

BORDER  
**eco**



**4** From Second Grade to County Leader: A Career Built on Listening, Trust, & Student Success

**CONNECTING SOUTHERN ARIZONA**



*10th Annual*

**IGNITING A BRIGHTER FUTURE**

**EARLY CHILDHOOD  
 EDUCATION  
 AWARENESS MONTH**

**7. Foundations of the Future: Santa Cruz County Honors Eight Early Learning Heroes 2026**



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**15** Sheriff's May Round-Up

# Congratulations!

## Class of

# 2026



*"You did it!"*



Maya Donnelly  
Santa Cruz County  
School Superintendent  
&  
Staff

21 E. Court St.

Nogales, AZ 85621

Phone: 520.375.7940

# Border Eco Updates

## Mental Health Awareness Month

To our Border Eco readers, thank you for being part of a community that values connection, reflection, and the stories that bind us together. Your continued support allows us to highlight the people, places, and issues that matter most across our region. Mental health is not just an individual concern; it is a community asset. When residents maintain good mental health, they are better equipped to work, learn, build relationships, and contribute to the overall well-being and stability of their communities. Strong mental health supports productivity, reduces strain on healthcare systems, and fosters safer, more connected neighborhoods.

Communities thrive when individuals feel supported, and local organizations play a crucial role in making this possible. Nonprofits, counseling centers, and grassroots programs provide accessible services, reduce stigma, and create safe spaces for individuals seeking help. Community-based mental health care ensures people receive support where they live, making these services more approachable and effective. Supporting these organizations through funding, volunteering, or advocacy strengthens the entire community.

Economic conditions also have a direct impact on mental health. Financial stress, unemployment, and rising living costs can increase anxiety, depression, and feelings of instability. When the economy struggles, individuals and families do too. However, strong communities can mitigate these effects by promoting connection, sharing resources, and fostering resilience.

We all have a role to play. Checking in on neighbors, supporting local programs, and advocating for mental health resources can make a meaningful difference. Being part of a supportive community reduces isolation and improves overall mental well-being. When we invest in mental health, we are investing in stronger, healthier communities for everyone.

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Please send us information on any upcoming events, meetings, or programs to share with our readers.

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## July 21, 2026 - Primary Election Day Important Dates for Early Voting:

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<b>LAST DAY TO REGISTER TO VOTE:</b>	<b>JUNE 22, 2026</b>
<b>EARLY VOTING BEGINS / EARLY BALLOTS ARE MAILED:</b>	<b>JUNE 24, 2026</b>
<b>LAST DAY TO REQUEST A MAIL BALLOT:</b>	<b>JULY 10, 2026</b>
<b>DEADLINE TO MAIL BACK YOUR BALLOT:</b>	<b>JULY 14, 2026</b>
<b>LAST DAY TO VOTE EARLY IN PERSON:</b>	<b>JULY 17, 2026</b>
<b>ELECTION DAY (DROP OFF YOUR EARLY BALLOT BY 7:00 P.M.):</b>	<b>JULY 21, 2026</b>

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# From Second Grade to County Leader: A Career Built on Listening, Trust, and Student Success

For more than three decades, Maya Donnelly has walked the same hallways she now oversees, just from different chairs.

In July 2025, Donnelly was appointed Santa Cruz County School Superintendent after a career that began in 1993 at A.J. Mitchell Elementary. She taught second and third grade, paused to raise her daughters, then returned to Lincoln Elementary and Wade Carpenter Middle School to teach sixth- and eighth-grade Language Arts.

In 2016, she stepped out of the classroom and into the County School Superintendent's Office. There, she managed grant programs and served as Chief Deputy before taking the top job.

"There is no better motivation than to see a former student thrive and come back to thank you for being a good teacher or for supporting their family," Donnelly said. That moment, repeated across years, is why she is running for office.

When longtime Superintendent Alfredo Velásquez approached retirement, Donnelly's decision was immediate. "My only thought was that I must step up and continue the hard work and dedication the staff puts forth daily."

Her mission is clear: safe, well-funded, academically sound learning environments for every child in Santa Cruz County. "Santa Cruz County deserves all the resources bigger counties receive. I want to contribute to creating a level playing field for our teachers and students."

