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December 16, 2024

Congratulations to Commissioner Doug Weisenauer on his well-deserved retirement after 16 years of dedicated service to Crawford County. Thank you for your commitment to bettering the county.

Left to right, Commissioner Tim Ley, CCAO Executive Director Cheryl Subler, Commissioner Doug Weisenauer, CCAO Assistant Director John Leutz, Commissioner Larry Schmidt, and CEBCO Assistant Director Kevin Hinkle.

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Ohio County Employee Retirement Plan to implement fund changes

As a result of extensive work and contract negotiations with our recordkeeper Empower, a new fund line-up will take effect in January. Participants will begin to receive participant communications from Empower regarding these changes.

The new fund lineup and mapping are a result of the work of CCAO, our fiduciary consultant, and Empower. As our Section 3(38) fiduciary, we have delegated discretionary authority over the plan funds to the Shuster Group. These changes will enhance our offerings and give participants even more flexibility with their funds, including new target date funds that previously have been offered.

Additionally, Morningstar will review and rebalance investments for participants who have elected the managed Account Services following the fund changes effective January 17th, 2025. The OCERP plan will have an increased line-up, going from the current 23 funds (including Self-Directed Brokerage) to 51 investment options (including Self-Directed Brokerage and the Target Date series - 11 funds). **The rebalancing process requires the Managed Account Service to lock out participants for several days from making changes to their accounts, investments ONLY, if enrolled in MTR. In addition, participants will not be able to enroll or unenroll from MTR during this period.**

If you have any questions regarding this, please contact the Client Service Center at 800-284-0444 or visit: OCERP457.com to set-up an appointment with an OCERP Retirement Plan Advisor.

The Ohio County Employees Retirement Plan continues to be a major resource for Ohio's county workforce. These changes will strengthen the plan and make OCERP even more valuable to our dedicated county workforce.

40 Years 1985-2025
OHIO COUNTY EMPLOYEES RETIREMENT PLAN
For the future you imagine

Applications open for jail funding projects

The Department of Rehabilitation and Corrections (DRC) is accepting applications for jail funding projects, to be funded through the $50 million made available through the capital budget. You can access the application here. Applications close on March 3.

As a reminder, DRC will give priority to projects that:

1. Target county jails that the Department of Rehabilitation and Correction determines to have the greatest need for construction or renovation work;
2. Improve substantially the condition, safety, and operational ability of the jail; and
3. Benefit jails that are, or will be, used by multiple counties.

Another important aspect of this round of funding is that ***there is no*** prescribed local match. While the amount of match funding the county offers may affect the likelihood of receiving funding, the match is open to negotiation between DRC and the county rather than a mandatory rate.

CCAO is happy to help counties craft robust applications. If you would like any suggestions or assistance from the Association, please contact Managing Director of Policy Kyle Petty, either at kpetty@ccao.org or 614-220-7977.

State Disaster Relief Program opened to counties hit by Hurricane Helene

Governor Mike DeWine announced last week that he authorized the use of the State Disaster Relief Program (SDRP) to support the following six counties that were significantly impacted by the remnants of Hurricane Helene in September:

- Adams County
- Gallia County
- Jackson County
- Pike County
- Scioto County
- Vinton County

The SDRP is a reimbursement program that can be used in instances where storm damage amounts do not meet the threshold for federal assistance but do meet state program requirements. This program is intended to provide supplemental state assistance to local governments and eligible private non-profit organizations for costs associated with debris removal, emergency protective measures, and permanent work.

The SDRP is authorized for counties whose damages meet a countywide per capita indicator. Governor DeWine's authorization allows the Ohio Emergency Management Agency to request the funding from the Ohio Controlling Board.

More information on the State Disaster Relief Program is available at ema.ohio.gov.

A Special Thanks to our Pinnacle Partner

RUMPKE

STATE AND FEDERAL NEWS

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ARPA December 2024 obligation deadline reminder

Counties and other local governments that received Local Fiscal Recovery Funds from the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) ***must obligate these funds by December 31, 2024***. Funds that remain unobligated after that date must be returned to the US Treasury. If funds are properly obligated, they may be expended until December 31, 2026. (Funds used for federal Surface Transportation Projects or Housing and Community Development Title I projects must be expended by September 30, 2026.)

