

2024 SCAC Awards Application

This applicaton is for:	Barrett Lawrimore Memorial Regional Competion
Project Title	Strengthening Regional Coroner Capacity
County or Counties	Charleston, Beaufort
Application Contact	Bobbi Jo O'Neal, Charleston County Coroner
Application Email Address	boneal@charlestoncounty.org
Presenter(s) Name and Title	Bobbi Jo O'Neal, Charleston County Coroner
Main Presenter's Email Address	boneal@charlestoncounty.org

Project Written Submission

Project Summary

The nature of coroner casework often requires interaction and cooperation with adjacent counties to perform death investigations. For cases that cross county lines, coroners may need to contact next-of-kin who may be in neighboring counties, subpoena medical records from outlying hospitals, coordinate cross-jurisdictional media releases, and arrange transport to funeral homes to the original county of residence, among other tasks.

Natural disasters often encompass more than one county and underscore the need for preparedness and cooperation as such casework strains already taxed systems. Investigations resulting from the human-made opioid crisis also often extend beyond county borders and put further financial strain on coroners due to the increased need for autopsies, toxicology tests, investigators, and laboratory resources. Mass fatalities and public health disasters also affect law enforcement budgets, funeral homes, families, and probate processes.

Lack of case data standardization and investigative resources can significantly complicate death investigations. These challenges lead to delays in determining the cause and manner of death, which in turn slow the delivery of answers to families and the issuing of death certificates. Consequently, this delays the probate process, causing additional difficulties for families already dealing with the loss of a loved one.

To address these problems, both the Charleston and Beaufort County Coroners worked together to establish a two-way sharing of resources and investigative tools. Now, each county is ready to assist the other if the facilities of one are damaged due to storms or are otherwise overwhelmed due to a sudden surge in deaths that exceed the capacity of either.

As a result of this project, the Charleston and Beaufort County Coroner’s Offices built a resilient and cooperative framework that enhanced their ability to respond to the needs of their respective citizens. Data are now standardized, allowing for more effective communication between the counties and with state and federal stakeholders. Investigative tools and resources funded through grants are now strategically positioned between the counties, enabling both to better respond to mass fatalities. This collaborative effort promoted regional strength, which ensures more efficient resource utilization and better services and support to the communities they serve.

This project benefited all 429,000 citizens of Charleston County and 201,000 citizens of Beaufort County. Furthermore, innumerable family members, regardless of their location, were emotionally and financially affected by deaths within these counties. There were no negative community concerns associated with the project.

Project Effort/Difficulty

Project goals were achieved largely through the concerted effort of both counties in seeking funding programs where regional mass fatality planning was addressed. Both counties took turns hosting meetings with funding agencies, both worked to provide the other with letters of support, and both established MOUs for shared data access and cooperative grant applications. Project hurdles included identifying specific regional needs, continually communicating those needs to funding sources, and working with county officials and administrators to acquire resources.

Working with multiple funding sources required communication between the Coroners and their County Councils and County Administrators, whose trust and support of the coroners' vision was critical for the project to go smoothly (letters of support are attached). They also assisted with building expansions and structural upfitting necessary for large scale equipment. Coroners had to work closely and extensively with finance departments during procurement processes.

The resources and tools for this project were supported largely through grants. This involved navigating the complexities of grant applications and meeting the administrative and budgeting criteria required to be awarded funding. The MorphoDent® fingerprint readers (\$5,000 each), Kirby Lester® Pill Counters (\$4,895 each), the Lodox® (\$500,000), and the Randox® units (\$45,000 each) were acquired through DHEC's Healthcare Preparedness Program grant funds. The CT scanner (\$500,000) was funded through American Rescue Plan funds. Charleston's case management software (\$8,000) was funded by the county, while the same software for Beaufort was funded by a 2023 Paul Coverdell Forensic Sciences Improvement grant.

Benefit/Importance of Project

BACKGROUND

The increasingly lethal opioid crisis is currently the main driver in inter-agency investigations. Unintentional drug overdose is a significant public health emergency that claims more than 100,000 lives per year across the United States. From 2020 to 2022, the country saw an 18% increase in overdose deaths, while South Carolina experienced a 33% increase during this same time. The rising concentration of synthetic opioids in drugs seized at the southern US border, as well as regional population growth, continue to challenge coroner resources needed to investigate these deaths. Since opioids do not recognize county borders, they may originate in one county and then freely flow between counties, resulting in overdose deaths in adjacent areas.

Natural mass disasters such as hurricanes also require significant inter-agency cooperation. The combined eastern borders of both Charleston and Beaufort Counties make up 69% of the entire South Carolina Atlantic seacoast. The geographical positioning of their respective autopsy facilities directly on the coastline exposes them to hurricanes, high winds, rising waters, and other natural events that can overwhelm local resources.

