

Pickens County's COPE Program Fights Opioid Crisis

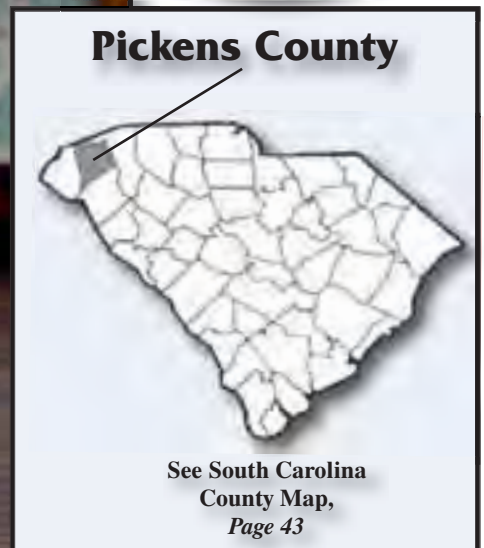
By W. Stuart Morgan III

Pickens County ranked second per capita in South Carolina last year for opioid addiction. Now, it's the first county in the state to implement a Community Outreach Paramedic Education (COPE) program to tackle the crisis.

"Our opioid crisis is dire, and there isn't an appropriate way to describe the situation," said Angela B. Farmer, executive director for Behavioral Services of Pickens County. "There are many reasons why, but it's a perfect storm. We're located between two major drug trafficking highways, Highway 11 and Interstate 85, we're a rural county, and we have a lower socioeconomic standing. The compilation of all these things creates the crisis, which goes both directions.

The drug problem creates all those issues, and all these problems create the drug problem.

"But we're not just talking about typical drug addicts taking illegal drugs," Farmer added. "We're talking about anybody who's



taking pain medicine and getting addicted quickly. People experiencing pain do not realize how dangerous it is to take prescription medicine, and our program is working really hard to educate our county's residents of the dangers." (See **You Need to Know More ...**, P. 10)

Last January, the S.C. Department of Health and Environmental Control (DHEC) awarded a \$25,000 Federal grant to Bowers Emergency Services, a licensed community-based paramedic program based in Easley, to conduct a community outreach program to fight the opioid crisis. Randy Bowers, the company's chief executive officer, then presented an opportunity for a public-private partnership to Pickens County, which had already been working with the sheriff's office to find innovative ways to combat the crisis.

Governor Henry McMaster had just said the silent hurricane of opioid addiction was continuing to pummel the Palmetto State, and promised to form an Opioid Crisis Response Team and to disperse \$14.3 million to all 46 counties in the state to fight the opioid crisis. The White House had also just declared the opioid crisis a public health emergency.

"Because I felt that the fight against the opioid crisis warranted specific attention, and that it was imperative for Pickens County to take action soon rather than wait until our next regular council meeting," said Pickens County Council Chairman Roy Costner, "I called a special meeting just to discuss creating what would be called the COPE program, and sent a message that we were serious about taking action to address our county's drug and opioid crisis."

Pickens County's community relations manager, Jamie Burns, acted quickly to effectively communicate the severity of the county's opioid crisis and the county's serious commitment to tackle the crisis and to provide resources to help anyone suffering from addiction. It isn't a stretch at all to describe her communication efforts as "effective," because *Fox News* picked-up the story on the county's opioid crisis. This helped spark conversations across Pickens County and the nation on how communities could unite to fight opioid epidemics where they live.

The partnership, which quickly formed Pickens County's COPE program, includes: Pickens County, S.C. Department of Health and Environmental Services; S.C. Depart-

ment of Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse Services; Behavioral Health Services of Pickens County; Bowers Emergency Services; local police departments; Pickens County EMS; and other emergency response organizations.

Pickens County officially announced the formation of its COPE program in January 2019 and launched the program by June that same year.

The county's EMS department continues to provide the same services it has in the past.

However, Bowers Emergency Services' specially-trained and equipped community paramedics, and peer support specialists, working for Behavioral Health Services of Pickens County (BHSPC), have been treating addicts differently and making a difference in the process since the COPE program's formation. They've been making home visits and providing the long-term support often required to help anyone recover from addiction to opioids.

Pickens County's effort to communicate its fight against the opioid crisis began when the county announced the formation of the COPE program.

"I spent time listening to the experiences shared by community paramedics and peer support specialists to better understand the impact of the COPE program," Burns recalled. "This helped me understand just how impactful the program's hands-on approach to recovery can be, and made me a better advocate and spokesperson for the COPE program."

(See *COPE*, P. 11)



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You Need to Know More About the Opioid Crisis

If you think the opioid crisis is only about drug addicts, and you'll never be affected, think again.

Pickens County's COPE program strives to educate everyone about the dangers of opioids, and offers treatment to anyone who has an opioid problem. Learn a little more about the crisis, and you might realize that you or someone you care about could be affected now or later.

