

NACo kicks off 2025 Legislative Conference

by **Mary Ann Barton**
editor

County workforce gaps, land use, intergovernmental partnerships, disaster response and preparedness, federal regulations and the future of artificial intelligence (AI) are just some of the many topics that 2,000 participants are tackling March 1-4 at NACo's 2025 Legislative Conference underway at the Washington Hilton in Washington, D.C.

County officials attending the conference are set to hear from federal partners, national experts and thought leaders as the conference kicks off on the heels of the 119th Congress convening and President Donald Trump taking the oath of office for a second time and beginning a shakeup at federal agencies that could affect counties.

Conference attendees will hear from a number of high-profile speakers including NACo President James Gore of Sonoma County, Calif.; Sen. Ron Wyden (D-Ore.), speaking on the Secure Rural Schools program; Rep. Sam Graves (R-Mo.), speaking on transportation and infrastruc-

ture and Fred Humphries, corporate vice president of U.S. Government Affairs for Micro-soft.

 **LEGISLATIVE CONFERENCE**
2025 MARCH 1-4 | WASHINGTON, D.C.

Other high-profile speakers who will address conference participants include U.S. Secretary of Veterans Affairs Doug Collins and Sen. Alex Padilla (D-Calif.).



Graves



Wyden



Humphries

Conference participants will also hear from Wake County, N.C. Commissioner Shinica Thomas and Travis County, Texas Judge Andy Brown as well as from two county officials running for second vice president, Wayne County Commission Chair Alisha Bell and Greene County, Mo. Presiding Commissioner Bob Dixon. That election will take place in July at the 2025 NACo Annual Conference in Philadelphia.

Wyden, 75, will address the General Session Tuesday, March 4, focusing on the Secure Rural Schools program. Since 2000, the Wyden-authored Secure

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Counties invest opioid settlement funds in life-saving programs

by **Meredith Moran**
staff writer

Over the past two decades, the opioid crisis has devastated counties across the country. In 2021, U.S. annual overdose deaths topped 100,000 for the first time in history. As opioid

settlement dollars trickle in, the 2,769 counties receiving funds are working to determine the most effective ways to leverage the payout, such as building access to substance use treatment — including creating facilities, increasing beds and providing connections to

transportation — and investing in harm reduction and peer support recovery.

In West Virginia, local governments receive 24.5% of the total settlement funds allocated to the state, which

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New funding boosts Indiana county health departments

by **Charlie Ban**
senior writer

For 30 years of her career, Mindy Waldron felt like Allen County's public health efforts, along with those of other counties in Indiana, were just treading water.

"We were just doing regulatory work and keeping our

lights on," she said. Waldron is the public health administrator for the county that includes Fort Wayne. "We knew what we were doing in statutory public health was primarily enforcement of rules and inspectional things and we weren't in the preventive space."

Meanwhile, the state's life expectancy fell throughout the

2010s and was two years below the national average in 2019. The Hoosier State was near the bottom of public health funding, spending an average of \$15 per resident.

"The funding that came from the state to the locals to do public health had been

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County officials meet in D.C.

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Rural Schools and Community Self Determination Act, commonly known as the “county payments” law, has helped provide a stable source of revenue for historically timber-dependent communities and Wyden’s Combat Illegal Logging Act has helped protect Oregon’s hardwood industries from the import of illegally harvested timber products. Wyden has also fought to expand rural access to health care. .

Wyden serves on the Committees on Finance, Budget, Intelligence, and Energy and Natural Resources. He is Ranking Member of the Senate Finance Committee and a senior member of the Energy and Natural Resources Committee.

Graves, 61, is a lifelong resident of Missouri’s 6th Congress-

sional District, which includes all or part of 39 counties, working as a small businessman and a sixth-generation family farmer.

In Congress, Graves chairs the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee. As chairman, Graves leads the Committee as it has jurisdiction over all modes of transportation – aviation systems, highways and bridges, transit and rail transportation, pipelines, and maritime and waterborne transportation. Graves is also a member of the House Committee on Armed Services.

Padilla, speaking Tuesday, is the first Latino elected to represent California in the U.S. Senate. The son of immigrants, he grew up in the San Fernando Valley and studied Mechanical Engineering at MIT.

Members of NACo’s policy steering committees were set to explore an array of domestic policy issues, March 1.

These committees meet at least twice each year to review and make recommendations on public policy issues and legislation.

The policy development process initiated by the steering committees is the foundation for the American County Platform, which drives NACo’s advocacy work.

Participants will get a chance to meet with federal agencies at the Federal Agency Expo taking place March 3.

NACo’s Federal Agency Expo is the only event that brings more than 100 federal officials from dozens of offices together in one room specifically to engage with county leaders.

Attendees are encouraged to set aside time during this one-of-a-kind opportunity to connect with any federal agencies important to their counties.

On March 4, NACo will hold a Capitol Hill press conference on disaster reform before winding up the conference at a Washington Hilton reception. **CN**



SNAP/STATS

Best Counties for Families

#1 Howard County, Md.

#2 Loudoun County, Va.

#3 Forsyth County, Ga.

#4 Oconee County, Ga.

#5 Collins County, Texas

Source: Niche Best Places
<https://www.niche.com/places-to-live/search/best-counties-for-families/>

ERC fellows demonstrate value of relationships in economic development



Mick Thornton looks out over a small portion of San Juan County, Utah, where he is an Economic Development Corps fellow. Photo courtesy of Thornton

by Jack Callahan

Mick Thornton has spent the past year tracking housing in San Juan County, Utah and developing a strategic plan to increase the county’s workforce housing supply. The project seems straightforward on paper, but the on-the-ground reality is far from straightforward. San Juan County is more than 8,000 square miles — the size of New Jersey, dotted with mountains, national monuments, detours and more.

In a geographically large county like San Juan, it is especially difficult to know and connect relevant stakeholders. In Thornton’s case, that means long travel times. He could be going to the remote Navajo Nation, the county seat of Monticello or all the way out to the state capital, Salt Lake City. Monticello sits five hours

from Salt Lake City, or three hours from some of the Navajo and Ute communities.

“Sometimes in a week I’ll start in Monticello, head up to Salt Lake City for a Tuesday meeting with the Governor’s Office for Economic Opportunity, then head back down to Monticello,” he said. “Then on Thursday, I’ll attend a community meeting in Navajo Nation where 70% of the time it’s in Navajo and then I have a couple hours in the car home.”

Long travel times are a small

‘Breaking down silos is really just building relationships.’

-Jessica Stern
Taos County, N.M.

price to pay for progress. Making a concerted effort to engage with all stakeholders in San Juan has allowed Thornton to gather data for the housing study that truly reflects needs and perspectives of multiple communities.

Traditional economic development schools of thought do not typically recognize relationships as assets that a community can use to further their economic development agenda. But effectively engaging fractured or distant networks across a region can transform how economic development practitioners operate in their environment.

More than 1,500 miles away from Thornton, in the swamp and bayou north of New Orleans, Deeneaus Polk navigates his way among the silos of St.

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Counties solicit feedback for spending on opioid solutions: ‘This is the people’s money’

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has the highest rate of opioid overdose-related deaths in the country. In 2016, West Virginia’s rate of opioid deaths was 169% higher than the national average, according to the National Institutes of Health.

Kanawha County — West Virginia’s most populous county and home to the state capital — has higher drug overdose rates than the state, according to the West Virginia Health Statistics Center, and has received its first opioid settlement funding allocation of more than \$2.9 million.

“No matter your class, no matter your race, no matter who you are, you have been afflicted some way, somehow, from this drug epidemic here in Kanawha County and West Virginia,” said Kanawha County Commissioner Lance Wheeler. “I personally speak on this because I lost my father five years ago to a drug overdose. I know that a lot of people are struggling, I know a lot of people are hurting, and it’s not just those who are struggling with addiction — it goes deeper than that.”