The establishment of multiple, well-equipped centers across the low country can provide critical support in times of mass fatality events. With Charleston situated centrally on the coastline and Beaufort positioned at the southern border, these two offices needed to be prepared to assist each other if one office became structurally compromised or overwhelmed. This arrangement ensures the region's resilience and ability to provide continuity of essential services.

OBJECTIVES

Improved Data and Systems

The coroners for both Charleston and Beaufort County began by integrating the same case management system so they could "speak the same language" regarding case information. There is more effective communication between agencies, providing quicker investigative turnaround times, more timely answers for families, and more efficient processing of death certificates. The Charleston County Coroner's Office then assisted the Beaufort County Coroner's Office with the development of policies and standards required for their accreditation by the International Association of Coroners and Medical Examiners (IAC&ME). Beaufort was awarded accreditation, joining Charleston as one of only eight counties in the state to have such distinction.

Benefits/Results:

- Data are easily shared across the counties, saving time and resources and expediting investigations. This includes 5 investigations in the last fiscal year where Charleston and Beaufort coordinated data sharing, including one multi-jurisdictional manhunt that resulted in the shooting death of a SLED K-9 and the fugitive.
- Both offices are proven to operate at a level that meets or exceeds national and international standards.

Timeliness of Victim Identification and Autopsy Imaging

During mass fatality events, rapid identification of the decedent is paramount. Both offices acquired MorphoIDent® fingerprint readers to allow immediate biometric identification of victims. Beaufort County procured a Lodox® unit for their autopsy suite that provides full-body radiographic imaging. Together with the full-body CT scanner to be placed in Charleston County's autopsy suite in the fall of 2024, these two counties are now poised to provide postmortem imaging data for the other if the facilities of one office are compromised.

Benefits/Results In the last fiscal year:

- 215 individuals have been rapidly identified by using the MorphoIDent® fingerprint devices. Quicker identification of victims leads to quicker answers for families, and improves turnaround time for death certificates, legal, and probate.
- The Lodox® x-ray unit was installed in Beaufort on July 26, 2024. Within 3 days of installation, it was used on 2 high-profile homicide cases.

Improvement of Investigative Processes for Drug-Related Deaths

Coordinating and upfitting both offices with newer investigative tools and technology is a direct response to the challenges of the opioid crisis. Both counties received Kirby Lester® Pill Counters to quickly and accurately document pills found at overdose scenes. Both counties acquired Radox® units that provide rapid drug screens to guide autopsy decisions and to inform stakeholders of the presence of specific drugs in the community for harm prevention efforts.

Benefits/Results In the last fiscal year:

- Over 85,000 pills from overdose scenes have been documented for evidence.
- 289 rapid toxicology tests were performed. The time to receive preliminary results decreased from an average of 28 days to just 2 days.
- 258 cases have been uploaded to the Overdose Detection Mapping Application Program. Narcotics officers can now geographically track drug movement throughout the region with near real-time surveillance capability.
- 198 cases have been uploaded to the CDC's State Unintentional Drug Overdose Reporting System, and 131 deaths to the CDC's National Violent Death Reporting System. This allows epidemiological analyses to improve public health and guide federal funding back to the region.

Project Originality/Innovation

This project is the result of a shared vision between two elected officials from separate counties, who

combined their efforts to develop robust regional reciprocity in death investigations. Unlike most county coroners who remain within the artificial geopolitical borders of their respective counties and face limitations in resources and communication, these officials recognize the benefit of collaboration. The project's uniqueness lies in its ability to transcend traditional boundaries and then plan and execute a cooperative effort. This reflects a mutual understanding of each other's respective challenges and the potential for growth beyond what is typically offered within standard budgets. It demonstrates innovative forward-thinking by individual county coroners, creating a standout collaborative program.

Throughout the project's duration, no other cooperative initiatives among coroners in the state were known.

Following the success of this particular project, however, the collaborative spirit continued with programs that directly benefit 4 additional county coroners. The Charleston County Coroner's Office was awarded a grant from the Bureau of Justice Assistance (\$280,000) as well as a cooperative agreement with the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (\$1,095,000); both embrace a unique regional perspective that will improve coroner systems in Georgetown, Berkeley, Dorchester, and Colleton, Beaufort, and Charleston counties. Both awards are multi-year projects still in the early stages of workflow initiation.

While the objectives set out at the beginning of this project are complete, the Charleston and Beaufort County Coroners will begin working with the 4 additional counties and collaborate on the additional grant projects that focus on improving toxicology testing for opioid-related deaths and improving child death investigations. These two programs reinforce the importance of wide regional data standardization, improved investigations, and automatic data exportation to state and national federal stakeholders.

