YORK COUNTY CORONER'S OFFICE

2013 ANNUAL REPORT

SABRINA H. GAST, CORONER

YORK COUNTY, SOUTH CAROLINA

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Sabrina H. Gast, Coroner

September 24, 2014

To the Citizens of York County,

I am pleased to share our 2013 Annual Report. My goal in making this information public is to increase the public's awareness about the role of the Coroner's Office and to bring attention to the cause and manner of deaths in our county in an effort to prevent such deaths where possible.

The information you will find in this annual report has been gathered from records held by the York County Coroner's Office which includes autopsy reports, police reports, death certificates, cremation permits, and motor vehicle reports. It is our wish to provide the public with the most up-to-date and complete information possible in a format that is accurate and easy to read.

I hope these statistics will be of value to you. If you have any questions or need any further information, please feel free to contact my office.

As always, thank you for your support,

Sabrina H. Gast, Coroner

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DESCRIPTION, PURPOSE, & FUNCTION OF THE YORK COUNTY CORONER'S OFFICE

The main task of the Coroner's Office is to determine both the medical and legal causes for deaths in York County with priority focused on sudden, suspicious as well as deaths that occur for no apparent reason. The Coroner is a County official whom is elected to serve a four-year term.

The Coroner, an elected constitutional officer, has jurisdiction over all deaths investigated by their office. Generally, the Coroner is responsible for investigating all suspicious and violent deaths, as well as all deaths that occur outside of a hospital or nursing home. In addition to the aforementioned scenarios, the Coroner/Coroner's Office is also responsible for investigation of all deaths that occur less than 24 hours after patients are admitted to the hospital as well as all emergency room deaths. The York County Coroner's Office operates under South Carolina State Law Title 17. Criminal Procedures, Chapter 5. Coroners & Medical Examiners, Article 1. Definitions – 17-5-5 through 17-5-610. For additional information regarding South Carolina State Law, please refer to the website at www.scstatehouse.gov.

It is the sole responsibility and authority of the Coroner to determine the cause and manner of death of every person who dies in York County or is injured in York County insofar as to result in death, regardless of the location of death, as it pertains to the injury. As circumstances warrant, the Coroner may retain the assistance of experts in the fields of anthropology, toxicology, odontology, entomology, radiology, photography, trace evidence collections, and other fields of forensic science to assist in his or her investigation. The Coroner has to determine and make the decision for natural, accident, suicide, homicide, or undetermined causes for death. The Coroner is solely responsible for deciding when an autopsy will be performed.

It is the responsibility of the Coroner to see that all evidence at the scene of a death is preserved and all personal belongings of the decedent are safeguarded and returned to his/her family. When possible, the Coroner personally notifies relatives and loved ones of the unfortunate death.

In addition to the above responsibilities, the Coroner conducts inquests, issues burial removal permits, authorizes and issues cremation permits, signs death certificates, and maintains permanent records on every case.

Sabrina H. Gast, RN, MSN, F-ABMDI, has served the residents of York County as the Coroner for the last eight years. Her career began in 1992 when she received her nursing degree from Clemson University. She worked as an emergency room nurse in a level one trauma center and transitioned to forensic nursing in 1998 when she attended a training to become a sexual assault nurse examiner. She worked in her community to develop the first and only Sexual

Assault Nurse Examiner (SANE) program based in a law enforcement office. Since her appointment in 2006, Sabrina has worked to increase the community confidence in the Coroner's Office. She was elected as Coroner in November, 2008 and was re-elected in November, 2012. She was awarded "Coroner of the Year" for 2013 by the South Carolina Coroner's Association. Her experience and training has made her a resource to other community and state agencies. She has been a presenter for the training on Domestic Violence for the South Carolina Attorney General's Office and she speaks routinely to community groups, schools, and healthcare professionals on various safety and evidentiary topics.

