



Title: **Unions work**
 Author:
 Size: 12.86 square inch
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Unions work

On Sept. 10 in a Georgetown hotel meeting room, a group met for the 59th year. This group awarded scholarships to members' children and grandchildren. They discussed issues that affect citizens of our state and asked politicians to come and be a part of those conversations.

The members have family ties to South Carolina dating back hundreds of years. They elected an executive board to work within our state for the betterment of the organization. They discussed how they could help the Georgetown community after the devastating closure of the steel mill.

This organization is none other than the SC AFL-CIO, an organization of unions with members across the state. It is an organization that Gov. Nikki Haley has repeatedly said does not belong here.

I encourage Gov. Haley and all our legislators to reach out to members and learn our history.

A labor organization is more than the internationals that our politicians like to say are pushing labor issues in our state. The citizens of South Carolina have struggled, and the SC AFL-CIO has helped.

But most of all, it is important to know that we are here and we are not going anywhere without a fight. We fight for our ancestors as well as our children's future.

JOE SHELLEY
 Vice President
 SC AFL-CIO
Belvedere Drive
Hanahan

Title: **Court sets deadline for school improvement**
 Author: By JAMIE SELF The (Columbia) State
 Size: 48.05 square inch
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Court sets deadline for school improvement

Lawmakers need plan by Feb. 1

By JAMIE SELF

The (Columbia) State

COLUMBIA — Lawmakers have until February to draft legislation to improve the state's rural schools.

That deadline was issued Thursday by the S.C. Supreme Court, less than a year after the state's highest court ruled South Carolina is not meeting its constitutional obligation to provide a quality education to children in low-income schools.

In a 3-2 order issued Thursday, the court gave Republican Gov. Nikki Haley and the leaders of the GOP-controlled House and Senate a Feb. 1 deadline to develop a plan — including legislation — to improve those schools.

Last year, the court ordered the

state and school districts to work together to come up with an improvement plan. However, Carl Epps, an attorney representing the school districts that sued the state in 1993, said the two sides needed a timeline from the court to help move along the process.

"If the (state's) proposed remedies are inadequate to meet the children's needs, the court will intervene," Epps said. "I'm always hopeful and optimistic that the General Assembly will do what it is required to do to uphold the Constitution."

House Speaker Jay Lucas, R-Darlington, called the deadline in Thursday's court order arbitrary, adding it suggested the

court's three-member majority had a "complete lack of understanding of the legislative process."

"Clearly legislation is not passed by proposal. It's passed by actual bills that have to go through the House, through the Senate and go through the veto process," said Lucas, an attorney. "Those are the rules that we have to play by."

Last November, the court ruled 3-2 that the state had violated its constitutional duty to provide a "minimally adequate education" to all S.C. public-school students.

Chief Justice Jean Toal and Associate Justices Don Beatty and Kaye

Please see COURT on 4A

COURT

Continued from 3A

Hearn formed the majority in that ruling, while Associate Justices Costa Pleicones and John Kittridge dissented.

That ruling was long sought by 39 rural school districts that sued the state in 1993, alleging they did not have enough money to educate their students.

In response, House Speaker Lucas formed a task force of legislators and business and education professionals, including representatives of the school districts that sued the state, to propose how the state should address inequities between affluent schools and poor ones.

The House-appointed task force and its subcommittees

have been meeting since the beginning of the year. It plans to produce a report in January with policy recommendations.

The state Senate also named a committee, which has been meeting, to try to address the high court's school-equity ruling.

Lucas said the timing of Thursday's order could be politically motivated.

"To have this ruling come at this point in time certainly makes me wonder whether the court is worried about this issue or just creating a legacy for the chief justice prior to her term expiring,"

Toal, who retires at the end of this year, said Thursday it would be inappropriate for her, as a member of the court,

to comment on Thursday's order.

However, she added, the order was the court's reaction to a request by the rural school districts. In June, those districts asked the court to create a framework to guide the state and school districts as they sought a school-equity solution.