Future goals include encouraging coroners across the state to participate more in legislative efforts. Coroners are part of the 'medicolegal' system, which encompasses both the medical and legal aspects of death. As such, coroners need to have a voice in legislative matters that affect their offices and the profession at large. It is at this larger political platform that real change can occur. At the 2024 annual conference of the National Association of Counties (NACo), Charleston County Coroner Bobbi Jo O'Neal submitted a resolution to support the medical examiner/coroner system. The resolution specifically requested funding for (1) the Collaborating Office for Medical Examiners and Coroners (COMEC) which is housed under CDC, (2) trainings for pathologists and investigators, (3) accreditation, and (4) data modernization. The resolution aims to improve the quality and timeliness of death investigations that directly impact the criminal justice and public health systems (attached). The resolution was passed unanimously across the NACo voting board and is currently being presented to federal agencies that fund medical examiners and coroners nationwide.

Concluding Remarks

This project had a significant impact on improving the investigation of deaths that cross county lines by procuring and sharing investigative tools and resources between the Charleston and Beaufort County Coroner's Offices. The collaborative efforts enhanced the efficiency of daily work for the involved agencies, saved money, and fostered a sense of goodwill and cooperation between them.

Southern low country coroners are prepared to assist their citizens during mass disasters and are honored and privileged to serve them and their families in their time of greatest need.

NACo Policy Resolution Recommendation

Federal Support of Medical Examiners and Coroners

Issue: NACo supports the strengthening of Medical Examiner and Coroner offices to improve the quality and timeliness of medicolegal death investigations which directly impact the criminal justice and public health systems.

Adopted Policy: NACo supports and strongly encourages the implementation, support and funding of federal legislation that will provide grants and microgrants specific to strengthening Medical Examiner and Coroner Offices (ME/C) to improve the medicolegal death investigation system which is often managed at the county level. NACo supports the development, implementation and funding of national standards, certification of personnel, accreditation of ME/C offices and data modernization of the medicolegal death investigation system.

1. COMEC: The Collaborating Office for Medical Examiners and Coroners (COMEC) which is housed under the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) should be fully funded.
2. Quality of Personnel: The Department of Justice (DOJ) and the COMEC should provide programs to fund training and the certification of forensic pathologists and medicolegal death investigators.
3. Accreditation: The DOJ and the COMEC should provide funding to ME/C offices to meet national office accreditation requirements and national standards related to forensic medicolegal death investigations.
4. Data Modernization & Interoperability: Federal funding should be available to ensure ME/Cs have access to, and utilize, electronic case management systems to allow interoperability between forensic/criminal justice and public health stakeholders.

Background: The majority of medicolegal death investigation systems are managed and funded at the county level. Medicolegal death investigation has become more specialized, technical, costly, and public. The quality of a forensic death investigation should not be determined by the size or wealth of a county government. The ME/C should not make autopsy, toxicology or other medicolegal death investigation decisions based on a county budget but rather ensure that these investigations meet national accreditation requirements and national standards. County governments have a vested interest in how deaths are investigated in their community. These investigations impact: The overall budget; how decedents and survivors, whether citizens or visitors, are treated and represented; the reputation of the County and related entities should a poorly executed death investigation become public; and may fiscally impact a county should there be civil litigation related to a death investigation.

Fiscal/Urban/Rural Impact: County governments fund local medicolegal jurisdictions often without federal or state stipends. The cost to ensure a thorough and competent medicolegal death investigation has risen as well as the cost to ensure personnel are trained and certified. The federal government has a vested interest in ensuring these systems are operating at a high

level regardless of the size or wealth of the county as these investigations impact national statistics, national criminal justice decisions as well as national public health decisions. Ensuring the public's trust in the medicolegal death investigation system is not just a local county issue but a federal one as well.

Respectfully Submitted By:

Bobbi Jo O'Neal, RN, BSN, F-ABMDI, F-AAFS
Charleston County Coroner
Charleston, SC

* International Association of Coroners & Medical Examiners (IACME): Chairwoman of the Board of Directors:

* Consortium of Forensic Science Organizations (CFSO): Board of Directors

For questions: Boneal@charlestoncounty.org or 843-822-6868



CHERYL H. HARRIS
EXECUTIVE ASSISTANT

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MICHAEL R. MOORE
COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR

August 12, 2024

South Carolina Association of Counties
1919 Thurmond Mall
Columbia, SC 29201

Re: 2024 Barrett Lawrimore Memorial Regional Cooperation Award

Dear Awards Committee:

I am writing to recommend the Beaufort County Coroner's Office for the 2024 Barrett Lawrimore Memorial Regional Cooperation Award for their project with Charleston County, "Strengthening Regional Coroner Capacity."

The Beaufort and Charleston County Coroner's Offices joined together on this project to address the growing need for regional partnership, strategies, and solutions to aid the citizens of both counties. Beaufort County Coroner David Ott and Charleston County Coroner Bobbi Jo O'Neal developed a working relationship that has resulted in significant improvements within each of their offices.

