

<b>This applicaton is for:</b>	J. Mitchell Graham Memorial Award
<b>Project Title</b>	CERT as the First Responder
<b>County or Counties</b>	Spartanburg County
<b>Application Contact</b>	Robbie Swofford
<b>Application Email Address</b>	rswofford@spartanburgcounty.org
<b>Presenter(s) Name and Title</b>	Tyler Golbus - Deputy CERT Coordinator & Dr Kara Davis - Quality Assurance Coordinator
<b>Main Presenter's Email Address</b>	tylergolbus@gmail.com

## Project Written Submission

### Project Summary

Coordinating emergency response across Spartanburg County is an ongoing challenge, particularly given the rising volume of lower-acuity 911 calls that can strain EMS resources and delay critical response to life-threatening emergencies. To address this gap, Spartanburg County Emergency Management developed and launched CERT91, a 911 response program that leverages the dedication of trained volunteers to respond to lower-acuity service calls.

CERT91 serves as a volunteer-based extension of the county's emergency services infrastructure and Community Emergency Response Team (CERT). The program responds to lift assists, welfare checks, medical alarms, and provides first-response support when needed. By design, CERT91 addresses calls that frequently do not require ambulance transport or advanced medical intervention, allowing professional EMTs and paramedics to focus their expertise on true medical emergencies.

Since its inception in January 2024, CERT91 has handled over 2,100 lower-acuity EMS calls and contributed more than 11,000 volunteer hours to Spartanburg County. Each response helps to reduce system congestion, especially during high-demand periods when traditional EMS services are stretched thin. By effectively triaging and managing lower-acuity calls, the program has directly improved the county's overall emergency response capabilities and outcomes.

The success of CERT91 lies in its coordination and cross-agency support. In addition to working closely with EMS, CERT91 also responds to non-criminal welfare checks at the request of the Spartanburg County law enforcement partners and assists local fire departments with non-emergent service calls. These call types, while vital to community safety, have historically increased emergency responders' response times to high-priority emergencies by tying up critical resources on lower-acuity calls. With CERT91 now filling that gap, fire, EMS, and law enforcement units can remain focused on time-sensitive incidents, improving both safety and operational efficiency.

CERT91 operates under the direction of Spartanburg County Emergency Management, which oversees volunteer recruitment, training, and deployment. Volunteers undergo structured preparation to ensure they are equipped to respond professionally, ethically, and safely to a variety of community needs. Many volunteers come to the program with a background in healthcare, public safety, or military service, and the program provides them with an opportunity to continue serving their community in a meaningful way.

The program's impact reaches beyond call response. CERT91 has become a trusted and recognized component of Spartanburg County's emergency preparedness and response ecosystem. By bridging the gap between professional EMS and non-emergent community needs, the program has demonstrated the power of innovation, interagency collaboration, and volunteerism in modern emergency management.

CERT91 exemplifies how local government, volunteers, and public safety agencies can work together to meet increasing service demands without sacrificing the quality of emergency response. This program enhances county-wide emergency operational capacity and redefines what is possible through strategic planning, community involvement, and a commitment to public safety.

## **Project Effort/Difficulty**

Launching CERT91 required a coordinated, countywide effort to design, build, and integrate a new tier of response into the existing 911 system. This initiative was driven by Spartanburg County Emergency Management, but its success depended on collaboration with EMS, fire department, law enforcement, and healthcare partners across the county.

At the core of the effort was the need to define a clear and appropriate operational scope. Spartanburg County is home to 34 separate fire departments, 8 municipal law enforcement jurisdictions, and a central EMS system. Emergency Management leadership spent months meeting with these agencies to identify gaps in service, determine how CERT91 could complement existing response capabilities, and minimize inter-agency conflicts. This included developing clear protocols for the types of calls CERT91 should respond to and what the level of care provided by CERT91 should be.

