

**Good afternoon, Kelsie –**

Thank you for reaching out and for giving the City of Oxford an opportunity to respond to the concerns raised during your reporting.

We take concerns involving underage drinking, fraudulent identification, illegal drug use, drink tampering and the safety of our students, residents and visitors seriously. These are not new issues for a college community, and Oxford has spent more than a decade developing enforcement, prevention, education and victim-support strategies specifically designed to address them.

We also believe it is important to distinguish between individual accounts and documented facts. Your email indicates that approximately 30 students were interviewed. We respect the experiences and concerns of each of those students, and any allegation involving someone's safety deserves to be taken seriously. At the same time, those interviews represent a small sample within an Oxford campus community of more than 25,000 students. Their accounts may identify issues that should be examined, but they should not, standing alone, be treated as representative of the entire student population or as proof that a specific allegation is occurring broadly throughout our community.

We are not suggesting that underage drinking, fake identification, illegal drugs or other safety concerns do not exist in Oxford. Our own enforcement numbers demonstrate that these challenges are real. They are real in college towns across the country.

The question is what a community does in response. The City of Oxford will continue to put every measure in place possible to protect our residents, students and visitors.

I asked Oxford Police Chief Jeff McCutchen to provide a response to the individual issues you cited.

**The following is a statement from Chief Jeff McCutchen:**

Our responsibility is to evaluate concerns based on reported incidents, current trends, investigations, enforcement activity and the evidence available to us.

#### Underage Alcohol Use and Enforcement

Oxford Police actively enforce laws involving underage alcohol possession, fraudulent identification, public intoxication, open containers and furnishing alcohol to minors.

During the calendar-year reporting period, the Oxford Police Department documented:

- 673 public intoxication arrests
- 378 alcohol-possession-by-a-minor violations
- 38 violations for furnishing beer or wine to a minor
- 98 fake-ID citations
- 759 false identification cards confiscated
- Approximately 2,800 restaurant and alcohol-establishment checks
- 43 open-container violations

During that same reporting period, 10 violations were issued to establishments for violations of Oxford's alcohol ordinance.

These numbers demonstrate two things. Alcohol-related violations do occur in our community, and our officers are actively looking for them and taking enforcement action when violations are identified.

Our enforcement strategy is not limited to citing students. We investigate how alcohol is obtained, take action when individuals furnish alcohol to minors, routinely inspect establishments and hold businesses accountable when violations of the City's alcohol safety ordinance, 14-100-104, are documented.

### 18-to-20-Year-Old Entry

It is also important to accurately explain Mississippi law regarding individuals between the ages of 18 and 20 entering establishments that serve alcohol.

Mississippi law does not impose a blanket rule that a person must be 21 simply to enter every licensed establishment where alcohol is served. Mississippi Alcoholic Beverage Control guidance specifically recognizes that persons under 21 may be present inside licensed premises, although they cannot legally be sold or furnished alcoholic beverages. Businesses may also establish their own more restrictive entry policies.

For that reason, the presence of an 18-, 19- or 20-year-old inside an establishment does not, by itself, establish that a violation has occurred.

While people commonly use terms such as “bar” and “restaurant” to describe businesses downtown, those labels alone do not determine whether an 18-to-20-year-old may legally enter. From a law-enforcement standpoint, our focus is on the conduct occurring inside the establishment: whether alcohol is being illegally purchased, possessed or furnished and whether the establishment is complying with applicable state law and City ordinances.

Mississippi ABC also places responsibility on permitted businesses to prevent minors who are allowed inside from being provided alcohol by other patrons.

### Fake Identification and “Pass-Backs”

Fraudulent identification is a significant issue in college communities across the country, and Oxford is not immune from it.

Our enforcement numbers demonstrate that we are actively addressing the issue. During a two year search, officers issued 98 fake-ID citations and confiscated 759 identification cards.

Oxford's alcohol safety ordinance requires safeguards intended to help identify fraudulent identification. We have at times had uniformed officers monitor the entrances to establishments as an additional deterrent and enforcement measure.

Our officers routinely conduct establishment checks, and we partner with Mississippi Alcoholic Beverage Control on compliance and spot checks.

