NACo Brief:

County Innovations in Public Safety Workforce Recruitment and Retention

Introduction

Counties invest $124 billion annually in justice and public safety. From patrolling the streets, to operating and maintaining county detention and court facilities, to employing innovative approaches to safely reduce jail populations, the county public safety workforce fosters safe and resilient communities.

America's 939,000-person public safety workforce encompasses all county-employed positions that support local public safety, including but not limited to law enforcement (civilian and sworn), emergency medical services, fire, crisis response, corrections, community supervision and related administrative support.

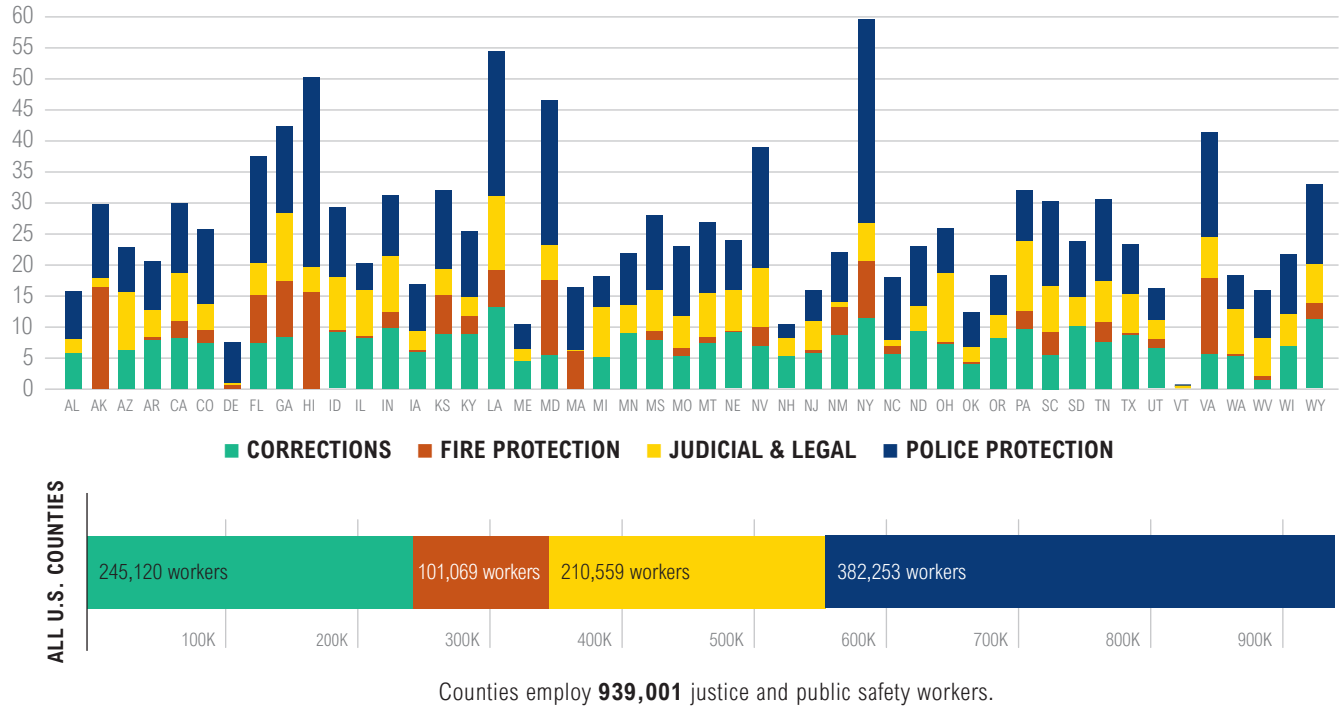
Recent cultural and economic changes such as competition with federal, private and other local employers, declining applicant pools, misaligned workplace expectations, high turnover and population shifts have led to public safety workforce challenges in counties nationwide.

This report presents key findings from a national survey and focus groups of county officials and offers insight into innovative approaches counties are employing to address challenges in recruitment and retention.

Scan to see NACo's full report on County Service Provision and the Public Workforce

COUNTY GOVERNMENTS IN 48 STATES ARE KEEPING COMMUNITIES SAFE THROUGH A STRONG JUSTICE AND PUBLIC SAFETY WORKFORCE

County Justice and Public Safety Employment, per 10,000 Residents, Breakdown by State



Counties employ **939,001** justice and public safety workers.

