

GEAUGA COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE AGENCY AND ADMINISTRATION POLICY AND PROCEDURE		NUMBER 7.5	PAGE 1 OF 14
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POLICY

It is the policy of the Geauga County Sheriff's Office to thoroughly investigate all reports of missing persons. Members of the Geauga Sheriff's Office will consider every person reported as missing, "**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 resides in, or was last seen in Geauga County, the Geauga Sheriff's Office will ensure that the police agency with jurisdiction is immediately notified. (i.e. Chardon City, Burton Village, Geauga Park Rangers, etc.) If the missing person legally resides in Geauga County and was last seen in another jurisdiction, but the law enforcement agency covering that jurisdiction chooses not to make a missing persons report, the Geauga Sheriff's Office 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 Geauga Sheriff's Office 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 (ren) is paramount, members of the Geauga Sheriff's Office will open a case, without delay, when it can be shown that the child is missing without explanation from his or her usual place of residence, and will continue until such time that the child is located and determined to be safe.

REFERENCE

GCSO Policy 7.6 Amber Alert
GCSO Policy 7.7 Silver Alert
GCSO Policy 7.8 Deserted Children
GCSO Policy 7.9 A Child is Missing
National Center for Missing & Exploited Children Model Policy
National Center for Missing & Exploited Children Check List

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PURPOSE

The purpose of this policy is to establish guidelines and responsibilities regarding response to reports of missing persons by members of the Geauga Sheriff's Office.

DEFINITIONS

Missing adult refers to a person who is:

- a. 18 years of age or older and
- b. Whose absence is contrary to his or her normal patterns of behavior and may be due to one or more unusual circumstances listed in Paragraph D of this section

Missing child refers to a person who is:

- a. Younger than 18 years of age and
- b. Whose whereabouts are unknown to his or her parent, guardian, or responsible party.

At Risk – the missing adult or child will be considered “**at risk**” when one or more of the **unusual circumstances** noted in section b of the definition of unusual circumstance are present.

Unusual Circumstances -The term **unusual circumstances** refers to:

- a. A missing child 13 years of age or younger. This age was established by the federal Missing Children Assistance Act because children of this age group have not established independence from parental control and do not have the survival skills necessary to protect themselves from exploitation on the streets.
- b. A child or an adult who is missing and believed to be one or more of the items noted below.

- i. Out of the zone of safety for his or her 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 will include the immediate presence of an adult custodian or the crib, stroller, or carriage in which the infant was placed. For a school-aged child the zone of safety might be the immediate neighborhood or 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.
- ii. Mentally diminished. If the person is developmentally disabled or emotionally disturbed, or the victim of disease, he or she may have difficulty communicating with other about needs, identity, or address. The disability places the person in danger of exploitation or other harm.
- iii. Drug dependant. In the case of a child, the term "drug dependant" shall refer to dependence on either prescription or illicit substances, since any drug dependency puts a child at substantially increased risk. In the case of an adult, the term "drug dependant" shall refer to a dependence on legally prescribed medicines vital to the adult's continued physical well-being. This in no way limits a deputy's discretion in determining exigent circumstances regarding an adult's use of illicit drugs.
- iv. A potential victim of foul play or sexual exploitation. Significant risk to the person can be assumed if investigation indicates a possible abduction, violence at the scene of abduction, or signs of sexual abuse.
- v. 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 teenager, or an outdoor environment in inclement weather for a child of any age or elderly missing person.
- vi. Absent from home for more than 24 hours before being reported to law enforcement as missing. While some persons may incorrectly assume that 24 hours must pass before law enforcement will accept a missing-person case, a delay in reporting might also indicate the existence of neglect or abuse within the family.
- vii. Believed to be with persons who could endanger his or her 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.
- viii. 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. 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.

