

County Connection

November 2025

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Stay Engaged. Click the logos to join us on social media



Building on our success

Seasons are changing and I am sure many of you are welcoming the cooler temperatures and relief from our hot and busy summer.

As we move into the new fiscal and calendar years, take a moment to reflect on the many successes we have achieved this past year. Every accomplishment matters. Even the smallest completed tasks compound upon each other and contribute to the greater goal of serving the needs of our residents.

The work we do collectively has a major impact on keeping this County running smoothly and it's my role as the County Administrator to get you the tools to do that.

As you move through your work day, consider last year's victories as motivation for the coming challenges and keep moving forward. I am thankful for all you do and I appreciate working with you as we continue this momentum.

Have a safe and restful Thanksgiving holiday.



John Hofstad
County Administrator

JetBlue to launch nonstop flights from Destin-Fort Walton Beach to New York, Boston



The airline will operate five weekly seasonal flights from both Boston Logan International Airport and New York's John F. Kennedy International Airport on Mondays, Thursdays, Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays. [READ MORE>>](#)

Williams International breaks ground on billion-dollar Okaloosa County facility



Williams International broke ground recently on the first phase of its \$1.04 billion manufacturing facility in Okaloosa County, the largest investment in Northwest Florida history. [READ MORE >>](#)

Okaloosa, Santa Rosa counties approve agreement for Highway 98 connector study



The agreement formalizes a partnership for a \$4 million state-funded study to determine if a collector road can connect the two counties' separate projects. [READ MORE>>](#)

Okaloosa Commissioners confirm Charles Cooper as Dorcas Fire Chief



Charles Cooper, a current Okaloosa County EMS lieutenant, will lead the newly re-established fire district after unanimous selection from 15 candidates. [READ MORE>>](#)

Okaloosa unveils pickleball courts, expanded horse stalls at Baker Recreation Center



The Baker Recreation + Equestrian Center has completed a series of upgrades to its sports courts and equestrian facilities, with night lighting for pickleball courts planned in the coming months. [READ MORE>>](#)

Okaloosa County secures \$1 million state grant for Santa Rosa Boulevard improvements



The Board of County Commissioners unanimously approved a state grant that will fund the first phase of roadway reconstruction, pedestrian safety enhancements and stormwater improvements on Okaloosa Island. [READ MORE>>](#)



A New Leader Emerges for Dorcas Fire District

Mr. Cooper is a current Okaloosa County EMS Lieutenant/Paramedic with outstanding leadership ability and has public safety experience dating back to 1977, 11 years of which was in volunteer fire service. He has more than 13 years of fire service experience with four years as a Deputy Chief, and five years as a Fire Chief in Nassau County- a hybrid fire service similar to that which we intend to create in Dorcas.



Full Speed Ahead

Overnight concrete pouring recently took place at the new Shoal River Ranch Water Reclamation Facility (SRRWRF). The new facility is a major step forward in expanding wastewater treatment capacity for future needs in north Okaloosa County. The \$40.8 million plant has multiple funding sources, including federal and state grants and a generous state legislative appropriation. The facility is expected to be completed in late 2026.



Swim, Bike, Run

No, this is not Tom Selleck, but Okaloosa County Water & Sewer Utilities Tech Jared Peterman. He recently finished the Visit Panama City Beach Ironman. Thanks for the inspiration on and off the job, Jared! (2.4-mile swim, then 112-mile bike, followed by 26.2-mile run.)



Welcome to VPS

JetBlue announced they will be coming to Destin-Fort Walton Beach Airport and will be providing service to and from New York City and Boston beginning in March. We are excited to have this new carrier and look forward to seeing new visitors and providing a new option for Northwest Florida residents and the military. Read the full press release at <https://bit.ly/jetBlueatVPS>



Friends and First Aid

Okaloosa County Emergency Management and Okaloosa County CERT recently assisted Santa Rosa County Emergency Management, Santa Rosa County CERT, and Santa Rosa County ARES teams to provide first aid at the rest area at Bryant Bridge Road for the Fenner Ride which is a 100-mile bike ride sponsored by the Big Brothers and Big Sisters. We were deeply honored to attend and we look forward to next year's event.



Tour Time

Students from Farling School of Excellence took a recent field trip to the Arbennie Pritchett Water Reclamation Facility. They had such a wonderful experience last year that they came again.



The Okaloosa Housing Program is delivering on promises.

Housing Program Manager Brittnee Orr shares with us the recent successes of how the State Housing Initiatives Partnership Program (SHIP) is working for first-time homebuyers in Okaloosa County. Follow along as first-time homebuyer Ashley Barnes takes us through the process and into her new home. [View the video >>](#)

UNITED

is The way.

We care for our neighbors, our children, our active duty service members, our seniors, and our community. This holiday season, let's continue showing up for one another. Together, we can make 2026 a year of compassion, connection, and change.

Join us in making a difference for those who need it most.

