

THE ADMINISTRATOR

CREDENTIALIALED MANAGERS GATHER

ICMA Summit in Durham combined professional reflection, enduring management principles and a candid focus on well-being.

ICMA Credentialed Managers from North Carolina and beyond gathered in Durham on August 6 for a day devoted to professional growth, peer learning, and the continuing responsibilities of local government leadership.

Held at the PNC Triangle Club at Durham Bulls Athletic Park, the Credentialed Manager Summit was one of only two such gatherings scheduled nationally in 2026. Durham hosted the first, with a second summit planned for Palo Alto, California, later in August. Bringing the event to North Carolina gave credentialed professionals in the state a valuable opportunity to participate in focused national programming close to home.

Credentialing as a continuing journey

The ICMA Credentialed Manager designation recognizes significant professional experience, a commitment to the ICMA Code of Ethics, and an ongoing investment in professional development. The Durham summit reinforced an important point: earning the credential is not the completion of a leadership journey. It is a commitment to keep learning as the work changes.

The program opened with updates from the ICMA Credentialing Advisory Board and a discussion of individual learning journeys. That emphasis invited participants to consider how professional development should evolve alongside



their organizations, governing boards, and communities. Effective managers do not simply accumulate training hours; they connect learning to the decisions, relationships, and challenges that define their daily work.

The continuing relevance of the Cookingham Guideposts

A central portion of the summit examined the Cookingham Guideposts, the collection of management observations associated with longtime Kansas City Manager L. P. Cookingham. Although the guideposts emerged from an earlier era of the profession, their central themes remain recognizable: integrity, preparation, sound judgment, clear relationships with elected officials, development of employees, and devotion to community service.

Revisiting those principles in 2026 offered more than a history lesson. Managers now face artificial intelligence, cybersecurity threats, workforce shortages, intense public scrutiny, social-media pressure, and rapidly changing



community expectations. The tools may be different, but professional credibility still depends upon consistent conduct, competence, communication, and trust.

Steady under pressure

The afternoon program addressed emotional and psychological well-being. That subject has become increasingly important as managers and their employees navigate conflict, emergencies, vacancies, difficult public interactions, and the expectation of constant availability.

Resilience is sometimes misunderstood as the ability to absorb unlimited pressure without visible effect. In practice, sustainable leadership requires self-awareness, healthy support systems, boundaries, and the willingness to seek help. Creating space for that conversation among experienced managers reinforced that well-being is not separate from professional effectiveness. Leaders who care for their own health are better positioned to make sound decisions and support their organizations.

The summit concluded with group reflection, and participants also had the opportunity to tour Durham Bulls Athletic Park and learn about the redevelopment of the surrounding American

Tobacco Campus. The setting offered an appropriate reminder that successful community transformation depends upon patient leadership, public-private collaboration, and a long view.

Credentialed Managers could earn five hours toward their annual professional-development commitment through the summit. The greater value, however, came from the opportunity to pause, learn with peers, revisit the principles of the profession, and return to their communities with renewed perspective.

NCCCMMA was proud to welcome ICMA and Credentialed Managers to Durham. Hosting one of the nation's two summits reflects North Carolina's strong commitment to professional management and provides another example of what can be accomplished through the partnership between state and national professional associations.

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FROM CRISIS RESPONSE TO EARLIER, LOCAL CARE

New NCACC research shows options for improving rural health care costs.

Two difficult challenges frequently arrive in different sections of a county budget: limited access to health care in rural communities and the rising, unpredictable cost of providing medical care in county jails. New research from the North Carolina Association of County Commissioners (NCACC) shows why those challenges are connected - and highlights approaches communities are using to address them.

In August, NCACC released *Best and Promising Practices for Improving Rural Health Access and Lowering Health Care Costs in County Jails*. Prepared by Carolina Demography at UNC-Chapel Hill, it is the final paper in NCACC President Wallace Nelson's NC Counties Care: Access Within Reach initiative. It presents options rather than prescriptions and distinguishes documented results from programs still early in implementation.

