

Guidelines for Handling Calls Regarding Missing and Exploited Children Operations Information Document (OID)



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National Emergency Number Association (NENA) Standard Operating Procedures Committee in conjunction with the Joint Steering Committee on Call Center Best Practices in Cases of Missing and Exploited Children

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OPERATIONS INFORMATION DOCUMENT**

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NENA's Committees have developed this document. Recommendations for change to this document may be submitted to:

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Acknowledgments:

This document has been developed by the National Emergency Number Association (NENA) Standard Operating Procedures Committee in conjunction with the Joint Steering Committee on Call Center Best Practices in Cases of Missing and Exploited Children.

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1 Executive Overview

This document has been developed at the request and through the efforts of the Joint Steering Committee on Call Center Best Practices in Cases of Missing and Exploited Children. This Committee was created through a Memorandum of Understanding signed by the National Emergency Number Association (NENA), National Academies of Emergency Dispatch, the Association of Public Safety Communications Officers (APCO), National Amber Alert, and the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC).

Exhibit 1 contains a statement of the mission and goals of the Steering Committee and Appendix A contains a list of all Steering Committee members. Members of the Executive Committee are:

Dr Bill Munn, Chairperson, NENA Past President; Scott Freitag, President, National Academics of Emergency Dispatch; George Rice, Executive Director, APCO International, Inc.; Courtney McCarron, Communications Affairs Manager, APCO International, Inc.; Peter Bellmio, Senior Police Advisor, Office of the President, National Center for Missing & Exploited Children; Dr. Robert Cobb, NENA Development Director; Phil Keith, AMBER Alert Program Manager, Fox Valley Technical College; Robert L. Martin, Executive Director, National Emergency Number Association; Keith Griffiths, President, The RedFlash Group (a division of KGB Media); Steve O'Connor, NENA Operations Committee Chair, Brevard County 9-1-1.

This document provides a recommended procedure for handling calls concerning missing children and from parents, guardians and caretakers seeking help in protecting their children from sexual exploitation. Guidance is provided relating to the collection of information by call takers, which is vital to the speedy recover of missing children. Guidance is also provided on pre-arrival instructions, which should offer parents the best available information on child safety.

2 Introduction

2.1 Purpose and Scope of Document

This document describes guidelines that, if applied in 9-1-1 Centers, can help to swiftly recover missing children and may protect children from exploitation. 9-1-1 Centers should use these guidelines to issue their own policies and procedures for handling calls related to missing and exploited children (MEC).

2.2 Reason to Implement

On an annual basis, almost 800,000 children are reported missing to law enforcement agencies. Those children are runaways as well as victims of abduction by family members, by strangers and by acquaintances. Swift and accurate collection of information can contribute greatly to the recovery of missing children.

The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) is designated by the United States Congress to serve as the national clearinghouse for training and technical assistance designed to strengthen policies and procedures used to respond to cases of missing and exploited children.

NCMEC is committed to including 9-1-1 Center staff in current training programs as well as to develop, with help from the Steering Committee, new courses and materials designed for staff in emergency communications centers.

2.3 Reason for Reissue

NENA reserves the right to modify this document. Whenever it is reissued, the reason(s) will be provided in this paragraph.

2.4 Recommendation for Standards Development Work

Operations standards development work is needed for this topic. There is no consistency in the manner in which 9-1-1 Centers handle cases of missing and exploited children. Federal law requires entry of missing children (and young people from 18 to 20 years of age) in NCIC within two hours of a report being taken but compliance to that law is low. Research has shown that, for abducted children who are subsequently murdered, there is only a very brief period of time between the abduction and the murder. Time is of the essence. Further, it is difficult to know which kind of missing child case could be a homicide. Of child homicide cases studied, only 10 percent were reported as abductions and over 60% were reports of just a missing child. Each case of a missing child called into a 9-1-1 center has the potential to be a homicide. For this reason, 9-1-1 Centers should carefully consider the impacts of establishing a waiting period.

2.5 Cost Factors

This effort will require staff time dedicated to developing policies and practices consistent with this OID. Information about those policies and practices will need to be integrated in training for staff delivered by 9-1-1 Centers, by NENA, by APCO, by NAED, and by other emergency call protocol development entities. The US Department of Justice (USDOJ) can provide tools and training materials to support those training efforts.

NCMEC has included 9-1-1 Center Directors among those eligible to attend its Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Briefings. National AMBER Alert has also provided training to 9-1-1 Center Directors for those communities developing Child Abduction Response Teams (CARTs).

NCMEC also provides on site assistance when child abductions occur through its Team Adam program. Other on site assistance for a wide range of services is available from retired law enforcement personnel who volunteer their services through Project ALERT.

