National Association of Counties at 90

1935/2025


Stronger Counties. Stronger America.

NACo President Sandy Smoley opens the 1984 Annual Conference in King County, Washington.

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Foreword: Counties Rise

As the United States prepares to celebrate 250 years of independence, America's county government leaders are marking 90 years of coming together through the National Association of Counties (NACo)—nearly a century of powering the nation from the ground up.

Counties in the United States began with eight shires in colonial Virginia in 1634 and now total 3,069. Our counties, including parishes in Louisiana and boroughs in Alaska, maintain essential transportation and infrastructure, safeguard public safety and justice, and play an essential role in public administration, including elections, that keep our democracy strong. In every corner of the country, we are unique, yet we are all governments in action.

Before the Great Depression, we were largely fragmented. But as the federal government expanded and the demands on local services grew, county leaders knew we needed a unified voice. In 1935, a few pioneering county officials came together to form NACo—to ensure counties had a seat at the table in our evolving intergovernmental system.

Since then, we've spoken louder, acted smarter and stood stronger—together. From a laundry room office in the Mayflower Hotel to a lasting presence in the halls of Congress and the White House, we've advanced the message that counties are not just implementers—we are innovators. We've pushed back on unfunded mandates, fought for our fair share and led through every challenge.

We've risen to the moment—again and again. We lent personnel and salvaged resources like gasoline during World War II. We strengthened civil defense during the Cuban Missile Crisis. We delivered critical services through recessions, disasters and terrorist attacks. And when the COVID-19 pandemic hit, our health departments, first responders and local leaders were ready. In the recovery, we've been entrusted with the tools to rebuild—and we've delivered.

Through NACo, we've forged a stronger national voice and a deeper connection to each other. And at our own pivotal crossroads, we reaffirmed that our collective voice matters—and we're stronger together than apart.

We've proven that we not only have the charter to govern, but the will and vision to lead effectively. By strengthening our counties, we strengthen America. Because when counties lead, America thrives.

Counties matter—yesterday, today and for the next 250 years.

Jamestown and Vicinity.

Counties in the U.S. began with eight shires in colonial Virginia in 1634 and now total 3,069.

Counties Convene

Utah delegates gather for lunch during the 1949 National Association of County Officers conference in Alameda County, California.

The Draft Agenda

Counties were under attack.

That's the attitude Milwaukee County, Wisconsin Clerk George F. Breitbach took when he invited county officials to a Cook County, Illinois meeting to organize a national group of county officials: the National County Officers Association.

Although counties in several states had already bound together to keep pace with their legislatures and governors, with Nebraska leading the way in 1894, no national organization had served the same purpose for a form of government that predated both state and federal bodies.


New Leaders of County Officials' Association

New officers of the National Association of County Officers elected Wednesday include, seated, left to right: Carl W. Chambers of Pendleton, Ore., vice president; Judge Jake L. Loy of Sherman, Texas, president; Geeorge F. Simmons of Ogden, retiring president and newly elected executive director, and Pete Hughes of Pueblo, Colo., vice president. Standing, left to right, W. A. Smith of Whittier, Cal., and Clarence E. Roy of Fort Wayne, Ind., vice presidents; George F. Breitbach of Milwaukee, Wis., reelected secretary-treasurer, and E. H. Beckett of Tarpon Springs, Fla., and Patrick H. Dupuis of New Bedford, Mass., vice presidents.

Newly elected officers gather at the 1939 National Association of County Officers Annual Conference in Weber County, Utah.

The first convention, held Oct. 16-19, 1935, focused on the decentralization of government. The meeting included a speech by Iowa journalist W. F. Parrott, titled "Better County Government." Salt Lake County, Utah Attorney Harold E. Wallace, serving as vice president, summed the mood up that government should not be turned over to state and national bureaus, owing to county officials' closer relationship to the people. Wallace noted that several state governments had taken over all road supervision, leaving county officials without a voice in their regulation, construction or maintenance.

Those early years repeated the consistent theme of preserving county authority.

In 1937, the association incorporated in Wisconsin, and the annual meeting in Milwaukee County drew 200 attendees. Attendees adopted a resolution censuring opponents of the county system of government, defending it as most expressive of the liberties of the people and their right to self-government.

County road networks also featured prominently, and attendees heard from Frank R. Wilson, representative of the federal accident prevention conference, who presented results from surveys indicating that speed and youth were the greatest contributors to the 35,000

National County Officers Association founder and president George F. Breitbach, clerk of Milwaukee County, Wisconsin. Photo courtesy of the Milwaukee County Historical Society

Attendees voted for the best orator of the conference, honoring Milwaukee Mayor Daniel Webster Hoan, Jr.

automobile fatalities every year. Attendees voted for the best orator of the conference, honoring Milwaukee Mayor Daniel Webster Hoan, Jr.

Counties have always, in some regard, had to fight for respect. Contemporary news reports from NACo's early days were littered with items about county officials attending conferences, but those items referred to the officials' nearest cities, rather than the counties they served.

Fueling for the Fight

A funding problem dogged the association because at the time most counties were forbidden from spending public money on association membership or out-of-state travel. A solution rolled off the printing press in the form of *The County Officer*, published by Allen D. Alberts of Edgar County, Illinois. While counties could not spend money on memberships, they could buy newspaper and magazine subscriptions.

The County Officer became the association's primary fundraising vehicle, yet subscription revenue—$3 per year—only covered production costs. Production opened the door to additional fundraising through state associations of counties. They contributed subscription revenue, editorial material and advertising revenue. Publishing an article won a free membership for the author.

Breitbach's home state of Wisconsin contributed heavily to the 56-page first edition in April 1937, with articles by Gov. Philip La Follette, who spent two years as Dane County's district attorney, Secretary of State Theodore Dammann, Dane County Clerk Austin N. Johnson and J.H.H. Alexander, superintendent of recreational publicity for the state conservation department. One article examined county employee pension plans.

Breitbach served as president for three years, until 1938, after which he served as secretary-treasurer and editor of *The County Officer* and later, a magazine called *Governmental News*.

The association's 1938 meeting in Rock Island County, Illinois aimed to attract 500 attendees but saw only 60 registrants. The 1938 meeting included an address by Carl H. Chatters, executive director of the Municipal Finance Officers' Association of the United States and Canada, warning that encroachment by the states was increasingly endangering local revenue sources.

Meanwhile, the federal government was alternating between preserving counties and cities and planning new burdens on them to sap their authority and influence. State laws canceling county-imposed penalties, postponing sales taxes and encouraging tax exemptions were eroding property taxes, which serve as counties' primary source of revenue to this day.

"The elected officials of local communities and elected officials of states cannot be expected to stand up and cheer at the thought of raising local tax rates or devising new forms of state taxation for relief purposes if that responsibility can be transferred to Washington," Chatters said.

The Surge

The disappointment in 1938 raised the stakes for 1939, setting up that year's meeting in Weber County, Utah as a make-or-break event in President George F. Simmons's home county, where he served as chairman of the county commission. Members sent out 25,000 invitations and aimed high, inviting Vice President John Nance Garner and FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover to speak, though neither attended.

"The challenge has been issued to us as a state as to whether or not we can successfully conduct a convention and bring the 'national' back to an association. It will be up to us to revive the National County Officers Association," Simmons said.

Attendance rebounded, with more than 500 registrants and $2,500 in revenue.

Not only did attendance rebound, with more than 500 registrants and $2,500 in revenue,


Short-Wave Used to Cover County Conclave

EWS FROM MOUNTAIN PEAK . . . Wayne Iverson, forest service radioman, watches the dialboard f a two-way radiophone set as W. F. Smiley, Standard-Examiner rewrite man takes down the story of day's session of the National Association of County Officers being conducted 45 miles away at Monte risto recreationaal park, high in the Wasatch mountains. Louis A. Skaggs, reporter covering the convention for The Standard-Examiner, is on the other end of the wireless setup. (Staff photo.)

The 1939 conference received media attention from the *Ogden Standard-Examiner*, covering the proceedings 45 miles away via two-way radiophone.

but the renamed National Association of County Officers attacked the new stage in its development with gusto. NACo mobilized that year to combat efforts to consolidate counties, a movement afoot at the time in Missouri.

"The nationwide movement toward the consolidation of counties and the further centralization of government in large units is a distinct threat as well as a challenge to all county officials," Simmons wrote.

The conference even received media attention from the *Ogden Standard-Examiner*, which covered proceedings 45 miles away via two-way radiophone.

G. Claiborne Blanton, Joseph F. Hammond, Harry Bartell and Stanley Martin review the program for the 1949 National Association of County Officers Annual Conference.

The conference even received media attention from the *Ogden Standard-Examiner,* which covered proceedings 45 miles away via two-way radiophone.

A new plan hatched in 1939 counted on state associations to sponsor issues of *The County Officer*. The sponsoring state association pledged to collect the magazine subscription fees for each of the officers of every county in the state and to solicit advertising.

Following his term in office, Simmons traveled throughout the United States, visiting Pueblo County, Colorado; Ford and Sedgwick counties in Kansas; Tarrant, Harris, Bexar and El Paso counties in Texas; Maricopa County, Arizona and Los Angeles County, California as part of his part-time role, alternately dubbed executive director or executive secretary.

Throughout its first two decades, NACo continued to operate under the same basic conditions. Its members were individual county officers who subscribed to *The County Officer*. States took turns sponsoring issues of the magazine and generating the advertising revenues that underwrote NACo activities. County officials paid their own ways, often chartering trains or bus caravans to conventions, which focused on networking, problem solving, education and advocacy with counties' federal delegations. NACo's message to county leaders: Do more for our constituents.

"No county officer can do his job by staying home or just doing the thing that his predecessor did," Simmons said in 1941, when membership grew to 1,500 individuals. "We and other county officers have in our hands one of the greatest powers in our nation."

Strengthening the Western Flank

Advocacy gained steam on an issue that has been a throughline in NACo's operation and a galvanizing issue that drove longstanding loyalty to the organization.

Guy Cordon, a lawyer for the Association of Oregon Counties, spoke to county officials at the annual conference in Louisville about the disparity between the value of tax-exempt federally owned land and the remittances given to the counties by the federal government. The property tax revenue of all of that land in 1941 should total $91 million, while the government instead divided $2.5 million among counties.

The Interstate Association of Public Land Counties formed in 1941 to advocate for a fairer share and later merged with the Western District of NACo to form the Western Interstate Region in 1978. In the 2020s, the Western Interstate Region added Minnesota and Nebraska, recognizing the prevalence of public lands in those states.

"Counties with large proportions of their natural resources held in nontaxable status therefore are at a decided disadvantage so far as obtaining property taxes for their support, compared with counties in older sections of the country where virtually all of the land is under private ownership," said Edwin J. Regan, chairman of the Interstate Association of Public Land Counties and district attorney for Trinity County, California.

Federal land management became a rallying cry for NACo in the early days because it was a direct touchpoint between county and federal governments, though it would be 35 years until the 1976 Payments in Lieu of Taxes program codified how the federal government would compensate counties for lands administered by the Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Forest Service, National Park Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and some military installations.

A Nation at War

The next year saw the United States shift to fighting World War II, and counties themselves, besides lending their personnel to the war effort, made temporary repairs to save critical materials.

"No county officer can do his job by staying home or just doing the thing that his predecessor did."
— George F. Simmons, a Weber County, Utah commissioner and former NACo president

Attendees gather during the 1949 National Association of County Officers conference in Alameda County, California.

"I saw firsthand the fine leadership with which counties provided during the dark days of the Depression and the services they rendered during the war," said Sen. Lister Hill (D-Ala.).


Honolulu Star-Bulletin 1st EXTRA

WAR!

OAHU BOMBED BY JAPANESE PLANES

SAN FRANCISCO, Dec. 7.—President Roosevelt announced this morning that Japanese planes had attacked Manila and Pearl Harbor.

SIX KNOWN DEAD, 21 INJURED, AT EMERGENCY HOSPITAL

Honolulu Star-Bulletin

On the eve of World War II, Grayson County, Texas Judge and NACo President Jake Loy in 1939 said, "County officers are the first line of defense. They must be men of courage and action, sympathetic but firm."

In 1944, NACo leaders decided it was time to establish a Washington office, funded by subscriptions to *The County Officer*, and that members would make a major push to sign up officials from all counties nationwide as subscribers. NACo hired a Washington law firm in 1944 to be its eyes, ears and voice in the capital. With the war following on the heels of the depression, America's county officials felt acutely their role as the government unit closest and most connected to the people.


Harry S. Truman is sworn in as presiding judge of the county court of Jackson County, Missouri. Left to right: Edward Becker, county clerk; Eugene Purcell, judge of Eastern District; Truman; W. O. Beeman, judge of Western District. Photo courtesy of Petey Childers

America came out of the war with a new president—Harry S. Truman, who Jackson County, Missouri residents remembered as a county court judge (1923-1925), a role similar to a county commissioner, and later presiding judge (1927-1935), a role that was both administrative and judicial.

In 1946, the association incorporated again, and the first major article said:

"The objects and purposes for which the corporation is formed are to stimulate and contribute to the continuing improvement of county government throughout the United States, including specifically increased efficiency of county government and an even higher standard of public service through the medium of county government."

By 1956, NACo's western constituencies were convinced enough of the value of concerted action to take the lead in forming the Council of State Associations. William MacDougall, general manager of the County Supervisors Association of California, was the first chairman of the new group. He and Washington State Association of Counties executive Richard Watts collaborated on a vigorous effort to establish a full-time NACo presence in Washington.

During the mid-year business conference in 1954, personally financed by St. Clair County, Alabama Judge Ward Forman and Calhoun County, Alabama Commissioner Dan Gray, the board debated the so-called California Plan, which set both an immediate goal for NACo to procure full-time professional staff support and a financial strategy to support that goal. The association had maintained part-time executive directors, often past presidents like George F. Simmons, who continued working in their home counties in places like Utah and Illinois, far from Congress and the heartbeat of the federal government. The Board of Directors also increased the cost of an annual subscription to *The County Officer* by a dollar.

The National Association of County Officers' 1949-1950 executive committee: W. Ward Forman, fourth vice president; Dean Z. Haddick, first vice president; Sid Caillavet, third vice president; Stanley Martin, president and Marcus Christ, second vice president.

Left: Attendees board buses outside of the Leamington Hotel in Alameda County, California during the National Association of County Officers' 1949 conference.

A New Vision and a New Name

As NACo's first executive director, Bernie Hillenbrand took county government from relative obscurity to a political mainstay in Washington, D.C.

Pouring a New Foundation

In the winter of 1956 through 1957, Bernie Hillenbrand was working in Washington, D.C. as an assistant director of the American Municipal Association, a precursor to the National League of Cities. He was the only full-time lobbyist in the nation's capital for cities, counties and state governments and was busy covering a variety of issues ranging from highway funding to water pollution. After initially being rebuffed, William MacDougall again offered Hillenbrand the role as full-time executive director in 1957, which Hillenbrand accepted after noticing the emerging national influence of counties. He became NACo's first full-time staffer.

With finances still tenuous, Hillenbrand worked out of an unused Mayflower Hotel laundry room and took any meetings across the street in the hotel's opulent lobby. That was enough to begin professionalizing the organization, securing funding from federal and philanthropic sources and giving NACo a firm foundation.

Hillenbrand's desk that once occupied that laundry room now rests in NACo's current office.

The *Wilmington News Journal* described Hillenbrand's secret to NACo's success over his 25 years as executive director, a time in which he outlasted the leaders of virtually every other public interest group:

Executive Director Bernie Hillenbrand's desk, which once occupied the Mayflower Hotel laundry room, now rests in NACo's current office.

"His lobbying method was to research an issue of concern to counties, decide upon a strategy, give county officials a crash course and send them over to Capitol Hill to corner legislators they knew. It worked."

In 1957, NACo spent its mid-year meeting compiling all of its previous policy resolutions into a single guiding document: The "American County Platform."

That platform included a basic policy that was included in the first report of President Eisenhower's Commission

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— Bernie Hillenbrand, NACo's executive director

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The Mayflower Hotel

on Intergovernmental Relations, known colloquially as the Kestnbaum Commission:

"Leave to private initiative all the functions that citizens can perform privately; Use the level of government closest to the community for all the public functions it can handle; Use comparative intergovernmental arrangements where appropriate to obtain economical performance and popular approval; Reserve national action for residual participation where state and local governments are not fully adequate and for the continuing responsibilities that only national government can undertake."

