Counties build AI framework to harness its potential

by Charlie Ban
senior writer

When Peter Crary left his job helping to develop software to read license plate numbers, he thought his days working in the nascent field of artificial intelligence were over.

He figured in his new role as senior manager of technology at the Texas Association of Counties, he would be working on much more practical matters, dealing with TAC’s immediate equipment and networking needs. He was glad to be wrong.

Now he’s one of the county leaders taking the initiative to figure out how to harness the potential of artificial intelligence and protect counties from its worst outcomes.

Crary recognizes that the nature of AI development may be too fast for the committee to be too prescriptive, so he wants to set a framework to help counties properly vet applications for the technology.

“I’m worried that a county will get itself into a contractual agreement they find may not be favorable,” he said. “I really do hope that we can give them guidance on what to do. If we can at least build guardrails and educate them on how to build the policies, what vendors are looking for, these are the questions you should ask.”

The committee membership spans the spectrum of county government, including state association personnel like Crary, elected officials like Alameda County, Calif. Supervisor Keith Carson, specialists like King County, Wash. Chief of Staff Shannon Smith or appointees like Peoria County, Ill. Administrator Scott Sorrel.

Sorrel hopes to voice the needs of mid-sized counties and recognizes the competitive disadvantage for local governments in adopting the technology.

“Suddenly, it’s all in the forefront, it’s in the news. It’s everywhere.”

Crary recognizes that the nature of AI development may be too fast for the committee to be too prescriptive, so he wants to set a framework to help counties properly vet applications for the technology.

“‘All the way’ is the only approach she knows

by Charlie Ban
senior writer

Mary Jo McGuire doesn’t just watch the snow fall in Minnesota. She’s wading her cross-country skis, eager to get out there. If there’s a bike ride, her helmet is on. She brings the water when it’s time to hike in the desert.

That attitude — to make the most of her opportunities — has driven her throughout her life. When she found her home as a Ramsey County, Minn. commissioner, she didn’t want to waste the chance.

“When I’m involved in an organization, I care about what happens with it and I like to be a part of the decision-making,” she said. “When I joined student government in college, I wanted to be making decisions and making an impact, and I feel the same way about NACo.”
More than 3,000 attend NACo 2023 Annual Conference in Travis County, Texas

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representative and Cascade County, Mont. Commissioner Joe Briggs was re-elected West Region representative.

Rounding out the 2023-2024 executive committee is First Vice President James Gore, a Sonoma County, Calif. supervisor and Immediate Past President Denise Winfrey, a Will County, Ill. Board member.

McGuire presented Winfrey with several parting gifts to commemorate her year as president, including a photo of Winfrey with President Joe Biden, published in County News.

McGuire took to the stage surrounded by friends, family and many members of the Minnesota delegation wearing red sunglasses and waving red bandannas. She was sworn in by former NACo president and fellow Minnesotaan Colleen Landkamer, a former Blue Earth County commissioner and now state director for the USDA’s Rural Development program.

McGuire has been a county commissioner for 11 years after serving 16 years in the Minnesota Legislature in the House and Senate.

Growing up, McGuire said in her acceptance speech, she and her five siblings each got a chance to speak around the dinner table for three minutes, thanks to a timer her parents made use of to give everyone a chance to share their day.

“My family still does the timer to this day even though there’s almost 40 of us now,” she said. “Sharing stories and listening to each other has held us together as a family through both good and tough times.”

“In many ways, I see the same thing happening here at NACo,” said McGuire. “I come to NACo meetings and I see colleagues from all different places and backgrounds listening carefully to each other, making sure that everyone’s voice is heard and working together to find practical solutions.”

“Listening and learning together is part of the culture of NACo and I’m excited to share the spotlight for this year, which reflects this culture: “Forward Together: Connect, Inspire and Lead.”

“As we move forward together, now is the time for county leaders to connect, inspire and lead,” she said. “Connect and build bridges, inspire engagement and lead intergovernmental partnerships.”

“When we connect and build relationships, we grow our leadership skills and build a strong network of support,” she noted. “Together, we have unlimited potential to advance excellence and trust in county government. Second, inspire engagement — everyone has a voice and everyone’s voice matters.

“Together, county officials can lead by listening to and engaging with residents including those who are most difficult to reach,” she said. “We can continuously improve and build residents’ trust in us as our public partners.

“Third, lead in intergovernmental partnerships,” she said. “From the flexibility of the American Rescue Plan to the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, counties have been leading. It’s clear that when we lead, our residents benefit.”

“As we work with all levels of government, we lead by example on how to get the work done,” she said. “Our focus on working together and our common-sense solutions is our strength and a breath of needed fresh air in politics. “Each of you brings your own strength to this organization, and I’m so excited to see what we’ll do to move forward together this year at NACo,” she said. “Let’s find ways to invite new colleagues into this work, let’s support programs and services that make our members need and want and let’s build relationships with policy makers to get our priorities over the finish line.

