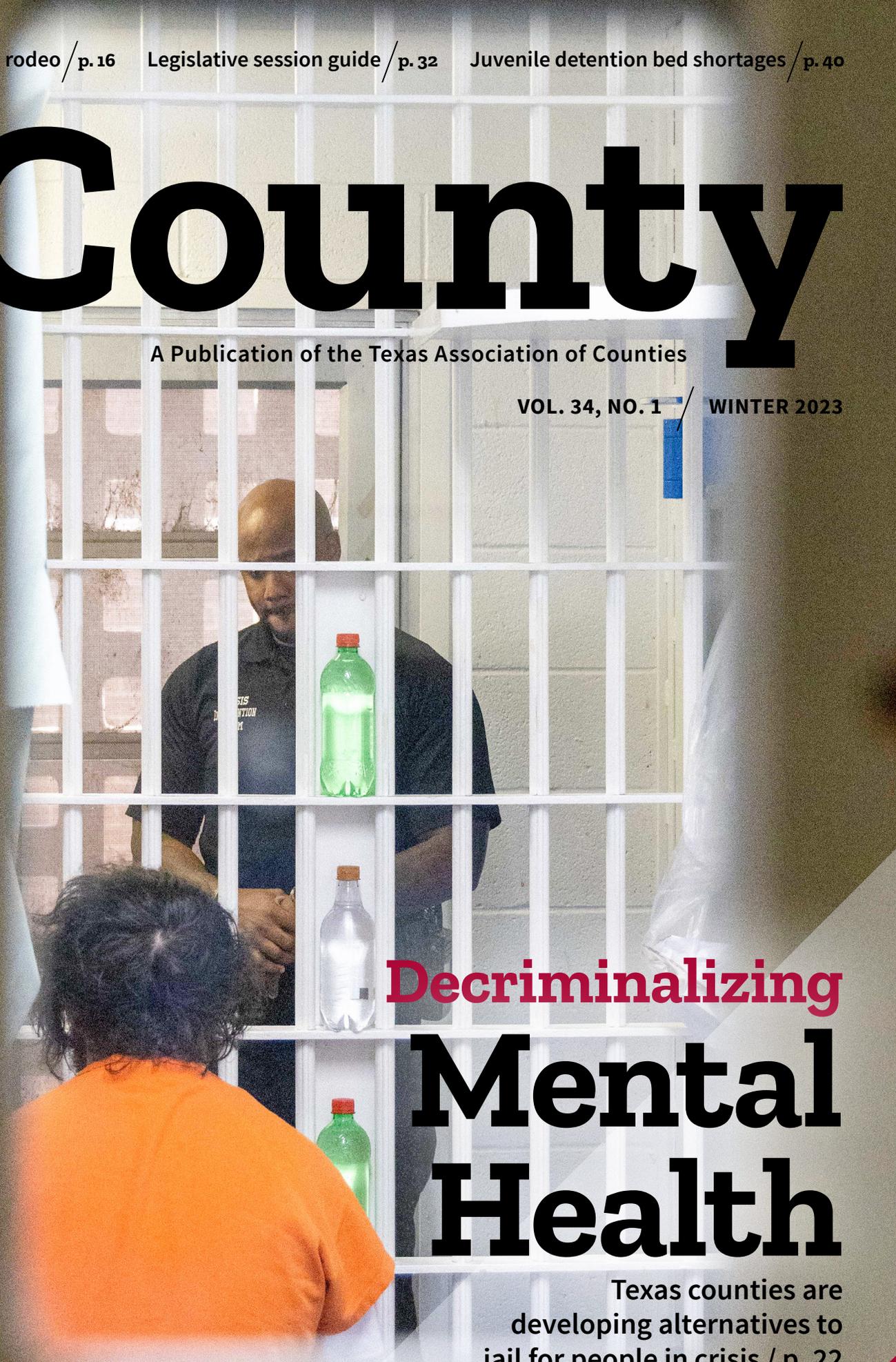


County

A Publication of the Texas Association of Counties

VOL. 34, NO. 1

WINTER 2023



Decriminalizing Mental Health

Texas counties are developing alternatives to jail for people in crisis / p. 22

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On the Cover
Hockley County Sheriff's Deputy Brandon Lewis, a
member of the county's crisis intervention team (CIT),
meets with an inmate. The goal of the CIT is to direct
services to individuals with mental health needs,
including after their release from jail.
(Credit: Chase Seabolt)



Winter Wonderland on the Way to
McDonald Observatory - Fort Davis -
Davis Mountains, West Texas.
(Credit: Silvio Ligutti/Shutterstock)

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Texas Association of Counties Mission Statement

The mission of the Texas Association of Counties is to unite counties to achieve better solutions.

County, a quarterly magazine, is distributed to every elected county official and county auditor in Texas' 254 counties. Other readers include purchasing agents, budget and planning administrators, appointed department heads, state legislators and state agency personnel.

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Zapata County Courthouse
(Credit: Texas Association of Counties)

TAC is here for you amid a year of exciting changes



Susan M. Redford
Executive Director
Texas Association
of Counties

A New Year is here, and I hope it is off to a great start for you and your county. Welcome to all of our new county officials. This year promises to be busy for TAC

and county officials with the start of the 88th Texas Legislature.

The TAC team, especially those in our Legislative Services department, stands ready to assist county officials with every aspect of the legislative process. TAC has worked hard to be a valued and trusted resource for you and our legislators throughout the interim, and we will build upon that work during the session, educating all involved on the issues affecting Texas counties. This work is continuous – preparations for this session began before the ink was dry on bills signed into law last session.

There are several opportunities to stay informed and get involved.

Counties at the Capitol Legislative Day is Feb. 7, and we invite county officials to join us for an overview of the many facets of the legislative session, along with issue briefings and networking with fellow officials

and legislators. We built time into the schedule for your individual meetings with legislators, and we look forward to hosting you at a reception at the TAC events center that evening.

Every Tuesday during the session, join us for Tuesday Morning Breakfasts from 7 to 8 a.m., in person at TAC or through a virtual option. The weekly event will provide the newest information about the ever-changing legislative landscape at the Capitol. Get a game plan and a good meal before heading to the Capitol for meetings with legislators.

If you cannot attend a breakfast, look for a summary of the week's developments in the **County Issues newsletter**, which is sent every Friday during the session.

I also encourage you to get involved with the state legislative process by participating in the **Core Legislative Group**. CLG members are tapped to provide legislative testimony on issues affecting county government. Members are encouraged to reach out to their legislators about specific legislation and to maintain consistent communication with them throughout the year.

Beyond the legislative session, other opportunities abound for **continuing education and training**. Healthy County Boot Camp is this month, and the County Management & Risk Conference is in March.

Following a very successful virtual event during the fall, the **County Elections Academy** returns this spring for an in-person education event that will explore elections-related topics of interest to counties.

TAC will host its first **County Technology Conference** in May. County officials, staff and IT personnel helped shape a terrific agenda that covers some of the biggest technology challenges facing counties today: cybersecurity, data storage, best practices, and more. The event is appropriate for county officials as well as IT personnel. Technology issues continue to be at the forefront of all issues in county government. This conference was developed to help counties plan for and address these needs.

Whether it is connecting over breakfast to discuss the latest legislative news, participating in county operations workshops and conferences, or learning more about emerging technologies, you can rely on TAC to support you throughout your term of public office. We are here to help and proud to serve all Texas counties.

Stay #254Strong!

Together we can be an effective voice for county government



Nathan Craddock
President
Texas Association of Counties

It's another busy start to another busy year for Texas counties and the Texas Association of Counties, made more so by the new session of the Texas Legislature, now underway. Until the session's scheduled end on May 29, state lawmakers will be considering thousands of bills that affect county government and local taxpayers.

Each session brings its share of challenges for

counties. But I have no doubt counties will respond with productive acts of collaboration, mutual support and determination. As they have in years past, counties will create success where they can and in doing so will reaffirm the value of relationships across county offices and with state partners.

Experience with TAC and our county affiliate organizations justifies my confidence. TAC's [Legislative Services](#) department, led by Noe Barrios, keeps counties informed about the latest developments at the Capitol and the possible effects of proposed legislation on county government. They're a dynamic team whose understanding of county-related legislative matters provides invaluable support to counties at the Legislature. Please take advantage of this great resource that TAC offers.

Our members and affiliate associations work equally hard to keep pace with events at the Capitol. I encourage you to join the effort to make our county voice heard. Participate in the legislative process by joining TAC's [Core Legislative Group](#). Reach out to your district representative

and senator to let them know why county government is the best form of local government there is. Take time, if possible, to drive to Austin and speak with legislators on behalf of counties. We need everyone in the game.

I also would encourage Auditors and Treasurers to respond to fiscal note requests, either from the Legislative Budget Board or TAC. Knowing the fiscal impact of proposed legislation is an important part of the process, and legislators will not have all the information they need to assess a bill's impact unless we contribute.

Come what may, we'll review where we are and where we're headed at TAC's Legislative Conference in Austin from Aug. 30 to Sept. 1. [Registration is open now](#). I hope to see you there.

Each new year also brings new appointments to [TAC's Board of Directors](#). New Board members include Comal County Commissioner Jen Crownover, Swisher County Judge Harold Keeter, Bosque County Attorney Natalie Koehler and Potter County Clerk Julie Smith.

I look forward to their contributions to TAC's continued success over the next year — and to the contributions from new members to the Boards of Directors of the [Health and Employee Benefits Pool](#), [Risk Management Pool](#), [County Information Resources Agency](#), [Unemployment Compensation Group Account Fund](#) and various TAC committees. I will miss working with those members whose terms ended at the end of 2022. It was a pleasure working with them and I can't thank them enough.

But one of TAC's many blessings is its deep bench of county leaders. It's a key reason why we stay #254Strong.

Nathan Craddock



Bosque County Courthouse
(Credit: Laura Skelding)



County Calendar

Conferences and events that matter to county officials and employees

Feb. 8-10

1 Healthy County Boot Camp

Embassy Suites by Hilton Denton Convention Center
3100 Town Center Trl.
Denton, TX 76201

Wellness industry experts and your peers will share powerful tips, strategies and resources that you can use to help county officials and employees lead healthy lives. The event has an online option. For more information, contact your Wellness Consultant at www.county.org/County-Health-Benefits-Map, Rachel Kucera at rachelk@county.org or Megan West at meganw@county.org.

Feb. 14

Fireworks Authorization Deadline*

Last day to adopt the discretionary fireworks authorization order for Texas Independence Day.

Feb. 15-17

2 County Court Assistants Training Conference

Embassy Suites by Hilton San Marcos Hotel Conference Center
1001 E. McCarty Ln.
San Marcos, TX 78666

The County Court Assistants Training Conference gives the county judge's staff the opportunity to learn more about the management and operation of the judicial and administrative procedures of the judge's office. For more information, contact Ashley Royer at ashleyr@county.org or Regan Williams at reganw@county.org.

Feb. 21-23

3 V.G. Young Institute of County Government School for Commissioners Courts

Brazos County Expo Center
5827 Leonard Rd.
Bryan, TX 77807

The faculty and staff of the institute are working with the officers and Education Committee of the County Judges and Commissioners Association of Texas to plan a relevant and effective educational program. For more information, contact the V.G. Young Institute of County Government at vgyi.tamu.edu or call (979) 845-4572.

Feb. 21-July 17

County Administrative Training: County Budgeting

Various locations

This series of practical workshops, developed by the Texas Association of Counties and the V.G. Young Institute of County Government, is designed to provide an in-depth and concentrated learning experience on the county budget. For more information, contact Michele Ewerz at michelee@county.org or Jackie Boone at jackieb@county.org.

Feb. 28-March 3

4 Basics of County Investments Course

Embassy Suites by Hilton San Marcos Hotel Conference Center
1001 E. McCarty Ln.
San Marcos, TX 78666

The Basics of County Investments Course

Register for any of these events

at www.county.org/Calendar-of-Events. For more information, call (800) 456-5974 or email the respective contacts for each event.

offers 14.75 hours of classroom instruction appropriate for all levels interested in the essentials of investing public funds. An additional 7.75 hours of in-depth, hands-on learning is offered for those actively investing funds. For more information, contact Deanna Auert at deanna@county.org or Nino Miranda at ninom@county.org.

March 2

5 Spring Panhandle County Judges and Commissioners Association Conference

Texas A&M Agrilife Research and Extension Center
6500 Amarillo Blvd W.
Amarillo, TX 79106

The members of the Panhandle County Judges and Commissioners Association will be gathering in Amarillo for their semiannual meeting. For more information, contact Michele Ewerz at michelee@county.org or Jackie Boone at jackieb@county.org.

March 8-10

6 Spring Judicial Education Session

Overton Hotel & Conference Center
2322 Mac Davis Ln.
Lubbock, TX 79401

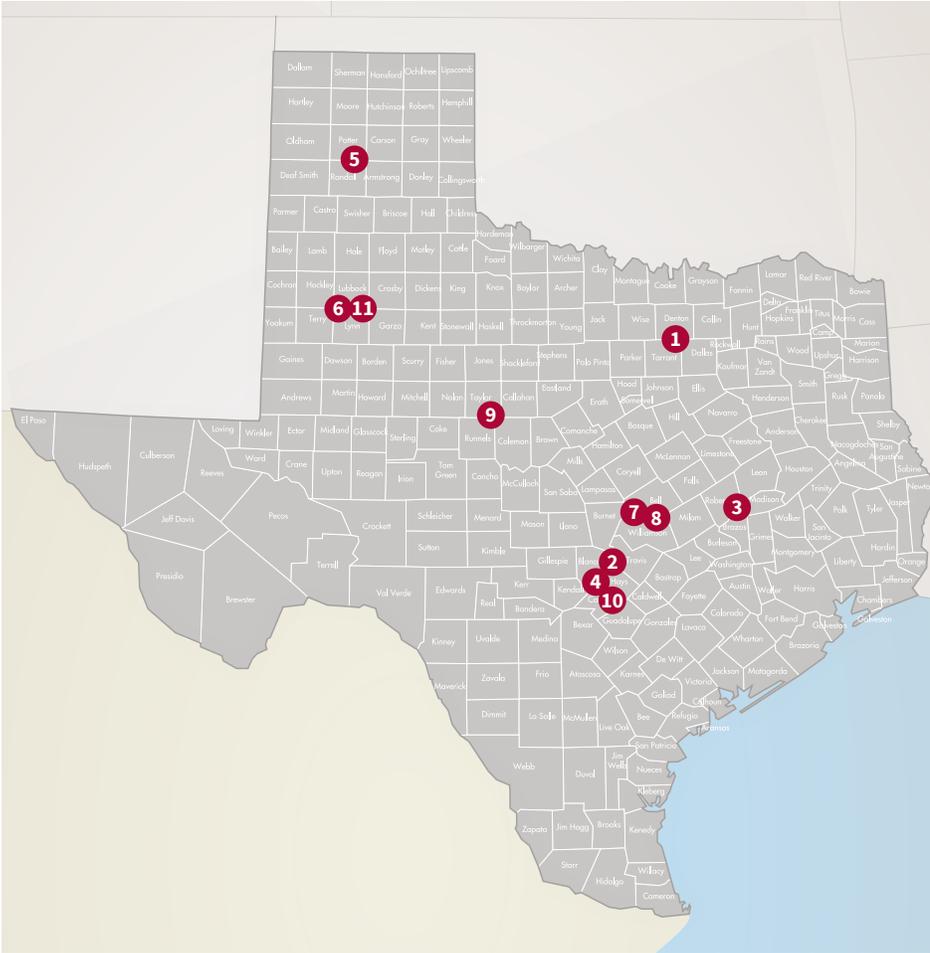
The Spring Judicial Education Session of the Texas Judicial Academy gives constitutional county judges an excellent opportunity to learn from and connect with judges from across the state and to discuss a wide range of topics that affect their judicial duties. For more information, contact Ashley Royer at ashleyr@county.org or Regan Williams at reganw@county.org.

