

SPOTLIGHT ON:

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

County gov't. attracts three members of one high school class of '98. Pg. 6



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CN CountyNews



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NATIONAL ASSOCIATION of COUNTIES

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NACo series 'First 100 Days' explores a quickly changing federal landscape



President Donald Trump delivers his inaugural address Jan. 20 after being sworn in as the 47th president, for a second term, in a ceremony held in the Capitol rotunda due to cold weather. White House photo

by Mary Ann Barton editor

The NACo government affairs team is analyzing a flurry of executive orders on housing affordability, artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, national energy policy, immigration and more signed by President

Donald Trump during his first days back on the job.

"It's go time!" NACo President James Gore said Jan. 24, in the kickoff of a NACo webinar series exploring the first 100 days of Trump's presidency.

The second call for the series took place on Jan. 29.

"This First 100 Days series is

going to concentrate on how changes at the federal level... impact our daily operations, whether that's leveraging our intergovernmental partners and partnerships to address regulatory hurdles, funding efforts, changing to the whole

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County jail, vet groups fast-track help to incarcerated veterans

by Meredith Moran staff writer

Warren County, Ky. Regional Jail is working with veterans organizations to cut down obstacles for incarcerated veterans to access healthcare, housing, education and disability assistance upon release, with the aim of reducing recidivism. Research suggests that those who recently served in the military are twice as likely as non-veterans to face incarceration, according to the Council on Criminal Justice.

Volunteers from the local Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) post go into the county jail once a month — switching off each time among the jail's four sections (specialized housing, general population, female and protective custody) — to provide veterans with information on a variety of resources available to them, and give them an opportunity to get a head start on the documentation process so they can access them when they're released.

"It just totally makes sense" to bring veterans into the jail to educate incarcerated veterans on what resources will be available to them upon release, said Captain Douglas Miles, Warren County Regional Jail's reentry services coordinator.

"They signed up to protect us for our freedoms, our rights," Miles said. "And when they are done with [serving time], veterans — along with anybody

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Hyland leaves legacy of NACo service

by Charlie Ban senior writer

There was a moment when Larry Naake was worried about the future of Gerry Hyland's involvement with NACo.

In the fall of 1997, NACo's

then-executive director visited Hyland in his Fairfax County, Va. office to gauge the county supervisor's mood following his defeat that summer in his run for the NACo first vice presidency. To Naake's delight, his enthusiasm for the organization was not diminished.

"He did not let that defeat keep him from being a leader for NACo," Naake said.

Hyland, who served on the Fairfax County Board from 1988-2015, died Jan. 19 at 88. He spent

the next four terms deeply involved in NACo's management, his state association's leadership and service to his county. Naake noted that Hyland was eager to serve in various capacities, particularly in politically delicate situations.



Hyland

"Over my career, I worked with a lot of first-class public servants and he's right at the top of the list," Naake said. "He was the only person who read every word of all the ma-

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NACo analyzes new administration's policies



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dynamic of what we see going on," Gore noted.

"This webinar is the beginning of our coordinated effort to ensure our counties are in-

formed and equipped to navigate what is a rapidly changing federal landscape," he said.

Mark Ritacco, NACo's chief government affairs officer, noted to members on the webinar call that NACo is analyzing ex-

ecutive orders on a number of subjects including housing affordability, artificial intelligence (AI), cybersecurity, national energy policy and immigration.

"We are analyzing what these executive orders mean for counties," he said. "I think the courts are doing the same and we'll have further analysis on it."

"As the political and policy directions shift, our mission stays the same," Ritacco said. "We are keeping county governments at the table as these policy decisions get made and we will do our best to update you..."

The new membership series provides updates and analysis on key developments during the first 100 days of the Trump Administration geared to county government. The calls will focus on policies and actions that directly impact counties, including congressional action, federal funding, regulations and intergovernmental partnerships. Members are welcome to join the calls to stay informed on how these changes may shape county priorities and operations. For more information, contact nacomeetings@naco.org.



STATUS	NUMBERS
News deserts (no news outlets)	208 counties
Newspaper closings in 2023	Two-and-a-half per week
Limited/no access to local news.....	55 million people
Newspaper loss, 2005-present	3,300 or more than one-third
Newspaper circulation	40 million (115 million in 2005)

Source: Northwestern/Medill Local News Initiative

Incarcerated veterans get help from VFW

From VETERANS page 1

that's in our country — deserve the right to be healed and helped so they can come back into our communities and be successful."

VFW Post 1298 worked with the jail to get the National Personnel Records Center phone number "whitelisted" through its system, meaning inmates are now able to request records while they're still incarcerated, speeding up the application process, according to Rob Holdsworth, a VFW representative who is the lead volunteer in the jail's Veterans Justice Outreach Program (a program that shares the same name with a program at the federal level).

"One of the things I tell them, is 'You've obviously got plenty of time — that's the one thing you've got, is time,'" Holdsworth said. "So read this packet. Think about where you were, what you did, because everything in the VA, they're going to ask you, you're claiming service-connected disability for this injury, show me a record that says that you were in this place, at this time, doing this work, when you were injured."

"Anything with the government comes down to documentation, so we try to help them track down the documentation and fill out the paperwork"

Keeping track of all of the different veterans organizations and what they do and what their contact information is — particularly without access to a phone or computer — can be a challenge, so the VFW is there to help aid the process along, Holdsworth said.

"Unfortunately, a lot of guys, when they get out of jail, they may be homeless, they may have no income, and they go

right back to jail," Holdsworth said. "So, we try to connect them to [Veterans Affairs] resources to hopefully help them put jail behind them for good."

Representatives from the Veterans Upward Bound program also come into the jail to share what post-secondary education opportunities veterans can leverage upon release.

Travis Slusher, an inmate at Warren County Regional Jail, started going to the Veterans Justice Outreach meetings last year to learn more about the resources available to him. The meetings have helped him access information on housing and employment, and educated him on the processes of filing disability claims and getting his pension reinstated. It's also been a positive experience for him to build a sense of community with other veterans, Slusher added.

"You share a common bond with people that served," Slusher said. "It's helpful and it's nice just to get out of the cell, and be able to speak with people who are going through or have some of the same issues that you have, and try to come up with a resolution or find things that are available to us."

Slusher's currently incarcerated for a probation violation related to a drug possession charge, and is set to be released next month from Warren County Regional Jail, after serving time for roughly a year. He said the VFW meetings have helped give him the "tools to be successful" once he's released and his top priority is finding housing.