2.6 Acronyms/Abbreviations

See NENA-ADM-000, NENA Master Glossary of 9-1-1 Terminology, located on the [NENA web site](#) for a complete listing of terms used in NENA documents. All acronyms used in this document are listed below, along with any new or updated terms and definitions.

The following Acronyms are used in this document:	
CART	Child Abduction Response Team
MEC	Missing and Exploited Children
NCIC	National Crime Information Center
NCMEC	National Center for Missing and Exploited Children
Project ALERT	America's Law Enforcement Retiree Team for MEC cases
Team Adam	NCMEC on site emergency response team for abduction cases

The following <i>new terms</i> are included in this document:	
Family abduction	A family abduction occurs when, in violation of a custody order, a decree, or other legitimate custodial rights, a member of the child's family, or someone acting on behalf of a family member, takes or fails to return a child.
Non-family Abduction	A non-family perpetrator takes a child by the use of physical force or threat of bodily harm or detains a child for at least 1 hour in an isolated place.
Throwaway	A throwaway is a child asked or told to leave home by a parent or other household adult and the child is out of the household overnight; or a child who is away from home is prevented from returning home by a parent or other household adult.

The following <i>new terms</i> are included in this document:	
Runaways	A runaway is a when a child leaves home without permission and stays away overnight; or a child 14 years old or younger (or older and mentally incompetent) who is away from home chooses not to return when supposed to and stays away overnight; or a child 15 years old or older who is away from home chooses not to return and stays away two nights.
Lost otherwise missing	a child's whereabouts are unknown to the child's caretaker and this causes the caretaker to be alarmed for at least 1 hour and try to locate the child, under one of two conditions: (1) the child was trying to get home or make contact with the caretaker but was unable to do so because the child was lost, stranded, or injured; or (2) the child was too young to know how to return home or make contact with the caretaker.

3 Operational Description

Effective response by a 9-1-1 Center to calls regarding missing children is much like that of any other crime against a person. Therefore, policies and practices need to be developed for missing child cases in cooperation with law enforcement agencies served by 9-1-1 Centers. For 9-1-1 Centers an effective response is made up of four components: Employee Awareness, Information Collection Criteria, Dispatching Practices, and NCIC entries.

3.1 Employee Awareness

Call takers need to know about NCMEC and its role as the national clearinghouse and technical assistance provider designated by Congress to support law enforcement in its efforts to recover missing children. The working relationship between NCMEC and AMBER Alert should be clear. NCMEC has a wide range of publications, training and services that call takers need to know about so that they can refer parents to prevention materials and help ensure that law enforcement reports cases of missing children to NCMEC. Call takers also need to know about the role of AMBER Alert and Child Abduction Response Teams (CART) as part of an overall effort to recover missing children.

3.2 Information collected

Exhibit 2 contains a protocol that describes the information that needs to be collected by call takers handling various kinds of MEC cases. That information is not unlike what is needed for any major case and should not place an unusual burden on call taking staff. That protocol also must be used for cases of missing persons under 21 years of age based on the Protect Act of 2002

3.3 Dispatching Criteria

Patrol officers should be dispatched to take reports on all cases of missing children. This response is mandated by the National Child Search Assistance Act of 1990 and the Adam Walsh Act of 2006. In cases of runaways, NCMEC's model policy (also adopted by the International Association of Chiefs of Police) calls for the completion of runaway debriefing reports as part of an overall effort

to prevent future runaway events and reduce the number of chronic runaways and throwaway children.

3.4 NCIC Entries

Federal law requires entry of missing children in NCIC within two hours of the report being taken. There are NCIC guides to help staff to accurately enter these cases. Special attention needs to be given to prompt entry as soon as necessary information is collected. Where possible, pictures should be added to NCIC entries. Flags for child abduction (CA) cases should be added in a manner consistent with NCIC guidelines. Missing children must remain in NCIC until they are recovered and should not be removed when they are old enough to be adults. These entries should be flagged so that agencies will be notified of any modification to that entry.

4 References

National Incidence Study of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway (NISMART) Children,
US Department of Justice, October 2002

Case Management for Missing Children Homicide Investigations, State of Washington Attorney
General's Office and the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention of the US
Department of Justice, May 2006

National Child Search Assistance Act of 1990

Protect Act of 2002

Adam Walsh Child Protection and Safety Act of 2006

5 Exhibits

5.1 Exhibit 1



Joint Steering Committee on Call Center Best Practices In Cases of Missing Children

Mission Statement

Establish a consortium of Public Safety Communications organizations to create and promulgate recommended industry best practices for effective intake and response to reports of missing and/or exploited children.