March 22-24

7 County Management & Risk Conference

Kalahari Resort and Convention Center
3001 Kalahari Blvd.
Round Rock, TX 78665

Don't miss this opportunity to learn how to reduce risk and prevent losses throughout your county's operations. Hear the latest about employee wellness and health benefit options that affect your bottom line. The event has an online option. For more information, contact Deanna Auert at deanna@county.org or Megan West at meganw@county.org.



For more information, contact Amy Lawson at amyl@county.org or Nino Miranda at ninom@county.org.

March 31

Fireworks Authorization Deadline*

Last day to adopt the discretionary fireworks authorization order for San Jacinto Day.

April 2-4

2023 County Elections Academy

Sheraton Austin Georgetown Hotel & Conference Center
1101 Woodlawn Ave.
Georgetown, TX 78628

The County Elections Academy will provide education and resources for county officials and personnel responsible for holding efficient and secure elections. For more information, contact Deanna Auert at deanna@county.org.

April 13

Mental Health Workshop

Abilene Convention Center
1100 N. Sixth St.
Abilene, TX 79601

The Mental Health Workshop is a one-day meeting that will focus on mental health issues and services that county judges can use in the courtroom. For more information, contact Ashley Royer at ashleyr@county.org or Regan Williams at reganw@county.org.

April 17-20

51st Annual County Treasurers' Spring Education Seminar

Embassy Suites by Hilton San Marcos
Hotel Conference Center
1001 E. McCarty Ln.
San Marcos, TX 78666

April 25-28

94th Annual West Texas County Judges and Commissioners Association

Lubbock Memorial Civic Center
1501 Mac Davis Ln.
Lubbock, TX 79401

For more information, contact Michele Ewerz at michelee@county.org or Jackie Boone at jackieb@county.org.

April 24

Fireworks Authorization Deadline*

Last day to adopt the discretionary fireworks authorization order for Cinco de Mayo (for counties not more than 100 miles from the Texas-Mexico border).

*For more information, sample orders and FAQs, visit www.county.org/fireworks or call the TAC Legal Helpline at (888) ASK-TAC4.

Empowering Seniors fortifies Tarrant County residents entering their 'golden age'

By JJ Velasquez

When Tarrant County Commissioner Gary Fickes turned 60, his "golden age" as he calls it, he knew there would be a need for others in his age group to combat some of the issues that come with aging.

"In 2010, the first baby boomers started turning 65, and they've been turning 65 at a rate of about 300,000 per month nationwide," Fickes said. "It's one of the fastest growing demographic phenomena going on."

Being a baby boomer himself, he saw a tidal wave coming of elder Tarrant County residents needing help. So Fickes, Tarrant County's Precinct 3 Commissioner, commissioned a task force in the late 2000s to take the collective pulse of the local senior community.

"IN 2010, THE FIRST BABY BOOMERS STARTED TURNING 65, AND THEY'VE BEEN TURNING 65 AT A RATE OF ABOUT 300,000 PER MONTH NATIONWIDE."

The upshot of that task force's work was *Empowering Seniors*, an annual event that aimed to give seniors a one-stop shop to fulfill their needs. Back when the task force convened, six focus areas were identified as being key to the local senior community: isolation, transportation, health care, financial security, identity theft and employment. The events *Empowering Seniors* hosts are free to residents and tackle at least one of those focus areas.

Empowering Seniors was able to leverage the already-prevalent work of nonprofit organizations such as United Way, Meals on Wheels and the Area Agency on Aging. Through this network of agencies, wellness checks were built into regular visits so that any senior citizens struggling through loneliness or medical ailments could get the help they needed.

Empowering Seniors also provided area agencies the initial stimulus to expand currently existing transportation services to benefit older residents. For health care needs, *Empowering Seniors* coordinates with local health care providers to offer preventive care: hypertension screening, diabetes tests and other diagnostic exams. Fickes also transformed the



Empowering Seniors website to serve caregivers and the senior community year-round. Valuable information, resources, and entertainment are easily accessible 24 hours a day.

What's more, these programs don't cost Fickes' constituents a dime. Rather than coming out of county coffers, the funding for *Empowering Seniors* events comes entirely from event sponsors, including each of the area's five major hospital systems.

Tarrant County's work with *Empowering Seniors* was recognized in 2012 by the Texas Association of Counties with a *County Best Practices Award*, and the program has inspired copycats throughout the state.

In 2021, there were more than 255,000 Tarrant County residents



Tarrant County Commissioner Gary Fickes and Scott Murray emcee an Empowering Seniors event together. (Photos by Tarrant County Commissioner Gary Fickes' Office)

over age 65, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Tarrant was one of three Metroplex counties in the nation's 10 fastest growing counties from 2010 to 2020.

"We've got a lot of seniors that are located here, and [more] are moving here — for a lot of reasons," Fickes said.

The first year the Empowering Seniors event was held in 2009,

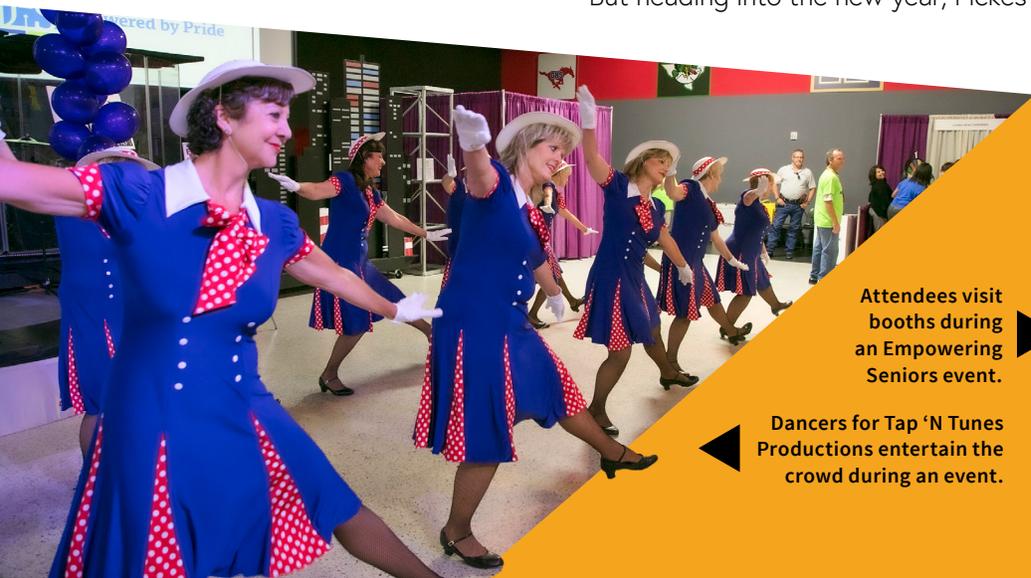
300 residents attended. In 2019, that number had grown nearly tenfold.

The COVID-19 pandemic necessitated an all-virtual event in 2020, and in 2021, Empowering Seniors was split into several events held throughout the year, running the gamut from wellness seminars to outreach initiatives.

But heading into the new year, Fickes

said Empowering Seniors is ready to return to an all-in-one format.

"We're ready to go do another big one," he said. The first annual Empowering Seniors event since 2019 is scheduled for September. 🇺🇸



Attendees visit booths during an Empowering Seniors event.

Dancers for Tap 'N Tunes Productions entertain the crowd during an event.



Event examines the strengths and needs of rural Texas

By Jody Seaborn

The Texas Tribune hosted a two-day symposium in November that surveyed the strengths and needs of rural Texas ahead of this year's legislative session and beyond. Held on the Texas Tech University campus in Lubbock, "The Future of Rural Texas" featured a series of panel discussions on education, health care, broadband access, economic development, natural resources, local government and more.

Participants underscored rural Texas' crucial contributions to the nation's and the world's food, fiber and energy supplies throughout the event, which the Texas Association of Counties helped sponsor. Nearly 2,000 people joined the conference either in person or online.

"The through line of this conference is that rural is Texas and Texas is rural — always has been, always will be," Evan Smith, The Texas Tribune's CEO and co-founder, said during introductory remarks.

While the state's population grew by 4 million between 2010 and 2020, more than half of Texas counties, all of them rural, lost population, further decreasing the percentage of Texans who live in a farming or ranching part of the state. Even so, Smith said, more than 3 million people still live in rural Texas. If rural Texas were its own state, it would be the 33rd-largest state in the nation, he noted.

"Rural Texans deserve, have earned and have a right to expect so much more than they're getting," he said.

The conference began Nov. 17 with a preview of the 88th legislative session, moderated by Smith. State Reps. Dustin Burrows (R-Lubbock), Eddie Morales Jr. (D-Eagle Pass) and Brooks Landgraf (R-Odessa) discussed several topics, including higher education funding, property taxes and school vouchers.

There was a noticeable lack of enthusiasm for vouchers expressed during the conference. In many parts of rural



Amarillo Mayor Ginger Nelson speaks during a panel discussion on municipal government in rural Texas, part of The Texas Tribune's "The Future of Rural Texas" conference held Nov. 17-18 in Lubbock. Also pictured, from left, are Texas Tribune editor-in-chief Sewell Chan, Lubbock City Council Member Steve Massengale and Lufkin Mayor Mark Hicks. (Credit: Jody Seaborn)

Texas, the local public school is the center of community life, and private schools are nonexistent. Burrows and Landgraf were noncommittal when asked by Smith about letting families use public education dollars for private school tuition. Other conference panelists were clear in their opposition.

"If I have anything to say about it, it's dead on arrival," state Rep. Ken King, (R-Canadian), said about school vouchers during an education panel on Nov. 18. "It's horrible for rural Texas. It's horrible for all of Texas."

Because expanding access to high-speed internet is critical in so many areas, broadband was a common theme across panels. Likewise concerns about "a cookie-cutter approach" from the Legislature to issues important to rural Texans, as Amarillo Mayor Ginger Nelson described it during a panel on municipal

government in rural areas.

It's important that local rural voices are heard at the Legislature, Nelson said.

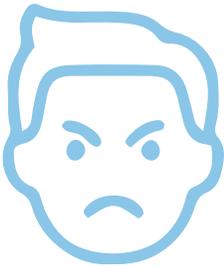
"If you're a city far away from Austin, other than your legislative voices, it's difficult to get your voice into the Capitol," she said. "Amarillo is closer to three state capitals than we are Austin. If (legislators are) going to tie my hands and not allow me to hire a lobbyist to be the voice for the citizens of Amarillo in Austin, I don't know how my voice is going to be near as loud or get near as much volume" as the voice of Austin's mayor.

The event also included Smith's videotaped interview with U.S. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack. You can watch it and videos of all of the event's panel discussions on [The Texas Tribune's YouTube channel](#): www.youtube.com/@texastribune. 🇹🇽



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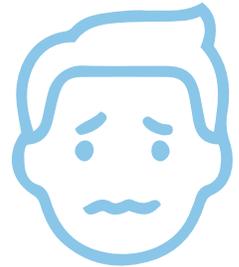
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Expanding safety culture in San Patricio County

Safety Rodeo welcomed employees from across the county

By Jillian Becquet

Classroom safety exercises aren't often met with "Go do it! It was fun!" when encouraging others to fulfill their training requirements. However, those phrases were used often by employees finishing up their events at San Patricio County's first Safety Rodeo, held Oct. 19 at the San Patricio County Fairgrounds.

The county reviewed its safety history and designed the full-day event to draw attention to and work on the skills that can help prevent future safety incidents in common categories. Their priorities for training

this year were slips, trips and falls, heavy machinery, and vehicle safety.

This is the first safety exercise of this type for San Patricio County, said Safety Specialist Sylvia Marquez. She wanted to create a welcoming and enjoyable environment where county employees could come together to work on important skills, even those they may not encounter at their daily jobs.

"We need to educate all the employees, whether they work out in the field, or they're driving a car like law enforcement, or they work in the

office. Safety needs to be their number one priority," said County Judge David Krebs. "I want them to say that we had fun, we enjoyed it, and we've learned some of the things that we need to work on." Krebs welcomed the idea of the Safety Rodeo after seeing its success in the city of Portland, Texas, while he was mayor.

The spirit of competition was strong, with teams and individuals competing to win awards in six events. Participants navigated obstacles and completed challenges with a mini-excavator, forklift, front loader



San Patricio County Judge David Krebs looks on during the Safety Rodeo.
(Credit: Jillian Becquet)

Participants navigated obstacles and completed challenges with a mini excavator, forklift, front loader and backhoe.
(Credit: San Patricio County)



San Patricio County employees were awarded medals for winning in certain categories.
(Credit: Jillian Becquet)

and backhoe. They also drove a San Patricio County Sheriff's Department vehicle through a challenge course and observed workplace hazards in an indoor environment in the Hazard Hunt.

Outside of the competition, employees could receive flu and COVID-19 vaccinations, practice CPR, learn how to stop bleeding and how to use an EVAC chair. They also visited displays by the San Patricio County Public Health Department; Texas Women, Infants and Children (WIC); and the Gulf Coast Growth Ventures Fire Safety Training trailer.

TAC Risk Control Consultant Joe Szewczyk served alongside county employees and elected officials as judges of the event. He praised San Patricio County's focus on safety, including having an employee dedicated to addressing the specific challenges facing the county, allowing them to be nimble in targeting training to specific needs.

Szewczyk stressed the importance of all levels of government being present at the rodeo. "The buy-in that lets the employees know that 'my boss thinks safety is important, so I need to think

safety is important' is huge for having a big safety culture," he said.

"It's important that we don't just stick with one method of learning when practicing or focusing on safety. There are different people who learn differently," explained Szewczyk. "This event met all of those."

