CN CountyNews



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NATIONAL ASSOCIATION *of* COUNTIES VOL. 58, NO. 18 NOVEMBER 23, 2026

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The Bob Kerrey Pedestrian Bridge participates in Douglas County, Nebraska's Operation Green Light to honor veterans and support service members transitioning to civilian life. See photos of more participants in this year's Operation Green Light on pages 12-13.

Florida counties face steep budget cuts starting in FY2028

by Charlie Ban
senior writer

Florida counties are grappling with looming budget deficits as they face the potential loss of one-third of their property tax revenue in the coming years — a change that could become a slippery slope toward eliminating the revenue stream entirely, with no clear replacement.

Staff reductions, hiring freezes, service privatizations and deferred fleet purchases and maintenance are in the works for some counties, while others are considering adjustments to tax rates and fees to try to mitigate shortfalls.

Counties are in this posi-

See PROPERTY TAX page 11

Counties brace for Medicaid cuts as rural health fund falls short

by Meredith Moran
staff writer

Counties and their health systems are bracing for new Medicaid requirements set to go into effect Jan. 1, 2027, including work requirements and more frequent eligibility checks, which are expected to result in millions of people losing healthcare coverage.

More than 1,000 hospitals, clinics and nursing homes have shut down, cut services or are at risk of doing so as a result of H.R. 1's nearly $1 trillion in Medicaid cuts, according to a Hospital Crisis Watch report published by Protect Our Care, a D.C.-based healthcare advocacy group.

According to health policy analysts and hospital executives, most people who will lose Medicaid coverage will do so because of added administrative barriers and paperwork, not because they're ineligible.

Roughly 33% of the Medicaid expansion population in Boone County, Mo., is set to lose healthcare coverage because of the new work requirements and added administrative hurdles, according to Boone County Commissioner Janet Thompson. The added costs of care that will be shift-

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NACo analyzes election results, looks ahead

by Ben Gilsdorf

While much media attention focused on the success of parties and candidates during the 2026 midterm elections, perhaps one of the night's biggest winners was counties. With votes still being counted, the 120th Congress will have at least 18 new members who have previously served in county government, bringing the expected number of members of Congress with county experience to 75.

This was among the key takeaways from NACo's "2026 Elections Analysis," a document of more than 40 pages prepared by members of NACo's Government Affairs Team. This resource will help county leaders make sense of the election results, while also detailing how NACo will push for its federal policy priorities in the lame-duck period and the 120th Congress.

Federal elections

Midterm elections have long been seen as a "referendum" on the president and typically result in the president's party losing seats in both the House of Representatives and the Senate. In fact, the president's party has not gained House seats in a midterm election since 2002.

These trends bore out again in the 2026 midterms, with Democrats winning enough seats to take back control of both chambers of Congress. This will mark the end of a two-year Republican trifecta and set up two years of divided

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Some county officials take their experience to Capitol Hill

From ELECTIONS page 1

power in Washington.

In the Senate, Democrats flipped at least eight Republican-held seats while holding all of their own, giving them a 55-44 majority. Votes are still being counted in Alaska. Among the Democratic flips were wins in typically Republican states, including Texas, Mississippi and South Carolina. Similarly, Kansas elected its first Democratic senator since the New Deal.

In the House, Democrats flipped at least 44 seats, giving them a majority in the chamber for the first time since 2022. Notably, the 120th Congress will mark the first Democratic-led House since 1994 in which the Speaker will be someone other than Rep. Nancy Pelosi, who is set to retire at the end of her term.

Statewide elections

Democratic victories were not limited to federal elections. Democratic candidates flipped governorships in Alaska, Texas, Nevada, Iowa, Ohio and Georgia, giving the party a majority of the nation's governorships for the first time since 2010. Democrats also held all of their open governor's seats, including in Wisconsin, where Milwaukee County Executive and former NACo Large Urban County Caucus (LUCC) Chair David Crowley (D) defeated U.S. Rep. Tom Tiffany (R).

Down ballot, Democrats flipped at least 12 state legislative chambers, securing trifectas in Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan, Pennsylvania and Arizona. Democrats also broke Republican trifectas in Ohio, Texas, New Hampshire, Georgia and Iowa.



Ballot initiatives

Beyond partisan elections, voters in 40 states considered a range of ballot measures with major implications for counties. These ranged from property tax limitations to changes to election laws and other county obligations.

Among the most high-profile measures was Florida's Amendment 3, which passed with almost 62 percent of the vote. The amendment will significantly increase the homestead tax exemption for non-school district property taxes and spell out the allowable purposes for property tax revenue. Other measures restricting property taxes passed in Louisiana and North Carolina but failed in Wyoming and Oklahoma.

Abby Davidson, NACo's chief research officer, says the insights in NACo's Elections Analysis are useful even for counties whose states had no ballot initiatives relating to county governance. "We know that none of these efforts happen in a vacuum," said Davidson. "What one state does on property taxes this year could appear in two years on another state's ballot, which is why it's so important for counties to read through this analysis."

In some states, voters chose to expand county authority and unlock additional resources for local leaders. Louisiana's Amendment 7 will allow local governments to use public funds to identify, remove and replace privately owned lead drinking water lines, while Hawaii's Question 2 will authorize counties to issue bonds to fund housing projects.

County connections

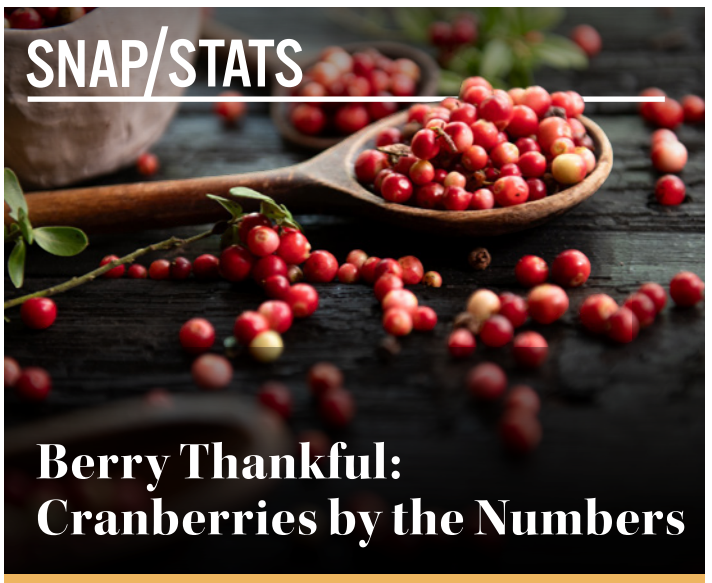
County leaders will have a fresh slate of former colleagues on Capitol Hill when the 120th Congress begins, with 14 representatives-elect and four senators-elect having direct experience in county government. This includes several county elected leaders from some of America's largest counties, such as Reps.-elect Hilda Solis from Los Angeles County, Oliver Gilbert III from Miami-Dade County and Donna Miller from Cook County.

These 18 new members will join 57 returning members with county backgrounds in the 120th Congress. NACo's Chief Government Affairs Officer Eryn Hurley says having county experience in Congress is crucial for advancing NACo's priorities and strengthening the intergovernmental partnership. "Counties are critical for implementing so many different federal programs, from administering SNAP benefits to running elections," said Hurley. "It's important to have leaders on Capitol Hill who have navigated these challenges themselves and can bring the county perspective to policymaking."

What's next

NACo's Elections Analysis details the changes likely to come next year with a Dem-

See ELECTIONS page 15



Berry Thankful: Cranberries by the Numbers

U.S. cranberry crop forecast for 2026: ..... Up 5% to 787 million pounds

Wisconsin's streak as the nation's No. 1 cranberry state: .....31 years

Wood County, Wis.: ..... Produced 1.38 million barrels in 2025 crop, making it the state's top cranberry county

Cranberry sauce Americans eat each holiday season:.....5 million gallons

Cans of cranberry sauce sold for every bag of fresh berries: ..... Nearly 4 to 1

Sources: USDA Economic Research Service; Wisconsin Cranberry Board; Ocean Spray

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PRESIDENT'S INSIGHTS | BY GEORGE DUNLAP

County Leaders: Take Action to Build Better Futures for Youth



In my inaugural address as NACo president, I highlighted a simple idea: life ought to be better for young people. As counties, it's one that we're well positioned to advance.

The budgets we set, the partnerships we build and the programs we oversee shape young people's daily lives. Education, public safety, mental health, housing, nutrition, workforce opportunity and more all show up together in the same young person, and counties play a role in every one of them.

That is the idea behind "Building Better Futures," my presidential spotlight. It calls on counties, regardless of size, structure and geography, to pass a formal resolution to review investments in young people and take at least one concrete action to, again, just make life a little better for a young person.

That could mean investing in after-school programming, improving access to behavioral health services, committing to alternatives to detention for justice-involved youth or launching career readiness programs with county departments or local employers. Counties do not have to do this work alone. Strong partnerships with families, community organizations, service providers and others dedicated to supporting young people can help counties coordinate resources and build on work already underway.

The action can be as practical or expansive as counties see fit and tailored to local needs. My home county, Mecklenburg County, N.C., passed our resolution in August, and pledged to share what we learn with NACo and peer counties, helping contribute to a national network of policy and practice. NACo has developed a resolution template that counties can use as a starting point and adapt with local data and priorities.

As part of this spotlight, I also launched a Youth Housing and Homelessness Task Force, composed of 21 county leaders across 18 states and co-chaired by Supervisor Holly Mitchell of Los Angeles County, Calif., and Commissioner Shannon Jones of Warren County, Ohio.

More than 4.2 million young people and young adults experience homelessness in the United States each year. The mission of the task force is to strengthen county capacity to prevent and end youth and young adult homelessness through three main areas of focus.

First, we're looking at immediate county action and what counties can do with the authority, resources and partnerships already available to connect young people to housing and support. Second, we're focused on preventing homelessness during systems transitions, focusing on systems that many counties oversee, such as foster care, behavioral health and youth justice. And third, we're examining intergovernmental partnerships and policy, including how county experiences can help inform state and federal policy conversations.

I encourage you to join me in Charlotte, N.C., Dec. 3-4, for "Building Better Futures: A County Leaders' Symposium on Youth Outcomes." Attendees will hear from young adults about the county-supported programs that shaped their paths, visit community-based organizations that provide wraparound supports for youth, and learn from peer counties about ideas worth bringing home.

