Buncombe County Child Fatality Review Team



Protecting our Children

2025 ANNUAL REPORT TO THE BUNCOMBE COUNTY Health and Human Services Board

Submitted 04/24/2026

I. Introduction to the North Carolina Child Fatality Prevention System

North Carolina's Child Fatality Prevention System is addressed in Article 14 of Chapter 7B of the North Carolina General Statutes. The public policy that anchors this system is articulated in the statute as follows: "The General Assembly finds that it is the public policy of this State to prevent the abuse, neglect, and death of juveniles. The General Assembly further finds that the prevention of the abuse, neglect, and death of juveniles is a community responsibility; that professionals from disparate disciplines have responsibilities for children or juveniles and have expertise that can promote their safety and well-being; and that multidisciplinary reviews of the abuse, neglect, and death of juveniles can lead to a greater understanding of the causes and methods of preventing these deaths."

Session Law 2023-134 (the Appropriations Act of 2023) included revisions to Article 14 and other parts of state statute to restructure the state's Child Fatality Prevention System. This restructuring began at the state level in 2024, changes to county-level teams began on July 1, 2025.

According to the revised Article 14, "the purpose of the system is to assess the records of child deaths in North Carolina from birth up until a child's eighteenth birthday, and with respect to these cases, to study data and prevention strategies related to child abuse, neglect, and death, and to utilize multidisciplinary teams to review these deaths in order to (i) develop a communitywide approach to the problem of child abuse and neglect, (ii) understand the causes and contributing factors of childhood deaths, (iii) identify any gaps or deficiencies that may exist in the delivery of services to children and their families by public agencies that are designed to prevent future child abuse, neglect, and death, (iv) identify and aid in facilitating the implementation of evidence-driven strategies to prevent child death and promote child well-being, and (v) make and implement recommendations for changes to laws, rules, and policies that will support the safe and healthy development of children and prevent future child abuse, neglect, and death."

Child Fatality Review Team (CFRT) membership is designated by statute, consisting of various representatives of public and private community agencies that provide services to children and their families, including the local Department of Social Services (DSS), Health Department, law enforcement, Guardian Ad Litem, and school systems. **Appendix 2 shows the mandated and ad hoc members and their appointing authority, as well as the specific individuals filling those roles for the Buncombe County CFRT at the time of this report.**

The purpose of this report is to summarize the activities and accomplishments of the Buncombe County CFRT during the prior calendar year, including the number of child fatality reviews conducted, data related to those fatalities, and recommendations and initiatives that could be implemented at the State or local level to prevent deaths from similar causes or circumstances in the future.

II. Role of the Buncombe County Health and Human Services Board

- Receive the annual report from the Buncombe County CFRT, which contains recommendations for prevention of child abuse, neglect, and death.
- Advocate for system improvements and needed resources, if requested.
- Appoint members to the Buncombe County CFRT as designated by state statute.

III. Child Fatality Reviews

The Buncombe County CFRT reviewed 14 deaths of children who resided in Buncombe County at the time of their deaths in 2024. **Please see Appendix 3 for data on the causes of child deaths in Buncombe County in 2024, as well as select demographic information about the deceased children.**

During review of the 2024 child fatalities, the team identified:

- significant challenges faced by the child or family, the systems with which they interacted, and the response to the incident.
- notable positive elements in the case that may have promoted resiliency in the child or family, the systems with which they interacted, and the response to the incident; and
- recommendations and initiatives that could be implemented at the State or local level to prevent deaths from similar causes or circumstances in the future.

