



NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF COUNTIES

VOL. 58, NO. 1

JANUARY 19, 2026

Fraud concerns prompt HHS funding freeze

by Kevin Moore

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Administration for Children and Families (ACF) sent letters Jan. 6 to California, Colorado, Illinois, Minnesota and New York announcing they are temporarily restricting access to select federal child care and family assistance grant funds while the agency conducts a program integrity review.

According to ACF, the temporary restriction will impact nearly \$2.4 billion of Child Care and Development funds, \$7.35 billion of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families funds and \$869 million of Social Services Block Grant funds.

In Colorado, Minnesota and New York, all three of these programs are directly administered by counties. In California, counties are responsible for administering TANF. In the letters, ACF raised concerns that eligibility verification practices in some states may need additional review to ensure alignment with federal law. In a separate communication, ACF stated that they have activated the Defend the Spend system to review funds for all CCDF grantees.

What does this mean for counties?

Counties are the frontline

providers of human services and critical social support services. In three of the affected states, county governments directly administer CCDF and SSBG and administer TANF in four. In these states, counties are responsible for functions such as eligibility determination, service delivery, enrollment, data reporting and management of provider networks.

The temporary funding freeze has the potential to create significant operational strain on the delivery of child-care and family assistance services. Counties rely on timely federal reimbursement to support eligibility staff, provider payments, case management, and the coordinated delivery of wraparound services that stabilize families and strengthen local economies. NACo is concerned that prolonged payment restrictions could disrupt services for eligible families and increase administrative burdens and errors on county human services systems.

These measures will remain in place until ACF completes its review and NACo will continue to monitor federal guidance. **CN**

Kevin Moore is a legislative assistant in NACo's Government Affairs department.



NACo President J.D. Clark delivers a "State of the Counties" address to members of NCCAE Jan. 14 in Washington, D.C. Photo by Charlie Ban

NACo President Clark: State of America's counties is strong

by Meredith Moran

staff writer

Leaders of state associations of counties across the country came together Jan. 14 to discuss the county role in transportation, energy, artificial intelligence development and disaster response and reform amid shifts in federal policy and funding at the NACo

National Council of County Association Executives meeting in Washington, D.C.

The meeting kicked off with remarks from NACo President J.D. Clark of Wise County, Texas.

"The state of America's counties is strong, yet we are facing a complex intergovernmental landscape that is shaped and heavily influenced by the policy, funding and imple-

mentation decisions made by our federal and state counterparts," Clark said. "Every day, county officials wake up to the unshakable reality that we are the bedrock of service delivery and accountability across this country."

Teryn Zmuda, NACo's chief research officer and chief

See NCCAE page 2

Counties' sustainability efforts earn top grades

by Charlie Ban

senior writer

As much as a county government may want to make meaningful progress on environmental sustainability, it can't do it alone.

Progress requires partnership, either with other parts of government or the private sector. Ideally with both. That was the consensus of the three counties that scored the highest possible rating from a non-

profit that for decades has collected voluntary disclosures from both the private and public sectors.

More than 1,000 U.S. cities, states and regions disclosed their data to the organization CDP in 2025, including 10 counties and three regional councils that represent a total of 24 additional counties.

"Nothing of long-term consequence can be achieved and sustained without full participation," said Jennifer Jurado,

Broward County, Fla.'s chief resilience officer. "Nothing is unilateral, and it requires a lot of investment."

Broward County's new countywide resilience plan was developed in collaboration with business and municipal leadership, including the county school district, which owns a sizable footprint of property throughout the county. The plan, which

See RESILIENCE page 3

Counties stay the course through intergovernmental policy shifts

From NCCAE page 1

economist, shared results from NACo's County Pulse survey, which received responses from 1,600 county leaders. The survey helps NACo better understand the pressures on service delivery, fiscal health and the real-world impacts of federal and state policies, Zmuda said.

"At NACo, we are fond of saying, 'If you have seen one county, you've seen one county,' because the next one will undoubtedly be a little bit different," Clark said. "But at our core, counties are uniquely positioned, sitting at the intersection of policy development and practical implementation."

When asked if the nation is on the right track or the wrong track, 57% of the survey's respondents said the nation

is headed in the wrong direction. At the edges, 14% believe the county is strongly on the right track, and 36% believe it is strongly headed in the wrong direction.

"Across these perspectives, though, counties' distinct position of evaluation is rooted in a pragmatic approach to on-the-ground service delivery," Zmuda said. "It's a mindset of keeping the car assembled, fueled and tuned for operation."

The responses, regardless of sentiment, reflect that counties have a shared commitment to public service at the county level, support for an intergovernmental approach and a desire for systems that enable effective local governance, Zmuda said.

County leaders identified

disasters and emergency management along with transportation and surface infrastructure as the top two most important categories of federal policy, according to the survey.

The state of county transportation networks

Counties own 44% of the nation's roads, 38% of all bridges, 40% of public transit agencies and one-third of the nation's airports, Clark noted. Counties "keep America moving, and keep America connected," he added.

Inflation has drastically driven up the cost of maintaining those roads, bridges and transit systems, which, along with aging infrastructure, exacerbates budget struggles, said Phillip Church, Oswego County, N.Y.'s county administrator. For rural counties with a small staff, grant writing is also a funding obstacle, he noted.

"Small rural counties don't have the resources to have professional grant writing staff," Church said. "Sometimes we have to contract it out ... so, sometimes the grants are difficult for us to access."

Like many counties, Oswego County and Macomb County, Mich. have suburban and rural pockets. Addressing transportation needs for both can be a balancing act, said Steve Hobbs, Missouri Association of Counties' executive director.

Macomb County Commissioner Antoinette Wallace said that communication between commissioners is key to ensuring that transportation needs are met for constituents across districts. Oswego County hired an employee from one of its transportation vendors who helped identify route problems and get the word out to increase ridership, which has been beneficial,

according to Church.

"I think we're seeing a common thread today, that communication is critically important," Hobbs said. "And a seat at the table is even more important."

Access and preserving and improving discretionary grant opportunities are priorities NACo has established for the Surface Transportation Reauthorization, according to Hobbs.

NACo is advocating for more direct resources to counties, noted Matt Chase, NACo executive director. There are expected challenges in funding the reauthorization, amid declining gas tax revenue and

coming out of data centers in Prince William County, Va. is their use of power, but the revenue they have brought in is something the county can't ignore, said County Supervisor Victor Angry. It's allowed the county to lower residential taxes and build a commercial tax base, he noted.

Georgia's data centers have helped revive economies in agricultural areas, where many of them are located, according to Dougherty County, Ga. Commissioner Clinton Johnson.

"Farming is not the way it was years ago," Johnson said. "So, if you're a person trying to make money off their farm, solar farms and digital campuses are now the way for families to sustain themselves."

More regulation around data centers is being established as a response to widespread residential complaints of issues including noise, increased utility costs to individuals and environmental impact.

Chris Villines, executive director of the Association of Arkansas Counties, outlined the DATA Act, legislation recently introduced by Sen. Tom Cotton (R-Ark.), that would eliminate federal regulations and enable data centers, manufacturers and other energy-intensive industries to build customized electricity systems without impacting existing power grids. Congruently, tech companies are putting major investments into a new power source, micro-nuclear power sites, that the Department of Energy has fast-tracked, according to Villines.

