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**Florida Department of Law Enforcement (FDLE)**

**Missing Endangered Persons Information Clearinghouse**

**Advisory Board**

**Virtual Meeting**

**Tuesday, December 3, 2024**

**11:30 AM to 1 PM (EST)**

**Mission Statement:** Together with the citizens of Florida, we promote the safety of children and other vulnerable populations through public and private collaborations.

**Meeting Minutes**

**Chairperson: Karen Mazzola**

**Welcome**

**Roll Call**

**Board Members:** Karen Mazzola, Sheriff McNeil, Fran Carlin-Rogers, Peggy Pitta, John Pitta Terri Lynn, Mark Young, Kristin Morgan, Jessica Janasiewicz, Stephanie White, Major Jerry Hensley, Travis Paulk, Brandy Manley, Dan Campbell

**FDLE Members:** SMAS Bullard, Mehgen Peoples, Megan McDonald, Makenna Nix.

**Organizations and Individuals Represented:** Florida PTA, Leon County Sheriff’s Office, retired law enforcement, the Jimmy Ryce Center for Victims of Predatory Abduction, the Department of Children and Families, the Florida Association of School Administrators, the Florida Public Safety Institute, the St. Petersburg Police Department, the Governor’s Legal Office, impacted missing families, and private citizens.

**Meeting begins at 11:30 AM.**

**Nomination Forms / Award Criteria Discussion:**

* SMAS Bullard begins by establishing that age of qualifying “missing children” should be clarified. Under 18, under 21, under 26, or another limit as a whole in each award category.
* SMAS Bullard provides some background information on how Florida Missing Children’s Day (FMCD) began, to provide context for newer Board members. In the 1990s when FMCD was established, FDLE did not yet provide any missing person alerts for adults. The statute language written to establish FMCD only refers to children for this reason.
* Over the years, FDLE and legislation has expanded their missing person alerts/cases to include Silver Alerts, Purple Alerts, and more. FMCD’s ceremony grew to include missing adults as well, and then returned to recognizing only children and adults under age 26 due to reaching the limits of what the ceremony was able to accommodate due to spacing. There were several years that both child and adult missing person families were able to participate and were invited. At this time, only families with the missing person being under 26 or those that have participated in the past, are invited to FMCD.
* The Board should consider clarifying what age qualifies for the awards, and criteria moving forward. Child cases vs other age groups like endangered missing adults due to the Missing Endangered Persons Information Clearinghouse expansion of the years. Are the awards issued at FMCD specific for law enforcement, citizens, teams that work a missing child case or should we allow for the expansion of criteria to include missing person as a whole. At the time of FMCD establishment, there were only missing child cases that could be opened with MEPIC. Did not allow adult cases. Also need to clarify age considered child. In 2008 Ms. Sessions helped with legislation passed that allowed anyone to open a case for missing persons under 26. Due to this, we issue invitations to FMCD for any families with missing persons under 26 and not 18. Also, sometimes schools allow young adults to stay enrolled if they have an impairment. Should this be considered?
* Terri Lynn asks SMAS Bullard to clarify what she meant by FDLE opening a case for a missing person. Shouldn’t FDLE have an open case for everyone missing? Missing person cases are opened through their jurisdictional agencies/calling 911. The expectation is for local law enforcement to already have a case open as they are the primary investigative agency. There is no Florida requirement that maintains a FDLE/MEPIC case must be opened in addition to the case that has already been opened by the jurisdictional agency. However, FDLE/MEPIC offers law enforcement additional resources if they feel like they need them, and a case can be opened with MEPIC in addition to the one at the jurisdictional agency. All Florida alerts have to be issued by FDLE and have a case opened in addition to the jurisdictional agency. However, if no alert is issued, the jurisdictional agency has the option to open a case or complete their own investigative and analytical work without assistance.
* The local jurisdictional law enforcement agency can request FDLE to open a MEPIC case for any missing person. For those missing persons under 26, any person with knowledge of the missing person can request FDLE open a case. FDLE can open this case when appropriately requested as long as the person has been reported missing already and the information has been entered into FCIC/NCIC.
* MEPIC is an analytical and investigative *resource* for law enforcement that supports the jurisdictional agency. The jurisdictional agency is still the ones working the case and working with the family.
* SMAS Bullard explains that in most cases involving children, FDLE does end up opening a case as alerts are issued for children routinely.
* MEPIC messages to local agencies to use FDLE’s resources to their full potential in missing adult cases and there is a lower percentage of adult missing person cases opened.
* SMAS Bullard clarifies that the Board can decide for each award independently whether child/adult qualifies for criteria, and that some awards will not be able to be changed; as an example, the Young Hero Award must go to someone who was a minor at the time of the events.

**Jimmy Ryce Trailing Team Award**

* Stephanie White explains the difference between a scent discriminatory and non- scent discriminatory dog. Scent discriminatory dogs can track a specific person, while non-scent discriminatory dogs cannot and instead track the unspecified presence of any person.
* SMAS Bullard explains that the award applies only to scent discriminatory and non- scent discriminatory dogs trailing missing persons (so recently missing), and not to cadaver dogs, electronic storage detection dogs, or pet dogs, which fall under the criteria of other awards. The criteria specifies that the award is for the safe recovery of a missing person.
* Terri Lynn asks if the intent is to recognize any recovery (even if the child is found deceased or is the intent to prioritize safe recoveries for the sake of the tone of the ceremony? Discussion indicated that the child should be found “alive”.
* Clarification on whether child should mean a minor child, student that may be enrolled with an impairment, under 26, or if the award criteria should be the recovery of any missing person. Chairperson Mazzola suggests child interpretation should best reflect what the family of Jimmy Ryce would want.
* SMAS Bullard asks Dan Campbell, who was on the Board at the time, what the family may have thought. He says that the family seemed to prioritize children.
* Terri Lynn says that if the family had an opinion on changing the criteria, they would have voiced it. Terri Lynn, Dan Campbell, Peggy Pitta, and John Pitta all voice an opinion that “child” should be defined for these purposes as a minor.
* Board requests award clarification to include recovered alive and minor age but no real award criteria change. Location wording removed as recovers is sufficient.
* Criteria for award: activity resulted in the safe recovery of a missing minor child.

