THE WEEKLY COMMUNITY NEWS OF ASSOCIATIONS, CVBs AND HOTELS

USAE

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Destinations International (DI) held its Business Operations Summit from October 26–28 in Oklahoma City. The Business Operations Summit brings together destination organization professionals in finance, human resources, operations, and technology to strengthen the systems that drive organizational success. Pictured here: Shaun Yates (center left), Sr. Vice President, Tourism Development, Visit Oklahoma City; Christy Gillenwater (center), President & CEO, Greater Oklahoma City Chamber; Don Welsh (center right), President & CEO, DI; and members of DI's staff.

National Association of Secretaries of State Provides Election Resources

By Todd McElwee

Seeking to prepare Americans for Election Day on November 3, the National Association of Secretaries (NASS) is offering resources to answer pertinent questions, including where to vote and how votes are counted and results certified. This election year, #TrustedInfo2026 is the association's call to every voter.

Steve Hobbs, Washington Secretary of State and President of the National Association of Secretaries of State (NASS), and Michael Howe, North Dakota Secretary of State and PresidentEelect of NASS, wrote: "Americans will disagree about candidates, policies and politics. Vigorous debate is an essential feature of our democratic system. But wherever they live and whichever candidates they support, voters deserve accurate information about how to participate in our elections."

#TrustedInfo is a nonpartisan voter

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Airbnb Updated Guidelines Limit Allowable Chores

By Jordan Bradley

International short-term rental company Airbnb updated its guidelines for hosts—and guests are bound to be happy.

With its new guidelines, hosts will no longer be allowed to demand guests change sheets, wash dishes or take out the trash as they leave the property after their stay completes. The new guidelines go into effect on November 20.

The new policy was established in response to years of guest complaints about what they said were outlandish and unreasonable expectations. Many complaints from guests note that Airbnb hosts regularly charge cleaning fees, but they also ask guests to do a significant portion of the cleaning before they check out.

The new policy allows hosts to make "reasonable requests" of guests instead, Airbnb said.

In recent years, Airbnb hosts have come under social media fire for their checkout requirements.

A couple in their twenties who host an Airbnb unit in Glennville, Georgia, went viral in late July when they posted a video inspecting their Airbnb unit after a guest checked out. The pair

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Hilton Unveils New Business Travel Tools

By Jordan Bradley

Hilton is making it easier for businesses to book, modify and manage hotel reservations on behalf of their company's travelers with updates to its Hilton for Business program.

Hilton for Business is a free global travel program for small- and medium-sized companies (SMBs). On October 22, Hilton shared updates and new tools available through the program.

With the new iteration of the program, Hilton for Business now offers members the ability to book, modify, or manage a hotel reservation on behalf of another traveler within their organization "without needing separate logins or workarounds"; view shared reservations; and see which employees are staying at a Hilton hotel all through "one single, end-to-end" digital platform.

"Extending beyond the point of booking, business owners and administrators are now able to support travelers throughout the lifecycle of a trip, reducing

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Destinations International, Tourism Industry Association of Canada Announce Partnership

By Jonathan Trager

Destinations International (DI) and the Tourism Industry Association of Canada (TIAC) have announced a new strategic partnership aimed at strengthening collaboration and advocacy for Canada's destination organization sector.

The partnership is expected to strengthen industry advocacy by supporting a coordinated approach to communicating the economic, social, and community benefits of the visitor economy to policymakers and other stakeholders. The initiative was announced during DI's Advocacy & Action: The Destination Impact Event, which took place October 20–22 in Ottawa, Ontario.

"Canada is an important and growing part of the

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NEWS

ASAE Research Foundation Opens Scholarship Application Period

By Todd McElwee

Encouraging industry members to find a scholarship that's right for them, the ASAE Research Foundation has opened the application period for the AMC Leaders Scholarship, NextGen Scholarship and John H. Graham IV Fund.

"ASAE Research Foundation Scholarships give association professionals the chance to grow, lead, and make a lasting impact on the association community," the organization said. "These scholarships offer more than financial support; they're a stepping stone to career-building opportunities, mentorship, and meaningful connections that will shape your professional path."

The AMC Leaders Scholarship was created for professionals at Association Management Companies to advance their leadership skills and attend ASAE's in-person events.

The NextGen Scholarship awards up to $3,000 awarded to three association young professionals to support career development.

The John H. Graham IV Fund provides registration for ASAE's ReadyMe Program, including virtual and in-person training that builds leadership and career management skills.

"Whether you want to sharpen your leadership skills, expand your network, or reach your next career milestone, these scholarships can help you get there," the foundation said.

November 8 is the deadline to apply. The ASAE Research Foundation is encouraging those not applying this year to pass along this opportunity along within their professional networks.

Find more information here.

