

The County Landscape Project:

Service Provision and the Public Workforce

Vision

Healthy, safe and vibrant counties across America.

Mission

Strengthen America's Counties.

About

The National Association of Counties (NACo) strengthens America's counties, serving nearly 38,000 county elected officials and 3.6 million county employees. Founded in 1935, NACo unites county officials to:

- Advocate county priorities in federal policymaking
- Promote exemplary county policies and practices
- Nurture leadership skills and expand knowledge networks
- Optimize county and taxpayer resources and cost savings, and
- Enrich the public understanding of county government.

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The County Landscape Project

Counties are vital to the foundation of our communities, helping shape the places where we live, work and thrive. From maintaining critical infrastructure and delivering essential public services to fostering economic growth and ensuring public safety, county governments play a pivotal role in the daily lives of millions of Americans. Notwithstanding our significance, the complexity and diversity of county governments often go unnoticed. The County Landscape Project brings the nuts and bolts of county governance to the forefront, providing a clear and comprehensive guide to how counties function, govern and serve our residents.

As NACo continues its commitment to strengthen America's counties, we recognize the need for a unified, accessible and authoritative resource that provides a comprehensive guide to our nation's county government system. By bringing together key insights, data and best practices under a single, cohesive brand, we aim to enhance the way county officials, policymakers, federal and philanthropic partners and the public engage with

and utilize these valuable resources. Whether examining the **organizational structures, financial frameworks, essential services or intergovernmental roles of counties**, the project serves as a crucial reference for understanding county government at its core.

This initiative reflects NACo's dedication to providing clarity in county governance, empowering leaders with actionable insights and fostering collaboration across all levels of government. Whether you are an elected official shaping policy, a researcher exploring county data or a resident seeking to understand the impact of local government, these resources serve as a guide to the essential functions of counties nationwide.

As we move forward, we invite you to explore, engage and utilize the resources from the Project in your work. Counties are the backbone of our nation's governance, and together, we can ensure that their impact is recognized, strengthened and sustained for generations to come.



Matthew D. Chase, CEO/Executive Director

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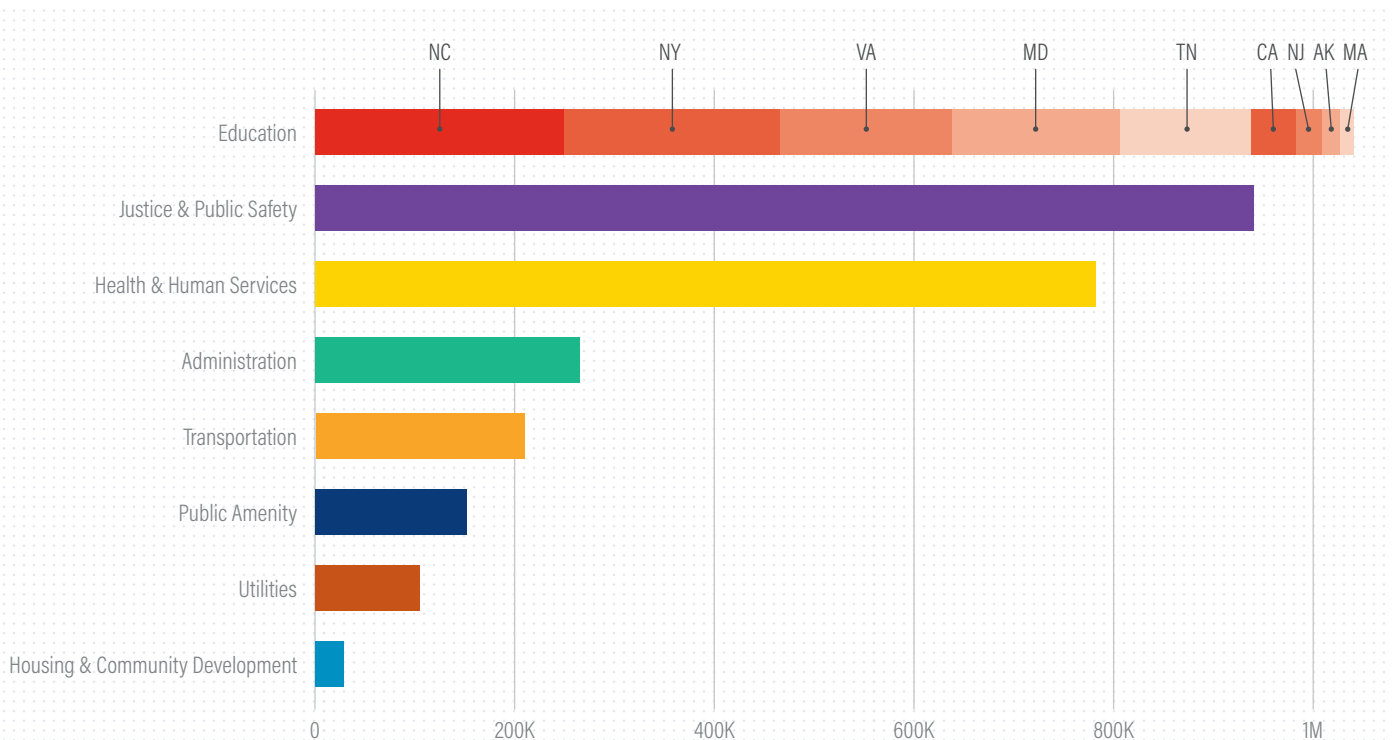
Local Service Provision and the County Workforce

Counties impact daily life in ways often unseen, managing over 45 percent of public roads and 38 percent of bridges, while responding to health crises, housing challenges and natural disasters. Often behind the scenes, with nearly **38,000 county elected officials** and a workforce of **3.6 million public servants**, counties are responsible for maintaining key pieces of infrastructure, caring for our physical and mental health, administering our elections, ensuring public safety, strengthening environmental stewardship and so much more.

No two counties are the same. Counties are diverse in structure and size, serving urban, rural and suburban communities across the country. Yet while organizational structures may vary, **all county, parish and borough governments and our workers are on the front lines of delivering vital services to residents.** As determined by state statute, the authority, flexibility and role of counties varies in each of these service areas, though all contribute to building healthy, safe and vibrant communities.

EDUCATION*, JUSTICE & PUBLIC SAFETY AND HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES ARE TOP COUNTY SERVICE CATEGORIES BY EMPLOYMENT

Total County Employment, by Category



**Note: Counties employ education workers primarily in nine states. For more details on the county role in education, see the "Education" section below.*

Source: NACo Analysis of U.S. Census Bureau - Census of Individual Governments: Employment, 2022

County governments employ 3.6 million workers to provide services to residents. At the national level, local government employment numbers can show what types of services counties focus on providing residents, and state-level breakdowns give important context. **Over 1 million** county employees work in the education system, though counties in only nine states are directly involved in primary, secondary and/or postsecondary education. Aside from education, the top two employment categories are: (1) justice and public safety, with **939,000 workers**, followed by (2) health and human services with **781,000 workers**. In contrast to education services, counties in nearly every state employ justice and public safety or health and human services workers. Infrastructure is another key service area for counties: across nearly every state, **312,000 county workers** build and maintain critical transportation and utility infrastructure.

At the state level, counties vary in terms of which services we focus on providing. Although counties

employ the most workers for education services in total, education is the primary focus for counties in only eight states. Justice and public safety, on the other hand, is the top employment category for counties in 28 states, while health and human services is the top category for the remaining 12 states.

“It is one our priorities to have a workforce that reflects the residents that we serve, and so that means being inclusive to all members of our community.”

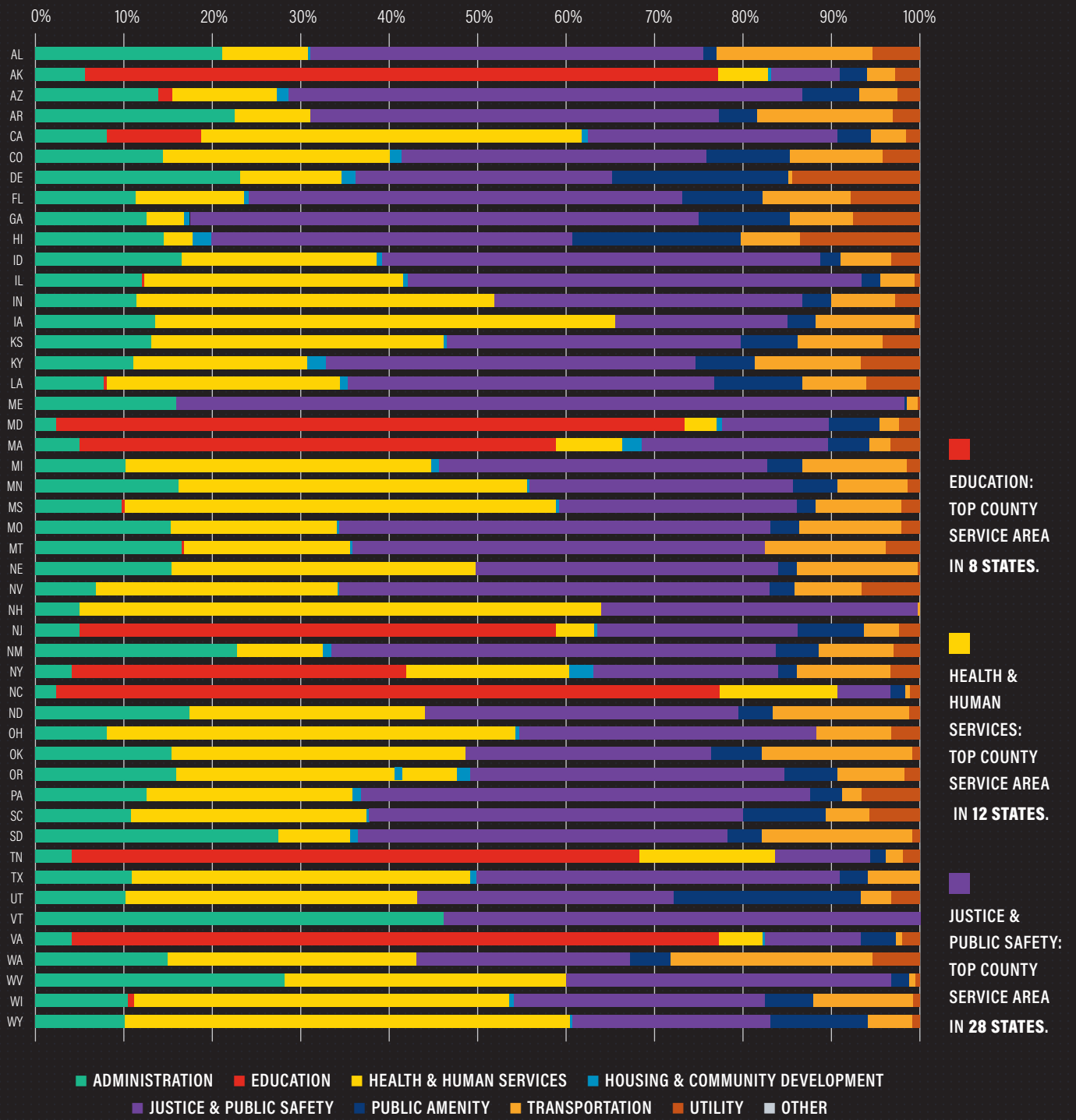
— Andrea Scott, Director of Talent Acquisition, Harris County, Texas



Counties are deeply engaged in the labor market, employing more than 3.6 MILLION public servants, representing one out of every 50 American workers.

