



# 2024 Civic Excellence in Innovation Award Winners

# Congratulations!

The Excellence in Innovation Awards program received nearly 60 applicants this year, highlighting the great work taking place across North Carolina counties.

After a thorough review by county leaders, staff and previous award winners, the North Carolina Association of County Commissioners (NCACC) and Civic Federal Credit Union are proud to name 13 outstanding projects as recipients of the 2024 Excellence in Innovation Awards.



2024

# EXCELLENCE IN INNOVATION

— AWARDS PROGRAM —

# Buncombe County

## Pioneering a Shared Training Hub

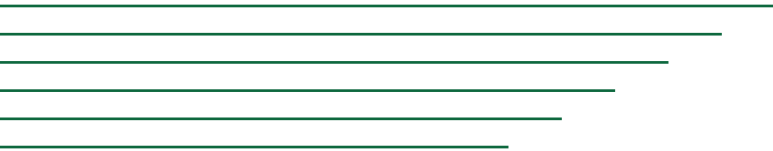
Over the last two years, departments of Social Services and Health and Human Services within North Carolina counties have experienced many changes to the policies that drive public benefits programs. High levels of turnover combined with higher-than-ever caseloads leave counties struggling to hire and onboard staff.

Buncombe County recognized these gaps in workforce development and, initially, created an in-person training team responsible for generating training content and onboarding new hires. Nearby counties that could afford to do so would send their staff over to Buncombe County for live training sessions, but counties without the financial means or that were too far away were unable to access the helpful resources offered by Buncombe County.

Wanting to share their information across the state, Buncombe County created an online Community SharePoint site that centralizes their training solution information. This site offers a comprehensive content library with over 200 courses on an array of county-level topics, recorded class sessions, onboarding information, real-time updates and more. By providing free, high-quality training resources through a centralized online platform, Buncombe County empowers other counties to enhance employee skills and improve public service delivery efficiently and effectively.

Since launching the site, Buncombe County has allowed access to 65 North Carolina counties as well as state entities including the Division of Health Benefits. Site data metrics show more than 16,000 visits from May 2024 to June 2024.

*For more information about the training site, email Heather Ramsey, staff development manager of Health and Human Services, Buncombe County, at [heather.ramsey@buncombecounty.org](mailto:heather.ramsey@buncombecounty.org).*



# Caldwell County

## Workforce Wednesdays

In Caldwell County, there is a significant gap in understanding between the community and the industrial employers within the region. Many citizens are unaware of the diverse career opportunities available in local industries, and, simultaneously, employers often fail to effectively market themselves to teachers and students who could fill the workforce needs.

Workforce Wednesdays: Connecting Careers to the Classroom is an exciting professional development initiative for teachers created by three dedicated organizations: Caldwell County Economic Development, Caldwell County Schools, and Caldwell County Community College. The objective is to share data-supported evidence of high-growth, high-wage careers available in Caldwell County and demonstrate a clear path from post-secondary education to promising jobs through the local community college system. Teachers and those working with children have a profound influence on the next generation of the workforce, and it is essential that educators and school administrators are equipped with up-to-date knowledge about current and future workforce needs. This program aims to provide them with the insights and tools necessary to guide students toward successful and fulfilling careers.

Kelly Caswell, a teacher who participated in the first cohort of Workforce Wednesdays, states, "This was truly inspiring. I've shared it with my students, colleagues, friends and family. It was like a series of eye-opening events that made me aware of so many opportunities right here in my backyard. From puppies to pipettes, I've enjoyed all the thoughtful planning put into this event. Why move anywhere else when so many big industries are starting to come back here."

*For more information, email Ashley Bolick, director of economic development, Caldwell County, at [abolick@caldwellcountync.org](mailto:abolick@caldwellcountync.org).*

# Carteret County

## Turning the Tide

Carteret County, like many communities across the nation, has been affected by the opioid epidemic. This rise in opioid overdoses

presents a significant challenge, with Carteret County experiencing a higher rate of opioid overdose deaths than the state average. Specifically, Carteret County sees approximately 32 opioid overdose deaths per 100,000 North Carolina residents, compared to the statewide average of 22.7 per 100,000. The impact of opioid overdoses has been devastating for families and communities within Carteret County, and it became evident that an innovative and robust response was urgently needed to address this public health crisis.

