



HARFORD COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE OPERATIONS POLICY

Civil Disturbance Unit

Distribution:	All Personnel		Policy Number:	OPS 0729
Responsible Unit:	Special Operations Division		Rescinds:	
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1. Purpose

This policy establishes the guidelines, responsibilities, planning requirements, and operational procedures governing the activation, deployment, and use of the Harford County Sheriff's Office (HCSO) Civil Disturbance Unit (CDU). It is intended to promote a coordinated, lawful, and effective response to demonstrations, civil disturbances, and other incidents requiring CDU deployment while safeguarding public safety, protecting constitutional rights, and supporting the preservation of life and property.

2. Background

The HCSO is responsible for preserving the public peace, preventing crime, arresting offenders, and protecting the rights and safety of persons and their property. HCSO provides trained personnel to respond to the scene when crowd management is required for peaceful public events including parades, festivals, and First Amendment assemblies, as well as situations involving civil disturbances and riots.

The First Amendment of the United States Constitution guarantees the right of all persons to march, demonstrate, protest, rally, or perform other activities. Government may impose reasonable restrictions on the time, place, and manner in which persons engage in First Amendment activity. Deputies must not be affected by the content of the opinions being expressed by anyone exercising their lawful First Amendment rights.

For events involving First Amendment assemblies, HCSO protects the constitutional and statutory rights as well as the physical safety of people to assemble peacefully and exercise free speech while preserving the peace. When managing crowds, HCSO makes all reasonable efforts to employ non-arrest methods of crowd management to maintain order. When such methods are unreasonable under the circumstances or unsuccessful, arrests shall be made for violations of the law. All arrests shall be based on probable cause and members shall use only the minimum necessary force to make the arrest. To the extent possible under the circumstances, high-volume arrests shall be made in an organized manner by units at the direction of the Sheriff or his or her designee.

The HCSO cannot devise specific procedures for handling all possible crowd management situations in advance, as each crowd situation presents its own unique characteristics, circumstances, and challenges. Accordingly, the HCSO philosophy is one of moderation, flexibility, and controlled response, employing the requirements of the National Incident Management System (NIMS). In some cases, peaceful gatherings escalate and include cases of civil disobedience, assaults, property damage, or rioting. Crowd behavior operates on a continuum, and members must be prepared to

reasonably de-escalate or respond to situations, whenever necessary, while taking appropriate police action to maintain order.

Since each situation is unique, both commanding and supervisory officials must plan to respond according to the nature and size of the crowd. This policy is intended to exceed constitutional requirements and satisfy the heightened requirements of local statutory law and best practices for protecting the First Amendment rights and safety of demonstrators, as well as all affected individuals while safeguarding all persons and property in Harford County.

3. Policy

The HCSO will provide a police presence at expression of First Amendment demonstrations, civil disturbances, civil disorders, and acts of civil disobedience to prevent loss of life, prevent injuries, prevent property damage, minimize disruption to persons who are not involved in such activities; and to protect the constitutional rights of participants by promoting an orderly, lawful demonstration in the best interest of public safety.

4. Definitions

CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE: An unlawful and non-violent action involving a planned or spontaneous demonstration by one or more persons.

CIVIL DISORDER: a public disturbance by numerous people who commit violent acts that cause immediate danger or injury to people or property.

CIVIL DISTURBANCE: a gathering that constitutes a breach of the peace or any assembly of persons where there is a threat of violence, destruction of property, or other unlawful acts.

CIVIL DISTURBANCE UNIT (CDU): a designated team of trained personnel organized to provide a coordinated response to demonstrations, civil disturbances, and other events requiring specialized crowd management and public order operations.

CROWD MANAGEMENT: Techniques used to manage lawful assemblies before, during, and after the event for the purpose of maintaining lawful status.

CROWD CONTROL: techniques used to address civil disturbances to include a show of force, crowd containment, crowd dispersal equipment and tactics, and preparation for multiple arrests.

