

ST. TAMMANY PARISH CORONER'S OFFICE

Science - Service - Compassion



Story and photos by Donna Bush

The first thing that comes to mind when you hear the word "coroner" is death. But our St. Tammany Parish (STP) Coroner's office wants to change that way of thinking. Rather than focusing on death, they want to pursue "Life, Safety and Death Postponement." How can they accomplish this? The answer is the amazing number of life safety programs they offer.

In 2020, STP Coroner, Dr. Charles Preston established the Life Safety Education Initiative in an effort to reduce and potentially eliminate preventable deaths and tragedies in our parish. Partnerships with professional and private organizations, and individuals around the community and nearby areas flourished during 2021. Despite the pandemic, technological advances allowed the newly developed programs to continue and assist residents.

Dr. Preston describes himself as a "recovering emergency physician." His background prompted his desire to provide a higher quality of care for Parish residents and we are the fortunate recipients! He and his amazing team are enthusiastic about upgrading the quality of life in our parish.

Let me share with you some of the spectacular programs they have implemented...



Safe sleep for your baby

The Coroner's Office partnered with the Southwest Louisiana Safe Sleep Task Force and national Crisbs for Kids® to educate and train parents and caregivers about infant death from unsafe sleep practices. It highlights the correct way to position babies for sleep and the dangers of co-sleeping that can lead to accidental suffocation of an infant. Education includes "The ABC's of Safe Sleep," as recommended by The American Academy of Pediatrics, which are A-Alone, B-Back, C-Crib. Once the education portion is completed, parents receive a free Graco Pack N' Play crib, provided through the generous donations of local businesses, groups and individuals. Since the inception of the program in March of 2021, they have issued over 140 cribs to pregnant parents.

The Coroner's Office also partnered with Covington First Baptist Church "Sewing Servants" to make "sleep

sacks" to donate to each of the mothers, providing at least one safe sleep garment.

Here are just two of the many real-world examples of how this program has helped members of our community and beyond:

Recently a woman gave premature birth, then left the child's father to care for the baby alone. The unprepared dad had no crib and knew nothing about infant Safe Sleep. Our STP Coroner's Office took one of their cribs to the discharging hospital, gave the new father the class, taught him how to set up the crib, and sent him home with a safe way and knowledge for Safe Sleep for his baby.

Shortly before going to print, an out-of-state expectant mother was passing through Slidell, went into labor and gave birth at one of our local hospitals. She had no crib for her baby to continue their trip. Upon hearing about this event, our STP Coroner's Office reached out to the new mom, offering a crib and the Safe Sleep class. Upon learning that she did not speak English, the Coroner's Office arranged for one of their fluent Spanish-speaking employees to translate the class. Now she will have a safe crib and Safe Sleep knowledge for her return trip.

While they don't normally deliver cribs to parents, there are unique exceptions.

Their **Shaken Baby Prevention** program also targets infant health, by demonstrating with a special state-of-the-art LED doll, named Annabelle, where injuries occur when shaken. The course offers techniques for parents and caregivers to de-escalate a situation before it reaches critical. Such techniques include checking obvious items such as a needed diaper change, or hunger, etc. They also suggest reaching out to a parent or friend for advice when a baby will not stop crying. Twenty percent of infants sustain brain injuries from being shaken. The main contributing factor in shaken baby syndrome is frustration with the baby's crying.

This program, along with Safe Sleep, are included in the babysitter course provided to interested 10-13year-olds, looking to offer babysitting services to friends and family. Chris Knoblauch, STP Coroner's Office Community Outreach Coordinator and Forensic Death Investigator, shared, "Annabelle is a real eye-opener for parents and perspective babysitters about how a very small movement can impact an infant's brain."



Swimming Pool Safety

The focus here is on pool safety and emphasizes barriers around pools; installing a pool alarm; installation of automatic locking gates; swimming instruction for both children and adults; and installation of drain guards for pools and hot tubs. Most of us think about having a fence around a pool, but often that is not enough. Determined children can easily climb a fence. My neighbor's 2-year old son was able to open their child-proof back door, climb the fence and access the neighbor's pool.