Goals

1. Establish a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) among consortium members that define commitments to the effort.
2. Develop and endorse best practices, to include minimum performance levels, and performance measures for evaluating effectiveness.
3. Improve awareness regarding missing and exploited children on the part of stakeholders.
4. Develop and disseminate tools to improve the knowledge and skills of public safety communications staff to effectively respond to reports of missing and exploited children.
5. Develop and deliver training for all levels of public safety communications staff to improve their knowledge and ability to effectively respond to reports of missing and exploited children.

5.2 Exhibit 2

MISSING CHILD FIRST RESPONSE PROTOCOL
THE TELECOMMUNICATOR'S GUIDE FOR
INITIAL CALL INTAKE AND INCIDENT INITIATION
September 25, 2006 Working Draft

A CHILD IS DISCOVERED MISSING.

9-1-1 is dialed.

The telecommunicator takes the call, and the process begins.

Every question strategically formulated and asked...

Every word spoken to facilitate the caller's focus in this horrific moment...

Every second expended in gathering critical information...

ALL DETERMINE THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE FIRST RESPONSE.

The work of Public Safety Communications Professionals creates the very foundation of first response when a child is reported missing. Before officers arrive on the scene, before investigative agents begin their work, the Telecommunicator forges a near-instant, strategic, yet profoundly humanistic and interdependent relationship with the caller. It is this first interaction with the public safety community that can define how subsequent responses will be organized and perceived.

The result of this work fortifies the field response with every aspect of available information about the child, any possible suspect(s), vehicle(s), environment, and the continuum of circumstances associated with the event. Beyond the initial call intake, minute-to-minute updates are gathered, formulated, disseminated and logged to enhance the integrity of enforcement and investigative actions in the case.

The impact of the role and responsibilities undertaken by the Telecommunicator contributes in a defining sense to the development, management, and resolution of the case.

AND THE RESOLUTION OF THE CASE....IS THE VERY LIFE OF THE CHILD

MISSING CHILD FIRST RESPONSE PROTOCOL
THE TELECOMMUNICATOR'S GUIDE FOR
INITIAL CALL INTAKE AND INCIDENT INITIATION

Basic Assumptions:

- ✓ The call taker will gather enough information to determine an appropriate response consistent with agency policy pertaining to the missing child incident.
- ✓ The focus of the call-taker should NOT be on whether or not the case will qualify for an AMBER Alert. The AMBER Alert program does not supersede nor in any way replace the core functions of law enforcement operational and investigative response.
- ✓ The call-taker is trained and qualified in recognized basic call handling and intake policies and procedures within his/her agency.



Guiding Principles and Values:

- ✓ Professionalism
- ✓ Compassion
- ✓ Respect
- ✓ Patience
- ✓ Commitment to Accuracy and Detail
- ✓ Commitment to Follow-Through and Accountability (Quality Assurance)



Goals for Initial Intake:

- 1. Obtain and Verify Incident Location, Callback and Contact Information**
- 2. Maintain Control of the Call**
- 3. Communicate the Ability to HELP the Caller**
- 4. Methodically and Strategically Obtain Information Through Systematic Inquiry to be Captured in the Agency's Intake Format**
- 5. Recognize the potential urgency of the missing child incident and immediately begin the proper notifications consistent with agency policy**
- 6. Perform all Information Entries and Disseminations, Both Initial and Update**

FIRST RESPONSE CALL INTAKE

CHECK LIST

The following protocol is intended as a solid framework for call intake, but should not in any manner rescind or override agency procedures for the timing of broadcasts and messaging.

These procedures are established as recommended practices to consider with existing agency policy and procedure to ensure the most swift and accurate handling of every missing child incident.

All information should be simultaneously entered, as it is obtained by the telecommunicator, into an electronic format (when available) that will feed/populate any directed messages which will be sent to law enforcement in conjunction with on-air broadcasts.

Preferably, when an AMBER Alert request for activation intake form is used, this initial entry should be set up to automatically populate that format as well to avoid double entry.