Keeping care closer to home

Housing instability, food insecurity, and lack of transportation can cause people to miss routine care and eventually require more expensive emergency treatment.

North Carolina's Healthy Opportunities Pilots use Medicaid funding to address certain housing, food, transportation, and interpersonal-safety needs. An evaluation of approximately 31,600 participants found that Medicaid spending was about \$164 per member per month lower than it otherwise would have been, along with fewer emergency department visits. The report identifies this as one of the practices with firmer documented evidence.

Other approaches require continued evaluation. North Carolina is developing six locally governed NC ROOTS hubs through the state's Rural Health Transformation Program to coordinate primary care, behavioral health, and nonmedical supports, but the program remains in its early stages.

For county managers, the practical lesson is that health access is not only a hospital issue. Transportation, social services, public health, emergency medical services, economic development, broadband, and community partnerships all influence whether residents can receive care before a problem becomes a crisis.

Why community access affects county jails

When primary, behavioral-health, or substance-use services are difficult to obtain, some unmet need shifts into law enforcement, emergency departments, and county detention facilities. Jails can become a default site of care for people whose conditions were not adequately addressed in the community.

Counties are legally responsible for health care provided to people in their custody, and federal Medicaid generally cannot pay for care while a person is incarcerated. A relatively small group of individuals with overlapping physical, mental-health, and substance-use needs can account for a disproportionate share of medical encounters and off-site costs.

The NCACC report identifies several practices that counties are using to improve care and manage those costs:

Behavioral-health support at intake

- Placing clinicians in detention facilities allows needs to be identified earlier and treatment to resume more quickly. North Carolina's Restoring Individuals Safely and Effectively program provides capacity-restoration services inside detention centers. Early state data cited in the report indicate an average restoration time of about 48 days in the detention-based program, compared with more than 180 days for similar services in a state psychiatric hospital, with roughly 80 percent of participants restored within the facility.

Treatment for opioid use disorder

- Medication paired with counseling can treat withdrawal, support recovery, and reduce the particularly high risk of overdose following release. Buncombe County is among the North Carolina examples highlighted for beginning treatment in custody and connecting participants with peer support.

Telehealth and specialty care

- Secure telehealth can reduce the staffing, transportation, and security costs associated with off-site appointments. Rowan County uses telehealth for certain chronic and infectious diseases, and psychiatric telehealth is already used broadly in North Carolina detention settings.

Continuity during reentry

- Several counties provide a short-term medication supply or scheduled follow-up before release. Others distribute naloxone and provide overdose-recognition training. These practices seek to prevent a treatment gap that can lead to medical crisis, emergency care, or a return to custody.

Contracting and bill review

- The report notes that routing eligible off-site invoices through the North Carolina Sheriffs' Association Inmate Medical Costs Management Plan has produced an average reduction of approximately 48 percent on external medical claims. Contract terms that share risk, define pharmacy costs, and provide meaningful invoice review can also improve predictability.

The manager's role: convene, measure, and connect

No single county controls every part of the health-care system. Many of the practices depend upon hospitals, health departments, sheriffs, state agencies, providers, nonprofits, and federal policy. County managers are nevertheless well positioned

to connect those partners and ensure that decisions are informed by both outcomes and total cost.

Managers can begin by examining where costs and needs appear across departmental boundaries. Are repeated emergency transports connected to gaps in behavioral-health access? Do jail medical contracts clearly allocate financial risk? Are reentry plans coordinated with public health and community providers? Can telehealth infrastructure serve both detention and rural access needs? Are programs measuring whether they reduce off-site care, emergency use, or treatment interruption? The research does not offer a universal solution, and it cautions that evidence varies. Its most useful contribution may be the shift in perspective: from reacting to expensive crises toward meeting needs earlier, closer to home, and more predictably.

That shift can improve lives while helping counties fulfill one of their most difficult responsibilities - providing necessary care and remaining careful stewards of public resources.

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CONNET ACCEPTS STATEWIDE ROLE

Longtime manager to join NCLM in September.

