

NACo kicks off 2026 Legislative Conference

by **Mary Ann Barton**
editor

More than 2,000 county officials from across the nation are visiting Washington, D.C., this week for the National Association of Counties (NACo) 2026 Legislative Conference, which kicks off at the Washington Hilton.

The NACo 2026 Legislative Conference, taking place Feb. 21-24, provides county officials with a forum to engage directly with federal policymakers, share local perspectives and shape discussions on national issues with significant local impact.

Over several days, attendees will explore hot topics in workshops, steering committee meetings, general sessions and conference-wide receptions.

Pre-conference events are also scheduled on Feb. 20 including a technology innovation forum and disaster response and recovery training.

The multi-day conference

will focus on a broad range of federal policy issues affecting counties, including disaster reform, energy, land use, artificial intelligence and emerging technologies.

Additional key topics include Surface Transportation Reauthorization, local pre-emption efforts related to permitting and property taxes, and implementation of H.R. 1 as it pertains to Medicaid and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

Attendees will gather for two General Sessions, where they will hear from a number of high-profile speakers including NACo President J.D. Clark of Wise County, Texas as well as Cabinet secretaries and members of Congress.

Monday, Feb. 23 speakers include:

- Federal Transit Administration Administrator Marc

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County officials will speak one-on-one with federal officials and staff at the Federal Agency Expo at the conference.



NACo to unveil 'We Are Counties' message at Legislative Conference

by **Mary Ann Barton**
editor

NACo will unveil a national three-year, multimillion-dollar education campaign this week at its 2026 Legislative Conference.

Titled "We Are Counties," the \$3.5 million initiative is designed to educate policymakers and the public about the full scope of county responsibilities

— from disaster mitigation and affordable housing to broadband access and healthcare.

The campaign will target three key audiences: State and federal policymakers, the general public and NACo members, serving both educational and information-sharing purposes.

The campaign will roll out with a mix of videos, posters,

postcards, social media content and an online toolkit for NACo members, building on

a storytelling initiative launched last year by NACo President J.D. Clark of Wise County, Texas.

"Every day, counties deliver essential services that touch nearly every aspect



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Commissioner fights for 'forgotten' township

by **Charlie Ban**
senior writer

Yolanda Smith Charles received a gift she didn't ask for, or expect, when she won a seat in 2020 on the Oakland County, Mich. Board of Commissioners. Soon after taking office, reapportionment shifted her district's boundaries around, and she found herself representing Royal Oak Township.

If she could talk to her pre-

decessors in local government in the 19th century, they'd likely be impressed that she represented a 36-square mile area. She would then explain that Royal Oak Township — distinct from the larger City of Royal Oak — had dwindled to just 2% of its original size since its founding in 1833. But she has taken up the mantle of advocating for the community.

"It's kind of like the Haiti of Oakland County," she said. "It's

little, it's forgotten, it's predominantly Black people."

Over the years, 10 municipalities have split off from Royal Oak, taking with them commercial properties that fund municipal coffers. It's now the second smallest township in the state, with roughly 2,400 residents.

"It doesn't have any of its own city services like fire, police or EMS," Charles said. "It doesn't get the attention,

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County officials to gather in Washington, D.C. to talk policy, swap ideas

From CONFERENCE page 1

Molinaro, whose public service career includes four terms in the Dutchess County, N.Y., Legislature

- House Majority Whip Tom Emmer (R-Minn.), who represents Minnesota’s 6th Congressional District
- U.S. Rep. Andrea Salinas (D-Ore.), a member of the House Agriculture and House Science, Space and Technology committees and co-chair of the bipartisan Mental Health Caucus

Tuesday, Feb. 24 speakers include:

- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr.

- Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Lee Zeldin
- Rep. Bruce Westerman (R-Ark.), chair of the House Committee on Natural Resources

Members of NACo’s policy steering committees are set to explore an array of domestic policy issues. These committees meet at least twice each year to review and make recommendations on public policy issues and legislation. The policy development process initiated by the steering committees is the foundation for the American County Platform, which drives NACo’s advocacy work.

Several NACo caucuses will



EPA staff meet with county officials at the 2025 NACo Legislative Conference. Photo by Denny Henry

SNAP/STATS

Washington’s Birthday

FACT	NUMBERS
No. of days in White House	Zero
Campaign spending	Zero
Whiskey distilled annually	11,000 gallons
Biological children	None
Original teeth while president.....	One
Birthday celebrated	Feb. 16 (third Monday in February)
Actual birthday:	Feb. 22

Source: Reader’s Digest



Zeldin

host specialized discussions with federal leaders.

The Large Urban County Caucus will hear from Ronnie Kurtz, assistant secretary at the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, and Matt Squeri, senior advisor in the State Department’s Office of China Coordination.

The Midsize County Caucus will receive an update from Connor Torossian, associate administrator at the Federal Transit Administration.

The Rural Action Caucus will meet with Robert Hyman, director of Infrastructure Implementation at the U.S. De-



Kennedy

partment of Transportation.

A unique opportunity at the conference will be the NACo Federal Agency Expo on Monday, Feb. 23, when county officials meet one-on-one with federal representatives.

Attendees will visit their congressional representatives on Capitol Hill Tuesday, Feb. 24.



Westerman

The expo is the only event of its kind to bring together more than 100 federal officials from dozens of agencies in a single setting dedicated specifically to engaging with county leaders.

On the final day of the conference, Tuesday, Feb. 24, members will visit with their congressional representatives on Capitol Hill, while public information officers will gather for a meeting on storytelling, to hear from speakers about creative ways to get the word out about county initiatives. Attendees will end the conference with a county fair-themed reception. **CN**

Survivor's story helps empower Ohio county dog wardens

by **Charlie Ban**
senior writer

The days of “free bites” in Ohio are almost over for vicious dogs.

Despite the authority that the state grants to dog wardens, who are appointed by county commissioners, it hasn't been enough to prevent some horrific injuries before they were allowed to take action against a dog. Larry Williams has felt a lot of frustration about how his hands were tied in Licking County, where he serves as chief dog warden and must wait for a dog to attack once to be classified as dangerous.

“We can't even protect the public from some of these dogs that we've had issues with,” he said. “You can designate a dog as ‘vicious’ after it bites someone the first time, but then there's concern about if it's going to happen again. Will it be worse next time?”

On March 18, that will change, thanks in large part to the willingness of a young dog attack survivor who gave voice to an effort to increase authority given to county dog wardens.

State law currently gives wardens the authority to oversee dog licensing, conduct dog bite investigations and conduct investigations of dogs attacking livestock. Animal cruelty and neglect cases, on the other hand, are handled by the humane society.

Williams, who was named 2025 warden of the year by the Ohio County Dog Wardens Association, had been working with state Rep. Kevin Miller on legislation to give wardens more authority after an 11-year-old girl, Avery Russell, was attacked by two pit bulls in a friend's relative's Franklin County house and saved by a neighbor who fought off the dogs with a power washer.

“I was just trying to use the restroom — I never imagined something so ordinary would turn into something so tragic,” she told the House Public Safety Committee in June 2025. “I truly thought I was



Licking County, Ohio Commissioner Tim Bubb (right) recognizes Licking County Dog Warden Larry Williams (center) and Assistant Chief Warden Jeremy Williams. Photo by Ryan Horns

going to die.”

The dogs' owner was fined \$450 and sentenced to four days in jail and three years of probation.

Rep. Meredith Lawson-Rowe, who co-sponsored Miller's bill, dubbed Avery's Law, noted the disparity between the girl's injuries and the dog owner's penalty.

“[The owner] received a slap on the wrist for her role in an event that left Avery with lifelong scars,” she said.

Meanwhile, Russell faced a long and painful series of surgeries to repair the physical damage, including facial scarring and the loss of both ears, to say nothing of the trauma she suffered, but when her family learned of the effort in the statehouse, she testified in support of the bill.

“Her mother had to quit all of her jobs to take care of this little girl for a year through about a dozen surgeries to put her back together. They could

have run away and just said ‘We want to forget about this terrible thing,’ said Licking County Commissioner Tim Bubb. “Avery got up in front of House and Senate committees and told her story about almost being killed, and that she didn't want this to happen to any other little children.

“Instead of running away, they fixed it, and they stood up big time with the counties and made this case to the legislature. The story she told connected with the legislators, and they could relate to Avery and what it

would be like for their child or grandchild to be attacked by a vicious dog.”

Avery's Law passed quickly, within about six months of introduction, with unanimous support.

