



Spotlight on Sheriffs

Police Executive Research Forum
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Spotlight on the Santa Cruz County Sheriff's Office

Introduction

The Santa Cruz County, CA Sheriff's Office (SCSO) is a full-service law enforcement agency that is embracing technology and training to meet the challenges of 21st century policing. The SCSO was an early adopter of the Integrating Communications, Assessment, and Tactics (ICAT) training program developed by the Police Executive Research Forum (PERF). The agency initially trained all its patrol deputies in ICAT. In 2022, the SCSO was one of the first agencies to certify all its correctional officers in ICAT. The SCSO is also expanding its use of drones in law enforcement operations, adding a state-of-the-art DNA laboratory, and embracing civilianization in the agency.

Like many other law enforcement and first-responder agencies across the country, the SCSO has faced many challenges in recent years. In 2020, a rising leader in the agency was ambushed and killed in the line of duty. The agency has also had to respond to multiple catastrophic weather emergencies, and, because the sheriff is also the county coroner, an increase in fentanyl-related deaths. Since 2011, the agency has been required to house felons in its jail in addition to those charged with misdemeanor crimes, causing housing and supervision challenges.

About This Series

As part of PERF's Sheriffs Initiative, PERF researchers are conducting site visits in sheriffs' offices around the country to study and document their operations and share innovative practices with the profession. PERF's Sheriffs Initiative is made possible by the support of the Howard G. Buffett Foundation.

At the invitation of Sheriff Jim Hart, PERF

staff members Dan Alioto and Matt Harman visited the Santa Cruz County, CA Sheriff's Office in November 2023. Alioto and Harman met with Sheriff Hart; Undersheriff Chris Clark; Chief Deputy Daniel Freitas; Forensic Services Director Lauren Zephro; Lieutenant Christopher Shearer; Public Information Officer Ashley Keehn; and Sergeants Kyle Ward, Billy Burnett, Ryan Kennedy, and Zach West. PERF toured the SCSO's headquarters, forensic lab, Main Jail and Rountree detention facilities, and Aptos Service Center.

About the Santa Cruz County Sheriff's Office

Santa Cruz County is located south of the San Francisco Bay Area. The SCSO serves a population of approximately 270,000 people. It has 165 patrol deputies and 120 correctional officers, is responsible for several jail facilities, and operates six service centers throughout the county. Jim Hart is the three-term elected sheriff-coroner in Santa Cruz County.

During his tenure as the elected sheriff, the county has seen a decrease in use-of-force incidents. Sheriff Hart has established a recovery center, created a drone program, and implemented PERF's ICAT training program throughout the agency. He also formed a Focused Intervention Team (FIT), composed of law enforcement professionals and mental health clinicians, dedicated to addressing the needs of high-frequency users of police, fire, and medical services.

More recently, Sheriff Hart secured funding to construct a state-of-the-art DNA laboratory on the SCSO campus. The laboratory is currently under construction and is expected to be staffed and fully operational by 2026.



