

## Public Alerts

### 317.1 PURPOSE AND SCOPE

The purpose of this policy is to provide guidelines for alerting the public to important information and soliciting public aid when appropriate.

### 317.2 POLICY

Public alerts may be employed using the Emergency Alert System (EAS), local radio, television and press organizations and other groups to notify the public of incidents, or enlist the aid of the public, when the exchange of information may enhance the safety of the community. Various types of alerts may be available based upon each situation and the alert system's individual criteria.

### 317.3 RESPONSIBILITIES AND ALERT PROCEDURE STANDARDS

#### 317.3.1 MEMBER RESPONSIBILITIES

Members of the St. Mary's County Sheriff's Office should notify their supervisor, Duty Officer or a Criminal Investigations supervisor as soon as practicable upon learning of a situation where public notification, a warning or enlisting the help of the media and the public could assist in locating a missing person, apprehending a dangerous person or gathering information.

#### 317.3.2 SUPERVISOR RESPONSIBILITIES

A supervisor apprised of the need for a public alert is responsible for making the appropriate notifications based upon the circumstances of each situation. The supervisor shall promptly notify the Sheriff, the appropriate Division Commander and the Public Information Officer when any public alert is generated in accordance with SMCSO Policy 327 Major Incident Notification.

The supervisor overseeing the investigation to which the alert relates is responsible for the following:

- (a) Updating alerts
- (b) Canceling alerts
- (c) Ensuring all appropriate reports are completed

#### 317.3.3 STANDARDIZED PROCEDURE FOR ALL ALERT CATEGORIES

The following procedures apply to every alert category addressed in this policy, including AMBER, Blue, Silver, Yellow and Purple Alerts. These requirements are in addition to the criteria and any alert-specific requirement stated in the section governing the individual alert.

- (a) Internal notifications: Upon determining that an alert may be warranted, the supervisor overseeing the investigation shall notify the Duty Officer. The Duty Officer shall ensure that the On-Call Commander, the appropriate Division Commander and the Public Information Officer (PIO) are notified in accordance with SMCSO Policy 327 Major Incident Notification.

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- (b) NCIC entry: Before activation of a state alert is requested, the supervisor overseeing the investigation shall confirm that the subject of the alert has been entered into the National Crime Information Center (NCIC) in the appropriate file, that the entry includes all available identifying and descriptive information, and that any associated vehicle has been entered into the appropriate NCIC file. Entries for a missing person under the age of 21 shall be made without delay and in no case later than two hours after receipt of the report (34 U.S.C. Section 41308). The member making the entry shall record the NCIC number in the case file, and the supervisor shall confirm the entry before contacting the Maryland State Police (MSP).
- (c) Activation request: After confirming that the criteria for the alert have been met and that NCIC entry is complete, the supervisor designated in the applicable section of this policy shall contact the MSP Headquarters Duty Officer and request activation. The requesting supervisor shall provide all information required by MSP and shall remain available for follow-up contact.
- (d) Written confirmation of the request: The requesting supervisor shall be prepared to follow the verbal request with a written request or activation form, submitted in the format and by the method currently designated by MSP. A copy of any written request submitted shall be retained in the case file.
- (e) MSP point of contact: At the time of the request, the requesting supervisor shall record the name and rank of the MSP Headquarters Duty Officer or other MSP point of contact, the date and time of the request, the method of contact, whether the request was approved or denied, and any alert or activation number assigned by MSP.
- (f) PIO and media notification: The Duty Officer shall ensure that the PIO is notified of the alert.
- (g) Local public notification: Public notification through tip411 and Sheriff's Office social media accounts shall be made in accordance with Section 317.8, regardless of whether a state alert is activated. Information requiring immediate public dissemination shall not be delayed pending PIO availability or the preparation of a press release.
- (h) Updates: The supervisor overseeing the investigation is responsible for providing significant updates to MSP, the Duty Officer and the PIO, and for ensuring that NCIC entries are supplemented as additional information is developed.
- (i) Cancellation: Immediately upon locating the subject of an alert, upon apprehension of the subject, or upon a determination that the criteria are no longer met or that the alert no longer serves a law enforcement purpose, the supervisor overseeing the investigation shall request cancellation of the alert by contacting the MSP Headquarters Duty Officer. Notification shall also be made to any other law enforcement agency that filed the report resulting in the alert, and the NCIC entry shall be cancelled or cleared as appropriate.
- (j) Documentation of cancellation: The supervisor requesting cancellation shall record the name and rank of the MSP point of contact who received the cancellation request, the date and time of the request, the method of contact, and confirmation that the alert was cancelled. An update or cancellation shall also be disseminated through tip411 and the Sheriff's Office social media platforms used for the original notification, in accordance with Section 317.8.7.

