# CREATIVE FUNDING, DESIGN MAKES FIRE STATIONS EFFECTIVE *Page 8*

# in this issue

# SCDMH
## Offers Community Mental Health Resources Throughout State

**W**ith public safety workers often responding to mental health crises in cities and towns, the Municipal Association of SC included in its 2024 Advocacy Initiatives support for greater funding in the state budget for mental health resources. As part of this focus on mental health, the Association hosted a session at its 2024 Annual Meeting covering the services of the SC Department of Mental Health and its 16 mental health centers covering every part of the state.

Association President and Goose Creek Mayor Greg Habib introduced the session, noting that the legislative work opened a larger conversation about resource availability.

"Part of what came out of that discussion was that there are programs and services available that many of us may not know about," he said. "Untreated mental health issues place a considerable burden on our cities, our emergency services, our local law enforcement."

The presentation came from SCDMH Deputy Director of Community Mental Health Services Deborah Blalock. The services that Blalock overviewed included its more than 40 satellite clinics, three hospitals, two nursing homes including a veterans' nursing home, and its Sexually Violent Predator Treatment Program. SCDMH serves about 100,000 patients each year, with operating expenses of $620 million in FY 2024.

Where most states have mental health departments that only direct funds to nonprofit groups, South Carolina's department provides the services, Blalock said, adding that South Carolina also uses single electronic health records.

"So whether a person pops up in Allendale County or Oconee County, our clinicians can go into that EHR and see the record of the individual if we've ever interfaced with that person previously," she said. "You can imagine that's a great benefit to us and to law enforcement and all of the counties."

Blalock reviewed the location and areas served by each of the mental health centers throughout the state, describing it as "the part that's near and dear to my heart. It's where the bulk of our services occur."

She described the SCDMH philosophy of getting the right level of treatment to patients for their level of need. For the general population, this can take the form of prevention efforts in the community, and for those with mild mental health symptoms, this can be immediate access to care. This can advance all the way to those who are a danger to themselves or others, in need of inpatient care.

Prevention efforts for the largest, general population can take many forms, such as in schools or with the caregivers of young children.

"Every mental health center has an infant and early childhood champion that can treat infants [ages] 0 to 3. And you might ask, what on earth does an infant need? They have to thrive," she said. "So if they don't have a thriving environment with their caregivers, there's going to be a problem down the road. This is really about assisting mothers, in particular, on how to bond with their babies and how to provide a thriving environment."

## SC Department of Mental Health Community Health Centers
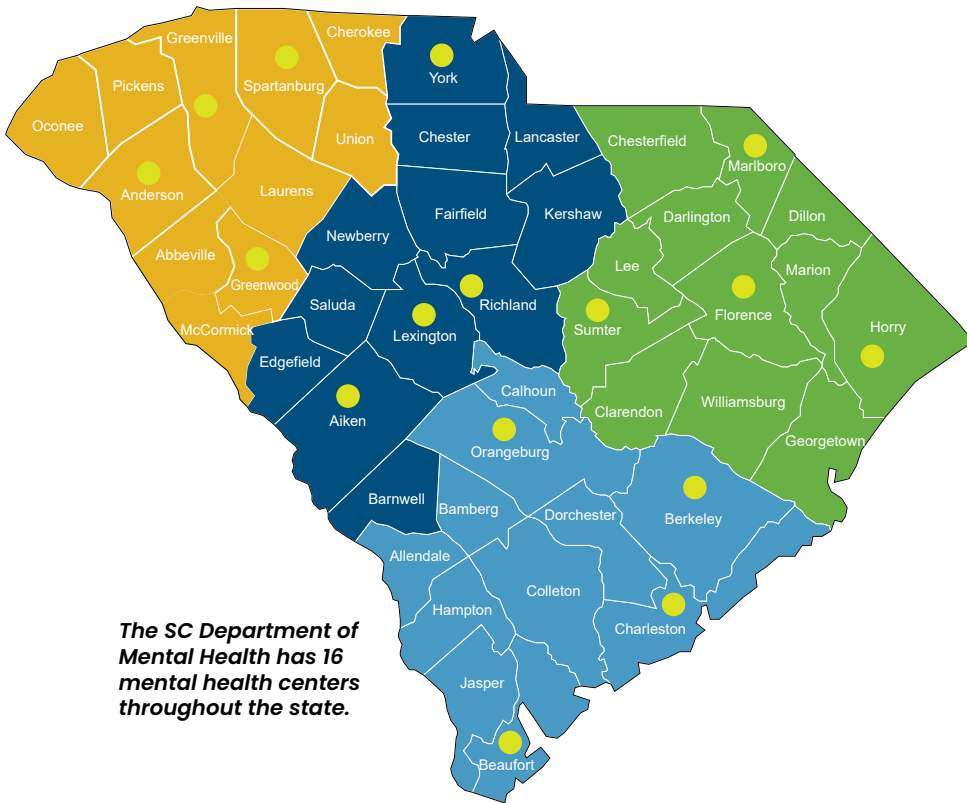


*The SC Department of Mental Health has 16 mental health centers throughout the state.*

Blalock went over many other SCDMH offerings, including crisis intervention team training with law enforcement, the Office of Suicide Prevention, Intensive Community Services, and even the Mobile Crisis Response Team covering all 46 counties in the state. She noted that SCDMH staff had assisted after many disasters and emergencies in the state, from hurricanes and floods to deadly events like the Sofa Super Store fire that claimed the lives of nine firefighters in Charleston in 2007, or the Emmanuel AME Church shooting in 2015 that also killed nine people.

