



SPOTLIGHT ON:

## THE COUNTY WORKFORCE



**Counties turn to service appeal to attract staff. Pg. 8**



**Sheriffs face hiring challenge. Pg. 10**



**County administrators bridge the gap. Pg. 11**

# CN

## CountyNews

COUNTIES STRETCH SMALL OPIOID SETTLEMENT ALLOCATIONS. **PG. 3**

COUNTY JAIL RECORDING STUDIO ADDRESSES INMATE MENTAL HEALTH. **PG. 7**

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION *of* COUNTIES

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# County officials moonlight in search and rescue roles



The Butte County, Calif. Sheriff's Search and Rescue team is an all-volunteer organization.

by **Charlie Ban**  
senior writer

There's the life-changing service Matt Jensen offers to Delta County, Mich. as a commissioner every month in meetings as he helps guide his county's governance. Then

there's the life-saving service that gets a little more frequent this time of year.

Jensen volunteers his time as an ice rescue team member, willing to wade into the frigid waters of Lake Michigan to bring residents and visitors alike back to solid ground

when they've fallen through the ice.

"If your head doesn't go underwater, we can get you easy enough and you have a really strong probability of survival," he said. "Most people don't

*See RESCUE page 2*

# Counties celebrate significant permitting inclusion in SPEED Act

Just in time for Thanksgiving, counties had something to be thankful for after the Standardizing Permitting and Expediting Economic Development (SPEED) Act (H.R. 4776), ad-

vanced Nov. 20 out of the U.S. House Committee on Natural Resources.

"Counties are pleased that the SPEED Act would reform the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) by streamlining federal permitting and strengthening county involvement in decision-making," NACo CEO Matt Chase said. "We support common-sense permitting reforms, and the provisions in this bill would guarantee us a seat at the table during federal environmental

reviews.

"The text of this bill states that 'counties, boroughs, parishes, and other political subdivisions of a State' can be named as cooperating local agencies during the NEPA process. This vital provision recognizes the expertise of counties as intergovernmental partners and would codify that partnership in federal law.

"If enacted, the SPEED Act would implement needed per-

*See PERMITTING page 6*

# Rural leaders pitch county capacity-building

by **Charlie Ban**  
senior writer

Counties are making the best of another year without a farm bill, using that time to articulate how Congress can better equip them for success. Their message is already coalescing around ways government policy can simplify federal-local cooperation and address capacity limitations.

And while one year is likely too little time to comprehensively address the scope of rural prosperity and economic development, it's a chance to move the discussion in the right direction, as county leaders discussed Nov. 19 during NACo's Rural Action Caucus (RAC) Fly-In, in Washington, D.C.

"What we do have is a lot of programs, and that shows a lot of responsiveness on behalf of Congress, but we don't really have a coherent national rural policy at this point," Brookings Institution Senior Fellow Tony Pipa told county leaders.

"Rural counties have more fiscal constraints than the metro counties," he noted. "They have limits on their administrative capacity that are distinct from suburban and urban areas."

Ben Hill County, Ga. Commissioner Hope Harmon said staffing is her county's greatest limitation.

"We simply do not have the capacity of the staff to be able to apply for grants," she said.

The Southern Georgia Regional Commission is a lifeline

*See RURAL page 6*



# 'You can't leave stones unturned, and you can't give up on people'

From RESCUE page 1

pass away from hypothermia, they end up drowning.”

In that case, Jensen added, it wouldn't be a terrible thing if someone's beard were to freeze to the ice, helping keep their head above water.

The ice rescue task force is composed of volunteers, all of whom are trained ice rescue technicians.

And they need them all. Last year, the county received three calls for service from three locations within five minutes of each other.

He's helping hunting parties, ice fishing expeditions, snowmobile riders and everyday explorers who misjudge the strength of the ice on Little Bay de Noc and Big Bay de Noc.

“People think the ice is

thicker than it is,” Jensen said. “At the beginning of the fall or later in the spring, people can get a little overconfident about it, or maybe they just aren't familiar with the area and when it's safe to go out.

“Most of our rescues come a little after dark or just before dawn.”

Drones help with initial reconnaissance and airboats, the kind that are more associated with swamp tours, reach rescue sites faster, but then there's the matter of getting into the mostly frozen bay. Jensen and his colleagues are never exactly jumping into the cold water.

Wearing a dry suit with insulated liners, they gently slide into the water and gain enough buoyancy that two adults can grab on and float along with the rescuer.



Delta County, Mich. Search and Rescue team trains on ice rescue. Photo courtesy of WLUC-TV

That airboat that rushed them to the scene can cut an hour from the trip to the hospital, depending on where the rescue happens along the county's craggy shoreline.

“The turnout we have is a testament to our community in Delta County,” Jensen said. “The bays bring people out, but what really stands out is that we have residents who want to make sure it's safe for our neighbors or our visitors to go out on the ice.”

That's a thought process that goes through Jerry Taylor's mind. In Garfield County, Utah, Taylor has received his share of late-night phone calls. He's a county commissioner and chair of NACo's Public Lands Policy Steering Committee, and he's been doing search and rescue operations in his vast county for nearly 20 years.

Although every rescue is different, the circumstances seem to follow a trend for volunteers.

“I came home late one night after spending all day fabricating doors,” he said. “I was getting into bed at 2 a.m. and I got a call that a young woman had been missing in the

mountains. I was tired, and wanted to go to sleep, but then I thought ‘What if that was my daughter, or my granddaughter, or me and someone else decided not to show up?’”

'Most of our rescues come a little after dark or just before dawn.'

– Matt Jensen, Delta County, Mich.

Taylor and the rest of his team found the woman a few hours later, before dawn broke.

“You can't leave stones unturned, and you can't give up on people,” he said. “You go into each operation knowing it's either going to be good or bad, and as time goes on, the chances of it being bad get a little higher. You just have to push through and keep going.”

Jensen and his colleagues have a narrowly defined area in which they perform their rescues, but most of Garfield County's 5,000 mountainous square miles is federally

owned.

While rangers from the three national parks in the county help out within their boundaries, when it comes to Bureau of Land Management (BLM) land, including the massive Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument, the county is often on its own finding hikers because of a significant staffing disparity between national parks and national monuments. There just isn't adequate BLM staffing, Taylor said.

Although Taylor has enjoyed working with fellow search and rescue volunteers, he worries about refreshing their ranks with younger residents.

“I'm in my 60s and I'm not sure how much longer I should be doing this,” he said. “It can be hard carrying people out of some of these places.”

“It's a blessing to have all of this federal land that draws people here and they help support our businesses; we could use better staffing from the BLM to help out, because it can be hard to find people who are able to leave work at a moment's notice to search for people.”

## SNAP/STATS



### Homelessness Persons Memorial Day Dec. 21

YEAR	NO. OF HOMELESS NATIONWIDE
2020:	580,466
2021:	inconclusive counts due to COVID
2022:	582,500
2023:	653,104
2024:	771,480

Source: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development



# How to stretch small opioid settlement allocations

by **Meredith Moran**  
staff writer

Experts in substance use prevention, harm reduction and recovery advised counties last month with small opioid settlement allocations on best practices for leveraging funding across the continuum of care, at NACo's Opioid Solutions Leadership Network peer exchange in Washington, D.C.

States and localities are set to receive \$56 billion in opioid settlement dollars over an 18-year period, but not every county that receives settlement funding will get enough to build out infrastructure — some counties will only receive hundreds of dollars — but effectively using small allocations can still lead to meaningful impact, according to Dr. Abby Winiker, director of Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health's Bloomberg Overdose Prevention Initiative.

Prevention work is often under-resourced and underutilized, but effective prevention programming tackles substance use disorder before it starts, saving lives and costs associated with treatment and recovery for localities, said Robyn Oster, associate director of health law and policy for Partnership to End Addiction.

"Without [prevention], at a very basic level, cycles of addiction are going to continue," Oster said. "If we don't prevent it, it doesn't matter how much treatment you have, the problem is just going to continue."

Substance use prevention work, such as school and community-based life skills programming and mentoring, also prevents against other negative outcomes that share the same underlying risk and protective factors, such as mental health challenges, violence and dropping out of school, Oster noted.

"The innovation that I think is promising is the shift toward prevention programs that are addressing youth resilience and coping skills and mental health and all those sorts of things that start earlier in the lifespan and really address



**Marianna Reid, Faces and Voices of Recovery director of programs, speaks to best practices in financing recovery work at NACo peer exchange.** Photo by Charlie Ban

the broad array of factors that can underlie substance use," Oster said. "Rather than the 'Just Say No' era of prevention that really emphasized scare tactics and ineffective media campaigns and punitive responses, that really ignored a lot of the factors that lead people to use substances."

## Allotments under \$50,000

For counties receiving opioid settlement allotments under \$50,000, the most effective ways to invest in prevention work are to scale up existing prevention programming, which could be adding another component or making it universal, and train existing workforce (such as people in the community working with or mentoring youth) on substance use prevention, according to Oster. Counties receiving a bit more funding could also use their funding to hire a prevention specialist in the school system, she noted.

Studies show that people who utilize harm reduction programming are five times more likely to enter treatment and three times more likely to stop using drugs than people who don't, said Roxanne Saucier, an Open Society Foundations consultant. And syringe service programs, which provide substance users with sterile injecting equipment and collect used syringes to get them out of the community and safely dispose of them, have resulted in 50% reductions in incidence

of HIV and Hepatitis C, she added.

"Harm reduction is really an on-ramp to care for so many folks," Saucier said. "Harm reduction programs are a place where people can come as they are, be accepted and welcomed as they are and have their humanity and dignity affirmed as they are. And you don't have to make a change in order to come in the door and get care. Once people are there, we're giving people tools that they want to use to protect themselves, protect their health."