Research shows that many of the reasons veterans disproportionately face incarceration compared to civilians stem from health conditions from serving, including post-traumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain injuries and substance use disorder.

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Rhethe Foust from Veterans Upward Bound talks to incarcerated veterans about the importance of leveraging education benefits after release.

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“I’ve talked to guys — one guy was an Afghanistan veteran who was telling me some war stories, and it led me to believe that he may have experienced some traumatic stuff when he was deployed, and then perhaps maybe had a TBI (traumatic brain injury), came back to the states, got out, and then

he ended up in a motorcycle gang and got himself sentenced to prison,” Holdsworth said.

“And I can’t help but wonder if part of his mental problem, whatever it is, doesn’t go back to traumatic experiences that he experienced in service, and if we had been able to provide him more and better services when needed, maybe he might have avoided jail, I don’t know.”

Another veteran, who suffered injuries in a helicopter crash in Kuwait while serving, shared with Holdsworth that he thought his substance issues stemmed from dealing with both the physical and mental effects of the injuries.

“Now that may or may not be,” Holdsworth said. “He’s one who’s been in and out of jail so many times, so I feel like he’s

had ample opportunity to access [Veterans Affairs] services, but it’s a bureaucratic process, so people can lose patience with that and just go get some illicit substances to self-medicate.

“I had somebody here locally that was maybe being a little derogatory toward some of our folks needing so much help, and I try to remind them, not

everybody went to West Point, not everybody used their G.I. Bill to go to college. Some folks struggle, and those are the folks that we’re trying to help out.”

Many people who are incarcerated don’t know what to do when they get out, and the Veterans Justice Outreach Program simply helps veterans take advantage of the resources they’re offered, Miles said.

“When we look at our veterans, active or inactive, I think everybody has a certain pride with them, and we want them to be successful,” Miles said. “It just makes sense to help them, like they’ve helped us, and there are resources available to them that are out there, and they don’t have knowledge of it.

“To just navigate them toward resources that are there for them, that’s a huge blessing. Instead of just sitting here warehousing people and waiting for their time to be done — why not try to make their time here be as productive as possible by teaching them how things should be and [connecting them to] people out there that could help them when they get out?” **CN**

Fairfax County, Va. Supervisor Hyland started town hall meeting now in 38th year

From HYLAND page 1

materials, and you could tell by the questions he asked that he deliberated on everything.”

Hyland staked out his seat at NACo Board meetings, at times defending his turf when newcomers wandered and sat down in the wrong chair. He also served as the president of the Virginia Association of Counties in 2002.

A Massachusetts native, Hyland came to Virginia for law school in 1969, later opening a law practice. After serving on the Fairfax County Human Rights Commission and Board of Zoning Appeals, he ran for county supervisor. He was a 30-year Air Force reservist with the Judge Advocate General’s Office after serving four years of active duty in Normandy, France.

His district town halls, adapted from a New England tradition, drew high-level speakers from county administration and many of the county’s agencies, along with federal and state representatives. In the mid-2000s, a PowerPoint presentation



Longtime Fairfax County, Va. Supervisor Gerry Hyland, flanked by U.S. Rep. Jim Moran (l) U.S. Rep. Gerry Connolly and Supervisor Dan Storck (far right) celebrate naming of county center for Hyland.

helped him drive a “virtual bus tour” presentation of hot spots for county intervention and investment.

His legacy within Fairfax County includes the closure of a landfill in his district, an effort to keep a local hospital open and the redevelopment of the Lorton area following the clo-

sure of a correctional facility. He championed the South County Center, making it the place to go for family services, community health, career programs, a senior and teen center and more, including many public rooms essential for community meetings and workshops. Hyland had advocated for the

placement of county services in southern Fairfax County, saving residents a long trip through the suburban county to reach those service providers. In 2019, the county renamed the building the Gerry W. Hyland Government Center.

“I don’t get mad, I don’t get even, I never lose my sense

of humor and I work to find a way for folks to agree,” he wrote in 1997 when he pitched his candidacy to NACo members. “But above all, I have sought to achieve consensus as to what is best for NACo and its member counties.”

Mount Vernon Supervisor Dan Storck, who succeeded Hyland, called him a community pillar and a true patriot as well as a friend and mentor. “He was committed to doing things right for the right reasons and challenged us all to be our best selves,” Storck said.

To celebrate his life and legacy, the county planned to honor Hyland at the 38th Annual Mount Vernon Town Hall Meeting, the event he founded and cherished.

As a master of puns, Hyland left a lasting impression with his humor. At his final Board of Supervisors meeting, he shared one last pun that perfectly encapsulated his wit: “There once was a supervisor who told ten puns to his colleagues to get them to laugh, but no pun in ten did.” **CN**



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CIVIC ENGAGEMENT STRENGTHENS COMMUNITY RELATIONSHIPS

by **Chris Chung**

County government is often regarded as the most direct form of government to the people, making local civic engagement a pillar of our democracy.

Civic engagement is the practices, principles and conditions that build an environment where people can interact with their community, coming together to make collective decisions that affect all residents.

Although a community can be defined in numerous ways, at the local government level, each county can be considered its own community. Therefore, civic engagement at this level is central to the idea of county government

and the creation of opportunities for every resident to become more involved in guiding their community's future.

Civic engagement in the local decision-making process promotes and ensures that equitable investment, conditions and outcomes are present within the county. Building on this idea, inclusive engagement fosters stronger community relations because inclusion makes all residents feel invested in the betterment of the county.

Individuals can participate in civic engagement through voting, volunteering, joining a community board or attending county meetings. To some, the ultimate form of civic engagement is civic duty, also known as



civil service or public service. Serving as a county elected official is a form of civic duty.

County elected officials occupy a unique position within the concept of civic engagement, because they are both engaged through the public service of their office and are also positioned to encourage and support county residents' involvement. Elected officials have the authority to introduce and enact policies that allow for community input in the decision-making process, not just making the traditional political process

accessible to the public, but opening new avenues for involvement. Likewise, elected officials who reach out and interact with their county residents are providing opportunities for engagement to their community.

Civic engagement in action

Several counties offer high school students the opportunity to participate in a youth commission. Knox County, Tenn., for example, holds an annual junior commissioner program

"What we're trying to do is break down the barrier of knowing what your local officials do, and if we can kind of give them a taste for what public service looks like, then I think the politics won't seem as scary or unobtainable," Knox County Commissioner Larsen Jay told County News in 2023.