From county judge to brand-new hire, county employees showed up and participated, and walked away—sometimes with a medal around their neck—knowing that safety is a focus at all levels of San Patricio County. 🇹🇽

The 2024-25 State Budget – Budget writers working on first drafts

By Zelma Smith

The state budget provides counties with limited funding for indigent defense, indigent health care, programs diverting people experiencing a mental health or substance abuse crisis from county jails, and other services. Many of these services are unfunded and underfunded mandates: requirements placed on counties by the state that result in the expenditure of county property taxes to pay for required services.

Texas House and Senate budget writers just filed their introduced budget bills, [House Bill 1](#) and [Senate Bill 1](#). These baseline funding bills, as the introduced bills are known, serve as the starting point for the Legislature's budget deliberations.

For this budget cycle, there is an unprecedented amount of funding available to spend. The funds are in three pots:

- A projected \$32.7 billion in general revenue funds – the state's equivalent of a county general fund – as of Aug. 31, 2023, the end of the current two-year budget.

- \$3 billion in unspent federal money from the State and Local Coronavirus Fiscal Recovery Fund authorized by the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA).

- \$13.7 billion in the state Economic Stabilization Fund (or "rainy day fund") at the end of the current budget, not accounting for outstanding spending authority and investment earnings or additional appropriations out of the fund.

Comptroller Glen Hegar estimates that the rainy day fund balance will nearly double -- reaching \$27.1 billion by Aug. 31, 2025, the end of the upcoming two-year budget, absent any appropriations by the 88th Legislature.

Counties faced similar issues when deciding how to spend their ARPA allocations. Many Texas counties chose to provide large outlays for water and sewer improvements and connections, facilities and capital equipment for law enforcement and firefighters, broadband connectivity and other one-time projects. The challenge

for the Legislature is to avoid a fiscal cliff by using this one-time surplus to fund recurring spending that cannot be sustained in future budgets – for example, a large-scale property tax relief package.

With the state experiencing a windfall in available revenue, counties might expect additional cost-sharing from the state for unfunded and underfunded mandates. Budget requests from state agencies that partner with counties to provide indigent defense, jail diversion and mental health services, and community supervision for adult and juvenile offenders do include increases in county funding (see Chart 1 for selected funding requests that benefit Texas counties).

Reducing the cost of unfunded and underfunded mandates on Texas counties is unlikely to be a state budget priority for the 88th Legislature. However, property tax relief will be a priority, especially for state leaders. Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick, a key member of the state leadership triumvirate, recently proposed an

increase in the homestead exemption from \$40,000 to as much as \$65,000.

Patrick also proposed establishing a rural law enforcement fund for Texas counties. This proposal was inspired by his tour of rural Texas communities and discussions with county judges and sheriffs. Patrick also supports construction of a state mental health hospital in the Texas Panhandle and investing in the electric grid. Speaker Dade Phelan (R-Beaumont), now in his second session as leader of the House, also supports investing in the grid and the state's road, water and broadband infrastructure.

Budget spending limits for 2024-25

On Nov. 30, the Texas Legislative Budget Board (LBB), a panel of legislators led by Patrick and Phelan, adopted a growth rate of 12.33% for each of the following Texas spending limits.

- The state's [Tax Spending Limit](#) restricts increases in appropriations from tax

SELECTED 2024-25 BUDGET REQUESTS IMPACTING TEXAS COUNTIES

State agencies have requested funding in the 2024-2025 two-year budget for a variety of positions and services, many of which would benefit counties.

STATE AGENCY	FUNDING REQUEST*	AMOUNT
FISCAL PROGRAMS - COMPTROLLER OF PUBLIC ACCOUNTS	BROADBAND OFFICE – 18 additional full-time equivalent (FTE) positions	\$-
TRUSTEED PROGRAMS WITHIN THE OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR	DISASTER FUNDS – assists local governments in meeting FEMA match requirements for disasters	\$150M
	SPECIALTY COURT GRANTS (rider allocation) – includes \$19.6 million increase in funding due to HB 1256, 87R, (Rep. Trent Ashby, R-Lufkin)	\$24M
TEXAS HISTORICAL COMMISSION	COUNTY COURTHOUSE GRANTS	\$45M
TEXAS HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES COMMISSION	Expand state hospital capacity with funding to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Operate 168 BEDS at the John S. Dunn Behavioral Sciences Center in Houston. Operate the Dallas hospital, including 100 BEDS at the planned children's unit (300 BEDS TOTAL). MAINTAIN CONTRACTED BED LEVELS to assist with reducing the state hospital waitlist (forensic waitlist ~2,400 people). Planning and land acquisition for a NEW IN-PATIENT PSYCHIATRIC HOSPITAL in the Panhandle. Planning for CONSTRUCTION at Terrell and Wichita Falls state hospitals. 	\$119.1M
	REDESIGN OF STATE MENTAL HEALTH SYSTEM AND STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE CONTINUUM OF CARE – funding proposals presented during 2023 legislative session. Redesign of state mental health delivery system would reduce county jail incarceration costs, court costs, emergency room visits and hospitalization.	\$-
TEXAS INDIGENT DEFENSE COMMISSION	RURAL PUBLIC DEFENDER OFFICES	\$50M
OFFICE OF COURT ADMINISTRATION	OPERATION LONE STAR – administrative assistants to manage the magistration hearings and a court consultant to assist counties with adjudication of cases – 4 FTE positions	\$1M
TEXAS DEPARTMENT OF CRIMINAL JUSTICE	FUNDING FOR COMMUNITY SUPERVISION AND CORRECTIONS DEPARTMENT (CSCD) – 15% pay raise for probation officers and 10% pay raises for all other CSCD staff; additional funding for basic operations, offender treatment and enhanced offender supervision programs	\$137.9M
TEXAS JUVENILE JUSTICE DEPARTMENT	PROBATION SALARY STIPEND	\$28M
	NEW FACILITIES IN URBAN AREAS	\$120M
	REGIONAL POST- ADJUDICATION FACILITY	\$40M
	PRE/POST- ADJUDICATION CAPACITY	\$22M
	PRE/POST- ADJUDICATION FUNDING	\$12.4M
	MAINTAIN DIVERSION TARGET	\$8.9M
	REGIONAL COMMUNITY CAPACITY	\$7M

*These are exceptional item requests, funding requests by state agencies above current budget levels, that require legislative approval unless otherwise indicated.

Highlights

revenue not dedicated by the Texas Constitution to growth in the state economy. The Legislature can exceed this limit with a simple majority vote in both chambers.

- The Consolidated General Revenue Appropriations (CGR) Limit, a new limit established by **Senate Bill 1336** by Sen. Kelly Hancock (R-North Richland Hills) that is being applied for the first time to the 2024-25 appropriations. The CGR limits growth in appropriations from general revenue-related funds to the estimated compounded growth in population and inflation during the current and upcoming fiscal biennium. The CGR limit applies to a greater proportion of appropriations than the Tax Spending Limit but does not apply to appropriations for property tax relief or for the recovery costs of a disaster declared by the governor. The latter provision would exempt state expenditures for border security from the limit. To exceed the CGR limit, a supermajority vote of three-fifths of each chamber is required.

Applying the adopted growth rate to the Tax Spending Limit allows for a \$12.5 billion appropriations

increase from nondedicated tax revenue above the current two-year budget. The CGR limit provides for an even greater appropriations increase in general revenue funds subject to the new limit of \$15 billion above 2022-23 budgeted amounts. When comparing spending limits, the limit providing the lower spending cap is the controlling limit. Accordingly, the Tax Spending Limit is the controlling limit now that the Legislature has convened. State lawmakers may vote to exceed this limit during the session. Also, the \$114.1 billion spending cap will increase when lawmakers enact a supplemental appropriations bill for the current 2022-23 budget.

Neither of these initial estimates of spending capacity allows lawmakers to fully expend the **\$32.7 billion surplus** **Comptroller Glenn Hegar projects** for the end of the 2022-23 biennium – leaving as much as \$20.2 billion of the surplus unspent. 📍

For more on the state budget process and its effect on counties, follow the process in TAC's County Issues newsletter; visit www.county.org/News/County-Issues. Also, check out the state budget webpage on the TAC website and contact your legislative consultant.

TWO-YEAR BUDGET CYCLE

■ SB 1, HB 1 ARE FILED.

■ Committee HEARINGS AND MARKUP.

■ BUDGET BILLS ARE ADOPTED, go to conference committee.

■ Chambers ADOPT CONFERENCE COMMITTEE REPORT.

■ Comptroller CERTIFIES BUDGET.

■ Budget is SENT TO GOVERNOR, who has line-item veto authority.

■ LBB MONITORS AGENCY EXPENDITURES.

■ LBB, GOVERNOR MAY USE BUDGET execution authority.

■ LEGISLATIVE LEADERS MAY REQUEST spending reductions.

JAN. FEB. MAR. APR. MAY JUNE JULY AUG. SEPT. OCT. NOV. DEC. 2023
2024

2023
GENERAL APPROPRIATIONS BILL

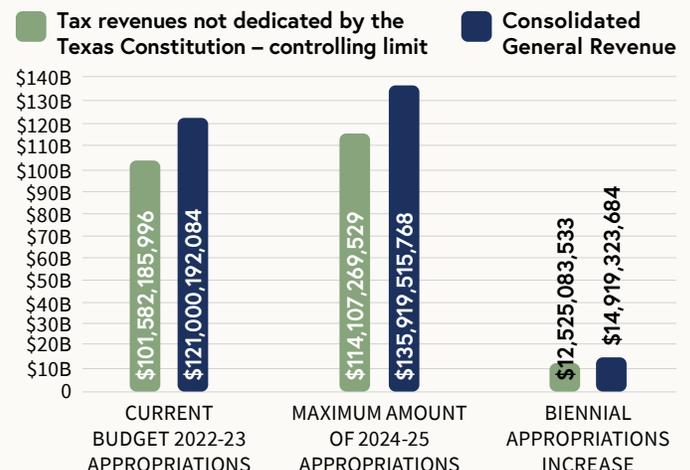
ACTION AFTER PASSAGE

INTERIM BUDGET ACTIONS

SPENDING CAPS 2024-25 BIENNIUM

(12.33% ADOPTED GROWTH RATE)

The current estimate of how much lawmakers are authorized to spend under each limit.



Leadership

TEXAS ASSOCIATION of COUNTIES
Reflect | Grow | Transform

The 2023-24 Leadership 254 class will attend courses over a 14-month period.



Ms. Shelly Atteberry
County Auditor
Cooke County



Hon. Sharla Baldridge
County Judge
Hockley County



Hon. Mark Beauchamp
County Commissioner
Wichita County



Hon. Maxey Cerliano
Sheriff
Gregg County



Hon. Jen Crownover
County Commissioner
Comal County



Hon. Ron Cunningham
County Judge
Llano County



Hon. Wayne Dicky
Sheriff
Brazos County



Hon. Christopher Forbis
Sheriff
Randall County



Hon. Philip Mack Furlow
District Attorney
106th District



Hon. Paul Gonzales
Constable
Kerr County



Hon. Arturo Guajardo
County Clerk
Hidalgo County



Hon. Patti Henry
District Clerk
Chambers County



Hon. Michael Jimerson
District & County Attorney
Rusk County



Hon. Tandra Kile
County Treasurer
Ochiltree County



Hon. Shay Luedeke
Tax Assessor-Collector
Bell County



Hon. Steven Pohorelsky
Constable
Lee County



Hon. Randy Riggs
Tax Assessor-Collector
McLennan County



Hon. Laura Rogers
District & County Clerk
Sherman County



Hon. Julie Smith
County Clerk
Potter County



Ms. Brenda Trevino
County Auditor
Wilson County



Hon. Erleigh Wiley
District Attorney
Kaufman County



Hon. Holly Williamson
Justice of the Peace
Harris County



Hon. JR Woolley
Justice of the Peace
Waller County



Hon. Jerry Yarbrough
County Treasurer
Lamb County

Two dozen county officials picked for Leadership 254 class

The TAC Leadership Development Committee selected 24 county officials during November to participate in the 2023-24 class of Leadership 254, the Association's program to advance leadership skills.

Officials from across the state, representing every county office, will participate in the classes, which are designed to help them meet the unique challenges of their duties. They will attend four training modules of two to three days each over the course of 14 months. The first module begins in February.

The program's theme is "Reflect, Grow and Transform." The

curriculum will challenge participants to grow as leaders through skills assessments, discussion, theory building, self-examination and experiential learning.

Twenty four officials were blindly selected from 80 applicants. Committee members reviewed the entries without knowing names or the counties they came from.

TAC provides a scholarship to each of the 24 participants. More information about the program can be found at www.county.org/leadership254. Applications for the next class will be accepted during the summer of 2024. 🇺🇸

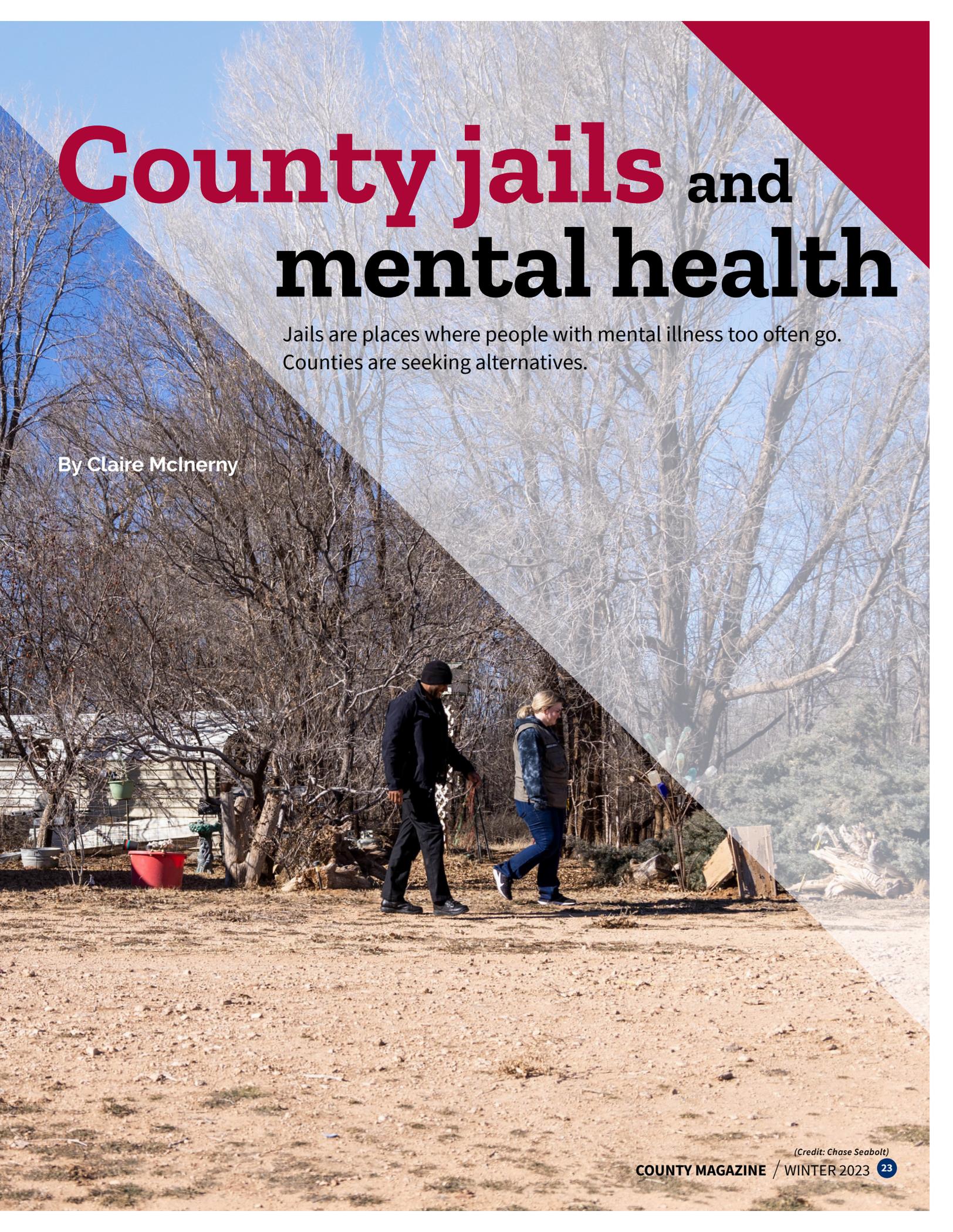


Hockley County Sheriff's Deputy Brandon Lewis and Crisis Worker Abigale Blasingame, members of the county's crisis intervention team, complete a wellness check in Anton on Jan. 12.