Source: *NACo Analysis of U.S. Census Bureau - Census of Individual Governments: Employment, 2022; NACo Analysis of U.S. Census Bureau - Population Estimates Program, 2022*

Findings

In 2025, NACo conducted a survey of county officials to gain insight into the national context of local public safety workforce challenges. Among responding counties, nearly all indicated that their public safety teams are understaffed. Approximately one-third reported operating with less than 75 percent of the necessary personnel, which significantly impedes effective public safety administration.

Additionally, NACo organized a series of focus groups to identify barriers and potential solutions for workforce development. Participants included elected officials, county public safety department leaders and human resources directors from counties representing diverse population sizes nationwide.

Based on findings from both the survey and focus groups, NACo observed that county leaders are employing dynamic strategies to address staffing shortages and bolster the public safety workforce. This report showcases five counties that have taken a robust, multi-pronged approach to improving recruitment and retention in their public safety workforce.

NACo County News: ICE hiring surge challenges county law enforcement

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

Scan to read the County News story

Key Public Safety Workforce Recruitment and Retention Strategies

- Administrative Support
- Compensation Incentives
- Staff Wellness Enhancements
- Retirement Model Improvements
- Work-Life Balance
- One-Time Federal Investments
- Technology Advancements
- Staff Workload Reduction
- Targeted Recruitment
- Training/Education Opportunities

Acknowledgements

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NACo's Behavioral Health and Justice Programming page

Williamson County, Texas

Since 2020, Williamson County has experienced rapid population growth that resulted in increasing public safety concerns. Specifically, county leaders noticed sheriff deputy understaffing, higher emergency call volume and longer response times. To address these challenges, the Williamson County Sheriff's Office is strengthening its public safety workforce through enhanced processes and services to streamline hiring new staff and improving conditions for current staff.

Administrative Support

In 2023, the sheriff's office launched Expedited Testing Days, where applicants complete paperwork, written and physical exams and oral interviews in a single day. The county can issue conditional job offers the same day, reducing the hiring process from three months to four weeks.

Compensation Incentives

In the FY26 budget, the Williams County Commissioners Court approved salary increases for sworn and unsworn sheriff's office staff. Average increases included 8.38 percent for deputies, 10.98 percent for corrections officers and both a 2 percent cost-of-living and 2 percent merit pay for civilian employees.

Staff Wellness Enhancements

The sheriff's office expanded its chaplaincy program to include a variety of faiths and strengthened its peer support team with external counselors. The department provides officers with access to on-duty fitness centers and discounted memberships at local gyms, a renovated secure break room and an on-site convenience store and cafeteria.

Training/Education Opportunities

The sheriff's office increased training for both new and veteran deputies and correctional officers by offering programs to enhance skills on defensive tactics, ground fighting, control and restraint techniques and handcuffing procedures.

Through these proactive, people-focused measures, Williamson County leaders demonstrate how local governments can leverage a holistic innovative approach to strengthen recruiting and retention practices within the public safety workforce.

Hillsborough County, Fla.

Hillsborough County has experienced a public safety staffing shortage due to a competitive talent market, high occupational stress and high turnover. County leaders have adopted innovative measures to support public safety personnel by addressing some of the key causes of the shortage.

Compensation Incentives

Hillsborough County Fire Rescue offers a $1,000 lump sum promotional incentive to promote career progression and retention. This incentive recognizes advancement, encourages internal mobility and demonstrates the county's commitment to rewarding professional growth.

Staff Wellness Enhancements

Hillsborough County Fire Rescue has implemented a comprehensive behavioral health and peer support system. The department provides a dedicated peer support team with trained members, access to culturally competent clinicians who understand firefighter culture, confidential annual wellness visits and up to six additional visits with contracted practices. Additionally, the county offers chaplaincy services, therapy dog support and clinician referrals.

Retirement Model Improvements

Florida's expansion of the Deferred Retirement Option Program from five to eight years has allowed Hillsborough County to retain highly skilled and experienced employees. Once county staff, including the public safety workforce, are vested by 30 years of service or reaching the age of 62 ½, they can continue to work for up to eight additional years while beginning to earn their pension. The county has leveraged this extended timeframe to preserve institutional knowledge, strengthen succession planning and expand its internal talent pipeline.