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**'Without prevention at a very basic level, cycles of addiction are going to continue.'**

– Robyn Oster,  
*Partnership to End Addiction*

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## Allotments under \$5,000

For counties receiving opioid settlement allotments under \$5,000, the most effective way to invest in harm reduction is to buy and widely distribute naloxone, the medication that rapidly reverses opioid overdoses, according to Saucier.

Buying the generic intramuscular product instead of the nasal product (which is at least 10 times more expensive) can also cut down on costs and allow counties



**Abby Winiker, director of Johns Hopkins Bloomberg Overdose Prevention Initiative, highlights ways to stretch opioid dollars at NACo's Opioid Solutions Leadership Network peer exchange in Washington, D.C.** Photo by Charlie Ban

to distribute it more widely, Saucier said. Investing in test strips and wound care, particularly in areas with high rates of xylazine (an animal tranquilizer) use, also provides large benefits at relatively small costs, she added.

If counties have a bit more funding to work with, funding the local syringe service program is a beneficial way to use settlement dollars, especially amid changing federal guidelines around harm reduction, according to Saucier. Martinsville, Va. used funding to ensure it is able to distribute safety supplies in isolated rural areas through mail-based and delivery services, she noted.

"The federal environment for harm reduction funding may be constricting, or at least there may be the perception that it's constricting," Saucier said. "So, the opioid settlement dollars are one place where we do have the flexibility to spend money on this."

Drug checking, using fourier-transform infrared (FTIR) spectrometers, is a way counties can invest in harm reduction beyond test trips, according to Saucier. It promotes safer drug use and helps public health communities understand trends in the drug supply, she noted.

"More and more harm reduction programs are starting to have drug checking on site with FTIR machines," Saucier said. "Where people can bring a residue of a batch of drugs and have it tested, so they can find out what's in it.

"Not just 'Yes or no, is fentanyl present?' but really find out all of the ingredients in a batch of drugs, which can lead to safer decisions about use — whether that's deciding not to use a certain batch because it has an ingredient that somebody's really trying to avoid or using with other people to make sure that somebody is there to help you in the event of an overdose."

Marianna Reid, Faces and Voices of Recovery's director of programs, echoed the importance of drug checking, and said that an innovative approach she's seen harm reduction organizations take is to text substance users who utilize their services when a batch of drug supply is creating increased overdoses in a specific area, as a reminder to test their supply.

It's important to bring services to substance users instead of expecting them to seek them out, and mobile syringe exchange services and mobile treatment are a great way to offer that, according to Saucier. The "health hub" model, in which there are co-locating services at one site, such as syringe services and legal aid services, has also been effective, she noted.

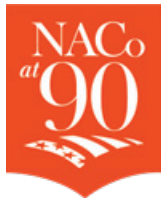
Recovery programming, including peer support, saves lives, said Reid, who celebrated 13 years of sobriety last month. Funding transportation services and peer support are effective ways counties



# NACo book: Matt Chase takes the helm in 2012

by **Charlie Ban**  
senior writer

As NACo celebrates its 90th year, *County News* is serializing a book commemorating the occasion. You can read it in full and learn more about NACo's anniversary at [www.naco.org/90](http://www.naco.org/90).



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 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



**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, Colo. Photo by Charlie Ban**



**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 on Capitol Hill.**

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.

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.

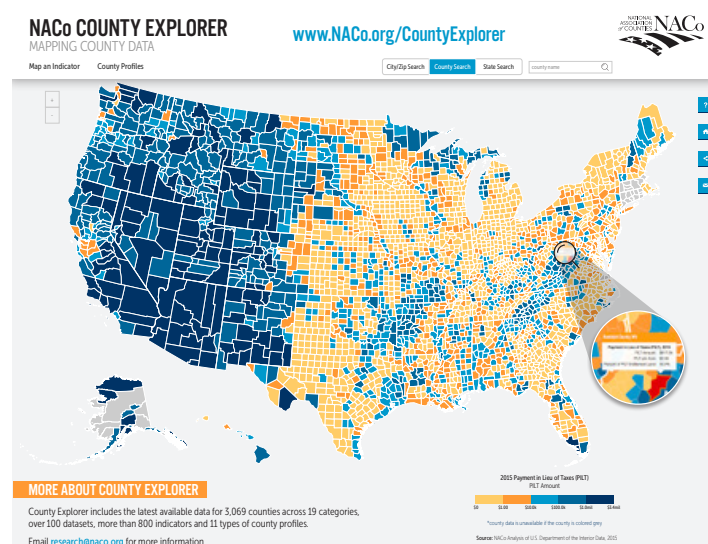
## Stepping Up

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



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

years later, Douglas County, Neb. 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 collabora-

tion 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, Fla.; Johnson County, Kan.; Sacramento County, Calif. and Washington, D.C., emphasized the plight suffered by an estimated 2 million people who were incarcerated at the time.

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



From HISTORY page 4

“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.”

The initiative followed the example of Miami-Dade County, Fla. 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 know-how 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.

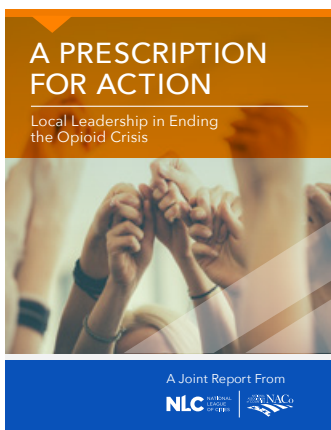
Ten years in, more than 600 counties have committed to Stepping Up, and 54 counties have been recognized as “accelerators” for their sophisticated, comprehensive efforts to reduce the number of people with mental illness in their jails.

### Close partners

In 2016, NACo moved again, this time to the adjacent



(L-r): Council of State Governments Executive Director Michael Thompson; Loudoun County, Va. Sheriff Mike Chapman; Ramsey County, Minn. 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 NACo - National League of Cities partnership offered policy recommendations to combat opioid addiction.

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 diagnostic effort or corroboration. These clinics were often the refuge of patients who received prescriptions for medicine that was advertised to be nonad-



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

dictive, 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 because 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, Ky. 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 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.



# Brookings fellow: 'We don't have a comprehensive national rural policy'

From RURAL page 1

for Ben Hill County, offering staff who can contribute not just to writing and executing grants, but finding grants that align with particular counties.

"So, we are blessed that we have a great regional commission, but even regional commissions don't have the same resources everywhere," she said.

Crawford County, Iowa Supervisor Ty Rosburg hopes to diversify his county's economic base so it isn't so reliant on an aging Smithfield Foods packing plant. But expertise is limited by a relatively small county workforce.

"On our Board of Supervisors, we have two farmers, a banker, an insurance agent and I own a trucking business, so our specialty is not economic development," he said. "The different professions don't sound like a big deal, but a city's got them in abundance. We don't have them. And in a small county like ours, I am my staff."

Other counties are limited by finances and the expectation that federal bureaucracy will work smoothly. But Saline County, Mo. will end up paying more for a wastewater treatment plant because federal grants that have been authorized for three and five years, respectively, still haven't reached the county coffers. Residential development in the county depends on that plant being finished in a few years, so the county has no choice but to borrow money to bridge the gap, which Commissioner Stephanie Gooden called a significant burden.

"We have so much red tape to jump through," said Gooden. "We've been through a couple of government shut-

downs. It would be so much easier if we just got the award directly like with ARPA (the American Rescue Plan Act)."

## Making change

Saline County's delayed grants from the Environmental Protection Agency and Economic Development Administration stretch back years, but Pipa said the transition between presidential administrations will likely result in more instability for rural counties after years of direct investment by ARPA, the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act and the CHIPS and Science Act and as counties adjust to new federal priorities and different governing styles.

"A lot of those resources were made available over the last three to four years, and now it's swinging back to where we've seen a contracting footprint on the federal side," he said. "And it... makes it difficult to navigate for the future. What does the future look like when you're halfway down the road in trying to build a project, and have the funding for that project, and all of a sudden that's shifting?"

Olga Morales-Pate, CEO of Rural Community Assistance Partnership, wondered about the long-term viability of farm bills and the consequences of the extensions; the latest was a part of the continuing resolution that ended the federal shutdown. Passed in 2018, it predates the pandemic and was forged in a much different economy.

"If you look at the provisions that happened in the last few months, it makes you wonder if we are living in a post-farm-bill reality," she said. "I hope not. There's obviously a need for more stability... there doesn't seem like there's a lot of desire for compromise to



Doug O'Brien, Olga Morales-Pate and Jonathan Hurwitz listen as Ann Lichter discusses rural capacity building challenges. Photos by Charlie Ban



Saline County Mo. Commissioner Stephanie Gooden notes the limits of the Rural Health Transformation Program.

really develop policy."

Ann Lichter, director of Resource Rural, said the farm bill's continuance gives counties a chance to provide more feedback about how they interact with federal programs, in hopes of influencing future legislation.

"We know there are programs that aren't working, we've got some opportunities to get rid of red tape," she said. "That's how we build a bigger coalition; if we can demonstrate that, 'no, it's not just business as usual, we actually are going to change how some of these programs work.'"

Jonathan Harwitz, director of public policy at the Housing Assistance Council, noted that rural capacity challenges are

compounded by federal policy largely not being designed with rural communities in mind.

In hopes of addressing that design flaw, Pipa will spend the next two years leading Brookings' participation with the American Enterprise Institute on their Bipartisan Commission on Rural Policy. Following consultation with rural stakeholders, along with six site visits around the country that will include public hearings, the commission aims to publish a national rural strategy by fall 2027, complete with policy recommendations for federal and state policymakers ahead of the 2028 election.

