

## Introduction

**Julia Jarema:** Hi, welcome to the NCDPS Safety Scoop, a podcast sponsored by the North Carolina Department of Public Safety. There are great people, programs and resources within this department. In each episode of the Safety Scoop, we'll share how NCDPS employees prevent, protect and prepare North Carolinians and help enhance safety in our state. We hope you'll listen along and learn something you may not have known about the largest state agency in North Carolina.

[Music]

**Julia:** Hi, I'm Julia.

**Kirsten Barber:** And I'm Kirsten!

**Julia:** And you're listening to the NCDPS Safety Scoop, a podcast sponsored by the North Carolina Department of Public Safety.

**Kirsten:** NCDPS is the largest department in the North Carolina state government with some amazing programs and resources...

**Julia:** ...as well as phenomenal personnel and volunteers.

**Kirsten:** Listen along as we take you behind the scenes and dive into how the people, programs and resources within this department enhance the safety of the people of North Carolina—give you the scoop, if you will of all things NCDPS.

**Julia:** NCDPS's mission is to safeguard the people of North Carolina through prevention, protection and preparation. As you listen to this podcast, we hope you'll learn something you may not have known about the ways the people of NCDPS are working to keep our state safe.

[Music]

## Season 1, Episode 2

**Julia:** The Department of Public Safety is the largest state agency in North Carolina with more than 26,000 law enforcement and civilian employees, plus another nearly 12,000 National Guard soldiers and airmen. 2019 has been an especially busy year for DPS with the addition of two new divisions (the Office of Recovery and Resiliency and Alcohol Law Enforcement) and several major initiatives, including ongoing prison reform efforts and implementation of the Raise the Age legislation to better address juvenile delinquency issues with older teens.

Joining us today to discuss some of the ways DPS has helped to protect and prepare North Carolinians in 2019 is Public Safety Secretary Eric Hooks. During his 25+-year law enforcement career before his appointment as secretary, Mr. Hooks led the state Bureau of Investigation's efforts in threat assessment, inspections, compliance and professional standards. That background has given him a broad understanding of the various aspects of public safety. Welcome, Secretary Hooks!

**Sec. Eric Hooks:** Good morning, glad to be with you.

**Kirsten:** All right. So, starting off, DPS has a number of different law enforcement agencies under its umbrella, including State Capitol Police, the Highway Patrol and, most recently, Alcohol Law Enforcement, also known as ALE. Can you share some of the high-level accomplishments in these agencies this year?

**Sec. Hooks:** North Carolina has the second largest state-maintained road system in the country, second only to Texas, so our State Troopers are responsible for patrolling a lot of miles. This year, our troopers inspected nearly 102,000 commercial motor vehicles which helped reduce the number of fatal truck collisions by more than one-fifth. Fewer collisions means safer roads and fewer fatalities, and that's good news. We also received \$1.1 million in grant funding to begin upgrading our aging 9-1-1 technology. This grant will give us the ability to better connect SHP call centers with local 9-1-1 centers to enable our call centers to communicate seamlessly with each other.

The State Capitol Police is responsible for the protection of the governmental complex in downtown Raleigh. This year, we were able to standardize and update some of their safety equipment, such as body armor, firearms and laptops that were 15+ years old.

While transitioning back to the Department of Public Safety this year, Alcohol Law Enforcement partnered with the ABC commission, industry members and stakeholders to develop best practices, then mandatory training to address a new law to ensure that alcoholic beverages purchased online and delivered complied with the same age-restriction practices as in-person sales to keep our public safe.

**Julia:** Safety in our schools has been an increasing concern for several years. Uh, tell us about what is DPS's role in keeping our students and teachers safe in and out of the classroom?

