



Heroic Hands: Celebrating Public Service

Recognizing North Carolina Local Government Employees



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A Letter from President Tare "T." Davis

Serving as 2024-2025 president of the North Carolina Association of County Commissioners this past year has been an absolute honor. From the mountains to the coast of our beautiful state, I've had the privilege of visiting our counties and meeting with local leaders, listening to community members, and recognizing the public service workers who keep our counties thriving and our communities strong.

As a former state trooper, I know firsthand the heart and hard work it takes to show up each day in service to others. I also know that those who choose careers in public service rarely seek recognition — but they absolutely deserve it. That's why I launched my presidential initiative, Heroic Hands: Celebrating Public Service — to shine a light on the often unseen individuals who play essential roles in our communities.

Throughout the year, this initiative has elevated the voices and stories of librarians, emergency responders, county finance staff, parks employees, sanitation workers, and many others. They are the backbone of local government, and this book is a tribute to them.

Across these pages, you will see the faces of local heroes who have been recognized by their county as part of this initiative. You'll see stories of dedication, resilience, and service. These are the stories of people who go above and beyond not for recognition but because they care deeply about their communities.

It is my hope that this book will not only honor these local heroes but also inspire a new generation to consider a career in public service. Because when we invest in people, we invest in the future of North Carolina.

To our public service workers: thank you. You are seen, valued, and celebrated.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Tare Davis".

Initiative Overview

At the 2024 NCACC Annual Conference in Forsyth County, Warren County Commissioner Tare “T.” Davis assumed the gavel as the 108th president of the North Carolina Association of County Commissioners and unveiled his presidential initiative, Heroic Hands: Celebrating Public Service. Rooted in his more than two decades as a public servant and retired state trooper, President Davis launched this initiative to spotlight the critical work of local government employees and elevate the importance of careers in public service.

The initiative’s mission sought “to highlight the value of having a career in public service, to work with state leaders and partners to promote workforce training needs in local government, and to help create a better pipeline of public service employees to fill county jobs.”

Throughout his presidential year, President Davis traveled to counties across the state to encourage local leaders to recognize their employees and promote public service as a meaningful and rewarding career path. The initiative has emphasized the value of roles that are often undercelebrated yet deeply essential — from public health and public safety to libraries, parks, and county administration.

District meetings provided space to celebrate regional heroes, and the Association launched a call for counties to share stories from their own communities. The result is this book — a statewide collection of narratives that memorialize the people behind the programs, the faces behind the services, and the hands that strengthen our counties.

Heroic Hands is a tribute, a thank you, and a call to action. It calls on us to recognize, appreciate, and invest in the people who serve, today and in the future.



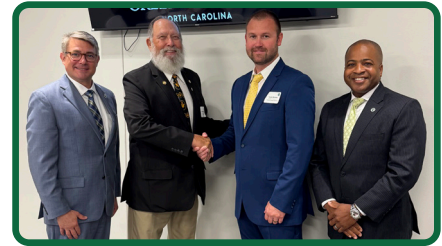
Heroic Hands Across Our Counties



Camden County, NCACC District 1



Pitt County, NCACC District 2



Greene County, NCACC District 3



New Hanover County, NCACC District 4



Robeson County, NCACC District 5



Cumberland County, NCACC District 6

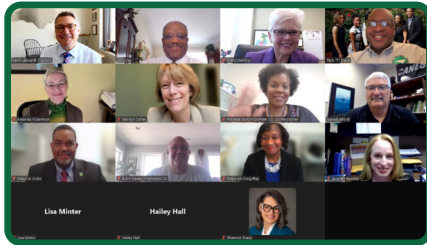


Wilson County, NCACC District 7



Person County, NCACC District 8

Heroic Hands Across Our Counties



Wake County, NCACC District 9



Anson County, NCACC District 10



Davidson County, NCACC District 11



Iredell County, NCACC District 12



Catawba County, NCACC District 13



Polk County, NCACC District 15



Mitchell County, NCACC District 14



Transylvania County, NCACC District 16

Heroic Hands Across Our Counties



Haywood County, NCACC District 17



Forsyth County, NCACC District 18

The Importance of County Workforce

In North Carolina's 100 counties, there are thousands of workers who help keep our communities safe, healthy, and running every day. These county employees run local health departments, work in social services, respond to emergencies and make sure our students have quality places to learn. They help take care of our parks, libraries, and elections. Their jobs may not always be in the spotlight, but their work is essential to our daily lives.

This year's presidential initiative, Heroic Hands: Celebrating Public Service, shines a light on workers like these. It helps people understand how valuable local government jobs are and why public service matters. County workers are often the first to respond when their communities need help, whether during a storm, a health emergency, or everyday challenges. They play a vital role in providing support and solutions where it's needed most.

As our state grows, we need more people to see public service as a strong and meaningful career. County jobs offer chances to help others, learn new skills, and build a better future. By supporting and celebrating these workers, and helping students and young people explore these careers, we can make sure every county in North Carolina has the strong team it needs to serve the people who live there.

*The local heroes featured in this publication were nominated by their respective counties.
All accompanying stories, descriptions, and submitted content were provided by the counties.*



Jennifer Herman

Finance Director

Finance/Administration

Jennifer Herman has been with Alexander County for 24 years.

There are many heroes in county government, some visible to the public and others whose impact is behind the scenes. Jennifer Herman, Alexander County's finance director, is one of those unsung heroes. A certified public accountant, Jennifer joined the county in 2001 after serving as a local government audit manager. Since then, she has demonstrated integrity, professionalism, and tireless dedication in managing county finances. In 2025, following the resignation of the county manager, Jennifer stepped up to guide the FY 2025-2026 budget process. She worked closely with the Board of Commissioners, interim leadership, and staff, often putting in 65-hour weeks while managing audits, reporting, and daily duties. Jennifer never sought recognition for her efforts — she simply ensured everything was done well and on time. Her quiet leadership and commitment to excellence during a time of uncertainty exemplify public service at its best. She is truly deserving of the Heroic Hands award.



Brian Nance

EMS Director

Emergency Medical Services (EMS)

Brian Nance has been with Anson County for 20 years.

Brian is a dedicated member of Anson County Emergency Medical Services (EMS), consistently going above and beyond his daily responsibilities. He can always be counted on to lend a hand wherever needed, demonstrating reliability and a strong work ethic. During periods of declared emergency conditions, Brian willingly steps up, playing a vital role in the county's emergency response efforts. His commitment to service and support makes him a valuable asset to the EMS team and the Anson County community.



Patty Gambill

Emergency Management Director

Emergency Management

Patty Gambill has been with Ashe County for 26.5 years.

When Hurricane Helene tore through Ashe County, one person stood at the center of the response: Patty Gambill, Ashe County Emergency Management Director. For her leadership, grit, and tireless service, Patty is our Heroic Hands honoree. As homes flooded and roads washed out, she acted quickly — coordinating emergency teams, managing shelters, and working long hours with little rest. Her calm presence brought order in a time of crisis. What sets Patty apart is her unwavering commitment after the storm. When headlines faded, she stayed — helping families with FEMA paperwork, overseeing cleanup, and ensuring resources reached even the most remote areas. She fiercely advocated for rural needs and didn't let red tape stand in her way. Patty is strong-willed, determined, and deeply respected. She speaks plainly, leads clearly, and gets things done. Her steady leadership helped guide Ashe County through recovery. She is our calm in the storm and a true local superhero.



Ruth Shirley

*Volunteer Avery Coordinator
Senior Center*

Ruth Shirley has been with Avery County for 2 years.

