



The Task Force to Strengthen the Health and Promote the Environment of South Carolina

2100 Bull Street
Columbia, SC 29201

SHaPE SC Full Task Force Meeting

Sept. 17, 2021

Minutes

The Task Force to Strengthen the Health and Promote the Environment of South Carolina (SHaPE SC) held its third full task force meeting on **Sept. 17, 2021, at 1:00 p.m.** The meeting was conducted virtually via MS Teams.

The meeting was called to order by the task force facilitator, Mr. Bernie Hawkins, and the following members were in attendance:

Attending virtually:

Larry Martin, Chair (SHaPE SC); Bernie Hawkins, Facilitator (SHaPE SC); Edward Simmer; Greg Pearce; Tommy Lavender; Mark Binkley; Lee Pearson; Graham Adams; Rebecca Brannon; Jarrod Bruder; Susan Cohen; Lee Dutton; Sara Goldsby; Rebecca Haynes; Sara Hazzard; Erika Hollis; Alan Hughes; Bill Lindsey; Amy McCulloch; Joseph McLamb; Lill Mood; Patricia Moore-Pastides; Connie Munn; Mark Nix; Ken Rentiers; Kenneth Rogers; Kacey Schmitt; Myra Reece; Seema Shrivastava-Patel; Jauna Slade; Bill Stangler; Anne Summer; Gwen Thompson; Brannon Traxler; Gerald Wilson; Lathran Woodward

Not in attendance:

Jeffery Allen; Laura Aldinger; Gayle Aycock; Art Braswell; Eric Bellamy; Thaddeus Bell; Emily Cedzo; Anna Maria Conner; John Durst; Michael Fields; Beth Franco; Samuel L. Green, Sr.; Todd Glover; Elizabeth Harmon; Jeffrey Korte; Thornton Kirby; Clint Leach; Jill Miller; Harold Mitchell, Jr.; Brenda Murphy; Gary Spires; Richele Taylor; Kim Wilkerson

Note, some members may have called in by phone, and may not be indicated in attendance as their participation was not announced.

Also, in attendance were two Regional Health Directors from the South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control (DHEC), Buck Wilson and Taylor Lee; DHEC's Senior Deputy for Public Health, Nick Davidson, several DHEC support staff, as well as members of the public.

Item 1: Call to Order/Welcome

SHaPE SC Chair and Former State Senator Larry Martin welcomed members to the third task force meeting and called the meeting to order. He then provided a brief overview of the purpose of the day's meeting, including proposed recommendations and reports by the task force's three subcommittees. Chair Martin stated that the aim of the meeting was to set the stage for the drafting of a final report. He also thanked task force leadership for their work during this process.

Before turning the meeting over to task force facilitator, the chairman shared the following remarks:

"The important role of this agency or any governmental agency function, for that matter, is never more evident than when we need them. These past 18 months have shed new light on the critical role of public health in our state. And it continues to do so today and will do in the days ahead. That makes what we're doing today even more vital as we move forward in our discussions and our recommendations."

Item 2: Agenda Overview

SHaPE SC Facilitator Bernie Hawkins provided an overview of the meeting agenda. He then congratulated each task force member on meeting an important milestone in their collective work together and stated that following the receipt of final subcommittee recommendations that the task force leadership would draft an overarching report. As part of his overview, Mr. Hawkins also reviewed the task force's charter, including its charge.

In June 2021, a charter issued by Dr. Simmer was approved by the DHEC Board authorizing the establishment of the SHaPE SC Task Force with the instruction that it consider ways to improve the delivery of health and environmental services for all South Carolinians. This group was then formed and requested to look at all available options to improve services. As part of its evaluation process, the task force was asked to identify consensus recommendations concerning:

- preservation of what is working,
- improvements in services themselves,
- improvements in structure of function of DHEC, and
- potential changes to alignment among agencies delivering services to improve those services.

Mr. Hawkins emphasized that the task force was asked to seek broad-based public and stakeholder input concerning identification of challenges and recommendations for service improvements. To support this work, the task force held 16 public meetings; conducted countless hours of research; carried out numerous interviews with current and former DHEC employees; reviewed organizational changes in DHEC going back to 1973; reviewed changes in the number of employees for DHEC over time, salary information and comparisons to comparable jobs at other agencies and the private sector, and the increasing length of time required to replace critical positions within DHEC to replace lost DHEC positions; reviewed DHEC's finance and budget information, including sources of funding, allocation of funds, and budget request processes; and received and reviewed public input from more than 400 individuals and stakeholder groups.