PROCEDURAL GUIDELINES

A. Actions upon determination of **unusual circumstances**.

1. If it is determined that unusual circumstances are involved in the report of a missing adult or child, the person will be considered **at-risk**, and an expanded investigation, including the use of all appropriate resources, will immediately commence. While all missing-person incidents should be thoroughly investigated, those involving unusual circumstances indicate a heightened likelihood of risk to the person and, therefore, require an intensive response.
2. If appropriate, existing interagency response protocols – including **AMBER or Silver Alerts** and/or other immediate community notification methods, if available – should be considered. Pre-planned strategies for responding to missing-person reports are essential for successful case resolution. The Geauga County Sheriff's Office has a cooperative agreement with the Geauga County Department of Emergency Services and other law enforcement agencies within Geauga County which pertains to, "At Risk" missing person cases.

B. Communication personnel receiving the report of a missing person shall:

1. Determine if circumstances of the report meet the definition of a missing child or adult as set forth in DEFINITIONS. By questioning the caller about the circumstances of the report, the dispatcher can 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. Dispatch, in a prompt manner, a deputy to the scene of the report. The deputy who routinely patrols the vicinity of the report is best suited to handle the first response since he or she should be familiar with the area and is likely to have knowledge of unusual activities, suspicious persons, known offenders, and other neighborhood dynamics. The handling of missing person reports over the telephone is discouraged since accurate assessments of risk to the person cannot be made. However, reports of missing persons made by distant family members or close acquaintances of the missing person will be investigated.

Notes:

(1) 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 in to the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) National Crime Information Center (NCIC) Missing Person File.

(2) The PROTECT Act of 2003 amended the National Child Search Assistance Act to extend the same NCIC reporting responsibility and other benefits to young adults, 18, 19, and 20 years of age.

3. Notify a supervisor and investigator when appropriate. 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 deputies respond to such an assignment. A supervisor and a deputy should be notified of every reported incident in which "unusual circumstances" exist.
4. Transmit the appropriate radio alerts and other notifications. A critical responsibility of the dispatcher is to obtain sufficient information from the reporting party to broadcast a radio message that alerts other deputies and law enforcement officers within Geauga County about the circumstances of the person's disappearance. Information should include the person's height, weight, hair and eye color, and clothing, as well as the location where last seen. 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 direction of travel. In the case of an abduction, consideration should also be given to using highway surveillance plans to apprehend a fleeing abductor.
5. Reverse 911 –If appropriate, a reverse 911 message can be scripted and directed to the area where the person was last seen, or believed to have been. Descriptive information regarding the victim and / suspect should be provided when available.
6. Search agency records for related information. It is essential for responding deputies 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 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 will be of particular interest. Access should also be made to the Sex Offender Registration list to determine if individuals designated as sexual predators reside, work, or might otherwise be associated with the area.

7. Safeguard all pertinent records. The dispatcher should also ensure that records of all communication related to this incident, such as telephone conversations with the reporting party including written notes regarding the discussion, radio broadcasts, and all subsequent notifications, are safeguarded for future investigative reference.
8. Initiate media contact – including activation of the **AMBER/Silver Alert** system and/or other immediate community notification methods when appropriate. The dispatcher, under direction of a law enforcement supervisor, should contact the Public Information Officer. The PIO is best situated to provide information to the media that is designed to elicit public assistance in the search for the missing child.
9. Preparation- Dispatchers should have available the telephone numbers of media contacts should they be called upon to make notifications. Additionally, the dispatcher should also be prepared to immediately activate the appropriate immediate, community notification method if so directed by appropriate law enforcement personnel.

C. The **initial deputy** or first responder assigned to the report of a missing person shall:

1. Respond promptly to the scene of the report. Even if the assigned deputy has been provided with initial information such as the missing person's description and other facts about the incident, it would be inappropriate to delay response to conduct a random search, or stop suspicious vehicles or individuals, unless in immediate response to the missing person's safety, these activities can't be handled by other patrol units. It is important to have a deputy at the scene as soon as possible to being collecting and relaying accurate information.
2. Interview the person (s) who made the initial report. The purpose of this interview is to gain 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. The collection of information about the missing person, including race, height, weight, hair and eye color, clothing, and other noteworthy features, should be done promptly and relayed to other deputies who may be assisting in the investigation. Recent photographs and/or videotape should be secured if available.
4. Verify that the person is in fact missing. 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. In the case of older children,

first responders should ask if parents have checked the with the child's friends or perhaps overlooked or forgotten something the child may have said that would explain the absence.