NACo also fought for representation on the Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations (ACIR), a successor to the Kestnbaum Commission, after the body was announced to include just state and city leaders. Sen. Karl Mundt (R-S.D.) responded with a successful amendment which provided that three county officials nominated by NACo be added to the four city officials nominated by NACo's sibling associations, the National League of Cities and the U.S. Conference of Mayors.

NACo nominated three representatives: Westchester County, New York Executive Edwin G. Michaelian, Wayne County, Michigan Supervisor Edward Connor and Plumas County, California Supervisor Clair Donnenwirth. The three played leading roles in the work of the commission and were critical to the appointment of William G. Colman as ACIR's first executive director. At the first ACIR organizational meeting, the seven county and city representatives caucused and decided that Colman, who had staffed the Kestnbaum Commission, was the best candidate for the position, but the Eisenhower administration felt otherwise and publicly had the votes to elect their candidate.

But Donnenwirth spoke up:

"Mr. Chairman, in my little county of Plumas, we have fallen in love with the secret ballot."

Following a secret ballot election, Colman was confirmed as the first ACIR executive director. The commission would last until Sept. 30, 1996.

Hillenbrand and NACo's growing staff moved out of the laundry room and into other office space in the same building, though they still entertained in the Mayflower Hotel's lobby.

Maturity

NACo President Mark Johnson, a Salt Lake County, Utah commissioner, empaneled the "Committee on the Future" to figure out a funding fix that would allow counties, rather than individuals, to become NACo members. Fulton County, Georgia Commissioner Jim Aldredge noted that counties could legally purchase services that included printing, painting and plumbing. Why not market NACo as an information service? That solution was the County Information Service, which offered publications, information, analysis and other material with fees based on population. The service also required that counties be in good stead with their state associations.

The plan made NACo fiscally viable in 1959 but also met a longstanding desire of a generation of leaders: for counties to have a single home and to match the drive for equitable apportionment of representation in state legislatures and Congress. The new membership structure allowed NACo to demonstrate that its actions reflected the needs of citizens.

> "NACo was a place where county leaders can get together, talk about the problems they are facing and find solutions," Hillenbrand said

In 1962, the association found its home in a name, when the National Association of County Officers became the National Association of Counties, reflecting the change that the counties, rather than officers, were the members.

"NACo was a place where county leaders can get together, talk about the problems they are facing and find solutions," Hillenbrand said in June 2018. "There was a comradeship you can't get anywhere else, and bonding, seeing the same people every year at our meetings. People would look forward to 'next year.'"

As the role of the federal government expanded during the Great Depression and World War II, the federal government needed an effective way to partner with counties to administer the growing number of social service and economic development programs. NACo tried several methods for reaching out. A series of state-by-state syndicated articles examined federal aid programs, then a newsletter tailored to the needs of state associations and affiliates. A grant from the Ford Foundation in 1958 funded a full-time position to expand information services offered in *The County Officer.*

The Monday Letter followed in the wake of NACo's increased influence in Washington, D.C. Every Friday, the entire NACo staff summarized the week's developments in terms of possible local implementation or action opportunities. It was mailed to several hundred leaders, arriving on Monday mornings. In the 1960s, it was replaced by

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NACo NEWS & VIEWS

LEGISLATIVE CONFERENCE PUSHES REVENUE SHARING

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NACo News and Views, which offered broader content for a wider circulation. It would later be supplanted by *County News*, which continues to this day, regardless of challenges to its deadline.

Quick Work

Hillenbrand applied in 1958 for a five-year matching grant of $160,000 from the Ford Foundation, which Paul Ylvisaker approved. When Ylvisaker called Hillenbrand to tell him the grant would be approved, he set off a minor panic. Ylvisaker asked for NACo's tax exemption number under Section 501(c)(3) but NACo was a civic organization organized under 501(c)(4). Without a tax exemption number, NACo would not be awarded the grant.

Hillenbrand immediately retained a Wilmington, Delaware law firm to draft new bylaws and incorporation papers for "The Local Government Education And Research, Inc.," later changed to The NACo Research Foundation.

The papers were delivered to the NACo office and a party of staffers carried the completed package by hand to the IRS regional office in Baltimore. The new documents got the group a temporary exemption and a number that satisfied Ylvisaker and the Ford Foundation.

That was a Friday afternoon, and Hillenbrand sent the documents via special delivery to Ylvisaker's home in Cranberry Lake, N.J., and NACo's staff celebrated. Prematurely, it turned out.

The following Sunday brought a blizzard that paralyzed the New York area, and Ylvisaker spent the next day trying to navigate to the Ford Foundation offices, arriving with only five minutes before the Board was set to adjourn.

That grant fueled expansion that would have otherwise taken five years to finance. NACo was able to move to a more traditional office space at 1001 Connecticut Ave., NW, an ironic address because in 1960 the state of Connecticut abolished county governments.

The funding helped establish a central clearinghouse on administrative reorganization, charters, state enabling legislation, modern budgeting and finance and other aspects of streamlining county government. Staff analyzed administrative problems and published results. Training programs and educational sessions were added to regular NACo meetings.

Urban Expansion

The demographic shifts and migration to cities and suburbs placed 60 percent of the nation's population in the largest 300 counties by 1959.

In response, NACo conducted its first Urban County Congress that March. The three-day meeting drew more than 900 attendees and represented a quick pivot away from the reputation of county governments that one attendee noted was "a unit of government that was outmoded, archaic, a product of horse and buggy days and probably doomed to extinction."

NACo's President C. Beverly Briley, Davidson County, Tennessee judge, served as keynote speaker and told the attendees: "The way to focus the babble of voices (on urban problems) into a single strong voice is to make county government again the dominant local government. I say this is the only way."

The meeting drew two national luminaries—Vice President Richard Nixon and Sen. John F. Kennedy (D-Mass.)—who would compete for the presidency the next year.

Nixon: "You are faced with a thousand challenges. Further, your responsibilities for the welfare of your fellow citizens will be greatly increased, as an estimated one million acres become urban and suburban each year. Men, it seems, have always been faced with a form of the problems you must now solve. As our ancestors met the challenges of their times, so I have faith that you will help us meet this generation's."

Kennedy: "It is clear that our city governments cannot always assume the sole responsibility for the solution of these pressing urban problems. I repeat they cannot—our state governments will not—the federal government should not—and therefore you on the county level must. It is up to counties and similar area governments to play a more important role in the solution of urban problems."

Richard M. Nixon and John F. Kennedy.

In 1962, NACo shifted its attention from primarily rural issues to a balanced program that assisted every county, regardless of population. A county urban advisor joined the staff and represented a contact point between urban counties and key federal agencies that provided technical and financial aid on problems such as urban renewal, civil defense, mass transit and sewage treatment.

Hillenbrand staked out NACo's position that year.

"We recognize the need for federal and state government, but we strongly believe that federal and state participation should supplement and not replace local decision making," he said.

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— Bernie Hillenbrand, NACo's executive director

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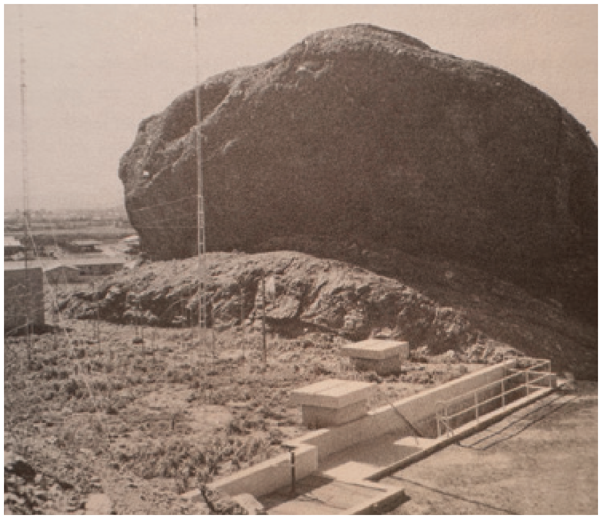


County governments' responsibility for civil defense was pronounced during the Cold War, particularly during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Maricopa County, Arizona's civil defense shelter, pictured here, was located beneath a small butte on the outskirts of Phoenix.

Counties' place in this intergovernmental partnership became evident that October, when NACo was among the organizations summoned to the Pentagon for an emergency consultation during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Counties would need accurate and timely information to keep their citizens as safe as possible, and NACo staff would be placed on alert to pass on new information as quickly as possible to local officials. That meant constantly staying in touch with Pentagon leaders for the next two weeks.

"It was clear to us that if the Communists did not back down, there would be war," Hillenbrand said.

The Spotlight Shines on NACo

The presidential campaign of 1964 provided NACo with several opportunities to build its rapport with national leaders.

NACo was meeting in Washington during the week the Democrats held their national convention in Atlantic City, and Sen. Hubert Humphrey was to be NACo's banquet speaker. Humphrey was widely regarded as the likely vice-presidential nominee on Lyndon Johnson's ticket, and that raised expectations for press coverage. Staff went to the Sheraton Park Hotel to make arrangements with those responsible for the banquet.

"Do you want a spotlight?"

"Sure."

"The spotlight people charge $100."

"That is unreasonable!"

"Those are the union rates."

"Well, okay. It's an important occasion."

"Is there any chance that Sen. Humphrey will speak longer than 25 minutes?"

Even by the standards of the U.S. Senate, Humphrey had a reputation for loquacity, so this question prompted a laugh.

"In that case you will have two spotlight people because they only work for 25 minutes at a time."

"This is highway robbery," the NACo staffer countered, "but I guess we'll have to have two."

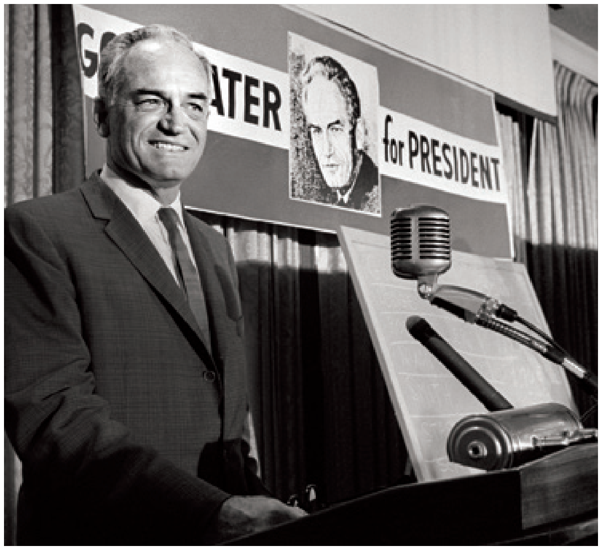
"But union rules are that if you have two spotlight operators, there must also be a supervisor present."

"And how much do supervisors get paid?"

"They get $150."

Eventually the expensive personnel agreement was handed out and the great night came. There were 82 NACo officers and directors at the head table. Senator Humphrey walked the entire length in a blazing spotlight, shaking every outstretched hand. There were lights from dozens of TV cameras. Then he came to the lectern, still in the spotlight. He held his arm up to shield his eyes and said, "I'm not an entertainer, I'm a politician and I'm working tonight. Please turn off the lights!"

Humphrey got the second spot on LBJ's ticket, and the Republican Party nominated Arizona Sen. Barry M. Goldwater and New York Rep. William Miller. A year in advance of its 1964 conference, NACo invited Sen. Goldwater to speak and he readily accepted. But in the late summer of 1964, things were different. Goldwater was the Republican nominee for president, and he had announced that he would be spending the next few weeks planning his campaign and not speaking in public.



Sen. Barry Goldwater kept his word that he would address NACo members despite canceling speaking engagements upon winning the 1964 Republican presidential nomination.

"Senator," a New York leader told the Arizonan on the telephone, "we congratulate you on winning the presidential nomination, but we're disappointed that you were not going to address the NACo meeting."

"Who says?' Goldwater replied. "I told you a year ago that I would attend, and I don't go back on my word."

Goldwater's appearance before the Annual Conference turned out to be the opening speech of his campaign.

Vice President Hubert Humphrey

The Roaring '70s

Past NACo presidents gather with Executive Director Bernie Hillenbrand (bottom) in 1970. Photo courtesy of the East Baton Rouge Parish, Louisiana Library

County Programming

In 1970, NACo drew its best and brightest ideas through its new Achievement Awards program, which not only allowed the association to recognize innovative programming by county leaders but helped develop a repository of counties' solutions for problems that many shared. The inaugural cohort included 16 county honorees.

In 2025, NACo awarded more than 1,500 Achievement Awards to almost 200 county members, recognizing 18 best-in-category winners.

The hallways of the New Hanover County, North Carolina administration building are lined with years' worth of Achievement Award certificates. If NACo appears in a local newspaper, it's most likely in commemoration of a county's recognition, which often includes details of a winning program's superlative qualities. *County News* features award-winning programs in every issue.

"I'm proudest of the fact that our county recently received a 2022 National Association of Counties Achievement Award because we've put in place some of the best county practices helping veterans in the nation," Cathrene Nichols said in 2022. Nichols is the regional veterans service center director in Spokane County, Washington.

NACo President Clesson Chikasuye (left) presents a NACo Achievement Award to a NACo member in the 1970s. Chikasuye was a Honolulu County, Hawaii councilmember.

Almost 50 years after the program began, Leon County, Florida Commissioner Bryan Desloge made those programs a centerpiece of his NACo presidency.

"One of the primary reasons that organizations like NACo exist is to try and share those best

Prince George's County, Maryland Councilmember Gladys Spellman, Vice President Spiro Agnew, King County, Washington Councilmember Ed Munro and NACo Executive Director Bernie Hillenbrand. Spellman and Munro both served as NACo president.

practices. We're not competing against each other most of the time, so if somebody else has figured out a better way to build a mousetrap, we ought to 'plagiarize' it," he said. "Any time I was criticized for traveling on NACo's behalf, I would come right back with examples of what I'd learned from other counties that we put to work in Leon County.

"We see a lot of winning programs from large urban counties, but that information can benefit the smaller rural counties that don't have the same staff capacity," he said. "It's a chance to learn from one another."

The 1970s also saw NACo move into a new office at 1735 New York Ave., NW, along with the purchase of the "Hill House" at 115 C St., SE, which NACo would use for lobbying and entertaining members of Congress.

General Revenue Sharing

Richard Nixon had campaigned for president partly on a platform of empowering local governments to do more for themselves. A key element in this platform was General Revenue Sharing, a concept that combined the federal government's prowess in collecting tax revenues with the local discretion in how those funds would be spent. General Revenue Sharing was not new. It had been proposed in Congress in 1958 by Rep. Melvin Laird (R-Wis.). But this time, a motivated administration and an organized collection of county officials made the difference.

The 1970s also saw NACo move into a new office at 1735 New York Ave., NW, along with the purchase of the "Hill House" at 115 C St., SE, which NACo would use for lobbying and entertaining members of Congress.

General Revenue Sharing meant that the federal government, from its tax revenues, would reallocate a large amount of money to state and local governments in the form of unrestricted grants. The localities could spend this money however they felt proper, in contrast to the long-standing categorical grant programs that restricted spending to specific, approved programs.

Nixon himself mentioned General Revenue Sharing in both 1969 and 1970, but in neither year did the idea leave the congressional starting gate. It had formidable opposition from House leaders such as Rep. Wilbur Mills (D-Ark.), chairman of the Ways and Means Committee, who refused to even hold hearings on revenue sharing.

"I now propose that we give our state and our cities, our towns and our counties the tools so that they can get on with the job," Nixon told members of Congress in 1971.

NACo continued to press the idea at any available forum, even when the outcome seemed foreordained. A House Ways and Means Committee hearing in 1970 featured a verbal altercation between Mills and NACo Past President Woodrow Wilson Dumas, mayor-president of East Baton Rouge Parish, Louisiana.

"Mr. Chairman," Dumas said, "we know this game is crooked, but it's the only game in town!"

Stunned silence reigned in the huge hearing room as Dumas gazed up at the chairman.

"What do you mean?" Mills nearly shouted.

"What I mean," Dumas replied, "is that your committee has already announced it is opposed to the revenue sharing and that the purpose of this hearing is to kill the idea."

Mills, one of the Capitol's most powerful figures, retorted: "And where do you propose to get the money to fund this program?

Left: NACo President Edwin Michaelian, Westchester County, New York executive, and his wife, Joyce, meet with President Richard Nixon and his wife, Pat.

Bottom: NACo President Woodrow Wilson Dumas (second from left), East Baton Rouge Parish, Lousiana Mayor, was a strong voice for General Revenue Sharing. Also pictured is former Vice President Hubert Humphrey (third from right).

