

Don't Wait to Report a Missing Person

by Lt. Fred Plageman Santa Cruz County Sheriff's Office

Last week my 11-year-old daughter told me about one of her friend's loved ones being reported missing to the local police. Misinformed, my daughter and her friend thought they had to wait 24 hours prior to making a report. I asked my daughter how she came to believe this notion and she said it was echoed by everyone including a teacher.

This is not the first time I have heard this misinformation. As a law enforcement professional, a father and a member of this community I would like to inform everyone that a person should be reported missing promptly, without delay.

Missing persons cases should be evaluated and often continually re-evaluated on a case by case basis. Communication between the reporting party, family members and the police, including police communicating with one another, is crucial in insuring the best possible outcome.

Leave no doubt. Do not allow feelings of embarrassment or imposition to interfere with what is most important, the safety and well being of the person missing. Do not wait or conduct extensive searches on your own when you could get help. Report the missing person to law enforcement.

Penal Code Section 14205 requires police to accept a report of a missing person regardless of jurisdiction. The agency that receives the report accepts responsibility for the investigation and will direct resources accordingly. The receiving agency, be it police, sheriff or state parks, shall immediately formally notify law enforcement where the person lives and any agency where the missing person was last seen in their jurisdiction.

If the missing person is under 16 or at risk, expedited reporting is required.

Putting Resources to Work

Law enforcement collects and shares information about a missing person through many resources.

We will complete a missing person report and a lost person questionnaire form that provides detailed, thorough background information. That information may be entered into the Missing Unidentified Persons Systems.

Law enforcement can issue an all points bulletin, prepare and circulate flyers including a photo(s), issue press releases, start canvassing and notify residents by reverse 9-1-1. We may also deploy a search and rescue (SAR) team comprised of security-checked, trained volunteers working with a management overhead team. This is integrated with an incident command system under the direction of sheriff's command staff.

A well-trained officer should notify the supervisor of a missing persons report if the supervisor is not already aware. Involuntary missing persons, parental abductions, runaways under the age of

16 years, suspicious circumstances, unknown or at risk circumstances all require immediate attention. The at-risk category includes a person who is the victim of a suspected crime or foul play, someone in need of medical attention, a person who is mentally or emotionally impaired, someone with no pattern of running away or disappearing or a victim of parental abduction.

Sometimes a criminal investigative team will be involved in the case in addition to investigators trying to locate the missing person. In the case of criminal abduction, resources such as the Amber Alert System can be implemented. In the case of a voluntary missing adult, when the missing person is located, limited information may be provided to insure privacy.

Whether or not an actual search and rescue mission will be conducted depends on the facts of each case. Deciding where to search, how long and to what extent is a collaboration of objective, well-trained, experienced members of an overhead team. A search is considered an emergency. If there is not a starting point or a last known place for the missing person, a search may not be conducted. In the county, the ultimate decision lies with the incident commander who must answer to the sheriff.

It is essential for the community to be supportive and trust the search and rescue effort. If reverse 9-1-1 goes out at 3 a.m. and wakes you up, it is for a well-thought-out reason, critical to the safety and well-being of a person. Similarly, when a SAR member contacts you, we are seeking your cooperation.

It takes a community to locate a missing person. The first step is to contact law enforcement as soon as possible to get the appropriate resources to find them.

Lt. Plageman is a native Santa Cruzan and second generation deputy who has served at the Sheriff's Office for 23 years. He is currently the Investigation Division commander.