Note: A search of the home should be conducted even if the missing person was last seen elsewhere.

5. Confirm custody status. First responders should ascertain whether a dispute over the child's custody might have played a role in the disappearance. Questions regarding whether the reporting party has full legal custody, in the noncustodial parent has been contesting custody, or if the missing child expressed a wish to live with the other parent, may help a deputy gain important insight into the case.
6. Identify the circumstances of the disappearance. First responders need to ascertain whether the circumstances surrounding a person's disappearance are such that a heightened level of response is warranted. If "unusual circumstances" exist, (See definition), then the decision to employ additional response methods is clear. In other situations where the circumstances are not clear, deputies should keep the missing person's safety in mind and act accordingly.
7. Determine when, where, and by whom the person was last seen. This information is needed to determine factors such as abduction time frame, window of opportunity, and verification of previously received information.
8. Interview the individual (s) who last had contact with the missing person. Effective questioning of those individuals who last saw or spoke with a missing person is crucial in the case assessment process. While seeking information about the person's appearance, demeanor, and actions, deputies should also be alert to contradictions or evasiveness by the witness, especially if these statements cannot be readily substantiated. These interviews should be recorded when possible.
9. Identify the missing person's zone of safety for his or her age and physical and mental state. The responding deputy should attempt to determine how far the missing person could travel from the location where they were last seen. This perimeter should, under many circumstances, define the first search zone.
10. Make an initial determination of the type of incident. By employing all available assessment tools (i.e., completion of standardized forms; interview with parents, other family members, and friends; statements of witnesses; and search of scene) a deputy should be able to reach a preliminary determination regarding the type of case and need for additional resources.

Note: Deputies must be cautious in “labeling” while classifying a missing person case, since the classification process shall affect the way in which initial information or evidence is gathered. Even if first indications suggest a “less urgent” incident, deputies should consider all possibilities until the case category is clearly determined.

11. Obtain a description of the suspected abductor (s) and other pertinent information. Deputies need to immediately record witness information, not only for general investigative use but also before witnesses forget or speak to other who may confuse or make suggestions about what was actually observed. If the abduction scene involves a business or other public place, deputies may be able to supplement witness information with video from security cameras that might provide crucial information about the suspect, vehicles, and circumstances. In the case of a suspected family abduction, the reporting party may have photographs of the abductor or other valuable information.
12. Evaluate whether circumstances of the child’s disappearance meet existing AMBER Alert and/or other immediate community protocols. Discuss plan activation with supervisor. In most cases the decision to activate and AMBER Alert rests with supervisory staff; however, input from first responders may be instrumental in the supervisor’s decision making process. **(See Amber Alert Policy – 7.6)**
13. Determine the correct NCIC Missing Person File category and ensure that a notification is promptly transmitted. There are 6 categories within the Missing Person File. They are disability, endangered, involuntary, juvenile, catastrophe, and other. Quickly entering this information into NCIC will increase the possibility of identifying a missing person coincidentally stopped or observed by law enforcement personnel not yet aware of the incident at hand. In the case of a missing child, simply because the child is younger than 18 does not require that the juvenile category must be used. The circumstances of the disappearance should govern category selection.
14. Provide detailed descriptive information to the communications division 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 deputy should ensure that other deputies and agencies are provided with up-to-date facts.
15. Identify and interview everyone at the scene. The name, address, home and work telephone numbers of everyone present at the scene, along with his or her relationship to the missing person, should be recorded. If possible, include them in photographs and/or videotapes of the incident scene. By interviewing each person privately, deputies may be able to uncover information that could be instrumental in resolution of the case. All witnesses and persons contacted should be

entered into the Spillman Name file and added to the report with the appropriate relationship to the case.