“Let’s gather around our own timers, listen to each other and lean forward together,” McGuire said.

Delegates approved changes to the American County Platform, NACo’s official policy record and adopted 134 policy resolutions ranging from addressing the protection of pollinator species, food waste in landfills, better staffing in nursing homes and mental health funding for emergency management response teams.

Keynote speakers at the conference during the General Sessions included U.S. Sen. John Cornyn (R-Texas) and Dr. Drew Pinsky on July 22 and Allan Golston, president of the United States Program at the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and longtime journalist Joan Lunden on July 23.

The daylong CIO Forum preceded the conference July 20 including a discussion with Suffolk County, N.Y. officials and employees about a cyber-attack they experienced.

This year’s conference featured five key themes: County Economies, Health & Wellbeing, Leadership, Resiliency & Safety and Governance & Operations. Each theme offered plenty of workshops where attendees could learn more about each subject matter.

The conference featured three mobile tours — visiting the Community First! Village, the 911 Emergency Communications and STAR Flight Mobile Tour and Engaging Global Business with Dell Technologies and TACC’s Visi Lab.

Award winners were feted at the Achievement Award Luncheon on July 23. The awards program, now in its 53rd year, celebrates the 18 Best of Category Achievement Award winners.

The Nationwide Scholarship winners are: Kira Shabazz, of Cook County, will be attending Massachusetts College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences; Anthony Morillo of Bergen County, N.J. will be attending Moravian University; Ranya Khan of Maricopa County, Ariz., will be attending Georgia Institute of Technology; Obi Nwafor of Riverside County, Calif. will be attending UC Berkeley.

Hawaii County Council Member Ashley Kiekie-Kiwias received the Public Leadership in the Arts Award from Americans for the Arts.

NACo’s 2024 Annual Conference will take place July 12-15, hosted by Hillsborough County, Fla. in Tampa.

NACo’s 2024 Annual Conference will be hosted by Hillsborough County, Fla., and held July 12-15 in Tampa.
If McGuire learned anything as one of six children growing up in St. Paul, it’s that everyone has a voice, no matter how small. When it was her time to talk during family dinners, she had her points to get across. She was involved in student government while at St. Catherine’s University and carried that ethos into the Minnesota House after law school at Hamline University in St. Paul.

McGuire represented part of St. Paul for 14 years, during which she earned a masters in public administration from Harvard University, before declining to run against a friend after redistricting. She decamped for a stint in civic education then spent two years in the state Senate before again being redistricted. It was in talking to Colleen Landkamer, who she knew primarily as a fellow Minnesotan and Blue Earth County commissioner (and past NACo president), that she started to find her way forward.

“We talked and I told her she would make more of a difference as a county commissioner than she ever could in the Legislature,” Landkamer said. “She had the temperament and the toolbox of skills that was better suited for the kind of job that had her in contact with people all the time.”

Landkamer was at the time of the conversation, and is once again, Minnesota’s USDA Rural Development state director. McGuire won that seat on the Ramsey County Board in 2012.

“She’s not only smart, bright and verbal, but she loves people and loves engaging with them,” Landkamer said. “She should be out with more direct contact among her constituents and the county commission was the place that was best for her.”

That is not to say her talents were wasted in the state house. Scott County Commissioner Barb Weckman Brekke took notice of her state representative when Brekke was at the University of Minnesota and was excited to have a woman leading her district. They later bonded over, what else? Cross-country skiing, and Brekke found a philosophical kindred spirit.

Same with Trista MatasCastillo, once a constituent and now a colleague on the Ramsey County Board.

“What stands out about her is her absolute dedication and her willingness to listen to other people and really make conscious decisions,” MatasCastillo said. “She’s not quick to react. She’s very thoughtful, she listens to all sides and is truly a representative of nonpartisan leadership and really good policymaking.”

‘What stands out about her is her absolute dedication and willingness to listen.’

After 10 years of honing her skills on the county Board, McGuire is ready to represent counties across America, and she feels like that experience will ensure she isn’t over her skis.

The nature of county government, where the problems can’t be passed off to someone else, inspires creative action.

“I love that we don’t divide on party and nonpartisan levels,” she said. “We really are united in the work that we do. When we go to Congress and our state legislatures and say, ‘Here’s what we need, here’s how we need to be able to do our work,’ that voice carries. Whether it’s ‘We need more resources’ or ‘We need flexibility,’ it’s all tied to ‘We need mental health care,’ ‘We need transportation funding.’ We need this help and we’re unified on it. That’s what makes it exciting.”

Chief among her goals is making sure counties are using what’s available to them, in terms of resources, knowledge and their voice.

“I want to continue to learn what people want from their association, how can we best help them with their work? How can we best educate our policymakers and our partners? How do we best elevate our intergovernmental partnerships?” she said.