“You don't see this kind of support for impactful legislation that really does some-

thing,” Bubb said. “These days, it usually only happens for something like naming a road, so that speaks to how important legislators saw this issue and how well Avery persuaded them.”

The law imposes criminal penalties on a dog owner who negligently fails to keep their dog from committing an unprovoked attack and gives the county dog warden the authority to seize the dog immediately. The investigation and enforcement requirements in the event of a complaint that dog law has been violated and allows the euthanasia of a dog if it kills or seriously injures a person, though the law includes protections for dogs that are defending themselves, their owners or their property. It also requires owners of dangerous dogs to carry \$100,000 in liability insurance.”

Many of the dangerous dogs Ohio dog wardens encounter have been bred for their disposition, Williams said.

“For whatever reason, they want a protective dog,” he said. “Sometimes they're doing something illegal and don't want anyone in the house. Maybe they're breed-

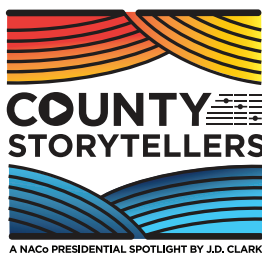
ing fighting dogs. Regardless, if the owners don't contain them, they become a public safety threat.”

Bubb said the attention that Russell's testimony attracted will help spread the news that county dog wardens across the state are equipped to meet the threat more effectively.

“There are a lot of irresponsible dog owners out there, and they're going to find out they won't get a slap on the wrist if they don't even bother to have a good fence in their yard or contain their dog,” he said. “These dogs aren't going to go away and these people aren't going to go away. But maybe, maybe when they become educated, and they know that we have some teeth in the dog law now, maybe they'll act more responsibly. That's what I hope.”

And Williams continues to look up to Russell for her courage.

“She was probably the bravest person that I've ever met,” he said. “We had been working on this law before she was attacked, but her willingness to speak up for kids like her across Ohio helped focus everyone on making the legislation pass.” **CN**



“I truly thought
I was going
to die.”

— Avery Russell, 11

After historic winter storms, counties assess response

by Meredith Moran
staff writer

In the wake of last month's colossal ice storm — which caused hundreds of thousands of power outages and dozens of deaths nationwide — counties across the country are reassessing their preparedness for major winter weather events.

The combination of snow, sleet and ice that blanketed the southern and eastern United States left many local governments struggling to manage the aftermath, as they were ill-equipped for a storm

of that magnitude.

President Trump approved 12 federal emergency disaster declarations for Arkansas, Georgia, Indiana, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia and West Virginia.

"Public assistance is traditionally provided on a reimbursement basis after costs are incurred and documented," FEMA stated in a Jan. 30 news release. "This time, because the storm was so serious, FEMA is sending the money upfront so Mississippi, Tennessee and Louisiana can act quickly."



Debris lies in the road following Winter Storm Fern. Crews trimmed or removed more than 4,000 hazardous limbs and trees in Lafayette County, Miss. Photo courtesy of Beau Moore

Lafayette County, Miss.: 'Like a tornado hit the entire county'

The winter storm marked the most challenging response Beau Moore, public information officer for Lafayette County Emergency Management, has seen in the county and the broader region. He compared the widespread damage to homes, trees and power lines to the impact of a tornado striking the entire county at once.

Roughly 95% of Lafayette County lost power during the ice storm.

“Mother Nature threw quite the event at all of us,” Moore said.

More than two weeks after the storm first hit, Lafayette County schools reopened on Feb. 9, but 2,299 power outages still remained. Restoring power in the remaining locations will be “very challenging,” Moore said, because most are in outlying areas where service relies on utility poles — many of which were damaged or destroyed and must be replaced.

"We think that winter events don't happen really often," Moore said. "But if we look back over the last five years, we have had snow events that have shut down parts of North Mississippi for a week at a time, so I think we have to be



Crews collect debris. As of Feb. 10, Lafayette County, Miss. collected 90,000 cubic yards of debris. Photo courtesy of Beau Moore

real about what our weather forecasts are showing now.”

Mississippi's last major winter storm — the 1994 blizzard — occurred more than three decades ago. Moore said that with climate change, he expects severe winter storms to become more common, underscoring the need for more local resources.

In 2023, Lafayette County was awarded a federal grant to build an emergency operations center and distribution facility, with the county agreeing to fund the remaining 25% of the cost to build. The

federal funding was delayed until 2024, and by then, due to the rising cost of building supplies, the county could no longer afford the remaining building costs and has been unable to secure additional funding, despite already clearing the land to build. During the storm, delays in distributing supplies could have been alleviated with a centralized distribution point, Moore said.

“This [would be] not just something for Lafayette County, but all our friends and

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California counties fight agricultural crime

by **Charlie Ban**
senior writer

Most farmers put a lot of effort into maintaining their fences. At the same time, law enforcement agencies in California's Central Valley are worried about other fences — the intermediaries who help thieves traffic in stolen goods.

For years, copper wire has been both a staple of farm equipment and a target for criminals, particularly in the nation's most productive agricultural region. Lt. Randy Gunderman of the Tulare County Sheriff's Office said the market for stolen copper, much of which reaches dealers covered in remnants of burned plastic — indicating that it had been part of a machine — doesn't seem to be waning.

"It's going to continue to be a problem because recyclers are offering pretty decent money for this stuff," he said. "As long as they continue to take it, there's going to be a market for people to steal it and turn it in."

Even when authorities catch copper thieves, Merced County District Attorney Nicole Silveira said prosecutors are hamstrung by the state's high threshold for theft. When prosecuting a theft that involved burning a GPS device off a tractor, it made more sense to charge him with arson.

"We really have to look at these cases carefully and make sure that we're charging everything," she said. "That's what we did with that guy, because convicting him with theft would have been a slap on the wrist. Arson, in addition to everything else, is a serious felony."

That's to say nothing of the victim. The process of stealing the wire often causes significantly more costly damage.

"They'll cut, hook a truck to it, they pull their variable pump speed controller board off the wall, which costs \$15,000 to fix," said Jay Struble, the supervising investigator Merced County's rural crime prevention unit. "They rip the



A stolen backhoe being unloaded in March 2024 from a semitruck, recovered by law enforcement in Tulare County, Calif. Photo courtesy of the Tulare County Sheriff's Office

conduit out of the ground. A lot of times it's not necessarily the wire that's the expensive part, it's all the damage it's incurred as a result of them taking the wire."

And it's not just farms that grow food that have suffered. A theft of \$100,000 worth of copper wiring from a Fresno County solar farm in late 2023 caused \$2.8 million in damages.

More than California wire country

There's more to agricultural crime than preventing, investigating and prosecuting copper wire theft. How much more?

"Name it," Gunderman said. "It could be anything. Vandalism, tool and equipment theft, embezzlement from agribusiness. Trucks and side-by-sides. Someone will steal boxes of bees. Livestock theft."

That's right. Gunderman has investigated cattle rustlers — in 2017, he conducted a six-month investigation into a man accused of stealing nearly a thousand head of cattle, totaling a loss of \$1.5 million.

Gunderman sees diesel fuel theft, bee theft and of course,

copper wire theft being chief among farmers' concerns this year.

For the half dozen counties in California that support agricultural crime units in the sheriff's or prosecutors' offices, it's an investment in safeguarding their business community. Tulare and Fresno counties regularly spar for the top agriculture production ranking in the country.

'Someone will steal boxes of bees. Livestock theft.'

— Lt. Randy Gunderman,
Tulare County, Calif.

"We have to take these crimes very seriously because when you steal a farmer's equipment, some people think that a rich farmer can replace it, but that's not the case," Silveira said. "You can't just go to Merced Honda and buy a new tractor. It's not that easy. So that's less work the farmer can do. Then he's not going to be able to make payroll, because he has to replace

that piece of equipment. And then that means people aren't going to be able to put food on the table.

"It really has a trickle-down effect in our community."

An eight-county investigation into what they dubbed "Operation Tractor Pull" in 2024 alleged that 11 suspects stole more than two dozen tractors, backhoes and excavators, totaling \$2.25 million, and took them to Mexico. Only \$1.3 million of the equipment was recovered.

As Silveira noted, however, because the actions did not constitute a violent crime, it was unlikely the suspects would face jail time.

"We can't put them in jail for an extended amount of time, which sends no message of accountability," Tulare County Sheriff Mike Boudreaux said at a press conference.

Talk like a farmer

These agencies target recruits who have agricultural backgrounds.