COUNTIES SERVE RESIDENTS IN A VARIETY OF AREAS; HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES AND JUSTICE & PUBLIC SAFETY ARE COMMON ACROSS MOST STATES

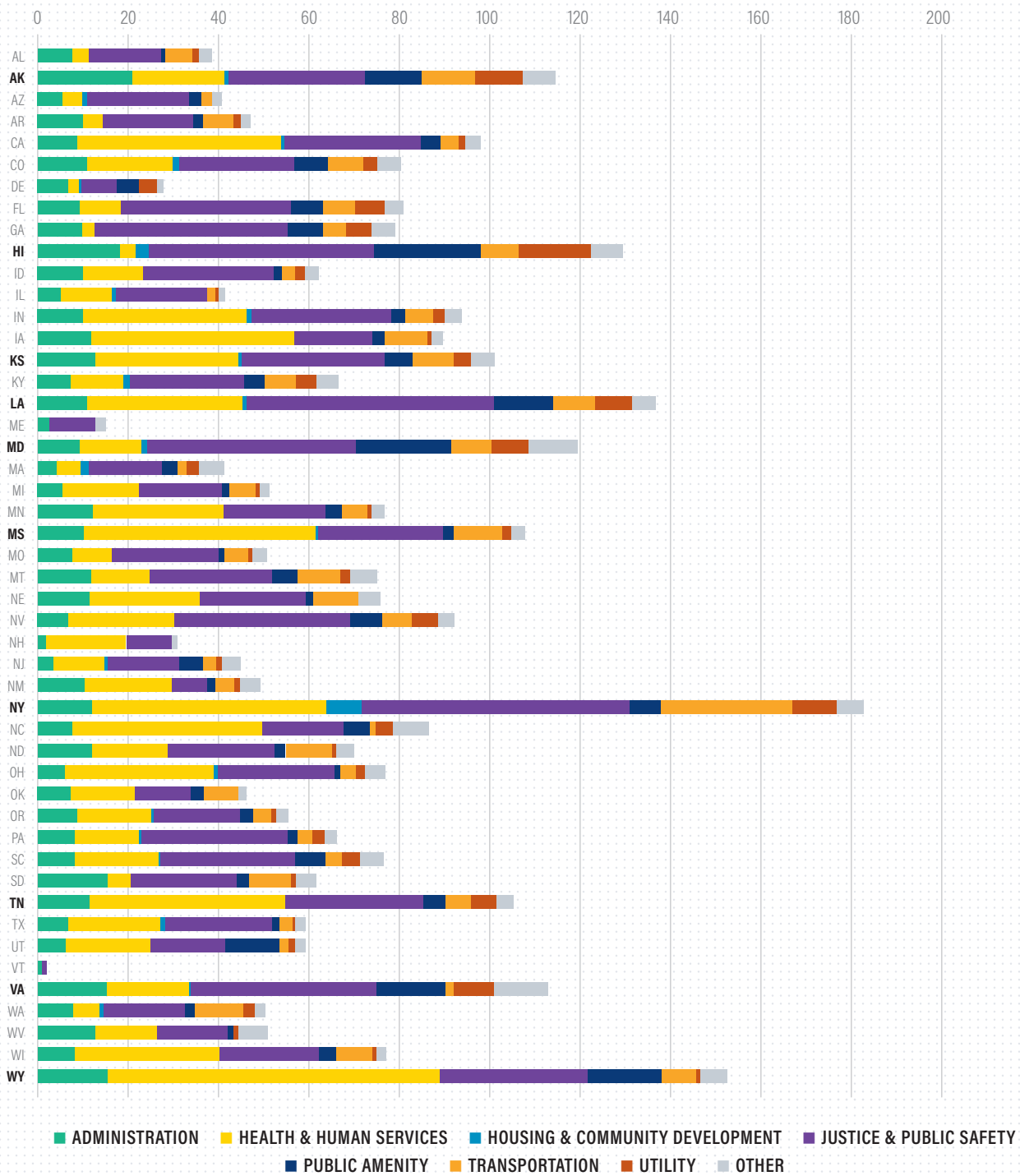
County Employment Breakdown by State



Source: NACo Analysis of U.S. Census Bureau - Census of Individual Governments: Employment, 2022

COUNTIES IN 10 STATES EMPLOY HIGH SHARE OF LOCAL WORKFORCE

County Employment by Service Area (Minus Education), per 10,000 Residents, Breakdown by State



**Note: States in which counties employ more than 100 non-education workers per 10,000 residents are highlighted.*

Source: NACo Analysis of U.S. Census Bureau - Census of Individual Governments: Employment, 2022; NACo Analysis of U.S. Census Bureau - Population Estimates Program (PEP) - 2022

THERE ARE 10 STATES IN WHICH COUNTY GOVERNMENTS EMPLOY OVER 100 WORKERS FOR EVERY 10,000 RESIDENTS:



New York
182 workers



Wyoming
152 workers



Louisiana
136 workers



Hawaii
129 workers



Maryland
119 workers



Alaska
114 workers



Virginia
112 workers



Mississippi
107 workers



Tennessee
105 workers



Kansas
101 workers

At the local level, employment figures can be compared to county population levels to better understand the prevalence of these services in residents' everyday lives. In the few states where counties are directly involved in education (e.g., Maryland, North Carolina, Tennessee and Virginia), residents are most likely to interact with county employees, since teachers are employed by the county directly. Outside of the education system, **there are 10 states in which county governments play a particularly pronounced role as a local employer and service provider, employing over 100 workers for every 10,000 residents** (see above).

In these 10 states, residents are most likely to interact with county workers, especially in the justice and public safety system (e.g., law enforcement, courts, firefighters, EMTs) or in the health and human services system (e.g., hospital workers, public health workers, social services providers). Four states have a particularly diminished county role, employing 30 or less county workers per 10,000 residents: New Hampshire (30 county workers per 10,000 residents), Delaware (27 workers), Maine (15 workers) and Vermont (1 worker). These figures, however, do not fully capture residents' interactions with other county services which rely less on labor and more on capital, as residents drive on county roads and bridges, use county water and sewer utilities or visit a county park or library.

County employees are the face of local government services to residents, and the key to continued excellence in service provision. **As the public sector workforce is stretched thin due to competition with the private sector and shifting workforce dynamics, the challenge of providing county services with less resources may intensify.** Thus, county governments are working diligently to provide the benefits and compensation needed to attract and retain high-quality employees.

"In a metro market, we are competing with private industry as well as other public entities in the area... [It is a challenge] to find the right talent, the right fit, that will be excited about working in Rockdale County, and excited about serving the citizens."

— Toni Holmes, Executive Director, Department of Talent Management, Rockdale County, Ga.





Key Takeaways

County Workforce

Counties are deeply engaged in the labor market, employing more 3.6 million public servants, representing one out of every 50 American workers.

County Authority

State law requires counties to provide some services, prohibits us from providing other services and permits still other services as optional. Typical examples of each include:

- **Must:** Public health, infrastructure, jails, emergency management
- **May:** Parks, libraries, economic development, workforce training
- **Cannot:** Some zoning regulations, certain utility services (gas, electric)

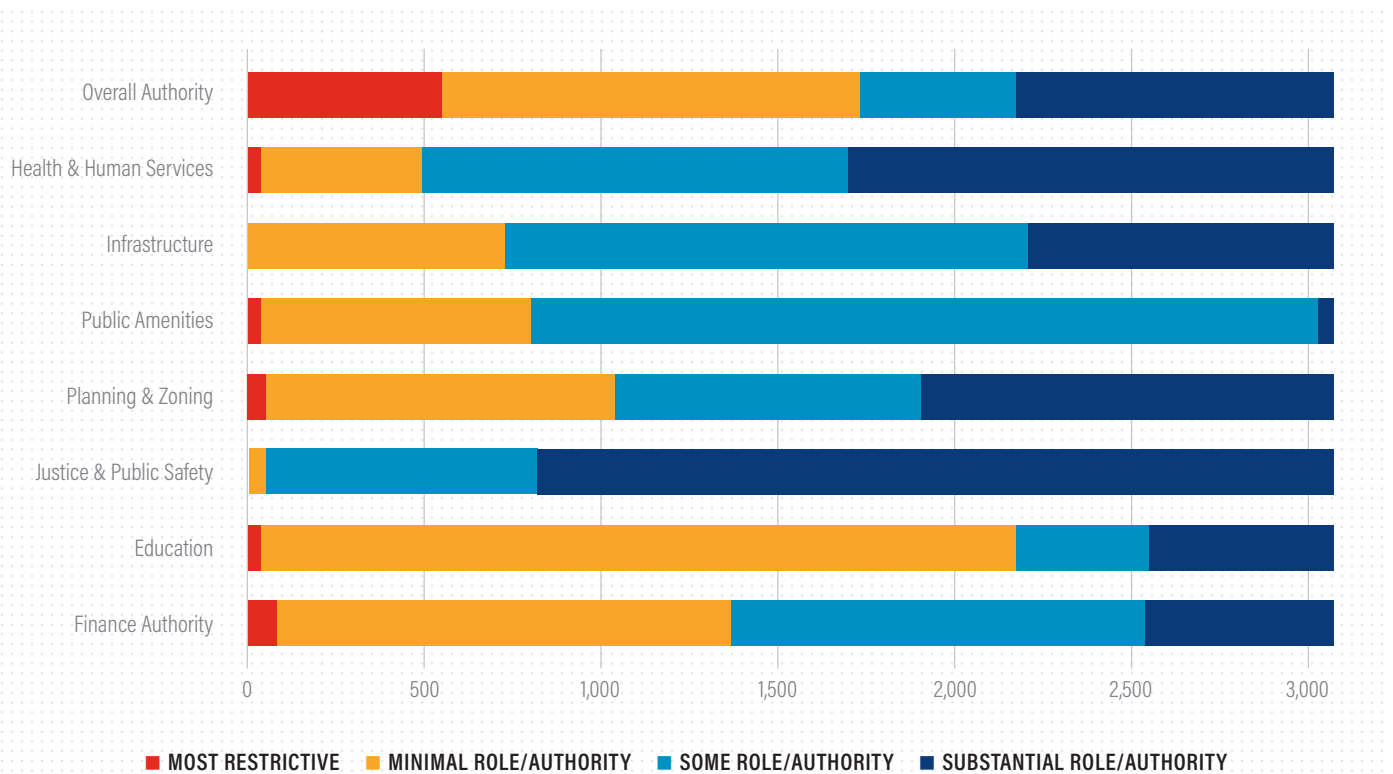
County Authority Over Local Service Provision

State statute determines county authority. State law requires counties to provide some services, prohibits us from providing other services and permits still other services as optional. Across state lines, the county role varies widely since different states grant their counties different levels of authority over different service areas. Nevertheless, certain trends still exist at the national level.

Typical mandatory county services include public health systems, infrastructure (such as roads and bridges) and public safety services, like overseeing jails and providing emergency management coordination. Public amenities, such as parks and libraries, workforce initiatives and economic development programs, tend to be generally optional county services. Depending on the state, counties are often prohibited from enacting certain zoning regulations or providing certain public utilities, especially electricity and gas.

COUNTIES GRANTED BROADEST AUTHORITY OVER JUSTICE AND PUBLIC SAFETY SERVICES BY STATE STATUTES

Authority Level as Determined by State Statute, by Number of Counties



Source: NACo Research, 2022.

Note: The above chart depicts the total percent of all counties that fall into each category. The total number of counties was calculated based on overall state authority in these areas, with the understanding that there may be some slight discrepancies due to variations within the states themselves. The authority levels were selected based on NACo's own evaluation of the county role as determined by individual state statutes in each service area and subject to revision upon further analysis.

Services are often delivered through various mechanisms between counties, municipalities and the state. One of the most notable partnerships among government levels is found in delivering educational services. While states play the largest role in administering K-12 schools and community colleges, counties in most states are required to provide funding for education through allocating a portion of their property taxes. Counties also work alongside municipalities to provide a range of services, particularly within the public safety sphere. While cities are heavily involved in law enforcement, counties are integral to supporting jail operations and maintenance. Municipalities are also

involved in zoning and development policy to a greater degree than counties, as counties mostly have zoning jurisdiction over unincorporated areas. Counties in New England states, such as Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire and Vermont, have a notably diminished role compared to counties in other states due to the expanded role of towns in the local government system within those states.

The types of services which state statutes mandate, allow or prohibit counties to provide together help to shape the overall role of counties within a state, and how involved counties are in providing services to residents.



“We have over 8,400 positions in my county, but routinely we hold a thousand vacancies... When I entered public service over 30 years ago, I sat in a ballroom with probably 300-400 other people competing for a job because everybody knew the benefits and the public sector was very desirable. It was a place that people wanted to be. Today, we’re finding that people don’t understand even the difference between a county and city sometimes... I do think as counties, we need to talk about the values of our organization and what we stand for.”

— Paul Nerland, Chief Operating Officer,
Fresno County, Calif.

COUNTY GOVERNMENT WORKFORCE, BY STATE

STATE	TOTAL COUNTY GOVERNMENT EMPLOYMENT	SHARE FULL-TIME	TOP EMPLOYMENT CATEGORY
Alabama	19,577	91%	Justice & Public Safety
Alaska	25,547	79%	Education
Arizona	30,264	95%	Justice & Public Safety
Arkansas	14,174	86%	Justice & Public Safety
California	425,268	89%	Health & Human Services
Colorado	46,506	91%	Justice & Public Safety
Delaware	2,797	81%	Justice & Public Safety
District of Columbia	39,374	93%	Education
Florida	178,562	95%	Justice & Public Safety
Georgia	85,773	85%	Justice & Public Safety
Hawaii	18,625	92%	Justice & Public Safety
Idaho	11,921	88%	Justice & Public Safety
Illinois	51,758	90%	Justice & Public Safety
Indiana	63,794	83%	Health & Human Services
Iowa	28,560	82%	Health & Human Services
Kansas	29,615	83%	Justice & Public Safety
Kentucky	29,637	85%	Justice & Public Safety
Louisiana	62,562	86%	Justice & Public Safety
Maine	2,033	91%	Justice & Public Safety
Maryland	238,028	79%	Education
Massachusetts	23,774	89%	Education
Michigan	50,909	83%	Justice & Public Safety
Minnesota	43,511	88%	Health & Human Services
Mississippi	31,618	82%	Health & Human Services
Missouri	31,164	89%	Justice & Public Safety
Montana	8,403	82%	Justice & Public Safety
Nebraska	14,754	85%	Health & Human Services
Nevada	29,106	90%	Justice & Public Safety

STATE	TOTAL COUNTY GOVERNMENT EMPLOYMENT	SHARE FULL-TIME	TOP EMPLOYMENT CATEGORY
New Hampshire	4,244	72%	Health & Human Services
New Jersey	68,122	77%	Education
New Mexico	10,335	93%	Justice & Public Safety
New York	570,497	89%	Education
North Carolina	343,055	81%	Education
North Dakota	5,435	83%	Justice & Public Safety
Ohio	89,463	89%	Health & Human Services
Oklahoma	18,423	88%	Health & Human Services
Oregon	23,306	89%	Justice & Public Safety
Pennsylvania	85,383	92%	Justice & Public Safety
South Carolina	40,230	84%	Justice & Public Safety
South Dakota	5,547	79%	Justice & Public Safety
Tennessee	202,726	84%	Education
Texas	177,394	91%	Justice & Public Safety
Utah	19,994	69%	Health & Human Services
Vermont	71	48%	Justice & Public Safety
Virginia	238,474	80%	Education
Washington	39,013	93%	Justice & Public Safety
West Virginia	8,934	86%	Justice & Public Safety
Wisconsin	45,586	82%	Health & Human Services
Wyoming	8,818	84%	Health & Human Services
All U.S. Counties	3,642,664	86%	Education*

**Note: Counties employ education workers primarily in nine states. For more details on the county role in education, see the "Education" section below.*

Source: NACo Analysis of U.S. Census Bureau - Census of Individual Governments: Employment, 2022

Justice and Public Safety



Key Takeaway

Counties employ **939,000 workers** across **48 states** to provide a wide range of mandated and optional public safety services, including law enforcement, jails, courts, fire departments, ambulances, 911 centers and emergency management.