The young people in our communities are counting on the decisions we make today. I'm grateful to the counties already taking action, and I invite those who haven't started to join us and pass a resolution committing to do so.

George Dunlap is the chair of the Mecklenburg County, N.C. Board of County Commissioners and was elected president of NACo in July at the Annual Business Meeting in New Orleans.



Limited access to routine healthcare leads to costlier hospital stays

From HOSPITALS page 1



ed onto hospitals could be the final straw for health systems that are already struggling, she noted.

"When they lose that coverage, then they no longer have access to routine care, and when you don't have routine care, eventually something more catastrophic occurs," said Brady Dubois, president and CEO of Boone Health. "And without any payer source, that cost burden of relatively inexpensive outpatient care becomes very, very expensive inpatient care … and what ends up happening is the hospitals eat that."

Safety-net and essential hospitals are projected to absorb roughly 25% of added unpaid care costs, totaling about $110.3 billion from 2025 to 2034, according to America's Essential Hospitals research. Boone Health is looking at a 79-basis-point increase in bad debt this year compared to last, according to Dubois.

"And when you start doing the calculations, most hospitals in the state are at least that," Dubois said.

"And you look at that annual spend in healthcare in the state, that's a pretty significant change. Care's still going to be provided, because we're obligated to provide that care, [we're] just not going to get any reimbursement for that care that's provided."

To ease H.R. 1's financial strain on rural healthcare providers, lawmakers included funding for them in the legislation by creating the Rural Health Transformation Program. The initiative, administered by the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, will provide $50 billion in federal funding to all 50 states from fiscal years 2026 to 2030.

States with approved plans can use the funding for workforce recruitment, technology and cybersecurity upgrades, behavioral health and substance use treatment, alternative payment models and adjusting service capacity and infrastructure to match local need.

No more than 15% of a state's Rural Health Transformation award can be used to directly pay providers for patient care services.

The investment will offset roughly 37% of the $137 billion in projected 10-year rural Medicaid cuts, according to KFF, the national health policy research nonprofit formerly known as the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation.

"There's a lot of opportunity for those funds to be used, but when you take a look at the overall total value of those funds compared to the amount of funds being removed from the system, it's a pretty stark difference," Dubois said. "And so, that's the biggest piece, [that] … a lot more is being removed than what's being supplemented."

As a result of H.R. 1's cuts to Medicaid, as many as 446 hospitals are at risk of shutting their doors or reducing their services, according to a report by Public Citizen, a consumer advocacy group. Of those facilities, 60% serve urban areas and are not eligible for Rural Health Transformation funding.

"That rural funding, it was a portion of what has disappeared from what they could have drawn down before they implemented this plan," Thompson said. "So, they've already cut it, and they're acting like, 'Oh look at us, we're Santa Claus.'

"No, Santa actually doesn't take away the four presents and give back one. That's what they've done, but then they've limited who would be eligible for it, and a county like Boone is not eligible because we don't count as rural."

McKean County, Pa., a rural county with a population of roughly 40,000, no longer has an active hospital with inpatient or emergency services. Bradford Regional Medical Center closed those services earlier this year due to financial pressures and now operates solely as an outpatient care center. Since the emergency department closed, call response times have doubled, according to local first responders.

> 'Economic development and healthcare go hand in hand.'
>
> *– Marty Wilder, McKean County, Pa. commissioner*

H.R. 1's Medicaid cuts will worsen rural communities' healthcare crisis, and there are concerns about further service reductions or closures across rural Pennsylvania, according to McKean County Commissioner Marty Wilder.

Analysis commissioned by the Hospital and Healthsystem Association of Pennsylvania estimates that a dozen more facilities could close over the next five years without more help from policymakers.

"Economic development and healthcare go hand in hand," Wilder said.

"You see a further reduction in the population. I know people personally who have moved away to be near healthcare, and as people get older, they need a reliable healthcare system.

"We already are having really serious problems that are affecting us, and I just can't imagine that [H.R. 1] is going to be anything that's going to do us any good. I hope that somehow there's some kind of solution found in Congress because it's not going to just be [felt] here. Rural hospitals are already hanging by a thread. I think it's going to be devastating."

McKean County is part of an eight-county maternity care "desert" in northern Pennsylvania that spans more than 6,000 square miles — an area larger than the state of Connecticut. Pennsylvania's Rural Health Transformation Program plan includes a $186.4 million maternal health initiative built around the creation of two comprehensive maternal health hubs by 2028.

The program's first round of rapid-response stabilization funding went toward ultrasound machines, on-site diagnostics, home blood pressure and glucose monitoring, and a renovation to expand women's health and obstetrics services in Pike County. But the eight counties that make up the maternity care desert have yet to receive maternal health funding. It's simply not sustainable for a county to survive without access to healthcare, Wilder noted.

"We're losing a lot of population here, and how do you attract a young family to move to this area? It's like 'You don't have a way to give birth?'" Wilder said. "Somebody seriously needs to take the bull by the horns and handle this issue.

"If somebody doesn't do something fairly soon, we're not going to have a rural America. Towns will be so tiny, and nobody will be able to live here. To me, it's an existential question."

The Memorial Hospital of Converse County, Wyo., received more than $5 million in Rural Health Transformation funding, which it used to switch to a more dynamic nursing staffing model for labor and delivery and to help expand EMS coverage. Federal funding is essential for rural hospitals, noted Matt Dammeyer, the hospital's CEO.

Without federal funding, "we would just keep plodding along until we drowned," Dammeyer said. "I think it's a lifeline to give us time to basically change the models that we're using."

Wyoming is one of the 10 states that didn't expand Medicaid, so while it's still affected by H.R. 1, it's shielded from the law's largest coverage and funding cuts. States such as Alaska, where more than 31% of Medicaid recipients are in the expansion group, are in a rougher spot, Dammeyer noted.

"We're much better off than a lot of states in the country, because if I had a high percentage of Medicaid [patients], I would be using this money just to keep from drowning from the loss of the Medicaid requirements that are rolling in in 2027," Dammeyer said. "So, I don't know how successful it's going to be in those places, but for us, we actually have a fighting chance." CN

AI shifts some personnel conversations

by Ivey Martin, MPA



An employee who once might have walked into a supervisor's office to say, "I'm uncomfortable about something that occurred," now arrives with a three-page, professionally drafted document citing retaliation, hostile work environment and protected activity. Nothing about the underlying concern may have changed. But everything about how the organization must respond has.

County personnel leaders across the country are beginning to experience this shift, yet few have language for what they are seeing.

That language now exists and it is called AI-Amplified Escalation (AAE). AI does not determine whether an employee's concern is valid, nor does it independently create allegations. It helps employees express their own narrative with greater structure, sophistication and persuasive force. The organization receiving that document has no choice but to respond to the communication they received which is not necessarily the conversation the employee hoped to have.

Unlike many private employers, counties operate in environments where employment decisions are subject to public records requirements, civil service rules, collective bargaining agreements, elected official oversight and heightened public accountability. That context makes AAE dynamics both more consequential and more urgent to address.

Why this is happening

Previously, workplace concerns followed a recognizable progression. An employee felt uncomfortable, had an informal conversation with a supervisor and the issue was clarified or resolved before it escalated to formal action. That progression created space for proportional responses.

AI increasingly compresses that progression into a single step. An employee uses an AI tool to help prepare a written complaint. The tool accepts the employee's facts, perceptions and assumptions as presented and enhances the communication for clarity and persuasiveness. The result is a document that is detailed, formal and uses employment law terminology. Whether or not the employee intended to initiate a formal complaint, the communication signals potential legal and policy concerns that the organization is required to address.

The communication becomes more sophisticated than the human situation behind it. Organizations are designed to respond to what arrives, not to what was meant.

Organizations designed for a human-to-human communication environment are now operating in a human-AI-human communication environment. Governance must evolve accordingly.

What it looks like in practice

An employee receives coaching regarding declining performance. The conversation is difficult and the employee leaves feeling frustrated and fearful for their job. Rather than requesting a follow-up discussion, the employee uses an AI tool to draft a response.

The subsequent communication is formal, structured and references retaliation, disparate treatment and hostile work environment. The organization routes the complaint through established investigative processes. Interviews are conducted, documentation is assembled and legal counsel is engaged. Months later, the investigation concludes that the original performance feedback was appropriate and that no policy violations occurred.

The employee remains dissatisfied. Not because the investigation was flawed. Because the explanation they needed, a clear conversation about performance expectations, what was observed and what a path forward looked like, came after the investigation rather than before it.

The investigation answered the allegations. It did not answer the employee's need.

This pattern is not limited to performance situations. Similar challenges occur when employees seek help expressing concerns about promotion decisions, workplace conflict or supervisory concerns. The facts may be different, but the pattern is consistent: communications arrive in a form that indicate formal legal or policy risk, initiating the investigative process before the underlying human need is fully understood.

What county leaders should do

The response to AAE is not to restrict AI use. Employees are already using these tools, and prohibition without governance simply means your organization is unprepared for what is already arriving. This is a matter for county administrators, department directors, county attorneys and elected officials, not HR alone.

1. Recognize the shift. County leaders across every function need to understand that communications that appear formal may now arrive with the frequency and sophistication that exceeds the underlying situation. That gap is not a problem with employees. It is a system design problem that requires a governance response.

2. Review your intake processes. Most employee relations intake models were built for an environment where informal concerns arrived informally. Consider whether in your county a clarification first conversation should take place, where legally appropriate, before a formal process begins.

3. Train supervisors and department leaders. Managers need practical skills to read beyond highly polished communications to identify the concern beneath them and for creating early opportunities for clarification without compromising formal obligations.

4. Modernize governance rather than restrict AI. The more effective posture is augmentation governance: how does your county enable AI thoughtfully, understand its effects on organizational systems and build human and AI collaboration that is responsible and publicly accountable?

5. Track escalation patterns, not just individual cases. Begin measuring investigation volume, intake complexity and time to resolution. Counties that build this baseline now will be better positioned to recognize AAE patterns early and respond appropriately.

Why this matters for county government

Equal Employment Opportunity Commission charge volumes increased 9.2% in FY 2024, with retaliation remaining the single largest allegation category. In the United Kingdom, 95% of HR leaders surveyed reported encountering at least one AI-generated grievance in the prior 12 months. Whether or not the research catches up quickly, the operational reality is already here.