Building infrastructure

The county has dedicated funding to six projects so far, which include increasing the number of beds the county has, treatment for children of substance users who are born with drugs active in their system and providing access to transportation, according to Wheeler. Kanawha County has steered away from funding salaried behavioral health positions (which many counties have devoted opioid settlement dollars to) and instead focused on building infrastructure, he said.

Because of the nature of the funding, the county doesn’t want to be in a position where it comes up with “for now” solutions and then doesn’t have a strong infrastructure to address substance use disorder once the money dries up, Wheeler said.

“We’re not rushing to win a race,” Wheeler said. “We’re looking to make sure that we look under every rock and

crevice and make sure that we’re doing everything as efficient as possible.

“We have one shot at being the most effective and efficient at helping this drug epidemic, and we want to get it right ... This is a lot of money. It can bring a lot of good, but it could bring even more good if you do it right.”

Public input

Transparency has been the most important part of the process for Kanawha County, according to Wheeler. Anyone can apply for funding through the county’s website; all of the submitted applications are then made publicly available and the county holds an open community feedback session before each initiative is voted on.

“Anytime the County Commission decides to spend one cent of this opioid settlement money, we put it on a public

agenda for a public meeting with a public vote,” Wheeler said. “And then anybody can come and have a discussion of whether they support or oppose the funding application.

“This is the people’s money, and they deserve to know where and how it’s being spent.”

Regional approach

In the neighboring state of Virginia, some counties are taking a more regional approach. The Virginia Opioid Abatement Authority provided the New River Valley Recovery Ecosystem project — which consists of Floyd, Giles, Montgomery and Pulaski counties and the city of Radford in Virginia’s New River Valley — with \$2.1 million to address the opioid crisis through transportation, housing, prevention and treatment strategies, recovery and harm reduction.

The local governments had

worked together previously to handle public health crises — the New River Valley was the only region in the state to pool its CARES Act funding to provide vaccinations and services across the area during the COVID-19 pandemic, according to Holly Lesko, New River Valley Regional Commission’s community health director — and the commission felt “well poised” to combine efforts for the opioid crisis, she added. A stipulation to the funding was that it had to be devoted to new initiatives or existing ones that were expanding in a new way, according to Lesko.

“We really wanted, from the very beginning, to do something that was broad in scope, because whatever was shovel ready to get going, we wanted to make sure there would be funding for that,” Lesko said. “But also, how could we do better as a region in addressing some of the needs of folks who

are struggling with their addiction and/or on the road to recovery, that may be with a lot of baggage, either political, social or health wise?”

Coming up on its third year of receiving funding, the New River Valley Regional Commission has dedicated opioid settlement dollars to expanding medicated assisted treatment (MAT) services through its community health center, establishing continued supportive services for people in recovery court even after they graduate and investing in harm reduction outreach and peer support. Building in access points and expanding policy definitions, including adding substance use disorder to what is defined as a disability for additional support, such as transportation to work or medical treatment, has greatly benefited the community as well, Lesko said.

Mobile service

Rise Above, a mobile harm reduction service receiving opioid settlement dollars through the Commission, provides Naloxone, safe use supplies, wound care and hygiene and testing kits to substance users across the New River Valley. In its first year alone, Rise Above served more than 300 people, saving more than 200 lives through Naloxone and connecting 8% of participants to substance use treatment, according to Chris Alderman, New River Health District’s outreach and harm reduction coordinator. Alderman coordinates Rise Above, and the program’s team also consists of a medical director, an epidemiologist, a population health coordinator, nurses, volunteers and health counselors.

“The main thing about harm reduction is connection,” Alderman said. “That’s really what it’s about. It’s not about syringes, it’s not about anything for us other than to connect with folks to meet them exactly where they are, so that’s what we do. And the outreach part of it in rural America and rural southwest Virginia, it means that we have to go to them.”



Staffers from Rise Above pause for a photo. Their mobile harm reduction service provides Naloxone, safe use supplies, wound care and hygiene kits to substance users across Virginia’s New River Valley.

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Bringing community together ‘essential’ to economic development

From *ECONOMY* page 2

Tammany and the surrounding parishes.

St. Tammany Parish is a rapidly growing suburb of New Orleans. Adding 25,000 residents over the past decade has prompted officials to look for development support beyond its traditional boundaries to

neighboring Washington and St. Helena parishes.

This is where Polk has found that relationships are his greatest currency in the economic development world.

“Consistently bringing the community together where members can be engaged has been essential to my work so far in St. Tammany Parish,”

he said. “Building strong relationships through trust is key for the community driving resources, rather than following top-down models of traditional development where the community may have little say.”

Meanwhile Jessica Stern, economic development director for Taos County, N.M., got

her start in economic development through arts and culture management, showing her the potential for the arts to be a cornerstone in local economic development.

Thornton, Polk and Jessica Stern are Economic Recovery Corps fellows, part of a capacity-building initiative from the U.S. Economic De-

velopment Administration. Through 26-month fellowships, ERC places 65 economic development professionals with counties and other host organizations in economically distressed areas of the country. These ERC fellows live and work in these communities to implement innovative projects that strengthen and grow local economies. Under the International Economic Development Council’s leadership, NACo is an ERC partner, focusing on expanding economic opportunity for county residents nationwide.

‘We need to embrace imagination and new thinking.’

As an ERC host organization, Taos County aligned with Stern’s vision and teamed her with their ERC Fellow Connessa Trujillo to begin work on a cultural and outdoor asset-mapping project. This analysis will provide valuable insights on how to best steward the natural environment and cultural assets in local economic development.

The asset map will not only provide analysis of the community’s physical assets but also document less intangible cultural and natural treasures. Working together, the county and ERC fellow are safeguarding what makes Taos County unique as growth and development occur.

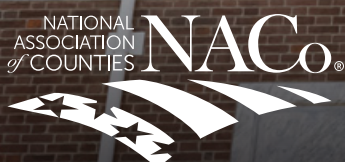
“Breaking down silos is really just building relationships,” Stern said. “As a field, we need to embrace imagination and new thinking. We need to see beyond the nuts and bolts of traditional deal-making and move in a direction that considers the downwind impacts of economic development on a community as a whole. This is really about building strong relationships and understanding the connectivity of all our work.” **CN**

Callahan is a program associate for economic development at NACo.