Sheriff Jim Hart

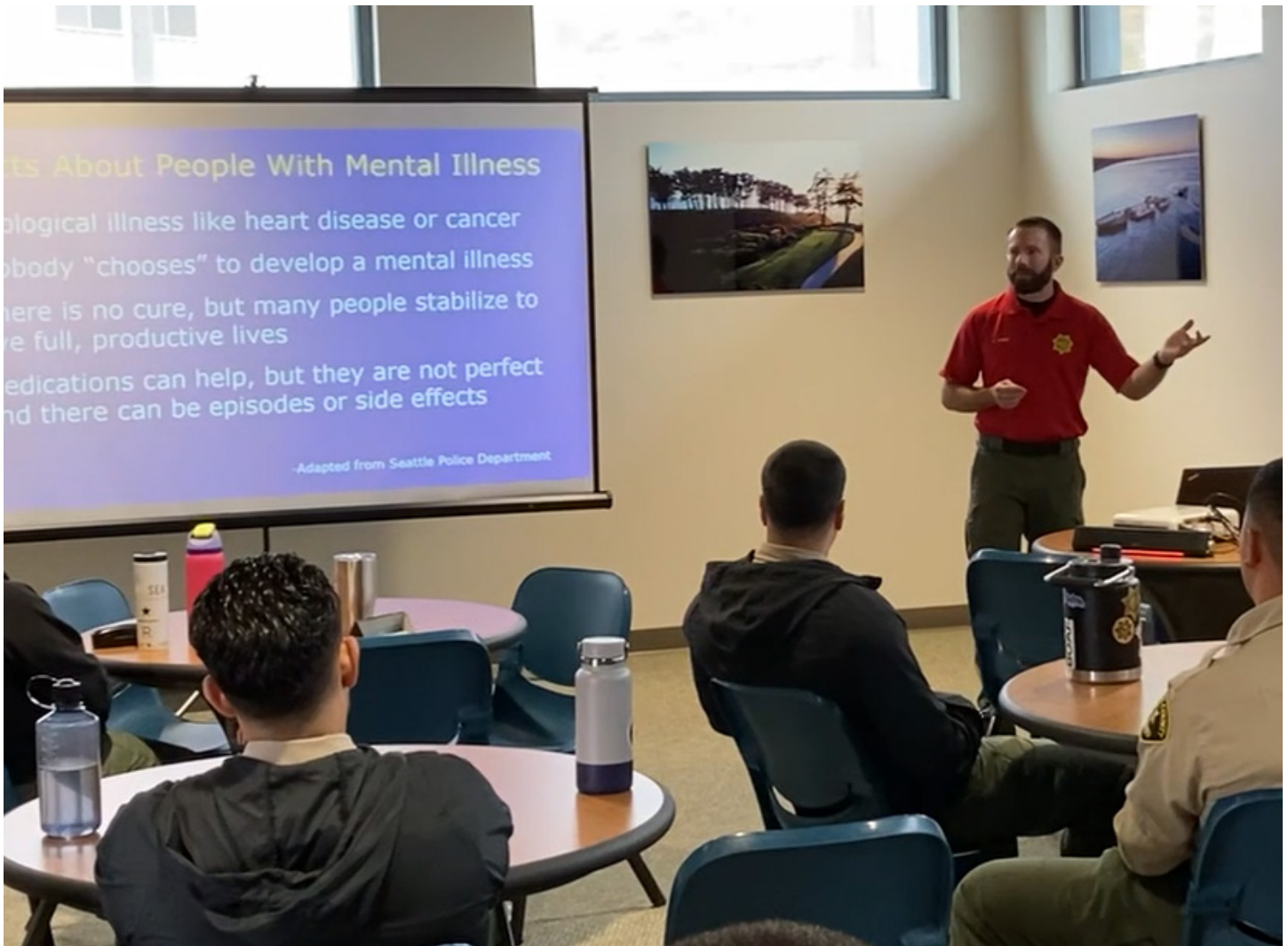
ICAT Implementation

In 2018, the SCSO began training its patrol deputies in ICAT. The agency also taught its correctional officers to use ICAT when de-escalating incidents in the jail.

Training staff at the SCSO say that ICAT has become a part of the agency's culture. When on a call for service, one deputy serves as the primary communicator while the others assess the scene and their response options. Once the primary officer begins talking to the subject, support officers plan for the next steps. They are comfortable taking their time to make good decisions and do not rush to use force. If their initial actions are unsuccessful, deputies have become much better at planning their next steps, or, as it's called in ICAT, "spinning the Critical Decision-Making Model (CDM)."

When debriefing an incident, the agency will use the CDM to walk through the officer's decision-making process. The agency has found that the CDM is not only a resource for making good decisions during an incident, but also a tool for officers to use when articulating their thoughts and actions during a debrief.

ICAT training has instilled patrol deputies with the knowledge that they have several options when responding to a challenging call for service. Since training its deputies and correctional officers in ICAT,



SCSO was one of the first agencies to certify all its correctional officers in ICAT, starting in 2022.

the agency has not had any fatal uses of force, and total use-of-force incidents have declined.

The SCSO found that there were 30-40 individuals in the community who frequently called 9-1-1, often with mental health-related calls for service. The agency currently receives an average of 10 calls per day regarding mental health crises. Patrol deputies use their ICAT training when responding to these calls for service.