Cause of Death	Challenges within systems	Positive factors promoting resiliency within systems	Recommendations
Drowning	• Tropical Storm Helene and the subsequent flooding leading to the inability to evacuate; disrupted communication systems • Lack of awareness about how devastating the flooding would be • Families may underestimate the risk posed by swift river currents, leading to preventable drowning deaths.	• Family connection and support • Community support and resources	• Development of more robust Emergency/Evacuation Notification Systems that are accurate, regularly updated, and inclusive of all communities • Increase awareness in all communities about emergency preparedness and available resources
Suicide	• Cost of medical care • Tropical Storm Helene	• Utilization of Mobile Crisis, School-Based Therapy, outpatient mental health care (psychiatry, IOP). • Strong collaboration between school leadership/staff and school-based therapist and family.	• Need for parent support groups for families of children who have behavioral health care needs (especially for families with children who have had psychiatric hospitalizations or are involved with enhanced outpatient mental health programs) • Need for more residential treatment facilities across NC for children with behavioral health care needs. • Need for more established and operational IOPs locally and across NC

IV. Buncombe County CFRT Activities and Accomplishments

- The full team met 11 times in 2025 and one additional time in 2026 to complete all required 2024 fatality reviews.
- The team allocated their FY25 state funding to purchase pack and plays for child welfare social workers to distribute to families who needed safe sleeping spaces for their infant.
- The Team Chair and Review Coordinator completed the required reports on each child fatality reviewed by the team and submitted these reports to the state CFPT Coordinator.

V. Conclusion

Several individuals transitioned off our team since the submission of the last annual report. Thank you to Dr. Jennifer Mullendore, David Denniger, and April Dockery for their years of service to our team and Buncombe County children and families.

Thank you to the members of the Buncombe County Board of Commissioners and the Buncombe County Health and Human Services Board for this opportunity to share the work of Buncombe County CFRT. We appreciate your support of our efforts and your attention to our recommendations for the prevention of child abuse, neglect, and death. Please feel free to contact me should you have any questions about this report.

Ellis Matheson, DNP, RN

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Chair, Buncombe County CFRT

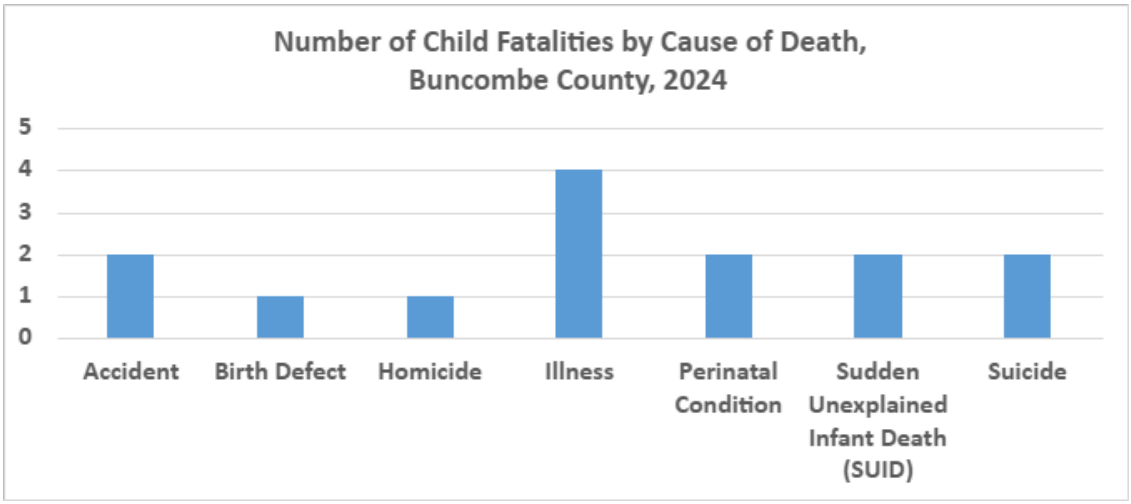
Appendix 2: Buncombe County CFRT Membership (as of 04/01/2026)

