

KERN COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE

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Search and Rescue (SAR) Dispatch Guidelines

Purpose

This training document is intended to clarify when it is appropriate to dispatch the Kern County Sheriff's Search and Rescue (SAR) resources. It addresses common confusion among field personnel and dispatchers and outlines the criteria for emergency callouts versus non-emergency assistance. These guidelines are aligned with KCSOPPM H-0400 which can be accessed via the following link:

- [H 0400 - Search and Rescue Incidents .doc](#)

Core Guidelines

SAR shall only be activated when:

- A situation meets the definition of a search and rescue emergency, or
- All reasonable field and patrol-based efforts have been exhausted in non-emergency circumstances.

Immediate SAR Activation Required (Emergency Examples)

The following scenarios warrant immediate SAR dispatch:

- A report of a person in the Kern River or other fast-moving water.
- A hiker, hunter, or off-road vehicle operator is missing in remote terrain and is significantly past expected return time.
- An aircraft crash is reported in an inaccessible or rugged area.
- A person is heard calling for help in canyons, mountains, or undeveloped areas.
- A person with significant medical needs or health conditions is missing and cannot be located within a short period.

Non-Emergency – SAR Not Initially Required

Do not dispatch SAR when the situation does not involve imminent danger, and deputies can resolve the incident through standard efforts. These include:

- A subject in a known location with GPS coordinates.
- A motorist stuck in an area where a patrol unit can access with 4x4 or standard vehicle.
- A person requesting help but who maintains cell contact and is not injured or endangered.

In these cases, deputies must attempt all reasonable contact, response, and resolution methods before initiating a SAR callout.

Deputy Responsibility in Non-Emergencies

Deputies are expected to exhaust all practical options before requesting SAR in non-emergency situations. This includes the use of available patrol resources and technology to locate individuals who are not in immediate danger.

When appropriate and available, deputies may also request assistance from the Sheriff's Air Support Unit to help locate individuals in either emergency or non-emergency scenarios. This asset is especially useful for visual searches in remote areas, terrain assessment, and reducing unnecessary ground deployment.

Before requesting SAR, deputies shall:

- Make all reasonable efforts to contact or physically reach the subject.
- Attempt phone contact and/or utilize GPS coordinates for location assistance.
- Consult with a supervisor regarding field accessibility and alternatives.
- Document all efforts taken in dispatch or CAD call notes prior to requesting SAR assistance.

If a SAR request is initiated but the situation resolves before deployment, deputies must:

- Immediately notify dispatch to cancel or modify the SAR activation.
- Ensure cancellation is clearly documented in CAD and call logs.

SAR is a limited emergency response resource and must not be used for routine public assistance that can be resolved with standard patrol operations.

Supervisory Oversight

A designated SAR Coordinator may initiate a SAR callout when they are aware of the call and determine it meets the criteria outlined in KCSO policy.

In non-emergency situations, a field supervisor must approve any SAR callout and coordinate the request with the on-duty or on-call SAR Coordinator. The SAR Coordinator may decline a request if it does not meet KCSO policy criteria.

Field supervisors are responsible for:

- Reviewing any SAR request from deputies,
 - Ensuring all reasonable steps have been taken prior to activation,
 - Notifying the Watch Lieutenant prior to any non-emergency activation so they can assess the circumstances,
 - Confirming the appropriateness of the request,
 - Ensuring all documentation is accurate and complete, and
 - Confirming that SAR-related notes are properly entered into CAD and that documentation reflects the timeline of the decision-making process.
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Dispatcher Protocols

Dispatchers play a critical role in initiating and supporting SAR activations. The following steps must be taken to ensure proper notification and documentation:

- In an emergency, notify the Watch Lieutenant immediately upon SAR activation.
- Notify Sheriff's Office Command Staff as soon as SAR is activated, providing the nature of the incident, any known hazards, and the responding units. Notifications should be made via CAD page, direct phone call, or text message, following agency protocol.
- Upon SAR deactivation or mission completion, send a second notification to Command Staff to document the conclusion of the operation and the results (e.g. Missing person located Code 4, search suspended due to lack of visibility, search to resume in daylight, etc.).

These steps ensure operational awareness, support supervisory oversight, and maintain consistency in critical incident reporting. All personnel are expected to follow these guidelines to ensure SAR resources are used efficiently, responsibly, and in accordance with department policy.

All affected personnel (Deputy Sheriff Ranks, Park Ranger Ranks, Sheriff Reserves, and Dispatcher Ranks) are required to review this training bulletin. By acknowledging this training bulletin, you certify you have reviewed this bulletin. **Your review and acknowledgment of these guidelines are due no later than May 23, 2025.**