FIRST RESPONSE CALL INTAKE

CHECK LIST

❖ **LOCATION**

- Request exact location of the incident (structure addresses, street names, intersections, directional identifiers, mile posts, etc.) and callback information
 - If specifics are not known, request landmarks or estimated proximity to landmarks
- **Tell caller and any witnesses to remain at current location (unless determined unsafe) until officers arrive**
- **Obtain names, and later in “ADDITIONAL INFORMATION,” locations of the caller and any additional witnesses**

❖ **WHAT IS THE EMERGENCY**

- **Ascertain exactly what happened**
- **Any injuries?**
- **Weapons involved?**
 - **If reported as an Abduction continue on...**
 - **If reported as Lost, Injured or otherwise missing go to page..... _____**
 - **If reported as a Runaway go to page....**

❖ **TIME FRAMES**

- **When did this happen? Determine if in Progress or not**
- **Descriptions and names (if known) of child and suspect**
- **Vehicle descriptions**
- **Direction of travel**
- **Relationships between child, suspect and caller**
- **If in Progress, broadcast available information to patrols ASAP**
- **Maintain telephone contact with caller until officer arrives at the scene**

❖ **SUSPECT**

- Name
- Sex
- Race
- Age
- Height
- Weight
- Hair
- Eyes
- Complexion
- Physical (Marks, Scars, Tattoos, Limp, etc)
- Hearing or Speech Impairment
- Clothing
 - Head to Foot, Outer to Inner
 - Hat/Head
 - Coat
 - Shirt
 - Pants/Shorts
 - Shoes
 - Socks
- Is the child familiar with the suspect?
 - If a relative, what relation?
 - Who allegedly has custody? Any custody disputes?
- Weapons involved - possessed?
- History of violence or mental illness?
- Known or obvious Medical/Psychological Conditions (Buy Medicine)
- Does the suspect have a cell phone? (***DO NOT*** have anyone try to call the cell phone. *This information needs to be immediately forwarded for investigative follow-up*)
- Assist responding officers with as thorough background information as possible.

FIRST RESPONSE CALL INTAKE CHECK LIST

❖ **CHILD**

- Name
- Sex
- Race
- Age
- Height
- Weight
- Hair
- Eyes
- Complexion
- Physical (Marks, Scars, Tattoos, Limp, etc.)
- Hearing or Speech Impairment
- Clothing
 - Head to Foot, Outer to Inner
 - Hat/Head
 - Coat
 - Shirt
 - Pants/Shorts
 - Shoes
 - Socks
- Was the child with anyone (adult, child, pets, etc.)?
- Injured?
- Medical/Psychological (Autism) Conditions and Medications Being Taken?
- Does the child have a cell phone? (***DO NOT*** have anyone try to call the cell phone. *This information needs to be immediately forwarded for investigative follow-up*)
- Any other identifying/distinguishing characteristics anything else that makes your child stand out (stutter, hairstyle, etc)

❖ **VEHICLE**

➤ **C.Y.M.B.A.L.**

- Color
- Year
- Make
- Model
- Body
- Additional Descriptors (rust, dents, other damage, stickers, etc.)
- License
 - If available, initiate plate/tag inquiry

Ascertain any upgraded onboard technology, such as OnStar, Lojack, or any on-board navigation systems.

ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS:

Most departments cannot ‘do it all’ when faced with emergency response to the abduction of a child. Action plans, interagency agreements and Incident Command Management Programs should be developed so that the officer at the scene will have access to a well-established and reliable framework of resources and assistance.

- **Consider Incident Command and Mutual Aid requests**
- **Consider (coordinate for internal additional staffing) additional PSAP staffing for the incident.**
- **Consider establishing tactical perimeter posts, if no immediate field command exists.**
- **Consider local, regional, county and statewide broadcast as appropriate.**
- **Consider establishing a dedicated frequency and dispatcher for the incident.**
- **Initiate immediate leads / case management system.**
- **Coordinate resource deployment for field units, i.e. air support, and search dogs (NASAR / USAR).**
- **Request staging area from Incident Commander to be conveyed to responding officers.**

Resources which should be used, and for which contact information should be readily available and organized within your communications center include:

- ✓ Federal Law Enforcement (FBI) (ICE)
- ✓ National Center for Missing & Exploited Children
- ✓ CART Teams (Child Abduction Response Teams)
- ✓ Computer Aided Dispatch System
- ✓ Law Enforcement Terminal Data System
- ✓ National Crime Information Center System
- ✓ National Law Enforcement Telecommunications System
- ✓ Leads / Tips management system/software
- ✓ Mobile Data Terminals for communications with field personnel and officers
- ✓ Public Information Officer (s)
- ✓ Search and Rescue teams
- ✓ K-9 teams
- ✓ Aviation
- ✓ FLIRS (Forward Looking Infrared System)
- ✓ Global Positioning Systems
- ✓ Night vision equipment
- ✓ Scanning equipment for photos and documents
- ✓ Digital camera equipment
- ✓ Mobile incident command post vehicle
- ✓ Phone bank resources/infrastructure
- ✓ Logging recording system
- ✓ Instant call capture and retrieval system (ANI/ALI)
- ✓ Additional Staffing
- ✓ Consider logistics
- ✓ Others....