The Coroner's Office seeks to find answers to the questions which are important to the decedent's family, involved law enforcement agencies, insurance companies, the judicial system, Consumer Product Safety Commission, the South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control (DHEC), and the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), to name a few. The pursuit of civil or criminal proceedings is in part determined by the ability of the Coroner's Office to determine the cause and manner of death. This unique makeup of job responsibilities means the Coroner's Office performs both a public service and a law enforcement role that requires the Coroner to scrutinize every death within her jurisdiction to determine the events that led to that death.

The Coroner's Office also functions as an advocate for families to ensure they are notified of the death and the circumstances surrounding the death known at that time. As more information is derived from autopsy and/or further investigation, the Coroner's Office staff updates family members and also assists them in contacting other agencies that can help them through the grieving process.

Started in October, 2011, the Coroner's Office has a C.A.R.E. Team that is made up of specially trained volunteers from York County to respond with the Coroners to assist families when they receive the tragic news of a loved one's death. C.A.R.E. Team volunteers can stay with the family until proper support can arrive. The volunteers have special training provided by the Coroner's Office that includes the components of the grieving process, how to talk with a family that has just been told of a death, what the Coroner's Office is responsible for and most importantly, how to assist the family during this time. There are various responsibilities that the C.A.R.E. Team volunteer can do: respond to death scenes/death notifications anywhere in York County upon request of the Coroners to assist with families; send out sympathy cards; make follow-up phone calls; meet with families; and present to groups of interest. For the year 2013, C.A.R.E. Team volunteers responded with the Coroner or Deputy Coroner to 67 scene investigations. The York County Coroner's Office continues to offer training and continuing education for our C.A.R.E. Team volunteers. The C.A.R.E. Team volunteers are a vital link between the Coroners' Office and the next-of-kin of deceased individuals. Their concern and compassion will help provide comfort and hope in difficult situations. The C.A.R.E. Team volunteer is representing the York County Coroner's Office.

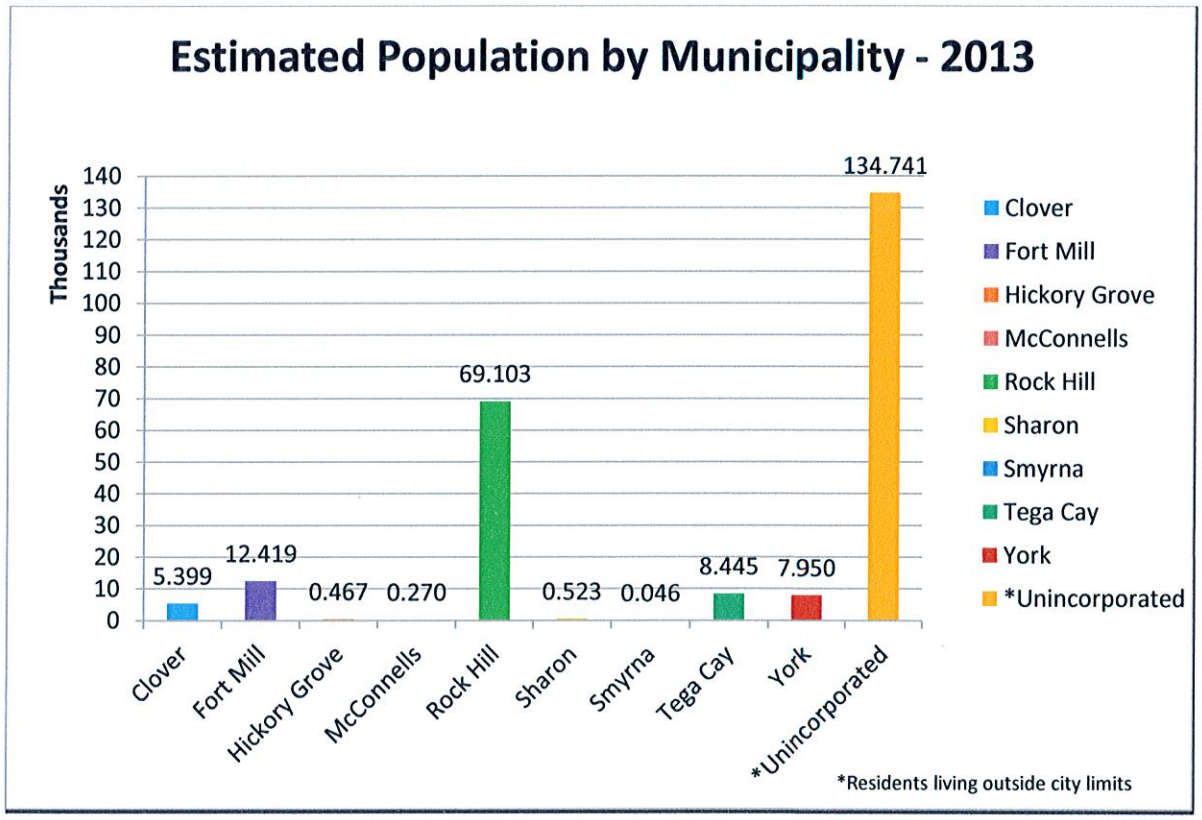
The Fiscal Year 2013 (July 1, 2012 - June 31, 2013) budget for the York County Coroner's Office was $597,780.00. This was 00.67% of the total approved Fiscal Year 2013 York County operating budget of $89,220,957.00. The Fiscal Year 2014 budget for the Coroner's Office was $614,380.00. This covers the time period of July 1, 2013 – June 30, 2014.