16. Conduct a thorough search of the scene. With the assistance of additional personnel, a systematic, thorough search of the incident scene should be conducted. If appropriate, deputies should obtain written permission to search houses, apartments, outbuildings, vehicles, and other property that might hold information about the person's disappearance. Deputies are again reminded to conduct a thorough, immediate search of the person's home and property – even if the disappearance supposedly took place elsewhere. When possible deputies should also search a missing child's school locker as well as any computer or electronic messaging systems to which a child has access. Searchers should also be alert for any surveillance or security cameras in the vicinity that may have captured information about the person's disappearance.
17. Secure and safeguard the area as a potential crime scene. If unusual circumstances exist, first responders must take control of the immediate area where the incident occurred and establish an appropriate perimeter to avoid destruction of vital evidence. In addition to external crime scenes, the missing person's home, and particularly his or her bedroom, should be secured and protected until evidence and identification material such as hair, fingerprints, and bite marks are collected.
18. Prepare necessary reports and completing appropriate forms. Information gathered by the first responding deputy (ies) may be instrumental in the eventual case resolution. To record his important information, deputies should prepare a chronological account of their involvement and actions in the case from time of assignment to the point of dismissal. Reports should include all information known to the deputy, not just those events that seem to have a direct bearing on the case.

D. Supervisor Responsibilities

1. Obtain a briefing from the first responder (s) and other agency personnel at the scene. This briefing allows the supervisor to determine the scope and complexity of the case and develop an appropriate response. The briefing should be conducted away from family, friends, or any other individuals who may be present. Doing so shall allow deputies to speak freely about the events that have transpired and 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. Depending on 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. It is the supervisor's responsibility to ensure that the appropriate investigative aids have been notified and are responding to the correct location.

3. The supervisor / OIC will contact and brief the Division Commander.
4. Staff Page: Should it be determined that a reported missing person is at risk a staff the supervisor / OIC will ensure that a staff notification page is sent as soon as possible.
5. Consider activation of the **AMBER Alert** system and/or other immediate community notification methods. If circumstances indicate the chances for the child's safe recovery would be increased by immediate public awareness, a supervisor should promptly implement such efforts.
6. Establish a command post. The 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, and intelligence gathering. 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.

E. Staff Response:

1. Staff members responding to assist with the search for a missing person will respond to the incident command post, or other appropriate location as directed by the Incident Commander.
2. Organize and coordinate search efforts. The Incident Commander should consider assigning a search operations coordinator who can oversee the search effort while the supervisor remains available to manage the entire investigation.
3. Ensure that all required notifications have been made. Because dissemination of information is an integral part of the search for a missing person, the supervisor should ensure that all deputies, other departments and agencies, and all investigative networks are supplied with accurate details.
4. Confirm that all office policies and procedures are observed. In addition to providing the direction required during a missing person investigation, a supervisor must also ensure that the rules and regulations of a professional law enforcement organization are adhered to. Established policies and procedures, especially those related to missing children, should be regularly reviewed to ensure compliance.
5. Manage media relations. Many missing person investigations, especially those involving large scale efforts, are likely to draw media attention. Supervisors should manage media presence in a way that complements, rather than conflicts with the investigation.

F. Public Information Officer / Media Relations

1. Notification. The PIO is included in the Staff Page Notification Group. The PIO is available to assist the Sergeant / OIC and or Incident Commander in matters pertaining to media notifications and management. The PIO can be a valuable resource in serves as a liaison to the various media outlets.

- G. Victim Advocate – The victim advocate is available and can serve to establish a liaison with the victim family. Families of a missing person will experience extreme stress. Supervisors should establish a liaison with the victim family who can explain what investigative actions are being employed and what they can do to assist in the search.

H. The Deputy / Detective assigned to investigate a missing person shall:

1. Obtain a briefing from agency personnel at the scene. This briefing should be conducted prior to follow-up interviews with family members of the missing person or witnesses who may have been identified during the initial stage of the case. Its objective is to assist the investigator in formulating an effective interview strategy.
2. Verify 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. Initiate a neighborhood investigation if appropriate. A thorough canvas of the neighborhood should be conducted without delay. The objective is to identify and interview all persons within the abduction zone who may be able to provide information related to the incident. Investigators should use a standardized set of questions to ensure completeness and uniformity of information and facilitate establishment of a database to track leads. A record should also be made of all vehicles parked within the neighborhood and any other conditions that may have future investigative value. Access should also be made to the Sex Offender Registration list to determine if individuals designated as sexual predators reside, work, or might otherwise be associated with the area. **Identification information should be obtained from all persons spoken to, and this information should be entered into Spillman.**
4. Obtain a brief history of recent family dynamics. Information about family dynamics, obtained from family members, neighbors, teachers, classmates, employers, coworkers, friends, and witnesses, can offer valuable insights into what may have happened to the missing person

and where he or she may be found. Records of family contact maintained by law enforcement agencies, social service departments, schools, and other organizations should also be obtained and evaluated.

