



BERKELEY COUNTY CORONER'S OFFICE

2024 Annual Report

Coroner Darnell Hartwell



Darnell Hartwell
Coroner

Kelly Powell
Chief Deputy Coroner



Office of the Coroner

102 Gullede Street,
Moncks Corner, SC 29461
Phone: 843-719-4566
Fax: 843-719-4570

To the Citizens of Berkeley County,

I am pleased to share the 2024 Annual Report for the Berkeley County Coroner's Office. The goal of providing this information to the public is to increase public awareness of the role of the Coroner's Office and to focus attention on the causes and manners of death in our county in an effort to reduce the number of preventable deaths to the extent possible.

The information contained in this annual report derives from sources reviewed by the Berkeley County Coroner's Office to include autopsy reports, police reports, death certificates, cremation permits and motor vehicle reports, among others.

I hope that you will find this up-to-date and complete information to be in a format that is easy to read and is of value to you.

If you have any questions or need any additional information, please feel free to contact the Berkeley County Coroner's Office.

As always, thank you for your support,

Darnell D. Hartwell
Coroner of Berkeley County, SC



Dedication

In Dedication to the citizens of Berkeley County and beyond that are grieving the loss of their loved ones, and in memory of the decedents, past and present, that we have had the privilege to serve.



Table of Contents

- Mission statement.....5
- Responsibilities of the coroner.....6
- The Coroner.....8
- Organizational chart.....9
- Funding and fiscal disclosures.....10
- Mass fatality Preparedness.....11
- 2024 Statistics.....12
- Community, outreach, prevention.....15
- Achievements.....17



Mission Statement

The Coroner's Office will investigate all deaths within its jurisdiction according to State Law. The Office conducts independent investigations of deaths in Berkeley County, serving as a representative of the decedents and survivors. The investigation's purpose is to determine the cause and manner of death and ensure that the circumstances are thoroughly understood. The Coroner's Office is responsible for investigating all suspicious, violent, sudden and unexpected deaths that occur within Berkeley County. As well as deaths that occur in other counties resulting from an accident or injury that occurred in Berkeley County. Additionally, the office also investigates all deaths that occur in a hospital within the first 24 hours of admission or after an invasive medical procedure.

The County We Serve

Berkeley County is located on the southeastern coast of South Carolina and measures about 1,233.88 Square Miles and is the eighth largest county in South Carolina by population, and the 3rd largest by square miles. Berkeley County's population was approximately 264,276 in 2024.

Responsibilities of the Coroner

The Coroner's Office investigates the circumstances surrounding a person's death independently of any law enforcement agency that may also be investigating the death. The role of the coroner's office is to determine the "Cause" and "Manner" of a person's death.

The South Carolina Code of Laws (17-5-530(B)) mandates "The coroner or medical examiner shall make an immediate inquiry into the cause and manner of death and shall reduce the findings to writing on forms provided for this purpose.", upon notification of deaths that are unexpected, unexplained, suspicious, violent or in which the cause and/or manner of death is unknown.

The Coroner is also responsible for identifying decedents and making notification to next-of-kin. The Coroner's Office provides information to the decedent's family, involved law enforcement, the judicial system, insurance companies, the Consumer Product Safety Commission, the South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control (DHEC), Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) and many others.

The Coroner's Office advocates for families by notifying and advising them of the circumstances surrounding the death known at that time. The Office provides updates to the families after autopsy and/or further investigation reveals new information. Additionally, we refer families to resource agencies when necessary to assist them through the grieving process. This Office works with organizations such as Sharing Hope to facilitate the family or decedent's wishes regarding organ and tissue donation whenever possible.

Medicolegal death investigation provided by the Berkeley County Coroner's Office may involve many things, to include but not limited to, scene response, scene and decedent photography, ordering of forensic autopsies (authorized by SC Code 17-5-520), forensic anthropology and odontology examinations, fingerprint collection and ordering of fingerprint comparison, etc. Collection of toxicology samples and/or DNA samples are also part of the investigation.

Medicolegal death investigation provided by the Berkeley County Coroner's Office may involve many things, to include but not limited to, scene response, scene and decedent photography, ordering of forensic autopsies (authorized by SC Code 17-5-520), forensic anthropology and odontology examinations, fingerprint collection and ordering of fingerprint comparison, etc. Collection of toxicology samples and/or DNA samples are also part of the investigation.

