



HIGHLANDS COUNTY

SHERIFF

PAUL BLACKMAN



**20
24 ANNUAL
REPORT**

ACCREDITATION



Accreditation programs are widely recognized as a key way to ensure the highest standards of professionalism. Essentially, accreditation is a certification granted by an independent authority, verifying that an organization has met specific requirements and standards.

In Florida, law enforcement agencies can achieve accreditation through the Commission for Florida Law Enforcement Accreditation, Inc.

Similarly, correctional facilities can earn accreditation from the Florida Corrections Accreditation Commission, Inc.

The Highlands County Sheriff's Office is one of only 24 sheriff's offices in Florida to hold Excelsior status in Law Enforcement accreditation, which is earned after six consecutive accreditations without conditions. The agency is also accredited by the Florida Corrections Accreditation Commission.

LAW ENFORCEMENT ACCREDITATIONS

2008 2011
2014 2017
2020 2023

CORRECTIONS ACCREDITATIONS

2011 2014
2017 2020
2023



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FROM THE SHERIFF



To the citizens of Highlands County:

I would like to begin by thanking you for trusting me to serve a third term as your Sheriff. It is truly the honor of a lifetime to hold this job and your support means the world to me.

I am very proud of the things the men and women of your Sheriff's Office have accomplished this year. We strive to provide professional and cutting-edge law enforcement services to our citizens every day, and our deputies and professional staff are constantly working to make that happen and improve our services through training and professional development opportunities.

We acquired new technology in our Consolidated Central Dispatch Center to assist in reducing response times to calls for service, upgraded equipment in our evidence processing lab and continued upgrades to our Real Time Crime Center.

Our deputies also continued their focus on community-oriented policing, working to build relationships and partnerships to ensure we provide community service in addition to law enforcement.

I hope this report gives you a better understanding of your Sheriff's Office and makes you as proud of the work that we do as I am.

Sincerely,

Sheriff Paul Blackman

SHERIFF'S CHALLENGE COIN



HCSO VISION

Our vision is a safer Highlands County where citizens and law enforcement are joined together; the rights of all persons are respected; and community values are reflected.

HCSO MISSION

The Highlands County Sheriff's Office is committed to protecting life, property, and individual rights while maintaining peace and order.

HCSO PROMISE

Our promise is to deliver ethical and effective services to all of Highlands County in a professional and responsive manner that demonstrates our commitment to honoring the public trust.



The Highlands County Sheriff's Office has a rich history that began in 1921, when Highlands County was formed. The area that now makes up the county was carved out of DeSoto County, and named for its rolling, elevated terrain, uncommon in the southwest Florida area that DeSoto County encompassed previously. Alongside the county's founding, the Sheriff's Office was created to enforce laws, maintain public safety, and uphold justice in the rural, growing community.

The first sheriff of Highlands County was W.M. Griffin, who served from 1921 to 1922. Sheriff Paul Blackman, who was first elected in 2016 and begins his third four-year term in 2025, is the 13th Sheriff of Highlands County.

Since its inception, the HCSO has evolved alongside the county, adapting to changes in population, technology, and the complexities of modern law enforcement. Over the decades, the agency expanded its services to include specialized units such as criminal investigations, narcotics enforcement, K-9 teams, and school resource officers. The office also embraced technological advancements, beginning with the use of radio communication and evolving to computer systems, and modern forensic and investigative tools to enhance its ability to serve and protect the community.

Guided by its core values of integrity, professionalism and quality service, the HCSO remains a cornerstone of public safety and community well-being in Highlands County.



W.M. Griffin was the first Sheriff of Highlands County, serving from 1921-22.

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THE SHERIFF'S STAR

October, 1957

Sheriff Coker to Operate from New \$250,000 Highlands County Jail

SEBRING — A new \$250,000 jail completed last month will give Highlands County modern facilities for housing prisoners and eliminate the overcrowding that existed in the old jail. It will also give Sheriff Broward Coker a new base of operations from which to carry on more efficiently the steadily expanding law enforcement activities of his department. The two-story structure of

brick, steel and concrete has a foundation and a roof that will permit addition of a third story if and when future expansion is needed. In contrast to the gloomy, ill-smelling jails of yesteryear, it is well lighted and ventilated by awning style windows without bars. A corridor between the cell blocks and the windows places them well out of reach of the prisoners, and heavy

screens provide added security. The first floor, which is air conditioned, includes a comfortable apartment for Jailer George Crist and his family, a well-equipped kitchen and operational facilities for the sheriff's department. The operational facilities include a reception room inside the main entrance; sheriff's private office and conference room; communications room

for radio, telephone and teletype equipment; and a photographic department for "mugging" prisoners and processing film. Facilities are also provided for fingerprinting and interrogating prisoners. The second floor, reached by elevator, has cells for 32 prisoners, in addition to a hospital cell and a confinement room for mental patients. The cells

for trustees and juveniles are separated from those of the other prisoners. The old jail had a capacity of 32 prisoners but many more than that number frequently had to be crowded into it. Winter Park Architect James Gamble Rogers II designed the new jail and Fred W. Pinkley of Lakeland was the general contractor. The cells were installed by Rosnoke Iron and Steel Co.



NEW HIGHLANDS COUNTY JAIL



OLD JAIL

Sheriff Broward Coker oversaw the construction of a new Sheriff's Office in the late 1950s. The building would serve as the HCSO headquarters until 2017. Sheriff Coker was the county's longest-tenured Sheriff, serving five terms from 1949-1969.