The County School Office acts as fiscal agent for schools, oversees the governing board and special elections, and documents homeschooled youth. That requires reliable financial oversight and clear communication between districts, the County Treasurer's Office, and the Arizona Department of Education.

As an Education Service Agency, the office convenes stakeholders, writes and manages grants, and hosts events such as the Teacher of the Year.

Donnelly calls her approach relationship-driven. "It is essential to ensure our office provides value by actively listening to the needs of our schools and building connections with everyone involved, from the superintendent and principal to teachers, nurses, custodians, and most importantly, students and their families."

First, Donnelly wants a seamless transition. Success means a satisfied business manager with timely payroll, a district superintendent who can call anytime for dependable guidance, and students and parents who navigate college applications with confidence.

Second, she plans to expand initiatives with new grant funding. Focus areas include early childhood education, the arts, wellness and prevention, college and career readiness, and workforce development. Success will be measured by new grant awards, sustained programs, new partners, and compliant reporting.

Third, she will cultivate community trust through visibility, teamwork, and a countywide consortium that prioritizes student achievement, attendance, and teacher retention.

From 2018 to 2024, Donnelly led the GEAR UP Program in county middle and high schools. The federal grant helps students from low-income, rural communities develop post-secondary plans and earn degrees or certifications. Coaches supported career exploration and aided counselors with advising, parent engagement, and planning.

The program opened the "HUB" at the Santa Cruz Center, which still helps students with college and FAFSA applications, scholarships, and resumes. Through COVID and into students' first year of post-secondary education, GEAR UP provided essential support. Results showed students were academically prepared, identified career paths, built resilience, and learned that "achieving dreams requires careful planning."

"The role of the county school superintendent is rooted in relationships," Donnelly said. Ten years in the office and twenty years teaching prepared her to connect with stakeholders. Work with nonprofits, businesses, and family events has built trust through successful grants and quality services.

Three challenges often arise: early childhood preparedness, chronic absenteeism, and literacy. Solving them requires partners like libraries, local government, childcare providers, and preschools. "Partnering early in a child's life will benefit them in their future."

Parent engagement means healthy two-way communication in home languages. Neighborhood gatherings, less formal than conferences, can be more inviting.

"Educators are superheroes," Donnelly said. To recruit and retain teachers, she would offer free, locally relevant professional development and advocate for better pay. She also plans to embed team building and self-care into weekly routines. "These heroes don't wear capes, but they do move mountains for our youth."

Colleagues describe her leadership as calm and straightforward. "I take the position and the office seriously. It is not just a job; it is a calling. I strive to be innovative and share leadership with my team. There is strength in numbers." The office operates with public funds, and timely service is the standard. "At the end of the day, every decision is made with our students' best interests at heart."





## Foundations of the Future: Santa Cruz County Honors Eight Early Learning Heroes

For Santa Cruz County School Superintendent Maya Donnelly, early learning is more than a program. It is the foundation.

This month, Donnelly and community partners used Early Childhood Education Month to raise awareness about the importance of early learning, childcare, and the people who make it possible. From infant rooms to kindergarten classrooms, from home visits to before and after school programs, “countless individuals play a vital role in creating safe, nurturing environments where children can learn, grow, and thrive,” Donnelly said.

To celebrate them, the County School Office presented Early Childhood Education Awards of Excellence in eight categories: Elected Official, Community Member, Healthcare Professional, Home Visitor, Preschool Teacher, Home Childcare Provider, Preschool Director, and Business Owner.

### The 2026 Award Winners

#### **Elected Official: Alfredo I. Velásquez**

A proud Nogales native and longtime educator, Velásquez taught first grade for 13 years before serving as Santa Cruz County School Superintendent from 2006 until his retirement in July 2025. “My mission was to support district superintendents, administrators, teachers, parents, and students... to prepare all students in Santa Cruz County to become successful life-long learners.” During his tenure he secured \$33 million in discretionary grant funding, launched the countywide Teacher of the Year gala, proclaimed October as Arts Month, and moved the county education office into the 1904 Courthouse to create “a mecca for education, workforce development and the arts in the heart of Downtown Nogales.”