Another topic discussed is designating a 'pool watcher,' much like a designated driver. The 'pool watcher' agrees to forgo consuming alcohol and constantly scans the pool for anyone in trouble. Most people, thanks to TV, associate a drowning person with someone gasping for air, flailing arms and calling

for help. This is very rarely the case. Actually, they are "silent events." Often children will just slip under the water completely un-noticed by a pool full of people – adults and other children.

Drain guards on pools and hot tubs prevent a child or an adult's hair from being caught in the drain, dragging them underwater to drown.

The best preventions are swimming lessons for all children and adults; pool barriers and alarms; locking gates; drain guards and knowledge of performing CPR. Check out www.poolsafely.gov for more information.



Firearm safety in the home

This program targets the serious responsibility of firearm safety in the home. Keeping firearms out of the hands of children or those who might want to harm themselves are the MOST important aspects. To highlight this message, the Coroner's Office partnered with the National Sports

Shooting Association and the national Project Child Safe™ program. Both an educational component and a physical gun lock are provided with this program, with over 150 firearm locks distributed so far.

CARBON MONOXIDE (CO) POISONING



The Silent Killer

Most of us only think of carbon monoxide as a threat during hurricane season when running generators. In reality, it is a year-round threat. Many homes have gas water heaters, gas dryers, fireplaces and automobiles – all of these can emit carbon monoxide. This gas is colorless and odorless, but deadly. You don't know it is present until it is too late. There is acute exposure, which is what is seen from running generators without proper ventilation. But there is also a chronic exposure from cumulative effects. The molecules can permeate through sheetrock. The treatment is not as easy as just breathing fresh air. Many times, the ER has to treat patients with hyperbaric chambers like those used by a diver who has risen to the surface too fast. Symptoms include nausea, vomiting, dizziness, dull headache, weakness, shortness of breath and confusion. Victims lose consciousness and ultimately die.

Prevention is achieved by running a generator a minimum of 20 feet from the home; and installation and maintenance of CO (carbon monoxide) monitors with a battery backup. Check batteries and working condition of monitors annually.

Shortly after 2021 Hurricane Ida made her devastating path across south Louisiana, a local St. Tammany Parish social worker reached out to our Coroner's Office about a family

in another southern parish whose trailer was damaged by the storm. The family was living in the damaged trailer with no electricity or crib for their baby, while running a generator. Our Coroner's Office took one of their Cribs for Kids© crib, along with a purchased smoke detector and carbon monoxide detector to the social worker who was able to leap-frog these items through other parishes' social workers to the family in need.



A close relationship is maintained between the Coroner's Office and St. Tammany Outreach, hosting suicide prevention education classes for the public and first responders at their Lacombe facility. The Coroner's Office investigators work closely with members of the Local Outreach to the Survivors of Suicide Team to connect survivors with counseling and mental health services in the community. They have a staff of instructors who volunteer to teach suicide intervention and prevention in local schools.



This program addresses the opioid epidemic in our nation by partnering with the Florida Parishes Human Services Authority Mobile Opioid Task Force to assist in

various outreach events and forums. They distribute free Narcan to families of opioid addicts to hopefully prevent a fatal overdose. The "One Pill Can Kill" campaign targets curious teens and others to make them aware of the number of counterfeit prescription drugs showing up in our community. In

addition, the Coroner's Office tracks drug related fatalities to alert law enforcement and the community of new trends in our area. Fake Xanax, Adderall, and Oxycodone (Percocet) are often mixed with fentanyl resulting in a lethal dose to the unsuspecting purchaser.



Sexual Assault

Our Coroner's Office also has on staff two full-time and one part-time certified sexual assault examining nurses. They handle the medical examination, evidence gathering, and counseling. They work hand in hand with the Coroner's Office DNA Lab, law enforcement, and the DA's office to apprehend and sentence the criminals. They also provide these services for a fee to Florida Parishes outside of St. Tammany. (The Florida Parishes are East Baton Rouge, West Feliciana, East Feliciana, St. Helena, Livingston, Tangipahoa, Washington and St. Tammany.)