The obligation deadline applies to all ARPA funds, including those that are expended under the revenue loss category.

Please review CCAO's overview of the deadline and how the deadline affects certain scenarios.

How to Protect Your Organization from Spear Phishing and Payment Redirect Scams

(Text adapted from an Auditor of State article)

In recent years, Ohio's local governments, school districts, and other public entities have increasingly been targeted by cybercriminals employing payment redirect and other business email compromise (BEC) schemes. These scams, often involving spear phishing, have led to significant losses of taxpayer dollars. Drawing on recent cases involving various public entities, it's essential for government officials to understand these attacks and the principles of cybersecurity to mitigate risk.

Understanding the Threat

In payment re-direct and other BEC scams, cybercriminals impersonate trusted vendors, employees, or business partners to deceive organizations into transferring money to fraudulent accounts. They do this by manipulating email correspondence, often using subtle changes to email addresses that can easily go unnoticed. For instance, an email might change from "vendor@example.com" to "vend0r@example.com." These schemes are often sophisticated and tailored, with criminals mimicking legitimate communications.

Earlier this year, a recreation district in Central Ohio fell victim to a spear phishing attack involving fraudulent payment instructions from an email account that looked almost identical (only a single letter was changed) to that of a trusted contractor who was working on a large project. The vendor's account information was changed, which resulted in $713,000 going to the scammer's account. It was only after the vendor contacted the recreation district about the missing payment that the crime was discovered.

Similarly, a school district in Clermont County and a school district in Cuyahoga County lost $1.7 million and nearly $620,000, respectively, because they didn't properly verify payment information change requests from fake email addresses that appeared to be from legitimate contractors.

Preventing Scams

While we recognize there is no perfect system to prevent 100% of scams, taking proactive steps can dramatically reduce the chance of a loss. Here are some key principles and recommended actions to reduce the risk:

1. Verify and Validate Requests

Never make changes to a vendor or employee's banking information without in-person verification. Don't rely on information in the change request email. Always use contact information from validated sources, such as previous invoices or official directories.

In 2023, a village in Huron County suffered financial losses when the fiscal officer made payments totaling $269,000 in response to fraudulent invoices. This incident could have been avoided by using an independently verified contact method to confirm the legitimacy of the change.

2. Require In-Person (or Independent) Confirmation

Verify change requests in person. If this is not possible, use only independently verified contact information and ask specific questions that only the legitimate requester could answer. Employees should develop a heightened sense of scrutiny, especially when a request for a change in payment information arrives unexpectedly or is accompanied by a sense of urgency.

In the case of a township in Ottawa County, a spoof email requesting a change to an employee's direct deposit information led to five payments totaling $3,500 being transferred to a fraudulent account. Likewise, a school district in Seneca County lost nearly $2,000 after processing a fraudulent request to change an employee's direct deposit information. Had there been a policy requiring in-person verification or secondary approval, these attacks could have been prevented.

3. Separate Duties and Use Dual Authorization

Separate the functions of payment change initiation and payment approval. Implement internal, secondary approvals for all requests involving changes to payment instructions or contact details. This ensures that no single individual can unilaterally change critical payment information without oversight.

An agency in Stark County experienced losses of nearly $29,000 because six deposits were redirected to an unauthorized account following changes made without proper independent verification. Requiring dual authorization could have provided a safeguard against this fraud.

4. Employee Training and Awareness

Providing continual training and education to employees about policies, procedures, and recent phishing threats is critical. Employees are often the first line of defense against fraud schemes, and consistent awareness training helps them recognize potential threats.

5. Use Technology to Assist

Use layers of authentication, such as financial institution tools like ACH positive pay or debit block programs. These tools can help prevent unauthorized transactions from occurring by flagging discrepancies before money leaves the account.