While NACo maintains an all-time membership high, McGuire sees the potential not to just build on those numbers, but to bring in new perspectives.

“When I go to a state association conference, I’m going to ask to meet with all the counties that aren’t NACo members,” she said. “There are so many small counties that might not be able to pay for their members to come to our conferences, so I want them to still see our value. They can still be involved in our remote meetings, they can benefit from our resources and all the reports that we publish.”

McGuire plans to adapt her leadership approach to the national level.

“I just listen to people without any preconceived notions and figure out how we can move forward together,” she said. “I think one of my biggest challenges will be holding us all together, because people are going to, you know, follow the divisions of their politics, and as counties move farther away from challenges like the COVID-19 pandemic, they may forget what brought them together to persevere.”

That’s how Todd Patzer, a Lac qui Parle County, Minn. commissioner, sees her leading NACo.

“She’s concerned about all aspects of the community, all the people of the community, doesn’t matter if they voted for her, she cares about them, and that’s the county way,” he said. “She is a high-energy person; she’s got a motor that never quits. She loves everyone and everything and it’s a great way to go through life.”
Counties explore promise of Artificial Intelligence, but proceed with caution

From AI page 1

ogy. Experimentation must not come at the expense of consistent service delivery.

“The speed of evolution of the technology is going to be a challenge for county governments, because they do not move at the pace of the private sector,” he said.

Tom Lynch, Cook County, Ill.'s chief information officer, wants to be sure the conversation is put in the proper perspective and grounded.

“I feel like AI is the next smart cities,” and I hate those kinds of buzzwords, because they’re meaningless,” he said. “The distinction between AI and generative AI is lost among a lot of these conversations.”

For that matter, “generative AI” refers to applications that produce output based on a data set, often based on one or many predictive algorithms. That introduces an element of uncertainty, because the outputs are only as good as the data they draw upon, and even then, the predictive models may make logical leaps that don’t hold up under scrutiny. If false information is dumped into the library from which a predictive model bases its work, the outputs may not just be wrong, they could be dangerous.

Wake County, N.C. Commissioner Shinica Thomas sees a county role in protecting citizens from fraud only escalating with the technology.

“People think that everything online is true, especially older communities who think that everything [is true] on Facebook,” she said. “Lots of times, I feel like with this new information type of technology, we’re really going to have to figure out what the delineation is.”

‘OKest-case’ scenario

There is low-hanging fruit for AI applications in county government, including using advanced chatbots, intuitive phone menu systems, improving search functionality and record keeping and analyzing large quantities of public information. But those ideas are just the beginning.

The NACo AI committee is shooting for a moving target as members educate themselves about AI’s capability and reliability, both of which are dynamic and more likely to expand than contract. The consensus of committee members is that AI could further automate mundane county functions.

For example, Stearns County, Minn. Commissioner Tarryl Clark sees an opportunity to outsource technical compliance tasks that weigh personnel down from pursuing higher-level problem solving.

Ricky Hatch has already started using ChatGPT as Weber County, Utah’s clerk/auditor. He uses it to add to job descriptions, to streamline the processing of transactions, including processing accounts payable. But it’s never without supervision.

“It can do check runs instantaneously when that usually takes me 20 minutes, and probably catches aberrations better than I could,” he said. “It’s a good second set of eyes, but we’re not setting it loose to make decisions.”

While AI can make short work of drudgery, Hatch worries what overreliance could mean for county staff skill levels.

“I worry that we are going to rely on our AI solutions too much,” he said. “Whenver you automate any process, you run the risk of losing your comprehension of what that process is and what’s involved in it.”

But he plans to run all of his departments’ public-facing documents through ChatGPT to see if they can be expressed more clearly.

Like Weber County, King County, Wash., has already used AI in a few instances. With five or six elections per year, the county streamlined frequently asked questions using a chatbot, county Chief of Staff Shannon Smith said. The county employs an “enterprise architect” whose main focus is on machine learning and AI.

“Our focus is not super-involved data grabs and predictive machine learning, but really trying to understand how we can use it to advance interactions with residents and understand the data better,” she said.

King County’s diverse population drives the application of AI to meet their needs.

“We have a baseline of six different languages and they’re not necessarily the languages most counties need to address—Vietnamese, Hmong, Arabic,” Smith said.

The county will also apply AI to help redact personal identity information on property tax records for seniors.

“It was 4,000 hours of work — it takes AI seconds,” Smith said. “You still need human quality assurance, but we’re reducing that immediate bulk lower-level work and providing an additional layer of security and privacy to our senior citizens.”

King County is also applying AI to sort causes of death in overdoses to match CDC reporting requirements.

“The labels are very specific, and we don’t always have the right materials in those reports to map to CDC reporting, because it’s a pretty complex set of labels. That allowed us to get in front of the uptick in fentanyl overdoses,” Smith said.