#### **Community Member: John Fanning**

After 35.5 years in Santa Cruz Valley Unified School District No. 35 as a teacher, coach, athletic director, principal, and District Outreach Coordinator, Fanning retired with a simple motto: “SERVICE ABOVE SELF.” He has served on the NACo Human Services & Education Committee, Rio Rico Rotary, First Things First, and the Santa Cruz County Provisional Community College Board, among others. “Supporting our youth, especially in their earliest years, is an investment in the future of our communities,” Fanning said. “The experiences, care, and opportunities children receive early in life shape the adults they will become.”

#### **Healthcare Professional: Patty B. Molina**

As Senior Director of Community Health Services at Mariposa Community Health Center, Molina has spent 22 years developing federal, state, and foundation-funded programs at the U.S.-Mexico border. Her work spans cancer and diabetes education, tobacco prevention for youth, childhood asthma, environmental health, and maternal-child health. A past chair of multiple University of Arizona advisory boards, she was most recently honored with the IBERO-American FHC Medal for Leader in Community Health Promotion 2025.

#### **Home Visitor: Melissa Gallegos**

Gallegos began her early childhood career in 2008 with the HIPPY program under Alfredo Velásquez, “whom I deeply admire for inspiring me to discover the beauty and impact of working with families and young children.” She now leads the Los Padres Program under Superintendent Maya Donnelly. A 2022 Grand Marshal of Nogales and co-founder of the OS3 Movement, she also serves on the IME Scholarship Committee of the Consulate General of Mexico. “My greatest motivation is my family,” she said, crediting her children, mother, and husband, Edgardo Muñoz.



10<sup>th</sup> Annual  
EARLY CHILDHOOD  
EDUCATION  
AWARENESS MONTH  
April 2026  
IGNITING A BRIGHTER FUTURE

# Foundations of the Future: Santa Cruz County Honors Eight Early Learning Heroes

## Preschool Teacher: Jethzabel Leon

Teaching with Montessori methods since age 15, this educator earned her Bachelor's in Early Childhood Education after studying in Leon, Guanajuato, Mexico. She opened a Group Home to provide high-quality childcare, earned Five Star recognition with First Things First, and was named Arizona Early Childhood Champion in 2020. Her work under Early Head Start prepared her "to offer a higher quality of education to the children and families I serve."

## Home Childcare Provider: Janeth Ivonne Valle

A DES-certified provider in Rio Rico who collaborates with the Child-Parent Center Head Start program, Valle has five years of experience, including three years managing her own childcare business. "I firmly believe that early childhood education is fundamental to every child's future." She is currently pursuing her CDA credential to further strengthen her skills.

## Preschool Director: Stephanie Garcia

Garcia's passion began when she became a first-time mother and saw "the importance of access to supportive community resources." She joined the Nogales Family Resource Center in 2015 as a parent, became a facilitator, and now serves as Site Coordinator. She develops curriculum, leads parent education classes, and helps create "a safe, welcoming, and inclusive environment for families." Watching families "grow in confidence, strengthen relationships, and achieve positive change" is her daily inspiration.

## Business Owner: Edgardo Muñoz

A graphic designer turned "Social Designer," Muñoz is president of the OS3 Movement and manages the OS3 Youth Center. He designs programs that serve as "a positive haven and a platform for growth for local youth and their families." He is the social architect behind the Nogales Half Marathon and oversees Santa Cruz County Public Media studios through We Love Nogales. "Each of these achievements has been made possible thanks to the enthusiasm and active participation of the community," Muñoz said.



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# Rio Rico Insights

## Strong Beginnings: Celebrating Early Childhood at Calabasas School

Recently, our valued community partner, First Things First, hosted the 13th Annual Celebrate the Young Child Community Event. It served as a wonderful reminder of the power of community when it comes together for children and families. We were especially honored to host this meaningful event at Calabasas School, where families, educators, and local organizations joined with a shared purpose: supporting the healthy growth and development of young children.

The event created a welcoming space for families to connect with local resources, learn about early childhood programs, and participate in fun, educational activities designed to promote learning and well-being. From interactive booths to family engagement opportunities, every aspect of the day highlighted the importance of building strong foundations during a child's earliest years.

Events like Celebrate the Young Child illustrate the significance of community partnerships in creating opportunities for success. When schools, families, and organizations work together, children benefit from stronger support systems that help them thrive both academically and socially. Early learning experiences not only prepare children for school but also help shape their confidence, curiosity, and lifelong success.