Ruth Shirley’s story is one of unwavering dedication — a testament to how one person’s commitment can uplift an entire region for over half a century. Her service journey began as a teen driving a school bus, long before becoming a teacher. After earning her degree from Appalachian State University, “Ruthie” returned to Avery County, serving as a high school teacher and principal of three schools. Whether writing grants, fundraising, or paying out of pocket, Ruth ensured every student had a chance to thrive. In the 1990s, she co-founded Avery High’s Interact Club, inspiring youth to serve their communities. Retirement didn’t slow her — she joined Habitat for Humanity, drove shuttles, and even filled in as a school bus driver. When Hurricane Helene struck in 2024, Ruth mobilized the Newland Rock Gym into a shelter, working 16-hour days to secure aid, pay bills, and support families and pets. Her lifetime of service continues to transform lives.



Jennie Haddock

Veterans Service Officer

Veterans Services

Jennie Haddock has been with Beaufort County for 4.5 years.

Jennie Haddock, Beaufort County Veterans Service Officer, has a deep passion for serving veterans and ensuring they receive the benefits they've earned through their service. She has a rare gift for connecting with veterans, encouraging them to open up about their service experiences—something that can often be difficult. This unique ability allows her to uncover the full range of benefits each veteran is eligible to receive. Jennie is a one-person department who goes above and beyond to serve the many veterans in the county. She helps all veterans with dedication and care but holds a special place in her heart for those who served during the Vietnam era. Her compassion, persistence, and commitment make a real difference in the lives of those who have given so much to the country. Beaufort County is honored to submit her as a Heroic Hands nominee.



Brunswick County EMS

Paramedics

Emergency Medical Services (EMS)

Cloey Rave, Hannah Smith, and Christian Hughes have been with Brunswick County for 3 years.

Brunswick County EMS exemplifies dedication, skill, and lifesaving commitment to the community. On February 17, 2025, their Medic 10 team responded to a residential fire where a woman suffered severe burns and respiratory distress. The department's swift and advanced care — including assisted breathing, airway protection, and rapid helicopter transport coordination — was critical to saving her life. Paramedics Cloey Rave, Hannah Smith, and Assistant Supervisor Paramedic Christian Hughes, all relatively early in their careers, demonstrated exceptional clinical judgment, resilience, and teamwork under pressure. Rave earned certification in 2023, while Smith and Hughes were certified in 2019. Their heroic actions reflect the strength and professionalism of the entire Brunswick County EMS department. We proudly nominate the department and these outstanding individuals for the Heroic Hands Award, recognizing their vital role in protecting the health and safety of our community.



Alex McKnight

Business Manager for PSCD

Public Safety Communications Department

Alex McKnight has been with Buncombe County for 13 years.

Alex has spent most of his career in Public Safety and now serves as the Business Manager for Buncombe County's Public Safety Communications Department (PSCD). He consistently goes above and beyond to ensure staff have what they need to succeed in a high-stress environment, while also focusing on morale and recognition. Creative and strategic, Alex never gets discouraged — he's a master at finding funding, engaging stakeholders, and doing whatever it takes to support the PSCD and its most valuable asset: its people. During Hurricane Helene, Alex put his own safety at risk to help locate missing individuals as part of the Urban Search and Rescue team (USAR), demonstrating his deep commitment to both his job and his community. What sets Alex apart is his ability to blend operational excellence with a values-driven, equity-focused mindset. His leadership and dedication continue to positively impact the safety and well-being of all who live, work, and visit Buncombe County.



Michael Brown

*Lt., Paramedic, Special Operations
Emergency Medical Services (EMS)*

Michael Brown has been with Burke County for 30 years.

Mike has dedicated over 30 years to serving Burke County through the Rescue Squad, Search and Rescue team, Burke County Emergency Medical Services (EMS) in multiple roles, Oak Hill Fire and Rescue, and as an instructor at Western Piedmont Community College. Beyond his professional duties, he shares his faith with anyone open to conversation. Most recently, during Hurricane Helene, Mike served as the paramedic caring for a man trapped in a culvert after a landslide. While many rescue personnel were recognized for their roles, Mike's critical care over more than 10 hours in dangerous, unstable conditions went unrecognized — despite risking his own life. This act reflects just one of many selfless contributions throughout his career. His unwavering commitment to the community, quiet humility, and consistent service make him a truly deserving honoree. Burke County is proud to recognize Mike for his lifetime of service and nominates him for the Heroic Hands Award.



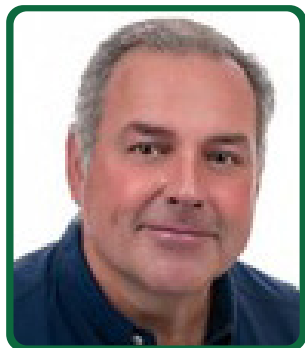
James "Jimmy" Lentz

Chief of Emergency Medical Services

Emergency Medical Services (EMS)

James "Jimmy" Lentz has been with Cabarrus County for 38 years.

Chief Jimmy Lentz exemplifies servant leadership and compassion as head of Cabarrus County Emergency Medical Services (EMS), making him a deserving nominee for the NCACC Heroic Hands award. Known for leading from the heart, Chief Lentz always puts the well-being of his staff and community first. His leadership is rooted in doing what's right, often by personally stepping in. Whether responding alongside his teams to emergencies or offering direct support during tough incidents, he shows humility, courage, and unwavering dedication. For instance, while attending the Cabarrus County Law Day Ceremony, Chief Lentz quickly assisted a person who passed out. Later that day, he stopped to help a stranded motorist change a flat tire. These quick acts of kindness and service reflect his commitment and set a strong example for the entire department. Chief Lentz's leadership inspires care and dedication throughout Cabarrus County EMS.



Seth Nagy

County Extension Director

Cooperative Extension

Seth Nagy has been with Caldwell County for 27 years.

Seth Nagy showed exceptional public service leading Hurricane Helene relief efforts in Caldwell County and beyond. When the storm caused widespread damage, Seth helped turn the Caldwell County Fairgrounds into a redistribution site in partnership with the North Carolina Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services. He managed logistics, mobilized volunteers, and worked with local, state and national partners to deliver critical aid to farmers and families. Seth collaborated with the National Guard to complete airdrops of emergency supplies to hard-to-reach areas in Marshall and Green Mountain. He also helped farmers secure disaster relief grants and funding to replant pastureland wiped out by flooding. Thanks to his efforts, devastated farms received livestock feed, fencing materials and other essentials. Through long hours and personal sacrifice, Seth became a pillar of hope, keeping morale high and showing unwavering dedication to the county's agricultural community.



Michael Whitehurst

***South Mills Volunteer Fire Department Assistant Fire Chief
Fire Service and Healthcare***

Michael Whitehurst has been with Camden County for 28 years.

Mike is always doing something for others. He serves his county daily, always staying in the background and never seeking recognition. Humble and dependable, he is an asset to the community and one of the most selfless individuals you'll ever meet. Mike has a deep love for people and works tirelessly to meet any need they may have. He is a trusted nurse practitioner at the local hospital and also serves as the assistant medical director for Camden County Emergency Medical Services. While he excels in every role, Mike might say his favorite title is "Pop" to his three grandchildren. To keep up with them, he maintains an incredible level of endurance — competing in Ironman triathlons that total over 140 miles. Mike's compassion, humility and quiet strength make him a standout in both his professional and personal life. He leads by example and serves with heart in everything he does.



Sarah McElhone

Library Services Specialist II
Library

Sarah McElhone has been with Catawba County for 6 years.

Sarah McElhone is a remarkable asset to the Newton Library, known for her warmth, dedication and innovative spirit. She creates a welcoming, supportive environment for patrons and staff alike. Sarah is deeply committed to serving the community, especially individuals experiencing homelessness, by helping connect them with essential services and job resources. She offers Notary Public services with care and professionalism. She leads the “Homework Helpers” program, pairing elementary students with high school volunteers to boost academic success. She also created the award-winning “Tales in the Garden” children’s program, which fosters early literacy and community engagement and earned a 2024 NACo Achievement Award. Sarah champions inclusivity through bilingual programs and cultural events that celebrate diversity. Her passion and creativity earned her the 2024 Catawba County Employee of the Year recognition. With more than six years of service, Sarah’s selfless dedication makes her an ideal honoree for the Catawba County Heroic Hands Spotlight.