She also called attention to the department's outreach efforts to remove the stigma of seeking mental health help.

"A lot of people don't seek care because they're embarrassed to seek care, or they think they're going to get fired for seeking care, so we do a lot of anti-stigma work," she said. "Parades, health fairs, back-to-school efforts, everything you can think of. If you want us there, you just call your mental health center and they will be there."

*Learn more about the services of the SC Department of Mental Health at www.scdmh. org. 2024 Annual Meeting presentations, including Blalock's presentation covering SCDMH topics and giving information on all the mental health centers, is available at www.masc.sc (keyword: Annual Meeting).*

# NEWS BRIEFS

Four municipal officials earned their Accreditation in Business Licensing designation from the Business Licensing Officials Training Institute in August. They are **Tiffany Mailand**, business license specialist, City of Goose Creek; **Lynda Williamson**, director of finance, City of North Augusta; **Shana Carothers**, business services manager, City of Tega Cay; and **Jo Anne C. Crosby**, customer service specialist, City of Walterboro.

Members of the Municipal Court Administration Association of SC recently elected their 2024 – 2025 board of directors. They are President **Patricia McTeer**, Town of Hampton; Vice **Brenda Armstrong**, City of Charleston; Second Vice President **Sarah Farrow**, City of Beaufort; Members-at-Large **Courtney Boughton**, Town of Monck Corner; **Katherine Jackson**, City of Columbia; **Rudi Summers**, City of Greenville; and Past President **Brittany Burns**, City of West Columbia.

The Southeast Crescent Regional Commission announced the first grant recipients for the inaugural State Economic and Infrastructure Development grant program. These include the **City of Abbeville** for its Harry's Plaza redevelopment project, the **City of Myrtle Beach** for its zoning rewrite, **Main Street SC** for its WeShopSC online marketplace, the **Lowcountry Council of Governments** for the Varnville Gin revitalization feasibility study and for the Town of Brunson transit shelter, the **City of Orangeburg** for its gateway revitalization project, the **City of Dillon** for the Dillon Festival Market project, the **City of Johnsonville** for fire hydrant improvements, and the **Santee Lynches Regional Council of Governments** for the Town of Lynchburg water system extension.

# IT Disaster Recovery Checklist and Best Practices for Municipalities

*By Clark Cooper, Senior Strategic Advisor, VC3*

When you think of a disaster that can impact your municipality, it's easy to think of something rare and devastating on a mass scale. However, it's important to define a disaster by its impact rather than its nature. Impacts can include

- organizational disruption and possible operational shutdown,
- an inability to serve residents, or
- destruction of IT systems and permanent data loss.

For example, ransomware often doesn't come to mind when thinking about disasters. It's not caused by nature, it's all electronic, and it seems like it's just an IT problem if it happens. Yet, the impact of ransomware or another serious cyberattack can wreak havoc as much as or more than a natural disaster — seriously affecting your operations and finances.

Or, did you know that flooding is the most common natural disaster that takes place in the United States, and major flooding events have increased during the last 10 years? In fact, 25% of flood insurance claims come from moderate- to low-risk areas — meaning a lack of past incidents are not predictors of future incidents. Such a common disaster can arrive out of nowhere, causing physical, operational and financial devastation.

## Disaster recovery checklist

While disasters can take many forms, the way to recover from those disasters follows some predictable principles that you can apply now. Follow the checklist below to ensure that you can recover your data after a disaster and begin to help residents immediately.

Want to learn more? Read VC3's full disaster recovery guide, designed for municipalities, at vc3.com/guide/it-disaster-recovery-blueprint-for-municipal-leaders.

*Clark Cooper is the senior strategic advisor at VC3, the Municipal Association's technology partner.*

### Disaster recovery checklist

- ☐ Use onsite local data backups to lessen time to recovery for smaller incidents, such as a server failure.
- ☐ Use offsite data backup to plan for worst-case scenarios, such as a natural disaster or ransomware. Offsite means storing your data backups far from your geographical location.
- ☐ Monitor your data backups. It's important to identify problems with your onsite and offsite backups before a disaster occurs.
- ☐ Regularly test your data backups. If you don't test your backups, you won't know if you will be able to recover after a disaster.
- ☐ Encrypt your backup data at rest and in transit — such as when you're sending data backups to your data center or cloud provider. Make sure your decryption keys are stored both onsite and offsite.
- ☐ Use endpoint detection and response, or EDR, to prevent and detect attacks.
- ☐ Proactively monitor and maintain your IT hardware, software, and network equipment. This includes software patching to eliminate cyber vulnerabilities.
- ☐ Periodically train employees about ways to spot phishing attacks and common cyberattacks. 95% of cyberattacks begin in an email.
- ☐ Create a disaster recovery plan that clearly outlines how your municipality will recover your data and restore operations after a cyberattack or other disaster.

