALL INside is simple: to help people move off the streets and into homes. The strategy is clear: to cut red tape that makes it so hard — often too hard — for people without a home to access housing, health care and other services that can help them get and stay housed.

While ALL INside's work is ongoing, progress is starting to show. In Dallas County, Texas for instance, homelessness is significantly dropping. While participating in ALL INside, Dallas has received federal waivers, secured housing vouchers for people living on the streets, and made changes that will expand housing for people who once experienced homelessness and speed up the time it takes a person without a home to get an ID.

In some of the ALL INside communities, we are helping counties and cities work



Olivet



Schneider

with state Medicaid programs, managed care providers and local public health and housing departments to implement federal 1115 waivers that let them use Medicaid to fund short-term housing and other housing-related services for people experiencing or at risk of homelessness who have complex medical needs. This is a common-sense and innovative change that can improve health and lower health costs — for people, providers and communities.

None of this work would be possible without counties' commitment, creativity and coordination — especially with cities. In many places — Houston, Los Angeles and Phoenix, to name just a few — counties and cities are working closer together than ever, leading to

less bureaucracy and fewer people living on the street.

## Defining homelessness

It's critical to acknowledge what homelessness is and what it is not. Homelessness is a housing and public health crisis. Only a couple generations ago, we had a surplus of 300,000 affordable housing units. Now, we have a shortage of 7 million. The results are clear to everyone. Rents have skyrocketed, and more people are living without a home. Even in areas with a relatively high minimum wage, there are literally not enough hours in the day for people to work so they can afford a roof over their head.

Meanwhile, untreated health problems can be a cause and effect of homelessness. Having limited or no access to health care worsens health, increases medical debt and makes a person more likely to experience homelessness. Living without a home worsens existing health conditions, causes new ones to develop and makes getting treatment far more difficult. Without a home, people have nowhere to rest or recover. In the end, on average, people without a home die nearly 30 years earlier — often from

treatable illnesses.

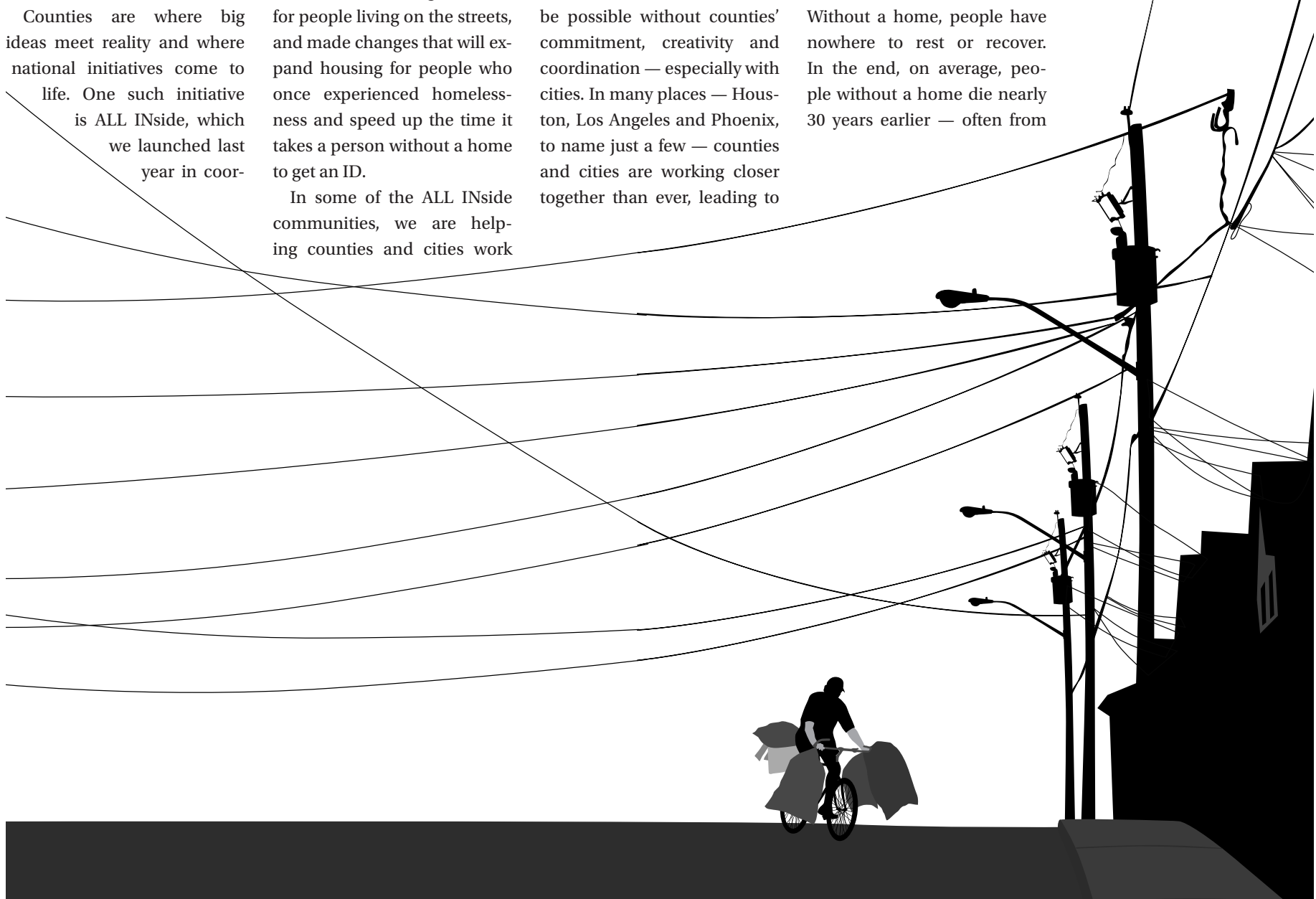
Homelessness also takes a financial toll — especially on local health systems. Because people experiencing homelessness are seven times less likely to have health insurance, they're more likely to go to the emergency room, be hospitalized — and for longer. Simply put: The higher homelessness is in your county, the higher your county health bills will be.

Homelessness is not a crime that we can arrest our way out of. Fining, arresting and jailing people for experiencing homelessness does not reduce or solve it. In fact, laws that make it a crime to sleep outside are expensive and only make it harder for people to get housing, jobs and services. The American public agrees: A recent survey found that seven out of 10 Americans oppose jailing, ticketing, and fining people when shelter is not available.

In just three months, it costs communities nearly \$4,000 to cite, arrest, move and/or jail

See USICH page 10

### SPOTLIGHT ON: HOMELESSNESS





**April Seat, director of Outreach for Hope Rescue Mission, shows off a pallet shelter in the Missoula County TSOS.** Photo by Charlie Ban

## MISSOULA COUNTY PUTS UNHOUSED RESIDENTS ON SOLID GROUND

by **Charlie Ban**  
senior writer

Missoula County's first Temporary Safe Outdoor Space was appropriately "Montanan."