Carteret County implemented a new program – the Post-Overdose Response Team (PORT). Funded by opioid settlement funds, PORT represents a data-driven, multifaceted approach to overcoming the complex challenges of addiction and overdose. Carteret County assembled a dedicated team of five North Carolina Certified Peer Support Specialists (CPSS) and a Navigator. The CPSS, with their own lived experiences of recovery, offers invaluable empathy, understanding and personal connection; the Navigator, a social service professional, complements the team by ensuring clients access to treatment options, community resources and family support networks. PORT’s approach centers on proactive engagement. Following an overdose, the team reaches out within 24-72 hours, offering immediate support and guidance to clients and families. By addressing this issue holistically, PORT not only helps in the immediate aftermath but also works toward a sustainable recovery.

The program’s success is undeniable. In the past year, Carteret County reported a decrease in overdose deaths. As of May 31, 2024, four deaths and 44 total overdoses have been reported by law enforcement this year. Clients report feeling more supported and equipped to manage their recovery, and the community has seen a decrease in repeat overdoses. The PORT model not only saves lives but also enhances the overall well-being of individuals and families, stands as a testament to the power of community-driven innovation, and offers a beacon of hope for other communities struggling with the opioid epidemic.

*If you or someone you know is struggling with substance use, contact the Carteret County PORT program at (252) 247-1129 or [postODteam@carteretcountync.gov](mailto:postODteam@carteretcountync.gov). For more information about the program, visit [www.carteretcountync.gov/2339/PORT-Program](http://www.carteretcountync.gov/2339/PORT-Program).*

# Catawba County

## Digital Setback and Site Plan Creator

In order to be issued a zoning permit in Catawba County, applicants must provide a 'Site Plan' map showing where the zoning setbacks are on the property and where planned structures will be placed on the property. Determining setbacks can be a complicated process. Historically in Catawba County, site plan mapping was done by hand – an analog process that was time consuming and very manual. In December 2023, Catawba County rolled out its new ePermitting software, allowing users to submit applications remotely, but this uncovered a problem with the site plan process since users still needed to submit their site plans to planning staff.

To tackle this issue, a pair of custom mapping applications were created: Setback Creator and Proposed Projects.

The Setback Creator allows planning staff to select property lines and generate setback polygons based on zoning regulations. A unique 'Setback ID' is generated for the applicant to add to the site plan and view their specific Proposed Projects application. The Proposed Projects application lets users add plans for where a structure will be placed within the setback and property boundaries and submit the proposed structures back to planning staff.

This project has been very successful, and the applications are utilized daily by the Catawba County Planning Department and its customers. With dozens of zoning permits are applied for each month, these tools have saved staff time, reduced errors and eliminated the need for paper. Since December 2023, the mapping applications have generated setbacks and site plans for approximately 400 projects. Related workload for staff at the Catawba County Planning Department has decreased by an estimated 50%. For customers, eliminating the need to come onsite to submit site plans has cut time, cut costs and brought in very positive feedback.

*For more information, email Nathan Bost, GIS administrator, Catawba County, at [wbest@catawbacountync.gov](mailto:wbest@catawbacountync.gov).*

# Craven County

## Collaborative Efforts to Address Transportation Needs

Craven County was experiencing a high number of emergency room visits and deaths related to opioid and fentanyl overdoses. Early on, participants of the Recovery Alliance Initiative – Craven County Collaboration identified lack of transportation to detox centers as one of the barriers to vital services needed for treatment and recovery from substance use. Safe and reliable transportation available at short notice was needed. Craven County expressed to the Capital Area Rural Transportation System (CARTS) the importance of assisting with substance use disorder transportation and requested assistance while staying within the parameters of public transit and available funding.

CARTS funding was identified, and transportation was implemented throughout the county at no cost to the individual using the service. Craven Pamlico Re-Entry Council, Craven County Child Protective Services, Craven County Opioid Epidemic Response and Craven County Jail Administration staff all collaborated with CARTS to identify areas in need, educate drivers and staff, and offer help to recovering individuals.

