

# City of Valdosta





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# GEORGIA ARBOR DAY





# GEORGIA ARBOR DAY

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## UPCOMING PROJECT

*On February 1, the Tree Commission funded a project that will take place near the overpass located by Patterson and Ashley Street. City employees began removing trees so that a hired contractor can replant and landscape that location.*



One of the many things that makes Valdosta such a beautiful place to live in, is the abundance of full and vibrant trees. The foliage-covered landscape can only be described as a scene right out of a storybook. This is all thanks to the dedication from the city's Arbor Division and Tree Commission, and there is no better time to recognize all their hard work than on Georgia Arbor day.

The responsibilities of these two organizations extend well beyond Arbor Day festivities. The Arbor Division falls under the city's Engineering Department and is ran by Stormwater/Arbor Manager Angela Bray. Bray is also involved in the Tree Commission, which meets monthly, currently via conference call, to discuss the removing, preserving, and planting of trees throughout the city. Bray stresses the significance of these organizations by saying, "It is crucial to have an Arbor Division because we need people to determine what to do with the trees in the city, as well as where we want to see ourselves in the future and help to us get there."

Though beautifying the city is part of their mission, safety is a top priority. The Arbor Division is tasked with identifying and removing all hazardous trees before they pose any risk of injury or destruction. Hazardous trees are any that pose a potential danger. These are not just trees that have the potential to fall over entirely but includes those with falling limbs as well. Initially, an Arborist will be sent out to determine the tree's health and determine whether the issue can be resolved with simple pruning, as they intend to save the trees if and when possible. If not, the tree will be taken down and replaced with a new healthy tree. Staff is only authorized to remove hazardous trees located on city property and right-of-ways. Hazardous trees located on private property would be considered a civil matter between property owners.

Within the past two to three years, replanting has been a significant objective as the Arbor Division has already planted over 23 trees in the downtown area since the start of the New Year, which Bray intends to rev up with Georgia Arbor Day around the corner. Though National Arbor Day does not occur until April, Georgia is one of three states that celebrates it in February as it is the best time for planting trees in the region. This year Georgia Arbor Day takes place on Friday, February 19.

Unfortunately, due to the COVID-19 Pandemic, the celebration will have to be scaled back to comply with social gathering and distancing protocols. However, the Tree Commission still hopes to be able to do some variation of events so that they can continue to inform the public about the vital role trees play in our communities.





*City employees plant a variety of new trees along W. Valley Street between Toombs and Oak.*

In previous years, the city would celebrate the entire week that Georgia Arbor Day fell in, by hosting daily themed events. This consisted of giving free trees out to city residents, reading tree-themed books to elementary schools in the area, and donating books to local libraries and daycare centers. The ever-popular Dr. Seuss's *The Lorax* being a group favorite. The festivities would usually end with a tree-planting ceremony on Georgia Arbor Day itself. Residents were invited to join the city in the planting of a new tree in an area of significance.

This ceremony is also when the city would receive its Tree City USA recognition award. A title it has proudly held for the past 35 consecutive years. The recognition of this award means a great deal to the city as it signifies how hard these organizations work. "It just goes to show that the city wants to go above and beyond to persevere our trees and to have an Arbor Division and Tree Commission that dedicates its' time and resources to removing hazardous trees and planting new ones," said Bray.

Though Georgia Arbor Day will still be celebrated, this year's observance will look a little different than in years past, as large gatherings go against COVID regulations. While Bray still intends to hand out tree seedlings to the public, this will be done at a smaller magnitude. The Arbor Division hit an all-time record of nearly a thousand tree seedlings distributed in 2016, but this year they will be happy with at least a hundred. On Friday, February 19, The city will be providing these free tree seedlings outside the City Hall Annex - Back Entrance (Ashley Street Side). This is a first come first serve event that will be held between 12 pm and 5 pm. Seedlings include Dogwood, Red Oaks, and Crepe Myrtles. The Arbor Division and Tree Commission have also discussed distributing virtual information to schools in replacement of the book readings. Lastly, city officials do intend to hold a tree-planting ceremony with safety protocols in place. The Tree Commission decided that this year with COVID, they want to scale back. They are trying not to promote large gatherings, and Arbor Day can be a large gathering. Unfortunately, only Tree Commissioners, city staff, and council members will be invited to participate in person, but anyone interested in viewing can do so via the city's website and Facebook page as it will be lived streamed. The event will occur take place at City Hall on Friday, February 19, at 10 am. Officials will plant a Trident Maple, known for its orange, yellow, and red color, this tree is sure to be a beautiful addition to Downtown Valdosta.