# Taking Properties From Liabilities to Assets

*Lake City used funding from the SC Brownfields Cleanup Revolving Loan Fund to transform a former landfill into Lake City Park. Photo: City of Lake City.*

In Lake City, the South Carolina Brownfields Cleanup Revolving Fund helped turn an old landfill and public works storage facility into Lake City Park, which now boasts a boardwalk, fishing piers and a canoe launch.

In Rock Hill, the printing plant known as "The Bleachery" received Brownfields loan funding to help kickstart the cleanup of the site, now home to mixed-use development. Similar efforts have come to the former Wellington Leisure Products site in Jonesville, or the once-blighted Bush Recycling Center in downtown Florence, now home to a substantial medical campus.

Many South Carolina municipalities face the problems of properties contaminated by past uses from major industries to old gas stations, hurting economic prospects and community fabric. State and federal funding, however, has brought more grant and low-interest loan options for such sites. Tyler Lewis of the Catawba Regional Council of Governments, program manager for SC Brownfields Environmental Site Testing, spoke at the Municipal Association of SC 2024 Annual Meeting about both the SC BEST program and the SC Brownfields Cleanup Revolving Loan Fund.

Lewis gave his hometown of Chester as an example of the challenges and opportunities that industrial sites present, with three mill sites that were central to its economy, but which had closed by the time of his memory.

Chester, he said, had seen "many different forms of industry over the years, and it's reinventing itself. The entire state has been reinventing itself, with new industries coming in."

South Carolina's Brownfields/Voluntary Cleanup Program and Loan Fund enables a party that was not responsible for the contamination at a site to acquire it with liability protection for that existing contamination by agreeing to perform an environmental assessment or remediation, overcoming the liability hurdle that had historically hindered many redevelopment projects.

The Catawba Regional Council of Governments administers the revolving loan fund, which offers below-market interest rates for cleanup and removal activities. While the list of eligible borrowers includes for-profit entities, the nonprofit and governmental borrowers who use the program are eligible to receive loan forgiveness of up to 30% of the loan, up to $200,000.

The CRCOG also administers the South Carolina Brownfields Environmental Site Testing Program, also known as SC BEST, which has $1 million available for required environmental testing. SC BEST has been used for 44 project sites across the state, Lewis said, with more than 60 environmental reports issued or underway.

"So why take this on? [It puts the properties] back on the tax rolls. These sites are sitting vacant. They haven't paid taxes in a while, they are a liability to your community. [The projects] don't always have to be something that turns into a money-making, private entity," Lewis said. "You can do stuff such as parks and recreation resources, or, if you sell it to somebody to bring in jobs, light industry. We've seen that [these projects] create jobs, that keep jobs, and revitalize the communities themselves."

Lewis cautioned that using the programs involves "a lot of front-end work."

"It takes a long time — years in the making — to get things moving," he said. "But once it gets moving, these projects turn into some really impactful economic developments, community development projects, revitalizing areas that may have had nothing happening for years."

*Learn more about the programs on the websites of the SC Department of Environmental Services, www.des.sc.gov; and the Catawba Regional Council of Governments website at www.catwbacog.org.*

# Establish Swearing-in Times by Ordinance

When does the term of office for a newly elected municipal councilmember begin?

Under Title 5 of the South Carolina Code, municipalities can choose the date of their own elections. Following that, state law provides no fixed date or time after a municipal election on which the new terms will begin.

## State, county and municipal election dates

SC Code Section 7-13-10 provides that "general elections for Federal, State and county officers in this State shall be held on the first Tuesday following the first Monday in November in each even-numbered year."

SC Code Section 5-15-50, meanwhile, states that "each municipal governing body may by ordinance establish municipal ward lines and the time for general and special elections within the municipality."

In other words, the regular elections for state and county officers always occur on the national general election date.

Municipalities, however, can choose any reasonable date for municipal council elections.

## Commencement of term

State law applicable to municipalities provides no fixed date when the term of a municipal elected official begins. Instead, their term of office begins as soon as the official is "qualified." This occurs when the election results have been certified and the official takes the required oaths of office.

## Clarifying the time for swearing-in ceremonies

Municipal elected officials may begin their term at any time after the election results are certified by simply taking the appropriate oaths of office. In practice, however, most municipalities have a swearing-in ceremony when all newly elected officials take the oath of office in a formal setting.

Many of these municipalities provide in their codes of ordinances that the swearing-in ceremony will take place at a certain time — for example, the next council meeting following the election, or the first meeting of the month after the month in which the election occurs. Other municipalities have a local custom for the swearing-in ceremony.

In some cases, the lack of a certain date, time and placement in the meeting agenda for the commencement of municipal terms can create disagreement. Municipal councils have been divided over whether the new councilmember oaths should be administered at the beginning or at the end of the meeting. For this reason, the Association recommends that all municipalities include details on the swearing-in ceremony in their elections ordinance. In general, the safest method is to provide that the newly elected officials will take the oath of office and commence their terms at the first meeting in the month after the election. For municipalities that have November elections, new councilmember terms may also begin at the first meeting in the following January.

