



# CHATHAM COUNTY POLICE DEPARTMENT

## STANDARD OPERATING PROCEDURES

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**SOP # OPS-006:**

**EFFECTIVE: 02/01/18**

**TRAFFIC ACCIDENT INVESTIGATIONS**

**REVISION: 06/24/22**

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### **PURPOSE**

The purpose of this directive is to outline procedures for traffic accident investigations.

### **POLICY**

The investigation of traffic accidents is necessary—to determine traffic law violations and obtain engineering data, protect the rights of the individuals involved, and assist in traffic education. The Chatham County Police Department (CCPD) shall conduct a proper and complete investigation of accidents professionally, absent any indications of bias on the part of investigating officers.

### **PROCEDURE**

#### **I. GENERAL**

- A. All reports of a vehicular accident received by the CCPD shall be answered, an investigation conducted, and a report written, provided it falls within CCPD jurisdiction and meets the following guidelines:
  - 1. Death or injury to one or more persons.
  - 2. Evidence that a vehicle left the scene.
  - 3. Collision due to alcohol or drugs.
  - 4. Hazardous materials.
  - 5. Damage to public vehicles or property.
- B. All reports of a vehicular accident received by the CCPD shall be answered, and a report may be written provided it falls within CCPD jurisdiction and meets the following guidelines:
  - 1. A disturbance between involved persons.
  - 2. Major traffic congestion as a result of the collision.
  - 3. Property damage to vehicles or other property.
- C. Accidents that occur on private property may be reported on a State of Georgia approved accident report, unless the accident involves one of the guidelines listed under

Section A of this directive or a serious traffic offense as defined by Georgia Traffic Law.

## **II. TRAFFIC ACCIDENT RESPONSE**

- A. Officers shall respond to all traffic accidents that occur within the limits of the unincorporated Chatham County.
- B. Officers responding to the scene of a traffic accident shall drive in a safe manner so as not to endanger themselves or the public and in accordance with O.C.G.A. § 40-6-6.
- C. The first officers at the accident scene shall take the following action:
  - 1. Place the patrol vehicle in a manner to protect the accident scene and alert other traffic of a roadway danger.
  - 2. Search for any injured and summon an emergency medical service unit if needed
  - 3. Call for additional assistance as needed.
  - 4. Protect the scene and preserve evidence.
  - 5. Establish traffic patterns around the scene.
  - 6. Locate persons involved in the accident.
  - 7. Locate and identify witnesses.
  - 8. Maintain peace and order at the scene.
  - 9. Summon a vehicle tow service if needed.
  - 10. Clear the roadway as soon as practical.
- D. If a fire hazard or other hazard exists on the scene, the first officer shall:
  - 1. Take immediate action to clear the area of all persons.
  - 2. Direct the communications center to dispatch the fire department or other appropriate agencies to contain and control the hazard.
  - 3. Direct the communications center to notify a supervisor.
  - 4. Request additional police assistance, if necessary, to make a perimeter around the scene.
- E. The responsibility of the accident scene remains that of the primary officer until relieved of the responsibility by an investigator (in cases of a traffic fatality) or a supervisor.

## **III. DUTIES OF INVESTIGATING OFFICER**

- A. The investigating officer shall properly report any traffic accidents meeting CCPD guidelines that occur within the jurisdiction of the CCPD.
- B. Officers shall also be familiar with the driver's responsibility, as outlined in O.C.G.A § 40-6-273 states the duties of the drivers to report traffic accidents involving injury to or death of any person or property damage to an apparent extent of \$500.00 or more.

1. CCPD personnel shall adhere to the following guidelines as they pertain to the distribution of the Personal Report of Accident Form (aka SR-13) to parties involved in traffic accidents:
  - a. Personal Report of Accident Form (aka SR-13) shall not be given out when:
    - (1) Any party involved (including occupants) in an accident request a police report.
    - (2) The accident is Hit & Run (no matter when the damage is discovered.)
    - (3) There is serious bodily injury person(s) involved in the accident,
    - (4) There is moderate to extensive damage to a vehicle.
  - b. Personal Report of Accident Form (aka SR-13) may be given out when:
    - (1) Requested by the parties involved in the accident. This does not mean that CCPD personnel will encourage the use of the form in lieu of an accident report.
    - (2) Both parties refuse a report at the time of the accident, then changed their mind(s) at a later date,
    - (3) Both parties have agreed to handle the accident amongst themselves as a civil matter, then change their mind(s) at a later date.
- C. The traffic accident shall be reported on a state of Georgia approved accident report form.
- D. The investigating officer shall be responsible for the following on-scene duties:
  1. Interviewing drivers/witnesses and including their comments in their report.
  2. Examining/recording vehicle damage.
  3. Recording accident information.
  4. Determining damage, if any, to the roadway and reporting it to the appropriate agency.
  5. Taking measurements, when appropriate.
  6. Requesting the forensics unit for scene photography, if necessary.
  7. Collecting/preserving, properly identifying, and securing evidence.
  8. Ensuring the Exchange of Information Form among parties involved (CCPD Accident Information form #1002)
  9. Checking for valid driver's license and insurance for each driver.
  10. Checking for possible impairment caused by being under the influence.
  11. The use of Body Worn Camera (BWC) will be indicated in the accident report narrative.

