

## Measles outbreak underscores rural healthcare challenges

by **Mary Ann Barton**  
editor

Miles between laboratories and testing sites, a shortage of medical professionals and deteriorating infrastructure is underscoring the health care problems that plague some rural counties as a measles outbreak spreads from the West Texas counties where it began.

The most recent count as of last week shows that 223 cases have been reported nationwide, with the bulk of them in Texas.

So far, 198 people in West Texas counties and 30 in neighboring Lea County, N.M. have become infected with measles since late January. Of those, 23 children have been hospitalized in Texas; one 6-year-old died there, and one adult died in New Mexico.

Measles showed up the first week of February in Andrews County, Texas.

"We had our first exposure when a person showed up in the ER with measles," said Andrews County Health Director Gordon Mattimoe.

"We had 50-plus exposures we had to follow up on. That was typical of the next couple of weeks."

State records in Texas show

that Gaines County, where the outbreak began, and where there were 138 measles cases so far, has a high rate (18%) of those who are unvaccinated.

"We are seeing folks from Gaines County, they're coming here for care, to our local hospital or clinic, so we get exposures from that," Mattimoe said.

Andrews County has been using the old City Hall building as a testing site to keep others from being exposed.

The county is getting the word out about getting vaccinated on social media, local newspapers and lots of correspondence with schools and daycare centers, "trying to get those children with exemptions vaccinated," Mattimoe said. In Texas, children can refuse vaccinations for religious or conscientious grounds.

His advice to other counties out there: "If you're seeing vaccination rates drop below 94 percent, you're going to see cases, you've got to keep working on keeping those immunization rates up," Mattimoe said. (State health departments typically record vaccination rates per county.)

Anyone who has been exposed can benefit by getting

See **MEASLES** page 4



Faulkner County, Ark. Judge Allen Dodson (second from right) argues that federal oversight and funding are necessary for supporting county governments before, during and after disasters. Charlotte County, Fla. Commissioner Bill Truex and Telfair County, Ga. Commissioner Dakkia Bradshaw are to his right and Harris County, Texas Commissioner Adrian Garcia is to his left. Photo by Denny Henry

## Counties vie for seats on FEMA review council

by **Charlie Ban**  
senior writer

When President Trump's Federal Emergency Management Agency Review Council meets, counties want to be part of the conversation.

The group established by Trump's January executive or-

der is set to convene by April 24, with a report due to the president Oct. 21, and Faulkner County, Ark. Judge Allen Dodson said local governments want a seat, and he doesn't



agree, as Trump has mused, that the best course of action is to abolish the agency and have states respond to disasters. Congressional action is necessary to dismantle or significantly reorganize FEMA.

"We do not need to be a na-

See **FEMA** page 2

## North Carolina county shell building program draws new businesses

by **Charlie Ban**  
senior writer

The term "blank canvas" often doesn't give enough credit to the canvas.

A painter can only start working once the fibers have been woven tightly and stretched over a wooden frame that requires the same meticulous

workmanship.

The same goes for empty structures that Nash County, N.C. builds. So far, the county has raised and sold five shell buildings, ranging between 40,000 square feet and 100,000 square feet. Another is being planned. While the insides might not be much to look at for many — the floors are dirt

— so far, businesses have liked what they've seen, drawing a food processing company, an agriculture business and a life science company.

"A lot of times, you'll drive out in the country and see a shell building standing there and nothing's happening,"

See **BUILDINGS** page 5

# NACo Legislative Conference attendees visit Capitol Hill to talk reforms to FEMA

From FEMA page 1

tion without FEMA, we just need reform,” Dodson said during a March 4 Capitol Hill briefing during NACo’s Legislative Conference in Washington, D.C. “It would be a mistake to undertake any reform without significant dialogue and engagement by our local government.”

Rep. Salud Carbajal (D-Ca-

lif.), who served as chair of NACo’s Energy, Environment and Land Use Steering Committee during part of his 12 years on the Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors, concurred.

“It doesn’t matter whether you call it FEMA... whatever you want to call it, you’re still going need an agency,” he said. “The bottom line is that the function that FEMA provides is

invaluable.”

The review council will include up to 20 representatives, which can then create standing subcommittees and ad hoc groups, including technical advisory groups. As end users of federal disaster relief, county officials offered their perspective and feedback on FEMA’s performance as a taste of the insight they would be able to offer to the council or subsidiary committees.

Telfair County, Ga. Commissioner Dakkia Bradshaw said that rural counties like hers don’t have the staff capacity to manage the paperwork necessary to receive full reimbursement from FEMA, and they rarely have the money necessary to put up matching funds, which she suggested reducing. By comparison, Charlotte County, Fla. has two full-time staffers for that task, given the number of hurricanes and tropical storms the Gulf Coast county faces.

“That’s all they do day in, day out,” said Commissioner Bill Truex of the staffers. “It is important for the money to flow faster so we can recover our community quicker, because we can’t start projects until we know we’ve got approval.”

Bradshaw suggested that simplifying relief applications would help rural counties like hers, and Ramsey County, Minn. Emergency Management and Homeland Security Director Judd Freed agreed.