Carolyn Miller

Assistant County Manager

County Management

Carolyn Miller has been with Chatham County for 28.5 years.

Carolyn Miller began her career with Chatham County Government on November 25, 1996, as administrative support specialist in the County Manager’s Office. Recognizing her potential, County Manager Charlie Horne sponsored her enrollment in the UNC School of Government’s Municipal and County Administration course, where she earned the prestigious Edwin M. Gill Award. Miller was promoted to purchasing agent in May 1998 and became director of human resources later that year. In 2002, she co-created the Chatham County Leadership Academy, helping develop strong county leaders. From 2019 to 2021, she helped expand the program to Martin, Bertie, and Washington counties. In 2021, she was promoted to assistant county manager and HR director. Known for her humility and mentorship, Miller inspires kindness — often bringing treats and asking only that others “do something nice” in return. With two master’s degrees and a novel to her name, her nearly 30-year career reflects leadership, loyalty, and heart.



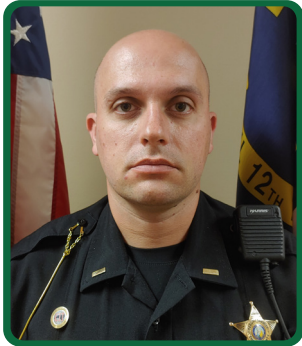
Denise Cross

Senior Services Director

Senior Services

Denise Cross has been with Cherokee County for 10 years.

Since joining Cherokee County in 2014, Denise has excelled in serving the county's aging population, rising quickly to the role of director. Her passion and compassion are especially evident in the end-of-life counseling she provides, easing the burden on families. In 2024 alone, through the Seniors' Health Insurance Information Program (SHIIP), she saved seniors nearly \$1 million across 1,060 client contacts, including many from neighboring counties. She oversees Meals on Wheels and Congregate Nutrition, ensuring seniors receive nutritious meals while checking on their well-being. Denise also manages the Consumer Direct Services and Home Repair Program, helping elderly residents access in-home care and safety-related home improvements so they can live independently longer. Additionally, she assists clients with Social Security needs, often helping them avoid lengthy round trips to the Franklin office and preventing overpayment issues. Her tireless advocacy has created meaningful, lasting impacts in the lives of countless seniors across the region.



Justin Saez

*Lieutenant for the Chowan County Sheriff's Office
Law Enforcement*

Justin Saez has been with Chowan County for 14 years.

Justin Saez began his law enforcement career in Chowan County in 2011 as a patrol deputy. Originally from New York, he brought with him a strong university education and the support of a loving family. He quickly embraced the southern way of life and became known for his easygoing nature and sincere desire to help others. After six years on patrol, Justin was promoted to sergeant, where he began training, guiding and mentoring other officers. He became a certified general instructor and now oversees the Chowan County Sheriff's Office training program. In 2019, he was promoted to lieutenant and continues to serve as a model of professionalism and leadership. Justin also volunteers with the Chowan County Emergency Response Dive Team, Special Olympics and the Kids and Cops program. He holds an Advanced Law Enforcement Certificate and was honored as Chowan County Law Enforcement Officer of the Year by American Legion Post 40 in 2019.



Betty Bradley

Human Resource Director & Clerk to the Board of Commissioners, Human Resources

Betty Bradley has been with Clay County for 6 years.

Betty Bradley volunteered to serve as project manager for the creation of the first Veterans Park in Clay County — an ambitious effort she led while continuing her duties in county government. Over three years, she worked closely with the project architect, the American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), and local contractors to turn the vision into reality. Her dedication and many volunteer hours resulted in a lasting tribute to veterans and a meaningful gathering space for the entire community. In recognition of her leadership, Betty received a plaque from the VFW and a flag flown over the U.S. Capitol, presented by Congressman Edwards' office. The Clay County Board of Commissioners is proud to recognize Betty Bradley for her extraordinary service. Her selfless commitment, leadership, and follow-through made the project a success and reflect the very best of public service. Her efforts will benefit Clay County residents for generations to come.



Josh Davis

Solid Waste Director

Solid Waste

Josh Davis has been with Cleveland County for 4 years.

Josh exemplifies servant leadership, working alongside his team while encouraging innovation, growth, and skill development. His team is fiercely loyal, united by a shared vision for Cleveland County Solid Waste. Josh consistently provides exceptional service while minimizing costs. He and his team redesigned and renovated several county convenience sites, improving traffic flow at a fraction of standard costs. They also fabricated a sheep's foot compactor from scrap metal, demonstrating resourcefulness and financial stewardship. A former general contractor, Josh regularly applies his expertise beyond his role. His team has demolished buildings for Planning and Building Inspections and is currently grading land for a new volunteer fire department substation. Following Hurricane Helene, Josh assumed the role of debris removal and management coordinator — just one example of his readiness to lead in challenging situations. Josh's dedication, hands-on leadership and problem-solving mindset set a high standard for public service and make him a model of effective county leadership.

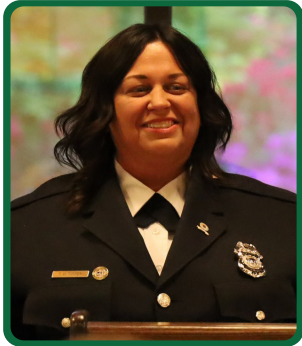


Stanley Kite

Director of Emergency Services
Emergency Services

Stanley Kite has been with Craven County for 48 years.

Stanley Kite began his service with Craven County in September 1977 and is now in his 48th year. Over his decades of service, he has held several key roles, including deputy sheriff, assistant director of emergency services, and, since 1995, director of emergency services. In this role, he also serves as the county's emergency management director, fire marshal, and emergency medical services (EMS) administrator. Kite has led Craven County through numerous hurricanes, including Florence, Floyd, Fran, and Dorian. Under his leadership, the 911 Center implemented Emergency Medical Dispatch, ESInet, and integration with the statewide VIPER system. He has advanced the use of technology in search and rescue operations, significantly improving emergency response capabilities. Often deployed to assist other counties and states, Kite's expertise is widely recognized. He embodies Team Craven's values of selfless service, and his lifetime of dedication makes him an ideal honoree for the Heroic Hands Presidential Initiative.

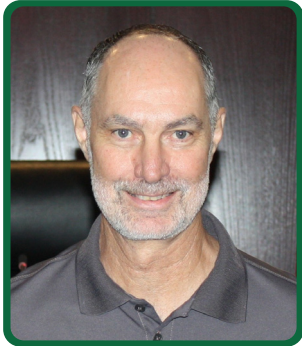


Tara Tucker

Community Paramedic / Behavior Health Initiatives
Behavioral Health / Paramedic

Tara Tucker has been with Cumberland County for 30 years.

Tara Tucker is a respected leader with 30 years of experience in mental health, substance use, and emergency medical services. She serves as a community paramedic with Cape Fear Valley's Behavioral Health Community Paramedic Program, where she champions access to care through innovative, community-based solutions for individuals with complex behavioral health needs. A pioneer in emergency medical services (EMS)-based, low-barrier Medication-Assisted Treatment (MAT) bridge programs, Tucker has helped advance the model nationally and trained Post Overdose Response Teams across North Carolina. She also founded Camp HEAL, an early intervention program for youth impacted by trauma, mental health, or substance use. In 2023, she partnered with Broken Chains JC to expand grassroots recovery and harm reduction work. She advocates for integrating lived experience and faith-based support into recovery efforts. Tucker has earned multiple honors, including the 2024 Harm Reduction Hero and 2025 Recovery Champion awards. She continues to lead systemic change with compassion, innovation, and community focus.