"One of my detectives is a fourth-generation dairyman, and another is a third-generation citrus farmer," Gunderman said. "When we go out

and talk to these farmers and ranchers, we need to have an idea of how their operation works to be able to help them."

With the potential losses in productivity and equipment in mind, the ag crime units offer ounces of prevention all over their communities. They meet with farm bureaus, social clubs and farming communities, offering advice on preventing theft and vandalism.

"I think that they like that we're available," Silveira said. "They know they can call us and they can work with someone who understands the issue, that we're there for them and that we communicate with them."

While she notes that some particularly effective investigative methods are better kept clandestine, Merced County shared a few tactics it encouraged among farmers, beyond vigilance and video cameras:

- Offering owner-applied numbers. While they are like vehicle identification numbers (VINs), they are consistent among all of a farmer's property.

2026 | NACo Second Vice Presidential Election

Meet the Candidates



Sarah Benatar
County Treasurer
Coconino County, Ariz.

Why are you interested in serving as a NACo officer?

I believe that counties remain a blueprint for leadership rooted in local control, fiscal responsibility, and solutions that meet communities where they are. My interest in serving as a NACo officer is founded on a lifelong commitment to public service and a deep desire to bring my leadership experience to strengthen the organization and advocate for all members. Over the years, I have had the privilege of serving in numerous national and state leadership roles, including:

- Vice Chair, NACo Finance, Pensions, and Intergovernmental Affairs Policy Steering Committee
- Former Chair, NACo Fiscal Policy & Pensions Subcommittee
- Past President, Arizona Association of Counties (AACo)
- Former Chair, NACo Resilient Counties Advisory Board
- Past Member of NACo Board, Audit Committee, Health Policy Steering Committee, and Human Services & Education Policy Steering Committee
- Past NACo Tally Clerk
- 2023 National Government Financial Professional of the Year by Controllers Council

As the Chief Banking Officer and Chief Investment Officer for my county, I manage critical financial operations that impact every resident. These

responsibilities, combined with my national leadership experience, have given me a unique perspective on the challenges and opportunities facing counties of all sizes - rural, midsize, and urban.

The most important reason I am seeking this role is simple: collaboration, advocacy, and the unwavering belief in local control. I believe the future of NACo and our counties must be shaped by listening, engaging, and working together. My goal is to ensure every county's voice is heard as we build a stronger, more resilient future for the communities we serve.

What do you consider to be the two or three most important challenges facing NACo in the near future on which the Officers/ Executive Committee/ Board of Directors should focus? Why?

One of the most pressing challenges facing NACo in the near future is fiscal sustainability. Counties are responsible for delivering essential services—public safety, health care, infrastructure, and social programs—yet their revenue streams remain rigid and highly sensitive to economic cycles. Today, fiscal stress is coming from multiple directions. Aging infrastructure and capital needs, such as roads, bridges, and public facilities, require significant investment. At the same time, counties are experiencing rising demand for behavioral health services, homelessness programs, and Medicaid administration, all of which are chronically underfunded. Increased costs for labor, materials, and operations only compound these pressures.

Nationwide policy shifts are also creating uncertainty around tax revenues and access to federal funding, while cost shifts to states are placing additional burdens on local governments. For example, leg-

islation such as HR 1 illustrates how fiscal responsibilities are increasingly being pushed down to counties without corresponding resources. These trends require counties to find creative solutions to maintain service levels while ensuring long-term fiscal stability. NACo must lead efforts to advocate for flexible funding, modernize revenue systems, and develop strategic financial planning tools to help counties navigate these challenges.

The second major challenge is preserving local control. Counties are facing growing threats to their decision-making authority, from contract negotiations and funding allocations to land-use decisions that impact ranchers and rural economies. When state or federal mandates undermine local priorities, communities lose the ability to shape policies that reflect their unique needs.

Ensuring that county officials retain the ability to make decisions on issues such as resource management, economic development, and service delivery is critical to maintaining strong, resilient communities. NACo should continue to champion local authority and emphasize that when counties decide, communities thrive.

What do you consider to have been your most important contributions to the National Association of Counties to date? What do you consider to have been your most important contributions to your state association of counties?

My most important contribution to the National Association of Counties has been advancing inclusive, fiscally responsible leadership that strengthens counties' ability to serve their residents. I have worked to elevate diverse county voices within NACo, build strategic partnerships, and ensure national policies reflect

the unique needs of local communities.

Through my national leadership, I have championed local control and fiscal responsibility for all counties.

For example, I was invited to testify before the U.S. House Financial Services Committee alongside federal finance regulators as the national expert on local control and fiscal policy. Following that testimony, I brought this expertise to NACo as Chair of the Fiscal Policy and Pensions Subcommittee, and through service on the NACo Board of Directors and Audit Committee, where I helped shape policies that protect counties' financial stability.

At the state level, my most significant contribution was serving as President of the Arizona Association of Counties, where I strengthened collaboration across counties, advocated for local control, and aligned state policy with on-the-ground realities. During my tenure, I helped secure over \$20 million in state appropriations for counties impacted by a property tax refund, ensuring they could maintain essential services.

Across both roles, my focus has been building partnerships, investing strategically, and empowering county leaders—on both sides of the aisle—to deliver better outcomes for our residents.

What measures would you recommend to increase and retain NACo membership and to encourage broad participation in NACo by elected officials and employees of NACo member counties? What specific role would you be willing to assume to help build and sustain membership in NACo?

At a time when counties are facing fiscal uncertainty and affordability challenges, NACo must demonstrate its value in

ways that attract new members and strengthen engagement. One of the most effective strategies is expanding outreach to non-member counties through a robust ambassador program. By empowering current NACo leaders and members to serve as ambassadors, we can build relationships, share success stories, and create a personal connection that highlights the tangible benefits of membership.

In addition, NACo should consider developing programming and resources that are exclusive to members while offering limited access to non-members at a reduced cost or trial basis. This approach allows non-member counties to experience NACo's value firsthand—whether through policy briefings, best-practice sessions, or leadership development—before committing to full membership. Creating these "preview opportunities" can help non-members understand that membership is an investment, overcome barriers to participation, and make joining NACo an easier decision.

As a County Treasurer with extensive experience in fiscal management and service on NACo's Audit Committee, I understand the importance of financial sustainability for both counties and NACo itself. I would take an active role in expanding the ambassador program, reaching out to non-member counties, and working with NACo leadership to design strategic engagement opportunities that demonstrate NACo's unique value. By listening to counties' needs and tailoring resources accordingly, we can grow membership and ensure NACo remains the united voice for all counties.

When counties decide, communities thrive—and by strengthening NACo's membership, we empower counties to make decisions that drive prosperity for every community across the nation.

2026 | NACo Second Vice Presidential Election

Meet the Candidates



Matthew Prochaska

Circuit Clerk
Kendall County, Ill.

Why are you interested in serving as a NACo officer?

I strongly believe NACo's strength is in its ability to build bridges between different groups. Throughout my career in county government, I have seen firsthand how NACo brings together diverse perspectives and develop practical solutions and elevate the voice of counties.

My involvement within NACo has reinforced the importance of a "county to county" connection and collaboration. We all understand counties face difficult challenges; where we succeed is when we learn from each other and work together. As NACo's Second Vice President I will continue building those bridges, strengthening those connections and collaborations, and ensuring NACo continues to support the existing bridges between large and small counties, and rural and urban communities.

NACo's officers play a critical role in uniting members, fostering trust, and creating space for productive discussions. I am committed to helping build bridges within our Association and with our federal partners, so counties are better equipped to meet today's challenges and prepared for what lies ahead.

What do you consider to be the two or three most important challenges facing NACo in the near future on which the Officers/ Executive Committee/ Board of Directors should focus? Why?

One of the most important challenges facing NACo is to continue strengthening and expanding NACo Edge as a reliable, value-driven resource for counties, and also a steady stream of non-dues revenue for our Association. Counties face ongoing fiscal pressures and NACo Edge has the potential to expand practical, cost-saving solutions for county government and our residents, while also providing NACo with sustainable income supporting advocacy, education, and member services. Continued focus on growth, innovation, and accountability within NACo Edge will help ensure it delivers clear value to our counties and long-term stability for our Association.

At a time of increasing political polarization in Washington, NACo's role as a solutions-oriented, nonpartisan, organization will become even more important. NACo is most effective when it minimizes conflict, calms the waters and remains focused on shared county priorities. The Officers, Executive Committee, and Board of Directors must continue fostering an environment that encourages respectful discussions, collaboration between members, and consensus-building across all lines.

