



ENTREPRENEURS GET A BOOST WITH LOAN FUND IN HAWAII COUNTY. **PG. 4**



SONOMA COUNTY'S JAMES GORE, ON WHAT HE'S LEARNED. **PG. 5**



MIAMI-DADE MAKES 'TRIPLE PLAY' WITH COUNTY PARK. **PG. 8**

Federal election changes loom ahead of midterms

by **Grace Thrush**

Counties play a pivotal role in election administration in the United States, funding and managing over 100,000 polling places staffed by over 770,000 certified poll workers each election cycle. This November, counties in 36 states will have the primary responsibility for administering federal elections in their states. But with the rapidly evolving federal legislative landscape, counties can get caught in the middle of policy changes with little guidance.

SAVE America Act is pending in Congress

The SAVE America Act, which would implement major changes to election administration, is currently stalled in Congress, but has a few avenues for passage.

On July 22, the House advanced the bill by incorporating it into the National Defense Authorization Act but would need to overcome the filibuster to pass the Senate. The House also passed a separate budget reconciliation framework that includes up to \$10 billion in spending over 10 years for SAVE America Act-style elections provisions, requiring state-wide compliance with those provisions to receive federal election grant funding.

This bill would only need a simple majority to pass the Senate. However, the Senate has less than three weeks in Washington to pass this reconciliation framework before the midterms, meaning they would need to move quickly. Any provisions in the reconciliation bill would need to pass the Byrd Rule in the Senate, which stipulates that all measures in the bill must be budgetary in nature. If any of the SAVE America Act-style provisions focus more heavily on changing election policy than the budget, they could be stripped out of the bill.

The SAVE America Act is much more than a bill requiring photo ID at the polls – it mandates that documentary proof of citizenship must be presented by citizens registering to vote. For most Americans, this typically means a passport or certified birth certificate presented in person.

The SAVE America Act would immediately require counties and their voters to comply with other provisions, including in-person registration appointments for mail-in voters, presentation of photo ID at the polls, increased liability through new criminal penalties for election officials

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A footbridge lies along Bright Angel Creek in Grand Canyon National Park after it was washed away during the Aug. 29 Colorado River flash flood. Photo courtesy of the National Park Service

Coconino County aids in Grand Canyon flood search, recovery

by **Charlie Ban**
senior writer

Though last month's flash flood that killed at least two hikers and stranded almost three dozen others happened in Grand Canyon National Park, Coconino County, Ariz. has been a major part of the search, rescue and recovery

efforts.

That cooperation has long been a feature of the intergovernmental relationship near one of the United States' premier outdoor recreation destinations, one that is vulnerable to flooding during monsoon season.

"I'm meeting with the superintendent every month,

and usually going up there every month," said Patrice Horstman, chair of the county Board of Supervisors. "Our role with our national park and with the Forest Service starts way before there's an emergency."

The Colorado River, which runs through the bottom of

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Seniors in Loudoun County, Va. build community, reflect with memoir group

by **Meredith Moran**
staff writer

Roger Klinker may now be an 83-year-old retired Navy man whose travels have brought him to six continents, but sitting in the Loudoun County, Va. Senior Center, he's transported back to the summer of 1955. Surrounded by

members of his senior memoir group, Klinker reflects on a childhood summer he spent jumping off the high dive, watching Howdy Doody and working on his uncle's farm.

"When these adventures took place, I still had the innocence of youth, and was not weighed down with responsibilities," Klinker wrote.

"I could enjoy the simple pleasure of living. That brings me to the great philosophical question young boys have always asked: 'Why is the school year so long, but summer vacation so short?'"

The group, which operates through Loudoun County's

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Coconino County, Ariz. worked on a warning system for Grand Canyon flood risks

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the canyon, flooded at 2:30 p.m. Aug. 29, most significantly in Bright Angel Canyon, a popular thoroughfare for hikers near the Phantom Ranch. The force of the water and debris also caused significant damage to campsites, bridges and water infrastructure, and 80 people were evacuated by state and federal teams. Human remains were found Sept. 14 and sent to the Coconino County Medical Examiner's Office. One person remained unaccounted for, down from an initial count of 30.

Coconino County Emergency Management Director Tim Carter was embedded in the NPS Emergency Operations Center as liaison from the county. The county's most direct role in supporting the recovery effort came from the



Hikers wait for helicopter evacuation from the bottom of the Grand Canyon following an Aug. 29 flash flooding. Photo courtesy of the National Park Service

sheriff's office's search and rescue team. Several deputies helped coordinate investigations, sorting through tips

submitted by family members and permits for backcountry hiking and the license plate numbers on cars in the parking lots to determine who was lost. They also operated drones equipped with technology that could pick up low frequencies emitted by personal devices, including AirTags and anything running a Bluetooth signal.

"They're able to fly that area and that device will pick up those signals, even [if] they're covered by debris," Carter said. "It's definitely still no substitute for the traditional boots-on-the-ground search method, but it helps."

Carter was recently named Emergency Management Professional of the Year by the Arizona Association of Emergency Managers.

The county's emergency response had some help from a yearslong effort among the county and several federal agencies, including the U.S. Geological Survey, to reach backcountry hikers in the event of an emergency.

When the National Weather Service issues a flash-flood

warning that affects the Colorado River, that warning is able to be broadcast to satellite devices, including cell phones, despite a lack of cellular service in most of the canyon. Users must sign up to receive messages from the Grand Canyon River Alerts System, and the county issued 15 such warnings over 48 hours during this most recent flood.

"It is not designed to replace general situational awareness, but we know that there are a lot more people who aren't necessarily backcountry experts these days. They can have one more tool to receive those life-saving alerts," Carter said. "We've heard anecdotes that people have received these alerts and used that warning to find higher ground before flood waters reached them."

Year-round, the county's communications department works to proactively warn aspiring hikers about weather conditions, assessing comments left on the county's social media platforms to better tailor messaging to match concerns. During an emergency like the flood, the coun-

ty's social media amplifies messaging published by the lead agency in any incident — in this case the National Park Service — funneling interested users toward that agency's information.

"We keep our finger on the pulse of what's happening in those channels and in the media to see where the needs are, where people are commenting on our posts, what kind of questions they have so we can address those as well," said Communications Director Melissa Randazzo.

"I feel like we've got a very wide breadth of followers really has a lot of different types of people, including hiking groups and the conservancy groups and the organizations to reach their people because then that spreads through that community. A lot of times, if they do a campaign, we join their campaign."

Now that the flood has spent several days in the public consciousness, Horstman and her colleagues on the Board of Supervisors are moving to support the local communities that depend on tourism and advocate on their behalf. The flood damage has indefinitely closed campsites inside the canyon and the damage to water infrastructure will force hikers to carry more of their own water when they descend into the canyon.