Earlier this year, legislators elected Associate Justice Pleicones to succeed Toal as chief justice. Pleicones, who dissented from the court's 2014 school-equity ruling and Thursday's order setting deadlines, will be presiding over the court when the school-reform proposal is scheduled to reach the court for review early next year.

On Thursday, the court or-

dered the formation of a panel of three experts by Oct. 15 to identify the educational needs of students in the districts that sued the state.

The General Assembly and school districts each will choose and pay for one expert on that three-member panel. State Superintendent of Education Molly Spearman will be the third expert.

The governor, S.C. House and state Senate have until Feb. 1 to present the court and the school districts with a plan to address the needs of poor schools, including legislation and dates to put that plan into action.

School districts have until March 1 to respond.

Title: **Law enforcement claims cost SC \$17million**
 Author: BY TIMSMITH The Greenville News
 Size: 244.12 square inch
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Law enforcement claims cost SC \$17 million

Excessive force, false arrest among claims settled

BY TIM SMITH

The Greenville News

Stanley Brown lay on the ground on a Charleston street for about two minutes following a police chase in 2010 when he felt “something hit me in the back” and he blacked out, he later testified.

Police testified an officer had made a “knee strike” aimed at Brown’s upper thigh that ended up near his rib cage after Brown moved.

Although Brown complained he could not feel his legs, an emergency room doctor received no information indicating any significant trauma, the records show, and did not look at his vertebrae before clearing him to be transferred to the detention center.

The next morning, a detention center nurse discovered Brown lying in his own excrement, unable to move his legs. He returned to the Medical University of South Carolina, where doctors found three cracked vertebrae.

Last year, the State Insurance Reserve Fund, which covers claims made against state and local agencies, paid Brown

\$700,000 to resolve his claims and another \$200,000 for legal fees to defend the agencies and officers he sued.

His case is one of hundreds of claims involving law enforcement agencies, detention centers, jails or prisons that were concluded last year after payouts totaling \$17.6 million, according to a review of State Insurance Reserve Fund records provided to The Greenville News under the state Freedom of Information Act.

While the case earlier this year of a white police officer charged with shooting to death an unarmed black man in North Charleston captured the attention of the state and the nation, allegations of excessive force, police brutality and civil rights violations in South Carolina have not been limited to a single incident, according to a review of claims, court records and interviews with lawyers, law enforcement officials and others.

State Rep. Joe Neal, a Richland County Democrat and minister who speaks out on social and

race relations issues, said the amount paid in claims “suggests to me there is a significant problem in

SEE CLAIMS, 5C

By the numbers

Payouts last year from State Insurance Reserve Fund

\$17.6 million Total payouts

\$9.8 million Damages paid in law enforcement claims

\$7.7 million Legal costs to defend those claims

72 Claims related to use of force, excessive force or brutality allegations

85 Claims related to false arrest allegations

71 Claims related to alleged civil rights violations

AMONG HIGH-PROFILE CASES

\$400,000 in damages, \$52,748 in legal fees: Claim involving case of former Eutawville Police Chief Richard Combs, who shot to death in 2011 a man whose daughter Combs issued a traffic ticket. The legal fees were to defend the case. Earlier this

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month, Combs pleaded guilty to misconduct in office. A judge gave Combs a year of home detention, a 10-year suspended prison sentence and five years of probation.

Claim paid to unarmed motorist who was shot and injured in 2014 by former state Trooper Sean Groubert, who is facing charges of felony assault and battery of a high and aggravated nature. He also was fired. The criminal case is pending.

\$285,000 in damages:

FROM PAGE 1C

CLAIMS

South Carolina and in law enforcement in regards to these issues.

“Which suggests to me that we need, as a state, more information about what’s happening in contacts between law enforcement and the public,” he said.

State Rep. Todd Rutherford, a Columbia Democrat and lawyer who has handled complaints against law enforcement, said the numbers show a need for more training.

“If we’re spending that much on paying out claims, we need to spend a lot more money on training officers so that we don’t have these claims filed in the first place,” he said.

It is a tragedy what the government makes victims of law enforcement misconduct go through to collect damages, and many never win any money or get to trial, Rutherford said.