> "Involvement of cities, counties and municipalities into the day-to-day work of the Congress is of an increasing and continuing importance..."
>
> — Gerhard A. Gesell
> U.S. District Judge

"Well, Mr. Chairman, I have in my hand a copy of last year's budget for the House of Representatives," Dumas replied. "We find places that funds might be better used for aid to hard pressed local governments. For example, here's an item for a chauffeur driven car for the speaker, and then there are the free mailings for congressmen under the franking privilege."

Dumas's exchange with Mills was just one episode in a long struggle to build enough grassroots support for General Revenue Sharing to persuade the House of Representatives. Nixon was pressing for several features in General Revenue Sharing that made it less palatable to the House. He wanted, for example, a five-year authorization for the new program, so this politically sensitive issue would not need to be revisited too frequently.

NACo members plan their policy advocacy strategy ahead of congressional meetings.

From NACo's perspective, a key challenge was simply to gain a seat at the negotiating table. The federal sponsors of General Revenue Sharing thought its chief beneficiaries would be state governments, with some funds also being channeled to cities. NACo needed to create a position for counties as a conduit of revenue sharing money to local communities. Allocation of General Revenue Sharing funds would be based on percentage of people living in poverty in a given area, the population of the area and the effectiveness of local tax efforts.

As the government unit closest to local communities, counties were ideally positioned to maximize local eligibility for funds. Moreover, county governments could steer a middle course between preponderantly Republican state governors and the mayors of key cities, who tended to be Democrats.

A key ally, and one of the figures most responsible for the eventual success of General Revenue Sharing, was Vice President Spiro T. Agnew. Agnew was friendly to NACo and counties because he himself had been

Baltimore County, Maryland's executive and later Maryland governor before becoming Nixon's running mate.

Agnew pressed Nixon to increase the financial commitment he was seeking for General Revenue Sharing, arguing that a modest level of funding individual congressional districts might pass Congress more easily but wouldn't have enough impact at the local level to demonstrate the effectiveness of the program. The vice president also committed to working closely with NACo leaders to press hard for General Revenue Sharing at every opportunity.

NACo Executive Director Bernie Hillenbrand (left) greets President Jimmy Carter at NACo's 1979 Annual Conference.

The key to persuading the House was to generate support at the level of individual congressional districts, a task NACo, by structure and membership, could do more effectively than anyone else. Slowly, momentum grew for General Revenue Sharing.

NACo organized one of the proposal's most successful and visible supporting efforts in mid-1971, when it scheduled a full day of "jet-ins" throughout the country.

NACo organized one of the proposal's most successful and visible supporting efforts in mid-1971, when it scheduled a full day of "jet-ins" throughout the country. Each jet-in would gather local officials from a broad area to a meeting facility near a centrally located airport. NACo and administration allies would fly a team of speakers to several of these airports in a single day to brief these officials on the status of General Revenue Sharing and recruit their active support in lobbying their own representatives.

Stops were scheduled in Philadelphia, Atlanta, Kansas City, Cleveland and San Francisco. Agnew himself flew with the NACo team to Atlanta and Kansas City. The rallies were hugely successful in Kansas City. For instance, although only 200 people had registered in advance, more than

"It was an amazing experience for a young kid new to the Washington political scene."

— Larry Naake, NACo's executive director

The 1971 New Castle County, Delaware Council included (first on the left) future U.S. President Joe Biden.

1,500 turned out. NACo's staff had to scramble to set up closed circuit television links to overflow rooms to enable all attendees to hear the vice president.

NACo backed these occasional high-profile events with a steady lobbying campaign period. Slowly, the opposition was persuaded until both houses passed the State and Local Fiscal Assistance Act of 1972 in the summer of that year. Harmonizing the different versions of the legislation and conference committee proceeded into the fall. Finally, Nixon scheduled a ceremony at Independence Hall in Philadelphia to sign into law the bill he called "the new American Revolution."

In 1972, Hillenbrand had assigned Larry Naake, then 30, to represent NACo in lobbying Congress and the Nixon administration on General Revenue Sharing.

In 1972, the passage of General Revenue Sharing was NACo's most important legislative success.

"It was an amazing experience for a young kid new to the Washington political scene," he said more than 50 years later. "It was, at least up to that point in NACo's lifetime, along with that of state and other local government organizations, our most important legislative success."

NACo also saw its ability to do government advocacy work fortified in 1974. Attorney General William B. Saxbe decided that the organizations of the county, city and state officials were not covered by the 1946 Regulation of Lobby Act, which specifically exempted public officials from the regulation. He sent a flood of agents into the offices of the U.S. Conference of Mayors and threatened the staff with prosecution for violating the act.

Saxbe argued that while city, county and state officials were exempt from the lobby law, their associations were not – a key pillar of today's intergovernmental framework. NACo, NLC and USCM went to court. On Dec. 17, 1974, U.S. District Judge Gerhard A. Gesell issued his declarative judgement in their favor:

"Involvement of cities, counties and municipalities into the day-to-day work of the Congress is of an increasing and continuing importance. The court must recognize that the voice of cities, counties and municipalities in federal legislation will not be adequately heard unless through cooperative mechanisms such as the plaintiff organizations. They pool their limited finances for the purpose of bringing to the attention of Congress their proper official concerns on matters of public policy."

"There can be no doubt that all officers and employees of the plaintiff organizations are engaged in lobbying solely for what may purposely be stated to be the 'public will' as conceived by those in government they represent, who are themselves officials solely responsible to the public and acting in their official capacities."

Above: NACo legislative staffer Larry Naake shakes President Richard Nixon's hand during the signing ceremony for the General Revenue Sharing bill at Independence Square in Philadelphia on Oct. 10, 1972.

Left: NACo Executive Director Bernie Hillenbrand catches a light moment between Vice President Nelson Rockefeller and President Gerald Ford.

County News covered the "jet-in" campaign that demonstrated the popularity of General Revenue Sharing.

The Course Correction

NACo President John Horsley, a Kitsap County, Washington commissioner, stands in front of NACo's office building at 440 First St., NW.

County Business

During the late '70s and early '80s, NACo shifted in a more entrepreneurial direction, establishing a deferred compensation program to aid county employees in their retirement and entering the real estate market. The fate of the two would diverge.

While Dallas County, Texas negotiated a deferred compensation program for its employees, Commissioner Roy Orr, then NACo's president, saw potential for smaller counties to adopt a national retirement plan. The executive committee decided on the Public Employee Benefit Service Corporation (PEBSCO) as a plan administrator, a business that was already serving several states and the U.S. Conference of Mayors. Within a year, 400 counties had signed, and counties and state associations would share in proceeds. In 1999, PEBSCO was acquired by Nationwide Retirement Solutions.

It also put NACo in business with Oklahoma financier David Davenport, PEBSCO's founder, who took a shine to county officials. He had pushed for changes to the tax code to create deferred compensation retirement plans for government employees. He also endowed an annual college scholarship for a student graduating from a high school in the NACo president's county, along with mentorship for the student.

NACo President Doug Bovin, a Delta County, Michigan commissioner; Presidential Scholarship Award winner Roxanne Doyle and scholarship sponsor David Davenport pose for their official portrait in 1996. Photo by David Hathcox

While Dallas County, Texas negotiated a deferred compensation program for its employees, Commissioner Roy Orr, then NACo's president, saw potential for smaller counties to adopt a national retirement plan.

"He saw what 401(k)s could do for the private sector and asked why public sector employees didn't have that," said Larry Naake, who was back on NACo's staff again in the early '80s. "He was the leading force behind getting that through Congress.

"He had a genuine appreciation for our members and often went out of his way to keep in touch with them and reach out if they were having difficulty."

"He saw what 401(k)s could do for the private sector and asked why public sector employees didn't have that."

— Larry Naake, NACo's executive director, about Oklahoma financier David Davenport, PEBSCO's founder

Left: Vice President Walter Mondale breaks ground for NACo's office building on Dec. 18, 1980, flanked by NACo Past Presidents Roy Orr and Charlotte Williams. Orr was a Dallas County, Texas commissioner and Williams was a Genesee County, Michigan commissioner. Right: Vice President George H.W. Bush gave the address at the building's Feb. 24, 1982 dedication.

Meanwhile, an $11 million construction project at 440 First St., NW in Washington, D.C. would culminate in a 100,000 square foot, eight-story building, two floors of which NACo and its more than 150 staff members would occupy, with a penthouse designed for events and entertaining. Rent revenue from subleasing the lower five floors, which would be NACo's responsibility, would cover overhead expenses, including $1.5 million in projected annual rent, and the cost of construction. NACo would take on the lease for the entire building.

Vice President Walter Mondale attended the Dec. 18, 1980 groundbreaking and Vice President George H.W. Bush gave the address at the Feb. 24, 1982 dedication, along with speeches by Senate Majority Leader Howard Baker (R-Tenn.) and House Majority Leader Jim Wright (D-Texas).

Contrasting with the contemporary exterior, the lobby evoked a 19th-century county courthouse, with terrazzo floors and a domed opening in the ceiling. A wall bore individually engraved bronze plaques with the name and seal of each of America's counties.

But by the time the building was complete, the market for office space in Washington, D.C. was cold.

Budget Crash

A month into his NACo presidency in August 1982, Rensselaer County, New York Executive Bill Murphy was entertaining Pennsylvania county officials for lunch when the waiter whispered that his NACo American Express Card had been declined. Murphy offered him his backup Visa card, but he was told he was "two for two."

"I thought, 'Uh oh, something is going on here that I am not going to like,'" he recalled.

This followed a clean audit report just weeks earlier, but Murphy called accounting firm Peat Marwick to scrutinize the association's situation. After that assessment, the firm's principal told Murphy to pour himself a stiff drink.

NACo had a $2.26 million budget deficit. Few knew it then, but it would take NACo 15 years to emerge fully from what was happening and

"I thought, 'Uh oh, something is going on here that I am not going to like.'"

— Bill Murphy, the Rensselear County, New York executive and former NACo president

Executive Director Bernie Hillenbrand (second from left) advises NACo officers John Horsley, Bill Murphy and Ann Klinger. Horsley was a Kitsap County, Washington commissioner; Murphy was a Rensselaer County, New York executive and Klinger was a Merced County, California supervisor.

President Ronald Reagan meets with Black county leaders in 1981.

25 years to leave the building that caused so much heartache.

"It's worse than that because your building is draining all of your resources, and resources have been diverted," the accountant told Murphy. "This was operating money that was being diverted into other things. It's not sustainable."

Over Labor Day weekend, NACo's executive committee met to figure out the crisis and how to shift the organization. At a White House press conference that week, a reporter spoke privately to Murphy about the situation, and Murphy offered him an exclusive interview on the issue in exchange for a delay in publication, winning the chance to tell NACo members about the crisis himself.

"Let me tell you, it was a very painful time for me," Murphy said. "...I knew some of the people that we were having to personally deliver pink slips to."

The leases for the lower floors of the building? Only one had an actual commitment, the American Management Association, and beyond that, the auditors had taken the word of NACo's financial staff rather than asking to scrutinize lease documents that did not actually exist. Those staffers were fired, and Hillenbrand, the executive director who took the organization from a hotel laundry room to a mainstay in the halls of Congress, resigned after 25 years leading the organization.

Getting approval for loans to keep NACo operating required dramatic action. Of the 118 staff members in August, only 51 remained in September.

"Let me tell you, it was a very painful time for me," Murphy said. "I knew those people very well. I had been on the NACo board for five or six years before I became president. I knew some of the people that we were having to personally deliver pink slips to. It was very hurtful, very difficult. Of course, your relationship changes with people when you're not giving them a job anymore, and you go from being a friend to being an avowed enemy."

Davenport personally loaned NACo $400,000 to satisfy operating expenses, with PEBSCO offering a similar amount. Davenport also helped Murphy negotiate partial repayment of outstanding bills. State associations loaned NACo $10,000 apiece, and members advanced a year's worth of dues, on top of a dues increase.

Bill Murphy

Murphy said that the siloed organization that permeated NACo at the time made it harder for the problems to be apparent.

In the meantime, PEBSCO loaned executives James Marshall and Ron Cameron to manage NACo until the executive committee hired a successor to Hillenbrand.

"I asked Jay Wilkinson, who was the president of PEBSCO, if he could loan me Jim. I said I wouldn't need him for more than a few weeks, but that was a lie. He stayed for four months," Murphy said. "Those two guys were instrumental in helping pull the monkey off my back of having to deal with this stuff literally on a day-to-day basis."

By April 1983, a sense of normalcy returned to NACo as its new executive director settled in after a few months on the job. Matt Coffey came to NACo steeped in financial know-how, having previously served as CFO of Textron Inc., and he was familiar with NACo after serving as a special assistant to both President Johnson and Carter. At 6 foot 8, he was hard to miss. He brought a pragmatic perspective to an organization in need of steady leadership.

"It's going to take 24 to 30 months to work our way out of the hole," Coffey said upon his hiring in 1983.

Murphy said Coffey pulled NACo out of a financial tailspin and allowed it to get its bearings, though the necessary austerity limited how wide NACo could reach.

"He did a good job in setting up the structure that would cause us to be able to move forward," Murphy said.

NACo Executive Director Matt Coffey (right) hands an Achievement Award to Dougherty County, Georgia Commissioner Gil Barrett, a past NACo president.

"It's going to take 24 to 30 months to work our way out of the hole."

— Matt Coffey, NACo's executive director

"Bill Murphy did all the hard work keeping NACo together. Then the next year I got to travel around the country, kissing and hugging everyone and thanking them for helping us survive."

— Sandy Smoley, a Sacramento County, California supervisor and former NACo president

Sandy Smoley, Murphy's successor as NACo president, also helped with that. As the only Republican on the Sacramento County, California Board of Supervisors, she often found herself on call for events with Gov. Ronald Reagan. The two struck up a friendship that she later drew on to help his presidential reelection campaign staff find office space downstairs from the NACo staff. That rental revenue was crucial to NACo's solvency for the next two years.

"Bill Murphy did all the hard work keeping NACo together. Then the next year I got to travel around the country, kissing and hugging everyone and thanking them for helping us survive," she recalled in 2024.

Counties in Virginia and Maryland lent their fiscal staff to help bridge the gap between the staff NACo could support and the work that needed to be done.

Murphy also had to play hardball with some vendors. NACo had leased, for $100,000, three heavy-duty photocopier machines, "each capable of serving the Library of Congress," he said. "They were a tremendous oversell by the company."

Negotiations with the company's sales consultant were slow going.

"I told him we needed to break the contract, and he told me they didn't break contracts for anybody," Murphy said, advising the consultant that it was time to make an exception.

"Unless you know our president, don't even think about it," he was told.

Murphy told him to get his trucks ready, then retreated to try and figure out how to back up his bluff. He called a fellow county executive, asked out of the blue if he knew the company's president, and it turned out the executive golfed with him regularly.

Shortly after, the sales consultant expressed amazement that Murphy was able to the break the contract. "That's the army of county government," Murphy said. "We stick together."

NACo President Sandy Smoley and Past President J. Richard Conder confer during the 1984 Annual Conference.

Renewed Focus

With a bank loan secured, Murphy and the executive committee needed to figure out where NACo would ultimately go from there. They asked members:

- Is NACo important to you?
- What do you want from NACo?

The answer that resonated the most was to have better government affairs efforts. Despite a two-thirds cut to the NACo staff, the legislative affairs department added three lobbyists to the previous six and focused on being the voice of counties.

But the most powerful response came from Shelby County, Tennessee Mayor Bill Morris.

"I asked him, 'Should we just shut this down?'" Murphy said. "'Should we just get rid of NACo and just have the American Association of Counties and clean the slate already?' He said, 'No, my advice to you would be to stay and fight. Let's just do what we need to do to clean this up and get it back together because you've got a position that's been around for decades. And we've got people that know us. We don't want to start fresh with somebody else.'"

While NACo was able to pull together friends and influence to stay alive, the following years were marked by severe austerity for the organization. Counties, too, suffered a loss three years later when General Revenue Sharing met its demise after winning a reprieve in 1983.

NACo President Bob Aldemeyer welcomes President Ronald Reagan to the 1985 Legislative Conference. Aldemeyer was judge-executive of Kenton County, Kentucky.

"We were preparing for that," said Kitsap County, Washington Commissioner John Horsley. "We were able to make the transition with some tough, but not fatal, adjustments."

"That's the army of county government," Murphy said. "We stick together."