The York County Coroner's Office served the residents of York County in a variety of ways highlighted by:

- Performing independent investigations into traumatic deaths, deaths that occur outside of hospitals and deaths that occur suddenly or unexpectedly 24 hours a day, 7 days a week;
- Making identification of the deceased;
- Removing the body from the scene in a dignified manner;
- Notifying families when unexpected deaths occur;
- Determining the necessity of autopsy, anthropologic examination or odontology examination;
- Creating reports that relate to deaths investigated by the Office;
- Issuing burial removal transit permits for individuals who have died outside of a hospital;
- Providing autopsy and Coroner's reports to agencies and next-of-kin;
- Releasing information to the public only when deemed necessary;
- Making the final determination as to the manner of death;
- Securing and releasing personal effects to the next-of-kin;
- Acting as the depository for all records relative to a death, including the autopsy report, police investigative reports and any other investigative agencies' reports;
- Providing testimony at depositions and in court;
- Maintaining the County Coroner's Book of Inquisitions;
- Conducting inquests;
- Issuing cremation permits;
- Participating as a member of the Disaster Preparedness Team;
- Providing speakers for community awareness and educational programs within schools, community organizations and various professional organizations;
- Routinely keeping up with the latest in investigation techniques and technology through training with various agencies and professional organizations;
- Working with organ and tissue donation procurement teams in a collaborative effort to ensure that the decedent's wishes and those of their family are honored; there were 9 tissue and/or eye donors for 2013;
- Notifying the public of any public health concerns related to a death;
- Notifying the media, upon request of public information regarding a death or other statistical information.

SIZE & POPULATION OF YORK COUNTY

York County was founded in 1785 and is located in the north-central section of the state of South Carolina. The geographic area served by the York County Coroner's Office includes all of York County which is 696 square miles covering nine municipalities to include Clover, Fort Mill, Hickory Grove, McConnells, Rock Hill, Sharon, Smyrna, Tega Cay, and York. The population of York County for 2013 is approximately 239,363 with the largest city being Rock Hill. Rock Hill is the fifth largest city in the state of South Carolina. As the commercial center of this region, Rock Hill is home to numerous businesses and institutions, including the campus of Winthrop University. Over 69,000 people live in the greater Rock Hill area.