What was then called "the new jail" was constructed in the early 1980s behind the headquarters building on Fernleaf Ave. A second expansion to the jail was built in 2004.



Sheriff Susan Benton was the first woman to be elected Sheriff in the state of Florida and was also the first woman to be President of the Florida Sheriff's Association. She served from 2005-2016.



SHERIFF PAUL BLACKMAN

Highlands County Sheriff Paul Blackman took office in January 2017 after having served with the Highlands County Sheriff's Office for 23 years. He had previously served as a K-9 handler, detective, road patrol sergeant and lieutenant (watch commander). In the 10 years before his election, he served as a captain in the Uniform Patrol Division, the Court Related Services Division, the Law Enforcement Bureau and the Detention Bureau.



UNDERSHERIFF MIKE BROWN

Undersheriff Mike Brown began his career in 1993 as a law enforcement officer at the HCSO. He served in patrol, investigations, juvenile, and crime prevention operations. Additionally, Colonel Brown worked at the State Attorney's Office for the Tenth Judicial Circuit for eight years, leaving as the Assistant Chief of Investigations before returning to the HCSO in 2017 to join Sheriff Blackman's administration.



MAJOR DARIN HOOD - LAW ENFORCEMENT BUREAU

Major Darin Hood supervises the Law Enforcement Bureau and has been a member of the HCSO since 1999. His previous positions include patrol deputy, field training deputy, school resource deputy, detective, patrol sergeant, accreditation sergeant, detective sergeant, lieutenant in the Criminal Investigations Unit, the Internal Affairs Unit, and the Uniform Patrol Division before serving as captain of the Specialized Services Division.



CAPT. JAMES MCGANN - UNIFORM PATROL

Captain James McGann began his career at the Highlands County Sheriffs Office in 1995. He has worked in and supervised functions in Uniform Patrol, Special Operations, Field Training, SWAT, and K-9. He is a graduate of Columbia College, the DEA Drug Commander Academy, and the FDLE Executive Institute. Captain McGann is currently assigned to the Uniformed Patrol Division.



CAPT. KEITH STARLING - CRIMINAL INVESTIGATIONS

Capt. Keith Starling began his career with the HCSO in 1988 as a detention deputy, before transferring to the Law Enforcement Bureau in 1990 as a patrol deputy. He has served as a field training deputy, supervised the agency Dive Team and Marine Patrol units, been a watch commander for Uniform Patrol Division and a lieutenant in the Criminal Investigations Unit.



CAPT. KENNY JOHNSON - SPECIALIZED SERVICES

Captain Kenny Johnson began his law enforcement career in 1992 with the Highlands County Sheriff's Office. He has worked as a patrol deputy, field training officer, detective in the Criminal Investigation Unit, SWAT Team, SRT supervisor, patrol corporal, patrol sergeant, patrol lieutenant (watch commander), lieutenant in the Internal Affairs Division and lieutenant in charge of the Judicial Process Unit and the Training Division.



CAPT. JOHN BARCINAS - OPERATIONS

Captain John Barcinas began his law enforcement career in 1994 with the HCSO. His previous positions include detention deputy, patrol deputy, field training deputy, school resource deputy, Crisis Negotiation Team member, detective, patrol sergeant, school resource sergeant, lieutenant in the Criminal Investigation Unit, patrol lieutenant/watch commander, and lieutenant in the Court Related Services Unit.



CAPT. BOBBY GREEN - DETENTION SECURITY

Captain Bobby Green began his career in corrections at Hardee Correctional Institute in 1991 and has worked in the HCSO Detention Bureau for more than 30 years. He previously served as a sergeant and lieutenant supervising a detention squad. He was Operations lieutenant before being promoted to captain of the Operations Division in 2007.



CAPT. KENNY PENDARVIS - DETENTION OPERATIONS

Captain Kenny Pendarvis has been a member of the Highlands County Sheriff's Office since 1994. His previous positions within the agency include detention deputy, community maintenance program deputy, transport deputy, Security Division corporal, Security Division sergeant, Operations Division sergeant, Security Division lieutenant, and Operations Division lieutenant.



COMMUNITY & KIDS FIRST

The Highlands County Sheriff's Office is dedicated to making our community a safe, vibrant place to live, work, and raise a family. At the heart of this mission is a commitment to fostering strong relationships with the people we serve, with a special focus on supporting and nurturing our youngest residents.

Deputies are actively encouraged to get involved in their neighborhoods. From attending local gatherings to supporting community initiatives, our team values building meaningful connections with residents.

Additionally, members of Explorers Post 2247 are often seen lending a hand to local organizations, bridging generational gaps as they interact with citizens of all ages.

We're also committed to keeping Highlands County beautiful. Deputies and inmate work crews routinely clean up illegal dump sites and assist schools and community groups with landscaping and maintenance projects. Our dedication to youth development shines through in programs like our free, week-long summer camp, which offers local students a fun and enriching experience.

This camp is made possible by funds raised through the annual Bass Tournament on Lake Istokpoga.

We also host an annual kids' fishing event, creating memorable outdoor experiences for children and their families. For more details about these programs and events, we invite you to explore this year's annual report.