# **COVID-19 VACCINATION DRIVE-THRU**

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When the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) first authorized the emergency use of the COVID-19 vaccine on December 11, 2020, many rejoiced at the thought of returning to a normal life. Two weeks after the authorization was granted, the South Health District received its first supply and began administering it to Valdosta residents. With a high demand for the vaccine, South Health decided to take a multi-level approach to distribution and opened a COVID-19 vaccination drive-thru site to make the process as convenient as possible.

On Monday, January 18, the South Health District opened the drive-thru vaccination site as a secondary alternative to provide COVID-19 vaccinations within Lowndes County. This site does not replace the vaccinations administered at the health clinic. Any resident that wishes to receive their vaccine at the clinic will still have the opportunity to do so when it becomes available to their tier. The drive-thru site simply provides residents with the opportunity to complete their paperwork, set up their second appointment, and receive their vaccine all from the comfort of their vehicle as opposed to a hospital or clinical setting.



# COVID-19 VACCINATION DRIVE-THRU

The site is comprised of five separate stations. When you drive up, you are greeted by South Health District employees at the first station. This is where staff will confirm your appointment time and verify that you are on the list to receive a vaccination that day. If you do not have an appointment, they will explain how to sign-up and instruct you to return during that designated time. You'll then go through two stations of forms where you will be asked a series of questions and provide your contact information—basically all the routine paperwork involved with health care. From there you will drive forward to the vaccination station to be immunized. The final station is the observation area, where healthcare workers will monitor you for 15 to 30 minutes to make sure you do not have any adverse reaction before leaving. Because the vaccination requires two doses, three to four weeks apart, the South Health District will schedule a follow-up appointment for the second dose during that initial visit.

It did not take very long for the site to gain traction. The Public Information Officer for South Health District, Kristin Patten, says that their appointments have been booked solid from the beginning. Patten was rejoiced by the positive response to this site from the community, saying, "So far things have been going great the community response has been wonderful. Everyone is extremely thankful to have this option. Some people don't feel comfortable going into the clinic, and we understand that. So this offers them an alternative option if they want to utilize it."

South Health follows the tier system set forth by the Health Department. Currently, vaccinations are only given to Tier 1A+, individuals 65 and older, their caregivers, first responders, and healthcare workers.

However, it is important to note that in January, South Health temporarily suspended all new appointments due to supply shortages, that suspension has since been lifted but could be put back in place in the future if vaccine supply is limited. Patten assures residents that appointment availability is utterly dependent on vaccine supply. Though they have experienced a good turnout, Patten acknowledges that some residents might still be apprehensive about receiving a vaccine. She urges anyone with questions to visit the South Health District and CDC websites to ensure they get their information from a reputable source.

South Health District's COVID-19 hotline is now open. This hotline is for all things COVID-19. Individuals who fit the current vaccination tier (Tier 1A+) can call to schedule first dose appointments. You can also call to schedule an appointment for testing or with general questions. Hotline: 844-955-1499.



***"Everyone is extremely thankful to have this option. Some people don't feel comfortable going into the clinic, and we understand that. So this offers them an alternative option if they want to utilize it."***

***– South Health District  
Public Information Officer,  
Kristin Patten.***

# VALDOSTA FIRE DEPARTMENT NEARING SAFETY GEAR GOAL



Cancer cases amongst firefighters are significantly higher than civilians due to the carcinogens they are often exposed to when answering calls. The Valdosta Fire Department (VFD) responded to 121 structural fires in 2020 alone, significantly increasing their exposure risk. When returning from a fire, it is not unusual for gear to be covered in carcinogens, smoke, and soot. Though VFD does have specific cleaning measures in place for their equipment, crew members might not always have the opportunity to do so before responding to their next call. For this reason, Fire Chief Brian Boutwell has made it a goal of VFD's cancer prevention initiative to provide two sets of structural firefighting gear for each of its members.