Scene investigations include, but are not limited to, child and infant death investigation and re-enactments, homicides, suicides, industrial and residential accidents, motor vehicle accidents, deaths due to abuse/neglect/negligence, terrorist acts, death due to malpractice, mass fatalities, arson, drowning, drug related and fire 6 Berkeley County Coroner's Office – 2024 Annual Report deaths. The coroner may hold a formal inquest to determine the "Manner of Death".

Cause and Manner of Death

The Cause of Death is the official determination of the specific disease or injury and the sequence of events that leads to a death.

The Manner of death is determined largely by means of the Investigation and relates to the circumstances at the time of, or surrounding the death. There are five manners of death: Natural, Suicide, Accident, Homicide, Undetermined.

Definitions:

Natural: Death caused by disease.

Suicide: Death because of a purposeful action to end one's own life.

Accident: Death, other than natural, where there is no evidence of intent.

Homicide: Death resulting from injuries inflicted by another person.

Undetermined: Manner assigned when after a thorough investigation there is insufficient evidence, or conflicting/ equivocal information (especially about intent), to assign a specific manner.

About the Coroner



**Serving Berkeley County since 2003...
Bonneau Volunteer Fire Department
Berkeley County Rescue Squad
Berkeley County Coroner's Office
Volunteer Deputy Coroner
Sworn Deputy Coroner
Chief Deputy Coroner
Coroner**

**Registered American Board of Medicolegal Death Investigator
Member of the SC Coroner's Association
SC Class 3 Certified Law Enforcement Officer**

**First African American Coroner in the
county of Berkeley**





2024 Organizational Chart

Coroner

Darnell Hartwell

Chief Deputy

Kelly Powell

Deputy Coroners

Christine Kinney

Rochelle Tuttle

April Overby

Caren Jeffcoat

Jordan Moran (PT)

Support Staff

Allison Bilton, Community Outreach

Chevon Allen, Evidence Custodian

Catherine Grill, Finance (PT)

Jodie Accor, Admin Assistant (PT)

**PT denotes part time*

Funding and Fiscal Disclosures



The Coroner of Berkeley County is an elected official and the Coroner's Office is funded by tax revenue provided by the citizens of Berkeley County. Coroner Hartwell submits an annual budget to Berkeley County Council for approval. The Finance Department of Berkeley County Government administers the approved funds.

The Fiscal Year 2024 approved budget for the Berkeley County Coroner's Office was \$1,200,092. The Fiscal Year 2025 approved budget for the Coroner's Office was \$1,341,879. The last six months of FY2024 and first six months of FY2025 combine to financially account for the calendar year 2024. Our operating budget for FY24 was \$429,809,

In 2024, the Berkeley County Coroner's Office was awarded SCORF Funds in the amount of \$175,000.00. The South Carolina Opioid Recovery Fund Board ("SCORF Board") was created by the South Carolina Opioid Recovery Act, SC Code §11-58-10 et seq., to administer and disburse the South Carolina Opioid Recovery Fund by the terms of *In re South Carolina Opioid Litigation* settlement agreements. The SCORF Board will distribute money from the South Carolina Opioid Recovery Fund to help address and remediate the impact of the opioid epidemic in South Carolina.

Mass Fatality Preparedness



The Berkeley County Coroner serves as the Coroner Representative for the Lowcountry Health Care Coalition. In 2024 the Lowcountry Health Coalition (LHCC) provided the Coroner's Office a free-standing building to house 4 enclosed trailers for Mass Fatality Preparedness and emergencies in the Lowcountry region. Two of the trailers were also provided by the LHCC. The trailers are as follows:

- 1 refrigerated trailer for a mobile morgue (LHCC)
- 1 family assistance trailer (LHCC)
- 1 South Carolina Coroner's Association mass fatality trailer with supplies
- 1 Berkeley County Coroner's mass fatality trailer with supplies

The Berkeley County Coroner's Office works closely with the Berkeley County Emergency Management Department and the Lowcountry Health Care Coalition. They meet quarterly for training, planning, and preparedness purposes. In the event of a mass fatality in Berkeley County, or throughout the entire Lowcountry region, we are ready and able to take action or assist as needed.