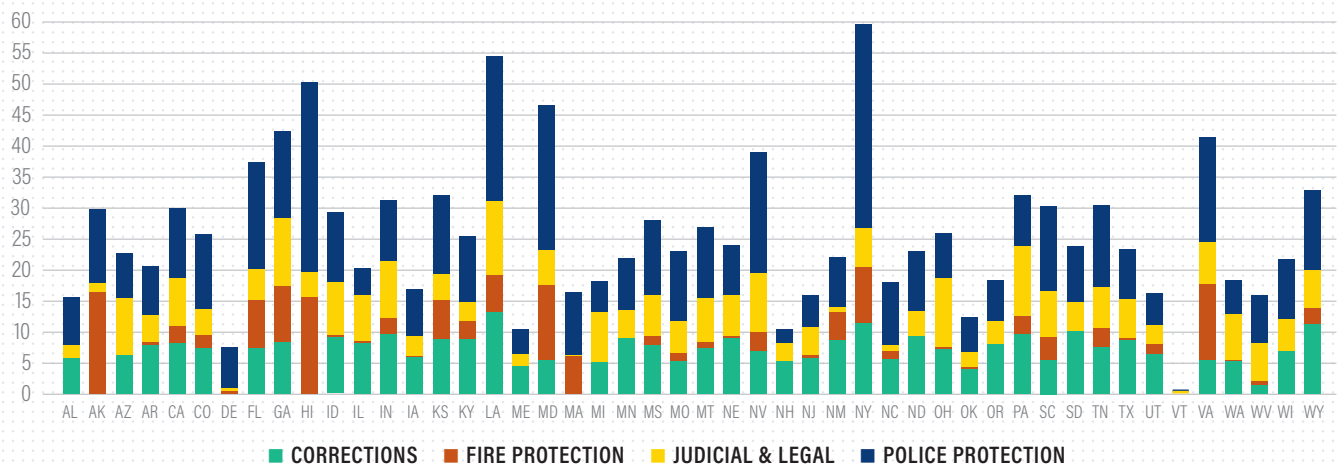
Nationally, counties employ over **939,000 justice and public safety workers** – more than in any other service category, education aside.

Counties provide a range of services within the public safety sphere in collaboration with the state and other local governments. **Law enforcement** is often a joint effort between counties and municipalities. Municipalities routinely fund and provide police forces, while counties employ a sheriff to oversee arrests and correctional statutes within the jail system. Counties mostly maintain both **jails** and **courthouses**, with

additional support from the state. **Fire and ambulance services** can be provided together or separately in counties; however, in contrast to jails and courthouses, fire and ambulance services are typically not required services or are provided jointly with other adjoining counties or municipalities. Most counties play a central role in **emergency management services**, developing emergency operations plans and procedures to bolster disaster resiliency. These services can include items like **911 call centers** and **flood control**, as well as other unique services such as firearm regulation or wildfire management.

COUNTY GOVERNMENTS IN 48 STATES ARE KEEPING COMMUNITIES SAFE THROUGH A STRONG JUSTICE AND PUBLIC SAFETY WORKFORCE

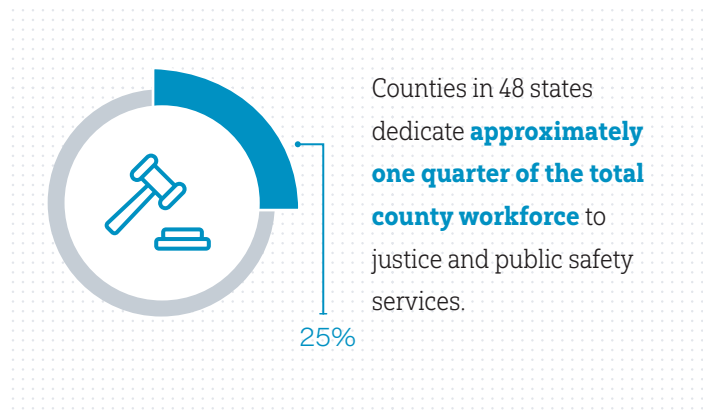
County Justice and Public Safety Employment, per 10,000 Residents, Breakdown by State



Counties employ **939,001** justice and public safety workers.

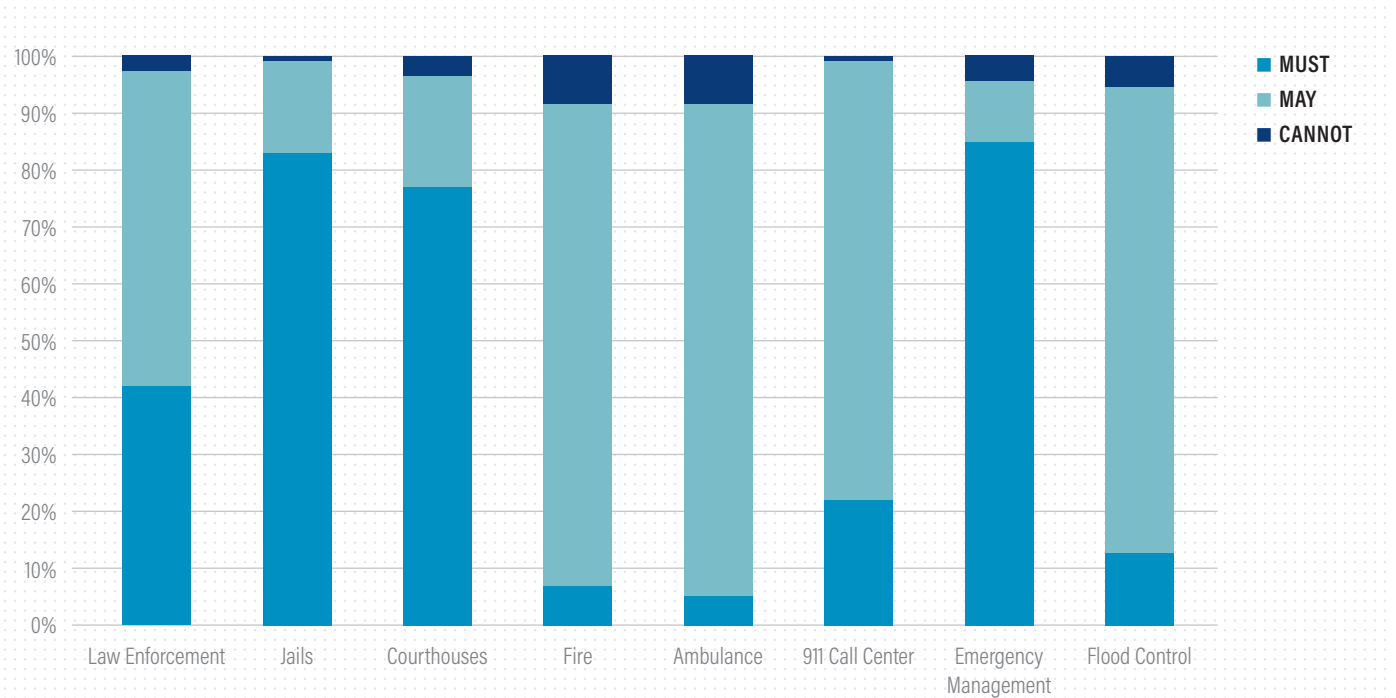
Source: NACo Analysis of U.S. Census Bureau - Census of Individual Governments: Employment, 2022; NACo Analysis of U.S. Census Bureau - Population Estimates Program (PEP) – 2022

In all 48 states with county governments, counties play a significant role in administering public safety services, dedicating **approximately one quarter of the total county workforce** to justice and public safety. Counties in nine states (Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Illinois, Missouri, New Mexico, Pennsylvania and Vermont) dedicate around half (45-55 percent) of their employees to justice and public safety. In **Maine**, 70 percent of county employees work in the justice and public safety space, since the state severely limits other functions of county governments.



COUNTIES MANDATED TO PROVIDE JAILS, COURTHOUSES AND EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT; FIRE AND AMBULANCE SERVICES OPTIONAL

County Role in Justice and Public Safety, Breakdown by Share of Counties



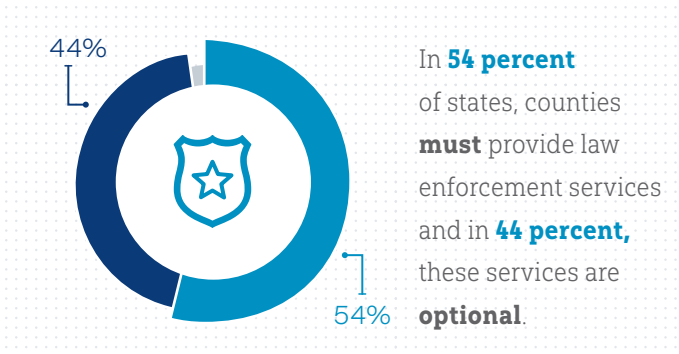
Notes: The above chart depicts the total percent of all counties that fall into each subcategory. The total number of counties was calculated based on overall state authority in these areas, with the understanding that there may be some slight discrepancies due to variations within the states themselves.

The "state" subcategory has been combined with the "cannot" subcategory in this chart for simplification purposes.

Source: NACo Research, 2022

Law Enforcement

Law enforcement includes services like police, sheriffs and other public safety operations related to arrests and warrants. In **54 percent** of states, counties must provide law enforcement services and in **44 percent**, these services are optional. In total, 41 percent of county justice and public safety workers are involved in law enforcement.



Most often, elected county sheriffs lead law enforcement services within the county. Sheriffs are typically responsible for making arrests, transporting inmates, enforcing correctional statutes and maintaining jails. Oftentimes municipalities will provide the actual police force for the jurisdiction in conjunction with counties; however, there are some counties in states such as **Kentucky** and **Indiana** who may provide a county-run police force. And in **Illinois** counties with less than 1 million people, the county board and sheriff may contract with one or more municipalities within the county to establish police protection.

Some counties are also more involved in the operations aspect of law enforcement. In **Michigan**, counties with a population of over 400,000 must have a board of civil service commissioners in the sheriffs' department to regulate hiring, employment and working conditions for law enforcement officers. And in **Georgia**, counties may create administrative boards to impose fines and other noncriminal penalties to enforce county codes and ordinances. These operational aspects vary by state and illustrate the more administrative role that counties may take in this service area.

A few states grant counties unique authority over certain areas of public safety. For example, in unincorporated areas, **Mississippi** counties may prohibit and regulate the sale and use of fireworks or other recreational explosives. And in **Arkansas, Alaska** and **Delaware**, counties may partially regulate and pass ordinances related to firearms.

Jails

Most county governments have jurisdiction over local jails; in fact, over 2,500 counties must provide jails and nearly 500 may provide them, leaving only a few states where the jails are maintained by the state. **In total, counties operate 91 percent of local jails**, which processed 7.3 million admissions in 2022. Corrections, which includes jails, involves about one quarter of county justice and public safety workers.

Counties are responsible for providing and maintaining jail facilities with the sheriff, who oversees operations and supervises those in custody. Some counties may also contract with adjoining counties or municipalities to provide joint jail facilities. For example, in **Virginia**, two or more counties, cities or towns may create a regional jail authority to provide joint public safety, which is governed by at least one member from each entity. **Hawaii** and **Delaware** have a rarer structure, where the state department of public safety administers and maintains all public and private correction facilities.



Courthouses

Alongside jails, counties in most states are responsible for the construction and maintenance of courthouses – over 2,300 counties must provide courthouses and another 600 may provide courthouses. 22 percent of county justice and public safety employees help provide judicial and legal services.

Counties play a significant role in the construction, maintenance, staffing and day-to-day operations of courthouses within their jurisdictions. In **Michigan**, **Georgia** and **Florida**, counties must finance and provide a courthouse at the county seat. And in **Maine**, counties must provide courthouses alongside a county law library. In some states such as **Hawaii** and **Alaska**, the state operates a central, unified court system and must construct and operate the courthouse facilities.

