



HARFORD COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE OPERATIONS POLICY

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Sheriff

Missing Persons

Distribution:	All Employees		Policy Number:	OPS 0704
Responsible Unit:	Police Operations Bureau		Rescinds:	
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1. Purpose

To establish Agency guidelines governing the reporting and investigation of missing persons.

2. Policy

The Harford County Sheriff's Office (HCSO) ensures all missing persons cases are investigated in a professional and timely manner to resolve the cases as soon as possible by locating the missing person

3. Definitions

CRITICAL FACTORS: any factors or unusual circumstances that lead the investigating deputy to believe that a missing person may be in danger. A missing person is considered a critical missing person by the existence of one or more critical factors, which include:

- a. A missing person who is believed to be out of the zone of safety for his or her's and developmental stage;
- b. A missing person who is drug dependent and the dependency is potentially life threatening;
- c. Based on available information it is believed that the missing child is in the company of an adult(s) who would endanger his/her welfare;
- d. The absence is inconsistent with the missing person's established patterns of behavior and the deviation cannot be readily explained; or
- e. Any circumstance that would cause a deputy to conclude that critical factors exist.

FOUND PERSON: a person who, upon contact by law enforcement, is determined to be lost, but has not yet been reported missing. A found person can also be an unidentified person as defined below.

HUMAN TRAFFICKING: the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of people through force, fraud, or coercion, with the aim of exploiting them for profit.

MISSING ADULT: a person 18 years of age or older who is unaccounted for, when the reason for, and/or cause of the absence is unknown.

MISSING CHILD: a person who is under the age of 18 years, the subject of a Missing Person's Report filed with a law enforcement agency and whose whereabouts is unknown. (Family Law Article, Section 9-401).

SEARCH MANAGER: an agency member trained in managing land-based search operations who is responsible for directing search efforts through the use of varied resources.

VULNERABLE PERSON: a mentally diminished subject who is believed to be developmentally disabled, emotionally/behaviorally disturbed, he/she may not be able to communicate needs, identity, address, and/or who lacks the physical or mental capacity to provide for his/her own daily needs. Examples are Autism, Cerebral Palsy, Down Syndrome, Dementia/Alzheimer's.

RUNAWAY: any juvenile under the age of eighteen (18) who purposefully leaves home to escape parental custody and/or guidance, and there is concern among family members for the welfare of such individual.

PATHFINDERS FOR AUTISM (PFA): a community partner with the Harford County Sheriff's Office. PFA will provide the Missing Persons "Safety Kit" to the HCSO, as needed, upon request.

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON: an individual that has become separated from their parent/guardian or caregiver. Most of the time, these are very young children who cannot speak or understand the questioning to help reunite them with their families. This may also include the population of people who have a diminished cognitive impairment that prevents communication with the deputies to include vulnerable people.

DEAFBLIND: an individual with a disability resulting from the combination of hearing and vision loss or impairment.

HARD OF HEARING: an individual with mild-to-moderate hearing loss.

LATE-DEAFENED: an individual who grew up hearing, then lost all or most of their hearing as an adult.

4. References

Maryland Code Annotated Family Law Article 9-402
Maryland Code Annotated Family Law Article 14-101(C)
Maryland Public Safety Article 3-601 through 3-607
The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children
(missingkids.org)
National Crime Information Center (NCIC) Operating Manual, Missing Person File
Maryland Code, Public Safety Article 3-608 (Establishes the Purple Alert Program)

5. Procedures

A. General

1. Missing Children

- a. Upon the receipt of a report regarding a missing child by the HCSO, the investigating deputy will immediately determine if:

- i. The missing child has not been the subject of a prior Missing Person's Report ([MSP 079](#));
- ii. The missing child suffers from a mental or physical disability or illness;
- iii. The disappearance of the missing child is of a suspicious or dangerous nature;
- iv. The person filing the report of a missing child has reason to believe that the missing child may have been abducted;
- v. The missing child has previously been the subject of a child abuse report filed with the state or local law enforcement agency; and/or
- vi. The missing child is under 14 years of age.