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- (k) Notify the PIO in writing via email that the missing person has been located. If the missing person is a juvenile, the Public Information Officer (PIO) will ensure the following action is taken: The PIO will remove the original social media post to prevent continued circulation of the juvenile's photo and personal information. In its place, a clarifying statement will be issued that reads: "The post for the recent missing juvenile has been deleted so that the photo and information is not circulated any further. If your page has shared the original missing persons post, we respectfully ask that you remove it to help protect the juvenile's privacy. Thank you. This practice is intended to respect the privacy and safety of the juvenile and their family." This is in accordance with SMCSO Missing Persons Procedures 311.
- (l) Documentation and reporting. all notifications, activation requests, written confirmations, MSP points of contact, updates, and cancellations required by this section shall be documented in the case report or a supplemental report. The Duty Officer shall ensure that the documentation is complete before the end of the shift on which the alert is activated or cancelled.

#### **317.4 AMBER ALERT**

The AMBER Alert™ Program is used to provide a statewide system for the rapid dissemination of information regarding abducted children.

##### **317.4.1 CRITERIA**

The following criteria are utilized to determine if an AMBER Alert should be issued:

- (a) There is confirmation that the child has been abducted.
- (b) The child is under the age of 18.
- (c) The circumstances surrounding the abduction indicate that the child is in danger of serious bodily harm or death.
- (d) There is enough descriptive information about the child, abductor and/or suspect's vehicle to believe an immediate broadcast alert will help.
- (e) The child is believed to still be in the broadcast area.
- (f) The child's name and other critical elements have been entered into the National Crime Information Center (NCIC).

##### **317.4.2 PROCEDURE**

- (a) The standardized procedures in Section 317.3.3 apply to all AMBER Alert activations, including internal notifications, NCIC entry, written confirmation of the activation request, documentation of the MSP point of contact, local public notification, cancellation, and documentation of the cancellation.
- (b) After verifying a report that a child has been abducted and is in danger of serious bodily harm, the supervisor overseeing the investigation shall:
  - 1. Immediately notify the Duty Officer.

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2. After confirming that the AMBER Alert criteria have been met, a field supervisor shall contact the Maryland State Police (MSP) headquarters duty officer and request an AMBER Alert activation.
3. Provide all necessary information to the MSP Missing Child Recovery Unit.
4. Be prepared to follow up the verbal request with a written request or activation form submitted in the format and by the method currently designated by MSP, and document the request as required by Section 317.3.3.

#### **317.5 BLUE ALERT**

The National Blue Alert System™ is used to provide a statewide system for the rapid dissemination of information regarding a violent criminal who has seriously injured or killed a local, state or federal law enforcement officer (Md. Code PS § 3-605).

##### **317.5.1 CRITERIA**

The following criteria are utilized to determine if a Blue Alert should be issued:

- (a) A deputy must have been killed or seriously injured by an offender.
- (b) It has been determined that the offender poses a serious risk or threat to the public and other law enforcement personnel.
- (c) A detailed description of the offender's vehicle, vehicle tag or partial tag must be available for broadcast to the public.
- (d) When an officer is missing in the line of duty.