"So, the good news is, if these things work, they would fall right in line with the DATA Act, would not be connected

'It's a mindset of keeping the car assembled, fueled and tuned for operation.'

— Teryn Zmuda,
NACo chief
research officer

the transformation of the traditional highway fund model, he said. The cost of transportation building and repair has also increased exponentially in recent years, he added.

In Oswego County, the cost to pave 40 miles 15 years ago is what it costs to pave only 10 miles now, Church said.

"The funding issue is front and center," Church said. "It's got to keep up with the costs. And being able to access federal funds directly would increase the resources that we have locally to do that."

The state of energy and AI development in local communities

The biggest issue currently

See NCCAE, page 6

SNAP/STATS



U.S. Birth Rates

BIRTH RATE PER 1,000 PEOPLE

2025:.....	11.99%
2015:.....	12.40%
2005:.....	14%
1995:.....	14.6%
1985:.....	15.8%
1975:.....	14.6%
1965:.....	19.4%
1955:	23.99%

Source: Macrotrends.net

'This is about the quality of life in the community'

From RESILIENCE page 1

Jurado termed a "major breakthrough" in the county's sustainability work, includes designs for long-term flood wall barriers in the coastal county, along with new water management strategies, recommendations for increased water storage throughout the county and green and gray infrastructure improvements. And it sends an invitation and opens the door to private sector participation.

"It's a blueprint that we can all access and use for coordinated planning and investment and decision making," Jurado said. "Having that blueprint has absolutely broadened the scope of participation because now we have something that is a real strong communicator that private sector partners can better get a handle on."

Measuring success and progress

An "A" grade from CDP means a reporting government has set and met ambitious climate action goals, a step above implementing current best practices, acting to mitigate against climate change and increase resilience and understanding, measuring and reporting climate impacts.

Reporting entities are evaluated on their risk and vulnerability assessment, emissions inventory, targets and actions along with data on energy, waste, food, transportation and public health.

"This is about the quality of life in the community that we all care about," Jurado said.

Though many of the United States' public reporting governments were cities, Jenita McGowan, Cuyahoga County's chief of Sustainability and Climate, sees a lot of opportunities for counties to tackle sustainability planning.

"I think there's a really important role for counties to play because of how we're structured and what we're chartered to do," she said. "Especially on the health angle, how we adapt to and mitigate climate change."

"Counties historically,



Students attend the 2025 Broward Youth Climate Summit in Broward County, Fla. Photos courtesy of Broward County

unless they were a [consolidated city-county government] weren't doing private action planning and that's the trend that is starting to shift, because I think there's a really important role in climate change, especially on the kind of adaptation resilience and the health side of things that can be in the purview of counties," McGowan noted.

Leadership and division of responsibility

Ohio's home rule government structure limits Cuyahoga County's authority to enact certain policies, leaving it as a convener to persuade and support its 59 municipalities to pass land use policies and other measures supporting sustainability efforts.

"A lot of the actions that are in our climate action plan are things the county can enable, we might be able to provide grant funding for it, we can provide technical assistance for it, we can be on our working group to advance it, but we can't technically do it without real partnership with our municipalities," McGowan said.

At the same time, while those municipalities have the authority to enact sustainability measures, they don't always have the staff to do so.

"We almost see this as a shared service model," McGowan said. Cuyahoga County has, however, been able to pursue some

countywide sustainability



Students gather in a gym to explore the 2025 Broward Youth Climate Summit, held in Broward County, Fla.

programs on its own, including: integrating sustainability into procurement policies and to our economic development programs designing a transit-oriented development loan program that provides incentives for development near public transit

launching a residential solar cooperative and a new renewable energy micro grid utility compiling a greenhouse gas inventory.

Smaller scale work

With roughly 160,000 residents compared to Cuyahoga County's 1.2 million and Broward County's 2 million, Santa Fe County, N.M.'s sustainability partnership efforts are focusing on the whole of county government. That is reflected in a push to examine sustainability in each department, making it something the county does, rather than just the three-person sustainability team.

"What I have tried to focus

on more recently in the last three years is a shift from an internal focus on organizational mitigation and reduction of greenhouse gas emissions in our operations, which was more focused on fleet and the built environment and recycling, to a more holistic, countywide focus," said Sustainability Manager Jacqueline Beam.

"We're really making better connections with not only our departments and public works or community services or housing and all of the economic development and starting to tie all of those together in a way that sustainability is also in their minds," she said. "I do see a shift in the receptivity toward applying those principles more in every project."

While Cuyahoga County eyes greenhouse gas emissions as a target and Broward County tries to mitigate against sea level rise, arid Santa Fe County often faces the threat of wildfire and water

scarcity.

"We've been working on increasing awareness and changing our codes to be more friendly toward green stormwater infrastructure," Beam said.

"The reduction of emissions is ongoing, but the reality on the ground is that we're having to deal with more drought, more extreme weather events and we still have to operate and serve population during all of those things."

Santa Fe County Sustainability Specialist Will Donahoo said that the county's heritage has largely been aligned with sustainable practices, thanks to the traditions adopted from the county's indigenous community, including communal responsibility for drainage ditches.

Santa Fe County's recent resiliency achievements include:

Updating building codes
Offering energy efficiency upgrades for low-income households

Development of a community solar plan, with the potential for a public utility option.

Support and the future

None of the A-graded counties are planning to rest on their laurels. In addition to updating the Santa Fe County's sustainable wind development code, Beam hopes to turn her focus to living systems. **CN**

COUNTY NEWS PODCAST

Panache and presentation boost highlight reels of county action

by Charlie Ban
senior writer

Despite its own significant population, Riverside County, Calif. is sliced apart by media markets in Los Angeles, San Diego and Arizona. That makes it hard for the county to establish a sense of place and for county business to find a home in people's media consumption.

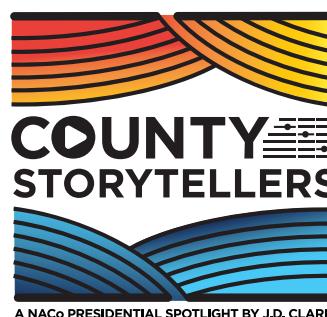
That's where Pep Fernandez comes in. The longtime Inland Empire sports broadcaster joined the county's communications department right before the pandemic, when the county could hold regular news briefings for an audience eager for news from their local government.

In the years since, the county's in-house media production team has refined its messaging down to a weekly 90-second Board Brief, which receives tens of thousands of



Riverside County's Pep Fernandez prepares to deliver an engaging 90-second account of a county board meeting.

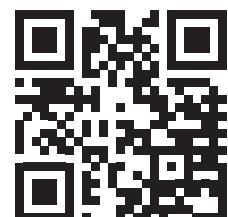
views weekly on social media platforms. Fernandez adapts his delivery to create a sort of SportsCenter highlight reel of county government issues, actions and resources.



it and some energy, that was just a bonus."