The argument is not that AI is creating more workplace conflict, the argument is that AI is changing how conflict gets expressed: more formally, more quickly and with greater procedural weight than the underlying situations may require. For county governments, that distinction carries real operational and financial consequences.

County government serves the public. That mission depends on workforces that are well led, conflicts that are resolved with proportion and care and governance systems that adapt to the environments they operate in. AI-Amplified Escalation is one of the clearest early signals that adaptation is already overdue.

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CHILD CARE MODERNIZATION ACT
OFFERS BIPARTISAN PATH TO FEDERAL CHILD CARE REFORM

by Emma Conover and Kevin Moore

SPOTLIGHT ON: HUMAN SERVICES

As the 119th Congress draws to a close, next year's divided government has legislators and local stakeholders looking for bipartisan initiatives to focus on in the coming year. In the child-care space, the Child Care Modernization Act is emerging as a promising opportunity to reform federal child-care programs. Introduced with bipartisan sponsors in both chambers, the legislation would be the first comprehensive reauthorization of the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) since 2014.

CCDBG is the discretionary portion of the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF), the federal-state partnership that connects eligible families to affordable childcare and supports parents' participation in the workforce. Unlike the mandatory portion of CCDF, CCDBG must be appropriated by Congress each fiscal year.

Childcare is both a human services issue and an economic development issue, especially as affordability remains one of the largest challenges facing families. In many communities, childcare is one of the largest household expenses. According to Child Care Aware of America, a nonprofit that connects families to childcare and early childhood education, the average U.S. family spent more than $13,000 on childcare in 2024.

Limited access to childcare can also undermine other county investments. Business development, housing and transportation infrastructure cannot be supported without a workforce able to participate in the economy. According to the Bipartisan Policy Center, the U.S. economy is projected to lose $329 billion over the next decade because of inadequate childcare.

Child-care costs and availability are often shaped by the financial challenges providers face.

Providers must balance the costs of recruiting and retaining staff with the expenses of maintaining facilities. Barriers to recruiting and retaining qualified staff can make it difficult to maintain or expand capacity. Even families who can afford childcare may struggle to find available slots, particularly for infants and toddlers, children with disabilities, and families needing care outside traditional working hours. According to the Center for American Progress, 46% of all children ages five and under — and 70% of children in rural communities — lived in a child-care desert in 2025.

In addition to reauthorizing CCDBG, the legislation would transition provider reimbursement rates from the current market-rate survey approach to a cost-estimation model. This would better reflect the actual costs of providing services, including expenses associated with recruiting, training and retaining staff.

This change would address longstanding challenges related to child-care affordability and provider sustainability. Under the current system, reimbursement rates are generally informed by market-rate surveys that do not fully capture the costs of operating a child-care facility.

Both bills also include provisions for child-care facility development and expansion grants to help communities address shortages of available child-care slots, particularly in areas where providers face high startup costs, workforce shortages and limited access to suitable facilities.

With limited time remaining in the current Congress, the Child Care Modernization Act provides a foundation for bipartisan discussions on strengthening federal child-care programs in the new year. While the legislation has not been enacted, its bipartisan introduction in both chambers demonstrates broad congressional interest in addressing child-care affordability and sustainability.

Counties have a strong interest in strengthening child-care systems. Beyond counties that directly administer CCDF, expanding access to affordable child-care is a critical component of local economic and workforce development. Child-care access and affordability can influence where families choose to work and live.

As Congress considers future CCDBG reauthorization efforts, NACo continues to monitor developments and advocate for policies that strengthen the intergovernmental partnership and support county-administered programs that serve families across the country.

Emma Conover is the associate legislative director for human services and education. Kevin Moore is the legislative associate supporting community, economic and workforce development, human services and education and technology and telecommunications.



Counties for SNAP Transformation *NACo's launching Counties for SNAP Transformation, a cohort-based program that will empower counties to modernize SNAP administration with other public benefits systems. Applications open Dec. 1. For more information scan the QR code:*

COUNTIES BUILD SAFETY NETS AS RESIDENTS LOSE SNAP BENEFITS

by Meredith Moran
staff writer

Roughly 5.5 million people have lost their Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits since the passage of H.R. 1, and because of proposed rules the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) released Nov. 10, that number could more than double. Now, counties are working to fill in the food assistance gaps.

Enrollment in CalFresh, California's SNAP program, in San Diego County has decreased by about 8% since the passage of H.R. 1.

Most of the drop-offs occurred in June of this year, when stricter work requirements went into effect, according to Alberto Banuelos, interim director of Self-Sufficiency Services for San Diego County.

To mitigate the impact of cuts to CalFresh and Medi-Cal, San Diego County invested $20.4 million in the Safety Net Bridge Program, which it designed to keep its most vulnerable residents from falling through the cracks. San Diego County Supervisor Monica Montgomery Steppe spearheaded the initiative.

SPOTLIGHT ON: HUMAN SERVICES

"We really felt that it was necessary to build this bridge and to provide coverage when people were scheduled to lose their access to food stamps, or CalFresh eligibility," Montgomery Steppe said. "… This is the work that we do.

"We're mandated to provide these programs to our region, and I really felt that because we were experiencing a loss at the federal level, we needed to put our heads together and do everything that we could for folks in our region that would be negatively impacted by that."

After having discussions with local food banks and receiving data on food insecurity and the scope of need from the San Diego Hunger Coalition, the county decided to bring food distribution sites to the 16 ZIP codes at the highest risk of food assistance loss, according to Montgomery Steppe. "We wanted to ensure that we were closest to the people that would be most impacted," she said.

Since its first food distribution event in August, San Diego County has served 7,800 people across its high-risk zones, with each distribution serving roughly 120 households on average, according to Montgomery Steppe.

The county is using the events as an opportunity to track data on food assistance need and has added more sites to meet demand, she noted.

People can also receive other county services at the food distribution sites, such as vaccines or linkages to behavioral health resources, according to Montgomery Steppe.

"Part of building out this program was to take in data in real time," she said.

"We really were deliberate about monitoring the data so that we could be nimble with whether we needed to change a food distribution site or whether we needed to add more to the calendar … whatever we needed to do to be responsive to the needs of people who have been negatively impacted."

Children make up nearly half of the individuals who have lost SNAP benefits, according to a ProPublica analysis of the 12 states that provide data about the age of SNAP recipients. The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities estimates that around 2 million children across the country have lost access to food assistance since July 2025.

"The SNAP cuts certainly increased the amount of people that were food insecure in our county, and particularly when we think about children," said Prince George's County, Md., Councilmember Shayla Adams-Stafford. "… We have a lot of families that are suffering in silence, and I think that ultimately, food insecurity is something that's not as visible as being unhoused, so it's something where people might make their meals stretch or put things back in the grocery store.



Phyllis Wright, at Fairmount Five Market at a Prince George's County library, hands a shopper a turkey Nov. 18. Photo by Meredith Moran

"Some people are priced out of getting food. That's sad to say, and when you have mouths to feed, that's really troubling."

Earlier this year, Prince George's County, Md., launched free grocery stores inside two of its libraries to combat food insecurity and help families and seniors affected by last year's mass federal layoffs, rising grocery costs and SNAP cuts.

Adams-Stafford led the effort to launch the first location, Fairmount Five Market, which serves the county's District 5 residents and is located in the back of the Fairmount Heights Branch Library.

"We wanted this store in a place that would be open to the public and wouldn't be as obvious for folks that they would be going into a grocery store, because they may be going there to use the other amenities of the library," Adams-Stafford said. "I think that for a lot of people that are dealing with food insecurity, that can be a concern, some of the shame that comes with it.

"…Some people that have been receiving assistance were people that had not been in the situation previously, so it's definitely giving them a sense of dignity in terms of they can come at a specific time, they can shop and they can choose the items that they like."

Fairmount Five Market launched in May and is a partnership between the county and Goodr, a sustainable waste-management and hunger-relief startup that had previously set up free grocery sites in schools, healthcare centers and neighborhoods across the country.

It's funded through a $200,000 county grant and will serve about 200 families a month for one year, although the initiative will likely extend beyond that, according to Adams-Stafford. "I definitely think we're going to maintain funding," she said.

"But then we also are going to look for ways to make this more sustainable by working with local farmers and food organizations to stand this up over time."

A month after Fairmount Five Market opened, another free grocery store, District 7 Fresh Market, opened a few miles away at the Spauldings Branch Library.

It operates through a partnership with two nonprofits, the StoreHouse and Community on the Frontline, and is funded through a $250,000 Prince George's County grant. Its goal is to feed up to 400 families per month.

For other counties looking to adopt similar programs, partnerships with organizations already doing food assistance work are essential, according to Adams-Stafford.

"There's so much that goes into maintaining the store in terms of the refrigeration, the logistics of the food, monitoring the constituents that come in and out," she said.

"It's not necessarily the role of the elected official to handle those types of logistics.

"I think that if you get bogged down with some of that planning, it can be an impediment to really getting the project off the ground, so seeking partners that do this work that already have the know-how I think is the first step to consider."

Phyllis Wright, a member of Adams-Stafford's staff, helps operate the market. "I'm happy to see them when they come because I know when they leave, we're gonna feed a family, and that's the blessing of that," Wright said. "Right now, it's a difficult time, and we need this, more so now than ever."

Jina Komla, one of the market's regular shoppers, picked up supplies to make Thanksgiving dinner for her family of 4 on Nov. 18.

Komla's been laid off twice in the past couple years — first due to Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) cuts after serving over 25 years as a government contractor, and again recently after she secured a job at the Pentagon.

"I was put into a situation where I had to come to a food pantry to be able to afford to eat," Komla said.

"… This is a case that's not happening just to me, but to a lot of people, especially here in PG County who are affected by this, and I do appreciate that the District 5 Councilwoman is actually taking charge and helping to provide." CN

For more information on USDA proposed rules on SNAP, scan the QR code below.

PROPOSED CENSUS CHANGES WOULD REDUCE FEDERAL FUNDING FOR COUNTY HUMAN SERVICES

by Bryce Wilkom

In September, the U.S. Census Bureau published a proposed rule that, if adopted as a binding regulation, would drastically change how the 2030 decennial census and future census counts are conducted. The changes could result in significant undercounts, leaving counties with a less accurate picture of their populations, reducing federal funding for critical programs and services, and affecting political representation.