Through this collaborative project, CARTS has provided over 1,900 trips and assisted approximately 45 individuals. Most trips are to and from Port Health, a local mental health and substance use treatment provider in Craven County. The individuals utilizing this project are receiving vital services needed to achieve recovery.

*For more information, email Kelly Walker-Cuthrell, director, Transportation Department (CARTS) at Craven County, at [kwalker@cravencountync.gov](mailto:kwalker@cravencountync.gov).*

# Cumberland County

## Fort Liberty WIC Office

With a population of nearly 335,000, Cumberland County is home to Fayetteville and has a unique tie to Fort Liberty, an Army installation that lies within the county lines and is home to the largest military installation in the world by population hosting over 258,000 people. Cumberland County Department of Public Health (CCDPH) created the Fort Liberty Public Health Partnership (Partnership) in 2019 alongside numerous other public health organizations to address pressing health issues across the Ft. Liberty and Cumberland County communities.

In response to the identified needs, the Partnership opened a Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) office on Ft. Liberty in March 2023. The Cumberland County WIC Program is implemented by the CCDPH and the Partnership, serving more than 11,500 participants in four locations across the county. CCDPH operates a WIC clinic on Ft. Liberty two days a week offering WIC-eligible Ft. Liberty residents to receive services on the installation. In July 2023, the Partnership was awarded a grant from the WIC Community Innovation and Outreach (WIC CIAO) Project to reduce barriers to WIC services for families in the Ft. Liberty and Cumberland County military community. Funding supports the implementation of innovative outreach strategies to increase WIC awareness, participation and benefit redemption.

The work of the Partnership has been recognized nationally as a best practice and was a National Network of Public Health Institutes (NNPHI) Public Health Innovation Award Winner in 2023. The Ft. Liberty WIC office has an average monthly enrollment of 1,004 WIC participants – an increase from an average monthly enrollment of 308 during the first quarter Ft. Liberty was open.

*To learn more about WIC program benefits, eligibility and the Fort Liberty WIC office, visit [www.cumberlandcountync.gov/departments/public-health-group/public-health/WIC](http://www.cumberlandcountync.gov/departments/public-health-group/public-health/WIC).*



# Cumberland County

## Library Community Navigator

In 2019 and 2020, consultants conducted a Community Needs Assessment for the Cumberland County Public Library as part of their strategic planning process. The assessment identified a need for increased support for the unhoused community within the libraries and for patrons needing assistance in connecting with essential services and resources. Libraries play a vital role as safe havens for all community members, particularly those who rely on library services for internet access, computers and shelter. Note, this assessment predates the COVID-19 pandemic, which exacerbated existing community needs such as homelessness, mental illness and more.

In response to the assessment and after reopening (due to the pandemic), the Cumberland County Public Library welcomed its inaugural Community Navigator, a pivotal role designated to cater to the evolving information needs of library patrons, in November 2023. This position is not mandated but rather serves as a proactive approach for the library and county to engage with the community and address its evolving needs.

Tasked with guiding community members toward essential resources, the library's community navigator operates across eight library locations. While the position is based at the library, the community navigator attends meetings and committees related to homelessness, mental health, substance use, reentry needs and more. Also, the community navigator plays a significant role in enhancing library staff capabilities through tailored trainings such as conflict resolution and adult mental health first aid. To date, the community navigator has successfully connected over 100 individuals and families with a myriad of resources, ranging from housing and food to medical care and reentry support post-incarceration.

*For more information, email Faith Phillips, library director, Cumberland County Public Library, at [fphillips@cumberlandcountync.gov](mailto:fphillips@cumberlandcountync.gov) or visit [www.cumberlandcountync.gov/departments/library-group/library](http://www.cumberlandcountync.gov/departments/library-group/library).*

# Forsyth County

## Community Resources and Assets

Originally developed in 2021, Community Resources and Assets was a collaboration between MapForsyth, the Forsyth Regional Opioid & Substance Use Team (FROST) and Partnership for Prosperity. Version one of the Community Resources and Assets was mainly map-based displaying locations and contact information for various resources including substance use treatment, educational resources, food and clothing, childcare, and more. As time passed, more organizations requested similar applications tailored to certain groups. In mid-2023, Safe Youth Initiative requested a mobile friendly application with information on access to juvenile specific resources.