##### **317.5.2 PROCEDURE**

- (a) The standardized procedures in Section 317.3.3 apply to all Blue Alert activations, including internal notifications, NCIC entry, written confirmation of the activation request, documentation of the MSP point of contact, local public notification, cancellation, and documentation of the cancellation.
- (b) The following are the procedures for a Blue Alert:
  1. Upon confirmation of the Blue Alert criteria, a CID supervisor in charge of the investigation shall recommend activation of the Blue Alert to the MSP.
  2. Once this office apprehends a missing offender who is the subject of a Blue Alert, a CID supervisor overseeing the investigation shall immediately notify the MSP and any law enforcement agency that filed the report resulting in the Blue Alert that the missing offender has been apprehended (Md. Code PS § 3-605).

#### **317.6 SILVER ALERT**

Silver Alerts are used to provide a statewide system for the rapid dissemination of information regarding a missing person who has a cognitive disorder (Md. Code PS § 3-604).

##### **317.6.1 CRITERIA**

The following criteria are utilized to determine if a Silver Alert should be issued:

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- (a) The whereabouts of a person at least 60 years old is unknown.
- (b) The person suffers a cognitive impairment, including a diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease or dementia to the extent that the individual requires assistance from a caregiver.
- (c) The disappearance poses a credible threat to the health and safety of the person due to age, health, mental or physical disability, and environment or weather conditions, as determined by this office.
- (d) The person is traveling in a vehicle and there is enough descriptive information about the missing person and the vehicle to issue an alert.
- (e) The Office has already activated a local or regional alert by contacting media outlets in the jurisdiction and the missing person has been entered into NCIC.

#### 317.6.2 PROCEDURE

- (a) The standardized procedures in Section 317.3.3 apply to all Silver Alert activations, including internal notifications, NCIC entry, written confirmation of the activation request, documentation of the MSP point of contact, local public notification, cancellation, and documentation of the cancellation.
- (b) The following are the procedures for a Silver Alert:
  - 1. Upon confirmation of the Silver Alert criteria, a supervisor overseeing the investigation shall contact the MSP headquarters duty officer and request a Silver Alert.
  - 2. Once the Office confirms that the missing person has been located, a supervisor overseeing the investigation shall notify the MSP that the missing person has been located.

#### 317.7 YELLOW ALERT

Yellow Alerts are used to provide a statewide system for the rapid dissemination of information regarding a suspect in a hit-and-run involving serious injury or death (Md. Code PS § 3-606).

##### 317.7.1 CRITERIA

The following criteria are utilized to determine if a Yellow Alert should be issued:

- (a) The whereabouts of a person suspected of leaving the scene of an accident involving serious bodily injury or death are unknown (Md. Code TR § 20-102).
- (b) The suspect's vehicle can be described, including any information about the vehicle's license plate number.

##### 317.7.2 PROCEDURE

- (a) The standardized procedures in Section 317.3.3 apply to all Yellow Alert activations, including internal notifications, NCIC entry, written confirmation of the activation request, documentation of the MSP point of contact, local public notification, cancellation, and documentation of the cancellation.
- (b) The following are the procedures for a Yellow Alert:

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1. Upon confirmation of the Yellow Alert criteria, the supervisor in charge of the investigation shall contact the MSP headquarters duty officer and request a Yellow Alert.
2. Once the Office confirms that the vehicle or suspect has been located, the supervisor in charge of the investigation shall notify the MSP.

### **317.8 LOCAL PUBLIC AND MEDIA ALERT**

#### 317.8.1 CRITERIA

- (a) A local public alert may be used for the rapid dissemination of information to assist in locating a missing person, regardless of whether the criteria for a state alert are met.
- (b) The scope and method of public notification should be based on the circumstances of the incident, including the urgency of locating the missing person, potential risk to the missing person or public, investigative needs, geographic considerations, and the anticipated benefit of public assistance.
- (c) The use of a local public alert does not, by itself, require the issuance of a formal press release or direct notification to news media.

#### 317.8.2 IMMEDIATE PUBLIC NOTIFICATION

When public assistance may aid in locating a missing person, the Duty Officer is responsible for coordinating the immediate dissemination of information authorized for public release.

