



**PUBLIC LANDS COUNTIES EMBRACE OUTDOOR REC ECONOMY. PG. 5**



**COUNTY MENTAL HEALTH ADVOCATES TAKE ISSUES TO CAPITOL HILL PG. 7**



**FLA. COUNTY RESIDENTS BECOME TOURISM AMBASSADORS. PG. 11**

## LUCC sees housing cooperation in Arlington County, Va.

by **Charlie Ban**  
senior writer

When discussing housing affordability, the most important factor is location, location, location...and partnerships.

Amazon could have easily done a “cannon ball” into the local housing pool when the retailer decided to move a significant portion of its workforce to Arlington County, Va. Thousands of highly paid workers threatened to overturn the housing market, which was already hot thanks to a host of secondary and tertiary federal

government industries around the Washington, D.C. region. But the company’s Housing Equity Fund is helping to mitigate its workforce’s effects on the nation’s geographically smallest county.

“Partnerships are essential to creating and sustaining affordable housing,” Russell Danao-Schroeder, the county’s principal housing planner, told the leadership of NACo’s Large Urban County Caucus (LUCC) during a May 2 fly-in at Amazon’s Arlington headquarters.

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The 2024-2025 Western Interstate Region Executive Committee (l-r): Second Vice President Dwayne McFall, a Fremont County, Colo. commissioner; First Vice President John Peters, a Mono County, Calif. supervisor; President Wes McCart, a Stevens County, Wash. commissioner and Immediate Past President John Espy, a Carbon County, Wyo. commissioner. Photo by Amber Edwards

## Rural counties attract new residents with incentives

by **Meredith Moran**  
staff writer

Kansas counties are investing in their future through the “Rural Opportunity Zone” program, which offers state income tax credits and up to \$15,000 in student loan repayment assistance to people who move to and create roots in rural counties.

The Rural Opportunity Zone (ROZ) program has been around since 2011, but because of a lack of marketing and strin-

gent eligibility requirements, it hasn’t had as much of an impact on population growth as it set out to.

The Kansas Department of Commerce’s Office of Rural Prosperity, which took over the program from the department’s Community Development office nearly two years ago, is working to change that.

Last month, the Kansas Department of Commerce updated the program’s eligibility

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## Mariposa County finds third time’s a charm for WIR meeting

by **Charlie Ban**  
senior writer

2024 NACo  
**WESTERN INTERSTATE REGION CONFERENCE //**

After two postponements in the last four years, the Western Interstate Region Conference made its return May 7-10 in California, drawing public lands county officials to Mariposa County.

The COVID-19 pandemic forced cancellations in 2020 and 2021, but the conference came back stronger, adding Nebraska as a probationary associate member and amending WIR bylaws to allocate votes among full (five votes per state) and associate members (three votes per state). Minnesota joined WIR as an associate member in 2022.

“The more voices we can get working together, the more we can accomplish for counties and the Western region,” said Stevens County, Wash. Com-

missioner Wes McCart, who was elected WIR president.

Though slightly more than 1% of Nebraska is entitled to Payments in Lieu of Taxes (PILT), totaling \$1.4 million in 2023, 0.2% of the national PILT authorization, Western issues are important to the state, said Jon Cannon, executive director of the Nebraska Association of County Officials.

“We just want to lend our voice to the effort. There’s a lot that we have in common with states in the West,” he said, adding that the association was investing \$5 million to establish a satellite office in Keith County.

He pledged that the association would amend its bylaws to ensure that the state’s WIR Board member would represent a county from the western

part of the state.

“We think it’s that important,” to have a Western presence, he said.

Mono County, Calif. Supervisor John Peters and Fremont County, Colo. Commissioner Dwayne McFall were voted as first and second vice president.

Immediate Past President John Espy, a Carbon County, Wyo. commissioner, noted an additional administrative burden borne by his state association executive director. He credited Idaho Association of Counties Executive Director Seth Grigg and Montana Association of Counties Executive Director Eric Bryson with helping throughout his presidency to alleviate the workload on Jeremiah Rieman, Wyoming County Commissioners Association executive director, who

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# Overhaul of Rural Opportunity Zone program attracts new residents to rural counties

From RURAL page 1

requirements, changing the window of time for participants to live outside a participating county from five years to two years, and language was clarified to better define someone's "permanent residence" outside of the county.

Previously, people who had a driver's license with an address in a participating ROZ county weren't eligible for the program, regardless of how long they had been living outside of the county, disqualifying many people who had temporarily moved away for school or employment, but never formally changed their address, according to Trisha Purdon, director of the Office of Rural Prosperity.

One young attorney in Montgomery County was denied entry to the program, despite the county's need for legal professionals.

She had not updated her driver's license in the seven

years she was away at college and law school because her father was an elected official and she wanted to be able to vote for him in each election.

"We kept seeing these perfect people that were trying to go through this process, and then were getting denied due to odd things," Purdon said.

"... I was able to dig into the original statute and work with our legal team and our administration to really analyze the original intent of the program, to address these people that were obviously critically needed people in these rural communities."

People who move into a ROZ county from out of state are potentially eligible for a tax credit to cover 100% of their personal state income taxes through the duration of the program.

For every 25 cents the state spends on a ROZ participant, the state gets back \$3.85 in added value, through property taxes, sales taxes and income taxes.

The updated framework will allow more people to participate in the five-year program, which currently has 221 active participants, 123 people on the waitlist to get approved and enough funding for 500, according to Purdon.

The average student loan debt in Kansas is \$32,160, according to 2023 Federal Student Aid data, and the difference of \$15,000 in student loan repayment has proven to be life-changing for many ROZ participants.

Between 2012 and 2022, 1,670 people enrolled in the program, receiving a total of roughly \$13.3 million.

For Trent Weinman, ROZ has done more than give him some extra pocket change — it's carved his life's path.

When he graduated college, Weinman debated whether he wanted to create a life in Kansas City or return to his hometown of Phillipsburg in Phillips County, Kansas.

After learning that the program could help him pay off his student loans, he moved back to Phillips County and enrolled in ROZ, which he said "definitely influenced" his decision to then settle down, get married and have a family.

"It really had an impact on my entire life," Weinman said. "... And I don't think I'd be here in this community without [ROZ], that's just the truth.

"Me being able to ease that financial burden, to be able to whittle my loans down that much, made a payment manageable enough to where I could raise my family in the community that I wanted to, which is a rural zone.

"In a rural community, everybody raises your kids — like I was yelled at by the neighbors when I was doing things that were wrong, and everybody kind of looked out for each other, so I wanted that for my kids."



Trent Weinman, with his son, returned to Phillips County, Kan. after applying for a program that helped with student loans.

According to an audit of the program, around 1,430 individuals moved to ROZ counties between 2012 and 2022 specifically for the program, like Weinman, while the remaining individuals would have moved to the counties regardless.

Republic County resident Ashleigh Brandenburgh falls into the latter category.

Having spent her whole life in Topeka, Brandenburgh never envisioned herself living in a rural county, but after her sister passed away, she uprooted her life and moved to Republic County, where the population is under 5,000, to help raise her sister's children.

Because of the ROZ program, she was able to buy a house instead of renting — something she never thought she would do.

Although she hasn't fully paid off her student loans yet, the program's helped with a "good chunk" of it and it pre-

vents her from having to worry about how she'll be able to make payments each month, she said.

While 95 of Kansas' 105 counties are designated "Rural Opportunity Zones," some of them don't provide any actual funding toward the program, but instead allow employers to sponsor people through ROZ; 40 counties contribute to the fund, the amount of which the state then matches.

"Some of these counties are like, 'I don't want to pay for somebody else's schooling,'" said Jenny Russell, Republic County's economic development board director.