A particularly innovative but sensitive component involved working with the Spartanburg County Sheriff's Office and other law enforcement agencies to allow CERT91 to respond to non-criminal law enforcement service calls, such as welfare checks or traffic control, when no EMS unit was dispatched. Establishing this process where CERT91 responds in lieu of a law enforcement asset required extensive communication and safeguards to ensure responder safety and public trust, but ultimately allows law enforcement officers to remain available for higher-priority incidents.

Another key challenge was ensuring that CERT91 responders met the necessary minimum medical competencies to safely handle patient care prior to responding to calls. To accomplish this, CERT91 leadership worked with the South Carolina Department of Public Health and Spartanburg County EMS leadership to clarify the permissible scope of volunteer-led medical services. Simultaneously, CERT91 leadership consulted Spartanburg EMS to determine the appropriate clinical equipment, documentation processes, and training requirements needed for a safe and effective response.

Volunteer recruitment and training became a major operational focus. CERT91 leadership developed a tiered responder system based on level of training and experience, requiring lead responders to have a minimum of Emergency Medical Responder (EMR) training. In conjunction with the Spartanburg County CERT instructor staff, CERT91 leadership led dozens of training events focusing on first aid, CPR, EMR, and clinical skills, ensuring that all volunteers were properly prepared to respond to 911 calls. Spartanburg EMS and Spartanburg Regional provided direct support for training, donated surplus medical equipment, and continue to offer ongoing clinical guidance through dedicated physician medical control.

Funding the program presented additional challenges. While CERT91 was developed as a cost-effective solution to rising 911 call volume, outfitting response vehicles, supplying medical equipment, and insuring operations still required significant investment. The county leveraged grants, donations, and in-kind support from partner agencies to overcome initial hurdles.

Public reception of CERT91 was overwhelmingly positive. The community quickly recognized the program's value, especially among medically vulnerable and elderly populations who often benefit from non-transport EMS assistance. No significant concerns were raised, in part due to the extensive outreach and interagency coordination that precede the program's launch.

CERT91 continues to grow and presents a continued opportunity to advance its impact on the community. One of the primary goals for the coming year is to transition the program from an EMR-level model to a certified Basic Life Support (BLS) EMS agency. This elevation in scope would allow CERT91 to provide a

higher level of medical care, respond to more urgent medical incidents as a first responder agency, and further reduce the strain on the EMS system. Progress is already underway: the program has received all initial certifications required for elevating to the BLS scope.

## **Benefit/Importance of Project**

The health and safety of our community depend on emergency response and on the thoughtful, efficient use of public safety resources. Spartanburg County's CERT91 program directly addresses this challenge by creating a sustainable solution for non-emergent 911 calls. The program's significance lies in its ability to improve system-wide response capacity, reduce strain on EMS, fire, and law enforcement agencies, and provide timely, compassionate care for residents in need of non-transport assistance.

While life-threatening emergencies will always be a top priority, a large portion of 911 calls in Spartanburg County are for lower-acuity incidents. These calls can tie up advanced life support units and delay critical response to more urgent calls. CERT91 offers a targeted response to these specific challenges and allows first responders to focus on their expertise where it is most urgently needed.

The idea for CERT91 was born when Spartanburg County EMS voiced their concerns about staffing, call volume, and the strain of lower acuity calls. In response, Emergency Management pitched the idea of CERT91 to EMS in an effort to alleviate growing concerns about increasing 911 call volumes, widespread EMS staffing shortages, and frequent delays in response to high-acuity emergency calls. Emergency Management developed CERT91 to directly fill this operational gap. The program was created as a lower-acuity medical rescue squad staffed by trained volunteers capable of handling 911 calls unlikely to require transport. By deploying CERT91 units to these non-emergent calls, EMS crews could remain available for critical emergencies.

