



# Child Abduction T.I.P.S. (Training, Information, Practices & Strategy)

Volume 10

Nov 6, 2019



## **Bureau of Victim Services Canine Program**

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In January 2017, the Los Angeles District Attorney's Bureau of Victim Services established the "Victim Services K-9 Unit" (VSK9). The K9 unit currently has three facility dogs (Skippy, Nora, and Lennox) who were bred, trained, and socialized by Assistance Dogs of the West. One VSR is assigned as the primary handler to each dog. As primary handlers, the VSRs accept total responsibility for the welfare of the dogs and take the dogs home each night. Three Victim Services Representatives (VSR) have been certified as handlers and have passed a public access test. The VSK-9 Unit works tirelessly to provide assistance to hundreds of victims and witnesses from 7 courthouses and the specialized units housed at the Hall of Justice in Los Angeles. In 2018, BVS submitted applications to Assistance Dogs of the West for two more facility dogs. Obtaining additional facility dogs in the coming years will allow BVS to better manage the large number of requests received by deputy district attorneys for a facility dog to assist their victims and witnesses to manage the traumatizing difficulties realized during interviews, to prepare for court, and to testify at preliminary hearings and trials.

VSK-9 Unit facility dogs and their VSRs assist victims by providing comfort and support to children, elders, victims with disabilities, families of homicide victims, and survivors of sexual assault and domestic violence. BVS three facility dogs Skippy, Nora, Lennox, and their VSR handlers, have achieved great success in alleviating the fear and discomfort of child victims and other vulnerable victims of crime. The K-9 team has been granted access to all Los Angeles Superior Court buildings, as well as approval to provide support to victims inside courtrooms for the purpose of accompanying victims to the witness stand during testimony.

Facility dogs, also known as courthouse dogs, work with crime victims, predominantly children, to help foster a safe and more comfortable environment as the children give testimony in court. These dogs play a crucial role in easing stress felt by children in the court system. Thus, a facility dog that accompanies a witness into court is not a household pet, but instead is a highly trained dog in the care of a trained handler.

VSK-9 teams also provided much-needed assistance to hundreds of victims, family members, and witnesses affected by the tragic mass shooting in The Las Vegas incident on October 1 at the Harvest Festival Concert, and the mass casualty incident which took place on November 7, 2018, in Thousand Oaks, California, at the Borderline Bar and Grill, a country-western bar frequented by college students. In the short time since the VSK-9 Unit's humble beginning in January 2017, BVS has heard story after story about the magical difference made by facility dogs and VSR/dog handlers for the most vulnerable victims.

## Neighborhood Investigations

By: Joseph Brine

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During a missing child case, the Neighborhood Investigation is one of the most critical components. The Neighborhood Investigation, along with the Command Post, is one of the components that is most likely not to be done properly. The Federal Bureau of Investigation's ("FBI") Child Abduction Response Plan ("CARP") provides guidance on how to conduct a Neighborhood Investigation, including a Neighborhood Investigation form. Please contact your local FBI office if you would like the latest copy of the CARP. Below is an excerpt from the CARP concerning the Neighborhood Investigation.

"The neighborhood investigation is a comprehensive effort designed to search for the child and obtain valuable information about all individuals present in locations relevant to the investigation during the time period that the child was last seen. The neighborhood investigation is one of the most crucial steps in a missing child case.

BAU has conducted extensive research into child abductors who murder their victims. While every missing child case does not end in the death of the victim, information from child abduction homicide cases can provide guidance to investigators involved in missing/abducted child cases in which the status of the victim is unknown. BAU research into child abduction homicides reflects that almost half of the homicide crime scenes and offender residences, and over a third of the body disposal sites were located within a half-mile of the original abduction site (3). These findings reinforce the importance in conducting exhaustive searches, canvasses and other investigation in the neighborhood surrounding the known abduction site, or the victim's last known location.

A neighborhood investigation is significantly more comprehensive than the preliminary neighborhood canvass discussed in Section 1, Phase II, which is primarily utilized to quickly identify potential witnesses and to assess the situation. Neighborhood investigations should be conducted in the area surrounding the location where the child was last seen, where the child was recovered, and any other areas developed by the investigation. The boundaries of the neighborhood will vary from case to case, and will be dependent on factors such as geographic features, population density, and the nature of the residential/commercial development in the area. The majority of the addresses will generally be residential, however the neighborhood investigation should include any structures in the targeted area, whether residential, commercial, Industrial, agricultural, or abandoned.

The neighborhood investigation is comprised of two primary functions. The first function is to personally interview all individuals within the defined neighborhood. All persons who live or work at each address within the neighborhood should be identified and interviewed. In commercial establishments, investigators should identify and interview employees who were working during the time period the child disappeared. Additionally, other individuals, who may have had some reason to be in the area during the timeframe of the abduction should be identified and interviewed. This would include any visitors at residences, customers at commercial establishments, delivery personnel, construction workers, or any other persons temporarily present in the neighborhood. Conceptually, the neighborhood investigation is designed to recreate an "image" of the area where the child was last seen. Results obtained from the neighborhood investigation can be incorporated into the victim/suspect timelines, and used to confirm or contradict previous information.

The second function of the neighborhood investigation is to conduct a thorough search for the victim. The goal is to clear every structure and the surrounding property within the defined neighborhood area in an attempt to locate and recover the victim. While searches of all locations (e.g., large factories, warehouses, unsafe abandoned buildings) may not be feasible, investigators should allow available resources and the circumstances of the case to dictate the parameters of the search effort.

Investigators should emphasize to property owners that the sole purpose of the search is to locate the missing child; in most cases, investigators are successful in obtaining consent for these searches. Agency legal counsel/prosecutors should be consulted for specific guidance prior to initiating the neighborhood investigation.

Often, someone within the neighborhood observed an individual or activity that was related to the disappearance of the child, but did not realize the importance of what they saw until contacted by authorities. Unless the neighborhood investigation is conducted quickly and thoroughly, valuable information that may assist the investigation may be lost.”

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