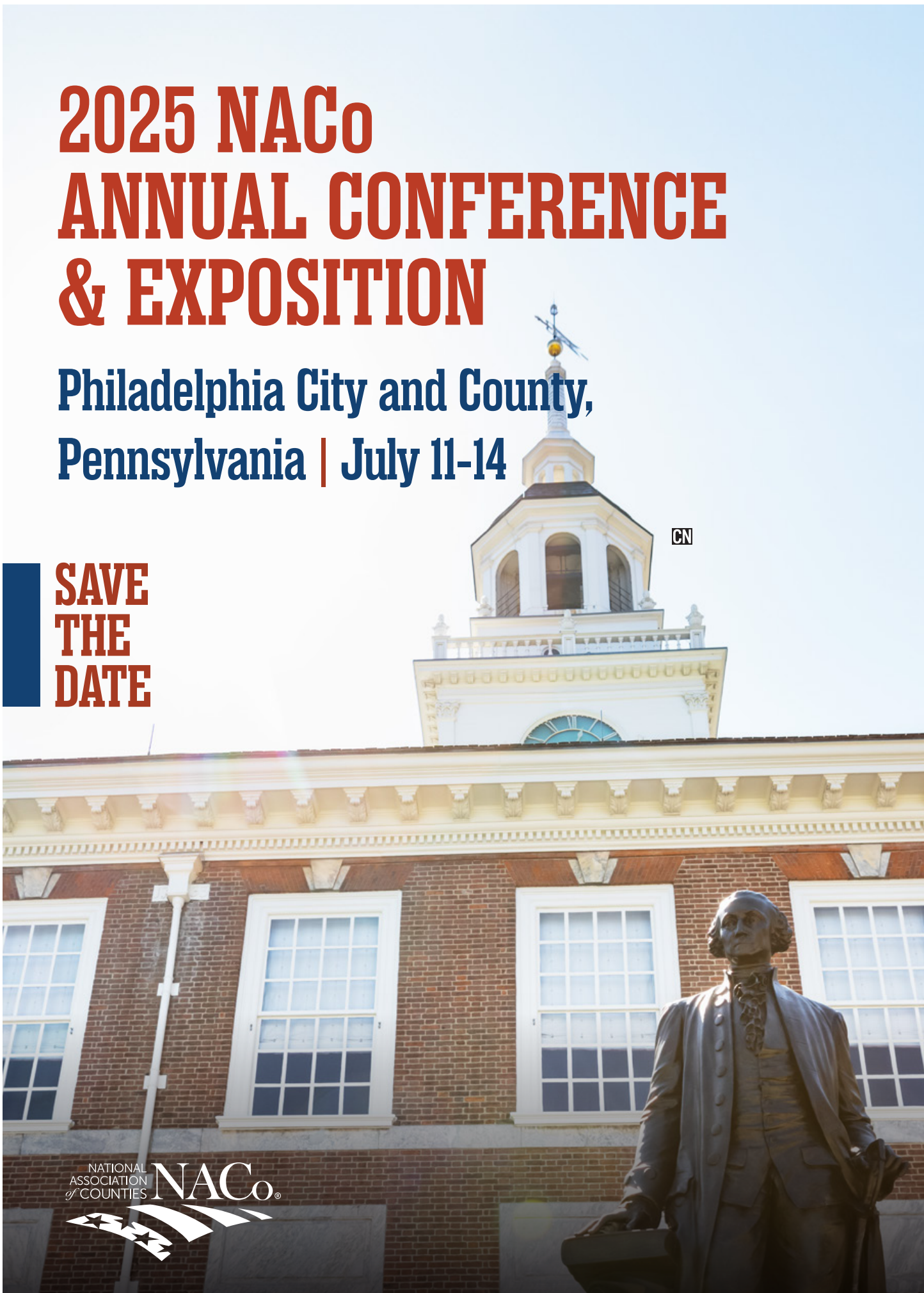
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CN



State funding fueled massive increase in public health resources for Indiana counties

From HEALTH page 1

the same for 20 years — \$7 million,” said Lindsay Weaver, Indiana’s state health commissioner.

“It really made it so that our local communities had to come up with the tax revenue if they wanted to actually invest in this space.”

In the last two years, the state has added \$225 million in funding for public health through the Health First Indiana program, which allocated \$75 million in the 2024 fiscal year and \$150 million in 2025.

Three-quarters of that goes to core public health services with an eye toward prevention, including maternal and child health, chronic disease prevention and tobacco and vaping prevention and cessation and lead paint management.

Counties must provide 20% in matching funds.

“For some of our counties, it’s about close to what they had always been spending, and for some counties it’s a little bit less,” Weaver said.

Six counties declined the funding in 2024, but changed their minds for 2025, putting the state at 100% participation.

“There was some concern that if they accepted the state funding, that they’d be letting the state take over their health department, and that’s not the case at all,” Weaver said.

“I love this legislation because it really leaves it to the counties,” she said.

“Our counties that are off by Chicago look really different than our counties that are in our rural southern part of the state, closer to Kentucky,” she noted. “Resources are different, cultures are different, and we leave it up to counties to decide what they’ll do.”

“We give them the resources and the data to decide what their priorities are and to address the leading causes [of bad health outcomes].”

Like many health initiatives, the impetus for Health First Indiana came during the COVID-19 pandemic, but indicators were alarming well before 2020.

“We just have poor health outcomes in the state of Indiana — high obesity rates, one



Allen County, Ind. residents with Down syndrome participate in a fitness program at GiGi's Playhouse Fort Wayne. GiGi's was one of 43 local organizations that received Health First Indiana funding from the county to address obesity in their population. Local physical and occupational therapy college students get them active several times per week and teach portion size and nutrition to families in the program. Photo courtesy of Allen County Public Health

of the higher infant mortality rates, maternal mortality rates,” Weaver said. “We needed to make a difference. That is really one of those spaces where the state should have a bigger role to help invest, because we need all of our counties to be healthy in order to have a healthy state.”

Waldron served on former Gov. Eric Holcomb’s public health commission in 2021-2022 and her optimism grew when she saw close to perfect attendance from commission members over the course of the year.

“A lot of times, you see that a commission is meeting on a topic to improve something; many times, there’s a report that comes out of it, but not a lot of action,” she said.

“Parts of this bill were verbatim what we wrote in the report, and what passed was historic for Indiana.”

While some of the money has helped Allen County supplement its internal public

health operations, the fastest way to build capacity has been to fund the existing services provided by nonprofits.

After years of receiving grants for the county health department, Waldron now finds herself awarding them to local organizations to do much of the preventive work — \$2.1 million to 29 organizations in 2024 and nearly \$3 million for 43 organizations in 2025.

Those organizations have expanded mobile pediatric care services, offered support services and linkage to care for survivors of domestic violence, assisted with benefit enrollment navigation for people with disabilities and more.

Waldron said the organizations that Allen County funded in 2024 served 80,000 community members and renewed grants with many of the nonprofits, but she didn’t want to see any complacency.

“If we awarded you in ‘24 and we want to award you in ‘25, you’ve got to show us how

your growth will happen,” she said. “We want to do more for more, not just maintain the status quo.”

Weaver likes seeing counties reach out to local providers to enhance preventive service delivery.

“I think this approach of using data, allowing it to be locally driven, really emphasizing partnerships at the local level, that the counties can’t be expected to do this work,” she said.

“They need to identify those partners,” she noted.

“Those are going to be the big success stories, and we will see health outcomes move down the way. But we also ask people to be patient, because it’s going to take time. But we’ll see things improve at the local level before we see them improve at the state level.”

David Bottorff, executive director of the Association of Indiana Counties, said the association cautioned counties against hiring new staff in fa-

vor of partnering with local organizations.

“That way, if the state does try to cut funding, the partners can show up and say, ‘This money was coming to us,’” he said.

Which may be what it takes to keep funding level. The state Legislature is working on its next biennial budget, and with two months to go, Health First Indiana is slated to receive \$200 million, \$25 million less than the last two years.

“It’s still better than what we had before,” Bottorff said.

Weaver noted that many counties enhanced their 2024 funding with American Rescue Plan Act money, knowing the 2025 funding would increase.

“A lot of reasons they were successful in the first year was because of that head start, but if we don’t sustain this funding, it’s all going to be for naught,” Weaver said.

“A huge investment one-time is not how you improve health outcomes.” **CN**

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People in crisis need help, not handcuffs

by **Meredith Moran**
staff writer

Counties can better serve people experiencing a behavioral health crisis by engaging behavioral health specialists instead of law enforcement, experts told county officials at a recent meeting held at NACo headquarters.

County leaders shared local behavioral health crisis challenges and solutions at play in their communities, at an intergovernmental roundtable NACo hosted on Jan. 30. Engaging behavioral health specialists instead of law enforcement and diverting people from the justice system to treatment and long-term support were identified as ways counties can better serve people experiencing a behavioral health crisis.

“People that are in a crisis, they need that support, they don’t need the handcuffs,” said Dan Gillison, NAMI’s chief executive officer of the National Alliance on Mental Illness.

Dallas County’s Rapid Integrated Group Healthcare Team

Dallas County, Texas has found success in implementing a Rapid Integrated Group Healthcare Team (RIGHT Care), which provides people experiencing a behavioral health crisis with proper support and diverts them from the justice system.