Over **2,300 counties** must provide courthouses and another **600 counties** may provide courthouses



Fire

Counties provide some form of fire protection in over three-quarters of states with county governments. In total, 11 percent of county justice and public safety workers provide fire protection services. In contrast to jails and courthouses, fire services are generally optional for counties. Only three states require counties to provide fire services: **Nebraska**, Utah and Colorado. In Nebraska, counties must establish rural and suburban fire protection districts to include all unincorporated areas. In **Utah**, counties must provide and maintain adequate fire protection services within their territorial limits. And in **Colorado**, counties must adopt fire safety standards and provide fire protection services.

Counties provide fire protection in over **three-quarters** of states with county governments.

Fire protection services range from directly establishing fire departments to providing a separate special district to supporting municipal fire departments through funding. On the one hand, states like **Tennessee** and **North Carolina** allow counties to form county-wide fire department agencies that may be paid via fire service tax districts out of the county's general fund. Yet in other instances, states like **Montana** may only establish a rural fire taxing district in unincorporated areas if petitioned by residents. A few states specifically prohibit counties from providing fire services such as New Jersey and Louisiana. In **New Jersey**, municipalities establish fire districts, and in **Louisiana**, the state establishes fire districts for all the parishes.

Ambulance

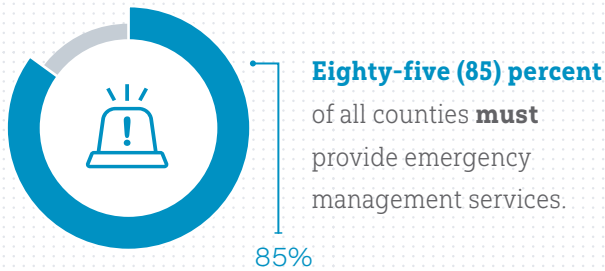
Ambulance and fire protection services are often intertwined. Counties in 39 states are permitted or required to provide ambulance or EMT services. In **Arkansas**, county quorum courts must establish ambulance service districts to provide emergency medical services if petitioned by property owners. And in **Kentucky**, counties have the option to establish a county ambulance service, establish a more specific ambulance service taxing district or contract with a city or private ambulance service provider. Many counties will partner to provide emergency medical services as well, such as those in **Mississippi**, so that all residents within a particular area have service coverage. In a few instances, the state is involved in the delivery of ambulance services. In **Massachusetts**, the state designates one regional EMS council in each region of the state. And in **Arizona**, a county that wishes to operate ambulance services must apply to the state department of health services, but only one county in the state has done so thus far.



Counties in **35 states** are permitted, and in **4 states** are required, to provide ambulance or EMT services.

Emergency Management

Emergency management services include emergency coordination, planning and infrastructure. Counties across nearly every state play a significant role in this area, for 85 percent of all counties must provide emergency management services. These services are typically performed in partnership with other municipalities, the state and federal government.



One example of this intergovernmental partnership is in **South Carolina**, where county governments must organize, plan and prepare county resources to support emergency operations, yet must also coordinate support to municipal emergency operations from state and federal sources. Additionally, in **North Dakota**, counties must either maintain an emergency management organization that serves the entire county or join a regional emergency management organization that serves more than one county.

Additionally, all county governments operate, manage and fund our own 911 centers, also known as public safety answering points (PSAPs). For approximately three-quarters of counties, these 911 services are optional, but counties provide them.

All county governments operate, manage and fund our own 911 centers. For **three-quarters** of counties, these 911 services are **optional**, and counties provide them.



States like **Maryland**, **Minnesota** and **Pennsylvania** mandate that counties provide 911 emergency communication systems in the remaining one quarter of counties. Some states also require counties to implement more enhanced 911 services and technology in line with state regulations.

Flood Control

Forty-four (44) states give county governments broad authority to provide flood control services through our emergency management and coordination; however, counties almost always contract or partner with the state and federal government to do so. For example, counties must work closely with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to ensure FEMA's maps on record match the county's maps and risks as its floodplain shifts. This partnership is evident in states like **Nebraska** where counties may appropriate funds and contract with the federal government to provide flood control, watershed protection, water conservation and flood prevention. These services may also be financially supported through other sources of funding from the state; in **Colorado**, counties must provide flood control, but it may be financially supported by grants from the Colorado Water Conservation.



Health & Human Services

Key Takeaway

Counties in **46 states** employ **781,000 workers** to provide public health departments, hospitals, mental health centers, senior care, social services, child welfare and indigent burials.

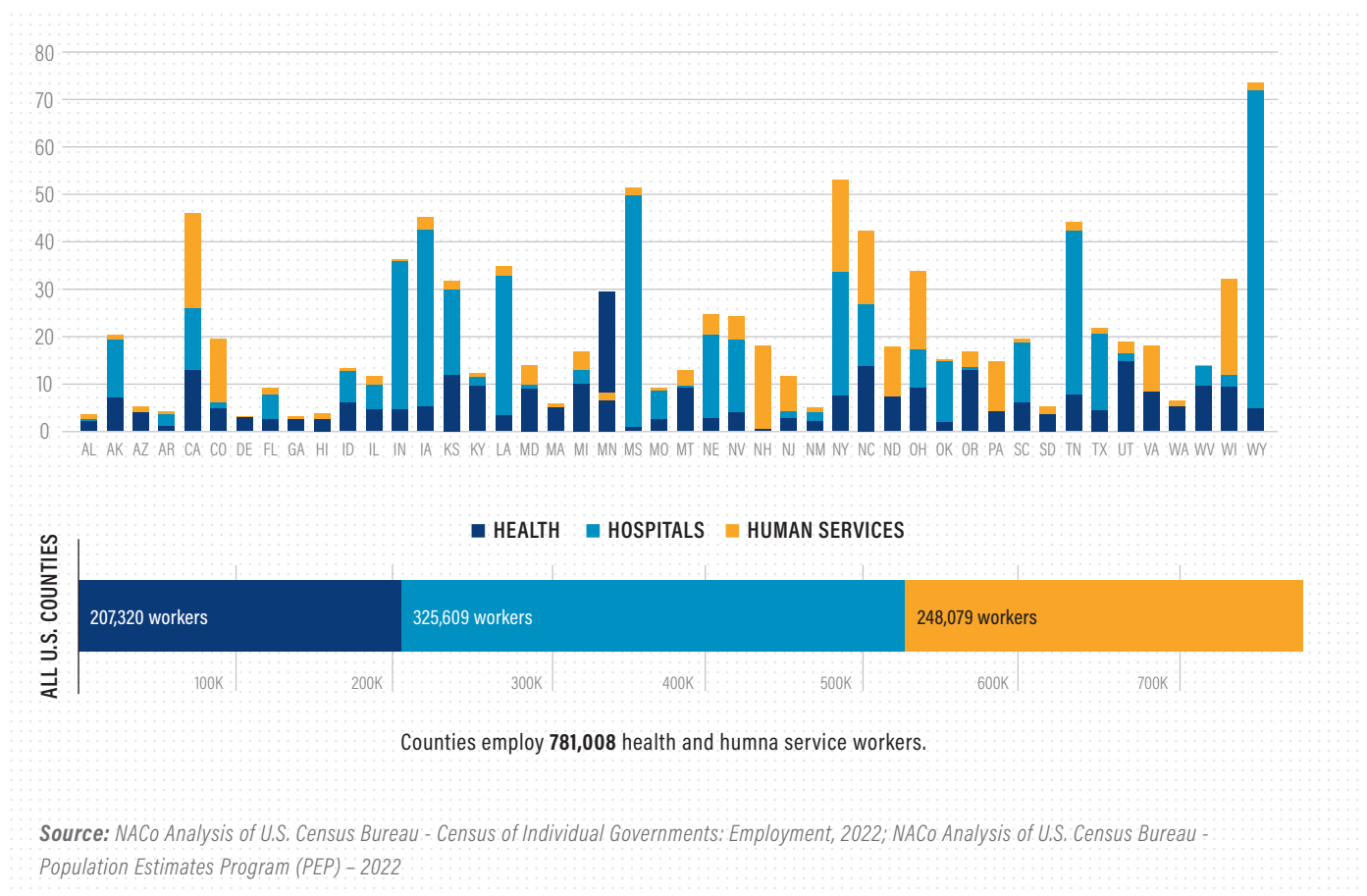
Counties in **46 states** play a key role in providing health and human services to residents, including public health departments, hospital services, mental health services, senior care, social services, child welfare and indigent burials. Education aside, health and human services is the second largest employment category for counties, after justice and public safety. Counties together employ **781,000 health and human services workers** – one fifth of the total county workforce.

This service category is a top service area for counties as a whole, and the share and emphasis varies from state to state. In 19 states, counties focus on hospitals; in 16 states counties focus on public health; and in the remaining 11 states counties focus on human services.

In **Iowa, Mississippi, New Hampshire** and **Wyoming**, roughly half of county workers are health and human services workers. In **New Hampshire**, these workers contribute mainly to senior care and nursing homes, and counties are prohibited from providing many other traditional health and human services. In the other three states, this category refewnd **Wisconsin** counties dedicate over 40 percent of their workforces to health and human services, since counties in those states are responsible for running welfare and child welfare systems.

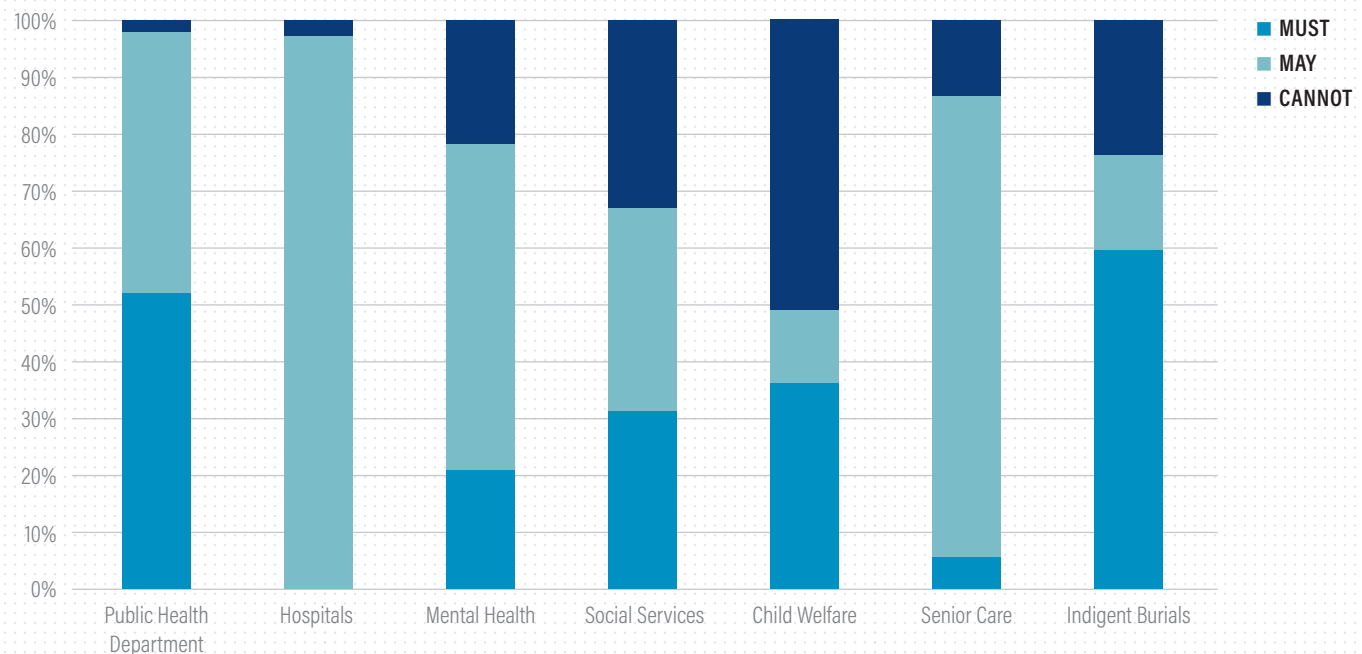
COUNTIES PROVIDE KEY PUBLIC HEALTH, HOSPITAL AND SOCIAL SERVICES IN NEARLY EVERY STATE

County Health and Human Services Employment, per 10,000 Residents, Breakdown by State



COUNTIES ARE HEAVILY INVOLVED IN HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES BY BOTH STATE LAW AND BY LOCAL CHOICE

County Role in Health and Human Services, Breakdown by Share of Counties



Notes: The above chart depicts the total percent of all counties that fall into each subcategory. The total number of counties was calculated based on overall state authority in these areas, with the understanding that there may be some slight discrepancies due to variations within the states themselves. The "state" subcategory has been combined with the "cannot" subcategory in this chart for simplification purposes.

Source: NACo Research, 2022

Public Health

Due to the significant amount of mandatory local health services, county governments were on the front lines of the COVID-19 pandemic response. County health departments took a major role in providing testing clinics, public information, service direction and vaccination efforts. In 23 states, counties are required to establish public health departments, and these services are optional in another 19 states. Overall, counties manage and/or govern **more than 1,900 local public health departments** or authorities.

