

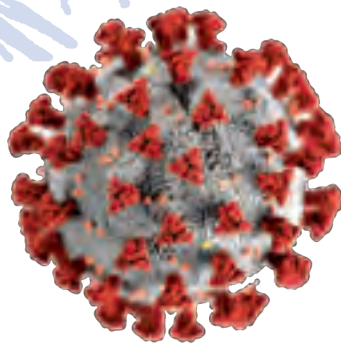
A Closer Look:

How the Coronavirus Is Affecting Four South Carolina Counties, Their Responses and Lessons Learned

The Important Lesson Orangeburg County Learned After Recent Tornadoes

By W. Stuart Morgan III

Chief administrative officers (CAOs) and emergency managers in York, Kershaw and Dorchester counties were interviewed in April to determine how the coronavirus pandemic was affecting their counties, how they were responding, and the lessons they were learning. Orangeburg County's CAO and risk manager were also interviewed after three tornadoes ripped through the county, causing a second disaster.



delegating to local officials the authority to restrict access, as they saw fit.

How the Coronavirus Pandemic Is Affecting Counties

The coronavirus pandemic is affecting all 46 counties in the state, albeit to different degrees. Counties are operating differently. Local economies are suffering along with the nation's economy, which is facing its worst downturn since the Great Depression.

Many recreational and entertainment facilities have closed, cancelled events or modified operations. Most citizens could not even enjoy the state's beaches or lakes for several weeks until the governor issued his second executive order on April 20 to reopen public access points. Tensions are growing between people who want to return to work and to normality, and those who believe reopening too soon could lead to a resurgence of the pandemic.

Predicting what counties will be facing several weeks from now when this issue of *County Focus Magazine* is published and distributed is akin to guessing what the weather will be like then. But as of May 1, the pandemic has hit these two counties the hardest: Richland County (913 confirmed cases, 34 deaths); Greenville County (730 confirmed cases, 38 deaths). (See P. 11)



The number of confirmed cases and deaths is growing daily.

York County

York County had 215 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and three deaths as of May 1.

York County Manager David Hudspeth's description of how the pandemic has affected York County could just as easily describe how it has affected Kershaw, Dorchester and Orangeburg counties and other counties across the state.

"As seen nationwide, the health and safety of York County residents and county first responders have been compromised by the coronavirus pandemic and the disease, COVID-19," Hudspeth

reported. “Our county’s economic well-being and quality of life have been negatively impacted. Our county is home to numerous local businesses and recreational and entertainment facilities unique to our area. Many of these entities have had to temporarily close, cancel events and/or modify their operations.

“However, on a positive note,” he added, “we have an amazing community that has come together in the face of adversity and supported each other and local businesses.”

York County, like all counties, continues to proactively implement preventive measures directed by Gov. McMaster, and guidance provided by the Centers for Disease Control and Pre-



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— David Hudspeth
York County Manager

vention (CDC) and S.C. Department of Health and Environmental Control (SCDHEC).

York County Council adopted an emergency ordinance on March 26, allowing county council to modify its ordinary operations related to conducting meetings. It also

adopted a Declaration of Local State of Emergency on April 7, allowing the county manager to take any necessary actions to protect and preserve the general welfare of residents and visitors. The declaration also activates the county’s 2019

Emergency Operations Plan, allowing for emergency procurement of items without having to use the normal procurement process.

(Continued on next page)

S.C. Counties Most Affected by the Coronavirus Pandemic

As of May 1, 2020

Most Coronavirus Cases

- Richland County—913
- Greenville County—730
- Charleston County—452
- Lexington County—370
- Florence County—325
- Beaufort County—269
- Spartanburg County—295
- Kershaw County—237
- Sumter County—230
- Horry County—223
- York County—215
- Clarendon County—214

