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*For Immediate Release*

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### **New citizens take the Oath of Allegiance in Macomb County**

Family and friends gathered in the Macomb County Administration Building today to celebrate a naturalization ceremony for 24 people from 17 countries across the globe. The event, hosted by OneMacomb and officiated by the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services, is the final step for becoming a citizen of the United States.

County Executive Mark A. Hackel offered welcoming remarks. "It is my pleasure to congratulate you for becoming a U.S. citizen."

Jako van Blerk, Chief Information Officer for Macomb County, spoke about his own journey to U.S. citizenship from his home country of Namibia, South Africa. Born and raised on a sheep farm, van Blerk's work experience includes service in the South African Defense Force and then a career as a vegetation ecologist. He married and had three children. At the age of 34, his wife was offered a position in southeast Michigan and the family saw it as a wonderful opportunity for a new challenge.

Unable to work at first because of visa restrictions, van Blerk enrolled in information technology classes and earned valuable certifications. With in-demand skills, his citizenship was sponsored by a company based in Detroit and provided the needed window to begin the naturalization process. Van Blerk began working for Macomb County in 2003 and became director of the Information Technology Department in 2016.

Having just become a naturalized citizen in July of 2017, van Blerk spoke with experience as he addressed the crowd. "The United States is a nation of immigrants. We are all essential to the continued prosperity and well-being of this great nation," said van Blerk. "Today is the culmination of something deeply important to all of you. Enjoy this moment and your new life as a U.S. citizen."

The Honorable George Caram Steeh, United States District Court, administered the Oath of Allegiance. The event also included a flag ceremony by the Macomb County Sheriff's Office Honor Guard. Tessa Janish, a student of the Arts Academy in the Woods, sang the national anthem. Other speakers included Pam Lavers, Deputy County Executive, Rhonda Powell, Director of Health and Community Services and Daniel Broughton, Acting Field Office Director for USCIS.

**About OneMacomb:** OneMacomb is a Macomb County initiative developed to promote multiculturalism and inclusiveness while strengthening Macomb County's economy and instituted best practices for welcoming newcomers to the community.

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