FIRST RESPONSE POST INTAKE

CHECK LIST

If your agency serves as the control point for development and dissemination of messaging and broadcasts directly related to the issuance of the AMBER Alert, and determined to be an AMBER Alert, additional significant procedures will apply within this section.

❖ **Complete Broadcast and Messaging Follow-Up**

- Complete all electronic logging

Compile hard copy documentation as defined by Agency policy

- Ensure all Agency and State (and/or Regional) personnel involved in the AMBER Alert Approval and Activation Process have been notified and supplied with all messages.
- Establish/activate dedicated communication line for incident updates from law enforcement personnel
 - As updates are received, make all appropriate broadcasts/re-broadcasts
 - As updates are received, develop and disseminate all appropriate electronic messaging

❖ **Management of Leads / Tips**

- If a call center is not activated, establish workload and lines of responsibility for taking calls regarding the abduction. If necessary, call in additional staff and supervision.
- Utilize call management software to capture leads/tips in order to effectively present them to field staff and supervisors for determination of validity and subsequent update broadcasts.

❖ **If AMBER Alert is Activated**

- Update state law enforcement terminal system and NCIC record with the “AA” flag to indicate activation of an AMBER Alert.
- Ensure contact with the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) is made (when the proper flags are used in NCIC, NCMEC will contact your agency, and that such contact is properly routed if your communications center is not responsible for interaction with NCMEC.
- Ensure parameters for NCMEC’s Secondary Distribution are communicated to NCMEC staff

5.3 Exhibit 3

**LAW ENFORCEMENT
POLICY AND PROCEDURES
FOR REPORTS OF
MISSING AND ABDUCTED CHILDREN**

— A MODEL —

**– developed by –
The National Center for
Missing & Exploited Children®**

Revised – January 2005

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The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children

Model Law Enforcement Policy and Procedures for Reports of Missing and Abducted Children

Overview

Reports of missing children can be among the most difficult, challenging, and emotionally charged cases a *law enforcement* agency will ever experience. The attitude and approach that an agency and its officers take in responding to reports of missing children may very well determine whether the child is recovered promptly and safely or remains missing for months or years or, even worse, is never recovered. Each stage of the case, therefore, from initial investigation through successful recovery, forms a critical component of a thorough *law enforcement* response.

A *law enforcement* agency must provide its officers with the tools that will enable them to act decisively when confronted with reports of missing children. The single, most important tool an agency can provide is a clearly worded policy directive containing understandable procedures that officers can follow as a guide through each stage of the investigation.

Policies and procedures are of limited value, however, unless an agency ensures that every member receives direct instruction about the policy's intent. Additionally, specific training and awareness about the overall issue of missing children will help each officer understand the critical role he or she plays in this important area of child protection. For example officers should be aware that they might encounter several types of missing child cases, each with their own unique response requirements. They include

- A. The **nonfamily abduction** in which a child is taken by an unknown individual, through force or persuasion, usually in furtherance of additional victimization.
- B. The **family abduction** in which a noncustodial family member flees with a child, usually in direct violation of a court ordered custody arrangement.
- C. The **runaway** child, most often a teenager, who leaves home voluntarily for a variety of reasons.
- D. The **lost or otherwise missing** child, who becomes separated from parents or caretakers under circumstances not indicating the likelihood of an abduction or voluntary absence.
- E. The **throwaway** whose caretaker makes no effort to recover the child who has run away or who has been abandoned or deserted. While not necessarily reported to authorities as missing, children in this category frequently require the services of law enforcement.

It should be noted that not all missing child incidents occurring each year in this country result in a direct *law enforcement* response. Some incidents are resolved by parents, relatives, friends, or neighbors while others are over (*i.e.*, the child escapes or returns home) before law enforcement is notified.

What this discussion should point out to the *law enforcement* administrator is that law enforcement is usually called upon to handle the most demanding missing child reports. That is those cases requiring decisive action and a carefully planned response.

When developing policy and procedures regarding missing children cases, it is essential that each response, regardless of what the initial indicators may be, should be governed by an assumption that the child is in jeopardy until significant facts to the contrary are confirmed. When officers respond with the missing child's safety as their foremost concern, they will be more likely to collect evidence or information that might otherwise be lost during the critical, early stages of an investigation.

Using the Model Policy

The model policy on missing children that follows has been designed to serve as a general reference that can be modified to fit the specific needs of any agency, regardless of size. It attempts to present the missing child response process in a logical progression from case intake through first response and case investigation on to recovery and case closure.