"Well, here's what you're not understanding is, yes, you're helping them to pay for their schooling, but you're also helping them to buy a house, helping them to be able to have kids earlier, you're allowing them to

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## SNAP/STATS

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### MOST-VISITED NATIONAL PARKS

PARK	NO. OF VISITORS EACH YEAR
Great Smoky Mountains.....	13.3 million
Grand Canyon .....	4.7 million
Zion .....	4.6 million
Yellowstone .....	4.5 million
Rocky Mountain.....	4.1 million

Source: National Park Service

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# LUCC members discuss housing challenges, solutions during D.C. meeting

From LUCC page 1

The Amazon Housing Equity Fund is allocating \$2 billion among Arlington County, Nashville-Davidson County, Tenn. and King County Wash. to create and preserve more than 20,000 affordable homes near its offices, with 16,000 complete thus far.

In Arlington County, that has taken the form of a loan, along with one from the county, to a real estate management company to purchase a 1,334-unit garden-style apartment complex that will remain affordable for renters making 60 percent or less of the area median income. The fund also donated to a local housing conservancy to fund the purchase of an apartment building and vacant land that would support 550 homes available to low- and medium-income renters.

But there's more to it than just raw spending power.

"The Housing Equity Fund has had the biggest impact where there have been policies that enable and invite more affordable housing, where there is funding to do things like what we were able to do with [the garden apartments], where our investments can be even more catalytic," said KellyAnn Kirkpatrick, senior product manager for Amazon's Housing Equity Fund.

She stressed that just providing housing isn't enough, that partnering with service providers who can communicate in the languages that residents speak and coordinating with transit agencies is crucial to making sure housing works for residents.

"From the public sector side, partnerships start with having the tools in place and being ready to be deployed to support opportunities as they arise," Danao-Schroeder said.

That leads to a number of questions:

- Does your comprehensive plan or general plan clearly articulate your jurisdiction's affordable housing policy?
- Do your zoning and general land use planning documents provide ample opportunities for multifamily development, regardless of affordability?
- Do you have inclusionary



Harris County, Texas Commissioner Adrian Garcia describes how no zoning does not necessarily mean no problems when it comes to promoting housing affordability. Photo by Josh Reed



Hennepin County, Minn. Commissioner Angela Conley (right) makes a point as Kareem Murphy, the county's director of inter-governmental affairs, looks on. Photo by Josh Reed

or incentive-based affordable housing policies to leverage affordable housing benefits when private development occurs?

- Does your jurisdiction have a housing trust fund or other mechanism for financing production or increasing affordable housing?
- Is your affordable housing trust fund adequately funded to meet the needs of the community?

"But," Danao-Schroeder said, "even with all these elements in place, we sometimes come up short."

LUCC Chair David Crowley noted the importance of housing in citizen's well-being.

"In Milwaukee County, housing is a matter of public health and housing stability is a critical social determinant of

health," he said. "Housing can influence our health, can influence our economics, can influence our education, our safety and our resilience."

Salt Lake County, Utah Mayor Jenny Wilson noted that counties have increasingly taken multilateral partnerships into consideration in recent years.

"Partnering with private entities enables counties to access a broader pool of resources and networks that may have not been traditionally available to us or maybe we weren't even aware they were there," she said.

"I really feel that it's even more accelerated post-COVID. I think we have to unpack everything; we all go back to the revenue we received, the greater and deeper relationships

with community partners have made this next phase more effective.

"So, there's a little something good that came out of that horrible couple of years."

Hennepin County, Minn. Commissioner Angela Conley said the zoning authorities rest with municipalities and create a minefield for counties and developers.

"Oftentimes, developers of affordable housing are navigating this really intricate maze of regulations and rules and associated bureaucratic processes from neighborhood groups to planning commissions and this presents hurdles for developers when pursuing equitable housing solutions," she said.

"Taken alone, each of those local regulations may have significant benefits, but also those benefits should be weighed against broader affordability implications. Sometimes the most effective solution is really the smallest one and that's a periodic review of your local regulatory barriers."

"By identifying and addressing these barriers, policymakers like us can promote equity and inclusion, and that is ensuring affordable housing is available to everyone — to all residents regardless of their socioeconomic status."

At the opposite end of the

spectrum, Harris County, Texas has no zoning at all, but that doesn't necessarily make it easy.

"When I became a county commissioner in 2019, affordable housing was at the top of my agenda for my team to achieve," said Harris County Commissioner Adrian Garcia.

"We are barely breaking ground on some of the projects that we started exploring and trying to navigate in 2019. The problem is finding plots of land that are absent of environmental issues and flood problems. And when you're using state or federal dollars, the environmental studies are all-or-nothing, meaning it either has some contamination or it has none. Then, we have to find other dollars to remediate what we think is a good developable piece of property."

Arlington County Board Member Matt de Ferranti noted that despite all the policy mechanisms available to encourage housing affordability, leadership from elected officials is a necessary ingredient.

"In many communities, you can see the seeds of the affordable housing push a decade ago," he said. So is, "creating a context where you have leadership that is willing to stand for affordable housing. There's no substitute." **CN**

## Farm bill negotiations offer an opportunity to fund the Secure Rural Schools program

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#### From WIR page 1

has navigated a family medical crisis during the last year.

The WIR Board voted to accept Maui County, Hawaii's bid to play host to the 2026 conference. The 2025 conference will be held in Pennington County, S.D. May 20-24.

### The state of public lands counties

The Western Interstate Region met during a tenuous moment for public lands counties, with funding for federally managed ground still up in the air, the looming publishing of the U.S. Forest Service's rule on old growth forests and the Bureau of Land Management's (BLM) recent rule that places conservation on equal footing with other multiple uses.

"We have an administration that has thrown out hundreds of hundreds of new rules, a lot of which will affect the West," McCart said during the Annual Business Meeting. "We've got a lot of work ahead of us to protect our constituents back home."

The PILT program remains subject to the whims of the appropriation process for the FY2025 budget and the Secure Rural Schools (SRS) program remains unauthorized, though there is an opening for it to be included in the farm bill.

"We have some time to reauthorize SRS," NACo Chief Government Affairs Officer Mark Ritacco told the WIR Board of Directors. "There are many moving vehicles to which SRS can be attached and we want to hitch a ride with the next moving train and we really need your help to do that," noting direct appeals to lawmakers by county officials help support advocacy efforts.

The U.S. House of Representatives recently passed a series of bills affecting public lands, including the WEST Act of 2023, which would revoke the BLM's recently finalized conservation and landscape health rule and prevent the BLM from introducing similar rules in the future.

The NACo National Center



**Greg Chilcott (left) and John Espy (right) continue to laugh and Todd Devlin (center) acts like he didn't have the WIR General Session audience in stitches a minute earlier when he roasted Chilcott while presenting him with the Dale Sowards Award.** Photo by Amber Edwards

for Public Lands Policy is continuing its fundraising effort to endow an investment fund that would finance the center's operation, with \$6 million pledged toward its \$15 million goal. The center will compile land use plans, natural resource plans, legal analysis, data and more resources of value to public lands counties.

### Mother of Counties

Mariposa County once encompassed 12 other California counties, stretching south to Los Angeles. More than half of what remains is federally managed, split among Yosemite National Park, the Sierra National Forest and Stanislaus National Forest.

During a joint mobile meeting of the Public Lands and Environment, Energy and Land Use committees, one attendee noted that the Sierra National Forest's state of management assuaged some concerns about that attendee's Forest Service land.