- (a) The Duty Officer shall ensure that appropriate public notifications are disseminated through tip411 and the Sheriff's Office official social media accounts, including Facebook and X.
- (b) Public notifications should include available information that may assist in locating the missing person, including, as appropriate:
  1. The person's identity, age and description.
  2. A photograph, if available and authorized for release.
  3. Pertinent vehicle description.
  4. Details regarding the location and circumstances associated with the disappearance, last known direction of travel, and potential destinations, when known and appropriate for release.
  5. Information concerning circumstances that may assist the public in recognizing or locating the missing person, when appropriate for release.
  6. A contact number or other approved method for the public to provide information or investigative leads.
- (c) Information released through tip411 and Sheriff's Office social media shall be consistent with agency policy governing the release of information.

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- (d) The Duty Officer shall ensure that significant updates are disseminated through the appropriate public notification platforms when necessary, including notification when the missing person has been located or the public alert is otherwise canceled.
- (e) Information requiring immediate public dissemination shall not be delayed pending the availability of the Public Information Officer (PIO), preparation of a formal press release, or direct outreach to news media.

### 317.8.3 DETERMINING THE NEED FOR BROADER MEDIA OUTREACH

Not every missing person investigation requires a formal press release or direct notification to news media. The need for broader media outreach should be based on the circumstances of the investigation and whether additional media exposure is reasonably expected to assist in locating the missing person, address a significant public safety concern, or serve another legitimate law enforcement purpose.

- (a) The Duty Officer should consider referring the incident to the PIO for broader media outreach when one or more of the following circumstances exist:
  - 1. The missing person is believed to be in imminent danger of death or serious bodily injury.
  - 2. The circumstances involve a particularly vulnerable missing person or other factors that substantially increase concern for the person's safety.
  - 3. The missing person is believed to have traveled, or may be traveling, outside the immediate area and broader geographic exposure may assist in locating the person.
  - 4. The investigation has generated, or is reasonably expected to generate, significant public or news media interest.
  - 5. The Sheriff's Office is conducting or coordinating a significant search operation for which broader public awareness may be beneficial.
  - 6. Investigators have identified specific information for which broader dissemination through news media could reasonably generate investigative leads.
  - 7. Misinformation, significant public concern, or widespread social media activity creates a need for authoritative information from the Sheriff's Office.
  - 8. The Duty Officer, investigating supervisor, Division Commander, Sheriff, or designee determines that broader media outreach may materially assist the investigation or serve a significant public safety purpose.
- (b) The presence of one or more of these factors does not automatically require a formal press release or immediate PIO response. The nature, urgency, and circumstances of the incident should be considered when determining the appropriate level and timing of media outreach.

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### 317.8.4 PIO REFERRAL AND FORMAL MEDIA OUTREACH

When broader media outreach may be beneficial but immediate PIO involvement is not necessary, the incident may be referred to the PIO for evaluation and follow-up during normal business hours.

- (a) Upon referral, the PIO should consult with the investigating unit, Duty Officer, or appropriate command personnel to determine whether additional media outreach is warranted.
- (b) When additional media outreach is warranted, the PIO will coordinate the appropriate method and timing of the outreach. This may include:
  - 1. Preparation and dissemination of a formal press release
  - 2. Direct distribution of information to local or regional news media
  - 3. Coordination of media interviews
  - 4. Responses to media inquiries
  - 5. Follow-up releases or other public information activities as appropriate
- (c) A formal press release should include information authorized for public dissemination that may assist in locating the missing person or otherwise serve the identified law enforcement or public safety purpose.
- (d) The issuance of a tip411 alert or Sheriff's Office social media post does not, by itself, require the PIO to prepare or disseminate a formal press release.
- (e) Notification or referral of an incident to the PIO does not, by itself, constitute a request for immediate PIO activation or response.