After more than 13 years of service to Hendersonville, City Manager John Connet will join the NC League of Municipalities in late September as its new Director of City Relations.

In this role, he will use more than three decades of local government experience to support over 500 municipalities across North Carolina and help communities continue serving their residents effectively.

“John’s municipal experience and professionalism are unmatched,” said Rose Vaughn Williams, NCLM Executive Director. “The League has valued his contributions over the years while serving on our board of directors and risk management services board of trustees, and we’re excited to see the positive impact he’ll make working directly with municipal members.”

Connet has served as Hendersonville’s City Manager since May 2013. Before coming to Hendersonville, he was City Manager of Clinton, NC for eleven years, Town Manager of Winterville, NC for three years, and worked for the City of Hickory for seven years as Risk Manager and Planner.

He is a credentialed member of the International City/County Management Association and a member and the past president of the North Carolina City and County Management Association. He has served on the North Carolina League of Municipalities Board of Directors, the Western Carolina University Alumni Association Board of Directors, and is an adjunct professor in WCU’s Master of Public Affairs program. Connet earned his bachelor’s degree from Western Carolina University and a Master of Public Administration from Appalachian State University.



“I know I am leaving Hendersonville in very professional and capable hands,” said Connet. “Since my arrival as manager in 2013, we have worked to build a team of capable, motivated, and talented professionals who truly care about our community.”

The Hendersonville City Council is working with Connet to determine a timeline and transition to the city’s next manager.

“While this news is bittersweet, I have full confidence that our organization will transition successfully into its next leadership chapter,” said Mayor Barbara Volk. “Over the next few weeks, we will make additional announcements and celebrate John’s contributions to our city.”

CYBERSECURITY IS AN EXECUTIVE RESPONSIBILITY

A cyberattack does not remain an information-technology problem for long.

When a network goes down, employees may lose access to email, financial systems, permitting records, public-safety information, utility controls, payroll, or resident data. Services slow or stop. Vendors, insurers, elected officials, employees, residents, law enforcement, and the media all need information. Decisions must be made about continuity, recovery, legal obligations, and public communication.

Those are management responsibilities.

On August 11, the National League of Cities and CyberAlliance announced the National Municipal Cyber Resilience Initiative, a program intended to provide municipalities with educational workshops, executive briefings, benchmarking, governance resources, and decision support. The announcement reflects a reality familiar to many North Carolina communities: cyber threats are increasing while many local governments lack dedicated cybersecurity staff.

Artificial intelligence, cloud services, online payments, remote access, smart infrastructure, and digital resident services create efficiency and convenience. They also expand the number of systems, vendors, accounts, and decisions that must be secured.

The manager does not have to be the technical expert

Professional managers are not expected to configure firewalls or investigate malicious code. They are expected to make sure the organization has qualified technical support, clear authority, appropriate resources, sound policies, tested plans, and honest information about risk.

Cybersecurity should therefore be governed like financial risk, emergency preparedness, workplace safety, or legal compliance. The manager establishes

expectations, assigns responsibility, asks questions, resolves conflicts between priorities, and ensures that the governing board understands significant operational exposure.

Seven questions every leadership team should be able to answer

- What systems and data are essential to delivering our most critical services, and who owns each one?
- Do all high-risk accounts - particularly email, remote access, administrator, finance, and vendor accounts - use strong multifactor authentication?
- Are critical data and system configurations backed up, protected from the production network, and tested to confirm that they can actually be restored?
- Who has authority to disconnect a system, contact law enforcement, engage cyber insurance, hire incident-response support, and communicate publicly during an attack?
- When did we last exercise the cyber incident-response plan with leadership, information technology, public safety, finance, legal counsel, communications, and key vendors in the room?
- What access do vendors have to our systems, and how quickly can that access be disabled when a contract ends or a vendor account is compromised?
- What cyber risk has been accepted because of cost or capacity, who made that decision, and

has the governing board been appropriately informed?

