

OFFICE OF THE CHIEF OF POLICE

ADMINISTRATIVE ORDER NO. 16

December 1, 2025

SUBJECT: RECOVERY OF STOLEN VEHICLES AND/OR VESSELS FROM A THIRD-PARTY TOW COMPANY – ESTABLISHED; RELEASING RECOVERED STOLEN VEHICLES AND/OR VESSEL – RENAMED AND REVISED; AND, FOUND VEHICLES – REVISED

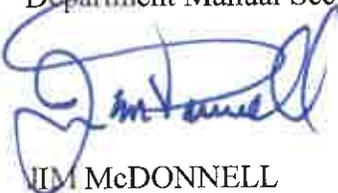
PURPOSE: The purpose of this Order is to establish clear guidelines and procedures for the recovery and release of stolen vehicles from third-party tow companies. The introduction of clear requirements aims to promote consistent and lawful handling of these cases by field personnel and to prevent abuse or misconduct by third-party tow companies. These revisions to policy will serve to safeguard the interests of vehicle owners and mitigate risks associated with unpermitted tow companies and unlawful access to recovered vehicles.

PROCEDURE:

- I. RECOVERY OF STOLEN VEHICLES AND/OR VESSELS FROM A THIRD-PARTY TOW COMPANY – ESTABLISHED.** Department Manual Section 4/221.09, *Recovery of Stolen Vehicles and/or Vessels from a Third-Party Tow Company*, has been established. The established manual section is attached.
- II. RELEASING RECOVERED STOLEN VEHICLES AND/OR VESSEL – REVISED AND RENAMED.** Department Manual Section 4/221.10, *Releasing Recovered Stolen Vehicles and/or Vessel*, has been renamed and revised, *Releasing Recovered Stolen Vehicles and/or Vessels at Scene*. The renamed manual section is attached with the revisions in italics.
- III. FOUND VEHICLES – REVISED.** Department Manual Section 4/221.20, *Found Vehicles*, has been revised. The manual section is attached with revisions in italics.

AMENDMENT: This Order adds Section 4/221.09 to the Department Manual. The Order also renames and amends Section 4/221.10, and amends Section 4/221.20 of the Department Manual.

AUDIT RESPONSIBILITY: The Commanding Officer, Audit Division, shall review this directive and determine whether an audit or inspection shall be conducted in accordance with Department Manual Section 0/080.30.



JIM McDONNELL
Chief of Police

Attachment

DISTRIBUTION "D"

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221. FIELD RELEASING VEHICLES.

221.09 RECOVERY OF STOLEN VEHICLES AND/OR VESSELS FROM A THIRD-PARTY TOW COMPANY.

Verification of Vehicle Status. During the course of a stolen vehicle investigation involving a vehicle towed by a third-party tow company, other than an Official Police Garage (OPG), investigating officers shall determine the following:

- *Whether the vehicle was reported stolen before or after it was towed;*
- *The precise time and location from where the vehicle was towed; and,*
- *The legal reason for the towing action.*

Verification procedures may include a query of the Stolen Vehicle System, Department records, or documents located inside the vehicle. Refer to Department Manual Section 4/222.50 for procedures to obtain registered and/or legal owner information.

Recovery of Lawfully Towed Vehicles. If it is determined that a vehicle theft did **not** occur and that the vehicle was reported stolen as a result of being lawfully towed, investigating officers shall:

- *Complete a Vehicle Report, Form CHP 180, with the title “Recovered – Unfounded;”*
- *Notify Vehicle Warrant Section, Records and Identification Division;*
- *Detail the investigation in which it was determined that the vehicle was towed and not stolen in the remarks section of the Form CHP 180;*
- *Notify the registered and/or legal owner that their vehicle has been located; and,*
- *Advise the registered and/or legal owner of the tow company’s address and that the tow company has the authority to recover towing and storage fees from the registered owner.*

Note: The officer shall allow the vehicle to remain in the possession of the third-party tow operator in cases where the stolen vehicle report is determined to be unfounded.

Handling of Recovered Vehicles Reported Stolen Prior to Third-Party Towing. In cases where it is determined that the vehicle was stolen **before** it was towed by a third-party company, investigating officers shall:

- *Complete a Vehicle Report, Form CHP 180, titled “Recovered” upon removal from the third-party tow yard.*

Note: Recovered stolen vehicles shall **not** be left in the possession of a third-party tow company.

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- *Conduct an inventory as outlined in Department Manual Section 4/222.59. The inventory is an accounting of all items within the vehicle and should be documented in the "Remarks" section of the Vehicle Report, Form CHP 180.*

***Note:** Any contraband or evidence found during the inventory shall be seized and booked according to Department Manual Section 4/501 through 4/590.10.*

- *Attempt to contact the registered or legal owner of the vehicle to inform them that the vehicle has been recovered. If contact is made, inform the owner that towing and storage fees are regulated by the Board of Police Commissioners (BOPC) and third-party tow and OPG operators have the authority to collect reasonable fees.*
- *If the registered or legal owner is not present to take custody of the vehicle, request the geographically-pertinent OPG tow, based on the location of the third-party tow company, to respond and take custody of the vehicle (California Vehicle Code Section 22850 and Department Manual Sections 4/222.50 and 4/780.77).*

***Note:** If officers are unable to reach the registered or legal owner, notifications must be sent within 48 hours using a Notice of Stored/Impounded Vehicle, Form 15.23.00, per Department Manual Section 4/222.50. No vehicle should be held for more than two business days for investigation, unless special conditions apply as outlined in Department Manual Section 4/780.77.*

The fees assessed should be comparable to those charged by OPGs or the rate contracted by the CHP, in accordance with California Vehicle Code Section 22651.07(e). Towing fees should align with the BOPC Fee Schedule; however, the payment of these fees is a civil matter, and officers shall not engage in negotiating them.