"When the national or even state media report on what's happening, they don't always make the distinction between what's available in the park and that there's still lodging just outside the park," Horstman said.

"There are hotels on the North Rim that have lost 40% of their bookings in what is our busy season, but they aren't operating under the water restrictions inside the park." 

SNAP/STATS

National Preparedness Month

Weather disaster frequency:..... Every two weeks
\$1 billion disasters last year:23
Counties hit by disaster:900 annually
Emergency supplies:.....5% of households have on hand
Have a disaster plan:.....46% of households

Source: FEMA, NOAA, NACo, SafeHome.org, Talker Research

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CEO INSIGHTS | BY MATTHEW D. CHASE

Closing the Knowledge Gap, Recognizing the Silent Successes of County Officials

The 2026 NACo Achievement Awards are out. Eighteen categories. Hundreds of impactful county impacts from Weld County to Waukesha, Cumberland to Cuyahoga.



Read the summaries and the passion, complexity and real-world impacts of county officials quietly grinding away jumps off the screen.

That's exactly why the awards are a great compliment to our new "We Are Counties" campaign.

"We Are Counties" exists to close a knowledge gap of the public, and our federal, state, tribal and municipal counterparts.

The Achievement Awards give us the ingredients to share our daily work. Every winner is a story already written by the work itself. Yet it must be amplified and validated.

Look at what counties achieved this year. Fairfax County, Va, put drones in the sky to assist first responders — arriving first on scene in rough-

ly seven of 10 calls, in under two minutes on average.

Cuyahoga County, Ohio built a Taxpayer Assistance Program to keep cost-burdened seniors in their homes.

Waukesha County, Wis. stood up a mutual-aid damage assessment team that helped residents secure nearly \$20 million in FEMA assistance after last year's devastating floods.

Dakota County, Minn. turned library branches into public health hubs with naloxone kits, lactation support and mental health connections. All in a building people already trust.

Here's the ask as part of NACo's "We Are Counties" campaign: don't just announce winners. Translate your programs into human impact stories. Demonstrate the return on investment of local taxpayers with the real-world impacts on real-world residents. Go beyond government lingo and insider talk.

In an era of declining public trust, we all share in the burning imperative to provide context to your decisions and investment of taxpayer dollars. In visiting my hometown in upstate New York, I'm always proud of the daily storytelling of Warren County, N.Y., with a population about 50,000.

The county hired the former editor of its local newspaper as public affairs officer. He built a weekly e-newsletter that does more than list board agenda items. It engages residents. It outlines key decisions coming before the county board. It profiles county employees as neighbors, coaches and volunteers — not job titles. It tells the story of community.

The county also regularly publishes the county's economic performance, revenues and expenses, and puts property and sales taxes into plain context. That's not a communications tactic. That's the whole mission of We Are Counties, running on a weekly cadence in one county.

Every county has this raw

material. A taxpayer doesn't care about "Best in Category." A taxpayer cares that their tax dollar is improving their daily lives. A state legislator doesn't care about an award plaque. A legislator cares that a county investment or action solved a problem the state was still studying. Again, our challenge is to demonstrate the return on each taxpayer dollar.

That's the concept behind the awards themselves. Since 1970, the Achievement Awards have run on a simple, non-competitive premise: if the work is good, recognize it. No county competes against another for a trophy. Every county that clears the eligibility bar earns the credit.

That's a rare moment in American public life — recognition without a zero-sum fight for it.

It should be rarer still that we let these stories sit in a database. Achievement Award winners are ready-made case studies for every social media post, every legislative hearing testimony and every conversation with a member of Congress or state legislator who has a narrow view of counties.

Again, we must also show taxpayers the self-interest value of each tax dollar.

We invent, adapt, and deliver — and now we have thousands of fresh examples to prove it.

So, here's the ask: tell your county's story. Tell it plainly. Share it consistently. Send it to your federal and state delegations. Engage your residents. Focus on restoring public trust in government.

The award already did the hard part — it found the story. "We Are Counties" is how we make sure it gets told. 

Need an idea on how to tell residents about your achievements? Be sure to read the story behind each year's NACo Achievement Award-winning program in each issue of County News, in the "Bright Ideas" standing feature written by Staff Writer Meredith Moran.

Matthew D. Chase is CEO and executive director of the National Association of Counties (NACo), the only national organization serving America's 3,069 counties, parishes and boroughs.

Celebrating County Innovation

For more than five decades, the NACo Achievement Awards program has recognized counties for innovative programs and creative solutions that improve the lives of their residents.

Miranda Morvay, Senior Operations manager for County Practices & Innovations at NACo, leads the Achievement Awards program. Since joining NACo in 2018, she has helped advance programs that support county innovation and excellence nationwide.

Morvay says she is especially passionate about the awards because they showcase the



The Achievement Awards program recognizes innovative county government programs in 18 categories.

incredible work happening in counties across the country. Each year, she is inspired by the innovative programs counties develop to address local challenges—and by the

opportunity to share those ideas so other communities can learn from them.

Counties interested in applying for the 2027 Achievement Awards should expect

the application period to open in the last week of January or first week of February 2027. The most current information will be available on NACo's Achievement Awards webpage.

Looking ahead to 2027

Prospective applicants can also explore previous winners through NACo's Achievement Awards Database, which offers examples of the innovative work recognized in past years.

For now, Morvay is keeping her advice about the 2027 application process — and what winners will receive — close to the vest.

Conversations about the program are underway, and some details could change before next year's awards cycle.

One thing that is certain: the Achievement Awards have a long history. Started in 1970, the program will celebrate 57 years of recognizing county innovation in 2027.

For counties considering applying, Morvay recommends keeping an eye on NACo's website for the latest information and taking some time to explore what other counties have accomplished. After all, the awards are not just about recognition — they are about sharing ideas that can make communities stronger.

Loan fund helps counties support entrepreneurs

by Mei Ou

Small businesses are not just a source of job creation and tax revenue for a county, nor are they just an ownership stake for an individual. From neighborhood shops to high-growth startups, a vibrant economy is a mosaic, each small business a tile that adds to a community's character and resilience.

A thriving small business ecosystem does not happen by accident and often, access to capital is the biggest challenge.

Many financial institutions require evidence of credit history, revenue or collateral, which often lock out new entrepreneurs.

Recognizing that barrier, the City and County of Honolulu made entrepreneurial financing an important part of its economic development



ERC Fellow George Yarbrough (back row, center) poses during a bill signing with Hawaii Gov. Josh Green (holding the bill).

strategy.

O'ahu Small Business Loan Fund

In May, Honolulu launched applications for a new program: the O'ahu Small Business Loan Fund.