ORGANIZATIONAL CHART

York County Coroner's Office

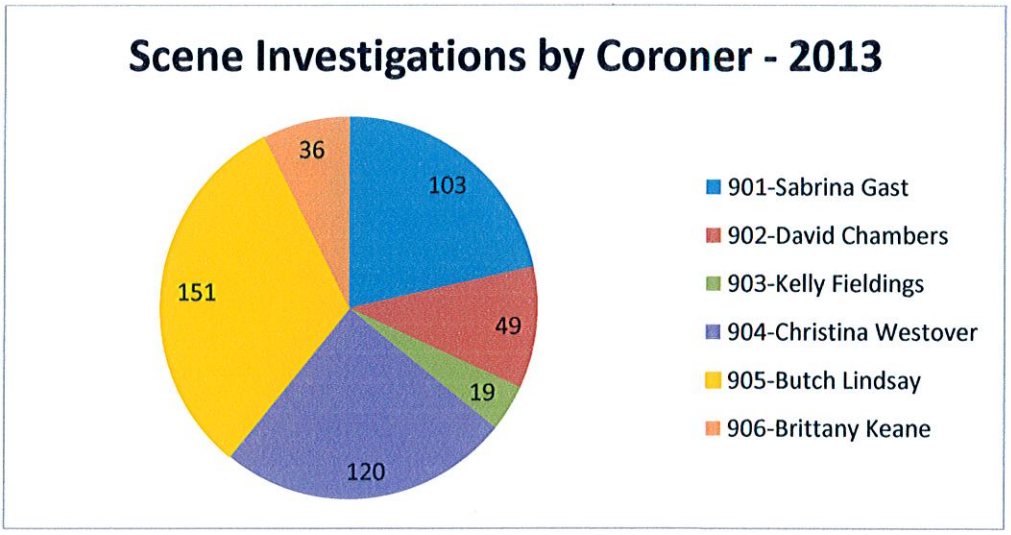
Coroner
Sabrina H. Gast, RN, MSN, F-ABMDI

Chief Deputy (1)
Christina Westover, AAS, D-ABMDI

Deputy Coroner (3)
Butch Lindsay, D-ABMDI
Kelly Fieldings, RN
Brittany Keane, BS (Part-Time)

Office Manager (1)
Natalie Dixon

CASE MANAGER/EVIDENCE TECH (1)
Wendy Bailey



INVESTIGATION & DISPOSITION OF CASES

All deaths reported to the Coroner's Office are handled according to the circumstances of death which generally funnel into one of four ways. First, the Coroner may assume jurisdiction over the death and conduct an investigation and order an autopsy to determine cause and manner of death and then issue a Death Certificate. Second, the Coroner may assume jurisdiction of a death and conduct an investigation, but not order an autopsy. Third, if the death is due to natural disease and if a private physician who has treated the decedent is confident in his/her opinion as to the cause of death, the Coroner may transfer jurisdiction to the private physician to sign the Death Certificate. Finally, even though a death may have occurred in York County, a "transfer of jurisdiction" may occur to the Coroner of the county where the initiating event causing death occurred.

The following description is a general overview of the processes during a jurisdiction assumed, full investigation and the follow-up processes.

Upon arrival at a death scene, the Coroner or a Deputy Coroner will speak with first responders, law enforcement officers and any witnesses to become familiar with the circumstances surrounding the incident and any safety considerations prior to entering the immediate scene. The Coroner or the Deputy Coroner will take notes and utilize photographs and/or video to further document the scene. They also collect and preserve all evidence and any personal property on or around the body/remains. In some crime scene situations, the Coroner or Deputy Coroner will coordinate with law enforcement officers regarding the collection of evidence. Any evidence and/or personal property collected by the Coroner or Deputy Coroner is secured and documented until it can be processed or appropriately turned over to legal next-of-kin.

The Coroner or Deputy Coroner makes every effort to identify the decedent utilizing at least two forms of the following methods: government issued photo ID of the decedent that matches decedent's physical characteristics/features; fingerprint analysis; DNA analysis; coordination of odontology examination (dental X-rays); coordination of forensic anthropology analysis (skeleton/bones); comparison of significant scars, marks and tattoos; birth defects and presence of prosthetics.