David Coultes

Judicial Center Custodian

Public Works

David Coultes has been with Currituck County for 8 years.

David's co-workers praise his dedication, work ethic, and positive attitude, especially through the COVID-19 pandemic and the severe recent flu season. His attention to detail and commitment to policy have likely saved lives. Thanks to David, the Judicial Building remains spotless and welcoming to all who enter. Always willing to drop whatever he's doing to help others, David maintains both the interior and exterior of the courthouse, ensuring a clean and safe environment. His professionalism, kindness, and willingness to handle tough situations — like cleaning after busy court days — make him an invaluable part of the team. Colleagues call him the “unsung hero” of the building, highlighting his consistent smile, friendly demeanor, and dedication to excellence. David's contributions truly set the standard for both cleanliness and care in the courthouse.



Laura Everhart

Telecommunicator

First Responder/911 Emergency Communications

Laura Everhart has been with Davidson County for 4.5 years.

Laura Everhart was honored as the Performance-Based Budgeting (PBB) Employee of the Year for fiscal year 2023-24 before her tragic passing on April 13, 2025. As the Hands-Only CPR committee lead at the 9-1-1 Emergency Communications Center, Laura led the center in CPR saves, with seven successful saves during her county career. In the last fiscal year, she also led the center in calls taken, handling 15,799 emergency calls with exceptional skill and dedication. Laura excelled in AQUA (Automated Quality Assurance) software tasks, known for their difficulty, and consistently remained in compliance while processing calls for service. Her commitment ensured Davidson County residents received the best possible care during emergencies. Her invaluable contributions to the department and community earned her well-deserved recognition as the 2024 Employee of the Year, highlighting her dedication and impact.



Patience Mukelabai

Welcome Baby Program Manager
Cooperative Extension

Patience Mukelabai has been with Durham County for 17 years.

Patience Mukelabai has been a quiet champion for Durham County families for 17 years. Serving as Welcome Baby Program Manager for seven years and a parent educator for 10 years prior, she understands that 90% of brain development occurs in the first five years — critical for a child’s future. Patience works directly with families in vulnerable situations, facilitating classes, connecting parents, and building community bonds. Each year, the program supports more than 3,000 families. Since its start in 1987, Welcome Baby has grown under her leadership into Durham’s cornerstone resource for reducing adverse childhood experiences, improving school readiness, and combating parental isolation. Her evidence-based approach includes a Fatherhood Initiative and programs for families with children on the autism spectrum. Patience’s work creates lasting impacts across Durham’s diverse communities, empowering families and staff alike, and making Durham a model for early childhood support and comprehensive family services.



Betty Battle

Social Services Director

Social Services

Betty Battle has been with Edgecombe County for 40 years.

With 40 years of dedicated service in one of the toughest areas of county government, Betty Battle, Social Services Director, has exemplified leadership rooted in strength and compassion. Known for her tireless advocacy for children and families, she has often made life-saving decisions under pressure. Battle has guided her department through numerous crises, always prioritizing the safety and well-being of the most vulnerable. Her resilience, commitment, and sense of purpose have left a profound impact on both the community she serves and the colleagues who serve beside her. For decades of hands-on, heroic service, she is Edgecombe County's clear and deserving honoree.



Annie Vasquez

Substance Use Services Coordinator

Behavioral Health Services

Annie Vasquez has been with Forsyth County for 2 years.

Annie joined Forsyth County Behavioral Health Services in 2023 as a Substance Use Health Educator, working tirelessly to reduce barriers and increase access for individuals with substance use disorder. She launched naloxone training for all county employees, community partners, and the public, including sessions in Spanish. Annie maintains a naloxone vending machine at the detention center and secured partnerships for 25 community naloxone shelving units, expanding access countywide. She manages opioid settlement activities, fostering collaboration among funded partners to create a seamless network of services. Annie leads the Forsyth Regional Opioid and Substance Use Team, helped distribute naloxone to all Winston-Salem Forsyth County Schools, implemented a stigma index survey, and facilitated storytelling opportunities for families affected by loss. A true servant leader, Annie's compassionate work makes her a local hero and a beacon of hope for the Forsyth County community.



Chloe Gordon

Public Health Nurse

Public Health

Chloe Gordon has been with Gaston County for 4 years.

Chloe Gordon is a standout public health nurse at Gaston County, dedicated to health equity and improving client accessibility. She developed an innovative, discreet condom distribution system using Quick Response (QR) codes, enhancing privacy and access for community members. Chloe also partnered with Gaston Emergency Medical Services (GEMS) to introduce critical harm reduction tools, including fentanyl test strips and Narcan kits, addressing urgent public health needs. Beyond her core duties, Chloe engages in community outreach, often working after hours to ensure services meet local needs. Her proactive and compassionate approach exemplifies Gaston County Public Health's mission, making her an invaluable community asset. In 2024, Chloe was honored as one of Gaston County's Employees of the Year. Her colleagues praise her dedication and impact, highlighting her role in advancing public health and safety across the community.



Barbara Austin

School Counselor

Education, Counseling

Barbara Austin has been with Gates County for 9 years.

Barbara Austin has dedicated years to supporting youth, going above and beyond for students, their parents, and staff. She regularly checks on students' health during absences, offers mental health support, coaches various activities, and provides ongoing encouragement. Barbara is a safe and steady presence for middle schoolers amid daily challenges, a fact that does not go unnoticed. Former students continue to praise her unmatched spirit, compassionate heart, and lasting impact. Many express how fortunate the county is to have her. Barbara's unwavering dedication and kindness have made a meaningful difference in the lives of countless young people, staff, and families. We are grateful for the opportunity to recognize her commitment and service.



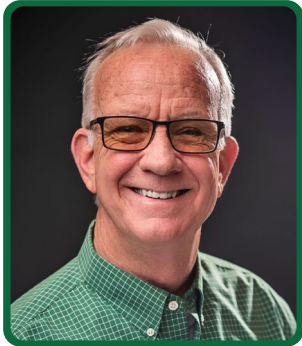
Harold Millsaps

Grounds Supervisor

Grounds

Harold Millsaps has been with Graham County for 6 years.

Since joining Graham County in 2019, Harold Millsaps has been a dedicated and dependable employee. He maintains 19 county-owned properties, including the county airport grounds, four “Welcome to Graham County” signs, a 911/Emergency Medical Services (EMS) transmitter tower, and a helicopter pad in Almond, North Carolina. Harold consistently assists department heads, the county manager, commissioners, and the public, whether on or off duty. He also supported animal control operations while fulfilling his regular duties without hesitation. His role requires travel of up to an hour to maintain county signage and the helicopter pad serving Graham and Swain counties. During COVID-19 shutdowns, Harold volunteered to deliver Meals on Wheels to elderly and homebound residents, always with a positive attitude. Beyond work, Harold is a devoted husband, father, grandfather, and friend. He exemplifies true service and community spirit, making him a proud nominee for Graham County’s Heroic Hands award.



Scott Phillips

Development Services Director

Development Services

Scott Phillips has been with Granville County for 26 years.

Scott Phillips has served Granville County for 26 years, transitioning from the private construction sector after being hired by former County Manager Dudley Watts. He oversees all county buildings, both new and old, and manages the Planning, Zoning, and Inspections departments. Scott played a key role in building the county's first major recreation park, a multi-million-dollar senior center, two new Alcoholic Beverage Control (ABC) stores, a river park, and numerous major building remodels and upgrades. Despite facing a profound personal loss while working for the county, Scott channeled his grief into community support efforts within Granville County. Known for his mentorship, he has guided many both inside and outside the organization. Scott's dedication, leadership, and resilience have made a lasting impact on the county and those around him.



