

Our Mission: We strive to provide exceptional services that enhance quality of life and promote a safe, healthy, and welcoming community for all.

Date: April 15, 2025
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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

The following actions were taken at the April 15, 2025, Washington County Board of Commissioners meeting at the Government Center in Stillwater, Minnesota.

County Board recognizes exemplary performance by county staff

The Washington County Board of Commissioners recognized county staff April 15 for exemplary performance with the county's annual Employee Recognition Awards.

The awards recognize employees in the categories of customer service; diversity, equity, and inclusion; employee engagement; innovation; teamwork; and excellence in county government. Employees are nominated by their peers, and nominations are reviewed by an employee review committee. Final recipients are approved by the County Board's Personnel Committee.

The employees recognized and their category of recognition are:

Customer Service Award – Muna Abdi, Community Health Worker, and Thallassa Gunelius, Senior Veterans Service Officer, Community Services Department

As a Community Health Worker, Muna Abdi has exemplified outstanding customer service through her work, especially for the East African community.

Abdi is bilingual and uses her customer service skills and cultural understanding of the East African community to educate Washington County staff and community partners. She has created community events that brought mental health awareness to refugee and immigrant groups, as well as those who have trauma from losing loved ones.

Abdi worked closely with Public Health staff and local food shelves to provide halal food options for Muslim community members facing food insecurity. She demonstrated impactful work with the first

Ramadan Food distribution. Through her work with PHE and food shelves, 9,000 pounds of halal food has been distributed to 475 households in Washington County.

Muna shares her knowledge and experience with others and is always ready to help her colleagues. She is passionate about helping people, always putting the customer first.

Thalassa Gunelius works as a Senior Veterans Service Officer. She served for 20 years in the United States Air Force, then transitioned to a career focused on serving the veteran population. Gunelius is a subject matter expert when it comes to veteran benefits.

Gunelius was a part of the five-person team that managed approximately 9,100 phone calls, conducted 1,000 visits, and submitted 865 federal and state claims, helping veterans and dependents receive over \$78 million in federal benefits in 2024.

She always accepts walk-ins between her scheduled appointments and phone calls. Gunelius' wealth of knowledge is used to train new employees and provide continuing education for current team members. She provides direction on difficult case scenarios and offers techniques for effective claim submissions, ensuring quality customer service is standard across the team.

Gunelius is dedicated to her work and goes above and beyond to assist Veterans and their families.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Award – George Stone, Division Manager, Community Services Department

As the Community Services Division Manager, George Stone has encouraged a workplace culture of respect and belonging. He has led diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts both formally and informally and is known for making employees and community members feel safe, heard, and valued.

Stone was integral during the Medicaid Renewal effort after the COVID-19 pandemic. He assessed barriers that marginalized groups faced when accessing county services. He worked with staff to facilitate listening sessions that engaged directly with these communities to ensure their needs and concerns were addressed. These sessions created an atmosphere of trust and authenticity that helped community members feel valued and respected.

Stone's leadership directly influenced policy changes that promote equity in hiring, promotion, and service delivery. He supports trainings and programs focused on unconscious bias, cultural competence, and inclusive leadership, and he serves on the county's DEI Steering Team.

In addition to his advocacy, Stone's informal mentorship has played a crucial role in shaping inclusive workplace culture. By sharing his experiences and demonstrating vulnerability, he helps foster a work environment that reflects the county's commitment to equity and belonging. Stone's ability to navigate difficult conversations with patience and sincerity has made a lasting impact on the county.

Employee Engagement Award – Yabi Ortega, Public Service Principal Specialist, Property Records and Taxpayer Services Department

Yabi Ortega, a Public Services Principal Specialist, is committed to engaging with her colleagues and is known for being supportive and a strong communicator.

Ortega takes charge in the Lead Worker group, where she is collaborating with members to create an onboarding plan in Property Records and Taxpayer Services to increase employee engagement.

Voluntary virtual meetings called Information Exchanges are a part of this plan. These meetings have shown considerable attendance — at times more than half of the department has participated — and is having an impact in employee engagement within the department.

Ortega is also developing a countywide training course for the License and Service Center division. This course will streamline the onboarding process for new employees and for current employees to refresh their skills.

Ortega's dedication to Washington County is unmatched. She is passionate about her team, division, department, and organization.