6. Develop a Proactive Security Culture

Public entities should create an organization-wide culture of security. Employees should feel comfortable questioning suspicious emails or requests, and there should be clear policies for dealing with any anomalies.

A township in Belmont County avoided falling victim to a spear phishing attack because of the strong internal controls they had in place. When the township received a suspicious email requesting changes to payment information, they identified inconsistencies and flagged the request as fraudulent, preventing any financial loss. This is a great example of how proper verification and adherence to policies can safeguard against cyber threats.

Conclusion

The financial losses resulting from spear phishing and BEC scams can be devastating for public entities, affecting services and eroding public trust. However, with proper training, verification procedures, and a security-conscious culture, many of these incidents are preventable.

Here's what do if you suspect your organization has been compromised by a cybercrime: first report the payment thefts to your financial institution to try to stop the transfer. Then notify local law enforcement. Next, contact the Ohio Auditor of State and report it to federal agencies including the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Internet Crime Complaint Center (IC3).

By following these guidelines, including requiring in-person verification, watching out for red flags in email correspondence, implementing dual authorization, and consistently training employees, your organization can protect itself from falling victim to these sophisticated scams.

Note: AOS has put together a downloadable checklist that employees can reference for payment security practices.

Program to strengthen flow of students into children services workforce expanded

As part of Ohio's efforts to build a talent pipeline into the children services workforce, Governor DeWine and Ohio Department of Children and Youth (DCY) Director Kara B. Wente recently announced a $2 million investment to expand the Ohio Child Protective Services Fellowship Program.

Through the fellowship program, college students majoring in human services-related fields like psychology, family science, and sociology can apply to work part-time at county public children services agencies (PCSAs) – where they will receive valuable training and hands-on experience in these in-demand jobs.

At the start of 2023, one in five children services caseworker positions in the state were vacant. By the end of the year, another 20% of the remaining caseworkers had resigned. In 21 counties, turnover reached 40% or more; nearly half of all caseworkers statewide (43%) had less than two years of experience. The fellowship program aims to reverse these trends. Students accepted into the fellowship program will earn $15 per hour for up to 26 hours per week, allowing them to work around their class schedules.

In addition to competitive pay, students accepted into the fellowship program can gain immediate experience with caseworker duties such as transporting clients, attending home visits and court hearings, documenting cases, making follow-up calls, and much more. The program also offers retention incentives and mentoring opportunities to keep students engaged and prepare them for caseworker jobs after graduation.

"These are incredibly important jobs that make a difference. Every day, children services professionals work to help keep vulnerable children safe," said Director Wente. "We believe the expansion of the Ohio Child Protective Services Fellowship Program will help us energize a new generation of college graduates to enter this critically needed and highly rewarding field."

Initially launched in 2022 by Wood County Job and Family Services (JFS), the program partners with colleges and universities to recruit students entering their junior year to start the fellowship in their senior year. The ultimate goal is to provide students with a pathway to full-time employment at the end of the fellowship.

Wood County JFS will continue to manage the program during this expansion phase. DCY's $2 million investment will nearly double the number of participating PCSAs, growing the program from 19 to 35 counties throughout northwest, southwest, and southeast Ohio. Funding will support 75 part-time fellowship positions for students. The goal is for the students who complete the program to use this experience to help secure permanent positions at county PCSAs or other local health and human services agencies.

Any Ohio college or university student majoring in a relevant human services field is welcome to apply. Students must be able to commute to a county PCSA with an available fellowship position to participate.

View an updated list of participating counties and learn more about how to apply on DCY's new program webpage: ChildrenAndYouth.Ohio.gov/Fellowship

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EDUCATION AND GRANTS

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Visit the Grants and Funding Opportunities page on the CCAO website for a detailed listing of open grant programs.

PUCO to open safe digging grant program in January

Excavation damage is a leading cause of pipeline related injuries and fatalities. That's why it's so important to educate the public about safe digging. Whether it's pipelines, cable, fiber, conduit, water, sewer or other underground infrastructure, Ohio law requires one to contact underground locating services prior to any digging or excavating.

