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Forum announces Salute to Local Government award winners

MILWAUKEE AND MADISON –The Wisconsin Policy Forum is proud to announce its **2022 Salute to Local Government** award winners, as we celebrate three decades of recognizing the best of our state’s public-sector agencies and workers.

Once again this year, the 30th Annual Salute celebrates the benefits that public sector ingenuity and excellence bring to taxpayers and communities throughout Wisconsin.

Award categories recognize local governments and school districts for innovative problem-solving, advancing racial equity, and public-private cooperation, as well as individuals in the public sector for excellence, leaders of the future, and lifetime achievement.

“When the Salute’s creators started this tradition three decades ago, I don’t think they could have foreseen how the importance of this annual event would grow over time,” Forum President Rob Henken said. “As our politics have grown more vitriolic in recent years, the Salute has taken on new meaning.”

The often thankless nature of public-sector work isn’t new. At his first Salute event in 2008, Henken noted that government officials go to work every day knowing that if they make a mistake it could end up on the front page of the newspaper – but if they do something right, it may go unnoticed.

Still, recent years have brought previously unforeseen challenges for public-sector workers, brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic and an increasingly polarized political discourse.

"There has always been value in taking a day to recognize those who accept the challenge of working in public service," Henken said. "Today, the Salute is now also one of the only opportunities we have as a community to say “thank you” to public workers at a time when a tight labor market gives them other options – and an increasingly fraught political dynamic gives them even more incentive to consider private-sector opportunities.”

Eligibility for Salute awards generally is for local government or school district accomplishments or individual performance between our last Salute nomination deadline up until the present.

The Salute event will be held Nov. 16 at the Italian Community Center in Milwaukee. [Click here to learn more about the event and how to participate.](#)

This year’s award recipients are:

Innovative Approach to Problem-Solving

Embedded Mental Health Professional Program
Waukesha County

Law enforcement professionals frequently are first responders to people experiencing mental health crises, and in Waukesha County, the frequency of such calls has risen. A collaboration of the Waukesha County Sheriff's Department (WCSD) and Waukesha County Department of Health and Human Services (WCDHHS) embeds a mental health professional (MHP) -- a certified crisis clinician -- with WCSD. The MHP deploys in real-time to the scene of mental health-related calls independently of WCSD deputies. If the situation does not require continued law enforcement presence, the MHP remains while the deputy may leave. The MHP also monitors calls for service through the police radio and dispatch system. The MHP initiates a response to assist in situations that may not initially be identified as mental health related but are based on a mental health concern. This element of the MHP program has been integral in identifying people in need of mental health services, linking them with resources, and decreasing arrests and legal charges for individuals experiencing a mental health crisis. A grant-funded pilot in fall 2021 proved successful and the program is now permanent, with plans for similar positions at the City of Waukesha Police Department and 911 Waukesha County Communications. County officials say it shortened the response time for mental health response more than 50% -- a change they say has significantly affected the outcomes of responses -- while freeing up significant time for sheriff's deputies to handle other law enforcement duties.

Effort to Advance Racial Equity

UniverCity Year - Waunakee
Village of Waunakee

Amid a racial reckoning after the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, the village of Waunakee began partnering with the UW-Madison UniverCity Alliance through its UniverCity Year (UCY) program, which connects local governments with university resources to solve community-identified challenges. Projects were completed to address local ordinances, village employment practices, relationship building with the Ho-Chunk Nation of Wisconsin, education, and more. As a result, Waunakee's Village Board unanimously approved a land acknowledgement statement that the village is on land within the ancestral territory of the Ho-Chunk people. Other impacts included a speaker series to educate the community about Ho-Chunk history, language, culture, and ecology; guidelines and protocols incorporating Ho-Chunk cultural resource management practices in village green spaces; resources for the Waunakee Community School District to assist in teaching about the Ho-Chunk people; and creating culturally appropriate historical markers while correcting existing culturally inappropriate or inaccurate language on village signage.