“Often, it’s the same questions asked in different ways,” he said.

That’s one of the goals of the bipartisan Disaster Survivors Fairness Act, which Rep. Dina Titus (D-Nev.) reintroduced in February. Cosponsor Rep. Chuck Edwards (R-N.C.) has been named to the FEMA Reform Committee.

On top of the many disasters counties frequently face, Titus

wants to start thinking about what extreme heat could mean for communities.

“We hit 120 degrees [in Clark County, Nev.] last July and it [the heat] comes with water problems, it comes with wildfires, so it’s not an isolated problem,” she said.

Dodson said not all states are equipped to respond to all disasters, citing Southern states’ relative inexperience with snow, and drawing emergency response expertise only from elsewhere in each state would limit expertise.

“I think if you asked any emergency manager, all 5,000 members of the international association, I’d be willing to imagine that 4,900 of them would tell you that the state can’t quite handle it,” Freed said. “Just taking FEMA and breaking it up into 50 inefficient [organizations] is not a solution.”

Freed said FEMA plays a crucial role in standardizing procedures, training and communication for emergency responders, particularly when they assist in mutual aid operations.

“When you hear of a FEMA team coming to help in other states, my fire, my cops and my public health, they’re able to go to your state and your county to help you because we all train and speak the same language,” he said.

Freed noted that local emergency management staffing is often nebulous and unartful, and most of all, inadequate. Although Ramsey County is set for 6.5 full-time employees in its Emergency Management and Homeland Security department, most of the 87 other Minnesota counties typically have one person in such a role, and often on a part-time basis.

“We all need somebody in-house who’s enough of an expert,” he said. “Being sher-

iff, being a firefighter, being a paramedic... does not make you an expert in emergency management. It makes you an expert in responding to emergencies, but my profession is different.

“It’s important to keep in mind that emergency management is more than just disaster recovery, it’s about prevention, preparing, planning, response.”

Truex recommended that any reform allows counties flexibility and avoids mandates on how work is done, with an eye toward preparedness.

“We should encourage people and give them opportunities to do things that will improve the resiliency of their homes,” he said.

Although the county officials brought different perspectives to the conversation, they all voiced need for more efficient reimbursements. Freed mentioned Ramsey County received its reimbursements for 2023 in February 2024.

Harris County, Texas Commissioner Adrian Garcia, co-chair of NACo’s Intergovernmental Disaster Reform Task Force, noted that his county, the third most populous in the country, enjoys funding advantages that the vast number of rural counties can barely dream of.

Truex, whose county seems regularly battered by storms, feels like his finance department is on a treadmill.

“It is important for the money to flow faster so we can recover our community quicker, because we can’t start projects until we know we’ve got approval, but in a lot of cases, you have to just jump in,” Truex said. “With Hurricane Ian, we were out \$180 million, and we received \$81 million as of December of 2024, and now we have Helene and Milton and we’re out another \$80 million.” **CN**



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# Padilla calls on common-sense bipartisanship to tackle disasters, mental health crisis

by Meredith Moran  
staff writer

A common-sense approach is needed across all levels of government, political parties and geographic regions to address America's "real and urgent" mental health crisis and its increasingly deadly disasters, U.S. Sen. Alex Padilla (D-Calif.) told members March 4, in a conversation with fellow Californian, NACo President James Gore, at a Legislative Conference General Session.

Padilla said when he worked for former U.S. Sen. Diane Feinstein in the 1990s, he traveled to multiple counties with James Lee Witt, the FEMA director at the time, to meet with local leaders and coordinate support. With wildfires increasingly becoming more extreme and frequent, that type of collaboration across agencies and all levels of government is more key than ever, Padilla said.

"Fires have only gotten worse," Padilla noted. "They've only gotten bigger, they've only gotten more frequent — not just in California, but especially in California. So, we had a roundtable in Sonoma County, where we pulled representatives from seven counties together — fire chiefs, supervisors, other emergency personnel — with common-sense questions, 'What's worked? What hasn't worked? What can we do better?'"

Out of those conversations came a number of ideas that evolved into the FIRE Act, which strengthened FEMA wildfire preparedness and response efforts, and was the first stand-alone bill of Padilla's signed into law.

"It can still happen, bipartisan support for common-sense things going forward," Padilla said. "Like, better pay and a full-time federal firefighting workforce — we need more of them, not less. We shouldn't be laying them off or asking them to resign. We need to hire and train more now, so that we're better prepared for the summer months."

Padilla's background as an engineer and city councilman



NACo President James Gore (left), a Sonoma County supervisor, greets Sen. Alex Padilla (D-Calif.) March 4 at the NACo Legislative Conference General Session at the Washington Hilton. Photo by Denny Henry

shaped his "common sense" approach to public service, he said.

"Engineers are trained to solve problems, isn't that what policymakers are supposed to do?" Padilla said. "I know that's why we're all in this business, to solve problems and improve people's lives."

"I was never a county official, but I have the perspective of what local officials deal with, how responsive we have to be for our constituents — there's no time for messing around, everything we do impacts people's daily lives."