**Citizen of the Year Award**

* Discussion on criteria “recovery of a child” and whether to expand or clarify what child ages count and/or expanding to missing persons as a whole.
* Fran Carlin-Rogers suggests that some of the awards be expanded to include all ages, specifically citing the huge number of Silver Alerts issued each year and suggesting that the Board should be open to nominees in this type of missing case.
* The Board agrees to change the criteria for this award to refer to missing endangered persons and not just children.

**School Bus Operator of the Year**

* Discussion on criteria related to child and age. Designed for school bus operators specifically. However, students over 18 do exist in the school system. Does child mean minors only, any enrolled student, or should we match the under 26 that MEPIC uses?
* A member comments that this award sometimes receives few or no nominations, Whatever the decision turns out to be should try to expand receiving more nominations.
* Another member comments that the criteria should not restrict disabled adults enrolled in high school from qualifying.
* Dan Campbell suggests using the broadest possible language here so as to draw in the most nominations, and leaving the Board to then determine whether to vote out nominations that it feels do not qualify.
* The Board agrees to change the language to “child or student” and to consider adult students, and for “child” to refer to minors.
* The Board’s general desire is for the language to exclude college students and those using public transportation, and include high school seniors who have turned 18, disabled public school students who may be older, and toddlers and young children who may not be enrolled in public school. However, case by case basis if enrolled as a student dependent on nominations for that year and activity.
* Criteria clarification and change: activity resulted in the prevention of a child/student abduction or the recovery of a child/student from harm.

**Local / State / Federal Law Enforcement Officer of the Year Award**

* Discussion on criteria change from missing child to expand to missing endangered persons.
* Dan Campbell suggests opening the criteria to include all ages.
* Mehgen Peoples indicated Hilary Sessions would like to include cold case detectives in the criteria. Dan Campbell agrees with this. SMAS Bullard clarifies that missing person cases are classified as child or adult based on the person’s age when initially missing, meaning that cases where the missing child would currently be an adult are counted as missing children. Cold Case detectives would already qualify for this award type if they were sworn.
* The Board agrees to change the criteria for this award to refer to missing endangered persons and not just children. Criteria change: resulted in the safe recovery/location of a missing child or endangered person, etc.…

**Task Force / Team of the Year Award**

* Discussion on criteria change from missing child to expand to missing endangered persons.
* Board agrees to changing the criteria to include all ages for this award category. Criteria change: safe recovery or location of missing child or endangered person, etc.

**Special Award Categories**

* SMAS Bullard clarifies that FDLE is in charge of the special award category criteria for the Commissioner’s Award, John and Reve Walsh Award and Evelyn Willams Memorial Award. As we are currently discussing being more inclusive to adults, the Board’s opinion is requested. For the Evelyn Williams Memorial Award and history behind the establishment of award, Ms. Williams worked on all missing person cases not just children and was an FDLE employee in MEPIC. The John and Reve Walsh Award, the Walsh’s worked to bring missing persons issues to the forefront both for their son who was a child and for missing persons as a whole as Mr. Walsh started America’s Most Wanted.
* Dan Campbell suggests opening the criteria to at least one category for endangered adults and not just children.
* Discussion on which awards to change language to include all ages. Agreement to change only for the Evelyn Williams Memorial Award to everyone at this time.
* Consensus was not reached regarding the two other awards and decision to keep as is for now to see if a notable difference is seen in the future for the Evelyn Williams all age change.
* The language of the Evelyn Williams Memorial Award should refer to missing endangered persons and the other two awards (Commissioners/John and Reve Walsh) remain the same for now and specific to children. FDLE will define children depending on how they wish to do so internally as the holder of the award criteria (under age 26).

**Combatting Human Trafficking Award**

* Category generally has questions about whether it will meet the human trafficking definition. In the past, it was determined that it should meet the Florida definition and not the federal definition and there is a difference between trafficking and smuggling. Suggestion is to leave the current criteria language unchanged, and to add additional language requesting that the nominator provide sufficient specific details with possible examples to illicit more information in the nomination summary and allow the Board’s subject matter experts to determine whether the nomination qualifies as human trafficking or human smuggling. SMAS Bullard will send out a SurveyMonkey with the updated language for Board members to vote on.

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Disclaimer has been updated for the Board review. The disclaimer was moved and changed to a more general disclaimer language based on the comments provided by the Advisory Board previously. FDLE and the Florida Missing Children's Day Foundation President feel a disclaimer is needed. We better matched the proposed disclaimer to general language that is used for our contests.

SMAS Bullard confirms that FMCD will use the Tallahassee Automobile Museum again in 2025 due to the construction at the Capitol.

Award criteria that is not being discussed for modification were the Young Hero Award and Maples Everyday Hero Award. Young Hero Award was confirmed that child means child of minor age.

**Adjournment**

**Meeting adjourns at 1:06 PM.**