We are always excited to welcome new families into our schools and connect them with programs and services that support their children's development. Opportunities like this strengthen family engagement and reinforce our shared commitment to ensuring every child has the tools, encouragement, and community support they need to succeed.



## Celebrating Excellence at Calabasas School: Honoring Student and Staff Leaders

Calabasas School is proudly celebrating two outstanding individuals whose dedication, leadership, and commitment to excellence continue to make a lasting impact on campus. Congratulations to Lisa Madrid, who has been recognized as Rio Rico Rotary's Student of the Month, and to Mrs. Michelle Cota, who has been named Staff of the Month for her exceptional service to students and the school community.

Lisa Madrid stands out as a dedicated and hardworking student who consistently demonstrates a passion for learning and a genuine willingness to help others. She goes above and beyond to support her classmates, offering encouragement and assistance whenever needed. Her strong work ethic, positive attitude, and ability to lead by example make her a role model among her peers. Lisa's focus, kindness, and commitment to excellence truly reflect the values of Calabasas School.

Mrs. Michelle Cota, Calabasas School's SEI teacher and former Instructional Coach, continues to make a powerful difference in students' lives every day. In her role supporting English Learners, she provides intentional, high-quality instruction that strengthens both language development and academic achievement. She has created a classroom environment where students feel supported, confident, and empowered to succeed. Her dedication, compassion, and commitment to student growth make her an invaluable part of the Calabasas community.

Both Lisa and Mrs. Cota embody the essence of Calabasas School through their hard work, leadership, and dedication to helping others succeed.



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# Rio Rico Insights

## **Books, Bikes, and Belief — How Rio Rico Rotary Keeps Showing Up for Students**

For more than ten years, the Rio Rico Rotary has established itself as a steadfast and generous force in the daily operations of schools within the district. Their influence is not limited to a single program or school campus; instead, it spans every corner of the district and profoundly impacts each phase of a student's educational journey.

The Rotary's commitment to supporting literacy is where it all begins. Every year, dedicated Rotary members personally deliver dictionaries to every third-grade student across the district. However, their involvement goes far beyond simply distributing the books. They take the time to engage with the children, discussing the importance of words, encouraging curiosity, and answering questions about language. For many of these young learners, receiving their own dictionary marks the first time they own a book, igniting a passion for reading and knowledge that can last a lifetime.

The Rotary's support continues to resonate through crucial educational milestones. As seniors approach graduation in May, many take their proud steps across the stage carrying the weight of thousands of dollars in scholarships made possible through the Rotary's generous contributions. These scholarships significantly ease the transition to higher education, whether it be universities, trade schools, or community colleges. Along the way, the club recognizes outstanding achievements by honoring Students and Staff of the Month, celebrating their dedication and hard work, and fostering a sense of pride within the school community.

Moreover, the Rotary plays a vital role in nurturing a sense of community among schools. They organize family-oriented events that bring parents, teachers, and students together outside the conventional classroom setting, strengthening relationships and fostering camaraderie. In a tangible show of commitment, they offer bicycles to elementary students as rewards for good attendance and exemplary citizenship, providing not just incentives but also encouraging responsible behavior. During the holiday season, the Rotary spreads joy by organizing toy donations, ensuring that every child in the district feels valued and cherished.

District leaders often use the word "consistent" to describe the Rotary's ongoing involvement. Their contributions cannot be reduced to a one-time grant or isolated event; they represent a long-term dedication to asking, "What do your students need?" and then delivering results, whether that be in the form of books, bicycles, scholarships, recognition, or the invaluable gift of time.

The philosophy underpinning Rio Rico Rotary's investments is guided by a simple yet profound belief: schools can thrive when the community actively supports them. Their efforts do not seek to replace classroom instruction; rather, they complement and enhance the overall educational atmosphere. By uplifting morale, creating new opportunities, and instilling in students the understanding that they are supported by a network larger than the school itself, the Rotary empowers students to reach their full potential.

In an era where public education faces an array of challenges, partnerships like that of the Rio Rico Rotary make a significant difference between merely surviving the school year and feeling deeply supported and engaged in the learning process. From the excitement of students opening dictionaries for the first time, to the joy of seniors celebrating college acceptance letters, to the laughter of first-graders ringing the bells of their new bicycles, the message is resoundingly clear.