If a specific allegation involving repeated “pass-backs” at a particular establishment is brought to our attention with actionable information, we can investigate it just as we would other allegations involving fraudulent identification. In our alcohol safety ordinance, we have a requirement for businesses to possess identification scanners to prevent fake identifications from being used.

### Holding Establishments Accountable

In 2018, Oxford strengthened its alcohol safety ordinance and established safety requirements and best practices for businesses serving alcohol.

Those measures include requirements involving security procedures, cameras, identification verification and other safety practices.

Each semester, we work directly with our restaurants and alcohol-serving establishments to provide training, discuss drink safety and review expectations under the City's alcohol ordinance.

Compliance does not end with training. Our officers conduct checks throughout the year, and we routinely partner with Mississippi Alcoholic Beverage Control in those efforts.

During the current reporting period, the City has issued 10 violations to establishments for violations of Oxford's alcohol safety ordinance.

When an alcohol-related medical incident or an allegation involving drink tampering is reported, our officers can extend beyond what happened to the individual. Officers can review available video, determine how the individual entered the establishment, examine available information concerning alcohol service and determine whether criminal laws or City ordinances were violated or if a drink was tampered with.

The goal is accountability at every level.

### A Downtown Safety Strategy Built Over More Than a Decade

Oxford's approach goes well beyond enforcement.

In 2015, the Oxford Police Department established a dedicated Downtown District with officers specifically assigned to serve and protect the downtown area.

That same year, we established a Safe Site on the Square. The purpose is simple: regardless of someone's current alcohol or drug status, if they need help, we want them to have somewhere to go.

A person can seek assistance finding a safe ride home, charge a phone, reconnect with friends from whom they have become separated or obtain other assistance. In recent years, the

Oxford Fire Department has also provided an emergency medical presence downtown to help address medical needs as quickly as possible.

We have established three designated, safe, well lit rideshare locations around the Square to provide organized locations for people leaving downtown and to make it easier for individuals to obtain a safe ride home.

We have also enhanced our video equipment and camera capabilities in the downtown district. That investment helps officers identify individuals who may be targeting, victimizing or taking advantage of people in our downtown area and provides additional investigative resources when an incident occurs.

We routinely use overtime details to provide extra staffing to create an even safer environment.

### Prevention and Education

Our philosophy cannot simply be to wait until something bad happens and then make an arrest.

Oxford has invested in prevention efforts, including providing NightCap drink covers designed to reduce opportunities for drink tampering and drink-testing coasters that can help identify certain substances that may have been introduced into a beverage.

We routinely participate in community safety and educational events both on and off the University of Mississippi campus. Our message to students is that we want to be a partner in their safety while they are living in our community.

We also work with University partners, Associated Student Body with an Angel Shots program, including the William Magee Institute for Student Wellbeing, on issues involving substance misuse, prevention, education and student wellbeing.

### Victim Services

Our commitment to student safety also extends far beyond alcohol enforcement.

In 2020–2021, the Oxford Police Department established a Victim Services Unit specifically designed to serve individuals affected by interpersonal violence.

That team routinely works hand in hand with University of Mississippi students, university partners and members of our community. Its purpose is to make sure that someone who has experienced violence or victimization does not have to navigate the aftermath alone.

The work of that unit was recognized by the Mississippi Attorney General's Office with the 2024 Victim Service of the Year Award.

## Our Commitment

For more than a decade, Oxford has invested in personnel, enforcement, ordinances, technology, transportation, education, prevention, medical response, victim services and partnerships designed to make our downtown district and our larger community safer.

We will continue holding individuals accountable when laws are violated. We will continue holding establishments accountable when violations are documented. We will continue working alongside the University of Mississippi, Mississippi Alcoholic Beverage Control, our business community and other partners. And we will continue looking critically at our own practices to determine where we can improve.

Most importantly, we want our students to know that asking for help should never be something they are afraid to do.

If you are intoxicated, separated from your friends, concerned that something may have been placed in your drink, experiencing a medical emergency, believe you have been victimized or simply need help getting home safely, call us or find one of our officers.

Enforcement is part of our responsibility, but so is taking care of people.

Our goal remains to create a safe and connected community for the people who live here, the students who call Oxford home during their college years and everyone who visits our city.