DI Canada

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DI community, and this partnership reflects our shared commitment to supporting the people and organizations that drive its visitor economy," said Don Welsh, President & CEO of DI. "By combining TIAC's strong national advocacy voice with DI's global research, resources and professional development expertise, we can better support Canadian destination organizations, strengthen industry collaboration and demonstrate the essential role tourism plays in communities across the country."

The Canadian Destinations Leadership Council (CDLC), which consists of representatives of DI's 70+ Canadian destination organization members, played a key role in shaping and enabling the partnership. The initiative addresses urgent advocacy issues identified and prioritized by the CDLC.

"Canada's destination organizations play a vital role in driving economic opportunity, supporting local businesses and enhancing quality of life in our communities," said Nancy Small, CDME, CEO of Tourism Richmond and CDLC Co-Chair. "This partnership and its resulting collaboration will continue to highlight destination organizations' perspectives and priorities in national tourism discussions. By bringing together the collective expertise and influence of DI and TIAC, we can strengthen our advocacy efforts and help build a more resilient and competitive visitor economy across Canada."

"When tourism leaders pull in the same direction, the whole sector moves faster," said Sébastien Benedict, President & CEO of TIAC.

The partnership will elevate the collective voice of destination organizations during TIAC's annual Hill Days and other advocacy initiatives throughout the year. DI and TIAC will also coordinate to release a series of messaging resources articulating the important role destination organizations play in advancing the travel and tourism industry and driving economic and social impact in communities across Canada.

The announcement comes as Canada's visitor economy navigates an increasingly complex environment shaped by economic uncertainty, changing traveler expectations, workforce pressures, and evolving relationships between tourism, government, and local communities. These challenges "underscore the importance of stronger partnerships and a unified approach to advancing the visitor economy's contributions to Canadian communities," according to DI.

"When tourism leaders pull in the same direction, the whole sector moves faster," said Sébastien Benedict, President & CEO of TIAC. "This partnership is about unity of purpose: tourism creates jobs, draws investment and connects Canada to the world, and its potential is far from reached. By advocating together for the measures that unlock growth, we can help our industry deliver lasting value for the country and Canadians."

Hilton

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the time spent managing travel while giving companies greater oversight of employee trips," Hilton said.

Outside of the recent updates, Hilton said it will continue to roll out improvements and enhancements "in a series of digital solutions," including the ability to book for travelers in your company regardless of their Hilton for Business membership status, new travel coordinator and travel administrator options so that businesses can designate an employee to manage travel "without requiring owner-level access," and an enhanced digital dashboard.

The updates and changes to the program were directly influenced by member feedback, Hilton said.

Frank Passante, SVP and global head of sales and HRCC at Hilton, said "Hilton for Business members have been clear about what would make the program work even harder for them."

"These new tools are a direct result of that feedback, especially the ability to book on behalf of someone else, which was the most requested capability," Passante said. "Our teams are acting quickly to deliver a full set of enhancements that provide a better digital experience and make managing business travel simpler for those who do it every day."

Find more information about Hilton for Business here.

Judge Sides with Town in Colorado Hotel Lawsuit

By Jordan Bradley

A judge in Ouray County, Colorado, has sided with the town of Ridgway after it sued a local hotel for leasing all of its guest rooms to construction workers employed at a neighboring town's forthcoming Four Seasons Resort.

The late-October filing from Ouray Country District Court Judge D. Cory Jackson grants a preliminary injunction that blocks a rental agreement between the owner of the MTN Lodge, Ridgway Suites LLC, and developer Merrimac Ventures. Ridgway city officials claimed the agreement violated municipal code.

Merrimac is in the process of developing the Four Seasons Resorts and Residences Telluride in Mountain Village, Colorado. When complete, the hotel is expected to feature 52 guest rooms, 43 one-bedroom to five-bedroom hotel residences and 26 private residences. The hotel broke ground last September.

According to the *Colorado Sun*, Florida-based Merrimac has purchased and leased several hotels and cabins in the area surrounding the project, but nearby communities are unhappy with the arrangement.

Ridgway officials sued the 52-guest-room MTN Lodge in March, seeking to end the contract and alleging that while municipal code allowed for short-term stays in the city's hotels for up to 30 days, the contract between Merrimac and MTN Lodge constituted a long-term rental contract.

"The new use is inconsistent with the land use code and the injunction therefore works to serve the existing understanding of the code," Jackson said in the ruling, according to the *Colorado Sun*.

Ridgway Suites purchased the hotel in 2021 and argues that without the contract with Merrimac, the hotel will need to lay off employees and possibly close. In a statement to the *Sun*, however, owners said they are complying with Jackson's injunction despite their disappointment.