**Sec. Hooks:** DPS is the cabinet leader in driving school safety initiatives. This year, we started quarterly reports that track what our agencies, as well as our partners, such as the SBI, Department of Transportation, Health and Human Services and the Center for Safer Schools are doing related to school safety. We also enhanced active shooter training simulator capabilities for School Resource Officers and other law enforcement at the Samarcand Training Academy. DPS partnered with

the SBI to look more closely at school threats, and our State Troopers increased the frequency of their school safety checks all across the state. And we completed the State Emergency Response Application, also known as SERA. That allows law enforcement, emergency managers, first responders and telecommunicators to access and view facilities, schematics, data and real-time event information.

**Julia:** Very cool.

**Kirsten:** So, for those who don't know, prisons, probation and parole, as well as reentry programs, also fall under DPS. You have made prison reform a major initiative during your tenure. Tell us what's been done in 2019 to help with those prison reform efforts.

**Sec. Hooks:** Sure. One of the challenges we face, like other prisons across the country, is staffing sh-shortages at our facilities. To reduce staff vacancy rates and overtime, as part of the Prison Safety and Employee Wellness Plan, we temporarily suspended operations at facilities in Robinson, Polk and Northampton Counties, and early next year, we will suspend operations at a facility in Terrell County. Staff working at these facilities were reassigned to nine neighboring prisons, cutting in half the vacancy rate for those facilities. These reassignments improved the safety and security of approximately 2,500 employees and resulted in salary increases for most of the transferred staff. These reassignments will reduce mandatory overtime and thus reduce overtime payouts.

We've also ramped up our recruiting efforts, attending more job fairs across the state, and have higher—and we have hired more correctional officers this year than we have in the previous year. We also converted several prisons from male to female facilities and vice-versa. This allows the agency to reduce the number of female offenders at the North Carolina Correctional Institution for Women in Raleigh which has been consistently operating above capacity. It also allows the more violent male offenders to be housed in smaller, more manageable units.

In 2019, we restructured 12 facilities as designated reentry facilities to provide transitional training and services to offenders being released into North Carolina communities. This is important because about 95% of those who have been in prison will be released to our neighborhoods again. We must do all we can to help them be successful in reintegrating back into our communities so that they do not create new victims and that they are productive members of society.

Recently, the seven-person Prison Reform Advisory Board completed nearly 20 months of reviewing recruitment, retention, hiring practices, benefits and safety and security enhancements, and they provided 30 recommendations to improve staff safety in all our facilities. We're reviewing those recommendations to see which ones are already have been initiated and which will need legislative assistance *or* further consideration. Providing more safety equipment has been a priority for the department. We have issued stab-resistant vests to more than

13,000 certified employees and more than 1,800 new cameras have been installed in our prisons. DPS and Prisons leadership will continue to investigate best practices nationwide to make our facilities safe for staff.

**Julia:** That's a lot. But in addition to the adult correctional systems, Department of Public Safety also has oversight of juvenile justice issues as well. What are some of the major endeavors this year for Juvenile Justice?

**Sec. Hooks:** Well, we're very thankful to have Deputy Secretary Billy Lassiter, uh, leading our efforts in Juvenile Justice. Most of—most of our focus in Juvenile Justice for the past two years has been to prepare our agency's employees and other stakeholders for implementation of the Raise the Age law that went into effect December 1st. As you can imagine, preparing for the 16- and 17-year-old offenders to switch from adult court to juvenile court systems takes a tremendous, coordinated effort across multiple jurisdictions and levels. Our staff has worked tirelessly with local law enforcement agencies, court officials, schools, counselors and dozens of others to prepare for this much-needed change.

We've also been working with juvenile residents in our centers to provide various academic and training programs. We have a string ensemble at one of our development centers, hands-on training in telecommunications and fiber optics at another and at another there's a gardening and nutrition program where students learn to grow and prepare food. Learning productive, healthy, real-life skills helps these students develop a sense of pride and responsibility that is critical to their success once they leave our facilities. Juvenile Justice has also developed a web-based resource guide for juvenile services and programs all across the state.

**Julia:** That's right. I think we covered that and talked about that in a previous version of the podcast that featured Raise the Age with Deputy Secretary Lassiter.