Hernandez and Riverside County CEO Jeff Van Wagener joined the County News Podcast to lay out the county's media strategy, offering useful advice for counties hoping to reach residents and articulate the work they are doing.

In this discussion, they offer helpful advice on how to meet news consumers' habits and capitalize on the skills and talents of county personnel to tell the county story. **CN**



Listen to the County News Podcast on your podcasting app, by scanning the QR code or by visiting www.naco.org/podcast.

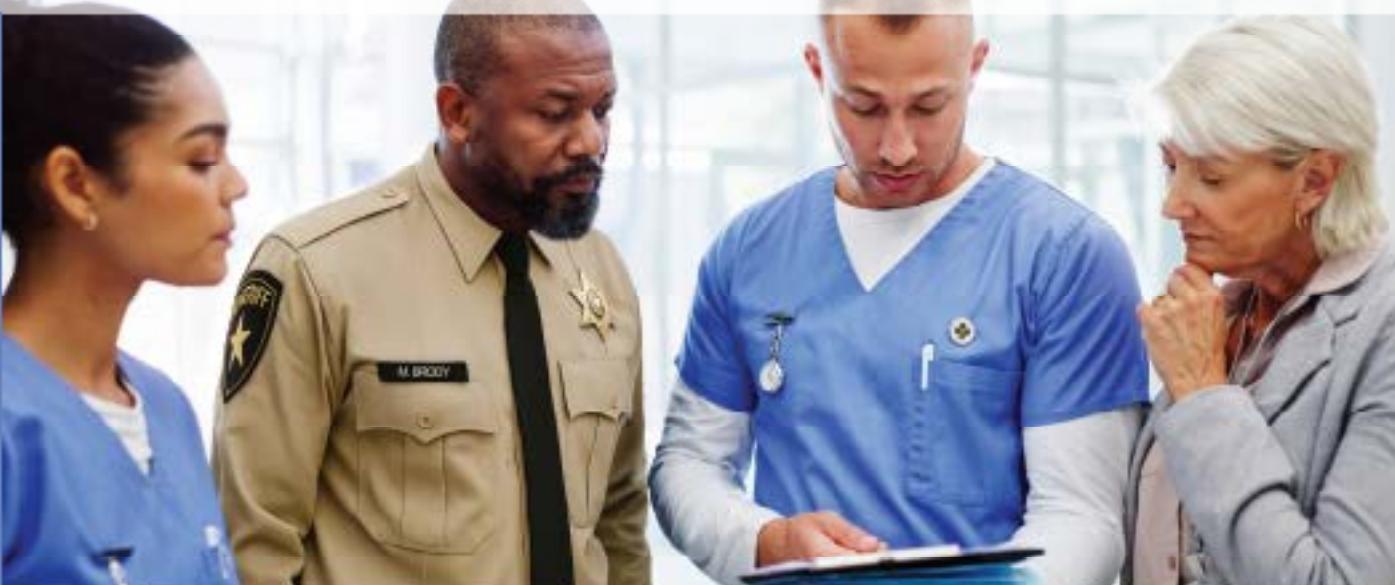


NCCHC
RESOURCES
CORRECTIONAL & COMMUNITY
HEALTH CARE

Put NCCHC's
unique clinical
and correctional
expertise to work
as your partner.

Correctional Health Care Consulting

Prevent Critical Incidents • Reduce Liability • Improve Care



KEY SERVICE AREAS

Suicide Prevention • Health System Assessment • Contract Monitoring
In-Custody Death Investigations • Medication-Assisted Treatment
RFP/RFQ Development and Support • Training and Education • Health Care Space Design

Contact us at info@NCCHCresources.org or visit NCCHCresources.org

NACo shares 2025 advocacy wins, 2026 policy priorities

As we release our 2026 federal policy priorities, NACo is reflecting on a year of advocacy that saw significant movement in the full range of policy areas reflected in the American County Platform. Counties remain committed to active, meaningful intergovernmental partnership, and we look forward to productive advocacy on behalf of America's local governments in the year ahead.

Agriculture & Rural Affairs

Testified before the House Agriculture Committee to advance county priorities for modernizing rural development policy as part of the pending Farm Bill.

Successfully influenced U.S. Department of Agriculture reorganization efforts to preserve the national footprint of Rural Development programs.

Hosted a highly attended Rural Action Caucus (RAC) fly-in, bringing rural county leaders to Washington to advocate for federal investment.

Secured bipartisan introduction of multiple bills supporting rural counties, including forest management, broadband access, housing, transportation, water infrastructure and economic development initiatives.

Community, Economic & Workforce Development

Secured Senate passage of the ROAD to Housing Act, expanding support for county-administered housing programs like HOME and CDBG-DR.

Secured an amendment to the House's Housing for the 21st Century Act to protect Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funding stability and ensure predict-

able community development resources for counties.

Restored the FY2024–25 Continuum of Care (CoC) program competition, preserving local expenditure flexibility for permanent supportive housing.

Finance, Pensions & Intergovernmental Affairs

Preserved the municipal bond tax exemption, protecting counties' ability to finance infrastructure projects without raising local taxes.

Raised the State and Local Tax (SALT) deduction cap to \$40,000 for middle-income households, providing tax relief for county residents.

Secured enactment of the Social Security Fairness Act, restoring full benefits for county public servants impacted by outdated federal offsets.

Health

Secured bipartisan passage of the SUPPORT Act reauthorization, protecting federal funding for county behavioral health, treatment and overdose prevention systems.

Influenced federal housing and mental health policy by elevating county-led innovations during direct engagement with the White House.

Built bipartisan momentum for the Michelle Alyssa Go Act,

which would expand Medicaid reimbursement and treatment capacity in county-operated behavioral health facilities.

Human Services & Education

Secured county testimony before the House Ways and Means Subcommittee on Work and Welfare, elevating county perspectives on Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) administration and outcomes for low-income families.

Secured county testimony before the House Agriculture Subcommittee on Nutrition and Foreign Agriculture, ensuring congressional decision-makers heard directly from counties administering the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) on the frontlines.

Justice & Public Safety

Advanced the Fixing Emergency Management for Americans (FEMA) Act through the U.S. House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, strengthening disaster response and recovery for counties.

Secured Senate passage of the Second Chance Act reauthorization, supporting county reentry programs that reduce recidivism and improve public safety.

Won \$1.6 billion in federal

security and planning funds to support counties hosting the 2026 World Cup and 2028 Olympics.

Secured a moderate expansion of the Child Tax Credit and Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit in H.R. 1, increasing financial support for working families served by county human services.

Public Lands

Secured reauthorization of the Secure Rural Schools (SRS) program through FY 2026, including back payments for FY 2024 and FY 2025, providing critical funding to more than 700 timber-dependent counties to support schools, roads and public safety.

Strengthened county roles in federal permitting by amending the SPEED Act to explicitly include counties as cooperating agencies.

Led a historic Payments in Lieu of Taxes (PILT) fly-in with more than 80 congressional and agency meetings to elevate county priorities and strengthen federal partnerships, resulting in the inclusion of full funding for PILT in the FY 2026 Interior and Environment Appropriations bill.