From the basic outline presented in this model, administrators are encouraged to add those topics that are unique to their agency or region of the country and incorporate actions mandated by federal, state, or local statutes. It should also be noted that the text found in *italics* is offered as explanation, and its inclusion in an agency's final policy or procedures is optional.

Finally, much of the content of this model policy is based on material found in the NCMEC publication titled *Missing and Abducted Children: A Law enforcement Guide to Case Investigation and Program Management*.

That publication contains chapters covering each type of missing child case and provides individual checklists that offer step-by-step recommendations for successful case investigation. A free copy of this publication can be obtained by calling 1-800-THE-LOST (1-800-843-5678).

Pre-Incident Planning and Resource Development

Along with the creation of a written policy and procedure - pre-incident planning and resource development are equally important to the formation of an effective law enforcement response to reports of missing children. When these three factors are given equal emphasis, a truly comprehensive response plan will result.

In an effort to more efficiently investigate, manage, and resolve cases of missing children and minimize the emotional stresses associated with these incidents, many communities, led by their

law enforcement agencies, are holding pre-planning sessions to assess roles, identify resources, and agree on responsibilities. When implemented, this interagency protocol not only spells out specific responsibilities, but also serves as the basis for ongoing communication and cooperation.

When law enforcement responds to the report of a missing child without a plan, time is lost and opportunities are wasted. By adopting planned strategies, officers will be able to exercise more control over events, react more effectively to unexpected occurrences, and enhance the likelihood of swift and successful case resolution.

**Comments or questions regarding this Model Policy and Procedure are welcomed.
Please contact NCMEC's Associate Director of Training at 1.877.446.2632, ext. 6080.**

Model Missing Children's Policy

Directive Type	Effective Date	Directive Number
Subject <p style="text-align: center;">Missing Children</p>		Issuing Authority
Reference		Amends/Rescinds
Distribution	Reevaluation Date	No. Pages

I. Policy Purpose *(Describe the objective(s) of this policy.)*

The purpose of this policy is to establish guidelines and responsibilities regarding this agency's response to reports of missing children.

II. Policy Statement *(Describe the agency's intent or philosophy regarding this policy.)*

It shall be the policy of this agency to thoroughly investigate all reports of missing children. Additionally this agency holds that every child reported as missing will be considered at risk until significant information to the contrary is confirmed.

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

Questions concerning parental custody occasionally arise in relation to missing child reports. It shall be the policy of this agency 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 this agency will open a case when it can be shown that the child has been removed, without explanation, from his or her usual place of residence.

III. Definitions

Describe what circumstances control report acceptance.

- A. The term **missing child** refers to a person who is
1. Younger than 18 years of age and
 2. Whose whereabouts are unknown to his or her parent, guardian, or responsible party
- B. A missing child will be considered “**at-risk**” when one or more of the **unusual circumstances** noted in paragraph C are present
- C. The term **unusual circumstances** refers to a missing child who is:
1. 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 - or -*
 2. Believed to be one or more of the items noted below.

Out of the zone of safety for his or her age, developmental stage, and/or physical condition. The zone of safety will vary depending on the age of the child and his or her developmental stage. 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 the route taken between home and school.

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.

Drug dependent, including both prescription and 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.*

A potential victim of foul play or sexual exploitation. *Risk to the child can be assumed if investigation indicates a possible abduction, violence at*

the scene of an abduction, or signs of sexual abuse.

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.*

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.*

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.*

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 - or -*

3. Whose disappearance involves circumstances that would cause a reasonable person to conclude that the child should be considered at risk.

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

1. If it is determined that **unusual circumstances** are involved in the report of a missing child, the child will be considered **at risk**, and an expanded investigation, including the use of all appropriate resources, will immediately commence. *While all missing child incidents should be investigated thoroughly, those involving unusual circumstances indicate a heightened likelihood of risk to the child and, therefore, require an intensive response.*
2. If appropriate, existing interagency response protocols - including the **AMBER Alert** system, if available - should be activated. *Pre-planned strategies for responding to missing child reports are essential for successful case resolution. By identifying all the services and resources a region has available to search for missing children, multiagency agreements can be reached beforehand and promptly activated when the need arises See Paragraph 7 of Section IV (A) regarding role of the call-taker and Paragraph 3 of Section IV(C) regarding the role of the*

*supervisor for additional **AMBER Alert** commentary).*

IV. Procedures

Describe the responsibilities of agency members who may be involved in a missing child case.