County jails and mental health

Jails are places where people with mental illness too often go.
Counties are seeking alternatives.

By Claire McInerney



(Credit: Chase Seabolt)

Four years ago, a police incident in Hockley County made Sheriff Ray Scifres think about his job differently. It was a typical call — a restaurant had a patron who was causing a scene and refused to leave.

"This person is possibly disorderly conduct, possibly criminally trespassing in a location they've been asked to leave. So, it could be an arrestable offense," Scifres said.

When officers arrived at the restaurant, the person was pacing back and forth and still being disruptive.

"(Officers) started to see some indicators that something's not quite right with this individual," Scifres said. "They identified this person was off their medications."

The responding officers knew this wasn't a criminal situation but rather a mental health one. They made some calls to get the person proper medical support, but nothing like that existed. With no other options, the person went to jail and stayed there for 27 days until the case was resolved.

"At the time, it really got us thinking: How is it this person has to come to jail to get active for services?" Scifres said. "Why are we just now having to deal with this? Where was the breakdown? So, we started asking those questions and that's kind of what pushed us towards having a CIT program out here locally."

CITs, or crisis intervention teams, are a new addition to the Hockley County Sheriff's Office.

"We have a trained deputy that rides along with a qualified mental health professional, and they respond to calls for crisis. It may be a disturbance ... it could be somebody who is expressing suicidal ideations, has threatened suicide or has made an attempt," Scifres said. "We then connect them with that qualified mental health professional to do an on-site assessment to see what we can do for them."

This crisis intervention team is one tool Hockley County is using to help divert people with mental health issues away from jails and toward medical professionals. This effort is necessary because Scifres said county law enforcement officers are dealing with mental health, rather than criminal, issues daily.

"About 70% of our inmates are flagged as having a possible mental illness. That plus a co-occurring substance use disorder," he said.

Texas jails are the largest mental health providers in the state.

Hockley County, just west of Lubbock, is far from unique in this situation. County jails across Texas are filled with people who would be better served by mental health professionals instead of law enforcement.

"I would say the jails still are serving as the largest mental health provider, because unintentionally we have criminalized mental health disorders," said Kristi Taylor, the executive director of the Texas Judicial Commission on Mental Health (JCMH).

JCMH works with judges and attorneys to better serve Texans with mental illness, intellectual disabilities or substance abuse disorders who get caught up in the legal system. The focus of JCMH's work is to get these people services rather than a criminal record.

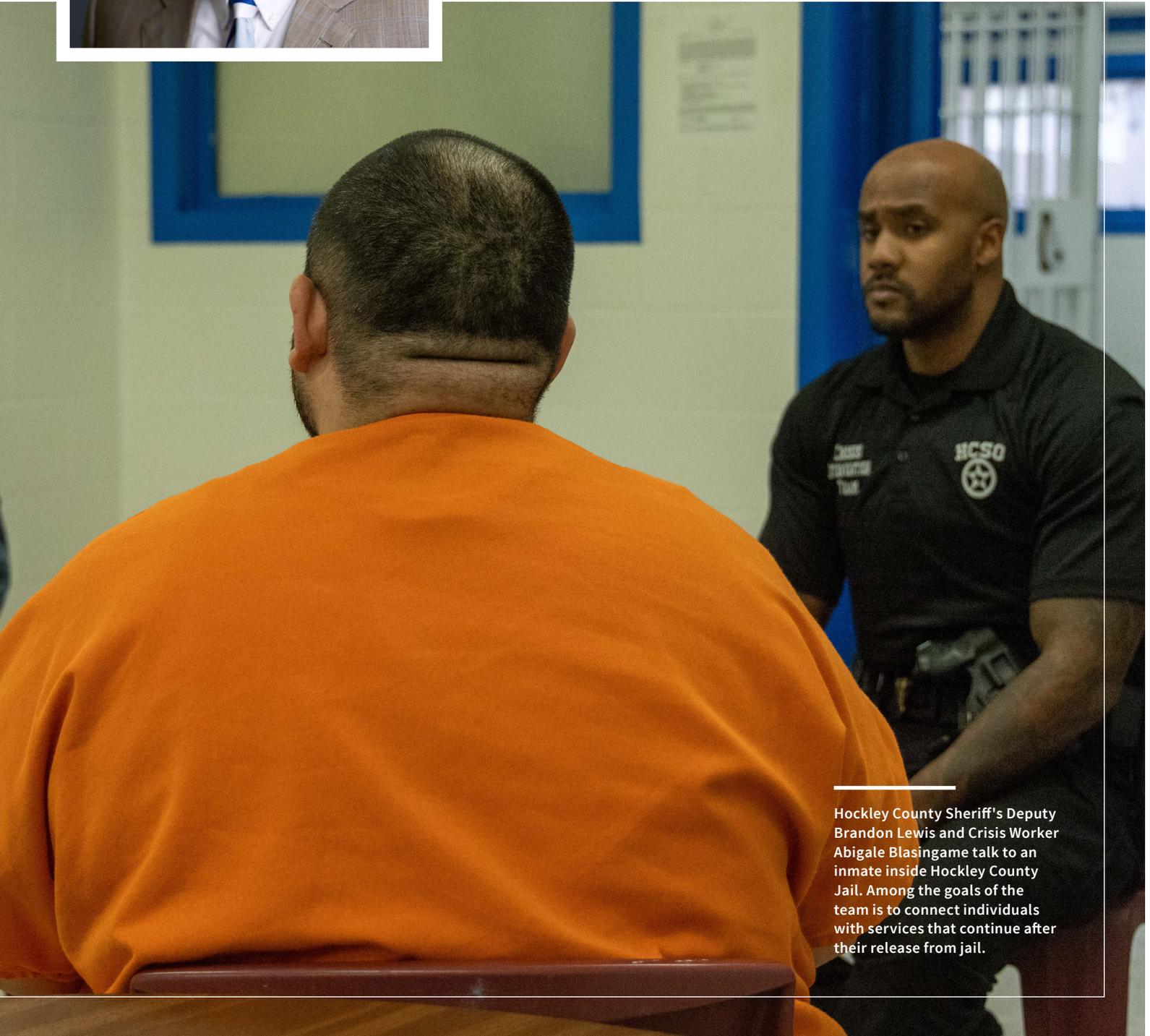


(Credit: Chase Seabolt)



"At the time, it really got us thinking:
How is it this person has to come to
jail to get active for services?"

- Sheriff Ray Scifres, Hockley County



Hockley County Sheriff's Deputy
Brandon Lewis and Crisis Worker
Abigale Blasingame talk to an
inmate inside Hockley County
Jail. Among the goals of the
team is to connect individuals
with services that continue after
their release from jail.

Hockley County Sheriff's Deputy Brandon Lewis, a member of the crisis intervention team, laughs with an inmate.

(Credit: Chase Seabolt)

When Taylor talks to county jails on any given day, they report having 70%-90% of their beds filled by people experiencing some sort of mental health crisis.

"From my understanding, it's taken 40 years to create this crisis, with the deinstitutionalization that happened in the '70s," Taylor said.

This deinstitutionalization she's talking about is the widespread closing of state-run institutions for people with mental illness. When these facilities were closed, nothing replaced them.

"What we still had left were jails, and if we have a hammer, everything looks like a nail," Taylor said. "So, people who might not have been

Hockley County Sheriff's Deputy Brandon Lewis and Crisis Worker Abigale Blasingame, members of the county's crisis intervention team, conduct a wellness check on an individual in Anton on Jan. 12.



(Credit: Chase Seabolt)

incarcerated 40 years ago are being funneled through the system, and the jails are serving as that filter to find those with mental illness. And this is obviously not optimal."

Diverting dollars to health care

While his goal is diversion, Scifres still finds people with mental health needs in his jail. Scifres' crisis intervention team members, which includes Deputy Brandon Lewis and Abigale Blasingame, a crisis worker employed by the local mental health authority, work with inmates to connect them with services, including after their release.

"(The CIT is) following up with individuals that may have been contacted prior to arrest, but more often, they are contacting individuals that have a known history of mental illness and are hoping to keep them connected to resources after release," Scifres said. "It is rare (individuals) enter for a crisis incident, but it does happen on occasion that an inmate makes statements about self-harm and they will visit with the inmate."

Taylor and her organization want to see more investment happening in preventive and community services related to mental health treatment.

"I'm going to encourage that we look at the small steps that we can take for some savings and then track that progress to show that if we keep

investing on the front end, that we will be able to build more diversion centers and rely less on state hospitals, less on jails," Taylor said.

There are still some state-run mental health hospitals, but they can't meet demand. As of Nov. 18, the capacity at state-run facilities was 1,764, and the waitlist was 2,550, with about 50 people being added to the waitlist every day. So, it's crucial to put solutions in place at the local level.

Taylor said it's important to start small because many communities in the state don't have the resources necessary to divert people in a mental health crisis away from jails.

Having alternative facilities such as diversion centers would be helpful. But not every person experiencing mental health issues needs an in-patient facility. She said having outpatient services in every community would provide support to many people. Also, she said changing laws and attitudes around convictions would help people in these situations because they won't be strapped with criminal records, which take away job and housing opportunities in the future.

Chad Stroud, a lieutenant at the Hunt County Sheriff's Office, said his community is trying to implement this kind of change. He said about 50% of the people brought to his jail suffer from mental health issues, and his community has started to collaborate across the entire judicial system to reduce this number.

"With the county attorney's office, the sheriff (and) our county judge, we're implementing this team that's going to consist of four mental health officers available to be out in the community, helping to prevent these individuals from coming in the jail," Stroud said. "The other thing that we're putting into place is having a licensed professional counselor that's going to be on staff here at the jail to provide counseling for our individuals with mental health issues."

Stroud said these are helpful first steps but not the comprehensive solution to this problem.

Of course, these solutions cost money, but Taylor said that cash can come directly from current county jail savings. She said an average cost of housing someone in county jail is \$225 a day. So, diverting even one person from county jail and a stay of 180 days (the minimum sentence for a felony in Texas under the state's Penal Code) would save that community about \$40,000.

That money could be directed to mental health organizations and health care workers, who could help these people in the long term.

"I think that it is going to require a change of the head and the heart to this in Texas," Taylor said. "I think that we are going to have to see mental health as health and have more empathy and understanding. Just as if our aunt had cancer, we wouldn't expect the police to answer that call. We wouldn't expect the jails to be the service providers." 🇺🇸



Promote your good work during County Government Month

April is National County Government Month, and the Texas Association of Counties (TAC) is encouraging counties to raise awareness about the good works they do. The National Association of Counties (NACo) started the annual celebration in 1991 and urges counties across the U.S. to promote the services and programs they offer.

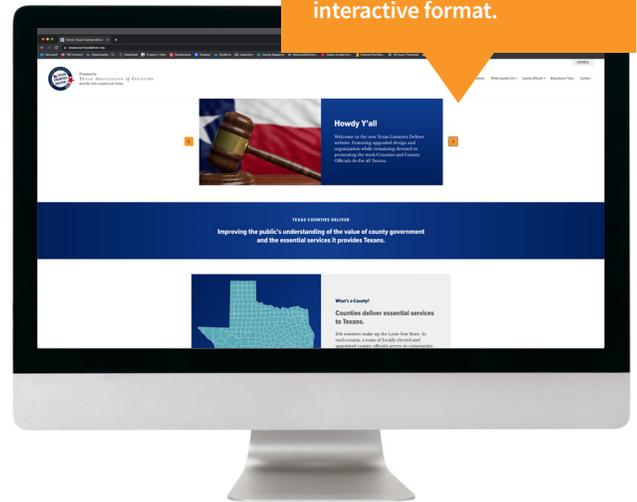
Counties can educate their residents and help spread the word using tools from TAC and NACo. Videos and brief explanations about the duties of Texas county officials can be found at the redesigned Texas Counties Deliver website (texascountiesdeliver.org). Visitors can

also play the online iCivics game Counties Work: Texas (www.icivics.org/games/counties-work-texas) to understand the challenges that county public servants face.

On its website, NACo (www.naco.org) suggests that counties involve the media in their celebrations and open county offices to tours during April. 🗝️

SPREAD THE WORD

The redesigned Texas Counties Deliver website allows visitors to learn the different roles of county government in a fun and interactive format.



Would you like your county featured in a future issue of *County*?

Submit a photo from your county that shows county officials in action or something unique about your county.

Photos may also be used on TAC's social media channels. Make sure that proper photo releases are received from non-county officials featured.