\$15
A MONTH Provides a neighbor in need 30 nights of safe shelter

\$25
A MONTH delivers 60 meals to homebound neighbors

\$50
A MONTH Gives 25 children access to quality afterschool programming

\$75
A MONTH Supports the most pressing needs of our local military community

DONATE AT [UNITED-WAY.ORG/DONATE](https://www.united-way.org/donate) OR SCAN QR CODE BELOW



United Way Emerald Coast UNITED WAY Emerald Coast

TRIVIA Night

WITH JOHNNY C

DEC 8TH EVENT STARTS AT 6 PM
LOCATED AT TASK FORCE PIZZA, CRESTVIEW
FREE EVENT WITH LIMITED SEATING

[UNITED-WAY.ORG/NEXTGEN-UNITED](https://www.united-way.org/nextgen-united) | [NEXTGENUNITED@UNITED-WAY.ORG](mailto:nextgenunited@united-way.org)



United Way Emerald Coast UNITED WAY Emerald Coast

Jingle Belles Social

DEC 6TH FROM 5-7 PM
TO REGISTER SCAN QR CODE OR VISIT
[UNITED-WAY.ORG/JINGLE-BELLES](https://www.united-way.org/jingle-belles)

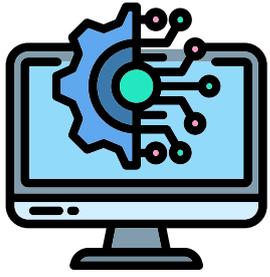
[UNITED-WAY.ORG/WOMENUNITED](https://www.united-way.org/womenunited) | [WOMENUNITED@UNITED-WAY.ORG](mailto:womenunited@united-way.org)





The Halloween spirit was on full display in a variety of departments on Halloween. Here is a sampling of photos taken to celebrate the occasion.

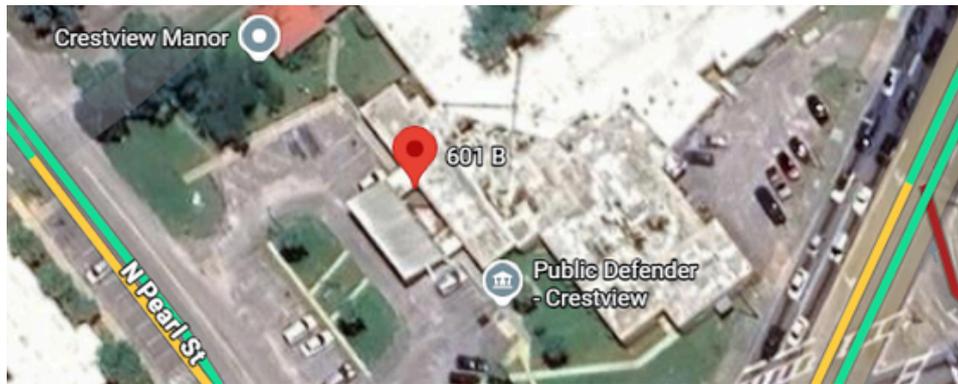




Tech Talk

A message from your County Information Technology Experts

The Help Desk Client Team has moved to the other side of their building! It is a great new space where we can better assist users and maintain machines. Parking is much easier. Technicians may ask you to come to us for the quickest ticket resolution. This is also where our access control badging station resides for county partners and vendors. (HR will continue to print the initial blue BCC staff badges). We are located at 601B N. Pearl Street in Crestview, next to the Public Defender entrance.



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Thanksgiving Food Safety Tips for Serving a Large Group

From Jill Breslawski, Family and Consumer Sciences Extension Agent

Thanksgiving is a special time when family and friends come together to celebrate and enjoy a delicious meal. If you're hosting a large group, keeping food safe for everyone should be a top priority to avoid foodborne illnesses like E. coli and Salmonella. Common symptoms like diarrhea, severe stomach cramps, and vomiting can quickly ruin a holiday gathering. Here are essential food safety tips to help serve a safe and healthy Thanksgiving meal to a crowd.

1. Wash Hands Thoroughly and Often

- Use Soap and Warm Water: Wash your hands for at least 20 seconds before handling food, during food prep, and after. This helps reduce the spread of harmful bacteria.
- Sanitize Regularly: Especially when cooking for a large group, frequently clean your hands and prep surfaces and utensils. Keep hand sanitizer nearby for quick sanitizing between tasks.

2. Separate Raw Meats from Ready-to-Eat Foods

- Keep Raw Foods Separate: Store raw meat away from ready-to-eat dishes like salads, breads, and desserts to prevent cross-contamination.
- Use Different Utensils and Surfaces: Use separate cutting boards, platters, and utensils for raw meats and other foods. Wash and sanitize these tools thoroughly after each use to prevent the spread of bacteria.

3. Keep Cold Foods Cold

- Use Refrigeration and Ice Packs: For dishes that need to stay cold, ensure they are kept at 40°F or below. This might mean storing items in the fridge or using coolers with ice packs for dishes you'll serve later.
- Minimize Time at Room Temperature: Dishes that must be kept cold should only be brought out shortly before serving. Avoid leaving these foods at room temperature for extended periods, as bacteria can multiply quickly.