Cross-collaboration also leads to more innovative solutions, Padilla said. There is extensive wildfire expertise across different departments and agencies — all of that could be integrated into a wildfire continuum of knowledge, like the National Weather Service, to maximize preparedness, he said.

A lot of data and technology, including imaging and modeling, he added, are underutilized, when it could be leveraged to create a more informed and strategic approach to anticipating and responding to fires.

While each disaster is unique, insurance affordability is a

'There's no time for messing around, everything we do impacts people's daily lives.'

—Sen. Alex Padilla

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pressing issue across the country, regardless of the type of disaster or its location. He used the recent fires in Los Angeles County and hurricanes in the Southeast as examples, and said collaboration across political parties and geographic regions is essential to making progress.

"While technically, that may be a challenge because 'they're different' or 'red state, blue state,' we actually see an opening and an opportunity to work collaboratively on some of this stuff," Padilla said. "It's, 'How do you buttress the market itself to make sure policies are available, actually affordable, actually meaningful and not in conflict with some of the public programs?' So, we have to really

look at how we do all of this."

Each year, more firefighters and law enforcement die by suicide than in the line of duty, Padilla noted. About a year and a half ago, NACo conducted a nationwide survey of the most pressing issues county officials are facing. While Gore expected it to be disaster management or roads and bridges, it was mental health that "cut across rural, urban, suburban, different landscapes, different parts of the country," he said. Padilla, a co-founder of the first-ever Bipartisan Senate Mental Health Caucus, said it's important for public officials to actively address, and work to destigmatize, the mental health crisis America is facing.

"Given our platforms, the more we talk and share stories publicly, the more we're doing our part to undo stigma and increase awareness and understanding and give people license to share their experiences," Padilla said. "Because everybody's touched by it, directly or indirectly."

The Bipartisan Safer Communities Act — which increased funding for mental health support, including crisis intervention programs and Mental Health Courts — was passed

into law in 2022 following the elementary school mass shooting in Uvalde, Texas. Padilla said it's important that the funding is spent responsibly, but also quickly, and that it continues to build on success stories of how it's being implemented across different states.

"The biggest element of that bill was funding for mental health," Padilla said. "And so, we want to make sure that the money isn't just approved and appropriated, but that it's moved, because the need is real and it's urgent."

As the country makes strides in destigmatizing mental health issues and seeking help for them, the biggest challenge moving forward is making sure there is a strong workforce to meet that need, Padilla said.

"The more we encourage people to speak out, the more we encourage people, 'If you need help, get help,' what are we doing on the public, on the government side?" Padilla said. "Federal, state and local officials are working together to make sure we're nurturing the next generation of psychologists, psychiatrists, therapists, counselors, etc., to meet the need of people coming forward. We've got a lot of work to do." **CN**



# CDC warns health officials: Spring break travel could spark more measles cases

From MEASLES page 1

vaccinated within 72 hours of an exposure, he noted.

In Ector County, Texas, after two cases popped up there, the county took action, said county health Director Brandy Garcia, who suspects even more people actually have measles there.

“Based off my experience, it’s always more than what you find,” she said.

“People get sick and don’t think about what it could be. If you have a mild reaction, some go undetected.”

Located smack-dab in the Texas oil patch, Ector County is sending any measles test samples to a lab in Travis County and usually sees results within 48 hours.

But without any drivers to take samples on weekends, the County Board recently voted to purchase a specialized freezer to store samples locally when needed.

With spring and summer travel season approaching, the CDC emphasizes the important role that clinicians and public health officials play in preventing the spread of measles.

“Spring break is happening for a lot of these school districts,” Mattimoe said. “We’ll have to see how things are going when they come back after spring break.”

Public health officials should be vigilant for cases of febrile rash illness that meet the measles case definition and share effective prevention strategies, including vaccination guidance.

“We’re scared of things we don’t know,” Garcia said.

“The MMR (measles, mumps and rubella) vaccine is very effective, and it’s been around for a long, long time,” she said.

“Measles is something we don’t normally see. Education is key.” **CN**



Andrews County Health Department director Gordon Mattimoe looks over the supply of refrigerated measles vaccines at the old City Hall building in Andrews, Texas. Photo by Mark Rogers for The Texas Tribune



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## Nash County, N.C. goes the extra mile to attract new businesses to the community



Nash County, N.C. is attracting new businesses to its county with shell buildings and completed surrounding infrastructure. An artist's conception shows one such building.

### From BUILDINGS page 1

said Andy Hagy, Nash County's director of economic development. "It'll sit there for 10 years, and it becomes a big white elephant for all the local residents. Construction companies tell these rural counties, 'If you build it, they will come,' but it's a little more complicated than that. Their business model has to work without all the freebies."

Now Nash County is selling buildings well before they're completed.

Nash County Commissioner Chair Robbie Davis is himself an experienced real estate developer, and he reflected on the economic development arms race that has brewed on the county level.

"Ten years ago, economic

development basically consisted of saying 'We're open for business,' and trying to attract a little interest in potential businesses," he said. "Then you had to have some land that's ready to sell, then it has to be ready to build. Now we're helping businesses picture themselves in Nash County with a finished building. It's just gotten more aggressive and more aggressive as more people chase industries."