“Even though the number is \$17 million, it probably should have been more,” he said. “There are some awful things going on that the government is able to squash because they make it so difficult to go after them.”

In fact, in most law enforcement claims closed last year, claimants received no money and funds paid out were for legal costs in defending the agencies.

Jarrod Bruder, executive director of the South Carolina Sheriff’s Association, said lawsuits and insurance claims are a fact of life not just for law enforcement but for other professionals.

“I don’t know that we will ever get to the point where we don’t have lawsuits,” he said. “And inevitably, we always have some that are settled that probably shouldn’t be settled. But I don’t think that is an overarching statement against law enforcement. The same thing could be said of just about any practice, including medical malpractice. There’s always claims, always suits.”

According to the Insurance Reserve Fund records, from November 2013 to December 2014, the fund paid out \$9.8 million in damages for law enforcement claims and another \$7.7 million for legal costs to defend against such claims, according to the analysis.

Many were filed by inmates or those who spent time behind bars. The allegations range from rotten food to being sprayed with chemical munitions to inadequate medical care and a failure to protect. Forty-two of the claims allege cruel and unusual punishment.

Among the hundreds of closed claims overall, 72 are related to use of force,

excessive force or brutality allegations; 85 allege false arrest; and 71 allege civil rights violations. Others allege negligent supervision, illegal search and seizure, due process violations and crimes.

Former Eutawville Police Chief Richard Combs was twice tried on murder charges related to allegations that Combs in 2011 shot to death a man whose daughter Combs gave a traffic ticket. A lawyer for Combs has said Combs feared he would be run over. After both trials resulted in hung juries, Combs pleaded guilty earlier this month to misconduct in office. A judge gave Combs a year of home detention, a 10-year suspended prison sentence and five years of probation.

The Insurance Reserve Fund last year paid a claim of \$400,000 in damages and \$52,748 in legal fees to defend the case.

Last year, former state Trooper Sean Groubert was charged with felony assault and battery of a high and aggravated nature related to allegations that he shot an unarmed motorist in Columbia stopped for a seat belt violation. He also was fired.

The state fund paid the motorist \$285,000.

Barney Giese, a former

prosecutor representing Groubert, said his client has pleaded not guilty and the case is still pending.

In February 2010, former Georgetown County Detention Center officer Belvin Lee Sherrill was arrested and charged with first-degree sexual conduct with an inmate, court records show, after two female inmates alleged they were sexually assaulted by an officer at the center.

Sherrill pleaded guilty in 2012, according to the records, and was sentenced to 10 years in prison, suspended to 18 months, with 30 months of probation.

The Insurance Reserve Fund last year paid \$100,000 to one of the females, \$50,000 to another and \$124,998 to defend against the claims.

The claims can take years to resolve, many times involve litigation and are generally limited in state courts to \$600,000 per claim, though most do not come close to that.

Of the hundreds of claims closed last year, just 34 cost the fund more than \$100,000. Twenty four were closed without any payment. In 40 cases, the amount paid to defend the claims was greater than the damages paid.

Among the more costly claims was one related to an incident that occurred

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on Feb. 25, 2014, when a York County deputy stopped 70-year-old Bobby Canipe at night for driving his pickup with expired North Carolina tags.

Canipe, a truck driver, had exited his vehicle, then reached in the truck bed to get his cane, which the deputy mistook for a weapon and fired multiple shots, hitting Canipe in the chest.

According to a dashcam video of the incident, the deputy, after realizing the mistake, begged God to forgive him and wept.

Canipe lived and was paid \$150,000 for his claim, with another \$1,906 paid for legal costs related to defending the claim. A spokesman for the sheriff's department said a State Law Enforcement Division probe cleared the deputy and he remains with the department.

In March 2010, the Berkeley County's detention center admitted Michael A. Wilson for an alleged probation violation.