Hillsborough County's multi-pronged approach illustrates how local government can enhance staff support and retain talent for an extended period to overcome today's challenges.

Elkhart County, Ind.

In 2021, new federal legislation required youth being tried as adults to be housed in youth detention facilities. As a result, the Elkhart County Juvenile Detention Center saw an increase in residents without an increase in full-time staffing. This initially led to higher rates of safety and security issues, resulting in increased staff turnover. Leveraging ARPA funding, detention center leadership explored new technology partnerships and implemented new recruitment tactics to support their staff.

Staff Workload Reduction

Elkhart County partnered with a non-profit technology company to provide tablets throughout the facility. Staff use tablets for administrative and security tasks such as scheduling visits and monitoring phone calls. The introduction of the tablets streamlined processes and reduced the time burden for staff.

Technology Advancements

Detention center residents use the tablets to access educational programming both during instructed and non-instructed hours. Additionally, through a partnership with the Elkhart County Public Library, residents can access the library's full online collection. Following the introduction of the tablets, staff reported improved resident behavior and fewer critical incidents.

Targeted Recruitment

Detention center staff regularly attend local job fairs to meet and interact with potential new hires. This helps increase the department's visibility as an employer to those entering the workforce. Additionally, the county revised its online application to be more user-friendly and approachable for prospective candidates. This includes the ability to pause and return to the application at any point over the course of a 25-day period.

By strategically implementing technology, Elkhart County public safety leadership demonstrates how measures to improve resident experience and access also reduce turnover and create a better working environment for staff.

Arlington County, Va.

The Arlington County Police Department (ACPD) has experienced a significant reduction in its workforce due to attrition, retirements and officers seeking other opportunities. To ensure public safety in the county, ACPD leadership is leveraging a multi-faceted approach to entice new recruits to its workforce and improve retention rates of current staff.

Staff Wellness Enhancements

ACPD proactively supports officer wellness through a robust program that connects staff with vital resources and services. Two dedicated Public Safety Wellness Coordinators provide clinical support to both personnel and their families, while a specially trained internal team stands ready to assist staff who face traumatic events or emotional challenges.

Work-Life Balance

To ensure staff can maintain a healthy work-life balance, ACPD patrol officers work the equivalent of a 37.5-hour work week with four or five days off at a time. This flexible schedule allows patrol officers to work a fixed shift consisting of only 15 days a month. Additionally, patrol officers have two weekends off per month. This staffing assignment model does not account for overtime responsibilities; however, county leaders hope that as staffing numbers increase the department can rely less on overtime service.

Compensation Incentives

Starting in July 2026, Arlington County will raise the starting salary for police officers by nearly 25 percent. The maximum starting salary for lateral officers transferring from other law enforcement agencies will also be raised. Funding for this increase comes from the county general fund. This increase makes the department the highest paid salary in its geographic region. Concurrently, to boost retention, current officers will receive varying percentage salary increases to improve the pay scale for officers throughout their careers.

In 2024, ACPD had an 80 percent increase in applications as compared to the previous year and had more hires than retirements and resignations for the first time in five years. County leaders are hoping to see continued progress in their approach.

Kent County, Del.

In the last five years, Kent County Emergency Medical Services (EMS) has experienced high vacancy rates driven by burnout and low wages. In addition, recent population growth has steadily increased the number of service calls. County officials and public safety leaders joined forces to expand EMS recruiting and retention.

Compensation Incentives

Kent County Commissioners doubled county paramedics' sign-on bonus, which now ranges from $5,000 to $10,000 based on years of experience. Bonuses are paid incrementally over three years to encourage retention among new hires.

Targeted Recruitment

Recognizing the various ways prospective employees hear about opportunities, the Department of Public Safety – which houses the Emergency Medical Services team – leverages social media campaigns to post open positions, compensation offers and other relevant information.

