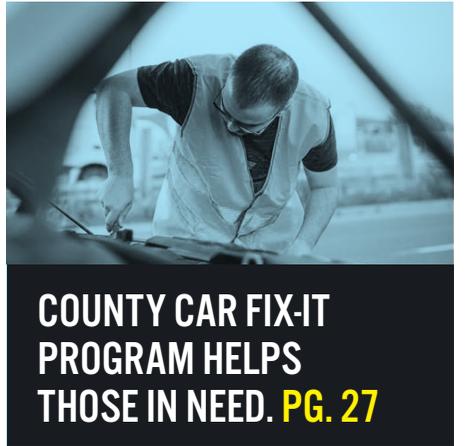




**NACo BOARD PASSES 39 INTERIM POLICY RESOLUTIONS. PGS. 19-26**



**2026 NACo LEGISLATIVE CONFERENCE, IN PICTURES. PGS. 15-18**



**COUNTY CAR FIX-IT PROGRAM HELPS THOSE IN NEED. PG. 27**

## Severe weather strains relief coordination

by **Charlie Ban**  
senior writer

Emergency managers face many challenges during and after severe storms, but a flood of volunteers and donations is often a welcome one.

Even so, when major disruptions, widespread destruction, injuries and loss of life strike a community, county officials must be swift to warn them off to avoid complicating rescue and recovery scenes and help well-meaning neighbors avoid injury.

“Please do not come here, do not try to help,” Newton County, Ind. Sheriff Shannon Cothran told viewers on social media March 10 as he surveyed the site of a tornado in Lake Village that evening that killed two residents, a married couple in their 80s.

“We appreciate your help, we appreciate your thoughts

and prayers, let the first responders do what we need to do,” he said. “Give us some room.”

The previous few days had marked tornadoes in Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Iowa, Oklahoma and Texas, killing an additional six people, including four in Michigan and two in Oklahoma. Kankakee County, Ill. Was hit by hailstorms, with chunks of ice measuring up to 6 inches, a pending state record.

When the help comes, it’s important to be specific about what crews and victims need and how best to collect it. Newton County designated the Lake Township Community Center as a donation drop-off site, for both rescue and recovery supplies and for food donations for workers. But Commissioner Abbey Rossiter

See **TORNADO** page 3



**Okmulgee County, Okla. Emergency Manager Jeff Moore surveys damage with Red Cross volunteers.** Photo courtesy of Red Cross

## NACo President J.D. Clark: ‘Stories build connection’



**NACo President J.D. Clark of Wise County, Texas kicks off the General Session Feb. 23 at the 2026 NACo Legislative Conference at the Washington Hilton in Washington, D.C.** Photo by Denny Henry

by **Mary Ann Barton**  
editor

More than 2,300 county officials and other guests from across the country gathered Feb. 21-24 in Washington, D.C., for the 2026 NACo Legislative Conference, where federal leaders, local officials and others discussed major policy issues affecting communities

nationwide.

During the Feb. 23 General Session, NACo President J.D. Clark opened the event

See coverage of the Legislative Conference inside, with more coverage coming up in our March 30 issue!

by welcoming attendees and recognizing service members, veterans and military families.

“Your leadership matters, your engagement matters, your voice matters,” he told the crowd. “Whether this is your first conference or maybe your 100th visit to D.C., welcome.”

Clark said county leaders are

See **CLARK** page 2

## National County Government Month marks 35 years of celebrating counties

by **Mary Ann Barton**  
editor

Counties across the country will celebrate National County Government Month (NCGM) this April. Now in its 35th year, the National Association of Counties (NACo) has encouraged counties

to celebrate county government since 1991, recognizing and promoting the vital roles and responsibilities counties serve in their communities.

Counties nationwide are invited to participate in National County Government Month 2026 by planning activities throughout April, to

tell the county story, champion the county workforce and boost civic engagement.

Telling the county story is also the yearlong initiative of NACo President J.D. Clark. When he became president in July, Clark emphasized

See **NCGM** page 29

# 'Stories create understanding, and stories build connection'

From CLARK page 1

meeting at a critical moment as the country approaches its 250th anniversary.

"We are meeting at a consequential time for our nation," he said. "Our policy landscape is complex. The pace is fast and the debates are intense."

Despite those challenges, Clark said county governments remain focused on practical solutions.

"County leaders continue to do what we have always done," he said. "We focus on solutions, we stay grounded in service, and we translate complexity into action for our communities."

Conference discussions focused on a wide range of issues, including artificial intelligence, disaster response, elections, energy, land use, health care, immigration, infrastructure and public safety.



NACo President J.D. Clark of Wise County, Texas officially unveils NACo's "We Are Counties" campaign. Photo by Denny Henry

"At the county level, these issues are not abstract," Clark said. "They intersect in real time, in real communities, af-

fecting real people."

Clark highlighted several examples of challenges counties are facing. In one county, a \$42 million annual budget was strained by more than \$50 million in disaster debris removal costs following historic rainfall from Hurricane Helene.

In another, rising infrastructure costs have made projects significantly more expensive in just a few years.

"Federal decisions shape how we deliver services," Clark said.

"But just as important, what happens in our counties should shape federal policy."

### 'We are the first to respond'

Clark also emphasized the scale and role of county governments nationwide.

"We are counties, 3,069 strong," he said, noting that the total includes parishes in Louisiana and boroughs in Alaska.

Counties collectively represent nearly 40,000 elected officials and 3.6 million public employees, he reminded the

audience.

"We are operators of critical infrastructure—roads, bridges, hospitals, courthouses and more," Clark said. "We are providers of health and human services. We are first responders devoted to safe communities."

Clark noted counties maintain 44% of the nation's roads and 38% of its bridges, support about 40% of public transit systems, and operate nearly 1,900 public health departments and about 1,000 critical access hospitals.

"When emergencies strike, we are the first to respond," he said, "and we remain long after the headlines fade."

### 'We Are Counties' campaign

Clark also highlighted NACo's "We Are Counties" campaign, which aims to raise awareness about the role of county government.

"Data is essential, but data alone does not move policy," he said. "Stories provide context. Stories create understanding,

and stories build connection."

The campaign encourages county leaders to share their experiences with policymakers and their communities.

"As county leaders, we do not seek the spotlight—we seek results," Clark said. "But if we fail to explain our role, others will define our story for us."

'...if we fail to explain our role, others will define our story for us.'

—NACo President J.D. Clark, Wise County, Texas

Clark closed the session by encouraging attendees to carry that message to Capitol Hill and back to their home communities.

"This week and beyond, we will tell our story," he said. "Thank you for your service, and thank you for the work you are doing every day for America's counties." 

## SNAP/STATS



### March Is Women's History Month

POPULATION:..... 172 million vs. 168 million men  
 No. age 85 and older: .....4 million vs. 2.4 million men  
 Median earnings:..... 80.9% as percentage of men's median earnings  
 Education: .....36.8% with bachelor's degrees vs. 34.5% of men  
 Voting: .....66.9% of women voted, vs. 63.7% of men in 2024

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

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# Okmulgee County emergency manager alerted residents before storm struck

From **TORNADO** page 1

also advised residents on what not to send.

“Until a need is seen, please avoid any donations of clothes, cash or gift cards,” she said in a March 11 social media video.

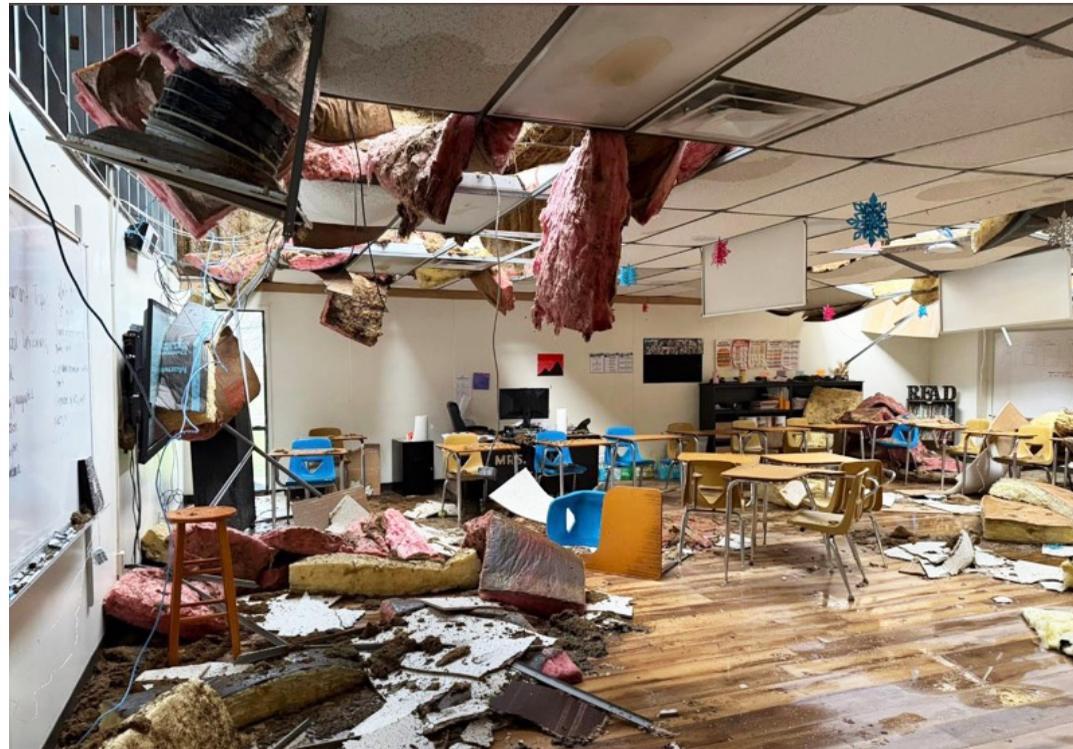
When it came to money, Cothran added, banks were designated as trustworthy custodians of donations.

“We encourage people to steer clear of monetary solicitations that our social media-based or door-to-door,” he said.

The Newton County building department serves as a clearinghouse for contractors who would provide cleanup services, in hopes of helping residents avoid predatory contractors by making them register with the county.

## Routines refine performance

Okmulgee County, Okla. has seen its share of tornadoes, but only one recent storm,



**A Beggs Middle School classroom suffered severe damage during a March 6 tornado in Oklahoma.**  
Photo by Tiffany Bell/Okmulgee Times

an EF-3 that struck around 7 p.m. March 6 near the town of Beggs, has been fatal.

Emergency Manager Jeff Moore alerted residents via social media roughly 40 minutes before the storm struck.

“Sometimes you can get 30 minutes, sometimes you’re lucky if you get two minutes’ warning,” he said.

The county received reports of victims trapped in their homes and some possible

missing people. When Moore arrived near Beggs, trees and power lines covered the roadway, forcing medics to continue on foot.

“I contacted the county district commissioner to let him

know that we had road trees down and we were going to need his crews out there to start helping us get through,” Moore said.

The local fire department had bulldozers on hand for wildland firefighting, and they cleared the roads. Then came the linemen from the electric co-ops to restore electricity.

“We quickly shifted into recovery mode, assessing what we had and figuring out what roads to close to keep people out,” Moore said. “Some people want to check out the damage, others want to show up to help out. It’s best to have civic organizations direct the volunteers.”

In Oklahoma, county commissioners are responsible for maintaining the roads and bridges in their districts, and Moore and his staff ensure the commissioners don’t inadvertently repair private roads. If needed, Moore initiates the permit process to establish a

**See TORNADO page 28**

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# HHS Secretary Kennedy touts fixes for obesity, chronic illness, mental health issues



by Meredith Moran  
staff writer

The country is facing a physical and mental health crisis, and counties can help improve health outcomes by prioritizing prevention over treatment, Robert F. Kennedy Jr., secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), told a General Session audience Feb. 24.

HHS is redefining its approach to public health by enacting a series of changes around nutritional guidance and education, the success of which is dependent on implementation at the community level, Kennedy told county officials on the last day of the NACo Legislative Conference.

The United States has the highest chronic disease burden in the world among high-income countries, and most chronic diseases are linked to poor nutrition and diet, he said. Healthcare is one of the fastest growing budget items in the federal budget, and obesity rates have significantly risen over the past few decades, Kennedy noted.

"On Capitol Hill, they have been arguing for decades whether we should have single-payer [healthcare] or Obamacare or all these other systems," Kennedy said. "They're all like switching deck chairs around on the Titanic."

"The ship is going down, and the only way we can deal with rising healthcare costs is if we deal with the chronic disease epidemic."

Counties operate hospitals, long-term care facilities and mental health facilities, which need to assess patients for metabolic challenges, pre-diabetes, obesity, hypertension and heart disease, and then offering dietary advice to pre-



HHS Secretary Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. discusses health issues Feb. 24 at the NACo Legislative Conference at the Washington Hilton. Photo by Denny Henry

vent chronic disease, Kennedy said.

"Counties are ground zero for changing behavior [around nutrition]," Kennedy said. "... One of the things that we can do at the county level is to focus more on prevention rather than treatment."

In January, HHS and the U.S. Department of Agriculture released new nutritional recommendations, restructuring the "food pyramid" and prioritizing protein, dairy, healthy fats, fruits and vegetables.

"This is what children should be eating," Kennedy said. "And when they eat it, their health changes. Most [people with] type 2 diabetes can lose the diagnosis by changing their diet."

Surveys show that roughly 70%-80% of doctors feel unprepared to offer dietary advice, according to the National Institutes of Health. HHS is working with medical schools across the country to add 40 hours of nutritional learning into their curriculum, Kennedy said.

"There's no such thing as Republican children, Democratic children," Kennedy said. "We all want our kids

to be healthy, and we're not going to get there [without change]. The dietary guidelines are really going to drive changes across the board."

Numerous states have opted in to prevent their SNAP recipients from spending food assistance benefits on soda, candy and other "ultra-processed food," Kennedy said.

"We're giving the poorest

**'There's no such thing as Republican children, Democratic children. We all want our kids to be healthy.'**

— Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.  
HHS Secretary

kids in our country diabetes," he noted. "And the taxpayers are funding it."

"... We're now the first nation in the world that has chronic obesity and malnutrition in the same people. They're eating things that have no nourishment, they're eating poison."

When a Big Mac meal at McDonalds costs \$12, it's worse

for a person's health and wallet to eat fast food when they could cook a fresh, nutritional meal at home, so HHS is working on a campaign to encourage people to cook their own meals, Kennedy said.

"People don't cook anymore," he said. "They're too busy and a lot of people have forgotten how to cook, but cooking is important because it's something the whole family can participate in and it's a daily ritual that brings people together."

Last year, President Trump signed an executive order reviving the Presidential Physical Fitness Test in public schools. The test was criticized for causing students anxiety and was replaced in 2013 with the Presidential Fitness Program, which aimed to focus more on health-related fitness as opposed to athletic skill.