Significant deferred infrastructure maintenance backlogs also dog the national forests. Visits to giant sequoia trees helped put the task of



**Sandra Chapman, chair of the Southern Sierra Miwuk Nation Council, looks on as her grandniece, Tara Fouch-Moore, the council's secretary, describes their tribe's relationship with Mariposa County, Calif. while presenting to the WIR Board.** Photo by Charlie Ban

managing public lands in perspective for many attendees.

Yosemite National Park remains the county's chief tourism driver, almost to a fault, making it a classic "gateway" county. Increased interest in outdoor recreation has drawn a glut of visitors that can make peak season resemble waiting in line at an amusement park.

The Park Service is developing crowd management strategies for the park, Superintendent Cicely Muldoon said during a tour of the park.

Despite a 40-year effort for federal recognition that has

thus far remained fruitless, the Southern Sierra Miwuk Tribe has maintained a strong relationship with Mariposa County.

"Essentially, the folks in D.C. have been telling us that we don't exist, we don't have a tribal community, we aren't a tribe," said Tribal Secretary Tara Fouch-Moore. "We have gotten support from the county and saying, as a government agency, we recognize these folks as a distinct Indian community, as a tribal government with political influence and community connections that are unique.

"Having their support in this

process has been instrumental."

The tribe operates the Miwumati Family Healing Center, which offers health services, mental health and counseling resources, as well as a food pantry and plays host to cultural events. But it's open to non-native residents, too.

"Being a small rural community, we don't have a whole lot of medical services available in our region, so again, the Indian clinic really provides a lot of services to the general community, including optometry, dental, general physician, so I think partnering with the tribal community has been beneficial to both us and the county in order to just elevate the amount of services we're able to offer," Fouch-Moore said.

The tribe is also collaborating with the county, the Sierra Foothill Conservancy and the Mariposa County Arts Council to restore the Mariposa Creek Parkway, the creek that runs through the town of Mariposa.

"It's basically why the town was built there," she said. "In ancient times it was an Indian

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# Outdoor rec shows viability in public lands counties

by **Charlie Ban**  
senior writer

The public-public partnership was so crazy, it just might work.

There was no money at stake driving negotiations, and nobody was trying to bend anyone else to their will, but counties, towns, the U.S. Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management and the National Park Service put their heads together and came up with a partnership agreement that led to sustainable recreation being identified as one of the top three priorities of the Inyo National Forest's new management plan in 2019. If the process wasn't thrilling enough for the participants, the results should be for the beneficiaries: The communities and visitors in the Eastern Sierra region of California.

And there is gold in them hills: A U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis study finds the outdoor recreation industry contributes \$1.1 trillion to the U.S. economy annually.

That's the ticket for many public lands counties, otherwise at the whim of federal policies regarding use of public lands. The work they can do to capitalize on natural assets can build and sustain a tourism economy.

"We're going to leverage this management plan and now we're going to start to do something with it, to work with our federal partners to advance the sectors around sustainable recreation tourism," said John Wentworth, CEO and board president of the Mammoth Lakes Trails and Public Access Foundation and a Mammoth Lakes, Calif. town council member.

Mammoth Lakes and Bishop joined Mono and Alpine counties along with the Inyo and Humboldt-Toiyabe national forests to form the Eastern Sierra Sustainable Recreation Partnership. Every month, members meet to plan how to advance outdoor recreation in a part of the state where 90% of the land is federally managed.

"People in California don't understand that 50% of the land mass in the state is managed by the federal government, so



**Volunteers move a boulder near the Pacific Crest Trail under the supervision of U.S. Forest Service personnel as depicted in a photo that received honorable mention in the 2020 Pacific Crest Trail Association photo contest.** Photo by Mark de Hoo

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it makes sense to be forming these types of partnerships," Wentworth said. "It is a big deal economically in this state."

Wentworth worked with Dana Stroud, Central California's community-based solutions manager from the governor's Office of Business and Economic Development. She described the \$600 million California Jobs First initiative and its potential to help the state's 13 regions, 10 of which comprise multiple counties, determine a direction to take their local economies.

"Instead of the state coming in and saying, 'We think we know what you should be doing at this level,' we are investing in these regional communities to let them explore, 'What are their local assets? What are their local capacities? What are their local industries that they want to start to build upon?'" Stroud said.

Each region received \$5 million to fund planning efforts, which includes identifying emerging industry sectors, and \$14 million per region for environmental review, project design or engineering, permitting or feasibility studies.

Nine of the 13 regions have identified tourism as an emerging industry sector.

The California Jobs First pro-

cess "now tees them up to start pursuing some funding opportunities to invest in their recreation and tourism product," Stroud said. "We can speculate, we talk about it and it's not a boondoggle. There is a very strong economic element to this and the more that we can identify and talk about it, the more opportunities we have to align with these funding opportunities out there. It starts to gain some traction has a real tradeable sector," and have value.

"Recreation tourism is a tradable sector. It's going to be about partnerships."

Partnerships were part of the fabric of the legislation establishing the national trail system — trails that were meant to be supported by public-private partnerships like one coordinated by the Pacific Crest Trail Association.

The association has a memorandum of understanding with the National Park Service, the U.S. Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management and California State Parks to collectively manage and maintain the 2,650-mile-long trail stretching between Canada and Mexico. As a non-profit, the association is also able to raise private money for maintenance, including more than \$48 million over the past 10 years. It also coordinates



**Heidi Hall, a Nevada County, Calif. supervisor, illustrates the economic viability emerging in the sustainable outdoor recreation industry.** Photo by Charlie Ban

the work of more than 2,000 volunteers annually, who generated 55,567 volunteer hours of trail maintenance in 2023.

"These are folks from within the communities along the trail and other folks who traveled in to do trail maintenance projects, anything from just clearing brush to folks that are registered sawyers (someone who saws) who can go in and really cut down large logs that have blown down to keep the trail open for foot traffic and equestrians," said Megan Wargo, the association's CEO.

The work the association puts into maintaining the trail rolls into towns near the trail, which benefit from attracting hikers and horseback riders.

"There are folks that are coming into all the communities up and down the trail when they want to rest for a couple days at the hotels to eat pizza, drink

beer, you know, all of that good stuff," Wargo said.

She has encouraged towns near the trail to reach out and welcome hikers, with something as simple as a sign welcoming trail users or as sophisticated as Mount Shasta, Calif.'s passport that encourages hikers to visit different attractions along the trail and complete stewardship challenges.

"A lot of the towns that have been really successful at connecting to the Pacific Crest Trail in our community are folks that see the trail as part of their identity," she said. "We've heard stories about people that were coming for a couple days and extended to stay a week in Mount Shasta because they wanted to check off all the hikes in the passport. You just need to find fun ways to draw people in and to really experience that trail culture." **CN**



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# County mental health advocates take issues to Capitol Hill

by **Charlie Ban**  
senior writer

Amid efforts of their own at home to better treat mental health, members of NACo's Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission asked Congress for the tools to do that work more effectively.

They aimed their advocacy efforts at the Due Process Continuity of Care Act, the Institutions for Mental Diseases exclusion and reauthorizing the SUPPORT Act during a May 2 briefing on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C.

Originally enacted in 2018, the SUPPORT Act contained important funding for community-based treatment and recovery programs and enacted key policy changes, including requiring state Medicaid programs to cover buprenorphine, methadone and naltrexone, all FDA-approved medications for opioid use disorder.

"This legislation emphasizes the need to address mental illness and substance use disorder concurrently, something that aligns with our commission's priorities," said Dow Constantine, King County, Wash. executive and a co-chair of the commission.

David Crowley, Milwaukee



**Mayor Jerry Demings, speaking at NACo's office in Washington, D.C., offers an example of how his native Orange County, Fla. manages mental health treatment.** Photo by Bryan Dozier

County, Wis.'s executive, chair of NACo's Large Urban County Caucus and a member of the commission concurred.