Most COVID-19 Deaths

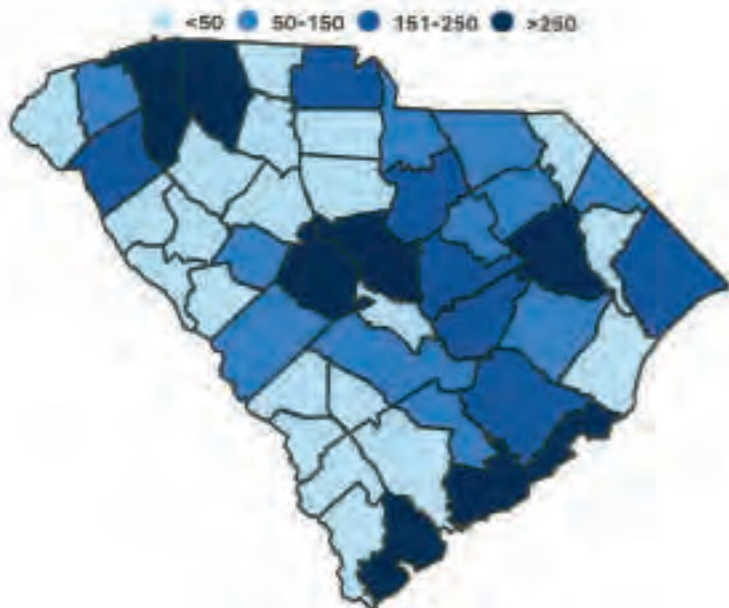
- Greenville County—38
- Richland County—34
- Clarendon County—21
- Horry County—16
- Lexington County—15
- Florence County—15
- Beaufort County—11
- Spartanburg County—11
- Sumter County—11
- Kershaw County—10
- Berkeley County—10

Confirmed Cases of COVID-19 in South Carolina: 6,258

Confirmed COVID-19 deaths in South Carolina: 256

Data provided by the S.C. Department of Health and Environmental Control and the Center for Disease Control. For up-to-date information on the coronavirus pandemic, visit: www.scdhec.gov and www.cdc.gov.

Coronavirus Cases by County



SCDHEC posts a map like the one shown above on its website that is updated each afternoon. Using your computer’s mouse, you can point to any county to receive figures for confirmed cases of coronavirus and deaths per county due to COVID-19. This map current as of May 1, 2020 *(Illustration courtesy of SCDHEC)*

“Operationally, our county proactively created and implemented a Continuity of Operations Plan that serves as the guiding document for the continuation of operations in our county during the coronavirus pandemic and similar emergencies,” Hudspeth explained. “During this evolving situation, the county is regularly modifying county operations. This includes implementing social distancing measures at local facilities, allowing non-essential county employees

“In this pandemic, we’ve learned that we can effectively and efficiently deploy technology and other resources to county officials and employees necessary to govern, provide services and continue daily operations if an emergency creates a situation when they’re isolated or cannot work at government facilities.”

— Chuck Haynes
York County Emergency
Management Director

to work remotely, and implementing COVID-19 mitigation efforts at county locations that must remain open like the county’s 16 collection and recycling centers and county landfill.

“York County officials are actively collaborating with representatives of community agencies to plan and implement preventive measures countywide,” he added. “We’re in contact daily with municipalities in the county, local school districts and public safety entities regarding COVID-19 preventive measures. We’re also in contact with our local hospital in Rock Hill, and working with its staff to satisfy their personal protective equipment needs, to help if there is a surge in the need for medical care, and to assist with alternate plans for providing service.”

York County, like other counties, is governing “virtually.”

“Our County Council and boards and commissions are conducting business as well as public hearings via teleconferencing,” Hudspeth said. “Additionally, we’re providing services to county residents while implementing and practicing social distancing. We’re also continuing our day-to-day county operations while most of our county employees work remotely at home.”

Chuck Haynes, York County Emergency Management Director, reported

that the county received essential supplies to protect first responders in a timely manner from the National Guard, and federal, state and third-party vendors.

“In this pandemic,” Haynes said, “we’ve learned that we can effectively and efficiently deploy technology and other resources to county officials and employees necessary to govern, provide services and continue daily operations if an emergency creates a situation when they’re isolated or

cannot work at government facilities.

“During any emergency, this is what residents expect and deserve,” he added. “They need to have confidence that their government will continue to provide essential services and continue to function in a way that maintains their safety and the county’s economic stability.”