The agency created the Focused Intervention Team (FIT) to respond to community members experiencing mental health crises. The FIT consists of three deputies and three mental health clinicians who work in pairs to identify and respond to those frequently committing low-level crimes. The team's primary goal is to reduce the strain on local emergency services by connecting those who frequently experience mental health crises with the resources they need, including drug and mental health treatment programs. The FIT contacts clients in various states of mental distress, both on the street and in jail, and often uses the principles they learned in ICAT to de-escalate the encounters.



“Women, children, and minorities are overrepresented as sexual assault victims. The new DNA lab will level the playing field, providing them access to these services much quicker and more efficiently than before. The DNA lab will be a game changer.” – Sheriff Jim Hart

“The sheriff had the foresight to build this lab, as well as the trust and confidence in his civilian staff to lead its development. This lab will enable us to better serve all victims.” – Dr. Lauren Zephro, Director of Forensic Services

Forensic Lab

The SCSO has a state-of-the-art forensic lab staffed entirely by civilians. The agency began civilianizing its forensic lab in 2008 and became fully civilianized in 2015. Before 2008, sworn members of the agency would spend a maximum of five years assigned to the lab. At the end of a five-year assignment, the deputy would rotate out, and the lab would lose their expertise. Civilianizing has helped the SCSO consistently provide a high level of service to the Santa Cruz community.

Forensic Services Director Lauren Zephro oversees all the lab’s functions and works closely with the sheriff and his leadership team. Dr. Zephro reports directly to the undersheriff; before civilianization, the lab director would report to a sergeant. This shift has given lab staff a say when the agency makes strategic decisions.

The lab currently has four functions, or specialties: general evidence processing, latent prints, anthropology, and digital forensics. Each specialty has at least one trained lab technician. The SCSO lab has access to five software subscriptions that assist in processing digital evidence. According to the lab technicians, many agencies typically only have access to one or two of those software services, so the SCSO lab’s software capability far outpaces the capability of most agencies.

A main priority of the agency is expanding the forensic lab by adding a fifth specialty: DNA processing. The DNA lab, which has been planned for 10 years and will open by 2026, will primarily serve the county’s sexual assault victims and survivors.

The new DNA lab will also reduce the evidence turnaround time to 48 hours. The state DNA lab has a 6-12-month evidence processing backup, so the SCSO DNA lab will greatly enhance the agency’s ability to serve its residents and visitors by solving sexual assault cases.

Once the lab is fully operational, the Forensic Services Division will hire another technician to supervise the DNA specialty and four additional criminalists to process the evidence.

SCSO Jail Facilities and Re-Entry Programs

The SCSO operates three jail facilities: the Main Jail facility, the Blaine Street Women’s Facility, and the Rountree facility.

Prison Realignment

SCSO officials noted that the layout of the Main Jail is not conducive to housing the types of inmates they have been required to incarcerate. SCSO command staff said California Assembly Bill 109 and subsequent measures have created staffing and supervision challenges. Commonly known as "prison realignment," Assembly Bill 109 was signed into law in 2011 and required all "non-serious, non-violent, non-sex offenders" be housed in county jails, rather than the state prison system.¹ Once this bill passed, sheriffs' offices in the state were responsible for supervising and housing long-term felony inmates, something their jails were not designed to do. In addition, California's Proposition 47, passed in

2014, downgraded dozens of drug and property felonies to misdemeanors, requiring local jails to house additional inmates.

As a result of these measures, the SCSO must supervise inmates for longer periods of time. SCSO officials say that, due to significant backlog in the courts, most of the inmates housed in the Main Jail facility are waiting for pre-trial hearings. In some cases, inmates can wait as long as three or four years for a pre-trial hearing. In one instance, the SCSO was forced to house an inmate for nine years before the inmate was transferred to prison.

The increased inmate population and duration of time the inmates spend in the Main Jail facility have caused staffing and supervision challenges. The SCSO is facing a staffing shortage and has had to stay on a mandatory overtime schedule for the last seven years.

¹ "California Realignment." Stanford Criminal Justice Center. <https://law.stanford.edu/stan>.