**Kirsten:** So, we ended 2019 with North Carolina in the midst of its largest ongoing hurricane recovery operation ever. Since September 2016, four hurricanes—Matthew, Florence, Michael and most recently Hurricane Dorian—have resulted in federal disaster declarations in 77 of the state's 100 counties. Some of these counties were declared for three or all four storms. DPS is leading the recovery efforts for these storms. What is the department doing to help families and communities recover? And given the increasing frequency with which the major storms are occurring, what are we doing to mitigate damage from future storms throughout the state?

**Sec. Hooks:** Well, the Office of Recovery and Resiliency was added to the department within this past year to help streamline the process for administering federal HUD grants to help with recovery from Hurricanes Matthew and Florence. This office also oversees state recovery funds and helps coordinate housing programs, infrastructure planning, construction management and much more. The Office of Recovery and Resiliency, or NCORR for short, has made tremendous progress

in getting disaster money out to people who need it but cov—but recovery is always a long-term process for storm survivors.

The state has put more than \$3.2 billion on the ground to help North Carolinians recover from Hurricane Matthew, Florence and Dorian. 150 million in Hurricane Matthew funds are already committed to recovery projects. North Carolina can begin to access more than \$542 million in funds for Hurricane Florence down the road once the Federal Register notices are published with instructions on how those funds can be used. We have also established a three-person resiliency team within the Office of Recovery and Resiliency. They're working to make sure we rebuild smarter and stronger in ways and places that won't be subject to damage from future storms. They're helping to coordinate the many government, private and nonprofit agencies working on recovery efforts to avoid duplication and maximize efficiency.

This year, for the first time ever, all of North Carolina is covered by active local emergency planning committees. Those LEPCs, as they are known, ensure that state and local officials are coordinating plans, preparedness efforts and response activities for hazardous material spills and other similar emergencies which could be disastrous for those living or working near our highways and railways.

**Julia:** Many people may not realize that the North Carolina National Guard is also part of DPS and that they have both federal and state employees within their agency, some of which are full-time but most of which are reservists with other full-time jobs. What are some of the Guard's major initiatives in 2019?

**Sec. Hooks:** The Guard is truly unique in that they have responsibilities to help protect our state *and* our country. Ongoing training is essential. Last summer, nearly 4,200 soldiers from the 30th Armored Brigade combat team and 1,800 vehicles spent several weeks training in the desert in California with other Guard units from across the country. Many of these soldiers and assets are deployed overseas and will be away from their family during this holiday. We also sent dozens of soldiers and airmen to Botswana, one of our partner nations, for two weeks as part of operation Upwork Minutemen. This decade-long partnership helps us foster trust and exchange, military to military, best practices while maintaining critical skills. And 545 of our National Guardsmen helped with response efforts to Hurricane Dorian this fall. They're our vital partners in storm response and recovery.

**Kirsten:** As we mentioned before, DPS is such a large agency, and these are just some of the high-level work that's been going on over this last year. There's so much more to talk about, and we could go on for hours and hours...

[Laughs]

...maybe even days. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

**Sec. Hooks:** Well, as you said, we could go on for days. But one other area which I think our team has made progress is getting more involved in our communities. Some of these outreach efforts are more organic and happen naturally. Uh, state troopers, correctional officers and others help out in—in various charities or other community events, but we also made a concerted effort to participate in more community events to include some of the Latino festivals in North Carolina. We know these community partnerships are critical on so many levels.

**Kirsten:** Thank you, Secretary Hooks. We appreciate you spending time with us to highlight some of the ways the Department of Public Safety is protecting, preventing and preparing our residents to keep North Carolina safe. We look forward to seeing what DPS divisions accomplish in 2020.

**Sec. Hooks:** I do, too.

## **Conclusion**

[Music]

**Kirsten:** Thanks for listening to this episode of the Safety Scoop. To learn more about NCDPS, go to [ncdps.gov](http://ncdps.gov). Tune in next time on your favorite podcast app to hear more behind-the-scenes stories from the North Carolina Department of Public Safety.

[Music]