On Thursday, January 7, the city council approved the request for the continued purchase of new structural firefighting gear, bringing VFD much closer to that goal. "We are very proud of the gear that we have already received. The gear that we are currently buying falls in line with our cancer prevention initiative. It has a particulate reducing system inside that both protects from fire and has fire resistance abilities. As well as protects the firefighter by preventing some of the smoke from entering their gear, ultimately minimizing their contact with hazardous carcinogens," said Chief Boutwell.





*Valdosta Fire Chief, Brian Boutwell.*



Cancer prevention is a significant focus for the fire service now. Still, when Chief Boutwell started his career, he recalls crew members being able to wear their gear inside stations and even sleeping with it at their bedside. This was done as a time-saving effort in case the crew had to respond to a call late at night. Wanting to cut down on response times crew members would quickly jump up, put their gear on, run to the truck and answer the call. When they returned from the structure fire, the soiled equipment would go right back to the side of the bed for the next call.

Since then, fire departments have come a long way, eliminating these unsafe practices and expanding their focus on cancer prevention. Some of VFD's changes to protect crew members are, of course, the gear with the particulate reducing system in it, as well as providing the crew with decon wipes and laundered hoods wrapped in bags that they must use before leaving the scene of a fire.

The decon wipes remove soot, smoke, and other harmful carcinogens that firefighters may be exposed to in hazardous environments. They are provided at every structural fire, and crew members are encouraged to use them before leaving the scene. Once the firefighters wrap up a fire call, they will take off their hoods to be collected on-site and are given a clean replacement hood. The soiled hoods are then taken back to the station, run through an extractor, and cleaned for the next use.

The element of VFD's cancer prevention initiative that is of great importance would be to provide two sets of gear to each of its firefighters. "With two sets of gear, they can take their dirty to be properly cleaned and dried while still having a set ready to respond to calls. This keeps them from having to reuse their soiled gear multiple times throughout a shift," said Chief Boutwell.

When VFD receives the 30 sets of gear approved on January 7, it will put them at about 70 percent near completing this goal. However, this will require ongoing efforts as that gear has a shelf life of ten years per the National Protection Association standards. When equipment reaches ten years, it is taken out of circulation. Although reaching the goal of getting every firefighter two sets of gear might take some time, Boutwell says the health benefits this provides to the men and women who protect our community far outweigh the costs.



# NATIONAL LAW ENFORCEMENT APPRECIATION DAY



THIS NATIONAL OBSERVANCE GIVES  
CITIZENS THE OPPORTUNITY TO PAY RESPECT  
TO ALL THE LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICERS IN  
THEIR COMMUNITY.





***In honor of National Law Enforcement Appreciation Day, Valdosta local Investigator Carlton Keith Harrell shares his experience working for the Valdosta Police Department and his motivation in choosing a career in public safety.***

National Law Enforcement Appreciation Day occurs annually on January 9. According to data from nleomf.org, there are more than 800,000 sworn law enforcement officers now serving in the United States. These officers work tirelessly in coordination with other local, state, and federal organizations to make our communities safe. National Law Enforcement Appreciation Day allows citizens to acknowledge this service and pay respect to all the brave men and women who have served or are currently serving as law enforcement officers. In honor of this national observance, Valdosta local Investigator Carlton Keith Harrell shares his experience working for the Valdosta Police Department (VPD) and his motivation in choosing a career in public safety.

A commitment to service has been an ongoing theme throughout Harrell's career. Before joining VPD, he served 15 years in the United States Army and worked at the Georgia Department of Corrections for eight. His military and corrections background fueled his desire to pursue a law enforcement career and proved extremely useful when training for his new role with the department.

Investigator Harrell currently works as a Permit Enforcement Officer. His day-to-day operations consist of him completing background checks and fingerprints for incoming officers, new hires, or officers who need recertification. His favorite part of his job, however, is assisting with the recruiting process. "Trying to get people to become police officers and helping them go through the hiring process than seeing them pass and become working officers and help our community, I like that part a lot," said Investigator Harrell.