- E. Follow-up activities may be conducted away from the accident scene after the normal flow of traffic is resumed.
- F. The investigating officer shall be responsible for follow-up on accidents, when necessary, which include:
  - 1. Collecting off-scene data (includes locating hit and run vehicles, and talking to other witnesses who are not present at the scene).
  - 2. Obtaining/recording witnesses' statements.
  - 3. Specially trained investigators.
  - 4. Completion of the accident report and an incident report, if necessary, to support criminal charges arising from the incident.

#### **IV. EMERGENCY SUPPLIES AND ACCIDENT INVESTIGATION EQUIPMENT**

- A. Each marked police vehicle shall be equipped with a fire extinguisher for emergency use. Re-supply may be obtained at Quartermaster.
- B. All Supervisors shall carry crime scene protection tape in their vehicles for traffic accidents.
- C. All marked patrol units shall be equipped with at least four traffic cones.

#### **V. ENFORCEMENT ACTION**

- A. When an officer investigating a traffic accident, which occurred on the public streets/highways, can reasonably determine the cause of the accident, the at-fault person(s) will be issued an appearance citation(s) for related violation(s).
  - 1. If an officer cannot reasonably determine that a clear violation has occurred, the officer will contact a supervisor for a second opinion.
  - 2. If officers still cannot reasonably determine that a clear violation has occurred, none of the drivers will be issued a citation, and the officer shall indicate such in their report.
- B. Investigating Officers may issue citations on private property in accordance with O.C.G.A. § 40-6-3.
- C. In order to make the accident report more understandable, the last sentence of the narrative section should read as follows:
  - 1. The driver(s) of vehicle(s) number \_\_\_\_\_ is at fault for \_\_\_\_\_. (insert the violation)

#### **VI. CONTROL OF PROPERTY BELONGING TO ACCIDENT VICTIMS**

- A. The investigating officer shall remove any valuable property at the scene or from the vehicle(s) being towed if the person(s) involved are unable to care for the property and take the property to the CCPD property room for safekeeping.
  - 1. Property left in a towed vehicle will be listed on the tow form in the vehicle inventory section.

- B. The property shall be noted in the property log and may be released to the owner.
- C. The officer shall notify the owner and advise of the location of the removed property.
- D. In the event of a fatality, the property may be released by the Accident Investigator to the next of kin.

## **VII. HAZARDOUS MATERIALS AT ACCIDENT SCENES**

- A. Officers responding to accident scenes suspected to involve hazardous materials shall immediately:
  - 1. Notify the communications center for fire department assistance.
  - 2. Immediately request a supervisor at the scene.
  - 3. Move and keep people away from the accident scene.
  - 4. Request additional police assistance to establish a safe perimeter around the scene.
  - 5. Complete an accident report. Notify the Georgia State Motor Carrier Compliance Division (MCCD) of any Haz-Mat spills involving Commercial Vehicles. At the discretion of the MCCD, they may respond to conduct a Commercial Vehicle Inspection.
- B. When approaching the scene of an accident involving any cargo, Officers shall:
  - 1. Not walk into or touch any spilled material.
  - 2. Avoid inhalation of all gases, fumes, and smoke, even if no hazardous materials are involved.
  - 3. Not assume that gases or vapors are harmless because of a lack of odor.
- C. A supervisor must be dispatched to all hazardous material accident scenes, and upon arrival, the supervisor shall establish an incident command post at a safe location away from the accident scene and coordinate activities.

## **VIII. HIT AND RUN INVESTIGATIONS**

- A. Officers who are dispatched to investigate a hit and run traffic accident shall, within the constraints of duty assignment, time, distance, and jurisdiction, investigate the hit and run accident to the fullest extent possible, including any followup investigations.
- B. Officers shall collect and preserve latent and physical evidence. All evidence collected shall be noted in the original or supplemental reports.
  - 1. If private video data is available, the primary officer will review said video, obtain a copy, and log the video into the property room as evidence.
- C. Officers shall also interview witnesses, drivers, and passengers and report any significant statements in their report.
- D. The investigating officer is responsible for the accident investigation, the apprehension of suspects, supplemental reports, and the disposition of the investigation.

