

Best Practices

FOR NON-POLICE

COMMUNITY VOLUNTEER SEARCHERS

IN A MISSING PERSON SEARCH



A Seven Youth Inquest Initiative

A RESOURCE CREATED BY
NISHNAWBE ASKI NATION AND
THE THUNDER BAY POLICE SERVICE

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Table of Contents

Preamble.....	1
Missing Persons – Overview.....	2
Safety Considerations for Community Searchers.....	2
General Search Organization.....	3
Evidence Preservation.....	4
Importance of Communication / Debriefing with Assigned Liaison Officer.....	5
Issues Relating to Private Property.....	6
Volunteer Considerations.....	7
Before Search.....	7
During Search.....	7
After Search.....	7
Volunteer Checklist.....	8
Appendix A: Ojibway Version.....	9
Appendix B: Oji-Cree Version.....	19
Appendix C: Mushkego Cree Version.....	29
Appendix D: Hudson Bay Cree Version.....	38

PREAMBLE

The Seven Youth Inquest was held in Thunder Bay, Ontario in 2015. The Inquest examined the circumstances into the deaths of seven First Nations youth who died between 2000-2011 while attending high school in Thunder Bay, with the goal of the proceeding being to prevent similar future deaths. The Inquest concluded with the Inquest Jury returning its verdict on June 28, 2016 and delivering 145 recommendations aimed at improving the safety and education outcomes of Nishnawbe Aski Nation (NAN) youth attending school off-reserve.

NAN and the Thunder Bay Police Service (TBPS) were both named in Inquest recommendation 94 to create a joint protocol for distribution to community search teams. The contemplated protocol was to explain the best search practices for non-police community volunteer searchers with a particular emphasis on the safety considerations for community searchers, evidence preservation, the importance of communication and debriefing with an assigned liaison officer, and issues relating to private property.

The *Best Practices for Non-Police Community Volunteer Searchers in a Missing Person Search* was created as an educational tool to assist community volunteer searchers within the City of Thunder Bay. The protocol is intended to be a general guide and should only be used as an educational reference or as supplemental information. NAN and TBPS are not liable for any information contained in the protocol, and in all circumstances all applicable laws and formal protocols or procedures should be followed.

MISSING PERSONS – OVERVIEW

Searching for missing persons is not a simple and straight forward matter. All incidents will be different. You may be searching for a child, an adult, or perhaps even looking into a wandering person. There may also be a criminal aspect to the search which you must be mindful of.

If you are calling in a missing person, it is important to give as much detail as possible. This is the information that the police will potentially use to build a profile of that missing person. It is important to know factors like if the individual is:

- A youth or an adult (or age of the missing person).
- Male or female.
- On foot or other mode of transportation is involved.
- Suffering from mental illness such as dementia, depression/suicide, psychosis, bipolar disorder, autism, brain injury, etc. and if that could be a factor.

Remember: no details should be hidden, even if they are embarrassing or negative. These details are important and could be time sensitive and even potentially lifesaving.

SAFETY CONSIDERATIONS FOR COMMUNITY SEARCHERS

Volunteer organizations have specific protocols for community searchers to ensure the safety of all volunteer community searchers and staff. It is important to be aware of and follow the protocol of the specific organization.

Generally, all community volunteers will be screened. If an individual is not able to produce a current criminal record check (CRC) with vulnerable sector check (VSC), then a waiver and consent form must be signed, and any offences must be disclosed on the waiver. Volunteers will be made aware that the organization leading the search will not be held responsible for any potential injuries associated with a volunteer search and will not be liable for any claims in this regard. It is important to read and understand any waiver that you are being asked to sign.

It is important to be aware that a search can bring on physical and mental strain for the volunteer, and that there is always some risk involved in participating in a volunteer search. Further, there are many environmental unknowns that must be adapted to. To best protect against potential injury and strain, volunteers must:

- Be self-sufficient and be sure to eat and drink water, to wear eye protection in the woods, wear appropriate clothing, and to carry a flashlight and gloves.
- Never search alone and should always have a way to communicate with others.
- Always be highly visible and aware of their surroundings.

