

National Association of Counties

2009

Achievement Awards



# Best of Category

June 2009

# 2009 Achievement Awards



## 2009 Achievement Awards– Best of Category

**A Publication of  
the Research Division  
of NACo's County  
Services Department**

**Compiled by  
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Research Intern**

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### **About NACo – The Voice of America's Counties**

The National Association of Counties (NACo) is the only national organization that represents county governments in the United States. Founded in 1935, NACo provides essential services to the nation's 3,068 counties. NACo advances issues with a unified voice before the federal government, improves the public's understanding of county government, assists counties in finding and sharing innovative solutions through education and research, and provides value-added services to save counties and taxpayers money. For more information about NACo, visit [www.naco.org](http://www.naco.org).

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## Introduction

For more than three decades, NACo has administered its annual Achievement Awards, a non-competitive awards program that recognizes innovative county government programs. This year, as the awards program experienced a record amount of participation from county governments, we are pleased to feature the best of category winners. These exemplary programs depict unique, innovative, and replicable ways for counties to enhance their communities.

Created as part of NACo's *New County, USA* campaign, the Achievement Awards Program continues to embody the grassroots and local government energy that the program was intended to promote. The main emphasis of the campaign was to modernize and streamline county government and increase its services to its citizens, goals that are still at the core of the Achievement Awards Program today.

## ★ Arts and Historical Preservation

San Diego County, CA  
Population: 2,933,462

### Collaboration for Community Art

Upon the recent completion of the new Encinitas Community Library, a branch of the San Diego County library system, a partnership between the City of Encinitas and the library was established to create a Civic Arts Program. In accordance with the city's official "embracing of the arts" in its Master Plan, the county-operated library created two professional art galleries in the library: one in the lobby and another in the Community Room. These exhibition spaces have helped to foster the concept of "library as community" by integrating Encinitas' artistic heritage into their institutions.

This project has called for the collaboration of the city's Arts Administrator and the County Librarian to coordinate the diverse artwork that gets displayed. The city installed a professional art hanging system for its Community Room to display 2-dimensional artwork. The lobby of the library also houses six lighted 3-dimensional artwork cases. The Arts Administrator then rotates the artwork monthly based

upon applications submitted from local artists. For the library's Special Collection's room, artwork is displayed that represents the library's biannual theme. The first theme was "The Ocean around Us" which highlighted artwork that connects to Encinitas' nautical heritage. The response from the community over this exhibit was so strong that they permanently dedicated the Children's Area of the library to this type of artwork that uses recyclable products to depict whimsical fish art. The Children's Area has since become an artistic venue for kids and parents to enjoy while promoting the values of recycling and conservation.

Since opening, the library's patrons have raved about the fine art in the building. The library has hosted periodic art receptions that have totaled over 1,000 attendees. Furthermore, during the first eight months of the program, over 75 artists have applied to have their work displayed, vying for 24 exhibition spots. Overall, this Community Art Collaboration effort has become a way to bring excitement to the opening of the county's new library, a way for local artists to showcase their talents, and a way for the community to embrace its artistic culture.

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## ★ Children and Youth

Brunswick County, NC  
Population: 73,143

### Computers for Kids

The Computers for Kids program gives computers to students in high school who could not afford to have one any other way. The computers are presented first to 9<sup>th</sup> grade students at each of Brunswick's three high schools as well as the Brunswick Learning Center and the Early College Program. The student takes the computer home and shares it with family members. Students are selected by their teachers to receive computers on the basis of need. The computers are then delivered to the school by volunteers, and the parents are notified.

The program utilizes a workroom at the community college to refurbish all the donated, used computers. Today, the largest source of donated computers comes from the Brunswick County Government. As county departments usually receive new computers according to the budget cycle, their used computers are now being sent to the schools after having their hard drives erased. Additionally, used computer parts that no longer have use are being recycled at the county's landfill.

So far, over 350 computers have been given to students. The county's original goal of having 400 computers donated over the course of four years is being exceeded. The ultimate goal of the program is to see that every student in the county has a computer. Not only have there been visible improvements in students' academic achievements, but they are also developing "computer literacy," a crucial skill in today's work environment.