The loans, ranging from \$5,000 to \$50,000 at below-market interest rates,

expand eligibility by using character-based underwriting and do not have credit score requirements. A total of \$200,000 in lending capital is available.

For underserved entrepreneurs who do not qualify for traditional financing, the loan fund is a game changer.

The microloans fill a gap

Many financial institutions require evidence of credit history, revenue or collateral, which often locks out new entrepreneurs.

that allows an early-stage entrepreneur to get a business off the ground or to grow in ways that might otherwise have been out of reach. Moreover, the loans themselves serve as a first step for building the track record needed to qualify for future financing.

Since the loan fund is structured as a public-private partnership with Feed the Hunger Fund, a nonprofit Community Financial Development Institution (CDFI), entrepreneurs also get to tap into the organi-

zation's wrap-around support and expertise at no cost, which includes business coaching and financial literacy assistance.

The small but mighty approach

The City and County of Honolulu may have had a fixed budget of \$40,000 for its program, but they leveraged private sector resources to build a more impactful one.

Rather than the county lending money directly, the loan fund uses a loan loss reserve, a financing model that leverages an initial public investment to unlock private capital.

In this model, county funds are held in a reserve while the CDFI uses its own capital to make loans. If an eligible loan defaults, the CDFI can draw

See LOAN FUND page 12



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Supreme Court blocks plan to screen mail-in ballots; door still open for future elections

From VOTE page 1

that make good-faith registration mistakes and submission of all eligible voters to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's Systematic Alien Verification for Entitlements (SAVE) system. The act provides no funding for counties to implement these changes.

These provisions would create extreme administrative burdens for counties to quickly create the infrastructure to review and validate voter identification documents and process in-person registration appointments.

Counties should evaluate how their state-level election laws diverge with provisions in the SAVE America Act and make plans to rectify those differences, including building processes to validate documentary proof of citizenship at registration, training staff and organizing infrastructure to process registration requests and planning voter education campaigns on the new eligibility and registration requirements.

Counties should continue to closely monitor the status of the SAVE America Act and contact their federal delegates on its impact with resources available on NACo's online SAVE America Act County Resource Hub.

USPS rule changing mail-in voting is blocked by the Supreme Court

On Sept. 14, the Supreme Court denied the administration's application to be added to the emergency docket to lift a preliminary injunction on a U.S. Postal Service (USPS) rule implementing new restrictions on mail-in voting. After an initial legal back-and-forth over the standing of states and voters' rights organizations to challenge the rule, two federal judges blocked its implementation with injunctions, stating that the rule unduly burdens state election procedures ahead of the midterms.

The Supreme Court ultimately denied considering

the federal government's appeal of these injunctions and indicated that if the issue was fully litigated, the argument for implementing USPS rule was unlikely to win on its merits.

The USPS rule follows direction from Executive Order 14399, which directs USPS to tighten restrictions on mail-in voting. The rule would have forced counties to prepare for major changes to mail-in voting, including new envelope design rules and a new verification step for outgoing ballots.

All envelopes containing official outbound and return federal mail would have to include the official election mail logo, be automation compatible and include the voter's unique Intelligent Mail barcode and new Federal Ballot Mail Service Type Identifier.

The rule also directs each state's chief elections official to oversee the input of all mail-in voter data to a new Federal Ballot Mail Portal and requires all mail-in voters to be entered before their ballot can be sent.

Even though the court denied the administration's emergency application lifting the injunction on the rule ahead of the midterm elections, the executive branch could still try to implement it for future federal elections. County leaders can tell their elections administrators to proceed with their mail-in voting procedures, but should closely watch future developments.

Checking voter rolls against DHS citizenship list

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) will create a list of confirmed citizens for each state's chief election official to verify citizenship of voters.

This directive, also from EO 14399, will use data from federal citizenship naturalization records, Social Security Administration records, Systematic Alien Verification for Entitlements system data

and other federal databases to create a list of U.S. citizens in each state. The executive order threatens to withhold federal election grant funds from noncompliant states and prosecute individuals who help distribute ballots to non-citizens.

This part of the executive order is not under a court-ordered hold. Counties should stay in close contact with their state election official's office to ensure they receive the DHS citizenship list when it is sent to the state.

The deadline for the list to be sent has passed, so the process of checking voter rolls against the list will be expedited further. Counties should prepare procedures and infrastructure to complete these checks under the new timeline.

Prepare staff for congressional election observers

County election administrators can again expect to see congressional election observers at the polls this November. Under the Election Observer Program, Congress will send trained staff to polling places to monitor ballot casting and counting.

Congressional election observers may observe a wide range of administrative processes but are required to be non-partisan and non-political in their action as an observer. While county election officials can remove congressional observers for violation of the stated rules, Congress may send new observers in their place.

Counties, especially in districts with close congressional races, should prepare their poll workers for the presence of congressional election observers and work with county attorneys to outline what observers can and cannot do ahead of the general election and offer staff training on how to handle congressional observers. **CN**

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

SALUTE TO COUNTY LEADERS:

James Gore



Sonoma County, Calif. Supervisor James Gore, a former NACo president, strikes a pose. Photo by Denny Henry

James Gore got into local government as supervisor in his native Sonoma County, Calif. following service in the Peace Corps in Bolivia and a tour of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. He chaired NACo's Resilient Counties Advisory Committee shortly before devastating wildfires struck Sonoma County, which galvanized his focus for the rest of his three terms as supervisor, including as NACo president in 2024-2025.

At home, he drove modernization of the county's emergency response infrastructure. Nationally, he made federal disaster reform his priority during his presidency, forming the Intergovernmental Disaster Reform Task Force to strengthen our nation's disaster mitigation, response and recovery capabilities and build a stronger relationship between county and federal government on disaster response. In 2026, a new law required the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to publish a publicly accessible, interactive dashboard tracking all Public Assistance reimbursement requests, giving counties unprecedented visibility into disaster recovery funding.

How did you know that county government was your calling?

When I learned that it was the epitome of "other duties as assigned." Even if you have a department for almost everything, if somebody comes in and says, "Somebody dumped

a couch on the side of my road," you have to figure out how to clean up the road. Something happens and county government has to respond. I feel this thrill, because I knew I had to rise or fall with the occasion when people are depending on you.

What were your proudest achievements in Sonoma County?

Leaving things better than I found them. Knowing that our disaster response was good, and now it's one of the best in the nation. We're more resilient on water management than we were 12 years ago, we've consolidated fire districts, we have a more transparent and formal budget process. And in each of those achievements, we had county staff, residents and leaders working together.

How did you change as a county leader over your tenure?

I have given up any sense of ego that I might have had. I don't need my name in the newspaper. I don't need to take credit for things. I don't have that young, burning energy to prove myself.