This program was established as a direct result of Dr. Preston's emergency medicine background. He, first-hand, saw and experienced how many different directions an ER doctor was pulled when dealing with sexual assault patients, while also attending to heart attacks, broken limbs and stitching cuts.

Human Trafficking

Our Coroner's Office is a member of the Greater New Orleans Human Trafficking Task Force, working together to bring awareness to our community; to support and protect the victims as much as possible.



Chaplains Corp

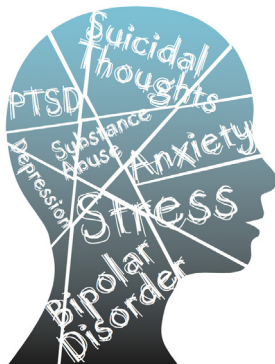
The Coroner's Office coordinates with 40+ volunteer clergy of all religious beliefs, from both east and west sides of the Parish. They assist on death scenes by providing grief counseling to family members and first responders. Additionally, they attend death notification of family members to provide support. Unselfishly, they provide this counsel, regardless of the time of day.



Internship Program

Our Coroner's Office has an in-house internship open to college students interested in pursuing forensics. Applicants provide a transcript proving to be an A/B student and a letter of recommendation from a college faculty member. The interns work hand-in-hand with a forensics medical science pathologist and investigator in the DNA lab and more. This is a great way to determine if an intern is up for "the good and the bad" of the job. Dr. Preston shared, "Most have pursued their degree and returned as employees."

Mental Health



Adele Bruce-Smith, Project Coordinator at our Coroner's Office, shared, "We want everyone in our community to know that we are here for them, to assist with any mental health crisis. We can help them

negotiate the maze of behavioral health." In an average year, they are involved in over 5000 cases, whether that is substance abuse, sexual abuse, or mental illness. Louisiana is the only state where the Coroner's Office is responsible

First Annual Special Needs Expo

In May 2022, the St. Tammany Coroner's Office hosted their first annual Special Needs Expo addressing those with disabilities, regardless of age. There were over 50 vendors, entertainment, a food truck and a great crowd. The Mande Milkshakers put on a terrific show as always. Just a few of the vendors I met were Ainsley's Angels – a non-profit group of runners who participate in foot races and assist those with special needs by pushing their chariots; Ski-Dawgs Adaptive Water Skiing, also a non-profit, make it possible for those with disabilities to participate in water skiing; and Buddy Cruises, who offer an annual cruise for those with disabilities and their family and care givers. In addition to these, there were booths hosted by the Shriners, STARC, Northshore Technical College, Families Helping Families, People First, BrightHouse Learning Center, Hope House, Easter Seals, Riley's Bikes, St. Tammany Parish Library and many more. I am certain it will grow quickly and be even more in demand next year.



When I last spoke with Chris, he shared the terrific news that on October 15, 2022, the St. Tammany Parish Coroner's Office will host their first Annual Veterans Expo! Stay tuned for more details.

Chris shared that, with most of their programs, "We never really know that our programs saved a life." This is a prime example of "No news is good news!"

I hope you've enjoyed learning of a different way to observe and relate to our St. Tammany Parish Coroner's Office. Watch their social media for updates about future events. Per Dr. Preston, "Our main goal is to go into each case, whether it is a mental health case, death investigation case, sexual assault case, or a DNA case, and rely on the science and get the facts. We are here to support you through whatever crisis is happening. You are not walking alone."

Please contact the St. Tammany Parish Coroner's Office if you'd like more information about the programs or services offered to all residents of St. Tammany Parish.



985-781-1150

STPCoroner.org

Science

Service

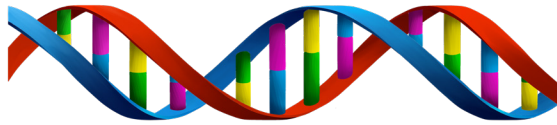
Compassion

for issuing orders of protective custody. This may come about when an individual is a danger to themselves or others, or greatly disabled due to mental illness.