Following his overview of the day's agenda, Mr. Hawkins turned the meeting over to the three subcommittee chairs to report out on their final findings and recommendations.

Item 3: Subcommittee Report Outs

Behavioral Health Subcommittee Recommendations

Mark Binkley, Chair of the Behavioral Health Subcommittee, recognized members of the subcommittee. He observed that almost all members of the subcommittee were very well acquainted with each other through their work related to behavioral health services in South Carolina and they held a shared focus on improving services and addressing challenges.

Key challenges identified by the subcommittee included the availability of qualified staff based on resource and salary constraints. This challenge cuts across the public sector and impacts the ability to maintain services. Mr. Binkley noted that while behavioral health services provided by the state received an increase in financial resources from the federal government during the pandemic, the decrease of staff capacity remained a major constraint to the provision of services.

Other major challenges identified by the subcommittee included addressing the ever-present stigma associated with receiving behavioral health services, as well as the lack of integration of behavioral and general health services.

To preserve what is working, Mr. Binkley stated the need to continue to collaborate across agencies, community organizations, and other stakeholders to promote a continuum of care. He specifically recognized the Behavioral Health Coalition for its work to connect stakeholders to core behavioral health challenges such as access and adequate care. This included continuing to leverage partnerships that have been developed over the years. He also mentioned that there was currently funding to increase the availability of diversionary courts, particularly mental health courts and drug courts. These courts help to identify the underlining causes of individuals who come into contact with law enforcement and can in-turn help to provide treatment to those individuals.

Recommendations for current service improvements included:

- A renewed focus on the expansion of behavioral health services in jails and prisons across the state.
- Investments in workforce development for behavioral health and substance use disorder (SUD) professionals.
- Better collaborate and coordinate in the use of federal mental health funding SUD funding to improve co-occurring behavioral health services.

Recommended structural or functional changes outlined by the subcommittee included identifying and exploring future opportunities to provide co-located behavioral health and general health services in communities. Several benefits to co-location were identified, such as the potential reduction in stigma for those receiving services and soft savings. The subcommittee also recommended efforts aimed at addressing information-sharing roadblocks that would make it easier for communication between providers treating the same individual for their behavioral health and SUD needs and improving the ability for all state operated or supported healthcare providers, and specifically DHEC, DMH, and DAODAS (including its county authorities) to share patient information electronically. A recent advisory committee was developed to review the state's current information sharing platform.

Funding and staffing items were also noted as recommended structural or functional changes by the subcommittee. These included:

- A support to repeal or modify the current federal IMD Exclusion that prohibits payment for Medicaid recipients in need of inpatient behavioral health services.
- Advocation for adequate reimbursement for behavioral health services provided in the private hospital setting.
- an evaluation of the use of paraprofessionals and new innovative ways to staff behavioral health services such as peer support specialists, community health workers, etc.
- Continued active participation and engagement in the Behavioral Health Coalition.

Concerning **recommendations related to the realignment of agencies and services**, the subcommittee recommended that DMH and DAODAS remain autonomous while strengthening service delivery through joint trainings and continuing routine meetings between the leadership of both agencies. It also recommended pursuing opportunities to expand behavioral healthcare via paraprofessionals and leveraging technology to increase information (to include DHEC), as well as representation from FQHCs, through the SC Primary Health Care Association, be included on the Behavioral Health Coalition on a permanent basis. Further the subcommittee recommended additional funding to support behavioral health services and continued implementations of recommendations provided by the South Carolina Institute of Medicine and Public Health.

Environmental Protection Subcommittee Recommendations

Tommy Lavender, Chair of the Environmental Protection Subcommittee, began his presentation by recognizing the countless hours of work of subcommittee members, which like the members of the Behavioral Health Subcommittee have a history of working together.

While the subcommittee did not reach consensus on every item, Mr. Lavender noted that members came away from the table with a productive discussion. In addition, there was general consensus, including with the other subcommittees, about state appropriations, funding, and the ability to recruit and retain professionals.

Mr. Lavender stated that the environmental programs in which stakeholders on the subcommittee interact with are fairly stable and include federal laws that are implemented and delegated to DHEC. For those which are more stringent in South Carolina, approval from the General Assembly is needed. He shared that the subcommittee spent much time on discussing the current strengths of DHEC.

Current strengths identified by the subcommittee comprised of the process and focus on building stakeholder input on environmental issues, including the use of virtual platforms; improvements in communications with external partners; enhanced internal coordination of customer service through efforts like ePermitting for the regulated community; and the leveraging of limited resources.