The impact of CERT91 extends across all geographic and demographic groups in Spartanburg County. From rural areas where response times can be lengthy to more densely populated areas facing frequent call volume surges, CERT91 fills a crucial service gap. Since its launch, the program has responded to over 2,100 911 calls, providing timely, hands-on support while allowing EMS and fire departments to remain available for emergencies. Because the program is countywide, 100% of Spartanburg County's population stands to benefit from its availability, either directly through service or indirectly by a faster EMS response in their time of need.

The program's impact was especially evident during Hurricane Helene when CERT91 played a critical role in the county's emergency response. As traditional EMS and fire units quickly became overwhelmed, CERT91 rapidly scaled up operations— placing four units in service around the clock to handle more than 100 calls in a three-day span. This surge capacity allowed core emergency services to prioritize high-acuity incidents and disaster response. At the same time, CERT91 volunteers staffed and managed the state's largest special medical needs shelter, established within six hours of Helene's landfall. Over the course of two weeks, more than 120 medically vulnerable residents were provided shelter and support by CERT91 volunteers. Medical emergencies that occurred inside the shelter were managed swiftly and effectively, with favorable outcomes. By stepping in during a countywide disaster, CERT91 not only supported traditional response agencies but also ensured access to care for Spartanburg's most at-risk residents, relieving pressure on local hospitals that would have been tasked with managing those patients. This response demonstrated the program's value not just in day-to-day operations, but also in large-scale, high-stakes emergencies.

As of August 1, 2025, CERT91 has contributed over 11,000 volunteer hours, representing the manpower of five full-time EMTs and saving an estimated \$206,850 in EMS personnel costs. Beyond financial impact, the time saved has been critical. With CERT91 handling over 2,100 non-transport calls to date, EMS units have avoided more than a thousand hours of out-of-service time that would have otherwise been spent responding, attending to patients, and documenting care for patients who do not require emergency medical attention. That availability translates directly to faster EMS response to time-sensitive emergencies like cardiac arrests, strokes, and traumatic injuries— where every second counts. In numerous instances, EMS units have arrived at emergencies minutes faster because CERT91 was able to absorb concurrent lower-priority calls.

CERT91 was established with the goal of reducing call volume for EMS, law enforcement, and fire services, and the data show clear progress toward that goal. By responding to low-acuity and welfare-related calls, CERT91 preserved emergency response capacity for higher-priority incidents. While 54.5% of calls resulted in patient contact, over 21% ended in “Patient Refused Evaluation/Care Without Transport,” and another 27.8% were resolved without requiring EMS or law enforcement intervention. These outcomes highlight CERT91’s value in absorbing calls that would have otherwise tied up emergency resources in both routine operations and crisis conditions (Hurricane Helene) by strengthening the overall emergency response framework.

## **Project Originality/Innovation**

CERT91 is the only known volunteer-based, lower-acuity 911 response program in South Carolina that is fully integrated into a county’s emergency management structure, operates under licensed medical control, and functions as part of the official 911 response system with 24/7 response capabilities. While other volunteer rescue squads exist across the state, CERT91 is distinct in that it is not a standalone or auxiliary unit; it is an extension of Spartanburg County’s CERT, and embedded directly within the county’s emergency communications framework.

What sets CERT91 apart is its structure: it is powered by trained volunteers, certified at a minimum as an Emergency Medical Responder (EMR) or higher within the pre-hospital care system. This ensures that all responses are delivered with consistency, competence, and adherence to professional standards. The program is supported by licensed medical direction, which provides clinical oversight, protocol development, and risk management, ensuring that every deployment is medically sound and operationally aligned with public safety expectations.

This dual emphasis on professional supervision and structured community volunteerism, combined with its direct dispatch integration and round-the-clock availability, makes CERT91 a truly hybrid and innovative model unlike any other in the state. It fills a critical service gap by handling low-acuity calls that traditionally burden EMS, fire, and law enforcement, while maintaining strong interagency coordination and medical accountability.