The work that goes into finding the right site for the buildings is just as crucial as the steps creating a canvas. In both cases, it's up to the customer to create from there. Hagy is loathe to give up his specific strategies for selling businesses on the county's buildings — his first duty is to Nash County's competitiveness, after all —

but he does have some general advice for counties trying the same thing.

"If you don't have a pro-business, pro-economic-development Board, you aren't going anywhere, no matter what staff recommends," he said. "If you aren't in the middle of a metropolitan area, a lot of times, the county has to do their own business park development; you can't wait on somebody else to take charge."

Counties either need tax revenue in the bank to finance construction, or they need favorable rates on loans from local banks, as Nash County had. When the buildings sell, Hagy said, the proceeds go right into the next building.

The infrastructure leading to the building, including roads and utilities, should be at least

concurrent with construction, if not ahead.

"We had a building without finished roads, but as soon as we paved it and built the curbs, we were able to find a buyer," Hagy said.

Nash County designs its buildings to be expanded to twice their initial size, giving buyers flexibility.

"We're starting to get more interest from developers who are interested in large speculative buildings of their own to attract tenants.

"We have 500 acres of industrial land in three business parks, so there's room for private development," Hagy said. "Two of the building sites can accommodate up to 1 million square feet."

Davis and Hagy acknowledge that Nash County's prox-

imity to I-95 and the Research Triangle (Raleigh, Durham and Chapel Hill) makes their county attractive for a lot of businesses.

"We have one business park that's fractions of a mile from I-95," Hagy said. "It's the kind of place that's ideal for logistics or distribution."

Despite receiving a letter of intent for one building before the steel was delivered to build it, Hagy protests that it isn't like shooting fish in a barrel.

The most Hagy would divulge from his repertoire was to be creative at marketing business parks.

"We're not in the business of building buildings, it's all toward the goal of making Nash County a thriving place to do business. We just had to take the lead." **CN**



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**Chara Bowie**

**NACo High Performance Leadership Academy graduate**  
Executive Director of Operations Precinct 2, Harris County, Texas

**Number of years in your role:**  
15 years

**Don't miss this in my county:**  
Visiting small business venues versus big chains like the original

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**My biggest challenge:** Health disparities

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## GET TO KNOW...

## Webb County, Texas

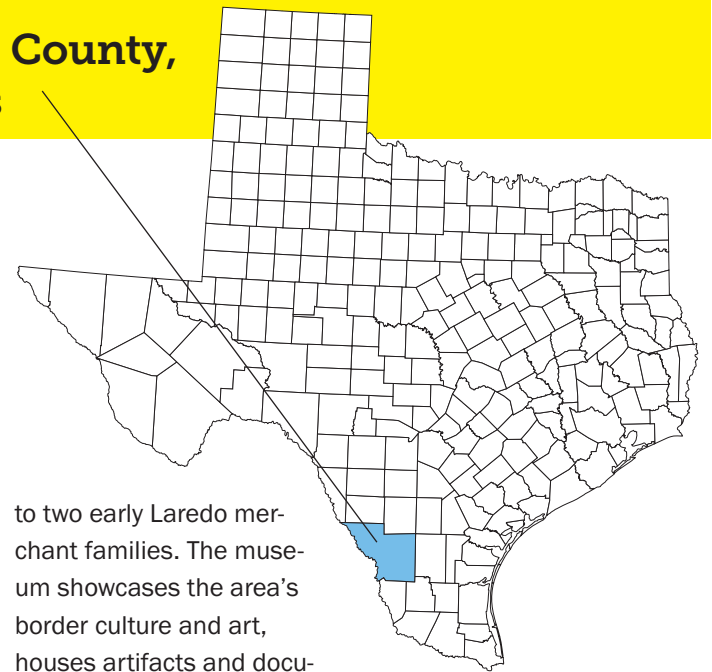
by Meredith Moran  
staff writer

Established in 1848, Webb County is named for James Webb, who served as secretary of the Treasury, secretary of State and attorney general of the Republic of Texas. When the United States granted Texas statehood, Webb became a U.S. District Court judge.

Its county seat, Laredo, is the largest inland port of entry in the United States and is one of the oldest crossing points along the Mexico-U.S. border. Laredo, which was established in 1755, was named for Spain's coastal city of Laredo. The city sits on the Rio Grande River, which is what separates it from the city of Nuevo Laredo, across the border in Mexico.

In 1840, from January to November, Laredo was the capital city of the Republic of the Rio Grande, in its rebellion against Mexico. Mexico quelled the rebellion, and the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo established the river as the border in 1848 following the Mexican-American War.

Laredo's Villa Antigua Border Heritage Museum is operated by the Webb County Heritage Foundation. The museum is housed in a restored two-story brick Italianate building that was once home



to two early Laredo merchant families. The museum showcases the area's border culture and art, houses artifacts and documents from Laredo's history and serves as a forum for educational seminars.

George Washington's birthday is a monthlong celebration in Laredo; **events include the Jalapeño Festival, Princess Pocahontas Pageant and the International Bridge Ceremony, which symbolizes the friendship between the U.S. and Mexico.** For nearly 20

years, Laredo has also celebrated farm worker right organizer Cesar Chavez throughout the month of March, with an annual march and festival operated by the League of United Latin American Citizens.