MANDATED MEMBER	APPOINTING AUTHORITY	AGENCY	REPRESENTATIVE	MEMBER SINCE
DSS Director		Buncombe County HHS (BCHHS)	David Sweat	2024
DSS staff member		BCHHS	Rebecca Smith	2019
			Sherrie Thomas	2024
Local Law Enforcement Officer	Board of County Commissioners	Buncombe County Sheriff's Dept.	Sgt. Caleb Hunter	2022
Attorney from District Attorney's Office	District Attorney	Buncombe District Attorney's Office	Amy Buchanan	2025
Executive Director of local community action agency (or their designee)		Community Action Opportunities	Trudy Logan	2016
Superintendent of each local school system (or their designee)		Asheville City Schools	Marta Alcala	2026
		Buncombe County Schools	Shanon Martin	2023
County Board of Social Services member	Chair of BCHHS Board	Buncombe County HHS Board	Kasee Locke	2025
Mental Health Professional	Vaya Health LME/MCO Director	Vaya Health	Angela Garner	2023
Guardian ad Litem Coordinator (or their designee)		Guardian ad Litem – District 28	Coby Wellshear	2019
Director of local Department of Public Health		Buncombe County HHS	Dr. Ellis Matheson	2023
Local healthcare provider	HHS Board	MAHEC OB/GYN Specialists	Dr. Carol Coulson	2023
		Mission Children's Specialists	Dr. Sarah Monahan-Estes	2024
Emergency Medical Services provider or firefighter	Board of County Commissioners	Buncombe County EMS	Sean Clickner	2025

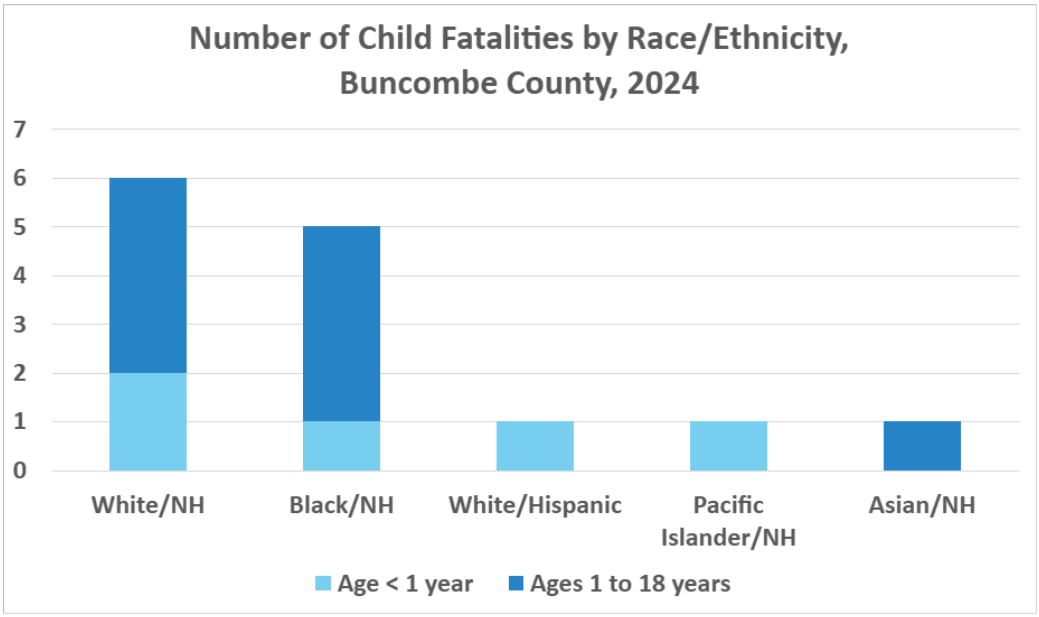
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District Court Judge	Chief District Court Judge	Buncombe County District Court	Judge Susan Dotson-Smith	2025
County Medical Examiner	Chief Medical Examiner	Buncombe County Medical Examiner	Paula Case	2022
Representative of a Local Childcare Facility or Head Start program	Buncombe County DSS Director	Community Action Opportunities Head Start	Sharon Farmer	2015
Parent of a Child Who Died Before 18th Birthday	Board of County Commissioners	n/a	*vacant*	
Ad hoc members	Child Fatality Review Team	Children's Developmental Services Agency	Molly Payne	2005
		Mountain Child Advocacy Center	Colleen Burnet	2023
		Community Care of NC (CCNC)	Sherry Noto	2018
		Helpmate	Jordyn Dezago	2024
Review Coordinator	Buncombe County DSS Director and Health Director	BCHHS	Deana Shetley	2020