"When you connect with them and that light bulb goes

off and they realize, 'Wait a second, this is my elected official standing here right in front of me — I have direct access to them,' they realize that you can start nudging your community right here, right now, instead of waiting for some sort of big national 'whatever' that they're never going to be able to touch on a scale of Washington and that sort of top-tier politics."

One recent participant, Gabriela Sánchez Benítez, was chosen thanks to her proposed solution to a problem she saw in Knox County — the lack of a relationship between the government and community. She suggested the county support more nonpartisan events that offer general information about the types of county services are available.

Other counties offer programs that give adults a look inside the workings of county government

Rowan County, N.C. holds a civic leadership academy, which meets for eight Thursdays. The program aims to give 20 participants a better understanding of county functions and services, to improve communication between citizens and government, to explain current challenges facing the community and to foster relationships with county officials.

Delaware County, Ohio, is one of many counties that offer a citizens' sheriff academy. The program is designed to strengthen community relationships through education, shadowing and hands-on learning over the course of 11 weeks. Upon graduation, participants can volunteer for the Sheriff's Office at various community events. **CN**

Chung is a program manager for equity and civic engagement at NACo



CIVIC ENGAGEMENT WAS IN THE WATER FOUNTAINS AT ELKO HIGH SCHOOL

by **Charlie Ban**
senior writer

Even as the vice president of her senior class in Elko County, Nev., Mariluz Garcia didn't consider herself to be tremendously civically engaged.

In fact, despite having been voted into the kind of position that many students use as a springboard into a future in government, she took a decidedly contrary attitude.

"It was a social outlet for me," she said. "I didn't want the responsibility of president."

One of the boys she trained against while on the Elko High School basketball team was also pretty detached when it came to the political process.

"I was a transplant from Wyoming, I was just in town for my senior year because my dad's job brought us to Elko," said David Stout. "I also didn't really think too much of elected officials."

The two went their separate ways after graduation but caught up at their 10-year reunion in 2008.

The next time they ran into each other, they were at the 2023 NACo Legislative Conference in Washington, D.C., thousands of miles away from where they met and even farther from the adopted homes where they were now county commissioners — Stout in El Paso County, Texas and Garcia in Washoe County, Nev.

Add in Brad Jensen, who served for a few years as San Bernardino County, Calif. government and legislative affairs director, and the Elko High School Class of 1998 must have had the highest number of county officials per capita of any peer group.

Stout's journey started a year before graduation, when he spent 11th grade living on an avocado farm in Mexico, which spurred his interest in international affairs.

At the University of New Mexico, he studied Latin American studies and Spanish and spent a semester in El Paso, before going into broadcast journal-

ism in Albuquerque. His career also took him to Washington, D.C. and Oklahoma before returning to El Paso.

"I had always wanted to come back to the borderland," he said.

While covering local government in El Paso, he was recruited by a state senator to do bilingual outreach, and he then started seeing himself as member of the community, and focused his long-held interest in international affairs on how it affected his new home. And, he took more of an interest in domestic policy.

"I just started really paying close attention to who's representing me at every level and there was a guy who was a county commissioner at that time who was just doing a terrible job — very antagonistic to a lot of good things that others were trying to do at the county level," Stout said.

"I started getting involved in local politics, something I couldn't do as a journalist, and I noticed there weren't a lot of young people in politics," he noted. "One night I was lying in bed and decided I would challenge the commissioner."

With a 37-vote margin, Stout won and is now in his 11th year on the Commissioner's Court, and has served as chair of NACo's Immigration Task Force, bringing two delegations of county officials to El Paso to understand the immigration system.

Garcia had the more direct route to county service, though



High school classmates El Paso County, Texas Commissioner David Stout, Washoe County, Nev. Commissioner Mariluz Garcia and then-San Bernardino County, Calif. Government and Legislative Affairs Director Brad Jensen meet up at the 2023 NACo Legislative Conference. Photo by David Stout

it was far more of a stretch for her. The daughter of a Basque father and a Mexican mother, she never saw her background reflected in local leadership, but much like her student council ambitions, she didn't think too much of that.

After graduating from high school, she attended the University of Nevada, Reno, then stayed for a master's degree, then a doctorate in education.

She serves as executive director of the Dean's Future Scholars program at the university.

Her first exposure to Wash-

oe County government came when she fostered, and later adopted, two children.

Then, as a result of her involvement with her children's school, she waded into civic involvement.

"People started tapping me on the shoulder for service on different nonprofit boards related to education or mental health — that's kind of in my wheelhouse with the school counselor," she said.

Garcia has been on her county Board for some fractious debates about election administration, and Stout has seen immigration from Mexico take the spotlight in the past few years.

Though neither spent their

teenage years planning their resumes for a run for political office, Garcia traces their amiability to the experiences in Elko County, taking lessons they learned in their adolescence to their new counties, like seeds blown in the wind.

"When you grew up in a small town, you quickly learn that you've got to learn how to get along with everybody or you're likely to get punched in the face at some point," she said.

"You're going to keep seeing these folks, right? I didn't know much when I got into office, but I knew I had to have that same kind of mindset if I wanted to get along with colleagues with different views or constituents." **CN**

**CIVIC
ENGAGEMENT**



CIVIC ENGAGEMENT RESOURCES

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT CIVIC ENGAGEMENT, VISIT:

NACo articles and resources for civic engagement



Five Keys to Enhancing Civic Engagement



Principles for Equitable and Inclusive Civic Engagement



Resources from the Municipal Research and Services Center



Developing Effective Citizen Engagement



COUNTY TAPS INTO YOUTH POWER FOR PUBLIC HEALTH ENGAGEMENT

by Meredith Moran
staff writer

If youth have something to say, Polk County, Minn. wants to hear it. Members of the Polk County Public Health Youth Advisory Board provide feedback on existing and new public health programming and make the county aware of emerging community needs for youth.

In return, the teens get a better understanding of how policy works and the government's role in public health, according to Sarah Reese, Polk County Public Health administrator and director.

"By engaging youth in our policies, our practices, our services, our procedures, we're getting a fresh perspective, energy, information and certainly knowledge that we wouldn't have otherwise," Reese said. "Our work, much of the time, is with youth or partners that work with youth, so it was important for us to hear it right from their lived experience."

Public health priorities that have been identified by Youth Advisory Board members include mental health and reproductive and sexual health, according to Reese.

Halle Nicholas, a high school junior on the Youth Advisory Board, said the board's discussions around youth mental health and substance use have been particularly powerful for her.