Send photos to melissam@county.org



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TEXAS ASSOCIATION *of* COUNTIES

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WEBSITE	<p>www.cdcatexas.com</p>	<p>www.cjcat.org</p>	<p>www.ctatx.org</p>	<p>www.jpca.com</p>	<p>www.cjcat.org/page/cjcat-Regionals#NE</p>

COUNTY ASSOCIATION LEADERSHIP & CONTACT GUIDE

<p>Sheriffs' Association of Texas</p>	<p>South Texas County Judges and Commissioners Association</p>	<p>Tax Assessor-Collectors Association of Texas</p>	<p>Texas Association of County Auditors</p>	<p>Texas District & County Attorneys Association</p>	<p>West Texas County Judges and Commissioners Association</p>
<p>Hon. Buddy Mills Gillespie County Sheriff 1601 E. Main St. Fredericksburg, TX 78624 (830) 997-7585</p>	<p>Hon. Jill Sklar Jackson County Judge 115 W. Main St., Room 207 Edna, TX 77957 (361) 782-2352</p>	<p>Hon. Bruce Stidham Grayson County Tax Assessor-Collector 100 W. Houston St., Ste. 11 Sherman, TX 75091 (903) 892-8297</p>	<p>Mr. David Wendel San Patricio County Auditor 400 W. Sinton St., Room B-50 Sinton, TX 78387 (361) 364-9312</p>	<p>Hon. Bill Helwig Yoakum County Criminal District Attorney P.O. Box 359 Plains, TX 79355 (806) 456-7491</p>	<p>Hon. Kirk Frye Parmer County Commissioner 2462 FM 1172 Frona, TX 79035 (806) 250-3713</p>
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<p>www.sheriffstx.org</p>	<p>www.cjcat.org/page/cjcat-Regionals#ST</p>	<p>www.tacaoftexas.org</p>	<p>www.texascountyauditors.org</p>	<p>www.tdcaa.com</p>	<p>www.cjcat.org/page/cjcat-Regionals#WT</p>

2023 LEGISLATIVE SCHEDULE

A list of important dates for the 88th legislative session, along with events scheduled for TAC members. For a full list of TAC events, visit www.county.org/calendar-of-events.

TUESDAY, JAN. 10

The 88th Legislature convened at noon.

TUESDAYS, JAN. 10-MAY 23

TAC's **Tuesday Morning Breakfast** series. Join TAC's Legislative Services in person or online each Tuesday at 7 a.m. throughout the session for a working breakfast meeting focused on important county-related bills moving through the Legislature.

TUESDAY, FEB. 7

TAC's **Counties at the Capitol** legislative day.

FRIDAY, MARCH 10

Deadline for filing most bills and joint resolutions.

TUESDAY, APRIL 4

TAC's **County Government Day** at the Capitol.

MONDAY, MAY 29

Sine die, the last day of the regular session of the 88th Legislature.

SUNDAY, JUNE 18

Last day the governor may sign or veto bills.

WEDNESDAY, AUG. 30-FRIDAY, SEPT. 1

TAC Legislative Conference. Registration is now open; visit www.county.org/legeconference.



The Legislature is back in session and TAC's weekly TAC on the Lege video series is back in action. Legislative Services' Noe Barrios (center) and Legislative Consultants Megan Molleur and Skylor Hearn recorded this session's first episode on Jan. 13. (Credit: Jody Seaborn)

The 2023 legislative session in underway; as always, TAC is here for you

There is one certainty during each legislation session: No matter what happens, TAC's Legislative Services team will be monitoring and reporting on developments to keep counties informed and engaged.

By Jody Seaborn

The Texas Legislature is back for its 88th regular session. By the time lawmakers are done on May 29, they will have considered about 7,000 bills, if recent history is any guide. Most of these bills will not become law, but hundreds of them will, and anywhere to one-third to one-half will affect county government in one way or another.

The Texas Association of Counties' **Legislative Services staff members** will be watching the Legislature closely, tracking county-related bills as they're filed and monitoring them for TAC's members and affiliate associations. TAC's legislative team members work tirelessly to be a trusted source of information for county officials who seek to stay up to date with the ever-changing legislative landscape at the Capitol. They help prepare officials in every county office

to build a constructive partnership with state representatives and senators, guided by the belief that policy is strengthened and improved when local and state officials work together.

"The amount of work that they do is just tremendous," TAC Legislative Services Director Noe Barrios said of the staff he supervises. "They're able to take a several thousand-page bill or budget and distill it down to its most relevant information for county members."

Record revenue

The big news so far in a session that is only a few weeks old is the amount of general revenue lawmakers will have available for the next two-year budget cycle — an unprecedented \$188.2 billion, according to the biennial revenue estimate that Comptroller Glenn Hegar released on

Jan. 9, the day before the 88th Legislature convened. That's a 26% increase over the revenue lawmakers had available in 2021 when they passed the current 2022-23 budget, which ends Aug. 31.

In addition, Hegar projected that the current budget would end with a \$32.7 billion surplus. Under state law, \$10 billion of that amount is reserved for highway projects and the rainy-day fund, but the rest is available for lawmakers to use to supplement the current budget.

"The enormous amount of projected revenues give the state a remarkable, or a truly once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, for historical actions in this legislative session," Hegar said.

Passing a balanced, two-year budget is the only constitutional obligation the Legislature must meet each 140-day regular session. Of course, no Legislature has stopped there. Lawmakers will consider many more issues this session, with property taxes topping just about every list of priorities.

The state does not levy a property tax; its revenue comes from sales taxes and other levies and fees. However, the state can provide some property tax relief. It can, for example, increase the homestead exemption to help lower local property taxes. Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick, who leads the Texas Senate, supports raising the homestead exemption from \$40,000 to \$70,000.

Other priorities supported by Patrick, House Speaker Dade Phelan and Gov. Greg Abbott include strengthening the power grid and investing in infrastructure. Public education, school safety, health care, elections, border security and numerous other major issues will generate their share of headlines as lawmakers begin the business of lawmaking in earnest over the next three months.

County priorities

Notable for counties is Patrick's support for the construction of a state mental

health hospital in the Panhandle and providing state money for additional mental health beds throughout rural Texas. Patrick has also called for the creation of a law enforcement enhancement fund, which he has said he would like to develop with the Texas Association of Counties and our members.

In addition to increased state support for mental health services and resources, county priorities include state funding to ease jail staffing shortages and reduce the backlog of state felons in county jails awaiting transfer to the Texas Department of Criminal Justice. This unfunded cost to county taxpayers and many others like it cumulatively contribute to higher property taxes as local governments pick up the state's tab.

It's one reason why county judges, commissioners and other county officials are always scanning the legislative horizon for such unfunded mandates headed their way. "I think it's important that we continue to remind legislators that fully funding some of the mandates they pass down to local governments would provide some property tax relief," Barrios said.

County officials also will be keeping a close eye on continued efforts to make it harder for local officials to effectively participate in the state policymaking process. The latest attempt, [Senate Bill 175](#), would ban so-called taxpayer-funded lobbying and repeal TAC's enabling statute.

County engagement is critical during each session. If the world is run by those who show up, then there is no better way for counties to state their case than to reach out to their representatives and senators and develop a collaborative relationship. TAC stands by as an always-available informational resource.

"The work of counties never stops, and neither does TAC's," Barrios said. 🇹🇽

LEGISLATIVE RESOURCES

Stay on top of the action at the Capitol with these resources.



Legislative Bills by Office. TAC's Legislative Services tracks all bills affecting county government: www.county.org/Legislative/Legislative-Bills-by-Office.



Keep tabs on bills filed this session with the [Texas Legislature Online](http://TexasLegislatureOnline.com): capitol.texas.gov/.



Subscribe to [County Issues](#), TAC's legislative newsletter: www.county.org/News/County-Issues.



[TAC on the Lege](#). In this weekly video series, members of TAC's Legislative Services department recap events at the 88th Legislature, analyze pending legislation and look ahead to what's next. Watch on TAC's YouTube channel: www.youtube.com/TexasCountiesVideo.



Listen to [Texas County Voice](#), TAC's podcast: www.county.org/About-TAC/Texas-County-Voice-Podcast.



Find more legislative information from [TAC's Legislative Services](#), including a staff directory, at www.county.org/legislative.



[Elected Officials Directory](#), a collection of information about every statewide elected official, every member of the Texas Legislature and every Texas in Congress, via The Texas Tribune: www.texastribune.org/directory.

Crystal Cedillo

Gonzales County Tax Assessor-Collector



How long have you been tax assessor-collector?

I was elected in 2012 and sworn into office in January 2013.

What did you do before you became tax assessor-collector?

I was hired as a clerk in the Tax Office in 1999. I started taking core curriculum courses shortly thereafter. I passed the state exam with the Board of Tax Professional Examiners and received my Registered Texas Assessor Certification. Through hard

work and dedication, I became chief tax deputy and remained in that position until my transition to tax assessor. I have had the great honor of being a TACA education instructor since 2011.

How did you become interested in running for office?

With the support and encouragement of the previous tax assessor, who was retiring, I decided it would be the best thing for the county for me to put my education

to use in this capacity. She had invested a vast amount of time preparing me to help the public in my duties as chief deputy, and I felt that it was my duty to continue to serve the county. And, I have to say, I love my job!

What was the biggest surprise or adjustment after taking office?

My biggest adjustment was going from a "co-worker" to the "boss." Everything else was a seamless transition.

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“ You can’t just do the job. You have to care enough to want to do an excellent job. ”



Since taking office, what accomplishment are you most proud of?

We have enhanced our technology and office/building security, and streamlined our balancing and accounting practices, but these don't come close to my proudest accomplishments. I take pride in the team that I have built here at my office. I have exceptional employees who have been well educated for all functions of the office. By upholding the laws and codes, we hold one another accountable and treat everyone with respect. This allows us to provide exemplary service to the public and to other offices that call upon us for assistance. This by far is my mission and my proudest accomplishment thus far.

What advice do you have that you've learned on the job or a philosophy that you go by in regard to your work?

My advice is to be involved: Be involved with your region, your association, TAC, the legislative process, your community and your family. You can't just do the job. You have to care enough to want to do an excellent job.

What do you do when you're not at work? Do you have any hobbies or are interested in something unique that may surprise your colleagues?

I am always working! I volunteer and serve on the boards of many nonprofits and community organizations such as Waelder New Millennium Lions Club, Waelder #1023 Order of the Eastern Star, Gonzales County Historical Commission, Waelder Visitors & Heritage Foundation, Waelder

Cemetery Association, Waelder Community Center, Waelder Lions Foundation, and others.

I have numerous hobbies, but I would say that the most unique activity that I like to do that would surprise my colleagues is that I have been cleaning and restoring old headstones in our historic cemetery for the past nine years. It is a tedious job that requires special soap and a soft bristle toothbrush. I spend hours cleaning just a couple of headstones, but these 100- to 150-year-old blemished rocks are beaming when the process is complete, and that gives me satisfaction.

What is your favorite thing about Gonzales County?

The people. The county is rich in history, architecture and values, but the people of Gonzales County make it what it is. 🇹🇽



WANT TO ATTEND CMRC?

Visit www.county.org/cmrc for details and to register. For more information about the conference and continuing education credits for attending, contact Deanna Auert at deannaa@county.org or Megan West at meganw@county.org or at (800) 456-5974.

CMRC focuses on relevant county issues

Annual conference to be held in Round Rock and online

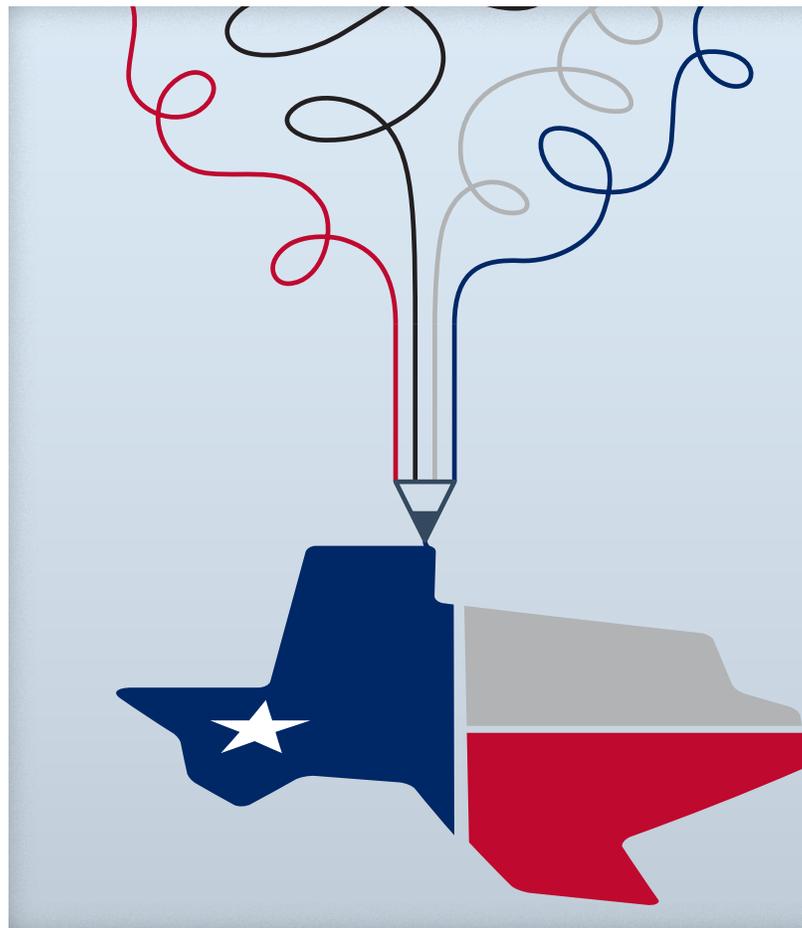
This year's County Management & Risk Conference will be held March 22-24 at the Kalahari Resorts & Conventions in Round Rock, and a virtual option will also be available to attendees.

"Members can expect what they're used to getting, which is a good time spent with their colleagues, networking within the counties and spending one-on-one time with TAC Risk Management Services staff," said Jennifer Kolbasinski, Operations Manager for TAC Risk Management Services.

She said the TAC Risk Management Pool chooses topics each year that align with issues counties are facing. In light of the 2021 Mason County courthouse fire, this

year's conference will have an emphasis on property coverage and crisis response. Other session topics include workplace violence red flags, handling media scrutiny, workplace culture and a variety of other risk management topics. There will also be information from the TAC Health and Employee Benefits Pool.

"Every year we try to make this conference more impactful than the year before," Kolbasinski said. "I hope people walk away from this year's conference energized and empowered to return to their counties to apply what they learned. We want our members to continue to grow as professionals as they navigate their roles in serving the public." 🇺🇸



Do you have a story

to share about a time TAC has affected your county, benefited you as an elected official or served your employees? We'd like to hear about it!

Your story may be used to create videos to be shared on social media, at conferences and on our website. Please email Jennifer Kolbasinski at jenniferk@county.org if you have a submission. ★

TEXAS ASSOCIATION of COUNTIES

When the heat is on...