What do you consider to have been your most important contributions to the National Association of Counties to date? What do you consider to have been

your most important contributions to your state association of counties?

My contributions to the NACo have been centered on strengthening our Association through membership growth, sound governance, innovation and collaboration and bridge-building. I served as NACo's Membership Chair for three years, helping our Association reach an all-time membership high, and one of the best retention rates ever. We did this by working closely with our state associations and our county leaders across the country to expand engagement and reinforce the value of NACo membership.

I served as NACo Parliamentarian and on the Credentials Committee, where I helped ensure a fair, transparent, and orderly governance processes for NACo. These roles require trust, neutrality, and an ability to bring people together, reinforcing NACo's role as a non-partisan, solutions-focused organization.

I serve as President of the Illinois State Association of Counties (ISACo) and continue to serve as a Board Member of both ISACo and the United Counties Council of Illinois (UCCI). In those roles, I have worked diligently to bring the two Associations closer together through shared programming, joint efforts on legislation in our state capital, Commissioner to Commissioner relations and presenting a more unified voice for counties in Illinois.

Across both my NACo and state service, my focus has been on building bridges, strengthening institutions, and ensuring county officials of all backgrounds and regions feel engaged, respected, and represented. This approach has guided my leadership and shaped my contributions to

both NACo and my state associations.

What measures would you recommend to increase and retain NACo membership and to encourage broad participation in NACo by elected officials and employees of NACo member counties? What specific role would you be willing to assume to help build and sustain membership in NACo?

Relationship building and succession planning! To increase and retain NACo membership, our Association must communicate both the financial value of being a NACo member, but also the value each individual Commissioner (and staff member) brings to the table by their participation. We must encourage active NACo members to involve other people from their county in NACo and introducing them to the friendships and learning experiences NACo offers. By doing this we will not only increase NACo participation, but also help with the succession planning needed for the next generation of active NACo members from every county.

NACo provides clear financial advantages through advocacy, education, and programs such as NACo Edge, but membership is strongest only when multiple people from each county are actively involved. When only one person is engaged from a county, that county is "at-risk", and may not continue participating in the future. Institutional knowledge about what NACo offers must not be in one the hands of only one person. How many times have we seen the one active member from a county retire, and because no one else from that county

has been involved, that county stops participating.

NACo must continue proving its financial value for counties but also encourage a Commissioner-to-Commissioner outreach that builds bridges and engages county leaders. This outreach should include not only Commissioners and Executives, but also countywide elected officers such as Sheriffs, Clerks, Treasurers, County Attorneys, Engineers and Coroners, and as importantly the staff from our counties. Encouraging participation across offices and roles will help ensure NACo will continue to reflect everything county government does, and also make sure several people from each county are involved in NACo.

I tried to use this approach as NACo Membership Chairman when NACo reached an all-time high in membership, and also one of its strongest retention rates ever. We did this by emphasizing both the tangible financial benefits of being a NACo member, but also the need for engagement through state associations and county leadership.

As NACo's 2nd Vice President I will continue serving as an ambassador for NACo to every county, parish and borough in America. I will promote multi-person participation from each county, encourage other county wide elected officers to participate alongside legislative and executive leaders, and help connect members to programs and leadership opportunities that sustain long-term involvement.

My focus will always be on building bridges: connecting counties to resources, to one another, and to a strong, durable National Association of Counties.

2026 | NACo Second Vice Presidential Election

Meet the Candidates



Mike Turner

Vice-Chair
Loudoun County, Va.
Board of Supervisors

Why are you interested in serving as a NACo officer?

I've spent my entire life in public service, first as a U.S. Air Force officer, helicopter pilot and fighter pilot for 28 years, then as a development officer (fundraiser) in six different national nonprofit organizations, and finally, as a Loudoun County, VA elected official. I can say without hesitation, being the Ashburn District Supervisor and Vice Chair of the Loudoun County Board of Supervisors is the most deeply satisfying and rewarding job I've ever had.

I want to contribute, and at this moment in NACo history, I believe my contribution to NACo leadership and NACo members can make a real difference.

I have made lasting, positive changes in every organization I've belonged to. During my final assignment in the military, I wrote a proposal for a concept to build an African peacekeeping force that ultimately trained more than 250,000 peacekeepers and became the largest U.S. foreign assistance program to Africa in history.

While serving in several national nonprofit organizations, I created three major donor annual giving programs to establish a steady, predictable flow of unrestricted donations in support of each organization's operations. These programs have raised millions of dollars for these organizations and still exist today.

I believe every one of Amer-

ica's counties are now facing or will soon face some of the most complex and challenging issues they've ever encountered regarding the unprecedented growth of data centers. They are going to turn to and rely on NACo leadership for answers and support.

Over the past two years I've done extensive research into the historic growth of data centers and the concomitant exponential growth in demand for energy to process data nationwide. As an elected Supervisor in Loudoun County, VA, home to the world's highest concentration of data centers, I felt I had an overarching responsibility to understand this phenomenon and its potential impact on my constituents. My research led to my authorship of a white paper tracing that growth in Loudoun County, exploring all aspects of the issue within the data center/energy sectors and providing in-depth analysis from an elected official's point of view of what may lie ahead for all of us. You may download the paper and a one-page data center "Best Practices" sheet for communities considering data centers at www.Loudoun.gov/Ashburn.

I believe we are entering a second Industrial Revolution. As the nation's leading voice representing our 3,069 counties, I feel strongly NACo must take an informed and assertive national leadership role on this issue, an issue I expect to dominate the national discussion for the foreseeable future for all our members. My work in this area has garnered considerable national and international attention. I believe I am uniquely well-qualified to lead NACo during these historic times.

What do you consider to be the two or three most important challenges facing NACo in the near future on which the Officers/Executive Committee/Board of Directors should focus? Why?

1. First, as stated above, exponential data center growth and

the resulting exponential increase in demand for power to accommodate that growth are impacting, or will impact within the next five years, every county in America. Every data center/power issue our members will face will be unique to their county, shaped and influenced by local ordinances, land-use best practices, history and culture. As data center growth and power demand grows, so too will pressure on state and federal governments to respond, often without regard for uniquely local considerations. NACo, the leading national voice for counties, can best serve them by ensuring all levels of government work collaboratively in support of sustainable, local solutions. As NACo members have always believed, the role of state and federal governments must be to empower smart local decisions. That has never been truer than today amidst such historic changes in the data center sector.

2. This same trend is happening with housing as a result of the nationwide, affordable housing shortage. While localities are working to find innovative housing solutions, many state and local governments are now considering programs that would force localities to build homes "by right" without regard to the negative impacts on critical, local infrastructure. NACo, through a united, common effort by its members, must continue to assert its leadership role on the issue of housing affordability by advocating for local housing solutions appropriate to each community.

3. Finally, NACo must continue to be a unifying voice for our counties and reflect, through them, ethical, compassionate and principled national leadership during one of the most divisive and challenging times in our nation's history. Such principled leadership was expected of me as a senior military officer, and my NACo membership has simply reaffirmed these core values.

When I was first elected, I, like most Americans, thought

of government as a pyramid of influence and power, with the federal government at the top, state government in the middle, and county government at the bottom. After six years as a county Supervisor, I've come to realize this hierarchy is exactly reversed. County elected and appointed officials are the frontlines of American Democracy. We do more in one week to improve the quality of life of our constituents than our state and federal representatives do in a year. Never in my lifetime has it been so important for American citizens to see and hear their local elected officials demonstrating every day in their local communities the highest ideals and aspirations of American Democracy: compassion, fairness, respect, self-sacrifice, decency, non-partisanship, honesty, and so much more. In these turbulent times in our nation, NACo must be a clarion voice of reason, optimism and hope, a shining testament to those principles which have made America the most enduring democracy in human history.

What do you consider to have been your most important contributions to the National Association of Counties to date? What do you consider to have been your most important contributions to your state association of counties?

I have been appointed Chair of the Environment, Energy and Land Use Committees (EELU) of both NACo and the Virginia Association of Counties. As the NACo EELU Chair, I designed a 10-month training syllabus addressing every aspect of data center/power grid growth, microgrid development, alternative energy sources, energy storage and power generation, transmission and distribution to educate and inform our members. I believe it's essential every county official become an expert on all aspects of these highly complex challenges.

What measures would you recommend to increase and retain NACo membership and to encourage broad participation in NACo by elected officials and employees of NACo member counties? What specific role would you be willing to assume to help build and sustain membership in NACo?