"I think that being able to use my voice to advocate for those that may feel like they are not heard is very important," Nicholas said.

Polk County Public Health also uses the youth perspective to tailor their social media content and messaging, Reese said.

"What speaks to them? Are we speaking the language and appealing to them in the way that they want to?"

"It could be marketing, it could be messaging, it could

be a program that people are thinking about, so whatever is on the minds of public health staff, they can bring that to the Youth Advisory Board for them to provide feedback."

Thirty years ago, Reese served as a youth representative on Polk County's health services advisory committee (the committee was made up of adults and had one designated position for youth). In 2018, health services advisory committees were no longer required as part of governance, and Polk County Health took a step back to assess the county's public health needs.

As a result, the department created the Youth Advisory Board, seeing it as an opportunity to merge civic engagement and leadership development, Reese said.

"One of the key things from the beginning was to give back to the students too, in some way, shape or form," said Kirsten Fagerlund, who is a member of the Polk County Health community wellness team.

"Speaking to what's current and what's on the minds of the youth, but also providing some leadership development, public speaking, maybe some parliamentary procedures, how to run a meeting, how to mediate and moderate differences amongst them."

The Youth Advisory Board is made up of high school students across Polk County — public health staff aim to engage two to three students per school district to get a more comprehensive youth perspective, according to Reese. Students at public and private high schools, as well as teens at the Red River Valley Juvenile Center in the county, are encouraged to participate.

Some members have been nominated by their school counselors or school leadership team, and current members share who among their

peers could potentially bring a new perspective to the board, as well, Reese said.

"We are one of the largest geographic counties in Minnesota and really have some unique differences across the county," Reese said. "So, we've been really intentional to try and have representation from all school districts in Polk County."

Polk County Public Health staff also use Minnesota Student Survey data to assess what youth are wanting to see in the public health space, according to Reese.

The 2019 Minnesota Student Survey found that adult mentorship was important to youth, particularly those who struggled with mental health issues, so the Youth Advisory Board created a "Safe Places to Land" initiative, which provided adults in school settings with a kit on what to do when a student confides in them and how to show they care — at some schools, Youth Advisory Board members identified teachers or coaches, but others identified janitors, cafeteria staff and receptionists as that "safe person," Reese said.

"Surprisingly enough, a lot of times, it's those other people that are in the building every day that create that culture of safety," she said.

Youth Advisory Board members are encouraged to listen to their peers and share their perspectives as well, "to bring all youth voices to the table," Fagerlund said.

"We're pretty clear in that they are representing their peers, so to listen and open their eyes at the culture of their school and their environment a little differently, and to bring that back to us," Fagerlund said. "And then also just to think wide, as youth."

"They're thinking about their school, their peers, but then also to think about peers in their county, in Northwest Minnesota, and then to think globally too — especially when we talk about justice and ethics and thinking about the plate of life that another student might have that they're not familiar with, but to put themselves as much as they can into that person's world, and to think about the services and the world that helps them be healthier." **CN**



PODCAST SERIES EXAMINES FACETS OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

by Charlie Ban
senior writer

Civic engagement is more than just encouraging residents to vote, volunteer for community service and leadership or answer surveys. The County News Podcast is releasing a three-part series examining other ways that counties view and support civic engagement. Starting Feb. 3, a new episode will debut on our podcast feed every two weeks, telling the story of a county effort to bring residents together.

In Berrien County, Mich., it means making sure county services work best

when residents need them. Specifically, when they call 911 for emergency service, someone will be able to help them in the language they speak. Berrien County recently contracted with a new service to provide language interpretation and translation services for callers.

"We really feel that we're called to provide that service," said Caitlin Sampsell, Berrien County's 911 administrator. "We're to be always present, to be competent in what we're doing and operate as one unit in

order for us to really build that reputation for excellence as that vital connection that links the caller and the field responders, the community together, so it's important for us to meet people where they're at."

The Berrien County episode will be available Feb. 3.

Earth County, Texas is fighting for attention with 253 of its Lone Star state peers, but with the help of social media, the county might be able to make up some ground. By virtue of its

Film Friendly Texas Certified Community designation, the county is receiving training and

guidance to help it effectively accommodate on-location filming and market itself to film producers as a filming destination.

The Earth County episode will be available Feb. 17.

In Santa Cruz County, Calif., more than 15% of the population lives below the poverty line. Community Action Board of Santa Cruz County works closely with members of the community to create social change. By being culturally responsive and always working through a social justice perspective, the board provides a perspective that shifts the way critical issues are addressed in the county. **CN**

The Santa Cruz County episode will be available March 3. Listen to the podcast at www.naco.org/podcast or by scanning the QR code.



SAVE THE DATES

Upcoming NACo Conferences

2025 Western Interstate Region (WIR) Conference

May 20-23
Pennington County, S.D.



2025 NACo Annual Conference & Exposition

July 11-14
City and County of Philadelphia, Pa.



NACo Fall Board of Directors Meeting

December 4-6, 2025
Wise County, Texas





GEM COUNTY, IDAHO

Named after the Idaho nickname “The Gem State,” and known as the Gem of the Payette, Gem County, Idaho was partitioned in 1915 from Canyon and Boise counties. Permanent settlement began after gold discoveries in the Boise Basin in the early 1860s brought people over the already established stage and pack train routes.

Rising 5,906 feet, Squaw Butte, named by Native Americans who used this area as their wintering ground, stands at the north end of the Gem Valley.



A depiction of the butte forms one side of the valley drawn on the seal and the other is a horn of plenty, representing the label of “Gem of Plenty” that fruit packers adopted in the early 1900s because of the valley’s fertility.

The seal also depicts the multitude of agricultural uses, including cattle grazing and crop cultivation.

Black Canyon Diversion Dam impounds the Payette River, creating the Black Canyon Reservoir, which is popular for recreation, including fishing and boating, both represented on the seal.

Would you like to see your seal featured in County News? Contact Charlie Ban at cban@naco.org.

Accepting criticism can help improve results, Howard County executive says



County Executive Calvin Ball, Howard County, Md., takes to the microphone at a local event designed to bring business to his community.

by Charlie Ban
senior writer

For county elected officials, the margin for error is small.

The electorate will decide just how much slack to cut when it comes to professional judgment and policy decisions, and those decisions come every four years. But there’s a faster ecosystem that defines an administration, for better or worse, and it’s built on the far murkier foundation of public sentiment. But the lessons can be direct.