Main Jail Facility

The Main Jail facility houses approximately 300 inmates. It was built in 1981 and was designed for indirect supervision over the entire facility. Approximately 60 percent of inmates are on psychotropic medication. As in many jurisdictions across the country, the SCSO officials say that the Main Jail facility is the largest detox center and mental health service provider in the county.

The SCSO has different approaches to reducing the number of overdoses that occur in the jail. Upon entering the jail facility, an inmate goes through a body scan machine to identify any hidden weapons and drugs that may have been missed when they were initially searched. The SCSO has an amnesty box for inmates to voluntarily dispose of any drugs or contraband before entering the body scan machine. The inmate will not be punished for using the amnesty box when entering the jail.

SCSO officials say that the amnesty box is primarily used to dispose of drugs. They know that other counties do not use an amnesty box, opting to add additional charges to an inmates file; however, SCSO Chief Deputy Daniel Freitas, who oversees all the county's jail facilities, said that the amnesty box allows the inmate to safely throw away items that would otherwise cause harm to other inmates.

To further reduce overdoses, the SCSO has transitioned to a digital mail service. This service scans

"The safety of the inmate and everyone in jail greatly outweighs the need to add additional charges to their arresting document."

– Chief Deputy Daniel Freitas



Santa Cruz County Sheriff's Office headquarters

mail at an offsite location, then emails inmates the content of the physical mail. SCSO officials said that this service has significantly reduced the number of overdoses that occur in the jail because no one in the facility is able to receive and open mailed packages that may contain hidden drugs or other contraband materials. In 2024, all inmates will receive a personal tablet to review their digital mail.

If, despite the preventative measures taken by the SCSO, drugs enter the jail and an inmate overdoses, inmates in each jail unit have access to a box containing two doses of naloxone. The boxes are easily opened and opening them will alert corrections officers and jail medical staff to immediately respond to the overdose and provide the victim with medical care.

Blaine Street Women's Facility

The Blaine Street Women's Facility is where the SCSO houses most of their female inmates. This facility is a medium-security jail and is smaller than the Main Jail with a more lenient approach. One corrections officer is assigned to the building per shift. The female inmates can walk freely around the building. There is a kitchen where inmates can cook items from a vending machine, a garden outside of the building, a small workout room, and two classrooms where they can attend class and participate in the SCSO's Women's Recovery Reentry Program (WRRP).

In 2023, the WRRP was designated a national model by the U.S. Department of Justice. In October 2023, agencies from across the country visited the SCSO to observe the WRRP. The WRRP partners with several community programs to provide education and substance abuse treatment to its female inmates.

“The WRRP provides comprehensive services for incarcerated women, from custody through post-release, to aid in maintaining sobriety, functioning, and quality of life through reduced rates of substance use and recidivism. Services include medication assisted treatment, gender-specific curriculum with a focus on healing trauma, comprehensive case management, substance use disorder treatment, housing, and resource referrals to meet specific needs of incarcerated women.”²

Female inmates begin participating in the program when residing in the women’s facility and continue participating after they complete their sentences. The SCSO reports that 85 percent of inmates who participated in the WRRP successfully transitioned to community-based aftercare from 2022 to 2023 when released from jail.

Rountree Facility

The Santa Cruz County Rountree facility contains two separate entities: a medium-security jail and a rehabilitation- and reentry-focused minimum-security facility. The Rountree facility solely uses direct supervision. All inmate booking and classification happens at the Main Jail. An inmate will be transported to Rountree if the SCSO determines they present a low risk of harming themselves or other inmates.

All inmates housed in the Rountree Rehabilitation and Reentry Facility are required to have a job at the facility and be enrolled in a minimum of two classes. In the medium-security facility, classes are not required but inmates can enroll in them if they choose. While the Main Jail only has two classrooms, Rountree has 13. Classes offered at Rountree include high school enrollment or equivalency classes, skills for reentry, computer literacy, a building trades pre-apprenticeship program, and the In2Work program, which teaches food service skills.

