2026 NACo

Federal Policy Priorities

America's 3,069 county governments provide essential building blocks for healthy, safe and vibrant communities.

Counties represent a foundational layer of American government. With 3,069 counties across the nation, nearly 40,000 elected officials and a workforce of more than 3.6 million, counties are on the frontlines delivering essential public services – from infrastructure and public safety to health, housing, elections and disaster response. Because counties implement numerous federal programs and enforce various regulations, NACo urges meaningful intergovernmental consultation throughout the federal policymaking process.

NACo stands ready as a nonpartisan, practical, data-driven partner for Congress, the Administration and federal agencies. We are committed to collaborating — offering technical assistance, sharing best practices and working to ensure that federal policy is grounded in local reality, responsive to community needs and effective for America's counties.

NACo policy positions are debated and voted on by 10 policy steering committees comprising more than 1,400 county officials, along with the NACo Board of Directors and full membership.

Counties own and operate **44 percent** of America's roads and **38 percent** of bridges

40 percent of public transit agencies are supported by counties

Counties invest **more than $146 billion** in infrastructure and maintaining and operating public works

Sixty-two percent of counties have federal public land

Counties support and operate more than **900 hospitals,** over **700 long-term care facilities, 750 behavioral health centers** and more than ***1,900*** public health departments

County governments operate **91 percent** of our nation's local jails

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Strengthen the Intergovernmental Partnership

Effective governance in the United States rests on collaboration among federal, state, local and tribal governments. County governments, led by our elected and appointed officials, are instrumental partners in our nation's intergovernmental system, which balances, divides and shares power and responsibilities between all levels of government.

While counties are uniquely positioned to implement and administer vital intergovernmental systems, county input is often missing or delayed in the federal policymaking process. This leads to policies that create unfunded mandates, regulatory burdens, or unintended consequences for local communities.

Counties call for formalized, consistent inclusion of local governments in the design, rulemaking and implementation phases of federal policies and initiatives. This means ensuring county officials are consulted before finalizing legislation or regulations that affect public infrastructure, social services, environmental policy, or public safety.

By elevating county perspectives early — the frontline implementers — the federal government can foster more effective and efficient policy outcomes to achieve our shared priorities. Strengthening intergovernmental partnership improves coordination, avoids duplication, reduces costs and ultimately delivers better results for our shared communities.

Counties invest **more than $146 billion annually** in building, maintaining and operating physical infrastructure and public works, including **transportation, water systems, ports, dams, hospitals, schools, libraries and courthouses.**

Multi-Year Surface Transportation Reauthorization with Direct County Investments

Counties own and maintain a significant portion of our nation's transportation infrastructure—including 44 percent of public road miles and 38 percent of bridges—and are integral to local transit, rural connectivity, aviation and the movement of freight. As the Infrastructure Investments and Jobs Act (IIJA) approaches its expiration, Congress is working to pass a reauthorization bill that will determine new funding levels, make policy changes and set the new course for federal transportation policy.

Counties urge Congress to pass a bipartisan, multi-year reauthorization bill that recognizes the crucial role that counties play in our transportation system by significantly increasing local access to formula funds, maintaining and improving discretionary grant opportunities, strengthening planning and project delivery—especially for rural counties—and streamlining permitting requirements to move projects faster and cheaper. Including these priorities in the next bill will not just support counties, but improve safety, mobility and economic development nationwide.

Counties are directly involved in
34 percent
of airports

Counties own
38 percent
of the National Bridge Inventory

Counties are directly involved in
40 percent
of all public transportation systems

Counties own and operate
44 percent
of all public roads

Bipartisan Farm Bill: Supporting Rural Development, Forest and Agricultural Lands, and Food and Energy Security

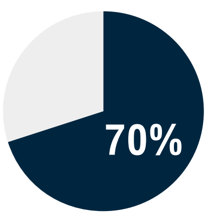
Nearly 70 percent of the nation's 3,069 counties are rural, home to 38.2 million Americans and covering over two-thirds of the country's land mass. For many of these communities, the Farm Bill remains a cornerstone of local economic development, land stewardship, infrastructure investment and nutrition access.