4. Keep Hot Foods Hot

- Use Serving Dishes with Warming Equipment: Slow cookers and chafing dishes can help keep food at a safe temperature of 140°F or above, preventing harmful bacteria from growing during serving.
- Monitor Temperatures: If you're using a buffet-style setup, periodically check that hot foods remain hot, as reheating might be necessary to keep them above 140°F.

5. Cook Foods Thoroughly

Use a Food Thermometer: Ensure meats, casseroles, and other hot dishes reach their recommended internal temperatures to eliminate harmful bacteria.

Here's a guide to safe cooking temperatures:

- Ground meat (beef, pork, veal, lamb) 160 °F
- Ground poultry (turkey, chicken) 165 °F
- Fresh beef (steak, roasts, chops) 145 °F
- Poultry (chicken, turkey) 165 °F
- Pork/ham 145 °F
- Leftovers of all types 145 °F

Important Reminders:

- Dependents age 26 (dental, vision & life) and age 30 (Medical) will age out of plans on January 1st, 2026, and will no longer be covered. Those affected will be contacted via email, postal mail, or both.*
- 2024-2025 FSA funds will expire December 15th*. Money not spent will return to the County. Contact Kelli Burgess if you need your balance.
- There will be changes in your pharmacy & telehealth plans. More detailed information will be sent to all County employees*—be on the lookout.

*With the end of the year creeping up, there will be communications from HR & Risk Management sent Countywide to ensure you are aware of important information.

On-Site Wellness Class – Sign up now! Call or email Kelli Burgess for assistance. Let’s start the year off right!



Take control of your health. Join us to discover the importance of having a Primary Care Provider and scheduling your annual wellness exam.

You'll learn how to:

- Identify potential issues before they become major problems
- Find the right doctor for your needs
- Prepare for your doctor's visit
- Know when to use Urgent Care or Emergency Care

Dates:

- Tuesday, November 18th - South
- Thursday, November 20th – North

Locations:

- South - Water & Sewer Building, 3rd floor conference room, 1804 Turner Blvd, Fort Walton Beach
- North - Brackin Building, 3rd floor conference room, 302 N Wilson St, Crestview

[CLICK HERE](#) to sign up for the date and location that works best for you.

Training Zone



More Okaloosa County leaders have earned their Training Zone Challenge Coins. There are 11 Training Zone classes in the program but eight core classes focus on policies and procedures. Any foreman, supervisor, manager or director who completes the eight core classes (since 2022) earns the Training Zone Challenge Coin. Pictured l to r: Jerry Semkiw, Eddie Taylor, Jr., Nogah Winfield, Ronald Hagberg, Bobby Boydston, Chris Anderson and Randall Overly. Any foreman, supervisor or manager or director who wants to sign up for courses, login to Training Zone or to find out what classes you are lacking, contact Becca Autry at 850-689-5873.

Recent Milestones



Congratulations to these County employees who are celebrating their work anniversaries. Pictured with County Administrator John Hofstad and County Commissioners are Chuck Cooper (5 years, EMS), Chelsea Shaw (5 years, Tourist Development), Stephen "Hunter" Campbell (5 years, Facility & Parks Maintenance), Trina M. Bradley (2 years, Water & Sewer), Ronnie Moore (2 years, Facility & Parks Maintenance), Jim Robinson (2 years, Facility & Parks Maintenance).

Other notable milestones

- Jacob Bryant, 2 years, Facility & Parks
- John Heaney, 2 years, Water & Sewer
- Victoria Richardson, 2 years, Information Technology
- Destiny Nunez, 2 years, Emergency Management
- Mauderem Kirby, 2 years, Corrections

In Case You Missed It

Regular Board Meetings

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November 4

- Board approved appointment of Charles Cooper as the Dorcas Fire Chief.
- Board approved purchase and sales agreement of two properties for the Northwest Crestview Bypass Project.
- Board approved the 2026 Interlocal Agreement for the Okaloosa County Public Library Cooperative between the County and the municipalities of Crestview, Destin, Fort Walton Beach, Mary Esther, Niceville and Valparaiso.

November 18

- Col. William Smith, Commander of the 1st Special Operations Wing at Hurlburt Field gave an informational presentation to Commissioners
- Okaloosa County Commissioners unanimously voted to approve agreements with Visit Pensacola and CCA as partners in the SS United States artificial reef project that will bring a \$1.5 million contribution from Visit Pensacola and a \$500,000 contribution from CCA.
- Deputy County Administrator presented Fiscal Stewardship Review Report.

TIDBITS

Beach Safety Wrap-up

It was another successful year on the beaches of Okaloosa Island.

Seasonal lifeguard season ended Oct. 31 and our full-time lifeguard staff will be moving towards a response and patrol schedule from 10 a.m. - 4 p.m. Beach flag text alerts will resume in the spring.

2025 Beach Safety Stats (Okaloosa Island)

- Census: 1,844,420
- Rescues: 29
- Drownings: 0
- Over 800,00 educational and preventative contacts