During World War I, the city was turned into an army camp, known as Camp Laredo, which housed more than 10,000 U.S. troops. Soldiers trained there and it served as a staging area for

troops heading to the front lines.

Laredo's population doubled from 1990-2000, making it the second fastest growing city in America at the time, behind Las Vegas, according to the 2000 census. Its population was 267,114, as of the 2020 census.

The city is known for its bird watching and hosts a Laredo Birding Festival each year, which includes a series of full-day scenic trips for birders. Laredo is home to numerous prized birds, including the Morelet's Seed-eater and Red-billed Pigeon, and is the only place in the United States to have four species of kingfisher: The Ringed, Belted, Green and Amazon.

*Get to Know features new NACo member counties.*



Children from the United States and Mexico hug at the International Bridge ceremony.





# WORD SEARCH

## SANTA FE COUNTY, NEW MEXICO

Created by Mary Ann Barton

**ARCHITECTURE:** The county is known for its Pueblo-style architecture which is a blend of its indigenous and Spanish roots.

**ART:** The county is a mecca for artists who show their work in more than 250 art galleries there.

**BOARD:** The Board of County Commissioners features five commissioners who get elected to four-year terms with a two-term limit.

**CAPITAL:** The capital of the state is the city of Santa Fe, the county seat, the oldest in the United States.

**ECONOMY:** The economic picture in the county offers a variety of industries including outdoor recreation, agriculture, creative industries and film industries

**GEORGIA:** The Georgia O'Keefe Museum is located in the county.

**HISTORY:** The county is home to the oldest public building in America, Palace of the Governors, built about 1610.

**NEWSPAPER:** The local newspaper is *The Santa Fe New Mexican*; the first issue was printed in 1849.

**OPERA:** The Santa Fe Opera holds a summer festival each year.

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**ORIGIN:** Santa Fe County got its name from the Spanish phrase "Santa Fe," which translates to "Holy Faith."

**PEAK:** The highest elevation in the county is at Santa Fe Baldy, which is 12,632 feet above sea level.

**POPULATION:** The population of the county is 154,823 as of the 2020 census.

**RECREATION:** The county offers outdoor recreation including hiking, biking, camping, skiing and climbing.

**RESTAURANT:** The oldest restaurant in town is The Palace Café, which opened in 1905.

**SUNSHINE:** The county sees about 300 days of sunshine each year.

# PROFILES IN SERVICE



## MICHAEL ZURLO

**NACo Board Member**  
 County Administrator  
 Clinton County, N.Y.

**Number of years active in NACo:** 23

**Years in public service:** 32

**Occupation:** County administrator, Clinton County, N.Y.

**Education:** BA Political Science, Siena College, MPA Public Management, Rockefeller College of Public Affairs and Policy

**The hardest thing I've ever done:** Manage county government through COVID.

**Three people (living or dead) I'd invite to dinner:** George Washington, Abraham Lincoln and Teddy Roosevelt

**You'd be surprised to learn that I:** Am a huge ABBA fan

**My favorite way to relax is:** Golfing

**I'm most proud of:** My family

**Every morning I read:** *Press-Republican, Albany Times Union, New York Post, Wall Street Journal*

## ZURLO

**My favorite meal is:** Cowboy ribeye; rare!

**My pet peeve is:** When a list-serv question says "only respond if yes" and 50 people respond "no."

**My motto is:** Don't worry about a problem until it's an actual problem.

**The last book I read was:** "The Match: The Day the Game of Golf Changed Forever"

**My favorite movie is:** "Miracle"

**My favorite music is:** '80s

**My favorite U.S. president is:** Ronald Reagan

**My county is a NACo member because:** Simply put, because counties matter! Counties are the level of government that touches everyone's life and helps our communities thrive. NACo unites all counties, big and little, and advocates for county priorities on the federal level.

*finally!*

NACo swag is now available online!

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION of COUNTIES **NACo**

**A dream I have is to: Win Powerball!**



## BRIGHT IDEAS | RIVERSIDE COUNTY, CALIF.

# California County Commits to Team Approach, Using Website to Help Tackle Homelessness

### PROBLEM:

The Santa Ana River Bottom has the largest concentration of homeless encampments in Riverside County, Calif., but the county departments working to serve them were siloed..

### SOLUTION:

Create a multidisciplinary team to better and more efficiently serve its unsheltered population and share success stories and data through a website.

by **Meredith Moran**  
staff writer

Riverside County, Calif. is bringing together staff across homelessness agencies and its county departments — including housing and workforce solutions, animal services and the parks and health systems — to better, and more efficiently, serve its unsheltered population in the Santa Ana River Bottom, which has the largest concentration of homeless encampments in the county.

The multidisciplinary team helps connect homeless individuals in the Santa Ana River Bottom to housing, mental health services, educational materials for fire management and suppression, veterinary services for pets and job placement. Riverside County used grant funding from the State of California Homeless Housing, Assistance and Prevention Grant Program to build the team and create a website to share stories of the people who have been helped, data collected through outreach and resources compiled for unhoused individuals in the area, such as where to access shelter, food, clothing and warming and cooling centers.