DEMONSTRATION: a lawful assembly of persons organized primarily to engage in First Amendment activity. These may include scheduled events that allow for law enforcement planning such as marches, protests, and other assemblies intended to attract attention.

KETTLING: a police crowd-control tactic that confines a group of people within a restricted area to prevent movement or maintain order.

PLATOON: an organized operational element of the CDU consisting of designated personnel, supervisors, and resources assigned to perform crowd management and public order functions.

PROTEST: an organized public demonstration of disapproval about the current social, legal, or political status quo.

RIOT: an unlawful disturbance of the peace by an assembly of people acting with a common purpose in a violent or tumultuous manner that threatens or terrorizes the public.

SQUAD: an organized team within a CDU Platoon consisting of designated personnel under the supervision of a squad leader and assigned specific operational responsibilities.

UNLAWFUL ASSEMBLY: a meeting of a set number of people as described by state law who intend either to commit a violent crime or to carry out an unlawful act that will constitute a breach of the peace.

5. References

Anne Arundel County Police Demonstrations and Civil Disturbances Policy.
Maryland State Police Public Order and Crowd Control SOP.
Metropolitan Police Crowd Management and Civil Unrest General Order.
National Tactical Officer's Association (NTOA) Public Order Standards.

6. Procedures

A. Planning

1. The First Amendment of the United States Constitution guarantees the right of all persons to march, demonstrate, protest, rally, or perform other activities. Government may impose reasonable restrictions on the time, place, and manner in which persons engage in First Amendment activity. Deputies must not be affected by the content of the opinions being expressed by anyone exercising their lawful First Amendment rights. When planning for an event the following items should be considered:
 - a. The protection of Constitutional rights;
 - b. Fair and impartial enforcement of laws;
 - c. Protection of life and property;
 - d. Protection of vital facilities;
 - e. Arrest and prosecution of violators;
 - f. Public and officer safety; and
 - g. Potential for disruption to commerce and community affairs.

2. Incident Command System (ICS)

Refer to OPS 0731- All Hazard Policy.

3. Levels of Response

a. **CDU** operations consist of three response levels:

- i. Level III- Crowd management, the lowest level of response. Law enforcement responds to all forms of public assemblies; their presence is to maintain the event's lawful activity.
 - a) Deputies will be in regular duty uniforms and should be used primarily to observe and limit crowd tension;
 - b) Deputies should avoid aggressive appearance, no riot gear to be worn at this level;
 - c) If the event is peaceful, a show of aggression by law enforcement could incite the crowd.
- ii. Level II- Crowd Intervention, the middle response level. Law enforcement responds to events to isolate unlawful behavior that impacts public safety while allowing the event to continue.
 - a) Crowd dynamics will determine law enforcement's response;
 - b) If the crowd is not demonstrating riotous behavior and projectiles are not being used, deputies wearing regular duty uniforms can isolate the person(s) demonstrating unlawful behavior and remove them from the crowd;
 - c) If the crowd is demonstrating riotous behavior, deputies wearing protective gear will remove persons demonstrating unlawful behavior from the crowd.
- iii. Level I- Crowd Control, the highest level of response. Law enforcement responds to events that have become unlawful or violent and may require arrests and crowd dispersal.
 - a) Deputies will respond in protective riot gear as authorized by the Incident Commander.

4. Primary objectives at a civil disturbance

- a. Protect persons, regardless of their participation in the disturbance; and protect property;
- b. Disperse disorderly or threatening crowds to eliminate the immediate risks of continued escalation of the incident and stop further violence;

- c. Arrest law violators and remove or isolate any other person(s) inciting or exhibiting violent behavior.