"Reauthorizing the SUPPORT Act is imperative for counties to continue to address the ever-growing needs of our residents and to make pivotal changes to reduce barriers to accessing services," he said.

April Aycock, director of Monroe County, N.Y.'s Office of Mental Health and a member of the commission, noted that access

to timely mental health services is severely limited, reforming the Institutions for Mental Diseases (IMD) exclusion could help by relaxing restrictions on residential facilities. Medicaid currently limits residential facilities to 16 beds, which creates significant barriers at the local level in providing clinically necessary inpatient care and exacerbated issues accessing care for low-income individuals.

"Reforming the IMD exclusion is critical to expanding

access to crisis care and supporting building out the infrastructure in local communities to deal with the present behavioral health crisis," she said.

"I want to urge how critical stable financing for service provision through Medicaid is to support the sustainability of local crisis response infrastructure," she said. "Future and further federal investment will aid counties in providing crisis stabilization services for those with ongoing mental health and

substance use issues, as the demand for crisis services continues to grow."

The Due Process Continuity

'...it's clear that a reevaluation of the federal Medicaid exclusionary policies is necessary...'

of Care Act would amend the Medicaid Inmate Exclusion Policy to allow access to Medicaid coverage for pretrial detainees.

Orange County, Fla. Mayor Jerry Demings, a former sheriff, noted that the cost of providing mental health services to pre-trial detainees creates an undue burden on counties, particularly because roughly half of the people in the criminal justice system suffer from mental illness and most of them have a co-occurring substance use disorder. The Due Process Continuity of Care Act would address the Medicaid Inmate Exclusion Policy, continuing coverage through adjudication.

"Considering the significant changes in our national approach to healthcare and mental health over the past few

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## Mariposa County and a local tribe work together for recognition and local services

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From **WIR** page 4

village, then it was a hot spot for the gold rush but in modern times, the town turned its back to this creek, so it's become overrun with invasive plants."

The county has acquired the land around the creek and the tribe has worked on the invasive plant removal, but a larger conversation has started among the partners about how the area will present itself.

"It's been easy to harp on things like being the gateway to Yosemite and we had the gold rush, but there are many other stories that aren't being told, including the tribal story," she said. "The point of this is not to replace the gold rush narrative



**Attendees hear about the importance of intergovernmental partnerships for natural disaster mitigation.** Photo by Amber Edwards

but to expand the story, tell a more rich, full story, of the history of our area that includes all people."

The tribe has focused on development along the parkway, which has opened the door for other planning activities.

"It's been really great that we have that trust between the counties and do all these things together," she said.

Attendees heard from Maria Gallegos Herrera, USDA Rural Development's state director for California; Brian Good, a

U.S. Forest Service smokejumper who shared footage from a parachute jump into a forest fire and Adrienne Haslet, a professional ballroom dancer who spoke about her physical and mental recovery from losing part of a leg in the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing and, several years later, shattering one of her arms when she was hit by a car at the site of the bombing.

She advocated for, and won, recognition for amputee athletes in the Boston Marathon, the world's oldest. Para Athletics divisions offer prize money and awards to athletes with visual, lower-limb and upper-limb impairments. After Haslet's second major injury, she finished fourth among runners with lower-limb impairments in 2022.

"Diversity is being invited to

dance, inclusion is being asked to dance," she said.

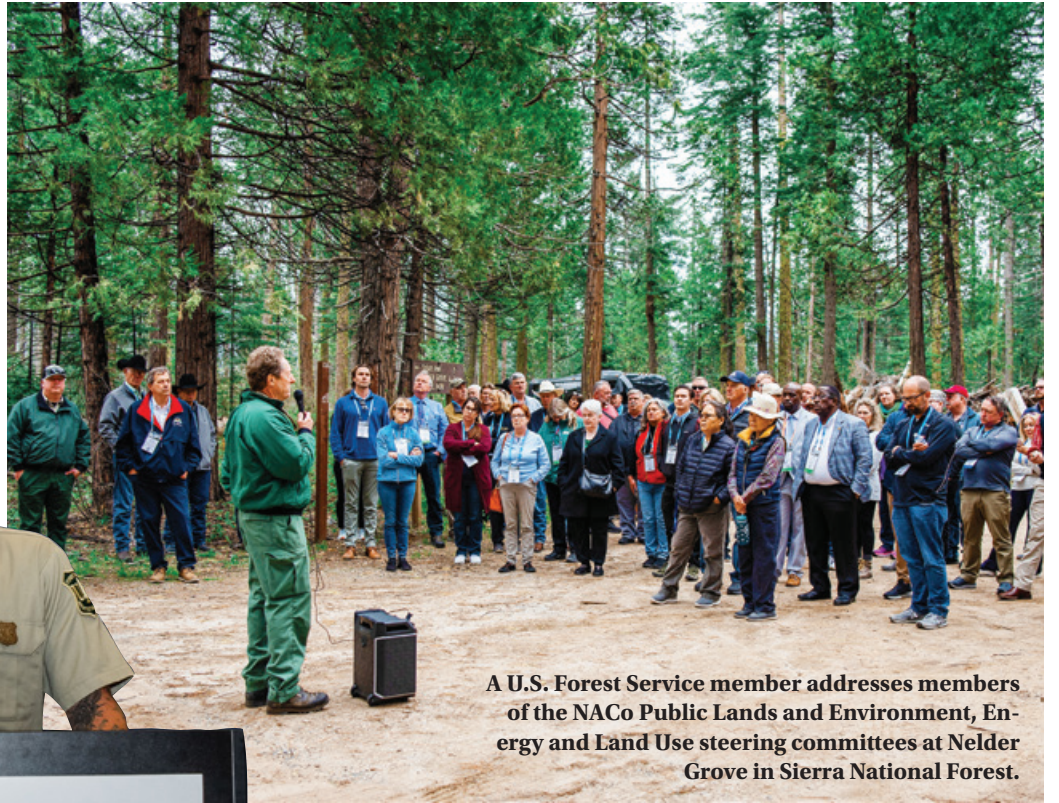
### Lighter fare

Ravalli County, Mont. Commissioner Greg Chilcott was recognized as the Dale Sowards Award winner in honor of his service to public lands counties, a career in county government that started in 2003 as well as his service to the NACo Public Lands Steering Committee and a term as WIR president. Prairie County, Mont. Commissioner Todd Devlin, employed some "Rodney Dangerfield humor" to roast Chilcott.

"Greg stuck his head out the window of his pickup the other day when he went to visit with the neighbor, and he got arrested for mooning," Devlin recalled, to applause and laughter. **CN**



Attendees tour a Yosemite National Park fire station.



A U.S. Forest Service member addresses members of the NACo Public Lands and Environment, Energy and Land Use steering committees at Nelder Grove in Sierra National Forest.



WIR attendees arrive for the conference, held May 8-10 in Mariposa County, Calif.



Brian Good, a U.S. Forest Service smokejumper, shares footage from a parachute jump into a forest fire.

2024 NACo

# WESTERN INTERSTATE REGION CONFERENCE //

PHOTOS BY AMBER EDWARDS UNLESS OTHERWISE NOTED

## IN PHOTOS







Members of WIR visit the Nelder Grove Historic Area at Sierra National Forest.



Yosemite National Park Superintendent Cicely Muldoo speaks to Maricopa County, Calif. Supervisor Miles Menetry and other WIR members.



A U.S. Forest Service representative speaks with conference attendees.



(L-r): Julie Ring, Mary Jo McGuire, Cate Duin, Darren Tobolt, Trista Martinson and Susan Morris pause for a photo.



Professional ballroom dancer Adrienne Haslet delights the luncheon crowd.