After helping stabilize NACo, reaching settlements with 323 creditors and establishing accurate membership records, Coffey moved on to the National Tooling and Machining Association, and NACo in turn hired John Thomas.

Thomas had been working as executive director of the Florida Association of Counties as the organization tried to shift toward more involvement from the state's urban areas after being dominated

"In 1986 and 1987, the federal government was scaling back on assistance to counties and cities but our burden, especially in mental health and social services, was growing."

— John Horsley, a Kitsap County, Washington commissioner and former NACo president

by rural counties. He worked at NACo on a county modernization grant from the Ford Foundation in 1972 after his college roommate, then a NACo intern, recruited him. Hillenbrand recommended he take the Florida job but told him there was always a place for him back at NACo.

"Bernie let me work on my doctorate while I was working at NACo. I'm not sure I would have finished it otherwise," Thomas said.

While in Florida, Thomas started organizing the state association executives on an annual basis, a precursor to the National Council of County Association Executives.

It was a challenging transition for Thomas, given NACo's situation.

"The first six months were an absolute nightmare, of all the issues constantly coming forward," he said. "I said to a couple of my friends that I thought I was coming back to help continue to modernize government, but 90 percent of my time I was doing either insurance or real estate work, trying to fill a building. But that was what we had to do so we could get back to the business of county government."

NACo did fill the building, with the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, which funded a significant security upgrade, along with a popular sandwich shop.

"I have to say, sometimes you just plain get lucky," Thomas said.

He had been a skeptic of insurance programs for associations, worrying that they would remove an incentive for members to invest in the organization, but he was glad to be wrong when NACo's insurance program allowed the organization a revenue stream to pay down its debt.

"I would have loved to have taken 10 percent and put it into programs, but the Board was firm on paying off our debt," Thomas said. "You have to get out of debt to have any credibility."

NACo was also able to rebuild its research and program capacity with grants, contracts and foundation money. An increase in urban membership, like Thomas had orchestrated in Florida, brought additional dues revenue.

"We were able to hire the kind of people that I thought we really needed to be cutting edge," he said.

The 1980s were a rough time for counties themselves. The nation was facing its worst recession since the Great Depression, and as a result the demands on county social services increased dramatically. Decreasing property and sales tax revenues further stressed county budgets.

"In 1986 and 1987, the federal government was scaling back on assistance to counties and cities but our burden, especially in mental health and social services, was growing," Horsley said. "We were between a rock and a hard place. We're losing General Revenue Sharing. We're losing federal grants in general, but the burdens in the suburban governments were increasing."

Though both served relatively short tenures, Coffey and Thomas each faced a tough task helping NACo through its transition. Coffey was more financially oriented but lacked experience working with a membership organization or county officials, and while Thomas didn't care for the financial matters, he thrived on engagement with county officials.

"I found in Florida that if you could get wins for the rural counties, they'd support efforts that benefitted urban counties," Thomas said. "We held on to that strategy to keep our advocacy efforts balanced."

Combined with the reinvestment in the legislative affairs staff, Thomas helped reorient NACo toward the intergovernmental affairs work that made the organization unique.

NACo past presidents gather in the 1980s.

"Hiring John Thomas was one of the best moves we made in that decade because he just turned out to be a superb leader," Horsley said.

Members of the executive committee started making regular trips to Capitol Hill, a major initiative led by President Ann Klinger, a Merced County, California supervisor.

In 1991, Thomas decamped for the American Society for Public Administration, where he could resume his academic interest in government.

"I was able to leave feeling like I had given back," Thomas said.

NACo Executive Director John Thomas (left) and NACo President Bob Aldemeyer. Aldemeyer was the Kenton County, Kentucky judge-executive.

A New Era

The 1990s brought a new opponent into view for counties: unfunded mandates. President George H.W. Bush decried them during his 1992 State of the Union address. Photo by David Hathcox

Springtime for Counties

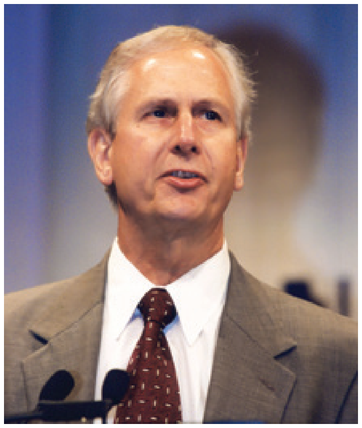
Right before he left, Thomas saw the birth of a major public affairs effort that his management drove. The country observed National County Government Week between April 7-13, 1991, a celebration that later expanded to all of April in 2010, stressing counties' role in the intergovernmental relationship with the federal government, cities, states and tribes. More than 80 counties and state associations recognized the week.

With county officials in attendance in the Oval Office, President George Bush signed a proclamation during that year's Legislative Conference:

> "In recent years, more and more Americans have realized what many have known all along: That the answer to many of the problems before us can be found, not in bigger federal government, but in effective local leadership and cooperation between citizens and public officials at all levels. Indeed, we know the government closest to the people is truly government of the people, by the people and for the people. This is the essence of federalism and democracy, and it is key to meeting many of the challenges and opportunities before our country."

President George H.W. Bush signs a proclamation establishing National County Government Week on March 19, 1991. Looking on are: John Thomas, NACo executive director; Ann Klinger, NACo immediate past president; Michael Stewart, NACo president; Kaye Braaten, NACo first vice president: Sen. Conrad Burns (R – Mont.) and Rep. Ben Erdreich (D-Ala.), who introduced the measure in Congress; Barbara Sheen Todd, NACo third vice president and John Stroger, NACo second vice president. Photo by David Hathcox

As a testament to the organization's recovery over the prior nine years, NACo received more than 200 applications to succeed Thomas. The executive committee reached back onto NACo's bench with Larry Naake, the executive director of the California State Association of Counties (CSAC), who had worked in NACo's legislative affairs in the early 1970s and 1980s. The same Larry Naake whom Bernie Hillenbrand had entrusted the General Revenue Sharing lobbying effort in the 1970s.



Larry Naake

NACo soon advanced some of its own to the federal government. Jim Snyder, a Cattaraugus County, New

NATIONAL
COUNTY
GOVERNMENT
WEEK
April 7 - 13
1 9 9 1

National Association of Counties: 90 years of u

NACo at 90

1935

1935
George F. Breitbach (below)
Milwaukee County, Wis. clerk organizes gathering for county leaders

National County Officers Association is formed

County Officer publication subscriptions offer workaround for membership — $3 a year

1937
National County Officers Association conference is aired on short wave radio

1939
National Association of County Officers conference reaches 500 attendees

1940s

1940s
County leaders help mobilize troops and resources during WWII

1945
Former Jackson County, Mo. judge **Harry S. Truman** becomes president of the United States

1950s

1953
Bylaws amended to allow regional districts

1957
Executive Director **Bernie Hillenbrand** (above) becomes NACo's first employee

1957
American County Platform consolidates and articulates NACo's policy objectives

1958
The Monday Letter replaces the County Officer

1959
Counties earn seats on the Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations

1960s


NACo NEWS & VIEWS

LEGISLATIVE CONFERENCE PUSHES REVENUE SHARING

1960s
NACo News and Views replaces "The Monday Letter"

1962
Name changes to **National Association of Counties**

1968
Former Baltimore County, Md. Executive **Spiro Agnew** (below) is elected vice president of the United States

unified county leadership

1970
Achievement Awards
NACo recognizes innovation in counties large and small with a national awards program

1970
Clesson Y. Chikasuye (above) becomes NACo's first Asian American president, launching a decade of important firsts

S

1972
Gladys Spellman (right) becomes NACo's first woman president

1973
NACo helps secure passage of **General Revenue Sharing**

1976
President **Gerald Ford** signs Payments in Lieu of Taxes program

1978
Charlotte L. Williams becomes NACo's first African American president (right)

1970s

1980
NACo establishes a **deferred compensation program** for county employees, beginning a long relationship with what would become Nationwide Retirement Solutions

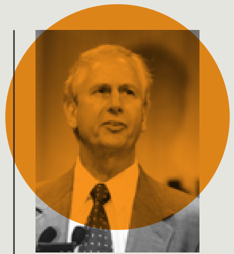
1980s
NACo makes an untimely lease of a building at 440 First Street NW

1982
NACo members, state associations and friends **help pull NACo through financial crisis**

1983
Executive Director **Matt Coffey** (below) helps stabilize NACo finances and operations

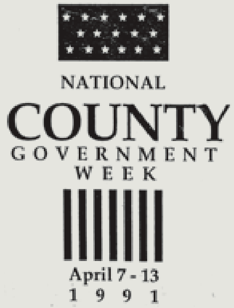
1986
Executive Director **John Thomas** (above) expands NACo pivot back toward county programming

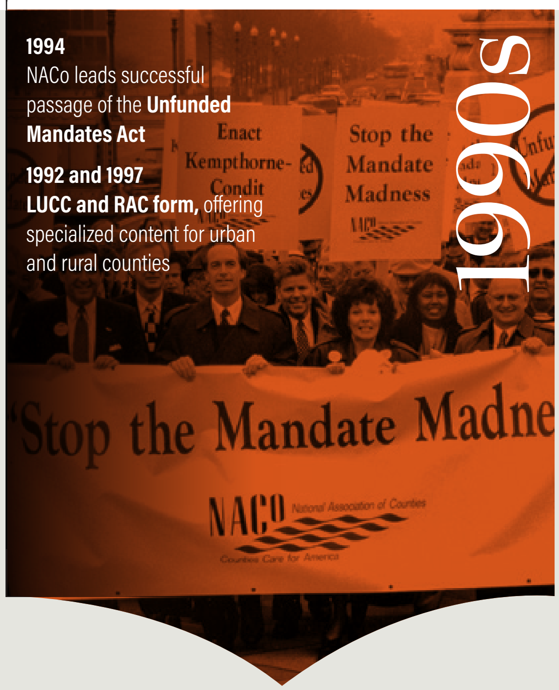
1980s



1991
Executive Director **Larry Naake** (above) brings a blend of legislative experience and business sense to help NACo rebuild a strong financial foundation with the launch of **U.S. Communities**

Counties celebrate **National County Government Week**, which evolves into National County Government Month





1994
NACo leads successful passage of the **Unfunded Mandates Act**

1992 and 1997
LUCC and RAC form, offering specialized content for urban and rural counties

1990s

2000
NACo reaches **2,000 member county** milestone

2001
Javier Gonzales (
becomes NACo's fi
Hispanic American

2001
Counties contribut
homeland security

2004
NACo starts the **Co**
Leadership Insti

2006
NACo is named on
outstanding assoc
American Society
Executives

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(below)
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of Association

2000s

2011
iCivics and Counties Work Game bring dynamic civic education to an online audience

2012
Executive Director **Matt Chase** (below) brings generational change and a foundation of county data to NACo

THE STEPPING UP INITIATIVE

2015
Stepping Up initiative seeks to divert people suffering from mental illness out of county jails

2019
High Performance Leadership Academy partnership with Colin Powell and Professional Developement Academy launched

2010s

2020
Former New Castle County, Del. Councilmember **Joe Biden** is elected president of the United States. Former San Francisco Count , Calif. District Attorney **Kamala Harris** is elected vice president of the United States

2021
Counties secure $65.1 billion in direct pandemic aid through the **American Rescue Plan Act**

2023
NACo launches **Public Promise Insurance** and **Public Promise Procurement**

2024
The Marvelous Adventures of Countyland helps counties look toward the transformative potential of artificial intelligence

PPI Public Promise Insurance Powered by NACo

PUBLIC PROMISE PROCUREMENT Powered by NACo

2020s

2025

National Association of Counties:

A 90-year history

“Some people in the White House didn’t know the difference between a county and a city. It was a shock to me.”

— Jim Snyder, a Cattaraugus County, New York legislator and former NACo president

York legislator and former NACo president, left county office to serve as director of intergovernmental affairs for President Bush. He noted a distinct lack of county awareness among his colleagues in the executive branch, and he sought to correct this.

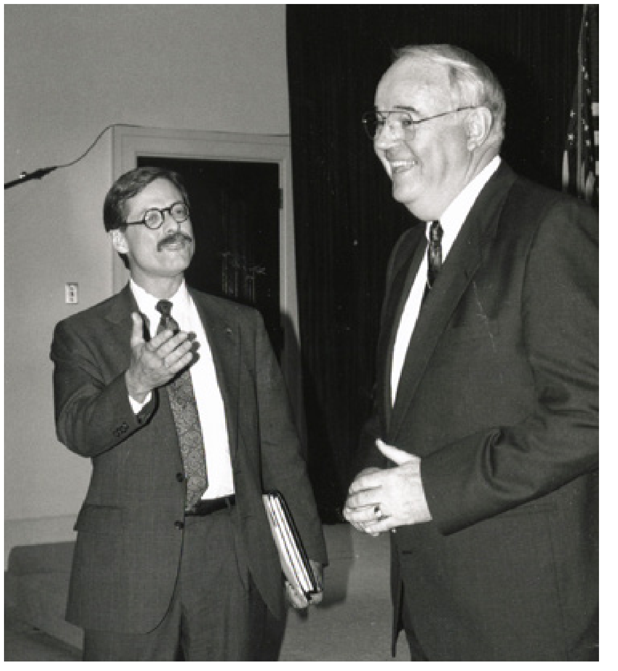
“Some people in the White House didn’t know the difference between a county and a city. It was a shock to me,” he said in 2019.

Ten years later, President George W. Bush would also bring a county veteran in as director of intergovernmental affairs, former San Mateo County, California Supervisor Reuben Barrales. That administration also included former Orange County, Florida Mayor Mel Martinez, who served as Secretary of Housing and Urban Development.

Cooperative Purchasing

When Naake returned to NACo, he left a small but reliable cooperative purchasing project at CSAC which his successor, Steve Swendiman, grew.

Soon after, he recruited Swendiman, formerly a Shasta County, California supervisor, to join NACo and bring his business sense with him, and they considered devising a program for cash management for rural county governments.



Multnomah County, Oregon Intergovernmental Affairs Officer Fred Neil, president of the National Association of County Intergovernmental Relations Officers, enjoys a light moment with Jim Snyder, newly appointed special assistant to the president for intergovernmental affairs, after a White House briefing Oct. 22, 1991.

“I was never a guy who wanted to lobby,” Swendiman said. “I always preferred the management side of things.”

Swendiman didn’t take a salary and lived on the road while he built what would be administered as NACo’s new for-profit Financial Services Center.

“That revenue went back into the organization, after the expenses, and really supported the concept that we don’t have to live just on dues,” Swendiman said. “It’s really hard to raise dues.”

The program, one of the first of its kind, sought to take advantage of the economies of scale when bundling the needs of many counties to secure lower purchase prices. David Davenport invested $1 million to seed the program.

Swendiman is quick to credit Naake with navigating the elements at play.

"How do you create something that's going to have a residual revenue flow to NACo? How do you do that without disturbing a nonprofit," he said. "I think it was masterful."

Swendiman also lauded Fairfax County, Virginia Supervisor Gerry Hyland for giving cooperative purchasing the shot in the arm it needed, after pitches to other nonprofits to get in on the business were unsuccessful. Hyland won Fairfax's purchasing director over on the service and before too long, Fairfax County and Los Angeles County were competing to

Fairfax County, Virginia Supervisor Gerry Hyland.

Steve Swendiman, founder and managing director of NACo's Financial Services Center. Photo by David Hathcox

do the most business, motivated by the 5% commission counties would earn.

The first major contract, with Office Depot, started at $2 million and grew to $700 million a year within seven years.

"It turned out to be our bread-and-butter program and it allowed us to do a bunch of other programs," Swendiman said. Doug Bovin, a Delta County, Michigan commissioner who was NACo's president when the Financial Services Center launched, was an evangelist for the program in Michigan. "It had the great dual benefit of making things more affordable for counties, while allowing NACo to be able to do more and be financially secure," he said. "The savings were incredible. We could never have paid the same prices on our own. It was a way NACo could demonstrate its value on counties' balance sheets."

"It turned out to be our bread-and-butter program and it allowed us to do a bunch of other programs."

— Steve Swendiman, managing director of NACo's Financial Services Center

NACo President John Stroger (right) meets with Virginia Gov. Douglas Wilder. Stroger was a Cook County, Illinois commissioner.

By 2018, U.S. Communities, as the cooperative purchasing venture was known, had grown in 23 years to $3.5 billion in annual sales, with 45 high-value national contracts. When partners in the business sold to a competitor, NACo sold its interest in the entity. Following a four-year non-compete agreement, NACo returned to the business, launching Public Promise Procurement and Public Promise Insurance under the rebranded NACo EDGE.