Atop 40 wooden platforms, mountaineering tents gave unhoused people a place to consider their home base after the state Department of Transportation barred them from camping under a bridge. The tents boasted a bucolic view of Blue Mountain and the sound of the nearby Bitterroot River. The county's CARES Act money covered the supplies.

But the tents weren't ideal for all-weather conditions over the long term. Plus the land — rented cheap from a private landowner — was in a flood plain. The offices for caseworkers, in a yurt, were heated by propane.

So, the partnership between Missoula County, faith-based Hope Rescue Mission and the United Way moved the Temporary Safe Outdoor Space (TSOS) to paved, county-owned land

in early 2023, much closer to supportive services and most importantly, inside durable 100-square foot fiberglass-reinforced plastic shelters.

Also added: An actual pair of shower trailers and an office for Hope staff who are on site 24 hours a day. The county has funded the program from its American Rescue Plan allocation and the city of Missoula contributes financially, too.

"We know we're not going to solve homelessness, but we can help a few dozen people move ahead with getting their lives on track," said Commissioner Juanita Vero. "This wouldn't work with 200 people. It works with 40 people. This works because of the scale."

April Seat, Hope's outreach director, had been working in the field for four years prior to

the pandemic, so she had a lot of credibility with the community, who understood what she was looking for.

"We invited them into the process, I took them to the site, they saw it as we built it," she said. "They thought we were going to build a FEMA camp [of soft tents] so they were glad to see we weren't doing that."

It was hard at first, she said, because of strict rules against bringing drugs, alcohol or guests into the village, and limits on how much people could store in their shelters — to prevent hoarding — but Seat said the ease with which residents were connected with human services, thanks to their fixed address, fueled more enthusiasm and uptake.

The standards for conduct are much higher than at the camp site, which means the TSOS is not always filled to capacity, but the residents want to be there and live by the rules.

"We realized when we brought people in that they

might never want to leave," Seat said. "That's why we always want them working toward their next step, preferably 30-, 60- and 90-day-plans. We can usually see in 30 days if they're going to be a good fit or not (TSOS staff work with other service providers to find the best for residents who don't work out). Then we should be looking for employment within 60 days and housing within 90 days."

It's not a hard-and-fast rule, though. Dustin Grace lived in the TSOS for a year while collecting himself after 13 years of living on couches and in his car in Cascade County, where he moved hoping to run from his painkiller addiction that developed in his hometown in Maine.

"I thought I'd never get in," he said. "I was number 82 on the list, but I stayed by my phone and eventually, enough people didn't pick up and they called me.

"As soon as I was in, I felt my life get better. It wasn't much of a home, but I had my own place to stay. I felt safe at night."

Seat interjected: "But Dustin did the work, that's what makes

it successful — submitting to what it is they need to do to get the help they need.

"It's important we address the trauma that led to their situations. Instead of 'What's the matter with you?' we ask, 'What happened to you?' And then we work on that."

"Over the three years we've been doing this, what's worked the best has been the accountability, the compassion and really jumping into their world and trying to figure out 'What happened to you?' and how can we address that?" Seat said.

Grace chimed in: "But you have to want it. You have to be accountable for everything in your life, and as soon as you lay off, then you start to slide back."

Residents stick to budgets and pay utility fees for their heat, electricity and internet access.

They have access to job search assistance services, including interview preparation.

In 2023, the TSOS program saw only one resident incarcerated and three back in shelters.

"We always stay in touch, and if they need it, we'd bring them back," Seat said.

Grace now lives in an apartment with a friend who he met in a shelter prior to TSOS and is hoping to ply his life experience and recovery to help others in the same situation.

The county commission voted in September to allocate \$740,000 of its remaining American Rescue Plan funding to help run the TSOS for 2025 and 2026 and is working to find a dedicated funding source to keep the TSOS running beyond that time.

"It's a tiny step toward combating homelessness, but it's a demonstration of what can be successful," Vero said.

"It's successful because of the partnership and the culture and the people. This isn't something you can do top-down and expect it to work, you can't just set up 40 pallet shelters and just hire some nonprofit to come in. It works because of the trust and results from the years of working together." **CN**

**SPOTLIGHT ON:  
HOMELESSNESS**



# NEW JERSEY COUNTY OFFERS TRANSITIONAL HOUSING OPTIONS FOR HOMELESS YOUTH

by Meredith Moran  
staff writer

The second night that Devon Durant had to sleep in his car, with nowhere else to go, he thought to himself, "When will this end?"

For months, the then 20-year-old Durant was sleeping on people's couches. He stayed with friends, family members, his girlfriend. There were nights when no one could offer a place to stay. On those nights, Durant would pull into a dark corner of the third floor of a parking garage or a dead-end street, lock the doors of his 2006 Honda Accord and try and fall asleep.

"I had trouble sleeping in my car," Durant said. "It's scary, because when you're sleeping in a car — especially when you're living out of your car — you can't just park somewhere and go to sleep with all of your belongings. To have your 'room' be only separated by a [car] door onto the street, it was definitely an eye opener."

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development doesn't explicitly address couch surfing in its four categories of homelessness — which include "literally homeless, imminent risk of homelessness, homeless under other federal statutes and fleeing/attempting to flee domestic violence" — meaning youth like Durant can fall through the cracks and not qualify for certain housing assistance.

Camden County, N.J. is making sure that doesn't happen by investing in two transitional housing projects for youth ages 16-24, including those who couch surf. The first project, which is operated by the Transformative Justice Initiative, houses up to six young men at a time. A second project, for young women, is operated by the non-profit Making it Work. It moved its first participant, a 16-year-old couch surfer whose parents have passed away, into housing on Oct. 1.

"What she said that really touched me [was], 'I can't wait



to just get in a shower," said Marcie Walton, with Making it Work. "And I was like, 'Wow, all the stuff we take for granted.'"

After moving in, the girl expressed shock at the home having paper towels.

"I said, 'Those are the kind of things you won't have to worry about,'" Walton said. "Because you can focus on something else besides daily survival now."

It's key to address homelessness early on, said Robert Jakubowski, Camden County's director of community development. "Couch surfing is going to lead to instability — not just at 18, not just at 21, but at 30 and at 50," Jakubowski said. "So those populations

who are homeless now in their 30s and 40s and 50s, probably were experiencing homelessness back when they were teenagers or early young adults."

The youth transitional housing projects are part of Camden County's broader plan to end homelessness and achieve "functional zero," which is when the number of sheltered and unsheltered homeless people is no greater than the monthly housing rate, by 2030. The county commission established a Homeless Trust Fund, which devotes funding to initiatives tackling homelessness in Camden County, to help meet that goal.