Photo by Charlie Ban

WIR Conference attendees pause for a photo after viewing scenic Half Dome while touring Yosemite National Park.



# 'The county is my home now'

From RURAL page 2

volunteer more, so it's multifaceted."

According to Kansas Department of Commerce data, ROZ has sustained 806 jobs in an 11-year period — nearly 50% of which are in the education or healthcare sector. Engineer-



Trent Weinman, pictured here with his family, returned to his hometown of Phillips County.

ing is also a large sector for the program, according to Purdon.

Weinman said he appreciates what ROZ did not only for him, but also what it's doing for the community by bringing college-educated people back into the county.

"That's what this town was really missing," Weinman said. "Everybody would flee and go to these cities, because of the paying jobs and the burden of student loan debt — I mean, you just can't do it on most rural wages. You take the \$15,000 off, it helps so much."

Weinman is glad to see the program widen its eligibility requirements, so that more people can take advantage of the benefits and move to rural areas, whether they're from there or not.

"I think any opportunity to get those younger families into these communities that are aging is so important," Weinman said. "To continue the traditions, to continue the smaller community lifestyles."

The Office of Rural Prosperity is investing more time and resources into marketing the program.

It hired a firm to determine which states across the country are most likely to have residents move to Kansas, based on geographic patterns, and is targeting recruitment for critical jobs needed in rural areas,

like healthcare and education.

The Office of Rural Prosperity is also focusing out of state relocation advertising in Arkansas, Colorado, Missouri, Nebraska, Oklahoma and Texas, because of their proximity, and plans to work with the Kansas Department of Commerce's tourism division to target people who have shown interest in visiting Kansas or who have graduated from a Kansas school, according to Purdon.

While Republic County's population has dropped slightly since the county joined the program in 2011, Russell — who firsthand has seen how limiting the previous qualifications were — said the new changes to ROZ are encouraging, and the county has six people currently going through the new application process. She can see a tide shifting, she said.

"I really feel like rural areas can grow, and I actually feel like we're on the cusp of that right now, which is so exciting," Russell said.

"... I have lived in this region for my entire life, pretty much, and I've never lived in a rural community that has grown, so it's really cool to see that."

Caleb Breon, Phillips County Economic Development's executive director, said he sees the program as a tool to both aid Kansas' current issue of dwindling populations in rural counties and to create more of a culture around people returning to their rural communities.

"It's a way to set us up for the long-term," Breon said. "It obviously helps fix some things now, but having this in place as kids get older, they start to understand what incentives are available for them to take advantage of, so maybe it'll encourage them to come back home and contribute to their community and set up the next generation, and the cycle just keeps continuing."

"And I feel like for the most part, [participants] are here to stay," he added.

Brandenburgh, who's in her fourth year of the program, said she'll be in Republic County long after her student loan payments expire.

"The county is my home now," she said. **CN**

## PROFILES IN SERVICE

### KEITH BECKER

NACo Board member  
McPherson County, Kan.  
Commissioner



BECKER

**Number of years active in NACo:** Three years

**Years in public service:** Fourteen years school board member, currently 10 years as county commissioner

**Occupation:** Farmer

**Education:** High school graduate

**The hardest thing I've ever done:** Campaigning to defeat an incumbent elected official who had served in office for many years.

**Three people (living or dead) I'd invite to dinner:** Jesus, Ronald Reagan and Abraham Lincoln

**You'd be surprised to learn that I:** Raised four daughters as a single parent.

**The most adventurous thing I've ever done is:** Ski in Winter Park, Colo.

**My favorite way to relax is:** Watching sports

**I'm most proud of:** Working as a farmer to provide food for the world while being a good steward of the land.

**Every morning I read:** The current world news and sports.

**My favorite meal is:** A hamburger

A dream I have is to:  
Travel to Hawaii



Looking to hire county staff?  
**Post your job listing on NACo's new career site!**



[jobs.naco.org](https://jobs.naco.org)



# BRIGHT IDEAS | LEON COUNTY, FLORIDA

## ‘Summer Backyard Bucket List’ Creates Tourism Ambassadors

### PROBLEM:

When tourists come to town, some residents aren't aware of all of the dining and attractions available in their own backyard.

### SOLUTION:

Leon County created a “Summer Backyard Bucket List” to help residents discover all there is to do in their own county.

by **Meredith Moran**  
staff writer

Of the more than 2 million people who visit Leon County, home to Florida state capital Tallahassee, each year, around 25% are coming to see friends and family. Leon County decided to take advantage of this discovery and create a summer bucket list for residents to “check off” local attractions, so they can support county businesses while finding new places and experiences they can share with visitors.

“We wanted to encourage local residents to become ‘ambassadors’ of Leon County,” said Katie Kole, senior marketing director for Visit Tallahassee. “So, when people are coming and visiting with their friends and family, rather than saying, ‘There’s nothing to do here,’ they say, ‘There’s all these amazing restaurants, bars and attractions.’”

The Summer Backyard Bucket List runs from the beginning of June through the end of August; this year will be the program’s fourth. When people go through the list — which includes parks, museums, shops, restaurants, bars and even non-businesses, like murals and statues — they can mark the activity as completed through the “Visit Tallahassee!” mobile app to “check in” or scan a QR code at each of the locations.

The program had 109 partners last year, and the county expects it to be even bigger this year, as it’s the county’s 200th anniversary and a variety of bicentennial celebrations will be featured on the list.

The Tallahassee Museum,

which sits lakeside on 52 acres, has been a partner each year. The museum offers nature trails and ziplining along with its wildlife exhibits. Russell Daws, the museum’s president, said he’s noticed a “definite uptick” in people visiting the museum the past three summers because of the bucket list.

“We’re pretty well known, but the bucket list gives us the opportunity to reach people that don’t know about us,” Daws said. “Leveraging Visit Tallahassee’s marketing efforts, it’s just a great way of introducing people to the museum.”

Over the course of this summer’s three-month bucket list, the Tallahassee Museum will have a new alligator exhibit, a display of African storks and the annual Swamp Stomp Music Festival, which features live folk and blues music.

“One of the best ways to get tourists is by word of mouth,” Daws said. “So, when people come to visit family or friends, it’s important our local residents are well aware of our attractions and the things to do, so that out-of-town people may get that information shared with them.”

Leon County Government works with the food blog Tallahassee Foodies and the Capital City Chamber of Commerce, a Black-centered business development and community outreach organization, to create the bucket list. The two organizations connect the county to local businesses and help market them to their large followings.

“We really wanted to make sure that we were reaching partners that were Black-owned businesses,” Kole said. “Katrina [Tuggerson], who’s the president at Capital City Chamber of Commerce, really helped open those doors to some businesses that maybe we didn’t already have relationships with, and one of our main goals is to make sure that this is very well-rounded as far as the establishments that we’re featuring.



“... And Tallahassee Foodies knows the ins and outs of restaurants; they were instrumental in getting restaurants involved in the program, as well.”

Last year’s offerings ranged from a cooking class at the Tallahassee cooking school KitchenAble to arcade games at Flippin’ Great Pinball.

“The main stipulation to be a part of the program is that you have to have some sort of visitor appeal,” Kole said. “So, it can be anything that a visitor would

**Residents and tourists visit restaurants and local attractions such as museums and murals as part of Leon County, Fla.’s “Summer Backyard Bucket List.” The program began in 2021 and reaches about 10,000 people on social media. The biggest thing the county learned was to keep the program simple.**

want to go to and see and do or experience.”

This year, the county’s adding tiered winnings. In the past, people could win a free T-shirt

if they checked off 20 activities on the bucket list. Now, there are going to be smaller prizes awarded along the way, once a participant has visited five spots and larger prizes once they hit 10.