After processing the scene, the Coroner or Deputy Coroner must make a decision on transportation of the decedent depending on the circumstances surrounding the death. If the decision is made to further investigate (autopsy, external examination, toxicology), the coroner's transportation services will be contacted to pick up the decedent and transport them to the morgue located at Piedmont Medical Center. If no further investigation is needed and the legal next-of-kin has a funeral home selected, that particular funeral home is contacted to pick up the decedent. The Coroner's Office currently is contracted with Carolina Mortuary for transportation services. For the year 2013, Carolina Mortuary transported 290 decedents.

If the Coroner or Deputy Coroner deems it necessary to conduct a post mortem examination, they notify the contracted autopsy vendor, which is generally York Pathology Associates in Rock Hill, South Carolina. If an out-of-town post mortem examination is needed, the Coroner or Deputy Coroner will notify the forensic pathology department at the Medical University of South Carolina in Charleston, South Carolina. This Office also notifies the interested law enforcement agency of the autopsy schedule. The collection and preservation of any and all evidence rendered from an autopsy is of the utmost importance to the investigation.

The Coroner or Deputy Coroner makes every effort to identify, locate and notify the legal next-of-kin of the death. This Office also facilitates the release of the remains to the funeral home selected by the next-of-kin or has a policy in place for unclaimed (indigent) decedents. The Coroner's Office had six (6) unclaimed decedents for the year 2013.

The Coroner's Office is responsible for obtaining a complete medical history of both the present event, if applicable and all past medical history which might have some relationship to the death. This Office thoroughly documents all the information gathered through the investigation in a written report and collects all documents related to a death in a case file. Upon request, the Coroner's Office provides copies of their investigation case file to the Solicitor's Office, the Public Defender's Office and invested law enforcement agencies.

Complete forensic autopsies were ordered in 109 cases of which 21 cases were sent to the Medical University of South Carolina. External examination (consultation) only was ordered on 38 cases. The cases that were not autopsied were those in which the scene investigation, circumstances of death, medical documentation, interviews, social history, and/or external examination of the body provided sufficient information for certifying the cause of death.

Included in all autopsies and in some cases where external examination only is performed, toxicology tests may be helpful in determining the cause and manner of death. Toxicology testing is performed on various specimens collected at autopsy. Either a nationally accredited lab is used or the South Carolina Law Enforcement Division (SLED) crime lab is used for toxicology testing. Screening tests include alcohol, illicit drugs, commonly abused prescription and nonprescription drugs, and other substances as needed. For the year 2013, 89 cases were sent to SLED; 21 cases were sent to American Institute of Toxicology (AIT); and 71 cases were sent to Forensic Science Network (NMS) for toxicology testing.

MANNER OF DEATH

The **Manner of Death** is a classification of the way in which the Cause of Death came about, whether by force of natural events, accidental means, self-inflicted wounds, or other external forces. Manner of death is determined largely by means of the investigation. There are only five (5) manners of death, listed below.

NATURAL: Death caused by disease. If natural death is hastened by injury or any other non-natural event (ex: fall), the manner of death will not be considered natural. If the terminal disease process is by a non-natural event (ex: pneumonia due to long-term bed confinement as a result of a motor vehicle accident), the manner of death will not be considered natural.

SUICIDE: Death as a result of a purposeful action set in motion (explicit or implicit) to end one's life.