Concerning **current challenges to the provision of environmental services in South Carolina**, Mr. Lavender noted strong agreement by subcommittee members related to sustainable funding. Specifically, he noted that the subcommittee was advised by DHEC staff that funding at the federal level for environmental programs had been stagnant for 20 years. As a result, to maintain the levels of service required, staff must rely on recurring funding from the state and program fees. From a fee standpoint, there is currently a statute that limits fee increases paid by regulated entities seeking permits to 1/3 of DHEC's environmental program budget. In addition, Mr. Lavender expanded that

while federal mandates have increased over the years, funding has stayed the same. This requires a need for additional state appropriations.

The subcommittee also identified a lack of competitive salaries across many of the professional categories, such as engineers, geologists, hydrogeologists, etc. as a challenge, which impacts the state's ability to recruit and retain subject matter experts. Emerging contaminants, such as Per- and Polyfluoroalkyl Substances (PFAS) in drinking water, were also identified as a challenge because additional built-in capacity and expertise is needed to adequately understand, communicate, and limit the presence and exposure of such environmental contaminants.

In addition, the subcommittee found that the recent centralization of internal agency support services within DHEC has unintentionally resulted in some decreased focus on mission critical services within the Environmental Affairs program areas.

Based on the subcommittee's discussions and findings, the following overarching **recommendations were determined:**

- Conduct a cross-analysis of critical agency positions to determine needed competitive salaries with the private sector, particularly within the deputy area of Environmental Affairs.
- Equitable consideration of budget requests from each of the three core deputy areas to avoid internal competition for funding within the agency for funding needs.
- Provide funding for a full-time dedicated environmental toxicologist(s).
- Evaluate effectiveness of current centralized structure of support functions and consider the de-centralization of those support functions to better support the needs of mission-focused deputy areas.
- Career advance opportunities for non-management scientists who are either not suited for or uninterested in management positions.

For **recommended functional changes**, the subcommittee recommended specifics related to:

- Conducting a cross-analysis of salaries of mission-critical positions to compare to the private sector; provide justifications for salary levels that promote mission-critical activities; and support the hiring, training, and retention of quality employees.
- Providing equitable consideration of budget requests from each of the three core deputy areas to promote the different resource needs of core deputy areas and advocate for adequate funding to support the effective implementation of mission-critical programs.
- Providing funding for a full-time dedicated environmental toxicologist(s) to encourage and enhance direct communications between environment and public health, further promote the coordination of decision-making and communication, and serve as a conduit of specific information and knowledge related to environmental programs.

For **structural changes**, the subcommittee specified:

- Supporting career advancement opportunities for scientists through career tracking for non-management scientist, promoting professional growth and development opportunities, and providing commensurate salaries.
- De-centralization of support services by embedding support functions within core deputy areas to provide greater integration and the ability to implement plans and initiatives and more effectively and quickly address critical needs.

The subcommittee had **no formal recommendation as it related to organizational realignment**. However, the subcommittee did recommend priority be placed on adequate funding and support to existing mission-critical programs.

Health Subcommittee Recommendations

Dr. Lee Pearson, Chair of the Health Subcommittee, thanked members of the subcommittee for their collaborative efforts throughout their evaluation process. He then stated that the recommendations of the subcommittee were a result of deliberations from its five public meetings and informed by the extensive feedback received from the task force by the public.

For the purpose of the day's meeting, Dr. Pearson **focused solely on the recommendations being put forth by the subcommittee**. The subcommittee recommended that the full budgetary needs of DHEC (including public health and environmental protection) be adequately documented for sufficient legislative investment on the part of the state. As part of this recommendation, the subcommittee noted that the state ranked 32nd in per capita public health funding based on pre-pandemic data, and that state allocations to DHEC represented 23 percent of the agency's budget, requiring broader dependence on fee revenue, federal allocation, and competitive grant funding.

Next, the subcommittee recommended that DHEC be enabled to enhance its workforce capacity and expedite hiring processes to adapt more readily to evolving demands. Driving the subcommittee's deliberation included the agency's loss of 1/3 of its full-time employees over the past decade, challenges in the requirement and retention of qualified staff, and the frequent leadership turnover in key senior positions within the department. At the same time, the subcommittee noted hiring process efficiencies leveraged by the agency to quickly upstaff during the pandemic as a positive innovation. Related workforce recommendations by the subcommittee included:

- Hiring and appointing capable leadership and staff with expertise in public health and environmental science, supplemented by active partnerships.
- Enabling and trusting DHEC's professional staff to use their expertise to do their jobs to protect the health of the residents of our state.
- Comprehensively adjusting salaries to be competitive and enhance the recruitment and retention of staff.
- Streamlining hiring processes to more efficiently meet the needs of the agency.
- Creating and maintaining a collaborative work environment that seeks and respects other perspectives and values the contribution of others, including the public.