The building trades pre-apprenticeship program is provided by the Santa Cruz County Office of Education and gives inmates an introduction into the building trades industry. It is a 10-week program where inmates will earn their Multi-Craft Core Curriculum (MC3), OSHA 10 Construction Safety, and CPR/First Aid certifications. Once an inmate successfully completes the program, they are given a pre-apprenticeship with the North America Building Trades Union and a \$350 gift certificate for tools and boots.

The In2Work program is provided by Aramark and teaches enrolled inmates skills needed to work in the food service industry. During this five-week program, inmates take classes and work in the Rountree facility’s full-service commercial kitchen. Graduates of the program can apply for jobs with Aramark once they complete their sentences.

When assigned to the reentry section, inmates are given an alarm clock and must manage their own daily schedule by attending classes and assigned jobs. The SCSO fosters a calm and quiet atmo-

2 Santa Cruz County Sheriff’s Office Instagram Page. https://www.instagram.com/p/Cx_rWg_PX_E/.

sphere in the reentry units. Inmates are given headphones for watching TV, and there is a large outdoor area with a garden, basketball court, gym equipment, cornhole games, and a pickleball court.

Sobering Center Partnership

The SCSO partners with the Janus of Santa Cruz sobering center to divert people arrested for public intoxication or who are under the influence of narcotics. Other law enforcement agencies are responsible for making DUI arrests, and those arrestees can also be accepted at the sobering center.

The sobering center is located next to the Main Jail and significantly reduces the amount of time required for an SCSO deputy to process an arrest. The SCSO says that a deputy can process an arrest in under 15 minutes if the arrestee is diverted to the sobering center, quickly returning the deputy to service. Approximately 200 people are diverted to the sobering center every month.



Undersheriff Chris Clark

Drone Program

The SCSO started using drones in 2018 to assist deputies and other first-responder agencies. There were not many policies, guidelines, or best practices available when the program began because only a small number of law enforcement agencies were using drones at the time.

To help establish guidelines for the SCSO's drone program, Sheriff Hart and his staff consulted a report written by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) on the use of drones. The SCSO also gathered ACLU members, representatives from the Santa Cruz County Office of the Public Defender, and other members of the community to discuss the drone program. The agency was adamant that drones would be used as an officer and public safety tool, not as a surveillance device. By consulting stakeholders before the program began, the SCSO received almost no pushback from the community or the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors when they asked the board for permission to establish the program.

The SCSO's approximately 30 drones are used for high-priority calls for service, calls where there may be a threat to officer safety, search-and-rescue missions, and when serving warrants. Drones are given to patrol deputies and stored in patrol cars, allowing deputies to deploy the drone quickly when needed, rather than waiting for specialized personnel to be dispatched to the scene. The SCSO also has two drone command vehicles with built-in chargers and televisions to monitor live footage. The SCSO has started using interior drones to help the SWAT team clear rooms and buildings while conducting search warrants. The interior drones are smaller and have bumpers to limit the damage when they contact walls and furniture.

The SCSO's drone program is also used to help other public safety agencies. For example, the SCSO helped fire and EMS officials monitor swimmers during a triathlon in Monterey Bay. The year before the agency began using drones for this purpose, a swimmer drowned during the competition and first responders did not see it happen due to the number of participants. The SCSO has also used drones to monitor the county's levees during major weather events.



Inside the SCSO Drone Response Vehicle

To provide transparency, the SCSO publishes an annual report on the agency's drone program that documents every time a drone was deployed. The SCSO had 47 drone deployments between March 2023 and February 2024.

Community Service Centers

The SCSO has six community service centers around the county it uses to conduct community policing and outreach initiatives. PERF visited the service center located in Aptos, CA.

The Aptos Service Center has a county probation office and an auxiliary district attorney's office where prosecutors can meet with officers and victims. During the pandemic, the district attorney's office used the auxiliary space as a permanent workspace. The service center has space and computers for patrol deputies to write reports and conduct other work. The service center also has a large conference room that is used by local organizations to host meetings and community events. Multi-agency teams and task forces sometimes meet in the conference room before conducting search and arrest warrants.