For over two years, through an entirely organic process and word-of-mouth, I have been invited to participate in seminars and on panels to assist county officials from across the country facing serious data center challenges. These include the County Commissioners Association of Pennsylvania (site visit), the Association of County Commissioners of Georgia (webinar), and dozens of one-on-one virtual meetings with county elected officials throughout the nation to answer questions about our Loudoun County, VA experiences.

I believe this same process offers NACo an extraordinary opportunity to grow membership. Every community in America is going to have to grapple with these same historic challenges over the next five years, and county officials who have become experts on data center/power issues are going to lead the way. No organization in America is better positioned and better suited to educate, empower and inform local officials on these issues than NACo.

I would be honored to continue my work travelling, participating in and hosting events and activities specifically designed to empower our NACo members to become community experts and to invite others to join the NACo team as a means of better serving their communities. Indeed, I can't think of a better role for a NACo 2nd Vice President.



#NCGM



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Maryland county executive calls ice storm a 'once-in-a-century' challenge

From ICE STORM page 4

neighbors throughout the region," he said. "All of us were delayed on getting supplies because of the conditions in North Mississippi.

"And I think unfortunately, we're going to be in this position again."

Montgomery County, Md. — Costly limits to preparedness

Montgomery County, Md., and other jurisdictions in the Washington metropolitan area, faced criticism from residents over slow snow and ice cleanup efforts.

At a Feb. 3 public briefing, Montgomery County Council member Laurie-Ann Sayles said she felt the county was underprepared. Council member Sidney Katz echoed those concerns, saying, "We need to try our best not to have this misery again."

During a Feb. 4 briefing, Montgomery County Director of Transportation Chris Conklin estimated that the ice that fell weighed roughly 3 million tons — equivalent to 30 aircraft carriers.

Despite the criticism, Montgomery County Executive Marc Elrich said the county cannot absorb the millions of dollars it would

take to significantly upgrade winter operations, such as hiring more staff and purchasing larger plows and dump trucks. He described the storm as "a once-in-a-century challenge."

The county plans to release an in-depth analysis after cleanup concludes to identify potential areas for improvement.

DeSoto Parish, La. — Communication and water challenges

DeSoto Parish, La., is also conducting a post-storm assessment to identify gaps or unmet needs, according to public information officer Mark Pierce.

"That type of winter weather is not something that's extremely common," Pierce said. "But it's definitely something you want to sit down afterwards and ask, 'OK, how can we do better?'"

The parish's biggest challenge during the storm was water outages. Pierce said all hands were on deck, including office staff.

"We had deputies knocking on doors, checking on people," he said.

Throughout the storm, DeSoto Parish relied heavily on social media to communicate with residents. Its Face-



The winter storm necessitated an "all hands on deck" approach for localities. Photo courtesy of Beau Moore

book page — which has more followers than the parish has residents — shared frequent updates about resources like warming centers and live-streamed helicopter footage showing road conditions.

"We got tons of positive feedback from that," Pierce said, noting that the videos helped residents decide whether it was safe to travel for work, medical appointments or family needs.

With fewer than 27,000 residents but more than 40,000 Facebook followers and 25,000 active users on the DeSoto Sheriff App, the parish has been able to streamline communication. Pierce said

officials want to better educate seniors on using digital tools to access timely information during extreme weather.

Rabun County, Ga. — Preparing for the unpredictable

In Rabun County, Ga., Vice-Chairman Scott Crane said no amount of planning could have fully prepared the county for an ice storm.

"We can plan for snow," Crane said. "But once it rains ice, the only thing you can do is prepare your citizens for the worst and hope for the best."

As a major outdoor recreation destination in the Blue Ridge Mountains, Rabun

County urged visitors and second-home owners to leave ahead of the storm, warning that first responders could not handle the added strain.

Compounding the challenges, the county was hit by a 10- to 12-inch snowstorm just one week later.

Small communities, strong responses

Both DeSoto Parish and Rabun County are rural, with fewer than 50,000 residents combined. Leaders said their tight-knit communities proved to be one of their greatest strengths.

"Citizens were out with our deputies, cutting trees out of roadways," Pierce said. "People were pulling deputies out of ditches. The community really stepped up."

In Rabun County, Senior Center and Transit Director Wanda Henry cooked meals for first responders and powerline workers — something she has done during past disasters. Crane praised Henry and other volunteers during a Jan. 27 County Commissioners meeting.

"They've put their lives on the line trying to help us and get people their power back," Henry said. "The least you can do is give them a warm meal." **CN**

Agricultural crime units stress 'hardening' targets to prevent theft, vandalism

From AG CRIME page 5

"We don't have to interpret VINs or deal with criminals filing them off," Struble said. "You can stamp it in several places on each item."

Through December 2025, 253 different owner-applied numbers were registered with Merced County.

- Encouraging networking among agencies. Particularly through classes, where deputies and investigators can meet peers while learning.

"These criminals aren't operating alone, so it puts us at a disadvantage if we don't network with law enforcement across the country," Struble said. "They can be stealing stuff from



Merced County, Calif. distributes stickers to dissuade thieves from breaking into machinery to extract copper wire.

my county and going to Stanislaus County, or they could be going to North Carolina.

"That's how networked they are, we have to get that net-

worked as well."

- Wear the sticker. Merced County distributes reflective stickers to apply to machinery that uses aluminum wire,

'These criminals aren't operating alone...'

— Jay Struble, Merced County

rather than copper. Struble hopes it acts as a deterrent.

"It's more vulnerable to moisture, but it's not valuable, so you don't have people destroying machinery to pull it out," he said. "Even if they open it up to get at the wire and cut it, that's easier to repair than some of the things they do when they take the copper out."

Tulare was the first county

to establish an agricultural crimes unit in 1997, but Gunderman said the unit really hit its stride in the mid-2010s.

"That team was really making a lot of good cases, but they were also doing a lot of presentations, getting in front of growers and encouraging them to be more proactive about security," he said.

Among the huge plots of agricultural land in the valley, some parts of a farmer's property could go for days before someone visits and notices something is awry.

"You can go in and clean up a couple hundred bins out of some of these larger orchards and the farmer may not even know it," he said. **CN**



20
26



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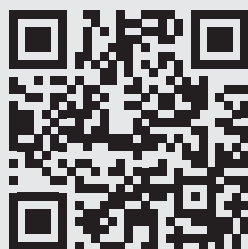
March 3, 2026 at 11:59 p.m. ET

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Oakland County, Mich. Commissioner Yolanda Smith Charles discusses housing needs at a press conference. Photo courtesy of Yolanda Smith Charles

School board service galvanized Yolanda Smith Charles' public service career

From HISTORY page 1

resources and help that Pontiac has. But it's been a point of pride that I've been able to work to restore Royal Oak Township in a lot of ways."

Now in her sixth year on the Board of Commissioners, she's not shy about angling for county resources, like \$20,000 for feasibility studies for parks and recreation projects in the township to apply for state grants.

"Somewhere along the line, decades ago, other cities got the grocery stores and restaurants on the border," Charles said.

Fighting for a community's sense of identity is nothing new to Charles. While serving on the Southfield Public Schools District Board of Education, her first role in elected office, she was the deciding vote to close her alma mater- Southfield High School and merge it with rival Southfield-Lathrup High School in the face of declin-

ing enrollment.

"To this day, it was the hardest vote I've ever taken," she said. "I tried to represent the alumni, our history and identity in the process so they weren't all forgotten."

She ran for the school board after being laid off as a substitute teacher. After completing a leadership development program, when someone asked her what office she'd want to run for, she reflexively responded "county commissioner."

The deadline for filing for the school board election had passed, but she mounted an Election Day write-in campaign for school board and won.

"It was just flyers I printed out at Kinko's," she said. "It was a humble campaign."

She entered the school board as an advocate for the teachers, having been one herself recently, but in her first professional development class, she turned on a dime, and hanged the way



Charles

'I've been able to work to restore Royal Oak Township in a lot of ways.'

— Yolanda Smith Charles
Oakland County, Mich.

she looked at representation.

"It turned everything on its head," she said. "I'm not there for the teachers, or for the parents or for the union, I had to

be laser-focused on what's best for the students."

She considered running for the Board of Commissioners before withdrawing to focus on the school district's superintendent search, then made a last-minute attempt in 2018 before breaking through in 2020.

"The second hardest thing I did was resign from the school board," Charles said. "At another time I could have done both, but with all of the pandemic relief money coming through the county, it would have been a conflict of interest."