Start with the fundamentals:

The Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency's Cybersecurity Performance Goals emphasize a core set of practices that can reduce risk across organizations. Those fundamentals include maintaining an accurate understanding of assets, using multifactor authentication, managing passwords and privileged access, installing security updates, protecting backups, and maintaining and exercising an incident-response plan.

None of those measures is glamorous. All require management attention. Multifactor authentication can encounter employee resistance. Replacing unsupported systems requires money. Limiting administrator access may inconvenience staff or vendors. Exercises take time. Offline or protected backups require deliberate design and testing. Cyber resilience is built by making those ordinary decisions consistently before an emergency.

Small communities need scalable partnerships

A smaller town may never employ a full cybersecurity team, but it can still establish professional expectations. Regional collaboration, shared services, managed providers, cyber insurance resources, state assistance, peer networks, and national programs can supplement local capacity.

Outsourcing technology does not outsource accountability. Contracts should define security responsibilities, incident notification, backup practices, access control, log retention, cooperation during investigations, data ownership, and secure termination of access. Leadership should know which services depend upon a single vendor and what happens if that vendor becomes unavailable.

Practice the moment before it arrives

A tabletop exercise is one of the most effective ways to reveal gaps. A realistic scenario forces leaders to decide which services must be restored first, how employees will work without normal systems, when the governing board will be notified, who will speak publicly, and how the organization will coordinate with law enforcement, insurers, legal counsel, and technical responders.



The purpose is not to embarrass anyone or produce a perfect response. It is to identify ambiguity while there is still time to correct it.

Local governments hold information and operate services that residents cannot simply obtain from another provider. Cybersecurity is therefore about more than protecting computers. It is about continuity of government, stewardship of public resources, employee readiness, and public trust.

Managers do not need to know every technical answer. They do need to ensure that the right questions are being asked - and that the organization is prepared to act when the network goes down.

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MEMBER SPOTLIGHT: CESAR CORREA

*Our “Member Spotlight” offers a glimpse into the personalities and lives of you – the N.C. City & County Management Association member. Our “Member Spotlight” this month features **Cesar Correa**, City Manager of Locust.*

Birthplace? **I was born in Queretaro, Mexico. Located about three hours north of Mexico City.**

Any siblings? **I have two younger brothers (Juan Pablo, and Rafael). We had an amazing childhood growing up in Mexico and NJ.**

Favorite food? **Probably not much of a surprise....but Mexican food. Fun fact: you can find some of the most authentic Mexican food (I’ve ever had in US) in Concord and Charlotte.**

Favorite vacation spot? **Seville, Spain.**

Favorite hobby/pastime? **Golfing**

Childhood dream job? **As a little kid, I wanted to become an ear, nose and throat doctor.**

Favorite Book Quote ? **“I swear – by my life and my love of it – that I will never live for the sake of another man, nor ask another man to live for mine” John Galt from Ayn Rand’s *Atlas Shrugged*.**

First local government job? **Assistant Township Administrator, Maplewood NJ.**

Western or Eastern BBQ? **Western!**

Mountains, beach or Piedmont? **Mountains.**

Favorite Idol/Role Model? **My dad! Always instilled discipline and tremendous work ethic.**

Favorite local government hero? **Joseph Manning, Township Administrator for Maplewood NJ. He gave me my first job, took me under his wing, and mentored me. Couldn’t have landed my current role without his guidance.**



What is one thing most people would be surprised to learn about you? **I have passports for 3 different countries (Mexico, Spain and USA)**

FROM ONE UNIFORM TO ANOTHER

Military veterans already possess qualities local government needs.

Every year, service members leave the military carrying years of experience in leadership, planning, logistics, emergency response, personnel management, technology, engineering, public safety, and complex problem-solving. At the same time, local governments are searching for employees who can lead teams, manage competing priorities, remain calm under pressure, and place service before self.

Those two realities should connect more often than they do.