7th ANNUAL BASS TOURNAMENT



Each March, the Sheriff's Office hosts a bass tournament on Lake Istokpoga. The event attracts a field of up to 60 two-person teams who take to the 26,763-acre lake looking for trophy bass. Cash prizes are paid to the top eight teams, as well as to the Big Bass winners and the top female and youth anglers. Dozens of sponsors help by contributing money, raffle prizes and food to help make the day a true community event.

Proceeds from the tournament are used to fund a summer camp, where deputies and students from local middle and high schools (the camp is for ages 10-15 and is featured on the next page) spend a week at Camp Cloverleaf in Lake Placid. The camp features a packed schedule of swimming, kayaking, fishing and more activities that offer fun and team-building benefits. On the final day of the camp, the students get to meet and interact with deputies from the HCSO K-9, SWAT, Crime Scene and Marine Units.





2024 HOOK TO COOK

Even though Highlands County is home to more than 100 lakes and some of the best fishing in the world, there are some kids who may never get to experience the joy of catching a fish. To help with that, the Sheriff's Office started the Hook to Cook Kids' Fishing Event. School Resource Deputies work with school administration to select two students from each elementary school in the county. Those students get to spend the day at a private, stocked pond where they not only catch fish with deputies and our partners at the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC), they also are taught how to tie and bait a hook, how to clean their catch, basic fishing safety and regulations and are taught about first aid by members of Highlands County Fire Rescue. The day wraps up with contests and a fish fry for lunch.



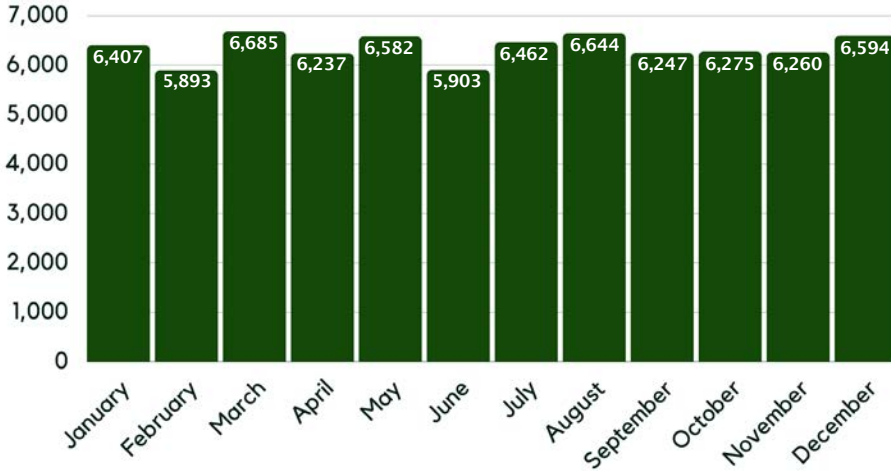


Held every August and September, the Citizens Academy is designed to provide residents with an in-depth understanding of the Sheriff's Office operations. Over the course of eight weeks, participants meet once a week to engage in hands-on, behind-the-scenes learning experiences covering various aspects of law enforcement, including the Uniform Patrol Division and other departmental functions. The goal is to foster positive community relations and enhance communication between citizens and law enforcement officials, to build stronger community partnerships, and promote transparency. Keep an eye on the Sheriff's Office social media to learn when registration opens for the next Citizens Academy.



BY THE NUMBERS

76,189 CALLS FOR SERVICE



TOP 5 CALLS

- Traffic Stop **11,615**
- 911 Hang-up **6,554**
- Suspicious Incident **3,343**
- Suspicious Person **2,389**
- Assist Public **2,282**

119,061

ADMINISTRATIVE
LINE PHONE CALLS

51,640

EMERGENCY 911
LINE PHONE CALLS

1,042

TEXTS TO
911

3,169

TRAFFIC CITATIONS

8,334

TRAFFIC WARNINGS

988

CRASHES
WORKED

2,058

TRAFFIC ENFORCEMENT
DETAILS

2,868

ARRESTS MADE

1,140

WARRANTS SERVED

50

DUI ARRESTS



\$37,111,117

2023-24 FISCAL YEAR BUDGET

353

EMPLOYEES

68

VOLUNTEERS

\$1,368,328

TAX DOLLARS SAVED BY USING INMATE LABOR

531

AVERAGE DAILY INMATE COUNT

2,824

INMATES BOOKED

2,917

INMATES RELEASED

1,457

ANIMALS ADOPTED, RESCUED OR REUNITED BY ANIMAL SERVICES

3,551

INMATE EDUCATION PROGRAM HOURS

93,036

PEOPLE SCREENED ENTERING COURTHOUSE

582,628

INMATE MEALS SERVED

1,265

K-9 DEPLOYMENTS

99

SEXUAL OFFENDERS & PREDATORS ARRESTED FOR REGISTRATION VIOLATIONS

\$2.40

AVG. DAILY FOOD COST PER INMATE



CRIMINAL INVESTIGATIONS

The Criminal Investigations Unit (CIU) is responsible for handling complex and serious criminal cases that go beyond the scope of initial law enforcement response. CIU detectives specialize in investigating crimes such as homicides, robberies, burglaries, fraud, and other felony offenses. Their primary goal is to gather evidence, identify suspects, interview witnesses and victims, and ensure cases are prepared for successful prosecution. Detectives assigned to the CIU are highly trained in gathering evidence, interviewing witnesses, and analyzing crime patterns to build strong cases for prosecution. They often collaborate with other units to ensure a comprehensive approach to solving crimes. The CIU also works closely with state and federal agencies when necessary to address multi-jurisdictional or particularly challenging cases.