Technology & Telecommunications

Secured House passage of

the State and Local Cybersecurity Grant Program, delivering direct federal funding to help counties protect critical systems and resident data.

Successfully defended county authority in Federal Communications Commission wireless and wireline proceedings to preserve local control over infrastructure and rights-of-way.

Protected county coordination roles in BEAD broadband implementation, advancing local input in deployment decisions that affect unserved communities.

Transportation

Hosted a Surface Transportation Reauthorization fly-in, directly advancing county priorities with nearly 30 congressional and committee offices.

Testified before the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee to highlight county leadership in road safety and life-saving investments for the upcoming surface transportation reauthorization process.

Engaged senior U.S. Department of Transportation officials to shape reauthorization policy reflecting county ownership of nearly half the nation's road and bridge network.



2026 NACo Federal Policy Priorities

NACo has also published policy priorities for 2026; scan the code to view them.



PROFILES IN SERVICE

PAT FARRELL

NACo Board Member

Chatham County, Ga.
Commissioner

Number of years active in NACo: 21

Years in public service: I was sworn in as a commissioner in January of 2005 and have continued to serve uninterrupted terms.

My first NACo event was: 2005 Annual Conference in Hawaii



FARRELL

NACo Committees: Transportation

Occupation: I am the owner and operator of two small businesses. I rent out some houses that I own. I have a full-time position working on the docks

The most adventurous thing I've ever done is: Go spear-fishing 40 miles off the coast of Georgia in 110 feet of water for grouper and encountered schools of a hundred barracuda coming right up to your mask with many of them a full six feet long.



at the Port of Savannah with the International Longshoreman Association. I own and operate a large commercial farm growing corn, cotton, peanuts and Angus beef.

Education: I earned a four-year degree in Mechanical Engineering Technology from Georgia Southern University in 1983.

The hardest thing I've ever done: Competed in an Ironman competition at Hunter Army Airfield about 15 years ago and finished in the top three for my age category.

Three people (living or dead)

I'd invite to dinner: George Washington, Robert E. Lee, Ronald Reagan

A dream I have is to: Host the best NACo Annual Conference ever in 2027

You'd be surprised to learn that I: Apprehended an armed robber shortly after a convenience store hold-up.

My favorite way to relax is: In the summer, is to take a slow ride in my boat in the intercoastal waterway in Chatham County, Ga. at sunset with a refreshing drink.

I am most proud of: My wonderful wife and children.

Every morning, I read: The latest news that pops up on my smartphone.

My favorite meal is: A grilled beef steak from my farm coupled with a salad, my wife's stuffed baked potato, a side of eggplant Parmesan with double chocolate cake for dessert.

My pet peeve is: When traveling on the interstate and it becomes a parking lot.

My motto is: From Thomas Jefferson, "Take things always by their smooth handle."

County leaders explore improvements on funding of clean-ups after major disasters strike

From NCCAE page 2

to the grid and would be a sustainable power source for data centers," Villines said. "The bad news is for us in county government ... how are we going to walk through that and make sure that, if that is the direction we're going, that we can keep our citizens OK with it?"

recommended components of the legislation, including the creation of a universal disaster application and a Public Assistance dashboard, Public Assistance program reform and loan interest payment relief.

"At the core, it's designed to make disaster recovery faster,

all together," Lincoln said, "if you are a fiscally constrained county, you are now even more in debt and asking for bonds and struggling even more to get your economy going again, which you definitely need to do if you're a tourist destination."

The success of American Rescue Plan Act funding going directly to counties is a lesson that should be applied to the disaster funding model, said Tangipahoa Parish, La. President Robby Miller. Miller noted that within his first three years in office, he signed more emergency declarations than his predecessor had over the course of 29 years.

"With hurricanes and floods, within a matter of days, we can kind of tell you how bad it's going to be — \$60 million, \$100 million," Miller said. "Front us 50% of it and then make us track how we spend it."

"That'll reduce the cost, we'll recover much quicker, get our people back and taken care of and the vendors will be able to do better work cheaper, because we have the dollars to pay them right away." **CN**

The state of disaster response and reform

In recent years, nearly one-third of counties have experienced at least one federally declared disaster, according to Clark. Counties are not just stakeholders in disaster response, but partners in that work with state and federal agencies, according to Jim Henderson, Kentucky Association of Counties' executive director.

The FEMA Act, which overwhelmingly passed the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, is "one of the most significant overhauls of the disaster response network in decades," said Henderson. NACo's Intergovernmental Reform Task Force

FEMA is the 'backbone of recovery' for counties.

— Michelle Lincoln,
Monroe County, Fla.

simpler and more responsive to the need of our communities," Henderson said.

FEMA is the "backbone of recovery" for counties, said Monroe County, Fla. Commissioner Michelle Lincoln. The county is still \$7 million "in the hole" from Hurricane Irma (that hit the area in 2017) and waiting on more than \$1 million in reimbursement from Hurricane Ian (2022), she said.

"When you start adding that

PALM BEACH COUNTY BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS



PALM BEACH COUNTY THRIFT STORE GOVERNMENT PUBLIC AUCTION

Varied and diverse Government Surplus.

UPCOMING SALE DATES

- November 1, 2025**
- January 17, 2026**
- February 21, 2026**
- March 21, 2026**
- April 18, 2026**
- May 16, 2026**
- June 20, 2026**
- July 18, 2026**
- November 7, 2026**

Palm Beach County Thrift Store
2455 Vista Parkway
West Palm Beach, FL, 33411

DURING STORE SALE HOURS: 8:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m.
BIDDING HOURS: 8:00 a.m. to 10:30 a.m.

SCAN ME 
If you have any questions or comments please call us at 561-233-2256
Visit our Website! pbc.gov/ofmb/thriftstore

SELLERS, NON-PROFITS & INDIVIDUAL BUYERS WELCOME!




BRIGHT IDEAS | HOWARD COUNTY, MD.

All Hands on Deck: County Cross-Trains on How to Take 911 Calls During Big Emergencies

PROBLEM: 911 Dispatch was inundated with non-emergency calls during emergency operations center activations, slowing down emergency response