Their long-standing cooperation led to a focused effort on this project, establishing two separate, well-equipped autopsy centers that provide reciprocal assistance if one office is overwhelmed by disaster. Together, these coroners have demonstrated that their combined efforts yield results greater than the sum of their individual contributions.

Thank you for considering the Beaufort County Coroner's Office for this prestigious award.

Sincerely,

Michael R. Moore
County Administrator

COUNTY COUNCIL OF BEAUFORT COUNTY
ADMINISTRATION BUILDING
BEAUFORT COUNTY GOVERNMENT ROBERT SMALLS COMPLEX
100 RIBAUT ROAD

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MICHAEL R. MOORE
COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR

SARAH W. BROCK
CLERK TO COUNCIL

August 12, 2024

Awards Committee
Barrett Lawrimore Memorial Regional Cooperation Award
South Carolina Association of Counties
1919 Thurmond Mall
Columbia, SC 29201

Dear Awards Committee:

I am writing to recommend the Beaufort and Charleston County Coroner's Offices for the 2024 Barrett Lawrimore Memorial Regional Cooperation Award for their project, "Strengthening Regional Coroner Capacity."

The Beaufort County Council has worked with Coroner David Ott to improve the Coroner's Office capacity. This includes the approval of grant applications, grant budgets, and the expansion of autopsy services and equipment. Charleston County Coroner Bobbi Jo O'Neal has shown her support for Beaufort by co-appearing with Coroner Ott before the Beaufort County Council as his office was recently awarded accreditation from the International Association of Coroners and Medical Examiners. Their collaborative efforts have significantly benefitted the citizens of both Beaufort and Charleston Counties, ensuring efficient use of taxpayer dollars and improved public service.

Thank you for considering the Coroners of both Charleston and Beaufort County for this prestigious award.

Sincerely,



Joseph Passiment, Chairman
Beaufort County Council

Herbert R. Sass, III - Chair
Jenny Costa Honeycutt - Vice Chair
Joe Boykin
Henry E. Darby
Larry Kobrovsky
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CHARLESTON COUNTY COUNCIL
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August 2, 2024

Awards Committee
Barrett Lawrimore Memorial Regional Cooperation Award
South Carolina Association of Counties
1919 Thurmond Mall
Columbia, SC 29201

Dear Awards Committee,

I am writing to recommend the Beaufort and Charleston County Coroner's Office for the 2024 Barrett Lawrimore Memorial Regional Cooperation Award for their project, "Strengthening Regional Coroner Capacity."

It has been my pleasure to work with Coroner Bobbi Jo O'Neal in my capacity as County Chairman. Since she was elected Coroner, she has secured impressive grant funds to support the Coroner's Office. County Council has approved these funding projects as well as the structural expansion of Coroner building facilities. We have also collaborated with the Lowcountry Healthcare Coalition, which allocates funding to promote intra-regional planning, cooperation, and resource sharing among agencies.

The Coroner, in their position as an elected official, operates independently compared to other agencies within the county that rely more directly on Council decisions. It is rare for an elected position to maintain such a positive working relationship with both County Council and the County Administrator. It is even rarer for two separate County Coroners to have positive relationships with each of their own systems. This cooperation has been vital to the success of this multi-county project.

Thank you for considering the Coroners of both Charleston and Beaufort County for this prestigious award.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Herbert R. Sass, III".

Herbert R. Sass, III
Chairman, Charleston County Council



WILLIAM L. TUTEN
County Administrator

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North Charleston, SC 29405-7464

August 2, 2024

Awards Committee
Barrett Lawrimore Memorial Regional Cooperation Award
South Carolina Association of Counties
1919 Thurmond Mall
Columbia, SC 29201

Dear Awards Committee,

I am writing to recommend the Charleston County Coroner's Office for the 2024 Barrett Lawrimore Memorial Regional Cooperation Award for their project, "Strengthening Regional Coroner Capacity." The County Administrator's Office collaborates closely with the Coroner's Office on staffing, budgets, procurement, and resources for mass fatality planning.

As the County Administrator, it has been my pleasure to work alongside Coroner O'Neal as she dedicated herself to this project aimed at enhancing the capabilities of both the Charleston and Beaufort County Coroner's Offices. Since her election in 2020, Coroner O'Neal's office has secured over \$1,800,000 in grant funds to acquire essential mass fatality resources for Charleston. These initiatives have led to significant improvements in coroner systems and have greatly enhanced resource accessibility for the region.

I look forward to the continued advancements and collaborative efforts that will undoubtedly emerge from the Coroner's Office under Coroner O'Neal's exceptional leadership.

Thank you for considering the Coroners of both Charleston and Beaufort County for this prestigious award.

Sincerely,

William L. Tuten
County Administrator
Charleston County Government