

## **FORMAL REQUEST FOR AN INDEPENDENT SLED INVESTIGATION INTO THE DEATHS OF EMORY AND HARLOW**

**To:** The Honorable Governor of South Carolina  
**To:** The Honorable Attorney General of South Carolina

**Subject: Urgent Request for Independent Investigation into DSS, Mobile Crisis, the Charleston County Sheriff's Office, and Charleston County Consolidated Dispatch**

Dear Governor and Attorney General,

We are writing to formally request your intervention to ensure that the South Carolina Law Enforcement Division (SLED) conducts a thorough, independent, and impartial investigation into the circumstances surrounding the deaths of Emory and Harlow, two young children whose deaths have left a family, a community, and countless concerned South Carolinians searching for answers.

Specifically, we are requesting an independent examination of the actions, decisions, communications, and potential failures of the South Carolina Department of Social Services (DSS), Mobile Crisis, the Charleston County Sheriff's Office (CCSO), and Charleston County Consolidated Dispatch in the weeks preceding the discovery of the children on September 29, 2026.

**This request is not based solely on the concerns of a grieving group of friends. More than 1,500 individuals have now endorsed a petition calling for an independent SLED investigation. The coroner has formally requested such an investigation, and attorneys representing parties on both sides have also reportedly called for the same action. Yet, to our knowledge, there has been no public response adequately addressing these requests or explaining whether an independent investigation will proceed.**

When a community raises this level of concern, when the coroner formally requests independent scrutiny, and when attorneys on opposing sides call for the same investigative action, these requests deserve a substantive response.

We recognize that investigative confidentiality and legal obligations may limit what can be disclosed publicly. We are not asking your offices to compromise an investigation or prejudice the conduct of any individual. We are asking for acknowledgment of these requests, clarity regarding the steps being taken, and an assurance that the circumstances surrounding these deaths will be examined independently and without institutional bias.

**The absence of a public response does not resolve the questions being raised. It makes an independent and transparent process all the more necessary.**

**The central question: What happened when people repeatedly asked for help?**

Beginning around September 9, friends became increasingly concerned about Justine's mental state after observing social media posts and behavior that appeared profoundly inconsistent with the person we know. A group communication was established to coordinate efforts to reach her, assess her well-being, and determine how best to help.

Our concerns grew as we learned of the circumstances involving her family, an arrest, a no-contact order, and the involvement of law enforcement and DSS. We understood that Justine appeared to be experiencing a serious mental health crisis and that her two young daughters could be vulnerable.

We did not believe that a tragedy of this magnitude was possible. We were friends trying to help another friend. We were not attempting to diagnose her, punish her, or interfere in her life. We were attempting to bring our concerns to people with the training, authority, and responsibility to assess the situation.

By September 15, communication with Justine had largely ceased. Friends began driving past the residence and attempting to determine whether she and the children were safe. As the days passed, the circumstances became increasingly alarming.

According to information available to us, a Mobile Crisis visit occurred during the period between September 9 and September 13, and the children were last visually observed by an authority figure around September 12. We are deeply concerned that the children were not subsequently visually confirmed safe by law enforcement, DSS, or another responsible authority before their bodies were discovered on September 29.

The following chronology outlines the events we experienced and believe warrant an independent investigation. It is based on our recollections, communications, and records obtained to date, and we ask SLED to independently verify each event.

**September 18:** Rebekah contacted the DSS agent associated with the case, left a message expressing concern for the children's well-being, and requested a return call. That callback never occurred.

**September 22:** I contacted dispatch to request a welfare check at 3280 Pinewood because I was concerned about Justine and her two daughters. According to CAD records obtained through a Freedom of Information Act request, the welfare check was not completed. That afternoon, Chelsea went to the residence and attempted to see the children. Justine reportedly appeared manic and denied her entry.

**September 23:** I followed up regarding the welfare check that had not occurred. Although three return calls were reportedly placed to my work telephone that day, they came in rapid succession after I had left for the day and did not resolve the underlying concern about the children.

**September 24:** I again contacted the Sheriff's Office and requested a return call to my personal telephone. No callback was received. The CAD records reportedly indicate that the incident was cleared without action because of "ongoing harassment." We request an independent

examination of the basis for this classification and whether it affected the handling of legitimate child welfare concerns.

**September 28:** After further observations heightened our concerns, I again contacted dispatch and insisted on speaking with someone about the unresolved welfare issue. I was reportedly told that the Sheriff's Office would no longer return my calls because contact had previously been made with me on September 20, despite my welfare check request being made on September 22. We are concerned that this may have referenced a separate visit during which Justine was reportedly seen but the children were not visually confirmed safe.

That evening, I spoke with a deputy for approximately ten minutes. She listened to our concerns and offered to review information we could provide. I sent an email containing the evidence we had gathered, and the deputy indicated that it would be forwarded to her sergeant.

We remain grateful to the deputy who listened. Our request is not to assign blame to an individual without evidence, but to establish what occurred across the entire chain of decision-making.