"The people who are overdosing on opioids aren't just drug addicts," explained Angela Farmer, executive director of Behavioral Health Services of Pickens County. "It's your mom, it's your dad, it's your brother, it's your sister, it's your children. Most of the patients seeking help from us due to an opioid problem started because they were on a prescription for a medical reason, and then it worsened. So, anybody can have an opioid problem. So, don't discount this."

People don't realize how dangerous it is to take medications for pain.

"Opioids—typically prescribed pain medications like Lortab, Hydrocodone, Morphine, Oxycodone, OxiContin and even the street drug, Heroin—are opioids," Farmer said. "Heroin is an opiate, and pain medication comes from a derivative of opium and heroin. It's the same kind of medicine. It's easier to get the prescription medication because you can find it on the street. Most people have these narcotics in their cabinets and hold on to them for a rainy day, and don't realize how easy it is for other people to get access to these narcotics."

"A person can become physically dependent on such medication within a short period of time because of how it is absorbed in the brain, which creates a greater need and desire to take the narcotics," she added. "More older patients are overdosing because their bodies no longer metabolize medications as well as when they were younger, or they forget they've taken their medication and end up taking too much."

The partnership, which last Janu-



Angela B. Farmer, executive director for Behavioral Services of Pickens County, outside her office in downtown Pickens (Photo by Stuart Morgan)

ary formed Pickens County's COPE program, is one of the first partnerships the county has formed during the past several years to help provide a better quality of life in the county.

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"We decided several years ago to build partnerships with organizations, municipalities, the local school board and state government," recalled Roy Costner, Pickens County Council Chairman. "My fellow council members and I decided to tear down any and all walls, to begin repairing partnerships and to work hard to clean up Pickens County by working with PalmettoPride and creating Five ON Friday cleanup initiatives."

"We rejoined our Upstate Alliance, and began working with our state delegation to declare that Pickens County is open for business," he added. "We've

created a forum for Greenville, Anderson, Oconee, Abbeville and Pickens county councils to meet quarterly to share ideas and best practices. After consolidating our 13 fireboards into one EMS county-wide board, we continue to create efficiencies saving thousands of dollars. The COPE program is just one tool in our box of opportunities designed to solve challenging problems, like the current opioid crisis, to create economic development and much more."

Pickens County's COPE program was one of many counties recognized for competing in SCAC's 2019 J. Mitchell Graham/Barrett Lawrimore Memorial Awards Competition at SCAC's 52nd Annual Conference. The county didn't win, but Costner still believes submitting the entry on Pickens County's COPE program was a good idea.

"Absolutely, competing last year was worth the effort despite the fact we didn't win anything," replied Costner, when asked if it was worth the effort.

"Everytime we attend SCAC meetings, the citizens of Pickens County benefit when we have the opportunity to participate and learn from other counties," he added. "Sharing our county's success with its COPE program also gives other counties the opportunity to learn, whether we win an award or not. Educating everyone on the opioid crisis and sharing ideas to help each other win the war on drugs is far more important than recognition."

For more information about Pickens County's COPE program, contact Angela B. Farmer, M.Ed., LPC, MAC, LAC, executive director for BHSPC, at (864) 898-5800 or visit:

www.bhspickens.com.

America ...

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“Addiction isn’t limited to those who illegally acquire ‘street drugs,’” Burns added. “Addiction can affect anyone—your neighbors, friends, coworkers and family members. It can also affect individuals in endless ways. In fact, I was surprised to learn that many who are treated for overdose were not intentionally abusing substances. In some cases, a patient has taken medication as prescribed—or as they thought it was intended to be taken—unaware of how the medication could react with other substances or how quickly dependency on opioids could develop.”

Addiction affects work performance or the ability to parent; decreases productivity at work, which could lead to unemployment or underemployment; and requires federal, state or local tax dollars to be used to provide housing assistance, medical assistance and more.

It also affects an individual’s ability to parent, which could affect a child’s academic performance or mental health; cause a child to be born into addiction if the mother uses opioids while pregnant; and statistically, as it has been proven, children whose parents abuse drugs are more likely to become addicts.

Fortunately, the COPE program is beginning to change

the way people think about addiction and opioid usage.

“Hopefully, by making people aware of the dangers,” Burns said, “they may use prescribed opioids less frequently than the maximum dosage permitted or stop taking them as their symptoms subside and before their prescription expires.”

Physicians are more carefully considering the dangers before prescribing opioids to patients.

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Pickens County Community Relations Manager

Printing the words, “Take as needed,” is “a simple way to remind people that they should only use prescribed opioids when critically necessary rather than simply following medicine bottle label instructions that tell them when and how often to take more medication.”

— Randy Bowers
CEO, Bowers Emergency Services

instruct them when and how often to take more medication.”

