

Richland County Sheriff's Department



Sheriff Leon Lott "State of the County Address"

When I took the helm in 1997, we committed to implementing problem solving community oriented policing in the County. Our objectives have and will continue to include, not exclude, citizens in reducing crime and creating safer communities. The success we have had over the last 13 years has been because of the community's involvement and the implementation of education, awareness and enforcement, which is the cornerstone of your Sheriff's Department's mission.

As we turn the corner to 2010, we look back at 2009 as being a good year. We are not satisfied with just reducing crime rates, but more so pleased that the citizens of Richland County are not living in fear: they are not afraid to go outside or get involved in their Neighborhood Crime Watch.

We knew there would be some anxiety about 2009 because of the downturn in the economy, because it has been proven in the past that if the economy is down, crime will go up. However, through planning, building relationships and preparation we had a reduction in crime. We saw a decrease in property crimes by more than 8% in 2009. We had 374 fewer property crimes in 2009 than we did in 2008. In 2009 we had nearly 30 fewer violent crimes than in 2008 which reduced our violent crime rate by 2%. This reduction in crime was a result of our ability to increase the number of patrol units and purchase new technology. Every Richland County patrol car is equipped with a computer. We have a full service forensic laboratory. We have new license plate recognition software that aids us in locating stolen and expired tags, and we purchased new tasers and radios for all our deputies. Through proper planning, we were able to obtain resources that will render more effective and efficient services for the citizens of Richland County.

I have worked very hard to manage and maintain our department's budget. I want to ensure that I am able to provide all the equipment and resources our deputies need to protect and serve the citizens of Richland County. Because we managed our resources well in 2009, we came under budget by \$405,000. I am pleased with how we managed the department, personnel needs, and equipment purchases. In 2009 we hired 15 new deputies, purchased new equipment, improved current facilities, and still saved money.

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In 2009, we accomplished several of our goals while meeting our challenges. We will carry that same determination into 2010 as we are faced with additional challenges. In 2009 we met the challenge of combating gang problems and assisting the government in the development of a gang law that imposed stricter sentences on gang members. For the past 11 years I have spoken about gangs in our community, repeatedly saying that they are real and they exist. No one wanted to listen. In 1999 we began dedicating resources to controlling the gang activity that we started seeing. After countless hours of speaking, meeting and presenting evidence we not only developed our own gang task force but we made an arrest using the new South Carolina gang law. Because of our continued commitment and dedication, Richland County received the first indictment under the new South Carolina gang law.

In 2010 we are challenged with engaging our youth and fighting this continuous drug war that we are already seeing the effects of. Less than two weeks ago, we recovered more than 2,000 pounds of marijuana and crack cocaine, along with \$2 million dollars from a house right here in Richland County. We recognize that the Mexican drug cartel and the drug war will increasingly become a problem, but we will commit the resources required to fight this drug problem.

I know greatness cannot be achieved without challenges and as we all know, we must fight the battles in order to win the war. As we have always done and will continue to do, we will meet each challenge with a well thought out plan that results in solutions and strong action.

To meet the challenge of engaging our youth, I have committed countless resources to enhancing all of our youth programs: expanding what we have and creating what we don't. This year will be full of new initiatives that will take a proactive and firm stand on redirecting the future leaders of America. We need to provide them with every opportunity possible. The Sheriff's Department is committed to giving our youth everything we can to teach, mold, guide, and encourage them to be great leaders and productive citizens. We want to build a relationship with them that is of mutual respect and understanding.

Our youth want a sense of belonging: they will either be a part of something positive or something negative. Our goal is to eliminate the negative option. We want to create a variety of programs that offer an extensive amount of diversity that keeps them actively engaged, eliminating any free time they may have to ponder on negative behavior. We want to empower them from within, encouraging them to think differently, which ultimately encourages them to behave differently.



Over the past 13 years, we have implemented various youth programs designed to rehabilitate, educate, and aid in the positive progression of our youth. We must teach our children that education comes before success in the dictionary and this is the same for life: you must be educated before you can be successful. Through our various programs, we believe in educating the youth about prevention and what they can do to avoid getting involved in criminal activity. We accomplish this through our youth programs: Crossroads, READY, Youth Arbitration, and Explorer Post 601.

The Crossroads program which is designed to give our youth a “reality check” by having deputies and personnel from the coroner’s office meet with the kids to talk about where a future of crime can lead them. They take a tour of the jail, where they hear inmates’ testimonies, and they visit the morgue.

The R.E.A.D.Y. program (Richland County, Educating, and Deterring Youth) gives teenagers an opportunity to stay overnight in jail. It gives them a chance to see what it is like to be incarcerated for more than a few hours. They are outfitted in a jail jump suit, transported by the Sheriff’s Department transport vehicle and are required to follow most of the same rules that inmates are required to follow. We provide these young men and women with a full inmate experience. The Sheriff’s Department believes that, although this experience is supposed to serve as a shock factor, it is also important to note that we feel strongly about educating and rehabilitating our youth. The way we achieve that mission is by giving our participants a chance to talk with our staff Behavioral Counselor, who shares with them some positive reinforcement about life and encourages them to make better decisions. And, finally the night ends with a roundtable discussion that lends the students an opportunity to talk about issues that concern them. At the end of the program we want our teenagers to walk away with an uplifting experience that not only changes their thought process about engaging in delinquent behavior but also adjusts their perception of law enforcement.