Todd Whaley

Greene County Schools Operations Manager; Town of Snow Hill Fire Chief, Administration/Maintenance

Todd Whaley has been with Greene County for 16 years.

No one better exemplifies the spirit of public service than Todd Whaley. As Greene County Schools Operations Manager and Fire Chief for the Town of Snow Hill, Todd wears multiple hats with unwavering dedication. Whether ensuring safe, efficient school operations or leading emergency response efforts, Todd brings integrity, reliability, and a deep commitment to his community. His leadership in both education and public safety reflects a rare blend of operational excellence and selfless service. This nomination honors Todd's tireless efforts and outstanding contributions to Greene County.



Antoine Ewell

Sheriff's Deputy

Law Enforcement

Deputy Antoine Ewell has been with Guilford County for 3 years.

Since joining the Guilford County Sheriff's Office in June 2022, Deputy A. Ewell has shown unwavering dedication, professionalism, and a commitment to community safety. He approaches each shift with enthusiasm, fostering a positive and collaborative environment. His actions consistently reflect his devotion to District 3 and the department.

On November 27, 2023, while in field training with Deputy Motino, Ewell pursued and apprehended a fleeing suspect. On May 8, 2024, he and Deputy Greco pursued a vehicle involved in multiple collisions; Ewell recognized the driver was in diabetic distress and secured medical assistance. On August 17, 2024, during a vehicle takeover incident, Ewell led a high-risk pursuit after a suspect rammed law enforcement vehicles. Despite being in unfamiliar territory, he remained calm and helped safely apprehend the suspect. Deputy Ewell's actions highlight his poise, courage and ongoing commitment to Guilford County and public service.



Michael Strickland

Operations Director

Operations, Maintenance

Michael Strickland has been with Halifax County for 36 years.

Michael exemplifies dedication and a can-do attitude, always willing to help others and never saying “no” or “it can’t be done.” He approaches every task with professionalism, politeness, and positivity — qualities that make him an outstanding employee and manager. Michael embraces challenges, focusing on solutions rather than problems, and skillfully juggles multiple projects and unexpected emergencies, such as power outages caused by fallen tree limbs. Known for leading by example, Michael never asks employees to do anything he wouldn’t do himself. He treats everyone with respect and courtesy, whether elected officials or fellow employees, maintaining a positive and proactive approach even in difficult situations. His flexibility and initiative shine in how he evaluates projects, carefully balancing outsourcing versus internal handling by analyzing resources, staff time, skills, and costs to achieve the best outcomes. Michael’s commitment and leadership make him an invaluable asset.



LeeAnn Blackmon

Volunteer Services Director/Medicare Coordinator
Public Health

LeeAnn Blackmon has been with Harnett County for 17 years.

LeeAnn has a big heart for serving others, focusing primarily on assisting the aging population. She helps seniors with Medicare enrollment, Meals on Wheels, senior prom events, and providing free over-the-counter medicine. LeeAnn guides seniors to the resources they need, always with a positive attitude and a willingness to help. She manages the Retired and Senior Volunteer Program, or RSVP, which places older adults in volunteer roles throughout the county. The hours these volunteers contribute enhance the experience for citizens using county services. LeeAnn also coordinates the county's blood drive program, supporting life-saving donations. She is the driving force behind many initiatives in the Division of Aging, impacting numerous people each week through her dedication and service.



Zack Koonce

Emergency Management Division Chief

Emergency Management and Emergency Services

Zack Koonce has been with Haywood County for 8 years.

As the District 17 Director for the North Carolina Association of County Commissioners, I proudly nominate Zack Koonce, our Emergency Management Division Chief, as our county's Heroic Hands honoree. Since joining in 2017, Zack has demonstrated exceptional leadership during major events like Tropical Storm Fred in 2021 and Hurricane Helene in 2024. With just eight years in emergency management, his steady presence and strategic response have become vital to our operations, earning respect locally and across the region. Zack's dedication and professionalism have made our emergency management program a model for others. His recognition at the upcoming district meeting is well deserved.



Richard Mann

***Clerk to the Board/Assistant to the County Manager
Administration***

Richard Mann has been with Hyde County for 2 years.

Richard Mann serves as Hyde County's Clerk to the Board and Assistant to the County Manager, while wearing at least 10 other hats. Raised in Fairfield, North Carolina, an unincorporated township on Lake Mattamuskeet, Richard grew up connected to local agriculture and government. After attending Campbell University, he returned home to work with the Fairfield Drainage District, focusing on expanding volunteer capacity and addressing climate change impacts. He has played a key role in the Lake Mattamuskeet Restoration initiative, bridging environmental science and local knowledge to develop innovative infrastructure protecting farming futures. Richard is also involved with the Hyde County School System and the STEM East Initiative, helping create educational and job opportunities to combat rural population loss. Outside work, he supports his family's farming operations and tends to livestock, often starting his day caring for sheep, pigs, and cows. Richard is known as a reliable resource, always ready to find answers for commissioners, staff, and community members.



Kent Greene

Director of Fire Services and Emergency Management
Emergency Management

Kent Greene has been with Iredell County for 9 years.

Kent Greene, a Caldwell County native, brings nearly 40 years of emergency services experience. Before joining Iredell County, he worked as a consultant for Emergency Services Consulting International, served as Paramedic Crew Chief for Mecklenburg Emergency Medical Services Agency, and held leadership roles in Rockingham and Catawba counties. A U.S. Air Force veteran, Greene began his career in 1985 as a volunteer firefighter. He holds a bachelor's degree in biology and chemistry from Lenoir-Rhyne University and a master's degree in public administration in emergency management from Jacksonville State University. Since 2016, Greene has served as director of fire services and emergency management for Iredell County. He coordinates emergency response efforts, manages fire services, and oversees community preparedness. His leadership has been essential to the county's effective emergency management and response.



Jeffrey Gwynn

*Lead Water Technician/Facilities Maintenance Technician
Public Works*

Jeffrey Gwynn has been with Jones County for 4.5 years.

Jeffrey Gwynn exemplifies public service through his dedication to Jones County's Public Works Department. Always willing to go beyond his duties, Jeffrey responds to water emergencies after hours, resolves urgent building issues, and volunteers for community efforts with compassion and reliability. During a devastating hurricane in Western North Carolina, Jeffrey made more than a dozen supply runs, delivering critical goods and hope to affected families. He also organized a holiday toy drive, personally delivering gifts to children impacted by the disaster. Closer to home, Jeffrey has been instrumental in the success of Jones County's Community Closet, which provides free clothing to residents. He secured donation drop-off points, arranged storage, and helped acquire necessary supplies. A problem solver and steady presence, Jeffrey's initiative keeps public works and community programs running smoothly. Jones County proudly recognizes him as a local hero for his tireless, humble leadership.



Luke Hollowell

Tax Division Supervisor

Tax Department

Luke Hollowell has been with Lenoir County for 5 years.

Luke is an active member of the Lenoir County Young Professionals and a dedicated public servant who consistently gives back to his community. For two consecutive years, he has led the Mary's Kitchen Food Drive across multiple county departments, including the Department of Social Services, Tax Department, and Register of Deeds. In addition to organizing the drive, Luke helped launch a countywide kickball tournament with the Young Professionals to raise funds in support of local initiatives. He also donates his time to cook and serve meals to individuals experiencing homelessness at Mary's Kitchen. Luke's community involvement extends further — he volunteered at a Bird Dogs baseball game in partnership with another local organization, demonstrating his willingness to support causes big and small. Whether through service events, food drives, or fundraising efforts, Luke exemplifies what it means to be both a public servant and a community champion.



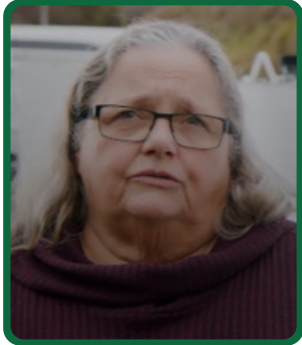
Polly Crunkleton

HR Specialist

Human Resources

Polly Crunkleton has been with Macon County for 9 years.