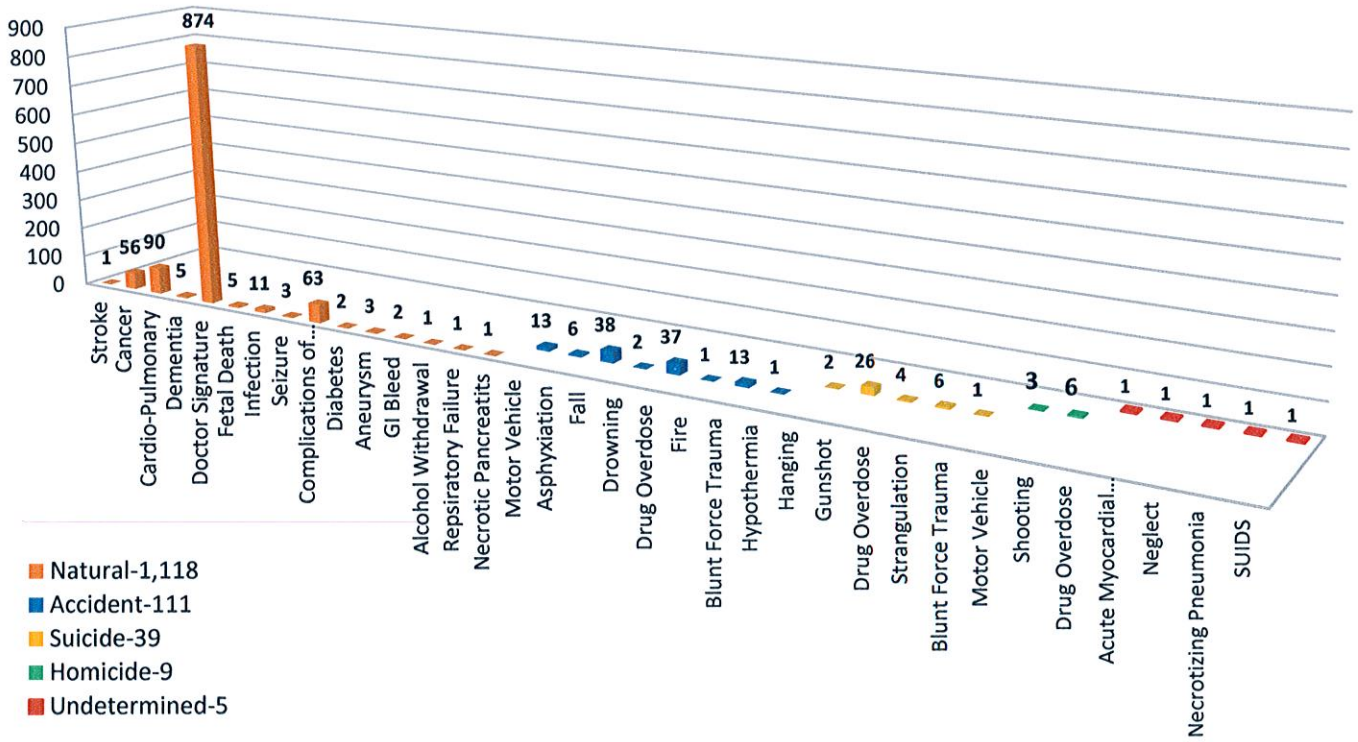
ACCIDENT: Death other than natural where there is no evidence of intent; i.e. an unintentional event or chain of events. This category includes most motor vehicle accidents, falls, drownings, accidental drug overdoses, drug reactions, etc.

HOMICIDE: Death resulting from injuries intentionally inflicted by another person (explicit or implicit), or inflicted on another by one's grossly reckless behavior (does not include vehicular homicide).

UNDETERMINED: Manner assigned when there is insufficient evidence, or conflicting/ equivocal information (especially about intent), to assign a specific manner (ex: found skeletal remains, where no other clear manner of death can be determined).

STATISTICS

In 2013, the York County Coroner's Office had involvement in 1,282 deaths in various degrees. Regarding those deaths, 1,118 were classified as "Natural" deaths; 111 were classified as "Accident"; 39 were classified as "Suicide"; 9 were classified as "Homicide"; and 5 were classified with an "Undetermined" manner.

In addition to these deaths, the Coroner's Office had involvement to various degrees with 235 requests for other services including cremation permits which require a deputy to review; and requests to make notification to next-of-kin by other jurisdictions.

2013 York County Deaths