"Competition and failure are part of life," Kennedy said. "To learn to experience that and process that and learn to get up on our feet again and recover, we have to have that kind of resilience. If we don't have resilience in our kids, they're not going to be able to face a very challenging world."

American children are "obese" and "damaged," Kennedy said. Roughly 77% of American teenagers don't qualify for military service, and the most prevalent reasons for disqualification include obesity and mental and physical health issues.

"That should get everybody's attention," Kennedy said. "It's a national security issue."

Physical and mental health are intertwined, and HHS is encouraging states to pass "bell-to-bell" legislation, banning cell phone use during the school day, Kennedy said.

"I see this whole generation is plagued by anxiety," Kennedy said. "And it may be food-oriented or it may be other exposures, but it seems to be related to telephone use, to social media."

Kennedy recently visited a school in Loudoun County, Va. that has "bell-to-bell" restrictions. Most students he spoke with said that it was initially difficult to not be on their phones during the day, but that they've come to enjoy the break, he said.

"The kids were all talking to each other," Kennedy said. "Nobody was looking at their laps — which, if you go in a high school these days, they're all looking at their laps [at their phones]," he said.

"There's no conversation happening, there's no social interaction. There's just this technological isolation that is stealing our souls."

Research suggests that school cell phone bans improve test scores, and teachers largely support them because they improve student engagement and decrease behavioral issues, according to the National Education Association.

"It seems to us like a win-win situation," Kennedy said. "If we can get them off of cell phones, we can start focusing them again on other things, including sports and doing plays and art and building community with each other."

EN

# EPA eyes new WOTUS definition coming soon

by **Charlie Ban**  
senior writer

Lee Zeldin knew the five letters that would get a rise out of county officials — W-O-T-U-S.

When addressing the General Session audience Feb. 24, Zeldin, the administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency, announced that the agency was close to finalizing a definition for the Waters of the United States regulation of the Clean Water Act.

The Waters of the United States defines the scope of the waterways under federal jurisdiction, guided by a patchwork of rulemaking and court cases since 2015. That has affected county operations ranging from essential water infrastructure to roadside ditches, slowing and adding costs and doubt to various county projects over the years.

“We believe strongly that farmers, ranchers, landowners, local governments shouldn’t have to pay an attorney or a consultant to tell you whether or not there’s a water of the United States subject to federal jurisdiction on your land,” he said. “It should be simple for you to know on your own.”

Zeldin previously represented part of Long Island in New York’s congressional delegation prior to leading the EPA.

“We have a goal to have a simple, prescriptive definition that strictly follows the U.S. Supreme Court decision in Sackett,” he said, referring to Sackett v. EPA, a 2023 decision that significantly narrowed the scope of the act to permanently flowing bodies of water that form geographical features.

Zeldin also opined on the EPA’s goals for permitting reform efforts that followed the same tenets at the WOTUS rule.

“A good bill would be a bill that results in a permanent process that takes less time, costs less money and has more certainty,” he said.

Zeldin said he had hopes that with advances in the technology that remediates PFAS, Congress will have an oppor-



tunity to legislate a solution that forces polluters to pay for remediation for the long-lasting chemicals that have infiltrated groundwater and have been linked to adverse health effects. The beginning of the Trump administration coincided with compliance deadlines that would have forced water systems to bear the costs to remove PFAS.

“What we decided to do with [PFAS], based off of concerns expressed to us from thousands of water systems across this entire country, is to give a two-year compliance headline to allow these local water systems to put together the resources, to pay for it, and to vet out and lean into the different technologies that are coming online and help allow all of you to get this done faster,” he said. “Instead of you, your local water system, having the responsibility of having to pay for it, and then passing it off to the rate payer. People should not have to pay to clean up PFAS from their own water supply.”

Those moving timelines for both WOTUS and PFAS illustrated Zeldin’s perspective on his work.

“An agency like EPA has the power to really slow things down. We also have the power to speed things up,” he said.

Throughout his remarks, Zeldin emphasized his priority for reducing regulations and giving end users more choice, noting that “protecting the environment and growing the economy is not a binary choice.”

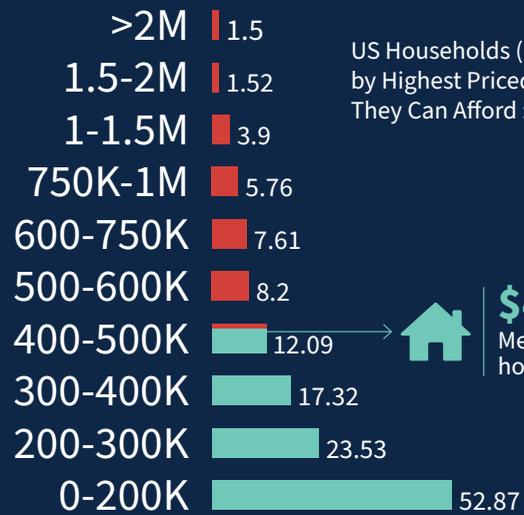
“I think it’s a lot easier for you, as local leaders, to be able to recruit projects, to keep power plants open, to be able to fight for and represent your people, when the federal government — as often as humanly possible — can just get out of your way and allow you to lead,” he said, “because you know your local counties, better than bureaucrats, or Washington, D.C.” **CN**



EPA Administrator Lee Zeldin outlines how his agency’s statutory functions align with the Trump administration’s economic agenda. Photo by Denny Henry

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# White House Intergovernmental Affairs Office helps ‘bridge the gap’ for counties

by **Meredith Moran**  
staff writer

The White House Office of Intergovernmental Affairs, which acts as a “front door” to the federal government for state and local government officials, is working to strengthen relationships and communication across levels of government to both “cut the red tape” that prevents county officials from carrying out the work they were elected to do and implement the Trump Administration’s policies on the ground, according to Alex Meyer, the Office’s director.

The Office of Intergovernmental Affairs helps amplify the voices of the more than 500,000 state, local and tribal elected officials across the country — “from governors to dog catchers” — to the White House and is a resource that counties should be le-



veraging, Meyer told county officials at a Feb. 24 General Session during NACo’s Legislative Conference.

“There’s a lot of state issues who you know where to go to there, but when it’s a federal issue, it kind of log jams you a little bit, and a lot of folks are not sure where to go with it,” Meyer said. “And that’s one of the things that our office does, is they want to help bridge that gap of, ‘Hey, I do have somebody that I can call in the White House,’ which is a good feather in the cap, obviously, for everyone in this room to have.”

Too often, work that would be beneficial for localities gets “stuck in the cogs of government,” whether that’s at the

state level or at a federal agency, Meyer said. Helping move that process along is the Office of Intergovernmental Affairs’ job, so that county officials can move on to the next pressing issue, he said.

“That’s what our office does, is we go to the agency, we say, ‘Why is this stuck?’” Meyer said. “Nine times out of 10, it’s because it was sitting on what we call a ‘careerer’s’ desk, and things haven’t been turned around, so our job is to unlock that.”

If a county has key permitting or funds being tied up somewhere up the chain, the Office of Intergovernmental Affairs wants to know, so that it can work to get localities an answer, Meyer said.

“Because ‘Yes’ is the best answer — ‘Hey, this permit is going to go forward in the right direction,’ or ‘These funds are going to start moving,’” Meyer said. “But even if it’s a ‘no,’ it’s



**Alex Meyer, assistant to the president and director of the White House Office of Intergovernmental Affairs, speaks Feb. 24 with NACo President J.D. Clark to a General Session crowd.**

Photo by Denny Henry

still a good answer, because you at least are able to build your budgets around it.”

In 2025, President Trump signed 225 Executive Orders, which is more than he signed throughout his first term. As the administration continues to take a head-on approach to policymaking, it’s reliant on states and localities to implement them.

“We can pass a lot of things

at the federal level, but they have to be implemented at the state [and local] level to truly be effective,” Meyer said. “So, we’re working with everyone in this room to help get the things that we can do to kind of bring this country into this ‘Golden Age.’ We’ve seen a lot of successes, and want to make sure that we help get you the tools to be successful.” **CN**



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# House Majority Whip: 'We are all members of the same team'

by **Mary Ann Barton**  
editor

While acknowledging Republican power in the Congress and White House, House Majority Whip Tom Emmer called for the country's two political parties to work together "to make the communities we love a better place for our children and our children's children."

"We may even bump into each other and challenge each other at times," the Republican from Minnesota told attendees Feb. 23 in the Washington Hilton ballroom. "That's not a bad thing. This is what teams do, but they come together at the end."

Before he dove into policy talk, Emmer, who has represented Minnesota's 6th District for the past 10 years, had to get something out of the way before speaking to the General Session audience.

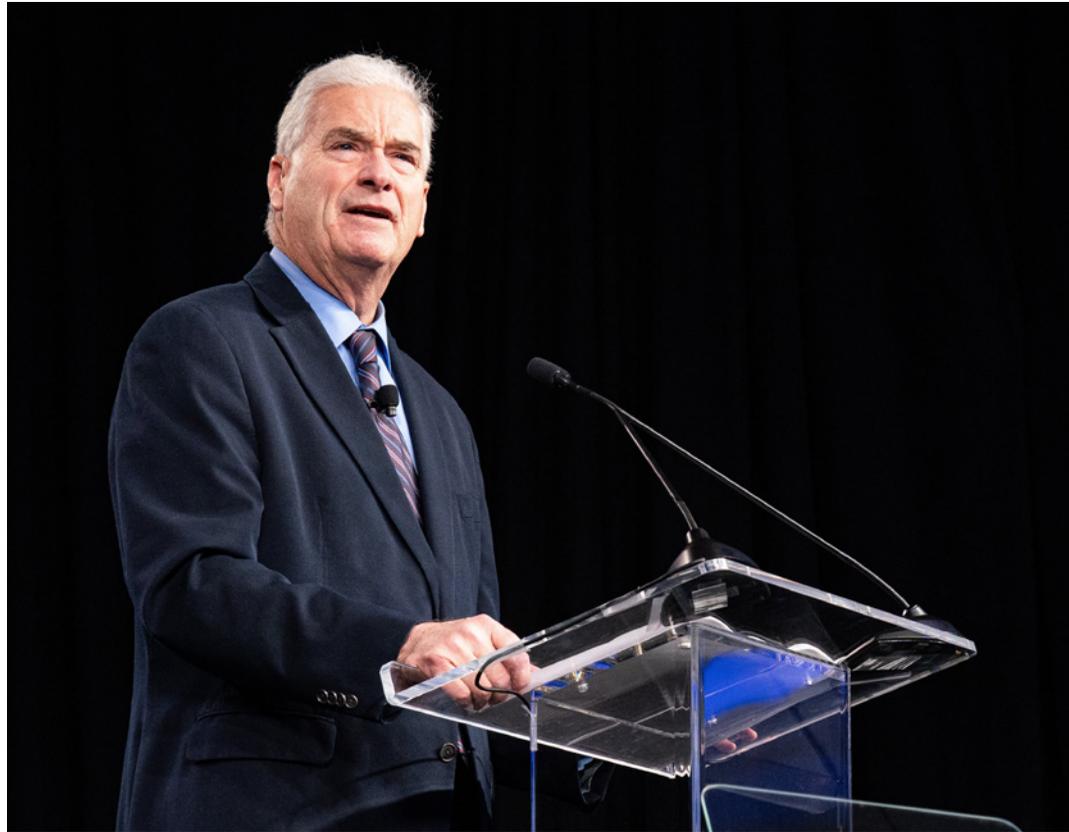
"There are Minnesotans in the crowd, where are ya?" he asked.

"It's good to see fellow Viking fans!"

The former hockey coach then started a chant of "USA," after the U.S. men's and women's hockey teams earned Olympic gold.

Emmer welcomed the crowd to Washington.

"I'm encouraged by the thousands of you from across the country who have gathered here in our nation's capital this week to engage on the issues that matter most to our communities," he said. "Governance starts at the local level, from public safety to infrastructure to economic prosperity. You are all boots



**House Majority Whip Tom Emmer (R-Minn.) discusses bipartisanship during his speech to NACo members at the Feb. 23 General Session.** Photo by Denny Henry

on the ground fighting the good fight and making America, our country, the greatest place to live on the face of the planet. So, on behalf of the entire House Republican Conference, I want to say thank you to you first. Thank you for your unwavering commitment to our country."

"The way I see it, we are all members of the same team working toward the same goal, just like those two teams I just mentioned, and like any successful team, we may not always agree with each other," he said.

"As the 2026 tax season begins to unfold," he said, "we're hearing more and more about the once-in-a-generation piece of legislation that is benefiting Americans from every walk of life, thanks to common sense tax provisions like an



**'We are all members of the same team working toward the same goal.'**

– *House Majority Whip Tom Emmer (R-Minn.)*

increased Child Tax Credit, no tax on tips, no tax on overtime and no tax on Social Security. Families are able to keep more of their hard-earned money in their pockets."

Emmer ticked off a laundry list of congressional accomplishments:

- **Laken Riley Act:** Passed by both chambers of Congress with bipartisan votes, it was sent to the president for signature in January last year; it requires federal authorities to detain undocumented immigrants arrested for certain crimes (e.g., theft, assault on police) and allows states to sue the federal government for failing to enforce immigration detention rules.
- **HALT Fentanyl Act:** Passed by the Senate (84-16) and House (321-104) it became law on July 16, 2025, permanently classifying fentanyl-related substances as Schedule I drugs, making it easier for law enforcement to prosecute trafficking.
- **GENIUS Act:** Passed by the Senate (68-30) and House (308-122) it was signed into law on July 18, 2025, creating

the first federal regulatory framework for stablecoins. Proposed legislation intended to establish clearer federal rules for digital assets and stablecoins.

"The road, to good governance hasn't always been an easy one, though, in fact, it's got pretty bumpy and ugly at times," said Emmer.

"In my role as whip, I've got a front row seat at what governing really looks like. Some like to joke that my job is similar to herding cats. I like to tell them I wish they were all cats."

After serving as the chairman of the National Republican Congressional Committee for the 116th Congress and again for the 117th Congress, Emmer was elected by his fellow Republican colleagues to be the House Majority Whip. Currently, he sits on the House Financial Services Committee.

Born in 1961, Emmer grew up in Minnesota and attended St. Thomas Academy. He received his BA in Political Science from the University of Alaska-Fairbanks and his JD from William Mitchell College of Law.

After practicing law for several years, he opened his own law firm. The next 20 years were spent balancing family, business, coaching hockey and serving on the city councils in Independence and Delano.

Before coming to Congress, he served in the Minnesota House of Representatives from 2004-2008.