Pipa noted that there was some consideration in the revision of the Opportunity

Zones program, which offers capital gains tax incentives for investors who invest in designated distressed communities. Its earlier variation saw little rural participation, but "there were changes made to make it more sympathetic to rural places," Pipa said. "Governors are going to be creating their maps on who's available for Opportunity Zone investment, and rural places should loom large in those maps."

## New legislation

The fly-in followed the re-introduction of the bipartisan Rural Partnership and Prosperity Act, which would create a grant program providing multiyear, flexible awards to communities to be used to address urgent needs, including:

- Affordable childcare
- Housing
- Job training
- Technical assistance grants to help rural communities navigate existing federal
- funding opportunities and ensure they get their fair share of private and federal investments, and
- Improved supportive services offered by the federal government to rural communities. **CN**

## SPEED Act may streamline permitting process for economic development

From PERMITTING page 1

mitting reforms that ensure decisions are timely, effective and incorporate the input of local experts.

"Counties thank Chairman

Bruce Westerman and Rep. Jared Golden for their leadership in sponsoring this bipartisan legislation and urge its swift passage in the House."

The changes proposed by the SPEED Act would be the

most significant updates to NEPA since the law was implemented over 50 years ago. Arduous NEPA processes often cause delays and increased costs for counties undertaking infrastructure,

energy, land management or broadband projects. If passed, the bill would further reform the permitting process by reducing redundancy and implementing timeline adjustments. **CN**



For more information about counties and the SPEED Act, please scan the QR code.



# County jail recording studio goal is to prevent recidivism

by Meredith Moran  
staff writer

*Names of the incarcerated have been altered to preserve privacy.*

When James steps into the music recording studio, everything else washes away. For a couple of hours, the space is a refuge away from the jail's fluorescent lights and his cell.

"It's really a therapeutic thing for me," he said. "Something that I can make that makes me feel good, to hear the beat and express myself through the music."

James and two other Mecklenburg County, N.C. Jail inmates, George and Stephen, were among the first participants of the jail's "Rhythm and Reflection: A Journey to Reformation" rehabilitation program, which aims to give inmates a healthy, creative outlet to express their feelings and the business tools to launch a career upon their release.

The program launched in June and expanded in November to women in the jail.

"This program serves as an outlet to the residents who have lots of different types of emotions bottled up inside," said Myra Stewart, one of the program's facilitators.

"And it gives them the opportunity to release those emotions through music."

Studio W5HY?, which was named in reference to inmates exploring the "Who, what, when, where, how and why of you" through music, sits on the jail's sixth floor in what was previously a storage room for graduation dress clothing.

"When you come in here, it's like a whole 'nother world," James said.

"It takes us out of the environment of being incarcerated — that's my favorite part."

The transformation of the space, which included installing a sound-proof recording booth and purchasing a keyboard and production equipment, cost roughly \$15,000, nearly all of which was funded by the Tim Bergling Foundation, according to Dorian Johnson, jail program director.

Johnson conceptualized the



A grant was used to create a recording studio at the Mecklenburg County, N.C. detention center.  
Photo courtesy of Mecklenburg County

program several years ago, but had no way to fund it, until he shared the idea with a jail staffer who had a connection to the band Coldplay.

The band passed along the pitch to the Tim Bergling Foundation, which was created by the family of Swedish DJ Tim Bergling (known professionally as Avicii) following his 2018 suicide.

"Tim wanted to make a difference — starting a foundation in his name is our way to honor his memory and continue to act in his spirit," the family said in a statement.

Over the eight-week program, inmates create their own music — singing, rapping, writing their own songs, learning how to use the production equipment — while also getting educated on the business side of the industry.

Stewart teaches participants about intellectual property, copyright, licensing and the monetization of songs, so that if they choose to pursue a career in music after they've served their time, they have the tools to do so.

She's worked in the music industry for more than 30 years and currently works in artist management.

"They're taking [in] this information like a sponge," Stewart said.

"The fact that they're excited about what they've learned really warms my heart, because it's so important," she said.

"There are so many artists who are talented, but don't know the business, and that's

**'This program serves as an outlet to the residents who have lots of different emotions bottled up.'**

— Myra Stewart  
Mecklenburg County, N.C.

how so many get taken advantage of."

Stewart got involved with "Rhythm and Reflection" because she wanted to help provide an alternative to violence and reduce recidivism.

It's been gratifying to see the evolution and growth of participants over the course of eight weeks, she said.

"To see them from the first time they entered the class, not knowing what to expect," Stewart said.

"Going from that, to by the end of the course, they're excited, they have a new outlook and now they have a different way of thinking about the next

phase of their lives — that's what's been very rewarding for me."

El Lambert, another program instructor, works with inmates in the studio and also teaches them about aspects of the music industry outside of being an artist, including working in production and artist management.

Participants create a capstone project around either being an artist, owning a studio or running a label.

"The process was just so natural," Lambert said.

"... We got a chance to create some great music, and adding onto that, some real marketing skills to build a business around that."

Any inmate in good standing can join "Rhythm and Reflection."

James, George and Stephen were the first participants chosen because they grew up making music and had expressed a passion for it, Johnson said.

"This has been wonderful for me," Stephen said.

"It's changed the way I view music. To me, music is life — it's more than just listening to a song, it's the expression of how you feel about your life."

The process, Stephen said, has been cathartic for him, allowing him to tap into his

emotions — something he was always discouraged from doing as a Black man growing up on the streets.

"Most of the music in the industry and in the streets today mostly harps on negative things," he said.

"But what we're doing is reflecting on our life and showing how we can take these negative things that we've been through and make them positive.

"... I think this is the best way to express how we really feel, because most of the guys in here, they're really not bad people, they've just been in some bad situations and didn't know how to handle them."

As a Black man, Johnson said that growing up, he was taught that the only acceptable emotion he could feel is anger.

He's hoping the program helps flip that narrative.

"It really has given them the opportunity to see there's nothing wrong with showing positive or happy emotions, there's nothing wrong with working together instead of working against one another," Lambert said.

"And to see that they can do this thing of music that they love without depending on alcohol or substance use on the outside."

Before joining "Rhythm and Reflection," inmates must participate in two mental health programs through the jail — "Mental Health 101" and "Into Me" — which provide education on mental health diagnoses (what they are and how they show up in individuals) and ways to cope with them in healthy ways, including emotional regulation and goal planning.

Learning about mental health and then processing his feelings through music helped Stephen see himself and his trauma more clearly, he said.

"I didn't know I had that type of trauma in my life until I recognized it through my reflection of the things that I've done and been through," Ste-



# COUNTIES ATTRACT TALENT BY STRESSING PUBLIC SERVICE APPEAL

by **Charlie Ban**  
senior writer

Recruiting employees in remote Mono County, Calif. is an uphill battle.

Steve Rose knew that, coming in as the county's new human resources director this past summer. The fourth-smallest population in the state gives him a small applicant base to staff the county's roughly 275 jobs, 23 of which were open in early December. On top of that, being isolated in the Sierra Nevada mountains means fewer people are nearby, willing or able to commute up to Mono County.

Rose clears those barriers by tailoring his county's talent acquisition approach to reach job candidates in different ways throughout their careers, and by exploring untapped potential in the county workforce.

"I think recruiters fail to

understand the target audience," Rose said. "A lot of early career workers think

of counties as service providers, they don't really see counties as an employer."

Perhaps they should. A total of 3.6 million county employees make up 2% of the U.S. workforce.

It doesn't get any easier for large counties, though; just different. Harris County, Texas may have more residents — it's the third largest in the country — but it also has more employers, particularly in the public sector. Andrea Kimble Scott, director of talent acquisition for the county, points to the city of Houston, along with a number of independent school districts, as competitors for the county's more than 30,000 employees.

"It is not uncommon at the same time that we're looking



SPOTLIGHT ON:

## THE COUNTY WORKFORCE

for a specialized or targeted talent that some of our com-

petitors are also looking for that same talent," she said.

Standing out in that job market means making those listings — 139 in early December — more than a dry description.

"We're telling the story of why you should come work for Harris County, why you should stay with Harris County, why you should continue to grow your career with Harris County," she said. "We have to be able to tell our stories in a very dynamic, robust way, how we are valuable employers and that we provide a very unique opportunity to individuals to start, continue and grow their careers."

That kind of targeted effort makes counties a more com-

petitive employer, moving beyond job boards.

"The days of 'post and pray' are over," said Ian Coyle, principal of Pracademic Partners and a former Livingstone County, N.Y. administrator. "Counties have a calling card as it relates to recruitment and retention that nobody else does except those in the governmental sphere: 'Come to a job where you can advance your community.'"

### The job fair up there

Rose has three options to fill his workforce in Mono County. Trying to attract job-seekers to the county creates a self-selecting pool of people who want to work in a remote county. He had to do this before, in Nevada County, Calif.

"If somebody wants to be in San Francisco, New York City, Atlanta or Orlando, that's not

*See SERVICE page 9*



Bridgeport, the seat of Mono County, Calif. has a hidden workforce resource nearby — military spouses at the Marine Corps Mountain Warfare Training Center.



From SERVICE page 8

going to work,” he said. “But if you want a lifestyle and a rural environment with the pristine alpine topography, this is the place for you.”

He can also try to keep young people in the county or at least keep them thinking about working for the county and knowing that the place they grew up is looking out for them and their futures.

“You want to reach people early,” he said. “In Nevada County, we partnered with the high schools to do career days and to create a youth commission and bring those students that are interested in public service into the fold. That’s something we want to do here.”

He also emphasizes using public service loan forgiveness as a draw, particularly when recruiting college students.

“We can’t compete on salary, but when you look at our total compensation, including loan forgiveness, that helps us tighten the gap between a county and the private sector,” he said. “When you figure in the quality of life, the benefits and generous leave, it makes a county more competitive.”