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## ★ Community and Economic Development

Fairfax County, VA  
 Population: 1,006,529

### Silver Lining Initiative

Fairfax County's Silver Lining Initiative serves as a three-tiered program designed to address the current housing foreclosure crisis and help to stabilize impacted neighborhoods while also taking advantage of lower cost housing to provide affordable workforce housing. Fairfax County, located in the Washington Metropolitan region of Virginia, has been experiencing a substantial increase in total number of foreclosed homes over the past several years. This has led to a steady drop in property values, an increasing number of vacant homes due to foreclosures, and an increasing number of neglected properties.

The initiative's primary function is to provide assistance for low and moderate income households who are seeking to be first-time homebuyers through shared equity loans. Qualified applicants are eligible to receive a loan, the amount of which is determined by household income and the price of the house, which can then be used to close the gap between an affordable first mortgage and the sales price of a market rate home. Upon sale or transfer of the property, the county will be repaid and will share in the appreciated value. The Silver Lining Initiative also provides loans for purchased, foreclosed homes that require repairs or improvements. A loan is made through the county's Improvement Loan Program to fund the needed repairs. Lastly, the initiative provides counseling services to distressed homeowners in danger of foreclosure. The focus of the counseling is to connect homeowners with their lenders or other resources, with the ultimate goal of a loan work out.

In total, seventy attorneys and thirty paralegals have been recruited to provide six hours of counseling services each to county homeowners. By helping homeowners during this foreclosure crisis, the county is creating a positive opportunity out of an economically damaging situation. These approaches work to stabilize communities by slowing the negative impacts that a large number of foreclosures can have on neighborhoods.

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## ★ County Administration and Management

Hennepin County, MN  
Population: 1,116,200

### Foreclosure Prevention and Response Program

Hennepin County, like many other counties across the country, has experienced the negative consequences of the housing foreclosure crisis. Since 2005, the county's foreclosures rose over 300%. In response to the mortgage meltdown, commissioners formed a cross-departmental Foreclosure Task Force to focus on prevention, stabilization, and recovery.

Among the Task Force's chief recommendations was the creation of a lead staff person to serve as a central contact for county foreclosure information and resources. The county designated two staff members to implement the education and outreach of the Task Force's recommendations which included the following: \$1.25 million for the city-county initiative to remove vacant and boarded houses from severely impacted neighborhoods; the creation of a data center to improve the county's ability to track the foreclosure issue and allow such data to be easily shared; the mailing of over 10,000 foreclosure information inserts in tax-delinquent notices to home-owners; and the creation of foreclosure mini-workshops for home owners and renters in Hennepin County.

Thus far, over 200 people have attended the county's twelve workshop seminars. Because tenants of properties are often unaware of the potential for foreclosure, many are left in vulnerable situations. The county's effort to keep its residents informed and offer them financial counseling is a helpful tool that can reduce the amount of foreclosures and help to stabilize its communities.

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## ★ County Administration and Management

Powhatan County, VA  
Population: 22,377

### Rules of Engagement, Commitment to Excellence, and Covenant with Staff

The program supplements the governing body's Rules of Order with a sensible companion document to address how Board members should interact with one another, with the media, with staff, and with citizens and stakeholders in the performance of their public duties. The previous Board's less-than-optimum collaborative behavior prompted the new members of the board to address prior dysfunction and find a way to conduct themselves in a more professional manner.

The Rules of Engagement set forth a commitment among the members to respect one another, to understand differences of opinion, and to work as a cohesive team with staff and stakeholders. The new program's Code of Ethics is designed to ensure that Board members follow the highest levels of ethical and moral conduct in securing the public trust of the office. The Standards of Conduct preserve the integrity and dignity of the public office by ensuring that members will be vigilant and will be tolerant and respectful of differing positions. Lastly, the Covenant between the board and staff provides assurance that the board will reciprocate the staff's hard work and commitment with support, understanding, and team work.