HOTS

HOTS Turkey Prep… If you're like HOTS and this is the first year you'll be stuffin' the turkey on Thanksgiving, head over to the National Turkey Federation's website to learn everything there is to know about cooking a turkey. The NTF's Thanksgiving 101 page walks readers through every step of cooking a turkey, and even breaks recipes down into different options, depending on number of guests that will be served. You can learn to cook a whole turkey through the "Going Whole Bird" guide or tackle turkey cuts with "Small Scale, Big Flavor." For the air fry enthusiast among us, NTF has a cooking guide for that too. There are guides to spatchcocking, smoking, smoking, and frying your turkey, for monitoring proper cooking temperatures and carving the turkey; there are guides for making stuffing—and so much more! There is even a guide for the best ways to enjoy your leftover turkey. Maybe after inhaling NTF's comprehensive turkey guide, HOTS won't feel intimidated to put the bird in the oven this year.

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HOT Walkin' the Dog… A tech startup in San Francisco is hiring for dog walkers—but this job isn't just any dog walking role. According to Yahoo! Tech, tech company Dimensional promoted a since-deleted job listing seeking people to walk a robotic dog for $20 an hour. "The listing asked operators to walk a roughly $2,000 Unitree robot dog through city streets for four to six hours," Yahoo! Tech reported. It sounds simple—if a bit odd, so it comes as no surprise that there was a catch. "The machine weighed about 33 pounds," Yahoo! Tech said. "If it overheated and stopped mid-route, the operator was expected to carry it back to Dimensional's office." Robo-dog walkers were able to control the product through a handheld remote or a mobile app. The endeavor was part of Dimensional's efforts to improve autonomous navigation for the robo-dog. HOTS wonders how long it will be before these digital dogs will be unleashed.

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NRF Finds More Than $1 Trillion Will Be Spent During Holiday Season

By Todd McElwee

More than a trillion dollars in retail sales are expected this holiday season, according to the National Retail Federation (NRF).

The NRF's annual holiday forecast predicts retail sales in November and December will grow 4.2% over 2025, translating to a total spending of $1.013 trillion. Last year's holiday sales rose 3.1% over 2024, totaling $972 billion.

"This year's forecast reflects our confidence that consumers will prioritize the holiday season even as they remain mindful of their budgets," said Matthew Shay, President & CEO, NRF. "Retailers are prepared to meet that demand with competitive prices, value and choices for every budget."

"Retailers are prepared to meet that demand with competitive prices, value and choices for every budget."

NRF said retailers are hiring seasonal workers to meet consumer demand this holiday season, with between 325,000 and 375,000 to be brought on board. That falls in line with last year's estimated 356,000 seasonal jobs. NRF added that, similar to last year, retailers remain cautious amid higher gas prices, inflation, higher interest rates and elevated consumer debt, resulting in a measured approach to seasonal hiring.

The holiday forecast is based on economic modeling using various key economic indicators, including consumer spending, disposable personal income, employment, wages, inflation and previous monthly retail sales releases. NRF's calculation excludes automobile dealers, gasoline stations and restaurants. NRF defines the holiday season as November 1 through December 31. Sources include the U.S. Census Bureau, NRF and Oxford Economics.

Mark Mathews, NRF Chief Economist and Executive Director of Research, said: "We head into the holiday season with strong spending momentum, as consumers remain the bright spot in the economy. At the same time, inflation, rising gas prices and pressure on household spending will affect consumers differently across income groups."

NASS Resources

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education initiative designed with the goal of having voters direct questions to their state and local election officials. This year, #TrustedInfo2026 encourages voters to seek accurate, reliable and timely information directly from the officials responsible for administering elections in their communities.

"This effort is especially important today, as voters encounter election information from many different sources and may not know which sources are reliable," NASS said. "Even information shared with the best of intentions may be inaccurate, incomplete or out of date—or it may only apply in another state. In a fast-moving information environment, inaccurate information can spread widely before it is corrected. Voters should not have to sort through that confusion on their own."

CanIVote.org is NASS's nonpartisan voter information website. It connects voters directly to their official state election websites and state-specific resources on polling places, voting, and other election information.

"NASS members come from every region of the country, operate under different state laws and do not always agree on matters of public policy. But as chief election officials of our respective states, we share a fundamental responsibility: to administer elections fairly and impartially and to serve every eligible voter," said Hobbs and Howe. "That commitment is at the heart of #TrustedInfo2026. We want voters to know that regardless of who they vote for or where they stand on the issues, they can turn to election officials for authoritative, accurate information about elections."

Find more information here.

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NEWS

Cayti Stein Appointed as VP at Visit Denver

By Jonathan Trager

Cayti Stein will join Visit Denver in late November as the organization's newly named Vice President & Chief Partnership and Business Development Officer.

At Visit Denver, Stein will guide partnerships and partner engagement, sponsorships, advertising and co-op programs and industry events. She'll also provide strategic oversight for the Visit Denver Foundation, including its tourism education and workforce development initiatives.

Stein will join the destination organization after nearly eight years working at the Denver Metro Chamber of Commerce, where she most recently served as senior vice president of customer experience.

"Tourism is one of Denver's most powerful economic engines, and Visit Denver is the innovative team that drives it. I'm thrilled to be part of it," said Stein. "I can't wait to work with Visit Denver's partners and help build lasting legacies in the hospitality community through the Foundation."