Counties are also often mandated to create a board of health, which then

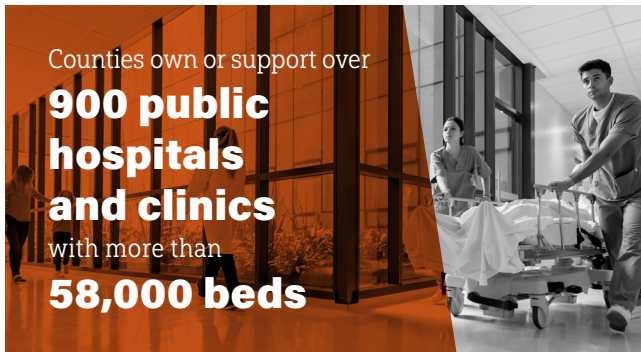
oversees and sets policies for health departments. In several states, including **Maryland**, if the county's governing body does not establish a board of health, then the members of the governing body themselves must serve as the board of health. Boards of health may be delegated additional responsibilities; for example, in **Arizona**, county boards of health may adopt fees for issuing permits and other services. Oftentimes, counties will form district health departments with other counties or municipalities. For example, the Southern Nevada Health District is governed by a board of health with members representing Clark County, the City of Las Vegas, Boulder City, Henderson, Mesquite and North Las Vegas.



Counties manage and/or govern **more than 1,900** local public health departments/authorities.

Hospitals

Counties are permitted to provide optional hospital services in 42 states. No state mandates counties to do so. In some states, like **North Carolina, North Dakota** and **South Dakota**, county-established hospitals depend on a petition and election from voters. Counties may also establish hospital special districts to carry out specific services. In total, counties own or support **over 900 public hospitals and clinics with more than 58,000 beds.**



Mental Health

Mental health services also range significantly depending on the state. Counties in 22 states may provide mental health services and counties in 10 states must do so. For example, **New Jersey** counties must develop plans for community mental health services and may appoint a county mental health board. Counties operate more than **750 behavioral health authorities** nationwide.

Social Services and Child Welfare

Counties are required to provide social services in 13 states and are given the option to do so in another 16 states. In some states, like **New Hampshire** and **Pennsylvania**, counties are prohibited from administering social services, but they must reimburse the state for welfare services provided within the county. Florida counties also cannot provide welfare services themselves

Social Services and the County-Federal Partnership

Counties partner with the federal government to administer a wide range of health and human services, as well as nutrition supports that help stabilize vulnerable families and individuals, though this role varies by program and state.

- County-administered programs include Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and the Social Services Block Grant (SSBG) in 9 states, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) in 10 states, the child welfare system in 11 states and the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) in 8 states.
- Counties also contribute to Medicaid in 25 states, including the District of Columbia. Of these states, 19 mandate counties to contribute to the non-federal share of Medicaid costs and/or administrative, program, physical health and behavioral costs.

MEDICAID IS JOINTLY FUNDED BY FEDERAL, STATE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENTS, INCLUDING COUNTIES IN 25 STATES

but are given the option to participate in a state program to provide health care for individuals who do not qualify for federal or state programs like Medicaid.

Counties are commonly prohibited from providing child welfare services, as states typically manage and administer these services. Even in states where counties have a role in child welfare services, there is typically heavy state partnership. For example, in **Utah**, counties must administer child welfare programs, but the state manages these programs. Fifteen (15) states require counties to administer child welfare services, and another eight give counties the option to do so.

Alaska, Idaho and North Dakota boroughs/counties have some regulatory authority over daycare/childcare facilities. In **Alaska**, boroughs may establish day care regulations and licensing policies. Second-class boroughs, however, must receive voter approval to

establish these policies. In **Idaho** and **North Dakota**, counties may establish and enforce childcare licensing requirements.

Senior Care

In total, counties operate over **700 long-term care facilities**. Counties in 33 states may provide senior care and counties in four states must do so. Counties often provide senior care services through senior centers, meals on wheels programs and transportation services. Counties typically act in partnership with the state and other organizations to provide these services, as well. County-run senior centers that provide programming and services are much more common than county-run nursing homes. However, counties in nine states (Arizona, Illinois, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, West Virginia and Wisconsin) are permitted to own and operate nursing homes. Additionally, **New Hampshire** counties are unique in

Counties operate more than **700 long-term care facilities** and more than **750 behavioral health authorities**.



Infrastructure

Key Takeaway

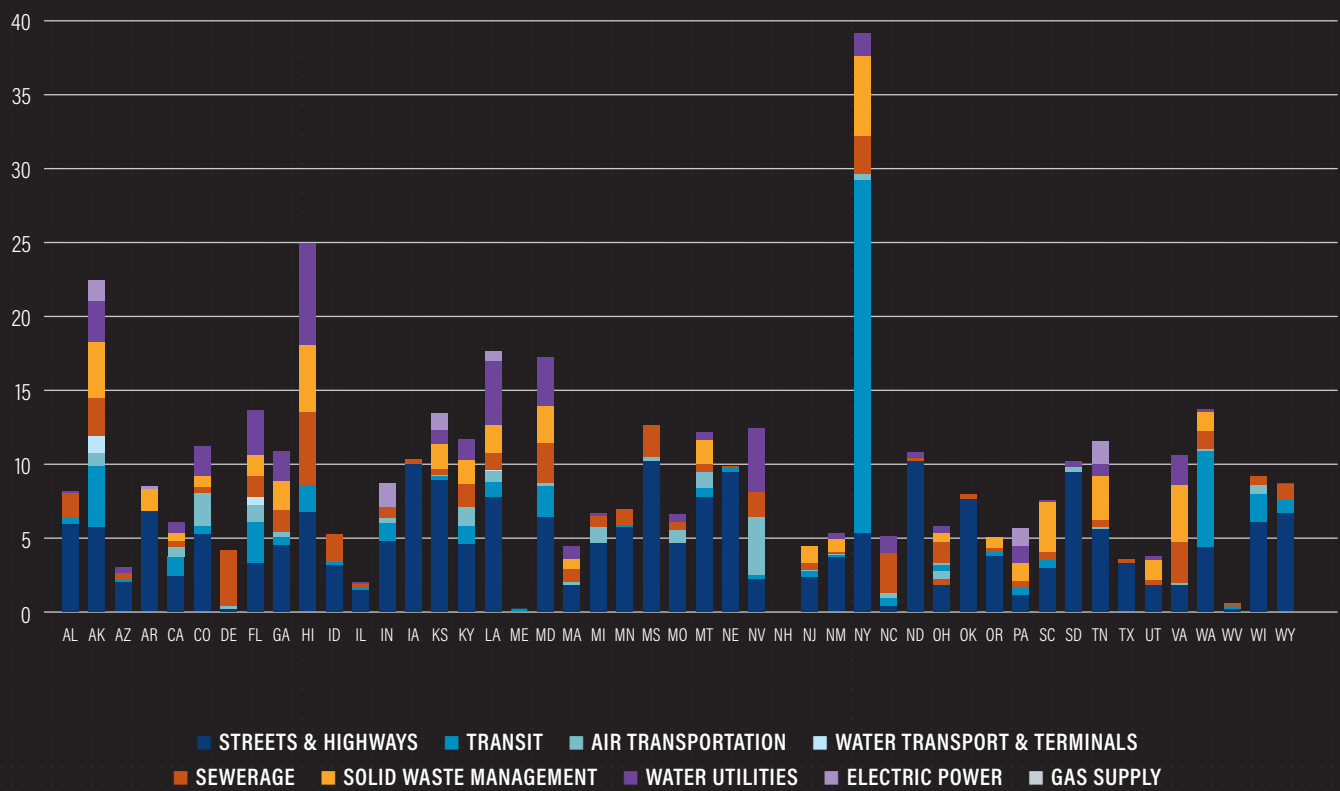
Counties employ **312,000 workers** across **48 states** to maintain 45 percent of public roads and 38 percent of bridges, as well as provide transit, airport and various utility services.

Nationwide, counties employ 312,000 workers to provide services such as roads, bridges, public transit, airports and utilities, including water, solid waste and sewerage. Counties in all 48 states with active county

governments provide some infrastructure services. Most often, county infrastructure services focus on transportation. In 10 states, counties focus more on utilities than transportation.

RESIDENTS DEPEND ON COUNTY WORKERS FOR KEY INFRASTRUCTURE IN MOST STATES

County Infrastructure Employment, per 10,000 Residents, Breakdown by State



Source: NACo Analysis of U.S. Census Bureau - Census of Individual Governments: Employment, 2022; NACo Analysis of U.S. Census Bureau - Population Estimates Program (PEP) - 2022

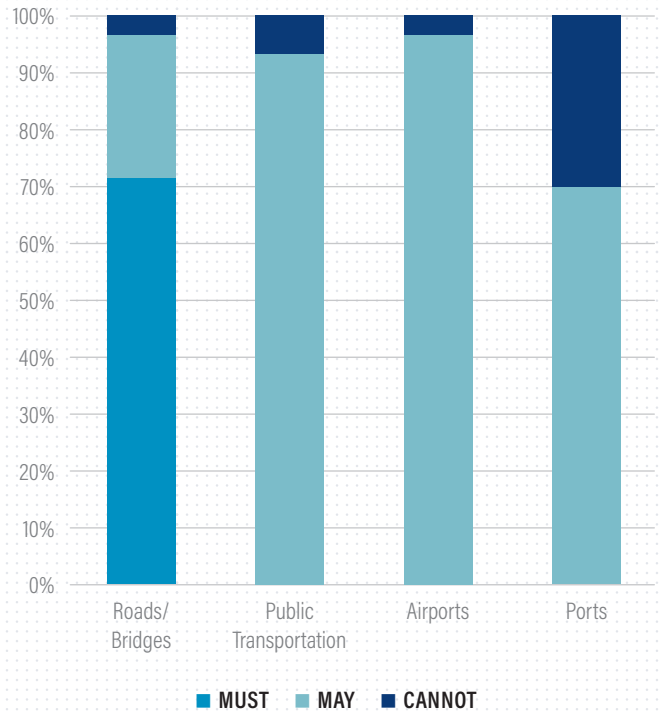
Roads and Bridges

Counties own and operate **45 percent** of public roads – more than any other level of government. Also, counties own and maintain **38 percent** of the over 600,000 bridges that comprise the national bridge inventory. Counties are often solely responsible for maintaining roads in unincorporated areas, such as in **Tennessee** and **Maryland** counties. Counties in some states may even maintain roads on private lands, if used for access to county facilities. For example, Arkansas counties may maintain private roads if they lead to county cemeteries. Additionally, **Mississippi** counties may grade, gravel or shell, repair and maintain private gravel or shell roads, driveways and parking lots for private residences if they are used for school bus turnarounds, other school property or certain types of nonprofit organizations.

In **Hawaii** counties, where county authority over roads and bridges is limited, counties may maintain or repair private roads if imperative for the general welfare of the county. Many counties are also permitted to maintain and build street lighting as part of their responsibilities to manage roads and uphold general welfare. In **Colorado**, counties are required to pay for the construction, installation, operation and maintenance of street lighting.

COUNTIES MANDATED TO BUILD AND MAINTAIN ROADS/BRIDGES, OTHER TRANSPORTATION SERVICES OPTIONAL

County Authority Over Transportation Infrastructure, Breakdown by Share of Counties



Notes: The above chart depicts the total percent of all counties that fall into each subcategory. The total number of counties was calculated based on overall state authority in these areas, with the understanding that there may be some slight discrepancies due to variations within the states themselves. The "state" subcategory has been combined with the "cannot" subcategory in this chart for simplification purposes.

Source: NACo Research, 2022



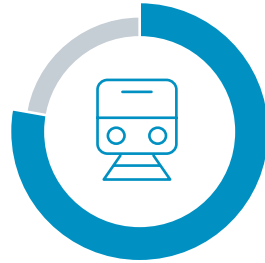
Counties own and maintain
45 percent
of public roads and
38 percent
of bridges

Public Transit

No state mandates counties to own, manage or fund public transit systems; however, counties often elect to do so, with counties supporting 78 percent of our nation's public transit systems. Counties therefore play a critical role in all aspects of transportation, and often incorporate public transit planning into our zoning and development responsibilities and master plans.

In particular, 16 counties dedicate more than 10 percent of their total workforces to public transit, including five large counties: Broward County (Fla.), King County (Wash.), Milwaukee County (Wis.) New York City and San Francisco City and County (Calif.). The remaining 11 counties are small or mid-sized counties in various states.

Some counties are permitted to create a county or regional railroad authority, which gives counties another cornerstone responsibility over transportation of both people and goods. Railroad authorities may manage, purchase, build and operate railroads. Additionally, **North Carolina** counties may participate in state and federal railroad revitalization programs necessary to ensure rail service.