Because all of the Board members came from different backgrounds and did not run for office on the same ticket, differences of opinion frequently come about. Since adopting these new measures, the new board has operated more efficiently. They have resolved many of the county's more complex and controversial issues, most of them in unanimous fashion. Not only have these rules helped Board members work more professionally, but they have also helped to regain the public's trust and respect.

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## ★ Court Administration and Management

Fulton County, GA  
Population: 816,006

### Business Court

Fulton County's Business Court is part of the Civil Division of the Fulton County Superior Court. The Business Court provides efficient and just resolutions to complex commercial and business cases, in addition to developing a robust body of business law in Georgia. By pooling these complex cases into the Business Court before specially trained judges, the business cases are timely and fairly addressed through the efficient allocation of the court's resources.

The Business Court tracks commercial and business cases that are resource-intensive where the cases receive the required level of judicial expertise and management in order to deliver an expeditious resolution. Most often, cases in the Business Court involve one or more of the following: high damages amount, multiple parties, high volumes of documentary evidence, complex commercial or business claims, extensive electronic discovery processes, increased motion practices, and required early court determination of issues.

Through the establishment of the Business Court and the promotion of business law in Georgia, Fulton County has developed a reputation for being a business-friendly location which, in turn, is growing and sustaining the economic base of the county. Additionally, the Business Court has given the County Superior Court more time to efficiently manage its civil and criminal cases.

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## ★ Criminal Justice and Public Safety

Lubbock County, TX  
Population: 252,284

### West Texas Regional Public Defender for Capital Cases

The West Texas Regional Public Defender for Capital Cases (WTRPD) was established at the end of 2007 as a collaboration of 65 counties in West Texas to provide legal defense services to individuals charged with capital murder offenses. In response to the counties' desire to have qualified defense attorneys available in a budget-efficient manner, the counties grouped together to create a cost-sharing system where all counties could benefit from the services of public defenders, mitigation experts, investigators and legal secretaries.

Centrally located in Lubbock County, the WTRPD has opened two additional satellite offices in the northern and southern parts of the region to make access to defense services more rapidly available to defendants. The program has also partnered with Texas Tech University's School of Law to receive interns to assist the office in their work.

Since the office began accepting clients in January 2008, it has represented 14 capital murder defendants in eleven counties, with ten pending cases and four cases successfully disposed of by guilty plea, none of which have resulted in defendants receiving the death penalty. The counties are estimated to have saved over \$300,000 dollars in legal expenses from the collaborative effort, and its overall success has prompted counties outside of their region to contract with the WTRPD.

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## ★ Criminal Justice and Public Safety

Los Angeles County, CA  
Population: 9,935,475

### Women's Reintegration Services

The Women's Reintegration Services is a program designed to assist soon-to-be released inmates as they attempt to transition back into the Los Angeles community. The service links these inmates with various public and private service agencies as they leave the women's county jail. Because an overwhelming majority of the inmates have a myriad of health, family, and substance abuse problems, many leave simply to return to the same lifestyle that originally landed them in jail.

In order to reduce the likelihood of recidivism, the California Penal Code was amended by the urging of the county to allow Inmate Welfare Funds to be spent to assist inmates for up to 14 days after release. This allowed for the Community Transition Unit of the county to participate fully in the continuum of care to which it so committed. After leaving prison, inmates were provided transportation to the Women's Reintegration Services where they can receive assistance from the Department of Mental Health, the Department of Children and Family Services, the Department of Public Social Services, and the Child Support Services. This collaboration between the Sheriff's Department and the various social service agencies exemplifies how the artificial walls between social service systems and jail systems can be broken down to help discharged inmates reintegrate back into the community.

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## ★ Environmental Protection and Energy

Fairfax County, VA  
Population: 1,006,529

### Tree Conservation Ordinance

Fairfax County's new Tree Conservation Ordinance is the first ordinance in Virginia to focus on tree preservation. The intent of this ordinance was to increase the county's ability to protect tree resources during land development processes. After a series of unsuccessful legislative attempts at the county and state levels, the county board sent two conservation bills to the Virginia Legislative Assembly. They eventually passed as a result of collaboration and partnering with the building industry. This was the first broad-based tree conservation legislation to pass the Commonwealth's Legislative Assembly, marking a shift of focus from tree replacement to tree preservation.