Other initiatives funded through the trust include a multi-agency service center the county is building in partnership with the city of Camden that

will act as a "one stop-shop for someone that finds themselves in this crisis," and the creation of 211 new affordable housing units, according to Camden County Commissioner Virginia Betteridge.

"I believe that every person has their own story," Betteridge said. "And we're just trying to do our best to address the challenges that the Camden County constituents are facing, because sometimes it's really, really hard. And I'm just glad that when funds become available and they come to us, that we can quickly get shovel-ready programs."

Feedback from a conference the county hosted last year (which brought together stakeholders from the city and county of Camden) helped inform both the creation of new homelessness initiatives and the tailoring of existing programming, according to Betteridge. Having strong communication with the school system on what the needs are among youth is also an "integral part of being on the pulse" in housing insecurity, she added.

"Kids become couch surfers because they just don't know what else to do," Betteridge said. "And the day that someone doesn't open their door is the day that it becomes a tragedy."

A Camden County Point in Time report from 2022 found that youth (individuals and families with heads of households 24 years old or younger) made up 6.4% of the counted homeless population in the county. One youth who received a housing referral through the coun-

ty had previously been staying on a friend's couch when they were told: "You can't stay here anymore," according to Sharon Bean, Camden County Jail population manager.

"He found himself out on the street that night, with a serious medical condition," Bean said. "So, this program helps to fill that gap for what exists right now in Camden County."

Before shuffling from couch to couch and sleeping in his car, Durant lived with his father. The two had disagreements over finances and "lifestyle clashes," according to Durant, which led to him getting kicked out.

Betteridge said that in her time engaging with Camden County's homeless youth, she often finds a common thread of them feeling "unworthy," because of their lack of housing or the situation that led to them being unhoused, which is why it's important that the county assists not only with housing, but also wraparound services, such as mental health support, she added.

"Maybe mom and dad are out of the picture, maybe an aunt's taking care of them, a grandmother, the cousin down the street, and they've struggled," Betteridge said. "Because a lot of the situations, especially in the city of Camden, it's a repetitive pattern. But you can't give up on people. I always say to my kids, 'When you traverse what is called 'life,' don't ever look at a person from the outside, because you don't know what they've been up against.'"


In June, the county's Youth Services Commission opened the Restorative and Transformative Justice Hub, which serves youth between the ages of 10 and 26. The hub accepts referrals and linkages from the police department in lieu of station house adjustments, from probation in lieu of a probation violation and from the school district in lieu of suspension, according to Shakirah Jones, Camden County's Youth Services Commission administrator.

"The overall goal is to establish what the core issue is," Jones said. "And to help that young person and their family navigate through the services and supports that they need to be able to shift out of whatever that situation is and move more into stability and independence."

The hub has made 15 linkages, Jones said. The services are only available to residents in the city of Camden, but the Youth Services Commission is working to expand it throughout the county, she said.

"Wouldn't it be great to take someone who's, at 18, couch surfing to fully employed and not only just stable, but owning his own home?" Jakubowski said. "This is the larger vision that we have, but it all starts from step one, of finding transitional housing."

Durant has been living in the county's transitional housing since August, which he got connected to after his girlfriend's mom urged him to call NJ211, the state's homeless hotline. Now having stable housing, Durant is a step closer to his dream of getting his degree and becoming a chemistry professor, he said. He's currently saving up to go back to school, working a security job until midnight. In the meantime, Durant's found a "camaraderie" among the other young men in the transitional housing, he said.

"We hang out, we play video games together and we talk about our goals in life," Durant said. "We'll sit down, 'Hey, I want to do this,' and 'he wants to do that.' 'You know what? Hey, maybe we can do it together.'" 

## SPOTLIGHT ON: HOMELESSNESS



# LIBRARY PROGRAM OFFERS PATH TO EMPLOYMENT, STABILITY

by Annie Qing

Jen Keys knows what it's like to be unhoused in San Francisco. Once in managerial roles at major dotcom and airline companies, with years of experience, she spiraled into hardship after she was laid off in 2008.

For months after, she lived on the consolidated city-county's streets, working sporadically under the table to earn money to pay for her drug use. Her journey paralleled

that of so many others — childhood trauma sowing the seeds for mental health challenges later in life, which led to unemployment and substance use disorder.

"Everybody and anybody can become unhoused," Keys said. "It's a very rough cycle, very lonely cycle."

But Keys, through the support of her care team and her own hard work, has since exited this cycle. Today, she spends her days at the main branch of the San Francisco Public Library, working to help others do the same. As a Health and Safety Associate (HaSA), she provides care and support to the unhoused patrons who congregate at the library — monitoring for overdoses and connecting them with county services such as showers, food

or shelter.

The HaSA program, started in 2010, is equal parts homeless outreach and workforce development. Employing individuals with lived experience like Jen to provide care to library patrons who are currently unhoused provides

a unique upside to both parties. Patrons receive non-judgmental empathetic care from those who are well-positioned to understand their challenges. And HaSAs can build work experience in a safe space, drawing on their expertise to give back to the community while gradually reintegrating into society at large.

"It gives you a sense of meaning and purpose...it gives you that starting point to do whatever you want — to go back to school, to get a different job,"

Keys said. "Learning life skills, I mean just showing up for work, learning how to communicate again, learning how to be a part of society. It had all the guardrails, so it was very safe."

The program has been a great success, with former HaSAs using their training to enter a variety of professions, from health care to the culinary arts. In 2023, HaSAs became full-fledged city/county employees, earning the full suite of benefits provided to

## SPOTLIGHT ON: HOMELESSNESS



Health and Safety Associate Jen Keys checks in with a regular patron at the San Francisco Public Library.

public-sector workers. And through strong support from the Library Commission and county leadership, the program that originally employed four people is set to expand to nine this year. More than 30 HaSAs have worked in the program over the years.

It's a model that has great potential around the United States. And it highlights the unique value of the library — a public space for every citizen, regardless of who they are.

Today, millions of Ameri-

cans visit libraries for information. Sometimes, that information is found in books and magazines. Other times, patrons seek information that lives outside of library walls, like emergency shelter or public benefits. In the latter case, the library and its HaSAs serve as the front door to a vast network of these human services programs.

"It makes a whole lot of sense for the library to provide these services because a lot of people, while the shelters are

closed, are here," explained Leah Esguerra, the San Francisco Public Library's Social Service Program Supervisor.

Esguerra likely became the world's first library-based social worker when San Francisco piloted the idea in 2009. Today, cities and counties in places from Arizona to Scandinavia to Colombia seek to follow in the program's footsteps. Over the last 15 years, Esguerra has helped other communities shape the program to meet the unique needs of their residents. In Pima County, Ariz. for instance, registered nurses staff rather than a social worker staff the library, a choice made to be responsive to the county context.