Counties support **78 percent** of public transit systems



Counties operate **34 percent** of our nation's airports



Airports and Ports

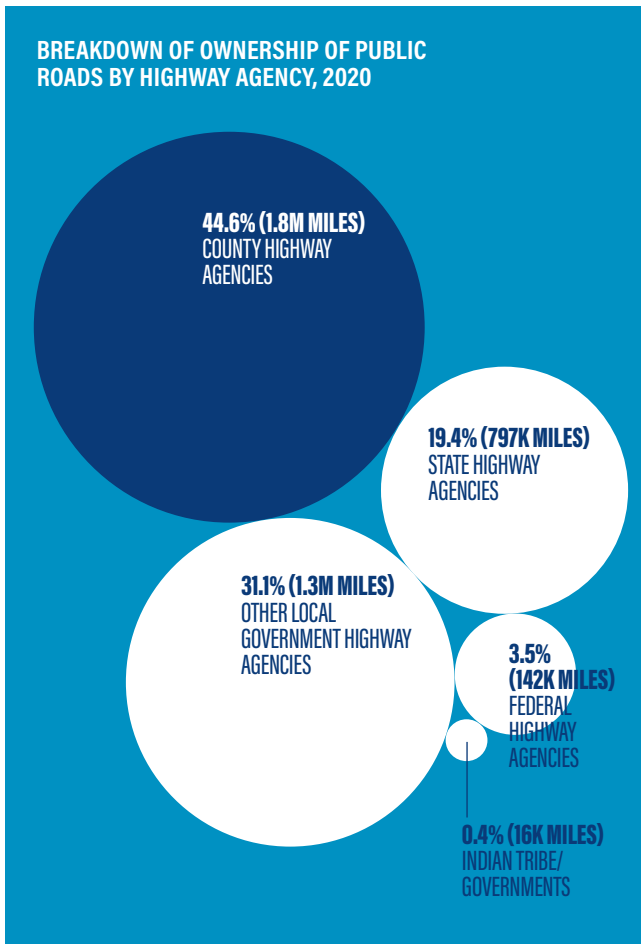
Counties in 45 states are permitted to own, maintain and/or operate airports. Many counties opt to do so, operating **34 percent** of our nation's airports. Counties also operate smaller scale heliports exclusively for county use for sheriff's departments or hospitals.

Counties in only three states cannot manage airports: **Vermont, Oklahoma and New Hampshire.**

In contrast, **counties fund only about 6 percent of the nation's ports**². Counties in a few states may form port authorities, often as special districts. Due to the inherent interstate nature of ports, counties that are involved in ports typically do so in partnership with multiple other organizations. For example, the Appalachian Regional Port is a joint effort of the state of Georgia, Murray County, the Georgia Ports Authority and a privately owned rail corporation.

One unique transportation service some counties provide is the operation of ferries, which counties in **Texas, South Carolina, Mississippi** and **Washington** are given full purview over. Additionally, **Washington** counties have full authority over construction, operation and maintenance of wharves.

BREAKDOWN OF OWNERSHIP OF PUBLIC ROADS BY HIGHWAY AGENCY, 2020

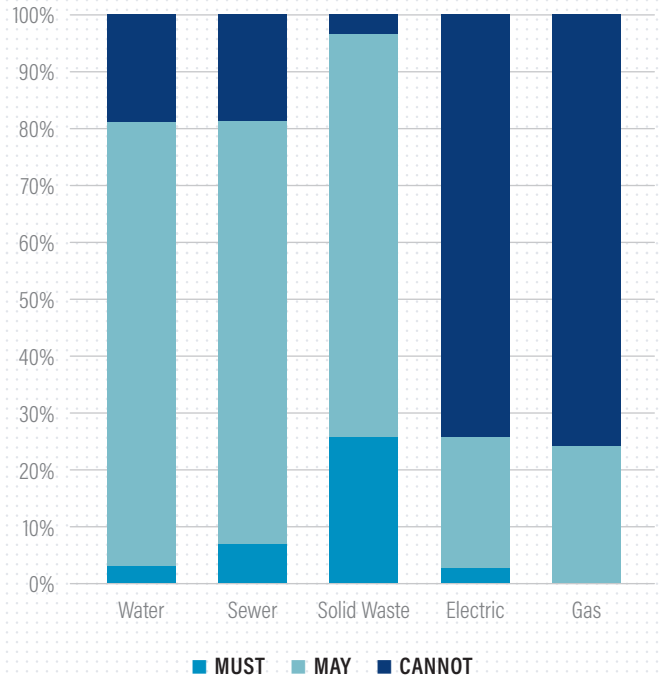


Utilities

Alongside transportation infrastructure, **counties are major owners of public facilities**, such as courthouses, county administration buildings, jails and detention centers, dams and reservoirs, sports stadiums, water purification systems, sewage treatment facilities, ports and solid waste management and recycling centers. Core county utilities include solid waste management, water and sewer. Most commonly, counties are mandated to provide solid waste management: counties in 11 states are required to do so, and counties in 31 states may provide solid waste utilities. Counties often provide these utilities through the creation of special districts. However, most states prohibit counties from

COUNTIES ARE GENERALLY PROHIBITED FROM PROVIDING ELECTRIC AND GAS SERVICES; OTHER UTILITIES OPTIONAL

County Authority Over Utilities, Breakdown by Share of Counties



Notes: The above chart depicts the total percent of all counties that fall into each subcategory. The total number of counties was calculated based on overall state authority in these areas, with the understanding that there may be some slight discrepancies due to variations within the states themselves. The "state" subcategory has been combined with the "cannot" subcategory in this chart for simplification purposes.

Source: NACo Research, 2022

providing electric and gas utilities, with these services typically delivered by the state, municipalities or private corporations.

Some counties are permitted to provide communications infrastructure for television, radio and broadband, such as in states like **Alabama, Alaska** and **Georgia**.³

A person with their back to the camera, wearing a dark shirt with white polka dots, is reaching up to a high shelf in a library. The shelves are filled with books. The entire image has a blue color overlay.

Public Amenities

Key Takeaway

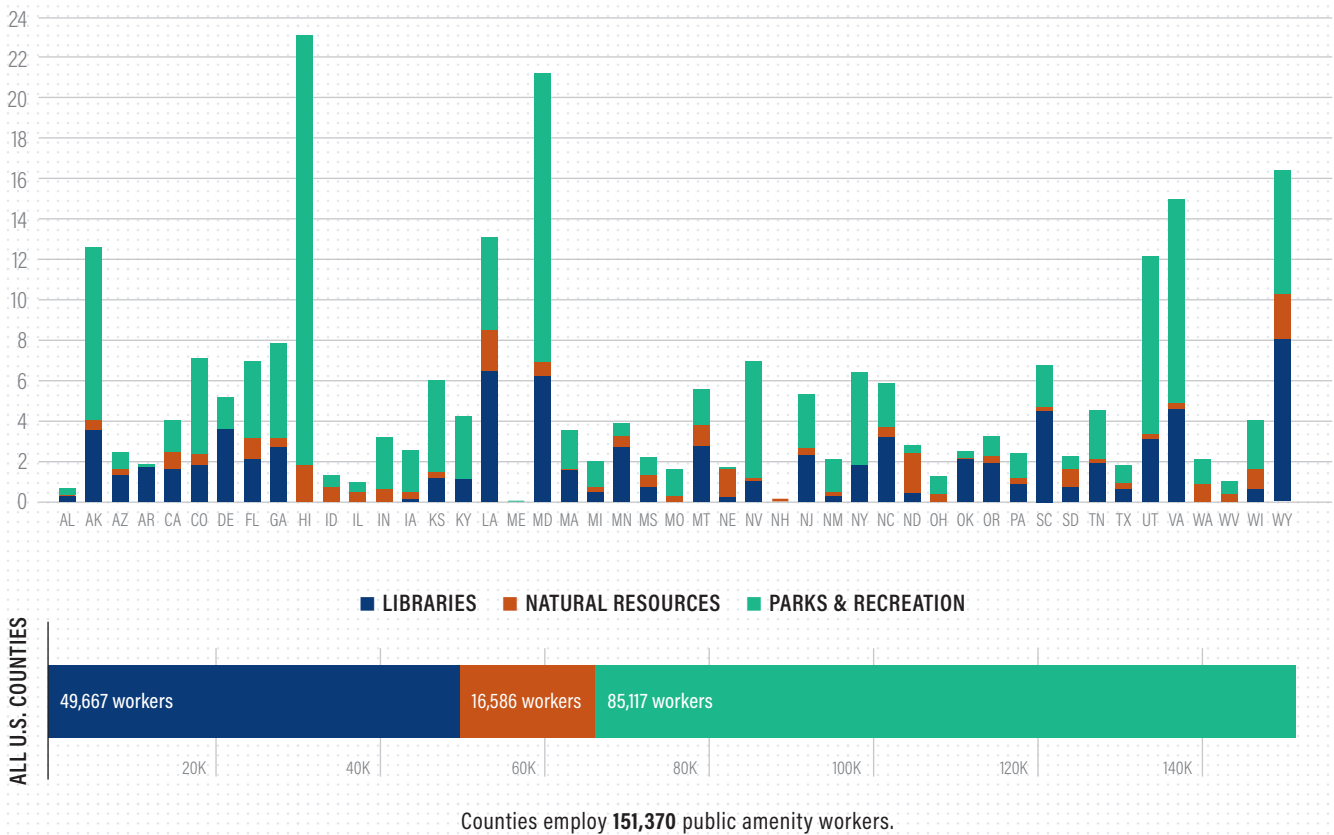
Over **150,000 county workers** manage mostly optional public amenities including parks and playground systems, recreation facilities, libraries, cemeteries and tourism efforts.

Counties provide a wide range of public amenities to residents, employing **over 150,000 workers** to manage parks and playground systems, recreation facilities, libraries, cemeteries and tourism efforts, among other services. Most county governments have some role in managing public amenities – typically an optional role. This role can range from appointing oversight or

regulatory boards and commission members to directly establishing and maintaining facilities and services. Many state statutes also specify additional public amenity services which county governments may choose to provide, such as veteran memorials, local museums and county fairs.

COUNTIES ACROSS MOST STATES TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR PROVIDING PARKS AND LIBRARIES

Public Amenities Employment, per 10,000 Residents, Breakdown by State



Source: NACo Analysis of U.S. Census Bureau - Census of Individual Governments: Employment, 2022; NACo Analysis of U.S. Census Bureau - Population Estimates Program (PEP) - 2022

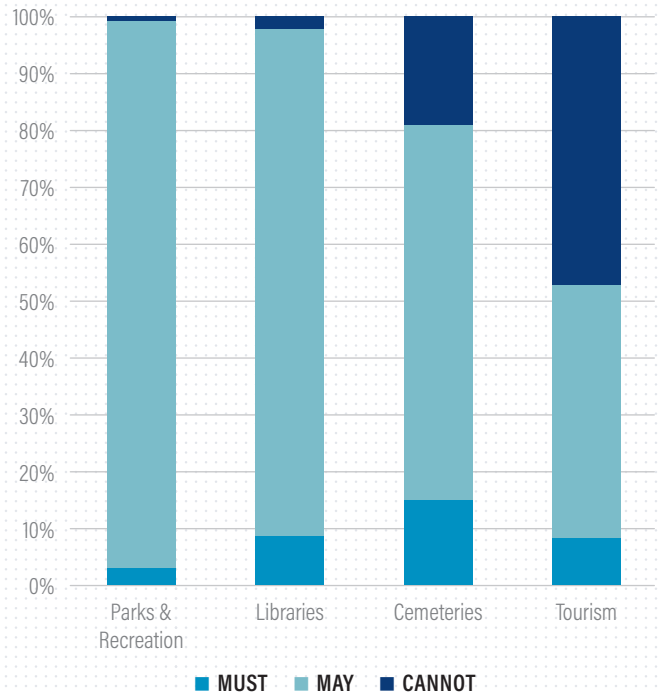
Parks and Recreation

Nearly half of all counties (1,444) dedicate a portion of our workforce to establishing and maintaining public land for leisure through parks, nature preserves, open space areas and trails, as well as various sports, recreation and arts programs. Most counties may establish and appoint board members to oversee and regulate parks and recreation. Some may acquire land for parks and recreation or donate land to the state park service. A few counties may directly establish and maintain parks and recreational facilities. Only **Vermont** precludes county governments from having any role in parks and recreation, leaving the decision-making to cities and incorporated villages instead.

Some states limit county authority under parks and recreation but stipulate additional specific services where county governments may have a larger role. For instance, in **Florida**, a county board of commissioners must act as the county beach and shore preservation authority, and in **Hawaii**, counties must maintain public beaches. In **Utah**, counties may levy special taxes for establishing and maintaining planetariums and zoos, while **Virginia, Arizona** and **Louisiana** have separate statutes providing for county establishment and maintenance of sports facilities. Thus, while some states include these services within their statutory definition of parks and recreation, other states provide for them in separate statutes.⁴

MOST COUNTIES GIVEN OPTIONAL AUTHORITY OVER PUBLIC AMENITIES

County Authority Over Public Amenities, Breakdown by Share of Counties



Notes: The above chart depicts the total percent of all counties that fall into each subcategory. The total number of counties was calculated based on overall state authority in these areas, with the understanding that there may be some slight discrepancies due to variations within the states themselves. The "state" subcategory has been combined with the "cannot" subcategory in this chart for simplification purposes.

Source: NACo Research, 2022



Libraries

County involvement in public libraries often takes the shape of establishing and maintaining a public library service and/or appointing a library board. Approximately **one third of counties (923)** in 44 states dedicate workers to providing library services. Sometimes counties fund, operate and maintain library services with cities or other counties. In some states, such as **Kansas** and **Missouri**, a county's obligation to establish a public library service is contingent upon a petition and approval by voters. Many states also specifically require counties to establish and maintain court law libraries.