The PUCO is pleased to announce a new grant funding opportunity. Up to $50,000 is available for:

1. Public awareness programs established by a protection service;
2. Training and education programs for excavators, operators, designers, persons who locate underground utility facilities, or other persons;
3. Programs providing incentives for excavators, operators, persons who locate underground utility facilities, or other persons to reduce the number and severity of compliance failures.

The official application window opens on January 1, 2025, and closes on March 1, 2025.

I encourage you to learn more about this exciting opportunity by visiting PUCO.ohio.gov/DamagePreventionGrant

Should you have any questions, please contact UTCGrants@puco.ohio.gov

Ohio EPA conducting voluntary resiliency survey

Ohio EPA's Resiliency Plan program is currently developing a Comprehensive Resiliency Plan (CRP) that will include a list of potential initiatives from across Ohio that would reduce air emissions. The plan will also include an analysis of the benefits to low-income and disadvantaged communities from these initiatives as well as an analysis of the workforce development required to implement potential emissions-reducing initiatives.

The Ohio Environmental Protection Agency (OEPA) is completing this plan with funding from the US EPA's Climate Pollution Reduction Grant (CPRG) planning grant program. Our initial plan, the Priority Resiliency Plan, was published in March 2024. The Comprehensive Resiliency Plan will build on this initial plan.

To assist OEPA develop the plan, they are conducting a brief survey of local governments to receive their perspectives and concerns.

For additional information on Ohio's Priority Resiliency Plan, or if you have issues accessing or completing the survey, please contact Laura Quiceno Waltero at Laura.QuicenoWaltero@epa.ohio.gov.

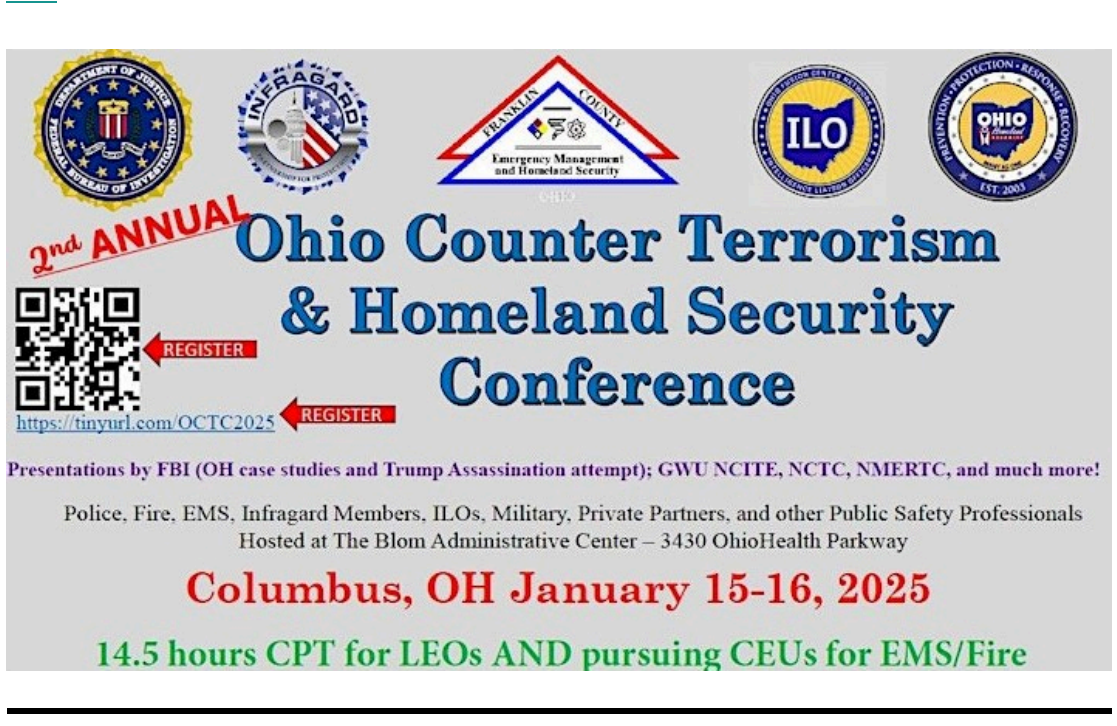
Ohio Counterterrorism Conference to be held on January 15-16