CRIME SCENE & EVIDENCE

The Crime Scene Unit plays an essential role in the success of the Criminal Investigations Division. Equipped with cutting-edge forensic tools and technology, this highly trained team's mission is to secure, document, and analyze critical evidence. The Property and Evidence Unit is responsible for maintaining the integrity and security of every piece of evidence and every item of property taken into custody of the agency. Their role extends beyond storage; they are meticulous record-keepers, ensuring a clear and unbroken chain of custody that is essential for upholding the credibility of investigations.



SCHOOL RESOURCE

The School Resource Unit has highly trained law enforcement deputies in every school in the county jurisdiction and Lake Placid. The unit also works closely with School Resource Officers of the Sebring Police Department to ensure the best practices are in place at each school. These deputies also serve as mentors, educators, and role models, fostering positive relationships with students, parents, and school staff. By engaging directly with students, deputies build trust and open lines of communication that helps prevent issues before they escalate and helps identify and assist students who may be at risk. The unit also includes the dedicated crossing guards, who ensure children can travel to and from school safely each day.



SPECIAL VICTIMS

The Special Victims Unit (SVU) handles cases involving vulnerable populations, including children, the elderly, and individuals with disabilities. Crimes investigated by the SVU typically include missing persons, sexual assault, child abuse, human trafficking, elder abuse, child pornography, and other offenses that disproportionately affect at-risk individuals. The SVU is staffed by highly trained investigators and victim advocates who possess the skills and compassion necessary to work with victims during some of the most challenging moments of their lives. They collaborate closely with social services, medical professionals, and community organizations. Their focus is not only on holding offenders accountable but also on providing resources and support to help victims recover and regain a sense of safety. In addition to investigations, the SVU is also tasked with monitoring the county's registered sexual predators, sexual offender and career offenders, ensuring compliance with registration requirements. In 2024, the SVU conducted more than 1,000 address verification checks on registered offenders.



FIGHTING CRIME IN REAL TIME

The Real-Time Crime Center at the Highlands County Sheriff's Office was launched in 2023. The HCSO is one of the few agencies of its size to make the investment into a RTCC, which puts the agency on the cutting edge of law enforcement and crime prevention tactics.

The RTCC serves as a hub designed to provide instant access to critical information and enhance decision-making for deputies. The goal is to not only help solve crimes quickly, but to also increase safety for deputies.

In 2024, the first full year of the Real-Time Crime Center, analysts completed 1,405 requests and assisted in making 22 arrests.



The RTCC uses the latest technology to rapidly collect information. The ability to instantly access video footage from nearby cameras, check for known criminal activity in the area, and provide detailed suspect information, sometimes while a crime is still in progress, gives deputies a vital tool to help catch criminals.

The center also provides crime analytics to help identify trends and helps contribute to the agency's intelligence-driven policing strategies to help prevent crime.

The RTCC represents a proactive approach to community safety. By harnessing the power of technology, the RTCC enables the HCSO to work smarter, faster, and more effectively, making our community safer for everyone.

SAFER STREETS

TARGETING TRAFFICKERS

One of the most important missions of the Sheriff's Office is to combat illegal drug activity in our county. Recognizing the devastating impact of narcotics on families and communities, as well as the link between illegal drugs and other crimes, the HCSO employs a multifaceted approach to tackle the issue head-on.

A key strategy involves proactive law enforcement operations by the Crime Suppression Unit designed to identify and dismantle drug networks. Through surveillance, undercover work, and intelligence gathering, detectives work tirelessly to intercept illegal substances before they reach the streets. These efforts often focus on reducing the availability of dangerous drugs like fentanyl, cocaine, and methamphetamine.

Collaboration plays a vital role in the Crime Suppression Unit's efforts. By partnering with other law enforcement agencies at the local, state, and federal levels, the HCSO is able to share resources, expertise, and intelligence, maximizing the impact of its operations. Additionally, community tips and reports are crucial to identifying suspicious activity, highlighting the importance of public involvement in the fight against drugs.

The Highlands County Sheriff's Office remains committed to creating a safer environment for its citizens by disrupting drug operations, supporting prevention efforts, and working collaboratively with the community. Through these comprehensive measures, HCSO continues to lead the fight against illegal drug activity in Highlands County.



THE CRIME SUPPRESSION UNIT SEIZED MORE THAN 30 POUND OF NARCOTICS IN 2024, INCLUDING:

8,140

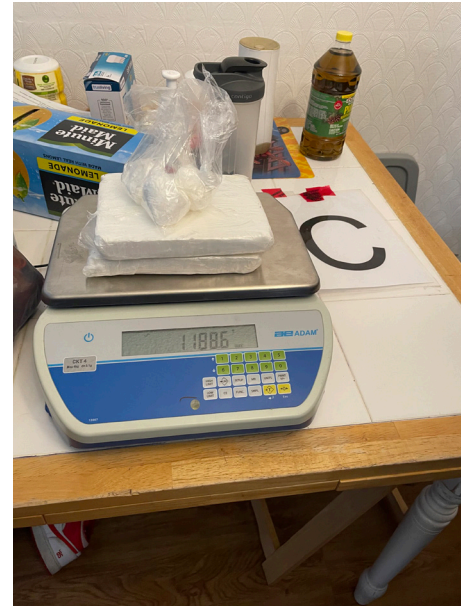
GRAMS OF FENTANYL

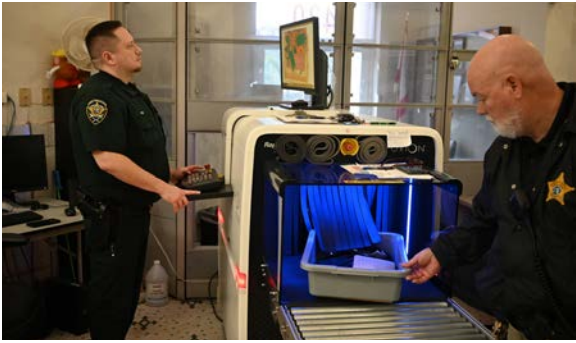
2,751

GRAMS OF METHAMPHETAMINE

1,229

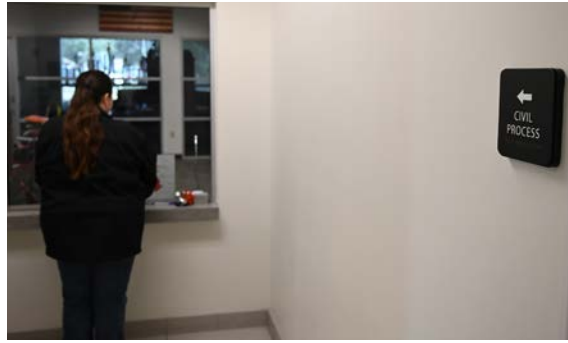
GRAMS OF COCAINE





COURT SECURITY UNIT

The Court Security Unit is responsible for ensuring the safety and security of all individuals within the county courthouse. This unit provides protection for judges, court staff, jurors, and the public during court proceedings. Deputies assigned to this unit oversee entry screening processes of the thousands of people who enter the courthouse each month, monitor courtrooms, and respond to emergencies within the courthouse.



JUDICIAL PROCESS UNIT

The Judicial Process Unit is tasked with managing and executing legal documents and court orders. This includes the service of subpoenas, summonses, writs, and eviction notices, as well as the enforcement of civil and criminal court mandates. Deputies in this unit ensure the accurate and timely handling of judicial paperwork, contributing to the efficient operation of the legal system. This unit also includes the warrants office, which is responsible for maintaining the database and hard copies of active warrants and working with deputies to ensure proper execution of arrest warrants.

SENIORS VS. CRIME

The Seniors vs. Crime Project is a Florida non-profit organization that operates as a Special Project of the Florida Attorney General's Office. In 1989, Attorney General Bob Butterworth chaired the Crimes and the Elderly Task Force. To continue their work, Ret. Col. Thornton, proposed a crime prevention program focused on seniors. The new organization became the Seniors vs. Crime Project.

While the program began with a focus on helping senior citizens, it is available to help anyone over the age of 18.

The Primary Goal of the Seniors vs. Crime Project is to help anyone involved in a civil issue. The Project accomplishes this goal by providing various educational and crime prevention programs to citizen groups, investigating complaints and seeking restitution for citizens in appropriate instances and by providing investigative agencies with senior volunteers to assist them with specific investigations.



TRAINING UNIT

The Training Unit is responsible for planning, coordinating, and delivering a wide range of training programs, including firearms proficiency, defensive tactics, crisis intervention, de-escalation techniques, legal updates, and emergency response protocols. The unit ensures that all personnel remain skilled, knowledgeable, and compliant with state and federal regulations, and also organizes the annual Citizens Academy.



SWAT TEAM

The SWAT (Special Weapons and Tactics) Team is made up of specially trained deputies who take on some of the most dangerous assignments. They face tasks such as high-risk search warrants, hostage situations and barricaded subjects. Deputies receive no special pay for their service on the SWAT Team, which is in addition to their normal duties.

FLEET MAINTENANCE UNIT

The Fleet Maintenance Unit is responsible for managing and maintaining the agency's fleet of vehicles to ensure operational readiness and safety. This unit handles preventative maintenance and repairs for patrol cars, specialty vehicles, and other departmental equipment to minimize downtime and maximize the lifespan of each vehicle. This unit is also responsible for maintaining the portable and in-car radios deputies use every day for instant communication with dispatch and other deputies.

CRIME PREVENTION UNIT

The Crime Prevention Unit focuses on educating residents, businesses, and organizations about ways to prevent criminal activity and foster a secure environment through safety assessments, working with neighborhood crime watch programs, and offering presentations on topics such as personal safety, property security, fraud prevention, and other important topics.

LAW ENFORCEMENT BUREAU | UNIFORM PATROL

When most people think of the Highlands County Sheriff's Office, the image that comes to mind is a deputy in a green uniform driving a white Ford Explorer. In other words, the Uniform Patrol Division.

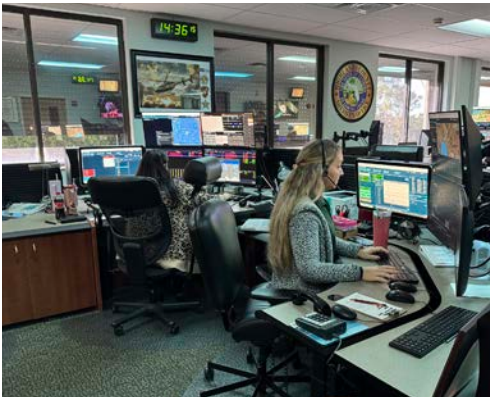
The deputies of the UPD are the backbone of the agency. They are the ones on the front lines every day, tasked with patrolling more than 1,000 square miles and delivering law enforcement services to more than 105,000 people 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

In 2024, UPD deputies responded to more than 76,000 calls for service (more than 200 a day), including more than 2,000 automobile crashes, and made more than 1,500 arrests.