The program was built from the ground up, requiring innovation at every level. Spartanburg County Emergency Management coordinated with Spartanburg County 911 to develop protocols to identify appropriate low-acuity calls and route them to CERT91 teams. Volunteers receive targeted training that includes response procedures, safety protocols, and coordination with EMS, fire, and law enforcement. The addition of medical oversight and EMR-level leadership adds clinical integrity to the response model while maintaining flexibility and cost-effectiveness.

What truly distinguishes CERT91 as an innovative model is its deep integration and active support from Spartanburg County EMS, Sheriff’s Office, and area fire departments. These agencies played a critical role in both shaping and sustaining the program. From refining dispatch criteria to ensuring scene safety protocols, their input ensured CERT91 could function seamlessly alongside existing emergency services. Ongoing communication between CERT91 and these partners fosters mutual trust, clarity in roles, and a shared commitment to reducing strain on the 911 system while maintaining high-quality service for residents.

Rather than operating independently or as an auxiliary unit, CERT91 is treated as an essential part of the county’s emergency response ecosystem. Agencies know that when CERT91 is dispatched, their teams are supported by trained, supervised responders who understand the needs of the system and the community.

The innovation behind CERT91 lies not in technology, but in rethinking how emergency services can be extended through community-driven, medically supervised solutions. Spartanburg County’s commitment to interagency coordination, clinical oversight, and grassroots volunteerism has resulted in a scalable, replicable model that enhances emergency response without increasing system costs. It represents the best of what local government and community partnership can achieve—responsive, sustainable, and deeply rooted in public service.

## **Concluding Remarks**

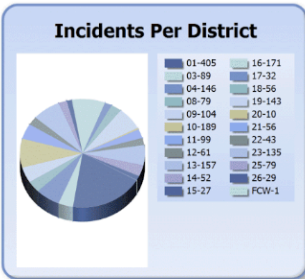
CERT91's value lies in its core mission and how it shifts the system. CERT91 demonstrates that solutions to public safety challenges do not always require more equipment or staff. Sometimes, they require rethinking how a community uses its existing resources. By mobilizing trained volunteers and coordinating with county services, Spartanburg County has created a replicable model that improves care, supports first responders, and delivers a high return on community investment.

The program has transformed how Spartanburg County handles lower-acuity 911 calls by offering an innovative response alternative. Its success is a direct result of planning, cross-agency collaboration, and a focus on public health over institutional boundaries. From routine lift assists to mass casualty response, CERT91 has proven its ability to scale, adapt, and meet community needs.

CERT91 sets a new standard for what's possible in county-wide emergency response. It has saved time, resources, and lives— all while building community resilience and trust. As demands on emergency services continue to grow, Spartanburg County's model offers a forward-thinking solution for jurisdictions nationwide seeking to maximize impact without increasing costs. CERT91 is more than a rescue squad, it's a strategy: one that leverages local volunteers, strengthens interagency collaboration, and redefines how communities can meet rising demands on emergency services. By demonstrating what's possible with limited resources and strong coordination, CERT91 offers a sustainable, scalable model for municipalities working to build smarter, more resilient public safety systems. CERT91 is improving patient outcomes today while preparing Spartanburg County for the emergencies of tomorrow.