I used to want to be a part of everything, inside every pothole and reading every permit. Now I want to focus on big problems that seem to be intractable, sticking my head into them and working on them. I want to address the big, messy things and just go after them.

See GORE page 9

Senior memoir group offers supportive space to build friendships, boost brain health

From SENIORS page 1

library system, provides seniors with an outlet to reflect on their lives through memoir writing and share it with a cohort of their peers.

The senior memoir group offers a supportive space for older adults to record their life stories, boost brain health and build new friendships.

Social isolation, according to the National Institute on Aging, can be as bad for a senior's health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day.

Diana Diehl, Loudoun County Public Library's adult services substitute library assistant, leads the senior memoir group, which has been meeting for nearly four years.

Each month, she provides participants with a quote that acts as a writing prompt, and relevant articles to help conjure up ideas or themes for participants to explore in their writing.

The prompts are "very evocative," said Joanie Walker, a senior memoir group participant. "They stir up memories I didn't remember I had."

It's interesting to see the different directions people take with the prompts, and each participant has devel-

oped their own unique writing voice, noted Rosemary Dougherty.

"Within the same prompt, one could write a hilarious story, and one could write a very sad story," Dougherty said. "... We can tell our different ways of writing very easily. If somebody read somebody else's story, I could probably guess who wrote that."

Today's prompt is pulled from Harper Lee's "To Kill A Mockingbird": "Summer was our best season: it was sleeping on the back screened porch in cots, or trying to sleep in the tree house; summer was everything good to eat; it was a thousand colors in a parched landscape..."

The participants, who range in age from 74 to 88, all wrote about the summers of their youth. Some chose to write about a stretch of summers in a specific location, others about a singular summer.

They reminisced on the simpler times of youth and memories with since-passed loved ones. In Sue Duka's writing, she returned to a summer in Nanticoke, Pa. with her grandparents.

"In bed at night, I loved hearing the sound of the train whistle as it wound its way



Memoir group participants exchange stories about their childhoods at a Loudoun County, Va. senior center. Photo by Meredith Moran

through town. I imagined all the places it might be going," Duka read. "During the day, we got to pick blackberries along the roadside and rhubarb from the garden for pies. We played in the State Street schoolyard next door and sat on Mrs. Kissler's front porch across the street, creating doll clothes from the quilting scraps in her sewing box."

That marked Duka's last summer at the State Street house. Her grandfather died the following year.

"Grandma lived with us for

another 10 years," Duka read. "The only vestiges of her former life being their bedroom furniture, a spongeware milk pitcher that sat on our table, as it had on hers, and Grandpa's monthly pension checks from the Glen Alden Coal Company."

"I'm glad I was able to experience a slice of small-town life that my father had grown up with," she wrote, of that summer.

There's no chronological structure to the memoir writing, and participants write about experiences throughout their lives, but they often find themselves gravitating toward earlier memories. Robert Fontana describes it as a feeling of being "unstuck in time."

"When I'm writing these stories that happened 50, 60 years ago, it's like literally, I'm right there," Fontana said. "The amount of memory that comes back is just fascinating, but also all the feelings — it's really just intense."

Diehl's initial intention was to keep the senior memoir group open for anyone to join at any point, but after the first couple of sessions, it became clear that it needed to function as a closed cohort.

The structure enables participants to feel open and safe in sharing their writing and stories with people they've built a rapport with, she said.

"This is like a therapy group," Duka said. "Because we know a lot of [each other's] history,

secrets."

The senior memoir group operates in rounds, which are six sessions each. On occasion, the participants will gather for lunch after the meetings, and some of them are in a walking group together. Over the course of the sessions, they've navigated life, and death, together. One member, Pat, declared after the memoir group's first session: "I have to tell you all, I've found my tribe." As Pat's health deteriorated, some of her fellow writers helped tend to her, and when she passed away during the group's second round of sessions, they attended her funeral, according to Diehl.

"She was quite a force," Walker said. "And she didn't go out alone," Diehl noted.

It's rewarding to see how much confidence the participants gain in their writing and in sharing it with the group over the course of the sessions, Diehl said.

"So many people come to a group, and they are so reticent about their writing ability, they're so timid," Diehl said.

"I try to encourage people — 'If you write what's in your heart, if your spelling is off, who cares? If your grammar is not perfect, it doesn't matter. This is your story.'"

The writing has also helped spark conversations among participants and their loved ones. Klinker shares his writing with his two granddaughters, and Fontana's participation inspired his wife, Vicky, to join another senior memoir group Diehl runs through the library.

"I've always read my memoirs to her, but now she's reading her memoirs to me," Fontana said.

"And it's really been nice to see what's coming out of her. I think it's done wonders for her. She so enjoys it and the connections that she gets with the other people, so it's been nice to see that happen."

For Walker, the writing exercises are an heirloom.

"This is my legacy," Walker said. "I have two sisters who quilt, and they're leaving all their children, their grandchildren quilts. This is my gift; this is what I'm giving." 



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ON THE MOVE

NACo OFFICERS

- President **George Dunlap**, Immediate Past President **J.D. Clark**, Executive Director **Matt Chase**, Chief Public Affairs Officer **Lori Dicker** and Membership Engagement Director **Tammy Tincher** attended the Texas Association of Counties Legislative Conference in Travis County.
- **Dunlap** and Special Assistant **Alyx Hawkins** attended the Association of County Commissions of Alabama Annual Conference in Baldwin Count.
- **Dunlap** also attended the Hawaii Association of Counties Annual Conference in Maui County.
- First Vice President **Alisha Bell**, Associate Membership Director **Grace Dunlap** and PPI National Program Director **Chris Blanchette** attended the Michigan Association of Counties Annual Conference in Grand Traverse County.
- **Clark** and Rural Development Senior Fellow **Owen Hart** attended the Association of Arkansas Counties Annual Conference in Garland County.

NACo STAFF

- **Zach Boone** has joined NACo as a multimedia content specialist. He previously served as creative director and press secretary for Rep. Mark Pocan (D-Wis.), a former Dane County supervisor. He earned a bachelor’s degree in advertising from the University of Oregon.
- **Tina Tu** has joined NACo as Center Operations coordinator. She previously served as a client services associate for Bal-



Boone



Tu

- timore-Washington Financial Advisors and earned a bachelor’s degree in biology from Bryn Athyn College.
- Legislative Director **Brett Mattson**, PPP National Program Director **Anthony Chapman**, National Director of Executive Relationships **Craig Holmes** and Membership Manager **Priscila Chrappah** attended the Maryland Association of Counties Summer Conference in Worcester County.
- **Tincher** and **Holmes** attended the Iowa State Associ-

- ation of Counties Fall Annual Conference in Polk County.
- **Mattson** attended the Tennessee County Services Association Newly Elected Officials Training in Rutherford County.
- Legislative Director **Ben Gilsdorf** attended the South Dakota Association of County Commissioners County Convention in Minnehaha County.
- Associate Legislative Director **Rachel Yeung** attended the Association of Minnesota Counties Fall Policy Conference in Beltrami County.
- National Center for Public Lands Counties Director **Gregory Nelson** attended the Utah Association of Counties Annual Conference in Utah County.