Maui County, Hawaii Assessor Scott Teruya sees the analytical nature of AI to be exactly what counties need, particularly when it comes to engineering efficiencies.
Mental Health Summit explores innovative solutions

by Meredith Moran
staff writer

Counties must leverage intergovernmental partnerships, expand their crisis response and invest in a behavioral health workforce to combat the country’s mental health crisis, according to leaders and experts at the local and state level.

“Policy change is crucial to moving the needle forward, but it also works hand-in-hand with the innovative programs and practices each of our counties is championing on the ground,” said Kathryn Bargeron, Los Angeles County supervisor and co-chair of the NACo Commission on Mental Health and Well-being.

Some of the innovative programs outlined July 23 at the 2023 Annual Conference include Travis County, Texas’ integration of clinicians into its 911 call center and Miami-Dade County, Fla.’s pre- and post-arrest diversion systems.

“What we’ve experienced the last few years is just a lot of workforce shortages, so I think that lifting up the services that we’re doing to ensure that we can continue to provide the services and sustain them is beneficial,” said Marisa Malik, director of Texas Integral Care in Travis County. “... Quantitative and qualitative data have been really beneficial to keep, not only sustaining, but expanding the services that we have here in Travis County, and I would say that that has been really critical.

“Outside of data, ensuring that you have good relationships with your city and county governments, police first responder partners, your mental health authorities, your hospital district systems [is key].”

Miami-Dade County’s pre-arrest diversion system trains law enforcement officers in identifying when someone is having a mental health crisis and in de-escalating the situation so it doesn’t end in an arrest.

The post-arrest diversion system provides juvenile first-time minor offenders with a specialized treatment plan, personalized to their background, as opposed to their criminal offense, in an effort to get to the root of the criminal behavior and prevent re-offense.

“We blame the people who fall in a system that isn’t working for them, and we end up punishing them in a criminal justice system that often makes matters worse,” said Miami-Dade County Judge Steve Leifman.

“... In many ways, the criminal justice system is the repository of many failed government policies, and there is no greater failed public policy than our treatment towards people with mental illnesses.

“The fact that we have applied a criminal justice model to an illness explains why we have failed so miserably, but the good news is, this is very fixable."

The diversion systems have saved Miami-Dade County $120 million since they were implemented and the number of yearly arrests has reduced from 118,000 to 53,000.

Miami-Dade County, Fla. is also set to open a mental health diversion facility, which will hold a receiving facility, crisis stabilization, vocational and educational programs, a courtroom to manage criminal and civil cases and 208 beds of housing, for the county’s most vulnerable populations.

“The idea is for this most acutely ill [population] that continues to cycle [in] again and again, to offer them what they actually need instead of just kicking them to the curb,” Leifman said.

“Once we’ve adjudicated their case in our criminal system, we can gently reintegrate people with the supports that they need to maintain their recovery.”

The most adventurous thing I’ve ever done is: Climb the south tower of the Straits of Mackinac (suspension) Bridge.

My favorite way to relax: Watching college football.

I’m most proud of: Successfully advocating for the expense of most of my county’s American Rescue Plan Act funds on broadband expansion.

Every morning I read: The Detroit newspapers; Catholic Vote newsletter

My favorite meal is: Boiled lobster with corn on the cob and red-skinned potatoes.

My pet peeve is: Unnecessarily long meetings.

My motto is: Eendragt Maakt magt; God Zij Met Ons: Dutch for “Unity is strength; God be with us.”

The last book I read was: Winston Churchill’s “The Second World War.”

My favorite U.S. president is: Theodore Roosevelt

My county is a NACo member because: It helps counties achieve the best service to all residents.

PROFILES IN SERVICE

JAMES M. (JIM) STOREY
NACo Board Member
Chair
Board of Allegan County, Mich.
Commissioners

Number of years active in NACo: Two
Years in public service: Ten as county commissioner; eight as Michigan Liquor Control Commissioner
Occupation: Public Affairs consultant
Education: University of Michigan, History

STOREY

The hardest thing I’ve ever done is: Adjust to divorce.

Three people (living or dead) I’d invite to dinner: George H.W. Bush, Winston Churchill, Edsel Ford

A dream I have is to: Take a global cruise.

You’d be surprised to learn that I: Love to experience new vistas.

The last book I read was: Winston Churchill’s “The Second World War.”

My favorite U.S. president is: Theodore Roosevelt

My county is a NACo member because: It helps counties achieve the best service to all residents.

MY FAVORITE MOVIE IS:
(tie) “The King’s Speech,” “Casablanca”
How to close your county’s digital divide

by Mary Ann Barton

When it comes to connecting residents to broadband, counties need to speak up with detailed information about their unserved and underserved areas and work closely with their state broadband directors to get their fair share of federal dollars, telecom experts told members July 21 at the jam-packed NACo Telecommunications & Technology Policy Steering Committee meeting.