Back in the 1990s, a growing corporate membership program put vendors in front of county decision makers, reflecting a nationwide trend toward more formalized public-private partnerships to address local and regional issues.

NACo also sold its option to purchase the building on First Street, netting $2.3 million. By 1997, NACo's 15-year deficit was eliminated and two years later, the organization boasted a $5.5 million surplus.

Caucuses

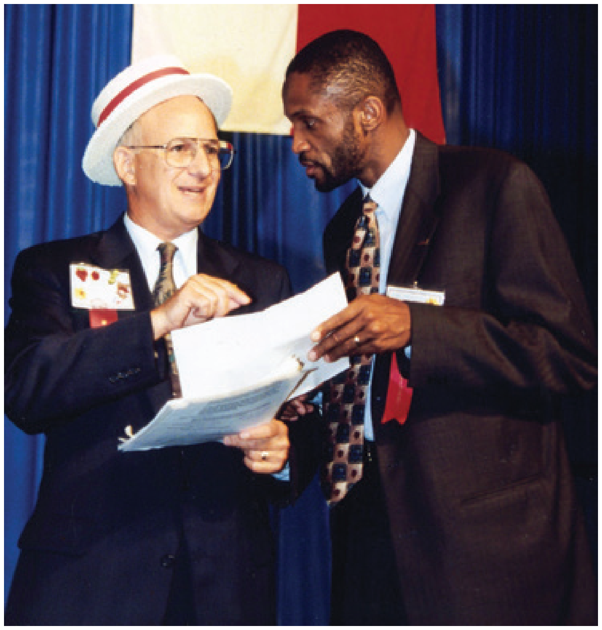
Following the riots in Los Angeles in April and May 1992, then-First Vice President John Stroger, a Cook County, Illinois commissioner, called for an urban county summit later in May to meet with White House and congressional leaders.

"All you need to do is look at the Los Angeles riots to see how extensive a role county government plays in the life of urban America," Stroger said. "It was the county health network that handled the emergency admissions during the unrest. It was the county fire department that fought nearly 1,000 fires during the days of the disturbance, and it's the county that will have to deal with the overcrowded court system in the aftermath of thousands of riot arrests."

The Large Urban County Caucus (LUCC) held its first regular conference in Washington, D.C. that fall. The caucus would meet every year but 2020 for its own conference with urban-centric themes. Programming and advocacy are oriented toward counties with populations of 500,000 and above.

Four years later, President Michael Hightower, a Fulton County, Georgia commissioner, established the Rural Renaissance Task Force, which later begat the Rural Action Caucus (RAC), led by Blue Earth County, Minnesota Commissioner Colleen Landkamer, later a NACo president, and Harney County, Oregon Judge Dale White, previously a Western Interstate Region president. Landkamer later twice served as Minnesota state director of Rural Development for the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

"At first it was just 10 or 20 us of, now look at it," Landkamer said of RAC, a caucus that



NACo President Doug Bovin, a Delta County, Michigan commissioner and President-elect Michael Hightower, a Fulton County, Georgia commissioner, review voting procedures during the 1996 Annual Business Meeting. Photo by David Hathcox

Donald Murray (left) represented NACo for 40 years as a legislative director for justice and public safety issues.

strains the occupancy limits of its conference meeting rooms. "The rural voice is so critical, and RAC members are getting so much information tailored to their needs they wouldn't get anywhere else."

In 2025, NACo's board filled the gap by establishing a new Mid-Sized County Caucus.

Unfunded Mandates

The 1990s brought a new opponent into view for counties: unfunded mandates. President Bush decried them during his 1992 State of the Union address:

"We must put an end to unfinanced federal government mandates. These are the requirements Congress puts on our cities, counties, and states without supplying the money. If Congress passes a mandate, it should be forced to pay for it and balance the cost with savings elsewhere. After all,

"We must put an end to unfinanced federal government mandates. These are the requirements Congress puts on our cities, counties, and states without supplying the money.

— President George H.W. Bush

Secretary of Housing and Urban Development Henry Cisneros (left) briefs county officials and NACo staff on President Clinton's economic plan on Feb. 17, 1993. From second to the left: Prince George's County, Maryland Executive Parris Glendening; Walter D. Webdale, director of Fairfax County, Virginia's Department of Housing and Community Development; John Murphy, executive director of the National Association of County Community and Economic Development and NACo Legislative Director Ralph Tabor.

a mandate just increases someone else's burden, and that means higher taxes at the state and local level."

In 1993, NACo found allies among the Big Seven public interest organizations, including the National League of Cities, the U.S. Conference of Mayors and the International City/County Management Association.

"We couldn't have done this on our own. No one organization could do this without help," said then-NACo President Barbara Sheen Todd, a Pinellas County, Florida commissioner. "This wasn't a matter of being against Congress, it was a matter of saying, 'This is how it affects us when Congress makes decisions.'"

The Big Seven organizations held news conferences across the country on Oct. 27 — National Unfunded Mandates Day, including results from a survey by PriceWaterhouse that found that unfunded mandates cost counties $4.9 billion.

In 1994, Legislative Conference attendees marched to Capitol Hill for a "Stop the Mandate Madness" rally.

The effort got some help from the Republican Party's Contract with America platform, which supported Sen. Dick Kempthorne's (R-Idaho) Unfunded Mandates Reform Act. That bill was signed into law March 22, 1995, requiring that the federal government consult with elected officers of local governments to provide meaningful and timely input in the development of proposed rules containing significant federal intergovernmental mandates, consider a reasonable number of regulatory alternatives and select the least costly, least burdensome, or most cost-effective option and include cost-benefit analyses for the rule.

Members in the Driver's Seat

NACo's legitimacy on Capitol Hill and around the United States is derived from our member-driven approach to policy development and advancement. Members on 10 policy steering committees recommend the agenda each year, giving the NACo board and staff direction in our government affairs efforts.

NACo Executive Director Larry Naake speaks with President Bill Clinton.

NACo officers Randy Johnson, Jane Hague and Betty Lou Ward draw states' names during an Annual Business Meeting. Johnson was a Hennepin County, Minnesota commissioner, Hague was a King County, Washington councilmember and Ward was a Wake County, North Carolina commissioner. All served as NACo president. Photo by David Hathcox

NACo members engage in many ways. Steering committee members dedicate an hour each month for calls, plus countless other ways, in actively offering ideas and feedback to White House and agency officials, congressional committees, and coalition partners.

Other officials encourage their staff to attend conferences. Some large counties like Franklin County, Ohio bring more than two dozen staff to conferences. Some elected officials, like Hanover County, Virginia in 2005, make it a point in their public meetings to credit NACo with a particular program or solution they are employing. In recent years, Ramsey County, Minnesota commissioners have been prolific in NACo leadership, serving as chairs of two steering committees and the Large Urban County Caucus in the 2010s. Commissioner Mary Jo McGuire went even further, serving as NACo's president.

> NACo's Board of Directors is one of the largest in the nonprofit world. In addition to Board nominees from state associations, NACo's president nominates 10 members, and NACo's 24 affiliates have seats.

"It's just part of our culture in Ramsey County to be involved in NACo and the Association of Minnesota Counties," she said. "It was accepted, encouraged and supported. We make sure there's a travel budget because it's an investment in our county."

McGuire credited the rest of her Board of Commissioners with shifting her responsibilities during her presidency to accommodate both roles.

"They were totally behind me because they knew what NACo means when

"I was able to show Georgians that NACo is a partner, that it complements everything we do on the state level."

— Larry Johnson, a DeKalb County, Georgia commissioner and former NACo president

we interact with the federal government," she said.

Don Stapley ran for the NACo executive committee, and served as president in the late 2000s, to ensure that Maricopa County, Arizona, where he was a supervisor, had a voice in the national policy discussion.

"We knew the issues we faced were on a different scale than a lot of counties, but more often than not, they are still the same issues," he said.

NACo's Board of Directors is one of the largest in the nonprofit world. In addition to Board nominees from state associations, NACo's president nominates 10 members, and NACo's 24 affiliates also have seats.

States that have 100 percent NACo membership earn an extra seat on the Board of Directors, which motivates recruitment. Larry Johnson, a DeKalb County, Georgia commissioner, served as NACo's ambassador throughout the state, before, during and after his presidency, helping to achieve 100 percent membership.

"I was able to show Georgians that NACo is a partner, that it complements everything we do on the state level," he said. "We're the eighth largest state in the nation, and it's time for us to use that voice and to make the South even stronger. We have so many more Georgians involved in steering committees now, it's a point of pride for me."

NACo executive leadership displays an even higher level of commitment.

Randy Johnson, then a Hennepin County, Minnesota commissioner, once made three trips to Washington, D.C. in the 1990s to testify before congressional committees in a single week while he was a NACo vice president, all while attending to his responsibilities at home. Riki Hokama's presidency may have set a record for air miles traveled, owing to his home county of Maui in Hawaii. The distance and the time zone difference did not dull his passion for NACo advocacy.

"I wanted to try to visit every state while I was on the executive committee," said Valerie Brown, a Sonoma County, California supervisor who served as NACo's president. "You meet so many people who put their time and energy into county government in states where they have different responsibilities and powers, it's really fascinating."

Randy Franke, a Marion County, Oregon commissioner who served as NACo's president in the 1990s, regularly came home with napkins covered in notes from conversations with county officials at different state association meetings. "The travel was worth it for all of the impressions you get to make and receive from the members," he said. "It's a big country and there was always something to learn about what more we could be doing for counties."

The runway through the executive committee has shortened since its six-seat process in the late 1970s to four today.

State and county policy often play large parts in when county officials can seek office, given county officials in some states face term limits. New Mexico, for example, limits officials to two terms, forcing candidates from the Land of Enchantment to pursue NACo office very early in their elected careers. Others also have short windows of opportunity.

"When I thought about it, there was really only one year that it made sense for me to run, given what I wanted to do with my career," said Bill Hansell, a Umatilla County, Oregon commissioner who served as NACo president in the 2000s.

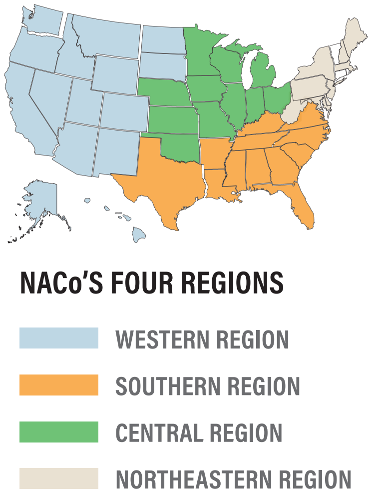
Because they must be elected county officials to serve in a leadership capacity, some NACo officers have had to forfeit their seats after losing reelection. On the other side of the spectrum, King County, Washington Executive John Spellman vacated his seat upon his

Riki Hokama has been involved in NACo leadership for nearly 25 years, including as president from 2014-2015, when he was a Maui County, Hawaii councilmember. Photo by Denny Henry

election as governor in 1980. There are times when NACo has held simultaneous elections for multiple executive committee seats.

NACo moved away from a nominating committee in favor of direct elections for officer positions in the late 1980s.

Now, the executive committee consists of a second vice president, first vice president, president and immediate past president, along with four regional representatives, a format introduced in 2010 after a governance review committee led by San Diego County Supervisor Greg Cox, who served as NACo president several years later. Those regional representatives, the West, South, Central and Northeast, help facilitate communications with membership on a regional level.



Gladys Spellman, of Prince George's County, Maryland was NACo's first woman president in 1972.

Competitive elections don't necessarily lead to acrimony among candidates. During the three-ballot, four-way race for second vice president in 2018, the candidates bonded and became friends during and after the campaign. En route to the Western Interstate Region Conference in Blaine County, Idaho, Boone County, Kentucky Judge-Executive Gary Moore and DeKalb County, Georgia Commissioner Larry Johnson found themselves sitting next to each other on the flight from Salt Lake City.

"We had both been through primaries the day before, so we had a lot to talk about there," Moore said. "He was elected the next year, and we worked so closely together and became great friends."

In the late 1980s, the election for the executive committee featured a matchup between Kaye Braaten, from 18,000-person Richland County, North Dakota and John Stroger, of then-5 million-person Cook County, Illinois. Braaten prevailed, and Stroger succeeded her.

Chikasuye

Williams

Gonzales

"We got along very well even though we ran against each other," Braaten said. "It was important for NACo to have that diversity. I was just a nurse from a farming community who ran to fix our roads and bridges, and he was from a county that did anything you could think of."

In addition to biweekly calls, members of the executive committee commit to ambitious travel schedules to attend conferences by state associations of counties.

NACo's leadership has featured noted diversity. Honolulu County, Hawaii's Clesson Chikasuye was NACo's first Japanese American president in 1970. Gladys Spellman, of Prince George's County, Maryland was NACo's first woman president in 1972. Charlotte Williams, a Genessee County, Michigan Commissioner, was NACo's first African American president in 1978, and Santa Fe County Commissioner Javier Gonzales was NACo's first Hispanic president in 2001.

2000 Election

The level of scrutiny over county-run elections reached a peak in November 2000, when the balance of the presidential election hung on the "butterfly" ballots distributed in Palm Beach County, Fla.

NACo and the National Association of County Recorders, Election Officials and Clerks formed the National Commission on Election Standards and Reform to develop policy recommendations for Congress, states and counties. The commission's report, delivered in May 2001, addressed a variety of areas of concern and recommended best practices for dissemination throughout county election offices.

"One good thing that has come out of this year's election is that people have started talking about the role of counties in the electoral process," said King County, Washington Councilmember Jane Hague, then NACo's president and a county elections official earlier in her career.

September 11, 2001

While the entire country, and even the world, was transfixed by the enormity of the day, counties were at work, cooperating with state and federal officials.

Flight 93 crashed less than 10 miles from the home of Somerset County, Pennsylvania Commissioner Pamela Tokar-Ickes.

The Flight 93 Memorial in Somerset County, Pennsylvania.

"On that day, we sort of divided all of the responsibilities that fell upon the county of Somerset," Tokar-Ickes said in 2022. "And we did what needed to be done. One of my fellow commissioners worked very closely with the coroner's office. Another one of the commissioners really assisted with all of the central purchasing requirements and the things that were needed. And I was tasked, really, immediately, with working on memorialization."

The events happened on Tuesday, and by Friday night, the Somerset County courthouse was home to a massive memorial service, drawing thousands for one of the biggest gatherings in the county's history, including family members of Flight 93 passengers.

Knowing the site would soon become a national memorial, the county coordinated with the local historical society.

The response to the crash of United Airlines Flight 93 fell to county government. The county was responsible for coordinating with the coroner's office the recovery of the

"Counties have a significant role to play in our new national strategy for homeland security. We are the public's first defense."

— Javier Gonzales, a Santa Fe County, New Mexico, commissioner and former NACo president

The 2017 County Leadership Institute cohort celebrates completion of their three-day intensive programming.

remains and the purchase of everything that was needed at that site for recovery.

"Everything from lip balm and sunscreen to the individuals who needed to be mobilized to actually search the site for human remains, everything," Tokar-Ickes said. "The Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency team told us: "This is your responsibility from start to finish. We just want you to know that. Nobody's going to come in here and do this for you. This is the county's responsibility.

"The county coroner held the crash site for more than a year and the county hired sheriff's deputies to patrol it day and night for more than a year until we could transition it over to the National Park Service. We could not release that site because you had people who were always wanting to come onto the site for various reasons, to pay their respects. We didn't feel that anyone should be on that site."

Across the river from New York City, Hudson County, New Jersey assembled three staging areas where EMS personnel treated injured people and transported them to hospitals. The county's fire department responded on the day of the attacks, and several EMS personnel remained on the scene during recovery operations.

Arlington County, Virginia EMS crews were first on site at the Pentagon, and by mid-morning more than 270 personnel were at work. Nearby counties contributed personnel and resources to all the affected areas.

Counties bridged the gap staffing security at their airports between September 11 and when the Aviation Security Act established the Transportation Security Agency and put federal employees in charge of security and baggage screening at some county airports, which account for one-third of the nation's airports, and a user fee funded security measures at all U.S. airports.

Santa Fe County, New Mexico Commissioner Javier Gonzales came into the NACo presidency eyeing a focus on rural county development. In an instant, his leadership pivoted.

"We got him a place to speak in front of the National Press Club that December, and he did a great job presenting where counties were in terms of protecting the country," said former NACo Legislative Director Ed Rosado.