Appendix 3: 2024 Buncombe County Child Fatality Data (based on fatalities assigned to the Buncombe County Child Fatality Review Team)



- There were 14 fatalities in total, including 5 infants.
- The fatalities due to accidents involved an accidental poisoning with illicit substances and a drowning due to flooding following Tropical Storm Helene.
- The fatalities due to perinatal conditions involved extremely premature births.
- Both Sudden Unexplained Infant Deaths were categorized as having an undetermined cause but involved unsafe sleep environments and co-sleeping.



NH = non-Hispanic

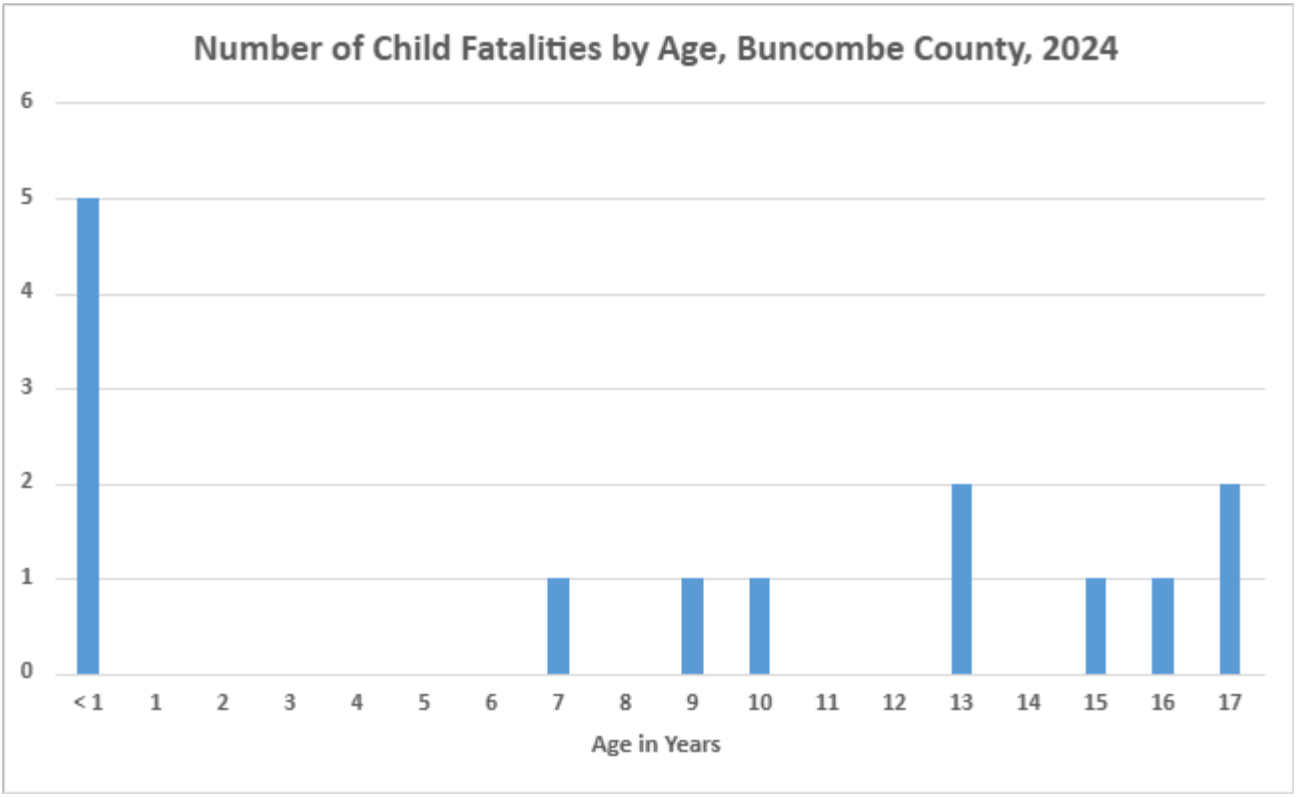
- <u>All fatalities by race/ethnicity</u>:
  - 6 White/Non-Hispanic
  - 5 Black/Non-Hispanic
  - 1 White/Hispanic