2. Missing Adult

- a. Upon the receipt of a report regarding an adult missing person by the HCSO, the investigating deputy will immediately determine if:
 - i. The missing adult is suffering from a documented mental, physical, or developmental disability, or is a ward of the state.
 - ii. The missing adult is in the company of another person under circumstances indicating a danger to their physical safety; and/or
 - iii. The missing adult is missing under circumstances indicating the disappearance is not voluntary, i.e., kidnapping or abduction.
- b. The following are **not** considered missing persons:
 - i. A person whose disappearance appears to be related to the issuance of a warrant, unless other critical factors exist.
 - ii. A person who has left a note (other than suicide note) or otherwise communicated the reason for their absence.
 - iii. A person who has left as the result of a domestic disagreement and is not a threat to the person or others.
 - iv. A person whose whereabouts are unknown, but who has contacted family, friends, or acquaintances, unless other critical factors exist.

3. Human Trafficking

- a. Upon the receipt of a report regarding a missing child or adult by the HCSO, where Human Trafficking factors may exist, the investigating deputy will immediately determine if the missing person:
 - i. Has previously been the subject of a sexual abuse/assault report filed with the state or local law enforcement or shows recent signs of physical abuse;

- ii. Is in the company of another person under circumstances indicating the disappearance is not voluntary, i.e., coercion/threats or has recently been observed in the company of individuals not familiar or unknown to family and friends;
- iii. Has recently been observed engaged in on-line activity, i.e., dating sites or chat groups; and/or
- iv. Suffers from substance abuse.

4. Found Person or Unidentified Person

- a. Upon contact with a subject who preliminary investigation determines has not yet been reported missing, or is unable to communicate their identity, the investigating deputy will:
 - i. Not remove them from the area that they were found in immediately as the parents/guardians or caregivers may be in the area looking for them. The deputy may remove an unidentified individual who is in danger due to their surroundings.
 - ii. Contact EMS to determine if medical attention is necessary for the individual.
 - iii. Determine the need for the PIO to post information on social media after a thorough search for the individual's family has been completed.
 - iv. The subject will only be released to the following:
 - a) An authorized representative of the Harford County Department of Social Services.
 - b) A representative of another law enforcement Agency.
 - c) A parent, legal guardian, or caregiver of the person after proof of identity has been verified.
 - v. Complete an FIR on the unidentified person and the person who is in care for that individual.
 - vi. Take a photograph of the unidentified person and the parent/guardian or caregiver will be attached to the FIR.
 - vii. If no one comes forward to identify the subject a report will be completed and the unidentified person will be entered into NCIC.

B. Initial Reports

- 1. The HCSO will accept, without delay, a report for a missing person who was last seen or believed to be in Harford County's jurisdiction, whether such a report is made in person, via telephone, or other electronic means.
- 2. If HCSO does not have jurisdiction, a "Police Information Report" will be completed and every effort should be made to assist the reporting person in making contact with the

appropriate law enforcement agency to complete a missing person report in that jurisdiction.

3. The HCSO will require anyone reporting a missing person by telephone or other electronic means, to complete the report in person, as soon as practical.
4. The investigating deputy will:
 - a. Respond promptly and make personal contact with the complainant;
 - b. Conduct a preliminary investigation utilizing the Missing Persons Investigative Checklist ([SO-302](#)) and complete a Search Urgency Evaluation Form ([SO-301](#));
 - c. Conduct an initial search which may include, but is not limited to:
 - i. A thorough search of the home and vehicles.
 - ii. The immediate area.
 - iii. Place last seen.
 - d. Provide Harford County Department of Emergency Services with updated information for countywide broadcast.
 - e. Notify the Duty Officer if critical factors exist or if notification of a Search Manager is necessary. Notify the on-duty/on-call Search Manager when:
 - i. There is a score of 1 in category B, C, H, or I on the [SO-301](#); or
 - ii. The cumulative score is 17 or less on the [SO-301](#).
 - iii. The subject is a first-time runaway child.
 - f. A supervisor should respond to the scene when there are critical factors or the need for a Search Manager notification. Supervisor response is not required if the preliminary investigation determines a missing child has been the subject of a prior missing person (runaway) report unless new critical factors exist.
 - g. Notify Law Enforcement Records immediately to ensure the initial entry of the missing person, regardless of age, into the National Crime Information Center (NCIC). Notification must be made within two hours of the arrival of the deputy on the original call for service. The two-hour requirement must take into consideration the time needed by Records to make the entries depending on staffing (which could be 30-45 minutes);
 - h. Initiate appropriate intensive search procedures as determined by the supervisor and/or Search Manager, which may include, but is not limited to:
 - i. Contact friends and/or relatives.
 - ii. Use of K-9.