***Valdosta Police Department Investigator, Carlton Keith Harrell.***



Because Harrell was already used to a loaded training schedule, he had very little issue adjusting to VPD's standards. All officers are well trained before they even go into the academy. After completing the academy, they are placed with a Field Training Officer (FTO) for eight to ten weeks before they are out on the streets. During that time, officers learn about the areas they will be working in and interpersonal communication skills to interact with people in the community. Every officer, investigator, chief, and commander are trained quarterly, with eight-hour days of training, and are required to recertify annually.

Their training efforts and dedication are among the many reasons that the Valdosta Police Department is a highly accredited agency. One of their notable achievements being the acquisition and retention of the Law Enforcement Accreditation status, through the Commission on Accreditation for Law Enforcement Agencies (CALEA). Which can be challenging as not many departments in the country have been able to do so. Due to their outstanding reputation and the fact that Valdosta was his hometown, Harrell was excited to join VPD.



*Valdosta Police Chief, Leslie Manahan.*

When beginning his career with the department, Harrell's family and friends were also excited to have someone they knew was both trustworthy and familiar with the community working on the force. Harrell believes that his knowledge of the Valdosta area is an attribute in his service, "I serve the community I grew up in. Most of the people I come into contact with I either know them personally or their family. I am familiar with the concerns of the city and know which areas require more assistance than others," said investigator Harrell. He also believes this is why people feel comfortable coming to him with any concerns they may have, as he tends to have a good rapport with everybody he comes into contact with.

Investigator Harrell also credits the department's outreach efforts as well, as they are often out in the community without cause interacting with the residents. Officers are encouraged to do community contact forms that require them to stop by people's houses and ask if they have any issues they need help with. In addition to that, the department has a community walk program where crew members walk around different neighborhoods in the city, going door to door to ask residents if there is anything that they have questions or concerns about in their area. Harrell believes that interacting with the community strengthens the relationship between VPD and its residents.

Overall Harrell's experience working as law enforcement in Valdosta has been a positive one. He says that most people are eager to thank VPD for their service, which he always enjoys hearing. When asked what advice he would give incoming officers, Harrell smiles and says, "Keep your word to everybody you encounter, follow the law, and tell the truth. If you are always truthful in your reports, you can never go wrong. Make sure to be fair and firm with everybody regardless of who they are." Investigator Carlton Keith Harrell is going on his 19th year with the department.





# 2021 Point-In-Time Homeless Count

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*Neighborhood Development & Community Protections Manager, Vanessa Flucas.*

Every two years, states are required to complete a Point-In-Time (PIT), Homeless Count, by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). These counts are coordinated in Georgia through the Georgia Department for Community Affairs (DCA), who generally coordinates a PIT count statewide yearly to determine the number of homeless families and individuals in Georgia. For the last five years, the City of Valdosta's Neighborhood Development Division has coordinated the Valdosta/Lowndes County's local count. This process usually consists of city employees and volunteers heading out into the community to manually count members of the homeless population in the area on a particular night (point in time) and throughout a one week period following the street count.

Though the count is intended to determine the number of homeless families and individuals, only a specific segment of the homeless population is counted each time. HUD will inform the local organization responsible for completing the count of which segment they will focus on that year. This is done so that communities can see which specific segments of their homeless population might require the most assistance. Running the count in this format also helps with the distributions of funds. "Data dictates dollars; whenever we have that data, that dictates where the money goes," said Neighborhood Development & Community Protections Manager Vanessa Flucas.

The city of Valdosta doesn't get money directly to help the homeless population; instead, they make sure that the organizations receiving money from HUD and DCA are doing what is needed within our community. When discussing funding for these organizations, two pots of money are available. This includes money coming from HUD and money coming from DCA. HUD sends money to DCA, and then they filter it out to organizations throughout the state through what they call the continuum of care.

Vanessa Flucas is responsible for managing the continuum of care for the Valdosta - Lowndes County area. Any organization that applies for a grant through DCA via the continuum of care must do so through Flucas's office. They are to bring their applications to her so that she may verify all the required materials have been provided and sign off on them. "I have to make sure these all fall into line with our consolidated plan, so that is why we tell organizations to find their niche and stick to it. We are a small community, and we don't need to bump each other out," said Flucas.