GET TO KNOW...

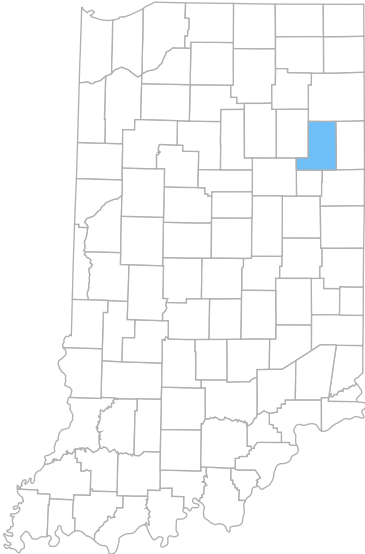
Wells County, Indiana

by Meredith Moran
staff writer

Established in 1837, Wells County, Ind., is named for Captain William Wells, a frontiersman who played a key role in the Northwest Indian War, when the United States and Native Americans fought over land north of the Ohio River. Wells was captured by the Miami tribal nation as a boy and was raised as a warrior named Apekonit (or “Blacksnake” for his red hair and combat skills) and fought alongside Native Americans against the U.S. military.

The county seat, Bluffton, is home to Ouabache State Park, which features a 20-acre bison enclosure, the only remaining year-round bison exhibit in the state. It was once considered the greatest laboratory for wildlife in the country for raising quail, pheasants, rabbits and raccoons.

Bluffton garnered its nickname, the “Parlor City,”



for having some of the first clean, paved streets in the region, which it’s said were kept as spotless as a home parlor.

On summer weekends, local artists perform at Kehoe Park’s Summer Concert Series along the banks of the Wabash River.

The Bluffton Street Fair, created in 1898, is one of Indiana’s oldest and largest free street fairs. It’s held on the streets of the city’s downtown every

September and features live music, carnival rides, a wrestling event and a singing competition.

Notable Wells County natives include Dr. Walter Fowler, a surgeon who participated in the first at-

tempted balloon flight over the North Pole and Charles Deam, Indiana’s first state forester and the author of classic field texts such as “Trees of Indiana” and “Flora of Indiana.”

Deam’s passion for bot-

any came after he survived typhoid fever as a teenager after drinking a remedy of boiled milk and an herb called Old-Field Balsam.

Get to Know features new NACo member counties.



The Bluffton Street Fair, created in 1898, is one of Indiana’s oldest and largest street fairs.

BRIGHT IDEAS | MIAMI-DADE COUNTY, FLA.

Miami-Dade County Makes ‘Triple Play’ with County Park

PROBLEM: A county park facing rising seas and more could be in danger of not being viable to residents in the future.

SOLUTION: With several studies as their guide, Miami-Dade County invested where it will count decades from now.

by **Meredith Moran**
staff writer

Facing rising sea levels and aging infrastructure, a coastal park in Miami-Dade County, Fla. took an opportunity to conduct environmental remediation to also make recreational improvements and enhance climate resiliency. Only 51 of Chapman Field Park’s 480 acres are developed for active recreational use; the rest of the park is mangrove forests, tidal waterways and other sensitive coastal ecosystems, according to Carlos Lopez, a Miami-Dade County parks planner.

“Miami-Dade County is on the front lines of sea level rise impact,” Lopez said. “For us in parks, that means thinking not only about how we’re functioning today, but how our assets are going to perform decades from now, as flooding, storm surge, saltwater intrusion — all those things — build up and become greater concerns.”

Before Chapman Field Park was a space to play baseball or take out a kayak on Biscayne Bay, it was a World War I army airfield and a landfill. In 2014, the county discovered high levels of arsenic on the fields, and a sea level rise and mitigation study projected that regional sea levels could rise approximately 1.5 feet by 2050 and more than five feet by 2100, increasing flooding risks throughout the park. The study also determined that the baseball fields and portions of the access roadway were in critical or poor condition and needed rehabilitation.

“Rather than treating the re-



An aerial view of Chapman Field Park in Miami-Dade County, Fla.

mediation, the recreation improvements and the resilience as separate projects, we used the opportunity to address them all together,” Lopez said. “... All these studies really gave us a more complete picture of what could responsibly occur at the site.

“Using that information to guide our capital decisions, we were able to make investments that made sense, and how the current community recreation needs could be addressed without ignoring the facilities and the impacts that they might experience decades from now.”

The first phase of the Chapman Field Park Resilience and Restoration Project included remediating contaminated soils, renovating a ball field and removing invasive species, such as Australian pine.

“Australian pines were historically introduced into the ecosystem down here by early settlers because it was a fast-growing windbreak and shade tree for coastal areas,”

Lopez said. “But today we recognize it as an invasive [species]. So, part of restoring places like Chapman Field is undoing some of those historic landscape decisions and bringing those native systems back into our parks.”

The parks system recycled sections of the removed Australian pines into playground elements, according to Lopez.

The second phase of the project addressed environmental restoration and recreational improvements, including the installation of a new T-ball field for youth, and the third phase further remediated portions of the park previously affected by landfill activities. Two deteriorated baseball fields were reconstructed to ensure resilience to sea level rise and elevated to improve drainage.

“South Florida incorporating sea level rise into our infrastructure planning is becoming really common, and in Miami-Dade, considering sea level rise as part of how we

approach capital investment, it just makes sense based on where we live,” Lopez said. “We’re experiencing tidal flooding, storm surges and that’s affecting not only our buildings but the roads, the athletic fields, all of these other elements of the park, and whether residents can actually use a park after significant rain events and storm events.”

What stands out about the Chapman Field project is the site-specific analysis and the way that that was translated into implementation, Lopez said.

“We’re not looking at a regional sea level rise map and saying, ‘Oh, this park is vulnerable,’” Lopez said. “We drilled down into the site, and we examined all the different assets in the site to see how their vulnerability changes over time horizons.”

Miami-Dade County Parks, Recreation and Open Spaces has now carried out site-specific sea level rise studies at 12 coastal parks and marinas,

and is beginning to conduct studies on some of its low-lying inland parks, according to Lopez.

After 11 years of work (including delays due to a funding shortfall and Hurricane Irma), Chapman Field Park reopened last summer. An upgraded canoe and kayak launch, with a new floating dock that can handle King Tides, is set to open later this year.