Esguerra's work has paved the path for HaSAs like Keys to deliver dignified, compassionate care at the San Francisco Public Library.

And in turn, Keys' story embodies the power of cross-systems collaboration and peer support's power to transform lives. Once stuck in a vicious cycle, she is now contributing to a virtuous cycle of growth and spending her days working to uplift others.

"Being unhoused isn't an identity, it's an experience," Keys said. "Every single one of these individuals has a story. They are valuable and they are important. And there are opportunities." **EN**

*Qing is a health and human services senior program manager in NACO's Counties Futures Lab.*

## 'Ending Homelessness Before It Starts' is 'first-ever federal framework for homeless prevention'

From USICH page 7

a single person living in an encampment. These resources could instead be invested in the long-term solutions to homelessness: housing, health care and services that help people move into and avoid losing homes.

### How counties can help

As county leaders, you oversee housing, public health, jails and courts. You have the power to make changes big and small to make housing and health

care more affordable and stop the vicious cycle between jail and homelessness.

This year, USICH published actionable alternatives to criminalization that counties can use to solve homelessness and to prevent more people from losing homes in the first place:

- "Ending Homelessness Before It Starts" is the first-ever federal framework for homelessness prevention and is intended for local, tribal, and

state governments; nonprofits, funders, systems, providers, and advocates of housing, health, human services, justice, education, employment, child welfare, and emergency services.

- "19 Strategies to Address Encampments Humanely and Effectively" provides a roadmap you can customize and build out in your own community.

- "How Health Systems and Hospitals Can Help Solve

Homelessness" offers practical strategies to care for people experiencing homelessness in ways that benefit patients, providers, and systems.

So much needs to change. If you don't know where to start, pick up the phone. Call the mayor. Gather elected leaders of the cities in your county. Email your USICH senior regional advisor. Set up lunch with the public housing authority director. Bring leaders of hospitals and jails to the table. Educate your congress-

sional leaders about effective responses to homelessness.

Homelessness is our collective responsibility — not a political football. Housing and services — not handcuffs — solve homelessness. Connect the dots. Find partners. Create solutions. Together, we can end homelessness.

Find your regional advisor by scanning the QR code below.



*Olivet is USICH executive director and Schneider is a senior regional advisor.*



# ALLEGHENY COUNTY PIVOTS TO HELP 'ECONOMICALLY HOMELESS'

by **Charlie Ban**  
senior writer

Five decades of population loss in Allegheny County, Pa. meant that when the door to one property closed for residents, another would usually open.

Even if a house fire, medical bills or the loss of a job interrupted a family's finances, that stable cost of housing meant people could usually bridge the bad times. But those house fires and the atrophy that comes from older housing stock ate away at the inventory when the population was starting to rebound in the 2010s. And that once-plentiful housing was getting more expensive, right around when the pandemic added financial stresses.

Now, the county is aiming to dramatically increase its stock of affordable housing over a year and a half, converting and rehabbing properties, working with landlords and coordinating assistance for residents in what is known as the "500 in

500" program — gaining 500 units of housing in 500 days.

"It's about creating access to affordable permanent housing to get this population of first-time homeless folks out of shelter and back into stable housing," said Ed Nusser, county director of housing strategies. "These are people who are holding down jobs... individuals that, but for the cost of housing, could be stably housed."

Without any dedicated housing available for people who can support themselves, the county saw little movement out of its shelter system, just a dozen leaving the shelter in 2023. In the few weeks after the 500 in 500 program kicked off, 21 had moved into the first properties acquired through the program and after three months, nearly 70 had moved into housing, with 43 units created.

## Tight targeting

One problem, Hu-

man Services Director Erin Dalton said, is that funding from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development is only suited to the most vulnerable homeless, not the "economically homeless" who need a few paychecks' worth of savings to afford stable housing. So, moving them out of shelters not only helps them back into stable housing, but allows the county to focus its resources on those who need it the most.

"There's certainly still a group of chronically homeless, very vulnerable folks who we are serving though those HUD dollars, but we don't have state and local dollars for those lower-vulnerability people and so we're working across our partners to house those people much more quickly," Dalton said.

Drawing on her teenage years spent in unstable housing situations, County Executive Sara Innamorato made housing a priority during her campaign in 2023, and upon taking office in January 2024, that mandate refocused various county departments, including the county redevelopment authority, which worked with non-profits and philanthropies and their city of Pittsburgh counterparts.

## SPOTLIGHT ON: HOMELESSNESS



Allegheny County, Pa. Executive Sara Innamorato embraces Pam Steimer after Innamorato announced the 500 in 500 initiative. Photo courtesy of Allegheny County

"We at DHS had not [previously] presented a clear problem statement, and more importantly, a clear ask," Dalton said. "We hadn't said 'Here's the problem and here's what we need from you,' so people were just doing what they do, making the best decisions they could, but not focusing on the precise needs that we had at the moment. So it did take us being able to define clearly both what the problem was and what we needed from them, and then I think equally, if not more important, having a county executive who was sitting at the table for all of those discussions, a new county executive with a housing priority, where people wanted to even do more than they would have done with a better problem statement."

Nusser said the new administration has helped realign local, state and federal governments at a time when housing affordability has become a crisis for many.

"We are not presenting a panacea, we're not presenting a silver bullet, but we are talking about a key challenge in the ecosystem of unhoused and housing unstable individuals and this is a clear problem and a clear sort of process toward addressing that specific problem," Nusser said. "500 in 500 is less a development problem and more of a government coordination problem."

## The blueprints

The first step has been looking for low-hanging fruit properties, using roughly \$6 million from the HOME Investment Partnerships American Rescue Plan Program to perform moderate rehabilitations. The county and city provide gap financing for projects that also use federal Low-Income Housing Tax Credit funding.

"Vacant buildings that aren't quite turn-key, but they're pretty close," he said.

The most promising project involves revising a shuttered nursing home in Pittsburgh, convenient to bus lines, which could be home to 52 residents.

For a lot of the effort, the county will be trying to recruit landlords, asking them to set aside properties and give

the county a head start to try to fill vacancies, with particularly a lot of "mom-and-pop" landlords, in the process disrupting what Dalton termed an information problem. The Pennsylvania Housing Finance Agency requires 10% of units in a building receiving Low-Income Housing Tax Credit funding be set aside for residents at or below 20% of area median income.

"People didn't know before now that they could come to us to fill those units," she said, adding they have made headway "by making this publicly known and by working with ... any affordable housing developer or landlord to place people and place them with tenant support. We know how to provide care and support for people including the property managers who work with these folks. People didn't know who to call. There's plenty of people out there who wanted to help, but they didn't know who to contact and where to call. Now we are establishing it and can then provide some support, so that if something happens, there's somebody to call, there's somebody to care for the person, someone to pay for some repairs for the building."