- iii. Use of small Unmanned Aircraft System (sUAS).
 - i. Attempt to obtain a most recent photograph of the missing person and attach it to the Missing Person Report ([MSP 079](#)).
 - j. Complete the Missing Person's Report ([MSP 079](#)) and provide the complainant with a copy of the report. Advise the complainant they should immediately contact the Sheriff's Office if the missing person returns.
 - i. Create a report in Records Management System (RMS) and complete your narrative in RMS and enter any applicable data regarding person's involved, vehicle, address etc.
 - ii. Scan and attach the completed [MSP 079](#) and Search Urgency Evaluation Form in the RMS report.
 - iii. The Deputy will ensure an e-mail is sent out to both the "Notable Incident" outlook group and Records e-mail group with any related pictures if they apply.
 - iv. The Deputy will send the original state form and related paperwork to records as they usually do in the mail.
 - k. Notify the School Policing Unit or the respective School Resource Officer (SRO) if the missing person is a student at the Harford County Public Schools (HCPS).
5. A Supervisor will:
- a. Respond to the scene of all calls for service for a missing person where critical factors exist, or it has been determined there is a need for a search manager;
 - b. Direct intensive search procedures as necessary and/or at the request of Search Manager, which may include, but is not limited to:
 - i. Contact friends and/or relatives.
 - ii. Use of K-9.
 - iii. Use of small Unmanned Aircraft System (sUAS).
 - c. When feasible, assign a deputy to remain with the complainant during an active search to ensure deputies are aware if victim makes contact and to obtain additional information as needed; and
 - d. Provide a Missing Persons PFA Safety Kit, which will include additional resources for preventing and reporting future incidents. This kit will be provided to the parents/caregivers of any child or adult deemed vulnerable based on intellectual and/or developmental disability or Autism. These resources may also be offered for individuals with Alzheimer's/Dementia.
6. The Duty Officer will:
- a. Notify the on-duty/on-call Search Manager when:

- i. There is a score of 1 in category B, C, H, or I on the [SO-301](#);
 - ii. The cumulative score is 17 or less on the [SO-301](#); or
 - iii. The subject is a first time runaway.
 - b. Review the Missing Person Report ([MSP 079](#)) and determine if notification should be made to the Criminal Investigations Division (CID) or the Office of Media and Public Relations (PIO) for further assistance or any critical circumstances not known prior;
 - c. Forward a copy of the approved report to LE Records for additional updates to NCIC; and
 - d. Assign the report for follow-up in the Missing Person Database to the investigating deputy unless the investigation is assumed by CID.
7. A Missing Person Report Coordinator will be established by the Division Commander at each Precinct and the Criminal Investigation Division. They will:
- a. Review all missing persons reports submitted to notable incidents email group.
 - b. Review classification codes for accuracy.
 - c. Review and maintain a Missing Persons Database, which will track information in the report to include, but not limited to name, age, date last seen, date reported missing, suspected location and any other critical factors. If juvenile, whether or not they are runaway (first time/repeat). Deputy/Detective assigned the follow-up.
 - d. When missing subject returns, track when/where located.
 - e. Determine if picture of the missing person is current. (Hairstyles, facial hair, piercings could change if picture is older).
 - f. Track the appropriate follow-up dates and CID notification for continued follow-up as needed.
8. A Person with Information (PWI) Record can be added to an Endangered or Involuntary Missing Person (MP) record in NCIC so long as the following specific rules and conditions are met:
- a. The MP was last seen under circumstances that pose a risk to his/her safety;
 - b. There is a substantial likelihood that the PWI has relevant information about the MP that could result in recovery of that person;
 - c. Entering identifying information about the PWI could assist the Agency to identify and interview the PWI which could assist in the recovery of the MP;
 - d. The PWI cannot be located, and time is of the essence;
 - e. There is no prohibition under the agency's state law on the publication of information

concerning the identify of a person for whom a warrant has not been obtained; and

f. The identity of the PWI has been disclosed to the general public through an Amber Alert or other formal notification.