Ohio Homeland Security, in conjunction with the FBI and Franklin County Emergency Management & Homeland Security, is hosting the 2025 Ohio Counterterrorism Conference at Riverside Hospital's Ohio Health Administrative Campus auditorium on January 15 and 16.

Sessions will include drone assessment and response tactics, domestic terrorism, case studies, including the investigation into the 2024 assassination attempt on then-candidate Donald Trump, and a discussion on how to manage an active shooter situation.

The training provided is approved for CPT for law enforcement officers, and CEU credits may be available for Fire/EMS (still under review).

Registration for the event is $195. You can register and view more information about the event here.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2nd ANNUAL Ohio Counter Terrorism & Homeland Security Conference

https://tinyurl.com/OCTC2025

Presentations by FBI (OH case studies and Trump Assassination attempt); GWU NCITE, NCTC, NMERTC, and much more!

Police, Fire, EMS, Infragard Members, ILOs, Military, Private Partners, and other Public Safety Professionals
Hosted at The Blom Administrative Center – 3430 OhioHealth Parkway

Columbus, OH January 15-16, 2025

14.5 hours CPT for LEOs AND pursuing CEUs for EMS/Fire

COUNTY NEWS

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Each week Counties Current highlights the happenings in our counties in the words of their local media. One story from each of the CCAO's five districts is highlighted, and on occasion other stories may be highlighted as well.

Northwest District

County signs pact for aid across state line

The Commercial Review, December 9, 2024

Jay County Commissioners signed a new agreement for emergency assistance across state lines Monday.

Commissioners approved an agreement for mutual aid with Mercer County, Ohio. The new agreement, which was approved by Mercer County Commissioners in November, takes effect immediately and serves as a formal document to legally allow for emergency personnel to offer mutual aid beyond the Indiana-Ohio state line.

"Because of that state line, there's a lot of legalities that go into them coming to us and us going to them," explained Jay County Emergency Management Agency director Samantha Rhodehamel.

"That's just an on-paper agreement that allows us to travel back and forth," she later added.

The agreement covers fire departments, emergency medical service workers, EMA employees, hazardous materials removal workers and other public health employees.

Rhodehamel noted that mutual aid and assistance has come from across the state line for emergency calls, typically those on the east side of Jay County. She also pointed to calls that may come from Fort Recovery, with commissioners president Chad Aker — he also serves as a firefighter for Portland Fire Department — recalling the fire at JR Manufacturing in April 2023.

Rhodehamel noted plans are in the works to create a similar agreement with Darke County.

Northeast District

Lorain County commissioners approve funding for reentry services coordinator for the county jail

The Morning Journal, December 6, 2024

Lorain County commissioners unanimously approved another year's salary for reentry services coordinator at the Lorain County Jail who specializes in helping those incarcerated at the lockup to connect with services to improve their lives upon re-entering the community.

The agreement is through the Mental Health, Addiction & Recovery Services (MHARS) Board of Lorain County, which provides the funding, said Andy Laubenthal, project specialist at the Lorain County Jail.

The funding will include $79,700 for the salary of the reentry services coordinator for one year beginning retroactively July 1, 2024, until June 30, 2025, according to county documents.

The MHARS board provides this funding to ensure the coordination of care for inmates with behavioral health needs and chemical dependency treatment needs in preparation for their release and reentry to the community, county documents stated.

"Because of that, we are looking at the greater good of the community to try to improve the well being, health and safety of not only the people in the jail, but also the community as a whole," Laubenthal said.

Approximately 80 percent of the jail's population suffers from mental health issues and, or substance abuse disorder, he said.