During the 2026 NCCCMA Summer Seminar, President Eddie Smith identified the transition from military service to local government as one of his priorities for the Association. A Navy veteran himself, Smith emphasized that veterans already understand leadership, teamwork, accountability, adaptability, and service before self. He announced plans to work with Will Doerfer, Brent Trout, and other interested members to better recognize veterans already serving in local government and encourage more veterans to consider the profession as their next mission.

Transferable skills - and a translation challenge

The connection is natural. Military service requires people to work within laws, policies, chains of responsibility, budgets, and operational constraints. Service members learn to brief senior leaders, coordinate across organizations, manage risk, plan for contingencies, and convert broad direction into executable work. Those skills apply directly to city and county management.

The difficulty is often translation. A veteran may have managed personnel, facilities, equipment, and projects worth millions of dollars without holding the civilian job title a local government uses. Military resumes may describe



Eddie Smith during his Navy days.

responsibilities in language unfamiliar to public-sector hiring managers. Automated applicant systems may screen out a strong candidate who lacks a particular credential even when that candidate has substantial equivalent experience.

Local governments can help close that gap by hiring for competencies as well as titles. That does not mean lowering professional standards. It means asking whether minimum qualifications



Will Doerfer (center) is one of several NCCCMA veteran members assisting with this initiative.

accurately reflect the skills required for the work and whether equivalent experience is being recognized consistently.

An existing pathway for North Carolina communities

ICMA's Veterans Local Government Management Fellowship provides a practical model. The fellowship is a 12-to-24-week Department of Defense SkillBridge program that places eligible transitioning service members with local governments for management training and hands-on experience. Participating communities develop a work plan, assign a senior-level mentor, and give the fellow a meaningful project that creates value for the organization.

The Fort Bragg/Fayetteville region is one of the program's designated host areas. Communities located within the eligible radius can express interest in hosting a fellow. Host governments do not pay the fellow's salary or benefits because the participant remains on active duty during the fellowship. The most important investments from

the host are staff time, mentorship, exposure to the organization, and substantive work.

For a community, the fellowship provides an opportunity to evaluate a potential employee while benefiting from that person's experience. For the service member, it provides a supported introduction to municipal or county operations, professional terminology, public communication, budgeting, procurement, land use, and the council-manager form of government.

What managers can do now:

- Review job descriptions for requirements that unintentionally exclude candidates with equivalent military leadership or technical experience.
- Ask human resources staff to translate common military occupations and responsibilities into local-government competencies.

- Identify veterans already employed by the organization and invite them to help strengthen recruitment, onboarding, and mentoring.
- Consider becoming an ICMA Veterans Local Government Management Fellowship host, particularly for a project that crosses departments and offers broad organizational exposure.
- Pair newly hired veterans with mentors who can explain the legal, political, and community context of local government without assuming that technical competence automatically provides that knowledge.
- Share local-government career opportunities with military transition offices, veterans' organizations, colleges, and professional networks.

A successful veterans initiative should do more than offer recognition. It should create a durable pathway from military service into meaningful civilian public service. That pathway benefits veterans, but it also helps local governments address workforce needs with people whose careers have already been built around responsibility, teamwork, and mission.

Public service does not end when military service ends. In many cases, it simply changes uniforms. By helping veterans see local government as their next opportunity to serve, NCCCMA and its member communities can strengthen the profession while welcoming experienced leaders into the places where their work will be visible every day.

In the months ahead, NCCCMA will explore additional ways to help veterans enter, advance, and lead within North Carolina local government.

That work may include strengthening partnerships with military-transition programs, promoting fellowship and employment opportunities, connecting veterans with experienced local government mentors, and helping communities recognize the value of military leadership experience. By building clearer pathways into the profession, the Association can help veterans continue their commitment to public service while strengthening the next generation of local government leadership.

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MEMBER MILESTONES

Welcome to where we highlight career milestones of N.C. City & County Management Association (NCCCMA) members. These milestones may include job changes, retirement announcements, educational/professional achievements, civic achievements and more. If you have a milestone to share, please send them to Nathan Lozinsky, Director, at nlozinsky@sog.unc.edu.