According to a lawsuit, Wilson was an alcoholic and went through severe alcohol withdrawal at the jail. Staff failed to properly examine Wilson, the suit alleged, failed to prescribe an adequate dose of a drug for alcohol withdrawal, did not have Wilson examined by a doctor, and when he went into seizures, three officers "climbed on top of Mr. Wilson's back, cuffed his hands behind his back, shackled his legs and used excessive force against him by smothering Mr. Wilson and kneeling him in the back, buttocks and head."

By the time Wilson was taken to the hospital, according to the suit, he suffered from severe brain injury with no hope of

recovery. He was taken off life support a week later.

Wilson's wife sued Berkeley County, the sheriff's office, the sheriff at the time, the officers involved, and various medical personnel.

The case was moved to federal court and a settlement was reached in December 2013 with the county, the sheriff and officers, who agreed to pay \$600,000, federal court records show. A settlement of \$250,000 was reached with medical personnel in March of this year, according to the court files.

Berkeley County Sheriff Duane Lewis said the case happened before he became sheriff this year and he knew nothing about it.

"I'm making a lot of changes all over the sheriff's office and there's a lot of people not here anymore that were working back then," he said.

Another inmate at the detention center whose family alleged negligent care in connection with his death brought a lawsuit that ended with a verdict last year in federal court of almost \$3 million, but it is being appealed, records show.

James Moore, one of the lawyers who represented Wilson's wife and whose law firm focuses on civil rights issues, says he does not think enough positive changes have occurred at the state's jails, detention centers and prisons.

"In fact, I'm hearing about more and more cases," he said, "and I'm

getting more calls about individuals who have been neglected and abused and have died from a lack of basic medical attention."

He cited as an example cases where inmates died of asthma attacks because they did not have access to their inhalers.

Moore was among the lawyers in the case of Jerome Laudman, a mentally ill inmate at the state Department of Corrections who died in 2008 after spending 11 days naked in solitary confinement. By the time he was taken to a hospital, he was suffering from hypothermia.

A state judge cited Laudman's death last year in a landmark decision finding the prison system had violated the constitutional rights of severely mentally ill prisoners.

The Insurance Reserve Fund paid \$600,000 last year to Laudman's family, part of a \$1.2 million settlement, and almost \$200,000 in legal fees to defend the case. Bryan Stirling, who became director of the state's prison system in 2013, has asked for a SLED probe of the case, which has been forwarded to a solicitor.

The Insurance Reserve Fund paid several large claims last year concerning suicides in jails and prisons, including a 2010 suicide in a state prison cell resulting in payments of \$550,000 for damages and \$10,255 for legal costs; another 2010 suicide in a state cell that resulted in a \$55,000 payment and legal fees of \$55,056; a 2010 suicide of a Marion County inmate that resulted in loss claims totaling \$525,000 plus

\$65,549 in legal costs; and a 2006 suicide of a Florence County inmate that resulted in a claim paid of \$160,000 plus \$132,236 in legal costs.

The agency has taken several steps in recent years to address suicide prevention and the larger issue of caring for mentally ill inmates, including the purchase of suicide smocks and tear-proof blankets, the training of 100 officers in crisis intervention, the creation of a self-injuries unit, moving to electronic medical records to better track the medications and appointments of mentally ill inmates and the hiring of additional mental health workers, Stirling said.

"It's an evolving process and unfortunately is a problem with corrections across the country," he said. "With a lot of mental health folks coming to corrections, it's not going to go away any time soon, but we are taking steps to try and prevent it."

Among the largest of civil rights claims last year was a payment of \$599,900 plus legal costs of \$390,036 after a lawsuit accused Berkeley County's detention center of banning books and magazines other than the Bible. A lawyer representing the county said then that the jail actually banned publications with staples. But the ban was lifted as part of the settlement of the lawsuit.

The fund also last year paid \$204,000 plus \$287,696 in legal costs over the arrests of Occupy Columbia protesters at the Statehouse in 2011 ordered by Gov. Nikki Haley. Federal judges found

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that the protesters' First Amendment rights were violated.

Sen. Larry Martin, chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, said he has no way of judging whether the \$17.6 million in payments is high or low. He said it might be worthwhile for lawmakers to find out what other states pay, especially on a per capita basis.