“You’re not allowed to have a bad day,” said Calvin Ball, Howard County, Md.’s second-term executive. “We can’t cuss someone out in anger, or get upset with a waiter if we get the wrong order or the food is cold. Those

are things you shouldn’t do anyway, but we definitely can’t do.”

Then there’s the criticism. Ball calls them “The Howard Hundred,” the people who always have something to say, some kind of criticism regardless of its relevance to a policy or the care with which it was crafted. As a public servant, he always wants to hear how the county can do a better job or craft better policy.

“We call them the Howard Hundred, but Howard County has 350,000 residents,” he said. “Having anywhere from 50-100 people who are never happy, that’s just statistically going to happen, no matter where you are. You can’t win them all, as hard as you try.”

Few candidates earn 100% of the vote, so perfection is an un-

reasonable standard.

“At any point, there’s 29%-49% of the population that didn’t support us for whatever reason.”

What if these residents are the canaries in the coal mine that are tipping the county off to something wrong?

“You can acknowledge that maybe there are things that we can do better, maybe there is some validity to the concerns, or we need to communicate better,” Ball said. “Maybe there’s a nugget of truth to the criticism and so I look inward and then to that point, try to communicate even more effectively and be transparent.

“I used to tell a lot of young elected officials, if you’re not able to deliver the product that

people want, you have to at least deliver the process. Allow them extra hearings, be transparent, talk about how we got to the decision, the data inputs that we use and then talk about the data. If people are saying, ‘you’re not funding education enough,’ ‘you’re not funding public safety enough,’ ‘you’re doing nothing for the environment,’ talk about the longitudinal data about the investments and the progress that you’ve made.”

Howard County has dealt with repeated floods and Ball found that addressing those infrastructure liabilities was as much about selling the solution as it was engineering one.

“We can explain our commitment to flood mitigation by telling people that our retention ponds hold about 13 million gallons of water during severe storms, but we make that accessible to people by showing that that’s equivalent to a football field filled with water that’s 30 feet deep,” he said.

Through it all, Ball advises acknowledging one’s own humanity and not losing sight of that in the effort to meet the moment.

“It’s important to keep in mind that as elected officials, we want to do a good job, we are good people and we have feelings, too,” he said. **CN**

WORD SEARCH

MONTEREY COUNTY, CALIF. Created by Mary Ann Barton

ADAMS: Photographer Ansel Adams, known for his black and white landscapes of the American West, was a longtime resident of the county.

AQUARIUM: The Monterey Bay Aquarium, home to 300,000 marine plants and animals, attracts about 3 million visitors per year.

ART: There is one art gallery for every 34 people in Carmel-by-the-Sea, a seaside town in the county.

CHARDONNAY: The county grows more Chardonnay grapes than any other county in California.

CROPS: “The Salad Bowl of the World” grows more than 150 crops.

ECONOMY: The county’s economy mainly consists of agriculture, forestry, fishing and hunting.

GOLF: The county is home to at least 26 public and private golf courses.

HISTORY: The county was founded in 1850, one of California’s original counties.

JAZZ: The Monterey Jazz Festival has been held each year in the county since 1958.

MILITARY: The county has a history as a military outpost with the Defense Language Institute, Naval Postgraduate School and Fleet Numerical all located there.

MONTEREY: The county gets its name from Monterey Bay, which gets its name from the Count of Monterey, the viceroy of New Spain.

NEWS: The county is home to several local newspapers including the *Monterey Herald* (established in 1922) and *The Carmel Pine Cone* (founded in 1915).

RESTAURANT: One of the oldest restaurants in the region is Old Fisherman’s Grotto, opened in 1950.

SALINAS: The county seat of Monterey County is Salinas.

STEINBECK: Author John Steinbeck based many of his novels in the Salinas Valley where he grew up.

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GET TO KNOW...

Craig County, Virginia



Lone Oak Farm and Cabin in Craig County, Va.

by **Meredith Moran**
staff writer

Established in 1851, Craig County, Va. is named for the 19th-century Virginia Congressman Robert Craig. It was built around an outpost in the area, “Craig’s Camp,” which George Washington visited in 1756 while exploring the frontier.

With no stoplights, Craig County is among the most rural counties in the Commonwealth. More than half of the county is federally owned forest land, including 112,000 acres of the George Washington-Jefferson National Forest. The Appalachian Trail also runs through Craig County. The county borders West Virginia and advertises itself as “a massive outdoor playground,” where visitors can hike, camp, hunt and fish across its 331 square miles.

New Castle, the county seat, is the only incorporated town in the county. During the Civil War, Union troops passed through New Castle looking for food and set fire to the courthouse, destroying early records. Across the street from the courthouse is the Old Brick Hotel, which was the center of town in the early 20th century when the

town was booming from iron ore discovery and was a stop along the railroad. The Craig County Historical Society begun restoring the hotel in 1984 and it now showcases local antiques and features a genealogy library.

Appalachians in the area have historically grown a crop there called sorghum in replacement of the more costly sugarcane. Sorghum, which is commonly served on biscuits, is crushed and squeezed for its juice and then boiled down into molasses. The crop looks like corn stalks without the ears and can be seen along the historic walk of William Addison “Add” Caldwell, who is known for trekking from his home in Craig County in the early 1870s to enroll as the first student at Virginia Tech in the nearby city of Blacksburg.

The Blue Ridge Soaring Society, a sailplane flying club, is headquartered in New Castle and hosts an annual competition in which sailplanes fly over 600 miles across four states. Sailplanes, also known as gliders, are a type of aircraft that flies without an engine, instead using rising air currents.

The county is also home to at least 15 different species of endangered wildlife, including the James River spiny mussel. Also known

as the Virginia spiny mussel, it is a species of freshwater mussel.

Man in the Moon farm, which sits on 37 acres in the county, is home to around 50 alpacas — one of which was crowned as the Alpaca Owners National Supreme Champion in 2017. **Roughly a decade ago, residents created a “Barn Quilt Trail” throughout the county, in which quilt squares are displayed (and for sale) on the sides of barns and buildings. The proceeds go to the Craig County Public Library.**

Craig County’s Paint Bank community is home to the Swinging Bridge Restaurant, which serves Southern homestyle food and is known for their famous buffalo meat. Restaurant-goers can walk across the indoor swinging bridge, visit the general store and view the historic Tingler’s Mill from the restaurant’s screened-in back porch. The town of Paint Bank is named for the iron ochre and red clay taken from the banks of Potts Creek that Cherokee Native Americans used as war paint and to make their pottery.

Get to Know features new NACo member counties.