B. Pre-Planned Events

1. The Special Operations Division (SOD) Commander oversees CDU operations. Upon receiving word of a planned civil event, the SOD Commander or designee will:
 - a. Assign an investigator from the SOD Crime Suppression Unit to the planned event.
 - i. The investigator will gather intelligence about the group/organization holding the event;
 - ii. The investigator will monitor social media to get an estimate on the number of people attending to support the event and to determine if the event will have counter-protestors;
 - iii. If counter-protest groups show interest in the event, the investigator will gather intel on these groups as well.
 - b. Assign a Crisis Negotiator to contact the event organizer to establish a point of contact for the HCSO.
 - i. The negotiator will address concerns pertaining to the planned event;
 - ii. The negotiator will work with the organizer to establish parameters of what will and what will not be legally accepted;
 - iii. The negotiator will work with the organizer to ensure that the group can exercise their First Amendment right, orderly and lawfully;
 - iv. The negotiator will act as a liaison on date of event.
 - c. Conduct operational planning meetings for the planned event.
 - i. SOD Tactical Commander;
 - ii. Crime Suppression Unit (CSU) supervisors and assigned investigator;
 - iii. CDU Platoon Leader; and
 - iv. Others as needed.
 - d. Based on intelligence gathered determine if and what size CDU will be utilized. The SOD Commander will also consult with the CDU and determine if the unit will be placed in on-call status or if the unit will stage at an off-site location based on gathered intelligence.

- e. The SOD Commander or designee will assign a member to complete an Incident Action Plan (IAP). The IAP will include, but is not limited to, the following:
 - i. Incident Commander;
 - ii. Detail Commander;
 - iii. **CDU** Platoon Leader;
 - iv. Date and time of planned event;
 - v. Location of planned event;
 - vi. Date and time of Operations for planned event;
 - vii. Briefing/Staging location if applicable;
 - viii. Unified Command information if applicable;
 - ix. Personnel assigned to audio/video record the event;
 - x. Personnel assigned to **CDU** operations;
 - xi. Protestor device extrication teams;
 - xii. SRT personnel assigned for less lethal options/overwatch;
 - xiii. Intelligence personnel assigned;
 - xiv. Prisoner Transport personnel;
 - xv. Assisting agencies personnel if applicable;
 - xvi. Coordinators and other contacts information;
 - xvii. Staging points for additional resources and equipment;
 - xviii. Traffic management;
 - xix. Purpose of the **CDU** for the planned event;
 - xx. Operational Mission;
 - xxi. Arrest Procedures;
 - xxii. **Assistance from Fire/EMS**;

xxiii. Roll call of available team members;

xxiv. Maps of area; and

xxv. Identify and mitigate all hazards.

C. Chain of Command

1. Due to specialized training and experience, deputies of lower rank may be in leadership positions within the CDU. The Chain of Command for the HCSO CDU is:
 - a. Incident Commander;
 - b. Detail Commander;
 - c. CDU Platoon Leader;
 - d. Assistant CDU Platoon Leader, if applicable; and
 - e. Squad Leader.

D. Response to Planned Events

1. CDU members and deputies will monitor the event, wearing any regular duty uniform.
 - a. The assigned personnel are deployed to monitor crowd activity and represent a police presence, and will ensure their Body Worn Cameras (BWC) are activated and de-activated in accordance with the protocol guidance per HCSO policy Body Worn Cameras (OPS 0103);
 - b. Deputies will position themselves in such a manner as to minimize contact with the participants;
 - c. Deputies will not engage in lengthy conversations or be prompted to act in response to comments from participants. Deputies will maintain a courteous and neutral demeanor;
 - d. People who reside, work, or have emergency business within the event area will not be prevented from entering the area unless circumstances suggest that their safety would be jeopardized, or their entry would interfere with law enforcement operations;
 - e. Periodic updates of crowd activity will be provided to the Incident Commander.
2. If the event grows significantly larger than expected or participants become unruly, the Incident Commander will be notified. The Incident Commander will determine if a CDU response is needed and, if so, will notify the Detail Commander.
 - a. Notifications will be made down the chain of command accordingly;

- b. CDU members placed on-call for an event will respond to the pre-determined staging location upon notification. Likewise, pre-deployed members will respond to the staging location to prepare and participate accordingly.
- c. The platoon will be briefed by the Incident Commander or designee;
- d. The team will be deployed as determined by the Incident Commander;
- e. A CDU staged at an event will be briefed by the Incident Commander or their designee and deployed as necessary;
- f. Deputies will not act individually unless ordered to do so by a CDU Platoon Leader or supervisor.
- g. The Incident Commander, Detail Commander, and CDU Platoon Leader will determine actions to be taken by the CDU.