Rose said that rural counties have a competitive advantage — most residents have a better sense that local government has a large and noticeable impact on the community, sticking in young people’s minds that counties are a chance to see their work in action.

He also sees opportunities for adults who show up to Mono County often in tow for



Harris County, Texas competes with a number of large public sector employers, on top of the private sector, for job applicants.

someone else’s career. A few miles away from the county seat of Bridgeport, the Marine Corps Mountain Warfare Training Center draws military families. Though they may not stay long term, he sees a mutually beneficial opportunity in seeking out spouses to apply for jobs, and to accommodate their unique work histories in the hiring process.

“They’re used to moving around and rarely being able to work somewhere long term,” Rose said. “Many of them have a lot of valuable skills and experiences, but it’s often tough to articulate that on a traditional resume.”

While other employers may

hesitate to hire short-term employees, Rose hopes to capitalize on opportunities to employ military spouses.

Coyle sees a growing number of what had been considered a nontraditional county government applicant entering the local government job market. That includes nonprofit professionals, education professionals, private sector managers and recently, displaced federal government employees.

“It’s these nontraditional candidates saying, ‘Hey, I never really took a look at my county government, but I’m a financial professional and they’re recruiting for a finance director,’ and they give it a shot,” he said.

### Building expectations

Coyle is seeing a cultural transformation in counties that may be a surprise to people’s conceptions of government work. While they’ll likely never occupy the free-wheeling atmosphere popularized by Silicon Valley startups, counties are moving away from a stodgy reputation. He also sees a growing focus on viewing county employees holistically.

“Counties are talking about things like professional development, leadership training, they’re talking about voluntary benefits and work-life balance

practices,” he said. “I think a lot of counties embraced it and they say ‘We need to compete for the top talent across the country,’ whether it’s those that are going to work for a major Fortune 500 company or they’re going to work for the feds or the state or a nonprofit, they need to compete with everybody and the only way to do that is to kind of play the game, and not in a bad way.”

Scott said that being transparent about the realities of some of Harris County’s jobs is crucial to retention.

“I think when we embark on these initiatives, there is some hesitancy to tell everything,” she said. “We varnish over some of the rough edges, but we want our employees to tell it all.”

That means leveling with prospective employees about the challenges that county employees face, particularly those who work in public safety, human services or disaster recovery.

“The reality is that we are all going to have a significant population of employees who encounter our constituents on some of the worst days of their lives,” she said. “Those days are difficult, so it’s important to know what the job is going to be like. That’s where genuine discussion about our work is helpful.” **CN**

### COUNTY NEWS PODCAST RETAINING COUNTY EMPLOYEES NOW MEANS INVESTING IN THEIR FUTURES



Fairfield County, Ohio Administrator Aundrea Cordle recently spoke to the County News Podcast about the emphasis her county puts on professional development and how that support for county personnel has attracted the attention of *Columbus CEO Magazine*, which named the county among its top workplaces for the fourth year in a row. Fairfield County leads the nation

among counties whose employees have graduated from the NACo High Performance Leadership Academy. Listen to the podcast at [www.naco.org/podcasts](http://www.naco.org/podcasts), by scanning the QR code or on your favorite podcast app.



### COUNTY WORKFORCE NUMBERS

A total of 3.6 million county employees nationwide includes:



**382,000**

LAW ENFORCEMENT  
OFFICERS



**325,000**

HOSPITAL WORKERS



**248,000**

HUMAN SERVICES  
WORKERS



**207,000**

PUBLIC HEALTH  
WORKERS



**101,000**

FIRE PROTECTION  
WORKERS



# ICE HIRING SURGE CHALLENGES COUNTY LAW ENFORCEMENT



SPOTLIGHT ON:  
**THE COUNTY  
WORKFORCE**

by **Meredith Moran**  
staff writer

County sheriffs' offices are facing challenges in recruiting and retaining staff, in part because U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) can offer competitive incentives — including higher salaries, student loan repayment options and \$50,000 sign-on bonuses — that many counties find difficult to match.

Starting in August, ICE began sending recruitment emails and letters to local deputies across the country, inviting them to join its workforce during a “critical time” for the nation.

A recruitment email reads: “Your experience in state or local law enforcement brings invaluable insight and skills to this mission — qualities we need now more than ever. ICE is actively recruiting officers like you who are committed to serving with integrity, professionalism and a deep sense of duty.

“This is more than a job; it’s a continuation of your service to our country and an opportunity to work alongside dedicated professionals on the frontlines of national security.”

The National Sheriffs’ Association was unaware that there was an active recruitment plan of local deputies before the letters started streaming in, as were county sheriffs across the country, which is a point of frustration, according to Jonathan Thompson, who is retiring from the National Sheriffs’ Association at the end of this year after serving as its CEO for a decade.

“Had we known about what the plans were, we could have advised them on how best to approach this,” Thompson said. “But instead, what we’re finding now is that much of it is becoming a surprise to the sheriffs, when somebody submits a resignation: ‘Hey, I’m going to work for ICE.’

“... Federal partners need to

recognize that you can’t rob Peter to pay Paul here. And that’s unfortunately what happened.”

Some county sheriffs’ offices are in talks with their state legislatures about the ability to offer some additional incentives of their own to retain staff, such as bonuses or waiving education costs, according to Thompson.

“When the federal government is recruiting against you, they have deeper pockets and a far healthier set of benefits in many cases,” Thompson said. “And that makes it rugged.”

Something local governments have in their favor is that joining ICE is an agreement to uproot your life, which some people aren’t interested in, Thompson noted.

“When you join ICE, or you join the federal government, you’re subject to where the work is needed,” Thompson said. “You’re going to be relocated, and you’re going to have certain obligations that you may not face in a county sheriff’s office or at a police department.”

Thompson is aware of a few dozen agencies, so far, that have had deputies leave to work for ICE, and more will be affected as time goes on, he said.

“Counties and sheriffs’ offices are really going to feel this, whether it’s a few dozen — which I suspect it’s a lot more than a few dozen — but, with 3,081 sheriffs across the country, if you lose one per agency, that’s quite a few.

“That’s a lot of investment that the counties and sheriffs have put into these people, and that’s troublesome.”

Sheriffs’ offices put tens of

thousands of dollars into the hiring and training process for each deputy, according to Canadian County, Okla. Sheriff Chris West, president of the National Sheriffs’ Association.

When a deputy leaves, the



**WEST**



**DONAHUE**

**'A \$50,000 signing bonus is probably a down payment on a house.'**

– Sheriff Kieran Donahue,  
Canyon County, Idaho

office not only has to fill the vacant position but also must absorb the associated costs again — including recruitment, background checks and police academy training.

“You run somebody through a probation period, you send them to the basic police officer academy, you get them back and you have a sizable investment in them,” West said. “And if they work for you for six months or a year, and somebody offers them a better paying job, now you have to go through that whole cycle again.”

One Canadian County deputy has left to work for ICE, according to West.

“Everybody wants the best,” West said. “And the more that you’re able to offer, the higher pay, the better the benefits, the better the retirement package and those things — at the end of the day, that speaks to people.”

Canyon County, Idaho is one of the fastest-growing counties in the country — between 2010 and 2022, its population increased by 32.6% — and many of its deputies, according to Sheriff Kieran Donahue, are struggling to make rent, let alone buy a house, so the perks of joining ICE are something that will be difficult for them to refuse.

“A \$50,000 signing bonus is probably a down payment on a house,” Donahue said. “So, that’s going to be extremely attractive to these men and women who are struggling to make ends meet on the wages that law enforcement is able to pay them.”

State and local law enforcement have faced an ongoing struggle with recruitment and retention, and ICE poaching their staff is exacerbating the issue, according to Donahue.

Idaho Public Safety is currently down 40 state troop-

ers, “with no hope of gaining ground in a competitive market salary analysis, with zero hope of retaining,” Donahue said. “And their fear is that at some point, there will be such a negative loss that they may cease to exist.

“That’s how devastating this is.”

Up until two years ago, the Canyon County Sheriff’s Office could not offer a competitive market salary, and roughly one-third of its jail staff positions were open, leading Donahue and his chief deputy to analyze how much it was costing the county for its deputies to regularly leave for higher salaries.

“We had to start mandatory overtime,” Donahue said. “It didn’t matter whether they wanted to work, they’re going to work — it was that dismal. And when you do that, now you’ve really hurt the morale, and fatigue and burnout becomes a big issue.”

Presenting the report to the county board resulted in a \$900,000 increase in funding for salaries in the Sheriff’s Office, which helped retain staff and offset its \$2 million deficit, according to Donahue. Other county sheriffs’ offices need to be proactive right now in analyzing their data and putting together a strategic plan, he noted.

“When those people walk out the door, we are losing millions of dollars,” Donahue said. “... If counties do not do a deep dive on a market salary analysis as to how much money is going out the door, because they’re not appropriating the correct market salary to these individuals, they’re foolish.

“If we don’t do that, then this approach by ICE, by [the Department of Homeland Security], is going to be even more catastrophic.”

Localities, on a wide scale, can’t compete with the incentives ICE is offering, and it

**See ICE page 12**



# BACK FOR MORE: INTERIM COUNTY ADMINISTRATORS BRIDGE THE GAP AND OFFER SEASONED EXPERIENCE

by **Charlie Ban**  
senior writer

So much for retirement.

Less than a week after her tenure as administrator for Frederick County, Va. ended, Brenda Garton got a call from a few counties south. Rappahannock County needed an interim administrator. Was she interested?

It was the first in a series of five contract stops for Garton, who had also served as administrator in Orange, Gloucester and Prince George counties in Virginia. She isn't alone in offering her expertise to a county in need.