**"It's too late to debate
a burn ban. We need to declare
a disaster now, but the
commissioners are out dealing
with a wildfire.
Can I declare it myself?"**



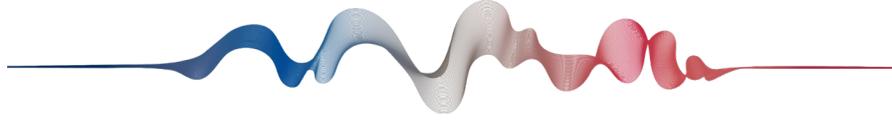
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- Emergency management
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TEXAS ASSOCIATION of COUNTIES
THE COUNTY PULSE



Taking the County Pulse

This spring, TAC will launch an initiative to evaluate a selection of TAC's services: The County Pulse. Every elected and appointed official in every county will be invited to share their feedback in a confidential, anonymous survey.

TAC will use the resulting data to plan for the future and make better business decisions to sustain the services you rely on and identify gaps that may need greater investment.

"We are a county-led organization, and we must continuously evolve to provide the solutions counties will

need," said TAC Executive Director Susan M. Redford. "Taking the counties' pulse about the services they value is critical for our long-term success in serving our members."

TAC has contracted with a professional survey administrator, Schlesinger Group, to administer the survey. Every county official will be invited by email directly from Schlesinger Group this spring to take the 15-minute online survey.

No identifying information will be shared with TAC, and your honest feedback will propel YOUR association forward. 🇺🇸

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With the shortages of juvenile detention beds in nearby counties, Bexar County has seen an increase in demand on its facilities. (Credit: Bexar County)

Texas counties struggle with lack of juvenile detention space

Staffing shortages contribute to scramble for available beds to house arrested youths.

By Brooke Crum

At times during the past two years, Bandera County Juvenile Probation Chief Matthew Haynie sent youths taken into local custody to the Victoria County juvenile detention center — more than a three-hour drive south — because he could not find a closer facility with space.

Other, nearby counties that Bandera County contracted with to house juveniles, such as Bexar or Atascosa counties, didn't have enough staffers to take in more young people. And Bandera County doesn't have its own facility for youths.

Since the onset of the pandemic, county juvenile justice departments have struggled more than ever to place children in detention centers, even if they have one located in their counties. The problem only grew worse in June, when Texas Juvenile Justice Department (TJJD) interim Executive Director Shandra Carter announced that the agency was temporarily suspending the intake of youths to state facilities due to a lack of staff.

TJJD coordinates with 165 county juvenile probation departments, which handle 98% of youth referrals at the local level, according to Carter's testimony to the

Texas House Appropriations Committee in September. Only 45 of those 165 counties have their own detention centers.

But even in counties with detention centers, there are not enough staff members to manage the workload of housing hundreds of teens taken into custody.

Bexar County Chief Juvenile Probation Officer Jill Mata said the staffing shortage is so severe that she has to turn away youths from neighboring counties that lack their own detention centers.

"We're at a point right now where we cannot do that," she said. "We cannot

help others because it's all we can do to manage our own situation. We have to take care of our county children first."

Before the pandemic, Bexar County frequently housed juveniles from Bandera and Comal counties, and its detention center could hold up to 200 youths when fully staffed, said Mata, who spent 25 years as a juvenile prosecutor and four years as general counsel for TJJD.

Now, about 100 teens stay in the Bexar County center on any given day to match the current staffing ratio.

The county tapped its probation officers to work

shifts in the detention center during the week to help relieve the workload, even though that's not their job, Mata said.

"Everybody's desperate to hire more staff, and everyone knows that the repercussions for not having enough staff are great," she said. "Children are not going to get the same level of supervision, so it's not good for kids. And it's not good for counties either, just in terms of a safety liability issue."

It costs Bexar County \$200-\$400 a day to care for youths in its juvenile detention center, according to Mata's testimony to the committee. Holding them in the local facility for sometimes months at a time — instead of days or weeks — has significantly cut into Bexar County's budget, but the county certainly is not alone.

TJJD and county juvenile probation departments have raised salaries to recruit and retain workers, but Haynie said that's not enough.

"It's going to take more than just that to fix the entirety of the system," he said. "I don't think anyone really has the magic button for staff. Everyone's having that problem across the board. It doesn't really matter what industry you're in."

Caldwell County increased its annual juvenile probation

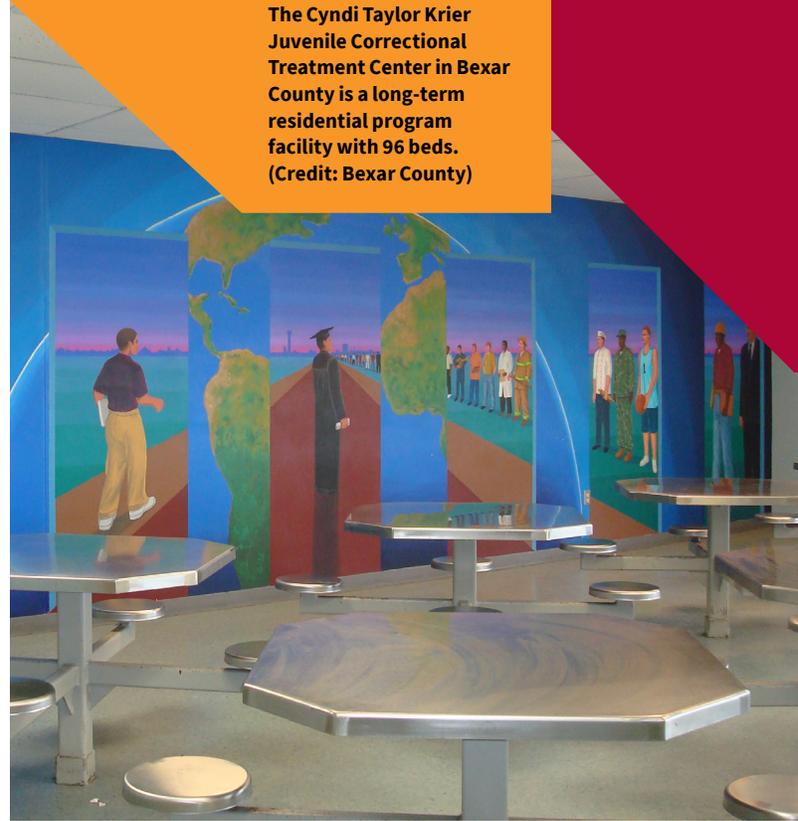
budget by about \$40,000, up to \$160,000, said Jay Monkerud, Caldwell County chief juvenile probation officer and president of the Central Texas Juvenile Chiefs Association. The association covers 44 counties and 28 juvenile probation departments.

Additionally, the cost for counties that lack a detention center to contract with another county's center also has increased, placing another pinch on counties' budgets. In some places, the daily rates have doubled, from \$100 to \$200 per day, Monkerud said. Caldwell County also lacks a juvenile detention center.

Monkerud, who has served as a juvenile probation officer since 1994, said a "conglomeration of factors" led to this understaffing problem. Low pay, difficult and sometimes dangerous working conditions, and the pandemic all contributed to the staff shortage that has spilled over into a larger issue.

"It creates a risk in your community," he said, adding that every juvenile probation department probably has released teens who should have remained in custody because they couldn't find space for them.

The Cyndi Taylor Krier Juvenile Correctional Treatment Center in Bexar County is a long-term residential program facility with 96 beds. (Credit: Bexar County)



The risk ranges from a small county such as Bandera having to send one of its few deputies to Victoria to transport a teen, to a large county like Bexar not being able to house every youth taken into custody. The risk also rises inside the facilities. Mata said teens who don't get their rehabilitative treatments try to break the monotony and gain attention by acting out, sometimes dangerously. That can lead to the juveniles being restrained.

"When you have kids detained that long, they're hard to manage, and it's

not a normal, healthy way to keep children," she said. "They exhibit a lot of difficult behaviors to manage, even more so than you would normally expect because it's not a normal situation, even in the correctional world."

For Monkerud, the long-term solution would be to build more detention centers, but they would still need people willing to do the work.

"The people that come to do this work are those who have a heart for it, and they really want to help kids," Mata said. 🇺🇸



For more than 70 years, the town of Magnolia relied on an all-volunteer firefighting force, but in recent years, taxpayers voted to form an emergency services district that now employs full-time firefighters, who work alongside volunteers. (Credit: Magnolia Fire Department)

VOLUNTEER FIRE DEPARTMENTS

ARE CHANGING FAST. AND SO ARE THEIR FUNDRAISERS



By Addie Broyles



Communities across the United States have historically relied on volunteer firefighters to offer fire protection when they need it. Even today, the number of volunteer firefighters outnumbers paid firefighters 3 to 1, but those numbers are changing.

There are nearly 20% fewer volunteer firefighters today than during the mid-1980s, when the National Volunteer Fire Council started keeping track of the data. During that time, calls for firefighting and EMS service have

tripled. Today, more than a third of the volunteers are over the age of 50.

Texas has more than 1,500 fire departments that are mostly staffed by volunteers, but that number is slowly declining.

Firefighters used to simply sign up to be a volunteer, but now they have to finish hundreds of hours of training, which they typically complete while working a regular job. Volunteers often have to respond to EMS calls, which requires a different certification.

Historically, departments relied almost entirely on events — barbecues, fish fries, burger nights — to buy equipment, saving taxpayers billions of dollars, but as communities grow, so does the need for fire protection services.

It's no wonder that many communities, particularly those on the quickly growing urban outskirts, have voted to create taxpayer-funded departments to improve response times.

Keeping up with growth

For more than 70 years, the town of



Hundreds of fire departments in Texas rely on volunteer firefighters to offer fire protection services to their communities. During the fall, a handful of new volunteer firefighters graduated from the State Firefighters' and Fire Marshals' Association (SFFMA) Fire Academy. These volunteers will work, often alongside paid firefighters, at departments across the state. (Credit: Magnolia Fire Department)



The Magnolia Fire Department Station 181 hosted an open house in December to meet members of their community. (Credit: Magnolia Fire Department)

Magnolia relied on an all-volunteer fire department that raised money for trucks, pumps and other gear through community dances, concession stands, turkey dinners and barbecues. In 2016, the volunteer department merged with the newly formed Montgomery County Emergency Services District (ESD) No. 10, a taxpayer-funded agency that now has 75 paid firefighters who call for help from the volunteer firefighters most nights of the week.

"I have been doing this since the pancake breakfast days, the sock hops, the dances," said Magnolia Fire Chief Jeff

Hevey, who has been in fire protection for 48 years. "That was the way of getting money."

But as communities grow, departments have to grow to keep up with them, and that means they turn to different sources of funding. "As the departments grow as the community grows and an ESD or a city takes over that department, things change," he said.

Hevey said that his district spans from the urban areas on the east, near The Woodlands, to a mostly rural section in the west. Those residents have different needs, and so do the firefighters who feel called to be part of the volunteer force.

Montgomery County ESD No. 10 Board President Larry Smith said that keeping volunteers at the stations is about more than saving money.

"The Magnolia Fire Department has the old volunteer, small-town feel that we want to keep," Smith said.

"When you pool these resources, you pool different perspectives. They share their ideas and different perspectives. That gives us the opportunity to change and run more effectively."

These days, volunteers are often asked to stay at the station during their shift so they can leave at the same time as the trucks and other emergency personnel. Because they are no longer at home and waiting around for a call, many districts pay those volunteers a stipend to be on call at the station.

Volunteer firefighting is a way that many people test out the field before pursuing it as a career. A quarter of recent hires at ESD No. 10 were from the volunteer force.

"Our county is growing very fast; it's hard to keep up," Smith said. "We'll need four or five more stations in the coming years. That's more trucks, more staff."

And more volunteers. In 2015, the National Volunteer Fire Council launched an initiative called Make Me A Firefighter to bring in new volunteer firefighters and EMS workers across the United States.

Fish fries, raffles and auctions

The switch to an ESD typically means that some of the volunteer-only departments close. In Smith County, 11 volunteer departments once served the rural areas around Tyler, but in 2007, they moved toward an ESD model and now there are paid firefighters at just five stations, but they are staffed 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

The Webb County Fire Department has recently invested in 10 new front-line units — four tankers, four fire pumpers and an ambulance per unit — over the next seven years to cover communities including Bruni, Mirando City, Oilton and Aguilares. Commissioners also approved 55 breathing masks for their firefighter volunteers.

But in counties that can't invest that kind of money in their volunteer departments, many smaller departments continue to host fundraisers, raffles and auctions to raise money to supplement their budgets.

In Grayson County, the Locust Community Volunteer Fire Department



The Johnson City Volunteer Fire Department hosts an annual fish fry every May that draws hundreds in Blanco County. (Credit: Johnson City VFD)

in Pottsboro hosts a fish fry each year at a marina on Lake Texoma. Last year's event included a silent auction for a four-wheeler and a guided pig hunt. The department receives 10% of its annual operating budget from Grayson County, and the fish fry is the biggest source of fundraising, according to the department's board president, David Carson.

Volunteers with the North Hood County Volunteer Fire Department hand out candy at Halloween and raffled off a pellet barbecue smoker to help cover the increased costs they faced during brushfire season.

And each May, they host a fish fry. Chief Mike Bell said those fish fries aren't going anywhere. The next one is already scheduled.

Fire departments also help one another in other ways. A rural department in Madison County needed an engine, but with a budget of \$12,000 a year, it wasn't going to be able to afford a new (or used) truck any time soon. So the Magnolia Fire Department/Montgomery County ESD No. 10 donated a used truck.

"We put \$30,000 in repairs into that engine before we gave it to them," Hevey said.

Hevey started his firefighting career as a volunteer. Even after he took on a full-time firefighting job, he continued to volunteer with a smaller department, a practice that is still common today.

"That's just part of the culture," he said. 🇺🇸



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Connect with peers across the state who have a role in county technology. Join the TAC IT Community to network and discuss tech topics in a free, private online forum.

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LegalEase

LegalEase: When commissioners can meet by phone

One of the Texas Association of Counties' guiding principles is to help you meet the unique challenges of local government. **LegalEase** is a monthly email to county officials, highlighting timely topics that affect county government. Select questions and answers from those emails are featured here in County magazine.

"Our commissioners court meetings have felt a little chaotic lately without many procedural guidelines. We'd like to implement some rules, but we don't know where to begin. Can TAC help?"

Q: Does TAC Legal Services have guidelines for running commissioners court meetings?

A: Yes. TAC Legal Services recently created a new handbook, Commissioners Court Meetings Procedure and Decorum. Texas law does not dictate what parliamentary procedure a commissioners court must follow. Many counties adopt Robert's Rules of Order, but these can be quite complicated and at times may conflict with Texas Law. The new guide offers a simplified approach to procedures to follow during commissioners court regular or special called meetings. If you prefer a physical copy of the guide, you may request one using our [Legal Publications Order Form](#).