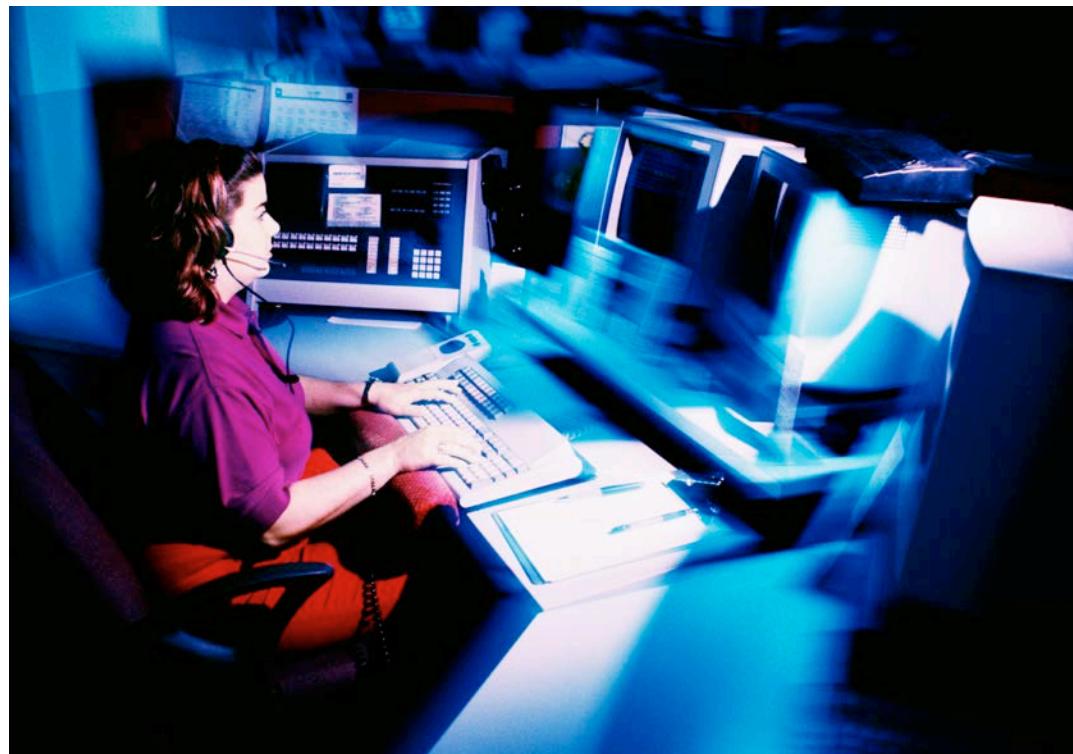
SOLUTION: Enlist existing county staff to filter calls, respond to non-emergency requests for information and assistance

by **Meredith Moran**
staff writer

When there's an emergency in Howard County, Md. — flooding, a snow storm, a large-scale power outage — there's an "all-hands on deck" approach" to response. Staff across county departments work as call center operators, connecting callers to the proper department or agency without inundating 911 dispatchers as they work to deploy first responders.

Public-facing county employees, such as public information staff, receive call center training to help during an Emergency Operations Center (EOC) activation, filtering non-emergency calls from emergency calls and ensuring that people receive information in a timely manner.

The initiative was created to strengthen emergency response, because the call center was overwhelmed during past emergencies,



A dispatcher takes calls. Howard County, Md. cross-trains its staff so they will have enough 911 operators during large emergencies.

including a catastrophic 2018 flash flood, according to Howard County Executive Calvin Ball. Staff with public-facing roles were chosen to step into the call center role, because they already possess the necessary interpersonal skills.

"There are so many historic events that have reminded us of the importance of the emergency communication," Ball said. "So, we've wanted to make sure that our call center responds effectively with clarity, with compassion, especially when residents need it the most."

In addition to an influx of emergency calls, county data shows that 911 Dispatch

has historically received an increase in non-emergency calls during an EOC activa-

'They go through all sorts of 'if, then' scenarios when engaging the public...'

— Calvin Ball
County Executive
Howard County, Md.

tion, with people often seeking information about ongoing emergency conditions or making non-emergency

requests for assistance.

County staff in other departments who take on a call center role ensure that only emergency calls are handled by 911 Dispatch, which has improved emergency response times and enabled the county to communicate better with the public, according to Caleb Goodie, a Howard County emergency manager.

"It gives us a trigger and a method to alleviate some of the burden during some of these emergency incidents," Goodie said. "... It's been really beneficial, in terms of maintaining that flow and efficiency."

The call center training,

which is roughly two to three hours, is run by the county Office of Emergency Management, according to Ball. The training simulates the call-taking process, with participants taking demo calls with live voice actors and going through mock situations for different emergency events. Because of the stressful nature of an emergency activation, staff also undergo training in empathy and de-escalation.

"They go through all sorts of protocols to better understand several 'if, then' scenarios when engaging the public and helping to guide them through, almost like a 'No Wrong Door' approach," Ball said. "Particularly when there are various emergencies and things where people just need guidance and support."

The call center training program is a concept that could be adapted across the county landscape, and Ball said he hopes its success will help empower other jurisdictions to create something similar.

"Our call center serves as a critical tool in public communication," Ball said. "... And the public has really lauded this [initiative] as a way to feel empowered, educated and safer." **EN**

The program won the NACo "Best in Category" Achievement Award/Risk and Emergency Management category.



Looking to hire county staff?
**Post your job listing on
NACo's new career site!**

jobs.naco.org



ON THE MOVE

NACo STAFF

• **Victoria Zelvin** has joined NACo as associate director of digital and social media. She previously served as a digital activation lead for Ørsted, national digital advocacy campaign manager for the Natural Resources Defense Council and campaigns manager for the ONE Campaign. She earned a Master of Fine Arts from Emerson College and a



Zelvin

bachelor's degree from Roanoke College.

GET TO KNOW...

Chickasaw County, Mississippi

by **Meredith Moran**
staff writer

Chickasaw County, established in 1836, is named for the Chickasaw Nation, whose ancestral land is in the area.

The county has two county seats, Houston and Okolona. Houston, the original county seat, was named for the Texan general and president, Sam Houston, by his childhood friend Judge Joel Pinson, who donated land and founded the town. Okolona was later established as an additional seat, when it became the commercial and population center of Chickasaw County as a result of the M&O Railroad. The railroad town was the site of the Battle of Egypt Station, a Union raid to destroy railroads during the Civil War.

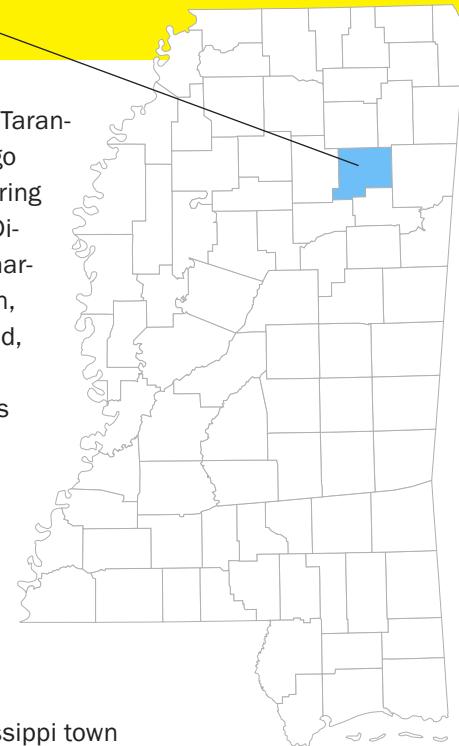
Both Houston and Okolona have their own county government offices, including courthouses, and county records. Chickasaw County, which is about 24 miles wide, established two county seats because it was difficult to travel across (due to the county's long and narrow shape), so the dual system was created to split services for convenience. Mississippi's first Carnegie Library is in Houston and the second is in Okolona.

Chickasaw County is fea-

tured in Quentin Tarantino's film "Django Unchained," starring actor Leonardo DiCaprio, whose character's plantation, named Candyland, is located in the county. Okolona's rich prairie soil made it a cotton hub and it was once known as the "Bread Basket of the Confederacy."