## Association Highlight:
### SC Municipal Human Resources Association

Many municipal job positions have specific training and networking needs, and the Municipal Association of South Carolina's affiliate associations offer opportunities to meet those needs.

The SC Municipal Human Resources Association promotes sound human resources administration and encourages innovative programs. MHRA provides training programs as well as an opportunity to exchange ideas among its members, both through meetings and through its very active listserve.

The national Human Resources Certification Institute and the Society for Human Resources Management recognize MHRA's training for continuing education credits.

The next meeting of MHRA will be its Annual Meeting taking place November 12 – 15 in Myrtle Beach. Topics will include generational differences in the workplace, artificial intelligence and HR practices, employee assistance programs, employee engagement, reducing burnout and encouraging strong performance.

*Learn more at www.masc.sc (keyword: MHRA).*
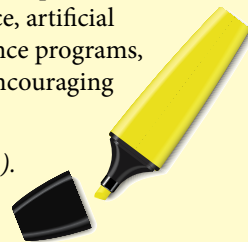
# How Special Meetings Work

City and town councils in South Carolina have to meet at least once a month. These are the regular meetings, required by SC Code Section 5-7-250, although councils can establish local rules to have regular meetings more frequently. Under the SC Freedom of Information Act, councils must give written public notice of their regular meetings at the beginning of each calendar year.

Councils aren't limited to meeting only during these regularly occurring times. They can meet at additional times, as called by the mayor or by a majority of council, regardless of the form of government. These special meetings typically occur when councils need to address late-breaking, urgent business that that cannot be postponed until the next regular meeting. Sometimes, councils use these meetings to receive information or have discussions that will help prevent excessively long regular meetings.

Some councils regularly hold special meetings that they refer to as work sessions, called meetings or study sessions, but these are simply other ways of describing a special meeting, since state law does not establish the other terms as particular categories of public meetings. Rescheduled meetings or council retreats also fall under the definition of special meetings.

Special meetings differ from the emergency meetings provided for in SC Code 5-7-250(d). Emergency meetings are intended for crisis circumstances, like a natural disaster. Because they are not subject to FOIA requirements, councils should use great caution when calling them.

Here are several points to consider when calling special meetings:

### Special meetings and FOIA rules

Because councils may call special meetings to address unexpected developments or workloads, they are not subject to the FOIA requirement of giving written, annual public notice of regular meetings.

Special meetings are subject to other FOIA requirements, however. They must have an agenda posted at the place of the meeting and distributed to the media and others who have requested them at least 24 hours in advance, giving the date, time and place of the meeting. As with regular meetings, the council in a special meeting can only take action on items listed on the agenda, which is subject to specific agenda amendment rules set out in FOIA. The meetings must be open to the public, and the council must record minutes.

### Carefully consider whether special meetings should be used to conduct regular business.

The regular business of the council — recurring ordinance and resolution items that the council can anticipate addressing on an ongoing basis — are often best handled through regular meetings. It's important also to use regular meetings for issues of major public interest when possible, such as for ordinances to raise taxes or increase fees.

Some councils use special meetings to address high-stakes but discrete issues like annual budget approval, or matters needing extensive public input, such as the required resident participation for the Community Development Block Grant budget. The potential advantage of special meetings in these contexts is that they allow a single-purpose meeting in which residents can be assured that the only business discussed will be the named action item. Councils should balance this advantage against the general preference for conducting business during regular meetings.

### Be mindful of council precedent when using special meetings.

For example, if a council regularly schedules special meetings called "work sessions," and has a history of rarely or never voting on action items during these work sessions, then residents would have reason to expect that council will not will take official action in work sessions and will instead wait until the next regular meeting.

*Learn more in the Municipal Association's* Handbook for Municipal Officials in South Carolina, *found at www.masc.sc (keyword: officials handbook).*

# Creative Funding, Design Make Fire Stations Effective



*The new headquarters of the Mauldin Fire Department has a decontamination room and a community training room. Photo: City of Mauldin.*

As many cities and towns in South Carolina grow rapidly, municipalities have realized the need for creative funding and design solutions to enhance their fire protection offerings. A long-standing issue for local governments, securing adequate funding and incorporating modern design with functionality are some of the most pressing concerns.

Many modern fire stations and headquarters are equipped with state-of-the-art training facilities, separate decontamination washrooms, and spacious living quarters, in addition to classrooms and gathering spaces. The cities of Mauldin, Barnwell and Fountain Inn are among those leading the way of this new frontier of fire stations.

Mauldin continues to experience exponential growth, with the population estimated to exceed 35,000 residents — an increase of 7,000 — by 2030. According to City Administrator Seth Duncan, future growth was one of the key factors that went into the city's new fire headquarters, which opened in April 2024.

"The City of Mauldin has been operating four fire stations for a number of years now, and found that one of our oldest, which served as our headquarters, was needing to be upgraded, but also needed to expand with our ever-growing community," Duncan said.

He added that the city has started receiving more calls for service on its western side.

"A lot of the work that went into the design was focused on growth and the future and making sure that this facility would be sufficient to meet the needs of our growing community for the next 25 to 50 years," he said.

To raise the $7.5 million needed to realize the new fire headquarters, the city sought out funding, first through Greenville County and its fire service area.