The county will also continue to be a resource for unhoused residents to help mix and match programs, funding and opportunities.

"The big part of it is connecting those individuals... how we can get you onto the waiting list for a housing choice voucher, because navigating that web of public support and where to go and who to call is something that most people can't handle on their best of days," Nusser said.

The program, 500 in 500, "is the first step in really beginning to address both 'How do we expedite production of housing that is affordable?' and 'How do we create ways to leverage the incredibly limited resources that we have at the local state and federal level to make those dollars go further?'" **CN**

Hear more from Ed Nusser and NACo Legislative Director Mike

Matthews on the County News Podcast, which you can listen to by scanning the QR code or visiting [www.naco.org/podcast](http://www.naco.org/podcast).



..... ON THE MOVE .....➔

**NACo STAFF**

● **Anuja Rathi**

has joined NACo as managing director for HR and talent management. She was previously a senior consultant for change management with the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority and earned a master's degree in psychology from the University of Pune in India.

● **Bryce Wilkom**

has joined NACo as a program associate for Behavioral Health and Justice. He was previously a public policy intern for Jubilee Housing and earned a master's degree in public administration and a bachelor's degree from American University.

● **Paige Mellerio** and **Owen Hart**

have been promoted to legislative director.

● **Naomi Freel** and **Joe Jackson**

have been promoted to legislative associate.

● **Chris Wathen**

has been promoted to digital communications manager.

● **Meredith Moran**

has been promoted to staff writer on the County



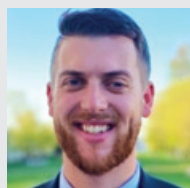
**Rathi**



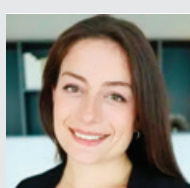
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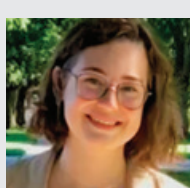
**Mellerio**



**Hart**



**Freel**



**Jackson**



**Wathen**



**Moran**

News team.

● Legislative Directors **Seamus Dowdall** and **Zeke Lee** attended the Nevada Association of Counties Annual Conference in Carson City. Dowdall also attended the Rural Broadband Association Fall Conference in Marion County, Ind. and Lee attended the Idaho Association of Counties Annual Conference in Ada County.

● Membership Manager **Priscilla Chrappah** attended the Wisconsin Counties Association Annual Conference in La Crosse County.

● Legislative Director **Brett Mattson** attended the Maine Association of Counties Annual Conference in Franklin County.

● Legislative Director **Mike Matthews** attended the National Association for County Community and Economic Development Annual Meeting in Tulsa County, Okla.

● Special Assistant to the CEO **Alyx Hawkins** attended the Wyoming County Commissioners Association Annual Conference in Sweetwater County.



**BINGHAM COUNTY, IDAHO**

**B**ingham County was established in 1885 and is known as the potato capital of the world.

Bingham County Clerk Pamela Eckhardt contributed the interpretation of her county's seal.

The seal depicts the productive agricultural land in Bingham County, in particular for potatoes and wheat.

The river represents the Snake and Blackfoot rivers which traverse throughout the county providing access to irrigation.



The county's long-time relationship with the Shoshone-Bannock Tribes is represented by the grazing buffalo.

The foothills and mountains are the horizon view from any point in the county.

Would you like to see your county seal featured in County News? Please contact Charlie Ban at [cban@naco.org](mailto:cban@naco.org).

**PROFILES IN SERVICE**

**JERRY DEMINGS**

NACo Board member  
Mayor  
Orange County, Fla.



**DEMINGS**

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

**Years in public service:** 44 years

**Occupation:** Mayor of Orange County, Fla.

**Education:** Bachelor's degree in Finance from Florida State University and Master of Business Administration from Orlando College.

**The hardest thing I've ever done:** Buried several colleagues in law enforcement killed in the line of duty.

**A dream I have is to:** Learn to play bass guitar.

**You'd be surprised to learn that I:** Play piano and ride motorcycles

**The most adventurous thing I've ever done is:** Rappel from a multi-story building.

**My favorite way to relax is:** Vacation in the Caribbean.

**I'm most proud of:** The success of my children.

**Every morning I read:** Various newspapers

**My favorite meal is:** Blue crab and shrimp.

**My pet peeve is:** Keeping a cluttered home or office.

**My motto is:** If you fail to plan, you plan to fail!

**The last book I read was:** "Know Your Price" by Andre Perry

**My favorite movie is:** "Shaft"

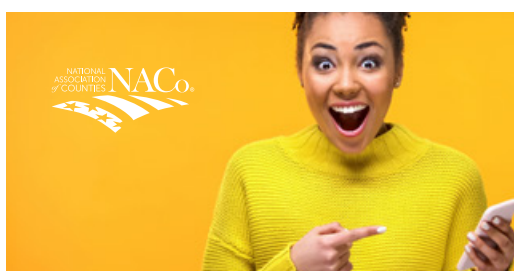
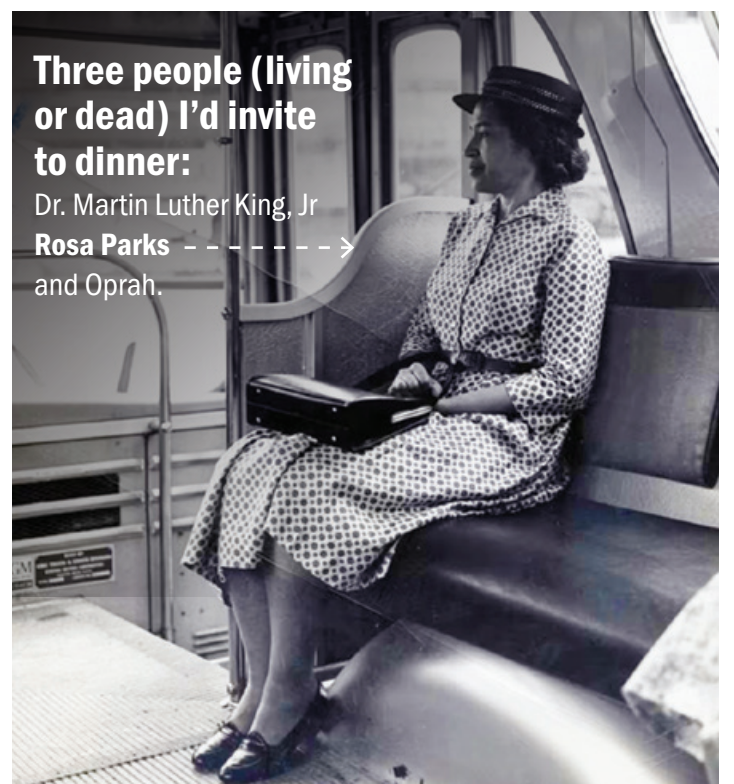
**My favorite music is:** R&B

**My favorite U.S. president is:** Bill Clinton

**My county is a NACo member because:** NACo gets results in Congress and provides the best engagements involving political cohorts.