Counties are responsible for administering the **Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)** in ten states representing **35.7 percent** of total participants (15 million people)

Farm Bill programs support 1.9 million farms across the U.S., helping to sustain agricultural production, preserve family farms and protect working lands. These investments also drive job creation and support county-led efforts to expand infrastructure, steward natural resources and boost rural economies.

The Farm Bill's nutrition title authorizes key programs that help county residents access healthy, affordable food. Counties administer the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) in 10 states, representing more than one-third of total participants. In nine of the ten county-administered states, counties are responsible for either partially or entirely covering the non-federal share of administrative costs, which was increased under H.R. 1. As counties work to improve payment error rates, we urge our federal partners to delay the implementation of benefit and administrative cost shifts enacted under H.R. 1 to provide counties with sufficient time to streamline and improve SNAP administration.

With programs in the 2018 Farm Bill set to begin expiring on Sept. 30, 2026, counties are encouraged to connect with lawmakers now to ensure passage of a five-year, bipartisan Farm Bill that expands conservation and agriculture programs, invests in rural development, supports access to healthy and affordable foods and protects working lands for future generations.



Nearly **70 percent of the nation's 3,069 counties** are rural, home to 38.5 million Americans and covering over two-thirds of the nation's land mass

Disaster Mitigation, Response and Recovery: Modernizing Federal Disaster Policy

Disasters — from wildfires and floods to hurricanes and extreme weather — are increasing in frequency and severity. Counties are typically the first to respond, coordinate evacuations, provide emergency services, manage shelters, clean-up, rebuild and support long-term recovery. Yet current federal disaster systems often are slow, unpredictable and administratively burdensome — leaving counties to absorb costs and delays when local budgets and services are already stretched.

NACo urges Congress to enact legislation that would streamline disaster recovery, increase transparency and efficiency and make federal assistance more accessible to the communities we serve. Specifically, counties support a universal disaster application, transitioning from a reimbursement-based model to a grant-based model for FEMA Public Assistance, a Public Assistance dashboard to increase transparency and modernizing FEMA's mitigation programs.

Additionally, counties call on Congress to pass long-term reauthorization and reform legislation for the National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP) to improve affordability, mitigation assistance, flood risk mapping and program administration. The NFIP reduces the impact of flooding on public and private structures by providing affordable insurance and encouraging communities to adopt and enforce floodplain management regulations.

Furthermore, counties support increased funding for the Emergency Management Grant Program and other mitigation grants to strengthen local hazard mitigation and preparedness efforts.

More than **483,000 county workers** provide essential first responder services through sheriffs, police departments, constables, 911 operations, firefighters and EMT/ EMS professionals.

In 2025, **680 counties** experienced at least one federally declared disaster

588 counties had at least one major disaster declaration

345 counties had at least one emergency declaration

Source: NACo Analysis of the U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Disaster Incident data as of January 2026

Note: Counties may have received both major disaster and emergency declarations and are counted only once in the total (680). Counts are based on currently available federal data and may increase as declarations and reporting are updated.

Flexible Federal Investments in Health, Human Services, Housing and Economic Development

Counties play a vital role in fostering economic growth, supporting labor market stability and building resilient communities. To continue meeting evolving needs — from aging populations to housing shortages— counties require predictable federal funding combined with local flexibility.

Federal investments in the Economic Development Administration (EDA) are critical to support local economies through infrastructure development, workforce initiatives and public-private partnerships. As new labor challenges emerge, counties are vital frontline partners to their federal and state peers in modernizing resources for job seekers and employers alike. Investment in and reauthorization of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) supports local workforce capacity-building as communities face growing service demands.