A. Communications personnel receiving the report of a missing child shall

1. Determine if circumstances of the report meet the definition of a missing child as set forth in Section III. *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. *The officer 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 certain missing child reports, such as suspected runaways, over the telephone is discouraged since accurate assessments of risk to the child cannot be made. Note: The National Child Search Assistance Act of 1990 mandates law enforcement's immediate response to reports of missing children and the prompt entry of descriptive information into the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) National Crime Information Center (NCIC) Missing Person File.*
3. Notify a supervisor. *Because of the complexity of some missing child cases, especially those that may require the immediate mobilization of investigative resources, call-takers should verify that a supervisor has been notified whenever officers respond to such an assignment.*
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, about the circumstances of the child's disappearance. Information should include the child's height, weight, hair and eye color, and clothing, as well as the location where the child was last seen. Most importantly the radio alert should contain any information known about a possible abductor with special emphasis on the description of the suspect and vehicle used as well as direction of travel. Consideration should also be given to the use of "road-block plans," including those involving surrounding agencies, to apprehend a fleeing*

abductor.

5. Search agency records for related information. *It is essential for responding officers to know if the child or family has been the subject of previous reports that might have a bearing on this incident. If possible, records should also be reviewed to learn if any incidents have been reported in the area 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.*
6. Safeguard all pertinent records. *The call-taker 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.*
7. Initiate media contact - including activation of the **AMBER Alert** system and/or other immediate, community-notification methods when appropriate. *In agencies without a public-information officer, the call-taker, under direction of a law enforcement supervisor, may be best situated to provide information to the media that is designed to elicit public assistance in the search for a missing child. In preparation for such situations, call-takers should have available the telephone numbers of media contacts. Additionally the call-taker should also be prepared to immediately activate the appropriate immediate, community notification method if so directed by appropriate law enforcement personnel.*

B. The **initial officer** or first responder assigned to the report of a missing child shall

1. Respond promptly to the scene of the report. *Even if the assigned officer has been provided with initial information such as the missing child's description and other facts about the incident, it would be inappropriate to delay response to conduct a random search by doing things such as circling through parks, checking playgrounds, or stopping suspicious individuals. Unless in immediate response to the missing child's safety, these activities can be handled by other patrol units.*
2. Interview the parent(s) or person who made the initial report. *The purpose of this interview is to gain an insight into the circumstances surrounding the disappearance and other information needed to conduct an initial*

assessment of the case. Note: Using a specifically designed missing-person report form to gather information will enable the first responder to more promptly reach an accurate risk assessment. One such form can be found in NCIC's Missing Person File Information Kit, available through your agency Terminal Control Operator.

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. Again, the use of a missing-person report form will expedite the collection of descriptive information.*
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 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 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, as defined in Paragraph B of Section III, 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. *This information is needed to determine factors such as abduction time frame, windows of opportunity, and verification of previously received*

information. Comparison of information gathered from the reporting party, witness, and other sources may prove vital to case direction.

8. Interview the individual(s) who last had contact with the missing child. *Effective questioning of those individuals who last saw or spoke with a missing child is crucial in the case-assessment process. While seeking information about the child's appearance, demeanor, and actions, officers also should be alert to contradictions or evasiveness by the witness, especially if these statements cannot be readily substantiated.*
9. Identify the child's zone of safety for his or her age, developmental stage, and physical and mental state. *Responding officers should attempt to determine how far a missing child could travel from the location where last seen before he or she would most likely be at risk of injury or exploitation. 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; interviews with parents, other family members, and friends; statements of witnesses; and search of scene*) an officer should be able to reach a preliminary determination regarding the type of case and the need for additional resources. *Note: Officers must be cautious in "labeling" or classifying a missing child 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, officers should consider all possibilities until the case category is clearly determined.*
11. 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.*
12. Determine the correct NCIC Missing Person File category and ensure that a notification is promptly transmitted. *There are 5 categories within the Missing Person File that apply to children. They are disability, endangered, involuntary, juvenile, and catastrophe. Simply because the child is younger than 18 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.

8. Provide detailed descriptive information to communications unit for broadcast updates. *As information becomes available regarding the missing child's physical appearance, circumstances of the case, or description of the potential abductor, the initial officer should ensure that other officers and agencies are provided with up-to-date facts.*
9. Identify and interviewing 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 child, should be recorded. If possible, include them in photographs and/or videotapes of the incident scene. By interviewing each person privately, officers may be able to uncover information that will be instrumental in resolution of the case.*
15. 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, officers should obtain written permission to search houses, apartments, outbuildings, vehicles, and other property that might hold information about the child's disappearance. Officers are again reminded to conduct a thorough, immediate search of the child's home and property — even if the disappearance supposedly took place elsewhere. When possible officers should also search a missing child's school locker as well as any computer or electronic messaging systems to which a child has access.*
16. 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 such as hair, fingerprints, and bite marks are collected.*
17. Record if the child has access to an online computer, cellular telephone, and/or pager. *Before making an initial decision that the child has run away, an officer should determine if the child may have left to meet someone he or she encountered while online. Since predators are known to use the Internet to identify vulnerable children, what appears at first to be a runaway case, may, in fact, be a child abducted or kidnapped by someone the child first met online. Additionally, since many children have their own pagers and cellular telephones and may have them while missing, an officer should note these devices during the information-*

gathering process.