In October 2024, Polly Crunkleton began helping a county employee file for disability retirement through the Local Government Retirement System after he was diagnosed with a medical condition that left him unable to speak or work. Polly communicated with him via written notes, texts, and emails, becoming his advocate and voice with medical providers, county departments, and the North Carolina Retirement System. While the employee had no income from October to January, she continued supporting him — submitting required documents, organizing a food drive, and sharing resources for assistance. In March 2025, she contacted North Carolina Representative Karl Gillespie’s office, and by April, the employee received his first check with back pay. Polly’s persistence, compassion, and advocacy ensured a positive outcome. Her selfless dedication exemplifies her commitment to the employees and citizens of Macon County and makes her a deserving recipient of the Heroic Hands award.



Kathy West Proffitt

Interim Transportation Director

Public Transportation

Kathy West Proffitt has been with Madison County for 10 years.

Kathy's extraordinary leadership during Hurricane Helene exemplifies courage, compassion, and resilience in the face of crisis. As the storm battered the region, Kathy stepped forward to organize critical wellness checks, coordinate life-saving supply distribution missions, and oversee the safe relocation of hundreds of citizens and stranded motorists to evacuation centers. Her calm under pressure, swift decision-making, and unwavering dedication to community safety made a lasting impact during one of the area's most challenging times. This nomination honors Kathy's selfless service and phenomenal leadership.



William Kehler

Emergency Services Director

Emergency Services

William Kehler has been with McDowell County for 25 years.

William Kehler has served McDowell County in various emergency services roles, becoming Emergency Medical Services Director in 2007 and Emergency Services Director in 2014. He has responded to more than 20 declared disasters at local, state, and national levels, including in Hawaii, Puerto Rico, and New Mexico, in addition to across North Carolina. This experience sharpened his disaster response skills, which proved vital in September 2024 when Tropical Storm Helene struck western North Carolina. Mr. Kehler and his team issued widespread warnings in advance, helping save lives. Since the storm, he has led recovery efforts to ensure survivors receive housing support, essential needs, and debris removal. His proactive leadership and dedication have kept McDowell County on a fast track to recovery, demonstrating his commitment to public safety and service.



Russell “Rusty” Rozzelle

Water Quality Program Manager, Mecklenburg County Storm Water, Storm Water Services & Water Quality

Russell “Rusty” Rozzelle was with Mecklenburg County for 45 years.

Rusty Rozzelle, who passed away earlier this year, dedicated over 45 years to local government as Water Quality Program Manager for Charlotte-Mecklenburg Storm Water Services. He was known for uniting diverse groups to protect surface water resources while supporting Mecklenburg County’s growth. Rusty played a key role in securing North Carolina’s first joint National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) permit and led efforts to develop protective ordinances, including Water Supply Watershed, Surface Water Improvement and Management (SWIM) Buffer, and Post-Construction regulations — helping safeguard streams and the endangered Carolina Heelsplitter. A gifted storyteller, he often connected environmental science with local history, including his family’s operation of Rozzelle’s Ferry on the Catawba River. Rusty’s legacy as an educator, collaborator, and protector of North Carolina’s waters will continue to influence and inspire for generations to come.



Michael Vess

Volunteer Fire Fighter

Fire Fighter

Michael Vess has been with Mitchell County for 21 years.

Mike Vess has served for many years as a volunteer firefighter at Bradshaw Fire Department, where his leadership, courage, and selflessness have left a lasting impact on the community. As fire chief, he took proactive steps to lower the district's fire rating and secured funding for a new station building. When Tropical Storm Helene struck and communications were lost in Mitchell County, roads were washed out and help could not get in — or out. Without waiting for direction, Mike and his son Cody took immediate action, using their own equipment to begin rebuilding critical roads and access routes. Their efforts enabled emergency services to reach those in need and reconnected isolated families. Mike's unwavering determination and service during a time of crisis not only restored vital infrastructure but also renewed hope across the community. He exemplifies how one person can make a profound difference.



Hope Downs

911 Communications Director
Public Safety Communications

Hope Downs has been with New Hanover County for 6 years.

With more than 20 years in public service and serving as 911 director since 2019, Hope Downs brings compassion, clarity, and a transformational vision to one of public safety's most vital roles. Under her leadership, telecommunicators have become more than responders — they are lifelines and critical links to help. In 2023, she launched the 911 CARE (Crisis Assistance, Resilience, and Empowerment) Team to provide mental health support during and after crisis calls, and she expanded bilingual services to ensure every caller receives assistance. In 2024, her team answered 481,000 calls, with 93% answered within 10 seconds, exceeding state and national benchmarks. During Hurricane Helene, her team supported western North Carolina counties, demonstrating exceptional readiness and reach. Hope leads with unwavering dedication and strength, embodying the spirit of Heroic Hands by responding in crisis and helping build a safer, more connected North Carolina for all.



Quintana Stewart

Health Director

Health Department

Quintana Stewart has been with Orange County for 10 years.

Quintana Stewart has served the county with strength and dedication, guiding the community through the COVID-19 pandemic and managing numerous challenges with steady leadership. She has been a strong advocate for law enforcement, offering critical support during times of national unrest that affected local agencies beyond their control. Most recently, she has led the county's opioid advisory team, overseeing the strategic use of settlement funds resulting from the lawsuit filed by North Carolina Attorney General and current Governor Josh Stein. Her leadership in this effort reflects her commitment to addressing the opioid crisis and improving public health. Quintana's unwavering support, resilience, and collaborative spirit make her a deserving candidate for recognition.



Paul Harris

Advanced EMT/Community Paramedic
EMS

Paul Harris has been with Pasquotank County for 5 years.

Advanced Emergency Medical Technician (AEMT) Paul Harris has been with Pasquotank County Emergency Medical Services (EMS) since November 2019, rising from EMT Basic to AEMT through hard work and dedication. Paul began as a street technician, consistently delivering exemplary care and demonstrating an advanced ability to assess patients and act swiftly. His name is frequently mentioned in patient compliments, a testament to both his clinical skill and public outreach. In 2023, Paul joined the Community Paramedicine Division, focusing on follow-up care, education, post-overdose response, fall prevention, and hospital readmission reduction. Despite his new role, he continues to respond daily to 911 calls — both critical and non-emergency — offering help wherever needed. Paul approaches every shift with a positive attitude, motivating his peers through his selfless work ethic. His unwavering commitment to service and excellence makes him a standout in EMS and a deserving recipient of recognition.



Melinda Hudson

Services Program Manager

Department of Social Services

Melinda Hudson has been with Person County for 30 years.

Melinda exemplifies compassionate, dedicated, and humble public service. Over nearly 30 years with the county agency, she has touched countless lives — not only through her official duties but through quiet, meaningful acts of kindness. From sitting with terminal clients so they wouldn't be alone to mentoring new staff and guiding them to find purpose in their work, she leads with heart. Melinda navigates complex state policies with empathy and professionalism, always putting people first. Her unwavering commitment to public education, support for vulnerable individuals, and encouragement of colleagues has made a lasting impact. She is a true local hero in every sense, lifting others through both her actions and example.



Angel Carmon

Vehicle Maintenance/Safety Training Officer
Public Transportation

Angel Carmon has been with Pitt County for 10 years.

