

# Stephen Combs, M.S., MPIO, SC CEM

Public Information Officer | Leadership Speaker | Founder, Firebase Leadership  
Bluffton Township Fire District | Bluffton, South Carolina

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## FULL BIOGRAPHY: SPEAKER VERSION

Stephen Combs did not plan a career in public safety. He walked into what he thought was a friendly breakfast meeting and found himself sitting across from the County Administrator, the Chairman of County Council, the County Sheriff, the Director of Communications, and most of county leadership, with no warning, no preparation, and, as it turned out, no breakfast.

A county emergency manager he had befriended through their kids competing on the same team had asked Stephen to come by his office one Friday morning. When he arrived, the EM walked him into a room full of people and said, "Tell us about the work that you do." At the time, Stephen was working in the IT and media departments of a 20,000-member megachurch, managing their online broadcasting platform (the same platform he later used to help launch the county's public access television station). He had no idea he was being interviewed. He just told his story. By the time the meeting ended, he had won over the room and walked out with a job offer he never saw coming.

He called his wife, Amy, from the parking lot and told her what had just happened. Her response was immediate: "*You DID accept the offer, right?*" He told her he wanted to think it over and give them an answer by Monday, because he also wanted to speak with his current employer first. Three days later, he called back and said yes. He has been living his best life as a PIO ever since.

His first role at the **Anderson County Sheriff's Office** gave him a foundation he still draws from today. He helped establish the county's public access TV station and produced and edited more than 100 short projects spotlighting the work of the Sheriff's Office and the people of Anderson County. Then, just eight months into the job (with nothing but an entry-level online FEMA course under his belt), he was deployed to the **South Carolina State Emergency Operations Center** during the Hurricane Joaquin response. The State's ESF-15 PIO, Derrec Becker, looked at him and asked what he could do. Stephen told him he knew a little about social media. Becker's reply was direct: "Great, sit down and get to work." He did. He ran social media and media monitoring for the state for 23 days, came home, and was later promoted to Public Information Officer for the county's emergency management division. The rest, as they say, is history.

What followed was a master class that no training program could fully replicate. Stephen has been activated for every significant natural disaster to hit South Carolina since, including multiple hurricanes and several tornadoes in Greenville County. He served as the **Joint Information Center Manager for the Pinnacle Mountain Wildfire**, coordinating public information operations for 10 consecutive days. He managed media relations for the **Townville Elementary School shooting**, one of the most emotionally demanding assignments a PIO can face, running the communications response for what became an international media event. Each deployment made him a sharper, more capable communicator than he was before. He has also designed and participated in full-scale, functional, and tabletop exercises testing responses to natural disasters, human-caused incidents, cyber events, and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Today, Stephen serves as the **Public Information Officer for the Bluffton Township Fire District** in South Carolina, overseeing communications, media relations, and community outreach across nine fire stations serving 246 square miles of southern Beaufort County. The territory covers barrier islands, rural communities, and one of the fastest-growing areas on the East Coast. No two days look the same. He would not have it any other way.

Along the way, he built a credential set that reflects someone who takes the craft seriously. Stephen is one of fewer than **100 internationally credentialed Public Information Officers** in the world through the Center for Public Safety Excellence, a FEMA Executive Public Information Officer, and a South Carolina Certified Emergency Manager. He holds a Master of Science in Emergency Management from Lander University and graduated *magna cum laude* with his business degree from Western Carolina University. He is currently completing his certification through the **John Maxwell Leadership Training Program**, not because he needed another credential, but because he genuinely believes leaders who stop growing stop leading.

That commitment to developing others showed up early. For five years, Stephen taught crisis communications for the **Texas A&M Engineering Extension Service (TEEX)**, one of the most respected public safety training organizations in the country. During that time, he was tapped to help rewrite the curriculum for *MGT 318: Public Information in an All-Hazards Incident*, the kind of assignment that does not happen unless your peers trust that you know the material cold. He eventually stepped away from that role, choosing his family over the road. Given that Amy and he have been married 31 years and his kids turned out pretty well, it appears he made the right call.

That same instinct, to teach, to develop, to pass something useful on, is what led him to found **Firebase Leadership**, a leadership development platform built on the idea that the values forged inside a firehouse (accountability, calm under pressure, servant-first thinking) are exactly what organizations outside the fire service are hungry for. Stephen speaks on crisis communication, community trust, and character-driven leadership. He brings real stories, not slides full of theory, and he has a gift for making a room feel like a conversation rather than a lecture. Which, if you have been paying attention, is exactly how he got his first job in public safety.

He is a contributing author to *Principles of Emergency Management and Emergency Operations Centers (EOC)*, named the **2022 ASIS Security Industry Book of the Year**. He has held board leadership roles with SC InfraGard, Anderson Area Crime Stoppers, the SC Crime Stoppers Council, and the SC Emergency Management Association.

Away from the firehouse, Stephen and Amy are raising two daughters still at home while watching three grown kids make their mark. His oldest daughter teaches high school English and is married to a Sheriff's Deputy. His second daughter is a pastry chef at the four-star Montage Palmetto Bluff. His son followed him into public safety and serves as a firefighter-paramedic with the City of Greenville Fire Department. And then there are his two granddaughters, ages two and ten months, who call him Pops, which he will tell you beats every credential on this page by a mile.

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## CONDENSED BIOGRAPHY: PROGRAM VERSION

Stephen Combs did not plan a career in public safety. He walked into what he thought was a friendly breakfast meeting, found himself in an unannounced interview with most of county leadership, and walked out with a job offer he never saw coming. That ability to connect with any room, under any circumstances, has defined everything since. He has managed communications for some of South Carolina's most demanding incidents, including the **Townville Elementary School shooting**, the **Pinnacle Mountain Wildfire** (where he led the Joint Information Center for 10 days), and every major hurricane and disaster to hit the state in the past decade.

Today he serves as the Public Information Officer for the **Bluffton Township Fire District** and is the founder of **Firestore Leadership**, a leadership development platform rooted in the values of the fire service. He is one of fewer than **100 internationally credentialed PIOs** in the world through the Center for Public Safety Excellence, a FEMA Executive Public Information Officer, a South Carolina Certified Emergency Manager, and a former TEEK instructor who helped rewrite the national curriculum for public information training. A contributing author to the *2022 ASIS Security Industry Book of the Year* and soon, a John Maxwell Leadership certified speaker.

Stephen holds a master's in emergency management from Lander University and a business degree from Western Carolina University, where he graduated *magna cum laude*. He and his wife Amy of 31 years live in Bluffton, South Carolina, where they raised five kids and where he is now officially known as Pops to two granddaughters.

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*For booking inquiries, topic sheets, or a high-resolution photo, contact Stephen at [pio@blufftonfd.com](mailto:pio@blufftonfd.com) or visit [blufftonfd.com](http://blufftonfd.com).*