At the end of the summer, one participant will win a grand-prize of a two-night staycation in Leon County that includes hotel accommodations, meals and activities. Each check-in through the “Visit Tallahassee!” mobile app earns users one grand prize entry.

Participants are encouraged to share photos and videos of themselves at the different spots on the list on their social media, using the hashtag #Tally-BucketListSweepstakes.

Facebook has been the biggest platform for the program, followed by Instagram.

Last year, over the program’s three months, it reached more than 10,000 people on social media. Most of the people who finish the challenge are young families or millennials, according to Kole.

The biggest thing the county has learned since the program began in 2021 is to keep it simple, Kole said.

“You have to make it easy for people to participate,” Kole said. “Because if you overcomplicate it, then people won’t do it.”

Leon County resident Tamara Verheyen participated in last year’s bucket list and plans to again this summer. She said she’s found new spots through the challenge that she loves and has returned to with family and friends.

“I like visiting new places,” Verheyen said. “Some of the places on the bucket list were ones that I had been meaning to visit, but just hadn’t taken the time to. Having them on the bucket list made it fun to go try out.”

*Leon County’s “Summer Backyard Bucket List” won NACo’s 2023 Achievement Award in the Community and Economic Development category.*

# Building bridges: County leaders play a critical role

by Kit Chalberg

As the major political parties have become more homogeneous across identities and worldviews, we are seeing America's political landscape grow to be increasingly polarized. This trend has led to decreased interactions between individuals with differing perspectives, exacerbating perceptions of division and threat.

Our worldviews drive our preferences and because they now more consistently align with our politics, we experience a decline in interactions with people who think differently than we do.

As our divisions continue to influence us to spend less time together, we lack opportunities to experience our many commonalities.

This leads us to exaggerate our differences and perceptions of threats from the "other" group, compelling us to cling to our own group more tightly and further reject those with opposing views.

We are experiencing a heavily divided culture where bridging across differences proves to be exceedingly difficult. However, even amid significant polarization, there is hope! A Public Agenda/USA TODAY Hidden Common Ground survey found that:

- 72 percent of Americans believe that we have more in common than what divides us
- 93 percent of Americans say it is important to reduce divisiveness in the United States, including two-thirds who say it is very important to do so, and



- 79 percent say that creating more opportunities for people to talk and interact with those who have different values and views would be effective in reducing divisiveness and destructive disagreement.

And, despite the waning trust in federal elected officials, Gallup's findings indicate that 67 percent place significant trust in local government to tackle local challenges.

Gallup also found that 67 percent have a great deal of trust in local government to handle community issues. County leaders are poised to play a crucial role in bringing people together and bridging divides.

In support of NACo President Mary Jo McGuire's signature "ForwardTogether" theme, NACo has partnered with the

Convergence Center for Policy Resolution, the leading organization bridging divides to solve critical issues through collaborative problem-solving across ideological, political, and cultural divisions.

The heart of our collective effort lies in the "Bridging Divides: Tools for County Leaders to Overcome Division and Foster Collaboration" toolkit — a comprehensive resource designed to share the research behind the divisions gripping our nation and equip county government leaders with practical strategies and tools to bridge divides.

In addition to the toolkit, Convergence will also build county leaders' capacity through training sessions. At the NACo Legislative Conference in February, Convergence delivered a ses-

sion that laid a foundation for bridge-building.

One more session is slated for July, providing county leaders with a unique opportunity to identify strategies to tackle the most pressing issues affecting their communities and departments. In the fall of 2024, Convergence will offer an eLearning program to a cohort of county leaders.

Solving shared problems across our differences requires a problem-solving mindset that helps to reset our typical "us vs. them" thinking.

Here is a summary of the five elements of the problem mindset, which you can learn more about in the toolkit.

• **Conflict Can Be Constructive.** Conflict can be an opportunity to learn and push thinking to a new level.

• **Everyone Gets the Benefit of the Doubt.** Negative intentions are rare. Seek to understand who people are — their experiences, their values, and why they think the way they do — before passing judgment on them or their viewpoints.

• **Curiosity Is the Cure.** Cultivate curiosity and keep asking questions to learn more rather than just react, especially when you hear things that you disagree with or don't fully understand.

• **Relationships at the Core.** Stay focused on building quality relationships. Identify and focus on shared goals, values, identities, and life experiences.

• **Seek Higher Ground.** Strive to develop solutions that go beyond compromise to integrate the perspectives and meet the diverse needs of everyone who has a stake in your problem.



To learn more about and to pre-register for the Convergence eLearning training program, please visit: <https://convergencepolicy.org/learning-lab/pilot/>. The Bridging

Divides: Tools for County Leaders to Overcome Division and Foster Collaboration toolkit can be accessed using the QR code. **CN**

*Kit Chalberg is the senior director for programs at the Convergence Center for Policy Resolution.*



**GET TO KNOW...**

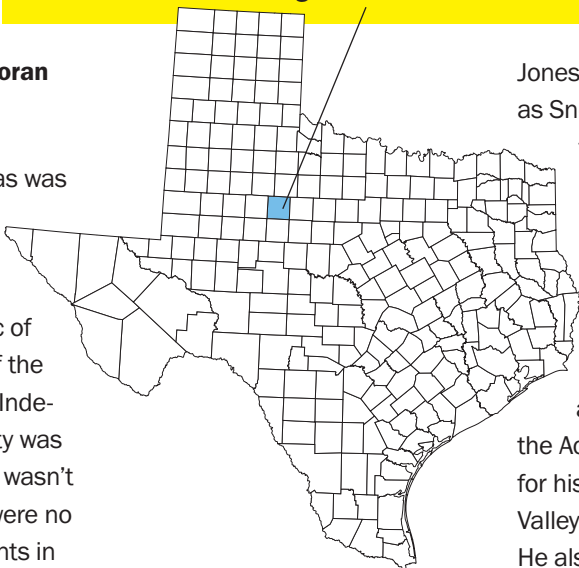
**Fisher County, Texas**

by **Meredith Moran**  
staff writer

Fisher County, Texas was named for Samuel Rhoads Fisher, the Secretary of the Navy for the Republic of Texas and a signer of the Texas Declaration of Independence. The county was created in 1876, but wasn't organized, as there were no permanent settlements in the area, until 1886, when its county government was instituted. The county has a population of 3,622 and the county seat, Roby, is home to 582 people, according to the 2022 census.

In 1996, 42 Roby farmers pooled their money and bought 430 lottery tickets. The night before Thanksgiving, they hit the jackpot, winning \$46 million. The win came just at the right time, as the small town was experiencing a drought and some of the farmers were in the process of filing for bankruptcy. It became international news and film crews all the way from Japan and Germany came to capture the story. Soon after, a family wearing jackets with "Roby" printed on them at the Fort Worth livestock show had strangers ask them if they could touch them for good luck. One of the winners went on to become Roby's youngest mayor, at 31.

**Pro Football Hall of Fame Sammy Baugh, known as**



**"Slingin' Slammy," retired in the Fisher County town of Rotan. Baugh, who played for the Washington Redskins (now the Commanders), was the first quarterback inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame. He popularized the forward pass as a primary offensive tactic and his number, 33, is the only jersey Washington has retired. Baugh played quarterback, defensive back and punter for the team, which he helped bring to five title games and two championships. After playing, he coached the New York Titans and Houston Oilers before retiring to Double Mountain Ranch in Rotan, where he lived until he passed away at age 94.**

Another notable person with ties to Fisher County is Oscar-winning actor Tommy Lee

Jones. Jones' first acting role, as Sneezy in "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs," was in his second-grade play at an elementary school in Rotan. Lee went on to win a Best Supporting Actor Oscar for his role in "The Fugitive," and was nominated by the Academy three other times for his roles in "JFK," "In the Valley of Elah" and "Lincoln." He also has two Screen Actors Guild awards, an Emmy and a Golden Globe.