“Before this whole collaborative, everything was siloed. ‘I do this thing, you do that,’ and it was all separate,” said Oscar Serrato, the natural resources manager for the Santa Ana River Collaborative, who oversees the park rangers’ role in the team. “... And it’s really transformed

into something that I don’t think anybody really expected.”

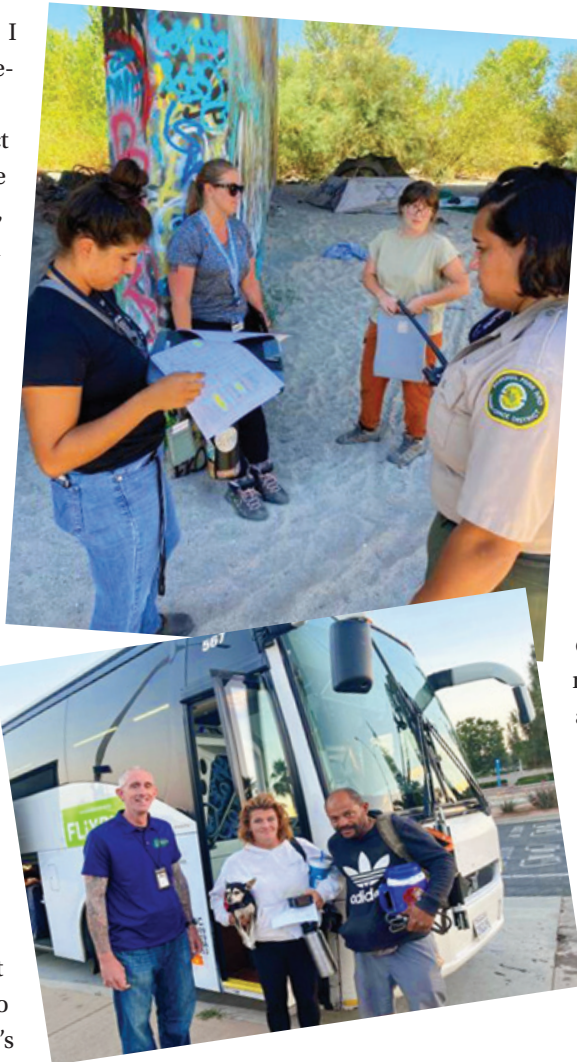
The park rangers act as the “boots on the ground” of the team, identifying where and what the needs are of the unhoused population, while other groups — such as the Housing Authority, behavioral health staff and other homeless services organizations, including Path of Life Ministries — can work to get people the support they need instead of devoting time to that extra step of outreach, according to Serrato.

“For us, it’s ‘How can everyone be most efficient?’” Serrato said. “And the way it’s worked, [park rangers] are the ones on the ground. ‘Let’s shoot off a phone call to behavioral health, because this individual is looking for some sort of help through their services.’

“And I feel like that’s what really made the biggest impact — we’re able to see more people and help more people on a daily basis.”

The homeless outreach “heat map” on the Riverside County Santa Ana River Bottom Collaborative’s website, which is updated regularly by park ranger staff, acts as a way to track where there are higher concentrations of encampments and higher needs throughout the area, according to Serrato.

“Data is what makes this website really cool, that we can share all the great work — documenting every encampment in the river, and it has a heat map where we can show what areas need the most help,” Serrato said. “So, instead of us being out just searching for ‘Let’s see who needs help,’ we’re able to identify these hot spots to be



**(Top): The team works an outreach event in the River Bottom. (Below): Bethany and Richard pause before heading to Ohio to live with a relative.**

more efficient all around, for us as ranger staff, but also to bridge those resources even faster than before.”

Since the creation of the website, agencies and nonprofits in the area have reached out to see how they can help support the team’s work, Serrato said.

“They’re like ‘How else can we help?’” Serrato said. “There’s a group — Healthcare in Action — they’re a bunch of physicians who literally just go out and they can assess on-site if somebody has some sort of injury or abscess, they can transport them to the hospital, they can take them to appointments. So, it has definitely grown in how far we’re reaching people by all these different agencies wanting to come on board.”

Not all of the unsheltered individuals in the Santa Ana River Bottom want support, but it’s the responsibility of park rangers to be there when they are

ready to reach out for help, Serrato said.

In one of the testimonials shared on the collaborative’s website, an unhoused couple was living in the Santa Ana River Bottom after they experienced a death in the family that led to a property inheritance dispute, which resulted in them losing housing.

Bethany and Richard were repeatedly offered support by the team, but declined, until they had made plans to live with a relative in Ohio and needed help paying for bus tickets that would allow them to make the cross-country trek with their belongings, including a suitcase full of one of their Grandma’s china they had carried since moving

out. Although the use was outside the limitations of the grant funding through the state, the team was able to leverage private funds to make it happen, according to Chris Oberg, CEO of Path of Life Ministries.

“We understand that everybody’s not ready to go that day, but we’re hoping that the day that they are ready, that we’re there being present,” Serrato said. “For them to see us every single day, it gives them that sensibility of, ‘They’re out here, we can trust them.’”