2024 Statistics



There were **1,944** deaths reported to the Berkeley County Coroner's Office in 2024. Regarding those deaths, **1,201** were classified as Natural deaths, **133** were classified as Accidental, **38** were classified as Suicide, **20** were classified as Homicide, and **7** were classified as an undetermined manner.

The Coroner's Office had involvement to various degrees with other requests for services which included: **3** cases of recovered bones - not human; **62** request to make a death notification to next of kin by other jurisdictions; **18** cases were investigated and determined to be out of our jurisdiction.

The grand total of all requests for services plus death investigations and cremations was **3,124**. This does not include requests from other agencies, family or outside reports. It also excludes additional meetings with families to release personal effects.

Other details of statistics include:

Grand total of cremation permits: **1162**

- Cremation permits issued with Coroner Cases: **723**
- Stand-alone Cremation Permits: **439**
- Cremation letters for fetal demise: **17**

Full autopsies contracted to MUSC: **180 (9.25% of cases)**

- Number of external autopsies: **13**
- Number of limited autopsies: **0**

Toxicology Tests performed without autopsy: **65**

- Total number of toxicology test ordered: **245**

Number of unidentified decedents in our morgue:

- **1** from 2023
- **2** from 2024

2024 Statistics, continued



Number of unclaimed Veterans with a Committal Service at Beaufort National Cemetery: **2**

Total number of unclaimed we cremated in 2024: **3**

Number of cases DNA was sent for identification: **2**

Number of cases DNA was used for paternity: **3**

Deceased transports to county morgue and MUSC: **428**

Organ Donation Summary from Sharing Hope SC:

- Released for organ donation: **12**
- Actual organ donation cases: **7**
- Organs recovered: **28**
- Lives saved: **36**
- Coroner cases declined for donation: **0**
- Coroner approval rate: **100%**

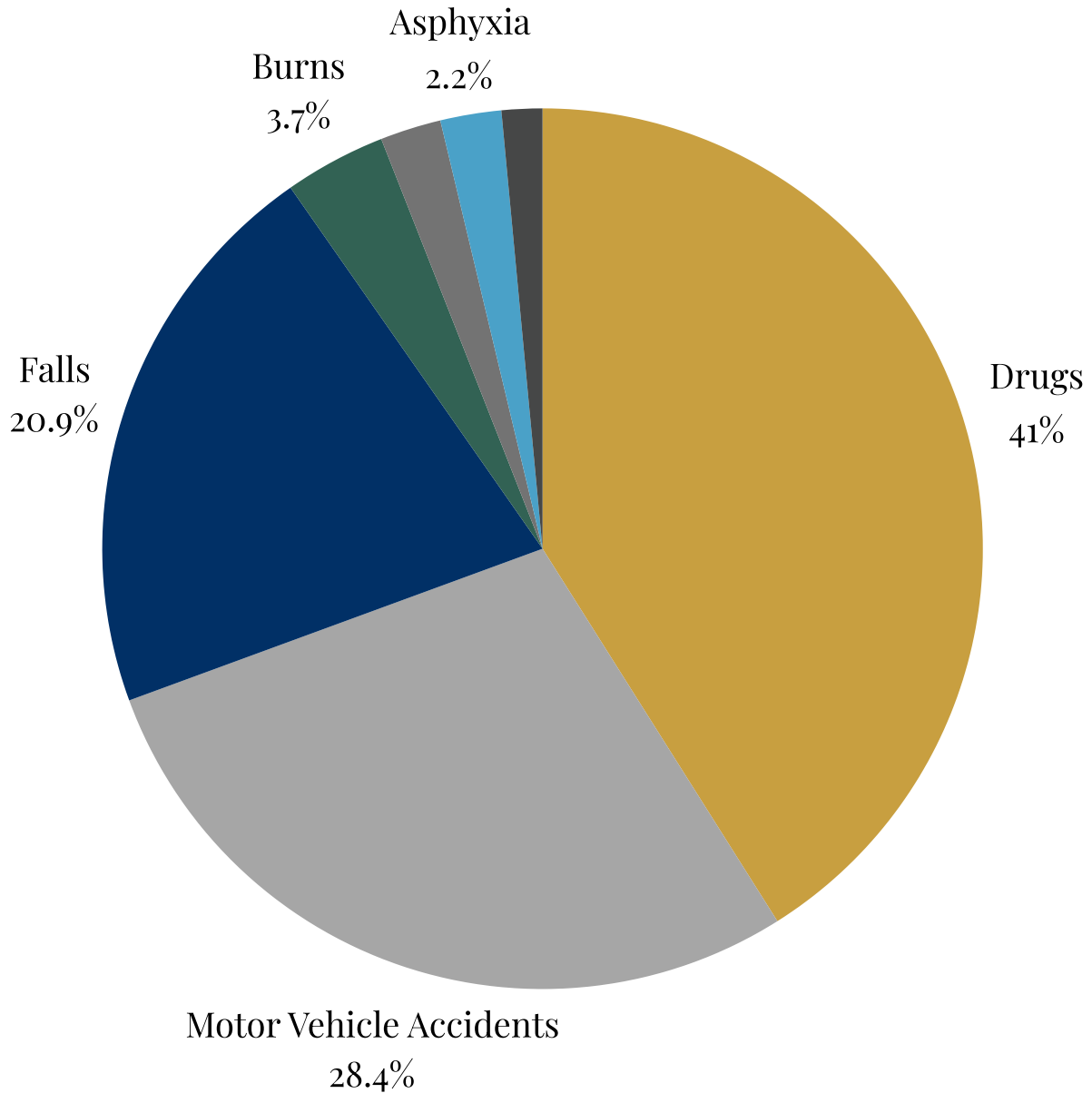
Tissue Donation Summary from Sharing Hope SC:

- Opportunities for tissue donation: **61**
- Released for donation: **56**
- Actual number of tissue donors: **11**
- Tissues recovered: **190**
- Lives enhanced: **825**
- Coroner cases declined for donation: **5**
- Coroner approval rate: **92%**

2024 Accident Statistics



Berkeley County had **134** accidental deaths in 2024. There were **54** drug related deaths, **38** motor vehicle accidents, **5** burns, **3** drowning, **3** Asphyxia, and **2** categorized as other.



2024 Homicide Statistics



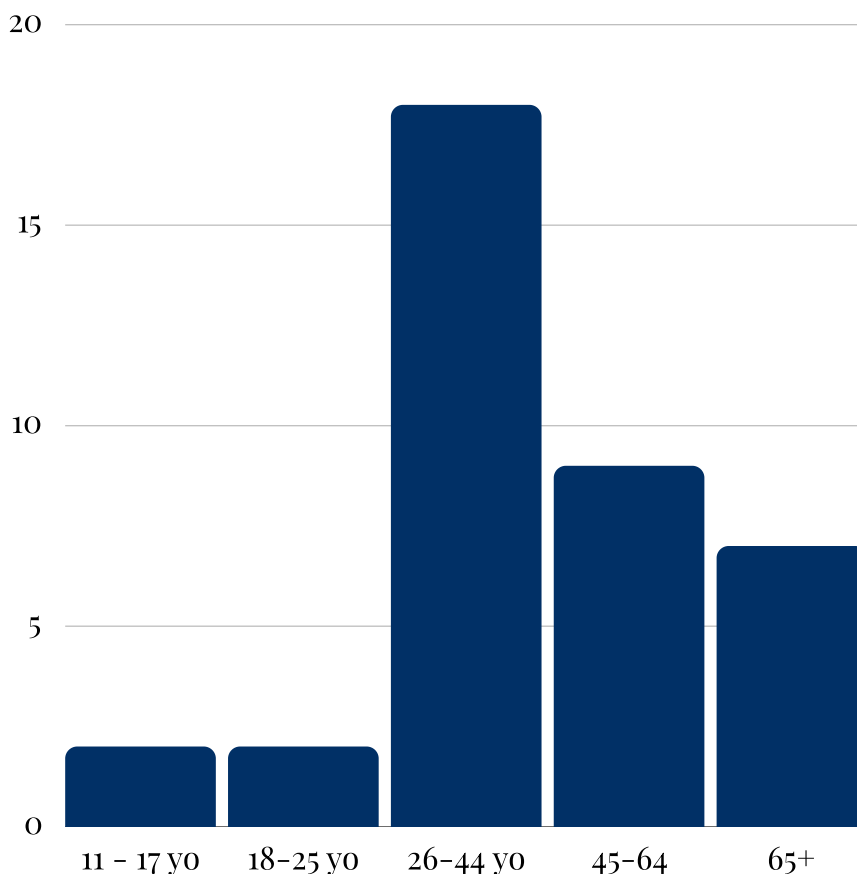
In 2024, there were **20** deaths classified as Homicide in Berkeley County. **19** were attributed to gun violence, and **1** was blunt force trauma.