Adele elaborated, "There are many services available but only if the individual is already on Medicaid. But, how do you acquire Medicaid? This is one of the many areas where the maze is difficult to negotiate, and we are here to help!" She explained if an individual is on Medicaid, they qualify for an Assertive Community Treatment (ACT) team, which is a team of mental health professionals available to assist with any needs. These needs can include home visits for medication management, therapy, etc. The goal is to get them the continuum of care appropriate for their case and avoid a repeat occurrence of the crisis.

Adele shared a recent real-life success story. A very elderly 80+ year old lady had a daughter (60+) who had lived with mental illness all her life. The elderly lady would have to come to the Coroner's Office and request an Order of Protective Custody on a regular basis. After the Coroner's Mental Health Office intervened, they were able to assure that the daughter did not return to the hospital that she did not like, which always set her up for failure. One of the things the Coroner's Office is allowed to do is to choose which hospital a person should attend. They don't force the hospital choice, but they do provide the family with the available resources to choose the hospital that will be most suitable. Staying local is an important part of a successful outcome, which allows the patient to receive the support of their family. This hospital was the perfect choice, allowing the daughter to stabilize. What next? An ACT team got involved to visit the house on a regular basis; they can tweak medication as necessary; check on what is going on at the house; and build a rapport with them which makes it less likely that they will spiral into another crisis. Adele was in the area they lived while running errands on her day off and decided to call to check in. They were good and invited Adele to stop by for a visit. She met the daughter for the first time!

"I love my job! The stigma is still big, and people are ashamed to ask for help. But I walk with them the entire way until they receive the necessary assistance that they need. The sooner they can get help, the faster they can get better. It's exhausting for the family to deal with on their own. So many people have sat across from me and cried that they were finally able to find the resources to help their loved one. Family members feel that they are trying to tread water! It's a brain illness just like any other disease - heart disease or diabetes. The more we can talk about it, the more open people will be, and the shame will disappear."



DNA Lab

Our Coroner's Office's state-of-the-art DNA Lab is the envy of all other parishes in the state! Our Parish is the only one that has their own DNA Lab and are not dependent on waiting up to a year or longer to receive results from the State Lab, due to their humongous backlog of cases. The Lab, which is utilized exclusively for our Parish, can have results returned to investigators within 72 hours! They can work a case outside of our parish if there is a tie to a St. Tammany case.

Evidence is screened, cutting samples, and more. Louisiana Coroner's Offices are charged with the examination of every survivor of sexual assault. For instance, in a sexual assault case, they must identify if sperm is present by staining and examining slides. Most, if not all, of the instruments are high-end robotics, allowing them to turn-around results much faster than handling everything manually. These instruments also enable multi-tasking. While the instrument processes samples and determines results, technicians are able to work on other tasks. Separating DNA strains by hand would take 4-6 hours; their equipment can do this in 20 minutes!

You might ask, "How are we so lucky to have this fantastic DNA Lab?" I did, and here's the answer: "The voters in St. Tammany approved a millage in 2004 to build the DNA Lab and fund the Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner program. The Lab opened doors in 2007 and completed the accreditation process in 2008. This millage, which will be up for renewal in the near future, continues to serve the residents of this parish on a daily basis by making our community a safer place to live and raise a family. We hope that the community will see the extraordinary value of this resource for St. Tammany Parish and continue to support this program in the future."

Recently, the STP Coroner's DNA Lab tested a piece of evidence for a minor crime in our parish, proving that their arrestee was the perpetrator. Upon uploading their evidence to the national database, they received a hit on a felony bank robbery case and were able to tie the arrestee to both crimes!

We are so fortunate to have this in our community along with diligent investigators who never give up. Chris shared that they are still actively working cases over 40 years old!

I hope you have enjoyed this look into the St. Tammany Parish Coroner's Office and their mission of Science, Service and Compassion.