



CHATHAM COUNTY POLICE DEPARTMENT

STANDARD OPERATING PROCEDURES

SOP # OPS-012

EFFECTIVE: 02/01/18

MISSING PERSONS

REVISION: 06/24/22

PURPOSE

The purpose of this policy is to establish guidelines and responsibilities regarding the Chatham County Police Department's (CCPD) response to reports of missing persons.

POLICY

It shall be the policy of the CCPD to investigate reports of missing persons that occur within the unincorporated Chatham County. Additionally, the CCPD holds that every person reported as missing under unusual circumstances as defined below will be considered **at risk** until significant information to the contrary is confirmed.

Jurisdictional conflicts are to be avoided when a person is reported missing. If a missing person either resides in, or was last seen in CCPD jurisdiction, the CCPD will immediately initiate the required reporting process. If a missing person legally resides in CCPD jurisdiction and was last seen in another jurisdiction, but the law-enforcement agency covering that jurisdiction chooses not to take a missing-person report, the CCPD will assume reporting and investigative responsibility.

Questions concerning parental custody occasionally arise in relation to missing-child reports. It shall be the policy of the CCPD to accept the report of a missing child even if custody has not been formally established. Reporting parties shall be encouraged to obtain legal custody as soon as possible; however, since the safety of the missing child (children) is paramount, CCPD Officers will open a case when it can be shown that the child is missing, without explanation, from their usual place of residence.

DEFINITIONS

Missing Adult - A person who is eighteen (18) years of age or older and whose absence is contrary to their normal patterns of behavior and may be due to one or more of the unusual circumstances.

Missing Child - A person who is younger than eighteen (18) years of age and whose whereabouts are unknown to their parent, guardian, or responsible party.

Unusual Circumstances - refers to a missing child thirteen (13) years of age or younger, a child or adult whose disappearance involves circumstances that would cause a reasonable person to conclude that the missing person should be considered at risk, or a child or an adult believed to be one or more of the following:

- *Out of the zone of safety for their age and physical and mental condition* - The zone of safety will vary depending on age. In the case of an infant, for example, the zone of safety shall include the immediate presence of an adult custodian, or the crib, stroller, or carriage in which the infant was placed. For a school age child, the zone of safety might be the immediate neighborhood or the route taken between home and school. In the case of an elderly person of

diminished physical and/or mental health, the zone of safety might include the close proximity and availability of a caregiver familiar with that individual's condition and needs.

- *Mentally diminished* - If a person is developmentally disabled, emotionally disturbed, or the victim of a disease, they may have difficulty communicating with others about needs, identity, or address. The disability places the person in danger of exploitation or other harm.
- *A potential victim of foul play or sexual exploitation* - Significant risk to the person can be assumed if the investigation reveals indications of a possible abduction, violence at the scene of the abduction, or signs of sexual abuse.
- *In a life-threatening situation* - The environment in which the person is missing may be particularly hazardous. Examples of a dangerous environment could be a busy highway for a toddler, an all-night truck stop for a young teenager, or simply an outdoor environment in inclement weather for a child or elderly missing person.
- *Absent from home for more than twenty-four (24) hours before being reported to the police as missing* - While some persons may incorrectly assume that twenty-four (24) hours must pass before police will accept a missing person case, a delay in reporting might also indicate the existence of neglect or abuse within the family.
- *Believed to be with persons who could endanger their welfare* - A missing person in such circumstances is in danger not only of sexual exploitation, but of involvement in criminal activity such as burglary, shoplifting and robbery.
- *Is absent under circumstances inconsistent with established patterns of behavior* - Most children and adults, to some degree have established routines that are reasonably predictable. Significant, unexplained deviations from those routines increase the probability that the person may be at risk.