"Our commissioners court has declared some of our surplus road materials as salvage property. We tried to sell it through the competitive bid process, but we didn't get any bids. Now what?"

Q: What is the county's authority to dispose of surplus property as salvage or waste?

A: Attorney General Opinion No. KP-0420 (2022) summarizes that Local Government Code §263.152 authorizes a county to periodically sell the county's surplus or salvage property by competitive bid or auction. If no bids are received, a commissioners court may authorize the use of recycling programs "under which the property is collected, separated, or processed and returned to use in the form of raw materials in the production of new products." For more information on competitive bidding, see our publication [Basics of the County Purchasing Act and Competitive Bidding](#).

"We have a surplus in the justice court technology fund. I think my team would really benefit from extra training on our new software. Can I use money from this fund to pay for the training classes?"

Q: How may justice court technology funds be spent?

A: According to Code of Criminal Procedure Article 102.0173, the justice court assistance and technology fund can be used to finance the cost of providing court personnel, to pay for the cost of continuing education for justice court judges and court personnel, and to purchase and maintain technological enhancements for a justice court. For more information on this fund and many others, see our publication [Special & Dedicated Funds](#).

"The recent winter weather conditions made me wonder about commissioners court meetings and what to do when the two coincide. Can

we still have our scheduled meeting if members of the court can't physically make it to the meeting location?"

Q: May a commissioners court meet by phone if members of the court are unable to attend a commissioners court meeting due to an emergency?

A: The commissioners court may hold an open or closed meeting by telephone if an emergency or public necessity exists and the convening of a quorum of the court at one location is difficult or impossible. Under Government Code §551.125, the emergency telephone meeting is subject to the meeting notice requirements applicable to all open meetings held pursuant to the Open Meetings Act. For more information, see our publication [Short Answers – Weathering the Storm: Disaster Preparedness and Response](#). 🇹🇽

HAVE LEGAL QUESTIONS? TAC's Legal Services department is here to help. Call the Legal Helpline at (888) ASKTAC4 or (888) 275-8224, or visit www.county.org/helpline to get assistance with legal research and deadlines.

You can also find resources online. There's a wide variety of up-to-date legal publications, disaster resources and more at www.county.org/legal.

TEXAS ASSOCIATION *of* COUNTIES

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Meet Membership Coordinator Ron Morelli

Ron Morelli's job is data-driven,
but his focus is people

By Erica Macioge

Membership Coordinator Ron Morelli maintains TAC's membership database, which contains more than 75,000 records and a wealth of data about counties, county officials and staff members. He describes his job as part detective, part editor and part welcome wagon.

Throughout the year, Morelli makes thousands of changes, including adding new records, purging old data and cleaning up error-ridden entries. But what makes him so valuable in his role is that he never loses focus on the people behind the data.

"Our customer service is about relationships," he said. "How do we build or maintain relationships when we don't know how to reach them?"

In December, hundreds of newly elected and appointed county

officials attended TAC's Preparing to Take Office workshops. These regional events cover essential legal topics every new official needs to know, and attendees leave with new contacts and a new-to-office kit of essential resources. Their attendance at the workshops is a triumph, as it sets them up for a successful transition to county office, and it helps TAC establish a good relationship with new officials.

Morelli's detective work is critical to the success of the initiative because after the general election, it's a race to acquire contact information for incoming officials to invite them to a workshop.

In fact, Morelli's support for the initiative began months in advance with the primary elections in May. He led a team of volunteers to collect county election returns for the primary and general elections and made them available via the County Elections Database.

Knowing how many races will be contested helps TAC plan for the training and the number of new-to-office resource kits that may be needed. It also means TAC staff members can begin to make new connections and build relationships with presumptive elected officials who will be running unopposed. "One of TAC's strategic initiatives is relationship building," said Director of Education and Member Services Haley Click, "including how to better support new officials. Ron's creativity and reliability have been invaluable as we explore new programs and process improvements."

"Our customer service is about relationships. How do we build or maintain relationships when we don't know how to reach them?"

Ron Morelli, Membership Coordinator

Since Morelli joined TAC in 2021, he has made other improvements, too, such as implementing a system to help TAC identify newly appointed officials throughout the year much more quickly. He proactively reaches out to each one to welcome him or her to county office and to share contacts and resources from TAC that will help them succeed. Often, the first contact

an appointed official has with TAC is Morelli. He sends a weekly report to the rest of TAC about the newly appointed officials so that every TAC employee is prepared to offer support within their respective roles.

He said, "We're a membership-based organization, so we need to be up to date on changes and who is coming in so relationship building can begin." 🗝️

In His Own Words

On growing up in Michigan: I moved to Austin as soon as I could.

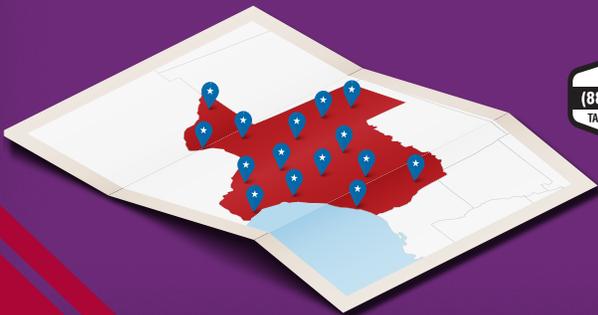
On customer service: I just pretend I'm Dolly Parton, who is the epitome of grace. Literally, I have a poster of Dolly Parton in my office so I can cosplay like her when I'm writing an email or talking on the phone. And, I try to be quick in answering emails and calls and acknowledging when something is completed so that there are no "mysteries" about where things stand.

Background: I have a Bachelor of Arts in English and a master's degree in organizational development. I worked for many years in advertising and marketing before finding my way to nonprofits.



Did your population change in the 2020 census?

Close to 1,000 Texas laws rely on population brackets based on your county's population in the 2020 census. TAC's population bracket map makes quick work of determining which statutes apply to your county.



LEARN MORE
County.org/population-bracket-map



Judge Don Allred Receives Giles Dalby Award

Don Allred, who has retired as Oldham County Judge after 32 years, is the recipient of the Judge Giles W. Dalby Award for Judicial Leadership. This award from the Texas Judicial Academy recognizes a constitutional county judge who exemplifies character, integrity and service to the judiciary, county government and community. Allred was presented the award at the Fall Judicial Education Session in November.

The Texas Judicial Academy also honored retiring judges in attendance at the event. 🇺🇸



Retiring Oldham County Judge Don Allred, middle, was presented the 2022 Judge Giles W. Dalby Award for Judicial Leadership in November. TAC Executive Director Susan M. Redford and prior Giles Dalby Award recipient Gene Terry presented the award. (Credit: Ashley Royer)

An Affordable Housing Solution

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Newly elected and appointed Texas county officials attend workshops

The Texas Association of Counties (TAC) held a series of workshops across the state in December to acquaint newly elected and appointed county officials with the demands of county government and the statutes and rules they must navigate.

"You can delegate authority, but you can't delegate responsibility."

- TAC County Relations Officer Alan Bristol

The free, daylong Preparing to Take Office Workshops attracted 366 new officials from 191 counties. TAC staff members introduced attendees to the basics of county government, the legal and human resource requirements that shape how they can do county business, the benefits of building effective relationships with the Legislature and of being involved in their office-specific associations, and the importance of knowing

the laws that govern open meetings and public records.

A key message: Running for office is one thing, governing quite another. "You can delegate authority, but you can't delegate responsibility," TAC County Relations Officer Alan Bristol told more than 40 new officials who attended a Dec. 13 workshop in Abilene.

Additional workshops were held during the first two weeks of December in Boerne, College Station, Corpus Christi, Lubbock, Odessa, Tyler and Waco.

Each new official received a box containing a primer on smart first steps, a list of TAC services with contact information, a planning calendar of legal deadlines, a legislative guide and many other TAC resources to help them succeed from the get-go.

The contents of the box and more can be found on TAC's website, www.county.org. 🇹🇽



(Credit: Regan Williams)

1. TAC County Relations Officer Alan Bristol reviews the contents of a resource kit for newly elected officials at a Preparing to Take Office workshop on Dec. 6 in Lubbock.
2. Wise County Clerk Blanca Tuma looks through her TAC resource box on Dec. 15 in Waco.
3. Young County Commissioner Scott Shook (left) and County Judge Win Graham check out the information box they received at a Preparing to Take Office workshop on Dec. 13 in Abilene.



(Credit: Gene Acuña)



(Credit: Gene Acuña)

Save the date!

**2023 NACO ANNUAL
CONFERENCE & EXPOSITION**

JULY 21, 2023, 8 a.m. TO JULY 24, 2023, 5:30 p.m.

Austin, TX

Scan below for more information



Texas to host NACo annual conference

The National Association of Counties' (NACo) annual conference is coming to Texas in 2023. Travis County will play host to the annual conference and exposition, taking place July 21-24 at the Austin Convention Center.

"The conference offers Texas county officials a great opportunity to get more involved and help shape NACo's federal policy," TAC Executive Director Susan M. Redford said. "I encourage everyone to attend if they can so that Texas county interests will be well represented."

NACo's annual conference is the largest meeting of county leaders from across the country. During the event, steering committees covering important county topics meet to set priorities and discuss pressing issues. Broadband, cybersecurity, transportation, economic

development, agriculture and rural affairs, health policy and more will be on the agenda.

The Gulf States Counties and Parishes Caucus, of which Texas is a member, will also meet to discuss issues important to Texas, Mississippi, Louisiana, Alabama and Florida.

To learn more about the NACo Annual Conference & Exposition and to register to attend, visit www.naco.org/events/conferences. 🇹🇽



TAC Board President and Tom Green County Auditor Nathan Cradduck and TAC Immediate Past President and Comal County Treasurer Renee Couch were part of Texas' contingent at the 2022 NACo Annual Conference in Colorado. Texas will host the 2023 conference in July.

(Credit: Susan Redford)



TAC Board President and Tom Green County Auditor Nathan Cradduck casts Texas' votes for NACo officer elections during the 2022 NACo Annual Conference in Colorado.

(Credit: Susan Redford)

» MULTIFACTOR AUTHENTICATION IS A SECOND LINE OF DEFENSE AGAINST ONLINE BURGLARS

THE SECURITY PRACTICE CAN BLOCK 99% OF ATTACKS, FEDERAL AGENCY SAYS

Texas counties are under constant attack from hackers attempting to compromise their accounts, networks and data. Cybersecurity training company KnowBe4 recently cited data showing that government websites were the top target of criminals. Successful attacks led to an average of

12 days of downtime and cost about \$141,000 in addition to remediation costs, the company said.

One defense against these risks is multifactor authentication (MFA), which can greatly increase protection for personal and county data.

WHAT IS MFA?

It is an additional layer of security that allows online accounts to be protected with more than just a single password. When logging in from a new device or location, or following a password reset, users will be asked for two things: a password and a security code, which is sent to a verified authentication device that only the owner of the account has access to, often times a cellphone or landline.

MFA acts like a second line of defense, and the federal Cybersecurity & Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) is urging organizations to greatly increase adoption of the practice.

WHY USE MFA?

In a word, **security**. Microsoft Corp. reported that there are **over 300 million fraudulent sign-in attempts** to its cloud services every day. “Think of it like an airbag or the seat belt in your car – an extra layer to keep you safe in the event of an accident,” said CISA Director Jen Easterly in a news release.

In addition, hackers don’t take vacations. Their tactics are constantly evolving, and **one-third of Americans were victims of cybercrime in 2021**, the federal agency said.

Over **300M** fraudulent sign-in attempts every day.

DOES MFA REALLY WORK?

Microsoft pointed out that **implementing MFA can block almost all attacks**. “Whether you call it multifactor or two-factor authentication, this simple step can make you **99% less likely to get hacked**,” Easterly said.

In addition, hackers are getting better at phishing and harvesting passwords to gain unauthorized access, CISA said. They take advantage of reused passwords stolen in other breaches, the federal agency said, but MFA greatly raises the bar for break-ins.

In several cases, a European cybercrime unit that was monitoring attempted hacks found that **criminals move on to new targets when they run into MFA – even when they have a legitimate password**. Multiple logon attempts can lead to an alert being sent to the user, stifling the attacks.

Finally, hackers are like burglars; they are looking for an easy way in. By enabling MFA, users are putting an extra lock on the door.

CYBERSECURITY TIPS ▶

The Texas Department of Information Resources and the federal Cybersecurity & Infrastructure Security Agency recommend these practices to keep individuals and counties safe:



Enable multifactor authentication.



Schedule regular cybersecurity trainings to stay up to date on the latest schemes.



Use strong passwords.



Recognize phishing emails and report them to your IT department.

Email services provided by TAC County Information Resources Agency (CIRA) include MFA free of charge. Reach out to TAC CIRA at support@county.org or by phone at (800) 456-1976 to enable MFA today.



You are **99%** less likely to get hacked.

2023

County Technology Conference

Bridging the Gap:
Technology, Cybersecurity & County Service

16-19
MAY

KALAHARI RESORTS
& CONVENTIONS
ROUND ROCK

County Technology Conference set for May, agenda shaped by counties

Registration is open for the highly anticipated County Technology Conference, taking place May 16-19 in Round Rock.

The list of technology challenges counties face today is lengthy: policy development, cyber threats, data storage, technology budgeting – the list goes on.

Get ahead of the curve when you attend the three-day conference.

“The agenda is packed with sessions for both county officials and staff. You are going to get something out of this, whether you’re in IT or not.”

- JUDGE JILL S. SKLAR, JACKSON COUNTY

"We have been working with county IT personnel and elected officials for months to identify the most pressing technology issues facing counties," said TAC Associate Director of Education & Member Services Dawn Noufer. "Our members' priorities have absolutely shaped the agenda."

The event will offer two education tracks to accommodate varying technical skill levels and will be appropriate for officials and county staff members at every level. "The agenda is packed with sessions for both county officials and staff," said Jackson County Judge Jill S. Sklar. "You are going to get something out of this, whether you're in IT or not."

Additionally, opportunities to connect with other county leaders, exchange information and learn from one another have been prioritized for the event at Kalahari Resorts & Conventions in Round Rock. This is the first event of its kind, specifically designed for county government.

Don't miss it! View the full agenda and register at county.org/techconference. 🇹🇽

Data & Analysis

Texas County Profiles show county data



By Tim Brown

TAC's [Texas County Profiles](#) is a rich repository of county data, such as demographic, geographic, finances and taxes.

For population data, one can find more than the most recent census data and annual estimates. By clicking the History link found near the top of each County Profile, a page showing the history of that county's population will appear, including the total population data from every census from 1850 to the present. Not only does the page include the numerical data, but also includes tables showing the changes graphically as well as percentage changes from one census to the next.