The RIGHT Care model brings in dispatch and field behavioral health clinicians to support paramedics and law enforcement in providing crisis de-escalation and stabilization and help people experiencing a behavioral health crisis navigate resources for long-term support. It was piloted through a revolving fund, in which the county helped fund the teams to get them off the ground, said Dallas County Judge Clay Jenkins.

“If you’ve got cities that aren’t in RIGHT Care interdisciplinary teams, talk to your county about starting a revolving [fund] to help get them started,” Jenkins said. “Because once you take your part of the money back, they’re going to keep it going, because they’re



The National Academy for State Health Policy’s Sandra Wilkniss (left) makes a point at the intergovernmental roundtable. Photo by Nicole Weissman

going to see this is really good for public safety in their communities.”

Pima County’s mental health crisis line

In Pima County, Ariz., when someone calls the county’s mental health crisis line, which receives about 6,000 calls monthly, if the crisis isn’t resolved over the phone (roughly 85% are), then a team of two clinicians is dispatched to the individual’s home. Within those face-to-face interventions, about 70% of crises are resolved, and for the 30% who need a higher level of intervention, the county has crisis facilities, including its High-Intensity Behavioral Health Emergency Center, according to Margie Balfour, Connections Health Solutions’ chief of quality and clinical innovation.

“We use that word ‘emergency’ very strategically, because it has implications for parity, it has implications for EMTALA [The Emergency Medical Treatment and Labor Act],” Balfour said. “So, start to make that argument that these are behavioral health emergencies that should be funded and treated as such.”

After people are stabilized

and discharged back into the community, Pima County provides follow-up services, “because a crisis doesn’t just flip off like a light switch,” including step-down facilities that are lower intensity, a transitions clinic and a peer-run agency that checks in with people, according to Balfour.

“The community has really galvanized around common goals, and that common goal is getting care in the ‘least restrictive’ setting,” Balfour said. “For those of us in the justice world, that means keeping people out of jail, keeping people out of law enforcement contact. For those of us in the healthcare world, least restrictive means out of the ER, out of the hospital, but we’re all aligned toward that common goal — that’s kind of our thread.”

The “least restrictive” option is also the most cost effective — providing adequate community care is less expensive than putting people experiencing a behavioral health crisis in the justice system, Balfour said. It’s important to make it as easy as possible for law enforcement to “do the right thing,” she added, which can include providing them with training in crisis intervention

and trauma-informed care and making the process to divert an individual experiencing a behavioral health emergency to a crisis center quicker than booking them into jail. It takes more than 30 minutes on average to book somebody into the county jail, and it’s around 10 (sometimes, even as quick as five) minutes to get them into the crisis center, according to Balfour.

“So, whether you’re talking about it from social justice or healthcare, clinical or just responsible stewardship of taxpayer funds, that thread argument makes sense to a lot of different people,” Balfour said.

Ending competency evaluation orders in Miami-Dade County

Steve Leifman, a retired Miami-Dade County, Fla. associate administrative judge, said his time in the justice system showed him how ineffectively mental health funding is used for the most vulnerable.

Florida spends one-third of its entire adult mental health budget on determining people’s competency in court, meanwhile 70% of people in jail in the United States either have a serious mental illness,

substance use disorder or both, Leifman said. Simply determining whether someone who is justice-involved is “competent” doesn’t help them, and he said that during his time as a judge, there were times people would leave the courthouse, without receiving any access to treatment, and get arrested before they hit the parking lot, because they were still floridly psychotic.

Community mental health was designed in America to serve people with moderate mental illness, not acute, and programming needs to shift to accommodate those with higher need or else the cycle will just continue, Leifman said. In Miami-Dade County, getting police officers with PTSD treated greatly helped outcomes, as did ending competency evaluation orders for people experiencing a behavioral health crisis, and instead assessing them for treatment, so that they can be sent to a crisis stabilization unit instead of jail.

“If you want to really fix government, stop spending money on stuff that doesn’t work, like competency, and spend it on treatment,” Leifman said. “...

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Counties share behavioral health wins

From *MENTAL HEALTH* page 7

Not one party, not one person, not one institution created this nightmare. And it's not going to be one party or one person or one institution that's going to fix it. It truly has to be a collaborative effort."

Leifman said he was part of a delegation that went to Trieste, Italy to study its mental health system, which is among the best in the world.

There, people experiencing a behavioral health crisis are provided with a bed and three case managers who work in 8-hour shifts, so the individual is constantly covered, which is significantly cheaper than housing someone in a hospital, he said.

After an individual's been stabilized, they go through a vocational education program and are connected to employment.

"We shouldn't, nor do we need to, accept the system we have today," Leifman said. "What other illness is it permissible to discharge people in the middle of the night with no medication, with no services?"

"And then when they fail — because, God, why would they succeed? — we blame them instead of us for setting up this ridiculous system and put them in jail. So, we can, and we must, do better by this population."

Streamlining access to resources is key, said Milwaukee County, Wis. Executive David Crowley, who highlighted the county's "No Wrong Door Model," which puts housing, the commission on aging, children youth and family services and veterans services, all under the umbrella of the county's department of health and human services.

"No matter how you are entering our door, we want to make sure you get access to all of our services," Crowley said. "Just because you're a veteran doesn't mean you don't need access to housing and all the other things, including behavioral health services, so we wanted to make sure that we were addressing all the underlying needs without people having to make multiple phone calls to us."

Milwaukee County builds center where it's needed

Milwaukee County used American Rescue Plan Act funding to build its emergency behavioral health center closer to the city of Milwaukee to better serve its at-risk population (it was previously in a more affluent area that had less need and was harder for low-income people in crisis to access). The county is also building single family and affordable housing units and has established additional behavioral health services in the same area as well, Crowley added.

"The data showed us that all the individuals that we were seeing coming through our doors came from seven particular ZIP codes that were nowhere near the former complex," Crowley said. "So, by building this complex right near many of the other health and human services that we provide, we've almost created a health and human service campus within our city."

Funding solutions

Jonah C. Cunningham, chief executive officer of the National Association of County Behavioral Health and Developmental Disability Directors, said the organization created a funding chart of federal, state, local and philanthropic funding streams that counties can use to build out a component of their crisis continuum, and the Department of Agriculture can be a resource for funding brick-and-mortar investments through community development and the Health Resources and Services Administration can help fund some of the workforce to fill that.

"All of our communities are different, but if we're going to be extensions of the state, like many of us are, doing the work that the state doesn't want to do around behavioral health, those resources should be coming directly to us," Crowley said. "Because we're the closest ones on the ground to those who are affected, but also the voices that contribute to the solutions we have better access to." **CN**

SPONSORED CONTENT

NACo, NATIONWIDE OFFER SCHOLARSHIP OPPORTUNITY



For the 25th consecutive year, the National Association of Counties (NACo) Deferred Compensation Program, in partnership with Nationwide, is offering a remarkable scholarship opportunity for high school seniors. This initiative aims to support the educational aspirations of the children and grandchildren of county employees who participate in the NACo Deferred Compensation Program.



Essay Question

Applicants are asked to submit a 500-word essay that answers the following question:

Recruiting and retaining employees is a pain point for today's human resources professionals. This is especially true in the public sector, where salaries tend to be lower than in the private sector. Please highlight how the public sector may highlight employee benefit opportunities available to employees, to assist with attracting and retaining younger workers as they start their career journey after college. In your response, please consider but not limit it to, the differences in benefit packages offered to public sector employees vs. private sector employees, with a specific focus on employer-funded defined benefit plans and employee funded defined contribution plans such as 457(b) deferred compensation plans, most commonly used in the public sector.

Partnership for a Better Future

Nationwide and NACo have a long-standing partnership dedicated to helping America's workers prepare for and live in retirement through 457(b) deferred compensation

plans. This scholarship program is an extension of their commitment, recognizing that county workers often face immediate financial challenges, such as funding college education for their family members. By offering these scholarships, NACo and Nationwide aim to alleviate some of these financial burdens.