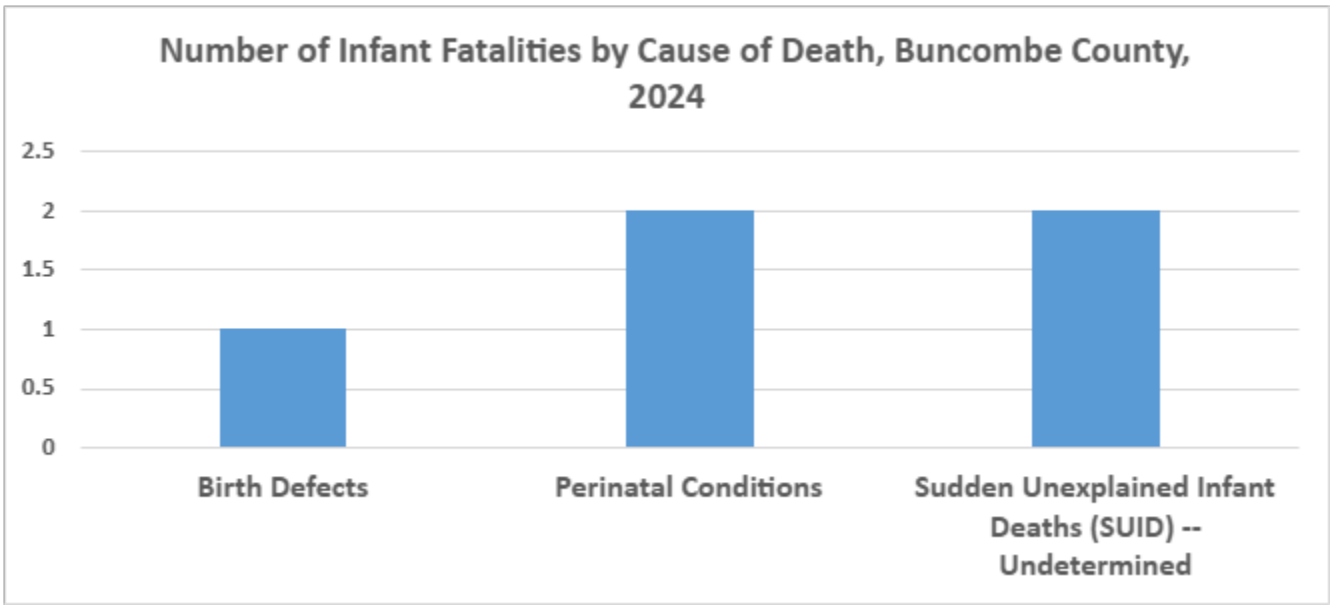
- 1 Pacific Islander/Non-Hispanic
- 1 Asian/Non-Hispanic

- Infant fatalities by race/ethnicity:
  - 2 White/Non-Hispanic
  - 1 Black/Non-Hispanic
  - 1 White/Hispanic
  - 1 Pacific Islander/Non-Hispanic

- All fatalities by gender:
  - 6 females
  - 8 males

- Infant fatalities by gender:
  - 3 females
  - 2 males




Number of Infant Fatalities by Cause of Death, Buncombe County, 2024
2.5
2
1.5
1
0.5
0
Birth Defects
Perinatal Conditions
Sudden Unexplained Infant Deaths (SUID) -- Undetermined