He and his wife Jacquie have been married for more than 30 years and have seven children. **CN**



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# Congress seeking 'common-sense solutions' to unmet mental health needs

by **Meredith Moran**  
staff writer

Congress is working on "common-sense solutions" to alleviate counties' pressing mental and behavioral health needs, U.S. Rep. Andrea Salinas (D-Ore.), told attendees Feb. 23 at NACo Legislative Conference General Session.

Salinas, a co-chair of the Congressional Bipartisan Mental Health Caucus, said she's committed to advancing bipartisan solutions that improve access to mental health care and improve county officials' ability to provide services in their communities.

"Right now, it is too difficult to access providers ... and get mental health care in a facility that is the right size and also the appropriate acuity level to meet patients' needs," Salinas said. "Because of this, too many people are having to access mental health care, as you all know, in the emergency room or in our jails. This is ineffective and it's way too expensive."

H.R. 1's cost shift of SNAP and Medicaid dollars onto states will result in cuts to other vital programs at the local level to bridge that funding gap, Salinas noted.

"We need to be clear eyed about the impact of these federal cuts on our state and local funds," Salinas said. "... As county officials, you know better than anyone, you are on the front lines of providing those services to our communities.

"Since Medicaid is the single largest payer of mental health services in our country, the cuts to the program will be significant and reverberate across the nation."

In the wake of cuts to social safety net services, it's imperative that Congress explore policy solutions that both mitigate the harm of the funding loss in the short-term and increase local capacity long-term, she noted. Last year, Salinas introduced the HOPE and Mental Wellbeing Act, which would cover three primary care visits per year without cost-sharing

under Medicare and Medicaid.

"We can encourage more people to get care when they are struggling, and when they identify it and when they are ready," Salinas said. "And importantly, schedule that follow up appointment that is so crucial to care coordination and continuity."

Salinas' home state of Oregon has a shortage of nearly 4,000 beds across inpatient and residential treatment, with people who need care waiting up to six months for a bed, she said.

The gap is one that counties across the country are facing, which is why Salinas introduced the Building Capacity for Care Act. The legislation would help address the bed shortage by providing localities with grant loans and loan guarantees to build up their facilities across the care continuum, she said. Salinas also supports the Michelle Alyssa Go Act, which would raise the Institute for Mental Disease (IMD) threshold from 16 beds to 36.

"These are the types of common-sense solutions that I feel like government can and should step in and help with



**Rep. Andrea Salinas (D-Ore.), discusses legislation that could help alleviate unmet mental health needs often shouldered by counties at the Feb. 23 General Session.** Photo by Denny Henry

ties need," Salinas said.

Without change, the country is on track to have a severe shortage of providers, who will be "overscheduled, overburdened and likely underpaid" and it's going to be hard to attract people to the field, she noted.

According to Salinas, that's why she introduced the STAR Plus Scholarship Act and the Mental Health Professionals Workforce Shortage Loan

Repayment Act, which would create a dedicated pool of funding for students to pursue degrees in mental behavioral and substance use disorder treatment, giving preference to those who commit to practicing in rural and underserved areas.

To enact change, county officials must share with members of Congress the obstacles they're facing in delivering mental and behavioral health care, Salinas said.

"We need to hear your stories, we need to hear your challenges and what you're facing, we need to understand what's happening in your communities," she said. "... Your knowledge can shape policy, influence the priorities we pursue and even improve bill text." **CN**



right now," Salinas said. "... We should be able to get this done. This is a non-partisan issue, and would help on the ground deliver services for all of you right now."

Along with the need to build more beds, the healthcare system needs more qualified clinicians to staff them, Salinas noted. Over half of the people in the country live in a Mental Health Professional Shortage Area.

"We need to provide the treatment, prevention and recovery services our communi-

# House Agriculture Committee chairman targets Easter farm bill passage

by **Charlie Ban**  
senior writer

FA Mid-Atlantic snowstorm did not delay trips back to Washington, D.C. for any of the members of Congress slated to speak at the Feb. 23 General Session. But it did delay House Agriculture Chairman G.T. Thompson's scheduled markup of the farm bill that afternoon, because not all members were so fortunate.

The committee passed the farm bill a week later.

"Time is of the essence for our farmers, our ranchers and quite frankly, our rural communities," he said, targeting House passage of the farm bill by Easter—April 5. "Let's face it — the 2018 policy was really great for 2018, but it's no match for the challenges of 2026."

ter—April 5. "Let's face it — the 2018 policy was really great for 2018, but it's no match for the challenges of 2026."

In the intervening years, the COVID-19 pandemic fueled a partial migration away from cities, which Thompson, a Republican, noted in his Central Pennsylvania district.

"We have a lot of hunting camps in my district, as you can imagine, and the lights were on during COVID, and they never went off," he said. "They actually became residences for these folks."

That demographic shift is just one reason rural development policy needs an update, which should have been done in 2023.



**House Agriculture Chairman G.T. Thompson (R-Pa.) touts the Rural Development program Feb. 23 while addressing the General Session audience.** Photo by Denny Henry

Thompson said that in contrast to many state legislatures' processes that generate policy through the work of a select group of experts, the Farm, Food and National Security Act of 2026 is the fruit of more than 150 listening sessions around the country.

"I happen to believe that people will know the best solutions are the ones that are

dealing with the problems," he said. "Having a restored, robust economy and really growing the population of rural America with the right resources, this is what we can accomplish."

The Rural Health Care Facility Technical Assistance Program Act, for example, would provide funding to vulnerable rural hospitals.

"We can prevent closures, we provide essential health services and improve the long-term stability of these key community institutions," Thompson said. "All our goal is, is to ensure that our rural healthcare facilities not only survive, but they thrive."

The farm bill includes nearly 150 separate bills addressing nutrition, infrastructure, rural development, healthcare, technology and more.

"Many of them accomplish vastly different objectives, but they are all have one thing in common: They work to move rural America forward," Thompson said. "These are not flashy programs. We're talking about wastewater. But these are important programs that provide us a strong foundation for the rest of the community to build on." **CN**

20  
26



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# Westerman warns of short timeline on permitting reform

by **Charlie Ban**  
senior writer



**House Natural Resources Committee Chair Bruce Westerman (R-Ark.) describes the differences among rural, suburban and urban counties while outlining how permitting delays affect each one.**

Photo by Denny Henry

The SPEED Act is more than just an acronym for the Standardizing Permitting and Expediting Economic Development Act. It's both inspirational—for the acceleration it can offer infrastructure and energy projects—and aspirational, because the time for it to pass the Senate is running short.

Sponsor Rep. Bruce Westerman (R-Ark.), chair of the House Committee on Natural Resources, tried to express that urgency.

"March tells me that it's a fun time for basketball, but it's getting late into the year during a midterm election year when we can get meaningful legislation passed," he told the General Session audience Feb. 23.

The SPEED Act, which passed the House in December 2025 on a bipartisan vote, would limit the scope and scale of National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) reviews, prevent the federal government from rescinding permits and make counties cooperating agencies for NEPA reviews.

"This bill... has a great chance to get over the finish

line, but it's going to require efforts from folks like you from all over the country, meeting with your senators and telling them how critical this is to the success of your ability to govern in your individual counties," Westerman said. "I hope you will do that. I know you've been doing it, but I promise you can't do it enough and don't underestimate how important that is to go through... your senators."

He noted that permitting delays affect projects ranging from energy development, resource extraction, infrastructure construction, infrastructure upgrades and more, an equal-opportunity complication for counties ranging from rural to urban.

Westerman also hopes to reform the Endangered Species Act, which he said excels at preventing species extinction but fails at advancing their recovery and moving them off the Endangered Species list. That's a result, he said, of the act's limited focus on addressing federal land.

"You can't fix habitat if you're only focusing on less than one-third of the land," he said. "It's important that we work with private individuals, with county governments, with the federal government of the state, to try and get everybody on the same page of how we actually make the Endangered Species Act work."

He suggested incentives to motivate private industries and organizations to work to recover species.

But Westerman, who worked as a private forester before running for office, said the lack of active forest man-

agement threatens habitats.

"We do things in this country in the name of environmental stewardship, that in the end creates a worse environment, for the creatures we're trying to protect and what they had going forward," he said. "The forest is a dynamic living organism that's just going to grow and build a growing space until there's no more growing space, and trees compete for light, nutrients and water. And when there's not enough of that, they're competing with each other. They get brittle, they become subject to insects and disease attack, which kills the

trees, and then they're subject to catastrophic wildfire."

Westerman argued that a healthy environment and a healthy economy were not mutually exclusive.

"I believe that they're dependent upon one another," he said. "If you travel around the world and you look at the most economically prosperous countries, you're probably going to see the most environmentally conscious countries. You're going to see a country where people have an economy where they can afford to take care of the environment in a better way." **CN**

# FEMA reform 'streamlines process incredibly'

by **Charlie Ban**  
senior writer



**House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee Chairman Sam Graves (R-Mo.) shares a laugh with the General Session audience when he realizes he dressed to match his photo on the projection screen.** Photo by Denny Henry

Piecemeal efforts didn't work when trying to fix the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

So when President Trump made it clear he wanted to see FEMA reformed, Rep. Sam Graves (R-Mo.) was enthusiastic. FEMA falls under the jurisdiction of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, where he serves as chairman.

"We've done a few bills in the past that address some specific issues, and all that we've been doing is creating more and more bureaucracy within FEMA itself," Graves told the General Session audience Feb. 24. "FEMA is bro-

ken... I don't have to tell you all this, because you have to deal with it if you have any sort of natural disaster."

The Fixing Emergency Man-

agement for Americans Act (FEMA Act) passed Graves' committee on a 57-3 vote in September 2025, which illustrated Graves' characteriza-

tion as a collaborative, bipartisan process.

He highlighted the bill's intention to make the FEMA administrator a Cabinet-level position and create a more streamlined individual assistance process.

"We take this back-and-forth cumbersome process that victims have to go through when it comes to getting recovery dollars," Graves said. "We pare that down to a one-page application."

And obviously, it applies a

whole lot of common sense when it comes to disaster assistance. It reduces the risk, the costs to the taxpayers and it just speeds up that recovery, it puts states back in the driver's seat. It takes away that federal overreach when it comes to disaster assistance."

Graves credited NACo and its Intergovernmental Collaboration in Disaster Resilience case study with sharing the roadblocks and delays the counties have faced while recovering from disasters and the solutions they developed along the way.

"We seek input, from the people that know, and people that have to implement the people that have to put these policies into action," he said. **CN**

# Next step on PILT requires more outreach

by **Charlie Ban**  
senior writer

Counties have long sought permanent funding for the Payments in Lieu of Taxes (PILT) program, so Rep. Celeste Maloy's (R-Utah) assessment could have had a chilling effect.

She has been on both sides of the deal, first as a county attorney for Washington County, Utah and then as a lawyer for the Utah Association of Counties before being elected to the House of Representatives in 2023.

"As much as I would like to see that happen, I think we're in the wrong political climate for that right now because we're trying to make everything not permanent right now," she told the NACo Public Lands Policy Steering Committee Feb. 21. "Mandatory spending is what we're trying to cut back."

But she didn't rule it out.

PILT compensates counties



**Rep. Celeste Maloy (R-Utah) shares her assessment of the appropriations process with members of the Public Lands Policy Steering Committee Feb. 21.** Photo by Charlie Ban

for the nontaxable federal land in their boundaries for which they provide services, and the Secure Rural Schools (SRS) program pays counties in lieu of timber receipts. Nearly three-quarters of counties contain federal public land, which accounts for more than

a quarter of U.S. land. The 2025 PILT payments, which are discretionary spending, totaled \$644.8 million.

"It's easy to forget about PILT and SRS unless your county elected officials are blowing you up all the time on it," Maloy said. "Go talk to

people you don't know, go tell your stories. I can tell you, sitting in office now, it is really hard to ignore people who show up and tell you their experience with something we're doing and how it impacts their constituents."

She noted that many of



her congressional colleagues don't often hear from their county leaders, suggesting that some members of Congress are low-hanging fruit in the effort.

"If your own representative isn't listening, call another one nearby, because our Western issues aren't that different," she said. "If you are in a blue Western state and you're looking at red issues, call someone across the border because what we need is good information."

"It would really be easy for me and my staff to sit in our ivory tower and think we have all the right answers and then we can come up with all the good ideas. And we will get it wrong if we're not hearing from people who are on the ground and applying it." **CN**

## Information-sharing bill could protect court workers

by **Charlie Ban**  
senior writer

There's a significant constituency that stands to benefit from the Countering Threats and Attacks on Our Judges and Attorneys Act — roughly 30,000 judicial officers who serve in state and local courts.

Those officials don't have access to the U.S. Marshals service, which provides security and tracks threats to federal judges.

In fact, they're largely blind to what's out there.

"They have virtually no access to experts or resources to understand the threat environment, take personal protective measures, design more secure court facilities or share threat information," Matthew Vigeant told the NACo Justice and Public Safety Policy Steering Committee Feb. 21. "The sharing of information is maybe the big-

gest issue."

Vigeant is counsel to Sen. John Cornyn (R-Texas), who is sponsoring the bill with Sen. Chris Coons (D-Del.), a former New Castle County executive.

The bill passed the Senate during the last Congress on

a bipartisan basis with endorsement from the entire Senate Judiciary Committee but didn't move in the House. The American Bar Association has reported that the number of serious threats against judges doubled between 2019

and 2024. On top of that, several threats became attempts on judges' lives over the last 10 years, including assassinations in Wisconsin and Maryland.

The bill would not offer any grant funding but would create several resources for judicial workers.

It would:

- Establish a state judicial threat, intelligence and re-

source center, providing technical assistance to state and local judges and court personnel regarding judicial security.

- Provide physical security assessments for courts, homes and other facilities.

- Coordinate research to identify, examine and advance best practices around judicial security.

- Provide a central tracker for threats that can be shared across state lines.

Those functions would be funded by the nonprofit State Justice Institute.

Before Travis County, Texas Judge Julie Kocurek was shot in her driveway in 2017, her assailant had stalked her and had previously been arrested in Louisiana for stalking another judge.

"That information, because there was no mechanism to share it, wasn't passed on," Vigeant said. "And if it had been, maybe precautions could have been taken."

"We're not creating any new grants, but it could end up saving lives." **CN**



**Senate counsel Matthew Vigeant addresses the Justice and Public Safety Policy Steering Committee Feb. 21.** Photo by Denny Henry

# Child welfare prioritizes foster youth, families

by **Meredith Moran**  
staff writer

Child welfare experts outlined current priorities at the federal level, including better supporting foster care youth who age out of the system and recruiting more foster parents, at NACo's Human Services and Education Policy Steering Committee meeting Feb. 21.

During this Congress, the House Ways and Means Subcommittee on Work and Welfare is focused on the John H. Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood, which serves older foster youth, ages 14 and older, according to Cheryl Vincent Freiman, majority staff director of the subcommittee.

More than 15,000 youths in foster care age out of the system each year, Freiman noted.