Deputies also spend many hours training in the latest tactics, including de-escalation and crisis intervention, first aid, defensive tactics and firearms proficiency to ensure that the agency is providing the best service possible to the citizens of Highlands County.



LAW ENFORCEMENT BUREAU | OPERATIONS



DISPATCH CENTER

The Consolidated Dispatch Center serves as the critical communication hub for emergency services in Highlands County. Operating around the clock, this center ensures that residents receive timely assistance during emergencies. Telecommunicators answer hundreds of calls — both emergency and non-emergency — every day and relay information to all law enforcement, fire and EMS units in the county to direct help to those in need. They are also highly trained to be able to give detailed first aid instructions over the phone, leading directly to several lives being saved each year.



AGRICULTURAL & K-9

Deputies in the Agriculture and Environmental units focus on preventing and investigating crimes related to farming and livestock. This includes addressing theft of livestock, securing stray farm animals, and investigating allegations of cruelty or abuse towards livestock. The K-9 Unit's three bloodhound handlers also serve as agricultural deputies in addition to their tracking roles. The agency also has three patrol dogs that are trained in apprehension, tracking and narcotics searches, as well as a single-purpose narcotics dog.

The K-9 Unit had more than 1,200 deployments in 2024.



ANIMAL SERVICES

The Animal Services Unit responds to reports of stray, injured, or neglected animals, providing them with necessary care and shelter. In cases where the HCSO Animal Services facility is at capacity, partnerships with organizations like the Humane Society of Highlands County ensure animals receive proper care. The unit also facilitates adoptions of abandoned or surrendered animals, and works with rescue organizations from around the country to find permanent homes for animals. They also educate the public about county animal regulations.

Animal Services had more than 4,200 calls for service in 2024.

ACCREDITATION

See page 2 for information about the HCSO Accreditation Unit.





Photo courtesy of the Highlands News-Sun

HEELING & HEALING



The Heel Together Academy, a partnership between the Highlands County Sheriff’s Office Animal Services Unit and the Avon Park Correctional Institution (APCI), is changing lives — both human and canine.

Rescue dogs from Animal Services are paired with inmates at APCI for a 12-week training program. During this time, the dogs live alongside their trainers, creating a bond that’s as therapeutic as it is educational. By the end of the program, the dogs are well-trained and ready for adoption, having learned basic obedience, crate training, and socialization, setting them up for a bright future in loving homes. And it’s not just the four-legged participants who benefit. The Heel Together Academy provides an opportunity to develop empathy, responsibility, and valuable life skills for the inmates. It’s a win-win, fostering transformation for all involved.

The Heel Together Academy has become a shining example of what can happen when communities work together. It’s not just about training dogs or rehabilitating inmates; it’s about fostering compassion, reducing the number of animals in shelters, and giving everyone involved a second chance to shine.



ADMINISTRATIVE BUREAU



The Administrative Bureau consists of key personnel who report directly to the Sheriff and the Undersheriff, playing crucial roles in maintaining accountability, transparency, and efficiency within the department.

Several positions within the Administrative Bureau provide direct support to the Sheriff, assisting in the strategic management and daily operations of the agency. These include the Sheriff's Executive Assistant, the General Counsel, the Internal Affairs Unit, and the Public Information Officer (PIO).

Additional divisions within the Administrative Bureau report to the Undersheriff, focusing on operational and administrative support services, including: Information Services (IT and Public Records Units), Human Resources, and Business Services (Finance, Budget and Purchasing Units).

The Administrative Bureau supports the operational functions of the Sheriff's Office. By maintaining strong administrative foundations, the bureau allows law enforcement and detention personnel to focus on their primary mission: serving and protecting the residents of Highlands County.

DETENTION BUREAU | OPERATIONS

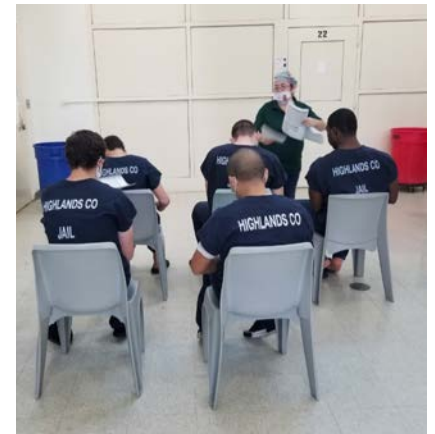
The Detention Bureau's Operations Division encompasses several specialized units, each dedicated to specific aspects of inmate management and facility operations.

The Classifications Unit conducts interviews to assign appropriate security housing classifications to inmates and monitors sentence lengths to ensure accurate detention release dates. The Transportation Unit escorts inmates to various locations across the state, including medical appointments, state prison transfers, and pick-ups from other county jails. The Food Services Unit ensures inmates receive meals certified by a dietitian, employing cost-efficient methods to meet nutritional needs.

The Operations Division also oversees the inmate workers, both inside and outside the jail facility. These workers perform maintenance and other duties that save taxpayers hundreds of thousands of dollars every year.