PROFILES IN SERVICE

MELISSA DAUB

NACo Board Member
Wayne County, Mich.
Commissioner



DAUB

Number of years active in NACo: Six

Years in public service: Six

Occupation: County commissioner, Wayne County, Mich.

Education: Bachelor’s Degree from Eastern Michigan University

The hardest thing I’ve ever done: Raise my son

Three people (living or dead) I’d invite to dinner: Queen Elizabeth I, Susan B. Anthony, Ruth Bader Ginsberg

You’d be surprised to learn that I: Have rescued two senior dogs and as hard as it is to say goodbye, I feel it’s important to give dogs the end-of-life care they deserve.

The most adventurous thing I’ve ever done is: Stray from my career path in accounting to run for office — and it’s been one of my best decisions.

My favorite way to relax is: Read. I have been a member of a book club called the “Michigan Beer & Book Club” — we read Michigan-themed books and meet at local breweries.

I’m most proud of: My grown son, Dominic.

Every morning, I read: The news and my email.

My favorite meal is: Fish and chips

My pet peeve is: Hearing other people chew. But I love listening to dogs eat!

My motto is: We should try to make life as decent as possible.

The last book I read was: “Everything I Learned, I Learned in a Chinese Restaurant” by Curtis Chin. It’s a memoir that tells the story of Curtis Chin’s time growing up as a gay Chinese American kid in 1980s Detroit.

My favorite movie is: I love horror movies. My favorite is probably “The Blair Witch Project”

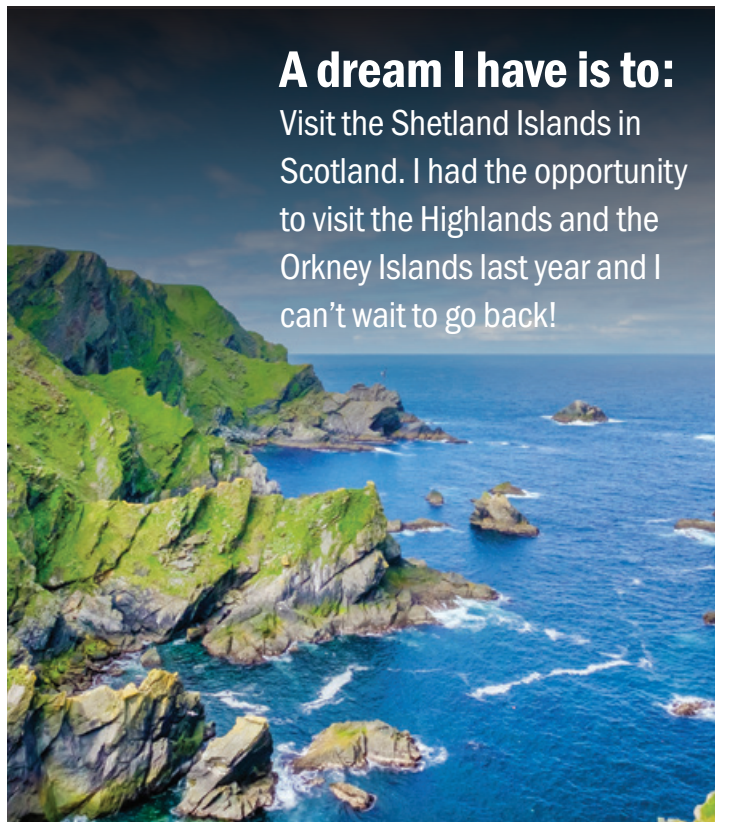
My favorite music is: Rock, metal, and 90s grunge

My favorite U.S. president is: Barack Obama

My county is a NACo member because: We have a diverse population and are representative of many points of view. It’s great to be part of a national organization and learn from other counties facing similar challenges.

A dream I have is to:

Visit the Shetland Islands in Scotland. I had the opportunity to visit the Highlands and the Orkney Islands last year and I can’t wait to go back!



Counties Across the Nation Recognized with Prestigious 90+ cashVest® Award for 2024



Counties across the nation were recently honored with the esteemed 90+ cashVest® Award for 2024 celebrating their exemplary leadership in public finance liquidity management.

The award highlights each county’s dedication to using data-driven insights to maximize taxpayer dollars, ultimately delivering enhanced benefits to communities across the country.

Matthew Chase, CEO and Executive Director of NACo, praised the award recipients by noting, “We congratulate the recipients of the cashVest® 90+ Award. This elite group has shown exceptional leadership in liquidity management. Their efforts in optimizing cash flow, lowering borrowing costs, and protecting public resources are commendable.”

Garrett Macdonald, Chief Executive Officer of three+one, also lauded the achievements in stating, “The collective efforts of these counties has generated hundreds of millions in additional revenue in 2024 alone. Their commitment to setting a national

standard in cash management and maximizing liquid cash resources is truly remarkable.”

Each honored county maintained a cashVest® score of 90 or above for four consecutive quarters demonstrating their unwavering commitment to effective cash management, enhancing financial stability, and ensuring responsible stewardship of public resources.

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| Beaufort County, S.C. | Rensselaer County, N.Y. |
| Caddo Parish, La. | St. Lawrence County, N.Y. |
| Chautauqua County, N.Y. | Steuben County, N.Y. |
| Chemung County, N.Y. | Wayne County, N.Y. |
| Columbia County, N.Y. | Westchester County, N.Y. |
| Dauphin County, Pa. | Westmoreland County, Pa. |
| Franklin County, Pa. | Wyoming County, N.Y. |
| Genesee County, N.Y. | |
| Harris County, Texas | |
| Lancaster County, Neb. | |
| Lewis County, N.Y. | |
| Lycoming County, Pa. | |
| Missoula County, Mont. | |
| Onondaga County, N.Y. | |



BRIGHT IDEAS | POTTER COUNTY, PA.

The Arts Spark County's Creative Quest to Keep, Attract Young Population

PROBLEM:

Potter County, Pa. was losing its younger population, seeing its median age rising to a decade older than the national average.

SOLUTION:

As part of an economic improvement plan, the county is investing in art and culture and attract a new, younger crowd.

by **Meredith Moran**
staff writer

Potter County, Pa., which has a dwindling population and a rising median age nearly a decade older than the national average, is investing in art and culture to help keep its youth population in the county and attract a new, younger crowd, as part of its broader "Revitalize Potter County" economic improvement plan, which also includes job training and local manufacturing initiatives.

The Potter County Creative Council, which is made up of local artists and community stakeholders, was recently established and is hosting a series of events in the county, including concerts and art showcases.