**September 29:** Shani observed Justine walking down the street and sent an urgent message to our group. She also requested a welfare check. Despite the preceding evening's conversation and the submission of information to a deputy, the dispatcher reportedly stated that the Sheriff's Office was no longer conducting welfare checks at that address.

Chelsea and I planned to go to the residence ourselves that afternoon to insist that the children be accounted for.

Instead, at approximately 2:14 p.m., we received a message that will remain with us for the rest of our lives:

"I'm at the house. The girls are dead. Justine is in custody."

Two young children were gone. We were left to revisit every call, every warning sign, every unanswered request, and every opportunity we feared might have been missed.

**The question is not simply what happened on September 29. It is what happened in the days and weeks when people were repeatedly asking for help and the children may still have been reachable.**

### **Why SLED must independently investigate**

The agencies whose conduct is being questioned should not be left to provide the only meaningful assessment of their own decisions. An independent investigation is necessary to establish the facts, examine the evidence, and determine whether the actions taken were consistent with applicable laws, policies, protocols, and professional responsibilities.

We respectfully request that SLED examine the following:

## **The Department of Social Services**

- The circumstances surrounding the reported September 12 case closure and whether it was justified by the information available.
- The September 18 message requesting assistance and why no return call was received.
- Whether subsequent reports and information about the mother's apparent deterioration and the children's safety were received, documented, assessed, or acted upon.
- Whether required follow-up, supervisory review, and interagency communication procedures were followed.

## **Mobile Crisis**

- The circumstances and findings of the reported visit during the September 9–13 period.
- Whether the circumstances warranted further assessment, referral, follow-up, or coordination with DSS and law enforcement.
- Whether relevant information was communicated to the appropriate agencies and how it informed subsequent safety decisions.

Mental illness alone does not establish that a parent is dangerous. The question is whether the mother's reported behavior, background of information available, and the children's safety were appropriately assessed together.

## **The Charleston County Sheriff's Office**

- Who decided that further visits or welfare checks at 3280 Pinewood would cease, when that decision was made, and what information supported it.
- Why the September 22 welfare check was not completed, according to the records obtained.
- Whether the reported September 20 contact established the children's safety or merely confirmed the presence of an adult.
- Why subsequent calls were cleared or reportedly characterized as “ongoing harassment.”
- Whether the information submitted on September 28 was reviewed and appropriately escalated.
- Whether the department's response to repeated concerns was consistent with its policies, training, and legal obligations.

## **Charleston County Consolidated Dispatch**

- Whether each call was accurately documented, classified, and routed.
- Why the September 22 welfare check was not completed.
- Whether subsequent calls were appropriately escalated or closed without sufficient follow-up.
- Whether dispatchers were acting on instructions to discontinue visits and, if so, who issued those instructions.
- Whether callers' concerns were accurately communicated to responding deputies and supervisors.

## **Interagency coordination and systemic failures**

We further request an examination of whether information was lost between agencies, whether one agency relied on another's involvement without confirming that the children were safe, whether case closure created an unjustified assumption that no further action was necessary, and whether any policies or practices discouraged people from reporting legitimate concerns.

All relevant evidence should be reviewed, including dispatch audio, CAD records, incident reports, case notes, emails, text messages, supervisory communications, visit records, and other documentation relating to the residence and the individuals involved.

The investigation should establish a verified chronology of the information available at each decision point, the actions taken or not taken, and whether any failures contributed to the inability to establish the children's safety before their deaths.

Where evidence supports findings of misconduct or violations of law or policy, we ask that appropriate referrals and accountability measures follow. Where systemic deficiencies are identified, we ask that corrective measures be recommended.

## **A request supported by the community and those directly involved**

The growing support for an independent investigation reflects a fundamental concern: people need to know that when they report a credible fear for a child's safety, their concerns will be assessed on their merits and not dismissed without appropriate review.

More than 1,500 signatures represent individuals who believe this case warrants independent scrutiny. These are not merely numbers on a petition. They represent parents, families, friends, and community members who want to know that a tragedy of this nature will not be met with silence or institutional defensiveness.

The coroner's formal request for an independent investigation adds further urgency. The fact that attorneys on both sides have also reportedly called for the same investigative action makes the lack of a public response particularly concerning.

We recognize that these requests do not, by themselves, establish wrongdoing. They do, however, demonstrate the seriousness and breadth of the concern surrounding this case.

We therefore ask directly:

- Has an independent SLED investigation been formally requested, authorized, or initiated?
- If so, what is the status of that request, to the extent it can lawfully be disclosed?
- If not, what is preventing it from moving forward?
- Which state authority is responsible for determining whether the conduct of the involved agencies will receive independent review?
- What steps will be taken to ensure that the evidence is preserved and that potential systemic failures are examined?

We are not asking your offices to disclose protected information or compromise any ongoing criminal proceedings. We are asking for a clear response concerning whether these requests are being acted upon and what process will ensure that the concerns are independently examined.

**A community should not have to continue pleading for an investigation after more than 1,500 people have endorsed the request, the coroner has formally called for one, and attorneys on both sides have reportedly done the same.**

This case is not only about two children and one family. It is about the reliability of the systems every South Carolina family may one day need.