PROCEDURE

I. JURISDICTION

- A. Whenever a person is reported missing, and the missing person resides in the unincorporated Chatham County, the CCPD shall respond to the incident location and complete the appropriate reports.
- B. If a person is not a permanent resident of the unincorporated Chatham County, but is staying with a permanent resident, the officer will complete the necessary report forms and conduct an investigation in the same manner as if the person were a permanent resident.
- C. Whenever it is suspected that a person may have been abducted or kidnapped from the unincorporated Chatham County, the officer will conduct an investigation accordingly.
- D. If a resident of another jurisdiction was last seen in the unincorporated Chatham County and there is no indication of criminal activity, the responding officer shall:
 1. Speak to the caller and complete the appropriate Investigative Report.
 2. Advise the caller to contact the police department in their jurisdiction.
 3. Call the police department where the Missing Person resides and advise of the situation.
 4. Check the surrounding area where the person was last seen.

II. LEVI'S CALL

- A. Levi's Call is the Georgia Bureau of Investigation's version of the Amber Alert. Levi's Call immediately accesses the emergency broadcast network for television and radio, as well as the DOT message boards across the State's highways.
- B. Activation Criteria:
 - 1. There must be a reasonable belief that an abduction has occurred of a child 17 years of age or under.
 - 2. The circumstances surrounding the abduction must indicate the likely possibility of harm to include death to the child. A non-custodial parent abduction where there is NO danger to the child will not be considered sufficient criteria.
 - 3. The case must be entered into NCIC immediately.
- C. Supervisors have the authority to approve the activation of a Levis Call. The Communications Center should be notified as soon as it is determined the abduction meets the criteria.

III. MATTIE'S CALL

- A. Georgia's Silver Alert Program is called "Mattie's Call." The program is for Older Persons with Alzheimer's disease and/or dementia and provides amissing emergency alert for disabled or elderly persons.
- B. Georgia law defines "disabled adults "as individuals who are developmentally impaired or who suffer from dementia or some other cognitive impairment. The Georgia Bureau of Investigations runs the program, and several criteria are in place for activation of the call, including:
 - 1. A local law enforcement agency believes a disabled person is missing and is in immediate danger of serious bodily injury or death.
 - 2. Through its own investigation, the law enforcement agency verifies the disappearance and eliminates alternative explanations for the disabled person's disappearance.
 - 3. Sufficient information is available to disseminate to the public that could assist in locating the disabled person.
 - 4. The missing disabled person is entered into the National Crime Information Center (NCIC) database.
 - 5. The law enforcement agency must issue a statewide broadcast to law enforcement/911 centers and contact local media regarding the missing person.
The twenty-four hour contact number for the GBI Communications Center is 404-244-2600

IV. DUTIES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

- A. Communications Personnel receiving the report of a missing person shall be responsible for the following:
 - 1. Determine if the circumstances of the report meet the definition of a missing child or adult as set forth in the "Definitions" section. By questioning the caller about the circumstances of the report, the call taker is able to make a preliminary assessment about the level of risk to the missing person. This assessment shall

also prepare the dispatcher to promptly activate additional response protocols, if needed.

2. Immediately dispatch an Officer to the scene of the report. There is no required waiting period for reporting a missing person. A person may be declared "missing" when their whereabouts are unknown and unexplainable for a period of time that is regarded by knowledgeable persons as highly unusual or suspicious in consideration of the subject's behavior patterns, plans, or routines.
 - a. The handling of certain missing person reports, such as suspected runaways, over the telephone is discouraged since accurate assessments of risk to the person cannot be made.
 - b. The National Child Search Assistance Act of 1990 mandates law enforcement's immediate response to reports of missing children and the prompt entry of descriptive information into the NCIC Missing Person File.
3. Notify a supervisor and an investigator when appropriate.
 - a. Because of the complexity of some missing person cases, especially those that may require the immediate mobilization of investigative resources, dispatchers should verify that a supervisor has been notified whenever Officers respond to such an assignment.
 - b. A supervisor and an investigator should be notified in every reported incident in which "unusual circumstances" are determined to exist.
4. Transmit the appropriate radio alerts and other notifications.
 - a. A critical responsibility of the dispatcher receiving the report is to obtain sufficient information from the reporting party to broadcast a radio message that alerts other Officers, and other agencies, if necessary, about the circumstances of the person's disappearance.
 - b. Basic information should include the person's race, sex, height, weight, hair and eye color, clothing, date of birth, and medical condition, including dementia and the location where the person was last seen. Most importantly, the radio alert should contain any information known about a possible abductor with special emphasis on the description of the suspect and vehicle used as well as the direction of travel.
5. Search agency records for related information.
 - a. It is essential for responding officers to know if the person or family has been the subject of previous reports that might have a bearing on this incident. If possible, records should also be reviewed to learn if any incidents have been reported in the proximate time or location to this incident that might have investigative value in this case. Complaints such as attempted abductions, prowlers, public lewdness, and suspicious persons shall be of particular interest.
 - b. Access should also be made to the sex offender registration file to determine if individuals designated as sexual predators reside, work, or might otherwise be associated with the area.