“It sends a message of what we can accomplish, that it’s within our realm of possibility,” Lopez said. “The county can address contamination, environmental sensitivity, aging infrastructure and climate vulnerability, and still return that land to meaningful public use for the community.” 

Miami-Dade County’s Chapman Field Park Resilience and Restoration Project was the 2026 NACo Achievement Award “Best in Category” winner in Parks and Recreation.

WORD SEARCH

EL PASO COUNTY, TEXAS

Created by Mary Ann Barton

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

BORDERS: The county borders Mexico to the south, New Mexico to the west and north and Hudspeth County, Texas to the east.

CELEBRITIES: Famous people from the county include actress Debbie Reynolds; Academy Award-winning actor F. Murray Abraham, actor Sherman Hensley and Star Trek creator Gene Roddenberry.

CROPS: Farms in the county grow pecans, cotton and alfalfa.

EMPLOYMENT: The largest employer — more than 40,000 — in the county is the U.S. Army post Fort Bliss.

FILM: The Plaza Classic Film Festival, which organizers say is one of the largest classic film festivals, attracts 40,000 annually.

GOVERNMENT: The county is led by one county judge and four county commissioners from four individual precincts.

HISTORY: The Texas Legislature established the county in March 1850 by subdividing Santa Fe County. It was not fully organized until 1871.

LOCATION: El Paso County is the westernmost county in Texas, situated

in the Chihuahuan Desert along the Rio Grande.

MOUNTAIN: The highest elevation in the county is North Franklin Mountain, at 7,192 feet.

NAME: El Paso County's name comes from the phrase "El Paso del Norte," a Spanish phrase meaning "The Pass of the North."

NEWSPAPER: The *El Paso Times*, founded in 1881, updates its website daily and is published in print six times a week.

POPULATION: The population of the county is approximately 877,888, the 10th most populated county in the state; about 13.7% are retired.

RESTAURANT: The oldest restaurant, Café Central, was founded in 1918 in Juarez, Mexico, but moved to downtown El Paso after prohibition ended in the United States.

SEAT: The county seat is the City of El Paso.

TIME: The county operates on Mountain Time, one of only two Texas counties (the other is Hudspeth County) that do; the others operate on Central Time.

From GORE page 5

What kind of advice do you have for other county officials who want to do more for their counties?

Don't wait for the perfect moment to get involved. Most of the world talks about problems and talks about why they're not being fixed. If you don't like that one of the committees isn't talking about something, bring it up, volunteer your concerns. We want you on committees; we want to hear your voice.

I'm not calling people out, I'm calling them in. The reality

is the people who are empowered through NACo, it's because they've decided to raise their hand to get involved.

Why are you optimistic about county government?

I'm an eternal optimist, but I don't have to be optimistic about this because we were the first form of government out here because it was necessary. We'll be the last form of government on the ground because it's necessary. I'm optimistic that the work is always there, and we're the ones to do it. 

PROFILES IN SERVICE

LISA A. SOBECKI
NACo Board Member
Lucas County, Ohio



SOBECKI

Number of years active in NACo: 3.5 years

Years in public service: 16 elected, 5.5 military, 10 non-elected

My first NACo event was: 2023 Legislative Conference

Occupation: Lucas County (Ohio) Commissioner

Education: Four years of college

The hardest thing I've ever done: Be a mom

Three people (living or dead) I'd invite to dinner: My mother, my grandmother and my best friend who have all passed away.

A dream I have is to: See the United States be a Benefits Bridge Country and to see women be treated equally.

You'd be surprised to learn that I: Was the first female fire safety instructor in the U.S. Navy.

My favorite way to relax is: To spend time with my grandchildren.

I'm most proud of: Raising two successful boys and making a positive difference in Ohioans' lives.

Every morning I read: Thirteen newspapers

My favorite meal is: Ice cream

My pet peeve is: Being late.

My motto is: On Time, On Task, On a Mission ("Mom on a Mission")

The last book I read was: "War and Peace"

My favorite movie is: "Forrest Gump"

My favorite music is: Country music

My favorite U.S. president is: Barack Obama

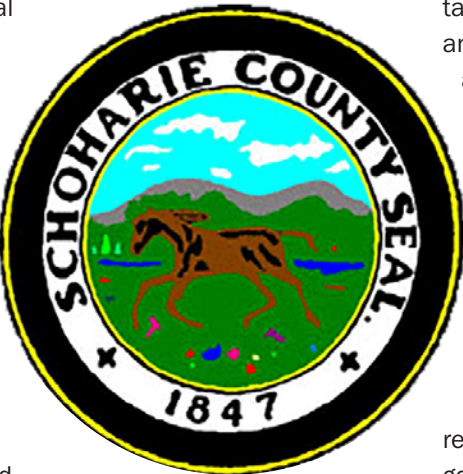
My county is a NACo member because: We know that the best federal policies are informed by local experience. Through NACo, Ohio counties have a voice at the federal level and the opportunity to help shape solutions that address the real needs of our communities.

The most adventurous thing I've ever done is: Become an advanced and nighttime scuba diver.



SCHOHARIE COUNTY, N.Y.

Schoharie County, N.Y.'s seal is based on the legend of a horse that helped settlers pull carts full of grain. In the 1700s, women pulled carts full of grain overnight to market so they could return home in time for cooking and childcare. One woman saw a horse for sale, but by the time the villagers went to see the horse for themselves, it had been sold. As winter approached, the



task became more urgent, and the settlers purchased a bedraggled mare. The mare was too weak to make the trip pulling the cart, but the women of the village fed and groomed her and then soon after, she gave birth to a lively new colt. The design of the seal depicts the colt running, representing all that is good and kind in Schoharie County.

CALIFORNIA

• **LOS ANGELES COUNTY** has sued **State Farm**, alleging unfair business practices in the company's handling of insurance claims filed by policyholders affected by the January 2025 Eaton and Palisades Fires.

The lawsuit follows County Counsel's investigation of State Farm's alleged violations of California's Unfair Competition Law relating to delays, underpayments and denials of wildfire claims from its policyholders impacted by the 2025 wildfires.

NEWS FROM ACROSS THE NATION



CALIFORNIA

• The **SISKIYOU COUNTY** Sheriff's Office Day Reporting Center recently launched a **habitat restoration program** to build and install bird nesting boxes throughout wildlife refuges in the county. The initiative supports the rehabilitation of native bird populations that have been steadily declining due to habitat loss and degradation. The Day Reporting Center provides alternative sentencing programs for people involved in the justice system. Staff members seek out community service projects for their program participants to complete.