It is about the parent experiencing a mental health crisis who needs timely and appropriate care. It is about the grandparent worried about a grandchild, the friend who notices a frightening change in someone's behavior, and the person who makes a difficult decision to call authorities because they fear a child may be in danger.

It is about children who cannot call dispatch themselves, cannot explain what is happening inside their homes, and cannot advocate for their own safety.

We are ordinary people. We do not have the authority to enter a home, compel an assessment, access protected case files, or direct an emergency response. We contacted the agencies that did have the authority to evaluate our concerns because we believed that was the responsible thing to do.

We did not expect our calls to guarantee a particular outcome. We expected them to be taken seriously and assessed appropriately.

We did not expect anyone to predict the future. We expected the warning signs in the present to be evaluated.

No agency can prevent every tragedy. But when multiple people repeatedly express concern about young children's safety, there must be a reliable process for receiving those reports, assessing risk, coordinating across agencies, and determining whether the children are safe.

If that process failed in this case, the public deserves to know why.

If policies were inadequate, they must change. If decisions were made without sufficient information, that deficiency must be addressed. If information was available but disregarded, that must be examined. And if individuals failed to meet their legal or professional responsibilities, there must be accountability.

We cannot allow the lesson of Emory and Harlow's deaths to be that people should have called more, tried harder, or found the right person sooner. We called. We followed up. We documented what we could. We shared what we knew. We kept asking for help.

The question is whether the systems entrusted with protecting these children responded as they should have.

We respectfully request that the Governor and Attorney General:

1. **Take appropriate action to facilitate an independent SLED investigation** into the handling of this case by DSS, Mobile Crisis, the Charleston County Sheriff's Office, and Charleston County Consolidated Dispatch.
2. Ensure that the investigation is sufficiently independent of the agencies whose conduct is under review and that all relevant evidence is preserved and evaluated impartially.
3. Ensure that the investigation examines the complete sequence of reports, decisions, communications, and actions preceding the deaths of Emory and Harlow.
4. Request a review of whether applicable laws, policies, protocols, and professional standards were followed, with appropriate referrals if evidence of misconduct or violations is established.
5. Examine whether current procedures adequately address situations involving a parent experiencing a serious mental health crisis while young children are in the home, particularly when communication with the parent is lost and multiple people continue to raise concerns.
6. Provide a written response acknowledging the coroner's request, the calls for an investigation reportedly made by attorneys on both sides, and the community's petition bearing more than 1,500 signatures.
7. Clearly communicate whether an independent investigation has been authorized or initiated, or explain what additional steps are required to determine the appropriate investigative path.

We recognize that the Governor, Attorney General, SLED, DSS, and local agencies have distinct legal authorities and responsibilities. We ask that your offices use the authority available to them to ensure that this matter receives meaningful, impartial review.

We are not asking you to reach a predetermined conclusion. We are asking you to ensure that the evidence is examined by investigators who can establish the facts without institutional pressure or a conflict of interest.

## **In memory of Emory and Harlow**

There are two little girls at the center of this request. They must never become lost in a debate over jurisdiction, competing accounts, institutional reputations, or public relations.

Emory and Harlow were children. They deserved safety, care, and the opportunity to grow up. Their lives mattered, and their deaths deserve a response worthy of the gravity of what occurred.

For those of us who knew and loved their mother, this tragedy is also profoundly personal. We are grieving the children we lost and struggling to understand how a situation that generated so much concern could end this way. We recognize the complexity of mental illness and the

importance of compassionate, appropriate intervention. We also recognize that compassion and accountability are not mutually exclusive.

We will remember the calls that were made, the warnings that were shared, the uncertainty that grew as the days passed, and the message that ended our hope of finding the girls alive.

We will remember that we tried because we cared, because we recognized that something was wrong, and because we believed the proper authorities could help.

We should not have to wonder whether a different response during those final days might have changed the outcome without receiving an independent investigation capable of answering that question to the extent the evidence allows.

We cannot bring Emory and Harlow home. But we can insist that their deaths be examined with the seriousness, independence, and transparency that their lives—and the lives of other children—demand.

More than 1,500 people have added their voices to this request. The coroner has formally requested an independent investigation. Attorneys on both sides have reportedly called for the same action. We ask that these requests receive a substantive response rather than continued uncertainty.

**Emory and Harlow cannot ask for answers. We must ask for them on their behalf.**

We respectfully urge you to act promptly to facilitate an independent SLED investigation, establish what happened, identify any failures supported by the evidence, and pursue the reforms necessary to protect other children and families throughout South Carolina.

Their deaths must not be met with silence. Their lives must matter enough for our state to confront the questions surrounding this tragedy and do everything within its power to prevent another family from enduring the same loss.

We look forward to your written response and to meaningful action on this urgent request.

Respectfully,

**Concerned friends, family members, and community advocates for Emory and Harlow**

Annie [REDACTED], Rebekah [REDACTED], Chelsea [REDACTED], and Shani [REDACTED]