Bowers Emergency Services isn’t a 911 service, but acts as a “force multiplier” by lessening the workload for Pickens County’s 911 services and the county’s EMS paramedics. When one of the company’s six community paramedics encounters someone experiencing an overdose, the community paramedic responds and first acts as a “paramedic” before activating the county’s

911 system. Within 72 hours after Pickens County EMS paramedics pick up someone who has overdosed or law enforcement arrests

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PICKENS COUNTY COUNCIL—County Council Members Wes Hendricks and R. Ensley Feemster; Council Chairman Roy Costner III and Vice Chairman Chris Bowers; and Council Members Carl Lee Hudson and Trey Whitehurst.

an addict, Bowers Emergency Services community paramedics then follow up. Community paramedics are required to have at least five years' experience as paramedics, and to have received an additional

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400 hours of training to be certified.

“A community paramedic is a cross between a social worker, case manager and paramedic, and each one acts a little bit like a case

manager,” Bowers explained. “Our community paramedics, using our company’s vehicles, make COPE visits. Carrying our paramedic gear, we work as paramedics when we encounter something—like someone who has overdosed—or when the COPE program, after being contacted by Pickens County EMS or the Sheriff’s Office, asks us to conduct a well-check and follow up on the patient.

“Working with peer support personnel from Behavioral Health Services of Pickens County, our community paramedics visit patients to conduct well-checks,” he added. “A peer support person will talk with each patient and explain the services provided by Behavioral Health Services and treatment services, including NARCAN® (Naloxone). Each support person, who takes NARCAN® with them on these visits just in case it’s needed, also encourages every patient to seek the COPE program’s help and services at Behavioral Health Services.”

So far, Pickens County’s COPE pro-

Partners in the Fight



Partnering with Pickens County’s COPE program to fight the county’s opioid crisis are (above, left and right) Pickens County EMS Director Michael E. Marling, Sheriff Rick Clark and (below, left to right) a few associates of Bowers Emergency Services—Robert Johnson, emergency medical technician; Chris Gaillard, operations supervisor/community paramedic; and Randy Bowers, CEO, community paramedic. (Photos by Stuart Morgan)



gram is making a positive difference.

“Pickens County’s opioid crisis is significant, but we’re making progress fighting it,” said Pickens County EMS Director Michael E. Marling. “I think our COPE program is a great program. Our relationship with our partners—the Sheriff’s Office, Bowers Emergency Services and Behavioral Health Services of Pickens County—is working out great as well. It took awhile for us to get everything to run smoothly, but our partners in the COPE program are doing an excellent job.

“I hope our COPE program continues to succeed and spread to other counties across the state, and that it helps other counties implement a program in their county to help them achieve the success we have,” Marling added. “With the opioid crisis as significant as it is, I believe the COPE program can make a positive difference. The program’s community paramedics and peer support counselors help people who would normally not seek or receive help they need for treatment, counseling and services.”

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— Michael E. Marling
Pickens County EMS Director

Pickens County Sheriff Rick Clark said other drugs, including methamphetamines, which he described as the “drug of choice” in Pickens County, have been a big problem in the county for awhile. But he said the opioid crisis is beginning to affect Pickens County as it has other counties across South Carolina as well as the nation.

“The COPE program has worked out well for us, and it’s a model that we see can be used to provide follow-up care,” Clark explained. “Before we had this program, there was no follow-up when drug offenders were released from jail, and patients were released from hospitals to return home only to return to their previous behavior.

“Statistics tell us that time and time again,” he added, “that if we’re not intervening or trying to do something to interrupt the process, drug abusers are going to return to their drug of choice—and that’s opioids. Our COPE program is very good about interrupting this process, and hopefully, giving them a chance to rebuild their lives. It’s important that we interrupt this chain or cycle to reduce the recidivism rate.”

Pickens County Council Chairman Roy Costner said he’s excited to see how the COPE program is beginning to impact families in a positive way.

“We’ve only just begun,” he said. “But when we see a report on the number of referrals to the program, I can’t help but think if we saved but one life and changed the direction for just one family that our COPE program is worth the effort. Every month, we see the numbers of 30, 40 or more people have been

referred and now have new hope.”

“The Opioid Crisis is a problem across the state, with over a thousand drug related deaths, and more than 75 percent of those deaths related to opioid use,” Costner added. “In the

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past, people with drug related problems—opioid or otherwise—were treated, charged with criminal violation, and released. Our COPE program gives people hope and an opportunity to break the cycle of abuse with real help. The program takes a proactive approach to stopping the cycle of abuse. Many times patients receive NARCAN® that saves their lives, but they often become addicted to it. So, the COPE program opens up an avenue to break free from the addiction and to recover.”



PalmettoPride is coordinating efforts for a statewide cleanup on April 22 to celebrate the 50th anniversary of Earth Day 2020.

PalmettoPride encourages South Carolina county officials and other South Carolinians to do their part by joining local efforts to remove litter from neighborhoods, beaches, parks, schools, etc.



For more information about Earth Day 2020, contact info@palmettopride.org. For more information about PalmettoPride, visit www.PalmettoPride.org.