FLORIDA

• Heavy rains have increased mosquito activity in **SEMINOLE COUNTY** mosquito control crews to use **artificial intelligence to identify mosquito species faster**, according to a report by WESH-TV. The county sets 31 traps each week and previously examined mosquitoes individually under a microscope. Now, an AI-powered machine can identify species within seconds, helping workers choose the right treatment. The technology reduces identification time from up



to two weeks to one day, allowing crews to respond more quickly with larvicide or fogging when needed. Since Florida has more than 82 mosquito species, identifying disease-carrying species is important for public health. Residents can also help by reporting mosquito activity and removing standing water around their homes.

• Florida counties, including **BROWARD COUNTY**, are using public awareness signs and vehicle decals to remind residents what property tax dollars fund as a high-stakes debate over **property tax cuts** unfolds. The messaging arrives as Florida voters prepare for a November vote on Amendment 3, a constitutional proposal aiming to significantly expand homestead exemptions and reduce local government revenues. County leaders defend the displays as pure public education meant to bridge gaps in resident understanding regarding how vital services — such as park maintenance and fire rescue — are financed.

HAWAII

KAUAI COUNTY coordinated the **opening of food distribution sites** earlier this month as residents dealt with

widespread power outages after Hurricane Lowell ravaged the islands. Hurricane Lowell had a "devastating" impact on Hawaii after sweeping past the state's islands, leaving at least one person dead, damaging homes and knocking out power to tens of thousands.

The County of Kauai's Incident Management Team coordinated the distribution

events in partnership with the Hawaii Foodbank and local churches.

MARYLAND

FREDERICK COUNTY Executive Jessica Fitzwater recently rejected the application for a Development Rights and Responsibilities Agreement sought by Catellus for the Frederick Digital Campus in

Adamstown. She also signed an Executive Order **extending the pause on data center applications** until July 1, 2027.

NEW JERSEY



• **MORRIS COUNTY** is launching a new **Farm Trail Passport program** aimed at encouraging residents and visitors to explore local farms, markets, orchards and other agricultural attractions throughout the year, WRNJ Radio reported.

Developed with members of the county's farming community, the program connects 13 participating farms and encourages visitors to collect stamps as they visit destinations throughout the county. Experiences include farm markets, seasonal festivals, pick-your-own crops and other activities.



GEORGIA

A mental health co-responder program in **DECATUR COUNTY** is **changing how law enforcement responds to crisis calls** — and what happens after, WTXL-TV recently reported.

Kristi Meade, a licensed professional counselor, works alongside the sheriff's office, monitoring 911 calls for signs that someone may be in crisis, helping determine what that person needs and following up within 48 to 72 hours of the initial call. The Bristol Myers Squibb Foundation provided a grant to support the program. Through it, residents can be connected to treatment, medication, therapy, housing, and employment.

From NEWS FROM page 10

OHIO

• Anyone curious about digging into **GEAUGA COUNTY's** past were recently treated to a free public program at the Geauga County Public Library's Middlefield branch.

The Geauga County CARE team — the county's Archives and Records department — recently partnered with the library to present “**What You Can Find in the County Archives.**”

The presentation helped researchers, students and history enthusiasts navigate the resources available in the county archives. Staff from the archives team and the library guide attendees through the types of information available at both institutions, including archival records, research tools and local history resources.

• The **MEDINA COUNTY** Career Center, which provides both technical high school and adult education programs, has launched a new training program to help **address a local shortage of nurses.**

The career center director of nursing says the program has been in the works for two years and will be the first of its kind in the county. The 11-month curriculum trains students to be Licensed Practical Nurses. The LPN certification allows people to enter the healthcare workforce more quickly than a two-year registered nurse program.

“Everything that happened with COVID, it kind of changed healthcare in many ways, and the demand for LPNs has increased since that time,” Myers said.

WASHINGTON

KING COUNTY's Hazardous Waste Management Program has tested thousands of everyday consumer products for lead as part of its efforts to reduce lead exposure and prevent lead poisoning.

Now, the Haz Waste Research Team has turned years of testing data into a searchable dashboard, allowing community members to explore the findings, search for specific products and brands, and make safer choices for their homes.



NORTH CAROLINA

First responders in **CURRITUCK COUNTY** raise an American flag Sept. 11 over Caratoke Highway, in remembrance of those who lost their lives in terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001. The 25th anniversary of those attacks — in New York City, Arlington, Va. and Somerset County, Pa. — was recognized in counties throughout the country. Photo by Mary Ann Barton

The dashboard features nearly 700 products and will continue to grow as testing continues. Products include cookware and pressure cookers, cosmetics, dishware and utensils, toys, jewelry, candy, food, incense, seasonings, and dietary supplements and medications.

WISCONSIN

• **MILWAUKEE COUNTY** is investing another \$7.5 million in opioid settlement funds into programs aimed at **preventing overdoses**, expanding substance use treatment and supporting people in recovery.

County Executive David Crowley signed legislation approving funding for eight initiatives that will operate during the 2027-29 fiscal years. The money is part of the \$111 million Milwaukee County is receiving over 18 years through settlements with opioid manufacturers, distributors, pharmacies and others.

• **VERNON COUNTY** is announcing the launch of “Driftless Bound,” a new **workforce attraction program** intended to encourage working individuals and families from outside Wisconsin to make their primary home in the county.

Funded by a Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation Talent Recruitment Grant and the county, it provides financial incentives to eligible households relocating to the county. Through the program, incentives are available to renters, homebuyers and those building a new home.

“Vernon County has so

much to offer people looking for a place where they can build a career, raise a family and become part of a community,” said Amy Oliver, director of Vernon County Community Development. “As communities across the country compete to attract and retain a strong workforce, Driftless Bound gives us another tool to encourage people to choose Vernon County as the place to build their future.”

Renters may receive up to \$2,500 toward a security deposit and first month's rent, while homebuyers and homebuilders may receive assistance of up to \$12,500, subject to program and lender requirements.

“As a social worker, I witnessed firsthand the amazing work Neighborhood First does for young people in Bucks County,” said Commissioner Chair Diane Ellis-Marseglia, LCSW.

“The staff cares so deeply for the communities and school districts they serve, and that's proven by the many students who have gone through the program and emerged as success stories.”

Share your news with Editor Mary Ann Barton at mbarton@naco.org.



PENNSYLVANIA

BUCKS COUNTY officials recently joined community leaders to celebrate the newly expanded home of the **Neighborhood First Program.**

The program, which provides mentorship and structured activities for at-risk youth, outgrew its original location long ago. Thanks to an investment from the county, it now has additional space.

Economic Recovery Corps program can help counties jumpstart small businesses

From LOAN FUND page 4

from the reserve to cover its losses up to the total capped amount.