“Get involved — go to your state broadband director — get to know them,’ said Luis Acuña, Southwest regional director for the National Telecommunications and Information Administration. “They can weave your needs into their plan. Share information with them.’

Another mantra also emerged during the meeting: **‘Get involved — go to your state broadband director — get to know them.’**

When Stearns County (Minn.) Commissioner Tarryl Clark, who chairs the committee, asked members to introduce themselves and describe their own broadband situation in their counties, almost every member said the words: ‘We need more fiber.’

One way to get that is to find out about several federal programs out there designed to help counties bridge the digital divide. The one with the most dollars, $42.45 billion, is the Commerce Department’s Broadband, Equity, Access and Deployment (BEAD) program. On June 30, the NTIA released information on the amount each state will receive from the program. You can see each state’s allocation here.

Before the dollars are invested, each state is required to file a draft plan with the NTIA. Some of those draft plans can be seen on the NTIA website here.

But before the dollars are invested, each state is required to file a draft plan with the NTIA. Some of those draft plans can be seen on the NTIA website here.

Other federal programs include the Digital Equity Act, funded at $2.75 billion; the Tribal Broadband Connectivity Program, funded at $2 billion; and the Middle Mile Program, funded at $1 billion.

Members of the NACo committee also heard about broadband solutions from their fellow county officials. Waseca County, Minn. Commissioner DeAnne Malterer described the success her county had due to a partnership with the American Connection Corp.

The group partially funded a fellowship position, staffed by an expert who helped the county secure an Internet provider. Using American Rescue Plan funds, the county was able to connect unserved residents to high-speed Internet.

“It was invaluable to Waseca County,’ Malterer said.

In Arkansas, after Glen Howie was named the state broadband director last summer, he toured all 75 counties in the Natural State.

“He left homework with all of the county judges and asked them to create countywide committees that included residents,’ Palm Beach County Mayor Greg Weiss, a member of the NACo committee.

“By establishing a committee, it puts a county in a much stronger position,’ he noted, when it comes time to submit any challenges as plans are hammered out to allocate BEAD program dollars.

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Palm Beach County, Fla. Mayor Gregg Weiss, vice-chair of the NACo Telecommunications & Technology Policy Steering Committee, makes a point July 21 during a small-group discussion with fellow county officials including Okeechobee, Fla. Commissioner Terry Burroughs (standing). Photo by Denny Henry

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York County, formed in 1634, was one of the eight original counties or “shires” of Virginia. The county seal features a ship, which represents the county’s settlement by way of the York River and a cannon and flags for the Revolutionary War’s Battle of Yorktown that took place in the county.

The furled British flag is included to indicate the end of British authority in the colonies, as the battle was one of the turning points for American independence.

The “Monument to Alliance and Victory,” located in the center of the seal, represents peace and hope for a lasting democracy.

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If you would like your county’s seal featured in “Behind the Seal,” contact Meredith Moran at mmoran@naco.org.
Your Priorities Change on Day One

by Alexis Hill
Washoe County, Nev. commissioner

You think you’re going to come into office and get to work on the problems that you identified before you were elected, the problems you campaigned on. Then you look around and realize, “No, I’m inheriting a lot of other problems that I also need to deal with. I need to deal with them now.”

When I took office, I felt a responsibility to start projects, because I realized that with term limits, I might not see them to completion by the time I am done. I wanted to tackle housing affordability, but when I came into office in the middle of the pandemic, it was clear that preventing homelessness was the immediate need. We had a lot of protections to keep people in their homes, but those emergency eviction moratoriums were going to expire. We’re right next door to Storey County, which is a major employer, but most people live in Washoe County.

Making sure we have enough housing to keep the region economically viable is crucial in the long term, but we also need to make sure it doesn’t displace people on the fringes of losing their place to live—that’s our immediate pressure these days. Now we’re focused on “housing first” policies to immediately get people into homes, to help them stabilize their lives. We’re trying to be transparent with the community, demonstrating our successes and failures to keep us accountable.

I was so excited to get on the regional transportation board for the county but I didn’t know how bad the transportation was in a rural part of my community. We’re between Reno and Lake Tahoe and coordinating transportation to our main natural attraction is absolutely necessary both to people using transit, but also trying to reduce the impact on the communities nearby. There are funding issues, there’s a resistance to bringing more people in, but if we do this right, we can cut down on the vehicle miles traveled and that will boost people’s quality of life. Maybe if I can help take care of these issues, the next person in this office will be able to follow their dreams, and not put them on the back burner.

"Now I Know..." is a new feature offering words of wisdom from county officials who share what they have learned after facing challenging aspects of their position. The feature is written from interviews by Charlie Ban, digital editor and senior writer.

Which residents benefit from prescription discounts?

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- Without Insurance
- With High Deductible Plans
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Any resident (and their pets) of a county, parish or borough participating in the Live Healthy Discount Program are eligible to save.

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*The Live Healthy program is not insurance. Prescription savings may vary by drug and pharmacy; discounts are only available at participating pharmacies.
ORANGE COUNTY, FLA.