It was the first Northeast Mississippi town with electricity, which it got in 1897, and was the fastest town in the country to meet its World War II Bond goal, leading to its motto "The Little City That Does Big Things."

Roughly 25 miles north of Okolona is Tupelo, Miss., in Lee County, the birthplace of Elvis Presley. **Notable Chickasaw County natives include blues legend Booker "Bukka" White, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist William Raspberry, a columnist for The Washington Post for nearly 40 years; Commodores founding member Milan Williams and country singer-songwriter Bobbie Gentry, who mentioned Chickasaw County often in her music.** Sparta Opry, located in a small, unincorporated town in the county, hosts weekly



music gatherings, featuring country, bluegrass and gospel acts. Mississippi is considered the home of the blues, gospel and early rock 'n roll music.

The Chickasaw County Historical and Genealogical Society was established in 1979 to preserve and share local history, including land maps, letters and cemetery locations, to help people research their roots. The society has built a blacksmith shop, an agriculture museum to house farm equipment and agricultural items with historical significance and another building to hold its research and historical records, as well as artifacts and exhibits. There are plans to create a permanent exhibit depicting the history of the Chickasaw Indian nation.

The 444-mile Natchez Trace Parkway, which spans from Natchez, Miss., to Nashville, Tenn., runs through Chickasaw County. The Witchdance trails are said to have paranormal activity and ghosts and were named for stories of witches holding ceremonies along the Natchez Trace Parkway. According to legend, wherever the witches' feet touched the ground, the grass withered and never grew back.



Singer-songwriter Bobbie Gentry pauses next to a bridge in Mississippi. Warner Bros. photo

WORD SEARCH

MOORE COUNTY, N.C.

Created by Mary Ann Barton



BARBECUE: Try some Carolina barbecue at Pik N Pig next time you're in Moore County.

BOOKS: Independent bookstore, The Country Bookshop, has been in business since 1953 in the town of Southern Pines in the county.

BREWERIES: The county is known for its craft breweries.

BUGGY: The county holds the Carthage Buggy Festival each year in a nod to its history of buggy-making.

CARTHAGE: The county seat gets its name from a Phoenician phrase meaning "new city."

FAMOUS: Noted people from the county include astronaut Charles Brady Jr. and opera singer Louis Meacham.

GEOGRAPHY: The county lies on the border between North Carolina's Piedmont and Coastal Plain regions.

GOLF: The county is known as the "Home of American Golf," with 40 golf courses in a 15-mile radius.

HISTORY: The county was founded in 1784 from Cumberland County.

HORSES: The county features equestrian centers including the Pinehurst Harness Track, in operation since 1915.

MOORE: The county is named for Alfred Moore, a Revolutionary War captain and U.S. Supreme Court justice.

MURALS: Downtown Carthage, the county seat, features murals depicting the town's history.

NEWSPAPER: The local newspaper is *The Pilot*, in business since 1920.

SCOTS: The area was settled by Highland Scots people from the mountainous northern and western regions of Scotland.

TOURISM: The county saw nearly \$860 million in tourism spending in 2024.

Get to Know features new NACo member counties.

EMPOWERING COUNTIES FOR A NEW ERA

NACo EDGE Solutions Drive Innovation and Results in 2026

As counties enter 2026, they face increasing demands for transparency, efficiency and measurable results. Despite tighter budgets and operational challenges, county leaders nationwide have demonstrated that innovation and collaboration can drive meaningful improvements. In 2025, counties leveraged NACo EDGE's peer-driven solutions to streamline operations, strengthen financial stewardship and address evolving community needs.

Transformative Impact

NACo EDGE tools enabled counties to accelerate project timelines, cut costs and improve long-term planning. These solutions, designed specifically for county governments, empower leaders to deliver value for residents while maintaining high standards of accountability.

Workforce Excellence

A major achievement was the enhancement of employee benefits. Through NACo's long-standing partnership with Nationwide, counties expanded access to competitive retirement plans and planning tools, helping attract and retain top talent while upholding fiduciary responsibility.

Financial Resilience

Financial stability remained a priority. By partnering with Three+One, counties benchmarked banking and investment relationships, resulting in increased interest earnings, lower fees and greater transparency. These data-driven insights supported informed decisions and strengthened public trust.

Modernized Budgeting

Counties adopted ClearGov to modernize budgeting,



enhance collaboration, and improve communication of fiscal decisions. These tools helped leaders clearly demonstrate how policy choices align with community priorities, reinforcing trust and accountability.

Optimized Liquidity and Healthcare Cost Management

With CashVest, counties invested idle funds safely, boosting interest earnings with minimal effort. The NACo Public Promise PBM Coalition addressed rising prescription drug costs by securing better pricing, stronger contracts, and improved oversight, delivering significant savings for employees and county budgets.

Key Achievements

Procurement and Financial Management: \$3.5 trillion in buying power and \$1.2 trillion in federal aid accessed through Public Promise Procurement, using transparent contracts to speed projects and reduce administrative burden.

Workforce Benefits: National pricing for 3.6 million county employees, saving \$65 million for 126,000 participants. The NACo PBM Coalition delivered 20% average savings on prescription drug plans.

Retirement Security: Nationwide partnership supported \$31.7 billion in assets for 450,000 county employees across 2,900+ agencies.

Financial Resilience: Three+One generated \$4 billion in new revenue and savings, increasing earnings by

30% and putting 73% more cash to work.

Leadership Development: 15,000 managers and supervisors completed NACo EDGE's

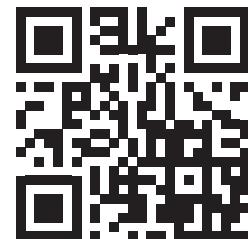
Professional Development Academy, with 90% positive scores and high peer engagement.

are ready to enter 2026 with renewed confidence and a commitment to excellence in public service.

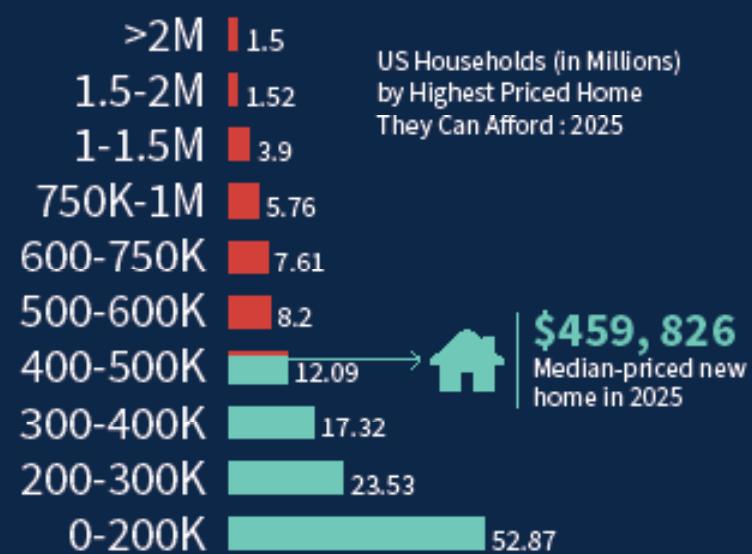
Looking Ahead

The successes of 2025 highlight the power of collaborative, county-driven solutions. NACo EDGE equips leaders with essential tools to govern responsibly, cut costs and deliver tangible value. Building on last year's momentum, counties

Get started with NACo EDGE now!