York County has created an online COVID-19 Resource Center at www.yorkcountygov.com/Covid19.

The information hub keeps local residents updated on the pandemic in real time, provides state and local COVID-19 information and posts details on the county’s modified operations.

Kershaw County

Kershaw County had 237 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and 10 deaths as of May 1.

“From an organizational level, the coronavirus pandemic has brought home the importance of being prepared for

the unexpected, and the need to have plans in place,” reported Vic Carpenter, Kershaw County Administrator. “These plans must not just be focused on protecting our citizens but also our county employees. It has also taught us



not to underestimate occurrences, like the coronavirus pandemic, happening around the globe. We’ve learned the importance of doing your best to quickly grasp the implications of such distant occurrences and the potential impacts they might have on your community.”

Kershaw County has responded to the pandemic with an “all hands on deck”

mentality, providing a focused effort, according to Carpenter.

“We quickly decided to take the approach that we were going to have to solve this on our own, and not look to nor expect help from others,” he said. “This has resulted in us refining our Continuity of Operations Plan

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— Vic Carpenter
Kershaw County Administrator

by moving to a three-deep structure. We have further cross-trained individuals to handle other duties not normally in their purview. We have also kept moving, planning and never feeling sorry for ourselves. This has pushed us to think about next steps and future decision points. We have been trying to work on at least a two- to three-week advance window of where we will be then, and what challenges or opportunities will be presenting themselves to us then.”

Carpenter said the biggest lesson he has learned so far is to keep expectations of state and federal government

response to a reasonable level and “not to expect the cavalry to come riding in and rescue you.” He described state and federal responses as “limited and not at the level” he and others had expected, and that the scope of the pandemic appears to have overwhelmed their ability to respond to the crisis in a timely manner.

“We’re the experts on Kershaw County, and we can and will find the answers and solutions to our issues,” he said. “Local problems must be solved by local solutions. It’s also important to show a united front when confronting an emergency like the pandemic. You can’t have different people and organizations all trying to take a separate, individualistic approach. You need to develop a strong system of community messaging. After all, keeping a steady stream of updates and guidance is critical to ensuring your community is comforted. In fact, maintaining a hotline/rumor control is

a vital part of any such effort.”

Gerald Blanchard, Kershaw County EMS Director, said in terms of scope all of the other disasters he has experienced during his career pale in comparison to the current coronavirus pandemic.

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“County agencies like EMS and Fire are used to responding to defined incidents, incidents with a beginning and an end, and to a large degree borders. This disaster is ongoing with no end in sight. It has no borders, and the playbook that we normally use to govern our response is not in play.”

— Gerald Blanchard
Kershaw County EMS Director

an end, and to a large degree borders,” Blanchard explained. “This disaster is ongoing with no end in sight. It has no borders, and the playbook that we normally use to govern our response is not in play. For example, when we found that the state and federal response was limited, and honestly, not as timely as we had expected, we elected to quickly find local solutions to solve local problems.”

Blanchard, like Kershaw County Administrator Vic Carpenter, said one of the biggest lessons he has learned is not to underestimate occurrences happening around the globe. Perhaps nothing better demonstrates the value of that lesson than the incredible luck Kershaw County officials had earlier in the coronavirus pandemic when they participated in the Midlands Healthcare Coalition in February.

“We happened to be at that meeting when John Williams with the South Car-
(Continued on next page)



Tension began surfacing in April between people who wanted to return to work and normality, and those who believed reopening too soon could lead to a resurgence of the coronavirus. Shown above, about a hundred people protest in front of the State House on April 24. Many other protestors drive down Main Street toward the State House to protest as well. (Photo by Stuart Morgan)

olina Hospital Association gave a quick update on supply issues that were coming out of China,” Blanchard recalled. “We listened to what was going on thousands of miles away on the other side of the globe and that afternoon began to bolster our PPE and other medical supplies in preparation. It’s a small world!”

Both Blanchard and Carpenter said it is important to trust your team when responding to a disaster. They also said it was important to listen to your team, to take their needs and concerns seriously, and to teach your team to embrace challenge.