The jail volunteer program offers a variety of programs, such as education programs, religious services, substance abuse treatment, and mental health counseling to support inmate rehabilitation.

Additionally, the Facilities Maintenance Unit is responsible for the upkeep of all Sheriff's Office facilities.



EMPOWERING SECOND CHANCES

The Sheriff's Office takes a proactive approach to reducing recidivism and fostering positive change through the GOALS (Giving Offenders Adaptable Life Skills) Re-entry Program. Designed to prepare inmates for a successful transition back into society, this initiative equips participants with essential tools to rebuild their lives and contribute positively to the community.

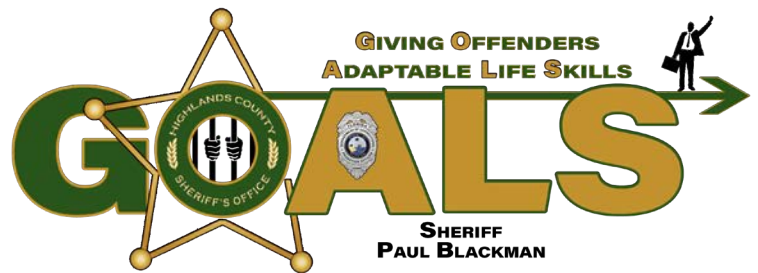
Working with the local Probation and Parole office, the GOALS Program offers a range of life-enhancing services, including educational courses, anger management classes, and community support opportunities. These initiatives aim to instill practical knowledge, emotional resilience, and a sense of purpose in inmates. For example, a six-week anger management course teaches participants effective strategies for managing emotions, with classes that combine engaging discussions and homework assignments.

In 2024, the GOALS Program awarded 188 skill certificates (for courses such as food preparation, food service, and landscaping) to inmates, and oversaw the baptism of 68 inmates.

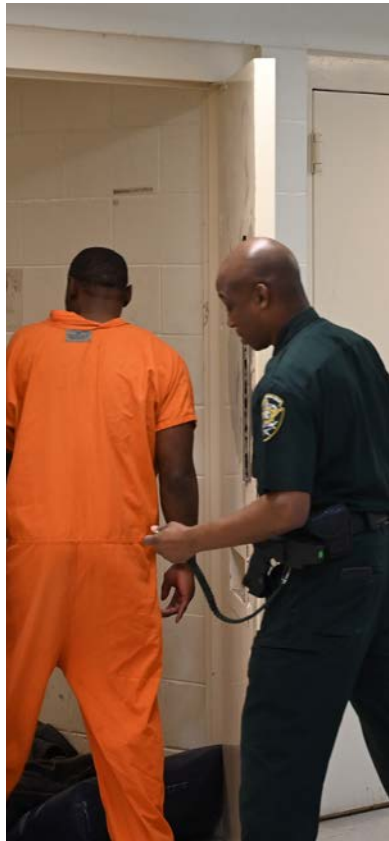
Collaboration with local organizations strengthens the program's impact. Events like food and gift distribution help the families of inmates. Another way the community makes an impact is by donating adult bicycles, providing participants with much-needed transportation upon release, an essential step toward securing employment and meeting personal responsibilities.

Community support is vital to the program's success. Donations and involvement from residents demonstrate that second chances can make a profound difference, not just for individuals but for the entire community.

The GOALS Re-entry Program underscores the HCSO's commitment to fostering growth, reducing re-offense rates, and creating safer neighborhoods. By empowering inmates with life skills and opportunities, the program proves that rehabilitation is not just a possibility — it's a promise of a brighter future for everyone involved.



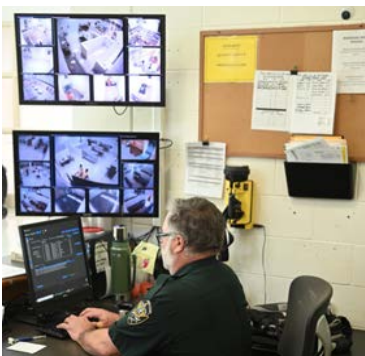
DETENTION BUREAU | SECURITY



The Detention Bureau's Security Division plays a pivotal role in maintaining the safety and order of the detention facility. The division is structured into four security squads, each managed by a lieutenant. These squads are responsible for the continuous supervision of inmates, ensuring adherence to facility regulations, and promptly addressing any security concerns.

The Security Division's primary mission is to provide a secure and humane environment for both staff and inmates. This is achieved through rigorous training, adherence to established protocols, and a commitment to professionalism. By fostering a culture of respect and efficiency, the division contributes significantly to the overall mission of the Highlands County Sheriff's Office.

In addition to its core responsibilities, the Security Division collaborates closely with other divisions within the Detention Bureau, such as the Operations and Medical Divisions, to ensure comprehensive inmate care and facility management. This collaborative approach enhances the facility's ability to address the diverse needs of the inmate population while upholding the highest standards of security and safety.



DETENTION BUREAU | MEDICAL

The Detention Medical Division plays a crucial role in ensuring the health and well-being of inmates at the Highlands County Jail.

Staffed around the clock, this dedicated team is comprised of registered nurses (RNs) and licensed practical nurses (LPNs) who provide comprehensive medical care within the facility.

When they are booked into the jail, each inmate undergoes a thorough medical screening to identify any acute or chronic health conditions.

The medical clinic is staffed four days a week with a physician and/or physician's assistant, who work with the nurses to ensure all inmate medical needs are being met, prescription medications are administered and health care programs are being followed.