Under the proposed rule, only U.S. citizens and lawful permanent residents would be included in the count. All other noncitizens, including temporary visa holders, individuals with Temporary Protected Status, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) recipients, asylum applicants and others, would not be counted. The rule also does not define "lawful permanent residence" or clarify whether transient, homeless or other disadvantaged populations would be considered lawful residents if they could not prove their citizenship.

The census has historically counted everyone living in the U.S., regardless of legal status, dating back to the first census in 1790. The 14th Amendment directs the government to count "the whole number of persons" in each state, and the decennial census has always included citizens and noncitizens alike.

The proposed rule would also redefine a person's usual residence based on where they lawfully spent the most days between Jan. 3 and April 1 of the census year, with residency verified against tax and other administrative records. This could affect counties with large seasonal or transient populations, including snowbirds and college students, who may spend those three months away from the county where they primarily live and receive services.

The rule would also prevent the census from asking questions that collect key demographic information, including race, ethnicity and sexual orientation, on the decennial census short-form questionnaire, while making all other demographic questions optional.

The public comment period for the U.S. Census Bureau's proposed rule on the 2030 Census officially closed on November 2. NACo submitted formal comments opposing the proposed rule and urges counties to continue weighing in on the potential county-level funding and apportionment impacts by contacting their members of Congress.

Historically, the U.S. Constitution establishes two primary purposes for the decennial census. The first is apportionment, which determines how many seats in the U.S. House of Representatives, and therefore how many electoral votes, each state receives. The second is taxation, as direct taxes were initially divided among the states based on population. However, this is largely no longer the case because the 16th Amendment established the federal income tax.

Importantly, a third purpose has emerged: allocating federal funding. Over the decades, Congress has enacted laws, and federal agencies have adopted regulations, that use census data in formulas to distribute federal funds to states and local governments.

Medicaid, the nation's largest federal assistance program, demonstrates how changes in census counts can translate into direct funding reductions at the local level.

For all 50 states, the federal share of most Medicaid service spending depends on the Federal Medical Assistance Percentage (FMAP) formula. The formula compares each state's three-year average per capita income with the national average to determine the federal government's share of Medicaid spending, which ranges from 50 percent to 83 percent. It is designed so that the federal government pays a larger share of Medicaid costs in states with lower per capita incomes.

Census population counts are used to calculate per capita income. When a state's population is undercounted, its per capita income can appear artificially high because the same amount of income is spread across fewer residents.

This inaccurate income measurement can make a state appear wealthier than it is, lowering its FMAP and reducing the federal Medicaid funding it receives.

A lower federal Medicaid share would increase costs for states. In the 26 states where counties contribute to the nonfederal share, shifting more of the cost burden to states could also strain county budgets and services. Low-income states with large immigrant populations would be particularly affected. These cascading effects could increase local costs or reduce services as counties already navigate new Medicaid financing and administrative requirements under the One Big Beautiful Bill Act.

If the rule goes into effect, states could see their FMAP affected as early as 2033. However, other health funding streams, including Title V Maternal and Child Health Block Grants and Older Americans Act programs, could be affected before 2033. Population counts are also used in calculations that determine federal allocations for the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) and funding under Title IV-E of the Social Security Act, the largest source of federal child welfare funding, totaling approximately $10 billion in Fiscal Year 2026.

Counties can look to previous census undercounts to anticipate the challenges that an undercount resulting from the proposed rule could create.

In Texas, for example, more than half a million residents, or roughly 2 percent of the state's population, were missed in the 2020 Census. Researchers estimate that Texas could lose $25 billion in federal funding over the decade, including roughly $2 billion annually for Medicaid and other health services.

As the Census Bureau reviews comments on the proposed rule, local leaders can take steps now to support an accurate count.

The first major opportunity is participation in the Local Update of Census Addresses Operation (LUCA). LUCA, a program administered by the Census Bureau, is the only opportunity for local, state and Tribal governments to review the Census Bureau's address list before the census begins. This process helps ensure that housing units and their residents are not missed.

Local leaders know their communities best. Through LUCA, counties can identify missing addresses, new developments, group quarters and other changes that may not yet be reflected in Census Bureau records. These efforts can help prevent an undercount and protect federal funding and accurate political representation for the next decade.

While the 2030 Census may seem years away, ensuring an accurate count requires county leaders to engage now. Decisions and preparations made today can empower communities to be counted, represented and funded for the next decade.

Bryce Wilkom is a program manager for behavioral health and justice.

BALTIMORE COUNTY CARES FOR THE CAREGIVERS, REACHES FOR MORE

by Charlie Ban
senior writer



Baltimore County Department of Aging staff meet prospective caregivers at the 2025 Power of Aging Expo. Photo courtesy of Baltimore County

Rehanna Khattak's life was turned upside down when her father suffered a stroke. When the dust cleared from all the work it took to get him home to Baltimore County, Md., she looked at her life and was just about as disoriented as if she had literally spun her body around.

She flew to and from Pakistan, where her father had traveled to visit family, and despaired as she grappled with the paralysis and speech disorder the stroke had left him with. And she was starting from scratch.

"I didn't know what to do," she said. "You think of how your parents bathed you and taught you everything when you were a child, and you don't think too much about having to do it for them someday."

Khattak had the good fortune of knowing Eram Abbasi, chief of Community Services at the Baltimore County Department of Aging, who was able to put her in touch with the county's Caregiver Support Program, which supports informal caregivers, who are most frequently family members.

"They took me through what I had to do, step by step," Khattak said. "What they had to teach me was important, but what I couldn't believe was how they spoke to me like we had known each other for years, even though it was our first time talking. They put me at ease."

The program is funded by a grant from the National Family Caregiver Support Program and supports family and informal caregivers of county residents over age 60, as well as caregivers older than 55 who care for children under 18 or adults 18-59 with disabilities. The program provides resources, connections and referrals to caregivers, along with stipends.

"It's not a huge amount, but it's an amount that can help supplement and fill in the gaps for some of the services out there, especially for things that Medicare doesn't pay for: incontinence supplies, some in-home services, financial or a nutritional consultation," said Kathleen Koenig-Stoffel, manager of the Caregiver Support Program. "A lot of people have to leave their jobs to care for relatives, so everything helps."

Khattak said the program's emphasis on respite was clear from the start. In their first call, the caseworker explained that she had to be strong but also recognize her own needs.

"She said that if I need a break, I should take a break," Khattak said. "If I burned out, there wouldn't be anyone else to help him."

Program managers are working to recruit volunteers to provide respite to caregivers who are comfortable with the volunteers entering their homes. The county's November caregiver conference features respite programming designed to give care recipients activities while caregivers participate in workshops.

"A lot of times, the guilt caregivers feel taking time for themselves is overwhelming," Koenig-Stoffel said. "It takes a mental toll, so we try to emphasize self-care components in all of our programming."

Not everyone has a friend who happens to work for the very program they need, as Khattak did. Koenig-Stoffel hopes to solve that problem through partnerships with local organizations and the Better Business Bureau.

"We meet people who have been caregivers for years and they find out about us and ask where we were five years ago," she said.

In 2027, the program will partner with community groups serving different cultural backgrounds to reach caregivers.

"In some cases, these are faith-based communities or cultural centers, so by partnering with those organizations, it will give us a chance to reach these caregivers that are not directly coming to us," Abbasi said.

Though much of the discussion around caregiver support focuses on caring for older adults, the county is also working with schools to identify and connect with grandparents who serve as primary caregivers for students.

In addition to partnering with nonprofits across the county to provide memory cafes, where caregivers and their family members can participate in low-stress group activities, the county hosts a monthly virtual support group for caregivers.

SPOTLIGHT ON: HUMAN SERVICES

"I know it's great to talk to us, but it's better to talk to your peers," Koenig-Stoffel said. "A lot of staff have been caregivers, so we have personal experience, but it's really nice to hear from your peers and know that you're not alone."

The county also provides free access to the online training platform Trualta, which allows users to tailor the service to their needs across the age spectrum and also offers resources on demand.

"If it's the middle of the night and your loved one wakes up and they have a behavioral issue, you can just click on there and it'll give you very quick, three- to five-minute tips to try to help you navigate that situation in the middle of the night," Koenig-Stoffel said.

Things are going better for Khattak's father. Once right-handed, he's getting along well with his left hand, and he has regained his speech, though he remains limited to his bed. She says his recovery and quality of life are a testament to the success of what the Caregiver Support Program taught her.

"In two and a half years, he hasn't had a single bedsore," she said with a note of pride. "The way they train people, the way they helped us figure out what we would have to do going ahead, I never expected any of that." CN



Important Update: NACo's Live Healthy Prescription Discount Card Program

For the past 20 years, NACo has operated the Live Healthy prescription discount program for county residents in partnership with CVS. Due to the steady decline in program utilization among residents and market changes, the program will sunset at the end of 2026.

Key Dates:

November 13:

- Digital card access removed
- Last date for counties to order physical materials
- Communications plan available to counties to share with residents at naco.org/livehealthy

December 31:

- Last date for using physical discount cards at pharmacies

Florida voters approve steep property tax cuts, squeezing county budgets

From PROPERTY TAX page 1

tion following the passage of Amendment 3, which cleared the 60% threshold on Election Day with nearly 62% of voters in favor — passing in all but three counties. The amendment will increase the homestead exemption for non-school property taxes and reduce the annual assessment increase cap for non-homestead properties. The homestead exemption will increase to $150,000 on Jan. 1, 2027, and climb to $250,000 a year later, with increases tied to inflation starting in 2029.

For the 2026 tax year, the state provides a $25,000 homestead exemption for all property taxes and up to $26,411 in additional non-school tax relief on assessed value between $50,000 and $76,411, though a voter-approved constitutional amendment will significantly expand the non-school exemption starting in 2027.

The Florida Policy Institute, which opposed Amendment 3, estimates $7.3 billion in revenue losses statewide over the first two years and $46 billion in losses for counties, cities and special districts over seven years.

"It's cataclysmic," Interim County Manager Adam Mengel said during a Flagler County Commission workshop six days after the election. "We had gone through this as an exercise before, but now it's taken on much more significance. Now it's become a plan that needs to be produced."

In nearly half of Florida's 67 counties — 32 — more than three-quarters of homesteads are valued below the $250,000 exemption that will take effect in 2028. The amendment will disproportionately affect rural counties with fewer second homes, such as Union County, which stands to lose more than 51% of its total county levy in the second year.