Several states, however, preclude county governments from having any role in library services. For instance, in **Alaska** and **Hawaii**, the state department of education is responsible for library services. **Massachusetts** and **Vermont** delegate authority over libraries to municipalities. Finally, the Idaho Commission for Libraries, within the state's executive branch, oversees libraries throughout the state of Idaho.

Cemeteries

Thirty-four (34) states stipulate county responsibilities regarding the creation and maintenance of cemeteries. Counties typically take responsibility for a cemetery when it is transferred or donated to the county, or when it is abandoned. Additionally, county recorders are often responsible for keeping records of all registered cemeteries in the county. In some states, such as **Colorado**, the obligation only arises if the county is

petitioned by property owners from the proposed district. Twelve (12) states preclude county authority over cemeteries in some way, usually because the state delegates authority over cemeteries to townships and municipalities instead (such as in Utah and New Hampshire). Otherwise, cemeteries are owned by private or religious organizations.

Tourism

Tourism is typically a partnership between state, regional and local government bodies. Every state has a department or division that regulates tourism statewide, given that tourism is a primary means of economic development. States are divided into tourism regions, which may combine several counties to help facilitate local tourism. Each tourism region may designate a non-profit as their official tourism promotion agency to receive, disburse and spend state grants to promote tourism in the region. Some states delegate authority of local tourism promotion to counties or, less commonly, to cities or townships.

In over half of states, counties have some responsibility to promote tourism. Although direct county participation in promoting local tourism in the form of permanent, county-level departments is uncommon, states delegate many responsibilities to counties closely related to tourism. Eight states have provisions for various types of county and agricultural fairs and six states have provisions for museums. Additionally, some services tangential to tourism may overlap with county responsibilities with respect to parks and recreation, such as the creation or maintenance of parks, lakes and sports facilities. In cases where states do not officially delegate local authority over tourism promotion at all, counties may apply for grants from the state tourism department to go toward discrete projects of which tourism promotion is a goal, such as renovating a sports facility or upkeeping local hiking trails.

An aerial photograph of a residential development, showing a mix of built-up areas with houses and streets, and large undeveloped or wooded tracts. The entire image is overlaid with a semi-transparent blue filter. The text 'Zoning and Development' is prominently displayed in white in the upper left quadrant.

Zoning and Development

Key Takeaway

Nearly **500 counties** dedicate a portion of their workforce to housing and community development – an optional county service in nearly every state.

Counties generally have broad authority over planning and zoning, which includes regulation of housing, environmental stewardship and economic development. **This authority sometimes extends only over unincorporated areas.** In incorporated areas with a municipal government, the municipality typically handles planning and zoning, though many counties will still play a role.

County responsibilities range from establishing local planning commissions and housing authorities to direct financial contributions to environmental and economic development programs. A few states expand this authority to include unique services such as disaster assistance, mobile home park regulation and indigenous and historical preservation. Counties in **Hawaii** and **Washington** have almost exclusive authority over planning and zoning, while counties in **Maine**, **Massachusetts** and **Vermont** have virtually none.

Planning and Zoning Authority

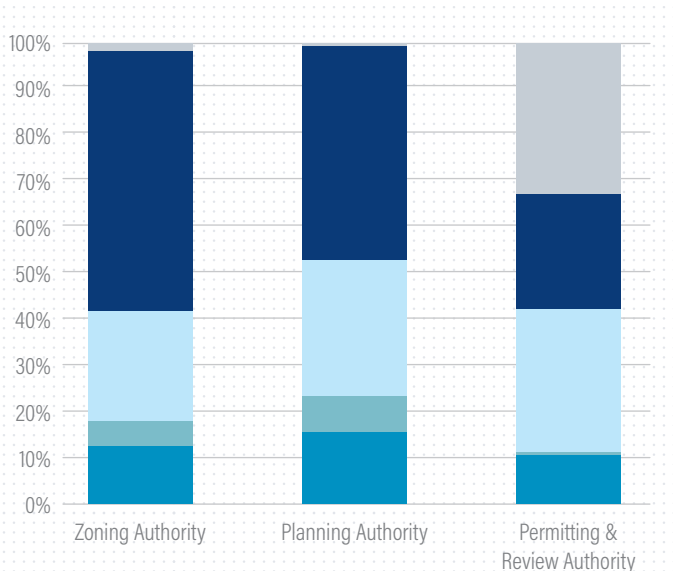
Planning powers consist of implementing zoning ordinances, subdivision regulations, building codes, health regulations and other applications permitted under state law. Zoning ordinances may regulate the location, height and the size of buildings; open spaces, density and distribution of population; and the uses of land, buildings and structures.

Most states permit counties to opt into planning and zoning. Five states (Alaska, Arizona, California, Florida and Oregon) require county involvement in planning. Most counties manage planning and zoning in one of two ways: they may establish a county planning and zoning commission, or the board itself may constitute the planning commission. For example, in **Arkansas**, county quorum courts hold zoning power and may create

a county planning board upon approval by a majority of the court. In six states (Colorado, Illinois, Kentucky, Maine, North Dakota and Washington), the governing boards of two or more counties or municipalities, or a combination, may jointly form a regional planning commission. The planning commission often produces a long-term, comprehensive plan to guide the overall future development of the county. In **Wisconsin**, incorporated municipalities may also be included in these plans if their governing bodies agree to it.

COUNTIES SHARE PLANNING AND ZONING WITH OTHER LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

County Authority Over Planning, Zoning and Permitting, Breakdown by Share of Counties



- UNRESTRICTED, EVERYWHERE
- UNRESTRICTED, UNINCORPORATED ONLY
- RESTRICTED, EVERYWHERE
- RESTRICTED, UNINCORPORATED ONLY
- NO AUTHORITY

Notes: The above chart depicts the total percent of all counties that fall into each subcategory. The total number of counties was calculated based on overall state authority in these areas, with the understanding that there may be some slight discrepancies due to variations within the states themselves. The "state" subcategory has been combined with the "cannot" subcategory in this chart for simplification purposes.

Source: NACo Research, 2022

Zoning Restrictions

Many counties only have authority over planning and zoning in unincorporated areas. In **South Dakota**, incorporated municipalities may contract out their zoning power to counties. In **Maine, Massachusetts, New Jersey** and **Vermont**, counties are prohibited from exerting authority over both planning and zoning; instead, municipalities have complete zoning power. In **New Jersey**, however, counties may form a county planning board that can put forth a guiding plan to influence the decisions made by municipalities.

Almost all states prohibit counties from using zoning authority to restrict the agricultural use of land. Some states also prohibit counties from regulating the use of land for facilities or utility power. **Montana** requires counties to consider railroads, mining, metallurgy, grazing, private schools, hazardous waste disposal or solid waste airport safety zones, protections for open spaces and the environment within their planning. All zoning decisions must comply with the county's plan.

County zoning decisions may be reviewed before or after implementation. In **Ohio**, county zoning codes must be approved by voters, and then they only apply within townships where they receive a majority vote. In **Louisiana**, parish zoning actions are subject to judicial review. State law in **Alabama, South Dakota** and **Virginia** explicitly state that counties must allow for county zoning decisions to be appealed after implementation. In **Alabama**, specifically, residents have 15 days from the decision to file an appeal with the county board of adjustments; all actions proceeding from the decision are halted until the appeal is decided.

Permitting and Review Process

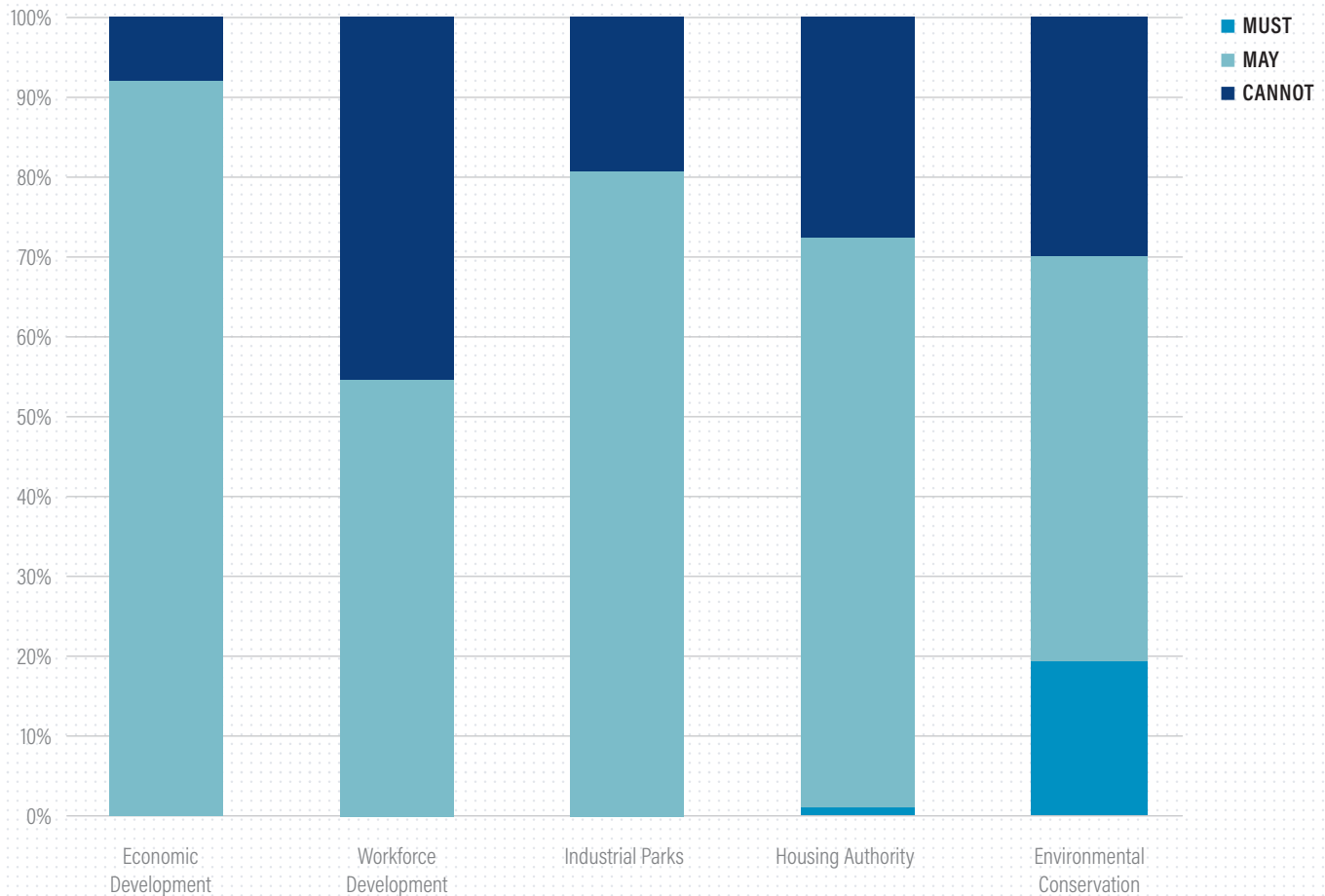
Though not as widespread as planning and zoning powers, counties in **32 states** are involved in issuing permits and reviewing housing plans. Some counties will also conduct housing code inspections and assess development fees when applicable. The permitting and review process deals with the micro-level of individual developments, as opposed to the more macro-level authority over planning and zoning. Building codes, permits and inspections help to guide the construction, renovation and occupancy of various types of housing units to ensure residents are healthy and safe in their homes. In 2022, counties processed and approved permits for more than 1.6 million new residential housing units, estimated at nearly \$374 billion.⁵

Counties have varying levels of authority over permitting. Seven states (Alabama, Alaska, Hawaii, Iowa, North Dakota, Oregon and Washington) grant counties mostly unrestricted authority over the permitting and review process, while 24 states restrict this authority. In certain states, such as **North Carolina** and **Oklahoma**, counties have permitting authority only in the areas where they also have planning and zoning authority. In **Tennessee**, counties cannot issue their own permits, but they can exempt developers from the need to have a state-issued permit. And in **Wisconsin**, incorporated areas by default use county permitting systems, but may choose to opt out. In states where counties do not have this authority, municipalities or the state may handle all permitting and review.



MOST COUNTIES MAY PROVIDE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT SERVICES

County Authority Over Economic and Community Development, Breakdown by Share of Counties



Notes: The above chart depicts the total percent of all counties that fall into each subcategory. The total number of counties was calculated based on overall state authority in these areas, with the understanding that there may be some slight discrepancies due to variations within the states themselves.

The "state" subcategory has been combined with the "cannot" subcategory in this chart for simplification purposes.

Source: NACo Research, 2022

Economic and Workforce Development

Nearly every state allows counties to enact various programs aimed at economic development. About 16 percent of counties (498) in 46 states dedicate a portion of our workforce to housing and community development. Twenty-four (24) states permit counties to implement workforce development programs, which may involve the creation of a skills training center, as in **North Carolina**, or direct financing of job creation,

as in **New York**. In **Wisconsin**, counties may establish and operate work centers to provide employment specifically for people with disabilities. Many counties may also establish their own county economic development commission, or they may grant or loan funds to a nonprofit corporation for private sector economic development initiatives, as in **Michigan**. Counties may also act independently or in partnership with other counties or incorporated municipalities.