Gonzales served as chairman of NACo's Homeland Security Task Force and testified before the Senate Governmental Affairs Committee, Dec. 11, 2001, demanding better coordination from federal agencies and increased assistance to counties for preparedness and security. He called for a $3 billion local anti-terrorism block grant to help finance emergency preparedness investments and for adequate funding of local public health infrastructure under the Public Health Threats and Emergencies Act.

"Counties have a significant role to play in our new national strategy for homeland security," Gonzales told the committee. "We are the public's first defense, but we do have limited resources and will need additional support and cooperation from the federal government in order to succeed."

NACo's Homeland Security Task Force adopted a 16-point policy platform addressing top issues for county governments in the areas

Executive Director Matt Chase chats with former Secretary of State Colin Powell during the 2020 Legislative Conference. Photo by Denny Henry

of public health, local law enforcement and intelligence sharing, infrastructure security and emergency planning and public safety.

County Leader Education and Training

"I always saw NACo as a higher education for elected officials," said C. Vernon Gray, a Howard County, Maryland Councilmember who served as NACo president in 1999-2000. "It's a place where you go and learn more. A lot of people become local officials because they're popular at home. They get elected, and they've not done much in terms of educating themselves with all the issues."

Gray himself was chair of the political science department at Morgan State University, so had a unique perspective on the issue.

NACo has always incorporated educational workshops into its programming. More and

In 2006, the American Society of Association Executives named NACo one of seven outstanding associations.

more, steering committee meetings include presentations by subject matter experts to help communicate complex issues to county officials who are otherwise trying to manage their counties, usually while working a full-time job at home.

Former President Bryan Desloge, a Leon County, Florida commissioner, said NACo's educational resources are important for smaller counties, where newly elected officials are more likely new to local government and need training that may not be available at home. Making county-focused education opportunities available to them, he said, can cut years off of their learning curves and help prepare elected officials to govern effectively much faster than with experience alone.

In 2004, NACo introduced the County Leadership Institute at New York University, later moved to Washington, D.C. The intensive leadership education course has served as an investment in county leaders, many of whom are in leadership roles in their state associations. Others would go on to NACo leadership and the presidency. Santa Barbara County, California Supervisor Salud Carbajal later served in Congress.

Linn County, Iowa Supervisor Linda Langston, later a NACo president, was part of the inaugural CLI class. Participants put their heads together to address the governing challenges one of their classmates was facing at home.

But Langston noted that a lot of the growth happened outside of class as the officials navigated New York City together.

"There were some people who had never been on the subway system and bonding over some of the experiences we had and things we saw along the way, built relationships that last to this day," she said. "When we face challenges in our counties, a lot of times we're consulting people who we got to know in that course." NACo added training for rank-and-file county staff in 2019 with the development of the High Performance Leadership Academy. The 12-week online program was designed by former Secretary of State Colin Powell, who attended the 2020 NACo Legislative Conference to celebrate the partnership.

The NACo Board invested $2.5 million in scholarships for county staff to participate in the academy, covering the cost for 2,000 graduates. An additional 8,000 county officials followed suit in the next few years.

Turning the Page on 1982

With the lease at 440 First St., NW finally complete in 2007, NACo moved to 25 Massachusetts Ave., NW, which it would occupy for nearly 10 years. This followed

NACo's recognition in 2006 as one of seven outstanding associations by the American Society of Association Executives. Together, the two events helped turn the page for NACo to look to the future with a stable footing.

Civic Education

In 2011, NACo partnered with iCivics, a nonpartisan nonprofit founded by Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, to develop an interactive computer game that placed users in the shoes of a county official. Faced with a budget, a suite of county departments and a procession of constituents armed with requests for service, players learned the variety of responsibilities and powers county governments wield.

By matching their request to the appropriate department, players earned the confidence, and approval, of the voters to aid them in their quest for reelection. iCivics also offered a civic education curriculum focused on county government aimed at students from grades 6-12.

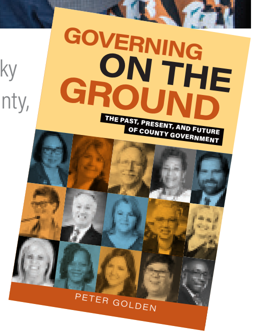
The online game helped counties reach a complex target audience thanks to the wide variation in county authorities, and names, in different states.

"Your major textbook publishers aren't going to put a chapter in a national civics or social studies textbook about county government because they'd have to change for every state," said NACo President Glen Whitley, Tarrant County, Texas judge.

Several years later, NACo funded upgrades to the game, particularly adapting it to changing technology.

In 2022, NACo published "Governing on the Ground," the story of county government seen through the eyes of 31 elected and appointed officials. These county leaders not only explained how their responsibilities and expertise in subjects like county roads, information technology, climate preparedness, mental health and homelessness interact with the public, they also offered a window into their motivations for pursuing a career in county government.

"After 25 years as an assistant public defender, I entered politics believing I could do more to help my community in office," Boone County, Missouri Commissioner Janet Thompson wrote.



NACo President and Boone County, Kentucky Judge-Executive Gary Moore; Spokane County, Washington Regional Veterans Services Director Cathrene Nichols, Weber County, Utah Clerk Auditor Ricky Hatch and Travis County, Texas Commissioner Ann Howard celebrate the release of Governing on the Ground. Photo by Denny Henry

Graphics from the "Counties Work" game.

Counties Matter

NACo President Sallie Clark leads a 2015 Fall Board Meeting tour of Waldo Canyon, the site of a devastating fire that struck El Paso County, Colorado. Photo by Charlie Ban

New Leadership

Approaching Larry Naake's retirement in 2012, an executive recruitment firm tasked with finding his successor pursued Matt Chase, then the executive director of the National Association of Development Organizations.

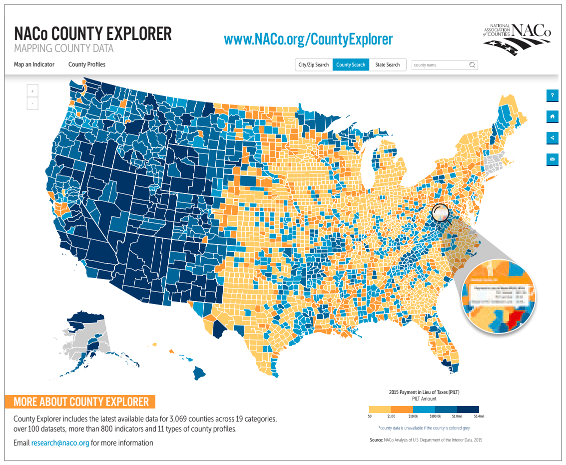
Chase was raised by a Washington County, New York district attorney and judge and a mental health professional and brought fresh federal government affairs experience to the job. "Matt wanted to make NACo the place to go for information, the source nationwide for data on counties," said Lenny Eliason, an Athens County, Ohio commissioner who was NACo president while recruiting Chase. "We had been an information clearinghouse, but he saw an opportunity to enhance our credibility by being more assertive, really becoming a leader in the ideas marketplace."

NACo soon fortified its research department, which compiled reliable statistics ranging from the proportion of county-owned roads (44%) and bridges (38%) to the share of the U.S. workforce comprising county employees (2%). Steering committees took a more active role in recruiting members who overlapped with congressional leaders in relevant committees.

"We wanted to put a human face on the services that counties are providing, and these are our neighbors, these are our family members, these are our friends," Chase said. "Counties are about community. We're not just about dollar figures, physical assets and courthouses."

The overall effort helps to illustrate the scope of the work counties do, the people involved in their governance and administration and the extent to which county governments have authority to enact policy.

The data analysis added up to the County Explorer, an interactive website displaying a dizzying array of county-level data.



County Explorer, an interactive website displaying a dizzying array of county-level data.

Policy development evolved to policy advancement, following member-driven initiatives to demonstrate counties' willingness to generate ideas and readiness to take charge and address their own issues. They wouldn't wait for Congress to make things happen.

NACo Executive Director Matt Chase

"Matt wanted to make NACo the place to go for information, the source nationwide for data on counties."

— Lenny Eliason, an Athens County, Ohio commissioner and former NACo president who hired Matt Chase

"Most of the individuals with mental health illnesses actually are the victims, not the perpetrators."

— Matt Chase, NACo's executive director

Stepping Up

In 2002, Ken Mayfield, a former assistant district attorney for Dallas County, Texas and chief of its juvenile detention division, brought attention to the expediency with which law enforcement would treat people who were suffering mental health crises, both in testimony to the Senate Judiciary Committee and as a focus of his NACo presidency beginning that year.

"Too often, they just arrest them and take them to jail, and then they don't have to deal with them anymore," Mayfield said. "You know that wouldn't lead to the best outcomes for those individuals or for society."

He had organized a community-based task force in Dallas County to create a comprehensive diversion program to keep people with mental illness out of jails. Ten years later, Douglas County, Nebraska Commissioner Chris Rodgers took up the cause with his Smart Justice presidential initiative, seeking to reform judicial policy to relieve counties from the bulk of pretrial detention for nonviolent offenses.

When Chase arrived for his first day at NACo, he was met with a tall stack of letters on his chair, mostly from bail bond agents excoriating Rodgers' initiative.

"That really motivated us to stick with it and what eventually became Stepping Up," Chase said. "Most of the individuals with mental health illnesses actually are the victims, not the perpetrators."

The Stepping Up initiative launched in 2015 in collaboration with the Council of State Governments Justice Center and American Psychiatric Association Foundation, calling for counties to commit to working with leaders in their communities, judicial systems, treatment providers and more to take concrete steps to divert people with mental illness from incarceration. Four different kickoff events, in Miami-Dade County, Florida; Johnson County, Kansas; Sacramento County, California and Washington, D.C., emphasized the plight suffered by an estimated two million people who were incarcerated at the time.

It also demonstrated a new tactic NACo was taking to address counties' needs.

"It shifted the focus from begging the federal government to engage with us to saying, 'We're going to continue to ask federal and state partners to help us, but we're not going to wait,'" Chase said. "We're going to get judges, prosecutors, public defenders, sheriffs, county commissioners, our community partners, and we're going to take it upon ourselves to make progress."

Council of State Governments Executive Director Michael Thompson; Loudoun County, Virginia Sheriff Mike Chapman; Ramsey County, Minnesota Commissioner Toni Carter; Rep. Patrick Kennedy (D-Mass.); mental health advocate Paton Blough; NACo Director of Strategic Relations Linda Langston and Department of Justice Director of Justice Assistance Denise O'Donnell celebrate the launch of the Stepping Up Initiative in May 2015. Langston, a former Linn County, Iowa supervisor, was a NACo president. Photo by Alix Kashdan

The initiative followed the example of Miami-Dade County, Florida Administrative Judge Steve Leifman's pioneering work directing people in mental health distress toward resources that will help them receive the treatment they need while also making better use of resources counties are otherwise spending on jail operations and expansion. Leifman's work was elevated by NACo's LUCC Chair Sally Heyman, a Miami-Dade County commissioner.

"The cost to local county governments, because of not treating this population, is so exorbitant," he said in 2024. "It's almost mind boggling. I think if taxpayers understood how many billions of dollars were getting wasted by not treating people, they would be stunned, and we might be able to actually fix the problem."

In addition to the pretrial services, Stepping Up has also emphasized the importance of crisis intervention training for law enforcement, equipping responding officers with the knowhow to de-escalate situations with people experiencing mental health crises.

"We've just seen tremendous buy-in and great results, including sheriffs and law enforcement being our champions," Chase said.

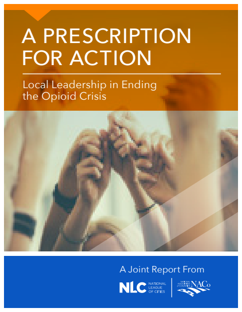
Ten years in, more than 600 counties have committed to Stepping Up, and 54 counties have been recognized as "accelerators" for their sophisticated, comprehensive efforts to reduce the number of people with mental illness in their jails.

Close Partners

In 2016, NACo moved again, this time to the adjacent building located at 660 North Capitol St., NW. Co-located with the National League of Cities, the building includes a joint conference center, which has allowed NACo to play host to an increasing number of briefings, conferences, peer exchanges, confabs, discussions, dialogs, debates and meetings.

Facing the Opioid Epidemic

In 2009 and 2010, counties started taking action to limit "pill mills," clinics that prescribed opioid-based painkillers with little or no



The NACo-National League of Cities partnership offered policy recommendations to combat opioid addiction.

"My greatest surprise was how physicians that were trying to find solutions to pain management had bought into the fact that opioids were not addictive and that they were safe."

— Gary Moore, the Boone County, Kentucky judge-executive and former NACo president

diagnostic effort or corroboration. These clinics were often the refuge of patients who received prescriptions for medicine that was advertised to be nonaddictive, then found out those claims were inflated and were desperate to avoid withdrawal symptoms.

Those efforts were too late to stem the increase in Americans suffering from substance use disorder as a result of their prescriptions. By 2016, drug overdose was the leading cause of accidental death in the United States, and counties were seeing those results manifest across the services they provided.

First responders were finding more and more residents suffering overdoses, and for many it would be years before they had access to treatment to stop those overdoses. Failed drug tests had become major contributors to unemployment. Coroners and medical examiners saw added caseloads when overdoses became fatal. Child and family services were stretched thin when parents died or were unable to care for children.

Much like the mental health crisis, options for treatment were dramatically limited by the number of providers, which was almost always far less than the demand. And when supply crackdowns made it harder and more expensive to obtain prescription drugs, users would divert into heroin and later synthetic opioids like Fentanyl, which posed even greater risks of overdose.

In 2016 NACo and the National League of Cities formed a joint opioid task force to examine the intergovernmental solutions to the issue, analyze best practices and offer policy prescriptions.

Boone County, Kentucky Judge-Executive Gary Moore, who later served as NACo president, was NACo's co-chair for the task force and saw the effects of the epidemic in his home county.

"My greatest surprise was how physicians

Mercer County, West Virginia Commissioner Greg Puckett (right) and Clinton County, Pennsylvania Commissioner Jeff Snyder discuss county strategies for combating opioid addiction in January 2020.

that were trying to find solutions to pain management had bought into the fact that opioids were not addictive and that they were safe," Moore said.

Soon, counties were seeking legal relief from the consultants, manufacturers and distributors of these painkillers, arguing that not only were they improperly marketed as nonaddictive, but the marketing efforts singled out individual communities. Between 1999 and 2017, the CDC estimated that 400,000 people in the United States died from opioid overdoses.

"Something that I think was key was through our work and working with others, demanding that the amount of money that would be paid by either manufacturers or distributors needed to be based not on population but based on some critical data like how many overdoses occurred in a county," Moore said.

Part of the $54 billion settlement from the multidistrict litigation against pharmaceutical manufacturers, distributors, marketers and retailers offered new resources to counties, and NACo's Opioid Solutions Center and Opioid Solutions Leadership Network presented resources to help them invest that money effectively to save lives and support recovery in a transparent manner.

Early Childhood Care

Though only a few states charge counties with a significant role in public education, there's a short window for county programming to make a difference in a child's development.

Counties for Kids is a public awareness campaign for county leaders who are committed to making investments in young children from prenatal to age three. The campaign offers peer learning networks for rural, suburban and urban counties for county leaders to learn local early childhood innovations and leading practices for advancing PN-3 policies, services and systems.

Like his early 2000s effort to address mental illness in jails, Dallas County, Texas Commissioner Ken Mayfield brought attention to the county role in child development, and that cause was carried further by Tarrant County, Texas Commissioner Roy Charles Brooks in 2017 upon his NACo presidency with a partnership with the Pritzker Children's Initiative and the National Collaborative for Infants and Toddlers.

"We have a vested interest in the lives of children because those children become adults, and the more resources we can pour into making them productive involved citizens the better off we're going to be as a society," Brooks said.

Franklin County, Ohio Director of the Department of Job and Family Services Joy Bivens discusses how the federal government can help states and counties deliver services that create pathways out of poverty while testifying before the House Committee on Ways and Means Subcommittee on Worker and Family Supports.

Counties Meet New Challenges

NACo's We Are Counties campaign highlighted the work of county workers on the front lines of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Pandemic

As county officials gathered in Washington, D.C. for the 2020 Legislative Conference, news from China buzzed in the background. Regardless of whether they were public health officers, word of a fast-spreading respiratory virus had a growing number of attendees concerned. Some wore surgical masks. Health Policy Steering Committee Chair Phil Serna, a Sacramento County, California supervisor, eschewed handshakes for an elbow bump as a precaution against spreading a disease that few understood.