**Spartanburg  
Communications /9-1-1**  
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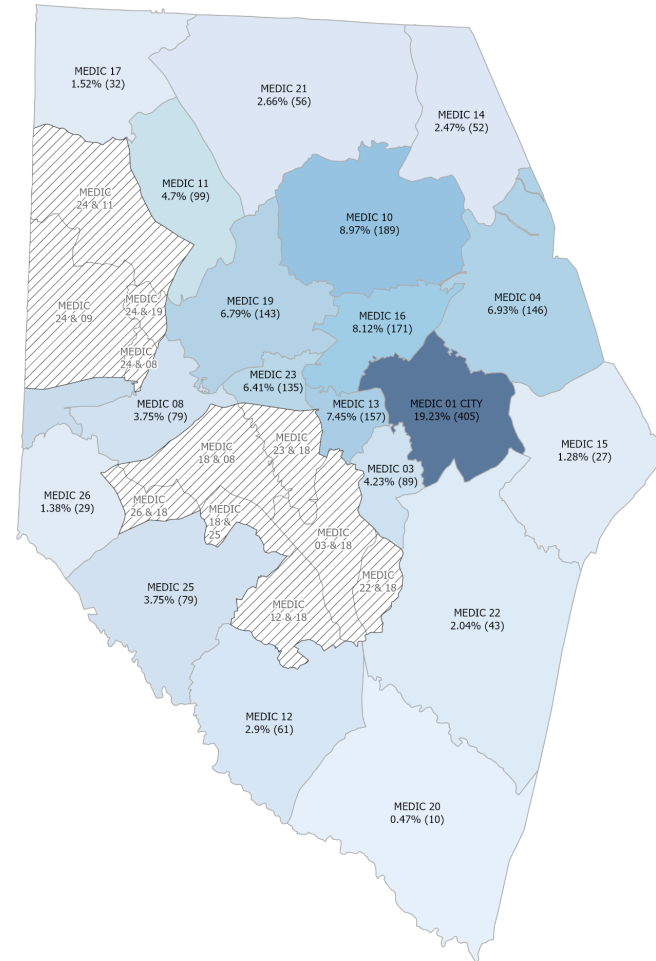
- ABDMM - Abdominal Pain
- ALARMM - Medical Alarm
- ALRGM - Allergic Reaction
- ASCIT - Citizen/Lift Assist
- ASFD - Assist Fire Department
- ASVC - Assault Victim
- BACK - Back Pain
- CHEST - Chest Pain
- CHOKE - Choking
- DETH - Obvious Death
- DIAB - Diabetic Emergency
- DRWN - Drowning
- EXPOS - Heat Exposure
- EYE - Eye Problems
- HEMO - Hemorrhage
- LAC - Laceration
- MNDN - Man Down
- NOTBR - Not Breathing
- OB - Childbirth
- OD - Overdose
- PSYCH - Psychological Problems
- SEIZ - Seizure
- SICK - Sick Person
- STRK - Stroke
- SUB - Submersion
- TRAUMA - Traumatic Injury
- UNAMM - Unknown Problem
- UNCO - Unconscious
- WEL - Welfare Check

### Incidents for CERT91 August, 2024

From: 01/29/2024 00:00:00  
To: 07/31/2025 23:59:59

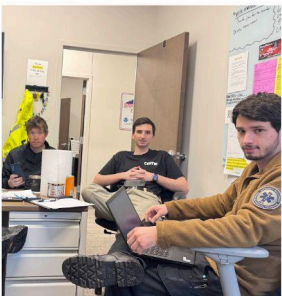
Incident Types	Total
AUTO ACCIDENT	6
ABDMM	1
ALARMM	130
ALRGM	1
ASCIT	1081
ASFD	10
OTHER	36
ASVC	2
BACK	1
CHEST	2
CHOKE	1
DETH	2
DIAB	1
DRWN	1
EXPOS	1
EYE	1
FALL	153
HEMO	2
LAC	4
MNDN	63
NOTBR	8
OB	1
OD	4
PSYCH	7
SEIZ	1
SICK	16
STRK	1
SUB	1
TRAUMA	3
UNAMM	4
UNCO	10
WEL	608
<b>Total</b>	<b>2163</b>

### CERT91 Responses by EMS Zones (January 29, 2024 - July 31, 2025)



\*Shaded areas account for 161 CERT91 calls excluded from map due to overlapping EMS zones\*

# CERT91 In Action



LOCAL NEWS

# Spartanburg County Community Emergency Response Team gets new role

by: [Collin Riviello](#)  
Posted: Feb 15, 2024 / 05:26 PM EST  
Updated: Feb 15, 2024 / 05:37 PM EST



SHARE    

SPARTANBURG, S.C. (WSPA) – On Jan. 29, Spartanburg County Emergency Management’s Community Emergency Response Team or CERT began to respond to non-emergency 911 calls. It’s something officials hope will take a burden off the county’s EMTs, allowing them to respond to higher-priority calls.