This program will change the lives our children and their parents. As a continued effort to show our commitment to our children, everyone that goes through the program will be assigned a mentor for an entire year. Their mentor will serve as the anchor they will need to stay grounded and focused on the positive aspects of life – this is an evaluative tool not often used when trying to effect change.



I believe in positive reinforcement, and one of the ways we have shown our commitment to providing young adults with a positive image of law enforcement is by recruiting junior deputies through our Explorer Post 601. Explorer Post 601 is fundamentally a Scout group for young adults, male or female, who are between 14 and 20 years of age and have completed the eighth grade. Chartered by the Boy Scouts of America, Explorer Post 601 is a function of the Sheriff's Department that puts young people who are interested in law enforcement in direct contact with deputies.

Explorer Post 601 meets at least twice a week at the Richland County Sheriff's Department. They are trained on different topics related to the law enforcement field such as conducting traffic stops, investigating traffic collisions, serving warrants, legal knowledge, physical fitness, and several other law enforcement activities. Explorers get hands-on experience through a variety of scenarios acted out by other Explorers and Sheriff's Department personnel.

We have been primarily successful with our youth programs because of the invaluable commitment from our School Resource Officers, who maintain a safe and secure learning environment on the campus of our local schools. They influence the development of positive attitudes towards law enforcement, and they assist in reducing juvenile crime through the use of intervention strategies, proactive policing, and networking.

The SRO program is a community policing approach practiced within a school environment. In our middle and high schools one officer is assigned to one school. In our elementary schools our officers cover two to three schools teaching the D.A.R.E. curriculum among other lessons. Generally speaking, this provides the maximum benefit for the school and the sponsoring law enforcement agency. The school becomes the officer's beat.

This is done by using the Triad Concept, a three stage approach.

1. Law enforcement officer: The School Resource Officers are state certified law enforcement officers who serve as deputies for the Richland County Sheriff's Department. Before being chosen as a SRO, they go through a rigorous selection process. The SROs are then required to complete a comprehensive School Resource Officer training program. These officers enforce local laws and are at the school to maintain a safe and secure learning environment.

2. Law-Related Educator: Once in his or her assigned school, the SRO's function is to serve as a positive role model for the students. This is accomplished through daily interaction with the students. The SRO will teach courses on topics such as Law Related Education, D.A.R.E., G.R.E.A.T., conflict resolution, internet safety, and peer pressure.



3. Law-Related Counselor: As a counselor, the SRO serves as a resource to the students, their parents, and the school faculty. Students will often first approach them with personal, scholastic, family, or law-related problems. By networking and developing response checklists, the SRO is prepared to refer persons in need to appropriate agencies that can assist them. This is the most dynamic aspect of the SRO's assignment, being an active listener.

Through our School Resources Officers, we are able to solve more than 90% of student conflicts before they result in criminal charges. One of the ways we have been successful at doing that is through our Youth Arbitration Program. This program is an intervention option for first time, non-violent student offenders. The overall intent of the program is to change the way schools handle student crime. The purpose is to restore safety within the school, and at the same time, prevent at-risk students from entering the justice system.

The program is based upon the principles of restorative justice and provides an effective means of addressing student safety, thus reducing reliance on suspension, expulsion, and police charges while reintegrating offending students back into the school community. The restorative approach focuses on a three-way relationship between the needs of the victims, student offenders, and the school community. The Richland County Sheriff's Department Youth Arbitration Program is very unique because we send students through this program before they are charged with a crime. They are given the opportunity to resolve their behavioral issues without obtaining a criminal record. The Youth Arbitration is a partnership with the Sheriff's Department, the Richland County Solicitor's Office and all three school districts in the midlands.

Every aspect of the County's success and the success of this department has been through the assistance of the community. The community has stood by us and supported every new initiative. With the help of the community we have reduced the property crime rate and our major crime rate. We added additional patrol units on the street. We increased citizens' participation, and developed new neighborhood crime watch groups that all became additional eyes and ears for our department. With your help and dedication we've had a successful 13 years. My commitment to you is that we will have another decade of success and progression. We will be a proactive department: reducing crime, creating new programs, and increasing awareness.

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Now as we reflect on where we have come from, we must take a close look at where we are, in order for us to prepare for where we are going. We will continue to be a productive and proactive agency for the citizens of Richland County: an agency which is driven by the need to reduce crime and increase awareness, an agency that respectfully acknowledges the presence of danger that awaits our children, an agency that is sincerely willing and able to counter that danger by creating new youth-based programs that are designed to change the thought process and behavior of our children, and, an agency committed to building the continued unity in the community.