Archer County's [History](#) page is a good example. According to the

[Handbook of Texas](#) from the Texas State Historical Association, the Legislature created Archer County on Jan. 22, 1858. However, according to censuses in 1850, 1860 and 1870, the county had no population – it wasn't until the 1880 census that the agency found 596 individuals in Archer. The county grew, sometimes rapidly, before peaking in 1930, when the population began to fall. It reached a low point of 5,759 in 1970, peaked again at 9,054 in 2010, then dropped to 8,560 in 2020.

[Loving County](#), Texas' least populous county, peaked in 1940 with 285 people before decreasing to 64 in 2020. Loving is a good example because it shows a decline in population from 249 in 1910 to 82 in 1920 – a decline many other counties reflect during this decade – perhaps

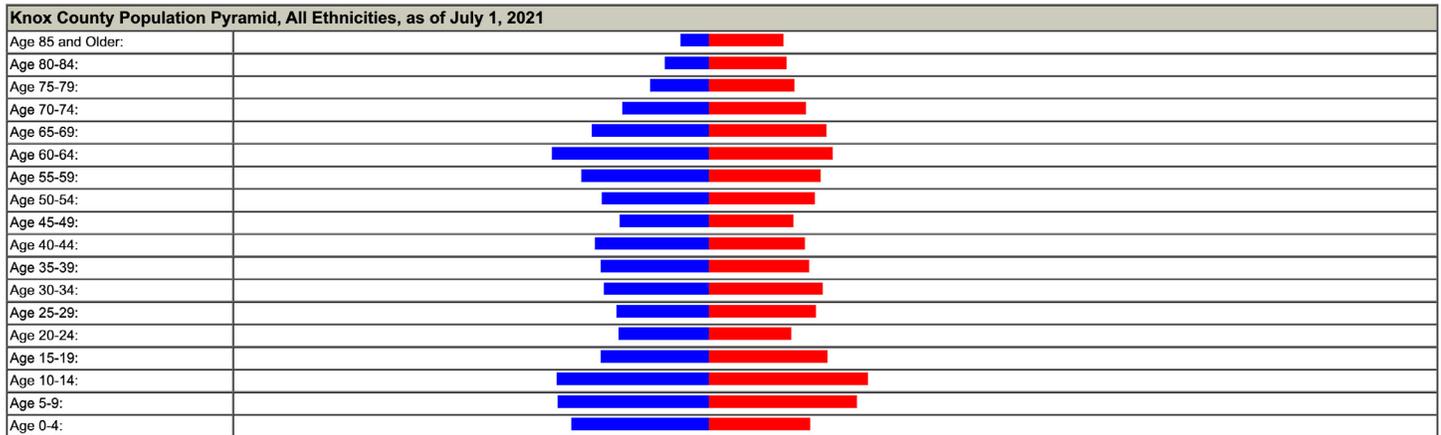
because of World War I. Other counties, though not all, show a decline during the 1860s because of the Civil War.

For example, the state organized [Clay County](#) in 1861, but the [Handbook of Texas](#) says people largely abandoned the county the following year due to the removal of federal troops during the Civil War. As a result, the 1870 census gave no population for the county.

Conversely, [Fort Bend County](#) shows a good example of recent growth. The 1970 census found 52,314 people in the county. But by 2020 the number grew to 822,779.

In addition to total population data, County Profiles includes demographics by ethnicity and race (as defined by the federal

FIG. 1



1. Blue represents males, red represents females.
2. The Census Bureau uses definitions from the Office of Management and Budget for race and ethnicity. They are considered separate and distinct identities. Thus, all survey respondents are categorized by membership in one of two ethnic categories, which are "Hispanic or Latino" and "Not Hispanic or Latino" in addition to their race or races.
3. Percentages calculated by dividing the number of individuals in each age/ethnic group by the total population of the county.
4. Lack of a visible bar can occur (a) when there are no individuals in that age/ethnic group or (b) when the percentage is so small the result is a bar less than one pixel in width.

Age Group	Number Male	Percent Male	Number Female	Percent Female
Age 85 and Older:	25	0.75%	66	1.97%
Age 80-84:	39	1.16%	69	2.06%
Age 75-79:	52	1.55%	76	2.27%
Age 70-74:	77	2.30%	86	2.57%
Age 65-69:	104	3.10%	104	3.10%
Age 60-64:	139	4.15%	110	3.28%
Age 55-59:	113	3.37%	99	2.95%
Age 50-54:	95	2.83%	94	2.81%
Age 45-49:	79	2.36%	75	2.24%
Age 40-44:	101	3.01%	85	2.54%
Age 35-39:	96	2.86%	89	2.66%
Age 30-34:	93	2.78%	101	3.01%
Age 25-29:	82	2.45%	95	2.83%
Age 20-24:	80	2.39%	73	2.18%
Age 15-19:	96	2.86%	105	3.13%
Age 10-14:	135	4.03%	141	4.21%
Age 5-9:	134	4.00%	131	3.91%
Age 0-4:	122	3.64%	90	2.69%
Total, All Ethnicities:	1,662	49.60%	1,689	50.40%

government), population density, age group quarters and percentages of the population living in rural and urban areas. Each profile also includes a link to redistricting data from the 2020 census for that county.

The Age Groups link on each county profile provides fascinating information with a population pyramid that breaks down the county by gender, age group and ethnicity. Use the dropdown boxes at the top of the page to

change counties or to change the ethnic group shown (Any, Hispanic and Nonhispanic).

The population pyramid can be a real eye-opener. Be sure to look at those for some of our rural areas such as Lamb County, which has more men in the 60-64 age group than in any other age group. For women, the largest group is in the 65-69 age range.

The population pyramid for Knox County is in Figure 1. Like in many

other Texas counties, this pyramid narrows in the middle since many residents are in either the younger or older age brackets. Note also that the number of those younger than 5 years old is relatively small, particularly for girls/women (shown in red).

The Demographics section also includes data on per capita income, percentage of the population in poverty, educational attainment, average annual pay and the annual unemployment rate.

Property tax data is also in demand. One can find county tax rates, market value, value available for county taxation and the actual county levy within County Profiles.

The section on road miles from the Texas Department of Transportation breaks down centerline miles and lane miles. Centerline miles ignores the number of lanes, while the agency adjusts lane miles data to account for each lane of the roads. The data also indicates whether the roads are on-system (those handled by the state plus many federal roads) or off-system (those handled by counties

and other local governments as well as some federal roads).

Each County Profile also includes other resource links including County Business Patterns data, as seen in Figure 2, from the U.S. Census Bureau, and the county's gross domestic product (GDP), as seen in Figure 3. The U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis did not include some GDP data to avoid disclosure of confidential information.

At the very bottom of the page, there are links to pages listing the special district, school districts and cities in the county. Each page shows limited property tax data for each of these entities (but just the part of each found in the county).

All this and more can be found on **County Profiles**. Be sure to visit the website to see what is there, and let us know what we should add.

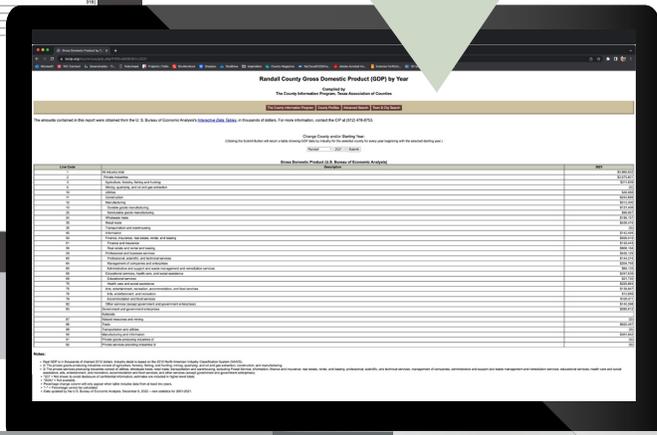
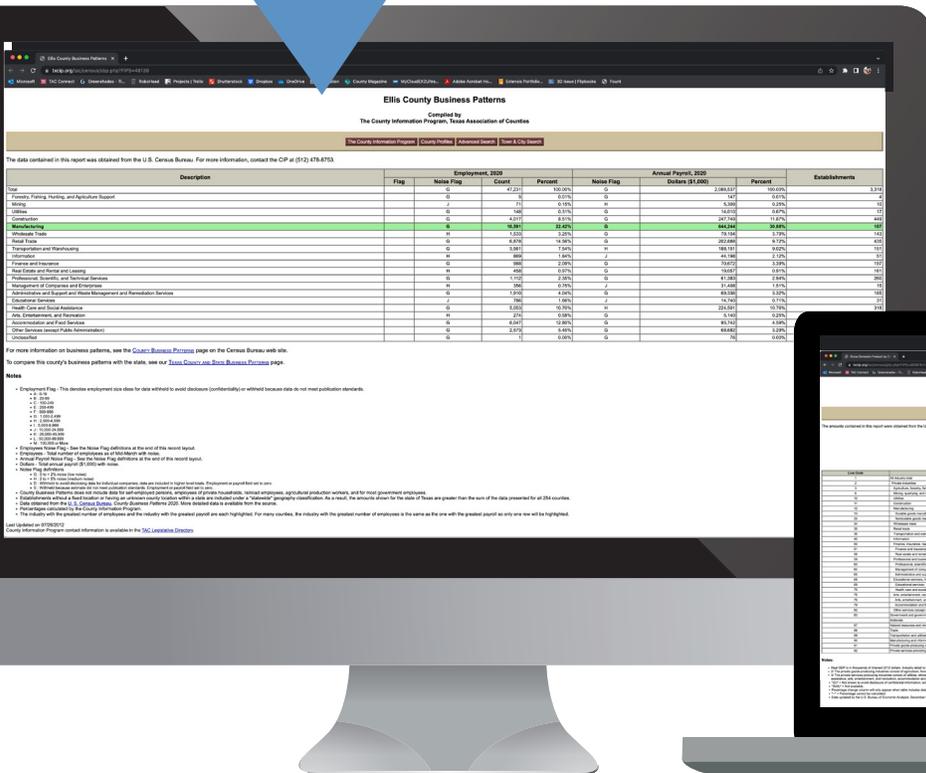
Of course, there are some criteria the data must meet before it can be added to the profiles. The data must cover a large number of counties. For example, the profiles show the sales tax allocation for the 124 counties collecting the county sales tax and show "N/A" for those counties that do not collect this tax. This allows each county to not only have access to this data, but also see a five-year history of the data and what recent trends may have occurred. 📍

FIG. 2 COUNTY BUSINESS PATTERNS DATA

The data includes the employment, annual payroll and establishments of a variety of industries that exist in each Texas county.

FIG. 3 COUNTY GROSS DOMESTIC PRODUCT (GDP)

The data shows the final goods and services produced in the county, providing a good indicator of the county's overall economic health.



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Chet Garner for



Chambers County

County Camping With History at Fort Anahuac Park

(Credit: Chet Garner)



By Chet Garner

I'm always up for a good day trip, but sometimes life calls for an extended getaway. When this happens, I'll load up my camping gear and set out on an adventure. This happens frequently in the spring when the weather improves and I'm in dire need of a post-winter break. While Texas state parks are an obvious choice and national parks offer some great escapes, I'm always

delighted to find an incredible county park that beckons me in with a touch of history and nature. This happened on a recent trip in Anahuac, where I found myself bedding down with the first soldiers of the Texas Revolution and a swamp full of alligators.

Anahuac is the county seat of Chambers County, which sits just east of Houston on the other side of Trinity Bay. Locals say there are more alligators than people in Anahuac, which is how this town became the official "Alligator Capital of Texas." Just

south of the historic district and right on the water's edge sits Fort Anahuac Park, a small but important park that is owned and stewarded by Chambers County. I circled through and picked out a camping spot for the night right next to a row of RV hookups. Every September, this park fills with thousands of patrons for the annual Gator Fest, but on this spring day, I felt like I had the entire place to myself.

I walked to the edge of the bay and stared out at the brackish water, wondering how many alligators were

truly lurking just underneath the surface. For my own safety, I deemed it too cold to swim. I meandered past the boat ramp and fishing pier, where I found a really cool boardwalk and observation tower right in the middle of the marsh. I constantly scanned the water for gators, but the real wildlife show was in the sky as hundreds of birds migrated overhead.

I walked back to my campsite and noticed a number of historical markers and displays recounting the fascinating story of this park and the fort that stood on this ground. I learned that in October of 1830, back when "Tejas" was part of Mexico, the government sent a general to Anahuac to establish a garrison and stop the influx of Anglo settlers

coming from the United States. As you might imagine, this general was not well liked, and in 1832 he arrested William B. Travis and his law partner for attempting a hoax to release and recapture runaway slaves. This led to a series of gun fights and skirmishes known as the "Anahuac Disturbances" that some call the "First Shots of the Texas Revolution." To mark the site, Chambers County has erected a monument with two soldiers taking the "First Stand" for Texas.

I was amazed that I had never heard this story or visited this park before, but I was happy that there are folks in Chambers County working to make sure this story lives on. My job was to live through the night camping right next to the gator-infested marsh. 🇺🇸



(Credit: Chet Garner)

Texas Counties Deliver by Chet Garner

Read about Texas counties' rich history, culture and service to their communities in each issue of County magazine. Watch Chet on PBS's "The Daytripper" and follow him on Twitter and Instagram @ChetTripper. He can also be found on YouTube and Facebook @thedaytrippertv.

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CRO and Former Navarro County Judge 1999-2006



RHITA KOCHES
CRO and Former Van Zandt County Judge 2004-2014



TRAMER WOYTEK
CRO and Former Lavaca County Judge 2011-2020



KIM HALFMANN
CRO and Former Glasscock County Judge 2010-2021

Always feel free to reach out with questions or request a visit!

Find and contact the CRO for your region with this interactive map: [county.org/CRO-map](#)

TEXAS ASSOCIATION of COUNTIES

County Clue

Which county is this?



(Credit: Alan Bristol)

Guess the county: The county is home to this colorfully painted steer located on its courthouse grounds. Which county is this?

Send your answer to magazine@county.org with the subject line "County Clue" to be entered into a drawing for a shoutout in the next issue of County magazine and a Texas Association of Counties mug.



The submission deadline is March 6. 🇺🇸

Which county was it?

Photo contest winners from the Fall 2022 County magazine issue:

- Sherry Crager, Nacogdoches County
- Deborah Lemons, Swisher County
- Corey Rogan, Ellis County
- Amber Hudson, Brazos County
- Dawn Lantz, Kerr County
- Frieda Pressler, Kendall County
- Karen Giles, Brazos County

Answer: Kendall County



- DeDe Taylor, Liberty County
- Alan Dierschke, Glasscock County
- Camille Hines, Red River County
- Arty Tucker, Cottle County
- Greg Mason, Hill County



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