President Donald Trump addressed the 2020 Legislative Conference, on the eve of the COVID-19 pandemic. Photo by Denny Henry

King County, Washington Executive Dow Constantine arrived in Washington, D.C., and immediately flew back to Seattle upon the news that the first domestic death attributable to COVID-19 had been recorded in his county.

President Donald Trump, making the first appearance by a U.S. president at a NACo conference in 24 years, brought with him to the conference CDC Director Robert Redfield to address county officials' concerns. Trump had invited several thousand county officials to visit the White House during his term, giving elected officials new levels of access to the executive branch and NACo an opportunity to engage with more county officials.

When attendees returned home in early March, few knew they would likely not be leaving their communities for roughly a year as they grappled with a public health and economic crisis that few if any could prepare for as the COVID-19 pandemic spread throughout the United States.

The nation's 1,900 local public health agencies responded with varying guidance regulating the size of gatherings, limiting commercial activity and trying to pierce the fog of uncertainty with guidance from the CDC, National Institutes of Health and other authorities. Many county agencies coordinated testing for COVID-19 when tests became available.

As NACo president, Douglas County, Nebraska Commissioner Mary Ann Borgeson heard from many county officials in those dizzying first few months.

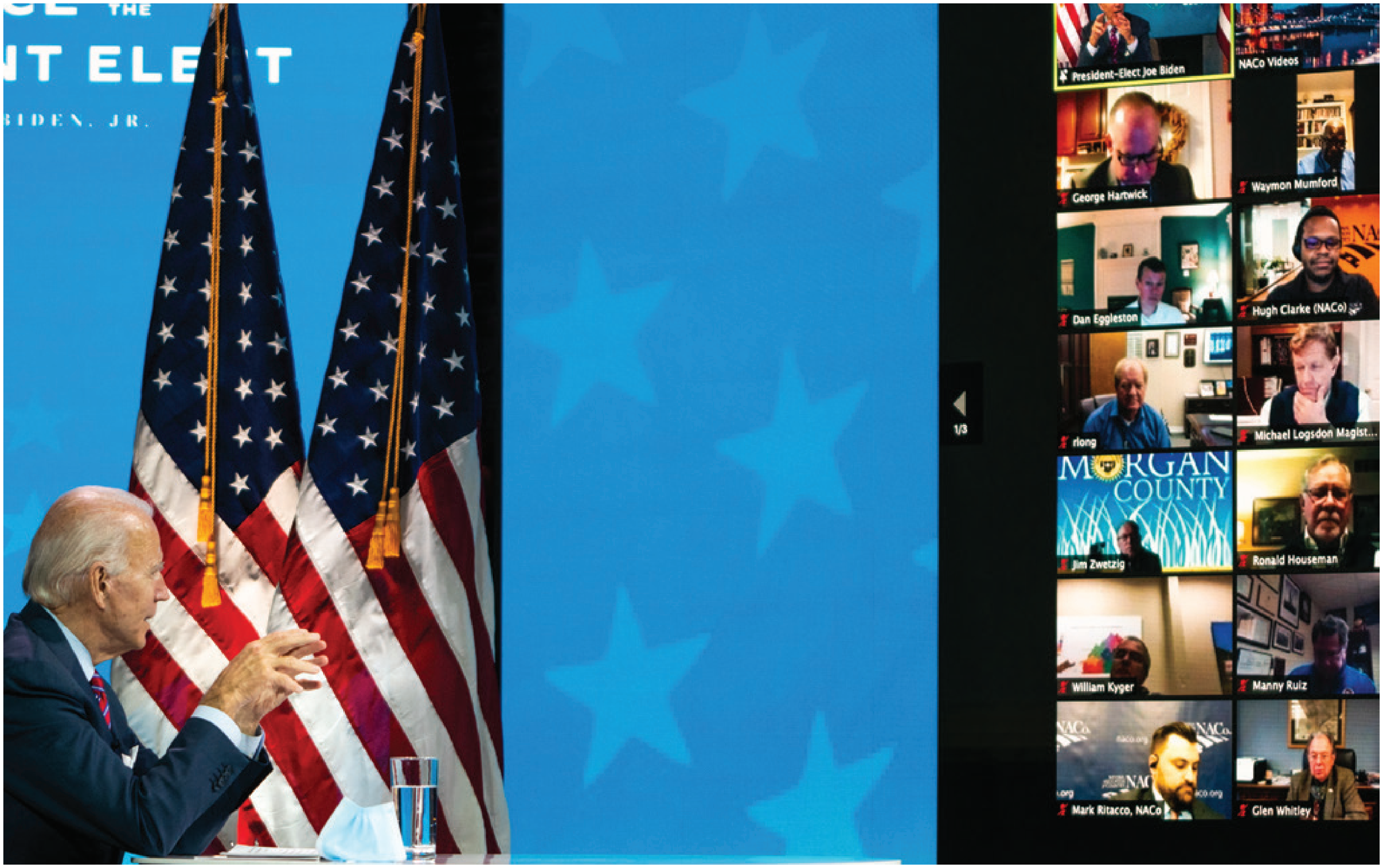
"I had daily conversations with people on the phone or on Zoom," she said. "A lot of people called for advice, or to trade stories, asking how other counties were managing the pandemic."

County hospitals were inundated by patients, and some coroners and medical examiners had to secure refrigerated trucks to manage the overflow in their morgues as casualties mounted.

Counties moved their operations online to ensure continuity of service. They also worried what the decline in economic activity would mean for their tax revenues that funded support services that were seeing dramatic increases in demand.

As the economic effects of local limits were distributed unevenly across the workforce, counties took the initiative to distribute food and supplies to help residents survive.

President-elect Joe Biden addressed the NACo Board of Directors remotely in December 2020 from the Queen Theater in New Castle County, Delaware. Photo by Demetrius Freeman/The Washington Post



The pandemic placed tremendous strain on county officials who bore enormous responsibility for the well-being of their residents. Onondaga County, New York Executive Ryan McMahon suffered vision problems because of stress and exhaustion.

The totality of the county effort was hard to see at the time, but looking back, Borgeson was amazed at what she saw.

"I was proud that counties showed that we don't shut down. We just find a way to do what we need to do to get the job done," she said. "I was just so extremely proud of the NACo staff, getting people together daily on phone calls to give them the best information, sometimes just peace of mind or a chance to hear their concerns and try to find answers.

"It was amazing to see the weekly calls with the media, the close coordination with the administration. I think we showed that we can continue to be strong for all counties, even through a pandemic."

The CARES Act, passed in March 2020, supplied some financial relief, though it was a state-oriented bill that only offered direct funding to 119 counties whose populations topped 500,000, with smaller counties forced to access funding through their governors' offices.

Former NACo President Chris Rodgers and Mary Ann Borgeson, then NACo's president, comply with public health guidelines while conducting a Douglas County, Nebraska commissioners meeting early in the COVID-19 pandemic.

Meanwhile, NACo's We Are Counties campaign highlighted the frontline roles that county personnel played in staffing nearly 1,000 hospitals, over 800 long-term care facilities, 750 behavioral health centers, 1,900 public health departments, emergency operations centers and 911 systems. The campaign showed the faces of the local civil servants who were keeping their counties running from home or six feet apart.

NACo had the foresight to purchase pandemic insurance for its events, which softened the financial blow of canceling the 2020 Annual Conference, scheduled for Orange County, Florida. Like everything else that year, a stripped-down conference was held online, with a fully remote Annual Business Meeting for the first and only time.

Counties met the challenge of the 2020 election, recruiting new poll workers to mitigate the risk to the traditional demographic who work

"I had daily conversations with people on the phone or on Zoom. A lot of people called for advice, or to trade stories, asking how other counties were managing the pandemic."

— Mary Ann Borgeson, a Douglas County, Nebraska commissioner and former NACo president

NACo's Coronavirus State and Local Fiscal Recovery Fund Advocacy Toolkit was a sampling of NACo's resources related to the American Rescue Plan Act.

"We had to start educating federal partners about what counties were doing to address the COVID-19 pandemic both immediately and in the long term."

— Eryn Hurley, NACo's managing director for government affairs

on Election Day, older Americans whose age put them at elevated risk for serious COVID infection. County election officials expanded ballot access, installed drop boxes and navigated uneven state laws governing ballot counting procedures. Elected officials of all kinds faced criticism, skepticism and in some cases harassment after a close presidential election, driving tremendous turnover in their ranks for years after.

Joe Biden, who had been a mainstay at NACo conferences both as a U.S. senator and in 2015 as vice president, took office in 2021, leading a ticket in which both officers were county veterans. Biden had served on the New Castle County, Delaware Council from 1971-1972 and Vice President Kamala Harris had served as San Francisco City and County district attorney from 2004-2011, as a deputy district attorney in Alameda County, California from 1990-1998 and chief of the San Francisco career criminal division from 1998-2000.

Throughout 2020 and early 2021, the need for additional COVID relief was apparent, and negotiations would continue through the end of Trump's first term and into Biden's. Along the way, the Senate changed hands, but throughout, NACo-engaged congressional leaders' familiarity with local governments would be invaluable in shaping what would be the American Rescue Plan Act.

ARPA's overall $1.5 trillion price tag was driven by economists' contention that insufficient relief for state and local governments in 2008 prolonged the Great Recession and contributed to uneven recovery. Two provisions made all the difference for counties: First, the $65.1 billion—the largest federal investment in county government in American history—would be distributed directly to counties, with no need to navigate relationships with governors. And second, the money could also be used to backfill lost tax revenue as a result of the pandemic.

Senate Democratic Leader Chuck Schumer (N.Y.), Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell (Ky.) and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) all committed to giving local governments equal footing with the states, though Matt Chase noted that their first draft proposal used the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) formula to distribute the money.

"We wanted it to be general aid and not a grant, they picked CDBG because it was really the most common trusted formula that got money directly from the federal government to local government bypassing the states," Chase said. "What they didn't realize was that the CDBG formula is based primarily on the age of your housing stock, so it really benefited the Northeast and the industrial Midwest. It was very unbalanced for counties."

“We had to start educating federal partners about what counties were doing to address the COVID-19 pandemic both immediately and in the long term,” said Eryn Hurley, NACo’s managing director for government affairs, who took charge of ARPA education and matters for county governments. “It really demonstrated how counties were on the front line of addressing the COVID-19 pandemic and not even just public health. There were so many other items that were exacerbated, housing, food and everything.”

NACo won support for a 50-50 share between cities and counties, with a key provision that consolidated city-counties could tap into both. Incidentally, all three congressional leaders represented consolidated governments. Pelosi served a San Francisco district, Schumer had represented New York City in the House prior to the Senate and McConnell was judge-executive of Jefferson County, Kentucky, which consolidated with Louisville in 2003.

“Speaker Pelosi was unbendable,” Chase said. “There were so many efforts by the governors to cut us out and to reduce our money, and Speaker Pelosi, in particular, was just a piece of granite. Senator Schumer was a champion of directing money to the local level. The New York county executives and the New York State Association of Counties did a great job of articulating the challenges counties were facing. They played an instrumental part in building political support..”

“There was also tremendous continuity between the Trump and Biden administrations while we worked it out.”

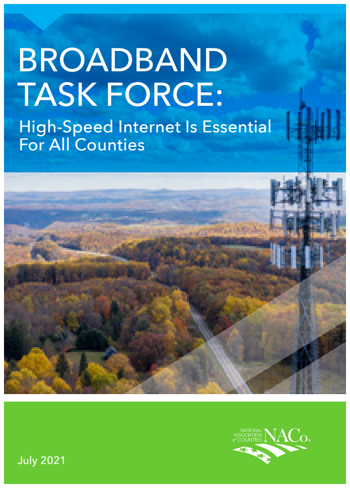
When Boone County, Kentucky Judge-Executive Gary Moore spoke to McConnell about getting aid directly to counties, he called upon the memory of General Revenue Sharing to show how the package would work. Although ARPA passed on a party-line vote, Moore said there was value in engaging the Republicans.

“We did have an impact with Republican senators because while they were insisting that they were opposed to the package, they understood that when it happened, it would be best to not go through the states. So, we all had an impact in educating and moving it.”

Counties had the leeway to invest their ARPA funding as they wished, supporting local businesses, bolstering food distribution systems for residents, offering grants to social service organizations and senior resource centers, providing housing assistance, public health and more.

“Senator Schumer was a champion of directing money to the local level. The New York county executives and the New York State Association of Counties did a great job of articulating the challenges counties were facing.”

— Matt Chase, NACo’s executive director



“Thanks to the pandemic, the universal need for broadband became reality overnight, rather than something that might have been 10 or 20 years in the future.”

— Gary Moore, the Boone County, Kentucky judge-executive and former NACo president

As 2021 dawned, counties were part of the chain of custody delivering and distributing doses of the COVID vaccine that allowed the country to tenuously return to a pre-COVID time. The successful vaccine distribution allowed NACo to quickly plan a hybrid 2021 Annual Conference, with an in-person event held at the Gaylord National Harbor in Prince George’s County, Maryland. Located within driving distance of NACo’s Washington, D.C. office, conference planning staff were able to prepare for the conference while limiting their travel. Accustomed to planning conferences over much longer timeframes, NACo had once arranged an Annual Conference on short notice in Cook County, Illinois in 2006, but staff had one year to plan that, compared to three months in 2021.

Vice President Harris continued a growing streak for the executive branch when she spoke at the 2021 Annual Conference, and Biden would carry it on for three more years, addressing General Sessions at the 2022-2024 Legislative Conferences.

Connecting Across the Country

When schools went remote, doctors limited in-person appointments, small businesses adapted to web-based commerce and counties maintained services during the pandemic, nearly everyone recognized the limitations that high-speed internet connectivity posed to the world at the moment and where things would be evolving in the future.

NACo had already been pushing to verify the accuracy of internet service providers’ claims, introducing a smartphone app, TestIt, that allowed users across the country to test their internet speed from their counties. The Broadband Task Force, in 2020 and 2021, examined what counties must do to prepare for broadband, what stood in the way, how disparities in access affected their residents and how counties could prepare to compete in a global internet economy.

“Thanks to the pandemic, the universal need for broadband became reality overnight, rather than something that might have been 10 or 20 years in the future,” Boone County. Kentucky Judge-Executive Gary Moore said.

Boone County was one of the first in the nation to connect every home to high-speed internet service.

As the task force’s work began, Chair J.D. Clark did not have much experience with broadband, even as judge of the Wise County, Texas Commissioner’s Court.

“I left that experience knowing a whole lot more about broadband than when I started, but more specifically with a much better idea of what possibilities existed," he said. "It gave me the right questions to ask, it gave me the right people to pull in the room to help change my framework for what good broadband looked like. But overall, the task force was representative of the best NACo has to offer—helping to equip county officials with the knowledge to address the problems that are affecting their communities. We saw broadband go from a luxury to a necessity, but NACo was already working on that when the rest of the world caught up."

Exploring Artificial Intelligence

What does the future look like?

Is it a natural progression of the world we now know, or will it veer off in a new, unthinkable direction?

Those are two of the questions NACo's AI Exploratory Committee addressed in 2023 and 2024 when considering the future of artificial intelligence, its applications and opportunities and its potential pitfalls to county government.

"I think government workers are just stuck in their ways a lot of times," said Maui County, Hawaii Assessor Scott Teruya.

NACo Artificial Intelligence Exploratory Committee members received high-level briefings from industry leaders as they sought to help direct county leaders in their adoption of the technology.

"Rather than following procedures without question, a wide enough net by AI could find a better solution. When you have been going through B to get from A to C, maybe there's a better way, and the human brain hasn't comprehended it yet."

For some counties, AI offers the potential to automate functions that take up staff time, increasing efficiency and sometimes accuracy and freeing personnel from mundane and frustrating tasks. The data analysis, on scales humans could only imagine, might provide new insights into the allocation of resources and service delivery.

For some counties, AI offers the potential to automate functions that take up staff time, increasing efficiency and sometimes accuracy and freeing personnel from mundane and frustrating tasks.

Stephen Acquario was concerned about the consequences for public sector labor unions, which will want a say in how

South Regional Representative Ron Berry (left) welcomes Rep. David Kustoff (R-Tenn.) to the 2025 Legislative Conference. Berry is a Roane County, Tennessee commissioner. Photo by Denny Henry

Innovations in the field can develop so quickly that the committee's report, the AI County Compass, instead focused on a framework for assessing the technology.

the employment world changes. As executive director of the New York State Association of Counties, he has been attuned to the nuances of a heavy public sector union state.

