

COVINGTON POLICE DEPARTMENT STANDARD OPERATING PROCEDURE

Subject: MISSING CHILDREN

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I. Purpose

To establish a uniform process and immediate response to reports of missing children and the prompt entry of descriptive information into the GCIC/NCIC missing persons file.

II. Statement of Policy

It shall be the policy of the Covington Police Department to take every report of a missing child seriously. Officers will investigate all reports thoroughly and shall consider every child at risk until significant information to the contrary is confirmed.

It shall also be the policy of this department that jurisdictional conflicts are to be avoided when a child is reported missing. If a missing child either resides in or was last seen in the City of Covington, this department will immediately initiate the required reporting process. If a child resides in the City of Covington and was last seen in another jurisdiction, but the agency covering that jurisdiction chooses not to take a missing child report, this agency will assume reporting and investigative responsibility.

III. Definitions

1. Missing child – any child under the age of 17 and whose whereabouts are unknown to his or her parent, guardian or responsible party.
2. At-risk child – any child 13 years of age or younger. (Note: 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). This definition also applies if:
 - a. the child is out of the zone of safety for his or her age, developmental stage, and/or physical condition. In the case of an infant, 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 the route taken between home and school.
 - b. the child is mentally diminished. If the child is developmentally disabled or emotionally disturbed, he or she may have difficulty communicating

with others about needs, identity, or address. The disability places the child in danger of exploitation or other harm.

- c. the child is drug dependent, including both prescription and/or illicit substances. Any drug dependency puts the missing child at risk. The diabetic or epileptic child requires regular medication or his or her condition may become critical. The illicit drug abuser, on the other hand, may resort to crime or become the victim of exploitation.
 - d. the child is a potential victim of foul play or sexual exploitation. Risk to the child can be assumed if the investigation indicates a possible abduction, violence at the scene of abduction, or signs of sexual abuse.
 - e. the child is in a life-threatening situation. The environment in which the child is missing may be particularly hazardous. Examples of a dangerous environment could be a busy highway for a toddler or an all-night truck stop for a teenager.
 - f. the child is absent from home for more than 24 hours before being reported to law enforcement as missing. While some parents 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.
 - g. the child is believed to be with others who could endanger his or her welfare. A missing child in such circumstances is in danger not only of sexual exploitation, but also of involvement in criminal activity such as burglary, shoplifting and robbery.
 - h. the child is absent under circumstances inconsistent with established patterns of behavior. Most children have an established routine that is reasonably predictable. Significant, unexplained deviations from that routine increase the probability of risk to the child.
3. **A Child Is Missing (ACIM) Program** – A public/private partnership devoted to assisting law enforcement in search/early recovery efforts during the initial hours of a child/elderly person's disappearance via a rapid-response neighborhood notification system utilizing a high-tech telephony program. ACIM uses a three-prong program: a telephone database, geo-mapping system, and a satellite imagery system.
 4. **Levi's Call** – Georgia's version of the national Amber Alert program. A voluntary partnership between law enforcement, emergency management, and broadcasters to issue an urgent bulletin in child abduction cases. Levi's Call utilizes the Emergency Alert System (EAS) to deliver vital information to broadcasters and the public about a missing child and an abductor. The Georgia Department of Transportation's Changeable Message Signs located along major highways also are accessed to display descriptive information about a suspect's vehicle.
 5. **The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC)** – Serves as the national clearinghouse for information on missing children and the sexual exploitation of children. NCMEC's role is to assist law enforcement by providing support in missing children and sexual exploitation cases.

IV. Responsibilities

A. Communications personnel

1. Determine if circumstances of the report meet the definition of a missing child as determined above.

By questioning the caller about the circumstances of the report, the call-taker can make a preliminary assessment about the level of risk to the missing child. This assessment shall also prepare the call-taker to promptly activate additional response protocols if needed.

2. Promptly dispatch an officer to the scene of the report.
3. Notify a supervisor of the call.
4. Transmit the appropriate radio alerts and other notifications.

A critical responsibility of the call-taker is to obtain sufficient information from the reporting party to broadcast a radio message that alerts other officers and other agencies if necessary. Information should include the child's race, sex, height, weight, hair and eye color and clothing, as well as the last know location of the child.

5. Search the CAD system for previous responses that might have a bearing on this incident.
6. Safeguard all pertinent records.

The records of all communications related to the incident will be safeguarded for future investigative reference.

7. Initiate media contact – including activation of the Levi's Call Alert system, "A Child Is Missing" program and any other community notification methods when appropriate.

B. Responsibilities of first responding officer.

1. Respond promptly to the scene of the report.
2. Interview the parent(s) or person 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 child including photograph(s) and videotapes.

The collection of information about the missing child, including race, height, weight, hair and eye color, clothing, and other noteworthy features, should be done promptly and relayed to other officers who may be assisting in the investigation. Several recent photographs and/or videotape, if available, should be secured.

4. Verify that the child is in fact missing.

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 where children could be trapped, asleep, or hiding. Special attention should be paid to enclosures like refrigerators, freezers, and the interior or trunks 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 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 child was last seen elsewhere.