**Three people (living or dead) I'd invite to dinner:**

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr  
**Rosa Parks** ----->  
and Oprah.



finally!

NACo swag is now available online!



# BRIGHT IDEAS | PIMA COUNTY, ARIZ.

## Arizona County Works to End Homelessness, Reduce Recidivism

### PROBLEM:

Chronic homelessness and co-occurring disorders were contributing to high recidivism rates.

### SOLUTION:

Pima County is offering housing and supportive services to its justice-involved population.

by Meredith Moran  
staff writer

Pima County, Ariz. is working to end chronic homelessness and reduce recidivism through the Housing First model, which provides transitional and permanent supportive housing, as well as supportive services for mental health issues and substance use disorder, to the county's formerly incarcerated population.

Homelessness in Pima County has skyrocketed in recent years. Between 2018 and 2023, the county saw a 60% increase. Since the pilot program launched in 2019, Pima County has housed 249 individuals through Housing First.

To be eligible for the program, participants must have two bookings in the Pima County Jail, as well as a mental health or substance use disorder, according to Cynthia Chapman, Pima County Justice Services' program and grant manager. Old Pueblo Community Services, a social services organization, refers Housing First participants to housing, counseling and supportive services and the city of Tucson provides vouchers for permanent supportive housing.

"The county really saw that there was a gap," Chapman said. Previously "there really was no good referral pathway for justice-involved individuals to be able to gain transitional or permanent supportive housing."

According to a RAND research report, which was conducted from December 2020-2021, the funding the county dedicated to Housing First, including bridge housing and supportive housing services,



**Phillip Bernard with dogs Xena and Harmonia: "I don't know where I'd be without OPCS, probably in prison. They laid out the foundation for me to be where I am today." Since getting connected to Housing First, he is sober, studying for his GED and taking computer programming classes.**

was offset by reductions in costs to the criminal justice and health systems.

Over the 12-month period of the study, among those enrolled in Housing First, justice-related service utilization declined by more than 50%, and health care costs declined by 45%, compared to the 12 months prior to the study — totaling a cost savings of approximately \$1.2 million for Pima County (for criminal justice-related costs) and the state of Arizona (for health care costs billed to Medicaid).

Old Pueblo Community Services prioritizes the housing list based on need, so if someone is in an emergency situation or a particularly unsafe predicament, they can be placed as soon as possible, Chapman said.

"For example, we've had a client who was pregnant, and that put them up higher on the list to be able to be off of the streets," she added. According to the RAND research report, the 12-month housing retention rate for Housing First par-



**Pima County's McKenzie Derfus and Cynthia Chapman pause for a photo with Housing First's NACo Achievement Award.**

ticipants is 82%.

Each individual enrolled in the program receives a case manager, who helps them with logistics such as employment services, obtaining Social Security cards and access to health care for any matters related to their substance use disorder and/or mental health. If the participant has court-ordered treatment, fulfilling that is a requirement for staying enrolled in the program and remaining housed, according to Chapman.

"The case manager keeps them throughout that process, so that way, they're able to

build that rapport," Chapman said. "And then they'll go with them if they have a court hearing, so they're also filling that advocacy role with the individuals."

Case managers also help connect participants to other grant programs for justice-involved individuals that assist with needs, such as transportation, that Housing First doesn't address, according to Chapman. "[We didn't want to say] 'Oh, you need to get to court so you don't get a 'failure to appear' at your court hearing, and we're going to hold you accountable to this,

but we're not going to provide you the resources to be able to do that," Chapman said. "... So, it's having their case managers say, 'Hey, there's this other program that the county offers,' and making sure they have access."

Less than four years ago, Jennifer Martin was homeless and using heroin and meth. She was attacked and had her head smashed in with a brick, leaving her in a week-long coma. After returning to the streets, she said she was "rescued by being arrested" after passing out behind a store from drug use. After Martin was released from jail, she got connected to Housing First, where she received intensive case management and found permanent housing.

"OPCS got me off the street, helped me stay off drugs and helped me with my brain injury," Martin said. "They showed me love and care and that's why I call them my angels."

Housing First offers wrap-around services to justice-involved individuals, as well as their families. Old Pueblo Community Services helps families with reunification, as well as referrals to legal representation (specifically related to familial issues) and offers group circles for family members of people who have been incarcerated, as a form of peer support.

The HUD housing counseling center is also helping Pima County work in tandem with the city and nonprofit agencies to create housing solutions and make dollars stretch, Chapman said.

The housing counseling center "really looks at braiding all of the efforts of our community together ... and making it one joint effort," Chapman said. "Versus 'That's your sandbox,' 'That's your sandbox,' 'Don't come over here, because this is ours.'" **CN**

*Pima County won the 2024 Best in Category NACo Achievement Award in the Justice and Public Safety category.*

**CALIFORNIA**

• **SANTA CRUZ COUNTY** is cracking down on **vacation rentals** owned by absentee landlords and investors, aiming to curb their proliferation and free up housing supply, Lookout Santa Cruz reported. A new subcommittee will propose regulations to limit the number of un-hosted rentals and rental permits, while the county demands platforms including Airbnb and Vrbo (Vacation Rentals by Owner) remove listings that don't have county permits. The moves come amid growing concerns about housing affordability in the area.

**COLORADO**

• **BOULDER COUNTY** recently published a 104-page **2024 ARPA Recovery Plan Performance Report**, highlighting advancements made in program design and implementation to tackle economic challenges, expand affordable housing options, improve mental health services and strengthen social resilience.

**DELAWARE**

The Government Finance Officers Association recently awarded **SUSSEX COUNTY** the **Distinguished Budget Presentation Award** for its Fiscal Year 2025 budget. The award is given to public bodies that have demonstrated an observance of the highest principles of governmental budgeting, according to the GFOA.

The award is presented by the same group that earlier this year bestowed its coveted Triple Crown title to Sussex County for winning three separate categories related to financial reporting and continues the county's two-decades long track record of accounting accolades.



**Veterinarian Cynthia Metcalf leads the Pet Aid & Wellness Services Mobile Clinic.** Photo courtesy of Sacramento County

**CALIFORNIA**

• The **SACRAMENTO COUNTY** Bradshaw Animal Shelter has been helping **improve the lives of pets and their unhoused owners** for almost a year now. Through the Pet Aid & Wellness Services (PAWS) Mobile Clinic, they are providing veterinary care, resources and support to a vulnerable population that needs it most. PAWS received a \$100,000 grant to launch the effort from UC Davis California for All Animals. A coalition was formed that meets bi-monthly to share resources.