Born in Colorado, Stein earned degrees in international affairs and Russian studies from the University of Colorado Boulder. She has spent most of her career in economic development, including as executive director of the U.S.-Russia Chamber of Commerce.

While at the Denver Metro Chamber of Commerce, Stein led investor relations, sales, events and marketing, most recently as senior vice president of customer experience. Stein thanked J. J. Ament, President & CEO of the Denver Metro Chamber of Commerce, for "his steady vision and guidance, both at the Chamber and throughout my career."

"Cayti understands how to build relationships that create value for partners and the broader community," said Visit Denver President & CEO Richard Scharf. "Her experience across sales, marketing, events and economic development will help us deepen engagement with Denver's tourism and hospitality industry and develop new opportunities to support our work."



Stein lives in Golden, Colorado, with her husband, Mike, their children, Clark and Shelby, and their dog, Petey.

Holly Ransom Back as Convening Leaders Main Stage Host

By Todd McElwee

Holly Ransom, CEO of Emergent Global, is returning as Main Stage Host for Convening Leaders 2027 (CL27), January 10–13, at the Miami Beach Convention Center.

Ransom has partnered with PCMA for eight years. The organization heralded her deep knowledge of the global business events community and ability to connect themes across speakers and sessions into meaningful narratives.

"Convening Leaders has never felt like just another event to me," said Ransom. "It is a community of people who bring the world together and who push one another to lead better. Sitting down with exceptional leaders in January is always a welcome and exciting opportunity, and I can't wait to share those conversations with this amazing global community."

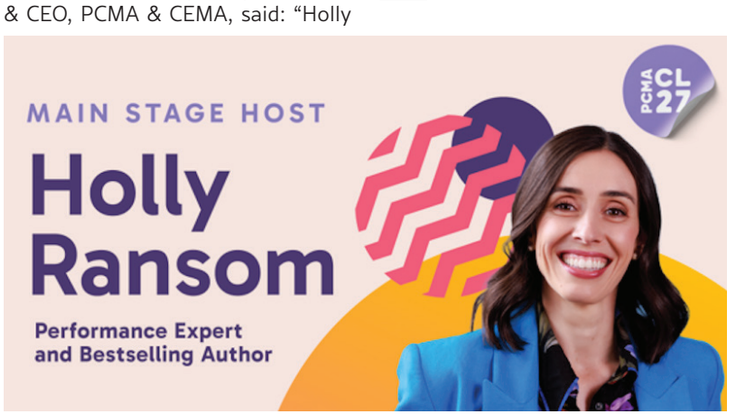
At Convening Leaders, Ransom has piloted conversations with Tabitha Brown, Brené Brown, Amal Clooney, President Bill Clinton and 67th Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, and Trevor Noah.

Sherrif Karamat, CAE, President & CEO, PCMA & CEMA, said: "Holly knows our community's history, not just a single year's run sheet. That continuity is worth more than any single great performance, and it's the reason we continue to engage Holly, year after year. Her ability to connect people and ideas makes her a natural partner in PCMA's mission to drive social and economic progress through business events."

As CEO of Emergent Global, Ransom advises Fortune 500 companies, governments, sports club and brands such as Microsoft, Virgin and P&G on building future-ready teams and navigating disruption. She's conversed with President Barack Obama and Sir Richard Branson and has spoken to audiences in more than 25 countries.

Ransom is a Fulbright Scholar, graduate of Harvard Kennedy School and the bestselling author of *The Leading Edge*. She co-chaired the G20 Youth Summit in 2014 and the United Nations Coalition of Young Women Entrepreneurs in 2016. She became the youngest director ever appointed to an Australian Football League club board with Port Adelaide.

Find more on Convening Leaders here.



Airbnb

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commented on everything from how clean the toilet was to noting what snacks had been eaten and that the guests had moved the ottoman closer to the couch. Their post on TikTok was ridiculed by other creators and commenters for their extreme attention to detail.

In an October 20 announcement, Airbnb cited as a general example that hosts will not be able to ask guests to wash and put away their dirty dishes. However, hosts can ask that guests put the dirty dishes in the sink. Airbnb is also banning requests for guests to remove sheets from the bed or to start a load of laundry, "but you can ask them to gather used towels," Airbnb said.

"When adding a request, remember that most guests want to avoid unexpected chores," Airbnb said. "Asking them to do things a cleaner should handle can negatively affect their stay and your reviews."

More than 21,500 hosts have taken to signing a change.org petition to protest the change in policy.

"We believe this policy is unreasonable, unfair to hosts and fundamentally misunderstands the nature of self-catering accommodation," the petition said. "We are calling on Airbnb to reverse this restriction and recognise the difference between unreasonable cleaning demands and ordinary household responsibilities."