Innovation Award – Sean Young-Stephens, Public Health Program Coordinator, and Rolando Vera, Jr., Senior Public Health Program Manager of Nursing Services, Public Health and Environment Department

Sean Young-Stephens and Rolando Vera, Jr. oversee the county's opioid settlement fund program and distribution.

Young-Stephens and Vera launched a community input survey in 2023 to learn about the needs of those impacted by opioid use. The survey provided insight on how to strategically engage with communities impacted by opioids.

Based on survey results, Young-Stephens and Vera formalized a plan to establish a board-appointed settlement council representing the community. In March 2024, the Washington County Board of Commissioners approved the initial 15-member Opioid Settlement Council. The council included community members, professionals, and individuals with lived experiences related to opioid use, and there was representation from each commissioner district.

The Opioid Settlement Council awards grants to organizations and projects that are addressing the opioid crisis head-on in the county. Young-Stephens and Vera worked with the council to establish funding priorities and develop a simplified project proposal process. This process increased accessibility to the community and allowed each applicant the opportunity to present their proposal and answer questions.

Throughout the development and implementation of the Opioid Settlement Council, Young-Stephens and Vera focused on the needs of communities impacted by opioids. Their commitment to quality, innovation, and successful implementation make them worthy of the Innovation Award.

Teamwork Award – Jail Medical Team: Correctional Health Nurse Supervisor Lindsay Mielzarek, Health Medical Unit Assistant RaeAnn Lindeberg, Correctional Health Nurse Rose Smith, Correctional Health Nurse Lindsey Pennel, Senior Correctional Health Nurse Patti Vodinelich, and Correctional Health Nurse Rebecca Smolka from Public Health and Environment; and Commander Roger Heinen, Lt. Jacqueline Dahms, and Lt. Nicholas Klinkner from the Sheriff's Office

The recipient of this year's Teamwork Award is the Jail Medical Team that made Medication for Opioid Use Disorder (MOUD) more accessible, efficient, and cost-effective.

Previously, MOUD services were time-consuming and resource-intensive. It would take an average of 90 minutes to administer vital medication, which frustrated staff and patients who depend on timely and effective treatment. Additionally, funding changes meant that unless services became more cost-efficient, residents risked not receiving care.

After identifying these issues, the Jail Medical team brought together a group of collaborators including jail custody partners, jail medical leadership, medical providers, and experts from Ramsey and Hennepin counties.

Through a series of brainstorming sessions, a streamlined medication administration plan was developed. The new administration process was cut down to 20-30 minutes. They changed the formulation of the medication, which reduced expenses by 170%, making it more cost-efficient with no reported reduction in therapeutic effects. An unexpected benefit of the new process was reducing opportunities for medication diversion, which improved residents' safety.

The faster service, safer outcomes, and lower costs demonstrate a quality product developed by this amazing team.

Excellence in County Government Award – Natalie Anderson, Senior Legal Assistant, County Attorney's Office

Over just a few years at the county, Natalie Anderson has established herself as a go-to person for her colleagues and others in the Criminal Division. Anderson embraces Washington County's mission every day and exemplifies organizational excellence — a pillar of the county's strategic priorities. She makes her colleagues' jobs easier and is critical to the success of the Attorney's Office.

Most recently, Anderson has played a crucial role in a high-profile criminal trial. There was a high volume of complex evidence for this case. Anderson invested countless hours in cataloging, organizing, and managing evidence for ease of access. This work also helped county attorneys point to aspects of the case that needed further investigation by law enforcement.

During this case, Anderson created a detailed spreadsheet that summarized the involvement of the numerous people named in the police reports — a task she did without asking — proving to be a

valuable resource for the attorneys. She transcribed many audio and video files, a daunting assignment that is particularly difficult when the contents involve difficult and traumatic events.

Anderson went above and beyond to ensure that the attorneys were best equipped and supported. Her attention to detail and exceptional work ethic helped deliver outstanding services to the people of Washington County and those needing justice.

Anderson's work has been recognized and appreciated not only by those she works with at the county, but other law enforcement and public safety agencies.