5. Confirm the child's 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, if the noncustodial 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.

6. Identify the circumstances of the disappearance.

First responders need to ascertain whether the circumstances surrounding the child's disappearance are such that a heightened level of response is warranted. If "unusual circumstances" exist, then the decision to employ additional response methods is clear. In other situations where the circumstances are not clear, officers should keep the missing child's safety in mind and act accordingly.

7. Determine when, where, and by whom the missing child was last seen.
8. Interview the individual(s) who last had contact with the missing child.
9. Identify the child's zone of safety for his or her age, developmental stage, and physical and mental state.
10. Obtain a description of the suspected abductor(s) and other pertinent information.

Officers need to immediately record witness information, not only for general investigative use but also before witnesses forget or speak to others who may confuse or make suggestions about what was actually observed. 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. In the case of a suspected family abduction, the reporting party may have photographs of the abductor or other valuable information.

11. Determine the correct NCIC Missing Person File category and ensure that a notification is promptly transmitted.

There are 5 categories with the Missing Persons File that apply to children. They are disability, endangered, involuntary, juvenile, and

catastrophe. Simply because the child is younger 17 does not require that the juvenile category be used. The circumstances of the disappearance should govern category selection. Note: NCIC suggests that family and nonfamily abductions be entered in the involuntary category. Runaways are most commonly entered in the juvenile category unless unusual circumstances exist.

12. Provide detailed descriptive information to the 911 Center for broadcast updates.
13. Identify and interview everyone at the scene.
14. Secure and safeguard the area as a potential crime scene.

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 child's home and particularly his or her bedroom should be secured and protected until evidence and identification material can be collected.

15. Record if the child has access to an online computer, cellular telephone, and/or pager.
16. Prepare necessary reports and complete appropriate forms.

C. Supervisory responsibilities

1. Obtain a briefing from the first officers on the scene.

This briefing allows the supervisor to determine the scope and complexity of the case and develop an appropriate response. This briefing should be conducted away from family, friends or any other individuals who may be present. Doing so will allow officers 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.
3. Consider activation of the Levi's Call Alert system if the child has been abducted and/or **A Child Is Missing** program.

If circumstances indicate the chances for the child's safe recovery would be increased by immediate public awareness, the supervisor should promptly activate such efforts.

4. Establish a command post.

The command post should be close enough to the center of the activity to facilitate control and coordination, but sufficiently apart to allow a free exchange of ideas among responders.

5. Organize and coordinate search efforts.
6. Ensure that all notifications have been made.

The supervisor should notify the Patrol Division Commander, the Assistant Chief of Police, the CID Commander, the investigator on call (if after hours) and the Chief of Police. Because dissemination of information is an integral part of the search for a missing child, the supervisor should ensure that all officers, other departments and agencies in the area, and all investigative networks are supplied with accurate details.

7. Establish a liaison with the victim's family.

Families of a missing child will experience extreme stress. Supervisors should establish a liaison with the family who can explain what investigative actions are being employed and what they can do to assist in the search.

8. Manage media relations until arrival of the PIO or Chief of Police.

D. Responsibilities of the case investigator.

1. Obtain a briefing from personnel at the scene.

This briefing should be conducted prior to interviews with family members of the missing child or witnesses who may have been identified during the initial stage of the case.

2. Verify the accuracy of all descriptive information.
3. Conduct a neighborhood canvass
4. Obtain a brief history of recent family dynamics from family members, neighbors, teachers, classmates, etc.
5. Explore the basis for conflicting information, if any.
6. Implement effective case management.
7. Evaluate the need for additional resources and specialized services.
8. Update descriptive information.

If it appears that the case will not be promptly resolved, the investigator should ensure that the descriptive record, especially that entered into the NCIC Missing Person File, is updated to include dental characteristics, scars, marks, tattoos, and fingerprints along with additional articles of clothing, jewelry or unique possessions.

V. Levi's Call – Georgia's Amber Alert

- A. Before Levi's Call can be activated, the following "Alert Criteria" must be met:

1. There must be a confirmed child abduction.
2. The circumstances surrounding the abduction must indicate that the child is in imminent danger of harm or death.

3. The child must be 18 years of age or younger.
 4. There must be enough descriptive information to believe that an immediate broadcast alert will help recover the child.
- B. Levi's Call will not be granted:
1. In cases of non-custodial abductions where no danger exists to the child.
 2. Runaways.
- C. When an abduction is confirmed and investigators determine that the case meets "Alert Criteria", the GBI regional office should be contacted. If after hours, on weekends and holidays, contact the GBI Communications Center at 404-244-2600. An operator will locate the on-call agent.
- D. The GBI will verify that the use an alert is justified and will work with the investigator to draft an "Alert Bulletin." The bulletin will include:
1. Description of the child (race, physical attributes, and clothing worn at the time of the abduction.
 2. A suspect description.
 3. A description of the vehicle in which the two may be traveling.
 4. Where the abduction took place and where the child was last seen.
 5. A phone number where the public can contact us with information.