Encouraging Academic Excellence

This scholarship opportunity is more than just financial aid; it is a recognition of the hard work and dedication of high school seniors. It encourages students to continue their academic journey with the support of their families and communities. By investing in the education of young individuals, NACo and Nationwide are contributing to the development of future leaders who will positively impact their communities and beyond. The scholarship's essay question also focuses on current financial trends with the goal of getting high school graduates to begin thinking about their finances and start healthy financial habits.

Visit nrsforu.com/scholarship for more information and to apply.

Congress can make changes to improve rural roads

by **Meredith Moran**
staff writer

To improve rural road safety across the country and better serve local communities’ specific needs, Congress must afford counties more flexibility in how funds can be spent in the 2026 surface transportation reauthorization, Converse County, Wyo. Commissioner Jim Willox said Feb. 12 during testimony on behalf of NACo before the U.S. House Subcommittee on Highways and Transit.

“What works in Wyoming, doesn’t work in Texas, doesn’t work in Florida,” Willox said at the Capitol Hill hearing, dubbed “America Builds: A Review of Programs to Address Roadway Safety.”

“So, more flexibility in those dollars, so that we can be more creative at the local level and accountable ... would be beneficial.”

Counties own or operate 44% of public roads and 38% of bridges. In Wyoming, counties own more than 14,000

miles of road, 96% of which are categorized as rural. Rural communities have unique challenges and needs when it comes to transportation safety; they often rely on non-traditional infrastructure, such as lane bridges and gravel roads, which present safety concerns, said Willox, who serves as vice chair of the NACo Transportation Committee.

Converse County needs dust control to keep its roads safe, which isn’t eligible under the current surface transportation funding framework, as it’s categorized as an environmental control and not a safety control, Willox added — emphasizing the need for more flexibility in reauthorization funding.

“In my county, we are larger than the state of Rhode Island, and we have over 500 miles of gravel roads,” Willox said. “When it comes to road safety, you may think of rumble strips or center lines, but neither of those are good options on gravel. Instead, gravel roads need dust suppression, longer



Converse County, Wyo. Commissioner Jim Willox makes a point Feb. 12 while testifying about rural road needs before the U.S. House Subcommittee on Highways and Transit.

culverts and regular blading to avoid wash-boarding [which causes ripples in gravel roads, making them dangerous to drive on].

“This is an area where I believe the government can do more to support rural communities by empowering local

leaders to implement safety strategies that work for them,” he said.

The nation’s “broken permitting system” creates additional challenges for counties, particularly in Western rural communities, which usually have larger federal oversight due to public lands, Willox said. Converse County currently needs to reduce, grade and pave an existing gravel road, but because of the extensive U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management (BLM) permitting and review process, the project is being delayed for another year, he said.

road,” Willox said.

To make roads safer, counties need the ability to receive both direct funding for regular maintenance and ongoing activities and grant funding for bigger projects, he said.

“If we don’t have the eligibility and the ability to go after grants that can help us with the large projects, many small underpopulated or underfunded counties won’t have the opportunity to do those projects that are larger in scale, that can be funded through their grant method,” Willox said. “Direct funding is wonderful, but if you’re a small county with a small population, the formula number is going to be smaller.”

“A blade costs half a million dollars now. If the formula gives you \$100,000, that’s still five years to gather it up ... so I think the blend [of grant and direct funding] is what’s important.”

To keep roads and residents safe, the whole system has to work, and county roads are a vital part of that — “nothing gets from ‘Point A to Point B’ without leaving the federal road system and crossing a county or city street and bridge,” Willox said.

In his closing statement before the U.S. House Subcommittee on Highways and Transit, Willox shared the path his fellow Converse County commissioner, who is also a cattle rancher, takes to sell his cattle at the market, to emphasize how essential partnerships at all levels of government are in strengthening the nation’s infrastructure.

“In order for him to get his cattle to market, he must travel across a series of roads — six miles of county gravel road, five miles of paved county road, three miles of a state highway, 68 miles of the interstate, 49 miles of a U.S. highway, finally into a city street to deliver the cattle to market,” Willox said. “To ensure road safety, there cannot be a weak link in that network. The interstate can be lined with pillows and mattresses, but if the county roads are unsafe, we have not done enough to keep our road users safe.” **CN**

WORD SEARCH

SUFFOLK COUNTY, NEW YORK

Created by Mary Ann Barton

B Z O K H K W H W S F D G M E H G T E B

X E I D N K A A U B H O N E R Q O R E A

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S P O P U L A T I O N I S H A S L M H S

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J X X E A R E A J H I R E E E O A F E U

HAMPTONS: The Hamptons, a popular summer destination known for its natural beauty and luxury lifestyle, is located in the county.

HISTORY: The county, founded in 1683, has a rich history including being occupied by the British during the American Revolution.

ISLAND: Suffolk County is one of four counties on Long Island.

LOCATION: The county is the easternmost county in New York.

NEWSPAPER: *The Suffolk County News* is the local weekly newspaper, in business since 1885.

POPULATION: The county’s population is 1,523,170 as of 2023.

RESTAURANT: The oldest restaurant in Suffolk County is Claudio’s, which opened in 1870 in Greenport.

RIVERHEAD: While Riverhead is the county seat, you’ll find many county offices in Happaage.

SUFFOLK: The name of the county comes from Suffolk, England and means “Southern folks.”

TOURISM: Tourists spent \$4.3 billion in the county in 2023. Tourism generates \$459 million annually in local and state tax revenues.

TOWNS: The county is home to 10 towns.

AGRICULTURE: The county is a leading agricultural region offering field crops, greenhouse and nursery, aquaculture and more.

AREA: The county is 2,373 square miles and has 980 miles of coastline.

BEACHES: There are more than 190 beaches in the county, including county beaches.

EDUCATION: You’ll find at least two universities in the county including Stony Brook University and Suffolk County Community College.

GET TO KNOW...

Hudspeth County, Texas



Guadalupe Mountains National Park, Hudspeth County, Texas

by Meredith Moran
staff writer

Founded in 1917, Hudspeth County is named for Texas state Sen. Claude Benton Hudspeth from El Paso. The county is one of two (along with El Paso County) in Texas that follows Mountain Time.

Of the state’s 254 counties, Hudspeth County is the third largest, at 4,750.5 square miles, but is home to less than 3,500 people.

Its county seat, Sierra Blanca, has the only courthouse in Texas made of adobe, which is sun-dried mud bricks reinforced with straw.

The walls, which are 18 inches thick, protect the building from the county’s desert climate. Built in 1919, the courthouse is on the National Register of Historic Places.

The town was named for the Sierra Blanca volcanic peak, the highest in its mountain range, which also includes Little Blanca Mountain and Round Top. Sierra Blanca has an elevation 6,891 feet above sea level, and its slopes drain to the Rio Grande — the fourth longest river in the United States.

Guadalupe Mountains National Park, which is home to the four highest peaks in Texas and the largest exposed fossil reef in the world, is located in Hudspeth County.

The fossil reef features remnants from 260 million years ago when West Texas was covered by the sea and the park preserves 10,000 years of human history, dating back to early hunter-gatherers who lived in the area’s caves. Visitors can hike up Guadalupe Peak, referred to as “The Top of Texas,” which is the highest peak in the state, at 8,751 feet.

Sierra Blanca is the meeting point where the Southern Pacific and Texas and Pacific railroads connected, completing the southern transcontinental railroad line in 1881 — the second transcontinental railroad in the United States.

Regional history can be explored at the Hudspeth County Railroad Depot Museum housed in the wooden railroad depot, built in 1881.