The subcommittee also recommended that DHEC be enabled to enhance local and regional units that are responsive to community needs and support public involvement. Specifically, the subcommittee believed that the existing centralized structure of DHEC promoted statewide coverage and flexibility in addressing varying needs and priorities, but it was the local presence through the regional and county structure that encouraged the establishment of essential trusting relations and partnerships to enable healthy communities. Related details to the local and regional recommendation provided by the subcommittee included:

- Sustaining and strengthening the local (e.g., county-level) presence.
- Facilitating efficient contact from the public with the appropriate DHEC staff member or unit to address an immediate issue.
- Establishing strategies that place value on DHEC staff's community involvement (e.g., WIC tele-visits).

- Improving communication channels within the agency divisions and regions and with the public.

Concerning the issue of realignment, the subcommittee recommended that public health and environmental protection be retained as one agency. The subcommittee stated that it recognized the role of the environmental programs within DHEC share the mission of protection of human health. In particular, the range of environmental programs reflect protection against illness from diseases that are spread through the air, water, waste, food, and other vectors. The subcommittee further stated that it was important that no organizational restructuring should be undertaken without a full examination by the General Assembly of the fiscal and functional impacts of such action.

[To view the presentations provided by the Subcommittee Chairs, click here.](#)

Item 4: Group Discussion, Q&A

Following the subcommittee presentations, Mr. Hawkins opened the floor for questions and discussions by the task force.

Lill Mood, a member of the Health Subcommittee, shared several comments recognizing the contribution of recommendations made by the other two subcommittees. This included the alignment concerns and coverage of care with the integration of health services addressed by the Behavioral Health Subcommittee. For the Environmental Protection Subcommittee, she noted the use of the term “mission-critical functions” and explored a potential to further review the articulation and advocacy of those mission-critical functions. She also discussed the Environmental Protection Subcommittee’s recommendation concerning the reassignment of support services. She shared that as a former DHEC employee, she recognized the importance of have having the flexibility and availability of connecting directly to support staff who hold expertise in specified subject matters. She also recognized the vital need for an environmental epidemiologist/ toxicologist.

Patricia Moore-Pastides, also a member of the Health Subcommittee, requested a clarification from the Environmental Protection Subcommittee concerning the de-centralization of support functions. Mr. Lavender clarified that the subcommittee was focused on the location of dedicated support functions to better support DHEC’s deputy areas so that they can serve as subject matter experts and further meet the specialized needs of the agency’s various programs. Ms. Moore-Pastides indicated that this seemed like a sound recommendation, and she also noted the difficulty of recruiting and retaining employees with limited funding. She stated that with increased federal funding for COVID-19 coming into the state that it may be an opportune time to look further into such matters.

Mr. Hawkins added that he worked with Senator Martin to hear from current and former DHEC employees. During their conversations, many individuals made similar comments to those expressed by Environmental Protection Subcommittee concerning the centralization of support services within DHEC. Mr. Hawkins stated that there was a common perception that the centralization of support services had led to unintended consequences through removing the link to the specialized understanding needed at the mission-critical level.

Item 5: Next Steps and Closing Remarks

At the closure of the Q&A portion of the event, Mr. Hawkins reviewed the remaining next steps in drafting the full task force report. He stated that based on the recommendations submitted by the task force, an initial report would be drafted and shared back with the subcommittees before the final task force meeting on Oct. 19, 2021. Senator Martin also offered follow-up remarks and items related to the drafting of the final report.

DHEC Director Dr. Edward Simmer then thanked Senator Martin and Mr. Hawkins for their leadership and shared his appreciation for the great work of the task force. He stated a number of the recommendations provided by the task force could already be acted upon by the agency. He also shared that he remained committed to providing the report to the DHEC Board, Legislature, and Office of the Governor.

Being no further business, Senator Martin adjourned the meeting.

A recording of the 3rd SHaPE SC meeting held on Sept. 17, 2021, is available [here](#).

Additional information regarding the SHaPE SC task force is available at shapesouthcarolina.gov.



Larry Martin, SHaPE SC Chair
Oct. 30, 2021