In response to their new authority from Virginia State Code 15.2-961.1, Fairfax County was able to develop its Tree Ordinance which was adopted in October 2008. The ordinance is administered by the Land Development Services of the Fairfax County Department of Public Works and Environmental Services. The Urban Forest Management Division and the Environmental and Site Review Division share the responsibilities of reviewing development plans to ensure conformity to tree conservation requirements.

The ordinance ensures that prescribed levels of tree canopy are provided on development sites within a 10-year timeframe. This requirement is expected to be met, first and foremost, through tree-preservation. However, requirements can be met through reforestation when trees do not meet standards for health and suitability; where construction activities are likely to kill or severely injure trees; or when preservation would preclude the development of allowable uses. The ordinance also places an empha-



sis on the planting of native tree species for energy, conservation, wildlife habitat, water quality, and air quality purposes.

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## ★ Financial Management

**Gwinnett County, GA**  
Population: 588,448

### Funding Post Employment Benefits

Gwinnett County's new financial management strategy provides a comprehensive approach to manage "Other Post-Employment Benefits" (OPEB). A team of Financial Service managers developed a sustainable plan for funding retiree healthcare that meets new accounting requirements, minimizes cost increases for retirees, and does not degrade the county's AAA credit rating.

The county altered their retiree health insurance benefit from paying a percentage of the health care premium to paying a defined, fixed monthly contribution. The contribution almost covers the entire premium for the least expensive health care option so retirees who choose that option will have minimal increases in their healthcare costs. To reduce the unfunded OPEB liability slowly, the county had to fund the Annual Required Contribution through an irrevocable trust. Because Georgia law previously permitted only the State to establish an OPEB trust, the county crafted legislation to allow the trusts for counties and cities. This allowed them to fully fund their Annual Required Contribution, giving them better investment returns and reduced future ARC requirements.

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## ★ Health

**Wake County, NC**  
Population: 627, 846

### EMS System Advanced Practice Paramedic

The Wake County EMS System Advanced Practice Paramedic (APP) is a new program designed to match specially-trained paramedics with the most sensitive patients, prevent emergencies in some high-risk patient populations, and seek further care for those patients who may be better served at locations other than local hospital emergency departments.

The APP program exceeds most traditional lone-paramedic systems whereby the individual paramedic merely supports basic-care ambulances. The Wake County model augments a paramedic-level ambulance response with experienced paramedics who have high-frequency exposure and involvement in critical patient care interventions. The Advanced Practice Paramedics also engage in preventive home-visits designed to decrease medical crises and improve the overall well being of patients. APPs also identify and place mental health patients and substance abusers in facilities more appropriate for their care than the emergency department.

The combination of these specialized skills have resulted in an efficient team of practitioners that improve emergency response care, lessen the need for some EMS responses, and facilitate the right care for some citizens that may otherwise be "lost in the system."

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## ★ Human Services

Sacramento County, CA  
Population: 1,223,499

### Adult Protective Intensive Case Management Hospital Liaison Program

In response to the aging population's need for sufficient health care, the County Board of Supervisor's created a system of protective services to elderly, dependent adults who tend to be subject to neglect and exploitation. Sacramento County's innovative Adult Protective Services Program created a comprehensive response system of protection for the older population across a range of public and private sector organizations by simply adding intensive case management services.

Funded by a combination of county, federal, state, and hospital funds, the program positively impacts health care delivery challenges by providing case management service interventions that can expedite the emergency department and inpatient discharge process for high-risk seniors, ages 65 and older. It also makes access to community resources that address the health, mental health, and social service needs of seniors more efficient. Without case management, Adult Protective Services operates merely as a short-term crisis intervention program, with cases open no more than one month.