The Potter County Commission applied for the grant funding that helped launch the Creative Council, which is working with consultants and researchers at Penn State University to determine the best ways to use arts and culture to support community and economic development, which include engaging youth in the arts, according to Potter County Commissioner Paul Heimel.

"The recognition of the value of a vibrant community is really at the heart of it," Heimel said. "The goal being that we need to give young people, young families, people coming out of school more reasons to stay here."

Since 2000, Potter County's population has dwindled from 18,000 down to under 16,000 — more than an 11% decrease

that will only continue to grow without investments that address the population crisis, such as Revitalize Potter County, Heimel said.

"Studies show that the cultural attractions, the social scene, the friendliness of the community and opportunities, are real high on the list of things that young adults want," Heimel said. "And they certainly appear to be a lot more attractive in other areas to the folks coming through the high school here."

Ronan Bray, a high school junior in Potter County, recently opened for the California Guitar Trio, a Grammy-nominated '90s rock band, who the Creative Council brought to the county to perform a free concert. Bray's been playing the guitar since he was 6 years old, and his dream is to study jazz theory at Carnegie Mellon University. He said he would be interested in moving back to Potter County if it had a

possible and said the goal of the council is to inspire young artists and get them involved in performing — on their own and with people established in their respective fields, he said.

The school district in Potter County's seat of Coudersport has less than 560 students in total. Many of the schools don't have the resources or capacity on their own to host community events and create innovative art programming, so the council is hoping to help bridge those gaps, Metzger said.

"I think we have some really good opportunities to combine the forces of the schools and our local musicians and artists, and also bring outside people in for special events," Metzger said.

'We need to give young people, young families, more reasons to stay here.'

"more vibrant arts community."

"It can get very dull around here," Bray said. "And more specifically, everybody I know moves out, because there's not a lot of shared culture around here, and people aren't really going out and doing stuff."

Bray said Revitalize Potter County is creating "great outlets for artists," but that the arts events usually attract an older crowd, so he's hoping for more widespread support of arts and culture among teens.

Before its recent relaunch, the county had an arts council that petered out in the early 2000s due to a lack of volunteer involvement. Art Metzger, a former school teacher, helped establish the original arts council in Potter County and is involved with revitalizing it. Metzger works with local youth in the arts, including Bray, to help make the community events

"And doing things where children in the community get to see people who are professionals, who are out there working and doing interesting things in music."

Metzger's vision for the arts council is one that casts a wide net and modern lens of "arts and culture" for youth, including the technological and commercial aspects of music, as well as videos and podcasts, he said. Because of Potter County's rural environment, the council is also looking into tying in agricultural production to the arts initiative, he said. Ideas in the works include featuring live music at farmers markets and the arts council hosting a farm-to-table dinner



Potter County guitarist Ronan Bray opened for the California Guitar Trio at the Pennsylvania Lumber Museum.



Potter County pianist Elizabeth Crawford pauses for a photo after performing a Beethoven piece. She is currently studying music at Houghton University.

development. "The community in general, county-wide, has been seated in the arts, through music and through fine woodworking — we are one of the leading counties in lumber production."

The arts and culture portion of Revitalize Potter County is in its early stages, but the arts council is looking to roll out some big initiatives in the coming months, according to Metzger.

"We're getting a lot of feedback in that there's excitement around the preservation of the arts and the history of our community character," Hunt said. "There's a lot of energy around it." **CN**

Potter County earned a 2024 NACo Achievement Award in the Arts, Culture and Historic Preservation category for its "Revitalize Potter County!" program.

in partnership with local farmers.

"This area is a unique opportunity for artists — there's growth opportunities, with the ruralness of it, and there's a lot of history here," said Will Hunt, Potter County's director of planning and community de-

NEWS FROM ACROSS THE NATION



a critical role in addressing homelessness, which has been a rising issue in the county. In 2024, more than 1,700 students reported experiencing homelessness.

Scheduled to open in mid-2025, the shelter will provide essential support services and resources. County Administrator Kevin A. Catlin emphasized the shelter's importance, noting that these statistics represent real families and children in need of security and stability.

NEW MEXICO

The **BERNALILLO COUNTY** Office is launching what it calls the **Drones as First Responder** program, KOB-TV reported.

"This is to help get you not just a faster response time, but more of a tactical advantage," Sheriff John Allen said.

"And then you won't have five or six deputies showing up, you might only have one, if any at all. That gives us all more choices to pull from, to make sure that we're handling each call appropriately."

The county says they have 20 drones that can go a thousand feet up. They can fly to where the call came from, and street names and addresses will pop up on the drone's screen. The drones will also have thermal

See NEWS FROM page 15

CALIFORNIA

LOS ANGELES COUNTY has launched a one-stop portal to connect the public with trusted organizations that are providing crucial relief and support from the **devastating wildfires** that decimated several neighborhoods. The LA County Relief: Funding & Resource Portal, hosts a range of funds dedicated to supporting first responders, offering housing assistance, providing relief for small businesses and workers, and removing barriers for students and communities.

MARYLAND

• **CHARLES COUNTY** Government recently launched a new digital **community engagement** website to foster trust and collaboration with the local community, The Baynet reported. The new website, named "Stay Engaged, Charles County," serves as a vital channel for residents to actively participate in shaping the future of their county by sharing their insights, concerns and ideas on upcoming plans and initiatives.

In preparation for launching the site, Charles County government has used the platform to enhance communications

for the fiscal 2025 budget cycle and begin the stakeholder engagement process for a new



sports and wellness complex.

MICHIGAN

The **KALAMAZOO COUNTY** Board of Commissioners has approved a new location for an 80-unit **family shelter** after the original site

was rejected due to issues with the purchasing agreement, WMMT-TV reported. The new site, a former Country Inn & Suites, offers access to public transportation, with a bus stop in front of the property. The shelter is expected to play

MARYLAND

• The **HARFORD COUNTY** Sheriff's Office **Animal Control** recently responded to a report of a large bird lingering by the side of the road. Officers discovered a large bald eagle in a dazed state, likely injured after being struck by a vehicle or colliding with something while chasing prey, the sheriff's office reported on Facebook.

Displaying remarkable calm given the circumstances, the eagle allowed Animal Control officers to carefully secure it before being transported to a local animal hospital for a thorough examination and further treatment. Unfortunately, the eagle passed away the next morning at the animal hospital from its head injury, WJZ-TV reported.