Foster youth who are aging out of the system "are one of the most vulnerable populations in our country — homelessness,

early pregnancy, all of these issues that we're seeing," Freiman said. "And the Chafee program is really designed to try to help and support them through that kind of transition."

Congress provided \$400 million in additional funding to the Chafee program during Covid, but the program hasn't gone through significant reform since it was established in 1999, according to Freiman. The U.S. Government Accountability Office found that some of the funding for the program's Education and Training vouchers were not being drawn down by the states, so the House Ways and Means Subcommittee on Work and Welfare is looking into why that is, when there's such an established need for them, Freiman said.

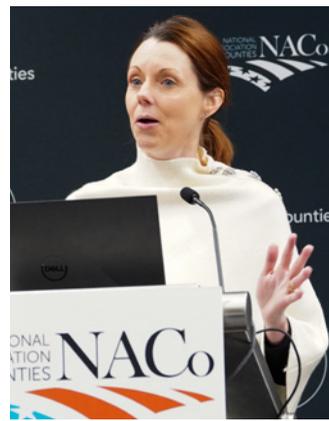
"The idea is 'Let's not just have this be on autopilot,'" Freiman said. "Let's really take the feedback from states, counties, stakeholders, youth with lived experience, and try

to make the program as effective as possible."

Last year, First Lady Melania Trump's "Fostering the Future for American Children and Families" executive order outlined educational and employment pathways for youth transitioning out of foster care, including increased access to education and training vouchers.

"It's a very high-profile focus on this one specific subset of the population and what kind of supports they need," Freiman said. "So, we really feel that's an opportunity to have that vision about where we can go and also, at the same time, having bipartisan conversations about what the solutions are."

Legislation introduced this session by members of the House Ways and Means subcommittee would increase the cap on individual education and training vouchers from \$5,000 to \$12,000 and allow for more flexibility on how the vouchers are used, so that fos-



**Cheryl Vincent Freiman, majority staff director of the House Ways and Means Subcommittee on Work and Welfare, discusses foster care initiatives Feb. 21 at the Human Services and Education Policy Steering Committee meeting.** Photo by Leon Lawrence III

ter youth could use the vouchers to pursue alternative career pathways outside of a four-year college, such as for trade school, according to Freiman.

The Home for Every Child initiative, which the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) launched last year following the executive order, is working to better support foster parents in the hopes of achieving higher retention rates, according to Ryan Hanlon, associate commissioner for ACF's Children's Bureau.

Child welfare research shows that if 100 new foster

families are recruited, 50% of them are going to drop out in the first year, and another 50% are going to drop out in year two, Hanlon noted.

"You are constantly recruiting, almost like a revolving door, of new foster parents," Hanlon said. "And you're training them, which can be time-intensive and expensive, and you're continually needing to find new foster parents. We want to help address that."

There's not a one-size-fits-all solution for the initiative's overall goal of achieving a foster home-to-child ratio greater than 1:1 in every state, because different localities have different needs, but ACF's priorities include improving prevention services, finding more permanent living solutions for foster youth and focusing on kinship care and community partnerships, according to Hanlon.

ACF is seeking feedback from those working on the ground, and the agency wants to work with states and localities to share data across levels of government that can help inform best practices, he noted.

"It's a federal initiative, but our success or failure is only going to be determined at the local level," Hanlon said. **CN**



# NOAA outlines help for counties navigating growing risks of drought

by **Mary Ann Barton**  
editor

When the rain doesn't fall and reservoirs begin to shrink, county leaders are often left asking the same question: What happens when the water isn't there?

For Elizabeth Ossowski, the answer starts with information — and getting it into the right hands before a crisis hits.

Ossowski, senior program coordinator for NOAA's National Integrated Drought Information System (NIDIS), spoke Saturday to members of the NACo Environment, Energy & Land Use Policy Steering Committee about how counties can move from reacting to drought to preparing for it.

"Drought looks different in Loudoun County, Virginia, than it does in Brookfield County, Colorado," she said. "So, the information has to re-



**NOAA's Elizabeth Ossowski discusses the National Integrated Drought Information System Feb. 21 with members of the NACo Environment, Energy and Land Use Policy Steering Committee.** Photo by Denny Henry

flect that."

Created by Congress in 2006 and reauthorized in 2014 and 2019, NIDIS is a multi-agency program led by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. Its mission is to help the nation shift from a reactive approach to a proactive one when it comes to drought risk.

That shift begins with tracking the warning signs: Precipitation levels, soil moisture, reservoir storage and other indicators that signal trouble ahead. By monitoring those measures, local officials can better manage water supplies, prepare for heightened wildfire risk and determine when to activate disaster aid programs, including the U.S. Department of Agriculture's livestock assistance programs.

But drought is not a one-size-fits-all disaster.

Unlike hurricanes or tornadoes, which strike quickly and visibly, drought creeps in and manifests in different ways. It can be meteorological — a prolonged lack of rainfall. It can be hydrologic, when rivers and reservoirs decline. It can be agricultural, damaging crops and pastureland. Or it can become socio-economic, disrupting industries and livelihoods.

"It's important that the drought information delivered to you is tailored to the various droughts being experienced," Ossowski told county officials. Decision-making timelines also vary by sector, she noted — from farmers making seasonal planting choices to water managers planning years ahead.

NIDIS serves as what Ossowski called the federal government's "front door for drought information." In addition to coordinating federal research, the program operates a national drought early warning system built around regional networks designed to reflect local conditions.

On April 9, NIDIS will launch the Mid-Atlantic Drought Early Warning System, covering West Virginia, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Delaware, Washington, D.C., Maryland and Virginia.

For county officials seeking

localized data, drought.gov offers ZIP code-specific information, maps and statistics, along with regional newsletters. The website's redesign was done in part in consultation with NACo to better support county-level decision-making, she noted.

Looking ahead, NIDIS is building a drought-planning platform aimed at helping communities translate data into action.

The effort is being piloted in the Four Corners states — New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado and Utah — where drought planning, hazard mitigation, water management and land use decisions are closely intertwined.

The platform is expected to expand nationally by the end of 2026, with the goal of making drought information not just accessible, but actionable. **CN**

# Virginia county transforms crisis care, eases police burden



by Meredith Moran  
staff writer

Prince William County, Va.'s Crisis Receiving Center is bridging the gap between emergency room care and traditional outpatient care in behavioral crisis response and reducing burden on local law enforcement and hospitals, according to Prince William County Supervisor Andrea Bailey.

The crisis receiving center "creates a safe and supportive and welcoming environment where one doesn't have to feel ashamed because they're suffering," Bailey said Saturday at the NACo Health Policy Steering Committee meeting. "They know that they're going to be stabilized in an environment where they are protected."

Prince William County's Crisis Receiving Center serves both youth and adults, offering wraparound services, including peer support, medication assistance (the center has a pharmacy on-site), drug offender recovery services and homeless outreach, according to Bailey. The center initially opened on a limited basis in October 2025 to adults who received referrals from hospitals and law enforcement and then expanded in January to serve walk-in patients.

Youth are in crisis, Bailey noted. She cited data from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, that shows that 8.8 million young adults reported having a mental health crisis, with only 42% of them receiving treatment, and 5.1 million reported having a substance use disorder, with only 13% of them receiving treatment.

"Any one of us can find ourselves in a behavioral crisis," Bailey said.

A mental health system reliant on emergency rooms and law enforcement means that someone experiencing a behavioral health crisis is "on a stretcher, in handcuffs and



Prince William County, Va. Supervisor Andrea Bailey discusses the success of the county's Crisis Receiving Center Feb. 21 during a meeting of the Health Policy Steering Committee. Photo by Leon Lawrence III

our policemen are not on the streets," Bailey said. That also creates a cycle where someone is in and out of emergency rooms and the justice system without receiving proper treatment, harming not only the person in crisis, but also the broader community, noted Robin Cheung, policy advisor to U.S. Rep. Dan Goldman (D-N.Y.).

Cheung shared the story of Michelle Go, a woman who died after Martial Simon, a homeless man experiencing a behavioral health crisis, pushed her in front of a moving subway train. Last September, Rep. Goldman introduced the Michelle Go Act, bipartisan legislation that aims to build capacity for both inpatient care and crisis response care.

Simon "was passed between emergency departments and jails without ever receiving the care he needed for schizophrenia," Cheung said. "And unfortunately, Michelle Go lost her life. Our system failed Michelle Go, but most importantly, our system failed Martial Simon, because people experiencing a mental health crisis are often the victims of violence, not just the perpetrators."

'The days are gone where we work in silos.'

— Andrea Bailey  
Prince William County, Va.  
supervisor

The federal government currently bans any psychiatric facility from receiving Medicaid funding that has more than 16 beds. The Michelle Go Act would raise the

cap to 36 beds.

"As you all know in your counties, the need is so high," Cheung said. "And 16 beds is nowhere near enough to meet the moment."

Medicaid is the backbone of making the crisis system sustainable, noted Chris Santarsiero, Connections Health Solutions' vice president of government affairs.

The Prince William County Crisis Receiving Center has 64 chairs and beds, according to Bailey. It tackles behav-

ioral health crises through a "No Wrong Door" approach, accepting emergency custody orders and temporary detention orders and offering medical detox within the facility, and uses the Crisis Now model, a collaborative approach to behavioral health crisis response that connects people with resources throughout the crisis, with the goal of providing effective care, reducing the need for emergency services and preventing suicide, according to Bailey.

"County government is leading the transformation in how communities redesign how they intersect behavioral health," Santarsiero said.

There were 93 stakeholders involved in making Prince William County's Crisis Receiving Center a reality, including local nonprofits and mayors, according to Bailey. Counties must partner with state and federal officials to get essential work done at the local level, she noted.

"The days are gone where we work in silos," Bailey said. "It's time for us to come together in a very strong way to serve our communities. What has made [the crisis receiving center] successful is connection ... and understanding that it does take a village to create." **CN**



Members of the Health Policy Steering Committee make their positions known on proposed policies during their meeting at the 2026 Legislative Conference. Photo by Leon Lawrence III

# CONFERENCE IN PICTURES

ALL PHOTOS BY DENNY HENRY UNLESS NOTED



Members of the Washington, D.C. Police Honor Guard parade the colors before a General Session audience.

Commissioner Jordan Juarez (center), of Sandoval County, N. M. speaks with Eric Masterson, his deputy county manager, at a breakfast for about 300 first-time Legislative Conference attendees.



Smile: Douglas County, Neb. Commissioner Mary Ann Borgeson, Loudoun County, Va. Board Chair Phyllis Randall and Ramsey County, Minn. Commissioner Mary Jo McGuire.



2026 **Legislative Conference**  
 Feb. 21-24  
 Washington, D.C.

The crowd stands to recite the Pledge of Allegiance as a General Session gets underway in the Washington Hilton ballroom.



2026 **Legislative Conference**  
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Nalini Padmanabhan, communications director at the de Beaumont Foundation, a think tank which strengthens public health by supporting local health agencies, stops by the Resource Center.



Ty Rosburg, who chairs the Crawford County, Iowa Board of Supervisors, pauses for a chuckle during a meeting.



Harrison County, Miss. Supervisor Rebecca Powers (right) speaks with her seatmates during a General Session.



House staffer Sam Dorsey displays a pair of spurs given as a gift by the Public Lands Policy Steering Committee. Dorsey previously worked for the late Rep. Doug LaMalfa (R-Calif.), who led the reauthorization effort for the Secure Rural Schools program.

Photo by Charlie Ban



Members of the Women of NACo assemble before their meeting.



Members of the NACo Board of Directors pause for a group photo Feb. 22 after the Board Forum at the 2026 NACo Legislative Conference.



An attendee pauses to visit with staffmembers from the U.S. Department of Commerce at the popular Federal Agency Expo.



NACo Senior Legislative Director Blaire Bryant briefs the NACo Board on health policy as NACo Legislative Director Jeff Thorsby looks on.



Zoe Coppola, a harpist with the Mid-Atlantic Symphony, performs during a workshop held by the NACo Arts and Culture Innovation Council. Photo by Leon Lawrence III



Adam Schwiebert of the County Commissioners Association of Ohio rises from the crowd to take a photo during a workshop on property tax reform. Photo by Charlie Ban



Jasper County, Ga. Commissioner Sheila Pounds and Telfair County, Ga. Commissioner Dakia Bradshaw pause for a smile during a General Session.



NACo President J.D. Clark tells nearly 300 first-time conference attendees Feb. 21 that his first connection with NACo came at the 2015 Legislative Conference.



Supervisor Latifah Faisal of Story County, Iowa in the crowd at the Feb. 23 General Session.



Lake County, Ill. Board Member Gina Roberts engages with fellow county officials Saturday morning at the First-Time Attendees Breakfast..



Robin Halsted, a Kent County, Mich. commissioner, prints out her badge.  
Photo by Leon Lawrence III



NACo members line dance to the eclectic music of The Exclusives Band.  
Photo by Leon Lawrence III

# NACo BOARD PASSES 39 INTERIM POLICY RESOLUTIONS

Board adopts new policies on rural emergency medical service, housing, mental health, FEMA reimbursements, AI policy and more.



NACo's 10 policy steering committees met during the 2026 Legislative Conference to debate policies that will guide counties' advocacy efforts in the new year. On Feb. 23, the NACo Board of Directors passed 39 interim resolutions, which will serve as NACo's positions until being reconsidered at the Annual Conference July 17-20 in Orleans Parish, La.



Supervisor Joshua Pedrozo of Merced County, Calif., who chairs the Agriculture and Rural Affairs Steering Committee, speaks during the NACo Board of Directors meeting. Photo by Denny Henry

## AGRICULTURE AND RURAL AFFAIRS

### Increase reimbursement for rural emergency medical services

**ISSUE:** Reimbursement rates to rural emergency medical service (EMS) providers from Medicare, Medicaid and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) have failed to keep up with inflation and rising costs of medical care, causing rural EMS providers and the communities they serve to experience a shortage of care. Additionally, rural EMS providers are not compensated for other services, such as Treatment in Place (TIP) and Transport to Alternative Provider (TAP) services.

**ADOPTED POLICY:** NACo supports an increase in reimbursement rates for rural EMS providers from Medicare, Medicaid and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs to

offset inflation and increasing medical costs, and the permanent implementation of COVID-19 era reimbursement to rural EMS providers for delivering Treatment in Place (TIP) and Transport to Alternative Provider (TAP) services.

### Prioritize farmer and rancher mental health and include counties as key partners in program development and implementation

**ISSUE:** The elevated mental health risks and suicide rates among farmers, ranchers and agricultural workers represent a preventable public health crisis requiring targeted federal action, and as such, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and other federal partners must formally recognize farmer mental health as a priority and ensure meaningful county involvement in federal initiatives, such as the Farm and Ranch Stress Assis-

tance Network (FRSAN).