The other community service centers are located in:

- Davenport, CA
- Boulder Creek, CA
- Felton, CA
- Watsonville, CA
- Live Oak, CA (at SCSO Headquarters)

Each service center is overseen by an SCSO sergeant who is responsible for community-related issues within their sectors. Service centers were established as a space for the SCSO and other county agencies to provide more localized community service.



Two SCSO deputies conduct a security check in one of Santa Cruz County's evacuated areas during the devastating CZU Lightning Complex Fire in 2020.

2020 Challenges

In addition to the challenge of policing and managing a jail during the COVID pandemic, in 2020, the SCSO had a deputy killed in the line of duty and responded to a catastrophic fire.

On June 6, 2020, Sergeant Damon Gutzwiller, SCSO deputies, and a California Highway Patrolman responded to a call for service about a suspicious vehicle. The vehicle matched the description of a van from which someone had fatally shot a Federal Protective Service officer and injured another officer the previous week during a march in Oakland to protest George Floyd's murder.

While approaching the van, the responding officers were ambushed with gunfire and explosives, killing Sgt. Gutzwiller and injuring two other officers. The assailant, who had ties to the right-wing extremist "boogaloo" movement, was arrested after a firefight and a carjacking. The assailant and an accomplice in the attack on the federal officers were found guilty and given life sentences for their assaults on the law enforcement officers.

The SCSO received an outpouring of support from the community and law enforcement from around the region. The agency brought in therapists to speak with SCSO employees. Sheriff Hart was able to give the entire SCSO one week of leave to grieve after Sgt. Gutzwiller's murder because neighboring agencies volunteered to take over patrol duties during that time. According to Sheriff Hart, "Neighboring agencies gave SCSO deputies the time to grieve by swapping radios with us and responding to the calls for service our deputies would normally respond to."



In December 2023, the SCSO responded to major storm and tidal surges that resulted in an estimated \$2.8 million in damages.

More information on the shooting is available in the [SCSO's 2020 Annual Report](#).

In August 2020, a severe lightning storm caused a series of wildfires, named the CZU Lightning Complex Fire, in Santa Cruz and San Mateo counties. Over a two-day period, the fire spread quickly through the remote mountainous areas of Santa Cruz County and into more populated areas, necessitating the SCSO-assisted evacuation of county residents. The California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE) was overwhelmed with multiple wildfires around the state, so the SCSO and other local agencies had to evacuate approximately 70,000 residents in 10,000 homes. CAL FIRE classified the CZU Lightning Complex Fire as fully extinguished four months later in December 2020. The SCSO had to continue to patrol the impacted areas to prevent looting and trespassing throughout that period.

Conclusion

The Santa Cruz County Sheriff's Office is navigating many of today's law enforcement challenges by embracing training and technology. As a full-service sheriff's office, the agency is one of the first to implement the Police Executive Research Forum's Integrating Communications, Assessment, and Tactics training in both its patrol and correctional functions. The training has led to better outcomes when responding to calls involving community members experiencing mental health crises and has reduced use-of-force incidents in the agency's jail facilities.

Despite housing and supervision challenges, the SCSO works to create a jail environment that promotes inmates' successful reentry back into the Santa Cruz County community. The SCSO's Women's Recovery Reentry Program received recognition from the U.S. Department of Justice in 2023 and was designated a national model for reentry. The SCSO's Rountree Rehabilitation and Reentry Facility requires inmates to participate in skill-building programs, some of which offer employment opportunities upon reentry.

In recent years, the SCSO has been confronted with many of the same challenges as other law enforcement agencies nationwide, including the COVID pandemic, natural disasters, and calls for reform after the murder of George Floyd. While addressing those issues, the agency also has focused on providing more equitable law enforcement services to its community by expanding its forensic laboratory to include a state-of-the-art DNA lab. Sheriff Hart oversaw civilianization of the forensic lab, which reduced personnel turnover in the lab.

Finally, the SCSO has been an early adopter of drones to assist in responding to some calls for service. The agency proactively worked with stakeholders, including the ACLU and the local public defender's office, to develop a drone policy that both enhances their ability to respond to high-priority calls for service and protects the rights of county residents. The SCSO uses drones during a variety of incidents and regularly assists other first responders within Santa Cruz County.

**We are very grateful to the
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