Roughly 75% of all U.S. households are unable to afford a median-priced new home.



Source: Calculations by the National Association of Home Builders Housing Policy Department, based on income data from the 2023 American Community Survey Public Use Microdata Sample File, U.S. Census Bureau

Visit nahb.org/homebuilding101



CALIFORNIA

The EL DORADO COUNTY recorder-clerk's office has started a free **property monitoring service** designed to help property owners detect and deter property-related fraud, the *Tahoe Daily Tribune* reported.



The no-cost service provides monitoring of property title and public records, rental and sale listings and the dark web. Enrolled property owners receive free email notifications, a free monthly analysis and a complimentary risk assessment to help them stay informed and act quickly if suspicious activity is detected.

SANTA CLARA COUNTY has created a **Wage Theft Judgement Dashboard** to track wage theft decisions issued by the California Labor Commissioner's Office. The County Office of Labor Standards Enforcement launched the dashboard in the fall, creating an accessible database that shows which employers have judgements against them and which have taken corrective actions.

The dashboard provides transparency regarding wage theft, which occurs when employees do not receive all the wages, benefits or other compensation that they have legally earned, as well as create an incentive for employers to treat workers fairly and resolve unpaid judgements.

The COUNTY OF SAN LUIS OBISPO Public Health Department has launched a redesigned **Respiratory Virus Data Dashboard** giving community members a clearer, more interactive way to monitor COVID-19, influenza and RSV activity throughout the respiratory virus season.

The improved dashboard

**GEORGIA**

DEKALB COUNTY officials have launched a new app that allows people living near an expanding airport to file **noise complaints**, Atlanta News First reported. The "Plane Noise" app gives families who live near DeKalb-Peachtree Airport a way to submit noise complaints directly to airport staff. The app launch comes as the airport in northeast Atlanta prepares for a major expansion. County commissioners recently approved a plan to add eight jet hangars.

arrives just in time for the peak months of respiratory illnesses, when cases of COVID-19, flu and respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) typically increase across the county. With simplified visuals, enhanced charts and user-friendly features, the tool helps community members, health professionals and community organizations stay informed and take action to protect themselves and others.

FLORIDA

LEE COUNTY recently launched a new online map to

help residents stay informed about **active nuisance accumulation** cases underway through the code enforcement process. Nuisance accumulation refers to the buildup of materials, debris and other items on private property that create unsafe or unsanitary conditions, attracting pests or negatively affect surrounding properties.

The map enhances public transparency with case locations and status updates; the site also answers common questions that people have about code enforcement.

**CALIFORNIA**

Several veterans and their families received the gift of a new home just in time for the holidays as SAN BERNARDINO COUNTY celebrated the grand opening of Liberty Lane, a new **affordable housing** community designed to serve veterans and individuals with special needs, according to the *Precinct Reporter*. Liberty Lane offers 80 affordable homes, providing long-term stability paired with supportive services to help residents achieve housing stability and improved well-being.

"We are proud to honor the men and women who served our country by providing safe, stable housing that supports their long-term success," said Board of Supervisors Chairman Dawn Rowe. "Liberty Lane offers more than housing; it provides dignity and opportunity."

Accessing public records is about to become even more accessible in ST. JOHNS COUNTY. The county Clerk of the Circuit Court and Comptroller's Office recently announced a new Public Records Request portal will launch to optimize the user experience, First Coast News reported.

The new portal will create a "user-friendly platform" where county residents can track their record requests in real time.

GEORGIA

The FAYETTE COUNTY Fire and EMS Department has created a new **non-emergency medical services hotline**, WSB-TV reported. The fire department launched the new program to improve the efficiency of non-emergency healthcare, all while keeping ambulances ready to roll out for emergencies. Starting last month, county fire and EMS is partnering with a private partner to connect non-emergency patients with on-demand emergency room physicians.

ILLINOIS

COOK COUNTY Public Health and Care Partners are continuing efforts to make the county more accessible for **older adults** through a newly presented Age Friendly Action Plan. The two organizations shared the plan at a recent

county board meeting. The plan is based on the "Nine Domains of Livability," an AARP framework used to assess and improve age-friendliness in communities.

A public outcry and inaccurate information on social media about a proposed **data center** in rural LOGAN COUNTY have prompted officials to delay votes on zoning necessary for the project until at least February, the *Illinois Times* reported. In the meantime, representatives of Miami-based Hut 8 Corp. plan to make a presentation and answer questions about the company's proposal to build a 500-megawatt data center on 200 acres of farm ground in front of the Logan County Board's Zoning and Economic Development Committee. The publicly traded company develops large-scale data centers that support artificial intelligence, Bitcoin mining and other high-powered computing platforms.

KENTUCKY

WOODFORD COUNTY Judge Executive James Kay is asking residents to **help plant 30,000 trees** across the county by 2030 as development and infrastructure projects reduce the area's tree coverage, WKYT-TV reported.

See NEWS FROM page 11

From NEWS FROM page 10

Kay recently posted a video to Facebook urging Woodford County residents to plant saplings in response to ongoing commercial and residential development that has removed trees from various parts of the county.

MICHIGAN

OAKLAND COUNTY has released a fully updated county **Registered Apprenticeship Guide**, showcasing 72 U.S. Department of Labor-approved apprenticeship occupations across a wide range of industries, D Business reported.

County officials unveiled the new guide at a special "Race to Talent" apprenticeship event. The guide was shared with employers, labor organizations, K-12 partners, community colleges and universities and state and local workforce development professionals.

"Building a highly skilled, competitive workforce is essential to Oakland County's long-term economic success," said Oakland County Executive David Coulter.

NEW JERSEY

MIDDLESEX COUNTY has launched a program to **help small business** owners enhance the exterior appearance of their buildings within the downtown districts of New Brunswick and Perth Amboy, Tap into New Brunswick reported.

By supporting strategic storefront upgrades, the Façade Improvement Program aims to deliver rapid, highly visible improvements that enhance commercial vitality, attract foot traffic and foster long-term economic resilience throughout the county.

NORTH CAROLINA

ORANGE COUNTY Public Transportation recently started a one-year, **fare-free model** for its fixed-route transit services, Chapelboro.com reported. The county government hailed the move as "an important step in testing strategies to expand mobility, promote transit equity and improve service efficiency for residents across the county."

**NORTH CAROLINA**

Kevin Madsen has spent decades managing **disaster recovery**, from the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in Texas to Hurricane Matthew in North Carolina. He is now leading **BUNCOMBE COUNTY**'s long-term recovery from Tropical Storm Helene, Mount Xpress reported. The county recently created the Helene Recovery Office to oversee 31 projects as part of a broader 114-project recovery plan spanning seven jurisdictions. Hired as Helene recovery officer, Madsen began Nov. 3 and is coordinating efforts among municipal, nonprofit and state partners. "I applied because I wanted to help the place where my family lives," he says, noting that recovery will require time, resources and collaboration.