**ADOPTED POLICY:** NACo urges the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), in coordination with Congress and relevant federal agencies, to:

- Formally acknowledge the elevated mental health risks and suicide rates among farmers, ranchers and agricultural workers as an occupational hazard requiring targeted federal action;
- Increase and sustain funding for the Farm and Ranch Stress Assistance Network (FRSAN) and related programs to expand access to behavioral health services, crisis hotlines, peer support networks and stigma-reduction efforts in rural areas;
- Include NACo and county officials as stakeholders in USDA advisory committees, policy development, grant review processes and program implementation related to

farm stress and rural behavioral health;

- Support intergovernmental partnerships that leverage counties' roles in delivering local mental health services, emergency response and community-based outreach to agricultural producers;
- Promote evidence-based strategies to address barriers such as geographic isolation, provider shortages and cultural stigma.

### Supporting water reliability for agriculture and food security

**ISSUE:** Reliable and affordable water supplies are critical to maintaining domestic food production, stabilizing grocery prices, protecting rural livelihoods and sustaining the national agricultural economy.

**ADOPTED POLICY:** NACo urges Congress and relevant federal agencies, including

the U.S. Department of the Interior and the Bureau of Reclamation, to ensure that agricultural water rights, including senior water rights and long-standing contractual allocations, are protected as a matter of national interest and food security.

NACo supports federal policies and funding mechanisms that:

- Prioritize agricultural water reliability in federally managed systems and interstate compacts, recognizing agriculture as essential infrastructure for domestic food production.
- Increase federal investment in water storage, conveyance, recycling and groundwater recharge projects that enhance supply for both agricultural and municipal users without reallocating existing agricultural water rights.

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# Modernize regulations to permit disability-specific housing options



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- Safeguard water transfers and market transactions to ensure they do not undermine the economic stability of rural communities or the nation's food supply chain.

- Promote balanced, science-based water policy by ensuring agricultural and rural counties have equal representation in federal and state water negotiations, planning processes and conservation programs.

NACo affirms the critical importance of domestic agriculture to national food security and calls on federal policymakers to ensure that farms and ranches retain access to the water resources necessary to feed the country and the world.

## COMMUNITY, WORKFORCE AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

### HUD Funding

**ISSUE:** The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) issued a new Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO) on November 13th for FY2025 funding for the Continuum of Care (CoC) Program. This NOFO raised serious concerns related to timing and included abrupt changes to process and policy that our community would have no time to plan for or adapt.

**ADOPTED POLICY:** NACo supports Sec. 244 of the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2026 and urges the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to:

- Award Continuum of Care funds on a timely basis, as outlined in Sec. 244
- Preserve local expenditure flexibility, including project type, within any upcoming Continuum of Care FY2026 program NOFO.



**Community, Economic and Workforce Development Steering Committee Chair Angela Conley of Hennepin County, Minn. takes the microphone.** Photo by Denny Henry

### Strengthen and sustain the U.S. manufacturing workforce

**ISSUE:** The manufacturing sector depends heavily on its ability to maintain and attract a skilled workforce; if continued investments in the manufacturing workforce are not sustained in the coming years, counties and the overall economy will lose out on economic and social gains.

**ADOPTED POLICY:** NACo urges the federal government to work with local and state governments to build a strong workforce pipeline for the manufacturing sector by (1) increasing funding for programs aimed at creating opportunities for high school and post-secondary students to explore career opportunities in the manufacturing sector and encourage workforce development programs; (2) connecting residents with skills training, digital access, career navigation, and employment opportunities via workforce development centers, community colleges, and trade schools, thereby strengthening neighborhoods and local economies; (3) designating additional funding for scholarships and grants for students enrolled in vocational and technical schools; and (4) developing strategies

to support the growth of key economic sectors to support the retention and expansion of existing businesses, attract new businesses, and showcase the United States' competitive business ecosystem. Taken together, these policies can advance equitable and sustainable development by helping manufacturers expand, collaborate, network, innovate and hire.

### Modernize Section 504 regulations to permit disability-specific housing options

**ISSUE:** Current federal housing nondiscrimination regulations under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act restrict the development of disability-specific housing, limiting the ability of individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities to choose residential settings that provide appropriate supports, amenities, and environments tailored to their needs.

**ADOPTED POLICY:** NACo urges Congress and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to modernize Section 504 regulations to clarify that disability-specific housing is permissible when such housing is voluntarily chosen by residents and designed to

promote independence, safety, and community engagement. Federal housing policy should recognize that equal opportunity does not require uniform housing models and that allowing intentional communities and targeted developments expands—not restricts—meaningful choice. HUD should revise its regulations to remove barriers that discourage the development of housing designed for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities, while continuing to prohibit unlawful discrimination and ensure access for individuals with disabilities.

Clarifying federal housing policy to permit disability-specific housing would advance the goals of independence, self-direction, and community participation while addressing real-world housing shortages and cost constraints.

### Promote targeted federal incentives and skills-based employment policies

**ISSUE:** Neurodivergent individuals, including individuals with autism spectrum disorder, ADHD, dyslexia, and other cognitive or neurological differences, remain significantly underrepresented in the workforce despite possessing valuable skills that

can contribute to economic productivity, innovation, and workforce stability.

**ADOPTED POLICY:** NACo urges Congress to advance federal workforce policies that increase employment opportunities for neurodivergent individuals through skills-based incentives and workplace supports and to clarify that such efforts are consistent with evolving federal workforce and equal employment policies. Congress should expand and modernize federal incentives that encourage public and private employers to recruit, hire, train, and retain neurodivergent individuals by supporting flexible work arrangements, skills-based hiring practices, job coaching, and reasonable workplace accommodations. These incentives should focus on measurable outcomes such as increased labor force participation, reduced dependency on public assistance, improved employee retention, and overall economic productivity, while preserving employer flexibility and avoiding prescriptive or quota-based requirements.

To this end, NACo urges Congress to advance federal workforce policies that authorize competitive federal grant programs and pilot initiatives, administered through the U.S. Department of Labor, to support county-led and employer-partnered demonstrations of skills-based hiring, alternative assessment methods, job coaching, and structured onboarding models. Congress should further establish targeted federal tax credits for employers that adopt verified workplace accommodations and skills-based hiring practices benefiting neurodivergent employees, with incentives tied to employee retention and advancement rather than initial hiring alone. Eligible costs may include job coaching, assistive technologies, alternative interview processes, and flexible work arrangements. For implementation of these policies, federal agencies may also provide technical assistance and model guidance to support

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voluntary, performance-based employment practices, with funded programs reporting measurable outcomes such as labor force participation, retention, and reduced reliance on public assistance.

**Support housing for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities**

**ISSUE:** While some local housing authorities have adopted Section 8 Administrative Plan provisions that facilitate housing developments serving individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities, inconsistent adoption across jurisdictions creates barriers to project development and limits housing choice for vulnerable populations.

**ADOPTED POLICY:** NACo urges Congress to support efforts to promote consistent adoption of Section 8 Administrative Plan provisions that enable housing authorities to support developments serving individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. The organization urges state housing finance agencies to encourage or require housing authorities receiving state or federal housing funds to adopt administrative policies that recognize the legitimacy of disability-focused housing models, preferences, and supportive service partnerships. Such policies should preserve local flexibility while ensuring that housing programs do not inadvertently exclude or disadvantage individuals with disabilities seeking appropriate community-based housing.

**ENVIRONMENT, ENERGY AND LAND USE**

**Maintain or increase funding levels for the Clean Water and Drinking Water State Revolving Funds**

**ISSUE:** The Clean Water and Drinking Water State Revolving Funds (SRFs) are critical funding sources for improvements to and expansions of county-owned and -operated

water infrastructure, but available SRF funding will decrease significantly at the end of FY 2026 without congressional action. Unless Congress maintains or increases current funding levels to support counties' efforts to deliver safe drinking water and uphold environmental water quality standards for residents, counties will have diminished access to affordable financing for water infrastructure projects.

**ADOPTED POLICY:** NACo urges Congress to fund the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) Clean Water and Drinking Water State Revolving Fund programs at or above the amount provided by both annual appropriations and the

**Reauthorize the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative**

**ISSUE:** Reauthorization of the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI) is critical to the continued restoration of Great Lakes waterways which, in turn support healthy ecosystems, improved public health outcomes, and a growing regional economy.

**ADOPTED POLICY:** NACo urges Congress to reauthorize the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI) through FY2031 and recommends increasing the program's annual funding to accelerate progress toward long-term water restoration goals.

experiences a change in scope, design, alignment, length, or configuration, the lead federal agency may address such changes through a targeted modification or supplemental environmental analysis rather than requiring preparation of a new Environmental Assessment or Environmental Impact Statement. The amended statute should establish a presumption that previously completed portions of the NEPA review remain valid and may be incorporated by reference, provided the change does not materially alter the purpose and need of the project or introduce significant environmental impacts that cannot reasonably be evaluat-

material change requiring the environmental review process to restart. In such cases, the lead federal agency should be authorized to incorporate responsive changes through targeted modification, supplementation, or incorporation by reference, without reopening previously completed analyses unrelated to the modification.

**FINANCE, PENSIONS AND INTERGOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS**

**Include active and retired reserve component status on the decennial census and the American Community Survey questionnaires**

**ISSUE:** The decennial census and related United States Census Bureau data collections do not consistently identify active or retired reserve-component status, limiting state and county planning for reservist benefits and services.

**ADOPTED POLICY:** NACo urges the United States Congress to direct the United States Census Bureau to test and add a reserve-component status question to appropriate census products, including the American Community Survey, and to evaluate inclusion on the next decennial census questionnaire, so states and counties can better plan and target services for active and retired reservists and their families.

**HEALTH**

**Fund research on CTW its affect on students' mental health**

**ISSUE:** Early exposure to head trauma can lead to life-long neurological and mental health conditions that exacerbate the nation's mental health crisis and place significant strain on counties as primary providers of mental and behavioral health services.

**ADOPTED POLICY:** NACo urges Congress and the Administration to fund comprehensive research on CTE progression and its link to mental health

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**Health Policy Steering Committee Chair, Supervisor Bruno Sabatier of Lake County, Calif. speaks during the NACo Board of Directors meeting.** Photo by Denny Henry

Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (P.L. 117-58).

Additionally, EPA should provide oversight of state implementation plans to ensure that funding is directed toward systems with the most need to complete projects with the greatest impact. Oversight should ensure that prioritized projects support the programs' primary objectives of improving drinking and environmental water quality rather than addressing ancillary deferred maintenance backlogs. Funding legislation should maintain state programs' flexibility to provide special financing and technical assistance for small water systems serving fewer than 10,000 customers with special emphasis on systems serving 3,300 customers or less.

**Clarify and Modernize NEPA**

**ISSUE:** Changes to the scope or design of federally approved infrastructure projects during an ongoing National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) review can unnecessarily require the environmental review process to restart from the beginning, resulting in delays, increased costs, and inefficiencies even when previously analyzed elements remain unaffected.

**ADOPTED POLICY:** NACo urges Congress to amend the National Environmental Policy Act (42 U.S.C. §§ 4321 et seq.) to clarify that when an infrastructure project undergoing an active NEPA review expe-

ed through supplementation. NACo further urges Congress to direct federal agencies to update their NEPA implementing procedures to ensure consistent application of this approach, including limiting any additional scoping or public review to those geographic areas, resources, or issues directly affected by the modification.

NACo further urges Congress to clarify that project refinements, design adjustments, or mitigation measures identified through public comment during an active NEPA review, where such changes maintain a clear nexus to the original purpose and need of the project and further the same underlying objectives, shall not be deemed a

# Expand federal healthcare programs to offer coverage to county first responders



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and suicide.

## Support the Healthcare Workforce

**ISSUE:** Recent federal proposals risk deepening health care workforce shortages in county hospitals and clinics by restricting access to H-1B health professionals who are H-1B visa holders and weakening the training pipeline, particularly in rural and underserved communities; the President's September 19 nonimmigrant worker restrictions and forthcoming Department of Education rulemaking under H.R. 1 could significantly limit both recruitment and preparation training of critical health care workers.

**ADOPTED POLICY:** NACo supports the inclusion of health care post-baccalaureate professional degree programs, such as nursing, nurse practitioners, Certified Registered Nurse Anesthetists (CRNAs), social work, physician assistants, physical therapists and occupational therapists, among others in the definition of a professional degree program. Additionally, NACo supports an exemption of health care workers serving our nation's hospitals and other county health service providers from the newly announced \$100,000 H-1B visa application fee.

## Reduce the frequency of reevaluations for Home and Community-Based Services

**ISSUE:** Under cost-sharing requirements between the federal and state governments, state Medicaid agencies are required to develop and manage a comprehensive assessment tool that is used to determine and reestablish waiver eligibility, including level of care. For counties operating under a state-supervised, county-administered social service

model, increasing demand for home and community-based services and the annual reevaluation requirement has created intensive labor challenges, extensive waiting lists and delays to accessing needed service.

**ADOPTED POLICY:** NACo urges Congress and the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) to adopt a reevaluation framework for Medicaid Home and Community-Based Services (HCBS) that extends reassessment intervals when participant stability is demonstrated—from the current 12-month requirement to a 36-month reeval-



**Human Service and Education Steering Committee Chair, Commissioner Barbara Weckman Brekke of Scott County, Minn. speaks at the Board meeting.** Photo by Denny Henry

uation cycle, upon request. These individuals will have demonstrated multiple consecutive evaluations showing no material change in needs or service utilization. Any extended timeframe should include clear expectations for interim reassessments when a participant experiences a significant change in condition or circumstances, to ensure timely identification of emerging needs and safeguard program integrity. This risk-based approach would strengthen continuity of care, align with CMS expectations for ongoing monitoring, and reduce unnecessary administrative burden on counties and states, allowing limited resources to be focused on service delivery and higher-need individuals.

## Expand federal healthcare programs for first responders

**ISSUE:** The cost of health care continues to rise forcing counties to pay large amounts of money to cover their first responders utilizing an inefficient system that values profits over service.

**ADOPTED POLICY:** NACo supports expanding federal healthcare programs (i.e. Medicare, Medicaid, Veterans Affairs) to provide healthcare coverage for law enforcement, firefighters, and emergency medical service (EMS) providers (including emergen-

to address the added administrative costs placed on counties by H.R. 1 provisions. NACo requests that HHS, Agriculture and the U.S. Congress exempt vulnerable populations from work requirements and eligibility redeterminations, align the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Medicaid work requirement reporting, allow cross-program reporting for semi-annual reviews and delay SNAP administrative and benefit costs shifts. NACo further urges the U.S. Congress to provide supplemental appropriations to directly assist counties with the added administrative costs caused by H.R. 1. While H.R. 1 does include limited federal funding for the implementation of eligibility redeterminations and work requirements, counties will require supplemental funding to ensure the continued and timely delivery of services.