Angel chose public transportation because she loves helping people and positively impacting Pitt County. Starting as a driver, she has grown into roles with greater responsibility. Daily, she transports residents to dialysis, medical appointments, jobs, Pitt Community College, and other trips that improve quality of life and meet basic needs. Angel is especially proud of how Pitt Area Transit System (PATS) removes transportation barriers, enabling students to continue their education. She finds joy in serving seniors, providing access to the Council on Aging for services and social connection. Passionate about paratransit — a demand response service for elderly and disabled riders unable to use fixed-route transit — Angel ensures PATS drivers receive mandatory training that meets North Carolina Department of Transportation (NCDOT) standards, promoting safety and customer service. Despite supply chain delays prolonging fleet use and causing maintenance challenges, Angel remains determined to keep vehicles safe and reliable. Proud, devoted, and committed, Angel is a true Hero shaping Pitt County's daily operations.



Bobby Arledge

Emergency Management Director, and Fire Marshal
Emergency Management and Fire

Bobby Arledge has been with Polk County for 12 years.

Bobby, a proud Polk County native and 1993 graduate of Polk County High School, has devoted over 30 years to serving his community through the Columbus Fire Department, which he joined in 1995. Now serving as fire chief, he remains a steadfast, active leader dedicated to protecting others during crises. His unwavering commitment is evident in the most demanding situations, from responding to Hurricane Helene to battling the Black Cove Complex fires. Bobby consistently puts the safety and well-being of others before himself, embodying the true spirit of service and sacrifice. In every challenge, he steps up, lends a hand, and gives his all — earning the trust and respect of the community he has served his entire life.



Jonathan Moody

Animal Services Director

Animal Services

Jonathan Moody has been with Randolph County for 5 years.

Jonathan Moody has led the Randolph County Animal Services Department for five years, playing a vital role in serving the mostly rural community. He consistently goes above and beyond, working extended hours, filling vacancies, and representing the department at statewide conferences. Jonathan helped develop and adopt a strategic plan for the Animal Services Advisory Board and is actively implementing its recommendations. In fall 2024, he and his team spent weeks in western North Carolina assisting agencies with sheltering and accounting for animals displaced by Hurricane Helene. Beyond animal services, Jonathan has contributed to developing athletic programming for Randolph County's Wellness Program. Known as a committed team player, Jonathan's dedication and leadership make him a deserving recipient of the Heroic Hands recognition.



Angela Jones

Chief Human Resources Officer

Human Resources

Angela Jones has been with Robeson County for 10 years.

Angela Jones has dedicated more than 30 years to serving Robeson County residents. She spent 26 years in mental health advocacy, supporting individuals with mental illness and intellectual developmental disabilities, and currently serves as chief human resources officer for Robeson County government. Angela has been instrumental in launching a weight loss incentive program, implementing a diabetes management initiative, and promoting professional development for employees. Her goal is to empower staff to make informed decisions about their health, benefits, and future success while shaping a positive organizational culture. Deeply involved in her community, Angela co-chairs the Health Education Ministry at her church, promoting spiritual, physical, emotional, and mental well-being. As an active member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc., she dedicates herself to serving those in greatest need. Guided by her late mother's motto, "Love one another," Angela's commitment and compassion make her a true local hero.



Sally Rogers

Paramedic

EMS

Sally Rogers has been with Rowan County for 19 years.

Since 2006, Sally Rogers has served Rowan County with unwavering dedication as a skilled paramedic and former community paramedic. During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, she provided critical care to the county's most vulnerable residents. Known for her quiet grit, tireless work ethic, and deep compassion, Sally is the dependable medic you want by your side on your worst day. Her coworkers trust her, and new hires learn true service by watching her lead. After a significant hip surgery, many would have retired, but Sally chose to return to frontline service, embodying her commitment to saving lives. Her heroic hands extend beyond patient care — she's building a lasting legacy through every shift and trainee she mentors. Rowan County is stronger because of Sally Rogers, a truly deserving recipient of this recognition.



Paula Roach

Finance Director

Finance/Budget Director

Paula Roach has been with Rutherford County for 22 years.

Finance Director Paula Roach is a vital asset to Rutherford County and its partner agencies. She holds two master's degrees, including a Master of Business Administration, an undergraduate degree in accounting, and numerous certifications such as Capital Financing in Local Government, North Carolina Finance Officer's Certification, Department of Justice Grants Financial Management Training, and more. Managing a budget exceeding \$80 million, Paula and her team have earned the Certificate of Achievement for Excellence in Financial Reporting for 23 consecutive years. During Hurricane Helene, Paula worked beyond her regular hours, assisting at the Emergency Operations Center Command Center and serving as the county's primary contact for the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). She fostered a strong partnership with the debris removal company, helping ensure all county roads were cleared — a rare achievement. Paula also supports the Tourism Development Authority and maintains active community involvement. Grounded and dedicated, Paula consistently goes above and beyond to serve Rutherford County.



Robert Sampson

Emergency Services Director

Emergency Services

Robert Sampson has been with Scotland County for 10.5 years.

Heart disease and cardiac arrest are leading causes of death in Scotland County. To improve survival rates, Robert Sampson enrolled the county in Duke Medical Center's RACE-CARS trial, led by the Duke Clinical Research Institute. The program focuses on enhancing outcomes for out-of-hospital cardiac arrest victims through health system and community interventions. Partnering with Scotland Health Care System, he and his team trained 250 non-clinical staff in Hands-Only CPR, making Scotland Health Care System the first in North Carolina to train all employees, clinical and non-clinical, in this lifesaving technique. Mr. Sampson also ensured that 225 Scotland County Government employees were trained by May 31, 2025, ahead of schedule. Scotland County was recognized by Duke Medical Center for these efforts at the June 2, 2025, Board of County Commissioners meeting. The county received 16 automated external defibrillators, placed with first responders and in public facilities, improving emergency response and survival rates under Mr. Sampson's leadership.



Dr. Mindy Turner

Lead Pediatric Dentist

Public Health

Dr. Mindy Turner has been with Stanly County for 20 years.

Dr. Mindy Turner exemplifies public service and selflessness through her dedication to pediatric dental care in Stanly County. For more than 20 years, she has consistently prioritized her patients' needs, delivering exceptional dental experiences that improve oral, physical, and mental health, including boosting children's self-esteem. Dr. Turner actively seeks ways to enhance the county's pediatric dental services and extends outreach to local daycares and schools. Her passion for serving children has had a lasting impact, reducing school absenteeism and supporting better educational and financial outcomes over time. Dr. Turner's commitment to the health and well-being of the community's youngest residents makes her a deserving nominee for the North Carolina Association of County Commissioners' Heroic Hands initiative.



Cameron Sexton

Communications Director and Deputy Director of Emergency Management, 911/Emergency Management

Cameron Sexton has been with Transylvania County for 14 years.

Cameron began his career with Transylvania County as a young professional and has continuously grown and refined his skills in service to the community. He has been an integral member of the emergency management team, playing a key role during major incidents such as Tropical Storm Helene and the recent forest fires. Cameron's dedication and expertise have been vital in protecting and supporting the county through these challenging events. His commitment exemplifies the importance of skilled public servants in maintaining the safety and resilience of the community. Without professionals like Cameron, Transylvania County would not be the strong, well-prepared place it is today.



Jared Steele

Park Superintendent

Parks & Recreation

Jared Steele has been with Union County for 20 years.

Jared Steele, a Union County Parks and Recreation employee for over 20 years, exemplifies public service through dedication, collaboration, and commitment to improving the county. He played a key role on the Rural Land Use Plan Committee, helping create a balanced guide for development that supports landowners, farmers, and community services while preserving natural resources. Jared actively supports the Union County Firefighters' Burned Children's Fund, contributing time and effort to fundraising and burn prevention programs. His partnership with Union County Emergency Services strengthens safety and preparedness, including coordinating suspect tracking officer training and underwater drone exercises. Jared also works closely with the North Carolina Forestry Division to implement controlled burns at Cane Creek Park, promoting native plant regrowth and managing invasive species. His broad impact on conservation, public safety, and community well-being makes him a deserving nominee for the Heroic Hands initiative. Union County proudly recognizes his outstanding service.