A statewide rubric judges applications, and there is a three-tier system for rewarding funding. The organizations that fall into tier-one generally get funding, and tier-two gets closer to the cut-off. The third-tier consists of those that do not even qualify. Valdosta is lucky that they typically have three or four organizations up in the top two levels.

The count data is used to let departments and organizations know where funding should be directed or if there are programs that are receiving inadequate financing. Flucas uses family facilities as an example. For a long time, Valdosta had separate shelters for men and women. Though there are still separate facilities, shelters have since added more facilities that can accommodate entire families when results from previous counts showed that homelessness extends beyond individuals. In certain situations, a father would have to go to a male facility, and the mother and children had to go to a separate shelter. "We don't want to split up a family when it is already tough for them because services may only be available to the dad at a male facility. The PIT count helps make this information available to organizations and programs assisting with homelessness," said Flucas.



Unfortunately, due to the recent rise in positive COVID-19 cases in the Valdosta, Lowndes County area, and Georgia's entire state, the street outreach portion of this year's count has been canceled. DCA will still complete a sheltered homeless count through the HMIS system and local organizations. This year's street outreach count was scheduled to start on Monday, January 25, and continue collecting data through the week, ending on January 30. The intended segment that was set to be the focus for this year's count included the homeless population living on the streets or in encampments.

Though this is what most people think of when they picture homelessness, Flucas wanted to shed light on what different homeless populations can look like. Typically, when discussing the homeless population, we speak of people who are genuinely homeless because they live in areas that normally are not supposed to be inhabitable by people. They remain in encampments, under bridges, and in abandoned structures. However, the government also has other categories in which they consider people homeless. For instance, anyone that does not have a permanent home and maybe living in a temporary housing structure like a hotel or a homeless shelter is also considered homeless; they are just counted differently. This also includes people who may live with relatives because they cannot currently afford their housing when they have previously had their own home or apartment. That is considered precariously housed and homeless.

Since the Neighborhood Development Department and Community Protection Division work very closely with members of the homeless population, Flucas thought it was important to acknowledge some common misconceptions people may have when dealing with the homeless population.

"A preconceived notion people often have is that these are lawless people, or they are bad people, and they are not. In reality, a lot of us are maybe one or two paychecks away from homelessness. Especially now, with the COVID-19 Pandemic, some individuals are having problems securing and keeping housing due to circumstances beyond their control. What is most important is that these are our neighbors. These are our friends and even family members. In some cases, these are people who have served our country, and some of them are sitting out there with doctorate degrees, but you will not ever know their story unless you talk to them," said Flucas.

For more information on organizations that assist the homeless population or resources available, please contact the Neighborhood Development Department at 229-671-3617.

### **Local agencies that provide assistance to the homeless population:**

- **L.A.M.P**
- **The Salvation Army**
- **The Meeting Place**
- **Behavioral Health**
- **Haven**





# MAIN STREET LOVE DOWNTOWN CAMPAIGN



GO DOWNTOWN, SHOP DOWNTOWN, LOVE DOWNTOWN





As we move further into the New Year and the holiday season has come and gone, it can be normal to experience a little lackluster. However, the city of Valdosta's Main Street Division is determined to keep spirits high in February with their annual Love Downtown Campaign.

Main Street started this campaign to help residents experience the wonderful amenities that Downtown has to offer, all while supporting the locally owned businesses that make the area so unique. The campaign kicks off every year at the beginning of February and lasts all month long. As an additional incentive to participate, when customers spend \$25 at a local downtown business, they will get entered to win \$200 at the end of the month.



**“WE WANTED TO REMIND PEOPLE TO COME DOWNTOWN, LOVE DOWNTOWN, AND SUPPORT OUR LOCAL BUSINESS DOWN HERE,”**

**- MAIN STREET MANAGER, ELLEN HILL.**

So the more money you spend, the more opportunity you have to win. Citizens will also have the opportunity to signify their unbreakable love for their partner, children, or even pets by adding a lock to the love lock fence in Bennie's Alley.

The lock fence is a free public art project that citizens are encouraged to add a lock to. So if you are looking for the perfect way to spend your date night or girl's night out, be sure to check out any of the incredible local shops and eateries that make Downtown Valdosta one of a kind.