"[The city] worked with the county to create the funding necessary, both through some county issuance of bonds but also the city use of some [American Rescue Plan Act] funding and the Installment Purchase Revenue Bonds," said Duncan.

Working with construction firm The Cloverleaf Group, LLC, and Stewart Cooper Newell Architects, the city broke ground on this capital project.

"Both have extensive experience in building and designing fire stations and I think that's one of the keys to any successful capital project," said Duncan.

Fire Chief Brian McHone, the 27-year Mauldin fire department veteran who is currently going into this fifth year at the helm, agreed.

The City of Barnwell opened its new fire department headquarters in April 2023. Photo: City of Barnwell.

"The main thing is getting a good architect that actually builds fire stations," he added.

The over 20,000 square-foot facility can accommodate two companies, a ladder company, rescue company, or both. McHone noted that the new headquarters has a dedicated decontamination room on its own filtration system, as well as training props and a community training room that can hold up to 30 people for anything from homeowners association meetings to South Carolina Fire Academy classes.

The City of Barnwell celebrated the launch of its new fire headquarters in March 2023, after funding kept the project from moving forward in 2020.

"We started out with state appropriations for $350,000 several years ago that we originally put into a fund for renovating our [existing] fire station," said City Administrator Lynn McEwen.

Retired Chief Tony Dicks added that back around 2000, the plan was to consolidate the fire and police facilities, but the property was not large enough to accommodate both.

A 1% capital improvement sales tax was implemented, which created funds to build a joint facility, starting with the police department.

"The police department got a separate facility basically across the street from our fire station, and once [the city] completed that, then our goal was to try to find a way to build a fire station [and] complete the same half of the public safety phase of this project," Dicks said.

Adding to this, McEwen said that the city received $2 million from the state's U.S. Department of Energy settlement for the Savannah River Site in 2020.

"It may have been more of luck than strategy," she said. "We also utilized the [American Rescue Plan Act] funding

that had been sent down from the federal government, and we also received another state appropriation."

Finally, to finish the project, the city secured a local general obligation bond.

"And so, we were able to hire a contractor to come in with his architect, and they set out with us and started the process of trying to put together a fire station in the most economical way possible but yet fulfill those requests we had when it comes down to needs and square footage," said Dicks.

Improving the overall design was paramount. Designated areas for search and rescue training, ladder skills training, and a 40-seat classroom went into the design. The city's police department also has space to train.

"The city can use [the classroom] with public works, so we have a large meeting room [that] can serve as an emergency operations center for the city, where, if

we have a disaster in place or we have a hurricane evacuation going through our town, we can operate out of there and manage our public works, our police department, fire department and our administrative sections of our city," Dicks stated.

Back in the Upstate, the City of Fountain Inn plans to build a third fire station and a new training facility in the near future, once additional funding is acquired. Fire Chief Russell Alexander explained that the new facility will have some mixed use in the design, with a larger training room that can convert into a community room for meetings, as well as a police substation.

Assistant City Administrator Russell Slatton added that the layered sources of funding came from various entities, including an earmark from the state for $3.5 million in last year's budget, which, he noted, would be reserved for construction of the training facility in the station.

"That is not going to be enough to finish construction of these two projects, so we are currently working with Greenville County and other methods to try and find other ways to get funding to finish these projects," he added.

Current growth for Fountain Inn is now estimated at about 1,000 residents per year. The addition of the new fire station in one of the fastest-growing areas that still remains rather isolated will help service that area with fire protection without the need to traverse a narrow two-lane road.

In terms of the growth of Fountain Inn, Alexander noted that the addition of a new fire station and training facility will benefit the city by reducing response times, increasing its staff to better protect its residents, and by keeping employees — its most valuable assets — safe.

Fire stations and fire headquarters remain cornerstones in the communities they serve. With modern and practical design features that enhance the important work of firefighters and first responders, as well as mixed use elements that can accommodate for training and future growth, municipalities are using layered funding sources to realize new stations and headquarters where their employees and volunteers can thrive.

# Public Safety Capital Investment by the Numbers

More than $271 million: The amount allocated by South Carolina municipalities since FY 2020 on public safety building projects. Funding sources for these expenditures include grants, bond proceeds, capital project sales tax revenues, federal American Rescue Plan Act dollars, state and federal appropriations, local general fund balance, capital project funds, loans, sale of assets, and hospitality and accommodations tax revenues.

This word cloud illustrates some of the most common building project types:

Police department expansion   New public safety complex
Public safety dispatch central console   Police evidence buildings
New fire department headquarters
New police departments
New public safety/court complexes
Facility renovations New fire stations
Training facilities   New forensics facilities
Fire department headquarters remodeling
Firefighter living quarters   New emergency operations center
New public safety dock

*Sources: July 2024 survey of South Carolina cities and towns, supplemental news coverage*

# Protective Equipment Helps Guard Public Safety Workers From Fentanyl Exposures, Bloodborne Pathogens

Exposure to fentanyl and to bloodborne pathogens have emerged as common risks in public safety work, with police officers, fire and EMS staff responding to more calls involving those using, possessing or even overdosing on drugs. Personal protective equipment, often known as PPE, can provide substantial protection against the risks of these exposures.