The city of Hamlin is located in Fisher County and Jones County. In 2019, five baby alligators were

found in a Hamlin home's backyard, in the family's pool. An Abilene Texas Parks & Wildlife game warden discovered the gators after receiving a tip the family was keeping them in a pool through photos that had been posted on Snapchat. The warden took the alligators to the Abilene Zoo.

Eskota is now a ghost town, but it was once the only town alongside the Texas and Pacific Railroad in Fisher County. No one knows what the name represents - the town was initially meant to be named "Trent" after a local rancher, Riley Trent, but the wrong sign was delivered, so it was put to use, and the name stuck.

Fisher County hosts a 24-hour hog hunt in Roby to benefit the county's fair and rodeo. The grand prize goes to the 3 Hog Stringer (whoever has the highest total weight of their heaviest three hogs). The Fisher County Rodeo Association also hosts a mutton bustin' competition, which allows children to get in on the fun of rodeos. While their older cowboy counterparts ride broncos and bulls, mutton bustin' participants ride sheep. The winner gets a belt buckle, just like the adult winner of the county's rodeo.



Slingin' Sammy Baugh

*Get to Know features new NACo member counties.*



**SITKA BOROUGH, ALASKA**

Once the U.S. government capital of the Department of Alaska (1867-1884) and District of Alaska (1884-1906), Sitka city and borough were incorporated on Dec. 2, 1971. The seal was redesigned in 2020, replacing a dated seal that depicted Russian aggression and occupation.



The new seal prominently features a totem pole, which represents the native Tlingit population. The name "Sheet'ka" is the native name for the land.

A fishing boat and buoy signify Sitka's large fishing community, which has been a mainstay of the community's culture and economy.

A helicopter represents Sitka's close relationship with the Air Force.

The volcanic Mount Edgecombe, one of the region's dominant physical features, looms over the John O'Connell Bridge, the first cable-stayed bridge in North America, which spans the Sitka Channel.

*If you'd like to see your county seal featured in County News, contact Charlie Ban: cban@naco.org.*

NACo swag is now available online!



# NEWS FROM ACROSS THE NATION

## ARIZONA

• **APACHE COUNTY'S** Health Start program is **helping expectant and new parents navigate motherhood.** The educational home-visiting program, offered through the county's Health Services department, allows mothers to tailor the education to what they are interested in or what they say they need to know. The program topics range from fetal development to budgeting and stress management.

• The average family spends between \$60 and \$90 on **diapers** each month per child. **PIMA COUNTY'S** Community Action Agency is ensuring that everyone has access to diapers through its Diaper Distribution Program, which distributes up to 150 diapers or pull-ups to low-income families each month; the pilot program is currently serving around 400 families.

## CALIFORNIA

• With the Affordable Connectivity Program set to expire, **LOS ANGELES COUNTY** is offering its own **high-speed broadband** service to low-income residents for as low as \$25 a month. The Community Broadband Networks service will be available later this year

## CALIFORNIA

• The **RIVERSIDE COUNTY** Regional Park and Open-Space District is working with local libraries to offer residents **free day passes to county parks**, hiking trails, picnic areas and nature preserves, with the aim of closing the "nature gap" and equalizing access to the outdoors. A RivCo-Parks Library pass, which can be checked out at any participating library, provides access to regional parks, lakes, educational programs and historic sites.

and all of its plans come with unlimited data and no contract. County residents who receive government benefits like SNAP or Medicaid or have a household income below 200% of the federal poverty line will be eligible.

• **SAN DIEGO COUNTY** supervisors recently approved a new **cannabis social equity program**, helping people who are low-income and have previously been arrested, convicted or deported for a cannabis-related crime set up a county-licensed cannabis business. Social equity business owners in the program will have a three-year window to start a cannabis-licensing process, so that they have the opportunity to secure capital and open before larger operators with more funding enter the market. At least 50% of storefront retailer licenses will be reserved for social equity applicants.

## COLORADO

• **BOULDER COUNTY** is using \$400,000 in American Rescue Plan Act dollars to repair and **rehabilitate mobile homes** at mobile home parks in the county. The funding will address energy efficiency, health and safety concerns,



accessibility issues and general repairs in mobile home units in Columbine and Orchid Grove mobile home parks, sites the county has deemed to have the greatest need. The county intends to use Community Development Block Grant Disaster Recovery program funding to expand the program to all of the county's mobile home parks.

• In an effort to **make trash more "bear safe," SUMMIT COUNTY** is reimbursing residents and businesses that install wildlife-resistant trash receptacles. Studies have shown that the most prevalent cause of conflict between bears and humans in Summit County is human-generated garbage. The program, which is funded through a Colorado Parks and Wildlife grant, is offering up to \$400 for residents with individual trash bins who make the switch and up to \$3,000 for business applicants with a dumpster.

## FLORIDA

**SARASOTA COUNTY** is helping **protect environmentally sensitive land** by acquiring 5 acres near a park and turtle preserve and preventing commercial development on it. Local wildlife, including gopher tortoises, red-shouldered hawks and great horned owls, and diverse plant life, including southern red cedar, cabbage palm and pond cypress, live on the land.

## MICHIGAN

• Eligible **OAKLAND COUNTY** residents can now receive up to \$2,000 to help **cover their water and sewer bills** and pay past due balances or plumbing repairs. The Hardship Assistance Program is intended for residents who don't qualify for existing water assistance but are experiencing a temporary financial hardship of some kind, such as sudden unemployment or medical expenses. County residents who make up to 300% of the federal poverty level, which is up to \$45,180 for one person or \$93,600 for a family of four, are eligible.

• **WASHTENAW COUNTY** is piloting a criminal justice



## NORTH CAROLINA

The **DARE COUNTY** library system recently launched a **home visits program**, or what some are calling "Doordash for books," for residents with mobility issues or for those who struggle to find time to go to the library. Just like if they were to go to the library themselves, individuals can speak with the librarian ahead of time to get recommendations or discuss what they're looking for. Any materials the library offers to check out in-person are available through the program.

reform program for low-level offenders. The Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion and Deflection (LEADD) pilot is a **pre-booking diversion initiative.** It connects people with a community-based case manager and resources include housing, employment and treatment, and gives law enforcement officers an alternative to citation, arrest and incarceration. The county launched the pilot after discovering that arrests and recidivism rates decrease when people are connected to social support services.

## MINNESOTA

**HENNEPIN COUNTY** is expanding an existing **crime intervention program** to serve the county's youth, linking them to mentors and resources before they get involved in the criminal justice system. The Youth Group Violence Intervention program will serve kids in the county who law enforcement deem as someone who would be a good candidate for it, primarily children who have a sibling involved in crime or are associated with other youth who are already on court supervision.

## PENNSYLVANIA

• **ALLEGHENY COUNTY** created a new web portal, allowing **sexual assault survivors to track their cases** through the justice system on their own time. Previously, sexual assault survivors had to request updates by submitting contact information to the correct law enforcement agency (which was often a confusing process to navigate), and would then be called with the information whenever it was available, which often led to people receiving the information at an unexpected time. Now, survivors can choose when they feel ready to receive information related to the case on their own terms.

• **LEHIGH COUNTY'S** Shared Housing and Resource Exchange (SHARE) affordable housing alternative program **pairs together homeowners with people in need of housing.** One of the participants in the dynamic must be over the age of 60, as the program is designed to help the county's senior population — whether it's connecting them to affordable housing options as the home-seeker or connecting them to care or companionship as the homeowner. Participants in the program can help "earn their keep" in the home by providing services, such as cleaning or maintaining the house. The highest percentage the homeowner can charge the home-seeker for rent is 30% of their monthly income.