- B. The initial officer assigned to the report of a missing person shall:
1. Respond promptly to the scene of the report.
 2. Interview the person(s) making the initial report to gain an insight into the circumstances surrounding the disappearance and other information needed to conduct an initial assessment of the case.
 3. Obtain a description of the missing person.
 - a. The collection of information about the missing person; race, sex, height, weight, hair and eye color, clothing, date of birth, and any medical condition, including dementia and other noteworthy features should be done promptly and relayed to other Officers who may be assisting in the investigation and the Communications Center.
 - b. Recent photographs and/or videotapes should be secured, if available.
 4. Verify that the person is missing.
 - a. In the case of children, first responders should never assume that searches conducted by distraught parents or others have been performed in a thorough manner. Another check of the house and grounds should be made that includes places where children could be trapped, asleep, or hiding. Special attention should be paid to enclosures like refrigerators, freezers, and the interior of parked vehicles where limited breathing air may place the child at even greater risk.
 - b. In the case of older children, first responders should ask if parents have checked with the child's friends or perhaps overlooked or forgotten something the child may have said that would explain the absence. A search of the home should be conducted even if the child was last seen elsewhere.
 5. In the case of a child, confirm the child's custody status.
 - a. First responders should ascertain whether a dispute over the child's custody may have played a role in the disappearance.
 - b. Questions regarding whether the reporting party has full legal custody, or if the non-custodial parent has been contesting custody, or if the missing child expressed a wish to live with the other parent may help an Officer gain important insight into the case.
 - c. If the child is under the custody of DEFACS and/or has a probation officer.
 6. Identify the circumstances of the disappearance.
 - a. First responders need to ascertain whether the circumstances surrounding a person's disappearance are such that a heightened level of response is warranted.
 - b. If "unusual circumstances" exist, then the decision to employ additional responders and resources is clear. In other situations where the circumstances are not clear, Officers should keep the missing person's safety in mind and act accordingly.
 7. Determine when, where, and by whom the missing person was last seen. This information is needed to determine factors such as abduction time frame, the window of opportunity, and verification of previously received information.

8. Interview the individual(s) who last had contact with the missing person.
 - a. Effective questioning of those individuals who last saw or spoke with a missing person is crucial in the case assessment process.
 - b. While seeking information about the person's appearance, demeanor, and actions, Officers also should be alert to contradictions or evasiveness by the witness, especially if these statements cannot be readily substantiated.
9. Identify the missing person's zone of safety for their age and physical and mental state.
 - a. Responding Officers should attempt to determine how far the missing person could travel from the location where he or she was last seen.
 - b. This perimeter should, under many circumstances, define the first search zone.
10. Make an initial determination of the type of incident (i.e., runaway, abduction, etc.).
11. Obtain a description of the suspected abductor(s) and other pertinent information.
 - a. Officers need to record witness information immediately for general investigative use and before witnesses forget or speak to others who may confuse or make suggestions about what was actually observed.
 - b. If the abduction scene involves a business or other public place, Officers may be able to supplement witness information with video from security cameras that might provide crucial information about the suspect, vehicles, and circumstances.
 - c. In the case of a suspected family abduction, the reporting party may have photographs of the abductor or other valuable information.
12. Evaluate whether the circumstances of the child's disappearance meet LEVI'S CALL protocol.
13. Ensure that the missing person is entered into the NCIC Missing Person File under the correct category (i.e., disability, endangered, involuntary, juvenile, catastrophe, or other).
14. Provide detailed descriptive information to the communications unit for broadcast updates. As information becomes available regarding the missing person's physical appearance, circumstances of the case, or description of the potential abductor, the initial Officer should ensure that other Officers and agencies are provided with up-to-date facts.
15. Identify and interview everyone at the scene.
 - a. The name, address, home and work telephone number of everyone present at the scene, along with their relationship to the missing person, should be recorded. If possible, include them in photographs and/or videotapes of the incident scene.
 - b. By interviewing each person privately, Officers may be able to uncover information that shall be instrumental in the resolution of the case.
16. Conduct a thorough scene search.

