PISCATAQUIS COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE

SEX TRAFFICKING AND COMMERCIAL

SEXUAL EXPLOITATION INVESTIGATIONS

Number: 31 Effective date: 07/28/2026

Division: Law Enforcement

I. PURPOSE

To establish clear guidelines for identifying, responding to, and supporting individuals who are victims of sex trafficking or commercial sexual exploitation. 17-A M.R.S. § 852-855.

II. POLICY

Piscataquis County Sheriff's Office [PCSO] policy is to identify and respond effectively to incidents involving sex trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation. PCSO is dedicated to ensuring that all individuals who are, or may be, victims are treated with dignity and respect and have access to appropriate services. Deputies will prioritize victim safety, actively pursue perpetrators, and work with relevant agencies to support both investigations and victim services.

III. DEFINITIONS

Commercial Sexual Exploitation. The misuse of a position of vulnerability or power imbalance for sexual purposes, including but not limited to exchanging sex for money, drugs, shelter, or other goods, particularly when involving a minor. Under Maine law, any commercial sex act involving a minor is considered trafficking or exploitation, regardless of coercion or consent.

Sex Trafficking. The recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for a commercial sex act, when such act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or when the person induced to perform such an act is under 18 years of age.

IV. PROCEDURES

A. Deputy Awareness and Indicators

1. Deputies may encounter potential victims of sex trafficking and/or commercial sexual exploitation during their duties, such as during domestic violence calls, responses to incidents at massage parlors, bars, and strip clubs, or even during routine traffic stops.

2. All deputies shall be trained to identify behavioral and situational signs that might indicate sex trafficking or commercial sexual exploitation, including but not limited to:

a. A minor involved in commercial sex acts or seemingly under someone else's control.

b. Signs of coercion, threats, or physical abuse.

c. Display of fearful, shy, or submissive behavior.

d. Lack of personal identification or control over personal documents.

e. Inconsistencies in stories, fearfulness, or difficulty speaking freely.

f. Seems to have been deprived of food, water, sleep, or medical care.

g. Involvement with older adults at hotels, motels, on the street, or during internet activities.

h. Seems to have been coached on what to tell law enforcement.

3. Deputies should also be aware of traffickers. They can come from any background, age group, or gender. Their victims may describe them as employers, co-workers, romantic partners, “pimps,” family members, friends, or a mutual connection.

4. If human trafficking is suspected, the officer is in a unique position to intervene. Knowing PCSO’s policies and both state and federal law is essential for the victim’s safety.

5. When it is safe and appropriate, efforts should be made to separate victims from suspected exploiters and create a secure environment for interviews or support.

B. Investigative Procedures

1. Deputies who encounter a situation indicating sex trafficking or commercial sexual exploitation must ensure the individual's immediate safety and notify a supervisor.

2. Investigations shall be carried out by or in consultation with trained personnel and may include:

a. Interviews conducted in a trauma-informed, victim-centered manner focused on the victim’s needs and interests. Victims may not be comfortable cooperating for a variety of reasons, including initial fear, distrust, or resentment of law enforcement. A victim may not wish to identify as a victim, may become defensive or use rehearsed or purposely misleading responses, may identify with the suspected trafficker or express romantic feelings or loyalty, or may fear judgment, consequences, or harm from law enforcement.

b. Collection of physical and digital evidence.

c. Coordination with local, county, state, and federal agencies, including Maine State Police (MSP), Department of Health & Human Services (DHHS), Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), Department of Homeland Security (DHS), local or regional human or sex trafficking task forces, District Attorney’s Office, U.S. Attorney’s Office, and victim-witness advocates.

3. Deputies shall document all observations, interviews, and evidence in accordance with department protocols.

C. Victim Safety and Referral

1. Deputies shall consider individuals suspected of being victims of sex trafficking or commercial sex exploitation as victims of a crime, not as offenders.

2. Victims shall have immediate access to medical care, shelter, and advocacy services as needed.

3. Deputies shall notify or coordinate with social service agencies such as local or regional crisis centers or sexual assault response services, DHHS Child and Family Services for victims who are minors, and the National Human Trafficking Hotline (888-373-7888)https://humantraffickinghotline.org/en.

Sheriff Robert Young