Dick Harpootlian, a former prosecutor who works as a Columbia trial lawyer, said he thinks with the spreading use of body cameras for officers, something that was mandated by lawmakers this

year, law enforcement claims will grow.

"A lot of times you'll have cases where the police officer says A and the victim or defendant says B and there's no independent corroboration," he said. "Now there will be a body camera. I think there will be more cases."

Modifying police behavior, he said, will take more than body cameras. He said it will take training "that they're not paramilitary, they are police officers."

"We're going to have to have a lot better training with intervention without violence," he said. That

should also be coupled with enough pay, he said, so officers are not forced to look for a second job, which may leave them weary and open to poor decision making.

Bruder, the director of the Sheriffs Association, said he has encouraged agencies to go through accreditation and adopt standards to reduce litigation and claims.

But he said only about 20 percent of sheriffs' offices are accredited.

Some don't do it because of the costs involved, he said. Sometimes it's the preference of the governing body over the agency and sometimes

it's the sheriff's preference, who may have a difference of opinion over a specific policy or standard.

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“WE’RE GOING TO HAVE TO HAVE A LOT BETTER TRAINING WITH INTERVENTION WITHOUT VIOLENCE.”

Dick Harpootlian

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Title: **Offshore impact**
 Author:
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Offshore impact

Gov. Nikki Haley has decided to pursue offshore drilling because she believes it is important for our economy, but does she realize that drilling off shore — no matter how careful — will damage marine life?

Marine organisms are already in jeopardy all over the globe due to over fishing, climate change and pollution. Promoting an industry that could be toxic to marine organisms off the shore of South Carolina is a mistake. The risk is not worth the reward.

Remember the 2010 BP Deepwater Horizon oil rig explosion in the Gulf Coast? Eleven workers died and millions of gallons of crude oil polluted the gulf, resulting in the deaths of millions of organisms. For months, seabirds were found on beaches covered in oil, unable to fly, and doomed to death because of the drilling.

Oil rig spills are not uncommon. Every spill adds to the pollution of our planet and damages nearby coasts. Do we really want our beautiful shorelines to turn into black, toxic goo? Every spill kills organisms already in danger. Do we want that? Every spill off South Carolina's coast would damage our marine environment.

Offshore drilling in South Carolina will affect all of us. It will damage us by damaging our unique wildlife. Is that what we want?

HAYLEY MAZUR
St. Philip Street
Charleston

Title: **SC high court sets deadline in schools suit**
Author: BY JAMIE SELF jself@thestate.com
Size: 47.89 square inch
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SC high court sets deadline in schools suit

Leaders ordered to offer plan to improve rural schools by February

Plan must address problems cited in school-funding lawsuit

Court will evaluate it early next year

BY JAMIE SELF
jself@thestate.com

S.C. lawmakers have until February to draft legislation to improve the state's rural schools.

That deadline was issued Thursday by the S.C. Supreme Court, less than a year after the state's highest court ruled South Carolina is not meeting its constitutional obligation to provide a quality education to children in low-income schools.

In a 3-2 order issued Thursday, the court gave Republican Gov. Nikki Haley, and the leaders of the GOP-controlled House and Senate a Feb. 1 deadline to develop a plan - including legislation - to improve those schools.

Last year, the court ordered the state and school districts to work together to come up with an improvement plan. However, Carl Epps, an attorney representing the school districts that sued

the state in 1993, said the two sides needed a timeline from the court to help move along the process.

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SEE SCHOOLS, 7A

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FROM PAGE 1A

SCHOOLS

the Senate and go through the veto process,” said Lucas, an attorney. “Those are the rules that we have to play by.”

Last November, the court ruled 3-2 that the state had violated its constitutional duty to provide a “minimally adequate education” to all S.C. public-school students.

Chief Justice Jean Toal and Associate Justices Don Beatty and Kaye Hearn formed the majority in that ruling, while Associate Justices Costa Pleicones and John Kittridge dissented.