Hosts note that Airbnb listings that offer entire houses are often booked by larger families and guests will use kitchens to the fullest extent.

"When guests cook a meal, is it really unreasonable to expect them to wash the dishes they have used? When guests generate household waste, is it unreasonable to expect them to put it in the bins provided? We believe the answer to both questions is a resounding no," the petition says. "These are not professional cleaning duties. They are ordinary aspects of living responsibly in somebody else's property."

Under the new guidelines, Airbnb will make it easier for guests to find a property's checkout requests while booking a stay. For hosts, the new policies will evaluate a property's checkout requests and alert a host to a policy that doesn't meet Airbnb guidelines.

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Industry Movers



Mark Colson will become President & CEO of The American Trucking Associations (ATA) on December 1. Colson has served as President & CEO of the Alabama Trucking Association since 2019. Before joining that association, he held leadership roles at the Business Council of Alabama, including interim president, senior vice president of governmental affairs, and chief of staff. ATA Federation service includes roles on ATA's Strategic Priorities Committee.



Charles H. Jeffers II has been named Interim Executive Director of the National Council on Problem Gambling (NCPG), effective immediately. He is the Founder and Principal Consultant of The Jeffers Group, a consulting firm specializing in interim executive leadership, governance, strategic operations, and organizational culture. Jeffers has served as interim executive director of the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) and was CEO of the Bermuda Tourism Authority.



Carissa Giliam has been promoted to General Manager of The Wildbirch Hotel. Located in Anchorage, the hotel is Alaska's first JdV by Hyatt property. She steps into the role having served as director of sales and commercial affairs since 2025. Giliam grew up in her family's locally owned hotel company, Aspen Hotels. She was General Manager of the Hilton Anchorage and Opening GM of the Aloft Anchorage.



Joe Alegre is now the Director of Sales & Marketing at the Grand Hyatt Indian Wells Resort & Villas. He has more than 30 years of hospitality experience, 25 of those years with Hyatt. Alegre has occupied various sales and management roles in San Jose, Santa Clara, Bellevue, and Newport Beach. Most recently, he was the director of sales, events & marketing at Hyatt Regency Phoenix.

See more Industry Movers

Melissa Callum Tapped as Executive Director of PHL Life Sciences

By Jonathan Trager

Melissa Callum has been named Executive Director of PHL Life Sciences, a business division of the Philadelphia CVB (PHLCVB), playing an integral leadership role in the promotion of Philadelphia as a life sciences business destination.

Prior to joining the PHLCVB, Callum spent more than a decade with Life Sciences Pennsylvania, where she most recently served as vice president of strategic initiatives. Life sciences meetings and conventions make up on average more than 45% of business booked by PHLCVB annually.

"I'm eager to build new relationships, explore opportunities for growth and help showcase what sets Philadelphia apart as a leading life sciences destination in the United States," said Callum. "I'm especially looking forward to working at the intersection of life sciences, business development, and hospitality to bring people together and create meaningful opportunities for the region."



Callum joins the PHLCVB team following the retirement of longtime executive director, Bonnie Grant, who led PHL Life Sciences for nearly two decades. She also brings a strong foundation in event management, having previously worked with Albrecht Events and served in leadership roles with the International Live Events Association (ILEA) Greater Philadelphia Chapter, including as chapter president.

Callum holds a bachelor's degree in communications studies and organizational studies from Bloomsburg University and has completed Temple University's Event Leadership Executive Certification Program.

"Melissa is the kind of strategic, forward-thinking, and collaborative leader needed for this role, given the size and scope of our current life sciences business," said Maria Grasso, Chief Sales Officer at PHLCVB. "Philadelphia is a global leader in cell and gene therapy and is home to some of the world's premier academic medical centers, research institutes, and universities. There is incredible opportunity to bring even more national and international life sciences meetings and conventions to Philadelphia, and Melissa's experience in building industry relationships and creating growth opportunities will be a pivotal for PHL Life Sciences in the years to come."

CVB Update

Visit Annapolis & Anne Arundel County on October 27 celebrated the official opening of The Welcome Center by Visit Annapolis & Anne Arundel County at Baltimore's **BWI Thurgood Marshall Airport**.

The 500-square-foot space, located in Terminal A baggage claim, features artwork from Anne Arundel County artists, 24-hour interactive destination information kiosks with itinerary integration, and a dedicated area where visitors can connect one-on-one with destination experience associates.

Features include:

• Personalized assistance from destination experience associates, available daily from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.

• A 24/7 interactive destination information kiosk offering trip-planning resources, maps, attractions, accommodations, dining recommendations, and multilingual support.

• Three digital displays showcasing destination content and partner messaging.

• Transportation information and guidance, including airport shuttles, public transit, rideshare services, taxis, MARC and Amtrak connections, and hotel transportation.

• Visitor information displays featuring local attractions, businesses, experiences, and group welcome opportunities.