9. For additional information on the rules and conditions of PWI entry, please refer to the NCIC Operating Manual, Missing Person File, Section 10 – Person with Information (PWI) Record.

a. Information may also be found in the Outlook Public Folders at All Public Folders/NCIC/Entry Information/Person with Information Guidelines.

C. Follow-Up Investigations

1. The investigating deputy will conduct a follow-up investigation within 48 hours after receiving the initial report, with additional follow-ups conducted every five days.

a. Missing Child: If not located in the first 48 hours, consult with CID. CID may assume the investigation at this time depending on the circumstances. CID will assume the investigation of a missing child after 7 days regardless of circumstances.

b. Missing Adult: If not located after 30 days, forward the report to CID for review and further investigation.

2. The investigating deputy will follow-up with the SRO at the respective school if the missing person is a student of HCPS to gather further intelligence about the missing person.

3. After 30 days the investigating deputy will take the Missing Person File Data Collection Entry Guide to the complainant to have them document additional information on the missing person. After a reasonable amount of time, the deputy will retrieve the completed entry guide from the complainant and forward it to Records so the additional information can be added to the NCIC entry.

4. If the investigating deputy is unable to meet the follow-up deadline due to a scheduling conflict (training, extended leave, sick leave, etc.) it will be the responsibility of the deputy to notify his supervisor of the conflict. The investigation will be assigned to another deputy, by the Duty Officer/Supervisor for follow-up as required.

5. Patrol deputies will generally be assigned follow-ups to missing persons deemed C/M and A/M(see Classification Codes).

6. Deputies will follow-up and document their investigation on all leads (social media searches, interviews with friends or family, etc.).

7. Deputies will ensure the follow-up is completed in RMS and that it has a heading at the top of the page relating to what follow-up it is. For Example: 48 Hr follow-up to missing persons CC# 202300000001 or 5-day follow-up to missing persons CC# 202300000001 or 10 Day follow-up to missing persons CC# 202300000001, etc.

8. Deputies will forward all document follow-up reports via RMS for approval by the Duty Officer or Supervisor.

9. Any deputy completing a Missing Person's Report ([MSP 079](#)) will be responsible for the completeness of the investigation unless otherwise notified by his supervisor.
10. If the case is determined to be upgraded beyond C/M or A/M classifications, the CID Major Crime Supervisor will be notified by the Duty Officer, or if after hours, the on-call CID supervisor will be notified.
11. The CID Major Crime On-call Supervisor will review the case and determine if the case will be assigned to a detective for follow-up.
12. The CID Supervisor will inform the Duty Officer/Supervisor if the case is being handled by CID.

D. Returned Missing Persons

1. A returned missing person will be confirmed in person by the investigating deputy or another deputy, unless authorized by a supervisor.
2. Deputies will conduct a return interview with the missing person to verify the condition of the person and to ascertain the reason for their disappearance.
3. The information will be documented in the follow-up report and forwarded to the investigating deputy, if returned on another shift.
4. A Missing Person Supplement ([SO-068](#)) will be completed upon the return and verification of a missing person.
5. The deputy completing the return will notify records of the returned missing person and forward a copy of the Missing Person Supplement ([SO-068](#)) to records immediately upon completion.

E. Classification Codes

1. Children
 - a. C/K - A missing child who is reasonably believed to have been kidnapped or abducted by someone other than a parent.
 - b. CPC - A missing child who is reasonably believed to have been abducted by a parent or guardian who has legal custody. Include all cases where there is no formal custody agreement to the contrary.
 - c. CPW - A missing child who is reasonably believed to have been abducted by a parent or guardian who does not have custody. Include only those cases where it has been reported that a formal custody agreement to the contrary exists.
 - d. C/C - A missing child who is considered critically missing by the existence of one or more critical factors.
 - e. C/M - A missing child 14 years of age or older for whom no critical factors are known to exist.