"I just want to keep the ship moving down the channel," said Craig Meadows, who recently finished stints as Stafford County's interim administrator and Radford, Va.'s interim city manager. "It's not my job to take the helm and set direction for the county, but I do get to offer some stability and some calm when communities are undergoing a change."

More than 40% of counties nationwide employ an appointed administrator. At some point, one of those 1,240 administrators — 95 alone in Virginia — is going to leave their role, and the show must go on for various departments. When in need, their county Boards will probably call someone like Garton, Meadows or six-time interim administrator Sandy Wanner. Meadows and Wanner have worked through the Berkeley Group.

After his CPA career migrat-

ed into local government in his native North Carolina, Meadows moved up to Montgomery County, Va., where he served as administrator from 2009-2023.

"You don't take on any new



**MEADOWS**

'You can be pretty blunt with the elected officials about what needs to be done because you're not trying to win the job long-term.'

— Craig Meadows

initiatives, but there are some benefits to not staying on full-time," Meadows said. "You can be pretty blunt with the elected officials about what needs to be done because you're not trying to win the job long-term. You still have to be cognizant of the politics, but at the end of the day, you have no motive other than trying to be helpful and supportive."

Garton liked the focus that comes with short tenures.

"You don't have to worry about the county's long-term goals and you don't have to solve huge problems, because you don't have enough time to do that," she said. "You're going to be there for eight months, not eight years."

Wanner was a longtime James City County, Va. administrator, retiring in 2010. When Garton left Gloucester County, he took her place temporarily. From there, he also served Isle of Wight, King William, Surry and Mathews counties before concluding his career this summer in Charles City County, with a few towns and public authorities mixed in there.

He started each stint with three steps — meeting with staff, meeting individually with each county supervisor and figuring out how to keep operations moving smoothly.

Interim administrators often collaborate closely with the full-timers hired to succeed them, and some participate in the recruitment. Wanner started his interim career working heavily on recruitment, then dialed that effort back in favor of working with outside consultants.

"Counties are good at recruiting their personnel, but an outside perspective is helpful in identifying administrators," he said.

Crucially, when their appointments follow a resignation or firing, the interim administrator plays a large part in restoring order among the staff, starting with reassuranc-

es that nothing dramatic will happen under their watch.

"I would never take a job if the elected officials wanted me to clean house," Garton said. "I was up front with the governing bodies in that process. I'm not saying I wouldn't fire someone if I needed to, but I want to leave a functioning county for whoever comes next. If the next administrator wants to make dramatic changes, that's up to them."

Meadows sympathizes with the rank-and-file staff.



SPOTLIGHT ON:

## THE COUNTY WORKFORCE

"No matter why the other administrator left, it's a period of uncertainty for the staff, it's a period of uncertainty for the elected officials. They don't know who they're going to get in the end," he said. "At the end of the day, what matters is serving the community, and everyone involved has to be focused on doing that."

After Rappahannock, Garton served interim roles in the city of Lexington, Greene County, Orange County and back to Greene County.

"When Greene County was looking again, one of the Board members contacted me," she said. "They knew I had my first granddaughter, and I probably wasn't going to want the job, but I said, 'No, this was one of my favorite places to work. I'll

do it."

Though many county staff have requisite managerial experience, Garton cautions against temporarily elevating staff to fill that interim role. Particularly if it's in addition to their job.

"That's really tough, because it sets the expectation that you're giving them the job, even if you're still doing a search," she said. "One person trying to do two jobs, especially when one is a new job to them, puts them in a tough place. It can also discourage other candidates. In my opinion, I think you're better off getting someone from outside and then taking applications."

Garton commuted for one interim job but had to rent locally for the rest. Meadows had no choice — Stafford County is four hours from his home in Montgomery County.

"I was never in the military, but I think it feels something like a deployment," he said. "You're away from your family and friends, and you're totally focused on the job during the week while you're in town. It helps knowing that it's a temporary assignment."

A second grandchild has cemented Garton's retirement, but she felt the hard work paid off.

"I think there probably were some governing body members in places who maybe didn't think they were going to like me at the beginning, but by the time I got to the end, they did," she said. "I don't know when I felt more appreciated professionally." **CN**

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# CROSS-GENERATIONAL MENTORING BENEFITS GO BOTH WAYS

by Heidi Cooper Comenetz

It's hard to find good help, but it gets a little easier when employees are willing to bring new colleagues on board—and sometimes those new colleagues bring fresh ideas in return.

According to Mission-Square's 2025 State and Local Government Workforce Survey Results, counties and other levels of government have seen improvement in recruitment in the past year, with 60% of respondents reporting success in recruiting younger workers.

However, almost 50% report that they expect the largest wave of retirements is still to come and that succession planning still needs to improve to ensure smooth transitions. With an aging workforce and challenges such as constraints on offering salaries that compete with those in the private sector, counties are seeking to build effective teams, foster a strong work culture and adapt to new technologies while navigating the complexities of local government.

Dallas County, Texas, Clerk John Warren found a solution in cross-generational reverse mentorship. Pioneered by General Electric CEO Jack Welch in the 1990s to help older workers learn to use the Internet, this approach

expands on the traditional mentorship model — rather than replacing it — by encouraging two-way learning that can boost job satisfaction, productivity, and team relationships.



## SPOTLIGHT ON: THE COUNTY WORKFORCE

One proven benefit of cross-generational work is the older staff report renewed enthusiasm for their work.

Warren ran into intergenerational work challenges when implementing a new case management system. His veteran employees knew the history of why things were done a certain way and the regulations governing their work and were most comfortable with what he called “the manual way.” On the other hand, his younger employees were eager to embrace new

technologies. Still, they did not always understand the complexities governing their work or have years of experience in their roles.

“Everything we do in local government is about ‘you shall’ or ‘you may,’ but we still need to evolve,” he said. “Using the [new technology] platforms we have available to us is what creates efficiencies.”

Both more experienced and less-experienced team members needed to work together to ensure adherence to all relevant rules while maintaining resident services and modernizing to meet current data management requirements and improve efficiency.

To solve this, Warren matched his staff members across generations and encouraged them to ask “Why?” The newer staff gained perspective on the reasons for the current status, and the older staff received hands-on individual training that helped them learn to use the new system more easily.

One proven benefit of cross-generational work is that older staff report renewed enthusiasm for their work. For Warren, getting the new system up and running was so exciting for his younger staff that it had a domino effect on the team, reminding his older workers



WARREN

of how much it improved their work when they migrated to computers from typewriters. The cross-generational mentorship method worked so well that Warren used it to change how the county managed property records and deeds and it has become standard practice when implementing new systems in his department.

Warren, who sits on the Elections Commission, began hearing from his colleagues in election administration about similar intergenerational challenges. Focusing on the role of the election judge, who serves as the presiding officer at Texas polling locations, Warren instituted a program to pair experienced election judges with less-experienced alternates by recruiting from area high schools and colleges and targeting young people

seeking civic engagement opportunities.

As the pairs spent time on the job together, with the more experienced judges training the younger ones on election process and the younger ones helping manage the technological aspects, they also had plenty of time to talk about bigger topics like the importance of public service, career paths and the many ways counties serve the community. The project was so successful that several alternate judges went on to apply for and take on full-time election administration and other county positions.

Supporting county challenges pertaining to recruiting and retaining county staff is a major focus of NACo's County Workforce Network, where members share innovative strategies such as Warren's intergenerational reverse mentoring program.

The network is open at no cost to all county administrators, human resource professionals and benefits directors. NACo EDGE Managing Director of Retirement Services Carlos Greene is the staff liaison to the network. [CN](#)

*Comenetz is a senior workforce development program manager in NACo's County Practices and Innovations department.*

## Staffing sheriffs' offices 'not cataclysmic, but it's a challenge, no doubt about it'

From ICE page 10

will disproportionately affect smaller, more rural counties with smaller tax revenue bases, Donahue noted.

The average national rate for rural county sheriffs' departments is 1.1 employee per 1,000 population, according to estimates from the Office of Justice Programs. And in extremely remote counties with under 500 residents, a sheriff's office may only have one or two deputies.

Some rural counties are

eliminating parts of their onboarding process, such as the polygraph examination, to cut down on costs and speed up filling a position, according to Donahue.

“Rural counties, they're lowering their standards,” Donahue said. “They're moving away from required polygraph examination as part of the background to get into that agency, and once you do that, now who are you hiring?”

“If we're dropping those standards — and we can't, but people are — just to try to

fill those positions, that has its own catastrophic cascading effect.”

The National Sheriffs' Association has been in contact with the Trump administration and the Department of Homeland Security about opportunities to work together and ensure localities are adequately staffed, according to Thompson.

“But you can't just direct ‘X’ number of dollars to an agency merely because they lost an employee to the federal government,” Thompson

said. “There're some limitations on that, and there're some constitutional issues there too, so we've asked them to look at this very closely, and I know that they are, not just from a legal, but also a financial perspective.

“They've got an awful lot of Homeland Security dollars that are available for these agencies to support homeland security missions across the board.”

Ultimately, it's at the local level that this will be felt, so the National Sheriffs' Asso-

ciation is advising county sheriffs' offices to take stock of everything from wages and benefits to hiring and promotion enhancement procedures and identify any opportunities to incentivize its deputies to stay, Thompson said.