Welcome, Washington County, Ohio!

Washington County, named for George Washington, was founded in 1788, making it the oldest county in Ohio. The county seat, Marietta, is known as the “Riverboat Town” and is located at the confluence of the Ohio and Muskingum rivers and was the first official American settlement territory northwest of the Ohio River. The city was named for the French Queen Marie Antoinette to honor the country’s contribution to U.S. independence in the Revolutionary War.

The county’s Ohio River Sternwheel Festival happens every September to honor the era when goods were transported by Sternwheel boats on the Ohio River. (Sternwheeler boats are boats with paddlewheels at the rear.) The festival attracts around 100,000 people each year and features a Sternwheel race, fireworks and live music.

Located in the Appalachian foothills, Marietta was ranked #1 in indoor recreation in the state and a top 100 adventure town in the country by National Geographic.

Washington County counts as one of its famous sons Charles Dawes, the U.S. vice president under Calvin Coolidge and 1925 Noble Peace Prize recipient for his work on the Dawes Plan for World War I reparations.

The county’s Mound Cemetery was developed to preserve the Adena burial mound called Conus, or the Great Mound, which historians believe was created between 100 BC and 500 AD.

The Adena were a group of Native Americans that existed in the Early Woodland period; they primarily lived in Ohio and Indiana and are known for their pottery, agricultural practices and the creation of conical burial mounds, such as the one in Marietta. The Mound Cemetery has more American Revolutionary War officers buried in it than any other cemetery in the country.

“Get to Know” features new NACo member counties.

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ORANGES: At its peak in from the 1950s-1970s, the county featured 80,000 acres of orange trees.

ORLANDO: The county seat of Orange County is Orlando.

PARKS: The county is home to 99 parks, trails and facilities that include horseback trails, water parks and canoeing.

POPULATION: The county is the fifth most populated in the state with about 1,430,000 residents.

SIZE: The county is 1,003 square miles; 100 square miles is water.

SUNSHINE: The county enjoys an average of 233 days of sunshine each year.

TOURISM: Businesses in the county include popular theme parks (including Walt Disney World Resort and Universal Orlando Resort), attracting 74 million tourists in 2022.

UNIVERSITY: The county is home to the University of Central Florida.

NACo OFFICERS
- President Mary Jo McGuire, Chief Government Affairs Officer Mark Ritacco and Public Affairs Coordinator Alyxa Hawkins attended the South Carolina Association of Counties Annual Conference Aug. 1-3 in Charleston County.

NACo STAFF
- Darrin Crittington has joined NACo as a senior conferences manager. He was previously director of meetings and events for the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators and associate director of conventions and meetings at the National Electrical Contractors Association. He earned a Bachelor of Science degree from the University of Central Florida.
- Robin Guyse has joined NACo as a conferences manager. She previously served as strategic operations coordinator for the Newseum’s Freedom Forum.
- Danny Tomares has joined NACo as a program associate. He was previously a research fellow at the National Association of Counties.

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**BRIGHT IDEAS | SALT LAKE COUNTY, UTAH**

**COUNTY NEWS | NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF COUNTIES**

**AUGUST 7, 2023**

### County Library Teams Up with Jail to Offer Resources to Incarcerated Individuals

**PROBLEM:**
Incarcerated individuals have a tough time after release.

**SOLUTION:**
Salt Lake County Library teamed up with the county jail to help inmates utilize library resources.

**by Meredith Moran**

The Salt Lake County Library collaborates with the county’s jail facilities to educate incarcerated individuals about resources available at the library. The program is one way to set inmates up for success after they are released and help reduce recidivism. Each participant gets a library card cleared of fines and fees post-incarceration.

“Anything we do, I want it to mirror what an individual can expect when they’re out of incarceration and can have full access to public libraries,” said Jenn McKague, manager of the Salt Lake County Library.

The library runs three two-hour classes as part of the jail’s broader six-week, 240-hour Life Skills program. The classes teach participants how to leverage the library’s resources toward career development and educational opportunities, with a focus in the final class on external community resources and stress management.

The feedback has been overwhelmingly positive from participants, McKague said, adding that many say they wish they had known earlier how much the library offers.

“One man said, ‘If I had these resources when I was a kid, I probably wouldn’t be in jail today,’” McKague said. “That has stuck with me for over two years, because it was so powerful.

“Individuals still are able to choose what they want to do, but just to be aware that libraries aren’t just repositories or museums for books, but have free programming, different community services and resources and all of these things that you can do — the class is just shocked when we talk about all of these services.”

One of the services the library offers is free mobile hotspot devices to check out for internet access, and McKague said that last year, a mother was able to attend her son’s graduation virtually, after finding out they were available because of the library-jail partnership.

Another hope is that participants in the program will share what they’ve learned about the library to others upon release.