- a. With the assistance of additional personnel, a systematic, thorough search of the incident scene should be conducted.
- b. If appropriate, Officers should obtain written permission to search houses, apartments, outbuildings, vehicles, and other property that might hold information about the person's disappearance.
- c. Officers shall conduct a thorough, immediate search of the child's home and property, even if the disappearance supposedly took place elsewhere.
- d. When possible, Officers also should search a missing child's school locker and any computer or electronic messaging system to which a capable child has access.
- e. Make a thorough search of:
 - (1) Premises.
 - Rooms (clothes, letters, etc.)
 - Closets.
 - Boxes
 - Under beds.
 - Crawl spaces.
 - Any place a person could secrete themselves.
 - (2) Additional Searches.
 - Check for a note.
 - Look in the person's wastebasket or school books for personal notes, timetables, or brochures.
 - Make a list of close associates.
 - Be sure to get a recent photo.
 - Make a list of places that the person likes to go, i.e., eating, recreation, etc.
 - List the addresses of vacation spots frequented by the family.
 - Obtain the locations of local "tree houses," barns, forts, and other areas where the youngster might go.
 - Check to see if the person has been corresponding with anyone lately.
 - Look at the most recent telephone bill for any new or frequently called telephone numbers or out-of-town telephone numbers.
 - Find out if any new friends have recently been called or been to the house.
 - Check to see if the person has a bank account and obtain the name of the bank.
 - Attempt to determine if the Missing Person has been talking about any particular area or activity recently.
 - (3) Search surrounding areas and areas of travel.

- To and from school.
 - School and grounds.
 - The area around the house or playgrounds.
 - Direction to and from work, or place last seen.
17. Secure and safeguard the area as a potential crime scene.
 - a. If unusual circumstances exist, Officers must take control of the immediate area where the incident occurred and establish an appropriate perimeter to avoid the destruction of vital evidence.
 - b. In addition to external crime scenes, the person's home, particularly their bedroom, should be secured and protected until evidence and identification materials such as hair, fingerprints, bite marks, etc., are collected.
 18. Prepare necessary reports and complete appropriate forms. Information gathered by the first responding Officer(s) may be instrumental in the eventual case solution. To record this important information, Officers should prepare a chronological account of their involvement and actions in the case from the time of assignment to the point of dismissal.
 19. Advise the reporting party to make contact with the CCPD should they hear anything from, or about, the Missing Person or if the Missing Person returns home.
- C. The supervisor assigned to the report of a missing person shall be responsible for the following:
1. Obtain a briefing from the first responder(s) and other agency personnel at the scene.
 - a. This briefing allows the supervisor to determine the scope and complexity of the case and thus develop an appropriate response.
 - b. The briefing should be conducted away from family, friends or any other individuals who may be present to allow Officers to speak freely about the events that have transpired and to pass along initial impressions and opinions that might be misconstrued by others.
 2. Determine if additional personnel and resources are needed to assist in the investigation.
 - a. Depending upon the situation, a supervisor may determine that additional personnel, including specialized units, should be called to the scene or otherwise assist in the investigation. Certain cases may also require that the supervisor activate existing interagency response protocols.
 - b. CEMA- By virtue of signed agreements between CCPD and the Chatham Emergency Management Agency, under Emergency Operations Plan ESF-9-1 Search and Rescue Coordination, CEMA will be notified in the event of a potential search and rescue mission due to:
 - (1) A natural or man-made event,
 - (2) A child under the age of 12 is missing,
 - (3) A person with mental illness is missing (i.e., Alzheimer's, Dementia, and Autism, etc.)