This is an **11%** increase from 2023.

2024 Suicide Statistics



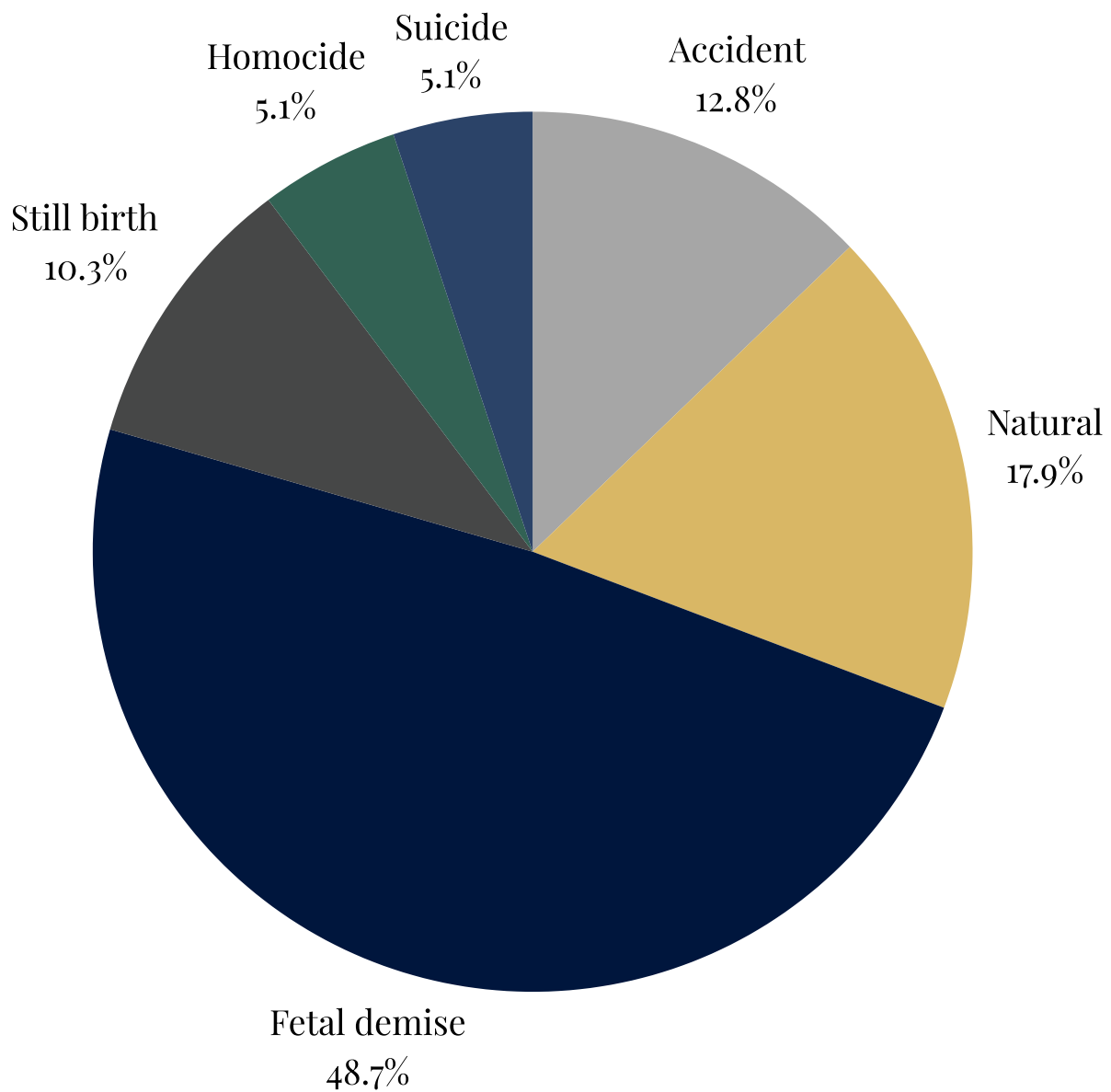
In Berkeley County, there were **38** deaths by suicide. This is the same number as in 2023, so there was no increase or decrease. The following graph shows suicides by age.