The Florida fiscal year ends Sept. 30, setting up the next budget cycle for the first round of cuts. Outgoing Gov. Ron DeSantis (R) is calling for a special legislative session to implement the amendment.

"The key, in my opinion, is to keep an eye on Tallahassee to see how the state Legislature puts the amendment into practice," Clay County Commissioner John Sgromolo said during a Nov. 10 commission meeting. "Until we see something from the state Legislature showing what implementation looks like, any decisions are going to be premature."

Flagler County expects a $33.1 million reduction in property tax revenue in the first year, increasing to $59.3 million in the second year.

Mengel has asked each of Flagler County's departments to describe the consequences of across-the-board budget cuts and to evaluate which interlocal agreements might be violated by certain service reductions, along with potential penalties if other services aren't provided. Flagler County has prepared a reduction-in-force plan, he said.

"We had known this possibility [of Amendment 3's passage] was out there. We did not anticipate it would happen," he said. "The big point from our end now is to continue that planning but not be punitive."

Flagler County Attorney Michael Roderick suggested that scrutiny of homestead claims could intensify.

"The property appraiser is given the sole discretion on determining whether or not property is homestead," he said. "I think statewide, we may see property appraisers begin to really crack down on folks who are claiming homestead, who are not homestead."

> 'This isn't a cycle, this is a permanent, structural shift in how government functions.'
>
> – *George Kruse, Manatee County commissioner*

He also predicted a push for commercial, industrial and multifamily residential development to try to offset lost tax revenue from homestead properties.

Counties can adjust their millage rates to mitigate some of the revenue losses, raise property tax rates on non-homestead properties or raise sales taxes, but Flagler County Commission Chair Leann Pennington said that would run contrary to the spirit of the voters' will.

"The residents voted this in, and they're not looking for a bait and switch of all this," she said. "They're looking for meaningful tax cuts in the midst of that, so it is reorganizing government to prioritize what you are supposed to be doing, what they want you to do versus the 'nice to have.' It's painful, but that is what the people voted in."

Mengel cautioned that potential cuts that look like opportunities may be traps.

"We had some vehicle purchases that were coming up on the next agenda," Mengel said. "[There are] some things that we just needed to at least look at and say, 'How necessary are these in the grand scheme of things?' Can we go another year, could we, you know, delay it? Instead of buying two ambulances, can we buy one? You trade off on those, of course — when you do that, you're increasing maintenance, you're having more of a fleet commitment. There's a trade-off with every one of these decisions that are out there."

Writing on Substack, Manatee County Commissioner George Kruse rejected comparisons to counties' rebound from the 2008 housing collapse.

"People keep commenting about how local governments survived in 2008 during the last major downturn, so we'll get through it. But that's factually incorrect," he wrote. "This isn't a cycle, this is a permanent, structural shift in how government functions. Forever. A facility that closes will stay closed. An employee going part-time will never come back full-time. A 'delay' in a capital project used to mean later, now it means never. The decisions we make this coming year will affect the long-term future of Manatee County, not just the near-term."

Kruse also considered the fate of the state's 29 fiscally constrained counties, which have limited property tax revenue. Reminding readers that every elected official will face voters again, Kruse laid out the calculation those officials must make.

"If we could keep every library open, every shelter running and every critical employee on the payroll, we would," he wrote. "We live here too and our goal is to keep making people happy and keep providing a high quality of life. We all just need to figure out what level of quality of life we can now afford."

Some potential cuts for counties include:

- Facing $144 million in potential revenue losses over the next two years, Lee County will freeze hiring Dec. 1 for all positions except EMS and 911 jobs.
- St. Johns County has frozen hiring and will hold off on $100 million worth of capital projects, including a new fire station.
- Martin County Fire Rescue's new class of 25 firefighters is at risk.
- Orange County Tax Collector Scott Randolph said many small, predominantly residential cities would have to dissolve or consolidate.
- Seminole County's animal shelter could begin euthanizing otherwise healthy animals because of budget cuts. CN



Looking to hire county staff?

Post your job listing on NACo's new career site!

jobs.naco.org



Cuyahoga County, Ohio's historic Terminal Tower shines bright for Operation Green Light.

County buildings light up green to bring attention to veterans

Operation Green Light began in New York in 2021 as a collaborative effort to honor military veterans, highlight their service and contributions, and raise awareness of the critical assistance they need as they transition back to civilian life.

The movement gained early momentum from two parallel sparks across the state. In Albany County, New York State Association of Counties (NYSAC) Executive Director Stephen Acquario noticed a green light displayed on the property of family friend and local veteran Dr. Thomas Bailey. Bailey explained that the light symbolized strong community support and served as a welcoming beacon for returning service members, encouraging Acquario to bring the concept to counties throughout New York and ultimately across the country. Around the same time, then-Livingston County Veteran Services Director Jason Skinner introduced a countywide initiative inviting residents and local businesses to display green lights at their homes and storefronts in solidarity with veterans. Skinner likely never imagined how quickly that simple, visible gesture would catch on or how far it would eventually reach.

Recognizing the power of this grassroots message, NYSAC worked alongside its partners and veteran service officers to educate local officials, provide resources to help them adopt local resolutions, and promote the campaign through traditional and social media. The effort quickly resonated across the state. During its first year, more than half of New York's counties participated, alongside New York City and New York State. Communities demonstrated their support in various ways, including illuminating county buildings and veterans memorials, utilizing digital signage, and lighting major New York landmarks — such as the Empire State Plaza, the New York State Capitol, and the Mario Cuomo Bridge —in green.

The initiative's rapid success across New York prompted the National Association of Counties (NACo) to help expand Operation Green Light nationwide, giving counties and other local governments across the country an opportunity to participate. The campaign also received support from national organizations and private-sector partners, including Amazon.

"Operation Green Light began here in Livingston County, and interest in the program spread across the country almost immediately," said Livingston County Veteran Services Director David Terry. "Having this start in Livingston County is an honor and testament to the pride, services and programs that shine bright on the veteran community here." CN



The Pennsylvania capitol building glows green in Dauphin County.



El Paso County, Texas' courthouse lights up for its veterans.

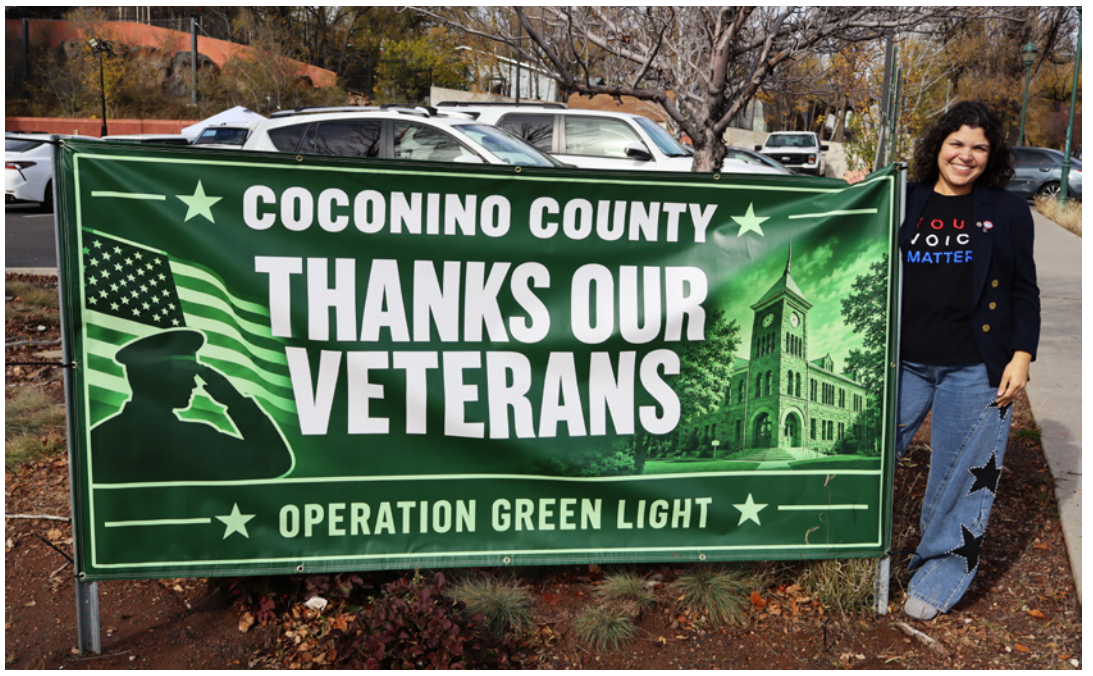
NACo Operation Green Light for Veterans



Erie County, N.Y. County and City Hall goes green for its veterans during Operation Green Light.



The Armed Forces Monument is a beacon in the darkness in Gwinnett County, Ga.



NACo Second Vice President Sarah Benetar, treasurer of Coconino County, Ariz., pauses for a photo with a banner recognizing local veterans.



Green lights flank the doorway at the Talbot County, Md. courthouse.



The James City County, Va. courthouse lights up green in honor of the nation's veterans.

SALUTE TO COUNTY LEADERS:

Kay Cashion



Guilford County, N.C. Commissioner Kay Cashion tries on firefighter equipment at the 2022 NACo Annual Conference. Photo by Denny Henry

Well before she was appointed to a Guilford County, N.C., Commission seat that she would hold for 22 years, Kay Cashion had built a following. Part of that came from her agricultural childhood, and more followed as she built a furniture and decorating business, became involved in a restaurant and a manufacturing plant, and eventually served as vice president of the local chamber of commerce. In addition to serving on the NACo Board of Directors, she served as chair of both the Justice and Public Safety Policy Steering Committee and the Arts and Culture Innovation Council. In 2024, Guilford County surprised Cashion by naming the building housing one of the county's family justice centers in her honor. In 2019, Americans for the Arts and NACo presented her with the Public Leadership in the Arts Award for County Arts Leadership.

When did you feel county government was the right place for you?

A lot of commissioners come onto the Board without that nitty-gritty experience of being active in the community. They may not know the different parts of the community or how to interact with them. I had a real advantage because I had customers all over the county, from different price ranges, and my years of community involvement gave me plenty of time to see what I wanted to do to help my community. It was almost immediate that I knew I was where I needed to be.

What were some of the issues you wanted to address through county government when you had the chance?