The decision was made to redevelop Community Resources and Assets. Many improvements were made to the application including the introduction of user-friendly dropdown menus based on resource categories, a “Near Me” tool, and expanded visible resource lists on mobile and tablet views. Since the application redesign was published, daily views have increased by nearly tenfold due to the fact that MapForsyth provides software training to service providers.

Community partners are crucial to the continued success of the application, and Forsyth County is focused on providing them with the resources needed to share with county citizens. In working with local partners, Forsyth County can secure more data sources and prevent duplication of effort by encouraging use of the application.

*To view Community Resources and Assets, visit [www.arcg.is/1Hyu9b0](http://www.arcg.is/1Hyu9b0).*

# Gaston County

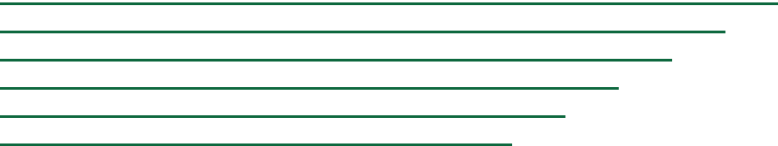
## Danger Assessment for Law Enforcement

Gaston County’s Danger Assessment for Law Enforcement (DA-LE) project addresses a critical need in the community: a comprehensive response system for domestic violence incidents. The Gaston County District Attorney’s Office and Survivor Services leadership staff recognized gaps in services and barriers that faced domestic violence survivors seeking justice or support services.

DA-LE is an 11-question, evidence-based tool designed to identify high-risk offenders who may pose a lethal threat to their intimate partner. By utilizing this tool on all calls for service that involve intimate partner violence, Gaston County ensures that law enforcement and legal professionals have crucial information at their disposal. The DA-LE initiative also involves training law enforcement officers, advocates, court personnel and more on best practices for handling domestic violence cases, developing workflow processes between agencies, and implementing specialized response protocols.

Following the rollout of the DA-LE tool, Survivor Services took additional proactive steps by establishing a High-Risk Fatality Prevention Team to do monthly evaluations of cases identified as high-risk through DA-LE. Since its integration, 524 cases have been reported, and among those, 217 identify as high-risk. DA-LE has transformed Gaston County’s approach toward identifying and addressing high-risk cases of intimate partner violence and represents a significant advancement in efforts to combat domestic violence.

*For more information, email Mollie Weakland, special events & service coordinator, Survivor Services, Gaston County, at [mollie.weakland@gastongov.com](mailto:mollie.weakland@gastongov.com).*



# Lee County

## R.E.N.E.W.

Over the past several years, many health and human services departments have seen an increase in mental health related challenges, and these challenges have put a strain on local county systems. Lee County leadership came together to provide a possible solution to bridge the gaps in services within the community. As a result, Resources for Eliminating barriers, creating New Beginnings, and providing Education for an enhanced Well-being (RENEW Lee County or RENEW) was born.

RENEW Lee County, housed in their newly established and expanding Community Support Services Department, is the approach used to assist individuals in the community with mental health and behavioral health needs. With the launching of RENEW in October 2023, the Community Support Services Department was formed due to multiple county initiatives including:

**Health and Well-Being Initiative:** RENEW will promote mental well-being in the community and provide opportunities to access mental health services for residents in need. \$250,000 was allocated to reimburse non-profits for a list of pre-approved mental health services. An additional \$250,000 was allocated for contracted services with mental health providers in the community to help provide treatment.

**Re-entry:** The Lee County Re-entry Council is the lead agency in re-entry work within Lee County to coordinate community organizations working with justice-involved individuals.

**Community Social Worker:** This position assists law enforcement and other partners in accessing mental health resources, works closely with re-entry and pre-trial, connects residents in need to services and more.

**Pre-trial Release:** These services assist and assess individuals in jail for appropriateness of pre-trial release. Part of this process is linking individuals to mental health services such as substance use disorder treatment.