## Classify Kratom alkaloids as scheduled controlled substances

**ISSUE:** Kratom's active compounds, mitragynine and 7-hydroxymitragynine (7-OH), pose significant addiction risks and opioid-like effects, creating a growing public health concern.

**ADOPTED POLICY:** NACo urges the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) to classify mitragynine and 7-OH as scheduled controlled substances under the Controlled Substances Act. NACo further supports federal, state and local efforts to regulate or ban kratom products, particularly those containing concentrated or synthetic 7-OH, and encourage collaboration with public health agencies to educate communities on the risks of kratom use.

In addition to urging the DEA to schedule mitragynine and 7-OH under the Controlled Substances Act, NACo recommends coordinated federal action to clarify regulatory authority, evaluate high-potency and synthetic derivatives, establish national potency limits, and require uniform labeling with clear

risk disclosures. NACo also calls for mandatory adverse event reporting, integration of kratom-related data into national surveillance systems and expanded federal research and public education efforts. Together, these steps would provide counties with clearer standards, stronger oversight, and better public health tools to address emerging substance use risks.

## Preserve Medicaid eligibility for people with disabilities

**ISSUE:** Amidst sweeping cuts to Medicaid and increasing paperwork requirements to prove Medicaid eligibility, individuals with disabilities are at greater risk of losing Medicaid coverage, thereby shifting the financial burden to local governments.

**ADOPTED POLICY:** NACo urges Congress to preserve Medicaid eligibility for people with disabilities by allowing states the flexibility to internally verify Medicaid eligibility, thereby limiting the paperwork an individual must submit every six months.

## Advance mental health equity and access for underserved youth

**ISSUE:** The growing mental health crisis affecting residents across country, marked by rising rates of mental illness among youth and young adults and compounded by long-standing inequities in access to care. Black, Brown and other underserved communities continue to experience disproportionate barriers to timely, culturally competent mental health services, resulting in unmet needs, delayed treatment and preventable social and health consequences.

**ADOPTED POLICY:** NACo urges Congress to establish a comprehensive national policy framework that promotes mental health awareness, reduces stigma and expands equitable access to culturally competent care. This frame-

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work should include scalable, community-based models such as the “S.H.O.P. (Sharing Hope and Overcoming Pressure) Talk” Initiative, which leverage trusted local spaces to provide trauma-informed outreach, early intervention and peer support, particularly in underserved communities.

**Rescind or amend the “Settings Rule”**

**ISSUE:** The Medicaid Home and Community-Based Services (HCBS) “Settings Rule” has been applied in a manner that restricts the development and operation of appropriate residential and vocational settings for individuals with significant intellectual and developmental disabilities, limiting individual choice and impeding access to Medicaid-funded services.

**ADOPTED POLICY:** NACo urges Congress and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), through the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS), to rescind or substantially amend the HCBS Settings Rule to ensure that federal policy does not unnecessarily restrict community-based service models that are chosen by individuals and their families and that meet legitimate health, safety, and support needs. Consistent with Executive Order 14219, federal agencies should eliminate prescriptive and burdensome regulatory provisions that exceed statutory authority, discourage private and nonprofit development, and impose unnecessary administrative costs on states and local governments. Federal policy should recognize a broad range of community-based settings, including intentional and disability-specific communities, where such settings promote meaningful engagement, personal safety, and quality of life.

**Support the 340B program**

**ISSUE:** For more than 30 years, the congressionally created 340B program has enabled safety-net hospitals and clinics to stretch limited



**Finance, Pensions and Intergovernmental Affairs Steering Committee Chair, County Treasurer Jennifer Henderson, of Schleicher County, Texas speaks during the NACo Board of Directors meeting.** Photo by Denny Henry

resources by purchasing outpatient drugs at discounted prices, allowing counties to expand services like mental health care, substance use treatment, and emergency care for vulnerable patients at no cost to taxpayers. Since 2020, manufacturer restrictions on contract pharmacies that were followed by as well as HRSA’s August 2025 launch of a 340B Rebate Model Pilot requiring upfront WAC payments and rebate claims have imposed significant financial and administrative burdens on safety-net providers.

**ADOPTED POLICY:** NACo supports legislation, S. 2372/H.R. 4581, the 340B Pharmaceutical Access to Invest in Essential, Needed Treatments and Supports (340B PATIENTS) Act of 2025, which would protect the 340B drug pricing program by clarifying that manufacturers are required to offer 340B discount prices to hospitals and other covered entities regardless of the manner or location in which a drug is dispensed, including if they use a contract pharmacy to dispense 340B drugs to the entity’s patients; ensuring that manufacturers cannot place conditions on the ability of a hospital or covered entity to purchase and use 340B drugs, regardless of the manner or location in which the drug is dispensed, including

through contract pharmacies; and imposing civil monetary penalties on manufacturers that violate these statutory requirements and prohibition.

NACo also urges HRSA to indefinitely postpone implementation of the 340B Rebate Model Pilot Program and instead work to support all county health service providers

**HUMAN SERVICES AND EDUCATION**

**Support the Major Richard Star Act**

**ISSUE:** Veterans who were medically retired because of injuries incurred in combat are only eligible for their full retirement pay from the Department of Defense (DOD) and disability compensation from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) if they served for 20 years and have a disability rating of 50 percent or higher; otherwise, medically retired veterans who were injured in combat see their DOD retirement reduced dollar-for-dollar by their VA disability compensation, which by unfair forfeiture financially punishes our most severely combat-wounded veterans and their families.

**ADOPTED POLICY:** NACo urges Congress to ensure that veterans whose military careers were cut short due to

combat-related injuries are no longer subject to an offset reducing their VA disability compensation and DOD retirement pay are no longer subject to the offset.

**Ensure continuity in SNAP benefits**

**ISSUE:** By law, individuals and families who meet the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program’s (SNAP) eligibility requirements are entitled to benefits. Despite this requirement, Congress has historically treated SNAP as an “appropriated entitlement,” funding the program through the annual appropriations process. This places the program at risk for lapses in benefits in the event of government shutdowns or other funding shortfalls.

**ADOPTED POLICY:** NACo urges Congress to enact legislation ensuring SNAP benefits are available on a permanent basis, including in the event of a government shutdown, by authorizing “such sums as necessary” for the program.

**Expand veteran benefit eligibility**

**ISSUE:** Naturalized citizens who fought in foreign wars under the direction of the CIA do not qualify for veteran’s benefits despite their service, and subsequent allegiance, to the United States of America;

recognizing these individuals as veterans will strengthen county-level health and social systems by connecting more Veterans to comprehensive VA services such as Whole Health supports, mental health care, housing programs, and employment resources that complement and enhance local safety-net efforts.

**ADOPTED POLICY:** NACo urges Congress to recognize those naturalized under Section 2 (1)(B) of the Hmong Veterans’ Naturalization Act of 2000 who served under the direction of the CIA in a documented special guerrilla unit, as Veterans of the United States of America, granting them full access to Veterans benefits and acknowledging their service and sacrifice for the Nation. NACo similarly urges the Administration to allow CIA contracted groups to apply for eligibility for consideration under P.L. 95-202 and 32 C.F.R. for a determination of Active-Duty service. 32 C.F.R. § 47.4(b) should be amended to read: “A determination of service that is considered to be equivalent to active military service is made on the extent to which the group was under the control of the U.S. Armed Forces and/or the Central Intelligence Agency in a military operation or mission during

# Better transparency on PILT payments would help counties plan accurate budgets



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an armed conflict.”

## Support of Reducing Chronic Disease in Children ages 0-18 to reduce requirements for Special Education and Special Services

**ISSUE:** Counties play a central role in administering and coordinating human services programs that support children and families, including early childhood programs, nutrition assistance and child welfare services. These county-administered programs are often the first point of contact for children with chronic health conditions and for families managing complex service needs.

Counties bear both the fiscal and administrative impacts of childhood chronic disease through increased demand for human services, care coordination across multiple systems and long-term service dependency.

**ADOPTED POLICY:** NACo supports federal and state policies that recognize counties rely on nonprofit organizations as trusted partners to reduce chronic disease among children ages 0-18 through county-administered human services programs and healthier food availability. NACo supports policies that expand funding and technical assistance for county-led prevention, early identification, and care coordination efforts that improve child health outcomes and reduce long-term reliance on intensive services and public assistance programs.

## JUSTICE AND PUBLIC SAFETY

### FEMA reimbursement rates for mutual aid response

**ISSUE:** Proposes to request that the Federal Emergency

Management Agency (FEMA) return reimbursement rates for firefighter apparatus to 2023 rates.

**ADOPTED POLICY:** NACo supports funding rates from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) - following a federal disaster declaration - for fire fighting equipment that adequately reimburse volunteer fire departments when they support

due process and identification protections for all responders, regardless of background or employment status.

## PUBLIC LANDS

### PILT Side B

**ISSUE:** Counties with high federal acreage but lower populations receive lower than equitable minimum payments under the current payments in lieu of taxes (PILT) Alternative

underlying data, supporting documentation, or clear explanations of year-over-year changes used in PILT calculations. Limited access to the state-submitted information and federal records used to calculate PILT payments reduces transparency, impedes counties' ability to verify payment accuracy and reconcile discrepancies, and complicates responsible budgeting.

reaffirm FLPMA's comprehensive control over public land disposal and protect completed transactions from retroactive legal challenges.

**ADOPTED POLICY:** NACo urges Congress to enact legislation reaffirming that the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA) provides comprehensive disposal authority for all public lands under the Bureau of Land Management's administration, regardless of the original acquisition statute. Such legislation should establish that FLPMA's uniform procedures apply to lands acquired through tribal cessions, railroad grants, military reservations, and other historic federal acquisitions, regardless of when those disposals occurred, while still maintaining appropriate tribal consultation requirements and relevant environmental protections.

NACo further urges Congress to protect the finality of completed federal land exchanges by establishing reasonable statutes of limitations for challenging transactions after federal agency approval and completion, safeguarding the reliance interests of counties, private entities, and communities that have made substantial investments based on approved land transfers.

In the interim, NACo supports efforts to seek Supreme Court review of the 9th Circuit decision and urges the Bureau of Land Management to develop clear guidance for identifying lands potentially affected by historic disposal restrictions, along with alternative authorization pathways when FLPMA authority is uncertain. Counties with significant federal land holdings or active economic development initiatives involving federal land should not face regulatory paralysis due to conflicts between century-old statutes and modern land management law.

NACo calls on federal land management agencies to work collaboratively with affected counties to inventory poten-



Comal County, Texas District Attorney Jennifer Tharp, chair of the Justice and Public Safety Policy Steering Committee, provides a summary of the committee's resolutions. Photo by Denny Henry

wildland fires.

### Protecting emergency responders

**ISSUE:** Counties are responsible for coordinating emergency responses during day-to-day operations, disasters, large-scale incidents and emergencies. Emergency responders, however, sometimes face obstruction and jurisdictional uncertainty while performing their duties. Inconsistent protections, fragmented authority across jurisdictions and limited federal coordination can undermine responder safety, delay emergency operations and increase risks to public safety.

**ADOPTED POLICY:** NACo urges Congress to pass legislation designating active emergency operations as non-interference zones, requiring federal law enforcement to coordinate with the local Incident Commander and guaranteeing

B formula.

**ADOPTED POLICY:** NACo supports amending the PILT formula to establish a base funding floor for all counties by setting the per-acre variable on the Alternative B side to a minimum funding level that is adjusted annually by the Consumer Price Index (CPI). The maximum payment to counties would not be adjusted, and the current population threshold would remain at 50,000. This would require additional PILT funding from Congress to meet this amended formula.

### Increase transparency and data sharing for PILT calculations

**ISSUE:** Counties rely on Payments in Lieu of Taxes (PILT) to help offset the non-taxable federal estate and support essential local services. However, counties and states often do not receive sufficient

**ADOPTED POLICY:** NACo encourages the U.S. Department of the Interior (DOI) to improve transparency in PILT calculations by (1) disclosing and providing states and counties the data and supporting documentation received from states and used by DOI to calculate PILT payments; (2) providing clear methodologies, assumptions, and change logs that explain year-over-year differences in PILT payments; and (3) ensuring timely access to this information so counties can accurately budget and plan for local government services.

### Reaffirming the Federal Land Policy and Management Act

**ISSUE:** Counties face hundreds of millions in lost tax revenue and frozen infrastructure projects due to uncertainty over the federal land exchange authority. This resolution calls on Congress to

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tially impacted lands, provide technical assistance for evaluating project risks, and prioritize legislative solutions for jurisdictions where economic development or critical infrastructure depends on federal land access.

**Move the National Marine Fisheries Service to the Department of the Interior**

**ISSUE:** This reorganization would enhance the stewardship of land and ocean natural resources by centralizing responsibilities under a single authority as it was from 1940-1970.

**ADOPTED POLICY:** NACo supports moving the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) from the Department of Commerce into the Department of the Interior (DOI). This reorganization would enhance the stewardship of land and ocean natural resources by centralizing responsibilities under a single authority as it was from 1940-1970. Anadromous species like salmon, which migrate between freshwater and marine habitats, exemplify the benefits: managed solely by NMFS across their life cycles, these fish nonetheless depend on land-based ecosystems overseen by Interior agencies, underscoring the value of alignment.

By merging redundant administrative functions, the reform would yield significant taxpayer savings and rebuild public confidence in a unified federal approach—ensuring all agencies operate from the same strategic framework. It would also foster symmetry, linking the Interior Department’s U.S. Geological Survey (focused on terrestrial studies) with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), which handles atmospheric and oceanic domains.

Proponents argue that unified oversight would yield a more consistent and predictable regulatory environment for key stakeholders, including local and state governments, the fishing industry, and offshore energy businesses. This could ultimately “unleash dominant American energy”

by spurring innovation and reducing bureaucratic hurdles in resource-intensive sectors.

**De-list the Mexican Wolf**

**ISSUE:** The United States Fish and Wildlife Service’s management practices to recover the Mexican wolf under the Endangered Species Act have habituated the Mexican wolf so it does not fear man. Human encounters with wolves are increasing, causing fear and panic and significant financial losses to the livestock industry in recovery areas.

**ADOPTED POLICY:** NACo expects the Congress to de-list the Mexican wolf as an endangered or threatened species, to de-link recovery of the Mexican wolf in the United States from recovery in Mexico (if it is not de-listed) and to provide financial resources to counties and livestock producers in recovery areas to compensate them for their costs to protect their citizens from Mexican wolves and for their direct and indirect damages from Mexican wolves.

NACo expects the Fish and Wildlife Service of the Department of the Interior to adopt and implement management practices to teach habituated wolves to fear man and to provide the necessary tools to livestock producers to manage their livestock around Mexican wolves. NACo expects the Farm Service Agency of the United States Department of Agriculture to pay 100 percent of the actual market value for livestock determined to be missing or killed due to Mexican wolves.

