

THE LOWDOWN

Sheriff Charles S. Blackwood

Missing person cases typically involve people who run away, wander off, get lost, or deliberately disappear. We rarely work a true abduction or kidnapping case, but such a situation is always possible. People should call 911 immediately if they discover a loved one missing. It is a myth that a person must be missing for 24 hours before deputies will take a report. Call immediately, and let us get started.

We appreciate the interest our missing person cases receive, especially on social media. People share our posts, helping them reach a wider audience, and resulting in a greater number of people looking. However, a social media audience tends to question, speculate, and make inappropriate requests, such as pressuring us to put out an Amber alert, even if the case clearly does not qualify for one. If we respond to these posts to educate and reassure people, we are distracted from the more important task of locating the missing person.

We rarely reveal information about a missing person case beyond providing a physical description and a very broad statement, such as “Deputies are concerned for *Person’s name* well-being.” If the person has dementia or is suicidal, he or she is entitled to medical privacy. If a person “snapped” under the weight of personal pressures, publically discussing those will do nothing to lessen that burden. A description of the person aids efforts to locate him or her; highly sensitive information does not. Any press release or social media post will remain on the Internet for all time. We want to minimize the impact of the crisis on the person’s future social relationships, employment opportunities, or political aspirations. The person’s current and long term well-being are more important than the curiosity of strangers.

Sometimes we receive suggestions in the comments on Facebook. People tell us to ask other jurisdictions to look for the license plate, check find my phone apps, alert the media, contact friends, or check the hospitals. Let me assure readers – these are all things we routinely do, and they are only the tip of the iceberg. This is not our first rodeo!

In one recent case, we had several convincing indicators the missing person voluntarily left his or her last known location in a vehicle. Multiple people wanted to know why we weren’t organizing a search party. What would that look like? Where would we start? On the ground grid searches certainly have their place; such as when a

person with dementia wanders away from home on foot, when a small child slips away, or when a hiker gets lost in the woods. Those cases have a starting point, and we can establish reasonable search parameters. We do not have these in a runaway-type case, especially when the person has a vehicle.

We have three primary databases at our disposal. We always enter the missing person into the National Crime Information Center (NCIC), a system used by more than 80,000 agencies. If the person comes into contact with a law enforcement officer, a simple check will reveal the person's status as missing and provide information about who to contact. This database is useful if the person ends up unconscious, at a hospital, in a car wreck, or if they surface asking for help.

Once entered into NCIC, there are two types of specialty alerts the investigating agency can pursue. Silver Alerts are used for missing and endangered people over age 65, or for a person with mental or cognitive disabilities (regardless of age) which place them at increased risk of harm. Amber Alerts are issued only when a person 17 years old or younger is believed to have been abducted and is not thought to be a runaway. The abduction must have been reported to and investigated by a law enforcement agency. Such alerts are issued only by the North Carolina Center for Missing Persons – we cannot issue one. If we apply and the case does not qualify, the application is immediately rejected, and we might see our credibility suffer – making it harder to justify future requests. Amber Alerts, by law, are only used in the rare cases that qualify for them. If they are overused, people will not give them the urgent attention they deserve.

If you need help finding a missing person, call us immediately. Tell us everything you know; we will protect sensitive information. Help us publicize the person's description. Understand what Amber and Silver alerts are, and trust us to use them when appropriate.