“We're going to have to put thinking caps on and be creative about how we try and either work around or work through this situation,” Thompson said. “It's not cataclysmic, but it's a challenge. There's no doubt about it.” [CN](#)





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WORD SEARCH

WINDSOR COUNTY, VT.  
Created by Mary Ann Barton

G I V M F S X W L R R O F V Q H S N R L  
V Z O B Y D S S E L P A B L S A P O B L  
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- BRIDGE:** The county is home to the Cornish-Windsor Bridge, at 449 feet, one of the longest covered bridges in the world. It connects to New Hampshire.
- CHEESE:** Vermont is known for its cheese with more cheesemakers per capita than any other state; look for Grafton Village Cheese’s aged cheddar if you visit the county.
- COLLEGE:** The main campus for Vermont Technical College is located in the county.
- COOLIDGE:** The county was the birthplace of Calvin Coolidge, the 30th president of the United States, known for his frugality and quiet nature.
- COURTHOUSE:** The county courthouse was constructed in 1855, the fourth one built for the county after the others were destroyed by fire. The Italianate style was designed by Thomas W. Silloway, the same architect who had designed the third courthouse.
- ENGLAND:** The county was named for the town of Windsor, England.
- NEWSPAPER:** *The Vermont Standard* weekly newspaper has been in production since 1853.
- PARK:** The county includes part of the state’s only national park, the Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historical Park.
- PEARCE:** The Simon Pearce glass factory and restaurant are located in the county’s town of Quechee.
- RESTAURANT:** The oldest restaurant in the county is Skunk Hollow Tavern in Hartland Four Corners, which has been in operation for more than 200 years.
- SHEEP:** Merino sheep, which revolutionized the wool industry, were introduced in the county in 1811.
- STONE:** The Stone Village of Chester in the county of “snecked ashlar” buildings in the state, a unique construction method using long “snecks” or stones to tie walls together. The method was brought to the area by Scottish and Irish masons.
- STORE:** The Vermont Country Store has two locations in the county; in Rockingham and Weston. The Weston store is the original location, which opened in 1946.
- WINDSOR:** The county is the largest county in Vermont at 977 square miles, famous as the birthplace of the Vermont Constitution, in 1777.
- WOODSTOCK:** The county seat is hailed as one of the most picturesque in the state.

Book: NACo embraced Zero-to-Three early childhood efforts

From HISTORY page 5

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. **CN**

GET TO KNOW...

Cortland County, N.Y.

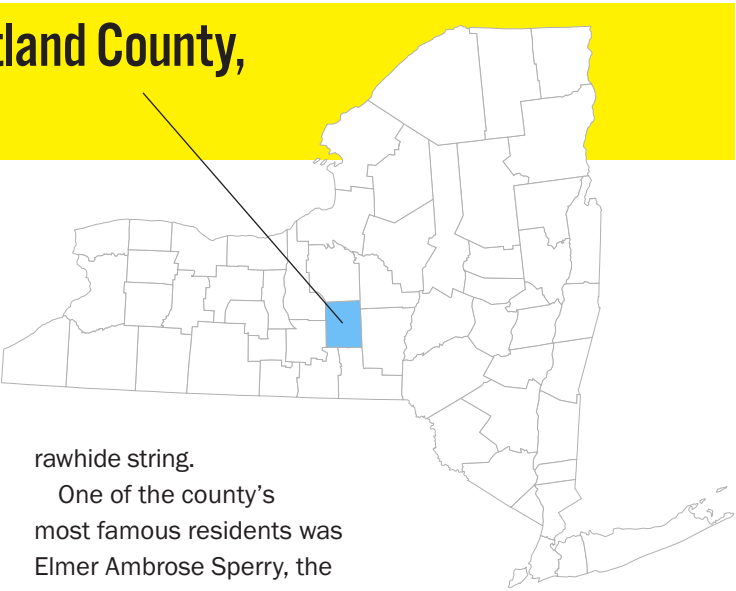
by Meredith Moran  
staff writer

Cortland County, N.Y., established in 1808, is named for Pierre Van Cortlandt, the first lieutenant governor of New York. Its county seat, the city of Cortland, is known as “Crown City” because it’s located at the highest point on the Tioughnioga River. Fishing and kayaking are popular pastimes for locals and visitors in the area, in addition to skiing at Greek Peak, Labrador Mountain and Song Mountain.

Cortland is in the Appalachian Plateau area of Central New York, situated midway between Syracuse and Binghamton. **Annual events in the county include the Cortland Celtic Festival, Central New York Maple Festival, the Frog Pull Festival and the Brockway Truck Show.**

Brockway Trucks were made in Cortland from 1912 to 1977, and all of the manufacturer’s cars have a husky dog hood ornament, which led to the city garnering the nickname “Huskie Town, USA.”

At the annual Frog Pull Festival in Preble, frogs are plucked from Tully Lake and Little York Lake and race each other, while pulling small blue plastic carts around their necks with a



rawhide string.

One of the county’s most famous residents was Elmer Ambrose Sperry, the inventor of the gyroscopic compass, was born in Cortland. The non-magnetic compass uses a fast-spinning disc and the rotation of the Earth to find geographical direction.

Other notable Cortland County natives include Amelia Jenks Bloomer, a women’s rights advocate who founded “The Lily,” one of the first newspapers by and for women, and Andrew Dickson White, the first president of Cornell University and a U.S. ambassador to Germany.

Truxton, a town in the county, is known for its local legend of the “Truxton Beast,” a creature with shaggy hair and long claws whose sightings date to 1940. To highlight some of its spooky lore, Cortland County created a “Cortland Curiosities: A Strange and Forgotten History Trail” tourism initiative that shares the history behind its hauntings, scandals and murders. Some of the history trails include “The Harum Hoax,” “Whodunit’ in Homer” and “The Sig Sautelle Circus

Spectacle.”

The village of Homer, which is named for the Greek poet of the same name, builds an ice-skating rink each winter in the Village Green, its central community space, and is also home to an eight-sided circus building, which was constructed by circus showman George Satterlee as a training facility. Today, the building houses an antique shop, but acrobats used to train on the third floor and the basement was used as an animal training ground.

McGraw, another village in the county, was home to the first college in the country to accept students of any race or gender. New York Central College was founded in 1849 by abolitionist Baptists, but shuttered in 1860, before the Civil War. Asaph Hall, the astronomer who discovered the two moons of Mars, graduated from the college.

Get to Know features new NACo member counties.



The Central New York Maple Festival started in 2013 to showcase maple products and artisans.



## SPONSORED CONTENT

## STRENGTHENING COUNTY WORKFORCES

# NACo PPI Delivers Student Debt Relief, Pharmacy Benefit Management Solutions

Recruiting and retaining a high-performing county workforce has never been more challenging. Between competition from the private sector, rising healthcare and prescription costs, and mounting student-loan burdens, many counties are seeking creative benefit strategies that support employees and the communities they serve.

Public Promise Insurance (PPI), wholly owned by NACo, gives counties access to key solutions that strengthen the public-service workforce such as a student-debt relief through Savi, and a pharmacy benefits management (PBM) coalition designed for self-insured county health plans.

## Student Debt Relief: A recruitment and retention game-changer

Through PPI's partnership with Savi, county employees gain access to a concierge loan-relief service that evaluates eligibility for more than 150 forgiveness and repayment programs. Employees often see



notable monthly savings and long-term forgiveness potential, helping reduce financial stress and improving workforce retention. Counties offer Savi as a benefit by choosing to cover the cost of the service for county employees and/or citizens through a customized county micro-site. Oakland County, Mich., chose to offer Savi to all county residents starting in January 2024. In one year, Savi identified \$20.1 million in debt relief for county participants.

## NACo PBM Coalition: Addressing escalating prescription-drug costs

Prescription-drug spending continues to be a major cost driver for county health plans. PPI's PBM coalition, designed specifically for counties and self-insured public-sector plans, offers pooled pricing, multi-year guarantees and significant

cost savings, averaging 15-25%. PPI evaluated the pricing of the Mecklenburg County, N.C. pharmacy program by utilizing actual claims and comparing 2025 pricing to the NACo PBM Rx Coalition pricing for the same time period. Through the PPI program, the projected savings was 28.1%, or \$7.5M. Through the terms of contract, these savings are guaranteed, and Mecklenburg has been taking advantage of this new contract since January 2025.

## Introducing Christopher Blanchette, National Program Director

PPI welcomes Christopher Blanchette as its new National Program Director. With extensive experience in employee benefits and insurance, Blanchette brings strategic vision and hands-on leadership to support counties in delivering high-value benefit solutions. Chris would love to talk about how PPI can serve your county's needs: [cblanchette@naco.org](mailto:cblanchette@naco.org)

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**March 21, 2026**

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**June 20, 2026**

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## Reducing stigma is crucial, especially in rural communities, to access treatment

### From OPIOIDS page 3

can invest in recovery work, at any scale, she said.

"If you want to know what those community-based services can do for your communities, I'm a product of that," Reid said. Local recovery organizations "work across systems to provide supports for medical needs, employment needs, safe housing, things like that. And they also support establishing a sense of purpose and belonging in the community."

Stigma reduction is crucial — especially in rural communities — both in helping local

residents understand addiction and removing barriers to accessing treatment, Reid said. Many counties have already integrated peer recovery support into their emergency rooms, but peer recovery support has also shown to be beneficial in the child welfare and legal systems, she noted.

For counties receiving opioid settlement allotments under \$5,000, the most effective way to invest in recovery work is to fund peer and professional development and create listening sessions and community assessments, Reid said. She noted that partner-

ing with social work students from nearby state or community colleges offers a strategic, low-cost way to conduct a community assessment.


"Those students need that real experience," Reid said. "Especially with rural communities, if they're already there, that's a way to kind of root them in their communities and allow them to be part of the broader community solution, while continuing to grow as a professional. So, definitely, with those small amounts [of funding], really looking at that community investment, community buy-in and, 'What

can I do now that we can use to support us long term?'"

If a county has more funding to work with, investing in a data collection method and putting a planning grant in place to create a recovery community organization (if the county doesn't have one), are other beneficial ways to leverage the dollars, according to Reid.

For counties receiving small settlement allocations, it's important to collaborate with community organizations, leveraging their expertise and investing in scaling up work that has already shown to be successful, according to Winiker.