Anderson joins a list of remarkable county employees who have earned this honor over the past 11 years. All of them have helped the county fulfill its mission of providing exceptional service that promotes a safe, healthy, and welcoming community. Anderson shares our core values of serving with dignity and integrity, acting ethically, and being responsive to the needs of others within the county and our external stakeholders.

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County expands Workforce Development Board

The Washington County Board of Commissioners approved the expansion of the Workforce Development Board to up to 20 members April 15.

The Workforce Development Board is responsible for strengthening the workforce development system through innovation, alignment, and improvement of employment; training and education programs; and promoting individual economic growth in the local and regional area. As Washington County continues to grow, it remains critical that the Workforce Development Board follow suit. Following the county board action, the Workforce Development Board can now have 19 to 20 members.

The board's composition is made up of representatives from the local business community, organized labor, adult basic education, higher education, and other agencies dedicated to fostering economic development, job services, and vocational rehabilitation.

Contact: Rick Roy, Community Services Workforce and Veteran Services Division Manager, 651-275-8660

County receives habitat restoration grants for parks

The Washington County Board of Commissioners approved two Conservation Partners Legacy Grant agreements April 15 for prairie enhancement in Lake Elmo Park Reserve and woodland restoration in Big Marine Park Reserve.

The grants are part of the Outdoor Heritage Fund, one of four funds established by the Clean Water, Land and Legacy Amendment.

The \$250,000 grant for Big Marine Park Reserve will go to restoring 50 acres of woodland habitat. The restoration is taking place in a mixture of oak woodland, mesic hardwoods, and a wetland complex between the main park road and County Road 4 (170th St.) where invasive shrubs, such as common and glossy buckthorn, are invading the plant community. The grant would help pay for contracted services to cut and treat common buckthorn, thinning undesirable trees, follow-up treatment of common buckthorn re-sprouts, and supplies for native seeds and plants.

The \$165,000 grant for Lake Elmo Park Reserve will go to restoring 35 acres of prairie habitat. The project location is on the north end of the park in a field dominated by smooth brome, which provides minimal plant and wildlife diversity. The goal of the project is to increase plant diversity by setting back smooth brome and reseeding and planting native species. The grant will help pay for contracted services including prescribed burning and grazing, seeding, and planting.

A 10% in-kind match is required for both grants and will be provided by staff time to plan and implement the project.

Contact: Dan MacSwain, Parks Natural Resources Coordinator II, 651-430-4323

County, Stillwater Public Schools enter cost share agreement for intersection improvements

Washington County and the Stillwater Public School District (ISD 834) entered a cost-share agreement on April 15 for intersection improvements near the site of the new Lake Elmo Elementary School.

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ISD 834 is relocating Lake Elmo Elementary School from its current location to the northwest corner of the intersection of County State Aid Highway (CSAH) 10 and CSAH 17/County Road (CR) 17B in the City of Lake Elmo. With this school development, improvements are necessary along the highway to support future traffic increases generated by the new school. These improvements were identified in a traffic study ISD 834 assembled. Through the development process, ISD 834 agreed to install a permanent signal at the new school entrance along CSAH 10 and a temporary signal at the intersection of CSAH 10 and CSAH 17/CR17B. Both signal systems will be in operation when the school opens to manage traffic.

Washington County will design, provide materials and equipment, and inspect the construction of both of these traffic signals. Through the development process, ISD 834 agreed to reimburse Washington County for signal design, county-furnished materials, and construction inspection for signal-related items. ISD 834 will use its own contractor to construct and install the permanent and temporary signal systems in conjunction with its roadway improvements, including the addition of new turn lanes and a pedestrian trail.

Contact: Ryan Hoefs, Public Works Engineer II, 651-430-4336

County acquires right-of-way for Bailey Rd. and Settler's Ridge Parkway improvements

The Washington County Board of Commissioners approved the acquisition of right-of-way and associated easements April 15 for an improvement project to the intersection of County State Aid Highway (CSAH) 18 (Bailey Road) and Settlers Ridge Parkway in Woodbury.

The project is included in the county's Capital Improvement Plan and construction is planned for 2026.

Contact: Andrew Giesen, Public Works Engineer III, 651-430-4336

April 21-25 is Work Zone Awareness Week in Washington County

April 21-25, 2025, is Work Zone Awareness Week in Washington County.