### 317.8.5 IMMEDIATE PIO NOTIFICATION

- (a) Immediate after-hours notification of the PIO should generally be reserved for circumstances in which timely media coordination is reasonably necessary and cannot effectively be deferred until normal business hours.
- (b) Circumstances that may warrant immediate PIO notification include:
  - 1. An imminent or significant threat to public safety requiring broader or rapidly coordinated public communication.
  - 2. A missing person investigation involving rapidly developing circumstances in which immediate news media dissemination is reasonably expected to materially assist in locating the person.
  - 3. A significant or expanding search operation generating substantial public or news media interest that requires coordinated agency messaging.
  - 4. Significant misinformation, widespread social media activity, or substantial public concern requiring an immediate authoritative response from the Sheriff's Office.
  - 5. A substantial volume of media inquiries requiring coordinated response.
  - 6. A request for immediate PIO involvement from the Sheriff or appropriate command personnel.

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- (c) The decision to notify the PIO after hours should take into consideration whether the communication need can be adequately addressed through the Duty Officer's immediate use of tip411 and Sheriff's Office social media until normal business hours.

### 317.8.6 PIO RESPONSIBILITIES

- (a) The PIO is responsible for coordinating formal news media outreach and media relations when such outreach is warranted.
- (b) The PIO's responsibilities may include:
  - 1. Preparing and disseminating formal press releases
  - 2. Coordinating the release of information to local, regional, or other news media
  - 3. Responding to media inquiries and coordinating interviews
  - 4. Preparing follow-up media releases when significant developments warrant additional media notification
  - 5. Coordinating with investigators, the Duty Officer, and command personnel to ensure information released to the media is accurate, appropriate, and authorized for public dissemination
  - 6. Providing relevant media communications, public inquiries, or information received through PIO-managed channels to the appropriate investigative or supervisory personnel
- (c) Nothing in this section requires the PIO to continuously monitor missing person investigations, Sheriff's Office social media accounts, public inquiries, or investigative tips outside of normal duty hours unless the PIO has been specifically activated for an incident or otherwise directed by the Sheriff or appropriate command personnel.

### 317.8.7 FOLLOW-UP AND CANCELLATION

When a missing person who was the subject of a public alert has been located, or when circumstances otherwise warrant cancellation of the alert:

- (a) The Duty Officer shall ensure that an appropriate update or cancellation is disseminated through tip411 and the Sheriff's Office social media platforms used for the original notification.
- (b) When a formal press release or direct media notification was previously issued, the PIO should provide an appropriate update to the news media.
- (c) Information regarding the circumstances of the person's recovery or location should only be released when authorized and consistent with agency policy governing the release of information.

### 317.8.8 PIO UNAVAILABILITY AND ALTERNATE MEDIA RELEASE AUTHORITY

When the PIO is unavailable, on leave, or cannot be reached within a time frame reasonable for the circumstances of the incident, the following apply:

- (a) Order of responsibility. Responsibility for preparing and distributing press releases and for responding to media inquiries passes in the following order:

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1. The PIO
  2. A member designated by the Sheriff as an alternate or assistant PIO who has received public information training.
  3. The Duty Officer for information that requires release before the PIO or an alternate PIO can reasonably be expected to respond.
  4. The Commander of the division to which the incident relates, or the Sheriff's designee.
- (b) Immediate public notification is not deferred. Nothing in this subsection alters the Duty Officer's responsibility under Section 317.8.2 to disseminate authorized information through tip411 and the Sheriff's Office official social media accounts. That responsibility exists independent of PIO availability.
- (c) Scope of authority. A member acting in the absence of the PIO shall limit the release to factual information that has been authorized for public dissemination and shall use the approved press release template maintained by the PIO. The member shall not speculate as to the cause, motive, or likely outcome of an investigation; release the identity of a juvenile, the identity of a victim of a sexual offense, or the identity of a deceased person before next of kin have been notified; release criminal history record information or other information restricted from disclosure; comment on personnel matters or pending litigation; or release information that would compromise an investigation or an officer safety interest.
- (d) Review and approval. A press release prepared in the absence of the PIO shall be reviewed and approved by the Duty Officer before distribution and, by the Commander or supervisor of the affected division. A release concerning a major incident, a use of deadly force, a line of duty death or serious injury, or any matter reasonably expected to attract significant media attention requires the approval of the Sheriff or designee before release.
- (e) Distribution. The release shall be distributed using the agency media distribution list maintained by the PIO and shall be posted to the platforms identified in Section 317.8.2.
- (f) Resources maintained by the PIO. The PIO shall maintain, and make accessible to the Duty Officer at all times, a current media distribution list, approved press release templates, the access necessary to post to Sheriff's Office platforms, and current after-hours contact information for the PIO and any alternate PIO.
- (g) Notification and turnover. The member acting in the absence of the PIO shall forward to the PIO, at the earliest opportunity, a copy of each release issued together with a summary of media inquiries received and responses provided. The PIO resumes responsibility for media coordination on the incident upon becoming available.
- (h) Documentation. Releases issued and media inquiries handled in the absence of the PIO shall be documented in the case file and in the records maintained by the Public Information Office.