## Fentanyl

The dangers of illicitly manufactured fentanyl have attracted great attention in recent years. Fentanyl is an extremely powerful synthetic opioid, made for use as both an analgesic, or pain relief drug, as well as an anesthetic. The U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration has reported fentanyl to be 100 times more potent than morphine as an analgesic, and 50 times stronger than heroin, and tiny doses of it can be lethal.

In the past decade, illegally made fentanyl has increasingly appeared as a contaminant in other illegal drugs in the United States, and research agencies have attributed it to the drastic increase in fatal overdoses recorded during that time. In 2015, the nationwide count of drug overdose deaths stood at 52,404, a number which increased to 107,941 by 2022, according to the National Institute on Drug Abuse. Numbers in South Carolina have been alarming as well. Among the 2,296 drug overdose deaths recorded in 2022, the deaths attributed to opioids had risen by 5% from 2021, and the deaths attributed to fentanyl in particular had risen by 9%, according to the SC Department of Public Health.

Although there may not be a documented fentanyl overdose linked to public safety in the United States, it doesn't mean that there are no dangers in being exposed to fentanyl. Encounters with fentanyl, such as skin contact or inhalation may cause serious effects. As rates of drug use grow, so too does the risk of exposure to public safety personnel.

The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health has offered several recommendations to help prevent emergency responders' exposures to illicit drugs, including fentanyl:

- Wear nitrile gloves when illicit drugs may be present.
- Wear respiratory protection if powdered illicit drugs are present or suspected.
- Avoid tasks that may cause illicit drugs to become airborne.
- Train officers to avoid touching their eyes, nose or mouth after touching contaminated surfaces.

## Bloodborne pathogens

Public safety workers can risk needlestick injuries when they are engaged in routine work-related activities. For police officers, it could be pat-down searches or property searches. As such, public safety personnel should receive yearly training in handling bloodborne pathogens. They should also be issued naloxone and puncture-resistant gloves as part of their PPE. If an exposure occurs, they must be transported to the hospital for a medical evaluation. They should receive a medical document allowing them to return to full duty capacity.

*For more information, contact the Municipal Association's Risk Management Services Loss Control staff at losscontrol@masc.sc.*

# Police Advisory Boards, Review Boards Give Residents a Voice

*Aiken Citizens Review Board Chair Carmen Landy, left, talks to Aiken Department of Public Safety Director Charles Barranco and Karl ODenthal, board liason. Photo: City of Aiken.*

**A**t a time when many residents have sought more dialogue with their local governments on policing issues, police departments in South Carolina have worked to find ways to bring residents into discussions and even reviews of their operations. Whether it's with an advisory board or a board tasked with reviewing complaints, police agencies around the state want their residents to know they are listening to their concerns.

The City of Clemson, for example, has a police advisory board with nine members, including one local high school student and one Clemson University student. The members are appointed by city council and the board meets once a month.

The board hears from Clemson Police Chief Jorge Campos on crime statistics and any issues facing the police department. Meetings of the police advisory board often include a guest speaker like the fire chief or the Clemson University police chief.

"We run it like a council meeting," Campos said. "There is a chair, a vice chair and an agenda."

Lisa Robinson, an attorney by training who works at Clemson University, is in her second term on the city's police advisory board, and serves as the chair.

"Recently we heard from an organization called Project Lifesaver that one of the lieutenants at the department brought to talk to us about," Robinson said. "It's a device that they can use for tracking Alzheimer's patients and others who may have a tendency to wander off or might get lost … It's really been interesting just to learn a little bit more about the policing that goes on in our community, and to give just regular citizens a voice with the department."

The board helps provide resident input into city operations.

"Anytime the city is considering adding an enforcement ordinance or making modifications to an enforcement ordinance directly related to the police, it goes through the police advisory board," Campos said. "We'll do a presentation of what we're trying to accomplish, and if they agree, we'll put a work group together and work with not only board members but with other citizens in town."

One recent example was a public work session on proposed golf cart regulations.

"This is community engagement, community advocacy work, just in terms of listening to our neighbors," Robinson said. "Things that may be of issue in the community, and working with the police department to bring those things to light. Then, also working with the city council on different issues that may be relevant. I think all the board members would agree that it's really interesting work."

In the City of Aiken, public engagement with the police involves a citizens' review board that reviews how the Department of Public Safety handles complaints. The 10-member board is appointed by Aiken's mayor and was created in 2016.

Karl Odenthal, a retired police officer, serves as a liaison between the review board and the department. If a complaint is made to the department about an officer, the officer's supervisor does the initial investigation and reports the findings to a team of senior officers. Command staff would then review complaints and determines whether they agree with the supervisor's findings or whether more investigation is warranted.

"They basically do a second review of the case, then they make their final decision on disciplinary action, if any," Odenthal said. "So each complaint gets a review two times in-house. Once public safety has completed their investigation, then they would give that information to me."

Odenthal provides all the materials from the investigation, including video and audio to the citizens review board, which discusses whether the action taken by the department was appropriate. The review board does not have the authority to change a decision made by the in-house investigators.