**The Rio Rico Rotary is not merely a community partner; they embody an integral part of the framework that defines success within this district. Their continuous presence in students' and schools' lives exemplifies a dedication to building a brighter future for all, and they remain committed to this mission with unwavering enthusiasm.**



**Follow us on YouTube for the latest community videos.**

Beyond the Badge

NOGALES

POLICE

# Monthly Roll Call

## “From History to Service: Nogales’ Road to 250 Celebrates Community, Commitment, & the Next Generation of Law Enforcement”

The deep toll of a bell echoed across the Nogales City Hall Plaza as families, officers, and community leaders gathered under the warm Arizona sun.

It was not the original Liberty Bell, but the traveling replica carried equal meaning for those attending the “Road to 250” event. It served as a reminder of history, resilience, and the shared responsibility of protecting the freedoms celebrated throughout the day.

Hosted by Councilwoman Liza Montiel, Road to 250 brought residents of all ages together to honor heritage, civic pride, and public service.

Children explored exhibits and posed with the towering bell while parents reflected on the upcoming 250th anniversary of the nation’s founding.

The traveling museum offered a tangible link to the past and the principles that still shape the country.

Beyond the exhibits, officers were active participants in the community. Parking Control Officers Adcock, Castillo, Beltran, and Garcia moved through the crowd, greeting families and keeping the event running smoothly. Their presence was reassuring, reflecting the evolving relationship between law enforcement and the neighborhoods they serve.

Nearby, Detective Moreno and Officer Castillo listened as a guide explained the Liberty Bell’s history. Detective Soto and Corporal Duran conducted routine security checks. Detective Lopez, Detective Rojas, and Sergeant Batriz scanned the plaza with practiced awareness. Their coordination kept the celebration safe and welcoming. For many, interacting with officers outside of emergencies fostered trust. Public safety is about presence, engagement, and connection.

Days later, that connection continued at the Southern Arizona Law Enforcement Training Center. After 24 weeks of training, a new class graduated, including Officer Abraham Hernandez. Families watched with pride as he crossed the stage and shook hands with Chief Carlos Jimenez.

The moment marked the transition from trainee to officer, from preparation to action.

The story grows with new team members like Jesus Gil, the department’s newest dispatcher. Officers are the visible face of law enforcement, yet dispatchers are critical behind the scenes. They are the first point of contact in emergencies. Gil’s arrival strengthens the department’s capacity to serve. Like Hernandez, he represents the next generation of public safety professionals.

As Nogales looks toward the nation’s 250th anniversary, these moments show what is possible when community and service come together.

For Hernandez, the shift to an active officer will bring challenges and opportunities. For Gil, the dispatch role will demand focus and resilience.

For the officers at Road to 250, building trust continues one interaction at a time.

The echo of the Liberty Bell replica may fade, but its message endures. It is a call to responsibility, unity, and service. In Nogales, that call is answered every day in the steady work of those who choose to serve.



# LET'S TALK HEALTH

## May: Mental Health Awareness Month

Each May, communities across the nation recognize Mental Health Awareness Month, a time to reflect, learn, and support one another. In a small border town like ours, where community ties run deep and neighbors look out for each other, this month carries a special meaning. It's an opportunity to remind ourselves that mental health is just as important as physical health and that no one must face their struggles alone.

Mental health challenges can affect anyone, regardless of age, background, or occupation. Stress, anxiety, depression, and trauma are more common than many realize. In border communities, unique stressors such as economic hardship, limited access to care, cultural stigma, and family separation can make these challenges even more complex. Yet, despite these obstacles, our community also holds powerful strengths, resilience, culture, and connection.

One of the most important steps in improving mental health is simply talking about it. For many, there is still a stigma attached to seeking help. People may feel embarrassed or fear being judged. But reaching out is not a sign of weakness; it is an act of courage. Whether speaking with a trusted friend, a family member, or a healthcare provider can be the first step toward healing.

Access to care can be a challenge in smaller or rural communities; however, resources are available to help bridge these gaps. Mariposa Community Health Center offers a Sliding Fee Discount Program designed to make services more affordable for individuals and families. The Eligibility & Enrollment Department can schedule appointments to complete the necessary forms and determine qualification. For those who may still face financial barriers, flexible payment plan options are also available.

Providing whole-person care remains a central priority. Throughout the region, local clinics, behavioral health providers, schools, and community organizations continue to work collaboratively to expand access, raise awareness, and support overall well-being. These collective efforts reflect a shared commitment to strengthening the health of the community.