"You don't need to reinvent the wheel," Winiker said. "There are experts in every state who are doing prevention and harm reduction and recovery work. It's a really classic academia problem where everyone wants to start at the beginning and solve the problem themselves, but people are out there doing this work already, and there're experts that know what each of these sectors needs."

"So, work together and build upon efforts that are already in place — that cuts a ton of infrastructure cost and saves when you're looking at these small dollar investments." 



ON THE MOVE

NACo OFFICERS

● Immediate Past President **James Gore** and Legislative Director **Zeke Lee** attended the California State Association of Counties Annual Conference in Santa Clara County.

NACo STAFF

● **Jeff Thorsby** has joined NACo as legislative director for Finance, Pensions and Intergovernmental Affairs. He served as chief of staff and clerk of the board for the Nevada County, Calif. Board of Supervisors. He earned a master's degree in public policy from San Francisco State University.

● Managing Director of Finance **Janet Fernandes** received the cashVest 90+ Award, recognizing her excellence managing and optimizing NACo's liquid assets.

● Chief Government Affairs Officer **Mark Ritacco** and Legislative Assistant **Rachel Yeung** attended the County Commissioners Association of Pennsylvania Fall Conference in Dauphin County.

● Membership Engagement Director **Tammy Tincher** attended the Colorado Counties Inc. Winter Conference in Jefferson County.

● **Tincher** and Senior Operations Manager **Miranda Morvay** attended the County Commissioners Association of Ohio Winter Conference in Franklin County.

● Associate Legislative Director **Charlotte Duyshart** and Program Manager **Patrick Spence** attended the Association of Oregon Counties Annual Conference in Lane County.

● National Center for Public Lands Counties Director **Gregory Nelson** attended the Washington State Association of Counties County Leaders Conference in Spokane County.

● Associate Legislative Director **Jared Grigas** attended the Florida Association of Counties Legislative Conference in Hillsborough County.

● Membership Manager **Priscila Chrappah** attended the Missouri Association of Counties Annual Conference in Camden County.



Jeff Thorsby



SANTA CRUZ COUNTY, CALIF.



The seal depicts the redwoods and a grizzly bear, the official state tree and state animal respectively. The grizzly bear has since disappeared from the area but once thrived until the late 1800s in the great valleys and low mountains of California.

The motto at the base of the crest is "Sine Praejudicio" which translated from Latin means "without prejudice," and 1850 is also featured, to commemorate the date of the county's founding.

PROFILES IN SERVICE

JOETTE WOODS

NACo Board Member  
Liberty County, Mont.  
Commissioner



WOODS

Number of years active in NACo: Five  
Years in public service: 23  
My first NACo event was: 2019 Annual Conference  
The hardest thing I've ever done: Raise children

Three people (living or dead) I'd invite to dinner: My grandfather, President Trump and John Ostlund, the late Yellowstone County, Mont. commissioner  
A dream I have is to: Do great things without being known.



The most adventurous thing I've ever done is: Become a county commissioner.  
My favorite way to relax is: Watching crime shows.  
I'm most proud of: Family.  
Every morning I read: My daily devotional.  
My favorite meal is: I've never been mad at a taco.  
My pet peeve is: Fake people.  
My motto is: Make Good Choices  
My favorite movie is: "The Proposal"  
My favorite music is: Any '80s metal  
My favorite U.S. president is: Abe Lincoln  
My county is a NACo member because: We want the opportunity to better equip ourselves as leaders by obtaining the best information and resources available to meet the needs of our communities.

You'd be surprised to learn that: I love swathing hay.

County music program aims to reduce recidivism

From STUDIO page 7

phen said.  
"So, I had to really see for myself, 'What causes this trauma? What makes me behave the way I do? What makes me want to think negative in the first place?'"  
"... They're giving me information I can teach my kids, other guys around me in my community. It really made me think totally different about myself."  
One of the participants shared with Stewart that the jail's classes have made him feel that he has a purpose for the first time in life.  
He was incarcerated multiple times, and told her that the programming sparked something, inspiring him to reset his life and start over.  
"To me, that made it all worth it," she said.  
The studio creates a space where people can talk about

things they've possibly never shared before, feel supported and channel that into their music, Lambert said.  
"One of the things that we actually get to see in here, that family members and loved ones may not have seen in years is the person underneath the addictions, the unmedicated or undiagnosed mental health challenges, the person that doesn't depend on substances to get through the day," Lambert said.  
George is 22 and has spent much of his life in and out of juvenile detention centers and adult facilities.  
Making music and having that as a creative outlet has helped re-establish a familial bond that he felt he had lost, he said.  
"People get tired of me, my family gets tired of it," George said.  
"But now, when I'm actually doing something that

they know I love — my whole family knows I do music — so, when I'm in here, and I say, 'I just recorded a song today,' they're like 'For real? Tell me more.' So, it brings me closer to my family."  
George's music is often influenced by his dreams, and he also finds inspiration in the everyday — through phone calls or watching a movie.  
He's looking forward to launching his music career on social media upon release and "rebranding" his life, he said.  
After the eight-week program, the three inmates each expressed a desire to forge a new path for themselves upon release.  
James said he's leaving with a new outlook on life and his music.  
"I used to make music way differently," he said. "I've found my voice and I know myself now."



## BRIGHT IDEAS | RIVERSIDE COUNTY, CALIF.

# California County Supports Veterans' Mental Health with Outdoor Programming

**PROBLEM:** Veterans needed mental health support, a place to gather with peers.

**SOLUTION:** Provide free access to the county's parks and build communal outdoor recreation programming designed with veterans in mind.

by Meredith Moran  
staff writer

Riverside County, Calif.'s Regional Parks and Open-Space District (RivCo Parks) is helping support veterans' mental health by increasing their access to, and programming around, fishing and outdoor recreation.

Veterans receive free access to the county's parks and facilities through RivCoSalutes and W.A.I.V.E. (Waive Admissions Involving Entry) passes, and the parks system hosts community events, including two annual fishing derbies and volunteer programs for veterans. Since RivCo Parks launched the mental health initiative in 2021, it's issued more than 563 access passes and served around 3,500 veterans.

The program was borne after surveys distributed to local veterans showed that they wanted a relaxed space to hang out with their peers who could relate to their experiences in the military, according to Robert Williams, the county's assistant parks director. The initiative is part of a broader parks system effort to support outdoor equity.

More than 3,000 people — primarily veterans and their family members — attended the most recent fishing derby, which took place in honor of Veterans Day and awarded more than \$3,000 in prizes. Rudy Cruz-Gutierrez II, a veteran and RivCo Parks commissioner, has attended all of the park fishing derbies and said that it's a great space for veterans to come togeth-



Fishing derby participants pause for a photo at Lake Cahuilla Veterans Regional Park. Veteran families from all over California attended the Nov. 8 event. Photo courtesy of Robert Williams

er with each other and their families.

RivCo Parks has also made accommodations to better serve veterans with disabilities, including creating ADA-compliant shade shelters, so that people with wheelchairs can still fish even in hot Coachella Valley summers, according to Williams. The fishing builds camaraderie and provides an escape for veterans away from their mental or physical health struggles that stem from their service, including PTSD, Cruz-Gutierrez said.

"There's a lot of freedom when it comes to open space for a lot of us vets," Cruz-Gutierrez said. "A lot of us are confined most of the time, whether it be in the house or doing doctor's appointments or what have you. It just brings a peace of mind."

Mental health struggles contribute to disproportionately higher rates of suicide, homelessness and substance use disorder among veterans.



A veteran fishes at a Riverside County park. Photo courtesy of Robert Williams

According to the Riverside County Suicide Brief, veterans are nearly three to four times more likely to die by suicide than non-veterans. RivCo Parks has a new initiative in the works that will regularly bring in behavioral health and mental health specialists for veterans to speak with for support, if they're interested, according to Williams.

"We're essentially allowing veterans opportunities to ask questions, if needed, and

really just giving them a safe space to do all of that," Williams said.

RivCo Parks' work to increase outdoor recreation access has provided veterans with space to clear their minds and be around people who have gone through similar experiences, which is invaluable, according to Cruz-Gutierrez.

"There are no triggers out there," Cruz-Gutierrez said. "It's helped me with sobriety,

'There's a lot of freedom when it comes to open space for a lot of us vets.'

— Robert Williams,  
Riverside County, Calif.

as far as being able to find a safe space where I'm not feeling judged, I'm not feeling like I have to look over my shoulder all the time.

"I do a lot of meditation out there. It's given me a better feel for who I am and another chance to be a better father and a better husband to my family, to be able to have these spaces."

Riverside County's "RivCo Parks: Veterans' Mental Health" initiative was the 2025 NACo Achievement Award "Best in Category" winner in Parks and Recreation.



# NEWS FROM ACROSS THE NATION

## ARIZONA

**MARICOPA COUNTY** has received \$1.5 million in **Industry-Driven Skills Training Fund grants** from the U.S. Department of Labor, distributed through the Arizona Department of Economic Security, to train and upskill workers in advanced manufacturing. Chairman Thomas Galvin highlighted the grant's role in strengthening the county's workforce and expanding partnerships with major employers like Boeing, which supports more than 4,800 employees and 570 suppliers statewide. The funding aims to build a pipeline of highly skilled manufacturing talent and boost the regional economy.

The partnership will train up to 469 current employees and new hires, developing them into future leaders. Grant funds will reimburse up to 80% of each participant's training — about \$3,200 per person — through performance-based payments after training completion and six months of job retention. This initiative is part of the U.S. Department of Labor's broader \$86 million investment in Industry-Driven Skills Training across 14 states, designed to accelerate innovation, strengthen domestic production, and meet critical workforce needs through outcome-based employer reimbursements.



