Child Abuse

313.1 PURPOSE AND SCOPE

The purpose of this policy is to provide guidelines for the investigation of suspected child abuse. This policy also addresses when Mount Pleasant Police Department members are required to notify the Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) of suspected child abuse.

313.1.1 DEFINITIONS

Definitions related to this policy include:

Child - Unless otherwise specified by a cited statute, a child is any person under the age of 18 years

Child Abuse/Neglect - Any offense or attempted offense involving violence or neglect with a child victim when committed by a person responsible for the child's care or any other act that would mandate notification to a social service agency. See Tex. Fam. Code § 261.001

313.2 POLICY

The Mount Pleasant Police Department will investigate all reported incidents of alleged criminal child abuse/neglect and ensure that DFPS is notified as required by law.

313.3 MANDATORY NOTIFICATION

Members of the Mount Pleasant Police Department shall notify DFPS when they have reasonable cause to believe that a child has been or may be abused or neglected, or an allegation has been made of abuse or neglect involving a person responsible for a child's care, custody, or welfare (Tex. Fam. Code § 261.101; Tex. Fam. Code § 261.103; Tex. Fam. Code § 261.105).

Members of the Mount Pleasant Police Department shall also notify DFPS when a child who was taken or retained without the permission of the child’s custodian for a period of 48 hours or more is located and it reasonably appears that the child was the victim of abuse or neglect. The child may be placed into protective custody if necessary pursuant to Chapter 262 of the Texas Family Code (Tex. Code of Crim. Pro. art. 63.009).

In addition, a member shall notify DFPS when the member has reasonable cause to believe that a person was the victim of abuse or neglect as a child, and the member determines in good faith that disclosure of the information is necessary to protect the health or safety of another child (Tex. Fam. Code § 261.101).

For purposes of notification, abuse and neglect includes but is not limited to acts or omissions related to impairment to the child’s growth, development, or psychological functioning; physical injury that results in substantial harm to the child; sexual conduct involving the child; child trafficking or prostitution; use of controlled substances by the child or the use of controlled substances by a person that results in physical, mental, or emotional injury to a child; and any other act or omission as provided by Tex. Fam. Code § 261.001.

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313.3.1 NOTIFICATION PROCEDURE

Notification shall occur immediately by phone or by using the online reporting website provided by DFPS and contain the following, if known (Tex. Fam. Code § 261.104; Tex. Fam. Code § 261.105):

(a) The name and address of the child and any person responsible for the care, custody or welfare of the child

(b) Any other pertinent information concerning the alleged abuse

313.4 QUALIFIED INVESTIGATORS

Qualified investigators should be available for child abuse investigations. These investigators should:

(a) Conduct interviews in child-appropriate interview facilities.

(b) Be familiar with forensic interview techniques specific to child abuse investigations.

(c) Present all cases of alleged child abuse to the prosecutor for review.

(d) Coordinate with other enforcement agencies, social service agencies and school administrators as needed.

(e) Provide referrals to therapy services, victim advocates, guardians and support for the child and family as appropriate.

(f) Participate in or coordinate with multidisciplinary investigative teams as applicable.

313.5 INVESTIGATIONS AND REPORTING

In all reported or suspected cases of child abuse, officers shall write a report even if the allegations appear unfounded or unsubstantiated.

Investigations and reports related to suspected cases of child abuse should address, as applicable:

(a) The overall basis for the contact. This should be done by the investigating officer in all circumstances where a suspected child abuse victim was contacted.

(b) The exigent circumstances that existed if officers interviewed the child victim without the presence of a parent or guardian.

(c) Any relevant statements the child may have made and to whom he/she made the statements.

(d) If a child was taken into protective custody, the reasons, the name and title of the person making the decision, and why other alternatives were not appropriate.

(e) Documentation of any visible injuries or any injuries identified by the child. This should include photographs of such injuries, if practicable.

(f) Whether the child victim was transported for medical treatment or a medical examination.

(g) Whether the victim identified a household member as the alleged perpetrator, and a list of the names of any other children who may reside in the residence.

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(h) Identification of any prior related reports or allegations of child abuse, including other jurisdictions, as reasonably known.

(i) Previous addresses of the victim and suspect.

(j) Other potential witnesses who have not yet been interviewed, such as relatives or others close to the victim's environment.

The investigation of an allegation that a child has been or may be the victim of criminal conduct that poses an immediate risk of death or serious harm from either physical or sexual abuse shall be conducted jointly by the investigating officer and DFPS (Tex. Fam. Code § 261.301).

The investigatory steps, as set forth in the existing memorandum of understanding (MOU) with a child advocacy center, should be followed when the terms apply to an allegation of child abuse or neglect (Tex. Fam. Code § 264.405).

All cases of the unexplained death of a child should be investigated as thoroughly as if it had been a case of suspected child abuse (e.g., a sudden or unexplained death of an infant).