Community members also play an essential role. Simple yet meaningful actions, such as checking in on a neighbor, offering a listening ear, sharing available resources, or first responders conducting wellness checks when requested by clinics can have a significant impact. Together, these efforts help foster a more connected, informed, and resilient community.

Mental wellness also starts with everyday habits. Taking time to rest & reset, staying active, connecting with loved ones, and practicing mindfulness can all support emotional well-being. It's okay to take a break, it's ok to ask for help, it's ok to prioritize your mental health, and "It's ok not to be ok!"

This May, let's come together as a community to raise awareness, reduce stigma, and support one another. By fostering understanding and compassion, we can create a healthier, stronger community where everyone feels seen, heard, and valued.

If you or someone you know is struggling, don't wait; help is available, and you are not alone.

**Please call the 24-Hour Crisis Line at 1-844-534-4673, Mariposa Behavioral Health Dept at 520-375-5000, Pinal Hispanic at 520-287-0015, or Intermountain Centers at 520-281-0678.**



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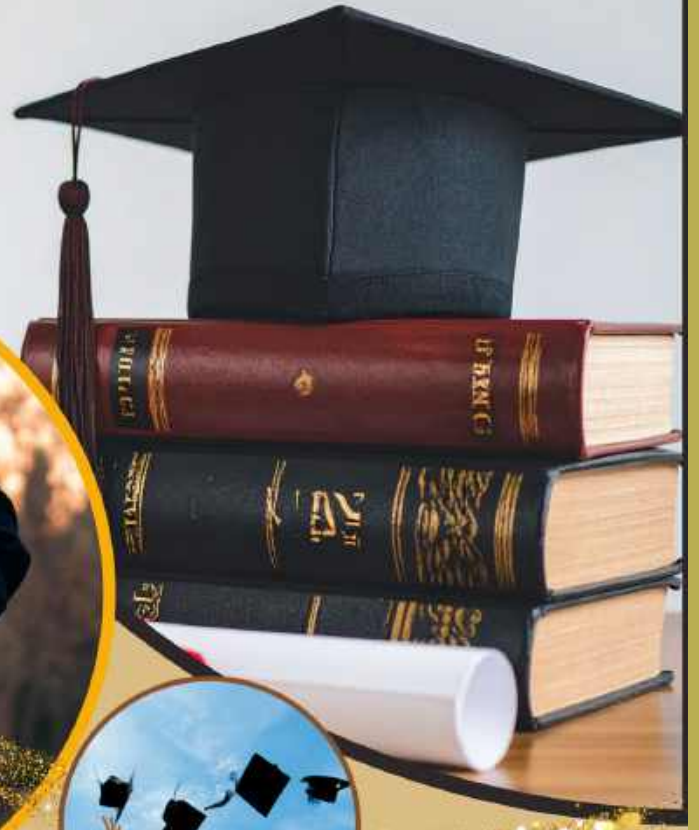
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2026



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**Santa Cruz County Sheriff's Office**  
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# Sheriff's Round-Up



Over the past month, members of the Santa Cruz County Sheriff's Office have proudly participated in several training sessions and community events.

During the month of April, we celebrate our different divisions and/or programs:

Communications Division (April 12-18, 2026)

Search and Rescue volunteer team and Law Enforcement Assist team (April 19-25, 2026)

Administrative week (April 19-25, 2026)

County elected officials and agency leaders were proud to sponsor and support the annual county employee appreciation luncheon this month.

We are very grateful to all our Sheriff's Office volunteers and employees, and to all they do for our community every day.

## Join Our Team

If you're interested in a rewarding career in law enforcement, we are currently accepting applications for the following positions:

Deputy Sheriff

Detention Officer

Dispatcher

Search & Rescue Volunteer

Law Enforcement Assist Team Volunteer

We are also actively recruiting Lateral Officers for Peace Officer, Detention Officer, and Dispatcher roles. Applications can be downloaded from the Santa Cruz County website and submitted to the Human Resources Office.

On behalf of myself and the entire administration, I extend my heartfelt appreciation to all members of our communities who help maintain public safety every day.

Sincerely,

Sheriff David Hathaway



SCCSO  
Dispatcher



Just because you don't see my face,  
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