“Have a plan and act fast,” Blanchard emphasized. “Failing to prepare two weeks in advance and to take action can have devastating consequences. If you slip, reassess and move. From day one of this pandemic, I told my command staff that they only had so many opportunities to lead a team during a crisis, and to bear down and embrace the pandemic we’re facing.”

Dorchester County

Dorchester County had 103 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and three deaths as of May 1.

County Council declared a state of emergency in the county through April 30 as the pandemic began spreading



across South Carolina. The county also closed county buildings on March 17 to prevent large groups from congregating and spreading the virus.

“The coronavirus pandemic has affected Dorchester County in many ways,” reported Jason Ward, Dorchester County Administrator. “Many families are struggling to make a living while securing childcare and making sure that their children keep up with their school assignments. Many businesses are closed,

and many residents have been laid off and furloughed. Our senior centers have been closed to protect one of our most vulnerable populations. Instead of providing congregate meals at the senior centers, our centers and volunteers from Meals on Wheels are delivering meals to the seniors’ homes.”

Most county services are being provided online whenever possible. The county has also waived convenience fees that citizens and businesses usually pay for online services.

“Employees designated as emergency service personnel are reporting to work as scheduled,” Ward said. “We’ve instructed all other county employees to stay at home where they can telework and telecommunicate unless called upon by a supervisor to perform an emergency assignment. We’ve permitted employees to flex work and work alternating schedules. We’ve also changed dispatch protocols to screen individuals for the virus and anyone who is exposed to someone who has the virus.”

Dorchester County has formed a COVID-19 Coordination Group that includes EMD, EMS, Fire Rescue, Sheriff’s Office, County Attorney, Human Resources, PIO and county administration. All members of this group, required to meet virtually on Mondays and Fridays, strive to tackle issues unique to the coronavirus pandemic.

To practice social distancing, the county is operating as a Virtual Emergency Operations Center (EOC). The EOC is holding virtual meetings to communicate with all county department heads, and elected and appointed county officials.

The county’s public information officer has turned the home page on the county’s website into an Online Newsroom to provide up-to-date information related to COVID-19. Flyers and public service announcements have been produced, and social media is being used to

alert local residents and business owners to keep them informed on the pandemic.

“We have reached out to businesses covered by the Governor’s orders to educate them on the orders, and in some cases taken enforcement action when a few businesses didn’t comply,” Ward said. “Our county’s Economic Development Office held a conference call with local business owners to provide information, listen to their concerns and answer their questions.

“On April 8, we held an Emergency Council Meeting, comprised of our

“We’ve closed County Council meetings to the public, but we’re live-streaming the meetings on YouTube. We’ve also created an e-form allowing anyone to address County Council that we made available on April 20.”

— Jason Ward
Dorchester County Administrator

County Council Chairman, County Administrator, mayors of municipalities in our county, and emergency management personnel,” he added. “We’ve closed County Council meetings to the public, but we’re live-stream-

ing the meetings on YouTube. We’ve also created an e-form allowing anyone to address County Council that we made available on April 20.”

Ward detailed and assessed the assistance Dorchester County has received, as follows:

- The federal government has been helpful as far as passing the Families First Coronavirus Response Act, which provides leave to employees infected by COVID-19, employees caring for a family member infected by the virus, or taking care of school-aged children because daycare centers and K-12 schools are closed.
- The county received a shipment of supplies from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Strategic National Stockpile (SNS) that has helped the county protect first responders in EMS and fire rescue so they can respond to medical calls.
- FEMA’s Fact Sheet for Coronavirus COVID-19 Pandemic Eligible Emergency Protective Measures has helped the county better understand what costs related to the pandemic can be reimbursed.

- The Small Business Administration has helped by providing low-interest loans to help keep small businesses afloat.
- SCDHEC has been helpful, but could be more forthcoming by sharing information with first responders when someone in the county has tested positive for COVID-19.
- The Centers for Disease Control (CDC), SCDHEC and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) have provided a wealth of information on the disease, how to protect local residents, county employees and especially first responders.
- Telehealth screening and in-person testing programs have helped streamline the testing process to help someone identify if they have been infected by the virus.
- Daily calls with the SCEMD have helped the county achieve and maintain situational awareness and pointed out resources that have proved to be valuable.