313.5.1 REPORTS BY PHYSICIANS

When a physician or physician's agent notifies an officer that a child has claimed he/she has been physically or sexually abused, or the physician has reason to believe such abuse has occurred, the officer shall (Tex. Fam. Code § 33.008):

(a) Respond and write a report within 24 hours of being notified of the alleged abuse.

(b) If warranted, refer the case to the prosecuting attorney.

The report is required even if the officer has knowledge that a report about the abuse may have previously been made.

313.6 PROTECTIVE CUSTODY

Before taking any child into protective custody, the officer should make reasonable attempts to contact DFPS. Generally, removal of a child from his/her family, guardian or other responsible adult should be left to the child welfare authorities when they are present or have become involved in an investigation.

Generally, members of this department should remove a child from his/her parent or guardian without a court order only when no other effective alternative is reasonably available and immediate action reasonably appears necessary to protect the child. Prior to taking a child into protective custody, the officer should take reasonable steps to deliver the child to another qualified parent or legal guardian unless it reasonably appears that the release would endanger the child or result in abduction. If this is not a reasonable option, the officer shall ensure that the child is delivered to DFPS.

Whenever practicable, the officer should inform a supervisor of the circumstances prior to taking a child into protective custody. If prior notification is not practicable, officers should contact a supervisor promptly after taking a child into protective custody.

Children may only be removed from a parent or guardian in the following situations:

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(a) When a court order has been issued authorizing removal.

(b) If there is no time to obtain a court order before taking possession of a child and there is an immediate need to protect the health and safety of that child, an officer may take possession of a child without a court order. Emergency custody may also be taken under the following conditions (Tex. Fam. Code § 262.104):

1. On personal knowledge of facts that lead an officer to believe that the child has been the victim of sexual abuse or trafficking, or that the parent or person who has possession of the child has permitted the child to remain on premises used for the manufacture of methamphetamine.

2. On information furnished by another that has been corroborated by personal knowledge of the facts all of which, taken together, lead an officer to believe that the child has been the victim of sexual abuse or trafficking, or that the parent or person who has possession of the child is currently using a controlled substance or has permitted the child to remain on premises used for the manufacture of methamphetamine.

(c) Without a court order on the voluntary delivery of the child by the parent, managing conservator, possessory conservator, guardian, caretaker or custodian who is presently entitled to possession of the child (Tex. Fam. Code § 262.004).

(d) When, during a criminal investigation relating to a child's custody, an officer discovers that the child is a missing child and believes that a person may flee with or conceal the child (Tex. Fam. Code § 262.007).

313.6.1 RELEASE OF CERTAIN CHILDREN TAKEN WITHOUT A COURT ORDER

Officers who take a child into protective custody without a court order pursuant to Tex. Fam. Code § 262.104 may release the child to an approved governmental entity, including DFPS, or to a person authorized by law to take possession of the child (Tex. Code of Crim. Pro. art. 2.273).

Prior to releasing a child taken into protective custody to a non-governmental entity, officers shall (Tex. Code of Crim. Pro. art. 2.273):

(a) Verify that the person to whom the child is to be released is at least 18 years old.

(b) Verify through NCIC that the child is not a missing child.

(c) Search NCIC databases for relevant information about the person to whom the child is being released, such as whether he/she is the subject of a protective order or a registered sex offender who is not permitted to take possession of the child.

(d) Contact the DFPS Abuse Hotline to determine whether the person is in the DFPS registry as someone who abused or neglected a child.

Officers shall document the placement of the child in an appropriate report. The report should include the name and address of the person to whom the child is released and identifying information about the child.

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313.6.2 SAFE HAVEN LAW

Members presented with an infant by a parent seeking to voluntarily surrender the child should immediately notify DFPS. Members should also notify appropriate emergency medical services personnel if it reasonably appears that the infant requires medical attention.

Any report to this department from DFPS of a surrendered child shall be investigated to determine whether the child is reported as missing (Tex. Fam. Code § 262.305).

313.7 INTERVIEWS

313.7.1 PRELIMINARY INTERVIEWS

Absent extenuating circumstances or impracticality, officers should record the preliminary interview with suspected child abuse victims. Officers should avoid multiple interviews with a child victim and should attempt to gather only the information necessary to begin an investigation. When practicable, investigating officers should defer interviews until a person who is specially trained in such interviews is available. Generally, child victims should not be interviewed in the home or location where the alleged abuse occurred.

313.7.2 DETAINING SUSPECTED CHILD ABUSE VICTIMS FOR AN INTERVIEW

An officer should not detain a child involuntarily who is suspected of being a victim of child abuse solely for the purpose of an interview or physical exam without the consent of a parent or guardian unless one of the following applies:

(a) Exigent circumstances exist, such as:

1. A reasonable belief that medical issues of the child need to be addressed immediately.
2. A reasonable belief that the child is or will be in danger of harm if the interview or physical exam is not immediately completed.
3. The alleged offender is the custodial parent or guardian and there is reason to believe the child may be in continued danger.