VI. A Child Is Missing Program

- A. When an officer receives a report of a missing child (age 1-17), an elderly person (with Alzheimer's) or a disabled person (in danger), he or she should notify the supervisor for approval to notify ACIM.
- B. All other circumstances will need approval for the use of ACIM.
- C. Factors for determining the use of ACIM.
1. Juveniles.
 - a. The child must be under the age of seventeen (17).
 - b. The reporting person must be an adult family member, teacher, or another adult who is responsible for the child.
 - c. If the juvenile is a habitual runaway, ACIM would only be used if foul play is suspected.
 - d. A first time runaway.
 - e. Stranger abductions prior to calling Levi's Call Alert, based on the preliminary investigation.
 2. Senior Citizens.

- a. The person must be sixty-five (65) years of age or older, unless he or she has early Alzheimer's.
 - b. Being missing must be out-of-character for the elderly person.
 - c. ACIM may also be used if an elderly person is a frequent walk away from a nursing facility.
- 3. Disabled Person.
 - a. There is no age stipulation for a disabled person.
 - b. Caution must be used when determining whether a person is truly disabled. For purposes of this policy, a disabled person will fall into one of the following categories:
 - i. The person has a physical or mental impairment that severely limits self-care.
 - ii. The person is disoriented or unable to respond to simple questions regarding personal information such as name and address.
 - iii. The person is dependent upon life sustaining medication.
 - iv. The approving supervisor may take into account exigent circumstances that may influence using ACIM even if the person is a habitual runaway or walk away. Examples of these circumstances are: suspected foul play, imminent severe weather, etc.
- D. Using ACIM
 - 1. Once a decision has been made to utilize ACIM, the officer can immediately call ACIM at 1-888-875-2246 or page the operator at 1-954-492-4778.
 - 2. The officer will provide the operator with a phone number for the public to contact the department with information about the missing person. (Note: most times, the Communications Center number is given.)
- E. Investigating Information Received from ACIM
 - 1. Information received from a citizen concerning the missing person or a possible sighting of the missing will be relayed to the supervisor or investigator in charge of the case.
 - 2. If a sighting of the missing person is confirmed, the supervisor may want to consider using ACIM again using the most recent known location in the notification of residents. This is particularly important if the sighting location is in a different jurisdiction
- F. Follow-up Investigation

1. If the missing person is found, the supervisor or investigator on the scene will call ACIM. A case follow-up report will be faxed to the department for the supervisor or investigator to complete and fax back to ACIM (954-763-4569).
2. If the missing person is not found within twenty-four (24) hours, the supervisor may pass the case on to the next shift and make them aware that ACIM is working with them on the case and if additional calls are necessary ACIM will know what areas have been called and can assist the officers in further searches.

VII. The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC)

- A. The NCMEC reports that an estimated 800,000 children are reported missing each year. That averages out to almost 2,200 per day.
- B. The NCMEC supplies a variety of resources that can help law enforcement agencies cope with missing child incidents. These include:
 1. National Missing Children Hotline – NCMEC operates the national toll-free missing children hotline 1-800-THE-LOST (843-5678), which processes reports of missing children, reports of sightings or requests for resources to assist with cases. The call center operates 24/7/365 and can handle calls in more than 180 languages.
 2. Team Adam – A program staffed by specially trained retired law enforcement professionals who serve as consultants to local law enforcement. Team Adam members are deployed to critical cases as a rapid, on-site response and support system that provides additional investigative tools and the latest technology to local law enforcement agencies. The members of this elite program are all retired from local, state, or federal law enforcement agencies and handpicked for their experience and expertise.
 3. Forensic Support – The Forensic Services Unit does age progression photographs, has access to 40,000 sets of unidentified human remains, and performs computerized skull reconstructions.
 4. Photo and Poster Distribution – Photos and posters are displayed on the organization's website www.missingkids.com and the organization works with an extensive network of private sector partners and direct mail services to transmit images and information instantly nationwide.
 5. Case Analysts – NCMEC case analysts assist law enforcement by searching numerous public record databases that have been donated to the Center. They also regularly track attempted abductions across the United States and provide valuable investigative information on historical incidents, working to link cases and identify patterns.
 6. Sex Offender Tracking Team – A special team has been designated at NCMEC to work with the U.S. Marshals and other law enforcement to locate the more than 100,000 noncompliant, fugitive registered sex offenders.
 7. Cold Case Unit – Another team is dedicated to investigating long-term missing child cases. No unsolved missing child case is ever closed at

NCMEC. Project ALERT (American Law Enforcement Retiree Team) uses retired local, state, and federal law enforcement officers to consult on cold cases. They assist in case review, analysis, investigative strategies, and interviews.

8. CyberTipline – NCMEC operates the national CyberTipline (www.cybertipline.com), which serves as the national system for reporting suspected child sexual exploitation.
9. Child Victim Identification Program – NCMEC analysts help law enforcement find victims of child pornography through its Child Victim Identification Program (CVIP).
10. Law Enforcement Services Portal – The Law Enforcement Services Portal (LESP) is used to aid in child pornography investigations by giving investigators and prosecutors access to information compiled by NCMEC.

This SOP supersedes any SOP previously issued.

BY ORDER OF THE CHIEF OF POLICE:

Stacey L. Cotton

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Chief of Police