In some cases, counties may work directly with a state agency. For instance, in **Pennsylvania**, the state Workforce Development Board (WDB) administers a mix of federal, state and local funding within their jurisdictions.

To promote tourism, trade, commerce and industry, many states allow counties to borrow money by issuing bonds or to draw from the county general fund to create industrial parks or economic development districts. In **Alabama**, counties may acquire, own and lease projects to promote industry and trade by inducing manufacturing, industrial and commercial enterprises to locate in the state; to expand, enlarge or modernize existing enterprises; or both. Several states, such as **Georgia, Hawaii** and **Louisiana**, also address urban renewal or urban blight. In **Kentucky**, counties may designate residential neighborhoods that have deteriorating housing stock and other related issues as a “neighborhood redevelopment zone.” These statutes allow counties to create a local redevelopment agency or program to eliminate and prevent the development or spread of pockets of blight, to encourage needed urban rehabilitation or to provide for the redevelopment of pockets of blight.



Housing Authorities

Thirty-five states permit or require counties to establish a housing authority. Generally, a housing authority may directly contribute to the construction, maintenance, operation, rehabilitation and funding of affordable housing units, or may create a separate fund to do so. Some housing authorities may exercise eminent domain

Thirty-five (35) states permit or require counties to establish a housing authority



to borrow money, issue bonds and acquire real property for the construction of low-income units. A housing authority may also provide services such as rent assistance, homeownership assistance and street outreach to support homelessness reduction and prevention.

There are five ways states usually delegate authority over affordable housing. First and most common, counties may establish a housing authority if the state determines a need. Second, two states (**New Hampshire** and **Washington**), require counties to establish a housing authority, but the authority cannot act until a need is found, whether by a petition from the people or a motion from the county board. Third, counties may only form a housing authority upon a petition by the people. Fourth, the housing authority is established by the state, but it only operates locally upon approval by the county board. Fifth, in some states, counties have no authority over housing; instead, municipalities regulate housing, like in **Massachusetts** and **Vermont**, or a state housing authority does so, like in **Delaware** and **Texas**. States may make alternative arrangements for regulating affordable housing as well. For example, in **Hawaii** and **South Dakota**, counties may cooperate with state housing authorities. And in **Ohio**, counties cannot establish their own housing authority but may contribute up to \$20,000 of county general funds for the administration of metropolitan housing authorities.

Environmental Conservation

Counties in more than half of all states are allowed to implement planning and zoning policies related to environmental conservation. Some states also require or encourage counties to take affirmative steps to construct, operate, repair or maintain projects related to flood control and watersheds. In **Wisconsin**, all counties must enact a shore-land and wetland protection program, while **New Mexico** state law requires counties to consider potential measures that will encourage water conservation and drought management planning.

Four states have statutes which specifically focus on energy conservation. In **California**, counties are prohibited from using zoning ordinances to prevent or inhibit the installation of solar energy systems and

electric vehicle charging stations. **Michigan** counties may pay for energy conservation improvements to be made to county facilities or infrastructure. In **Wyoming**, counties have authority to approve or deny permits for the construction of wind and solar energy projects. And in **New Hampshire**, the county planning board cannot unreasonably regulate renewable energy facilities. While these measures are optional in Michigan and Wyoming, the state statutes signify a general intent by the state to encourage energy conservation. Similarly, counties in **Washington** may develop a plan for the county to reduce its greenhouse gases emissions or achieve no-net emissions from all sources of greenhouse gases that the county controls.



Education

A man with glasses and a beard, wearing a dark sweater, is leaning over a desk. He is looking down at a woman who is sitting at the desk and writing in a notebook. The woman has long, curly hair and is looking up at the man. The background is a blurred classroom or library setting with bookshelves. The entire image has a blue tint.

Key Takeaway

Over **1 million county employees** provide education services, though only in nine states where counties are directly involved in primary, secondary and/or postsecondary education.

Counties have a more limited relationship with schools than many other services provided at the local level. Over 1 million county workers are directly involved in the education system, though only in nine states: Alaska, California, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Tennessee and Virginia. In most states, the public school system is run by the state, towns or by independently elected school boards.

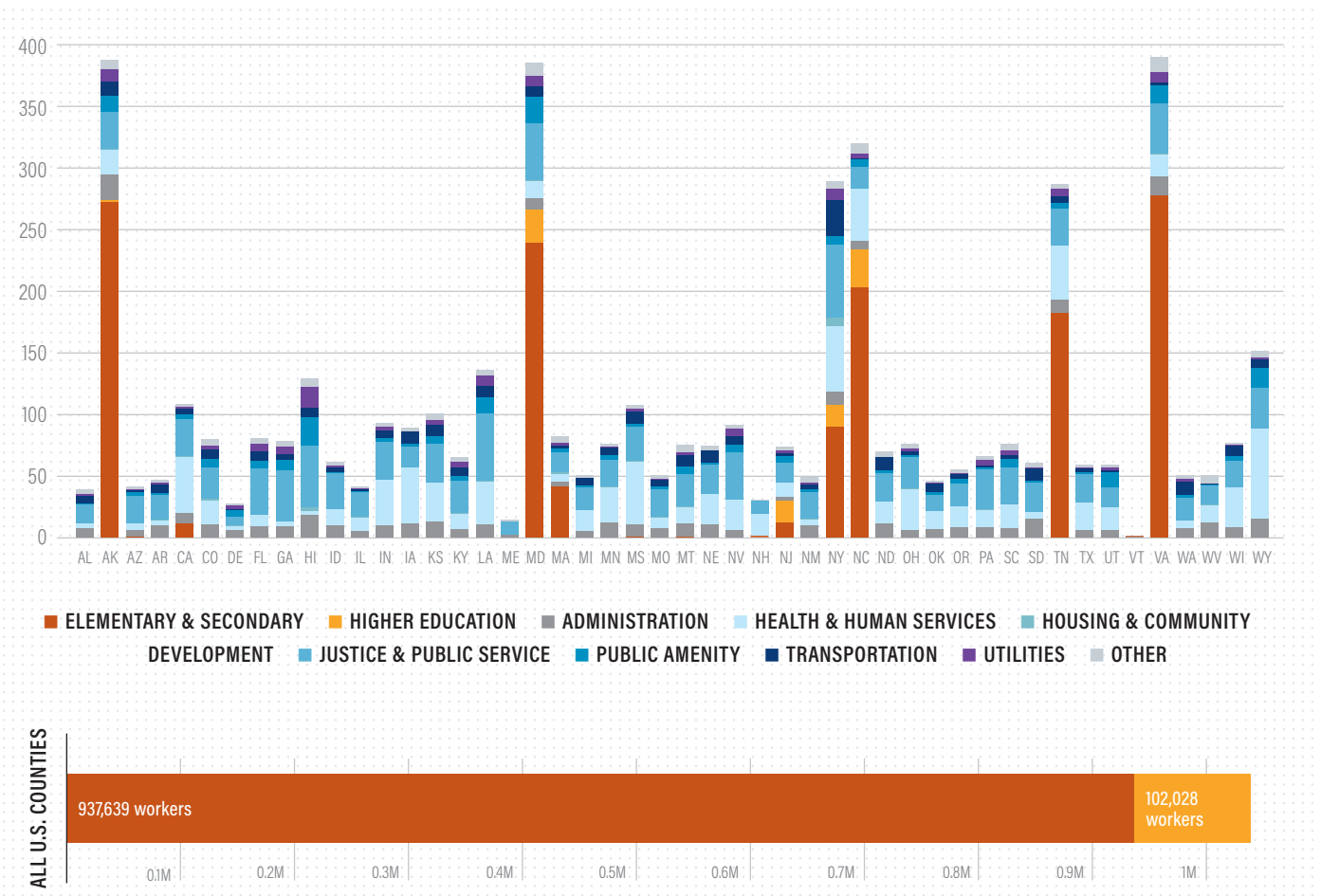
However, in some states, like **Maryland, North Carolina, Tennessee** and **Virginia**, the school board is a part of the county government, so public school teachers are

considered county employees, leading to a much higher number of county workers in those states compared with others.

Ninety (90) percent of county education workers are dedicated to elementary and secondary education. Only four states – **Maryland, New Jersey, New York** and **North Carolina** – directly employ county workers focused on higher education, though counties in many other states will work closely with community colleges and other higher education institutions in other ways.

COUNTIES IN NINE STATES DIRECTLY EMPLOY EDUCATION WORKERS

County Education and Other Employment, per 10,000 Residents, Breakdown by State



Counties in nine states employ 1,039,667 education workers.

Source: NACo Analysis of U.S. Census Bureau - Census of Individual Governments: Employment, 2022; NACo Analysis of U.S. Census Bureau - Population Estimates Program (PEP) - 2022

Funding is the predominant role most counties play within the education system, and counties often collect property taxes implemented by school districts. Even in states where the school board is part of the county government, such as **Maryland** and **Virginia**, the school board operates separate from the general county government – meaning county supervisors and council members have little say over K-12 education.

Some states provide counties with greater jurisdiction over the administration and affairs of public schools including **South Carolina, Alabama** and **California**. This increased jurisdiction can include everything from maintaining buildings, to funding special education programs to electing a county superintendent that oversees all administration. Higher education is often more complicated, and counties mainly play a supportive role through levying taxes or bonds.

K-12 Public Schools

Counties have a range of responsibilities when it comes to K-12 public schools. In all but five states – **Hawaii, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, New York** and **Vermont** – counties set aside a significant portion of property tax revenue to help finance local education. In some states, counties also play a larger role in the administration and upkeep of public education facilities. School districts in **South Carolina** are subject to the orders and supervision of county boards of education, which also help fund and maintain school facilities.

In other jurisdictions, counties work in tandem or beneath local school districts to support internal operations and administration. For example, in **Virginia**, counties must appoint a school board selection committee to nominate school board members in each county's school division.

Counties in roughly two thirds of states have a minimal role in K-12 education, with local school boards

or the state taking on most of the administration and facility responsibilities. In **Iowa**, counties can support but have no real authority to determine school board affairs. And in **Missouri**, K-12 education is run by the local school board, but counties may submit plans to enlarge or reorganize school districts to the state board of education. The local school board structure is common for counties that have little authority over K-12 education. These local school boards are often separately elected from the county board and have their own powers and responsibilities. State boards of education often oversee these local boards and work in tandem with them to implement local education policy and directives.

Community Colleges

Counties generally play an even smaller role in the direct administration and funding of community colleges than in K-12 education. While most counties are required to dedicate a share of property tax revenue to schools, most of that revenue is reserved for K-12 education. In over three-quarters of all states with county governments, community colleges are overseen and administered by the state or a board of regents/trustees that is separate from local government. In **Mississippi**, counties may jointly establish and organize community or junior colleges, but the state will often step in to distribute funds and provide general coordination of the institutions.

In other states, counties play a slightly larger role in community college administration and funding. Some of these counties have a fiscal responsibility to provide funding for community college facilities, such as in **North Carolina**, but are still under the state's jurisdiction. But in a few states, such as **Ohio**, the county is responsible for the administration and funding of community colleges



Ninety (90) percent of county education workers are dedicated to elementary and secondary education.

with general funding support provided by the state. In **New Jersey** and **New York**, however, counties may establish community colleges, so counties in those states dedicate more workers to higher education than to primary and secondary education. About two thirds (61 percent) of county education workers in New Jersey and all county education workers in New York (outside of New York City) focus on higher education.

In **three-quarters of states with county governments**, community colleges are overseen and administered by the state or a board of regents/trustees that is **separate from local government**.



A Final Note

America's 3,069 county governments provide essential services to residents in a wide variety of areas, from health care and public safety to infrastructure, parks and libraries – all of which benefit residents across our nation. This report covered many of the typical services counties provide, but it is by no means comprehensive, only touching on many key service areas. Alongside the primary service areas mentioned, counties also manage and administer our nation's elections⁶ and provide countless other services specific to our communities. With support from federal, state and other local governments, counties play a crucial role in our intergovernmental system of public service delivery. Moving forward, counties will continue to adapt to changing demands and strengthen partnerships with state and federal governments to ensure our local communities remain healthy, safe and vibrant.

Endnotes

¹ For more information on indigent burials, see Mary Ann Barton, “Undertakers of last resort: Indigent burials on the rise, denting county budgets,” NACo County News (Dec. 2018).

² Rexford B. Sherman, “Seaport Governance in the United States and Canada,” American Association of Port Authorities.

³ For more information on the county role in providing broadband services, see NACo’s Broadband Task Force report: “High-Speed Internet Is Essential for All Counties” (Jul. 2021).

⁴ For instance, California mentions beaches in their definition of “recreation facility” (CA Pub Res Code § 5780.1 (2021)). Mississippi consistently uses the phrase, “recreational centers, stadiums, lakes, waterfowl or game management areas or parks” (emphasis added) in their statutes on parks and recreation (MS Code § 55-9-1 (2023)).




⁵ NACo Analysis of U.S. Census Bureau – Building Permits Survey (BPS), 2022.

⁶ For more information, see National Association of Counties (NACo), “America’s County Governments: A Primer on County-Level Election Administration” (Nov. 2024).



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