LOUISIANA

ORLEANS PARISH and **JEFFERSON PARISH** officials were asking residents to shelter in place after they began a phased effort to clear the roadways from the Jan. 21 **historic snowfall** that saw a record 10 inches of snow fall in the area. Snow also fell in other counties across the South.

"The message is to stay home," Jefferson Parish President Cynthia Lee Sheng said. Lee Sheng's administration secured a half-dozen snowplows through an emergency contract. The parish initially focused on clearing a single-lane pathway on its major thoroughfares so emergency vehicles and firetrucks were able to move through the parish and get to hospitals. The parish also asked residents to conserve water and avoid washing dishes and doing laundry so as not to overwhelm the parish water distribution system.



From NEWS FROM page 14

cameras that can pick up heat sources like people or fires on the ground, which Allen says will also help firefighters and other agencies.

NEW YORK

MONROE COUNTY is breathing new life into **vacant properties**, WHAM-TV reported. County Executive Adam Bello joined other leaders to announce a new mission, called the Monroe County Land Bank Corporation, designed to revamp vacant lots and other parcels and transform them into affordable housing.

The initiative, which is funded by \$1 million in federal ARPA money, will address unsafe conditions at these properties and will be a vital step in restoring 29 local neighborhoods.

NORTH CAROLINA

MECKLENBURG COUNTY is launching a new program called Gear Up, aimed at providing financial assistance to young adults who have aged out of the **foster care** system, QCity Metro reported.

Administered by the county's Youth and Family Services division, the program will support 68 participants between the ages of 18 and 21, providing \$763 per month to help cover childcare, healthcare, substance use treatment, groceries and education.

Instead of giving the money directly to the participants, the county will manage purchases and payments through its LINKS program, which supports foster care youth aged 13 to 21.



County HOME program specialist Sandra Osborne

SOUTH CAROLINA

BERKELEY COUNTY is addressing the need for **affordable housing** through a new funding initiative called the Home Investment Partnerships (HOME) program, WCSC-TV reported. The program, which uses over \$1.7 million in grant funds, invites developers and community housing organizations to apply for support in building individual homes or rental units. The HOME program is part of a broader national initiative by HUD to provide affordable housing to low-income families, with a focus on households earning at or below 80% of the Area Median Income (AMI).

The program targets those who may struggle to afford housing in the county, where the median home value is over \$280,000. Berkeley County officials, such as HOME program specialist Sandra Osborne, emphasize that the program's goal is to support families in need.

The Mecklenburg Board of County Commissioners allocated \$500,000 for the Gear Up

initiative, which is part of the county's ongoing efforts to address community inequities.

PENNSYLVANIA

The **FRANKLIN COUNTY Area Agency on Aging** will begin offering a new program called "Second Saturdays" at a local senior center featuring guest speakers, catered lunches, health and wellness workshops and other activities. The county noted that all weekday resources available for Franklin County residents over the age of 60 will also be available during Second Saturdays.

VIRGINIA

LOUDOUN COUNTY has added two new **battery electric buses** to the Loudoun County Transit fleet. The buses will be available for use on multiple local routes.

The buses are a key step in the county's efforts to achieve the goals of the Loudoun County Energy Strategy, which include reducing greenhouse gas emissions in transportation and leading by example in county government operations.

Each bus is estimated to reduce carbon dioxide emissions by 180,000 pounds a year. In addition to reducing greenhouse gas emissions and air pollutants, battery electric buses are quieter and have lower operating and maintenance costs than diesel buses. The buses can travel 230 miles on a single charge of the lithium-ion battery, which takes a little more than four hours to charge.

WASHINGTON

The **THURSTON COUNTY** Board of Commissioners is

aiming to enhance **community engagement** in 2025 by expanding and strengthening the use of proclamations during their official meetings, *The Chronicle* reported.

In their January meetings, the board presented proclamations on their commitment to building a courthouse, National Human Trafficking Prevention Month and Birth Defects Awareness Month. Commissioners are also looking for ways to grow the process further, incorporating ideas from county staff and engaging the community in more meaningful ways.

Commissioners also discussed proposals for future proclamations, including raising awareness of missing persons cases in the county, mental health, arts and culture and local recreational programs.

Commissioner Wayne Fournier suggested highlighting missing persons and cold cases, inviting their families to meetings and allowing law enforcement to provide updates. Commissioner Rachel Grant emphasized the importance of showcasing success stories and programs that help people connect with their communities.

County Manager Leonard Hernandez supported these ideas, noting that proclamations are a valuable tool for convening the community and spotlighting the significant work done by both the county and local organizations.

Send your news tips, press releases and photos to Mary Ann Barton at mbarton@naco.org.

ON THE MOVE

NACo STAFF

● **Rowena Averia** has joined NACo as a senior accounting manager.

She previously served as director of finance and accounting at St. Leo the Great Catholic Church and director of finance at Refugees International.



Averia

● **Blake Gardiner** has joined NACo as a program manager for clean energy.

He previously served as a program coordinator at the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation. He earned a bachelor's degree in political science and environmental science from Miami University.



Gardiner

● **Gregory Nelson** has joined NACo as director of the Center for Public Lands Counties.

He previously served as director of government affairs for Coconino County, Ariz. and as a program manager for the county's public works and flood control district. He earned doctorate and master's degrees in science and technology studies and a bachelor's degree in international studies and French, all from Virginia Tech.



Nelson

● **Nelson and Chief Research Officer Teryn Zmuda** attended the Wyoming County Commissioners Association Legislative Conference in Laramie County.



Zmuda

● Chief Information Officer **Rita Reynolds** attended the Idaho Association of Counties Midwinter Legislative Conference in Ada County.



Reynolds



Artist Rudy Castro painted the mural for the Desert Wave Pool.

UTAH

The **CARBON COUNTY** Office of Tourism will open applications for its 2025 **Public Art Grant Program** Feb. 3, ETV News reported. This marks the third year of the program, which is aimed at fostering creativity and enhancing community spaces. The grant offers a unique opportunity for artists, businesses and municipalities to collaborate on public art projects that contribute to the beauty and vibrancy of the area.

Public art plays a crucial role in developing dynamic and vibrant communities by beautifying shared spaces, fostering a sense of identity and pride and attracting visitors to the area, the county noted. These projects not only enrich the cultural landscape of the Carbon Corridor but also create lasting impacts by sparking dialogue and connections within the community. By supporting public art, the program helps enhance the region's tourism appeal and cultivates a deeper cultural engagement.



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25

LEGISLATIVE CONFERENCE

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