Central District

County Commissioners approve sewer and water rate increase

Columbus Messenger, December 11, 2024

Prairie Township residents receiving water and sewer service from Franklin County will see a billing increase beginning Jan. 1 but it will be less than originally proposed.

"I thanked (the Franklin County Commissioners) for listening to the (Prairie Township) trustees and the residents," Prairie Township Administrator James Jewell said Dec. 10, at the conclusion of the Franklin County Commissioners meeting where he represented the township.

The commissioners unanimously approved a resolution increasing the water and sewer each by 3 percent, effective Jan. 1, and applicable to all Franklin County residents receiving services from Franklin County Sanitary Engineering.

The increase is half of what Prairie Township residents were told they were facing at a community meeting Nov. 22 at Norton Middle School.

Stephen Renner, Franklin County Sanitary Engineer, told about 100 residents that the city of Columbus was increasing water rates by 7 percent and sewer rates by 6 percent, and that Franklin County could no longer absorb the increase.

Renner began the meeting last month with a budget overview, making a clear case that Franklin County Sanitary Engineering, for the past three years in 2022, 2023, and 2024, absorbed rate increases for water and sewer services from the city of Columbus and did not pass it through to Prairie Township residents, but could no longer do so.

Southwest District

Montgomery County Veterans Service Commission brings on full-time case manager to help workers with a sustained focus.

Dayton Daily News, December 3, 2024

In an effort to get veterans more consistent help, the Montgomery County Veterans Service Commission has brought on a full-time case manager.

Courtney Griffith started her new role as veteran community health worker about a month ago.

Bryan Suddith, deputy director for the county Veterans Service Commission, said the commission may be the only such veterans service commission in Southwest Ohio and perhaps the state as a whole that has hired such a worker full-time.

Suddith said that for too long, financial assistance proffered to veterans could feel like a one-time "band-aid." While the commission might help veterans find rent or financial assistance, lingering problems would go unaddressed.

Bringing Griffith on board was an effort to address those issues for veterans the commission may see every few months or even more often.

"We're paying the rent this month or we're paying utilities, and then that would be it — they would be sort of on their own," Suddith said of those veterans. "If the issue behind that was, they didn't have reliable transportation or didn't have a contact for a job ... they were sort of left on their own."

Southeast District

Marietta City Council continues discussion of 911 merger with county

Marietta Times, December 4, 2024

Marietta City Council members continued to discuss merging the city's police 911 dispatch with Washington County 911 Monday, and the Marietta Police chief reiterated her concerns.

During a council Police and Fire Committee meeting Monday, Washington County Commissioner Charlie Schilling answered questions from city officials, saying the county is ready to take over the Marietta Police Public Safety Answering Point on Dec. 17.

"We have a backup console and the technology and what goes with it up at the (Emergency Management Agency) office," he said.

"Equipment-wise it's a matter of programming a radio frequency into a console," Washington County 911 Director Douglas Moore said.

At-Large Councilman and Police and Fire Committee Chairman Jon Grimm asked if additional equipment would be needed and how much it might cost.

"Equipment-wise it's a matter of programming a radio frequency into a console," Washington County 911 Director Douglas Moore said.

The county has reached out to its vendor about the programming and is waiting for a quote, Moore said. The last time they upgraded a console five years ago it cost $64,000, but that was buying all new equipment, he said. The programming and minor equipment they would need for the backup console is not expected to be very expensive.

Grimm asked if there would be additional costs to the city for the county to dispatch Marietta calls and to take the two landlines associated with the Marietta Police. Schilling said he wouldn't anticipate any.

"We have a levy in place, the county does," Schilling said.

DATES TO REMEMBER

Please view the CCAO Calendar for a comprehensive list of events to note.

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DECEMBER 25
Christmas

DECEMBER 31
New Year's Eve

JANUARY 1
New Year's Day

JANUARY 10
CORSA Board of Directors Meeting

JANUARY 20
Martin Luther King, Jr. Day

JANUARY 24
CCAO Board of Directors Meeting

JANUARY 31
CEBCO Board of Directors Meeting

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