**Opioid Use Disorder Reduction Initiative (OUDRI):** Using funds from the opioid settlements, Lee County hopes to reduce the prevalence of opioid use disorder by investing in research-based practices and programs currently operating in and around the county. Services

like access to treatment, re-entry services and transportation will be coordinated through the Community Support Department through RENEW Lee County.

*For more information about RENEW Lee County, visit [www.leecountync.gov/government/renew](http://www.leecountync.gov/government/renew).*

# **Pasquotank County**

## **Feral Cat Program**

In Pasquotank County, the population of feral cats has continued to grow over time, despite the county's best efforts and traditional animal control practices. County shelters were taking in three times as many animals as other similar sized counties and faced a sustained increase in the number of nuisance calls related to cats.

Equipped with scientific literature regarding population control, the staff in Pasquotank County began to take a different approach. They called it TNVR – Trap, Neuter, Vaccinate, Return. This program included stakeholders from the county manager's office, the county sheriff's office, animal shelters and community volunteers.

The county observed that calls for service came from all areas of the county, and many were from repeat locations. They also observed that the locations of calls would migrate geographically over time within a given region. This information was indicative of an often ineffective "trap and euthanize" strategy employed by many local governments to manage feral cat populations.

This "vacuum effect" would result in new feral populations migrating into areas where cats are trapped and removed, often with greater success in breeding. Their numbers multiplied more than if the cats were sterilized and allowed to remain in place.

As a result of the county's revamped efforts and emphasis on neutering over euthanasia, animal control calls related to cats decreased by 30% in 2023. Trapping calls were reduced by 44%.

*For more information, email Mike Barclift, management fellow, Pasquotank County at [barcliftm@co.pasquotank.nc.us](mailto:barcliftm@co.pasquotank.nc.us).*

# Rockingham County

## Mobile Dental Expansion

Research has shown that school-based programs can reduce dental disease by 50%, remove barriers to care and decrease missed education time. These programs also ensure that children receive recommended preventative care such as sealants, which are 80% effective in preventing dental disease. While school-based programs are effective, they haven't been widely replicated due to the complexities of integrating them within the education system and the challenges of establishing a sustainable business model.

Utilizing funds from the Duke Endowment and Blue Cross and Blue Shield of North Carolina, Rockingham County purchased a 38-foot trailer that had been converted to a mobile dental unit and hired a program coordinator and dental hygienist to provide care based out of the mobile unit.

By bringing the mobile unit and trained professionals directly to school parking lots, Rockingham County has had a tremendously successful first year for the Mobile Dental Unit. Staff have delivered consistent and recurring services to 174 elementary school children who needed care and were not receiving it elsewhere. These young people now have access to preventative services, sealants, cleanings and have benefited from over 1,500 treatment and preventative appointments completed by the Rockingham County Mobile Dental Unit team this school year.

*For more information, email Trey Wright, public health director, Division of Public Health, Rockingham County, at [fwright@co.rockingham.nc.us](mailto:fwright@co.rockingham.nc.us).*

# Wilson County

## Garden Partners

The Wilson County Public Library strives to provide meaningful and dynamic programming for adults with disabilities. Having traditionally focused activities around crafts, games and stories, the county was looking for a way to improve engagement and impact for their programs.

Garden Partners was established as a new opportunity for program participants to not only learn about horticulture but maintain a successful garden over time with their peers. It's a collaborative effort between Wilson County, Seeds of Hope Wilson and Diversified Opportunities to provide a sustainable, accessible opportunity for community members.

The program began with raised, handicap accessible garden beds, materials provided by Seeds of Hope, and educational information on vegetables and herbs that could be planted. As time progressed and the Garden Partners harvested more vegetables, participants began to learn new recipes and cooking techniques to prepare healthy, homegrown dishes with the foods they had grown.

By the time the season had ended, Garden Partners became a full-fledged "garden-to-table" experience for adults with disabilities, and the program has developed its own rich sense of community. Garden Partners has been a tremendous success and has attracted four times as many participants as traditional indoor library activities in Wilson County.

*For more information, email Lori Winstead, deputy county manager, Wilson County, at [ljwinstead@wilsoncountync.gov](mailto:ljwinstead@wilsoncountync.gov).*



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