Establishing trust was the biggest obstacle park rangers faced with unsheltered individuals — their uniforms resemble those of law enforcement, Serrato pointed out — but the creation of the team has helped to remove that sense of skepticism, he said. Park rangers provide outreach throughout the Santa Ana River Bottom Monday through Friday from 7 a.m. to 3:30 p.m, according to Serrato. After about six months of offering consistent outreach, unsheltered individuals really began to open up and trust the team and

its mission, Serrato said.

“We wanted them to know that we’re not here to arrest anybody, we’re not here to find them, we’re not here to do anything other than purely just help them in the most compassionate way possible,” Serrato said. “And we’ve been seeing such a difference in the way they speak to us. They’re telling us, ‘Hey, this is what happened last night,’ where before, we didn’t get any information. And I feel like it was important for us to kind of break that wall.”

Linda Sutton, a deaf woman from Riverside, was homeless for 14 years before she was connected to housing through the county’s Housing Authority. She initially lived in a tent in the Santa Ana River Bottom until her tent was stolen. She then couch-surfed before ending up back in the Santa Ana River Bottom, where she lived in her car before getting access to housing and supportive services through the outreach team.

“I love my apartment so much,” Sutton shared in the testimonial. “It’s so quiet here and people around here are friendly ... I wanted to thank my workers for helping me and working hard for me. I will not forget that.”

In addition to sharing success stories, the website acts as a way for the team to document all of the collaborative meetings it has and its processes, so that other local governments or entities looking to adopt a similar system know where to start, Serrato said.

“I feel like we’ve created something with the collaborative that people can take somewhere else — in other cities, other states — and really be successful, and we want to share those things,” he said. “... So, that way people understand what it looks like and what it takes to get to where we’re at.” **CN**

*The program earned Riverside County a 2024 NACo Achievement Award in the Information Technology category.*





NEWS FROM **ACROSS THE NATION**

**CALIFORNIA**

**LOS ANGELES COUNTY** is suing **Southern California Edison** over the Eaton Fire, which claimed 17 lives in January, Axios reported. While the cause of the fire, one of California's most destructive, is still under investigation, LA County argues in its lawsuit that evidence from images and witness statements points to SCE's equipment as the source of the blaze. This lawsuit is part of a larger legal battle for the utility, as both Pasadena and Sierra Madre have also filed suits against SCE in connection with the Eaton Fire. These actions are part of ongoing scrutiny of the utility's role in the disaster.

**COLORADO**

**JEFFERSON COUNTY** recently debuted its first **Engage Jeffco Podcast**. "We dive into our first County 101 segment, a conversation about how our county works and the systems that shape our community," the county announced.

The county describes its podcast as "an in-depth look at the issues, events and unique perspectives, the Engage Jeffco Podcast is a deeper exploration of important county initiatives, ways to get involved, and the people who make this county function."

rental units with 70% reserved for seniors, homeless youth and young adults aging out of foster care.

"This is more than a housing project," said County Board Chair Nicole Hendrickson. The county is investing \$7.7 million as a partnership with the Gwinnett Housing Corporation with additional funding from the Community Foundation for Greater Atlanta and Chase Bank. County officials say the need is urgent, citing data showing 622 homeless seniors sought housing assistance over

a 21-month period.

"It's a win-win for the community," Hendrickson said. "Now you don't have a property sitting vacant, attracting crime. We can repurpose it into something meaningful."

**LOUISIANA**

A state lawmaker plans to sponsor a bill that would give parishes the right to decide whether to grant a permit for **carbon capture and sequestration (CCS)** in their parish,

See NEWS FROM page 11

**NEW JERSEY**

• **HUDSON COUNTY** Sheriff Frank Schillari is launching a Blue Envelope Program to **support drivers with autism spectrum disorder** to improve safety and communication for individuals with ASD and police officers alike. The program provides ASD drivers with a dedicated envelope to store their license, registration and insurance card in one organized place.

The envelope also includes instructions for drivers on how to navigate a traffic stop, such as keeping their hands on the steering wheel until instructed otherwise and preparing for flashing lights and radio sounds from the police vehicle.



**GEORGIA**

For the first time, **GWINNETT COUNTY** officials are converting an extended stay hotel into **affordable housing** for vulnerable residents, WSB-TV reported. The \$13.2 million project will create 73 affordable



**ILLINOIS**

The Rural **WINNEBAGO COUNTY** Public Transportation program aims to **improve mobility for rural communities**. Starting July 1, Reagan Mass Transit District will offer daily demand-response service from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m., Monday through Friday (excluding holidays), WIFR-TV reported. The service, available to all rural residents, provides access to essential destinations like medical appointments and grocery shopping, with lifts for those with disabilities.

"Ensuring reliable transit for all residents has been a key goal of my administration," said County Board Chairman Joe Chiarelli. "With support from the County Board and state and federal grants, we're enhancing mobility and quality of life for rural communities."







**NEW YORK**

The New York State Association of Counties President Ben Boykin, **WEST-CHESTER COUNTY** legislator, and NYSAC Executive Director Stephen Acquario celebrate NYSAC's centennial with a proclamation from New York Gov. Kathy Hochul.