That ruling was long sought by 39 rural school districts that sued the state in 1993, alleging they did not have enough money to educate their students.

In response, House Speaker Lucas formed a task force of legislators, business and education professionals, including representatives of the school districts that sued the state, to propose how the state should address inequities between affluent schools and poor ones.

The House-appointed task force and its subcommittees have been meeting since the beginning of the year. It plans to produce a report in January with policy recommendations.

The process, Lucas said, “has been incredibly difficult for us, and I thought we were making tremendous progress.”

The state Senate also named a committee, which has been meeting, to try to address the high court’s school-equity ruling.

Lucas said the timing of Thursday’s order could be politically motivated.

“To have this ruling come at

this point in time certainly makes me wonder whether the court is worried about this issue or just creating a legacy of the chief justice prior to her term expiring.”

Toal, who retires at the end of this year, said Thursday it would be inappropriate for her, as a member of the court, to comment on Thursday’s order, adding it speaks for itself.

However, she added, the order was the court’s reaction to a request by the rural school districts. In June, those districts asked the court to create a framework to guide the state and school districts as they sought a school-equity solution.

Toal’s retirement could create a power shift on the court that could affect its involvement with the school-funding lawsuit.

Earlier this year, legislators elected Associate Justice Pleicones to succeed Toal as chief justice. Pleicones, who dissented from the court’s 2014 school-equity ruling and Thursday’s order setting deadlines, will be presiding over the court when the school-reform proposal is scheduled to reach the court for review early next year.

On Thursday, the court ordered the formation of a panel of three experts by Oct. 15 to identify the educational needs of students in the poor, rural districts that sued the state.

The General Assembly and school districts each will choose and pay for one expert on that three-member panel. State Superintendent of Education Molly Spearman will be the third expert.

Reach Self at (803) 771-8658

Title: **Columbia Chamber honors Haley as Ambassador of Year**
 Author: From Staff Reports
 Size: 21.23 square inch
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Columbia Chamber honors Haley as Ambassador of Year

From Staff Reports

Gov. Nikki Haley was honored Thursday night as the Columbia Chamber's Ambassador of the Year at the organization's 113th annual gala.

"Governor Haley's leadership this past year has opened multiple doors for South Carolina," Carl Blackstone, Columbia Chamber president and chief executive officer, said in July when Haley's selection was announced. "Most recently, her unwavering stance on the re-

moval of the Confederate Flag created a healthy business environment and new economic development opportunities throughout the region."

The chamber said in a news release that Haley's determination to be a change agent for South Carolina both socially and economically has been a major component of the state's recent growth.

Past winners of the Columbia Chamber's Ambassador of the Year honor include University of South Carolina President Harris Pastides; Bill

and Lou Kennedy, strategic consultant and president and chief executive officer of Nephron Pharmaceuticals; and Charles D. Beaman, Jr., chief executive officer of Palmetto Health.

Other award winners honored Thursday night were:

- Louis Lynn of Enviro AgScience, the Small and Minority Business Advocate of the Year
- Tommy Preston of the Nexsen Pruet law firm, Young Professional of the Year
- Bill Bethea, chairman



TIM DOMINICK tdominick@thestate.com

Gov. Nikki Haley signs legislation in July to take the Confederate flag from State House grounds.

the S.C. Military Base Task Force, and retired Major Gen. George Goldsmith, Military Advocates of the Year

- Mike Weaver of the Weaver Agency, Diplomat of the Year

Title: **Keep religion out of marriage, abortion decisions**
 Author:
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Keep religion out of marriage, abortion decisions

Mix religion and politics, and run like the devil before the explosion.



It is a lesson Kentucky county clerk Kim Davis learned after refusing to issue marriage licenses for same-sex

couples because it ran counter to her religious beliefs.

It also brings to mind Gov. Nikki Haley's call to close Planned Parenthood offices in Columbia and Greenville. After her successful effort to remove the Confederate flag from the State House grounds — an effort that

broadened her national visibility — Haley is being talked about as a vice-presidential candidate; what perfect timing to focus attention on another hot political potato.