2024 Child Fatalities



There were 44 Child/ Infant (ages 0-17) fatalities investigated by the Berkeley County Coroner's Office in 2024.



Community, Outreach, Prevention, & Education (C.O.P.E)



The Berkeley County Coroner's Office cares deeply for the community they serve. It is the coroner's desire to support the community through outreach, prevention and education. In an effort to do this, in 2024 one employee was designated to full time community outreach.

In order to achieve our goals of reducing deaths through C.O.P.E, we knew we had to be more involved with our community partners and develop new relationships. The Coroner's Office has proudly served on the Ernest E Kennedy Center's Berkeley County Prevention Board for over 30 years. We have also served on several of the subcommittees. In addition to continuing our work with the Kennedy Center, we are now community partners with WakeUp Carolina, MADD SC, The Bradley Blake Foundation, Jack Wagon Suicide Awareness, The Blessing Bag Project, and Jeans Angels, the VA, MUSC, and several others.

We work diligently to help families in need of grief support find a grief group and have a grief library to assist in the grief journey.

Number of C.O.P.E. Events Participated in: **117**

Number of Presentations Presented by Coroner, or Staff: **9**

The highlights were:

- Overdose Fatality Review Summit, Atlanta, GA
- Governor's Opioid Summit, Columbia, SC
- National Emerging Drug Trends Conference, Dallas, TX
- Charleston Southern University, Criminal Justice Dept., Charleston, SC

Community, Outreach, Prevention, & Education (C.O.P.E)



The Berkeley County Coroner's Office now has 2 certified car seat technicians, and we are a Nationally Certified Car Seat Inspection Site. You may drop by our office on Thursdays from 9:00-11:00 without an appointment to have your car seat checked for proper installation. We also partner with the Medical University of South Carolina to host annual trainings on car seat safety and infant safe sleep.

In 2024, our office hosted statewide Child Fatality Investigation Training at Cypress Gardens. We had 74 attendees representing 16 different agencies, and 11 presenters from the Solicitors Office, Department of Social Services, SC Law Enforcement Division, MUSC Pathology, MUSC Pediatrics, and more.

Achievements



The Berkeley County Coroner's Office acquired a Radox machine with SCORF dollars. This is for rapid toxicology testing.

Deputy Caren Jeffcoat, successfully completed SC Coroner's Academy in 2024.

The Berkeley County Overdose Fatality Review Board celebrated their 1-year anniversary.

Coroner Darnell Hartwell and Chief Deputy Kelly Powell attended the SCCA Coroner's Conference in 2024.

The Berkeley County Coroner's Office facilitated the start of a Tri-County Overdose Fatality Review Board. This is an OFR in collaboration with Charleston and Dorchester counties. The first meeting was held in September, 2024.

The Community Outreach Coordinator, Allison Bilton attended the National Prevention Network Conference in Pheonix, AZ.

Coroner Hartwell along with the Community Outreach Coordinator Bilton gave presentations for Rotary, Berkeley Alternative School, The Berkeley County Adult Education Program, in several municipalities and communities.

Community Outreach Coordinator Bilton along with Goose Creek Police Department and WakeUp Carolina presented on A Collaboration Between the Coroner, Law Enforcement, and a Noprofit for Overdose Protection: A Strategic Approach at the National Emerging Drug Trend Conference.

Deputy Rochelle Tuttle and Community Outreach Coordinator Bilton presented with the Ernest E Kennedy Center at the National 2024 Overdose Fatality Review Forum in Atlanta, GA on Coroner's In Prevention: Leveraging Your County Coroner.