Through Sacramento's new program, the Adult Protective Services helps to: prevent extended lengths of stay for hospital admissions; prevent medically unnecessary admissions by facilitating and expediting the emergency department discharge process; prevent medically unnecessary repeat hospitalizations and visits to the emergency department; improve the quality and continuity of care for discharged seniors; and develop a coordinated referral and communication process between hospital staff and APS.

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## ★ Human Services

Hillsborough County, FL  
Population: 998,948

### Homeless Early Childhood Initiatives

Because children represent 16% of the over 9,000 homeless persons in the Hillsborough County, county officials began an initiative to give these children priority access to early childhood services. The Early Childhood Initiative targets 60 to 70 homeless families with 3 and 4 year old children currently residing in Hillsborough County.

Referred either by the school system, ministry programs, or the county social services office, the Program aims to place the homeless children into productive pre-school and to get intensive assistance to the whole family. The children are placed in the Head Start program, offering an easily accessible learning environment that gives them an array of developmentally appropriate activities and services. This program has expanded to also give additional family members extra support and resources so that they can become self-sufficient members of the community. Through the program, families receive funding for child care and flexible funds which can be used to meet short term emergent needs such as transportation, health care, housing, job training, and child care.

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## ★ Information Technology

Fairfax County, VA  
Population: 1,006,529

### Courtroom Technology Management System

Fairfax County's Courtroom Technology Management System (CTMS) is a state-of-the-art centralized courtroom audio and video management system that captures the benefits of enhanced evidence presentation capabilities, videoconferencing, and remote courtroom monitoring. Designed

to standardize technology in each of the county's 43 courtrooms, the modern system meets the increasing demands brought before the court due to an increasing population in an enhanced, digitized society.

The CTMS system incorporates all court functions to include evidence presentation, real-time court reporting, video conferencing, video arraignment, protected witness testimonies, and judges' control of technologies from the bench. Evidence presentation technologies include document cameras, digital cameras, videotape/CD/DVD players, and laptop computers. The system also allows for overflow room monitoring and remote arraignments. All new courtrooms include multiple 17-inch flat-screen displays allowing the judge, jury, and gallery to view unobstructed presentations of evidence with the ability to pause, enhance, annotate, and print.

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## ★ Information Technology

Alachua County, FL  
Population: 217,955

### A Web GIS Code Enforcement Tracker

The Code Enforcement Tracker integrates real time public complaints, office activities of staff, and field activities of Code Officers in real time on the county's website. For the first time, it also translates this information into interactive maps that are integrated with other public safety map layers.

Concerned residents, neighborhood coalitions, homeowners, and county personnel can all monitor the entire process of code complaint and of code compliance from their homes or offices. Anyone can submit complaints for violations; upload pictures of the violations; track the status of complaints and action orders; and identify code officers assigned to each case. Additionally, maps can be created that are dynamically linked to the full history of code violations in Alachua County from 1995 to date.

The collaboration between the citizens and the county government using widely available technology has increased the practices of fiscal responsibility and the overall management of the community. The system has contributed to the increase in working standards, state-of-the-art customer service, a more transparent government, and the freeing of organizational resources for use in other areas of the government.

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## ★ Libraries

Augusta County, VA  
Population: 65,615

### Middlebrook Library System

Upon the loss of the county's bookmobile, citizens of the southern region of Augusta County had a serious need for a convenient library service. For many of the county's residents, especially those focused around the town of Middlebrook, a drive to the closest library could take upwards of 45 minutes. Also, because high speed Internet service is not available in most parts of the region, residents were not able to access the main library's website and database.

Because of this challenge that many residents faced to get books, the county opened its third "library station" in the town of Middlebrook. County library stations serve as satellite locations of the main library, open twenty hours a week. Since its opening, the Middlebrook library station has experienced the highest monthly circulation and patron count at of all the county's library stations. Centrally located next to the town's post office, the convenient location has become a major reason for the library's success and its place in the community as a spot for gathering. The library now contains three new computers with high-speed internet and complete access to Wi-Fi service. A large portion of the start-up resources for the library station were donated by

patrons and other county departments. The county also utilized the assistance of a work crew from the regional jail to spend a day installing shelving and moving boxes to offset additional costs.