18. Prepare necessary reports and completing appropriate forms. *Information gathered by the first responding officer(s) may be instrumental in the eventual case resolution. To record this important information, officers 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 everything, not just those events that seem to have a direct bearing on the case.*

C. The **supervisor** assigned to the report of a missing child shall

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 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. *Depending upon the situation, a supervisor may determine that additional personnel, including specialized units, should be called to the scene or otherwise assist in the investigation. Certain cases may also require that the supervisor activate existing interagency response protocols.*
3. 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 activate such efforts.*
4. Establish a command post. *A command post is a field headquarters for scene management. It is used as a center for organizing personnel and directing investigative efforts as well as a focal point for inquires, intelligence gathering, and media contacts. 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.*
5. Organize and coordinate search efforts. *Systematic searches are common features of missing child investigations. A supervisor should appoint a search operation coordinator who can oversee the search effort while the*

supervisor remains available to manage the entire investigation.

6. Ensure that all required notifications have been made. *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, and all investigative networks are supplied with accurate details.*
7. Establish a liaison with the victim family. *Families of a missing child 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.*
8. Confirm that all agency policies and procedures are observed. *In addition to providing the innovative direction required during a missing child 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.*
9. Manage media relations. *Many missing child investigations, especially those involving large-scale search efforts, are likely to draw media attention. Supervisors should manage media presence in a way that complements, rather than conflicts with the investigation.*

D. The **investigator** assigned to the report of a missing child shall

1. Obtain a briefing from agency 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. 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. Conduct a neighborhood investigation. *A thorough canvass of the neighborhood should be conducted without delay. The objective is to identify and interview all persons within the abduction zone who may 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 are otherwise associated with the area.

4. Obtain a brief history of recent family dynamics. *Information about family dynamics, obtained from family members, neighbors, teachers, classmates, employers, coworkers, and witnesses, can offer valuable insights into what may have happened to the missing child 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 agency 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. *An information-management system is an essential part of the overall investigative process. 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 child incidents may necessitate the use of resources and services both from within the agency and from other organizations as well. Investigators should be aware of the input that can be obtained from resources such as the FBI; NCIC; state missing children’s clearinghouses; and 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 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.*
9. Monitor media relations. *While information gained through effective*

media relations is often of significant value in a missing child case, investigators should review all notices prior to release to ensure that investigative objectives are not unintentionally compromised.

- E. An officer assigned to the report of an **unidentified person**, whether living or deceased, who appears to be a child, shall
1. Obtain a complete description. *Officers who are assigned to this task should utilize standardized information-gathering forms such as the NCIC Unidentified Person File Worksheet.*
 2. Enter the unidentified child's description into 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 child. *The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children; state missing children's clearinghouses; and other organizations, such as state medical examiners, may be of assistance in the identification.*
 4. Cancel all notifications after identification is confirmed.
- F. An officer assigned to the **recovery or return** of a missing child shall
1. Verify that the located child is, in fact, the reported missing child. *An officer should personally verify all returns. The benefits of this practice include assessing the child's safety, gaining intelligence about possible predators, and helping to prevent future episodes.*
 2. Secure intervention services, if indicated. *During the verification process, officers should be alert for indications that additional services may be needed before the child can be safely reunited with his or her family. These services may include mental and/or physical health examinations and arrangements for family counseling.*
 3. Arrange, in the case of a runaway or missing child from within department jurisdiction who has been located and who is not wanted on a warrant or other law violation, the return of the child to his or her legal guardian or an appropriate children's shelter.
 4. Place, in the case of a runaway from another jurisdiction or 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 transporting him or her to the appropriate facility for admission.

5. 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 that describes the child’s activities while missing and circumstances of the recovery/return.

Note: If appropriate, this section might also include a proviso concerning an agency’s limited authority regarding 16 and 17 year-old missing children who, when located, may not be detained or required to return home unless certain conditions exist.

Comments or questions regarding this Model Policy and Procedure are welcomed. Please contact NCMEC's Associate Director of Training at 1.877.446.2632, extension 6080.

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6 Appendix

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