2. Adults

- a. A/D - A missing adult documented as suffering from a mental or physical disability or is senile.
- b. A/E - A missing adult documented as being in the company of another person under circumstances indicating his/her physical safety is in danger.
- c. A/I - A missing adult under circumstances indicating the disappearance was not voluntary, i.e., kidnap or abduction.
- d. A/M - A missing adult in which no critical factors are known to be present.

F. A Child is Missing (ACIM)

1. Establish an orderly and uniform process for the use of the ACIM program.
2. The first several hours after a child, elderly, or disabled person is reported missing can be critical to the successful outcome and return of a reported missing person.
3. ACIM is a valuable tool for law enforcement if used immediately and properly. ACIM provides timely information to the public about the missing persons. ACIM will generate phone calls to a designated area so residents or business can use that information and supplement the search efforts of law enforcement.
4. ACIM is an additional tool for law enforcement. It does not replace or preclude a thorough investigation and/or search by law enforcement personnel or other public safety agencies in the field.
5. The HCSO will utilize ACIM only for missing children, elderly, and disabled persons, whenever the following criteria are met:
 - a. The investigating deputy on scene determines that ACIM will benefit locating the missing person based on the time lapse between when the person went missing and the reporting time (typically a report taken within hours of the actual person going missing is more beneficial);
 - b. Missing person is in danger due to age, mental or physical disabilities or health and medications. If the person is a critical missing person, the investigating deputy will relay that information to the Duty Officer/Supervisor for the activation of ACIM as soon as possible;
 - c. An immediate threat based on environmental conditions such as weather and terrain; and/or
 - d. The number of prior reports for the missing individual.
6. Once the determination is made to utilize ACIM, the approving supervisor will designate a phone number at the respective precinct for receiving tips.
7. The investigating deputy or his supervisor will call ACIM (24 hours/day, 7 days/week, 365 days/year) at 1-888-875-ACIM (2246) or page the operator at 1-954-492-4778.

8. The approving supervisor will notify the Dispatch supervisor and make them aware that ACIM is working the case.
9. The Duty Officer will notify the **Office of Media and Public Relations** regarding the use of ACIM and provide pertinent details as to who the missing person is and the circumstances (a copy of the report should suffice).

G. AMBER Alert

1. The following criteria are utilized to determine if an AMBER Alert should be issued for the State of Maryland:
 - a. Law enforcement confirms a child has been abducted;
 - b. The child is under the age of 18;
 - c. Law enforcement believes the circumstances surrounding the abduction indicate that the child is in danger of serious bodily harm or death;
 - d. There is enough descriptive information about the child, abductor, and/or suspect's vehicle to believe an immediate broadcast alert will help;
 - e. The child is believed to still be in the broadcast area; and
 - f. The child's name and other critical elements have been entered into NCIC by police.
2. Once law enforcement has been notified about an abducted child, they must first determine if the case meets the AMBER Alert Plan's criteria for triggering an alert.
3. AMBER Alert Procedures
 - a. To activate the Maryland AMBER Alert Plan, the following criteria must be satisfied:
 - i. A confirmed report of child abduction. Child abduction by a non-custodial parent is not a case that would routinely meet Maryland AMBER plan criteria, unless the Watch Commander can articulate a reasonable suspicion that the parent intends to physically harm the child.
 - ii. That the circumstances surrounding the abduction indicate that the child is in serious danger of bodily harm or death.
 - iii. There is enough descriptive information about the child, abductor, and suspect's vehicle to believe an immediate broadcast alert would assist;
 - iv. The abductor and/or child are likely to still be in the broadcast area;
 - v. The Duty Officer must authorize the Alert and notify Dispatch to prepare for a possible increase in 911 calls. A separate tip line should be activated to distinguish tip calls from 911 calls; and

- vi. The Watch Commander will contact the Maryland State Police (MSP) Headquarters Duty Officer and the following information must be provided:
 - a) Location of abduction;
 - b) Description of the child, to include name, age, and physical descriptors;
 - c) Description of the abductor, if known;
 - d) Description of the vehicle involved; and
 - e) Last known direction of travel of the suspect vehicle.
- b. Once confirmed, MSP will initiate notifications to the media and the Maryland Department of Transportation for the activation of “Dynamic Message Signs” and Highway Advisory Radios.
- c. As programming permits, participating broadcasters will broadcast the AMBER Alert four times per hour for the first two hours, continuing with three times per hour for the next three hours. All alerts will direct persons with information to call the established tip line.
- d. Immediately following the AMBER activation, the Duty Officer will ensure that the appropriate Division Commander and Bureau Commander, along with the Office of Media and Public Relations are notified of the activation.
- e. The Duty Officer will immediately contact the Maryland AMBER Plan coordinator if the child is located. If the child is not recovered within 24 hours, the alert is self-canceling.