Meanwhile, counties urge increased funding for the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG), which supports local housing and community development ecosystems and expands economic opportunities for low- and moderate-income residents. The program's strength lies in its flexibility—direct-to-county payments and a versatile list of allowable uses empower counties to identify community needs and tailor solutions to meet them.

Counties are also critical partners in delivering human services, advocating for expanded federal resources to combat poverty, strengthen families and support vulnerable populations. This includes increasing investments in child care, addressing the phase-in of the Child Tax Credit and improving child welfare programs.

Counties call for reauthorizing the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program to preserve flexibility while enhancing support for family self-sufficiency. We remain committed to working with Congress and federal agencies to ensure policies promote vibrant communities, economic stability for all residents and local flexibility with accountability.

Counties invest **$17.7 billion** annually in the construction, operation and support of housing and redevelopment projects

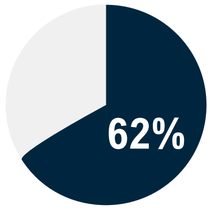
The 11 states with a county role in the child welfare system represented **33.8 percent** of the population of children served in formal foster care in 2022

Counties collectively invest more than **$121 billion** annually to support the public education system

Fully Fund the Payments in Lieu of Taxes Program & Reauthorize Secure Rural Schools

Counties with large amounts of federally owned, non-taxable lands face structural revenue challenges – we provide critical services, maintain infrastructure and support residents – but cannot tax federal lands. The **Payments in Lieu of Taxes (PILT)** program and the **Secure Rural Schools (SRS)** program were created to compensate for this lost tax base and ensure counties can support essential services like schools, roads, emergency response and public safety.

In FY 2026 and beyond, NACo calls for **full, mandatory funding for PILT.** Without predictable mandatory funding, PILT will remain a discretionary program subject to the annual appropriations process, which results in reduced budget certainty for these counties. Beyond mandatory funding, counties also support modifying the program to ensure those with smaller population receive adequate PILT payments to meet community needs.



Sixty-two percent of counties have federal land within their boundaries, and unlike other local property owners, the federal government does not pay traditional property taxes

Counties also support a **long-term reauthorization of SRS,** ensuring predictable, stable support for timber-dependent counties for timber-dependent counties that rely on these funds to maintain essential services and transition towards long-term fiscal stability. This stability allows counties to budget, plan infrastructure, support schools, maintain roads and ensure public services are delivered reliably to both residents and visitors alike.

Long-term commitment for both PILT and SRS is not just fiscal support — it recognizes the ongoing burden and responsibility counties assume in managing federal lands' impacts on local communities.

Governor Mark Gordon (Wyo.) speaks at NACo's PILT Fly-in

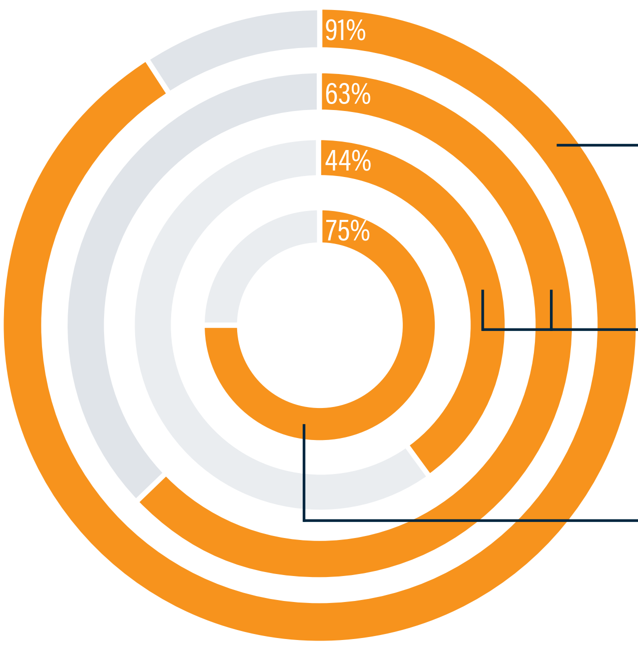
Behavioral Health, Homelessness and Criminal Justice Reform