Public-Private Cooperation

Mental Health Emergency Center
Milwaukee County and Private Health Systems

For more than a decade, research by the Forum and calls from providers and advocates have pointed to the need to reform the delivery of mental health crisis and emergency care in Milwaukee County. The fruit of efforts to address this is a new Mental Health Emergency Center (MHEC), which opened its doors last month in a setting on Milwaukee's near north side. The MHEC is a joint venture between Milwaukee County and four area health systems: Advocate Aurora Health, Ascension, Children's Wisconsin, and Froedtert Health. The center will offer 24/7 crisis mental health assessment, stabilization, treatment, and transition care management. It will provide a therapeutic environment with separate treatment areas for child and adolescent patients, and a separate entrance for those arriving via law enforcement. It will aid in the redesign of a continuum of community-based mental health service enhancements, and its new location will improve access to mental health care services for a large share of people who historically have needed them.

Public-Private Cooperation

Milwaukee's Collective Affordable Housing Plan
City of Milwaukee and Community Development Alliance

The Community Development Alliance is an affiliation of stakeholders that has collaborated for more than a decade on neighborhood improvement issues in Milwaukee. After narrowing its focus in 2020 to advancing racial equity by providing a quality, affordable home for every Milwaukeean, the CDA and a multisector group of advocates, funders and practitioners that included City of Milwaukee housing officials successfully crafted a Collective Affordable Housing Plan. It is the first of its kind for Milwaukee. Bolstered by a \$7.5 million grant from Wells Fargo, the CDA intends to advance the plan through multiple strategies, including by: converting vacant lots into entry-level homes; scaling homebuyer counseling and down payment systems for families of color; and advancing other supportive systems that help increase homebuyer success rates. An additional key objective is to fully fund an \$11 million housing acquisition fund, which is intended to disrupt out-of-town investors from buying vacant city lots and homes.

Jean B. Tyler Leader of the Future Award

Noah Wiedenfeld
City of New Richmond

Shortly after obtaining a Public Policy Master's Degree from the University of Minnesota's Humphrey School in 2015, Noah Wiedenfeld began working at the City of New Richmond as a Management Analyst. He was quickly promoted first to Planning Director in 2018, Interim City Administrator in 2020, and official City Administrator/Utilities Manager in 2021. His fast climb up the ladder was attributed to his outstanding leadership, knowledge, and passion for city government – as well as his knack for thinking creatively to make city processes more efficient. Among Wiedenfeld's accomplishments in his brief tenure are launching initiatives to craft a strategic plan for the city and develop a public-private partnership to build a new public library.

Norman N. Gill Award for Individual Excellence

Vera Westphal
Milwaukee County Zoo

In a career at Milwaukee County spanning four decades – the last 17 at the Milwaukee County Zoo – Vera Westphal has built a professional reputation as a dedicated problem solver, true team player, and trusted colleague. Westphal has steadily worked her way up to one of county government's most senior positions, having previously served in Parks, Clerk of Courts, Child Support Enforcement, and the Strategy, Budget, and Performance office. She currently serves as Deputy Director of the zoo and also served as Interim Director last year while the position was being filled. Her accomplishments include creating and leading the zoo's Green Committee to boost its sustainability and conservation practices, helping create new revenue for the zoo through its Wild Connections program, helping to improve zoo concessions and retail operations by outsourcing them, and leading the effort to secure federal funds to keep the zoo operating during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic.

James R. Ryan Lifetime Achievement Award

Tony Pérez
Housing Authority of the City of Milwaukee

During Tony Pérez's tenure of more than two decades as the leader of the Housing Authority of the City of Milwaukee (HACM), he guided the agency in its mission of fostering strong communities by providing a continuum of quality, affordable housing options. Housing stability has long been the foundation of Pérez's work, but his steadfast commitment to providing residents with programs and services to improve their quality of life and propel them out of poverty helped make HACM truly stand out as a national leader. He also made conservation and environmental stewardship a core tenet of HACM's development projects. Prior to joining HACM, Tony founded the nonprofit Milwaukee Community Service Corps and played a key role in the development of the Milwaukee Job Corps Center.

The Forum would like to thank this year's Salute award judges: Jim Healy, Claire Silverman, Dan McCarthy, Darryl Johnson, David Lubar, Joan Prince, Kenneth Munson, Robert Whitaker, Sarah Diedrick-Kasdorf, Dan Linehan, Michelle Naples, and Maria Monteagudo.

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