We needed to do something about domestic violence, and we needed to help kids get the psychiatric care they needed. Knowing that this was an issue George Dunlap focused on during his NACo presidency made me elated to hear. It's high time we support our community's youth. If you don't focus on your community, you're not going to have the future you want.

What was your approach to county government?

I'm a high-energy person, and I've always been able to compartmentalize and handle several projects at once. I think that comes from my business career —every day, you can be the janitor or the president, but either way, you have work to do. I also never viewed things through partisan eyes. Every effort I've undertaken in county government has been bipartisan, and that was important to making sure we had support for those projects.

Eleven years ago, your work led to Guilford County opening a family justice center. What kind of effort went into that?

It took eight years of work, and we had to change state law to allow people to sign protective orders inside the family justice center, but it was all worth it. Before we started, Guilford County had the highest number of domestic violence deaths in the state. Now, a domestic violence survivor can get all the help they need under one roof, and they don't have to worry about being confronted by their abuser at the courthouse. That was a major concern before. The first executive director we hired was selected last year to lead an international nonprofit (Alliance for HOPE International) doing the same work, so it is wonderful to see that.

You've been recognized for your leadership in the arts. How have you helped focus that conversation in county government?

Years ago, the Arts and Culture Commission would have conversations about arts appreciation, but they didn't draw a big crowd. You'd see 12 or 15 people drop by the Arts and Culture room, pick up information, and keep going. When they asked me to chair it, I said we had to refocus and talk about the value of investing in the arts and show the connection between investment and economic output. We emphasized that arts organizations generated $27.5 billion in tax revenue, and once people understood that it was serious business, we'd get 150 people packed in there for meetings. It was so nice to see that turnaround.

SPONSORED CONTENT

Start 2027 ready: Two NACo leadership academies begin Jan. 11

As 2026 comes to a close, county leaders are setting priorities for the year ahead. Budgets will stay tight, technology will keep changing and cyber threats aren't slowing down. The best time to invest in your team's leadership is before the year gets busy.

The National Association of Counties and the Professional Development Academy open their first 2027 cohorts of the High Performance Leadership Academy and the Cybersecurity Leadership Academy on Jan. 11. Both programs run 10 weeks and are fully online. Participants learn on their own schedule without stepping away from the job.

HIGH PERFORMANCE LEADERSHIP ACADEMY

- around five pillars: lead, organize, collaborate, communicate and deliver
- for supervisors and people preparing to lead
- from the late General Colin Powell, Fortune 1000 CEOs, public, private, and university sector leaders
- learning with county peers, guided by expert moderators

CYBERSECURITY LEADERSHIP ACADEMY

- for cybersecurity managers and their teams
- by Fortune 500 chief information security officers and their peers
- -paced lessons of 30 to 60 minutes a day
- Focused on securing networks, protecting data and safeguarding residents' trust

A January start makes the most of your budget and your calendar. You can put remaining 2026 professional development funds to work or lock in training as a 2027 priority. Participants finish by the end of March, leaving the rest of the year to put new skills into practice. Group discounts make it easier to enroll a team together, and shared learning goes further. It's also a meaningful way to recognize rising staff who are already doing the work of a leader.

For NACo member counties, enrollment starts at $2,000 per person, with discounts available for groups. To enroll in a January cohort or learn more, visit naco.org/skills or contact Luke Afeman at lukea@pdaleadership.com.

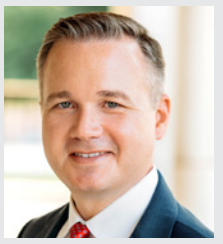
ON THE MOVE

NACo OFFICERS



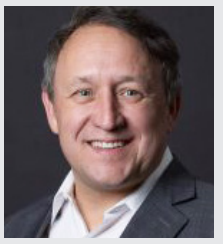
Dunlap

- President **George Dunlap** and **Owen Hart**, senior fellow for rural development, attended the Washington State Association of Counties County Leaders Conference in Pierce County.



Clark

- Immediate Past President **J.D. Clark**, Chief Government Affairs Officer **Eryn Hurley** and Membership Engagement Director **Tammy Tincher** attended the Kentucky Association of Counties Annual Conference in Fayette County.



Novotny

- West Region Representative **Bill Novotny**, Executive Director **Matt Chase** and Legislative Director **Zeke Lee** attended the Association of Oregon Counties Annual Conference in Lane County.

NACo STAFF

- **Chase, Tincher** and Associate Membership Director **Grace Dunlap** attended the Virginia Association of Counties Annual Conference in Bath County.
- Legislative Director **Jeffrey Thorsby** attended the International Association of Assessing Officers Annual Conference in Calgary, Canada and the National Tax Lien Association Fall Symposium in Philadelphia County, Pa.

Trump, Democrats express interest in working together

From ELECTIONS page 2

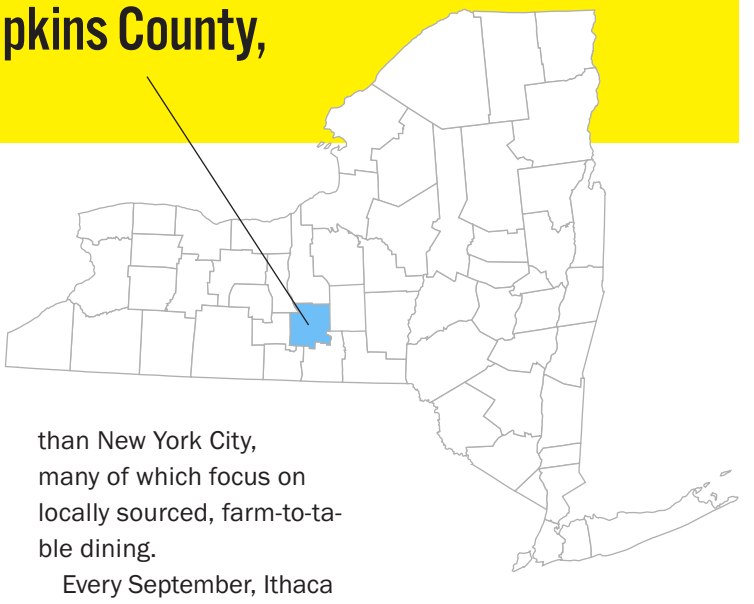
ocratic Congress. Counties should expect an increased focus on oversight, but opportunities remain to advance significant bipartisan legislation. Both congressional Democratic leaders and President Trump have expressed interest in working together where possible.

But Hurley pointed to the "lame duck" section of the Elections Analysis to remind counties that several significant issues still must be addressed before the end of the year. "Congress has an impending government funding deadline in December that will require action," said Hurley. "This gives us an opportunity to ensure that county priority programs are fully funded, but also a chance to push for movement on other key county priorities, like delaying implementation of the OMB rule," which means postponing the date when a federal regulation issued by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) will take effect or be enforced.

As counties prepare their federal advocacy priorities for the 120th Congress, the Elections Analysis should be at the top of their holiday reading list. CN

For more NACo election analysis, scan the QR code below.

GET TO KNOW... Tompkins County, N.Y.



by Meredith Moran
staff writer

Tompkins County, N.Y., is named for Daniel D. Tompkins, who was serving as vice president under President James Monroe when the county was established in 1817. He had also previously served as New York's fourth governor.

The county is one of 14 in New York's Finger Lakes Region, which comprises 11 lakes and covers more than 9,000 square miles, an area comparable in size to the states of New Hampshire or New Jersey. Tompkins County's seat, Ithaca, sits at the southern tip of Cayuga Lake, the longest of the Finger Lakes.

Ithaca is known for its waterfalls, with more than 100 located within 10 miles of downtown. It's also the birthplace of the ice cream sundae and French bread pizza, which was created at Cornell University as a less expensive pizza option for college students. In 2025, CNN named Ithaca America's best town to visit, highlighting its access to nature, vibrant college-town culture and expansive dining scene. Ithaca has more restaurants per capita than New York City, many of which focus on locally sourced, farm-to-table dining.

Every September, Ithaca hosts its Apple Harvest Festival, featuring cider and baked goods from local farms and apple growers, live entertainment and festive activities such as pumpkin painting and a pie-eating contest. "Lolita" author Vladimir Nabokov wrote the novel in Ithaca. After the story was initially rejected by every American publisher, he nearly burned the manuscript before his wife saved it from an incinerator.

John Philip Sousa, a composer and conductor well-known for his U.S. military marches, and Annie Oakley, the Wild West sharpshooter and folk heroine, were both patrons of the Ithaca Gun Company and appeared in the manufacturer's marketing and advertisements. The historic former factory site is now being redeveloped for housing, but its iconic brick smokestack remains and will be preserved, according to local officials and developers.

Alex Haley, the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of "Roots," which follows seven generations of an African American family from West Africa through American slavery to freedom, was from Tompkins County. The book was adapted into a miniseries in 1977 and became one of the most-watched events in television history, drawing around 130 million viewers.

Another notable Tompkins County native is Carl Sagan, a planetary scientist credited with making complex astronomy and astrophysics more accessible to the general public through his "Cosmos" television series and books, including the Pulitzer Prize-winning "The Dragons of Eden."

Get to Know features new NACo member counties.



Taughannock Falls in Tompkins County, N.Y.