The Medical Division also coordinates outside appointments with physician's offices and/or dental exams. Mental health screenings and counseling with follow up appointments with psychiatrists, psychologists, advanced registered nurse practitioners (ARNP) and certified social workers are also made available to inmates.





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BREAKING GROUND

Housing inmates in the Highlands County Jail involves more than just having enough bunks for the people in custody.

Security concerns are paramount when deciding where an inmate will serve their time. That means certain inmates can not be housed with others. With an increased inmate population, the Detention Bureau is constantly faced with a daunting challenge when it comes to the care and custody of inmates.

In an effort to address overcrowding and enhance inmate and staff safety, Sheriff Paul Blackman, alongside county officials and construction leaders, broke ground on a much-anticipated 100-bed annex on December 19. It will be the first jail expansion in more than 20 years.

The expansion, set to rise on the east side of the existing facility at

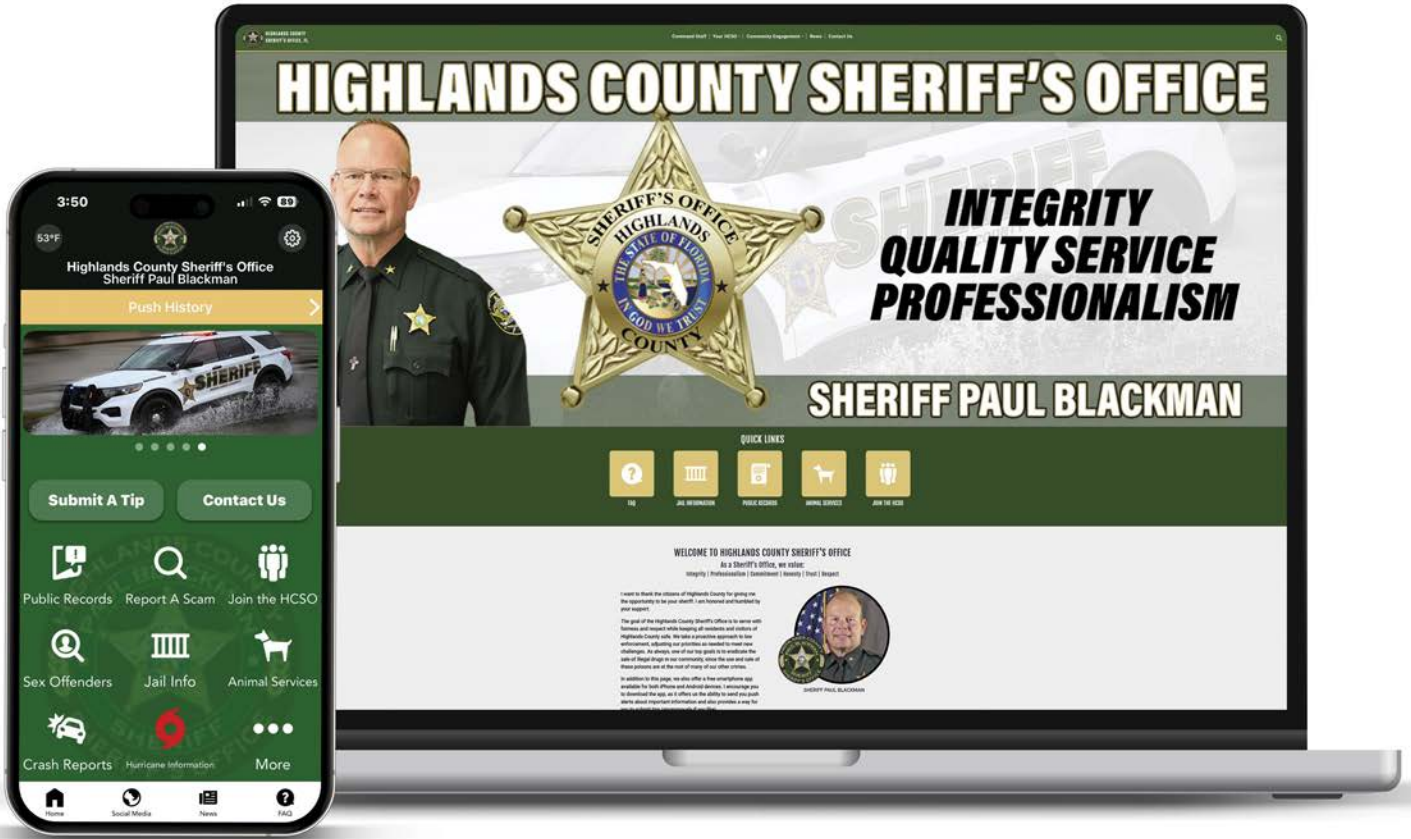
338 South Orange Street in Sebring, will provide much-needed relief for the current jail, which has been operating over capacity for years. Sheriff Blackman emphasized that the new addition is a crucial step in ensuring the safety and efficiency of jail operations while preparing for the county’s future growth.

“This expansion isn’t just about adding beds; it’s about improving our ability to serve the community safely and effectively,” Blackman said during the groundbreaking ceremony.

The project is a collaborative effort between the Highlands County Sheriff’s Office, the Board of County Commissioners, architectural firm Clemons, Rutherford & Associates, and Ajax Building Company, which will oversee the construction process. The facility is expected to be completed in early 2026.



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