E. Response to Spontaneous Civil Disturbances

1. Upon receiving a report of a possible civil disturbance, responding deputies will:
 - a. Observe the gathering from a safe distance and determine if the gathering is currently or potentially violent;
 - b. Notify the Harford County Department of Emergency Services Emergency Dispatch of the nature and seriousness of the disturbance;
 - c. Request a supervisor to respond;
 - d. Advise the exact location of the event;
 - e. Provide an estimated number of participants;
 - f. Current activities of the crowd (blocking traffic, acts of violence, damaging property, etc.);
 - g. If the crowd is mobile, provide direction of movement;
 - h. Safe ingress routes for responding personnel; and
 - i. Attempt to identify crowd leaders and agitators engaged in criminal acts, and document and report on events as they happen (Photographic and videotape evidence of criminal acts when possible).
2. The first supervisor on scene will:

- a. Assess If the crowd is unruly and displaying aggressive behavior;
 - b. Conduct an initial incident assessment by gathering and verifying available information regarding the nature, scope, participants, location, and circumstances of the disturbance to establish situational awareness and inform operational decision-making.
 - c. If approaching the crowd would not present unnecessary risk, instruct the gathering to disperse by issuing a lawful dispersal order using available amplification equipment (e.g., PA system, loudspeaker, or megaphone). When practicable, the order shall be documented by available body-worn and/or fleet camera systems, repeated multiple times to provide a reasonable opportunity for compliance, and the crowd's response shall be assessed to determine whether the order was audible and understood.
 - d. Request the Duty Officer to make notifications through the chain of command to initiate CDU activation and response;
 - e. Request additional Patrol deputies to respond to the scene;
 - f. If circumstances dictate, request personnel from allied agencies to respond;
 - g. Establish a perimeter sufficient to contain the disturbance and prohibit entrance into the affected area while avoiding kettling;
 - h. Establish a temporary command post;
 - i. Assign a deputy to begin documenting all actions on an event log; and
 - j. Provide ongoing assessment to Dispatch.
 - k. The Precinct Commander, or designee, of the affected precinct will respond and assume command. The Precinct Commander will confer with the Police Operations Bureau Chief and advise as to the nature of the situation or potential problems.
3. The Precinct Commander, or designee, will ensure that the following actions are taken:
- a. Pedestrian and vehicle traffic are rerouted around the disorder;
 - b. Control unauthorized ingress and egress by participants;
 - c. Proper notifications have been made, including the PIO;
 - d. A secure staging area for emergency responders and equipment is designated; and
 - e. Ensure all activities and actions are being documented on an event log.
 - f. The Police Operations Bureau Chief will contact the SOD Commander to determine if a CDU response is needed. If a response is needed, the SOD Commander will:

- i. Assume the appropriate role within ICS;
- ii. Make notification to the Special Operations **Division** Commanders;
- iii. Begin the process of assembling a **CDU**;
- iv. Notify **CSU** supervisors to assign an investigator to the incident and to begin gathering intelligence;
- v. Ensure a staging area has been secured;
- vi. Ensure that the **CDU** trailer is staged appropriately;
- vii. Notify the HCDC about the incident and the potential for mass arrests; and
- viii. Notify Division Commanders to initiate the availability plan.

