

# Stephens County Sheriff responds about length of absence

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By Charlene Belew The Duncan Banner

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Sheriff Wayne McKinney has contacted The Banner after a social media post surfaced Tuesday evening claiming he has been missing from office for nearly 90 days.

The post, originated on Facebook by Bill Scott, employed as a certified reserve deputy with Stephens County Sheriff's Office (SCSO) from August 2015 until May 17, 2022, originally spoke of Undersheriff Bobby Bowen's resignation ahead of calling attention to McKinney's absence.

"Undersheriff Bobby Bowen resigned with an unblemished and impeccable record," Scott wrote. "Today (Tuesday) is his last day. The county will be much less capable without his leadership. The courthouse foyer was packed with police and fire leadership, past and present, from across Stephens County. The sheriff was absent.

"The citizens of Stephens County need to be aware that Sheriff Wayne McKinney has not been at work in about 90 days. Nobody at the sheriff's office knows why," Scott wrote. "Accountability starts at the top. The citizens of Stephens County elected Wayne McKinney to do a job. To the citizens he is accountable. The period given to benefit of the doubt is over. Employee morale is at an all time low. I resigned my commission today as well. There will no doubt be more.

"Where is Wayne? Why is he absent? Who is in charge now that the undersheriff has left the building? Nobody knows," the post concluded.

The Banner received a call from Sheriff McKinney at 9:28 a.m. Wednesday, May 18. The call came from an Alabama number.

McKinney told The Banner he and his wife, Central High Mayor Julie McKinney, originally left on vacation but ran into trouble with their mobile home.

“We are actually broken down in the manufacturer now trying to get repairs,” McKinney said. “We’ve been trying and the problem is supply chain issues on parts and accessories.”

McKinney said on top of their mobile home experiencing issues and them getting stuck out of state, their dog spent an extensive amount in the vet in ICU while there — nearly 14 days — and the couple both became sick during their stay. He also said their cellular service is poor where they’re staying in Alabama.

McKinney said they hadn’t been doing well, but are okay now and hope to return this weekend.

“We’re getting out of here,” McKinney said. “I’m leaving and Julie’s leaving. We’ll be home this weekend.”

On Wednesday, Captain Bill Perkins confirmed SCSO has remained in contact with McKinney.

“We’ve had contact with him,” Perkins said. “It’s been spotty at times. But any issues that have come up and we need to reach him, we’re always able to.”

Perkins said he didn’t agree with the way the post read and said “I don’t think it painted an accurate portrayal.”

“You know, I don’t really know what else to tell you past that, but I can tell you that any issues that have come up, we’ve been able to handle them just fine,” Perkins said, “and we’ve communicated with him about a lot of it.”

Perkins confirmed he’s in charge of the department until McKinney returns. He also said Bowen’s resignation only indicated moving jobs to the private sector.

As far as from a public safety issue, Perkins said nothing has changed on a day to day basis.

“We’re staffing shifts fully,” Perkins said. “We’re able to handle our call load with no problem. I mean, we really have not had any issues with serving the public. That’s always the number one priority.”

Around noon Wednesday, Scott issued another post to Facebook. He noted McKinney had contacted The Banner and also said, “I only know that communication from elected officials is a no brainer.”

“My intention for the post yesterday was to force Wayne McKinney to come up for air and do the right thing,” Scott wrote. “Let’s see if he does.”

The post continues from Scott and states he had been out of the county for a couple years.

“I have been unable to fulfill my shift requirements (an as unpaid reserve deputy) due to distance, a paying job and health challenges,” Scott wrote. “The resignation of Bobby Bowen got me off of high center to turn in my commission.

“I cast no stones in anger,” Scott continued. “I only want the best for the county I grew up in and love. I wish no one ill will including Wayne McKinney.”

In an interview with The Banner, Scott said his only knowledge of what’s happening was contained in his postings to social media.

“It is based on knowledge that I have from many relationships in the department that I have,” Scott said. “I have reached out to Wayne personally, prior to my post, without a response. I have spoken to a County Commissioner who explained the lack of communication from Wayne in the past 90 days. The answers lie with Wayne.”

Scott, who moved out of the county in October 2019, confirmed his last day as an unpaid reserve with SCSO was on May 17, 2022, and Perkins confirmed the resignation.

When asked if Bowen confirmed why he resigned from SCSO, Scott said he “contacted me personally to inform me of his resignation” and the conversation was private so he wouldn’t discuss it because he didn’t have Bowen’s permission.

“Wayne needs to do the right thing for the elected office he holds and by extension the leadership role he holds as the chief executive law enforcement agent of the SCSO,” Scott said, noting he wanted to get McKinney’s “narrative out,” because “that was my only intent.”

In a Wednesday afternoon call to The Banner, McKinney said public safety is paramount and he has confidence in his staff.

“I’ve got competent people at the Sheriff’s Office,” he said. “I have a competent command staff. I have very competent employees in the administrative staff and with the ladies that work in the office. Our dispatchers are all up to speed. They’re very competent. So is the jail staff. Things are running smooth — now would I like to be there? Yes, I really would, but public safety is not an issue (with my absence) and I will be back. I didn’t just walk off. We’ve had some really big things to happen to us — devastating, unplanned — and that’s where we’re at. It’s just one of those things that happen.”

McKinney said he “wanted people to understand that me and Julie didn’t walk off.”

“We didn’t just disappear because we wanted to and just because it says Red Bay, Alabama — this is not Gulf Shores, Alabama. We’re not sitting on a beach. We’re sitting in a gravel parking lot, next to a dog food plant. We’re not having a really good time at all.”