New appointments:

- Sarah Bishop appointed Assistant Town Manager/Finance Director of the Town of Franklin effective July, 2026.
- Cynthia Broomfield appointed Deputy Town Manager of Cornelius, effective July, 2026.
- Katherine Cathey appointed Town Manager of Oak Island, effective September, 2026.
- John Connet announced he will be moving to the NCLM as Director of City Relations, effective late September, 2026.
- Brice Dalke appointed as Town Administrator/Clerk/Finance/Budget Officer in Misenheimer, effective July, 2026.
- Stephanie Dollinger announced as Town Manager in North Topsail Beach, effective September, 2026.
- Philip Geiger appointed Assistant Town Manager for the Davidson.
- Dane Rideout appointed Town Administrator for Sunset Beach effective August 11, 2026.
- Rebecca Shuler appointed Assistant Town Manager of Maggie Valley, effective July, 2026.
- Joseph Stallings appointed Deputy Town Manager for Clayton effective August, 2026.
- Chad Staradumsky appointed Assistant Town Manager of Belville effective July 2026.
- Ryan Thompson resigned as Interim Town Manager/Chief of Police for Pine Knoll Shores effective August, 2026.
- Scott Webber appointed County Manager of Rutherford, effective September, 2026.

Retirement Announcements:

- Mimi Gaither accounted her retirement as Town Manager of Shallotte.

Resignations:

- Justin Oaks resigned as Town Manager for Farmville, effective August 13. He has accepted the role of Planning and Economic Development Director for the Town of Ayden.
- Casey Smith resigned as Davidson County manager effective July, 2026 to become Assistant City Manager for the City of Lexington.

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The Administrator is a monthly newsletter of the N.C. City & County Management Association., a professional association of city and county managers and assistant managers from counties and municipalities throughout the state of North Carolina.

For comments or suggestions, please contact the editor, Matt Lail at 919-819-3979, or email collards12@yahoo.com.

UPCOMING EVENTS

2027 NCCCMA Winter Seminar

January 27-29, 2027
Winston-Salem

2027 NCCCMA Summer Seminar

June 17-19, 2027
New Bern/Craven County

2028 Joint Summer Seminar

June 22-24, 2028
Hilton Head, SC*

**Joint Conference with SC City & County Management Association*

MEMBERS IN TRANSITION

If you are looking to keep up with your colleagues in the profession, be sure to check out the Members in Transition page:

www.ncmanagers.org/page/ManagerInTransitionReports

WHEN EVERYONE WEARS FIVE HATS

In smaller communities, coordination is not an administrative extra.

In a small local government, a job title rarely tells the whole story.

The manager may also serve as the budget officer, economic-development contact, purchasing authority, and staff liaison to several boards. The clerk may coordinate human resources, records, public information, and front-counter service. A department head may supervise operations while writing grants, answering resident questions, and managing capital projects.

This is not necessarily evidence of a poorly designed organization. It is often the practical reality of serving a community with limited staff, a lean budget, and responsibilities that do not shrink simply because the population is smaller.

An August 2026 article in ICMA's PM magazine described this reality as an environment in which everyone wears five hats. Its central lesson is especially relevant across North Carolina: when specialization and additional organizational layers are not realistic, coordination becomes one of the most important management disciplines.

Do not measure a small organization against a large one

The scale of that relevance is easy to underestimate. Based on the state's July 1, 2024 population estimates, 458 of North Carolina's 550 municipalities—approximately 83 percent—had fewer than 10,000 residents; 397, or about 72 percent, had fewer than 5,000. In communities of that size, limited staffing and overlapping responsibilities are not unusual organizational shortcomings. They are defining features of how local public service is delivered.

Management advice is frequently written with large organizations in mind. It assumes dedicated communications staff, separate human resources and budget offices, specialized analysts, project management teams, and layers of supervisory support. Smaller jurisdictions may have none of those resources.

Trying to imitate a large-city structure can create frustration or unnecessary process. The better question is not, 'How do we build every function into a separate department?' It is, 'How do we make responsibility, timing, and communication clear with the people we have?'