- E. When a case file is made, it shall contain all investigative information that is generated by the investigating officer and should consist of:
  - 1. Original report & supplemental(s).
  - 2. File checklist (Form # 240)
  - 3. Hit and Run case log.
  - 4. Copies of letters (including form #246, A-West Chatham, B-Islands, C-Whitfield, if mailed), citation(s), photographs, tow form, driver's license & tag printout.
  - 5. Additional data generated by the investigation.
- F. The patrol supervisors are responsible for tracking the progress of the hit and run investigations.
  - 1. This information will be documented in the County Police Department's "I" drive in a folder named "Hit & Run Investigations".
    - a. The spreadsheet in the West and East Precinct's folders will be used to track the status and dispositions of the hit and run investigations.
    - b. The disposition or the completion of the investigation should not exceed 90 days from the accident date. If the investigation exceeds 90 days an explanation will be documented by the supervisor in the spreadsheet.
- G. Case investigation files shall be filed in the case-report number sequence after disposition.
  - 1. Those cases that are current and under investigation shall be stored in the cabinet designated for that purpose at each precinct and shall be organized as:
    - a. Current investigations, pending charges shall remain in storage until the statute of limitations expires.
    - b. Closed cases, shall be retained in accordance with the Georgia's Records Retention Schedules.
- H. It is the responsibility of the investigating officer to explore every avenue available to solve a case.
  - 1. Each step shall be recorded in the case investigation file.
- I. The investigating officer shall:
  - 1. Respond to all telephone calls or inquiries about their investigations. The time and dates that calls or inquiries are returned shall be logged on the Investigator's case log.
  - 2. Conduct follow-up interviews and take written statements of witnesses, victims, and suspects as appropriate.
  - 3. Utilize any investigative resources available when appropriate, and make every effort to identify and charge the offender.

4. Charge and process identified offenders, prepare final investigative reports, assist the District Attorney when necessary, and present the case in court.
5. Notify their supervisor when an investigation is complete or if their investigation will exceed 90 days.

## **IX. TRAFFIC FATALITY INVESTIGATIONS**

- A. Officers responding to an accident scene and discovering a fatality, a serious injury which is likely to become a fatality, shall immediately:
  1. Notify their immediate supervisor of the serious injury, fatality, or potential fatality. A patrol supervisor shall respond to the scene and, if necessary, call for forensics officer and Georgia State Patrol (GSP) to investigate the accident.
    - a. Accident scenes that are actively being investigated or were investigated by CCPD officers will not be investigated by GSP.
  2. Protect the accident scene and all evidence, which includes:
    - a. Requesting additional officers if needed for scene protection.
    - b. Treating the accident scene as a crime scene.
    - c. Securing the scene from unauthorized entry and removing non-essential emergency personnel.
    - d. Ensuring that evidence is not disturbed without the permission of the investigator.
  3. Locate and assemble all witnesses.
  4. Record the name, address, telephone number, etc., of all witnesses and record any spontaneous statements made by them.
  5. Direct traffic around the accident scene.
  6. Control any crowds that may gather.
  7. Assist and remain with the accident investigator until released.
  8. GSP will complete the initial accident report when they investigate the accident. When not investigated by GSP, the primary officer will complete the accident report.
  9. As soon as practical, officers are to complete a supplemental accident report detailing their involvement in this investigation.
  10. The name of any deceased victim(s) will not be released to anyone.
- B. The supervisor responding to the scene shall:
  1. Coordinate responding units and on-scene units.
  2. Preserve the accident scene to ensuring evidence is left in place to the greatest extent possible.
  3. Make all necessary preliminary notifications.

- C. GSP is ordinarily responsible for ensuring the deceased's next of kin is notified;
  - 1. They may utilize the services of a department chaplain;
    - a. When available and time permitting.
    - b. When the notification is within Chatham County or nearby counties.
  - 2. Send a fatality teletype if the deceased is an out of town resident, or
  - 3. Use any other resources available for notification.
- D. The Public Information Officer (PIO) or designee may be required to provide essential information for a press release, at the appropriate time.

This policy revision supersedes previous policy revisions.

**BY ORDER OF:**

*Electronically Signed in PowerDMS on 06/24/2022*

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**Jeffrey M. Hadley**  
**Chief of Police**