**FLORIDA**

• **HILLSBOROUGH COUNTY** is hoping that voters in November renew the **Community Investment Tax**, which is set to end next year after 30 years. The *Tampa Beacon* reports that voters can approve the tax for another 15 years. The county has a \$2.6 billion wish list if it's renewed that includes bridge replacements, repairs to an arena and stadium, nine new fire stations and stormwater infrastructure. Another need is for shade coverings at local playgrounds and basketball courts, which would cost about \$8 million.

**OHIO**

• **HAMILTON COUNTY** homeowners could soon qualify for a new **home repair** program of-

**HAWAII**

A groundbreaking ceremony was held recently for a new affordable rental housing development in **HAWAII COUNTY's** Waikaloa Village, Big Island Video News reported. The development, N Hale Makoa, will feature 139 one-, two- and three-bedroom units serving households earning up to 140% of Area Median Income (AMI), as well as one resident manager's unit. The county is leasing the approximately 10-acre site for 68 years to Kamakoa Nui Limited Partnership, the ownership entity.

"Today marks a pivotal step forward in our commitment to addressing the affordable housing needs of our community," said County of Hawaii Mayor Mitch Roth. "N Hale Makoa represents more than just new buildings; it symbolizes our dedication to ensuring that working families have access to safe, affordable, and high-quality housing."



fered by the county, according to an announcement from the county on Sept. 24, *City Beat* reported. The Revive and Thrive Home Loan Repair Program will offer loans to homeowners in Hamilton County, helping pay for home repairs at a 2% interest rate.

Loan amounts range from \$5,000 to \$25,000, and can be used for a variety of repairs, from health and safety fixes and code violations to general improvements. Of that \$2 million, \$1.3 million comes from the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) and the rest is supplemented through Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funds.

"We're securing homes, and we're securing futures for these families," said Denise Driehaus, Hamilton County Board of Commissioners vice president, at a press conference announcing the program.

**OKLAHOMA**

With state funding, **ROGERS COUNTY** plans to offer its residents the **Comprehensive Mental Health and Wellbeing phone app**. The app is designed to connect residents to urgent support and local community resources. "You're anxious, you think you might need some help. Suicidal people that have issues, we're hoping that they'll get on this app," Dan Delozier, the Rogers County District 1 commissioner told KTUL-TV.

See **NEWS FROM** page 15

**NORTH CAROLINA**

• **CRAVEN COUNTY** saw a 47% surge in **summer tourism**, with more than 2.1 million people visiting between May and August of this year, according to officials. The Coastal Carolina Regional Airport (EWN) is said to have played a vital role with this increased interest in eastern Carolina. Officials credit the addition of new airlines to the spike in travel to the area. American Airlines saw a 26% increase in travelers to EWN in 2024, according to airport officials.

**Patrons enjoy a night out at Persimmons in New Bern, Craven County, N.C.** Photo courtesy of New Bern

Convention & Visitors Bureau

**OREGON**

• **LANE COUNTY** was set to launch its Deflection Program this month to provide law enforcement officers with **an alternative to arresting people** facing low-level charges. Created as part of the state Legislature's reform of Measure 110, it will be the first of its kind for the county. "Creating a program from the ground up with our community partners has been both a challenge and a privilege," Lane County Deflection Program Coordinator Clint Riley said. Law enforcement will coordinate with the Mo-



bile Crisis Services of Lane County, which offers crisis de-escalation and safety planning; access to certified mental health professionals

and client-focused resources; coordination with existing providers; direct referrals for behavioral health care; transportation coordination; fol-

low-up check within 72 hours of contact and Naloxone administration. The program is administered by the county and paid for by the state.

From NEWS FROM page 14

**OREGON**

• The **BENTON COUNTY** Agriculture and Wildlife Protection Program will be open for general applications this month offering grants to farmers, *Philomath News* reported. The grants help **promote agriculture and wildlife coexistence** by funding non-lethal wildlife deterrents to prevent losses to livestock, crops and property.

Agricultural operations of all sizes may apply for up to \$5,000 in reimbursement funds for the purchase of non-lethal wildlife deterrents, which may include standard or electric fencing, sound or light scare devices, fladry or flagging, protective animal housing, livestock guardian animals and other approved options.

**PENNSYLVANIA**

• Concealed carry permits in **BUCKS COUNTY** will now come paired with **suicide prevention** information thanks to a new joint initiative by County Administration and the Bucks County Sheriff's Office. Commissioner Chair Diane Ellis-Marseglia, LCSW, and Sheriff Fred Harran announced the program's launch recently in a video posted online. The new initiative looks to place lifesaving facts and resources in the hands of gun owners:

- Men over 55 are at the highest risk of suicide

- Access to firearms greatly increases the risk of suicide

- Suicidal feelings can come on suddenly and feel overwhelming

- Help is available

"As a social worker, I'm concerned about people who feel suicidal," Marseglia said. "I also lost a child to suicide, so it's something that's very important to me. I'm glad to be able to partner with Sheriff Harran on this important effort."

- **LUZERNE COUNTY** Manager Romilda Crocamo recently detailed for the news media some **enhanced security measures** for Election Day that

the county is taking, the *Times Leader* reported. Those measures include real-time monitoring of video surveillance cameras in areas where ballots are stored and locked; panic button software and radios provided to poll workers from county emergency services to ensure swift communication in case of emergencies; color-coded vests and lanyards supplied to approved Election Day observers and more. Under Election Director Emily Cook, the county engaged the Department of Homeland Security to conduct a Security Assessment at First Entry review in August. The county did not

disclose every enhancement, for security reasons.

**WASHINGTON**

**PIERCE COUNTY** plans to create a **tiny homes village** called Good Neighbor Village similar to one in **TRAVIS COUNTY**, Texas, the *Seattle Times* reported. NACo members at the 2023 Annual Conference visited the Texas homes, Community First! Village. Pierce County will be able to copy Community First's looser intake and rent rules because officials are using \$22 million in pandemic relief funding, rather than housing dollars. They gave the money to the Tacoma Rescue Mission, one of the largest homeless service providers in the county.

The nonprofit will slightly upgrade the tiny home units — 300 to 400 square feet with a bathroom in each but no full kitchen. The rest will be the same as those in Austin. Tacoma Rescue Mission still needs to raise an additional \$40 million, but it has already purchased 90 acres to build the community for \$4 million. Construction is scheduled to begin this year, with the first 50 homes set to open in early 2026 and completion of the entire community in 2028.

*Do you have news to share? Please send your news tips, news releases and photos to Mary Ann Barton at mbaron@naco.org.*

*Opioid crisis in rural Georgia*

From RURAL page 6

nity — it means everything," Hamilton said. "We want to keep everything as local as possible, whether it's having a Life Care Specialist or contractors — anything we can do to keep folks in our community and just increase the quality of life here is vital to us, so I think that's a phenomenal thing."