• **YORK COUNTY** is investing in **energy and water conservation.** The York County Commercial Property Assessed Clean Energy Program, which was recently approved by the Board of Commissioners, helps businesses fund renewable energy and water conservation projects. The county is partnering with the nonprofit Sustainable Energy Fund on the program.

## VIRGINIA

**FRANKLIN COUNTY** recently launched Virginia's first-ever **Paramedic Apprenticeship program**, WSLs-TV

See NEWS FROM page 15



Photo by Ann Marie Pearce

**WASHINGTON**

• **THURSTON COUNTY's** WIN! Program, which rewards volunteer youth groups based in unincorporated parts of the county, is back up and running after a three-year hiatus due to the COVID-19 pandemic, ThurstonTalk.com reported. Getting youth involved helps encourage civic mindfulness and teaches them about water systems and the importance of watershed maintenance and protection. This year, the program will address stormwater pond maintenance and rehabilitation activities. The county's Storm and Surface Water Utility funds the program.

"This year, our WIN! Program aims to address stormwater infrastructure maintenance needs, particularly focusing on privately owned facilities where HOAs may have dissolved or struggle to fulfill maintenance responsibilities due to economic factors, for instance, where they are doing their best but their system is exceptionally large," Jim Leamy, stormwater inspector - residential for Thurston County Public Works.

*From NEWS FROM page 14*

reported. Its inaugural class started in January. "Those people who are retiring — that takes 80 years of experience out of our system. So, we need to fill that need. We need to fill that void," said Kathy Hodges,

executive director of Workforce Development with Franklin County. Apprentices take classes at the Franklin Center and work with nurses and doctors in hospitals. Apprentices also work side by side with paramedics in ambulances. Through the program, appren-

tices will complete 4,000 hours of paid on-the-job training and more than 280 hours of related technical instruction.

*Do you have news to share? Send your news tips and photos to Meredith Moran at mmo-ran@naco.org.*



**"First Call" participants in Cuyahoga County.**

related to a mental health crisis. The aim of the program is to deescalate a situation and make individuals experiencing a crisis feel more comfortable, while connecting them to resources. The program received 645 referrals in Shaker Heights last year and is expanding to four additional cities within the county because of its success.

**OHIO**

**CUYAHOGA COUNTY** is expanding its "First Call" program, which makes it

so that, along with fire or police assistance, **mental health professionals are brought to emergency responses** that are

*Federal policy changes needed*

*From COMMISSION page 7*

years, and taking into account all that has, and will be presented today, it's clear that a reevaluation of the federal Medicaid exclusionary policies is necessary if we want to address all barriers to community-based mental health and substance use disorder services," Demings said. "Despite regulatory advancements in this space — which have provided significant flexi-

bilities for states and local governments to coordinate pre-release services and access to care — meaningful change can only be achieved through permanent federal policy change."

He noted that the change would have a net positive effect for the general population because 95% of incarcerated people return to their communities, "bringing their health conditions with them." **CN**

**WORD SEARCH** **GARLAND COUNTY, ARK.**  
Created by Mary Ann Barton

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

**AIRPORT:** Hot Springs Memorial Field Airport operates in the county.

**BAR:** The Ohio Club opened in 1905, serving as a speakeasy during Prohibition and is still going strong today.

**CAPONE:** The resort town was a hide-out back in the 1930s and earlier for gangster Al Capone and his cronies.

**CLINTON:** President Bill Clinton grew up in the county and was a graduate of Hot Springs High School.

**COURTHOUSE:** The county's 1905 courthouse has been called one of the finest examples of Renaissance Revival architecture in the state.

**GARLAND:** The county is named for Arkansas Gov. Augustus H. Garland, the 11th governor of the state, a U.S. senator and attorney general in the Grover Cleveland administration.

**HORSES:** A thoroughbred racetrack, Oaklawn, is located in the county. Oaklawn Racing Casino Resort had a \$100 million renovation in 2021. The descendants of two founding partners, Louis and Charles Cella, still run the park today.

**LAKES:** The county is home to several lakes including Lake Ouachita, Lake Hamilton and Lake Catherine.

**MCCLARDS:** McClard's is a popular fourth-generation barbecue restaurant in the county.

**NEWSPAPER:** *The Sentinel-Record* is the local newspaper, publishing since the 1800s and privately owned by WEHCO Media.

**PARK:** Hot Springs National Park, located in the county, sees about 2.6 million visitors per year. A law was passed in 1832, before Arkansas became a state, to protect the area.

**RETIREMENT:** The county is home to Hot Springs Village, a neighborhood of about 17,000 that caters to the 55-plus demographic.

**SPRINGS:** Hot Springs National Park features 47 natural hot springs. Visitors can bathe in the waters in Bathhouse Row, open for more than 100 years.

**THORNTON:** Award-winning actor and writer Billy Bob Thornton is a native of the county.

**TOWER:** The Hot Springs Mountain Tower elevator transports visitors up 216 feet to an observation tower at 1,256 feet above sea level. It offers views of the Ouachita Mountains, Hot Springs Mountain and the Diamond Lakes area.

**NOW I KNOW**

# ...Not to Wait

by **Stephanie Gooden**  
**Saline County, Mo.**  
**commissioner**

I waited a whole year before I got involved in my state association.

I waited before I took special classes to benefit myself or looked outside of Saline County.

Our commissioners had always done fine managing the county without being involved more in the Missouri Association of Counties. I talked myself out of it and I waited.

But the status quo is a killer.

Even though people say you need time to get your feet wet — and I was appointed so I didn't have the same run-up to office other people get — I still feel like it set me back a bit.

When I did get involved — the growth, the connections, the benefits and things that I learned — were definitely worth it, because it benefited

the community. I gained knowledge and wisdom by attending these trainings, by meeting these people, by making these connections. Because of my involvement, I served as president of our association and now serve as past president

By working with former Sen. Roy Blunt's office, I was able to get \$2 million to help build a wastewater treatment facility. Through the USDA Re-Connect program, I was able to be the catalyst and go door to door to get the surveys signed, recruit others to help and determine the areas of the county that were unserved and under-served by broadband. I found a utility company that could accept the grant and now, 70% of our county is covered in fiber.

Don't wait to reach out to others. Put yourself out there to make good changes. But have thick skin when you do. We've had a difficult last few years, leading through the COVID



**Saline County, Mo. Commissioner Stephanie Gooden speaks during a Missouri Association of Counties conference.** Photo courtesy of the Missouri Association of Counties

pandemic and making some infrastructure decisions, and they were all tough decisions. Wanting to please people is part of the job and it's a good service to the community, but in this political climate and the use of

social media to attack people, those you don't please can be very vocal. But that doesn't necessarily mean that you're doing a bad job.

Know who you are to the core and your core values. I find my

identity in Jesus. I love my family and I value my community that I serve. I know I would not do anything malicious and degrading to our community, in spite of what people would write on the internet.

Go in with the heart of service, but don't let disagreements tear you down and make you cower. Keep a heart for those people you serve, and take in their perceptions and their opinions, but don't make it to where it breaks you down to where you think you're doing a bad job, because somebody disagrees with you and gets vocal about it on social media. Yes, mistakes happen sometimes, and that's unfortunate, but if it makes you afraid, then you won't do anything bold or new for your community. **CN**

*Now I Know explores experiences that have shaped county officials' approach to their work; as told to Senior Writer and Digital Editor Charlie Ban.*

Scan here for more conference information and to register

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