"There's a sense that 'we've always done it this way,' and it's hard to break that inertia," he said. "The lack of understanding by most people will be the impediment to adopting it."

Innovations in the field can develop so quickly that the committee's report, the AI County Compass, instead focused on a framework for assessing the technology and providing county officials with a basic understanding of how to evaluate AI.

"I'm worried that a county will get itself into a contractual agreement that may not be favorable," said Peter Crary, a committee member and senior manager of technology at the Texas Association of Counties. "I really do hope that we can give them guidance on what to do. If we can at least build guardrails and educate them on how to build the policies, what vendors are looking for, these are the questions you should ask."

Frankly, residents may come to expect AI-enhanced services that they experience in the private sector. Peoria County, Illinois Administrator Scott Sorrel staked out the challenge for counties.

"The speed of evolution of the technology is going to be a challenge for county governments because they do not move at the pace of the private sector," he said.

Chris Rodgers, a Douglas County, Nebraska commissioner who made cybersecurity his priority as NACo president in 2012-2013, was concerned about the proliferation of misinformation and disinformation in what AI models learn, influencing their outputs. If counties perpetuate that bad information, it legitimizes it and could deteriorate a county's trustworthiness.

"Once it's out there, there's no way you pull it back in," he said.

Matt Chase used generative AI to compose *The Marvelous Adventures of Countyland*, a rhyming children's story about the functions of county government, as an example to elected officials of what is possible with the new technology but also illustrating some of the limitations inherent in AI, such as biases in assuming demographic details in illustrations.

Housing Affordability

One of the long legacies of the Great Recession was the chilling effect on the housing market. Years before, Lake County, Illinois Commissioner Angelo Kyle made housing accessibility a focus of his year as NACo president.

It became clear in 2022 that housing affordability had reached a crisis, and every level of government would have to figure out how to make it easier to build housing. Will County, Illinois Board Member Denise Winfrey, then NACo's president, created the Housing Affordability Task Force to articulate ways counties could do their part to encourage the development of affordable quality housing units. NACo worked with the Brookings Institution and the Aspen Institute to create a Housing Solutions Matchmaker tool, which analyzes demographic trends for individual counties, comparing them against their peers in the same state and other counties across the country.

The task force itself provided policy prescriptions for leveraging federal resources, land use reforms, regulatory adjustments, community engagement and more.

"Stable, quality housing is the foundation for better health, safety, education, a strong workforce, improved financial wellness, and lower demands on the social safety net," Winfrey said. "NACo's Housing Task Force is committed to meeting the moment and addressing our residents' housing needs."

National Center for Public Lands Counties

As the COVID-19 pandemic continued and urban dwellers sought more space, some fled to rural counties, with many occupying second homes in resort communities near national parks and recreation areas. Public lands soon saw themselves being "loved to death," around the same time that wildfires in national forests sent plumes of smoke across the country. All of that converged to raise the awareness of the challenges public lands counties face in managing and funding operations.

Public lands counties, funded in large part by Payments in Lieu of Taxes and the Secure Rural Schools Act, have a unique relationship with the federal government, with federal policy having a direct and dramatic effect on how those lands are used. Nearly 62 percent of counties contain federal land.

Prairie County, Montana Commissioner Todd Devlin speaks at the 2018 Capitol Hill rally in support of the Payments in Lieu of Taxes and Secure Rural Schools programs. Photo by Jason Dixon

“We, as an organization, really believe in the importance of factual information and data-driven analysis to inform public officials.”

—Craig Sullivan, executive director of the County Supervisors Association of Arizona

Some of those counties focus on resource extraction, some on outdoor recreation. Others are affected by the ease with which a president can increase or decrease the amount of public land covered by the Antiquities Act, which governs national monuments. They have economies all of their own, and NACo and the Western Interstate Region created the National Center for Public Lands Counties in 2023 to study those economies, tell their stories and serve as a repository of knowledge for county leaders, including documents like natural resource plans and other strategic planning documents.

Sparked by the creation of the Local Assistance and Tribal Consistency Fund, counties voluntarily contributed funds for the center to demonstrate how the prosperity of public lands counties creates a more prosperous America, telling that story through traditional and new media.

WIR Conference attendees tour Yosemite National Park, a crucial player in Mariposa County, California's economy. Photo by Amber Edwards

“As a group, we have decades of experience working with public lands issues, but the problem with that is that it takes decades to build that up,” said Greg Chilcott, a Ravalli County, Montana commissioner who was an early champion of the center. “By pooling our experience and building that repository of knowledge, we can help new officials in public lands counties speed up their learning curve.”

Craig Sullivan, executive director of the County Supervisors Association of Arizona, prizes the data and analysis the center's staff has generated.

“We, as an organization, really believe in the importance of factual information and data-driven analysis to inform public officials,” he said. “It's also important to tell the story of public lands in a way that people can understand, because the public lands story is very complicated. We're already seeing foundational information coming out of the work the center is doing, things that would have helped me when I was trying to first learn about the issues.”

Disaster Reform Task Force

Repeated wildfires and floods in Sonoma County and elsewhere in California have shown Supervisor James Gore that federal disaster assistance policy, managed by the Federal Emergency Management Agency, is broken. Resiliency and disaster preparedness had long been a priority for NACo leadership, particularly for presidents Linda Langston, from Linn County, Iowa, site of devastating floods, and Sallie Clark, from El Paso County, Colorado, which suffered both wildfires and floods. Their advocacy reinforced the need for counties to perform mitigation work to prepare for an increasing number of natural disasters.

Gore named an Intergovernmental Disaster Reform Task Force to provide recommendations for policy reforms and best practices that improve disaster mitigation at the county level. Those aspects include direct technical support, reduced administrative burdens and public accountability.

With one-third of counties experiencing at least one disaster each year, the issue has reached a critical mass for change.

Meanwhile, President Trump opened his second term by establishing a council to assess FEMA and has mused about wanting Congress to dismantle the agency. Counties will offer their perspective on how federal disaster assistance should change.

The Intergovernmental Disaster Reform Task Force provides recommendations for policy reforms and best practices that improve disaster mitigation at the county level.

"Reform of FEMA is very different from elimination of FEMA, with no more payments for public assistance," Gore said. "If we have a cost shift where the federal government does not pay for debris removal anymore, we are fighting against that because our general funds cannot handle that. That is not a political fight. It's an existential fight."

Counties often carry millions of dollars in recovery costs while they await FEMA reimbursement.

Looking Ahead

County Crossroads Symposium attendees gather for a group photo at the Lake Sonoma Overlook in Sonoma County, California in December 2024. Programming covered issues of interest to both urban and rural counties. Photo by Amber Edwards

Soon after his term in Rensselaer County, New York ended, former NACo President Bill Murphy moved to Georgia and went to work for PEBSCO and Nationwide, and his tenure there far outlasted the length of his time in county office. Approaching NACo's 90th anniversary, he had lived another lifetime after leaving county government.

But he never lost touch with the formative years of his career nor with NACo. He remains a *County News* reader and looks with pride at the way NACo not only survived its near calamity but found its way through the challenges and away from the hazards facing any organization and set its trajectory.

"NACo was able to meet the challenge, sustain itself and grow into the wonderful organization that you have right now," Murphy said in 2024. "It's so much more multifaceted than when I was in office, and a lot of that is a function of having the revenue from the deferred compensation program to be able to do those kinds of things.

"I'm also proud they were able to keep the right perspective between the entrepreneurial nature of the organization and the lobbying nature of the organization and not let one crush the other, which frequently can happen, particularly when the entrepreneurial side crushes the other side.

NACo President Bill Murphy reflects on NACo's past and the promise for its future. Photo by Myava Mitchell

"It's obvious to me that NACo is held in very high regard by the people on Capitol Hill when we need their support for the things that are important to us. But it's also important to me that that NACo is seen as a resource for local governments at all levels. I know my commissioners here in Forsyth County attend NACo conferences, and they allow their staff to do the same thing. You have this coalition, this association of people of like minds dealing with similar problems. And no one of us is as smart as all of us, right?

"The more people we can bring to bear on a problem, the better off we are always going to be."

"NACo was able to meet the challenge, sustain itself and grow into the wonderful organization that you have right now."

— Bill Murphy, the Rensselear County, New York executive and former NACo President

NACo Leadership

Presidents

George F. Breitbach
Milwaukee County, Wisconsin
1935-1938

George F. Simmons
Weber County, Utah
1938-1939

Jake E. Loy
Grayson County, Texas
1939-1940

Austin Moore
Fayette County, Kentucky
1940-1941

William A. Smith
Los Angeles County, California
1941-1942

Eugene G. Meredith
Kimball County, Nebraska
1942-1943

Truman H. Preston
Steuben County, New York
1943-1944

Walter D. Ralston
Butler County, Ohio
1944-1946

G. Claiborne Blanton
Dallas County, Alabama
1946-1947

George W. Morgan
Salt Lake County, Utah
1947-1948

Joseph Hammond
Duval County, Florida
1948-1949

Stanley Martin
Gloucester County, New Jersey
1949-1950

Dean Z. Haddick
Rock Island County, Illinois
1950-1951

M. Ward Forman
St. Clair County, Alabama
1951-1952

Harry Bartell
Alameda County, California
1952-1953

Guerdon Allyn Treakle
Norfolk County, Virginia
1953-1954

Fred B. Glass
Falls County, Texas
1954-1955

Donald C. Scribner
Fulton County, New York
1955-1956

Herman C. Kersteen
Luzerne County, Pennsylvania
1956-1957

Mark S. Johnson
Millard County, Utah
1957-1958

W. H. "Pat" Johnson
Fulton County, Georgia
1959-1960

William E. Dennison
Shiawassee County, Michigan
1961-1962

Dan W. Gray
Calhoun County, Alabama
1962-1963

David Bird
San Diego County, California
1963-1964

Clifton Beverly Briley
Davidson County, Tennessee
1964-1965

M. James Gleason
Multnomah County, Oregon
1965-1966

Edwin Michaelian
Westchester County, New York
1966-1967

Woodrow Wilson Dumas
East Baton Rouge Parish, Louisiana
1967-1968

Edward Connor
Wayne County, Michigan
1968-1969

Ed Munro
King County, Washington
1959-1960

James H. Aldredge
Fulton County, Georgia
1961-1962

Conrad M. Fowler
Shelby County, Alabama
1962-1963

Clesson Y. Chikasuye
Honolulu County, Hawaii
1970-1971

William J. Conner
New Castle County, Delaware
1971-1972

Gladys Noon Spellman
Prince George's County, Maryland
1972-1973

Gil Barrett
Dougherty County, Georgia
1973-1974

Stanley Smoot
Davis County, Utah
1974-1975

Vance Webb
Kern County, California
1975-1976

Daniel C. Lynch
Douglas County, Nebraska
1976-1977

William O. Beach
Montgomery County, Tennessee
1977-1978

Charlotte L. Williams
Genessee County, Michigan
1978-1979

Francis B. Francois
Prince George's County, Maryland
1979-1980

Roy Orr
Dallas County, Texas
1980-1981

J. Richard Conder
Richmond County, North Carolina
1981-1982

William J. Murphy
Rensselaer County, New York
1982-1983

Sandra R. Smoley
Sacramento County, California
1983-1984

Philip B. Elfstrom
Kane County, Illinois
1984-1985

Bob B. Aldemeyer
Kenton County, Kentucky
1985-1986

John Horsley
Kitsap County, Washington
1986-1987

Harvey Ruvin
Miami-Dade County, Florida
1987-1988

James Snyder
Cattaraugus County, New York
1988-1989

Ann Klinger
Merced County, California
1989-1990

D. Michael Stewart
Salt Lake County, Utah
1990-1991

Kaye Braaten
Richland County, North Dakota
1991-1992

John H. Stroger, Jr.
Cook County, Illinois
1992-1993

Barbara Sheen Todd
Pinellas County, Florida
1993-1994

Randall Franke
Marion County, Oregon
1994-1995

Douglas R. Bovin
Delta County, Michigan
1995-1996

Michael Hightower
Fulton County, Georgia
1996-1997

Randy Johnson
Hennepin County, Minnesota
1997-1998

Betty Lou Ward
Wake County, North Carolina
1998-1999

C. Vernon Gray
Howard County, Maryland
1999-2000

Jane Hague
King County, Washington
2000-2001

Javier Gonzales
Bernalillo County, New Mexico
2001-2002

Ken Mayfield
Dallas County, Texas
2002-2003

Karen Miller
Boone County, Missouri
2003-2004

Angelo D. Kyle
Lake County, Illinois
2004-2005

Bill Hansell
Umatilla County, Oregon
2005-2006

Colleen Landkamer
Blue Earth County, Minnesota
2006-2007

Eric Coleman
Oakland County, Michigan
2007-2008

Don Stapley
Maricopa County, Arizona
2008-2009

Valerie Brown
Sonoma County, California
2009-2010

B. Glen Whitley
Tarrant County, Texas
2010-2011

Lenny Eliason
Athens County, Ohio
2011-2012

Chris Rodgers
Douglas County, Nebraska
2012-2013

Linda Langston
Linn County, Iowa
2013-2014

G. Riki Hokama
Maui County, Hawaii
2014-2015

Sallie Clark
El Paso County, Colorado
2015-2016

Bryan Desloge
Leon County, Florida
2016-2017

Roy Charles Brooks
Tarrant County, Texas
2017-2018

Greg Cox
San Diego County, California
2018-2019

Mary Ann Borgeson
Douglas County, Nebraska
2019-2020

Gary Moore
Boone County, Kentucky
2020-2021

Larry Johnson
DeKalb County, Georgia
2021-2022

Denise Winfrey
Will County, Illinois
2022-2023

Mary Jo McGuire
Ramsey County, Minnesota
2023-2024

James Gore
Sonoma County, California
2024-2025

Regional representatives

NORTHEAST

Joe Giles
Erie County, Pennsylvania
2009-2014

Christian Leinbach
Berks County, Pennsylvania
2014-2020

Mark Poloncarz
Erie County, New York
2020-2024

Tammy Tincher
Greenbrier County, West Virginia
2024-present

SOUTH

Burrell Ellis
DeKalb County, Georgia
2009-2011

Joe Bryan
Wake County, North Carolina
2011-2014

Merceria Ludgood
Mobile County, Alabama
2014-2017

Ruby Brabo
King George County, Virginia
2017-2020

Ron Berry
Roane County, Tennessee
2020-present

CENTRAL

Pat Conway
Buchanan County, Missouri
2009-2010

Keith Langenhahn
Marathon County, Wisconsin
2010-2011

Ron Houseman
Taney County, Missouri
2011-2014

Cindy Bobbitt
Grant County, Oklahoma
2014-2020

Tracy Graham
Audrain County, Missouri
2020-2024

Kurt Gibbs
Marathon County, Wisconsin
2024-present

WEST

Robert Cope
Lemhi County, Idaho
2009-2013

Tom Josi
Tillamook County, Oregon
2013-2015

Lesley Robinson
Phillips County, Montana
2015-2016

Gordon Cruickshank
Valley County, Idaho
2016-2019

Joe Briggs
Cascade County, Montana
2019-present

Executive directors

Bernie Hillenbrand
1957-1982

James Marshall (interim)
1982

Matt Coffey
1983-1985

John Thomas
1986-1991

Larry Naake
1991-2012

Matthew Chase
2012-present

NACo's names

National County Officers Association
1935-1939

National Association of County Officers
1939-1962

National Association of Counties
1962-present

Thank you to the NACo executive committee for your support in this project: President James Gore, First Vice President J.D. Clark, Second Vice President George Dunlap, Immediate Past President Mary Jo McGuire, Northeast Region Representative Tammy Tincher, South Region Representative Ron Berry, Central Region Representative Kurt Gibbs, West Region Representative Joe Briggs and Executive Director Matt Chase, along with NACo's Board of Directors. Much of NACo's early years were initially chronicled in a project by Bernie Hillenbrand, John McKeon, Tom Goodman and Beverly Schlotterbeck. Leon Lawrence III envisioned and executed this book's design and Nicole Weissman provided valuable direction in its development. Thank you to everyone who shared time, memories and insight into NACo's history and development, and for the time and energy you put into America's counties.

— Charlie Ban, June 2025


HOTEL LEAMINGTON
HOTEL LEAMINGTON
Welcome N.A.C.O
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NATIONAL ASSOCIATION of COUNTIES NACo

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Stronger Counties. Stronger America.