

**MEDIA RELEASE**  
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## **NUCA Concludes 2026 Convention With Thrilling Championship** *Second Annual NEOC Highlights Operator Skills and Introduces Young Adults to Underground Construction Careers Through Goodwill Partnership*

(Fairfax, Va.) – The National Utility Contractors Association (NUCA) wrapped up its 2026 National Convention in Tucson, Arizona, on Friday, February 13, 2026, with the second annual National Equipment Operator Championship (NEOC). This exciting competition showcased the precision, skill, and talent of the industry's top equipment operators while raising awareness about the specialized expertise required in underground utility construction and related fields.

"By showcasing real-world skills and inviting young adults from Goodwill's and Stay Positive Safety Solutions' reentry program to participate, the NEOC helps build awareness of the rewarding careers in underground construction while addressing workforce needs through practical, exciting and safe introductions to the trades," said **Ed DeNeale**, Vice President of Safety and Education, NUCA

Sponsored by NUCA National Partner U.S. Pipe, the NEOC awarded a top prize of \$5,000 along with national bragging rights. Competitors tackled hands-on challenges using two mini-excavators and a backhoe, including the cornhole, mini-golf putting, and "don't scramble the eggs" —each demanding expert control and real-world proficiency in operating heavy machinery for complex construction projects.

The winners of the 2026 NEOC were: 1st Place: **Aaron Rodriguez**; 2nd Place: **Victor Pianka**; and 3rd Place: **Juan Tolano**.

A special feature of this year's event was the participation of approximately 20 participants from Goodwill Industries of Southern Arizona's Young Adult Reentry Program (also known as Project Restore). These justice-involved young adults (ages 18-24) visited the NEOC to experience the industry's challenges firsthand, operating equipment under supervision.

The initiative drew interest from Arizona lawmakers for its potential to launch careers in a high-demand field. Representatives from two Arizona lawmaker's offices (**Marisol Flores-Aguirre**, chief of staff to Rep. Adelita Grijalva (D-AZ-07), and **Michael Pineda**, field representative with

Rep. Juan Ciscomani (R-AZ-06)—attended to observe the eager participants and support these workforce goals.

The event was coordinated by the NUCA National and the Arizona Chapter of NUCA (AZUCA). Both industry organizations organized the collaboration among NUCA member suppliers Caterpillar, John Deere (along with their local distributors), Trench-Ade, the convention’s hotel, and Goodwill Industries to make this unique hands-on introduction possible. The chapter also engaged Stay Positive Safety Solutions LLC and its owner and lead instructor **Ridge Wilson** to deliver his own high-energy presentation at our educational experience.

Goodwill's mission focuses on providing training, services, and jobs for individuals facing barriers to employment, including paid work experiences, on-the-job training, mentorship, occupational education in in-demand industries, and pathways to unsubsidized employment or further education. NUCA’s workforce development program goals in 2026 seek to address the ongoing employee shortfalls in the nation’s utility construction industry.

"Events like the NEOC not only celebrate the incredible talents of our industry's operators but also open doors for the next generation. Coordinating with our partners to bring Goodwill's Young Adult Reentry participants on-site was a rewarding effort that highlights the opportunities available in underground utilities," said **Christine Barnes**, Executive Director, Arizona Chapter of NUCA (AZUCA).

NUCA donated a further \$5,000 to the Goodwill chapter to show its support.

NUCA executives view this hands-on event as a model that other chapters could adapt to attract new talent and offer engaging entry points into the American underground construction industry.

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### **About The National Utility Contractors Association (NUCA)**

Founded in 1964, the National Utility Contractors Association represents over 2,000 U.S. utility and excavation contractors, manufacturers, and suppliers who provide the materials and workforce to build and maintain our nation’s intricate network of water, sewer, gas, telecommunications, and electric infrastructure. NUCA is found online at [www.nuca.com](http://www.nuca.com), and can be followed on social media at [@NUCA\\_National](https://twitter.com/NUCA_National) (X/Twitter), [nuca\\_national](https://www.instagram.com/nuca_national) (Instagram), [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/nuca_national), [YouTube](https://www.youtube.com/nuca_national), and [LinkedIn](https://www.linkedin.com/company/nuca-national).