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#### **317.9 TIP411**

tip411 provides a means for the Sheriff's Office to distribute alerts and community information through text messaging, email, the web, and other available notification methods. Citizens may register to receive information and select available notification methods that best suit their needs.

##### **317.9.1 TIP411 USE**

- (a) tip411 may be used to distribute information to a specific group, a geographically defined area, or all registered users. Whenever an alert or community notice is distributed, the alert or notice may also be posted to the tip411 website under the profile established for the Office of the Sheriff, as supported by the system.
- (b) For missing person public notifications made pursuant to Section 317.8, the Duty Officer is responsible for disseminating authorized information through tip411 and the Sheriff's Office official social media accounts, including Facebook and X.
- (c) The distribution of law enforcement-related alerts and/or community information through tip411 is restricted to personnel who have been authorized and trained in the proper use of the system.
- (d) Material distributed through tip411 shall be consistent with agency policy governing the release of information.
- (e) Nothing in this section prohibits other authorized personnel from using tip411 for appropriate law enforcement alerts or community notifications consistent with their assigned duties and agency policy.
- (f) The tip411 administrator is responsible for managing authorized users, establishing appropriate user profiles, and ensuring users have received required training before using the system to distribute alerts or community information.

##### **317.9.2 TIP411 TRAINING**

Prior to using tip411 for the distribution of alerts or community information, each authorized user shall complete or review the training designated by the Sheriff's Office for use of the system.

#### **317.10 PURPLE ALERT**

Purple Alerts are used to provide a statewide system for the rapid dissemination of information regarding a missing person who has a hearing impairment or who has a cognitive impairment, mental disorder, intellectual or developmental disability, or a brain injury that is unrelated to Alzheimer's disease, dementia, or substance abuse (Md. Code PS § 3-608).

##### **317.10.1 CRITERIA**

The following criteria are utilized to determine if a Purple Alert should be issued:

- (a) The whereabouts of a person is unknown.
- (b) The person has either:
  - 1. A cognitive impairment, mental disorder, intellectual or developmental disability, or brain injury that is unrelated to Alzheimer's disease, dementia, or substance abuse.

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2. A hearing impairment (e.g., deaf, deafblind, hard of hearing).
- (c) The disappearance poses a credible threat to the health and safety of the person due to age, health, mental or physical disability, environment, or weather conditions, as determined by this office.
- (d) The person does not meet the criteria for the activation of a Silver Alert.
- (e) Any other criteria required by the MSP prior to issuing the Alert are met.

#### 317.10.2 PROCEDURE

- (a) The standardized procedures in Section 317.3.3 apply to all Purple Alert activations, including internal notifications, NCIC entry, written confirmation of the activation request, documentation of the MSP point of contact, local public notification, cancellation, and documentation of the cancellation.
- (b) The following are the procedures for a Purple Alert:
  1. Upon confirmation of the Purple Alert criteria, the supervisor in charge of the investigation shall contact the MSP headquarters duty officer and request a Purple Alert.
  2. Once the Office confirms that the missing person has been located, the supervisor in charge of the investigation shall notify the MSP that the missing person has been located.