5. Explore the basis for conflicting information. When preliminary investigative steps have been taken, investigators should “compare notes” with the first responder, fellow investigators, and other office personnel to identify and work through conflicting information. This collaborative evaluation will provide the investigative staff with a solid foundation upon which to structure future case directions.
6. Implement effective case management. Depending on the resources available, information may either be computerized or incorporated in a simple card system. Both methods are used to record, index, cross reference, and retrieve the facts amassed during an investigation. The method doesn’t matter as long as the system works for the investigator in charge of solving the case. *Note: NCMEC can provide computer software designed for effective case management.*
7. Evaluate 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 office 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 & Exploited Children – in particular **Team Adam**, which is a rapid response team of experienced law enforcement investigators.
8. Update descriptive information. If it appears that the case will not be promptly resolved, investigators should ensure that the descriptive records, especially those entered into the NCIC Missing Person File, are updated to include dental characteristics, scars, marks, tattoos, and fingerprints along with additional articles of clothing, jewelry, or unique possessions.

Note: The National Child Search Assistance Act – enacted in 1990 and amended by the PROTECT Act in 2003 – mandates the entry of descriptive information for all persons, birth through 20 years of age. These entries are required to be made no more than 60 days after the report is taken.

9. Monitor media relations. While information gained through effective media relations is often of significant value in a missing person case, investigators should review all notices prior to release to ensure that investigative objectives are not unintentionally compromised.
- I. The deputy assigned to the report of an **unidentified person**, whether living or deceased, shall:

1. Obtain a complete description. Deputies who are assigned to this task should utilize standardized information gathering forms such as the NCIC Unidentified Person File Worksheet.
2. Enter the unidentified person's description in the NCIC Unidentified Person File. This file is compared daily with the contents of the NCIC Missing Person File. Entries with common characteristics are flagged and both agencies are informed.
3. Utilize all available resources to aid in identification of the person. The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children and state medical examiners may be of assistance in the identification.
4. Cancel all notifications after identification is confirmed.

J. The deputy assigned to the **recovery or return** of a missing person shall:

1. Verify - that the located person is, in fact, the reported missing person. A deputy should personally verify all returns. The benefits of this practice include verifying the person's safety, gaining intelligence about possible predators, and helping to prevent future episodes.
2. Inform, - in the case of a missing competent adult who has been located, the located person that he or she is the subject of a missing person investigation. If the located person is a competent adult, the deputy shall determine the person's willingness for law enforcement to reveal his or her whereabouts. To the extent possible, a competent adult's desire to remain hidden should be honored if it is possible to do so.
3. Notify - the initial reporting person (s) of the well being and, if permissible, the whereabouts and contact information of the person who has been located.
4. Secure - in the case of a missing or abducted person who has been located, intervention services, if indicated. During the verification process, deputies should be alert for indications that additional services may be needed before a located person can be safely reunited with his or her family. These services may include mental and/or physical health examinations and arrangements for family counseling.
5. Arrange - in the case of a runaway or missing child from within the Geauga County who has been located and who is not wanted on a warrant or other law violation, the return of the child to his or her legal guardian or to an appropriate children's shelter.
6. Place - in the case of a runaway from another jurisdiction from out of state who has been located and for whom a warrant exists or for whom an NCIC missing person "hit" is verified, the child in custody and transport him or her to the appropriate facility for admission.
7. Complete - the appropriate supplemental reports and cancel all outstanding notifications. Along with cancellation of the NCIC Missing Person File entry and other notifications regarding the case, a

supplemental report should be completed in Spillman that describes the person's activities while missing and circumstances of the recovery/return.