H. SILVER Alert

1. To activate the Maryland SILVER Alert Program, the following criteria must exist:
 - a. Subject suffers from a cognitive impairment, such as a diagnosis of Alzheimer’s disease or dementia;
 - b. Subject poses a credible threat to their own health and safety;
 - c. Subject is traveling in a vehicle and there is enough descriptive information about the missing person and vehicle for law enforcement to issue an Alert;
 - d. HCSO has already activated a local or regional alert by contacting media outlets in our jurisdiction; and
 - e. The subject has been entered into NCIC.
2. Provided the SILVER Alert criteria are met:
 - a. The Duty Officer will contact the MSP Duty Officer at 410-486-3101 or 800-525-5555 (in state only).
 - b. HCSO will provide the following information:

- i. Callback information; and
- ii. Contact information for the MSP SILVER Alert coordinator to call for verification.
- c. Immediately following the SILVER Alert activation, the Duty Officer will ensure that the appropriate Division Commander and Bureau Commander are notified.
- d. The Duty Officer will notify the Office of Media and Public Relations of the activation.

I. Purple Alert

1. To activate the Maryland PURPLE Alert Program, the following criteria must exist:

- a. Subject has a cognitive impairment, mental disorder, intellectual or developmental disability, or brain injury that:
 - i. Is not Alzheimer's disease, dementia, or a physical, mental, or emotional disability related to substance abuse, or;
 - ii. Is deaf, deafblind, hard of hearing, or late-deafened.
- b. The subject's disappearance poses a credible threat to the health and safety of the individual due to age, health, mental or physical disability, environment, or weather conditions, as determined by a law enforcement agency; and
- c. The subject does not meet the criteria for activation of a Silver Alert.

2. Provided the PURPLE Alert criteria are met:

- a. The Duty Officer will contact the MSP Duty Officer at 410-486-3101 or 800-525-5555 (in state only).
- b. HCSO will provide the following information:
 - i. Callback information; and
 - ii. Contact information for the MSP PURPLE Alert coordinator to call for verification.
- c. Immediately following the PURPLE Alert activation, the Duty Officer will ensure that the appropriate Division Commander and Bureau Commander are notified.
- d. The Duty Officer will notify the Office of Media and Public Relations of the activation.

J. Analytical Reporting

- a. Records Supervisors will complete a quarterly report on the number of persons entered and removed from NCIC as missing.
- b. Crime Analysis will complete an annual missing person's study on the incidents reported from the previous year.

c. Both reports will be sent to the Chief Deputy via the chain of command.

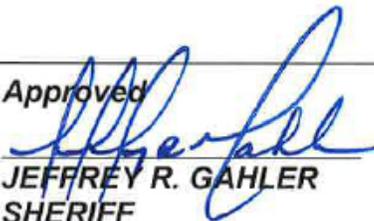
6. Summary of Changes

A. On 9/18/2023 the following revisions were made:

1. Updated various definitions.
2. Included new references from Maryland Public Safety Article 3-601 through 3-607 and The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (missingkids.org).
3. Updated and added various procedures throughout policy.
4. Added the search manager program to the policy which is now fully operational.

B. On 06/27/2025 the following revisions were made:

1. Under Section 3. Definitions, added the definitions for the terms Deafblind, Hard of Hearing, and Late-deafened.
2. Under Section 4. References, added the reference to Maryland Code, Public Safety Article 3-608 (Establishes the Purple Alert Program).
3. Under Section 5. Procedures, added the procedures for PURPLE Alert activation at Section 5.1.1 and Section 5.1.2.

Approved

JEFFREY R. GAHLER
SHERIFF
DATE 7/8/25