Ward said one of the lessons he has learned due to the coronavirus is the importance of having a “rainy day fund” or an emergency fund so you’ll have the resources to continue operating, to carry out your core missions as a local government, and to provide the essential services that residents and local businesses depend on daily. He also said to maintain order it is also important to continue providing: 24/7 public safety, first responder and dispatch operations; court bond hearings; water and sewer operations; Public Works Solid Waste Convenience Centers; and Animal Control for dangerous animals.

Mario Formisano, Dorchester County Emergency Management Director, said the county’s EMD is focused on supporting county and municipal leaders and providing support functions by providing timely, accurate information to guide their decision-making and actions.

He also said the pandemic has highlighted the importance of local continuity of operations planning, the pre-designation of emergency duties, defining essential versus non-essential

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Tornadoes Land Counties a Second Blow

Storms and tornadoes swept through South Carolina on April 13, landing the second blow of a one-two punch to counties already dealing with the coronavirus pandemic. At least nine people were killed, and many homes and businesses were destroyed or severely damaged. Most counties across the state sustained some damage, but counties hit hardest were: Aiken, Berkeley, Colleton, Hampton, Oconee, Orangeburg and Pickens.

Orangeburg County

Three tornadoes touched down in Orangeburg County, killing two people, destroying at least 14 homes and severely damaging seven others. When interviewed, the county’s CAO and risk manager both emphasized the importance of being prepared.

Orangeburg County had prepared early for the coronavirus pandemic and the COVID-19 disease by purchasing personal protective equipment (PPE) weeks before the first case was confirmed in the state,” according to Todd Williams, Orangeburg County Risk Manager. While preparing for the pandemic, the county also received a grant to modernize its mobile unit for county council.

The timing was perfect.

Todd said council members and staff worked with 17 mayors in the county to prepare for the recent storms that brought the tornadoes. Residents were quickly alerted through social media, robocalls and the media. As soon as the storms and tornadoes passed, council members and staff were in the

field assessing the damage and assisting residents either virtually via the county’s newly-modernized mobile unit or in person. County staff members distributed additional PPEs to first responders treating injured residents, and county staff members using chainsaws to rescue others.

“Our county’s greatest asset is our well-trained staff,” said Harold Young, Orangeburg County Administrator, when asked to explain his county’s response to the unexpected storms, including the tornadoes. “From bloodborne pathogen training to other risk management principles, our staff was able to quickly and safely rescue our residents

and efficiently sanitize our ambulances after the tornadoes to transport COVID-19 positive patients who needed medical care.”

Young credited county council members and county officials from other

counties who provided assistance immediately following the tornadoes.

“I commend county council for its leadership and willingness to spend \$50,000 or more to purchase PPEs early before we knew if the costs would be reimbursable,”

he said. “Our council understands that our staff is the first line of defense, and that we must stay safe in order to serve as first responders and help our citizens.

“Our county is grateful for the resources and assistance Lexington and Bamberg counties provided immediately after the storms,” Young added. “The collaboration and support of other counties shows the strength of our communities and our state.”



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employees, and having emergency procedures and policies part of human resources' plan to define how employees will be compensated during emergency operations and long-term closures.

"It has been a very unconventional response mission because our county's EOC is operating virtually. The challenges created by a public health emergency, like the current pandemic, and a natural disaster are very different."

— Mario Formisano
Dorchester County Emergency
Management Director

"It has been a very unconventional response mission because our county's EOC is operating virtually," Formisano explained. "The challenges created by a public health emergency, like the cur-

rent pandemic, and a natural disaster are very different—from the chain of command to authorities, and limitations. We are accustomed to rapidly obtaining information and data to aid decision-making and actions, but a public health emergency like this one creates unique challenges that we're having to adapt to.

"Fortunately, Dorchester County has always had a great working relationship with the SCEMD and National Guard," he added. "SCEMD has really championed much of the coordination with locals since the start of this event, just as they've done with other large scale emergencies/disasters."



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