- c. The immediate supervisor handling a case of a missing person meeting the criteria above is responsible for ensuring CEMA is contacted as soon as it appears an active search will be needed.
 - (1) CEMA has the ability to activate resources and provide manpower assistance to plan and coordinate a protracted search.
 - (2) CCPD personnel will conduct all interviews with family members and witnesses.
 - d. Supervisory and command personnel will be familiar with the CEMA Emergency Operations Plan ESF-9-1.
 - e. The supervisor's responsibility is to ensure that the appropriate investigative unit has been notified and is responding to the correct location.
 - 3. Establish a command post if needed.
 - a. A command post is a field headquarters for scene management. It is used as a center for organizing personnel and directing investigative efforts as well as a focal point for inquiries, intelligence gathering, and media contacts.
 - b. As a general rule, the command post should be close enough to the center of activity to facilitate control and coordination but sufficiently apart to allow a free exchange of ideas among responders. Using the victim's home as a command post is not recommended.
 - 4. Organize and coordinate search efforts. A supervisor should appoint a search operation coordinator who can oversee the search effort while the supervisor remains available to manage the entire investigation.
 - 5. Ensure that all required notifications have been made.
 - 6. Establish a liaison with the victim's family. Families of a missing person will experience extreme stress. Supervisors should establish a liaison with the victim's family who can explain what investigative actions are being employed and what they can do to assist in the search.
 - 7. Confirm that all agency policies and procedures are observed. In addition to providing the innovative direction required during a missing person investigation, a supervisor must also ensure that the rules and regulations are adhered to.
 - 8. Manage media relations. Many missing person investigations, especially those involving large-scale search efforts, are likely to draw media attention. Supervisors should manage media presence in a way that complements rather than conflicts with the investigation.
 - 9. Patrol Sergeant/Senior Officer is to remain in charge unless directed otherwise by the Chief of Police.
- D. The investigator assigned to the report of a missing person shall be responsible for the following:
- 1. Obtaining a briefing from agency personnel at the scene. This briefing should be conducted prior to interviews with family members of the missing person or witnesses who may have been identified during the initial stage of the case to assist the investigator in formulating an effective interview strategy.

2. Verifying the accuracy of all descriptive information. The verification process should include all details developed during the preliminary investigation. During the interview process, the investigator should be alert to facts or statements that conflict with those gathered by the first responder.
3. Conducting a neighborhood investigation if appropriate.
 - a. A thorough canvass of the neighborhood should be conducted without delay. The objective is to identify and interview all persons within the abduction zone who may provide information related to the incident.
 - b. Investigators should use a standardized set of questions to insure completeness and uniformity of information and facilitate the establishment of a data base to track leads.
 - c. Records should also be made of all vehicles parked within the neighborhood and any other conditions that may have future investigative value.
 - d. Access should also be made to the Georgia Sex Offender Registration file to determine if individuals designated as sexual predators reside, work, or might otherwise be associated with the area.
4. Obtaining a brief history of recent family dynamics.
 - a. Information about family dynamics obtained from family members, neighbors, teachers, classmates, employers, co-workers, friends, and witnesses can offer valuable insights into what may have happened to the missing person and where he or she may be found.
 - b. Records of family contact maintained by law enforcement agencies, social service departments, schools, and other organizations should also be evaluated.
5. Exploring the basis for conflicting information. When preliminary investigative steps have been taken, investigators should "compare notes" with the first responder, fellow investigators, and other agency personnel to identify and work through conflicting information. This collaborative evaluation will provide the investigative staff with a solid foundation to structure future case directions.
6. Implementing effective case management.
7. Evaluating the need for additional resources and specialized services. The complexity of many missing person incidents may necessitate the use of resources and services both from within the agency and from other organizations as well. Investigators should be aware of the input that can be obtained from resources such as the FBI, NCIC, and the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children.
8. Updating descriptive information. If it appears that the case will not be resolved promptly, investigators should ensure that the descriptive record, especially that entered into the NCIC Missing Person File, is updated to include dental characteristics, scars, marks and tattoos, fingerprints, along with additional articles of clothing, jewelry, or unique possessions.
9. Monitoring media relations. While information gained through effective media relations is often of significant value in a missing person case, investigator