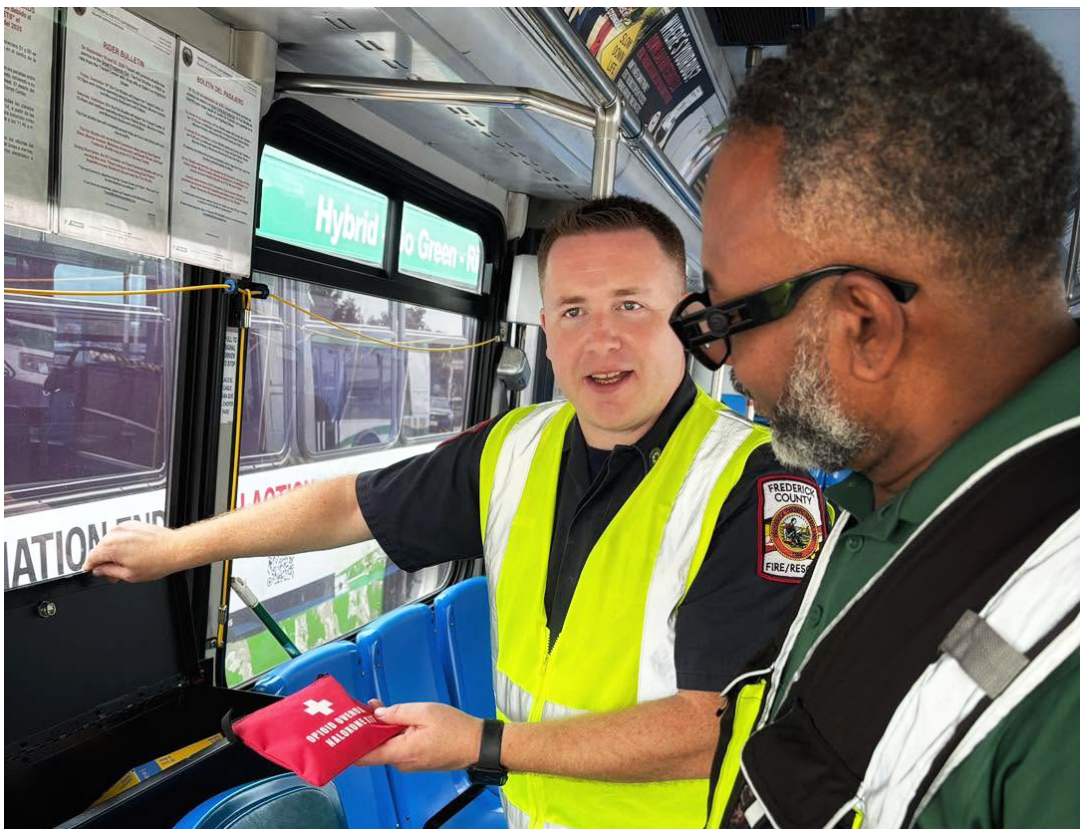
BRIGHT IDEAS | FREDERICK COUNTY, MD.

Frederick County Puts Narcan on Every Bus, Trains Drivers to Reverse Overdoses

PROBLEM: Overdoses on buses and trains have turned transit workers into frontline public health responders, but Frederick County's bus drivers did not have the tools or training to respond.

SOLUTION: The county put Narcan on every transit vehicle, and its Division of Fire and Rescue Services trained drivers, dispatchers and operations staff to recognize an opioid overdose and give the drug.

by Meredith Moran
staff writer



Frederick County, Md. equips more than 50 Transit Services buses with Narcan. Photo courtesy of Frederick County

To help make life-saving support more accessible, Frederick County, Md., equipped its buses with Narcan and trained its transit staff to administer the overdose reversal drug. Bus drivers interact with the public more than staff in any other county service, so giving them the tools to provide immediate care is a natural step in the county's efforts to tackle the opioid crisis, according to Matthew Burgan, a community paramedic with the Frederick County Division of Fire and Rescue Services.

"We know that in an overdose situation, time is of the essence," Burgan said. "So, having operators equipped and trained and able to deploy that Narcan at a moment's notice is a huge opportunity to change the trajectory for somebody and the people around them — their friends, their families, their loved ones."

The prevalence of drug use and overdoses on buses and trains has created a system-wide challenge that has turned transit workers into public health responders, according to the Transit Cooperative Research Program. If bus drivers are given the critical role of first responders, they need proper training, noted Jaime McKay, deputy director and chief morale officer of Frederick County's Transit Services Division.

"We think it's really important to ensure that no matter where you are in the county, Narcan or naloxone is not far away," McKay said. "And because our system has such a wide service area, this really allows us to be in more places than we are not, which is a bit of a privilege when it comes to ensuring that we respond quickly."

Frederick County's Division of Fire and Rescue Services trained transit drivers, dispatchers and operations staff to identify the signs of an opioid overdose and administer Narcan.

"I think there was some skepticism in the beginning of 'Will I know how to do this in an emergency?'" McKay said. "But as we went through the training, I think people felt more empowered, more equipped. We sort of reconciled it like this is similar to CPR training: This is an important tool in your toolbox that can help save a life in the moment of need.



The program includes Transit Services, the county Division of Fire and Rescue Services and the county Health Department.

"… My drivers get to see the best and the worst of people's lives, and understanding that addiction is a disease that you can recover from has been a huge perspective shift for us."

Having Narcan more readily available not only saves lives but also helps reduce the stigma around substance use disorder, according to Burgan.

"As we work to normalize Narcan and make that to where it's a prominent fixture in the community, I can't think of a more impactful way than to have it available on every single transit vehicle that we have," Burgan said.

Frederick County bus drivers have not yet needed to administer Narcan, but the training helped one driver respond to a different emergency, McKay noted.

"We did have a driver start the process, realize as they were preparing that this was not actually related to opioids, and proceed with different life-saving techniques," McKay said. "… They knew once they realized that this person was not experiencing an overdose to stop and administer different aid and contact our first responders, so that made us really proud, because it showed that they were aware of what to look for and how to do it."

Cross-department collaboration has been nothing short of "vital" in Frederick County's work to reduce overdose deaths, which have declined in the county every year since 2022, according to Burgan.

"This has provided us the opportunity to be proactive rather than reactive," McKay said. "And it's blossomed into partnerships with the communications and public engagement team, who help share out the message of what we're doing and encourage people to get trained in how to administer Narcan.

"It also brings into the fold our folks at Aging and Independence, because addiction doesn't have an age, it doesn't have a target audience, it really impacts everyone. So, we've been able to get out and engage more effectively with all of our groups."

Building on the initiative's success, Frederick County continues to move full steam ahead in its fight against the opioid crisis, according to Burgan.

"Putting Narcan on the transit vehicles wasn't the finish line, that was the starting line," Burgan said. "And now that we know what's possible, I think the next step is to keep pushing that envelope and keep trying to figure out what the next best thing is. And I have no doubts with the folks that we have and the positions that they're in, that is going to be a much easier task." CN

Frederick County's Narcan Deployment and Training initiative was the 2026 NACo Achievement Award "Best in Category" winner in the Human Services category.

WORD SEARCH

JACKSON COUNTY, N.C.

Created by Mary Ann Barton

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

CASHIERS: According to local legend, the town is named for a lost horse.

CHEROKEE: The federally recognized Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians is based in Swain and Jackson counties.

COFFEE: The Coffee Shop on West Main Street in Sylva is the county's oldest restaurant.

COURTHOUSE: Built in 1914 by industrialist C.J. Harris on a hill above Main Street, it is now part of the county library complex.

CULLOWHEE: Home of Western Carolina University, its name is a Cherokee word meaning "Valley of the Lilies."

DILLSBORO: This town, established in 1889, is named for Confederate veteran William Allen Dills, on whose farm it was built.

HERALD: *The Sylva Herald and Ruralite* has published weekly since 1926, marking 100 years this year.

JUDACULLA: Judaculla Rock is the largest and best-known American Indian petroglyph in North Carolina.

MCKEE: In 1930, Jackson County native Gertrude Dills McKee became the first woman elected to the N.C. Senate.

PANTHERTOWN: Panthertown Valley, a hiker favorite, has been called the "Yosemite of the East."

SYLVA: The county seat since 1914, after voters in May 1913 approved moving it from Webster.

TROUT: The county's Western North Carolina Fly Fishing Trail features some of the best trout waters in the Great Smoky Mountains.

TUCKASEGEE: This river once divided Haywood and Macon counties and runs almost the full length of Jackson County.

WEBSTER: The county's first seat of government, from 1851 until Sylva took over.

WHITESIDE: Whiteside Mountain has the highest vertical cliffs in the eastern United States and is considered by some geologists to be among the oldest mountains in the world.

AI influencing how employees approach HR challenges

From HR page 5

AI has already entered your employee relations system. The only remaining question is whether your governance system has caught up.

Martin is the director of Human Resources for Hillsborough County, Fla.

Note: *The concept of AI-Amplified Escalation was developed through direct observation of emerging organizational patterns in public sector human resources and AI governance. While empirical research on the phenomenon is still developing, the purpose of this article is not to suggest that every AI-assisted communication results in escalation or that the prevalence of AAE has yet been quantified. Rather, it is intended to give leaders practical language for recognizing an emerging organizational pattern that many leaders are beginning to observe and evaluate within their own organizations.*

PROFILES IN SERVICE

ADAM BRADFORD
NACo Board of Directors
National Association of County Planners



BRADFORD

Number of years active in NACo: one

Years in public service: 15

My first NACo event was: 2026 Legislative Conference

NACo committee(s): Board of Directors member, county planning affiliate.

Occupation: Assistant Director of Planning, NEGLIA group

Education: BS Economics, BS Urban Planning & Development: Iowa State University; MS Transportation: New Jersey Institute of Technology

The hardest thing I've ever done: Grad school

My favorite movie is: "The Thing"



Three people (living or dead) I'd invite to dinner: René Descartes, Adam Smith, Daniel Burnham

A dream I have is to: Run the family farm.

You'd be surprised to learn that I: Would rather be at an art museum sketching than a college football game.

The most adventurous thing I've ever done is: Go to school out of state.

My favorite way to relax is: Going to the gym or watching college football.

I'm most proud of: My New Jersey Professional Planner license

Every morning I read: The alarm clock.

My favorite meal is: Whatever my wife is cooking.

My pet peeve is: Traffic

My motto is: Chance favors the prepared mind.

The last book I read was: "Starship Troopers"

My favorite music is: Rock 'n' roll, grunge, heavy metal

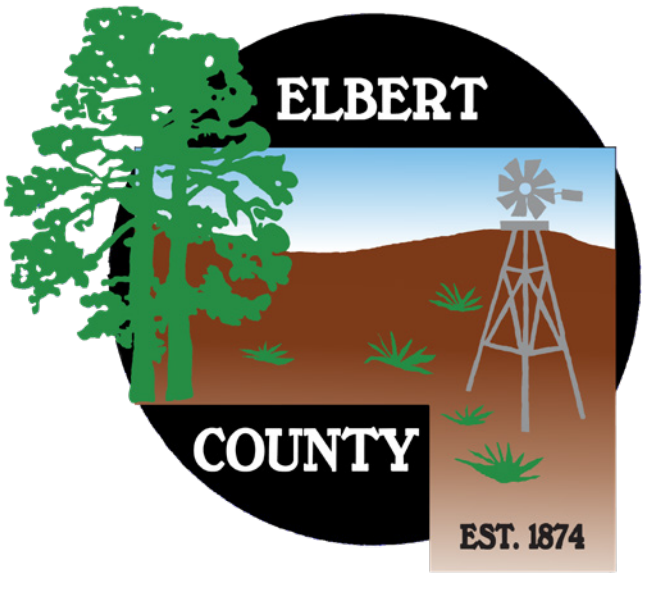
My favorite U.S. president is: Grant

My affiliate is a NACo member because: My firm represents many NACo, North Jersey counties.