F. Dispersal Orders

- 1. Personnel should understand the law as it pertains to an unlawful assembly. Law enforcement's decision to declare a crowd unlawful must be based upon reasonable and articulable facts. The definition of an unlawful assembly has been set forth in Maryland Criminal Law Article 3-904 and interpreted in court decisions.
- 2. The intent of a dispersal order is to permanently disperse a crowd, not relocate the problem. It should be made clear that the crowd is expected to immediately leave the area and include a warning that force may be used which could result in serious injury.
- 3. The dispersal order must be given in a manner reasonably believed to be heard and understood by the intended audience. Based upon the circumstances, multiple announcements from various locations may need to be given.
- 4. Dispersal orders delivered in other languages should also be considered, based upon the persons involved.
- 5. The name of the deputy making the statement, date, and time each order was administered will be documented.
- 6. Dispersal orders will not be given until control forces are in position to support crowd movement.
- 7. Command will approve the form Dispersal Order (SO-422) to be used; **ensure the dispersal order meets HCSO message standards; and ensure the dispersal order is recorded (both audio and video) when communicated.**

G. Use of Force

1. In accordance with HCSO policy *Use of Force (OPS 0501)* and as set forth under [Maryland Public Safety Article §3-524\(d\)\(1\)](#), deputies will employ an objectively reasonable (necessary and proportional) amount of force when necessary to effect an arrest and overcome any resistance offered.
2. When dealing with crowds and civil disobedience situations, deputies must be a disciplined and well-organized control force. The decisions to use force and the force options that may be applied in response to these incidents range from law enforcement presence to deadly force.

H. Incident Demobilization

1. When the civil disturbance has been brought under control, the Incident Commander will ensure that the following measures are taken:
 - a. All personnel and equipment involved in the incident are accounted for;
 - b. Documentation for any injuries sustained by deputies and/or any lost or damaged property;
 - c. Review BWC, in-car-camera (ICC), and other video systems and digital groups;
 - d. Ensure the After-Action Review (AAR) is conducted; and
 - e. All written reports are completed as soon as possible after the incident.

I. Requests by Other Jurisdictions

1. All requests for CDU assistance from other jurisdictions will be in writing and in accordance with state law; and forwarded through the chain of command with final approval coming from the Sheriff.
2. HCSO personnel will adhere to the HCSO Use of Force policy when operating in other jurisdictions.
3. If personnel are deployed to assist another jurisdiction, a HCSO supervisor/Commander will also be deployed, and unit members will remain under the authority of the HCSO supervisor/Commander.

J. Training

- a. CDU members are required to fulfill public order training requirements as outlined in the NTOA Public Order Standards.

7. Summary of Changes

A. On 10/01/24 the Agency 3-year review was conducted, and the following changes were made:

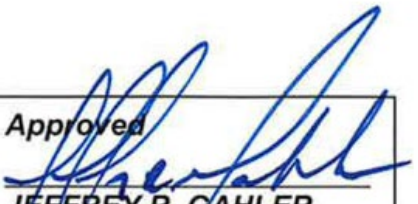
1. Narrative revision made to section 1.Purpose.
2. Added new section 2. Background.
3. Revisions to section 4. Definitions (existing and new definitions).
4. Additions made to section 5. References as follows:
 - a. Metropolitan Police Crowd Management and Civil Unrest General Order;
 - b. National Tactical Officer's Association (NTOA) Public Order Standards.
5. Reference to policy OPS 0731 in section 6. Procedures (A)(2).
6. Revisions to section 6. Procedures (D)(1)(a) to reflect that assigned personnel will ensure their Body Worn Cameras (BWC) are activated.
7. Revisions to section 6. Procedures (G)(9)(a) to reflect that less lethal impact munitions will be used in accordance with established training and use of force policy.