## COLORADO

• **WELD COUNTY's** mobile health unit, a two-room van staffed by nurses and community health workers, travels to rural areas and vulnerable communities to offer **free vaccines, STI testing and prediabetes screenings**, CPR News of Colorado Public Radio, reported. Since launching six months ago, the team has focused on building visibility and learning which neighborhoods and events — ranging from low-income housing complexes to food banks — most effectively connect them with residents. While some stops yield high turnout, others draw hesitant crowds due to concerns about cost, insurance or mistrust in health care and government.

Language barriers add another challenge. Although the team is bilingual in English and Spanish, communication can still require phone-based translation tools, especially for walk-ins who speak other languages. Workers say many residents approach cautiously until they hear staff speak their language. The county's diverse population — 31% Hispanic and 8% foreign-born — means translation needs vary widely, yet there are currently no plans to expand language services. Public health leaders say they are still evaluating improvements as the mobile unit completes its first year.

## CALIFORNIA

The **LOS ANGELES COUNTY** Office of the County Counsel has **opened an investigation into State Farm**, California's largest private insurer, focusing on how it handled insurance payouts following the Eaton and Palisades fires, KABC-TV reported. The move follows a surge of complaints from wildfire victims who report delays, underpayments and denials of legitimate claims.

Supervisor Kathryn Barger emphasized that Altadena residents, already facing se-

vere loss, should not have to struggle with their insurer to recover. She stated that timely, fair payments are a right and urged State Farm to act quickly so survivors can rebuild. The investigation will also examine whether the company violated California's Unfair Competition Law.

## COLORADO

• **Homelessness in JEFFERSON COUNTY** has risen 27% over the past year, with half of those affected experiencing homelessness for the first time — the largest increase in

the metro area, KMGH-TV reported. County leaders say the surge comes as cold-weather shelter options have declined, with several previously available shelters no longer operating this season, making protection during winter months a major concern.

To address these gaps, Jefferson County and six cities formed a one-year intergovernmental agreement to coordinate cold-weather sheltering. They pooled more than \$2 million to fund motel vouchers distributed 72 hours before severe weather and to deploy

extreme-weather mobile shelters when temperatures drop into the single digits or below.

## INDIANA

The **WARRICK COUNTY** Health Department and other community partners recently held its first **community baby shower**, WEHT-TV reported.

The event was free for parents and caregivers in the area and provided education resources

and supplies. There was a large turnout, and many walked away with car seats, pack-and-plays and other materials for newborns. One of the main purposes of the event was to educate parents on safe sleep for infants, which health officials say is a rising issue in the county.

"The Warrick County Health Department is a resource to anyone who's having a baby, from immunizations to weight checks, blood pressure checks for mom," Coroner Alissa Enright said. "So there is a part of that. And then secondly is to promote safe sleep for babies. That's why the coroner's office is here."

Officials say they want to make the baby shower an annual event and are planning a dads-only event around the Super Bowl.



## MARYLAND

• The **HARFORD COUNTY** Health Department recently hosted a **free potassium iodide (KI) distribution event** for residents who live or work within 10 miles of the Peach Bottom Atomic Power Station, WBFF-TV reported. Attendees completed distribution forms to receive adult or child doses. Officials say the initiative supplements county emergency plans in case of a radiation release, noting that KI tablets contain stable iodine that blocks radioactive iodine from entering the thyroid for 24 hours.

Health officials emphasize that iodized table salt cannot replace KI, as it does not contain enough iodine to protect



## FLORIDA

The **OSCEOLA COUNTY** Sheriff's Office is launching a new visibility enforcement program aimed at **improving pedestrian and bicycle safety**, particularly at high-risk intersections, WFTV-TV reported. Residents report frequent crashes and chaotic traffic conditions, with one worker noting she has witnessed five crashes near her workplace in just four months. Florida saw a 19% increase in pedestrian-involved crashes in 2024, and the county ranks among the top 25 counties for crashes involving pedestrians and cyclists, prompting participation in the state's high visibility enforcement program.

Under the program, deputies monitor pedestrians and drivers, checking for jaywalking, failing to yield, riding against traffic, improper lighting or clothing, speeding, improper use of turn signals and failure to stop for pedestrians. Warnings and citations are issued as needed.



## From NEWS FROM page 18

the thyroid. Residents with expired KI tablets were encouraged to discard them in the trash — not down sinks or toilets —and attend the event to receive fresh doses.

- **MONTGOMERY COUNTY** is inviting representatives from all houses of worship to participate in the 2025 Faith Community Survey, an initiative aimed at strengthening communication, **enhancing emergency preparedness** and improving access to grants and resources. The survey is open to clergy, staff or active members with a strong understanding of their congregation, ensuring the County has accurate, up-to-date information about its diverse faith communities. County Executive Marc Elrich emphasized that the survey is essential for coordinating emergency response, sharing grant opportunities and planning community events.

The county is one of the most religiously diverse in the country, with residents practicing Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Orthodox Christianity and many other faiths, and more than 162 languages spoken in local schools.



## NEVADA

**CLARK COUNTY** Family Services has launched its annual **GIVE JOY Toy and Gift Card Drive**, which aims to bring holiday cheer to about 3,200 children and teens in foster care. Now in its 15th year, the program relies on community support to ensure every child receives a gift or gift card, with new unwrapped toys requested for ages 0–12 and \$25–\$50 gift cards for teens.

Deputy Director Lisa Martinez emphasized that the holidays can be uncertain for children in foster care and highlighted the program's need for toys for babies, toddlers and kids ages 10–12. With many families across Southern Nevada facing economic challenges, community involvement is especially vital this year. GIVE JOY offers residents a meaningful way to support vulnerable children and help bring stability and hope during the holiday season.



tum Fund. The all-electric buildings meet high energy-efficiency and green design standards and feature a 700-kilowatt rooftop solar system supported by a Climate Smart Communities Grant from the Department of Environmental Conservation.

## NEW JERSEY

The **OCEAN COUNTY** Health Department recently celebrated the opening of its new **Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) Program** office, joined by a large group of state, county, and municipal officials. Brian Lippai, chief of administrative services, noted that the county's WIC program is the largest in New Jersey and has experienced significant growth over the past eight years. He emphasized that the county's caseload alone exceeds the total caseloads of 12 state programs combined.

What sets the new office apart is its innovative “family

room” model. Unlike traditional clinics where participants move from station to station, families now remain in one room while staff members rotate through. Intake, breastfeeding, and nutrition staff visit the family in sequence, reducing travel within the clinic and shortening appointment times—an improvement that has already generated positive feedback.

## NORTH CAROLINA

- **NEW HANOVER COUNTY** has launched a program to offer resources that connect the community to **mental health and substance use disorder** services. More than 65 local providers and community partners are listed on the website dubbed “Help Right Here,” which was created to assist users in finding the resources they need for access to services, treatment, sustainable recovery and long-term well-being. County officials say the program is intended to remove common physical and systemic barriers to accessing care.

“Each provider and community partner listing includes a detailed overview of the services provided, financial accessibility, and languages spoken, alongside clear guidance on how to receive services,” the county noted in a statement.

- **ONSLOW COUNTY** Tourism was recently presented the Platinum Award for **Best Social Media Marketing** at the North Carolina Travel Industry Association's Tourism Leadership Conference and

## NEW YORK

A former 20-acre **ULSTER COUNTY** jail site has been transformed into a **164-unit affordable, cross-generational housing community**, *Mid-Hudson News* reported. Nearly half of the units are reserved for seniors 62 and older, with 48 apartments designated for households needing supportive services. On-site programs provide case management, crisis intervention and financial counseling. County Executive Jen Metzger called the project a model of affordable, climate-responsible development that creates a vibrant community with services and amenities for residents of all ages.

The \$87 million development was funded through a combination of state and federal sources, including a \$10 million award from Gov. Kathy Hochul's Mid-Hudson Momentum Fund.

Award Banquet.

Onslow County secured the award for the OnlyinOnslow campaign with N.C. Tripping. OnlyinOnslow is a collaborative social media project designed to significantly increase social media engagement and followers, particularly on Instagram.

“This Platinum Award is a huge recognition of the power of strategic collaboration and creative content,” said Onslow County Tourism Manager Salem Clarke.

## VIRGINIA

**At just 19, Cameran Drew entered the Nov. 4 election in SURRY COUNTY**, determined to serve his community and advocate for its young people. He credits his confidence to his former civics teacher, Kenneth Bell, who long believed Drew had the potential to become a strong political leader, CBS News reported.

Their relationship made the race unusual: To win, Drew had to challenge Bell, the interim incumbent and a respected lifelong resident. Despite this, both insisted the situation was never uncomfortable, remaining respectful throughout. Bell even defended Drew publicly, particularly against

**Cameran Drew**



concerns about his age.

In the end, Drew narrowly won by eight votes, 345 to 337, according to unofficial results. Bell conceded graciously and offered his former student support and encouragement after the close, hard-fought race.



## WASHINGTON

Key Peninsula residents in **PIERCE COUNTY** will soon be able to ride a temporary **free shuttle** to Gig Harbor and back for the next eight months through the Peninsula Transit Pilot Program, starting last month, *The News Tribune* reported. A fixed route will run weekdays and weekends.

County Transportation Supervisor Daeveene May highlighted the program's benefits, noting it will help high school students get to work or sporting events, and provide seniors who no longer drive with access to medical appointments and connections to Pierce Transit and Sound Transit for trips to Seattle, Tacoma, and other locations.

*Send your news tips, press releases and photos to Editor Mary Ann Barton.*



20  
26

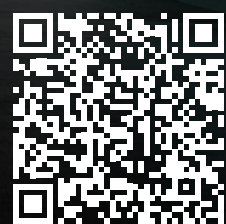


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