That question shifts attention from organizational size to operational discipline.

Coordination makes limited capacity usable

When employees have overlapping responsibilities, work can easily stall between people who assumed someone else was handling it. Priorities may shift without explanation. Important dates may live in separate calendars. The manager can become the only person who understands how all the pieces fit together.

Intentional coordination reduces those risks. It does not require expensive software or a new position. It requires consistent habits that make work visible and ownership clear.

- Use a brief weekly priority meeting to identify what matters most, who owns the next action, and which deadlines or decisions could affect another department.

- Maintain a shared calendar for governing-board deadlines, grant reporting, audits, major procurements, public meetings, capital-project milestones, and employee absences.
- Create short decision records so employees know what was decided, why it was decided, and who is responsible for implementation.
- Standardize recurring work with checklists and templates for agenda items, contracts, purchases, public notices, onboarding, and emergency procedures.
- Cross-train employees for essential responsibilities so a vacation, vacancy, or emergency does not stop a critical service.
- Use regional partners, councils of government, neighboring jurisdictions, the School of Government, and professional associations to supplement expertise that cannot reasonably be maintained in-house.

Protecting people as well as projects

Coordination is also a workforce strategy. Employees become exhausted when every request appears urgent, priorities change without context, and responsibilities remain unclear. The same flexibility that helps a small team succeed can become a source of burnout when leaders allow unlimited role expansion without making tradeoffs.

Managers should regularly distinguish between work that is legally required, work that advances the governing board's priorities, and work that is simply desirable. Adding a new responsibility should prompt a conversation about capacity: What will stop, slow down, or move to another partner? Saying yes to everything is not responsiveness

if the result is missed deadlines, turnover, or unreliable service.

Small organizations should also identify single points of failure. If only one employee knows how to run payroll, submit a reimbursement request, operate a water-system process, or prepare the board agenda, the organization carries a preventable risk. Documentation and cross-training are not signs that an employee is replaceable; they are signs that the organization values continuity and responsible stewardship.

A professional strength, not a limitation

Leaders in smaller communities develop a broad view of local government. They see how a land-use decision affects utilities, how a personnel vacancy affects customer service, how a grant affects future operating costs, and how one resident's concern can quickly become a governing-board priority. That perspective is a professional asset.

Wearing five hats will probably remain part of small-community service. The goal is not to pretend that limited capacity does not matter. It is to organize the work so that overlapping roles produce connection rather than confusion.

When ownership is clear, priorities are visible, and employees communicate across functions, a small staff can deliver remarkably sophisticated results. Coordination is what turns limited resources into reliable public service - and what allows the people wearing five hats to carry them sustainably.

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THE ESSENTIAL SERVICE WE KEEP CALLING NON-ESSENTIAL

Parks & recreation shapes our lives.

By Chris Wilson
Manager of Government Affairs, Cone Health

What makes something essential?

Most people would answer that it is something necessary. Something we need. Something we cannot imagine living without.

If that is true, then I have spent much of my career wondering why Parks and Recreation has so often been described as a non-essential service.

How did we get that so wrong?

Parks and Recreation shapes some of our very first memories and many of our last. It introduces children to play, gives teenagers positive places to gather, helps adults stay active, and allows older adults to remain connected. It provides opportunities to learn, explore, compete, celebrate, reflect, and simply breathe.

It is where we hike, fish, paddle, bike, run, picnic, and play. It is where neighbors become friends and communities become stronger. It is where festivals are held, races begin,

concerts are enjoyed, and milestones are celebrated.

It is one of the few public services that truly belongs to everyone.

Remember the pandemic.

When much of life came to a stop, parks and trails became places of refuge. Families searched for fresh air, exercise, and a sense of normalcy. Recreation professionals found safe ways to keep young people engaged when isolation threatened their well being. Community centers became food distribution sites when families needed help putting meals on the table.

When so many doors closed, parks remained open.