"Once the discipline has been handled, they can't overturn a case that public safety decided already," Odenthal said. "But what they can do is help shape future policy. And it's good to have a second voice, because you really get a different perspective when you're looking at the citizens' viewpoint."

Odenthal said if the board feels there needs to be a change in police policy, they can make a recommendation to the police department.

"The review board takes their role seriously," he said. "It's not a paid position, but they come in on their time off and review these cases … And it's not an adversarial relationship. The department is open to suggestions to be better. It could be a good opportunity — a learning opportunity for the officer and for the department."

The City of Florence combines both approaches with both an advisory board, established 12 years ago, and a review board that was created about three years ago.

The citizens advisory board meets each month with Florence Police Chief Allen Heidler.

Its members, Heidler said, come from "every corner of the City of Florence," and include members of the clergy, teachers, and housing authority representatives, among others.

"We just talk about issues going on with the police department in their specific areas," Heidler said. "It was created for more visibility with the community and to make ourselves more available to them, to establish better relationships with the community and to be open and honest about everything we're doing."

The review board which consists of seven voting members and two nonvoting members from the fire and police departments, was created by city council after a new member expressed concerns about the relationship between the public and the police. City council established the board and appoints its members to serve three-year staggered terms. The board members also must complete the city's Citizens Police Academy.

"That's so they'll actually have some knowledge about police work, behind-the-scenes police work," City Manager Scotty Davis said.

The board meets quarterly and reviews any concerns that might be brought before the board and makes recommendations to the city manager.

In its three years of existence, the board had only one complaint to handle, said Florence Human Resources Director Jennifer Krawiec, who is the staff member assigned to the review board.

"Ultimately, the city manager has the final say over [complaint resolutions]," Krawiec said. "It's very similar in set up to our grievance committee for employees."

Heidler said the added layer of review is not a problem for his officers, who wear body cameras that show every interaction they have with the public, and the fact that only one complaint has gone to the review board shows that the city's in-house investigations are thorough.

"With only one going before the board, we've obviously satisfied a bunch of people who have made complaints, whether they are sustained or whether they're unfounded," Heidler said.



*The City of Clemson Police Advisory Board schedules monthly meetings. Photo: City of Clemson.*

# Law Enforcement Can Help

## With Community Mental Health Challenges

Police officers responding to calls often find themselves in contact with people with behavioral health conditions or intellectual disabilities — a challenge that has led law enforcement agencies to make more and more use of programs and training that can improve the safety of police interactions for individuals in a crisis.

The 2024 Annual Meeting of the Municipal Association of SC featured a panel session with two police chiefs who have worked to expand mental health resources in their departments: Chief Marion Boyce of the West Columbia Police Department, and Chief Jorge Campos of the Clemson Police Department.

In West Columbia's case, Boyce said, the efforts came out of working "to figure out how we could better provide a service to that population suffering from mental health crises and substance abuse."

A significant issue involved, he said, was that a person with mental health problems can generate frequent calls for law enforcement, straining available resources. One of the department's responses was to partner with the nearby University of South Carolina College of Social Work so that its students could serve as interns handling social work cases with the department.

The West Columbia Police Department, along with the Cayce Police Department, also partnered with the Lexington County Community Mental Health Center through its Mobile Crisis program to embed a mental health professional with their officers.

"The biggest thing that we're trying to do in West Columbia is make that investment into our community, [so they] know that we care about them," Boyce said.

In the City of Clemson, Campos said, many of the mental health challenges the police department has seen are similar — mental health problems can lead to substance abuse problems, and people with ongoing conditions leading to numerous calls for service over time.

Campos shared a story to illustrate the value of crisis intervention team training for his officers, when they responded to a call of a person who appeared frantic and was trying to break into cars in a parking lot. The officers helped calm down everyone involved in the situation, called EMS, and got the person suffering from a mental health crisis to the hospital.

"Instead of handling it like someone's breaking in or trying to steal a car, a criminal trying to steal a car, they immediately recognized there was something else going on here," he said.

The panel also featured Stacee Rowell of the SC Department of Mental Health, who manages the Mobile Crisis program. The program aims to redirect individuals from unnecessary hospitalization and incarcerations, and helps those in crisis access ongoing mental health care, which has been available statewide since 2019.

"In addition to that, we have over 20 embedded clinicians throughout the state that are either embedded in law enforcement agencies or the jails," she said. "Those clinicians are able to engage with those individuals, either through getting reports, to do follow-ups with them, to try to get them engaged in services … It's also important to know that a lot of these positions are cost share, so that means that city and county councils may need to provide some budgetary space for that."

Boyce compared the partnership of law enforcement and social work to a strong marriage.

"It takes intentionality. It takes communication. We don't always speak the same language. I know we're there for the same purpose, and that's to serve people, but how a social worker serves, and how a law enforcement officer serves are sometimes a little bit different. You can imagine that that could cause some conflict, but you have to keep those doors of communication open," he said.

# Background Investigations Help Secure Strong Police Candidates

Selecting the right person to be a police officer should be a process that's more involved than simply checking a few boxes. A thorough background investigation may help identify any potential concerns that could cause trouble for the department or the municipality later.