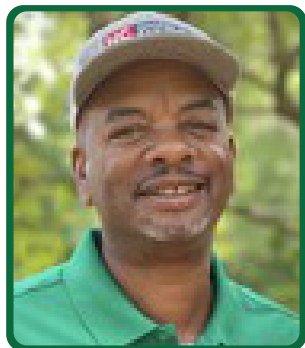


Darrell Alford

Director of Wake County Fire Services and Emergency Management, Emergency Services

Darrell Alford has been with Wake County for 28 years.

Darrell Alford is Wake County's Heroic Hands nominee, recognized for his 39 years of dedicated service in fire services, including 28 years with Wake County. He currently serves as Director of Fire Services and Emergency Management, where he plays a vital role in ensuring the county remains safe, well-resourced, and prepared. A respected leader, Alford has been instrumental in the strategic placement of fire and emergency medical services (EMS) stations in high-priority growth areas, helping build a stronger, safer community. After thoughtful consideration and input from colleagues, it was clear he embodies the qualities worthy of this honor. His leadership, commitment, and deep respect from peers make him an outstanding choice.



R. Reggie Stevenson

Extension Technician, Agriculture

NC Cooperative Extension, Warren County (Small Farmers)

R. Reggie Stevenson has been with Warren County for 3 years.

Reggie Stevenson, a part-time Warren County employee, is passionate about local agriculture and community service. Beginning his agriculture career with Warren County Government in the 1990s, he later worked for the North Carolina Forestry Service until retiring in 2019. Returning in 2022 as a temporary Small Farms Technician, Reggie became Warren County's first county-funded permanent part-time Small Farms Technician. Despite working just 25 hours a week, he is always available to support farmers. He has helped two small farmers earn Small Farmer of the Year awards in 2023 and 2024. Reggie teaches best management practices and trains farmers on county-owned equipment like the BCS tractor, saving resources. Recently, he co-facilitated the Small Farmers Kick-off event, drawing over 100 attendees. Known as a connector of food, people, and resources, Reggie volunteers with Loaves and Fishes, Inez Fire Department, and assists farmers in accessing support. He is truly deserving of the Heroic Hands recognition.



Jennifer O'Neal

EMS Director

EMS

Jennifer O'Neal has been with Washington County for 20 years.

Jennifer O'Neal, EMS director for the Washington-Tyrrell Emergency Medical Services system, brings a unique perspective shaped by her background as a former law enforcement officer, medical examiner, and paramedic. She leads one of North Carolina's most exceptional rural EMS systems, serving both Washington and Tyrrell counties through a collaborative contract. Jennifer fosters unity by branding the system to reflect mutual respect and inclusion, while also overseeing critical non-emergency medical transport services. Her leadership is marked by fierce dedication to patient care and first responder well-being. She has enrolled the system in grant-funded early intervention programs and champions mental health resources, including employee assistance, counseling, and suicide prevention. Despite a heavy administrative load, Jennifer often fills vacant shifts, ensuring uninterrupted coverage. Her compassionate, resilient, and selfless leadership holds rural EMS together, making her more than deserving of the Heroic Hands Award.



Joel Gillie

Director of Public Affairs

Public Affairs/Communication

Joel Gillie has been with Wayne County for 6 years.

When Joel Gillie joined Wayne County, his media expertise — especially in radio — proved invaluable. He spearheaded rebranding efforts, rebuilt a more efficient and professional website, and forged strong relationships with department managers and local and regional media. Joel handles difficult public events, including hurricanes, shootings, and investigations, with utmost professionalism. He also brings community spirit through cooking shows featuring the Cooperative Extension Department and popular annual holiday events. Responsible for meeting recordings, community events like the Christmas parade, and numerous daily tasks, Joel has saved the county money by managing many services in-house that were once outsourced. When western North Carolina faced devastation, Joel volunteered for a week to assist with communications and organization. Beyond his county role, he serves as a volunteer fireman and supports groups like Ducks Unlimited. With only one other employee, Joel's dedication and teamwork make him a standout Heroic Hands nominee and a true asset to Wayne County.



Hal Wilson

Program Administrator, Wilkes County Department of Social Services, Social Services

Hal Wilson has been with Wilkes County for 30.7 years.

Hal has dedicated over 30 years to Wilkes County Department of Social Services, working in both Child Protective Services and Adult Protective Services. A caring and compassionate professional, he has helped countless children and families, taking pride in their successes. Hal was also the primary caretaker for his parents and grandparents, showing his commitment to family. Known for his warm smile and sense of humor, he makes people feel welcomed and valued. In 2009, at the request of DSS administration, Hal created a foster care caseload and financial database that remains in use 16 years later, tracking assignments, court plans, hearings, and payments. A proud father of a son serving in the United States Marine Corps, Hal often receives gratitude from former clients now adults, a reward he cherishes deeply. Hal's career includes roles from social worker to program administrator, reflecting his ongoing dedication to his community and colleagues.



Jeff Hill

Executive Director, Wilson County Substance Prevention Coalition, Mental Health

Jeff Hill has been with Wilson County for 6 years.

Jeff Hill is the executive director of the Wilson County Substance Prevention Coalition, established in April 2007 to reduce substance misuse by addressing community risk factors. Under Jeff’s leadership, the coalition has strengthened access to comprehensive substance use prevention, treatment, recovery, and harm reduction resources for all Wilson County residents, provided without judgment. The coalition offers youth mental health first aid training and fosters innovative partnerships within public and private schools. Jeff unites community partners — including the county manager’s office, healthcare professionals, social workers, and advocates — to support prevention and recovery efforts. He oversees multiple grants supplying medication lock boxes, disposal kits, naloxone kits, and education. Wilson County was an early leader in these initiatives. Jeff also manages the county’s Opioid Settlement Plan, one of the first in the state to allocate funds swiftly. Known for meeting people “where they are,” Jeff’s leadership brings help, hope, and lasting impact, saving and changing lives across the county.



Cari Harold

EMS Training Officer
Emergency Services

Cari Harold has been with Yadkin County for 11 years.

Cari Harold has served Yadkin County Emergency Services for 11 years, advancing from paramedic to lieutenant, captain, and now training officer. In this critical role, she oversees continuing education and record-keeping for over 200 pre-hospital responders, including paid and volunteer EMS, fire, rescue, and some law enforcement personnel. Cari collaborates with the medical director to evaluate new medications and procedures for pre-hospital use, ensuring they meet community medical needs. She trains staff and conducts regular competency testing to maintain high standards of patient care. Driven by a passion to serve, Cari has enhanced the department's training programs and strengthened recruitment efforts, promoting the EMS profession and filling vacancies. She also engages the community through special events, providing CPR and life-saving technique education. Additionally, Cari assists Surry Community College instructors with volunteer skills assessments across the county. Though she has risen to management, her dedication to direct patient care remains at her core.

Acknowledgments

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to the counties across North Carolina for their vital role in the Heroic Hands: Celebrating Public Service presidential initiative. Your dedication to recognizing the everyday heroes in your communities has been essential to bringing these inspiring stories to life. By nominating individuals who exemplify commitment, resilience, and genuine care, you have helped shine a light on the quiet acts of service that strengthen our counties.

This initiative would not have been possible without your continued support throughout this presidential year. We are truly honored to serve and partner with North Carolina's 100 counties in celebrating those who go above and beyond not for recognition but because of their genuine devotion to the people they serve.

Thank you for trusting us to help share these meaningful stories of public service from across our great state.

To the local heroes highlighted in these pages: thank you. Your service uplifts your communities in ways that often go unseen but are deeply valued. Your dedication, compassion, and steady leadership embody the very best of public service, and we are proud to share your stories.

— *North Carolina Association of County Commissioners*





Heroic Hands: Celebrating Public Service

Thank you for all you do for our counties!



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