**National Park fees**

**ISSUE:** America’s well-managed National Parks drove over \$56 billion dollars of economic impact nationwide in 2024 with over \$20 billion of this activity directly supporting rural gateway communities. National Park entrance fees play a critical role in sustaining this economic impact. In 2024, the National Park Service (NPS) estimates over \$341 million in fees were reinvested by the NPS to sustain visitor’s National Park experience. While 80% of entrance fees are



**Montgomery County, Md. Councilmember Laurie-Anne Sayles asks for clarification on a proposed interim resolution.** Photo by Denny Henry

reinvested directly back into a Park when they are physically collected at that Park, changes in policy and technology are driving a shift to increasing online fee collection, as well as purchase of multi-unit passes, such as the America the Beautiful pass. To ensure Parks can continue to invest fees directly into sustaining critical operations, the Department of the Interior (DOI) and NPS should develop a transparent formula for park-specific allocation of entrance and multi-unit pass fees collected online which maximize Park reinvestment.

**ADOPTED POLICY:** NACo urges the Secretary of the Interior to clearly define an allocation formula for the distribution of all National Park Service visitor fees collected either physically on-site or via online payment including all versions of the America the Beautiful pass and all newly established non-resident fees to maximize fee return directly to Park units as intended by the Making America Beautiful Again by Improving out National Parks Executive Order.

**TELECOMMUNICATIONS AND TECHNOLOGY**

**Support of local control for AI policy making**

**ISSUE:** The Executive Order titled “Ensuring a National Policy Framework for Artificial Intelligence”, signed by

the President in December, may severely limit counties from ensuring the safe and responsible deployment of AI, including in the protection of resident data in county-owned and operated systems, and in the preservation of local land use and zoning authorities to guide locally informed siting of AI data center infrastructure.

**ADOPTED POLICY:** NACo urges Congress to protect and preserve existing local authority over the development and regulation of Artificial Intelligence (AI), and to refrain from enacting federal policies that preempt or undermine local decision-making. NACo supports local control for AI regulations, including support for local discretion as to how BEAD funding and other federal funds and grants are dispersed, without regard to federal AI regulatory compliance. No federal funding should be withheld, limited, or reallocated based on a jurisdiction’s AI policy choices or regulatory approach.

**Preserve pricing transparency for telecommunications services**

**ISSUE:** Telecommunication services are marketed in a manner that obfuscates total cost, which is harmful to county residents and impacts a county’s ability to meaningfully close the broadband

adoption gap in their communities.

**ADOPTED POLICY:** NACo urges Congress and the relevant federal agencies to require telecommunication services to be marketed in a manner that displays total cost of service through implementation of The President’s focus on affordability for companies dealing specifically in technology and telecommunications. Further, NACo urges the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to adopt the standards used in its broadband consumer label report and order across the entire spectrum of technology and telecommunication products and services.

**Extend the deadline for web-based ADA compliance**

**ISSUE:** As the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) and other resources seek to make web-based ADA compliance less costly, counties should be given more time to build compliance costs into their budgets.

**ADOPTED POLICY:** NACo urges Congress and the relevant federal agencies to modify the compliance date for the final rule titled ‘Nondiscrimination on the Basis of Disability; Accessibility of Web Information and Services of State and Local Government Entities’ to July 1, 2027 for all counties and include a

# Support federal protections for rail corridors, prioritize rail infrastructure activation



From **POLICY** page 25

remediation or cure option for local governments to satisfy requests for accessibility.

## TRANSPORTATION

### Support the National Trails System Act

**ISSUE:** Railbanking is a tool that preserves unused railway corridors, allowing them to be utilized as trails on an interim basis unless and until the rail service reactivates. Since 1983, this tool has been used to prevent unused railway corridors from being sold off piecemeal, preserving them for potential future use by the rail industry. Proposed new financial and noticing requirements for trail sponsors

would render the process unworkable.

**ADOPTED POLICY:** NACo opposes changes to the federal railbanking program by adding burdensome requirements for trail sponsors and creating obstacles for trail development and community access to trails, but encourages federal cooperation and coordination with adjacent private landowners.

### Federal protections for rail corridors and prioritize rail infrastructure activation

**ISSUE:** Rail infrastructure is a longstanding federal priority critical to national commerce, supply chain resilience, and regional economic connectivity. Nevertheless, inactive or underutilized rail corridors are being permanently converted to non-rail uses at an increasing rate, which can impede future rail activation and



Custer County, Mont. Commissioner Jason Strouf raises a question about a proposed interim policy resolution. Photo by Denny Henry

limit long-term economic opportunities for the communities that those corridors were designed to serve.

**ADOPTED POLICY:** NACo urges Congress to reinforce and clarify federal policy prioritizing the preservation and activation of

rail corridors, consistent with federal and state recognition of rail as essential infrastructure supporting interstate commerce and economic development. Specifically, Congress should strengthen federal protections to ensure that inactive, underutilized or dormant rail lines remain preserved for future rail use and are not permanently converted to incompatible non-rail uses, such as parks or recreational trails, in a manner that precludes reactivation.

NACo further urges Congress to promote outreach in directly impacted communities to demonstrate that rail activation creates local benefits, including economic development, job creation, freight mobility, and reduced roadway congestion. This initiative would highlight that impacted communities directly experience the benefits of rail connectivity, alongside broader regional and national economic gains. **CN**



# 20 26

# April is National County Government Month



#NCGM



## BRIGHT IDEAS | ALAMEDA COUNTY, CALIF.

# California County Transportation Program Helps People Get Back on Their Feet

**PROBLEM:** People who fall on hard times need transportation to places not always covered by public transportation routes.

**SOLUTION:** Partnering with a non-profit and local businesses, Alameda County created a program to fix cars and donate cars.

by **Meredith Moran**  
staff writer

Jasmine Sanchez was struggling to stay afloat. The Alameda County, Calif. single mother was in and out of the hospital and in need of heart and liver transplants when her car broke down. Without a reliable form of transportation, she was missing doctor's appointments, and her two children were missing school.

"I wasn't able to get to my appointments," Sanchez said. "One time, I had to be admitted [to the hospital] and my pastor from my church got me an Uber there — all the way to San Francisco. It was just a huge hassle."

Then, she got connected to Alameda County's Tri-Valley Seek and Save Auto program. The county is partnering with a local nonprofit, Tri-Valley Seek and Save, and local businesses to provide people in need with vehicle repairs and donations. Sanchez received a car through the program, which she uses to get to her testing and check-up appointments, pick up medication and get her kids to school.

People living in poverty often must choose between basic necessities in order to scrape by, said Shawn Wilson, Alameda County Supervisor David Haubert's chief of staff. They might have to choose between paying rent or keeping their heat and lights on or whether to fix their tires, he noted.

"That's a very difficult choice for a family," he said.

Alameda County does have



a bus and rail system, but, like anywhere, there are gaps in service, Wilson said.

"Having the vehicle ensures that if you're not on the line or on the stop, you're still going to be able to get to work," Wilson said. "You're still going to be able to do the things in which you need to do."

Sometimes, a car is the only thing preventing someone from living on the streets, Wilson noted. As housing costs continue to rise, an increasing number of Americans are living in their cars. A 2023 Annual Homeless Assessment Report from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development showed that between 45,000 and 67,500 unsheltered people live in their vehicle.

"It sounds like 'Wow, what? You fixed somebody's car? Big deal.'" Wilson said. "That's a life changer for some of these people that are on the edge. To see people get tears in their eyes because you're able to keep their car intact and they're able to perform their duties on a daily basis, it's very remarkable."

District 1, which Supervisor Haubert represents, has

two "safe parking" sites where people living in their cars can park at night to sleep. The largest site, which is run by a local church, holds around 130 cars and provides access to food, showers, washers and dryers and assistance with job placement and SNAP food stamp services, according to Wilson.

Fixing a car 'is a life-changer for some of these people that are on the edge.'

— Shawn Wilson,  
Alameda County, Calif.

"It's a one-stop shop," Wilson said, adding, "which we've found is good, because once they spend the night in the parking lot, they wake up, they can take a shower, they can get food, they can build a resume, they can go get clothes."

A positive outcome of the program is that it gives people living in their cars more agency, which benefits them beyond reliable transportation access, Wilson said.

"When you feel you're em-

powered and you're self-sufficient, it takes away a lot of the ill-conceived perceptions that people have of you as being homeless," Wilson said. "It's one of the legs of the stool to get you back into society and functioning as an individual, and get you back in the housing market, even if it's transitional housing."

The Tri-Valley Seek and Save Auto Program is partially funded through Alameda County's Vision 2026 initiative, which provided each county supervisor with \$1 million in discretionary funding, spread out over five years, to allocate to initiatives that support the county's missions of serving its most vulnerable populations and building healthy communities, according to Wilson.

In its first three years, Supervisor Haubert dedicated \$60,000 toward the automotive repair and donation program, and he bumped funding to up to \$120,000 for its fourth and fifth years. Roughly 385 people have received vehicles or repairs through the program.

When the Tri-Valley Seek and Save Auto Program first launched, the county and

nonprofit were able to gather a handful of businesses — in automotive repair, tire services and tow trucking — that agreed to do carry out the services at a slight reduction, but as the program and press around it has grown, the number of businesses involved has doubled and they've cut their rates down by around 30%, according to Wilson.

People primarily get connected to the program through referrals from local schools, shelters, non-profits, or — like Sanchez — churches. To enroll, participants fill out an intake form through Tri-Valley Seek and Save, but the nonprofit doesn't ask for income or information around their current financial situation, Wilson noted.

"We don't ask that you give us a lot of the details," Wilson said. "We just kind of buy in and believe that you are facing unfortunate circumstances. A lot of these families we know, based on seeing them around in the community and seeing them access certain services, that they are the most vulnerable."

"We've never had someone come in with a broken down 2022 Mercedes and go, 'Hey, I kind of need to get my transmission repair.' It's always been like a 1986 Mazda that's on its last legs."

The Tri-Valley Seek and Save Auto Program has helped bring stability into Kiyano Escoc's life. Escoc, whose previous car was stolen, received a vehicle through the initiative and has since received repairs as well, she said.

"It's a blessing," Escoc said. "It's a bridge to what we need ... It's everything." 

*Alameda County's Tri-Valley Seek and Save Auto Partnership was the 2025 NACo Achievement Award "Best in Category" winner in Transportation.*

**WORD SEARCH** **ANNE ARUNDEL COUNTY, MARYLAND**  
Created by Mary Ann Barton

A D K G J S H A M K M P Q R X I E Y H Y  
 N N Y L L M G J C A A H E T Y W P H J R  
 E Y N J E T O O A R B V T R G T N Y I O  
 W L G A M N L V I P L V B G R A X C M T  
 S C C T P L I S I O M I L I T A R Y N S  
 P A B S E O W S S E G C E H S P O R C I  
 A P J G A S L G I Q S X V Z Y Q U H W H  
 P I E Z F A N I S U M L Q X Q W A B A G  
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 R O I U K T U T N B J A I N U Q M A B Z  
 B L T N A R U A T S E R M G L O O K C X  
 T U W K Q Y B D D L K F H M D D T M L N  
 K E E X F R F Y J O S O S U W N W A T P  
 T G N O P Z R B R Y Q L J W Q L X J I W  
 C X O T Z L E V I B L P E K A C F J C K  
 H Y E O K H B F S K N Z C H M A A D R N  
 Z Z K X X R V Q O X S C N E Y N W I J S  
 M L R Q Q M S R U J I O T R V S B Y C C  
 O D E L T G N K W I V Z P C K B Z Z B F  
 L S E J P O C R R N U I A I R P O R T Q

**AIRPORT:** Baltimore/Washington International Thurgood Marshall Airport is an international airport in the county.  
**ANNAPOLIS:** The county seat served as the nation's temporary capital from 1783 to 1784 and is known as "The Sailing Capital of the World."  
**CAPITOL:** The Maryland State House is the oldest state capitol in continuous legislative use in the nation.  
**COLLEGE:** The county is home to St. John's College, the third oldest college in the nation.  
**CROPS:** The county is home to 34,000 acres of farmland.  
**CUISINE:** The county is primarily known for its Maryland Blue Crabs, prepared with Old Bay seasoning.  
**HISTORY:** Anne Arundel County gets its name from Lady Anne Arundell, wife of Cecil Calvert, the founder of Maryland.

**KINGSOLVER:** Pulitzer Prize-winning author Barbara Kingsolver was born in Annapolis.  
**MILITARY:** The U.S. Naval Academy is located in the county.  
**MOVIES:** Several films have been made in the county including "Patriot Games" and "Wedding Crashers."  
**NEWSPAPER:** The local daily newspaper is the *Capital Gazette*, which traces its roots back to 1727.  
**PARIS:** The Treaty of Paris that officially ended the American Revolutionary War was ratified in Annapolis in 1784.  
**RESTAURANT:** The oldest restaurant in the county is the Middleton Tavern, established in 1750.  
**SECURITY:** The county is home to Fort Meade, the National Security Agency and the National Cryptologic Museum.  
**SHORELINE:** The county features more than 500 miles of shoreline.

**BEHIND THE SEAL** **BAKER COUNTY, FLA.**



Baker County, Fla.'s seal features the pine flatwoods and cypress swamp, along with the wildlife, that fill the county's geography.

Located in northeastern Florida, the county was the site of the Battle of Olustee. The fray was the only major Civil War battle in the state and is represented on the seal by a cannon and the battlefield monument. The monument, dedicated in 1912, which is noted on both sides of the seal's border.

**PROFILES IN SERVICE**

**JHONATHAN ARAGON**

**NACo Board Member**  
Valencia County, N.M.  
County Manager

**Number of Years Active in NACo:** 12

**Years in Public Service:** 12 years

**My first NACo event was:** Legislative Conference in 2014

**Occupation:** County Manager, Valencia County, N.M.

**Education:** Bachelor's degree in business administration with a focus in Organizational Leadership-University of New Mexico

**The hardest thing I've ever done:** Honestly, answering this question. I've been blessed with incredible opportunities, loving parents who are still with me and the grace of Jesus Christ, who gave His life for us all.

**The most adventurous thing I've ever done is:** Taking on Class IV white-water rapids. It was terrifying in the moment, but unforgettable and exhilarating afterward.