From 1992 to 2001, over 200 tons of treated, dry sewage was shipped from New York City to Sierra Blanca each day, and the waste was spread over a remote site in Hudspeth County. The Texas Observer once called the 2,065-mile journey “the poo-poo choo-choo.” The controversial practice brought wealth and jobs to the county, prompting a *New York Times* headline: “New York’s Sewage was a Texas Town’s Gold” before it was ended.

The Indian Hot Springs, now a privately owned cluster of seven geothermal springs with high mineral properties, were

used as curative waters for centuries by Native Americans, are located in Hudspeth County. The springs were listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1991.

Numerous celebrities have been arrested for marijuana possession while driving through Hudspeth County (a border community) on tour buses, including rapper Snoop Dogg and singers Willie Nelson and Fiona Apple, putting the county on the pop culture map.

When Willie Nelson was arrested in 2010, the county’s lead prosecutor suggested he settle his charges by performing “Blue Eyes Crying in the Rain” for the court — Nelson instead paid a fine, but then-Hudspeth County Commissioner Wayne West took the opportunity to play one of his original songs for the country music icon.

An internet personality named Jon Jasniak from Fort Worth bought the small town of Cornudas in Hudspeth County in 2022, intending to hold contests in the area to draw in visitors with the promise of winners receiving land.

The first contest, a chili cook-off, brought in 1,000 people to the tiny town (which had a population of 19 in 2000). The cook-off featured live music and 58 cook-off participants, and the winner received 10 acres of land.

Get to Know features new NACo member counties.

.....ON THE MOVE.....>

NACo OFFICERS

- West Region Representative **Joe Briggs** attended the Montana Association of Counties Legislative Conference in Lewis and Clark County.
- Northeast Region Representative **Tammy Tincher** attended the County Commissioners Association of West Virginia Legislative Conference in Kanawha County.
- Central Region Representative **Kurt Gibbs** and Executive Director **Matt Chase** attended the Wisconsin Counties Association Legislative Conference in Dane County.

NACo STAFF

- **Jamara Green** has joined NACo as the assistant, Special Projects on the Corporate Relations team. She previously served as the special assistant for Legislative Affairs and Intergovernmental Affairs at NASA. She earned a Bachelor’s degree in Political Science from the University of South Carolina.
- **Leah Rivera** has joined NACo as director of conferences. She previously served as director of education and events for the National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization and the events director for the McChrystal Group. She earned a bachelor’s degree in integrated marketing communications from Duquesne University.
- Legislative Director **Seamus Dowdall** attended the New Hampshire Association of Counties’ Legislative Conference in Merrimack County.
- Dowdall and National Program Directors of Public Procurement **Anthony Chapman** and **Cathy Muse** attended the New York State Association of Counties Legislative Conference in Albany County.



Green



Rivera



Dowdall



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NACo’s new career site!



jobs.naco.org



PROFILES IN SERVICE

DANIELLE BETHELL

NACo Board Member
Marion County, Ore.
Commissioner



Number of years active in NACo: Three

Years in public service: Seven

Occupation: Commissioner and small business owner

Education: Bachelor of Science, Oregon State University

The hardest thing I've ever done: Climb out of generational poverty and not be a victim of my childhood circumstances.

Three people (living or dead) I'd invite to dinner: JFK, Michelle Obama, Queen Elizabeth

A dream I have is to: Testify before Congress and secure funding for real investment in prevention services.

You'd be surprised to learn that I: Navigated youth homelessness and I have extensive exposure to substance use and mental health disorders.

I'm most proud of: Breaking the cycle of generational poverty and purchasing my first home.

Every morning, I read: My daily calendar

My favorite meal is: A green salad and a baked potato.

My pet peeve is: Sticky countertops.

My motto is: I like to get things done.

The last book I read was: "The Boys in the Boat," by Daniel James Brown

My favorite movie is: "Pretty Woman"

My favorite music is: Country

My favorite U.S. president is: JFK

My county is a NACo member because: We believe in the power of partnerships.

My favorite way to relax is:
Warm tea and a good book near a wood stove.



Counties work to tackle the opioid crisis

From OPIOIDS page 3

Two community health workers provide outreach in Rise Above's mobile van that travels throughout New River Valley each day of the week, meeting with people who use substances and may be unhoused, and the organization also has a stationary location at the Pulaski Health Department two days a week, according to Alderman.

"They've built some real trust and that's really important," Lesko said. "And I think the fact that it's housed underneath the health department gives some people who might have some concerns or misunderstandings about what harm reduction is, knowing that it's under an agency that has a health model, I think has allowed people to learn about harm reduction in a way that sometimes it's hard for our local government folks to do and our citizenry."

Peer support has had a huge impact on the community in a way that the New River Valley Regional Commission didn't initially expect, and it's subsequently added more capacity for it throughout the process, Lesko said. Alderman is currently working to develop a peer coalition in the region.

Lived experience

"That lived experience is vital — being able to connect with somebody based on unique experiences and adversities that we've lived through," Alderman said. "Once I started talking to people, I realized, we've got so much in common, and not just our stories, but the way we feel about things and the way that we respond to different situations, such as relationships and work and stress, so I started sharing more, and it just evolved from there to where I had no problem sharing my

story, because so many people told me how it helped them, and it showed in their life."

Alderman was the first certified "peer" for substance use disorder in New River Valley in 2016, and the evidence-based practice has grown a lot since then, but it's still yet to become a "standard of practice," particularly in rural areas, such as the New River Valley, he said. Peers need to be embedded with first responders and in fields with high rates of substance use disorder, such as manufacturing and construction, he said.

"We need to get peers everywhere, because substance use is everywhere and recovery is also everywhere, so we've still got a lot more to do," Alderman said. "I think that everyone needs to be a little more trauma informed and really understand how we got here, how we even got to the opioid settlement fund, how we even got to harm reduction, because the root of all this stuff is trauma. And once we understand that, then we better know what to do for folks individually."

Community teamwork

What works for one county or community won't necessarily work for another, but when it comes to spending opioid settlement dollars, it's important for local governments to bring together community organizations to ensure services aren't duplicated and solicit community feedback, so that there's buy-in, according to Wheeler.

"This isn't a one-time fix," Wheeler said. "We're not going to be able to look at one issue and fix the entire drug epidemic — we have to look at this from multiple facets. We have to see how we can use this money together in different areas to work together, so I think that's going to be the key to finding the success with this opioid settlement money, but I think we can do that."

"We've just got to continue to work with our partners, continue to listen to the community and do what we think is best." **CN**


BEHIND THE SEAL

ASCENSION PARISH, LA.

Ascension Parish, located east of the state capital of Baton Rouge, was created in 1807.

The Mississippi River runs right through the center of the county (and the seal), dividing Ascension Parish into East and West, creating distinct geographic, economic and cultural differences.

East Ascension is home to major cities like Gonzales and Sorrento, while West Ascension, centered on the parish seat of Donaldsonville, is primarily agricultural.



The large building on the left of the seal represents Houmas House, one of Louisiana's most historic and well-preserved antebellum plantations. The house was once known as "The Sugar Palace" due to its prominence in the sugarcane industry and is a significant tourist attraction. It was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1980.

The right side of the seal represents the parish's industrial base, accounting for 35 different chemical and manufacturing businesses.

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

BRIGHT IDEAS | LOS ANGELES COUNTY, CALIF.

Fighting Alzheimer's: How Drumming Boosts Brain Health and Memory

PROBLEM:

People experiencing cognitive decline need ways to stay mentally nimble.

SOLUTION:

A county Alzheimer's day care center added a rhythm healing drum initiative that has proven to be extremely helpful.

by Meredith Moran
staff writer

Les Bybee, a 78-year-old with dementia, drums each week at a Los Angeles County Alzheimer's Day Care Center. Research has shown that drumming can improve cognitive and motor functions in older adults with dementia, according to studies published in the National Library of Medicine.

"He would go every day if he could — it's that helpful," said Bybee's wife and caregiver, Caroline Bybee. "He comes home with a smile, he's meeting friends that are in the same position he is, so he knows he's not the only one on Earth [with Alzheimer's], and it's made a big difference."