About 6,500 South Carolinians seek medical and educational services at Planned Parenthood each year. About 70 percent of them have no health insurance. Meanwhile, presidential contenders are jumping onto any hot issue they believe will make them more popular with voters.

Allow me to state this as clearly as I can: Religion should reign in places of worship and politics in places

of governance. Yet too often, those boundaries are pummeled, and the result is a firestorm of invective.

In the online news magazine Consortium News, retired Baptist minister Howard Bess writes that, among other complexities: "A significant number of Christians believe the United States was formed to be a Christian Nation. Therefore, they reject the principle of the separation of church and state."

Meantime, the Pew Research Center reports that the Christian share of adults in the United States has declined sharply; 71 percent of American adults called themselves Christian in 2014, down from 78 percent in 2007. Non-Christian faiths such as Judaism, Islam and Hinduism held steady or

increased their share of the population. Then there are those who, while professing no belief in a specific religion, either profess a belief in God, feel a deep connection with nature and the earth or classify themselves as "spiritual" but not "religious."

Rev. Bess also mentions "the onslaught against the rights of homosexual, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered persons by religious organizations."

It is time to do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Time to promise not to attack the rights of others unless they make some effort to attack yours.

And time to understand that "majority rule" is an undeniably faulty concept.

— Jerry Jewler
Columbia

Title: **State must reduce domestic violence**
 Author: By The Herald Editorial Board
 Size: 33.32 square inch
 Rock Hill, SC Circulation: 34688



OUR VIEW

State must reduce domestic violence

By The Herald Editorial Board

South Carolina once again has ranked worst in the nation for deadly violence against women. This is the fourth time that the state has ranked first and the 18th consecutive year it has ranked in the top 10.

But South Carolina cannot accept this as our destiny. And, with significant changes in state law regarding penalties for domestic violence and ongoing attention to the problem, the state finally appears to be taking steps to reduce the violence against women.

According to rankings released Tuesday by the Violence Policy Center, South Carolina had a rate of 2.32 women killed per 100,000 in 2013, the worst in the nation. That's more than twice the national average and represents 57 known deaths, compared with 50 a year earlier, when the state ranked second in the nation in the number of women killed by men.

But earlier this year, state lawmakers passed a substantive domestic violence bill that increased penalties for those convicted of criminal domestic violence. The effort also was supported by both Gov. Nikki Haley and S.C. Attorney General Alan Wilson, who lobbied hard for reforms.

Haley created a special task force, which still is in place, to study the causes of domestic violence and find ways to reduce it.

Wilson was joined by local prosecutors from across the state who worked with him to bring about new and stiffer penalties for domestic abusers.

Victim advocate groups also were effective in calling for changes. When lobbying lawmakers, they noted that penalties were greater for hunting out of season than for domestic abuse.

The bill passed by the Legislature gave prosecutors and judges more options in dealing with domestic abuse. The new law creates a four-tiered system of possible crimes with which suspects can be charged, ranging from a misdemeanor with a possible 90-day sentence to a felony punishable by up to 20 years in prison.

Those convicted of the most serious charges could be barred from owning a gun for up to a decade.

But while these changes in the law are a crucial step in dealing with domestic abuse, the state's high rate of violence is not likely to change until we address the root causes of violence against women.

We are encouraged that Haley's task force, which has been meeting all year, has proposed dozens of wide-ranging recommendations that promote a comprehensive approach to the problem. Proposals include training and hiring more 911 operators, improving documentation of the crime scene and increasing the number of shelters for abused women and their children statewide.

In addition to changing the law, we also must change the culture. We must encourage friends and neighbors to report domestic abuse when they see evidence of it. We need to teach young men nonviolent ways to resolve domestic disputes. We need to provide more safe havens for abused women so they can leave violent relationships. We need to teach law enforcement officers the most effective ways to handle cases of domestic abuse in the field and later, when questioning victims and suspects.

While South Carolina has a long way to go, changes taken this year appear likely to yield results. With hard work, maybe the state finally can lose its ranking among the top-10 states for domestic violence.