**ARAGON**

**Three people (living or dead) I'd invite to dinner:** Jesus, Abraham Lincoln and Benjamin Franklin

**A dream I have is to:** Raise children who are respectful, ambitious and committed to making the world a better place.

**You'd be surprised to learn that I:** Was appointed county commissioner at the age of 23 and elected at 24.

**My favorite way to relax is:** Fly fishing or spending time riding my horses.



**I'm most proud of:** My faith! It's my foundation and my greatest source of strength.

**Every morning I read:** Unfortunately, my emails.

**My favorite meal is:** Anything made with New Mexico green chile.

**My pet peeve is:** Rudeness. Kindness costs nothing.

**My Motto Is:** "Without Him, I am nothing."

**The Last Book I Read Was:** The Bible

**My favorite movie is:** It's hard to choose just one, but my favorite show is "The Office."

**My favorite music is:** Americana and Bluegrass

**My favorite U.S. president is:** Abraham Lincoln

**My county is a NACo member because:** Our state association is highly engaged with NACo and effectively communicates the value and importance of belonging to a 100% member state.

*'It's controlled chaos, but everybody knows their role'*

From **TORNADO** page 3

dump site for debris. Having the commissioner on hand helps expedite approvals for expenditures. Moore noted that it is easy for expenses to climb to \$250,000 in the middle of a recovery operation.

"The first 48 to 72 hours are focused on making sure those families are taken care of, making sure the power is back on, the water's going, making sure we can get county workers to clear the roads so we can access homes," Moore said.

The routine is borne out of

necessity, because Okmulgee County has been struck by 10 tornadoes in the last two years. But it also imbues a sense of civic pride in the volunteer effort, either supplying victims or feeding emergency responders.

"We're Oklahoma. It's what we do," Moore said. "It's controlled chaos, but everybody knows their role. The linemen can take care of themselves, but we want to make sure we're taking care of them anyway."

The elementary school was damaged more than a week before spring break, so the nonprofit Project Camp came

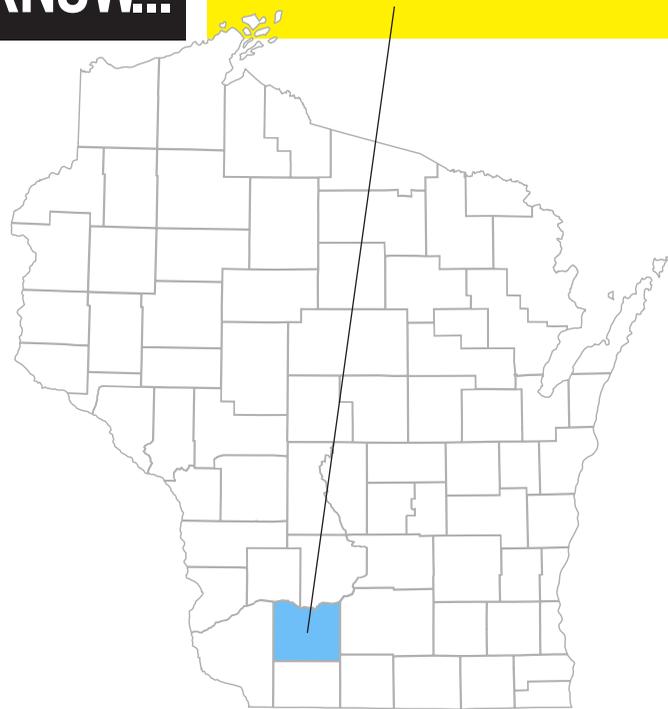
to set up a pop-up camp to offer trauma-informed care for the children.

As routine as tornado response is for Okmulgee County, emergency workers need to recover themselves, and facing the first loss of life in his tenure as the county's emergency manager — a married couple, whose son and girlfriend were also injured in another building on the property — Moore knew to expect to feel the loss when his adrenaline fades.

"I haven't had my big breakdown yet, but I know it's coming," he said. **EN**

**GET TO KNOW...**

**Iowa County, Wisconsin**



by **Meredith Moran**  
staff writer

Iowa County, Wisconsin, which is named for the Native American tribe who hunted on the land, was established in 1829 by the Michigan Territorial Legislature, nearly two decades before Wisconsin gained statehood. The county seat of Dodgeville, which was founded in 1827, is Wisconsin's oldest city and features the state's oldest operating courthouse. The

city was at one time the largest in the state and a center for mining, which attracted Cornish immigrants (from Cornwall, England), who built the courthouse in 1859.

The county seat is home to the Wisconsin Grilled Cheese Championship, a competition created by the Iowa County Area Economic Development Corp to celebrate the state's dairy farmers, which thousands of people attend each year.

Another county tourist attraction is Folklore Village, a folk arts center that hosts barn dances and folk music and dance festivals. The city is also the headquarters of Lands' End, making it an established sister-city with Oakham, Rutland, in the United Kingdom, the location of the retailer's U.K. base of operations and distribution center.

**Iowa County is part of the Midwest's Driftless Area, a 24,000 square-mile-region that was left untouched by the last Ice Age. The area's bluffs and valleys mark a contrast to the flatter surrounding regions, and popular activities include trout**

**fishing, hiking and kayaking in the Kickapoo River Valley.**

The county also features Taliesin, the home of iconic architect Frank Lloyd Wright. The home sits on his 800-acre estate, which also includes a studio and school, which is open to public tours from May to October. The property is a designated National Historic Landmark and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization World Heritage Site.

Another famous Iowa County site is the House on the Rock, which was built atop a 60-foot chimney of rock and features an infinity room that extends 218 feet out over the scenic valley. It's been open to the public since 1960, and many visitors say the room gives them vertigo. Also on the property are Japanese gardens, a carousel, more than 200 model ship displays, including one of the Titanic, and a 200-foot-tall sculpture of a sea creature that is as long as the Statue of Liberty is tall.

*Get to Know features new NACo member counties.*



The Driftless Area in Iowa County features limestone outcrops. Photo by Satiya Buell

*Take advantage of NACo toolkit to celebrate National County Government in your county*

From NCGM page 1

the importance of telling the county story to help others better understand the challenges counties face in serving the American public.

To support these efforts, NACo has developed a dedicated web page and toolkit to help counties plan their celebrations. The web page highlights examples of past county celebrations, while the toolkit includes template press releases, sample social

media posts, graphics and logos, educational materials and other helpful resources.

The toolkit is organized into three sections, each offering outreach resources and examples from counties to help inspire local participation:

- Tell the County Story: Raise awareness of county programs and services.
- Champion the County Workforce: Celebrate the 3.6 million public servants employed by counties nationwide.

- Boost Civic Engagement: Strengthen connections between county government and residents. 

Please scan QR code for more information about the National County Government Month toolkit.



County employees enjoy "Chill Out Day" in El Paso County, Texas during a past National County Government Month.

**CALIFORNIA**

The **COLUSA COUNTY** Department of Public Works recently launched a new user-friendly interactive **Road Closures Map** to improve public safety and assist with travel planning. Available on the county website, the map provides real-time updates on county-maintained roads, marking closures in red for easy identification.

**IDAHO**

A new tool for local governments to **boost affordable housing** development is on the table at the Idaho State Capitol, BoiseDev reported. A state lawmaker got the nod of approval from the House of Revenue and Taxation to introduce a bill paving the way for counties to give nonprofit organizations, or companies affiliated with nonprofits, that own affordable housing projects a property tax break.

This changes an existing exemption on the books in the hopes it will make it more likely for counties to use it for incentivizing the construction of affordable housing, as the struggle for housing for low-income residents continues.

"It's a tool for local government to use if they choose," Weber said.

**MAINE**

A bill originally written to offer bankruptcy protections for towns and counties in Maine has evolved into a proposal requiring county governments to file **annual audits** within 12 months of the end of each fiscal year, and for the state auditor to review the audits as they are submitted to ensure they



# NEWS FROM ACROSS THE NATION

**ILLINOIS**

Two **LAKE COUNTY** Forest Preserves photographers have won top honors for their images of the **Des Plains River Trail**. Volunteer photographer R. Scott McNeill and contractor Justine Neslund were recognized in the 2025 National Recreation Trail Photo Contest hosted by American Trails, a nonprofit that works to protect, enhance and promote the nation's trail networks. "These awards reflect the creativity and dedication of the talented photographers we're fortunate to work with," said Forest Preserves President Jessica Vealitzek. "Their images showcase the beauty of Lake County's landscapes."

Photo by R. Scott McNeill

are complete, the *Penobscot Bay Pilot* reported.

In what is known as a "strike and replace" bill, lawmakers removed all original language referencing bankruptcy protections for towns and counties and substituted language that shifts the bill's focus to the timely filing of county audits and their review by the state auditor.

If a county is unable to file an audit on time, the bill allows it to request an extension from the Office of the State Auditor. All requests for late filing and the resulting decisions would be public records under the bill.

**NEVADA**

**CLARK COUNTY** Commis-

sioner Justin Jones kicked off what he called a new phase for the county's Chinatown corridor during a recent event, where he was joined by community leaders, business owners and local artists to announce the start of the **Spring Mountain Redevelopment Implementation**, KSNV-TV reported.

"Tonight, we moved from vision to action," Jones said. "The Inspiring Spring Mountain Redevelopment Plan is no longer just a document; it is an active investment in the safety, culture and economic vitality of our community. By doubling our grant funding and launching the largest public art project in our county's history, we are ensuring

Chinatown remains a global destination for generations to come."

Jones announced the Corridor Improvement Grant fund has been doubled to \$1.5 million after what was described as overwhelming community demand. Eligible small businesses and property owners can access up to \$75,000 in matching funds for facade improvements, security and lighting.

**NEW JERSEY**

**Mail-in ballot drop boxes** are now open for the 11th Congressional District Special General Election in **MORRIS COUNTY**. The boxes are all outside and under surveillance 24/7. They resemble a

USPS Blue Mailbox, but are red, white and blue and display "Morris County - Official Ballot DropBox." Voted mail-in ballots may be deposited in any official drop box location until 8 p.m. on April 16, *Parshippany Focus* reported.

**PENNSYLVANIA**

• Beginning this month, **CHESTER COUNTY** Library residents will be able to **apply for a U.S. passport directly at the library**. This new service reflects the library's ongoing commitment to providing convenient, high-value resources. "This new service expands access and offers a convenient local option for residents who need to apply for a passport for both personal and business travel," said Melissa Straka, Information & Reader Services manager at the library.

**TEXAS**

• The **CLAY COUNTY** budget could be facing some changes after a major county **wind farm** filed for bankruptcy, KFDX-TV reported. Shannon Wind Farms filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy last month. Shannon Wind Farms

**FLORIDA**

**PINELLAS COUNTY** Animal Services is launching a new "**Spring Free from the Shelter**" adoption campaign to get their longest-waiting pets the fresh start they deserve.

Through May 31, the shelter is waiving adoption fees for dogs and cats who have been in the shelter's care for more than 60 days. All adoptable animals are spayed/neutered and come with a microchip with free lifetime registration, age-appropriate vaccinations, a one-year Pinellas County pet license, a bag of pet food and a toy or treat. All adoptions will require the usual screenings for adopters.

The shelter will highlight eligible dogs and cats on their Facebook and Instagram pages with information on how long the animal has been in the shelter, their strengths, personality traits, insight into the type of home they'd thrive in and more.

**From NEWS FROM page 30**

received an abatement from Clay County commissioners in 2015, in which they would give the county an annual payment in lieu of taxes.

According to court documents, the farm fell victim to the February 2021 winter storm, which prevented the windmills from making electricity, and the company could not keep up with the market price at that time. This year was supposed to mark the final payment the county received from the abatement, but with the wind farm filing for bankruptcy, the county could potentially miss out on \$1.5 million.

Commissioners now must revisit their budget and look at where money is currently being spent. Commissioners are hopeful that budgeting will remain the same without the final payment. The county has hired a bankruptcy attorney to try to recover some of the final payment.

- **HARRIS COUNTY** District Attorney Sean Teare recently joined local officials, rapper Bun B and volunteers to launch a new program aimed at cracking down on **illegal dumping** across the county, KHOU-TV reported.

The initiative, Cleaner Communities, is the first of its kind



**KANSAS**

The CEO of **SEDGWICK COUNTY** Zoo, Scott Newland, recently showed off **visions for the future of the zoo**, KWCH-TV reported. One of the big visions is an area being called “The Savanna,” which would be built in the southwest area of the zoo. The Savanna would be the new home for some of the larger animals like the giraffes, rhinos and other species from Africa.

This expansion would allow the zoo to increase the number of giraffes that they have. The current habitat for rhinos and giraffes would then be repurposed into additional rental space options, something the zoo says it needs more of.

The estimated cost of the project isn’t complete yet, but currently, the Savanna exhibit is projected to cost around \$46 million. Turning the current rhino and giraffe exhibits into rental spaces would cost around \$10 million.

for the district attorney’s Office and is designed to prevent, prosecute and remediate illegal dumping by working alongside community organizations and elected officials throughout the area.

- Google has announced a new **data center** with energy agreements in a rural Texas county, officials say. The data center will be co-located with the power generation company AES for a clean power solution to data centers in **WIL-**

**BARGER COUNTY**, WFAA-TV reported.

The data center will be cooled by air to eliminate operational water use with a new clean energy and generation capacity, Google said. The data center hopes to focus on water security advancement and energy affordability, while also providing the growing communities in Texas with AI-powered services that businesses, people and public sector organizations use every day.

**VIRGINIA**

**PRINCE WILLIAM COUNTY** recently launched a countywide interactive map that allows residents, property owners, county staff and other stakeholders to easily **track data center projects** at every

stage of development, from pending land use applications to projects under construction and completed facilities.

*Send your news to Editor Mary Ann Barton: [mbarton@naco.org](mailto:mbarton@naco.org).*



**NORTH CAROLINA**

**MECKLENBURG COUNTY** is enrolling new riders in its non-emergency medical and public **transportation** service, opening access to seniors and people with disabilities who need help getting to medical appointments, work and essential errands, WCNC-TV reported.

The Mecklenburg Transportation System, known as MTS, serves county residents who are 60 or older, as well as disabled residents under the age of 60. Eligible trips include rides to medical appointments such as dialysis and chemotherapy, adult day care, grocery stores, food banks, farmers markets, paid employment and post-secondary education.

Rides to Medicaid-approved appointments are provided at no cost to the rider. All other trips carry a \$1.50 fare each way. Transportation is provided by Mecklenburg County-certified drivers, contracted vendors including taxi services, and, in some cases, through monthly CATS bus passes.



**MARYLAND**

With more than 18% of its households deemed “cost-burdened,” **FREDERICK COUNTY** needs to build 31,853 new housing units — at least 10,000 of them affordable — by 2035 to meet demand, according to a housing needs assessment and **affordable housing strategic plan** the county published last month, Smart Cities Dive reported.

The 200-plus-page report from national consulting firm TPMA in conjunction with the City of Frederick lays out a “more active and strategic approach” to addressing the housing shortage, including by relaxing zoning restrictions, boosting partnerships and funding, leveraging county-owned land and increasing the number of county staff members dedicated to housing.

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# Annual Conference & Expo

July 17-20

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