"Before he started, he was very depressed," she said. "He couldn't really carry on a conversation. Now, he's doing really, really well, and he looks so forward to the class."

Linda Davies, a care manager at the Santa Clarita Valley Senior Center, led the "Rhythm Healing" drumming initiative after the county helped the Alzheimer's Day Care Center purchase drumsticks and buckets to prop up the large exercise balls participants drum on.

"I'm not a music person — I'm an adult day care professional, so I just want people to move and have a good time," Davies said. "I think the fact that you give people a way to interact and a way to express themselves and to do something that they have probably never done before — that was the beauty of this."



Participants enjoy a "Rhythm Healing" session designed to help maintain cognitive function, at a Los Angeles County senior center.

"It's very joyous, very fun, very collective for everybody and a way to exercise and feel good and not even know they're exercising."

Davies went through some basic training on drumming and modeled the Rhythm Healing sessions from videos she found on YouTube; however, the participants often end up freestyling beats, she said.

"Some of them would copy what we were doing, some of them just did their own thing and nobody was corrected, because they were just into movement," Davies said.

"There was a lot of joy in that movement for them. The beauty of the drumming is that everybody ends up getting on the same page with the beat no matter what, and so they sort of become one."

"And they just totally enjoyed that. It felt like an accomplishment, that they had created this beat that was the same and

'He comes home with a smile, he's meeting friends...'

-Caroline Bybee,
wife and caregiver

they all just fell into doing it. One of them might have started it, but they all ended up doing it without even knowing."

Les' doctor has said the drumming — along with other ways he keeps busy, like making meals at home or doing word searches — has helped him maintain cognitive function. Les developed dementia roughly two-and-a-half years ago, and started participating in Rhythm Healing about seven months ago, according to Bybee.

"When you first hear 'Alzheimer's,' the first thing you think is they're going to die — that's the perception, and that's not

true," Bybee said. "... I'm just so proud of him, he's amazing. And I'm so grateful for [the program], because he was headed down the wrong way, and now he's going straight instead of down."

The Alzheimer's Day Care Center has been an amazing social outlet for Les, and the activity of drumming has helped foster a sense of community among the group, according to Bybee.

While Rhythm Healing is completely optional, as are all of the activities at the center (which include crafts and exercise such as Zumba), everyone is eager to participate, Davies said.

"When you'd say, 'Who wants to drum?' everyone would come to the circle," Davies said. "I really feel like it's the community element of it. Whereas, when we do exercise, a lot of times they're not even maybe looking at each other.

At that point in time, they're looking at the instructor who's doing the exercise, but for this, they're looking at one another and they really feel that vibration and that feeling of 'We are in this together.'"

While drumming obviously won't get rid of Alzheimer's, it's a fun way for people with dementia to work their memory and muscles, Davies said. And that's all you really can ask for, she added.

"When you run an adult day program, it's not that you're going to take away their disease, but [it's about] giving them a really good day," Davies said. "If you come in there and you feel really good about yourself and about everybody in there, then I feel like we gave them joy." **CN**

The Los Angeles County program won a 2024 NACo Achievement Award in the Human Services category.

CALIFORNIA

• **SAN DIEGO COUNTY** is adding to its program to **help the homeless**. When it launched a safe parking program last year, they added security, clean restrooms, hot showers, a dog run and a small kitchen to the parking area open for 27 cars. On average, residents stay three to six months. Those in the program are paired with a case worker to help them find housing. There are also employment, health and social service resources. The county is working to launch a site that includes sleeping cabins that will open next year.

• The **SONOMA COUNTY** Administrator's Office recently launched a survey to collect feedback on **storm preparedness** after the county was hit by an intense "atmospheric river" event in early February that caused major flooding, road closures, power failures and landslides, The Press Democrat reported.

The survey results, the county said in a news release, will be used to shape the county's emergency response efforts in the future. The county invited all residents in Sonoma County to participate in the survey but said the "widespread disruptions" were particularly bad for residents living near the lower Russian River.

COLORADO

DOUGLAS COUNTY is setting itself apart by ensuring year-round **aerial firefighting support** for 2025, according

to Hoodline.com. In a move described as both proactive and economic, county commissioners have committed to spending \$1,530,000 on a contract. The agreement secures the presence of a helicopter equipped to deliver 300 gallons of water to critical areas during wildfires, for at least 168 days until the end of the year.

"This is a historic day for Douglas County. We are the only county in the state that has

a dedicated helitak team," said Commissioner Abe Laydon, who also serves as board chair and chair of the Wildfire Action Collaborative. "This proactive measure, a small investment compared to our property values, is widely supported by and helpful to our citizens. This is also economic development. One of the reasons businesses come to Douglas County is because their investment is protected."

FLORIDA

LEE COUNTY commissioners recently voted to move forward with expanding the Cape Coral Bridge with an estimated cost of \$360 million, WZVN-TV reported. Commissioners may use a "**design, bid, build**" process to save money, the News-Press reported. Governments typically use a design-build approach for small projects. The design-bid-build process allows for increased oversight

of the work. It might also save money based on firms bidding with complete construction plans in hand.

KENTUCKY

• The **FAYETTE COUNTY** Sheriff's Office has activated its **Winter Care Program**, which provides the community with safe transportation services. According to the sheriff's office, the following services are provided in the program:

- Transportation to and from employment for those in the healthcare industry or professionals who provide direct healthcare services.
- Transportation to and from a critical medical appointment.
- Pick-up of critical prescription medications.
- Welfare checks for any most vulnerable citizens.
- Distribution of winter coats and blankets.
- Transportation to shelters.

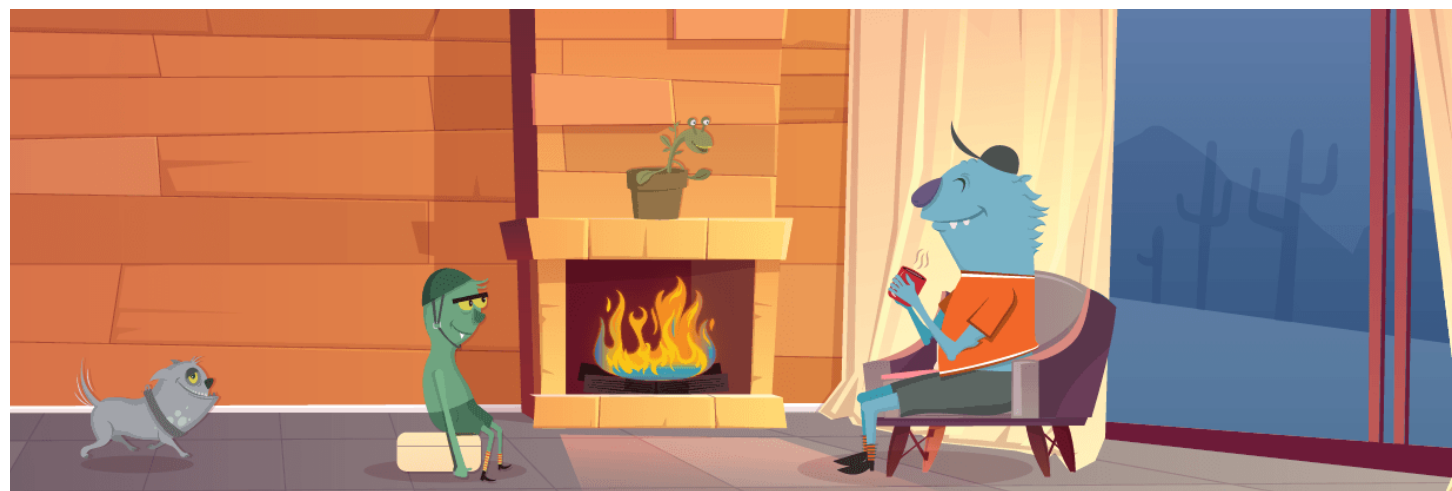
NEW YORK

• **ULSTER COUNTY** Executive Jen Metzger recently intro-

See NEWS FROM page 15

ARIZONA

MARICOPA COUNTY is seeking applicants for its Fireplace Retrofit Program, designed to **reduce air pollution** from wood-burning fireplaces and provide residents cleaner air to breathe. Residents must live within program boundaries to be eligible to apply. Residents are reimbursed up to \$2,000.