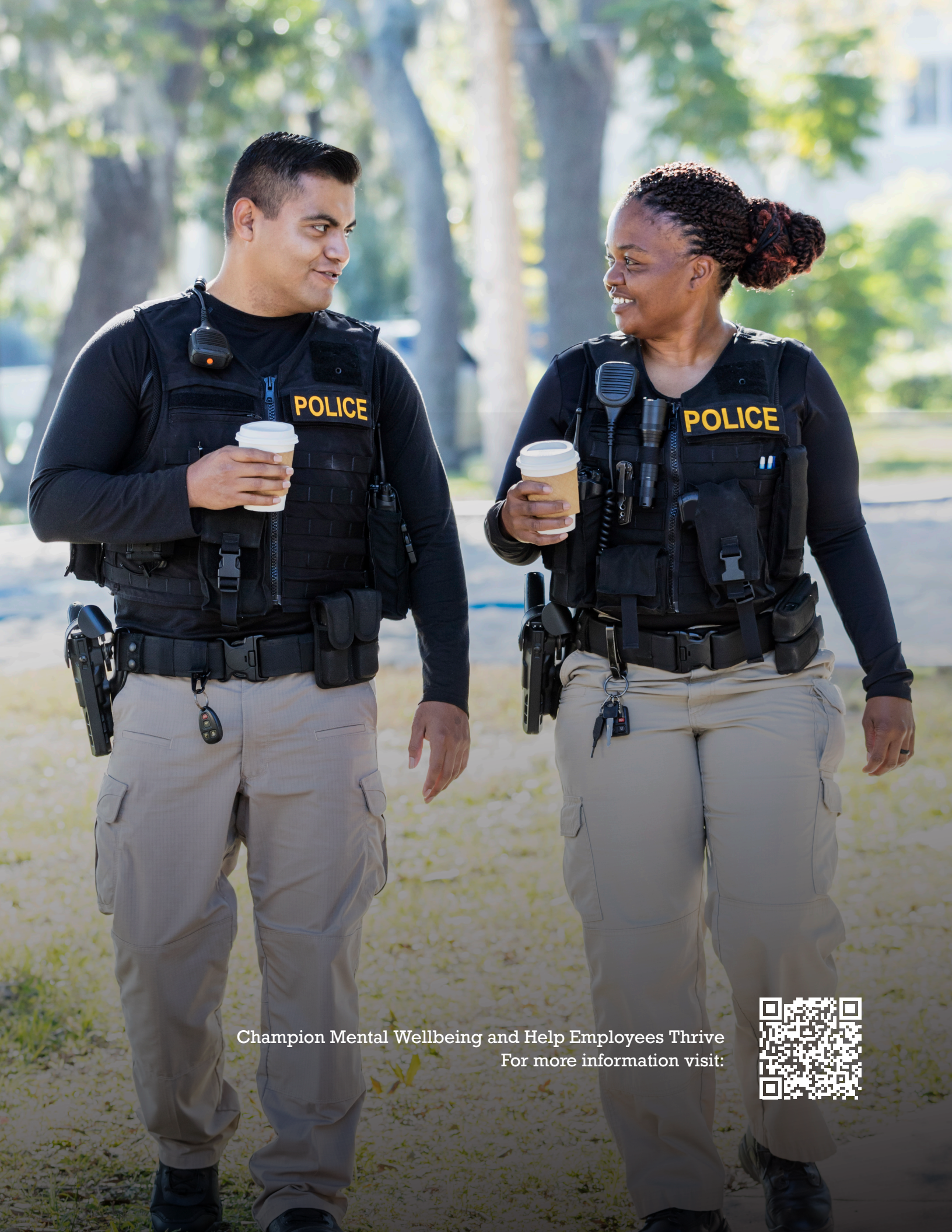
Training/Education Opportunity

The county offers a Paramedic Training Program through the Delaware Technical Community College. In exchange for a three-year work commitment, students receive free tuition and a salary during the 12-month paramedic certification program.

One-Time Federal Investments

The County Commissioners allocated $5.3 million in ARPA funds to build two new paramedic stations in the county. The new stations will reduce response times by bringing emergency services closer to residents across the county. Leveraging the on-going recruitment efforts, the Department of Public Safety used the increased staffing to support a new two-person unit at one of the stations.

Through collaboration and innovative approaches, elected officials and public safety leaders have bolstered county health and safety. Going forward, local leaders are also exploring increasing staff salaries and lowering the retirement age.



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