“This last graduation, a gentleman who successfully completed the Life Skills program was released the week before his class’s graduation and the class had become really close,” McKague said. “You have to be very vulnerable to be in the situation, and because it’s many hours of intensive instruction — the library does six of those hours — but there’s social and emotional development and just a lot of things that are taught by other instructors.

“So, he’d gone to the library, and he came back to the Life Skills graduation, and he walked in and said, ‘Guess what? I went to the library; I used my card.’ And it was really exciting, number one, that he would come back to graduate with his class, but also for us to hear, ‘Yes, this information is getting out and people are sharing it.’”

The program highlights specific databases, like Brainfuse, which assists users through the job process, connecting them to live resume feedback and help applying, and also provides educational tools for adults looking to get their GED. McKague said the program has also offered a book club, but showing inspirational videos of people who have been incarcerated themselves and found success upon release has made the most impact.

“One thing that was frequently requested was stories of inspiration for individuals who have gone through what the prisoners are going through, how they’ve overcome that and gone on to succeed in life,” McKague said. “There are a number of videos I’ve gone online and found — TED Talks and similar stories — and we show at least one of those during each of the classes.

“I’m not going to presume to know what individuals are going through, but the people telling their own stories do know what that’s like. We just create a very positive open environment, with boundaries.”

Neurographic art, which is working through the subconscious mind through drawing, was added to the class after McKague discovered it was scientifically proven to reduce anxiety. The hope is that encouraging participants to de-stress through art will carry on in their life post-incarceration as well.

“Listening to [inmates’] feedback, it was like, ‘This can be an extremely stressful environment,’ and prisoners can get hung up on the past or anxious about the future, but it’s hard to stay present,” McKague said. “...We’re not trying to ‘therapize’ individuals or anything like that — we’re staying within the boundaries of what’s professional in librarianship and leaving the mental health components up to those professionals, but we’re giving individuals a way to relax, so it’s really a calming experience.”

The library also works with officers in the jails who are going through public safety assessment training to become cadets. McKague said the collaboration came out of many officers having language barriers with incarcerated individuals and the library offering the language-learning platforms Rosetta Stone and Mango Languages for free, which then resulted in broader education on library resources and career development.

“We also wanted to explain library services in the jail to these incoming cadets, because this may be their first time with anything related to incarcerated services, and we just want to say, ‘Hey, this is the library, this is what we do, this is why we do this, this is how it benefits prisoners and this is how it helps you,’” McKague said. “So, if you have individuals engaged in something positive, it’s going to deter some of those negative behaviors.

“And, also to help them, [saying], ‘These are library resources that are available to you professionally,’ so that they’re aware of what they can access and also just hobbies; that’s part of that stress management, because it can be a very challenging job, so just letting them be aware of those pieces.”

**The Salt Lake County Library Connections at the Salt Lake County Jail was a 2023 Achievement Award winner in the Libraries category.**
CALIFORNIA

VENTURA COUNTY’s new education program is connecting the children of Mexican migrant workers with their heritage by teaching them about Mexican culture, food and language. The summer program—which is a partnership among Ventura County, the California Department of Education, the Somis Union School District and Mexico’s education agency—also has a focus on science, technology and math.

ILLINOIS

The presence of I-57 belies that much of WILLIAMSON COUNTY is hard to access in a vehicle, so the county sheriff’s office has introduced the All-Terrain Vehicle Criminal Patrol Program. Two ATVs will assist deputies in responding to criminal complaints, but also to augment their search and rescue operations range.

"Far too often deputies patrolling in the middle of the night come across ATV activity trespassing on private property, stealing or engaging in other nefarious activity only to have that vehicle drive into the woods while we watch," said Sheriff Jeff Diederich.

MINNESOTA

RAMSEY and WASHINGTON COUNTIES are using AI technology to benefit the environment. The pilot Ramsey/Washington Recycling and Energy Facility is sorting food scraps from the recyclable material on a line system using an AI robot, which the counties estimate will recover up to 60,000 tons of materials that would either go into landfills or be incinerated each year. Once the garbage is moved, it’s composted and can turn into anaerobic energy that can eventually be renewable.

FLORIDA

• LEON COUNTY is devoting $25,000 to add streetlights to bus stops in rural areas to improve safety and make students feel more secure. Parents can request a streetlight at their child’s school bus stop on the Leon County website.

MARYLAND

A dinosaur bone was recently discovered in PRINCE GEORGE’S COUNTY for the first time since 1887, in a county park. It is believed to be that of an Acrocanthosaurus, a large predatory dinosaur. "The discovery of this rare dinosaur fossil and bone bed marks an extraordinary milestone in the field of paleontology and opens a window into our ancient world and to the species that once roamed this land," Peter Shapiro, chair of the Prince George’s County Planning Board, told Baltimore’s WBAL-TV.