She made the transition with some unexpected relief. On the school board, she limited her communication with district staff to the superintendent. As a commissioner, she was not only allowed but encouraged to interact with any and all county employees — from the county executive to the custodian and everyone in between.

Though her district includes

larger communities, including her native Southfield, once represented by former NACo President Eric Coleman, Charles hopes her efforts continue to pay off for Royal Oak Township.

Though her outdoor hobbies had previously stopped at golf, she's taken an increasing interest in park amenities, particularly trails, where she walks her Boston terrier, Bella Amo, and as she saw open space options mitigate community challenges during the pandemic.

"We end up having a lot of 'cement parks' in southern Oakland County, so I'd like to see more mobile resources where we are," she said. "Archery, climbing walls...some options that don't involve people driving an hour to the northern part of the county to enjoy them. That's an easy way we can increase the quality of life for a community like Royal Oak Township that doesn't have many resources." **CN**

SPONSORED CONTENT

NACo EDGE Is Ready for NACo Legislative Conference

Counties today are tackling big challenges — tight budgets, workforce demands and the need for more efficient services. NACo EDGE, the solutions enterprise of the National Association of Counties (NACo), helps counties navigate challenges by leveraging the collective strength of 3,069 counties and 3.6 million employees. Through strategic partnerships and cost-saving initiatives, NACo EDGE delivers solutions that improve people, purchasing, and performance.

Your Exclusive NACo LEG/EDGE Pass

While attending the NACo Legislative Conference Feb. 21-24, be sure to visit the NACo EDGE Solutions Center on the Terrace Level of the Washington Hilton. Meet with the NACo EDGE team and our partners to discover county-focused solutions. Plus, enjoy a coffee break in our lounge between meetings, and find yourself the lucky winner of exciting giveaways!

Learn How NACo EDGE Supports Counties

NACo EDGE offers seven key cost-saving and value-added solutions designed to support county governments, their dedicated workforces and local taxpayers:

- **Retirement Planning:** A partnership with Nationwide Retirement Solutions provides county employees with deferred compensation plans and financial planning tools to

Put Your Knowledge to the Test

Join the NACo EDGE Game Show Workshop for a fun, interactive way to learn about EDGE solutions. Our game show will be held Sunday, Feb. 22, from 1:45-2:45 p.m. in Columbia 11 and 12 (Terrace Level, Hilton). Insights on NACo EDGE programs and how they benefit counties. Participants will enjoy prizes, ice cream, and a chance to win! This session is designed to be both educational and entertaining, giving attendees practical takeaways while having some fun. Whether you are looking for ways to streamline procurement, strengthen your workforce, or enhance financial planning, NACo EDGE offers tools and strategies to help counties succeed.




Join us in D.C. and explore how your county can benefit!



help them save for the future.

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- **Financial Strategy and Budgeting:** NACo EDGE partners with three+one and ClearGov to provide liquidity analysis, budgeting, and strategic planning tools for counties.
- **Leadership and Mental Health Training:** Programs in partnership with the National Council for Mental Wellbeing and the Professional Development Academy support leadership development and mental health awareness. 



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BRIGHT IDEAS | SAN BERNARDINO COUNTY, CALIF.

California County Uses Technology to Improve Disaster Response

PROBLEM: An outdated communication system wasn't allowing the Sheriff's Department to respond and evacuate as effectively as they could during a disaster.

SOLUTION: Create a mobile app to report each step of the evacuation process in real-time.

by **Meredith Moran**
staff writer

During a disaster, the San Bernardino County, Calif. Sheriff's Department used to track evacuations using paper forms and radio calls. Now, deputies can document and track evacuation points in real-time through the county's Evacuation solution mobile app, streamlining the evacuation process, according to Frank Kams, the county sheriff's department's emergency services coordinator.

"When you have all these deputies out running, knocking on doors, the radio got cluttered," Kams said. "It was a lot of paperwork, and not very efficient."

During a disaster event, deputies report each step of the evacuation process through the platform, allowing the supervising sergeant to follow each point and identify if there's a tract of homes that have been missed, according to Kams.

"It's in real-time," Kams said. "Now, we just put up a big map, and we can see exactly who's staying, who's leaving and who we haven't been able to contact."

"... We get an idea of how effective we're being and how we're doing timewise evacuating these neighborhoods, so it's really made a big difference."

The creation of the evacuation solution platform was a



The San Bernardino County Sheriff's Department first used the Evacuation solution mobile app during the 2022 Sheep Fire and has since used it in response to the 2024 Line and Bridge fires.

Photo courtesy of the Sheriff's Department's public affairs division

joint effort between Kams and Natalie Campos, a Geographic Information System (GIS) specialist. Campos was working on a county fire damage assessment dashboard when Kams asked if the technology could be adapted for evacuations.

"This was just a wild idea that they were able to pull together for us," Kams said. "And it's worked very well."

Sprawling more than 20,000 miles, San Bernardino County

is the largest county by area in the contiguous United States. The county's diverse geography includes mountains, deserts and developed urban areas.

"You can have writing 'x, y' locations in text, but that doesn't actually tell you where those people are, who is actually evacuated," Campos said. "So, it's a situational awareness I think that it's brought them."

Deputies may not be familiar with the areas they're

evacuating, so the technology helps ensure they don't miss certain spots that might not be visible from the road, according to sheriff's department Sgt. Kyle Glozer. He noted that during an evacuation of Angelus Oaks, an unincorporated mountain community in the county, he had no idea that there were camps there, which could have led to them being overlooked.

"You could drive past them 100 times and never know that

[the camps] are there," Glozer said. "But with this mapping system that Frank and Natalie developed, we can actually see where these areas are or give our deputies an idea of where to go."

The app has enabled more effective communication, which is crucial with all the uncertain variables disasters bring, according to Kams.

"Wildland fires are very dynamic and fluid," Kams said. "So, this also gives us an idea of where our folks are, in case there's a shift and the fire takes another direction, we can alert our people to get out."

The technology was initially used in the 2022 Sheep Fire, and has since been used in response to fires, including in the 2024 Line and Bridge fires, and flooding events in the county.

The Evacuation mobile app has recently evolved to better serve the county's most vulnerable populations. San Bernardino County is divided up into pre-drawn polygons for its evacuation areas, so now moving forward, when someone clicks on a polygon on the map in the app, it will pull up the names and locations of people who are registered as having access and functional needs.

"So, we will know that prior to having to evacuate them," Kams said. "And it will give us enough time, hopefully, to get in and knock on their door and make sure they have transportation. If they don't, then we'll arrange that."

"So, that's going to be a big improvement and change from what we started with." **CN**

San Bernardino County Sheriff's Department Evacuation Solution was the 2025 NACo Achievement Award "Best in Category" winner in Information Technology.

ON THE MOVE

NACo MEMBERS

- West Region Representative **Bill Novotny**, Johnson County, Wyo. Commissioner, attended the Wyoming County Commissioners Association Legislative Conference in Laramie County.
- Scott County, Minn. Commissioner **Barb Weckman Brekke** will serve as chair of the NACo Human Services and Education Policy Steering Committee for the rest of the 2025-2026 term.

NACo STAFF

- Sarah Brown** has joined NACo as senior budget and grants manager. She previously served as senior director for operations at the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and as advisor to the CFO of the United States Patent and Trademark Office. She earned a master's degree in public policy from Johns Hopkins University and a bachelor's degree in political science from Truman State University.
- Jessica Hartl** has joined NACo as senior communications manager. She served as senior communications advisor for the U.S. Agency for International Development's Bureau for Latin America and the Caribbean and for the United Nations Association of the USA and Eisenhower Fellowships. She earned a master's degree from Arcadia University in International Peace and Conflict Resolution and a bachelor's degree in French from Pomona College.



Starr



Brown



Haris



Hartl



Conover

- Jennifer Starr** has joined NACo as program manager for environment and land use. She previously served as senior coordination lead for the U.S. Global Change Research Program and director of the local government initiative at the Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay. She earned a master's degree in marine policy from the University of Southern California and a bachelor's degree in geology and political science from the University of Arizona.
- Carleigh Haris** has joined NACo as an environment and land use program associate. She previously interned at the American Clean Power Association and the White House Climate Policy Office. She earned a Master of Public Policy and bachelor's degree from the University of Maryland.
- Emma Conover** is now an associate legislative director for human services and education. She previously served as a legislative assistant.
- Executive Director **Matt Chase** attended the Wisconsin Counties Association Legislative Conference in Dane County.
- Associate Legislative Director **Ben Gilsdorf** attended the Montana Association of Counties Legislative Conference in Lewis and Clark County.
- Membership Engagement Director **Tammy Tincher** and National Program Director **Anthony Chapman** attended the West Virginia Association of Counties Legislative Conference in Kanawha County.