Volunteers should keep in mind that some missing persons, when found, may be hostile or aggressive towards searchers. This is especially true if they do not wish to be found. It is also possible that family members or friends of the missing person may be aggressive towards the searchers for a variety of reasons (they may believe they are not searching properly, or in the right place or that not enough effort is being put forth). Families may also lash out at searchers simply because they need an outlet for their fear and anguish as a result of missing their loved one.

****If a searcher's safety is at issue at any time during the search, the search should be abandoned and the police officer in charge should be notified.****

GENERAL SEARCH ORGANIZATION

To ensure efficiency and safety, all missing person searchers should keep in mind the following basic principles:

- Volunteers should be trained on all databases via Emergency Management Ontario IMS 100 (online), as well as Lakehead Search & Rescue basic training course.
- **Ground Support Unit Leaders** are in place to ensure that anyone assisting in the search will adhere to all legal aspects, police requests, ensuring that they never disturb a potential scene, seek permissions to search on private properties, etc. Volunteers should follow all direction and ask questions if tasks are unclear.
- Ground Support Unit Leaders train all staff and volunteers relating to:
 - Searching a specific grid area.
 - Evidence preservation issues.
 - Equipping search teams with vests, flashlights, checking for proper footwear and clothing.
 - Awareness of high-risk areas.
 - Reporting procedures for searchers to allow for safe tracking of volunteers.

- **Safety Officers** create safe operational standards or procedures for overall health and safety. They ensure that search protocols are in print and available at HQ for volunteers and ensure adequate Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) is available for staff and volunteers.
- **Logistics Lead** organizes staff relief and ensures that no one is working excessively long hours. The lead ensures all activity logs for each area are completed for each shift and reviewed at shift change.
- The **Safety Officer** will review the importance of safety with all teams of community-based volunteers. If any incidents occur during the search, they are to be reported to the Safety Officer immediately via telecommunications. Each team should be provided with a portable first aid kit. Depending on the time of year, volunteer searchers should also be briefed on either heat or cold emergencies in case a team member becomes ill.
- Each community based volunteer team will be briefed on the mandatory check-in prior to leaving for a search and a check out debrief once search has been completed. This is to ensure that all searchers return safely and to identify anyone that may need to be referred for counselling services due to something experienced, witnessed or brought on by the search.

With respect to any search equipment required, volunteer search members must come prepared in attire appropriate for the weather conditions, as well with any items that may be needed for the search. It is important to remember that the organization cannot provide every volunteer with items required for the search. For the physical search, upon availability, the organizing group may provide items such as: radios, maps, protein snacks, first aid kits, brightly coloured tape, flyer or poster for missing person, flashlights, water, and reflective vests or arm bands.

EVIDENCE PRESERVATION

Evidence can become a very important consideration in missing person searches. When volunteering for a search, a volunteer must be appropriately vetted to ensure the integrity of an investigation. Ensuring that evidence is preserved is paramount to potentially locating a missing person.

Volunteer searchers must also keep an open mind and be conscious of the evidence that they may be coming into contact with when searching for a missing person. All searchers must be

aware that a missing person search may start off as an innocent investigation but can quickly turn into something criminal. There may often be evidence found during the search that must be preserved.

If coming across any potential evidence, there should be immediate communication with the police officer/liaison. Volunteers should never disrupt the potential scene by touching things, or continuing to walk through the scene, etc., as this can destroy any possible information the police can use.

Volunteer searchers should never handle weapons, drugs, or unknown personal items that they may find. This can be a safety issue as well as an evidence preservation issue. It is also important to remember that hasty searches are more likely to affect or destroy fragile clues such as tracks and scent articles for canine searchers to track.

IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNICATION / DEBRIEFING WITH ASSIGNED LIAISON OFFICER

The Criminal Investigation Branch will always lead the investigation and determine the best way to proceed. There will be a designated liaison person with the police who will be in charge of leading the searchers. It is important to respect the liaison and listen to all information provided.

The central contact person is to receive and distribute “need to know” information between the police and volunteer search members while preserving the integrity and confidentiality of the missing person, the family, as well as the volunteer search members. More than one point of contact may be appointed to support the flow of information and shift communication.

Many volunteer searches will convene daily morning meetings to ensure the steady flow of communication for the family and for the purpose of directing the volunteer search teams. The importance of these meetings is the continuity of information, respect for the family, the policing jurisdiction, and the continuity of the relationships between all organizations involved. Having a respectful relationship and flow of communication is essential in ensuring the information shared is accurate, current, and free from the possibility of malicious content. Remember, effective communication is essential to the search. Logbooks should be appropriately filled in and referred to periodically.

At the end of each shift, it is important that the volunteer searcher takes time to debrief on the activities. This not only aids in preventing the internalization of stresses and worries for individuals but promotes best practice for self-care and transfer of important information.

At the conclusion of any search, a full team debrief will be conducted for all staff, volunteers, partners and/or community members that participated in order to commence the healing process. Emotionally charged situations involving missing persons can adversely affect one's mental health. Resource material will be provided for those who wish to seek additional counselling services.

A full team post-search strategy session will also be conducted at a later date in order to identify and review how the operation of the search worked, any gaps in services or communications, anyone requiring follow up counselling, etc. This is to be documented accordingly and future protocols reviewed and changed if necessary, to reflect any new best practices.

Searchers are required to remain on task and direct any and all outside requests for information of the search to the police. It is important that searchers do not discuss anything with those not involved in the search as this could potentially compromise the investigation.

ISSUES RELATING TO PRIVATE PROPERTY

Volunteer searchers are never to enter known private properties. If something seems to draw their attention to a private property from a distance, this information must be reported accordingly so that further investigation by proper authorities can be undertaken.

VOLUNTEER CONSIDERATIONS

Before Search:

- Are you able to make the necessary time commitment?
- Are you willing to consent to a criminal records check?
- Are you willing to sign a waiver of liability?
- Are you willing to sign a confidentiality agreement?
- Are you willing to receive basic search and rescue training?
- Are you able to bring the necessary supplies for the search?
- Are you willing to communicate and take instruction from the lead officer?

During Search:

- Have you checked in at the search site?
- Prior to setting out, have you received all necessary information?
- Arrive with all necessary equipment for the search including but not limited to:
 - Clothing,
 - Food,
 - Eye protection,
 - Gloves, and
 - Flashlights.
- Pair up with another searcher (NEVER search alone).
- Ensure you understand your role in the search.
- If you come across potential evidence, DO NOT TOUCH, and call the appropriate party immediately.
- If you feel overwhelmed at any point during the course of the search, please know your limits and practice self-care.

After Search:

- Have you communicated with the liaison officer prior to leaving the scene?
- Have you returned any borrowed equipment?
- Have you reported all findings to the liaison officer?
- Have you debriefed with like volunteers or others?
- Please take a minute to reflect and reach out if you require additional help processing what occurred during the search.

VOLUNTEER CHECKLIST

- ✓ Provided a current criminal record check with vulnerable sector screening.
- ✓ Signed waiver and consent prior to participating in search.
- ✓ Received basic training course.
- ✓ Familiar with the search protocol in place.
- ✓ Acquired all necessary equipment for the search (clothing, food, eye protection, etc.).
- ✓ Been paired up with a search partner.
- ✓ Know who to report to and when reporting should take place.
- ✓ Familiar with parameters of the search.
- ✓ Know what to do with potential evidence.
- ✓ Know what information to communicate and to whom.

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Best Practices for Non-Police Community Volunteer Searchers in a Missing Person Search

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