"A strong first impression can shape an entire trip," said Kristen Pironis, CEO of Visit Annapolis & Anne Arundel County. "The Welcome Center gives us an opportunity to connect travelers with the people, places, and experiences that make Maryland distinctive from the moment they arrive. It reflects years of collaboration with BWI Marshall Airport, state leaders, elected officials, and tourism partners—and a shared commitment to helping visitors discover more of Maryland."

New Orleans Ernest N. Morial Convention Center Chief Administrative Officer **Alita Caparotta** has been named to the 2026 *New Orleans CityBusiness* "Power 50" list, which recognizes 50 of the region's most influential business leaders for their leadership, accomplishments, and contributions to the Greater New Orleans business community. Caparotta has played an instrumental role in advancing the Convention Center's Capital Improvement Plan,

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Women Leading the Way

Leslee Oden Has Learned to Lead with Listening

By Jordan Bradley

If you'd asked 23-year-old Leslee Oden if the role of President and CEO of the National Turkey Federation (NTF) was on her career path, the answer would've been "probably not," she told *USAE*.

And yet, Oden, President and CEO of the org since 2024, has been with NTF for a majority of her professional career, first joining the org as an intern in July 2009.

So what made her stay?

The people in the industry and at NTF, for one.

"I knew immediately when I arrived how incredible the organization was," Oden said, and from the people that make up NTF's membership to her coworkers in the office, there was love in the org for Oden.

Beyond that, Oden possesses a passion for the poultry industry that goes deeper than her schooling in Texas A&M's poultry sciences program, reaching down to her roots growing up in rural Texas where poultry farming is a major source of stability and financial security.

Oden is from Leona, Texas, a small east Texas town with a population of less than 150 people and a strong foothold in the poultry industry. She began showing Broiler chickens (the quintessential chicken, complete with white feathers and bright red combs and wattles adorning their heads) at age 9, continuing through her high school career, as well. She was encouraged by a mentor to pursue a degree in poultry sciences and her lifelong love for the Aggies led her to Texas A&M, where she received both her bachelor's and master's degrees.

After she defended her master's thesis at Texas A&M, Oden looked to her next move and found the internship at NTF, during which time, she fell in love with the city of Washington, D.C.

After she defended her master's thesis at Texas A&M, Oden looked to her next move and found the internship at NTF, during which time, she fell in love with the city of Washington, D.C.

"I moved up here in what was supposed to be a two-month stint with NTF, and I have now been in Washington, D.C., for over 17 and a half years," Oden said.

For most of that time, Oden worked as a lobbyist, telling the stories of and advocating for NTF membership. But when NTF's former president and CEO, Joel Brandenberger, announced in 2024 his retirement after 17 years leading the organization, Oden said she "really looked at myself and said, 'There's no other person than can do this job but me.'"

Stepping into the role, Oden had around 15 years of experience behind her, "so I knew the organization structure and dynamics, and I knew there were some very quick things that I could come in and naturally be able to influence some change within the organization."

Oden describes herself as a servant leader: "I'm not going to ask you do something that I haven't done, or I'm not willing to do myself, and I've carried that in all facets of my career," she said, but because of her previous role as a lobbyist for NTF, a big priority for Oden was learning how to listen.

"The lobbyist is the person that's got to sell all the things and tell you what's going on," Oden said. "You're the talker. I've learned in this job that you've got to be the listener more than anything and really take time to step back and really analyze from every viewpoint."

Shifting her perspective into the role of leadership, Oden is regularly zooming out for the big industry picture and looking forward to future priorities.

With an increasing demand for turkey products due to its health benefits, Oden and her team don't take it for granted that their members are feeding not only Americans, but international communities as well with their products.

Major priorities for NTF and its membership include supporting animal health initiatives through federal partnerships.

"We have seen an overall decline in our industry over the amount of pounds [produced] and that has been directly due to the animal health challenges with highly pathogenic avian influenza and other viruses that have impacted our flocks," Oden said. "But we are working to try and find solutions for our growers, for our membership, to be able to strategically grow back and be the fourth largest protein that we continue to be."

According to Oden, the United States "is the gold standard" in food supply safety for poultry "and we take that so incredibly seriously," with NTF making sure that membership have the latest information in science and federal regulations.

And of course, November "is our Super Bowl," Oden said. With Thanksgiving just around the corner, she said, this is the time of year when Americans think the most about turkey "and we don't take that lightly."



The NTF helps to facilitate the annual National Thanksgiving Turkey Presentation at the White House each year.

"It's a really fun opportunity for us to have some one-on-one time with the President of the United States and be that global stage and that global presence of the entire industry, where we're going to show off the hard work that all of our farmers and processors do on an everyday basis to deliver to consumers—not only here domestically, but aboard," Oden said.

The event started in 1947 and has continued through 15 successive administrations, Oden said, but few may know that it wasn't until the early 1990s when President George H. W. Bush began to formally pardon the turkeys presented at the event.