By working cooperatively, the district supervisor and the library director were able to call upon local government and community groups to extend library services to an underserved population. Middlebrook's library station is an excellent model of various groups working with government to fill expressed needs at reasonable costs.

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## ★ Parks and Recreation

Indian River County, FL  
Population: 112,947

### Water Safety Outreach Program

This outreach program was created by several Indian River County Recreation staff and volunteers who recognized the need for water safety education. Coordinated primarily by volunteers, the program is three-tiered, targeting second and third graders from each of Indian River County's thirteen elementary schools.

First, a traveling puppet show is set up in the school's cafeteria which includes intricate props and scenery. The show presents a story of how a family reacts when one of their children is caught in a rip current after a trip to the local beach. The story educates students in proper water safety skills. From there, students then participate in an interactive program that works on dry land skills such as first aid techniques. Lastly, students are bused to the local aquatics center where they receive in-water instruction that demonstrate the lessons taught back at school.

Classes are given up to five times each year for the second and third graders.

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## ★ Personnel Management, Employee Training, and Employee Benefits

Maricopa County, AZ  
Population: 3,072,149

### Internal Control Video Program

The Maricopa County Internal Audit Department has developed a training program that uses web-based videos to increase organizational awareness of the importance of internal controls. To date, there have been three internal control videos posted on their 'Got Controls?' webpage addressing cash handling, IT security, and ethical dilemmas. All scripting, casting, filming, and editing of the videos were performed by the Internal Audit department to save external production costs of over \$25,000. Overall, these videos provide an inexpensive and entertaining way to train employees on appropriate responses to workplace situations where fraud or abuse could occur and to avoid actions that prevent organizations from accomplishing their goals.

The Video Training Program's first feature highlighted common cash control weaknesses, including the importance of pre-numbered and system-generated receipts, changing register tills for shift changes, security over transaction data, safeguarding change funds, and end-of-day reconciliations. Their next video presented common control weaknesses over information technology and data, including the physical security of IT equipment, removable storage drives, and password protection.

Their final video on ethics illustrated the right and wrong ways to handle common ethical dilemmas, including the use of company time and resources for personal gain, abuse of company resources, and unethical hiring practices.

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## ★ Volunteers

**Sarasota County, FL**  
Population: 325,957

### Volunteer Seagrass Survey Program

In 2006, Sarasota County began its biannual survey program of its bay's seagrass population. Because of the environmental and economic importance of seagrass, the county found it vital to perform its own survey to collect highly valuable data to help environmental administrators make sound scientific management decisions.

The program began conducting its seagrass survey in the winter of 2006 to supplement aerial seagrass maps created by Southwest Florida's Water Management District (SWFWMD). After conducting its first survey, the county staff realized that survey techniques could be easily performed by the average citizen. From that point forward, the county began soliciting help from community volunteers to assist in the seagrass survey.

The community's involvement in the seagrass survey process has not only helped the county save labor costs for the survey, but it has also served as a meaningful tool to educate citizens about their environmentally and economically important ecosystem. The residents' participation in live scientific research that has direct impact on policy decisions has been an exciting way to get them engaged with their community and government.

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## ★ Best Rural County Program

**Beltrami County, MN**  
Population: 39,650

### Northern Dental Access Center

The Northern Dental Access Center is a nonprofit, non-competitive dental service for the underprivileged and underinsured, providing access and education for emergency and preventive care, paying particular attention to children. Designed to provide a dental home to the most vulnerable people in the rural county of Beltrami, the program will serve low income people who are on Minnesota Care and Medical Assistance or those who are participants of local-government subsidized programs.

With seven fully functioning facilities, the Dental Access Center provides dental treatment, preventative oral health education, and assistance to target populations in making appointments. Overall, the program has the health goals of treating disease and infection, eliminating pain, providing referrals for specialty care, educating patients on preventative care; providing preventative care, and expanding public health programs regarding oral health. Currently, the county has hired local dentists to work for two to three days a week with the hiring of a full-time dentist underway. Since its opening, approximately twenty clients have been served per day.

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