From NEWS FROM page 10

the *Louisiana Illuminator* reported. "I wish right now that the police jury in Allen or Vernon or Beauregard could just say, 'We're not issuing that permit,' but because of the way our law is established, they can't," state Rep. Charles Owen told an audience at a recent community meeting in **ALLEN PARISH** on the topic. "So, what my legislation is going to do is give them that authority."

The proposed bill would allow parishes to regulate carbon sequestration projects by directly approving or rejecting them. If officials approve a project against public sentiment, residents could petition for a referendum, requiring 15% of registered voters in the parish to sign a petition to put the question on the ballot.

**NEW JERSEY**

• The **UNION COUNTY** Board of County Commissioners has partnered with Helpsy, a sustainable clothing and textile recycling company, to launch a county-wide **recycling program**. The initiative aims to reduce waste, promote environmental sustainability and offer residents an easy way to recycle unwanted clothing and accessories.

Commissioner Chairwoman Lourdes Leon highlighted the program as part of her 2025 initiative, "Union County 2025: Connecting Communities, Committed to Progress." She emphasized that the partnership reflects Union County's ongoing commitment to environmental stewardship, providing a simple way for residents to recycle textiles and contribute to a healthier planet.

**NORTH CAROLINA**

**WAKE COUNTY** Public Libraries is hosting a **bookmark-designing contest** for all ages as part of the 2025 Summer Reading Program. The contest runs throughout March, and winning designs will be printed and distributed at all 23 libraries this summer.

This year's theme, "Color Our World," invites participants to create bookmarks that celebrate reading and the colorful world of books. Artists can pick up entry forms at their local library, and designs must be submitted in person. Susan Evans, chair of the Wake County Board of Commissioners, hopes the contest will inspire

**SOUTH CAROLINA**

• **DORCHESTER COUNTY** held its first-ever **critical infrastructure summit** to review the security and resilience of key systems like energy, transportation, emergency services and communications, WCSC-TV reported. The summit, held at the Dorchester Emergency Operations Center in Summerville, aims to strengthen connections and prepare for future emergencies.

Presentations were private due to the sensitive nature of the event. According to Sheriff's Office Chief of Staff Steven Young, the summit wasn't prompted by any specific incident but focused on building relationships and planning for potential disasters.

"Today is also about ex-

creativity and bring more people into the library community.

**PENNSYLVANIA**

**ALLEGHENY COUNTY** has opened a portal for federal workers interested in **working for the county**, WTAE-TV reported. County Executive Sara Innamorato recently announced the launch of the job portal.

"If they're not welcome at the federal government, they're welcome in Allegheny County," County Manager John Fournier said, adding that the county has more than 1,000 openings for both full- and part-time employees between its 20 departments and divisions. Visit the portal here: <https://www.alleghenycounty.us/Government/Employment/Impacted-Federal-Workers>

**SOUTH CAROLINA**

• **CHARLESTON COUNTY** is accepting applications for its **2025 Summer Youth Internship Program**, offering teenagers and young adults the opportunity to gain workplace skills and experience, WCIV-

TV reported. The six-week program runs from June 13 to July 24, with accepted applicants earning \$15 per hour for around 20 hours a week.

To be eligible, applicants must be 16-21 years old, currently enrolled in high school or college and a Charleston County resident. Those under 18 will need parental consent.

**WISCONSIN**

The American Heart Association, **MILWAUKEE COUNTY** Department of Health and Human Services and Serving Older Adults of Southeast Wisconsin Inc. launched the second **blood pressure hub** recently at a local senior center. The new hub allows participants to check their blood pressure on-site and borrow a cuff for home use. "Our goal is to ensure all residents, especially older adults, have the resources to live healthier lives," County Executive David Crowley said at the event.

Send your news tips, press releases and photos to Mary Ann Barton at [mbarton@naco.org](mailto:mbarton@naco.org).



changing those business cards with folks that may not have ever had the opportunity to meet each other so that the disaster day isn't the first time

they've ever shaken hands, they can build relationships from here," Thomas McNeal, Dorchester County director of Emergency Management.



**BERTIE COUNTY, N.C.**

The seal of Bertie County, N.C., in the northeastern part of the state, features a green map of the county with local symbols, surrounded by a green ring with the name of the county and the state. The county was founded in 1739 and its namesake, British politician James Bertie and his brother Henry, thought to have been two of the first lord proprietors of Carolina.

The county is bordered by rivers on two sides — the Roanoke River to the west and south and the Chowan River to the east — and partially bisected by the Cashie River. The rivers are teeming with fish, to the point where one is featured on the county seal.



Bertie County's rich soil is ideal for agriculture because of its location and the large amount of water nearby. The county's major agricultural crops include tobacco and potatoes, which are represented on the seal, along with peanuts, corn, cotton, wheat, hay and soybeans. Pine trees, also represented on the seal, are plentiful.

Would you like to see your seal featured in County News? Contact Charlie Ban at [cban@naco.org](mailto:cban@naco.org).



# 2025 NACo ANNUAL CONFERENCE & EXPOSITION

Philadelphia City and County,  
Pennsylvania | July 11-14

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THE  
DATE**