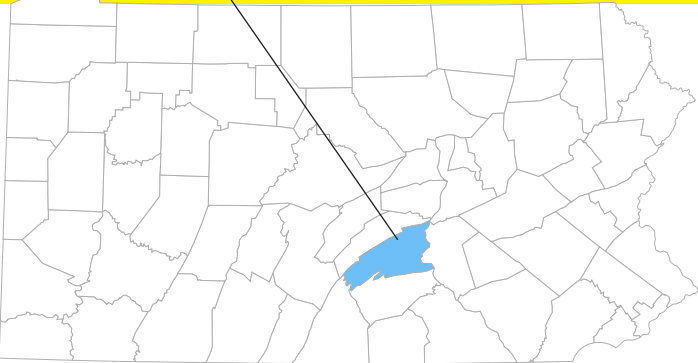
GET TO KNOW...

Perry County, Pa.

by Meredith Moran
staff writer

Perry County, Pa., established in 1820, is named for War of 1812 naval officer Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry, who was known as the "Hero of Lake Erie."

The county is a nature haven. Two of Pennsylvania's major waterways, the Susquehanna and Juniata rivers, meet in the county and the county offers plenty of opportunities for fishing, kayaking and boating, including at Little Buffalo State Park. Hiking on the Appalachian Trail and in Tuscarora State Forest and hunting deer and turkey are other popular pastimes. Nearly 90% of Perry Coun-



ty is protected public or farmland.

A box huckleberry colony located in the county is one of the oldest living organisms in the world. It survived the last ice age, and is estimated to be up to 13,000 years old. The plant grows roughly 6 inches per year, and extended for over a mile before it was heavily damaged by road construction

in the 1960s. It was declared a Natural Historic Landmark in 1967 by the National Park Service. There's another, younger colony, which is roughly 1,300 years old, that is protected in the nearby Hoverter and Sholl Natural Area.

Perry County has one of the state's largest collections of covered bridges and is the only county in Penn-



A box huckleberry colony in the county is one of the oldest living organisms in the world, estimated to be 13,000 years old.

sylvania where the majority of its labor force commutes outside the county for work. The county seat of New Bloomfield, with a population of less than 1,300 is named for its abundance of blooming clovers. The county seat features a granite and bronze Soldiers and Sailors Civil War Monument in its center, to honor local residents who served in the

war. Notable Perry County natives include Marie Doro, a silent film actress who starred alongside William Gillette of "Sherlock Holmes" fame and comic actor and filmmaker Charlie Chaplin and professional golfer Skee Riegel.

Get to Know features new NACo member counties.

WORD SEARCH

JEFFERSON COUNTY, ALABAMA
Created by Mary Ann Barton

Y E I C J E D J T O U R I S M Y Q Q A S
H T R T N C C S O G I B N D G F E R E S
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AREA: The county is 1,119 square miles.

BIRMINGHAM: The county seat was named for Birmingham, England.

COUNTY: The county elects five commissioners. The county also has an appointed county manager.

FAMOUS: Celebrities from the county include actress Courtney Cox of “Friends.” “American Idol” winners Ruben Studdard and Taylor Hicks both hail from the county.

FOODIES: Birmingham has emerged as a top Southern culinary destination, featuring numerous James Beard Foundation award winners and nominees.

GREEN: Red Mountain Park is a 1,200-acre park, 40% larger than Central Park in New York City, offering hiking and biking trails.

HISTORY: The county was established Dec. 13, 1819.

INDUSTRIAL: Founded in 1871 post-Civil War, Birmingham grew rapidly due to having all three raw materials for making steel — coal, iron ore, and limestone —within a 10-mile radius.

JEFFERSON: The county is named for President Thomas Jefferson.

MOUNTAIN: The highest point in the county is Butler Mountain, at 1,480 feet above sea level.

NEWS: Residents get their news from The Birmingham News; founded in 1888, it went digital in 2023 and is available on AL.com.

RESTAURANT: The Bright Star is Alabama’s oldest continuously operating restaurant, founded in 1907 by Greek immigrant Tom Bonduris. Renowned for its Greek-style snapper, it is recognized as a James Beard “America’s Classic.”

RIGHTS: The county contains the Birmingham Civil Rights National Monument, including the 16th Street Baptist Church and the A.G. Gaston Motel.

TOURISM: Tourism is a major driver in the county, with over 4 million visitors spending approximately \$2.57 billion in 2024.

VETERANS: Birmingham hosted the first national Veterans Day parade in 1947 and hosts one of the nation’s largest Veterans Day celebrations.

PROFILES IN SERVICE

CARLOTTA HARRELL

NACo Board Member
Henry County, Ga.
Chair, Board of Commissioners

Years in public service:
30 years

Occupation: Retired law enforcement, Current Chairwoman Henry County Board of Commissioners

Education: Graduate of Brenau University, bachelor’s degree in public administration with minor in criminal justice and University of Georgia, Carl Vinson Institute of Government, Lifelong Learning Leadership Development; Economic & Community Development; Intergovernmental Relations and Public Safety

The hardest thing I’ve ever done: Bury my son, husband, brother and father, all in a five-year span.

Three people (living or dead) I’d invite to dinner: Barack Obama, Dr. Martin Luther King and Jesus

A dream I have is to: Travel the globe, connecting with other leaders to make a global impact in the world.



HARRELL

You’d be surprised to learn that: I was the first Black female lieutenant for the Henry County Police Department, now I’m the chairwoman of the same county I policed in.

The most adventurous thing I’ve ever done is: Life is an adventure and I try to make every moment possible and adventurous because life is short; why not have fun?



My favorite way to relax is: Curl up on the couch and watch Hallmark Channel movies all day or just go get a relaxing massage.

I’m most proud of: Being a mom and especially a grandma.

Every morning I read: My daily devotional book.

My favorite meal is: I love all things seafood.

My pet peeve is: I like for things to be clean and in its place, or my OCD kicks in.

My motto is: “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” - Philippians 4:13

The last book I read was: “Lovely One” by Ketanji Brown Jackson

My favorite movie is: “Forrest Gump”

My favorite music is: Motown and country

My favorite U.S. president is: Jimmy Carter

My county is a NACo member because: We believe in the mission and vision of NACo, which is to strengthen America’s counties and to create healthy, safe and vibrant counties across America.

The last book I read was: “Lovely One” by Ketanji Brown Jackson

‘We Are Counties’ to include an online toolkit to help county officials customize campaign

From COUNTIES page 1

of our residents’ lives, from public health and infrastructure to public safety, economic development and human services,” Clark tells county officials in a welcome letter going out to NACo members, inviting them to join in the effort.


“Yet too often, the breadth, complexity and impact of county government is not fully understood by the general public or by federal policymakers whose decisions directly affect our ability to serve,” Clark noted. “We Are Counties exists to change that by clearly and consistently showing what counties do and why it matters.”

“We Are Counties exists to ...clearly and consistently show what counties do and why it matters.”

– J.D. Clark,
NACo president

An online toolkit will also be made available to NACo members, designed to make participation easy and flexible. Members will make use of communications resources, including sample messaging, graphics, data points and

storytelling guidance, along with ideas for how to tailor the campaign to reflect their county’s unique priorities and experiences.

Whether counties choose to use NACo-developed materials or highlight their own programs and successes, the toolkit is meant to support counties in sharing their story with confidence. 

Scan the QR code for more information about We Are Counties.



BEHIND THE SEAL
DESHA COUNTY, ARK.

Desha County’s seal features the outline of the county’s borders, including the Mississippi River on the right.

The county courthouse centers the design, along with points marking the county seat of Arkansas City, as well as Watson — a previous seat — and two principal cities — Dumas and McGehee — through which a rail line was laid.



Inside the seal, icons represent wildlife, cotton and wheat, fish and deer, the timber industry, livestock, industry and abundant sunlight, which makes agriculture possible in the county.

CALIFORNIA

California's county governments are warning the fallout from the Administration's HR 1 bill could cost them up to \$9.5 billion each year, Politico reported. The legislation puts **new restrictions on eligibility for health insurance and food benefits programs** in California.

Most notably, recipients will need to satisfy new work requirements to qualify. Counties will be responsible for implementing the new restrictions and county clinics and hospitals will be left to provide care to millions expected to become uninsured.