In Honolulu, this arrangement increased the capital available to entrepreneurs at a 1:5 leverage ratio, with \$40,000 in county dollars unlocking \$200,000 in financing from the Feed the Hunger Fund.

The county's risk was capped at the \$40,000 and the program has been able to extend more financing to directly target local and underserved entrepreneurs. For Feed the Hunger Fund, this arrangement reduces the CDFI's lending risk by offsetting underwriting costs and providing a financial cushion.

The small business loan fund demonstrates how counties can leverage public-private partnerships to stretch limited public dollars and amplify impact.

"Leaning on the private

sector with their already existing relationships and existing network was probably [our] number one effective tool," said George Yarbrough, an Economic Recovery Corps fellow.

Networks that deliver

Honolulu's Office of Economic Revitalization was envisioning a microloan program for some time, but bringing Yarbrough on board helped turn the concept into reality. Before joining OER as an Economic Recovery Corps (ERC) fellow, Yarbrough founded several successful startups in Hawaii and understood firsthand the financing challenges of entrepreneurs.

ERC fellowships are federally funded by the U.S. Economic Development Administration and managed by NACo and the International Economic Development Council.

The 30-month program

embeds experienced economic development professionals like Yarbrough into local governments to add staff capacity, secure critical resources and advance local priorities, all while building lasting systems, practices and partnerships along the way.

'You can do a lot with a little. You can start small... to accelerate down the road.'

— George Yarbrough,
ERC fellow

Yarbrough played a consequential role in introducing the Feed the Hunger Fund to Honolulu's competitive RFQ process in search of a CDFI partner.

He had first connected with the CEO of Feed the Hunger

Fund when he was seeking capital for a previous startup, Hub Coworking Hawaii, which is now the largest co-working space in the state. At the time, Yarbrough did not meet Feed the Hunger Fund's criteria, but he nonetheless stayed in touch with the CEO.

As it turns out, the loan officer he eventually worked with for financing elsewhere is now also the Board chair of Feed the Hunger Fund.

In economic development, relationships are hard to measure and sometimes treated as intangible benefits, or worse: dispensable.

Yarbrough is one of the main points of contact for any local business interested in learning more about the small business loan fund.

He has seen four times as many applications come through in the first three months than he initially expected.

Thinking through the long-

term sustainability of the small business loan fund, Yarbrough has developed a program evaluation plan that includes quarterly reporting metrics for demand, loan performance and borrower impact.

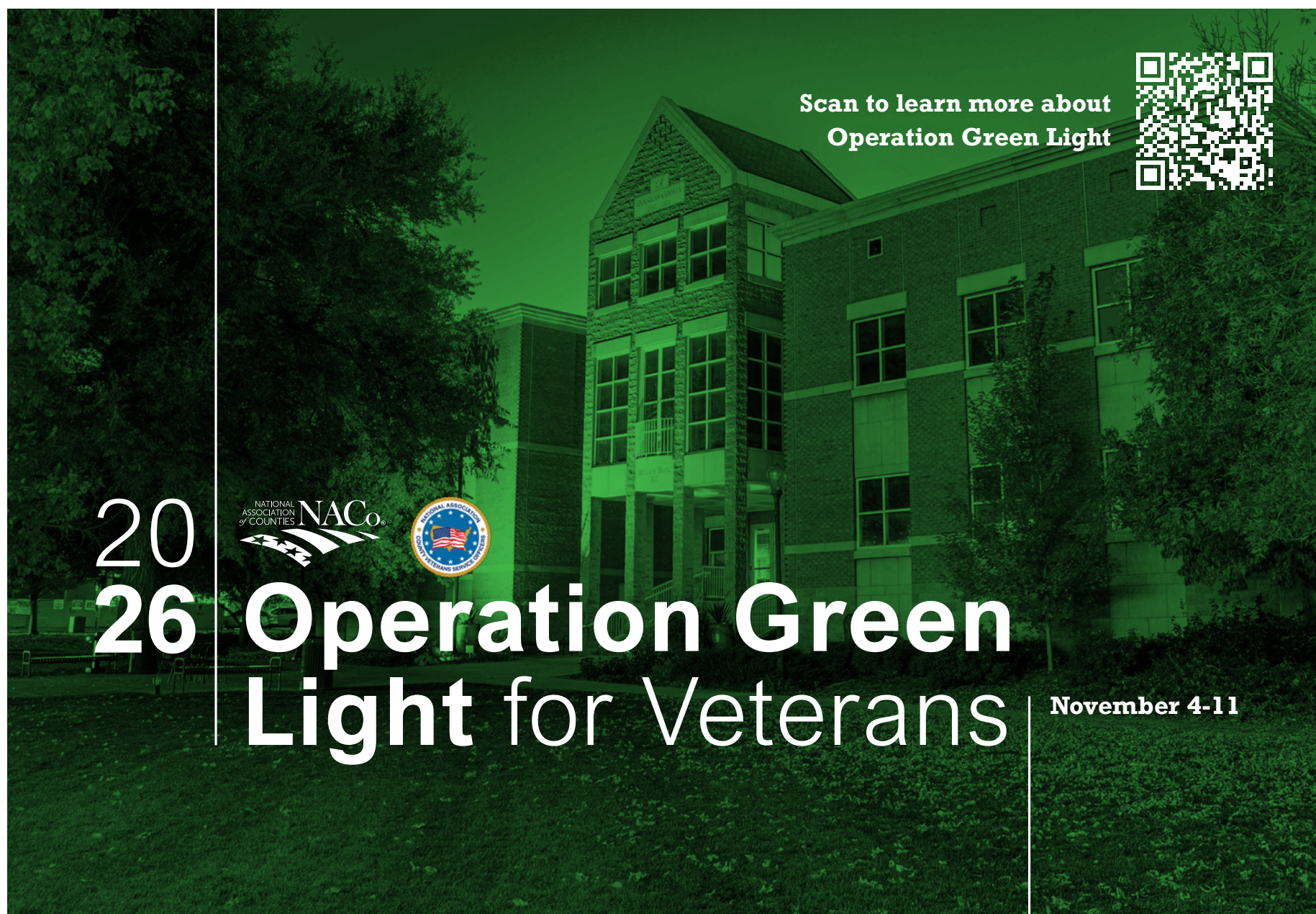
As his fellowship begins to wind down, he is working to set up a small business loan fund to evolve from a pilot into an ongoing program.

He believes that the fund can be a great model for other counties.

"You can do a lot with a little," Yarbrough said.

"We were willing to pilot the project and leverage \$40,000 to create [a] \$200,000... pot of money. You can start small and have very clear [objectives] and [key results] to be able to accelerate down the road." 

He is an economic development intern in NACo's County Practices and Innovations department.



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2026

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION of COUNTIES NACo

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