B. On 05/22/26 the following revisions were made:

1. Revised and updated the text at Section 1. Purpose.
2. Replaced the reference to the term/acronym "Mobile Field Force (MFF)" with the term/acronym "Civil Disturbance Unit" throughout the document as applicable.
3. Under Section 3. Policy, revised text to include expression of first Amendment demonstrations, civil disorders, and acts of civil disobedience.
4. Under Section 4. Definitions added definition for the term CIVIL DISTURBANCE UNIT, KETTLING, PLATOON, and SQUAD.
5. Removed text referring to the First Amendment of the Constitution under Section 6.A.1, and placed under Section 2. Background.
6. Edited Section 6.A.4.c Primary objectives at a civil disturbance to read as follows: "Arrest law violators and remove or isolate any other person(s) inciting or exhibiting violent behavior."
7. Edited Section 6.B.1.d Pre-Planned Events to indicate the SOD Commander will also seek assurance after consultation from the CDU.
8. Added the following under Section 6.B.1.e Pre-Planned Events:

- a. Assistance from Fire/EMS.
 - b. Roll call of available team members.
9. Added reference to HCSO policy [OPS 0103 \(Body Worn Cameras\)](#) under Section 6.D.1.a, Response to Planned Events.
 10. Under Section 6.D.2.b Response to Planned Events, clarified that pre-deployed members will also respond to the staging location to prepare and participate accordingly.
 11. Under Section 6.D.2.f Response to Planned Events clarified that deputies will not act individually unless ordered to do so by a CDU Platoon Leader or supervisor
 12. Added text under Section 6.E.1.i, Response to Spontaneous Civil Disturbances to clarify that deputies will also document and report on events as they happen (Photographic and videotape evidence of criminal acts when possible).
 13. Added the following text under Section 6.E.2.a, Response to Spontaneous Civil Disturbances:
"Assess If the crowd is unruly and displaying aggressive behavior."
 14. Added the following text under Section 6.E.2.b, Response to Spontaneous Civil Disturbances:
"Conduct an initial incident assessment by gathering and verifying available information regarding the nature, scope, participants, location, and circumstances of the disturbance to establish situational awareness and inform operational decision-making."
 15. Added the following text under Section 6.E.2.c, Response to Spontaneous Civil Disturbances:
"If approaching the crowd would not present unnecessary risk, instruct the gathering to disperse by issuing a lawful dispersal order using available amplification equipment (e.g., PA system, loudspeaker, or megaphone). When practicable, the order shall be documented by available body-worn and/or fleet camera systems, repeated multiple times to provide a reasonable opportunity for compliance, and the crowd's response shall be assessed to determine whether the order was audible and understood."
 16. Added the following text under Section 6.F.7 Dispersal Orders: "ensure the dispersal order meets HCSO message standards; and ensure the dispersal order is recorded (both audio and video) when communicated."
 17. Revised Section 6.G.1 Use of Force to read as follows:
 - a. In accordance with HCSO policy ([OPS 0501\) Use of Force](#) and as set forth under [Maryland Public Safety Article §3-524\(d\)\(1\)](#), deputies will employ an objectively reasonable (necessary and proportional) amount of force when necessary to effect an arrest and overcome any resistance offered.
 - b. When dealing with crowds and civil disobedience situations, deputies must be a disciplined and well-organized control force. The decisions to use force and the force options that may be applied in response to these incidents range from law enforcement presence to deadly force.

18. Edited Section 6.H.1 Incident Demobilization to include reference to accounting for equipment; documentation for any lost or damaged property; and review of BWC, in-car-camera (ICC), and other video systems and digital groups.
19. Edited Section 6.I.1 Requests by Other Jurisdictions to clarify all requests will be in writing and in accordance with state law.
20. Edited Section 6.I.2 Requests by Other Jurisdictions that clarifies any HCSO personnel deployed to assist another jurisdiction will remain under the authority of the HCSO Supervisor/Commander.
21. Added Section 6.J.a Training, that indicates "CDU members are required to fulfill public order training requirements as outlined in the NTOA Public Order Standards."

Approved

JEFFREY R. GAHLER
SHERIFF
DATE 7/29/20