Counties invest billions annually to improve health outcomes for residents, leveraging key federal programs such as the Community Mental Health Services Block Grant and the Substance Use Prevention, Treatment and Recovery Block Grant. These programs fund essential services, including housing assistance, case management, school-based supports and peer services, helping counties address the ongoing mental health crisis. To sustain our impact, Congress must fully fund these programs.

The federal–state–local Medicaid partnership is essential to strengthening care systems nationwide. As states implement provisions under H.R. 1, NACo urges our federal partners to work closely with county leaders to ensure new federal requirements are incorporated into state and county systems that can reliably support beneficiaries and uphold program integrity.

Counties must be empowered to design behavioral health and reentry services tailored to local needs, with adequate federal resources to support prevention, early intervention and reduced recidivism without to burden of unfunded mandates. Federal policies should remove barriers to local innovation by providing flexible funding, reducing unnecessary compliance burdens, promoting integrated, community-based approaches and advancing affordability measures that help residents maintain coverage and reduce strain on local health systems.

Counties call for federal policies that remove barriers to local innovation and cross-sector collaboration by offering flexible funding, eliminating overly rigid compliance requirements and promoting integrated, community-based approaches. Federal support should provide adequate resources, encourage prevention and early intervention and help reduce recidivism and unmet health needs — all without burdening counties with unfunded mandates.



Counties operate **91 percent** of all the nation's local jails

Approximately **63 percent** of jail inmates are people with substance use disorder and **44 percent** of jail inmates suffer from a mental illness

Counties invest more than **$130 billion annually** in community health systems that serve approximately **75 percent of the U.S. population**

Preserve and Strengthen Local Authority in Land Use, Environmental Stewardship and Infrastructure Development

Local control over land use, zoning, environmental stewardship and infrastructure planning is a bedrock principle of local governance and accountability. Counties support federal policies that balance environmental protection, public health, safety and local economic needs. As both regulators and regulated entities, counties are responsible for protecting local air, water and land resources under delegated authority from state and federal laws. Federal regulations and guidelines are most effective when they are clear, understandable and easily administered at the local level.

Counties advocate for federal policies that formally include counties as cooperating agencies in land-use decisions, environmental reviews and permitting processes, such as under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). Meaningful consultation, partnership and deference to local input ensure that infrastructure investments and environmental protections reflect community values, priorities and long-term local planning goals.

As the U.S. Departments of Interior, Transportation and Energy, Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and other federal agencies develop future regulations, Counties support meaningful consultation with county governments early in the rulemaking process, and federal investments should be implemented more quickly by reforming the permitting process. Early engagement helps prevent unfunded mandates and other unintended consequences that could arise from implementing federal policies. Additionally, Counties support increased federal funding and flexibility to counties to ensure the successful implementation of future regulations.

Counties invest more than **$146 billion annually** to build and maintain America's water and wastewater infrastructure

Counties invest more than **$26 billion** in sewage and solid waste management annually

Counties play an important role in supporting and maintaining public infrastructure, owning and maintaining roughly **45 percent of public road miles** and **38 percent of bridges,** and in some communities supporting drinking water and wastewater systems, often alongside state, municipal and special district partners

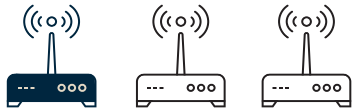
Scan to view
NACo's PFAS Hub

County leaders gather for NACo's 90th Annual Conference & Expo in the city and county of Philadelphia, Pa.