"Prior to that, I think they did receive a reprieve from the Thanksgiving table, but also some of them were eaten in the early '70s and '80s," Oden said. "So obviously the presentation has evolved significantly over time."

Oden has participated in 15 turkey pardons in some capacity, with this year's event being her 16th. She told *USAE* that every year, the lucky turkeys presented for pardon travel to Washington, D.C., and are treated to an overnight stay in five-star hotel accommodations at the Willard Intercontinental hotel. Oden has done everything from being the lead in planning the event to "just helping spread the shavings in the hotel room and picking up the trash," she said.

This year is special, Oden said, as she and NTF's first female Chair of the board, Christy Puffenbarger, VP of Technical Services at Aviagen Turkeys, will present the birds for pardon at this year's event.

"It's an incredible honor to get to be someone that helps facilitate it because of the national and global scale that it it," Oden said. She added that "it's been really unique for myself, to be able to help guide [Puffenbarger] in the process and have another female in leadership being able to experience it."

The NTF also publishes a wide variety of turkey dish recipes. Whether you're a first-timer or a seasoned Thanksgiving host, Oden encourages cooks of all skills to head over to eatturkey.org to find a recipe to try this year.

NEWS

Rashmi Airan Bringing Her Story to Holiday Showcase

By Todd McElwee

Exploring choices, mistakes, pressure, resiliency and legacy, Rashmi Airan, CEO, Ethics Integrated, will appear during both days of Association Forum's Holiday Showcase 2026: ICONIC at McCormick Place Chicago.

On December 2, she will facilitate, "CEOnly Live: RISE Through It – Leading Through Uncertainty," before delivering the brunch keynote, "Iconic Leadership: The Decision That Defines Your Legacy," the following day.

Association Forum said her message aligns directly to the event's ICONIC theme.

"Traditionally, it's very easy to think that there's one momentous thing that happened that made somebody an iconic leader. I actually believe that it's not that," Airan told Association Forum. "I believe that iconic leaders are built in the everyday, moment-by-moment decisions that we make."

Airan recently connected with Association Forum's Milana Katic, Manager, Marketing & Membership, to share her story and provide some insights into her message.

A first-generation Indian American, Airan attended the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, worked on Wall Street. After completing Columbia Law School, she set up a real estate law practice in Miami.

"She believed success was the way to honor the sacrifices her parents made for their family," the Association Forum piece said.

By 2007, Airan was operating at what she called "physically frantic" pace. In addition to the pressure of overseeing her business, there were struggles at home, including feeling guilty about not being able to spend more time with her young kids.

Airan met a real estate developer who she believed could right the ship.

"If I could land one big client, I could have financial stability," she told Katic. "I told myself a story that if I don't land this client, I can't live my life."

Unfortunately, that client proved poisonous. Years later, Airan was indicted for bank fraud and served six months in federal prison. She lost her law license, money, marriage, and freedom.

"But I didn't lose me," she said. "If you have the belief and faith that there's a light at the other side, [you can] take a spoon and start chipping away at the mountain. You'll find a tunnel, and you'll find the light."

Association Forum said Airan has turned her life's low point into a mission to inspire others.

"CEOnly Live: RISE Through It – Leading Through Uncertainty" is an exclusive session assembling association leaders for engaging discussions, shared insights, and valuable connections.

"Uncertainty tests more than strategy," Association Forum said. "It tests our instincts, resilience, and the stories we tell ourselves when the path forward is unclear. In this special CEOnly Live experience, Rashmi Airan invites CEOs to step away from the noise and examine how they respond to pressure, disruption, and change."

In her brunch keynote, Airan will trace how ordinary choices under pressure become the walls that define a career. Airan will share her story and the "Clarity Loop," which she describes as a framework developed to help individuals and leaders examine their thinking before making consequential choices.

Find more information on Holiday Showcase here.



CVB Update

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Omni headquarters hotel, and River District development, providing the financial expertise and strategic leadership that help turn the organization's long-term vision into tangible progress.

"Alita's strategic approach, financial acumen, and commitment to our team have helped us seize opportunities, overcome threats and move our major projects forward, making a foundational impact on our organization," said Jim Cook, President & CEO of the New Orleans Ernest N. Morial Convention Center. "Her daily leadership and dedication to our mission have strengthened the Convention Center at every level. Just as important is the trust she has built with our partners and stakeholders, which continues to position us for long-term success and create opportunities for the region we serve."