***Note:** If an officer suspects that a third-party tow company is charging excessive fees, they may file a complaint with the Official Police Garage Section, Commission Investigation Division (CID).*

***Verification of Licensing and Permitting.** Officers may request to see the tow operator's Board of Police Commissioners permit to ensure the company is authorized to conduct impounds within the City of Los Angeles.*

- *If officer(s) develop probable cause that the third-party tow operator conducted an unpermitted tow within the City of Los Angeles, they may cite the tow operator for a violation of Los Angeles Municipal Code Section 103.204.1(a)(1) via an Administrative Citation, Form 05.40.00, as outlined in Department Manual Section 4/216.68, Administrative Citation Enforcement Program Procedures.*

***Note:** Complaints about unpermitted companies or permit violations can be filed by either the officer or the registered or legal owner of the vehicle with CID, which may result in administrative or legal sanctions against the third-party tow company.*

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Non-Cooperation by Tow Operators. Some third-party tow operators may be reluctant to cooperate with vehicle release procedures because of a perceived loss of revenue. Should a tow operator refuse to cooperate with law enforcement in the release of a stolen vehicle, the investigating officer(s) shall:

- Request a Department supervisor;
- Advise the tow company of the following:
 - They are in possession of stolen property;
 - The Los Angeles Police Commission Board Rules Governing Tow Operations and Tow Operators, Rule 12, requires third-party tow operators to cooperate with law enforcement; and,
 - Failure to cooperate may result in administrative and legal sanctions against the company;
- File a formal tow complaint with OPG Section, CID.

Note: The complaint shall be filed regardless of whether the tow company possesses a valid Board permit; and,

- Contact the watch commander or Auto Coordinator for approval to obtain a search warrant to recover the stolen vehicle.

221.10 RELEASING RECOVERED STOLEN VEHICLES AND/OR VESSELS AT SCENE. When feasible, a recovered stolen vehicle and/or vessel *that* does not require a hold shall be released to the registered and/or legal owner, or the owner's agent, without impounding. In the event there is possible evidence associated with the vehicle that cannot be easily removed (e.g., latent prints, DNA), officers shall contact the Area Auto Detectives for advice and request a supervisor at scene, who shall then determine the feasibility of the vehicle's field release.

Upon verification of the identity (or authorization) of the registered and/or legal owner, or the owner's agent, the reporting officer shall document *on the Vehicle Report, Form CHP 180* the identity of the person taking possession of the vehicle.

Determining Feasibility. Officers who recover a vehicle and/or vessel which appears to be *eligible* for field release shall determine the feasibility of making a field release based on the following factors:

- The practicability of immediately contacting the registered and/or legal owner (e.g., availability of registered and/or legal owner's telephone number *or email*);
- The time required for the owner *or an agent* to arrive at the recovery location;
- The registered and/or legal owner's willingness to receive the vehicle; and,
- The current unit call load and need for police service.

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Signature on Recovery Report. After verification of identity, the employee shall obtain the signature of the person receiving the vehicle and/or vessel in the “SIGNATURE OF PERSON TAKING POSSESSION” box on the Vehicle Report, *Form CHP 180*.

Victim’s Report Memo. The person receiving the vehicle and/or vessel shall be given a completed Victim’s Report Memo, *Form 03.17.00*, and shall be advised of the necessity for caution if stopped by a police unit.

Recovered Vehicle Broadcast. The employee shall immediately notify Communications Division of the release of the vehicle and/or vessel. *The broadcast of a cancellation of the want on the vehicle and/or vessel shall be made without delay.*

Notification to *Vehicle Warrant Section*. The employee shall telephonically notify the *Vehicle Warrant Section, Records and Identification Division*, of the recovery as soon as practicable.

Latent Prints. When there is information or evidence regarding a possible suspect, consideration shall be given to the desirability of attempting to lift fingerprints prior to releasing the vehicle and/or vessel.

Special Instruction. The employee *recovering the vehicle and/or vessel* shall not leave the vehicle and/or vessel unattended, except under unusual or emergency situations. To preclude removal of the vehicle and/or vessel during the employee’s absence, the registered and/or legal owner shall be instructed not to remove the vehicle and/or vessel if the officer is called away from the scene.

221.20 FOUND VEHICLES. A found vehicle normally shall not be impounded.

Notifications. An employee discovering a vehicle which has been reported lost and which does not appear to have been stolen or used in a crime shall:

- Complete a “Found” Vehicle Report, *Form CHP 180*;
- Notify the *Vehicle Warrant Section, Records and Identification Division*;
- If practicable, notify the reporting person of the vehicle’s location. Indicate the date, time, and person notified in the narrative portion of the “Found” Report; and,
- If the employee discovering a lost vehicle is unable to notify the owner or person reporting the lost vehicle, they shall note in the Vehicle Report, *Form CHP 180*, that a notification has not been made. The notification shall then be the responsibility of the investigating officer.