KENTUCKY

• Water levels were still high across Kentucky, West Virginia and Virginia and other parts of the Ohio Valley and mid-Atlantic regions after Valentine's Day weekend, reeling from **deadly back-to-back storms** that brought snow, ice and dangerously cold weather. Multiple counties in Kentucky declared an emergency including **MARION, CRITTENDEN, MARSHALL** and **HICKMAN** counties. The storm hammered several states with severe weather and heavy rainfall that claimed at least 14 lives in Kentucky and three in West Virginia. Three people died in floodwaters in **McDOWELL COUNTY, Va.** Photo courtesy of Chesterfield County, Va.

From NEWS FROM page 14

duced a new **paid family leave program** during her annual State of the County Address, WAMC-FM reported. The program is designed to support more than 1,400 employees, including both mothers and fathers, who wish to take time off to bond with a newborn or newly adopted child. Metzger emphasized that the program would be an improvement over the state's, as it guarantees a full salary for up to 12 weeks of leave.

In addition to the paid family leave program, Metzger expressed her hope that it would assist the county in attracting and retaining employees, especially as it enters negotiations with its five unions. She also highlighted that the county is considering potential wage increases, with the results of an ongoing pay study yet to be released.

NORTH CAROLINA

CATAWBA COUNTY has launched CredibleMind, a free **brain health platform** designed to help residents improve their overall wellbeing. Available 24/7 at <https://catawbacountync.crediblemind.com/>, the platform provides personalized mental wellbeing resources, including free assessments, home-based activities and links to local services.

It aims to reduce the stigma around anxiety, depression and stress by offering anonymous access to valuable resources. The platform features thousands of evidence-based assessments, reviewed by experts and users, and offers a variety of resources such as videos, apps, podcasts and books, catering to different learning styles. Signing up is optional, allowing users to save assessments and track progress, with all personal information remaining confidential.



OHIO

On March 6, the **OTTAWA COUNTY** Commissioners will raise an America-250 Ohio Community flag on the courthouse lawn. The AM-250 Ohio Commission provided a flag to every designated AM-250 Ohio community. Ottawa County, along with the other 87 counties across the state, are participating AM-250 Ohio communities and receive access to resources and special information on planned statewide events and initiatives to **celebrate America's 250th anniversary**. This flag-raising event

coincides with the founding of Ottawa County on March 6, 1840.

PENNSYLVANIA

The Washington Mall, located in a township about 35 miles from Pittsburgh in western Pennsylvania, may soon be the site of a demolition project, Construction & Demolition Recycling reported. County commissioners in **WASHINGTON COUNTY**, where the mall is located, reportedly have approved plans for the **mall's demolition and indicate a redevelopment project** may soon follow at the site.

A Washington County commissioner quoted by Pittsburgh-based KDKA-TV says inspectors deemed the vacant shopping mall a blighted structure, helping clear the way for the demolition and redevelopment plans. The news report indicates partial funding for the project will come from a Washington County Blight Mitigation and Demolition Fund.

KDKA-TV reported that Commissioner Nick Sherman is backing the mall's demolition, commenting, "Eliminating blight is essential to sustaining healthy communities, fostering economic development and improving the quality of life in Washington County. Blighted buildings drain municipal resources, inhibit economic growth and create

negative perceptions of our communities."

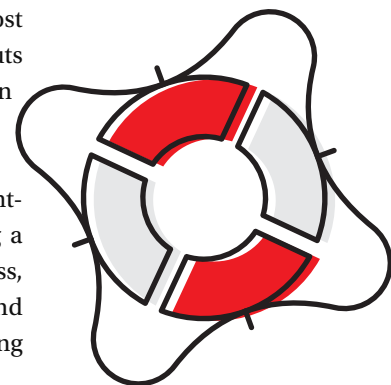
VIRGINIA

• **FAIRFAX COUNTY** is **recruiting laid-off federal workers**, encouraging them to look at county government jobs. The county launched a new website aimed at helping federal workers who have recently lost their jobs due to the recent cuts to the federal government. In addition to linking them to a county jobs website, the county is also highlighting ways to get help finding a new job, launching a business, managing mental health, and getting financial help, among other things.

• **The HENRICO COUNTY** Board of Supervisors met recently to discuss two independent investigations regarding the county's response to the City of Richmond's **water crisis** that occurred in January, WRIC-TV reported.

In 1994, the county entered an agreement with Richmond to purchase water from the city until 2040. Since this agreement, Richmond has been the main water supply for Henrico's East End. This flow was drastically impacted on Jan. 6, 2024, when a power outage at the Richmond Water Treatment Plant disrupted operations. The impact left surrounding counties including

Henrico with little to no water. "You'd never think over 30 years of this agreement being in place that this would happen. It did," said Daniel Schmitt, Henrico Board Chair. Henrico leaders are expected to discuss solution options as budget discussions begin in the coming weeks.



• **ROANOKE COUNTY** Parks, Recreation, and Tourism and Roanoke County Public Schools recently announced their collaboration in a **lifeguard training program** for high school students, WXFR-TV reported. The eight-week program of coursework, classroom and in-water sessions will provide students with essential skills and knowledge to become lifeguards. Students will learn water safety, rescue techniques, lifeguarding responsibilities, CPR and first-aid training.

Do you have news to share? Send your news tips, press releases and photos to Mary Ann Barton at mbarton@naco.org.

NEW YORK

• Looking for a fun way to engage your community? **ALBANY COUNTY** recently held a contest to **name several of its snowplows**. The residents who submitted seven winning names will march in a local St. Patrick's Day parade with two of the snowplows. From a total of 2,127 votes received, the seven winning snowplow names are:

- **SNOWSQUATCH**
- **EmpirePlowza**
- **ExSALTsior!**
- **SNO WAY JOSE**
- **Plowasaurus**
- **Sleet&Salty**
- **Frost Berne**



NOW I KNOW

...to Remember Why I'm There

by David Copeland
Tipton County, Tenn.
commissioner

I came home one day and told my wife I filed a petition to run for county commissioner. She asked “Why?” and I said, “Because I could make a difference.”

Looking at my professional experience, I had been working with public entities all over the country to address payroll issues, I had a lot of background and attraction retention and engagement with employees.

I really felt that I could bring something to the table that maybe they weren’t used to on a different perspective, so that’s initially why I was going to run: To hopefully help county personnel be more engaged.

But that changed during the campaign. I felt like my predecessor, who had been in office for 24 years, was not as focused

on the district. It wasn’t anything personal, but I knew he had bought a second home out of state and just wasn’t around as much as he used to be.

I probably knocked on 1,000 doors over the course of the campaign in 2018 and I heard a lot of “We don’t even know who our county commissioner is,” or “We don’t even know what you do.”

Our assessor’s office does community awareness meetings, but they weren’t happening in my district, so when I took office, I started focusing on citizen engagement.

It wasn’t about me, it was about helping people find a voice to express their opinions and needs and ideas about how county government could best work for them.

I thought that was the kind of change I could bring after taking a look at what others did and what I felt like our residents need and want.



Tipton County, Tenn. Commissioner David Copeland Photo courtesy of David Copeland

So, whenever we take on county business, I want to make sure our residents can understand it and find out more.

If that’s the difference I make while I’m in office, I’ll feel like I did what I set out to accomplish. **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.

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