Residents can now follow the impact of **WAKE COUNTY's affordable housing** investments — from new construction homes to preserved affordable housing — through the newly released Affordable Housing Impact Tracker. This public, interactive tool shows transparency, accountability and progress over time.

"We want residents to see exactly how we're delivering on our promises," said Commissioner Tara Waters. "The tracker turns complex investments into clear results and shows that every dollar counts toward creating and preserving homes across Wake County."

TENNESSEE

HAMILTON COUNTY recently announced the

launch of the **Chattanooga-Hamilton County History Experience**, a new immersive initiative aimed at bringing the region's history to life through film, interactive exhibits, and student-led storytelling WRCB-TV reported.

The experience, described as a "living archive," is expected to open this summer as the community marks America250, the nationwide commemoration of the United States' 250th anniversary.

"This isn't about creating another building filled with artifacts," said Hamilton County Mayor Weston Wamp. "The Chattanooga-Hamilton County History Experience is about strengthening our sense of identity by giving young people a front-row seat to

our past, present, and future. Only when we tell our county's history do students have the opportunity to find their place in our community — gaining skills, confidence, and a stake in carrying our story forward."

TEXAS

BRAZOS COUNTY has rolled out new **high-tech pet licenses** featuring QR codes that contain pet photos, medical details and owner contact information. Aggieland Humane Society unveiled its new pet tag system, tags containing a QR code with information such as the pet's photo, medical details and the owner's contact information.

VIRGINIA

FAIRFAX COUNTY is starting a new program that aims to make it easier and

**NEVADA**

The prospect of purchasing **affordable housing** such as a brand new 2,000-square-foot single-family home in the northwest part of the Las Vegas Valley for around \$300,000 would typically be scoffed at by local realtors. But that opportunity



more convenient for residents to **recycle unwanted books**, WTOP-FM reported.

Through a partnership with New Legacy Books, the county has placed a green drop-off bin at its Interstate 66 Transfer Station in Fairfax. There are currently two donation bins in place, though the program could expand to other locations if there's enough demand.

"A lot of our libraries will accept donations, but sometimes they aren't able to accept everything," Torgersen said. "This is just another way for people to donate."

The **PRINCE WILLIAM COUNTY** Department of Public Works, Environmental Management Division (EMD), in partnership with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and the Northern Virginia Regional Commission (NVRC), recently introduced freshwater mussels into several restored streams throughout the County as part of a pilot project. The goal is to evaluate whether the native Eastern Elliptio mussel can survive in local waterways.

Send your news to Editor Mary Ann Barton: mbarton@naco.org.

is becoming a reality later this year thanks to a new **CLARK COUNTY** program, the *Nevada Current* reported. Last month, the county broke ground on a 30-home development called Rebecca Place. The homes will be sold to local first-time buyers earning between 80% and 100% of the area median income, or roughly \$68,000 to \$85,000 per year for a family of three.

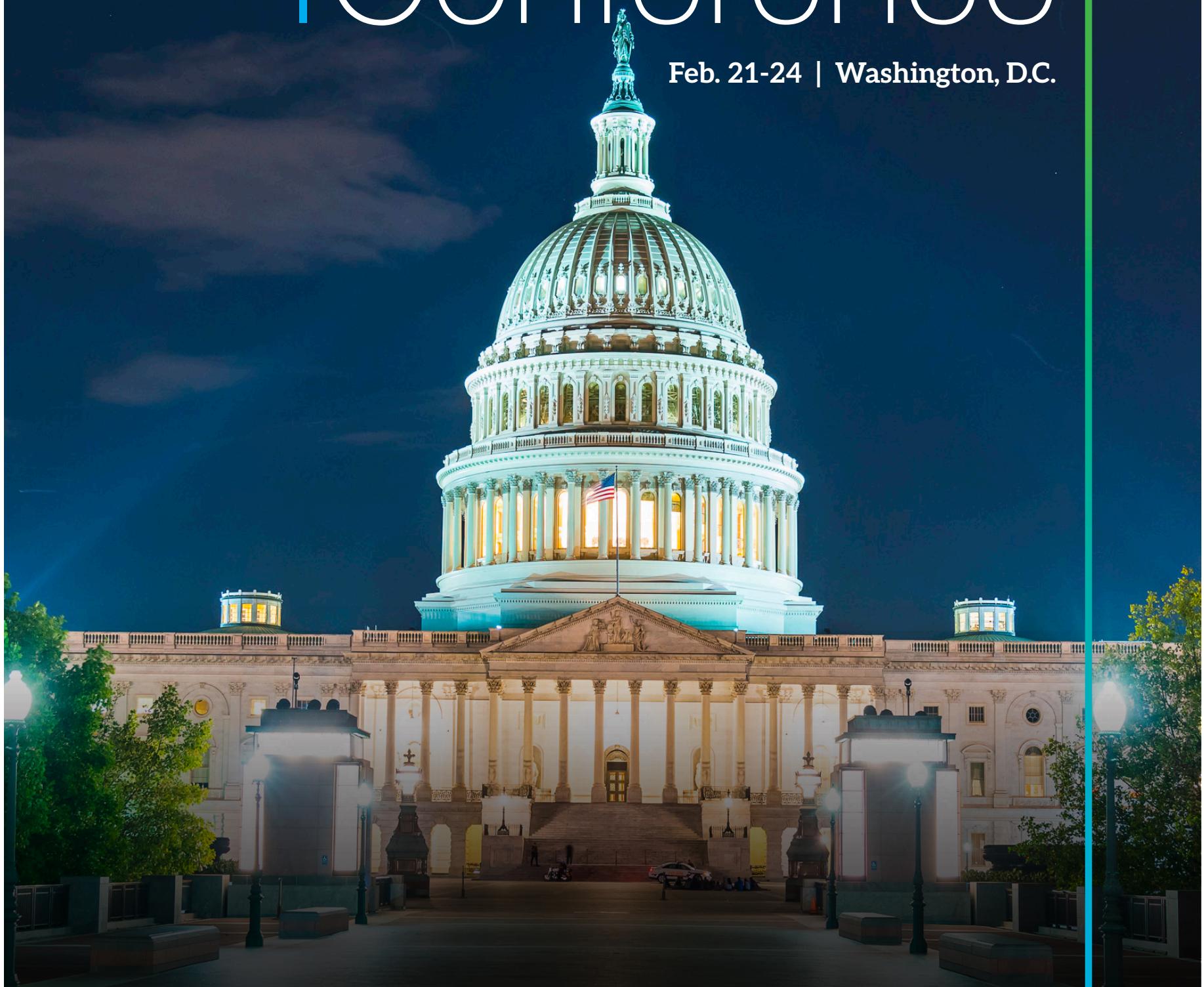
The catch is that Rebecca Place operates under a county-managed community land trust designed to keep homes affordable long term. Buyers purchase the physical home but enter a renewable ground lease with the trust, which retains ownership of the land. By removing the land cost, the initial sale price is kept lower, but buyers agree that when they sell, the home must be resold at a below-market rate using the same affordability formula.

20
26



Legislative Conference

Feb. 21-24 | Washington, D.C.



REGISTER NOW!



www.naco.org/leg