“There’s no reason why [you would] send two EMTs to something as simple as a fall with no injuries,” said Robbie Swofford, Spartanburg Emergency Management and CERT Coordinator. “This is something myself and EMS have been speaking about for a while just as a way to be a sort of force multiplier.”

[Established in 2005, CERT](#) is a group of trained volunteers which works in a supporting role during emergencies that happen across the county. They aid in calls for disaster relief, help perform search and rescue operations, assist other organizations in finding shelter for those that need it and more.

But over time, Swofford said he believed his team of around 200 volunteers, who are each trained at minimum in first-aid, CPR/AED, and search and rescue, could do more. So he tasked his group with another responsibility: taking on calls for non-emergent responses.

“Everything we do is non-emergent,” said Wofford. “The vast majority of them are falls. Let’s say for example, three houses down there’s someone with difficulty breathing or a heart attack. Do you want that medical unit there or do you want them on the heart attack?”

Wofford explained that because each CERT member is a volunteer who isn’t getting paid to be at SCEM’s offices waiting for a dispatcher to assign them to a call, it’s crucial for him to recruit.

Full Story:

<https://www.wspa.com/video/spartanburg-county-community-emergency-response-team-gets-new-role/9435150>



# County of Spartanburg

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Spartanburg, South Carolina 29304

**B. COLE ALVERSON**  
COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR

August 11, 2025

South Carolina Association of Counties  
Attn: J. Mitchell Graham Memorial Award Committee  
1919 Thurmond Mall  
Columbia, SC 29201

RE: Endorsement of CERT91 for the J. Mitchell Graham Memorial Award

Dear Members of the Selection Committee,

It is my privilege to nominate Spartanburg County's CERT91 program for the J. Mitchell Graham Memorial Award. CERT91 is a groundbreaking, volunteer-based emergency response initiative that has transformed how we manage lower acuity medical 911 calls — improving service delivery, reducing strain on EMS and law enforcement, and enhancing community safety.

Developed through unprecedented collaboration among Emergency Management, EMS, Fire, and Law Enforcement, CERT91 fills a critical gap in our emergency response system. Volunteers, trained to at least Emergency Medical Responder standards, respond to select 911 calls — such as lift assists, welfare checks, and assist citizens — freeing professional responders for higher-priority incidents. This innovative approach was carefully designed to complement existing services, with rigorous protocols, clinical oversight, and interagency coordination ensuring safety and effectiveness.

Since its launch, CERT91 has earned overwhelming support. In our opinion, CERT91 is more than a program — it is a model of cost-effective, scalable, and community-driven public safety innovation. Knowing this, I am proud to recommend it for this award and confident it will inspire similar initiatives across South Carolina.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "B. Cole Alverson", with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Cole Alverson  
County Administrator



# SPARTANBURG EMERGENCY MEDICAL SERVICES

525 Union Street  
Spartanburg, SC 29306  
Phone: (864) 560-9300  
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Jeffrey D. Carroll, Director  
Rodney J. McAbee, Operations Manager  
Jeffrey P. Jones, Asst. Operations Manager

To: S.C Association of Counties

From: Rodney J. McAbee, Operations Manager

Date: 08/07/25

Re: Spartanburg County CERT91

Over the past several years as Public Safety agencies in general have realized a dramatic increase in calls for service, we are also trying to navigate a decrease in staffing. This decrease in staffing has a direct impact on our ability to respond in a timely manner to emergency calls for service. As a result of these challenges, we have closely evaluated our service provision model, and discovered call types that are not urgent and may not require EMS response yet do require a response from someone. Two of these call types are welfare checks and citizen assists.