New officers may fall into the category of certified, non-certified or reserve officer. Having a strong hiring process is just as important for reserve officers as it is for certified or non-certified officers, especially if the department uses the reserve officer program as a recruiting tool.

Having an established process for hiring officers is now required by state law. In 2022, the General Assembly passed Act 218, also known as the Law Enforcement Betterment Bill, requiring all law enforcement agencies to adopt and implement a set of minimum standards. The Municipal Association's Risk Management Services drafted model policies for each required standard for members of the SC Municipal Insurance Trust or SC Municipal Insurance and Risk Financing Fund — including a policy for police officer hiring practices.

In the RMS version of the hiring practices policy, all police office job applicants must sign an affidavit indicating whether the candidate has ever been the subject of a domestic restraining or protective order, and whether they have ever been convicted of a domestic-violence-related offense.

For background checks, the RMS policy requires that the candidate have never been convicted of a felony or convicted of a criminal offense involving moral turpitude. The background check would also determine whether the candidate is "of good character" and has a good credit history. The candidate's fingerprints would be checked against the records of the FBI and the SC Law Enforcement Division. The check would also include contacting law enforcement agencies in places the candidate has lived, a database search to determine whether the officer has ever been decertified, and a call to the SC Criminal Justice Academy. The RMS policy also requires a polygraph test conducted by a licensed examiner and an objective interview using standardized questions.

For most departments, staff capacity, time and cost will drive how much effort they can invest in a background investigation. Any personnel conducting background check investigations, whether it be a department staff member or a third-party agency, should be trained in collecting the required information.

Act 218 also included provisions for reporting misconduct that can help police departments learn of issues that job candidates have had in their previous employment. The law requires agencies to report to the SC Criminal Justice Academy the occurrence of any act that is reasonably believed to be misconduct within 15 days of the action resulting in an internal investigation conducted by the agency.

"It is critically important that those chosen to enforce our laws have the requisite knowledge, skills and temperament to perform the often-challenging tasks that are required of a law enforcement officer," said attorney Kevin Sturm. "Not everyone who applies for such jobs will have such abilities and attributes. The importance to our society of the job that law enforcement officers perform on a daily basis makes choosing the right person imperative. The consequences of choosing the wrong person can be severe for any municipality. Accordingly, complete and thorough background checks along with good interview techniques are two necessary tools that municipalities should utilize to make good hiring decisions for their police departments."

*For more information, contact the Municipal Association's Risk Management Services Loss Control staff at losscontrol@masc.sc. SCMIT and SCMIRF offer a law enforcement hiring process guide to members, available at www.masc.sc (keyword: SCMIT, SCMIRF).*

# Calendar

*For a complete listing of the Association's training opportunities, visit www.masc.sc to view the calendar.*

## OCTOBER

**2 SC Utility Billing Association Customer Service Training and Networking Luncheon.** Cooperative Conference Center, Columbia. Topics include customer service and utility billing cyberattacks.

**3 SC Community Development Association Fall Meeting.** Cooperative Conference Center, Columbia. Topics include artificial intelligence, the Municipal Association's Advocacy Initiatives, affordable housing and the process of demolishing a house.

**8 – 11 SC Municipal Finance Officers, Clerks and Treasurers Association and SC Business Licensing Officials Joint Academy.** Sonesta Resort, Hilton Head Island. Topics include business auditing, business classifications, budgeting and codification.

**16 Advanced Municipal Elected Officials Institute of Government: Municipal Utility Policy and Administration.** Columbia Metropolitan Convention Center, Columbia. Topics include public utility risk management, water and sewer regulations, municipal utility authority, utility financing, and water and sewer engineering.

**16 Advanced Municipal Elected Officials Institute of Government: Public Safety Policy and Administration.** Columbia Metropolitan Convention Center, Columbia. Topics include police policy and fire policy.

**16 Municipal Elected Officials Institute of Government Institute: Advanced Continuing Education.** Columbia Metropolitan Convention Center, Columbia. Topics include retail development and public engagement.

**22 – 23 SC Municipal Court Administration Association 101 Session B Training.** Municipal Association of SC, Columbia. Topics include dispositions, finalization and an introduction to court financials.

## NOVEMBER

**6 Risk Management Services: Annual Members Meeting.** Cooperative Conference Center, Columbia.

**7 SC Association of Stormwater Managers Fourth Quarter Meeting.** Cooperative Conference Center, Columbia.

**13 Communications Workshop.** Municipal Association of SC, Columbia. Topics include releasing police department information, the SC Freedom Information Act, and communicating economic development and annexation information.

**13 Main Street SC 4th Quarter Manager's Training.** Black Creek Arts Council, Hartsville.

**13 – 15 SC Municipal Human Resources Association Annual Meeting.** Embassy Suites at Kingston Plantation, Myrtle Beach.

**19 Business License Essentials Training.** Virtual.

## DECEMBER

**13 SC Municipal Attorneys Association Annual Meeting and Continuing Legal Education Seminar.** Hilton Columbia Center.

## 2025
## JANUARY

**21 Hometown Legislative Action Day.** Columbia Metropolitan Convention Center, Columbia.

**22 Municipal Elected Officials Institute of Government.** Columbia Metropolitan Convention Center, Columbia.