(b) A court order or warrant has been issued.

313.8 MEDICAL EXAMINATIONS

If the child has been the victim of abuse that requires a medical examination, the investigating officer should obtain consent for such examination from the appropriate parent, guardian or agency having legal custody of the child. The officer should also arrange for the child's transportation to the appropriate medical facility.

In cases where the alleged offender is the custodial parent or guardian and is refusing consent for the medical examination, officers should notify a supervisor before proceeding. If exigent circumstances do not exist or if state law does not provide for officers to take the child for a medical examination, the notified supervisor should consider obtaining a court order for such an examination.

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313.9 DRUG-ENDANGERED CHILDREN

A coordinated response by law enforcement and social services agencies is appropriate to meet the immediate and longer-term medical and safety needs of children exposed to the manufacturing, trafficking or use of narcotics.

313.9.1 SUPERVISOR RESPONSIBILITIES

The CID - Criminal Investigations Division supervisor should:

(a) Work with professionals from the appropriate agencies, including DFPS, other law enforcement agencies, medical service providers and local prosecutors to develop community-specific procedures for responding to situations where there are children endangered by their exposure to methamphetamine labs or the manufacture and trafficking of other drugs.

(b) Activate any available interagency response when an officer notifies the CID - Criminal Investigations Division supervisor that the officer has responded to a drug lab or other narcotics crime scene where a child is present or where evidence indicates that a child lives at the scene.

(c) Develop a report format or checklist for use when officers respond to drug labs or other narcotics crime scenes. The checklist will help officers document the environmental, medical, social and other conditions that may affect the child.

313.9.2 OFFICER RESPONSIBILITIES

Officers responding to a drug lab or other narcotics crime scene where a child is present or where there is evidence that a child lives should:

(a) Document the environmental, medical, social and other conditions of the child using photography as appropriate and the checklist or form developed for this purpose.

(b) Notify the CID - Criminal Investigations Division supervisor so an interagency response can begin.

313.10 STATE MANDATES AND OTHER RELEVANT LAWS

Texas requires or permits the following:

313.10.1 CHILD SAFETY CHECK ALERT LIST

The Texas Department of Public Safety maintains a Child Safety Check Alert List as part of the Texas Crime Information Center (TCIC) to help locate a family for purposes of investigating a report of child abuse or neglect, or providing protective services to families (Tex. Fam. Code § 261.3022).

An officer who encounters either a person or a child on the alert list shall (Tex. Code of Crim. Pro. art. 2.272; Tex. Fam. Code § 261.3023):

(a) Immediately contact DFPS using the dedicated law enforcement telephone number and request information regarding the case involving the child or other person.

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(b) Request information from the person and the child regarding the child's well-being and current residence.

The officer should investigate whether it is appropriate to take possession of the child without a court order and in accordance with the laws specified in Tex. Fam. Code § 262.104.

If the officer does not take possession of the child, the officer shall obtain the child's current address and any other relevant information to be forwarded to DFPS (Tex. Code of Crim. Pro. art. 2.272).

The officer should inform a supervisor as soon as practicable when a child on the TCIC Child Safety Check Alert List is located. The circumstances shall be documented in an appropriate report. The officer shall ensure that TCIC is updated to reflect that the child has been located, to whom the child was released, as applicable, and the case number related to the incident (Tex. Code of Crim. Pro. art. 2.272; Tex. Fam. Code § 261.3024).

313.10.2 RELEASE OF REPORTS

Information related to incidents of child abuse or suspected child abuse shall be confidential and may only be disclosed pursuant to state law and the Records Maintenance and Release Policy (Tex. Fam. Code § 261.201).

313.10.3 MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING FOR CHILDREN'S ADVOCACY CENTER

The CID - Criminal Investigations Division Supervisor should ensure that a current copy of the MOU with a children's advocacy center regarding child abuse or neglect investigations is available to all department members (Tex. Fam. Code § 264.405).

313.11 TRAINING

The Department should provide training on best practices in child abuse investigations to members tasked with investigating these cases. The training should include:

(a) Participating in multidisciplinary investigations, as appropriate.

(b) Conducting forensic interviews.

(c) Availability of therapy services for children and families.

(d) Availability of specialized forensic medical exams.

(e) Cultural competence (including interpretive services) related to child abuse investigations.

(f) Availability of victim advocate or guardian ad litem support.

(g) Recognizing abuse that requires mandatory notification to another agency.

The Support Services Division Manager should ensure that members receive training on the Child Safety Check Alert List (Tex. Occ. Code § 1701.402).

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