A welfare check is typically a call to 911 concerning a person that has not been seen or heard from in an unusual period of time. Generally, this is an elderly person or a person thought to be at risk of self-harm. An example of an assist a citizen is often a person that needs assistance from the floor, from the bed to a chair, or from a car to inside the home.

On the average, Spartanburg EMS is dispatched to more than 10 of these call types combined in a 24-hour period. These responses can occupy an EMS ambulance for up to an hour from dispatch to clear. This puts undue stress on the EMS response to urgent calls for service.

Hearing this concern voiced, Spartanburg County Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) devised a way to help. CERT in Spartanburg has been well known for a variety of services helping the community and our Public Safety agencies. Spartanburg CERT's coordinator Robbie Swofford has a group of dedicated and talented volunteers that devote their time to support CERT's mission. Robbie decided that they needed a new mission: helping Spartanburg EMS handle these low acuity calls for assistance.

Once the decision was made, Robbie and his volunteers immediately began laying the foundation to begin a non-emergent response capability that was trained and qualified to handle the assist citizen and welfare check requests. They acquired a vehicle, communication equipment, medical equipment and certified EMRs, EMTs and even some paramedics to staff the team. Designated as CERT91, they realized the need to have medical oversight, protocols, policy & procedures, and all of these objectives were accomplished in record time to open for service on January 29, 2024. Since beginning service CERT91 has responded to over 2100 calls for service, not only assisting EMS, but assisting all Public Safety agencies in Spartanburg including Law Enforcement and Fire.

CERT in Spartanburg County has been known for some time to be a leader in CERT operations across the state. The addition of CERT91 is unique and I am not aware of another jurisdiction that provides this type of service. Robbie Swofford and his group of volunteers are a credit to Spartanburg County and we are very proud of their dedication to their community. We at Spartanburg EMS rely on CERT91 daily and they are wonderful and caring response partners. We ask that you choose to recognize them accordingly.

Please contact me directly if I can provide more information.

Respectfully,  
Rodney J. McAbee  
Operations Manager  
Spartanburg EMS  
525 Union St  
Sptbg. SC 29306  
864-560-9308  
[rmcabee@srhs.com](mailto:rmcabee@srhs.com)



To the Members of the Awards Committee,

On behalf of the Spartanburg Police Department, I am honored to recommend Spartanburg County Emergency Management's CERT91 program for recognition by the South Carolina Association of Counties.

Launched in January 2024, CERT91 deploys trained medically supervised volunteers to handle lower-level medical calls such as lift assists, welfare checks, medical alarms, and other non-transport needs. By managing these calls, CERT91 keeps EMS, fire, and law enforcement resources available for higher-priority incidents.

From a law enforcement perspective, the benefits are clear:

- **Officer Availability & Safety:** CERT91's response to non-criminal welfare checks and assist-a-citizen calls reduces the need for officer dispatch, allowing patrol units to remain focused on urgent public safety needs while limiting unnecessary call responses.
- **System Efficiency:** Many CERT91 calls end without the need for transport, confirming the program's ability to triage and resolve incidents that would otherwise tie up EMS and law enforcement.
- **Community Trust & Care:** Volunteers deliver timely, compassionate service, particularly to elderly and medically vulnerable residents, enhancing public confidence in our emergency response system.

The dedication of CERT91 volunteers is the program's greatest asset. They respond at all hours, in all conditions, with professionalism, reliability, and care, making a measurable difference in community safety and quality of service.

For its proven impact, operational excellence, and outstanding volunteer service, Spartanburg County Emergency Management's CERT91 program is fully deserving of this recognition. The Spartanburg Police Department is proud to partner with and strongly endorse CERT91.

Steve Lamb

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Steve Lamb', written over a light blue horizontal line.

Major – Investigative Services Bureau  
Spartanburg Police Department

**Policing in Partnership**

P.O. Box 1746 • Spartanburg, S.C. 29304

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