BEHIND THE SEAL

ELBERT COUNTY, COLO.

Elbert County, Colo. was named after Samuel Hill Elbert, who was governor of the Colorado Territory when the county was formed in 1874.



Located on Colorado's Eastern Plains, Elbert County once extended farther east, encompassing portions of what are now Lincoln, Kit Carson and Cheyenne counties. On April 11, 1889, the Colorado General Assembly created those counties, along with Kiowa, Prowers and Otero counties, from portions of Elbert and Bent counties. The boundary changes left Elbert County with its present-day shape: a backward capital L, similar to neighboring Washington and Lincoln counties but rotated 90 degrees counterclockwise.

The county seal features an outline of its borders, along with a windmill, rolling hills, sand sage grasses and a plains cottonwood tree.

NEWS FROM ACROSS THE NATION



ALABAMA

Ambulance service in rural **GREENE COUNTY** is back up and running after a funding shortfall sidelined the county's fleet over the summer, according to al.com. State regulators had deemed the county's ambulances out of compliance, leaving residents with a single quick-response vehicle and warnings to expect significantly delayed response times. Local leaders paid $70,000 for two replacement ambulances from the state EMS office, with the remaining costs covered by a legislature-funded grant administered by the Alabama Office of EMS and regional EMS partners.

County leaders called the new ambulances a short-term fix and said the service still needs a stable source of revenue, noting that Medicare and Medicaid, its largest payers, don't reimburse enough to sustain operations. One model under discussion comes from nearby **PICKENS COUNTY**, where voters in May approved an annual $10 vehicle tag fee to support ambulance service. A new state law signed in April also allows ambulance operators to be paid for providing basic life support without transporting a patient.

CALIFORNIA

NAPA COUNTY voters have approved Measure B, a new **half-cent sales tax dedicated to wildfire preparedness**, watershed protection and open space preservation, according to KQED-FM election results. The tax is expected to raise about $23 million a year for 18 years to pay for clearing brush and fire hazards, building firebreaks and creating evacuation routes, along with protecting local drinking water and preserving thousands of acres of open space. An oversight committee will monitor spending.

The measure, which needed a simple majority, was passing with about 63 percent of the vote as of Nov. 10. Opponents argued that residents already pay enough in sales and parcel taxes and that a new tax was a poor fit during an affordability crisis.

ARIZONA

MARICOPA COUNTY has added an **AI-powered virtual assistant**, nicknamed "Mari," to its website to help residents find county information at any hour, according to the county. Built on IBM's watsonx Orchestrate platform, Mari interprets plain-language questions and points users to information across multiple county websites, with each answer linking to an official county source. Early topics include pet adoption, property ownership and public health.

The county built in safeguards: answers draw only on public county information, content is controlled at the department level, and staff can review requests, responses and data sources. Specialized questions can be routed to subject-matter experts, and residents who prefer the traditional search bar and menus can still use them. "Mari is another step in our commitment to modernizing how residents interact with County government," said Chief Information Officer Richard McHattie.

COLORADO

Anythink Libraries, the public library system serving **ADAMS COUNTY**, opened its first fully **self-service "Express Library"** Oct. 28 in the Reunion community of Commerce City, according to the library system. After registering, patrons use their library cards to enter, then browse a curated collection, place and pick up holds, check out materials and use public computers, Wi-Fi, printing, copying and faxing without staff help. Security and monitoring systems are in place, staff make regular visits and phone assistance is available.

The branch is open from 7 a.m. to 8 p.m. Monday through Thursday and 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. Friday through Sunday, and its smaller footprint means lower operating costs than a traditional branch. A second Express Library is planned for Northglenn in 2027, restoring library service to a community that has gone 16 years without a branch of its own.



FLORIDA

PALM BEACH COUNTY voters approved two bond measures Nov. 3 to **upgrade the county's parks and libraries**, according to WPEC-TV. A parks bond of up to $280 million, which passed with about 66 percent of the vote, will modernize parks, recreation facilities and botanical gardens, upgrade sports complexes, improve beach access and trails and develop regional parks. A library bond of up to $175 million, approved by about 64 percent, will fund a new main library on Summit Boulevard and renovations at about a dozen existing branches.

The parks bond is estimated to cost property owners about $5 per $100,000 of taxable value, and the library bond about $6 per $100,000 within the library district, with neither starting before fiscal year 2030. Voters also renewed, with nearly 77 percent support, a 1-mill property tax that funds school safety, mental health services, arts, music and teacher pay.

GEORGIA

Earlier this summer, **DEKALB COUNTY** approved its first **housing trust fund**, committing $15 million a year to create or preserve 15,000 homes, the largest housing investment in county history, according to Atlanta News First. The FY 2027 budget includes $12 million to launch the fund, which reaches the full $15 million annual level in FY 2028. County leaders said the move comes as federal housing assistance declines and follows a 2023 study that found one in three county residents struggles to afford housing.

The fund will support down payment assistance for first-time homebuyers, home repairs for longtime "legacy" homeowners and seniors, incentives for developers to build workforce housing, projects through the DeKalb Housing Authority, the county's two homelessness day centers and new financing tools for affordable and workforce housing. "These resources are coming to DeKalb County at just the right time," said Chief Housing Officer Alan Ferguson.

ILLINOIS

CHAMPAIGN COUNTY

See NEWS FROM page 19

From NEWS FROM page 18

broke ground earlier this summer on a $48.4 million **fiber internet project** that will serve about 2,925 rural households, farms and businesses, according to IPM News. The county laid the groundwork in 2022, when the County Board set aside a quarter of its more than $40 million in American Rescue Plan Act funds for countywide high-speed internet. The project, built by local provider Volo.net, has secured $28.7 million from federal, state and local sources, including $7.1 million from the Illinois Office of Broadband.

Phase one, a 110-mile fiber "backbone" across rural parts of the county, is expected to be finished by the end of 2026, with rural communities in the northwest part of the county next in line. Connecting every household will take an estimated $50 million to $60 million more, and a federal BEAD funding application was pending. "It means businesses staying or moving to a county that makes it easier for them to reach the global market," said County Board Chair Jennifer Locke.



PENNSYLVANIA

ALLEGHENY COUNTY has lined up nearly $6 million to **expand child-care and out-of-school-time programs**, including $3 million from the Heinz Endowments, $2.5 million proposed in the county's 2027 budget and $400,000 the county already invested this year, according to the county. The funding is expected to cover up to the first 1,000 slots toward the county's goal of creating 5,000 new child-care and out-of-school-time slots over five years under its Forward with Families initiative, launched in April.

The Heinz investment targets child-care infrastructure and is designed to build supply that lasts beyond the grant period. County officials said the effort also includes supporting providers, building a workforce pipeline and expanding options for families. Details on how awards will be distributed are expected in early 2027.

MICHIGAN

OTTAWA COUNTY residents now have around-the-clock access to **mobile crisis response** at no out-of-pocket cost, regardless of age, insurance coverage or whether they already receive behavioral health services, according to the county. The service, operated by Community Mental Health of Ottawa County, connects callers with a crisis professional by phone for concerns ranging from stress and family conflict to alcohol or drug use and suicidal thoughts.

When needed, crisis responders can meet residents in person at home or another safe community location to ease distress, plan short-term next steps and connect them with resources, treatment providers or urgent care. The county is promoting a dedicated line while reminding residents to call 911 in a life-threatening emergency.

NORTH CAROLINA

DAVIDSON COUNTY commissioners voted 5-2 to adopt **stricter rules for data centers** instead of a moratorium, according to WUNC-TV. The new standards address noise, water and power use and environmental impacts, and apply to future proposals in the county's unincorporated areas, though officials say none has been submitted so far.

County staff spent months drafting the rules after commissioners asked for a summer study, and the board debated for about three hours before voting. Commissioner Matt Mizell argued for starting with strict standards to help the county avoid problems seen elsewhere, noting the rules could be loosened or amended later as the technology and understanding of it change. Residents had urged a moratorium, saying more work was needed on issues such as impacts on wildlife.



TEXAS

WILLIAMSON COUNTY commissioners have approved a $498,700 contract with engineering firm Freese and Nichols to create a **countywide water infrastructure plan**, according to Community Impact. The study will look at current and future water sources, along with treatment and distribution options, and suggest projects that water providers can consider.

Although the county is not a water provider, it formed a regional water coalition in November 2025, an advisory committee of representatives from cities and water providers, to help coordinate water procurement, infrastructure planning and conservation. "This is an effort to have all of our partners together to save money on the cost," said County Judge Steve Snell.

SOUTH DAKOTA

Three months after a July 4 **ransomware attack** shut down many of its systems, **PENNINGTON COUNTY** is sharing what it learned with other local governments, according to South Dakota News Watch. Law enforcement, emergency operations and the jail stayed largely operational, and nearly all services are back online. The county rebuilt its entire IT system with security as the priority, required employees to change every password they had used before the attack, expanded security training, switched county systems to a .gov domain and added a system to centralize security data.

The county also plans to hire a full-time IT employee dedicated to security and intrusion monitoring and is moving to a more secure government cloud storage system. IT Director Michael Iversen advised other local governments to contact their state fusion center before an incident to learn what help is available. county received help from the South Dakota National Guard, the state fusion center, the Department of Homeland Security and the FBI.

Do you have news to share? Send your news releases and photos to Editor Mary Ann Barton: mbarton@naco.org.

UTAH

GRAND COUNTY commissioners approved $500,000 toward a **pilot shuttle** connecting downtown Moab with Arches National Park to ease long-standing traffic congestion at one of the state's most-visited destinations, according to TownLift. The Utah Transportation Commission contributed $1 million and the National Park Service committed $1.5 million, for a first-season budget of $3 million.

The county calls the pilot a "real-world test" after at least seven transportation planning efforts since 1999. Using smaller vehicles on a hub-and-spoke system, with potential stops at sites such as the Delicate Arch trailhead and Devil's Garden, the shuttle was scheduled to run in September and October and resume from March through June 2027. Officials will collect data on ridership, route timing, visitor demand and operating costs to decide whether a larger or permanent service is feasible.




2027
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