The county government doesn't directly fund the Stephens County Hospital's services, but it provides roughly \$700,000 in funding each year to the hospital for indigent care, a portion of which goes toward treating people with substance use disorder and those experiencing opioid overdoses, according to Hamilton. The Stephens County Hospital also runs the county's emergency services response.

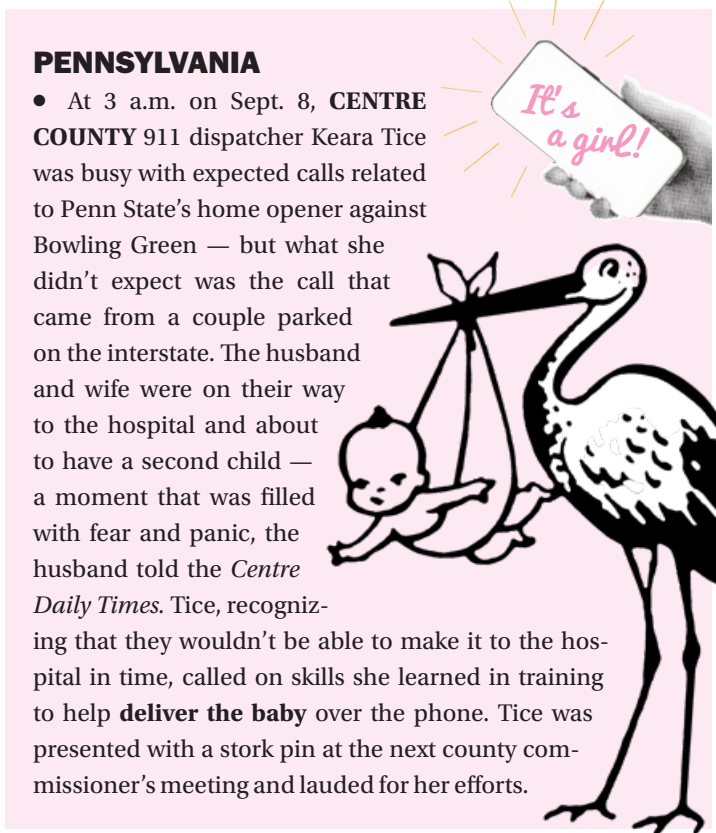
Stephens County has spent roughly \$70,000 of the more than \$594,072 it received so far of National Opioid Settlement Funds, according to Hamilton. Because of the funding, county buildings, schools, grocery stores and local businesses now have Narcan kits, he said.

Stephens County Commissioner Tara Simmons said that the county is working to create initiatives with local recovery organizations, but because of its rural nature, the county doesn't have the resources or staff to use the dollars to create a treatment facility (intensive outpatient treatment is currently only available to people in the county who have an open court case related to drugs), so the county is working to fund existing programs right now, she said.

Sumner said she envisions the Life Care Specialist model becoming a standard in hospitals across the country as more funding becomes available to tackle the opioid crisis.

"This is an opportunity for every rural community in this state, in this nation, to have somebody who's a go-to person for pain management, that's not a prescriber," Sumner said.

"A person who cares and can direct you to the right resources, so I think it's exciting to watch it be born."



**PENNSYLVANIA**

• At 3 a.m. on Sept. 8, **CENTRE COUNTY** 911 dispatcher Keara Tice was busy with expected calls related to Penn State's home opener against Bowling Green — but what she didn't expect was the call that came from a couple parked on the interstate. The husband and wife were on their way to the hospital and about to have a second child — a moment that was filled with fear and panic, the husband told the *Centre Daily Times*. Tice, recognizing that they wouldn't be able to make it to the hospital in time, called on skills she learned in training to help **deliver the baby** over the phone. Tice was presented with a stork pin at the next county commissioner's meeting and lauded for her efforts.

# WORD SEARCH

## COCHISE COUNTY, ARIZ.

Created by Mary Ann Barton

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

**COURTHOUSE:** The county's courthouse was built in 1931, designed by Roy Place in the Art Deco style.

**FAIR:** The Cochise County Fair just celebrated its 100th anniversary.

**HISTORY:** The county was founded in 1881 from the eastern part of Pima County.

**MINING:** More than 8 billion pounds of copper were mined over a century in the county. Mining ended in the 1970s.

**NEWSPAPER:** The *Arizona Range News* has been around since 1897. Other newspapers in the county include the *Sierra Vista Herald*, the *Bisbee Observer* and *The Tombstone News*.

**POPULATION:** The city with the highest population is Sierra Vista with approximately 45,466 population.

**SHERIFF:** A TV series, "The Sheriff of Cochise," aired from 1956-1958, was filmed in the county.

**SIZE:** The county at 6,166 square miles is the size of Rhode Island and Connecticut combined.

**TOMBSTONE:** The original county seat; it was moved to Bisbee in 1929.

**TUCSON:** The county is about 90 miles southeast of Tucson.

**AGRICULTURE:** The county is known for fruit and tree nut production.

**BISBEE:** The county seat of Cochise County. The name comes from Judge DeWitt Bisbee, a supporter of a nearby copper mine.

**CHIRICAHUA:** Chiricahua Peak is the highest point in the county, with an elevation of 9,773 feet.

**COCHISE:** The county name comes from an Apache chief from Mexico.

**CORRAL:** The O.K. Corral, where a famous gun battle took place in the town of Tombstone in 1881, is open for tours as a historic site.



Looking to hire county staff?  
**Post your job listing on NACo's new career site!**

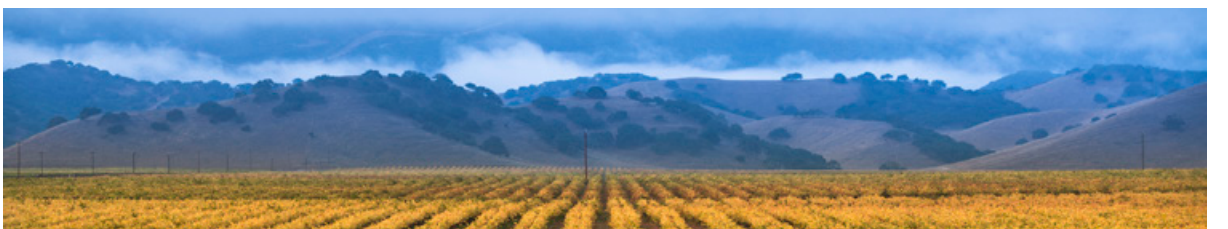
[jobs.naco.org](https://jobs.naco.org)

# SAVE THE DATES

## Upcoming NACo Conferences

### 2024 County Crossroads 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 & Expo

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