During my own career, I had the privilege of helping build parks, trails, recreation centers, athletic facilities, and gathering spaces that communities had envisioned for years. Looking back, I realize we were never just building amenities. We were creating places where life happened.

We watched children learn to swim and ride bicycles. We saw young people discover

confidence through sports, camps, and outdoor adventure. We watched friendships form, families reunite, and neighborhoods come together. We preserved natural places, expanded access to recreation, and created spaces where people found peace, joy, and belonging.

Sometimes one coach changed a life.

Sometimes one summer camp revealed a future career.

Sometimes one afternoon in a neighborhood park was enough to remind someone they mattered.

People spend billions of dollars every year pursuing recreation because they instinctively understand its value. Communities compete for people long before they compete for companies. Families choose places where they want to raise children because of schools, safety, parks, trails, recreation opportunities, and quality of life. Employers notice the same things.

Law enforcement agencies have long partnered with Parks and Recreation because positive activities help prevent negative outcomes. Faith communities work alongside recreation professionals because they share a commitment to serving others. Healthcare organizations increasingly encourage movement, connection, and outdoor activity because they recognize what park professionals have known for decades.

Healthy communities do not happen by accident.

They are built intentionally.

Yet when difficult budget conversations begin, Parks and Recreation is often among the first services considered for reduction.

I understood why. Every budget decision reflects difficult choices, competing priorities, and a sincere desire to serve the community responsibly.

Those of us in Parks and Recreation simply became very good at doing more with less.

We stretched every dollar. We found volunteers, built partnerships, wrote grants, and solved problems creatively. We rarely said no because we knew someone was counting on us. We made extraordinary things happen with ordinary resources.

When I served as Interim City Manager, a wise mentor shared something I have never forgotten.

For every dollar you reduce in Parks and Recreation, be prepared to spend more on public safety.

I did not need convincing. I had already witnessed it firsthand.

Every positive opportunity we create is one less opportunity for something negative.

Investment in Parks and Recreation is not simply about playgrounds, trails, or ballfields. It is about prevention. It is about giving children safe places after school. It is about reducing isolation among older adults. It is about improving physical and mental health. It is about creating places where neighbors know one another, where families gather, and where communities build trust.

That is public safety.

That is public health.

That is economic development.



That is community building.

Throughout my career, one thing never sat well with me. It was hearing Parks and Recreation described as non-essential.

No, we did not treat your drinking water, but we protected the watersheds that supplied it.

We did not respond to every medical emergency, but we helped people live healthier lives through recreation, movement, and connection.

We did not patrol every neighborhood, but we created places that strengthened communities and helped prevent crime.

We did not build every road, but we built trails and greenways that connected people to one another.

We cared for thousands of acres of public land, maintained hundreds of facilities, welcomed millions of visits, responded to emergencies, mentored young people, supported families, and served residents from cradle to grave.

If that is not essential, what is?

This Parks and Recreation Month, imagine your community without Parks and Recreation for just one month.

No favorite trail.

No neighborhood park.

No youth sports.

No summer camps.

No afterschool programs.

No kayak launch.

No recreation center.

No festivals.

No concerts in the park.

No greenways.

No place to gather.

The loss would be measured by far more than closed gates. A child would lose a place to play. A senior would lose companionship. A family would lose affordable opportunities to spend time together. A neighborhood would lose one of the few places where everyone is welcome.

Essential is not defined by what happens when something is present.

Essential is revealed by what happens when it is gone.

Parks and Recreation has never been a luxury. It has never been an extra.

It is one of the foundations of healthy people, safe neighborhoods, vibrant economies, and connected communities.

Perhaps we have simply become so accustomed to its presence that we stopped recognizing its importance.

I have never believed Parks and Recreation was non-essential.

I believe it is one of the most essential public services we provide.

And I always will.

-Christian "Chris" Wilson is Manager of Government Affairs for Cone Health. Prior to joining Cone Health, he devoted more than 30 years to public service with the City of Greensboro, serving as Parks Director, Assistant City Manager, Deputy City Manager, and twice as Interim City Manager