The new responsibilities will come with a price tag of between \$6 billion to \$9.5 billion annually according to a report released earlier this month by a coalition of groups representing counties and county workers, including the California State Association of Counties.

The Superior Court of **ALAMEDA COUNTY** in collaboration with Building Opportunities for Self-Sufficiency or BOSS and the county Probation Department, recently expanded the **Pretrial Services Program**, which provides defendants awaiting trial with case workers and access to vi-



FLORIDA

Small business owners and entrepreneurs now have access to a new **ORANGE COUNTY** resource hub connecting them with programs, tools, financial assistance and training them to help them grow and succeed. A recent ribbon-cutting marked the grand opening of the Orange County Business Resource Office.

tal services to avoid rearrest, *The Daily Californian* reported.

The expanded program will hire 12 new positions — including case managers, supervisors and intake coordinators — to support defendants while navigating the conditions of the pretrial period. It will also include additional funding for program services and resources that help defendants meet

the pretrial requirements determined by a judge. Anyone with a pending criminal case is eligible for the pretrial services.

GEORGIA

FULTON COUNTY officials filed a lawsuit seeking the return of its original **2020 election ballots** and related records recently seized by the FBI.

"Our constitution itself is at stake in this fight," said Fulton

County Chairman Robb Pitts. "It's much bigger than Fulton County Georgia. The president himself has said there are 15 other states that he's concerned about. So, I think we're going to be the epicenter for this."

The motion — which is still under seal — was brought under Federal Rules of Criminal Procedure 41(g) according to Fulton Commissioner Marvin Arrington, Jr., and challenges the legality and scope of the federal seizure.

Pitts, who is also list-

ed in the motion against the U.S. government, said the county is demanding the FBI return their 2020 documents that were seized last week and the county would like the search warrant to be unsealed.

MICHIGAN

All of **MIDLAND COUNTY** should expect to have access to **high-speed internet** by the end of 2029, thanks to Michigan's receipt of \$920 million in federal funds to administer the Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) program that will continue expanding high-speed internet access statewide. Internet Service Providers (ISPs) will contribute an additional \$550 million in matching funds, bringing the total upcoming investment in Michigan's high-speed internet infrastructure to \$1.47 billion.

"Moving forward, the Midland County Internet Connectivity Committee will work to help facilitate the efficient delivery of services with ISPs," said Bridgette Gransden, Midland County administrator/controller. "We want to ensure high-speed internet is delivered as fast and affordable as possible to every Midland County resident."

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KANSAS

The FIFA World Cup is expected to bring hundreds of thousands of visitors to the Kansas City metro area this summer. Essentially, the region's hosting success will depend on how convenient it is for **visitors to get around the metro**, KMBC-TV reported. **JOHNSON COUNTY** Commission Chairman Mike Kelly said they've rented 50 motorcoach buses to transport people to seven cities in Johnson County. "It's three circulator routes that go to a lot of different communities throughout Johnson County, from here in Mission to out in Olathe, to Shawnee, Overland Park," Kelly said.



MICHIGAN

WASHTENAW COUNTY's summer youth employment program, SummerWorks, is currently recruiting local employers to host interns and provide mentorship to young adults ages 16-24 this summer. Information sessions employers and mentors will be held throughout February and March.

"We are looking across the board to partner with employers throughout the county," said Morgan Cox, SummerWorks program coordinator. "Small businesses, nonprofits, government entities... We can partner with anybody as long as their intention is to work with youth and young adults being introduced to the workforce."

From NEWS FROM page 18

MINNESOTA

• A new program is aiming to assist **CALHOUN COUNTY** residents in the process of **buying a home**. The new program, a partnership between Calhoun County Treasurer Melinda Weaver and Independent Bank, was created “to help residents overcome financial barriers to purchasing a home,” the county noted.

Applicants who qualify can receive up to \$6,000 in down payment assistance from the county treasurer’s office and up to \$2,000 in closing costs from Independent Bank.

“Homeownership is a key part of building stable families and strong communities,” Weaver said in a statement. “This partnership allows us to provide meaningful assistance to buyers who are ready to take that step but need help overcoming upfront costs.”

• As new housing is built across **RICE COUNTY**, affordable units remain out of reach for many families — a reality that commissioners acknowledged while recently approving a new **rental assistance** program, *Faribault Daily News* reported.

Commissioners unanimously approved policies for the Bring It Home rental assistance program, a state-funded initiative designed to serve house-



NEW YORK

• Funding is available through the **ULSTER COUNTY** Clerk’s Office for programs commemorating the **250th anniversary of the American Revolution** in 2026, the *Daily Freeman* reported. Eligible organizations may apply for sponsorship awards of up to \$2,500, with proposals accepted through March 2026.

According to a press release, the funding is intended to foster and support a wide range of programming by Ulster County’s history community. County Clerk Taylor Bruck said the goal is to help the public engage with programs that highlight the history and legacy of the Revolution and Ulster County’s ongoing role in shaping American democracy.

holds earning less than 30% of the area median income and targeted specifically at families with children 18 and under. The approval follows an October 2025 decision by the Housing and Redevelopment Authority (HRA) Board to accept the Bring It Home Rental Assistance grant from Minnesota Housing.

• **STEARNS COUNTY** residents have embraced the new permanent **electronics recycling program** at the House-

hold Hazardous Waste Facility.

According to county officials, since launching Jan. 5, the facility has collected 17,836 pounds of e-waste, demonstrating strong demand for the convenient recycling option, KNSI-AM. The program allows county residents to drop off their unwanted electronics during regular business hours without waiting for special collection events.

NEW YORK

• A new program developed under the auspices of **WARREN COUNTY** Department of Workforce Development recently helped six men with criminal records get new **vocational skills** while helping create portable water filtration systems. Known as WAVE, short for “Workforce Advancement through Vocational Education,” participants in this 28-hour program helped build filtration systems developed by non-profit The Water Genome, learning plumbing and electrical skills and that their community can help them overcome obstacles to employment.

PENNSYLVANIA

On the ongoing fight against hunger in **MONTGOMERY COUNTY**, elected officials

and advocates recently secured a huge win, cutting the ribbon on a **food storage facility** to assist food pantries which serve local communities. Operated by the Philadelphia-based Share Food Program, the 27,000-square-foot warehouse can hold thousands of pounds of fresh, frozen and packaged food to help more than 70 area food pantries.

The initiative was years in the making as county commissioners designated millions of federal COVID-19 relief dollars to secure the property back in 2022. The Philadelphia-based agency transformed the former Co-

lonial Electric building into a food storage facility with designated office space for a handful of employees focused on operations in the suburban county and partnerships with dozens of area food pantries.

TEXAS

The number of **former county officials in Congress** grew when Christian Menefee won the special election to the U.S. House of Representatives for Texas’ 18th congressional district. He served as **HARRIS COUNTY** attorney from 2021-2026. Sen. Amy Klobuchar (D-Minn.) also served as a county attorney prior to her election to Congress.

UTAH

A home repair grant previously available only to residents in select cities is now available to all income qualifying homeowners in **CACHE COUNTY** and **BOX ELDER COUNTY**, *The Leader* reported.

Through the Northern Utah Neighborhood Improvement Program, homeowners whose household income is below 80% of the average median income can apply for a grant of up to \$25,000 to make necessary home repairs.

The program is funded by the Federal Home Loan Bank and administered through the Neighborhood Nonprofit Housing Corporation.

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



NORTH DAKOTA

The **WARD COUNTY** Detention Center is seeing success with an **opioid use disorder treatment** program that has been the first of its kind among jails in North Dakota, Minot Daily News reported.

“We’re an emerging model for corrections and recovery support,” Ashley Clouse, an officer for Medications for Opioid Use Disorder (MOUD) at the county jail. MOUD was developed by the Ward County Drug Task Force with funds from Ward County’s and the City of Minot’s participation in opioid lawsuit settlements.

NORTH CAROLINA

In celebration of **National Children’s Dental Health Month** Wake County Public Health is once again teaming up with **WAKE COUNTY** Public Libraries for the popular Books & Smiles program that gives kids something to smile about.

Books & Smiles promotes the importance of the three Bs before bedtime: brush, book and bed. It encourages families to incorporate good dental hygiene habits into nightly routines, fostering both healthy teeth and a love for reading.

“Books & Smiles brings together the joy of storytelling and simple oral health practices to help our youngest residents build healthy habits that last a lifetime,” said Wake County Commissioner Tara Waters.



WATERS

20
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Annual Conference & Expo

July 17-20
Orleans Parish, La.

Registration opens March 5.