Alita Caparotta



On October 28, Metro NYSAE hosted the Synergy Awards breakfast at ICSC headquarters in New York City. Lifetime Achievement honors were presented to Michael Weamer, President & CEO, Marfan Foundation. Shown here (left to right): Excellence in Educational Programming honoree, Kaleigh White Smolinski, PhD, CAE Director, Professional Development, MISBO; Chief Executive of the Year, Michelle Jackson, Executive Director, Human Services Council of New York; Rising Star recipient, Kristin Allgaier, Senior Associate, Conferences & Events, SIFMA; Excellence in Membership honoree Maria Ungaro, Senior Vice President, Membership & Partner Relations, Licensing International; Public Affairs & Advocacy Impact recipient, Melissa Barbour, CAE, Assistant Director, Mechanical Contractors Association of New York; Inclusive Leadership honoree Danette Leighton, CEO, Women's Sports Foundation; Weamer, and Meetings Professional of the Year, Christabelle Flanhardt, Vice President, Event Operations, ICSC.

Sponsored Content

Destination Z: How To Engage Your Gen-Z Attendees in New Jersey

In the United States, Generation Z employees make up over 20% of the workforce. By 2030, that number is projected to reach more than 30%. To ensure your next conference, meeting or event is not only well attended by, but also engaging to this critical audience, you need to carefully consider the venue, team building activities, opportunities for downtime and dining experiences. Discover how New Jersey checks every box in appealing to Gen-Z.

Standout Venues

Set aside the standard (and expected) conference hotel and liven up your group's setting with something far from traditional. Taking this experiential approach to your venue selection is highly effective in attracting and engaging Gen-Z attendees.

Let the salty ocean air invigorate their creativity at The Reeds at Shelter Haven, a boutique resort steps from the beach in Stone Harbor. Or in The Peninsula, a lovingly renovated circa-1854 mansion and carriage house located in Cape May Court House, a coastal destination nestled into the tip of New Jersey's Southern Shore Region.

Fire up the locomotive for their ingenuity at Northlandz, a facility in Flemington that maintains the Guinness World Record for the longest small-scale model railway track. Travel back to the 1800s, when the local blacksmith, woodworker and basket weaver honed their craft just down the street at Historic Cold Spring Village in Cape May. Your group will happily raise a stein to their collective effort at Departed Soles Brewing Company, Jersey City's first post-Prohibition microbrewery.

Winning Team Building

Ignite the spirit of friendly competition among your Gen-Z attendees in the Topgolf Swing Suite at iPlay America in Freehold. Encourage an immersive wellness journey at Crystal Springs Resort, a luxury property in Hamburg. This mountain resort offers an Inspiration Series Teambuilding collection which includes Appalachian Trail Hikes, Mindful Meditations, Forest Bathing, Goat Yoga, Sustainable Farm Tours, Foraging with the Botanical Hiker and more.

Uplifting Downtime

Shine a spotlight on shared cultural experiences with live entertainment at Mayo Performing Arts Center in Morristown. Take your team out to the game and score big at TD Bank Ballpark in Bridgewater. Bring them across the finish line for a stunning victory at Meadowlands Racetrack in East Rutherford.



Willow Creek Winery, West Cape May, NJ



Jockey Hollow National Historical Park, Morristown, NJ

Let them spend a day at American Dream, also in East Rutherford. Top attractions at this mega entertainment and shopping complex include Big Snow, North America's first-and-only indoor, real-snow, year-round ski and snow resort; Skudin Surf, an indoor wave pool where attendees can learn how to hang ten; The Messi Experience, which invites soccer enthusiasts to test their skills in AI-powered challenges; the New Jersey Hall of Fame, where your attendees can karaoke with celebrity holograms, visit space with Buzz Aldrin and so much more.

Write-Home-About Dining

With Generation Z, a typical group catering event just won't do. As the one-and-only Garden State, New Jersey's farm-to-table fare is well beyond compare. Your attendees can feast fabulously on chef-driven menus at Ninety Acres in Peapack, Agricola Eatery in Princeton, Brick Farm Tavern in Hopewell, Heirloom Kitchen in Old Bridge, Beach Plum Farm in Cape May and other innovative eateries where the food on the plate comes straight from nearby farms, pastures and orchards.

Treat them to a culinary tour around the world without ever crossing a border. New Jersey's extensive collection of gastronome-approved global cuisine includes Portuguese, Spanish, Brazilian, Indian and other international restaurants. And make sure they don't miss out on the state's famed diner culture. Recommend the Disco Fries — it's a local comfort food classic your attendees simply must taste before heading home.

When it comes time to raise a glass, your attendees can sip and savor varied varietals at Renault Winery in Egg Harbor City, Beneduce Vineyards in Pittstown, Willow Creek Winery & Farm in Cape May and Hawk Haven Vineyard & Winery in Rio Grande plus other award-winning wineries and vineyards spanning every region of the state.

New Jersey offers planners a tremendous logistical perk as well, thanks to its strategic location. This perfectly situated state is conveniently accessible by car for a large swath of the most populated areas of the United States — and just a flight away for the rest, thanks to several major airports serving the region. Upon arrival, getting your attendees from one destination to another is just as simple when you utilize New Jersey's extensive network of highways and its thriving public transportation system.

Make your next gathering one that inspires and engages Gen-Z attendees to their core. Start planning all the details today at VisitNJ.org/Meetings.