MICHIGAN

OTTAWA COUNTY residents can now access legal advice at self-serve kiosks that offer assistance in filing paperwork and paying fees. The 11 kiosks, which were funded through a grant from the Michigan State Police, also help residents conduct legal research and attend court hearings virtually in an effort to remove barriers including lack of transportation and access to reliable internet.

FLORIDA

• BREvard COUNTY is enlisting the help of drones to kill mosquito larvae amid a statewide malaria warning. The drones will spray chemicals over wooded areas deemed too dense and difficult to reach by land. The drones will target areas tested by the county’s Mosquito Control crew, and areas where there is water for larvae and where it is determined suitable to treat.

NEVADA

ELKO COUNTY is joining the Flight Alliance for Northeastern Nevada to support a minimum revenue guarantee for flight service to Elko Regional Airport served by SkyWest Airlines, which is planning to overnight in Elko beginning this fall. Commissioners agreed to provide $500,000 in the 2023-2024 fiscal year to help offset the cost of the guarantee.
which has cost the city of Elko $1.1 million to $1.5 million over the past few years. The county will have a seat on the nonprofit's alliance board, which aims to include public and private regional organizations and businesses, the Elko Daily Free Press reported.

NEW YORK
The PUTNAM COUNTY Youth Bureau and the DUTCHESS COUNTY Division of Youth Services have collaborated on the "Parents as Driving Partners" initiative, aiming to teach safe driving habits by encouraging active involvement and shared responsibility between teens and their parents during the early stages of driving.

Any teenagers who receive their learner’s permit will also receive a "Parents as Driving Partners" booklet. The booklet includes a Parent/Teen Driving Agreement, a mutual pledge to work across the county to prevent traffic fatalities.

INDIANA
Traffic fatalities decreased in King County have been increasing since 2018, with significant increases in 2021 and 2022 even as traffic volume has decreased.

WASHINGTON
After 25 years as the only KING COUNTY prosecutor handling felony traffic crimes, Amy Freedheim is about to get some help. Two deputy prosecutors are joining her in working through a backlog of cases as part of the new Felony Traffic Unit. Traffic fatalities in King County have been increasing since 2018, with significant increases in 2021 and 2022 even as traffic volume has decreased.

News from Across the Nation is compiled by Charlie Ban and Meredith Moran. Does your county have news we should see? Contact cban@naco.org and mmoran@naco.org.

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"I think government workers are just stuck in their ways a lot of times," he said. Rather than following procedures without question, a wide enough net by AI could find a better solution. "When you have been going through B to get from A to C, maybe there’s a better way," and the human brain hasn’t comprehended it yet," he said. Wake County, N.C.’s Thomas said she also sees hope for using AI to take racial bias out of government processes.

Is change bad?

Berrien County, Mich. Commissioner Choke Pitchford doesn’t hide his fears. "AI scares me," he said. "I think it could be used for good, but it honestly terrifies me.

What concerns him the most is if AI could generate audio that could implicate someone in a crime. "It’s going to raise a whole new level of scrutiny in legal cases."

Chris Rodgers, a Douglas County, Neb. commissioner who made cybersecurity his priority as NACO president in 2012-2013, is concerned about the proliferation of misinformation and disinformation in what AI models learn, influencing their outputs. If counties perpetuate that bad information, it legitimates it and could deteriorate a county’s trustworthiness. "Once it’s out there, there’s no way you pull it back in," he said.

For Carson, protecting personal information is a high priority. Cass County, N.D. Commissioner Chad Petersen, meanwhile, is not convinced of any world-ending scenarios driven by AI.

"I’m never convinced that the ‘Terminator thing’ is going to be real," he said, referring to the science fiction franchise’s self-aware AI network that defied human programming and tried to end life as we know it. "There’s always going to be part of the machine that doesn’t understand and can’t think as fast as we can. Our brains are so unique. "I’m safe in saying never in my lifetime."

AI offers opportunities for county governments

He does see the potential for AI to make life dramatically easier for emergency dispatchers, building automated response systems for callers who need emergency services. "We could automate that to the point where you have a faster response, faster dispatch times," he said. "You have an instantaneous answer for your 911 call, rather than a delay of three or four rings, you get the response going and then a human steps in, to help meet the caller’s psychological needs.

"In a happy world, we’d be able to take that burden off our dispatchers entirely."

With all of the talk of replacing and reassigning work, Steve Acquario is concerned about the consequences for public sector labor unions, which will want a say in how the employment world changes. As executive director of the New York State Association of Counties, he has been attuned to the nuances of a heavy public sector union state.

"There’s a sense that ‘we’ve always done it this way,’ and it’s hard to break that inertia," he said. "The lack of understanding by most people will be the impediment to adopting it."
LARGE URBAN COUNTY CAUCUS SYMPOSIUM

October 4–6, 2023  Orange County, Florida

RURAL ACTION CAUCUS SYMPOSIUM

November 5–7, 2023  Greenbrier County, West Virginia