National Work Zone Awareness Week (NWZAW) is an annual spring campaign at the start of the construction season to encourage drivers to use extra caution in work zones. The Washington County Board of Commissioners recognized the week at its April 15 meeting.

NWZAW takes place across the United States, with partnerships between state departments of transportation, national road safety organizations, government agencies, private companies, and individuals.

NWZAW is a time to show support for the roadway safety industry, especially to the families of victims who have lost their lives in work zones. On Go Orange Day, Wednesday, April 23, roadway safety professionals across the country are encouraged to wear orange to show their support for work zone safety.

Safe work zones are not only the responsibility of those working within them but also the thousands of drivers who travel through these areas daily.

Washington County recognizes the importance of Work Zone Safety and leads by example in working with stakeholders across the county to educate and strive for the safest work zones possible for staff and the driving public.

Washington County actively participates in the Minnesota Toward Zero Deaths coalition, which aims to reduce traffic crashes, injuries, and deaths on Minnesota roads. The county conducts public outreach at events, such as the Washington County Fair and the Stillwater Fire Department open house, and uses a device called a seat belt convincer that simulates a 5 MPH crash to demonstrate the importance of seatbelt safety. Additionally, the county participates in quarterly Minnesota Toward Zero Death meetings with key players in the traffic safety arena for Washington County.

Contact: Tim Parkos, Public Works Senior Engineer Technician, 651-430-4344

Stonebrooke Engineering to do design on multiple trail projects

The Washington County Board of Commissioners approved a \$474,875 contract with Stonebrooke Engineering to complete preliminary and final design on several trail projects April 15.

The county has identified the following trail projects in its Capital Improvement Plan and are all scheduled for construction in 2026; however, study results, local funding, and local construction projects may extend this timeline:

- County State Aid Highway (CSAH) 13 (50th St. N.) from Helmo Ave. to CSAH 13 (Olson Lake Trail).
- CSAH 13 (Radio Dr.) from CSAH 16 (Valley Creek Rd.) to CSAH 10 (10th St. N.).

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- CSAH 14 (34th St. N.) from Granada Ave. to Hadley Ave.
- CSAH 18 (Bailey Road) from La Lake Park to Woodlane Dr.

The work to be done on these projects includes new trail construction and trail connectivity, trail rehabilitation, traffic signal system evaluation, and evaluation of ADA compliance.

The county released a request for proposals and received eight proposals from qualified design services. The scope of work includes project coordination of preliminary and final design of trail construction and rehabilitation, evaluation of ADA compliance, public engagement, utility coordination, geotechnical services, topographic surveying, wetland delineation, drainage analysis and design, permitting approvals, traffic signal system evaluation, and identification of the right-of-way necessary to deliver these projects. The county selected Stonebrooke Engineering as the most qualified consultant.

Contact: Becky Hayden, Public Works Project Manager, 651-430-4352

TKDA to do preliminary design on Ideal Ave. improvement project

The Washington County Board of Commissioners approved a \$554,300 contract with TKDA to provide preliminary design services on the County State Aid Highway (CSAH) 13 (Ideal Ave.) improvement project April 15.

The CSAH 13 improvement project extends from CSAH 6 (Stillwater Blvd.) to CSAH 14 (34th St.), located within the Cities of Lake Elmo and Oakdale.

The county released a request for proposals in Dec. 2024 to provide project coordination, preliminary engineering, and stakeholder and public engagement services. It received four proposals from qualified firms and selected TKDA as its preferred consultant.

Contact: Andrew Giesen, Public Works Engineer III, 651-430-4336

County acquires property for central yard waste site and Sheriff's Office operations

The Washington County Board of Commissioners approved the acquisition of 14386 Hudson Rd. S. in Afton April 15 for a central yard waste site and Sheriff's Office operations.

In 2016, the County Board provided direction to include yard waste collection into the solid waste management plan. It was determined to create three sites, one in the north, south, and central. The acquisition of the 37-acre Afton property, located just east of Manning Ave. and west of County State Aid Highway 21 in the City of Afton, would be for the central yard waste site. This property was listed on the open market for sale and Washington County inquired about the property for potential purchase.

The purchase price for the property is \$4.5 million and will be funded through and will be funded by County Environmental Charge and Capital Re-Direct funds.

Contact: Greg Wood, Public Works Building Services Director, 651-430-6225