supervisors should review all notices prior to release to ensure that investigative objectives are not unintentionally compromised.

10. Assuming investigative responsibility from the initial officer. A thorough review of all work completed by the initial officer must be done immediately by the Investigator assigned to the case to assess what investigative tasks, notifications, and responsibilities must be completed. This will prevent anything from being overlooked.
- E. When the missing person has not been located, the detective will periodically contact the reporting party. This is to determine if the missing person has returned, contacted them, and/or let them know the case is still open. This contact will be documented in a supplemental report.

V. RECOVERY FOLLOW-UP

- A. A case shall not be closed based upon information received from a third party.
- B. Interview the person that was reported missing.
- C. Complete a Supplemental Investigation Report.
- D. Cancel all Crime Alert and NCIC Records. The officer receiving the call shall be responsible for ensuring that the cancellations are entered via Communications/Dispatchers.
- E. In the case of a missing adult who has been located, inform the located person that he or she is the subject of a missing person investigation. If the located person is a competent adult, the officer shall determine the person's willingness for the police to reveal his or her whereabouts.
- F. Notify the initial reporting person(s) of the well-being and, if permissible, the physical whereabouts and contact information of the person who has been located.
- G. In the case of a missing or abducted person who has been located, arrange for intervention services, if indicated. During the verification process, Officers should be alert for indications that additional services may be needed before a located person can safely remain with his or her family. These services may include mental and/or physical health examinations and arrangements for family counseling.
- H. In the case of a runaway or missing child from within department jurisdiction, who has been located and who is not wanted on a warrant or other law violation, arrange the return of the child to his or her legal guardian or to an appropriate shelter.
- I. In the case of a runaway from another county or from out-of-state, who has been located and for whom an arrest warrant exists, or for whom an NCIC Missing Person hit is verified, place the child in custody and transport the child to the appropriate facility.
- J. Complete the appropriate supplemental reports and cancel all outstanding notifications. Along with the cancellation of the NCIC Missing Person File entry and other notifications regarding the case, a supplemental report should be completed that describes the person's activities while missing and the circumstances of the recovery/return.

VI. UNIDENTIFIED PERSON

- A. An Officer assigned to the report of an unidentified person, living or deceased, shall be responsible for the same investigative and reporting procedure as outlined in this policy and procedure for Missing Persons.
- K. The Criminal Investigations Division will be responsible for the following:
 - 1. Obtain a complete description.
 - 2. Enter the unidentified person's description into the NCIC Unidentified Person File as soon as the individual identifying characteristics become available, which are necessary for the basic file entry.
 - 3. Ensure that a teletype message with all available, pertinent information regarding the unidentified person shall be broadcast concurrently with the entry into the National Crime Information Center Unidentified Persons File. The teletype will be broadcast on a statewide basis and expanded as the need exists.
 - 4. The record entry shall be immediately cleared from the National Crime Information Center Unidentified Persons File (NCIC) when an unidentified person is identified.
 - 5. Ensuring that a teletype message is immediately broadcast regarding the identification of the previously reported unidentified person. It is the responsibility of the Criminal Investigations Division to clear NCIC entries upon identifying the previously unidentified person.
 - 6. Utilize all available resources to aid in the identification of the person.
 - 7. Cancel all notifications after identification is confirmed.

BY ORDER OF:

Electronically Signed in PowerDMS on 06/24/2022

Jeffrey M. Hadley
Chief of Police