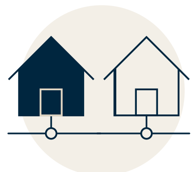
County Technology, AI, Broadband, Cybersecurity, Energy and Infrastructure Readiness

In a rapidly evolving technological landscape, counties must be prepared — not just to deliver traditional public services, but to lead on broadband deployment, cybersecurity, AI governance, energy infrastructure and digital equity. Counties are critical to ensuring that remote, rural and underserved communities have access to modern infrastructure and services.

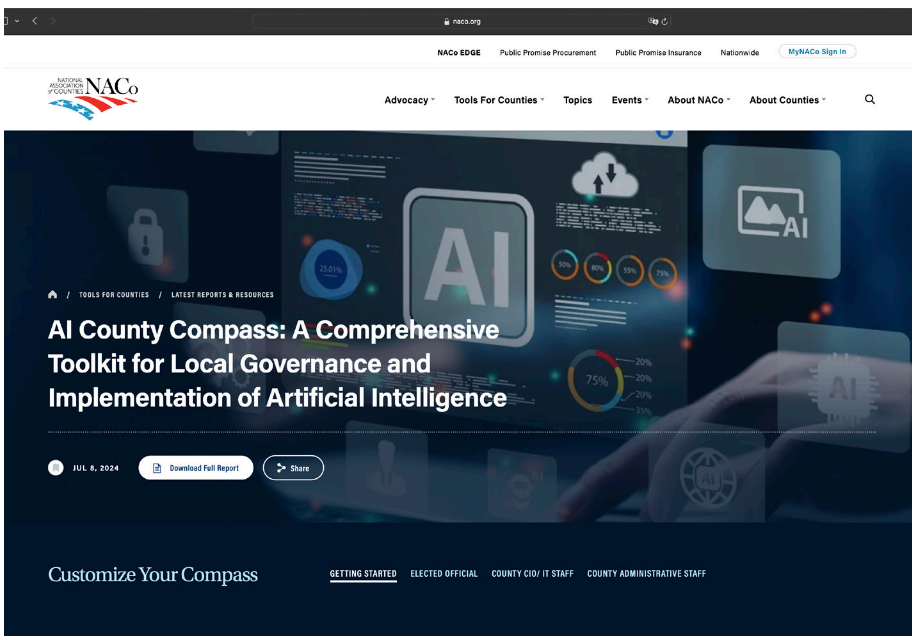
NACo supports federal investment and partnerships that help counties build technology capacity — from expanding broadband, strengthening cybersecurity of local government systems, supporting energy resilience and providing AI governance frameworks, to workforce development in high-tech and infrastructure sectors. These investments will preserve local decision-making while positioning communities for competitiveness, resilience and innovation.



More than **a third of U.S. households** have access to only one internet service provider or lack access altogether



Approximately **53 percent of U.S. households** subscribe to broadband at or above the FCC's accepted minimum definition of high-speed internet, 100 Mbps download and 20 Mbps upload



Scan the QR code to read **NACo's AI County Compass,** a comprehensive guide to artificial intelligence for counties.

Election Integrity and Strengthening County Election Administration Capacity

Counties administer the vast majority of U.S. elections, including voter registration, poll operations, mail-balloting systems, ballot tabulation and certification of results. The integrity of American democracy depends substantially on county election administrators' capacity.

In 2026, Counties urge federal investment in county election infrastructure, support the recruitment and training of election workers and encourage the modernization of systems — including equipment, cybersecurity and accessibility for voters. By strengthening county election administration capacity, Congress can help ensure secure, efficient and accessible elections, preserve public confidence and uphold democratic values.

More than **200 million people** typically register and are eligible to vote in jurisdictions where counties play a significant role in election administration

Counties administer elections through the funding and management of over **100,000 polling places staffed with over 630,000 poll workers** each election cycle

Election oversight is primarily the responsibility of county governments in **36 states**

The Maricopa County Recorder's Office explains to federal partners about the county role in the election administration process and how the county runs safe and secure elections.

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION of COUNTIES NACo®

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